



The Duke and the Unwanted Bride

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "Show me how desperate you are for my touch, wife." Marrying a second time is the bane of Duke Frederick's existence. Until the most dangerously alluring lady finds her way into his chamber...

Hannah is so desperate that she would even steal her cousin's husband-to-be. At least, that's what her family thinks when she's caught alone with Frederick...naked.

Forced to wed, Frederick vows never to touch her. Only, Hannah dares to tempt him time and time again. And now, he must teach this little minx a lesson...

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

Total Pages (Source): 98

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Chapter One

“Father, I have but one request for tonight,” Lady Hannah Bolton announced as the carriage came to a gentle stop outside Langham Estate.

“Is that right?” Phineas Bolton, the Earl of Ramsbury, huffed, looking out the window as if mentally preparing himself to exit the carriage. “I was not aware that you were giving commands. Nor that I was taking them.”

“When you see Aunt Teresa, will you at least try and behave?”

“Me!” He whipped around.

“Tonight is about Selina,” Hannah continued, ignoring his exclamation. “She is anxious enough as it is, and the sight of you arguing with her mother will only worsen the matter.”

“You speak as if I want to fight with my sister,” her father complained, his chubby face scrunching up in a grimace. “When she is the one who?—”

“Father,” Hannah cut him off with a raised eyebrow and a warning stare. “Please.”

“She is right, Phineas,” Lady Ramsbury sighed. “The two of you are like children when you are together. It is most unappealing.”

“Oh, so you are on her side!”

“I am on the side of having a pleasant evening,” she said, refusing to take the bait. “And I will ask that you not use that tone with me, dear.”

Lord Ramsbury looked as if he wanted nothing more than to argue. Face still scrunched up in a grimace. Complexion turning redder by the second. He was even shaking! Yet, his wife cocked a warning eyebrow at him, and he somehow pushed those emotions down, forcing a smile as he took her hand.

“Of course, my love.” He stroked the back of her hand. “I shall behave. But if she tests me...” he muttered, again looking out the window.

“Then I am sure you will be the bigger man,” Lady Ramsbury asserted. “If such a thing is possible.”

Hannah rolled her eyes at her father’s theatrics, then met her mother’s eyes and gave her an amused grin.

Before leaving the house, they had discussed the need to keep her father under surveillance because whenever he and his sister Teresa were in the same room together, all hell broke loose, as the two could not stop bickering as if they were hens fighting over the last seed.

“We are here for Selina,” Lord Ramsbury repeated to himself, taking a deep breath as he worked to calm himself down. “And I am sure that my sister will keep that in mind. She darn well better—and where is she!” he then barked, looking out the window again. “What are the odds she is inside right now, watching us stew? Oh, I bet she loves the idea of?”

“Phineas!” Lady Ramsbury snapped. “Calm down, dear. Calm down.”

To that, Lord Ramsbury scrunched up his nose and muttered something that neither

of them could hear. Likely, it was not anything worth hearing anyway.

Beyond the windows of the carriage stood Langham Estate, home to Teresa Gouldsmith, the Dowager Viscountess Langham. She had invited the Boltons for a celebratory supper tonight, one which Hannah's two older sisters and their husbands would attend as well. Hannah was very excited, as she did not see her sisters anywhere near as much as she would have liked, now that they were married with children of their own.

As to the reason for said celebration? Next week, Teresa's eldest daughter, and Hannah's favorite cousin, Selina, was due to wed the Duke of Thorne. As exciting an occasion as one could hope for and a perfect occasion to get the entire family together, as they had not been in an age.

The rest of the family were staying in residence, as they all lived some distance away, having made the journey especially for this supper and the wedding next week. But seeing as Hannah and her family lived nearby, they opted to arrive this evening instead... and now they were waiting to be greeted.

"Where is she?!" Lord Ramsbury snapped. "I have half a mind to storm in there without a prior notice. Let her know that we have been waiting for what feels like hours."

"It has hardly been a minute," Lady Ramsbury sighed. "Likely, she is busy dealing with her guests. There are half a dozen people staying here this week—surely she is busy."

"At the very least, Charlotte or Beatrice should have seen us arrive? Oh, my sister knows how to vex me!"

Lord Ramsbury was beginning to get angry... or angrier. A man of tradition, he had

insisted that they wait in the carriage until they were greeted outside by their hosts. And so, they sat tight, watching the manor, waiting for the doors to open and the Dowager Viscountess to appear.

Which she did do... only after another five minutes of waiting.

It was Teresa who appeared in the doorway first. Short and stocky like Lord Ramsbury, she was dressed finely in a colorful frock, her grey hair colored red, her round face looking sharper than usual with the powder and rouge she had applied.

She saw the carriage sitting there, waiting, opened her arms as she approached them, and beamed.

“Phineas!” she called out. “What on earth are you doing?! Come out and say hello!”

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“She knows damn well what?—”

“Phineas...” Lady Ramsbury took his hand. “Behave.”

It went exactly as Hannah had predicted. That is to say, not very well.

Her aunt Teresa greeted Lady Ramsbury with a warm hug. She then did the same for Hannah, kissing her on the cheek and gushing about what a wonderful lady she had grown into. And then she turned her gaze to her brother, cocked an eyebrow, and clicked her tongue.

“Phineas,” she drawled, her tone mocking. “You look... healthy.”

Lord Ramsbury’s eyes bulged. “And what does that mean?!”

“Nothing, nothing...” She slapped him on the arm. “Where I come from, healthy is a compliment.”

“It did not sound like one.”

“Honestly...” A sigh and a shake of the head. “One would think that I called you fat, for how you are carrying on. But did I? No. I opted to be polite, something you might wish to learn.” She looked at him flatly. “Even if you have put on some weight since the last time I saw you.”

Lord Ramsbury’s face turned bright red. “I would watch who you call fat, Sister. The layers of that dress are not fooling anyone.”

“Nice try,” she responded coolly. “I will have you know that I have slimmed down considerably this last month.” She ran her hands down her sides, as if to show off her slimmer figure. “It is not every day that one’s daughter is married, and it behooves me to look my best.”

“Your best?” Lord Ramsbury barked. “I have seen you at your best, and believe me when I say that this is far from?”

“Speaking of daughters,” Lady Ramsbury hurried to interject. “Where are Charlotte and Beatrice?” She looked toward the manor.

“Inside,” Teresa said, wearing a smug smile on account of how easy it was to upset her brother. “The last I saw of the two, they were looking after their children. Gosh, the rate that they are popping them out, it’s a wonder they haven’t had more since they arrived.” She tittered.

“Phineas...” Lady Ramsbury took her husband’s hand. “Shall we go and greet to our daughters? And grandchildren?”

Lord Ramsbury was still shaking, still red in the face, still struggling to control himself. But at his wife’s touch, he allowed himself to breathe, tearing his eyes away from his sister’s cool facade. “Yes... I think that is for the best.”

“Supper is in an hour,” Teresa announced. “And please remind your daughters of that. I do not accept tardiness.”

“Come now.” Lady Ramsbury pulled her husband along. “Breaths, dear. Deep breaths.”

Hannah watched them go, trying her best not to laugh at her father’s antics, knowing that this was only the beginning, and it was sure to be a long night—not to mention a

long week. Speaking of which...

“Aunty Teresa,” Hannah asked, “is Selina here?”

“Of course, she is, dear. Upstairs in her room, getting ready.”

“Wonderful. I shall just...” She swept past her aunt.

“And be sure to tell her to be ready!” Teresa called after her. “I do not care if she is the one getting married. Supper begins in one hour! We wait for no one!”

Hannah chuckled to herself as she made for the manor. Between her aunt’s theatrics, her father’s tantrums, the chaos of her two sisters and their children, and Selina’s wedding preparations, Hannah relished the chance not to be the topic of conversation instigated by her parents for once.

At the age of one-and-twenty, rarely a day went by when they were not pressuring her to do as was proper and find a man to court, have him marry her as quickly as possible, and then start producing children. The youngest daughter of three, she was quickly becoming the disappointment in her family because—and as she had told them time and again—she had no interest in such things.

Oh sure, she had once, but certain... events, not to mention social perceptions, had changed all of that, and now she was finally beginning to accept her lot in life.

The third-born child. She who could do as she pleased because the other two had taken care of the family’s reputation and solidified it. Perhaps not the most enduring legacy, but one that was to be her own.

Yes, a night in which Hannah could go about unseen, enjoy the drama that she would for once not be a part of and, of course, celebrate her cousin’s marriage as was the

entire purpose of this little supper, to begin with.

Surely, nothing could go wrong...

“... shall we make a bet?” Hannah giggled from the foot of her cousin’s bed. “That before the night is through, my father drops at least one glass on the floor?”

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“I was thinking it would be a plate?” Selina laughed. “Do you remember Christmas?”

Hannah smirked. “He still claims that he simply lost his grip, and that was why the plate ended up by his feet.”

“Of course, by his feet was somehow halfway across the room.” Selina grinned.

“Honestly...” Hannah rose from the bed and approached her cousin, who was standing before the mirror, inspecting her attire for the night. “Why he lets your mother get to him as he does is beyond me.”

“I choose not to think about it, but instead enjoy it.” Selina giggled as she turned around. “I know everybody else does.”

The two girls laughed, taking a little too much pleasure at the image of their parents behaving like children, as they did whenever they were together.

“Enough of that,” Hannah eventually managed to say as she composed herself. “I do not wish to speak of Father. It is you I am far more interested in.”

“Me?” Selina pretended to look confused. “Whatever for?”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Oh, I don’t know. Is there anything interesting happening in your life at the moment? Surely, there must be something?”

“Hmm?” Selina pretended to think. “I do not believe so. Why? What have you heard?”

More laughter was shared between the two girls. Both one-and-twenty, cousins also, they had grown up together and considered each other best friends. Matching personalities, comparable looks, some might have mistaken them for sisters, which Hannah did not mind one little bit.

Even the fact that Selina was getting married, and to a duke no less, was cause for celebration, rather than jealousy. And it helped that Selina was not one to brag or hold it over others, treating this little arrangement as a necessary affair, rather than the life-changing event that it was.

“Oh, come now...” Hannah took her by the shoulders and turned her back so that she facing the mirror. “No need to be coy. You are allowed to show some excitement. I will not tell.”

Selina rolled her eyes. “Is that what I should be? Excited?”

“Are you not?” Hannah frowned.

“Do I not look it? His Grace is handsome and rich and renowned among the ton—well-known as a good man who any lady should be thrilled to wed. Surely that must mean that I am simply buzzing with excitement such that I can hardly stand still.”

Hannah studied her cousin, her mannerisms, not entirely sure what she should say to that. Selina had a rather dark sense of humor, and it was often hard to tell when she was being serious. And while her words were correct in their assessment, the way she said them... it was almost as if she wasn't looking forward to marrying the man who was set to be her husband. And in less than a week's time!

“Selina...” Hannah began carefully. “Is everything alright?”

“Oh, I am only joking, Hannah.” Selina shook her head. “Honestly, you are far too gullible sometimes.”

Hannah snorted. “And you are far too sarcastic for your own good.”

“Of course, I am excited...” Again, the right words, but they rang as false. “Just nervous, I suppose. You know, I hardly even know the man!”

“That is normal enough.”

“And we have barely said two words to each other.”

“Perhaps he is as nervous as you are?”

“And what he did say to me left much to be desired. Why, I do not think that he smiled once the entire time that we spoke. I have been to funerals where the corpse has more of a personality.”

Again, Hannah studied her cousin, sensing now that there was some truth to her words. Growing up together, Selina had never much spoken about romance and falling in love, not nearly as much as many of their other friends had. But she was also a dutiful young lady and knew that this was her lot in life, enough that when the day came that it was announced whom she would be marrying, Hannah had assumed that she was accepting it, even trying her best to see it for the positive thing that it was. Surely?

What this must be, Hannah decided, were pre-wedding jitters. Independent in so many ways like Hannah, Selina was likely just a little nervous about married life, now doing everything she could to talk herself out of it.

“Come here.” Hannah took her by the shoulders again and forced her to look at

herself in the full-length mirror. “What do you see? Tell me.”

Selina rolled her eyes. “My reflection, clearly.”

“No, not that...” Hannah forced her to straighten up. “What do you see? Tell me.”

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“My cousin who is beginning to act like a loon.”

“I will tell you myself,” Hannah said, trying not to laugh. “I see a stunningly pretty, utterly gorgeous woman who any man would walk over hot coals to be with. Dark brown hair that glimmers even in the dark. Big, round eyes that one might get lost in. And curves...” She grinned. “From the little I know of men, most would be only too eager to get their hands on them?—”

“Hannah!”

“What?!” Hannah chuckled. “Do not pretend that you do not know what I’m speaking of.”

“And you do?”

“The point is...” Hannah smiled, making sure that her cousin could see the earnestness in it. “I am thinking that when His Grace saw you, he was simply smitten, is all. This led him to be a little more reserved than usual. But once the two of you are married, he will have the rest of his life to prove to you that he is a husband worth having.”

Selina scoffed. “I never knew you to be so romantic.”

“An optimist,” Hannah corrected. “One who wishes to see her cousin happy. Is that such a crime?”

She could feel Selina relaxing. “I suppose not.”

“Good.” A nod of the head. “Speaking of which, where is the husband-to-be? I was surprised he did not meet us when we arrived.”

“Oh...” Selina scrunched up her nose. “He is where he has been all day—in my father’s old study, writing to Amelia. Honestly, the man is obsessed!”

Hannah frowned at the comment, having no idea who Amelia was or who she could be. And the way that Selina spoke of her... she got the sense that it was a name that caused some tension. Only why it did...

“Amelia?” Hannah repeated carefully. “Who is?—”

A knock at the door interrupted her.

“Yes!” Selina cried.

The door creaked open, and one of the manor’s many butlers poked his head inside. “Miss Gouldsmith, your mother has sent me to inform you that supper is ready. She insists that you join them immediately.”

“Yes, yes. Tell her we are coming.” Selina waved him away and then spun to face Hannah. “So, how do I look?”

“I just told you,” Hannah said. “Stunning. His Grace will not know what hit him. Now, shall we go?” She held her hand out for Selina to take.

“Not so fast...” Selina gave a wicked grin. She took her by the shoulders, shuffled her around, and then positioned her in front of the mirror. “His Grace has many friends, you know.”

“And?”

“And seeing as you will be meeting him for the first time tonight, I insist that you make an impression. Now...” Her eyes widened. “Tell me what you see.”

Hannah snorted. “Do not be silly.”

“Tell me!”

“I see... I see...” Hannah looked herself over. “Someone who will risk your mother’s wrath if she is not?—”

“No, no. That will not work!” Selina cocked an eyebrow in warning.

Hannah shook her head to herself, even if she was somewhat pleased with the reflection that looked back at her. Like her cousin, she had dark brown hair, almost black in the right lighting, which fell to her waist. Big brown eyes also, like a doe’s, which some called innocent while others called mischievous.

The two cousins had a similar body type, short but curvy. Hannah’s low-cut dress was cinched at the waist—almost scandalous for how much skin she was showing.

Did she want the Duke of Thorne speaking about her to his friends? She told herself that she did not, but deep down, would it be such a bad thing if?—

“Oh!” Seline cried suddenly as she swept her hand over Hannah’s shoulder, accidentally catching the hem, and then tearing it right up the middle. “Oh no!”

“What happened?” Hannah gasped as she swung about, only to tear the shoulder further, for Selina was still holding on.

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“My ring caught on the stitching!” Selina said in a panic. “I am sorry! I—oh no!”

It was a disaster! The entire shoulder of Hannah’s dress had been torn in half, exposing her shoulder and upper arm. The neckline slipped down, unable to stay in place. She held her hand under her bust to keep her breasts covered, looking about wildly as if searching for an answer.

“My dress! I cannot—supper!” she stammered. “I cannot present myself at supper dressed as this! My father would kill me!”

“He is the least of your problems...” Selina bit her lip.

The two girls looked at one another in stunned silence, neither able to comprehend what they could possibly do about this. And then?—

“Oh!” Selina’s eyes widened. “I know!”

“What?”

“I have a spare dress that will fit you.”

“Thank God.” Hannah looked toward the wardrobe. “Where is?—”

“It is in the spare room next door,” Selina cut her off. “My wardrobe was full, so I thought to leave it there. But it will do perfectly.”

“Next door?” Hannah grimaced, glancing toward the closed door, not at all pleased

with the idea of leaving the room in her current state.

“It will be fine,” Selina assured her. “If you slip in there now, you should find the dress hanging in the wardrobe. Simply put it on and meet us downstairs. I will make up an excuse.”

“What excuse?”

Selina’s eyes flashed. “Something scandalous—I am joking! But we do not have time!” She took Hannah by the shoulders and led her toward the door. “You know how my mother is.”

Hannah’s mind raced as she tried to piece together what was happening and what she could possibly do. Not that she had any other real option before her.

“Alright,” she said finally. “Tell them I had to visit the washroom or something. I will be downstairs in less than five minutes.”

“Hurry!”

The two girls slipped out of the room, Selina going right—toward the staircase that led downstairs—and Hannah going left. She hurriedly opened the door to the spare room and stepped inside, making sure to close the door behind her.

The moment the door was closed, Hannah raced across the room, making for the wardrobe. As she went, she let go of the top of her dress, her breasts spilling out in a way that would have been highly embarrassing had it happened at dinner. She saw the spare dress immediately and decided to shimmy out of her dress before putting it on.

She stepped out of her ruined dress and reached for the spare?—

“Well, this is a rather shocking surprise, I must say,” a deep voice spoke suddenly from the corner of the room.

Chapter Two

Hannah froze where she stood as the voice registered. Like a mouse caught in the night, she stood perfectly still as if hoping—praying!—that she had somehow imagined it.

“What on earth are you doing?” The voice was a deep, commanding growl. As angry as it was surprised. “Well?!”

“Oh!”

She came back to herself suddenly, her eyes widening as she spun about, seeing the man who had spoken. He sat at the desk in the back corner of the room, half-bent over as if writing, his brow furrowed as if he still could not quite believe what he was seeing.

“I... I did not... I thought this was...” She stammered and stuttered uncontrollably, her face turning redder by the second.

The man, whoever he was, took a moment to himself. He studied her closely, looking her over, caught between surprise and something else that she could not quite place.

“I am not in the custom of having naked women barge into my bedroom, Madam,” he said evenly. “Although I suppose that I am not against it either.”

It was only then that Hannah realized something of the utmost importance—she was almost completely naked! A light robe made of silk covered her body and nothing more.

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“Oh!” she squealed, dropping to her knees and scrambling to collect her dress, which she then pulled to her chest in an effort to cover herself. But she was flustered, struggling to pull the awkward garment over her body as she fell back into the wardrobe. “I did not see you!”

“Clearly.”

“What are you doing in here?” she demanded, still struggling with the dress. It fell around her, slipping from her fingers, falling beneath her waist, again hoisted up, only to fall around her in a way that still left her exposed. “Selina told me this room was empty!”

“Selina did?” The man frowned to himself. “Ah, you must be Lady Hannah.”

“And you have not answered my question!”

Her back was against the wall, her entire body flushed as she finally managed to get the dress to cover her... mostly.

The man stood up suddenly, kicking the chair back as he approached her. And as he did, he took her in, studying her as if he was trying to see through the dress.

He was a big man, seeming a giant in the small room. Broad shoulders. A powerful gait. Dark features and deep brown eyes that roamed over her. There was a hunger in them, as if he was marveling at her near-naked body, as if he could not force himself to look away.

As he came for her, she did not know if she should cry out in fear...

“I must warn you...” She pressed herself against the wall, shaking with what she told herself was fear, although it was not quite that. “My family is just downstairs.”

“Is that so?”

“I will scream.”

“And why would you do such a thing? You are the one who came to me.”

“I... I...”

He reached where she was standing, stopping so that he was but a foot away. Up this close, he towered over her, and Hannah froze. She tried to meet his eyes, but she could not, sensing the way they ran down her body. A strange thought, but nearly naked as she was, alone, totally vulnerable, she wondered what might happen if she was to drop her dress suddenly—by accident, of course—exposing her body to him and?—

“Here.” His hand shot out and snatched the spare dress from the wardrobe. “You really should cover yourself better.” And then he draped it over her shoulders like a shawl, helping to cover her exposed body.

Hannah blinked in surprise. “Ah... thank—thank you.”

She did not move. She could barely breathe. This man, whoever he was, still stood before her, still watched her, still seemed set on intimidating her, as surely that was his purpose. She could smell him now too, an intoxicating musk that had her legs trembling.

“Are you going to put it on?” he asked. “Surely, you do not intend to attend supper like that?”

“Oh!” Her eyes widened, and she very nearly dropped the dress that she was holding to her body. He saw her do such and smirked. “Are you in the habit of staring at half-naked women?” she snapped.

He scoffed. “This is as new to me as I hope it is to you.”

“Of course, it is!”

“And yet here you stand, not even bothering with the garment you claim to be trying to put on.”

“Please, turn around.” She raised both eyebrows at him.

“Or what? You will scream?”

“I just might anyway,” she growled in warning.

His eyes flashed as if from amusement, and then he turned his back to her. “I was told I could use this room before supper,” he explained. “I was told it would be empty.”

“As was I.”

Hannah eyed the man, his back now to her. She was still only partially covered, two dresses now over her, not entirely certain she could trust the man to keep his back to her while she changed.

“I would ask that you leave the room, thank you.”

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“Afraid I will sneak a peek?”

“You still have not told me who you are,” she huffed as she dropped the torn dress again and then attempted to slide into the spare one. But she was feeling flustered, awkward, and her hands shook uncontrollably.

“Can you not guess?”

Her mind raced as she tried to force her shaking legs to step into the dress. She eyed the back of the strange man to make sure he would not suddenly turn around, all the while wondering who he was. She had never seen this man before, and if she had, she would have certainly remembered him. And considering where she was and what for...

Her eyes went wide in realization, and she let go of the dress again so that it fell to the floor. “Oh no!”

“Ah, there it is finally,” he sighed and turned back around, only to frown at the sight of her standing half-naked again. “I thought you were putting that dress on?”

Her mouth hung open, so shocked that she could not even bring herself to attempt to cover her body. “You are... you are... You...”

“Becoming impatient,” he said simply. He then looked her over, a quick glance back toward the door, and he came to a decision. “Here, if it is such a difficult task for you.” He took a step closer.

“What are you doing!” she gasped and tried to step back, only for her back to hit the wall again.

He dropped to his haunches, right by her thighs, and collected the dress. “What you are unable to do,” he said, “before we are caught in a most compromising position.” He looked up at her and raised an eyebrow. “Unless that is your aim?”

“What? Of course not!”

“Then be a good girl and raise this leg...” His right hand moved to the back of her calf, touching it gently, sliding down its length as he tried to help her lift it into the dress.

His touch sent a pulse through her body, from her calves to her thighs, right to her chest. Body stiffening, breath catching, she froze as his hand wrapped around her leg, and she looked down at him kneeling between her thighs.

A moment. A heartbeat. But he too seemed to pause as if realizing what he was doing. His grip on her calf loosened, but he did not let go, the tips of his fingers gently stroking her skin as if he was trying to summon the will to remove his touch entirely... or increase it further.

“Your leg...” he said, now looking right at her. His dark green eyes took her in, flicking over her body. “If you can just?—”

“Oh!” she gasped, coming back to herself and raising her leg, stepping finally into the dress.

“There,” he said. “That was not so hard.”

One leg in and his hand moved to her other leg, again guiding it into her dress.

“I-I am perfectly capable.”

“I am sure you are.”

Both legs inside the dress now, he took the garment with both hands and rose slowly. He was still standing much too close as his hands moved up her legs and over her curves as he pulled the dress up her body.

“Tha—thank you.” She had no idea what to say, barely able to even speak for how hard she was breathing.

The dress made it to her waist, and there, he paused. Still holding it, he seemed to hesitate, his eyes cast downward... the hesitation brought about by what he had to do next. Pulling the dress over her bosom, an act that would see him touch and grope her in ways that went beyond mere assistance.

And as for Hannah? She knew now was the time to stop him, to step away and tell him that she no longer needed his help. To curse him for getting so close to her in the first place! And yet...

He was standing over her. So big and strong and dominant. His scent was like wood over a fire, dark and mysterious. He was still not looking into her eyes, still staring down, still hesitating about a decision he had not made yet.

“You are the Duke, yes?” she asked softly.

“I am.”

“Perhaps...” She reached down and rested her hand on his own, where he was holding the dress. “Perhaps it is best if I... if I do this part by myself?—”

“Hannah!” her father’s voice cried suddenly from just beyond the door. “Where in the devil are you?!”

“I told her I would not accept tardiness!” Teresa’s voice followed. “This is unacceptable, Phineas!”

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“Do not blame me!”

“The apple does not fall far from the tree!”

“Oh no!” Hannah looked from the Duke to the closed door as the voices came closer.

“Oh no, no, no!”

She could see it happening in slow motion, knowing that there was nothing she could do. Alone with this man. Practically naked, standing before him the way she was! Her father and aunt’s voices getting nearer and nearer by the second. She barely had time to cry out before the door to the room swung open and her father and aunt walked inside.

“Hannah!” her father cried when he saw her there, her dress half ripped from her body, and the Duke’s hands all over her. “What are you—Your Grace!” he stammered when he spotted the Duke.

“What is this?!” Teresa exclaimed as she barged in after him. “Hannah! Your Grace! What is going on here?!”

“Father! Aunt Teresa! This is not what it looks like!”

“I should hope not!” Teresa cried out. “Your Grace! What is the meaning of this?!”

Strangely, the Duke of Thorne did not look nearly as put out as he should have. Calm and collected, he simply stepped away from Hannah and turned to address her father and aunt.

“I assure you, this is not what it looks like.”

“And again I ask, what does it look like?!”

His expression darkened. “A misunderstanding. Lady Hannah came into this room without knowing that it was already occupied by me, and by the time I announced my presence, she had removed her dress. Nothing untoward happened, nor was it intended.”

“Not from what I saw!” Lord Ramsbury shouted in rage. “You... you had your hands all over her!”

“I most certainly did not.”

“Mother, what is going on?” Selina strode into the room, looked around, saw Hannah and the Duke, and her mouth dropped open. “What is... I do not... Your Grace... Hannah!”

“Selina!” Hannah cried. She took a step forward, but that nearly made her dress slip down to her waist again. “It is not what it looks like!” she shouted for what felt like the tenth time. “Please!”

Selina looked at a loss for words, her chin trembling, her face stricken as she looked from Hannah to the Duke. “I... this was not...”

“Selina! Please, you must believe me!”

“This is an outrage!” Teresa stomped her foot. “And you, Your Grace! Never in all my life have I been so ashamed!”

The Duke groaned and rubbed his eyes, still not looking nearly as put out as the

situation demanded. “And as I said, it is not what it looks like. You simply refuse to listen.”

“Phineas!” Lady Ramsbury’s voice carried into the room. “What is all this screaming?”

“Oh no...” Hannah shrank back, clutching desperately at her dress as her mother entered the room.

“Hannah!”

“Mother!”

“What is going on?”

“Is it not obvious?” Teresa snarled. “Your daughter has seduced His Grace!”

“D-do not blame my daughter!” Lord Ramsbury snapped, rounding on his sister. “It is His Grace who has erred! Clearly, he came upon Hannah while she was changing clothes and... and... and sought to seduce her!”

“Now, see here!” the Duke tried to speak up.

“You were jealous!” Teresa pointed an accusatory finger at her brother. “Jealous of the man I found for my daughter. What happened, Phineas? Did you tell her to come in here dressed the way she is? Did you conspire to?—”

“How dare you!

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“You should be ashamed, Your Grace,” Teresa snarled. “As should you, Hannah!”

“Hannah, what were you thinking?!” Lady Ramsbury gasped in outrage. “What are you doing?!”

“Nothing!” Hannah cried, not even certain who she was speaking to. The room was pandemonium, and all she could do was shout. “It was an accident! Truly, nothing happened!”

“Only because we found you before it could!” her aunt declared next. “And thank God we did—the wedding! What are we to do about the wedding?”

“Mother,” Selina began with little conviction, as if worried to voice her concerns. “Surely you cannot expect me to marry this man now? Not after...” She looked at Hannah quickly, then looked away as if from shame.

“And you should not have to!” Teresa took her daughter in her arms. “I would not let him near you now for all the world!”

“What about Hannah?” Lord Ramsbury demanded. “I refuse to believe that she did this of her own accord.”

“What about Selina?!”

“My daughter was accosted!” Lord Ramsbury stomped his foot and clenched his fists. “And I want answers!”

The room seemed to spin around Hannah. Still standing in the corner, with her back pressed against the wall. Still half-naked, her body now trembling, feeling as exposed and embarrassed and utterly mortified as she ever had, it was all she could do to keep herself from collapsing. Which she might have done was it not for the fear that her garments would fall away entirely.

But her world was crashing down around her. Crumbling so quickly that she could scarcely believe it was even happening. Her aunt was furious. Her cousin was heartbroken. Her mother was ashamed. And her father was caught between embarrassment and anger. Shouting. Screaming. Hands wringing. It was a chaos that Hannah could not make sense of.

She knew one thing to be true, however. Regardless of what happened next, her future was well and truly ruined.

Amid the screaming and shouting, the Duke stood in a state of calm. Even among the chaos, it was shocking just how composed he was; he seemed like a giant among squabbling ants. He observed the mess, ignoring the insults and abuse as his mind worked toward what Hannah could not imagine.

And then, finally, he met her eyes. Held them. Looked right at her and through her as he came to a decision of some kind. At that moment, for a brief second, the chaos seemed to quiet, such was the power and command radiating from him.

“I want answers!” Lord Ramsbury shouted.

“The wedding is off!” Teresa cried.

“I cannot believe this has happened!” Selina wept.

“Hannah! What do you have to say for yourself?” Lady Ramsbury demanded.

“What about His Grace!” Lord Ramsbury parried. “He was the one who?”

“Enough!” the Duke suddenly bellowed with such force that it washed over the small room like a wave, silencing everyone as if they had been struck by lightning. “Enough,” he repeated, his voice softening to a rumbling growl.

He stood in the room’s center, all eyes on him. And while he might have sounded angry by the way he shouted, he did not look it. Cool and collected, was how Hannah saw him. Frustrated also, but certainly still in control.

“Lady Langham,” he began, turning to Teresa. “You disappoint me greatly. I have explained what occurred here, and yet, like some hysterical fishwife who had found her husband in bed with another woman, you have refused to listen. I would have thought that you of all people would know me well enough to at least give me the benefit of the doubt. Clearly, I overestimated you, holding you in too high an esteem.”

“Your—Your Grace,” she stammered. “Forgive me, but?”

“You wish to cancel the wedding? Even after I have given you my word that there was no need for this level of alarm—as if my word is not enough?” He glared at her. “Fine, I will not stop you.”

“I—”

“And, Miss Gouldsmith,” he continued, looking at Selina, “I am truly sorry for what you think have happened here. For as embarrassed as you are surely feeling, you must know that no offense was committed against you. A misunderstanding is all this is.”

Selina’s mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. The tears still flowed though, her mortification still apparent.

“Again, you wish to cancel the wedding? I will not stop you, nor would I agree to such a thing now, having witnessed this absurd carry-on. And, Lord Ramsbury...” He finally turned to the Earl, who was still looking dumbstruck. “I apologize for what you have witnessed.”

“I...” Lord Ramsbury struggled to find the words.

“We just wish to know what happened here,” Lady Ramsbury interjected. “Your Grace, surely you understand our concern. Our daughter...” She looked at Hannah. “She has been found naked in your room. How can you expect anything less than outrage?”

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The Duke nodded in understanding. “And as I said already—twice now, in fact.” A disappointed glance at Teresa. “This entire thing is a misunderstanding. Your daughter...”

He looked at Hannah, who bowed her head, feeling a mix of shame of nerves because, despite the misunderstanding and the lack of fault, she still felt responsible. Why, she could not even bring herself to look at Selina, for the guilt was too great.

“... she did not know I was in this room when she came in, and she removed her clothes before I had a chance to warn her of my presence.”

“But how is that possible?!” Lord Ramsbury cried, mustering the courage. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but that seems highly dubious.”

The Duke raised an eyebrow at him, and he shrunk back. “You still doubt me? What is more, you doubt your own daughter?”

Lord Ramsbury opened his mouth to argue but then caught his tongue, seemingly thinking better of it.

“Fine.” The Duke shrugged. “I see that nothing I say will convince you otherwise. What is more, if I were to leave here right now, I fear the rumors that will spread...” He cast a warning glare at Teresa. “Your daughter’s name might not mean much to you, Lord Ramsbury, but my own name will not be sullied because of you. Therefore, I have an offer.”

A pause as he looked right at Lord Ramsbury, who took a moment to understand

what was happening. “I-I am listening.”

Hannah could not explain how she knew what was about to happen, yet somehow she did. Her body flushed red, and her stomach twisted. She might have cried out in protest if she had been able to summon the courage to do so.

“I propose that in lieu of marrying Miss Gouldsmith, I marry your daughter, Lady Hannah, instead.”

Chapter Three

“Ex—excuse me?” Lord Ramsbury stammered, bewildered.

“Did I stutter?” the Duke responded coolly. “I proposed that I marry your daughter, Lady Hannah?—”

“No!” Hannah cried suddenly, the words escaping her lips as if of their own volition.

All heads turned to look at her, and again she was reminded of her current, semi-naked state. Her eyes went wide, and she hastened to cover herself further, glancing around for a savior of some sort to sweep in and take her far from here.

But not before she made certain that the Duke’s proposal was not taken seriously.

“Father! There is no way—surely, you cannot consider this!”

Her father looked at her for a minute, shook his head, and then turned to the Duke. “A marriage proposal? You are serious?”

“Do I not look serious?”

“I...” Lord Ramsbury hesitated, and then the smallest of smiles crept up the side of his face. “Interesting...”

“Father!” Hannah wanted to go to him but feared removing herself from the wall, for it was her only means of protection. “You cannot be serious! This is... this... he is set to marry Selina!”

“N-no!” Selina blurted out. Her eyes were wide as if from fear, as if the very idea of marrying the Duke terrified her. “Please... I cannot... not after this.”

“Selina, quiet!” her mother snapped and then turned to the Duke, her tone softening. “Your Grace, let us consider this before?—”

“Mother, no!” Selina gasped and took a step back. “I—” She hesitated as she looked at her mother’s warning scowl. “This is too much!”

With that, she turned on her heels and sprinted out of the room.

“Selina!” her mother shouted after her, looking as if she would give chase, only to turn toward the Duke again. “Your Grace, this is all very... hasty. How about we take the night and?—”

“A night will not change my mind,” he cut her off. “You have made your feelings toward me clear, and nothing you say will alter that. I am sorry, but the wedding is off.”

“You!” Teresa pointed an accusatory finger at Lord Ramsbury. “This was your doing! I knew it!”

“Oh, do not be ridiculous, Teresa! Besides, I have not yet agreed to His Grace’s proposal.”

“Phineas...” Lady Ramsbury took her husband by the arm and raised both eyebrows at him. “We cannot possibly turn this offer down.”

“I did not say that I would.”

“Father!” Hannah gasped. “Surely, you are not?—”

“Quiet!” Lord Ramsbury snapped. “You are in enough trouble as it is.”

“Me?! I did not do anything!”

A ridiculous claim to make, seeing as she stood half-naked in the room. But she had to say something! Hannah had never felt so utterly useless and powerless in her entire life. Despite being half-naked, she felt invisible as the strings of her life were pulled and manipulated before her, unable to do or say anything to stop it.

“I have never been so embarrassed!” Teresa hissed, throwing her hands in the air. “And you, Phineas, you should be ashamed!”

“And I told you, I have not agreed yet!” Lord Ramsbury looked at the Duke, and his expression changed entirely. “We will need to talk terms, Your Grace. Obviously, I cannot just accept?—”

“Father!”

“Of course,” the Duke said coolly, all but ignoring Hannah now. “Shall we adjourn to somewhere a little more private to discuss?”

Hannah never got the chance to see if they did indeed adjourn to somewhere more private, for no sooner had he asked the question than both her sisters walked into the

room.

“What on earth is going on?” Charlotte asked as she walked in. “I just saw Selina and...”

She spotted Hannah standing there, and her mouth dropped open, hitting the floor for how quickly it fell.

“Hannah!” Beatrice swept in. “What are you doing?!”

The pandemonium continued as the two sisters converged on Hannah, finally acting with some sense and helping her to pull her dress up, and then they led her out of the room. Hannah might have fought them, as she wished to stay and protest this impending marriage of which she was the center. But she was worn out, broken, barely able to think let alone protest.

Her sisters led her down the hall and to another bedroom. The walls spun around her, and the floor seemed to sway. She could barely walk, barely think, so out of her mind with shock and surprise and anger and fear and every other emotion in existence that it wasn't until she was sitting at the foot of her sister's bed with a blanket around her shoulders that she even realized what was happening.

And even then, it took her a few more minutes to process it.

“... you have only yourself to blame,” Charlotte was saying as she paced the room. She was the middle sister of the three and by far the most proper and prim. “Honestly, Hannah, what were you thinking?”

“Oh, it's not her fault,” Beatrice sighed. She was the ‘wild’ one of the three sisters, with a wicked sense of humor and an inclination for the outrageous. She sat beside Hannah and rubbed her back. “By the sounds of it, it was an accident.”

“Who doesn’t check whether a room is empty before stripping off?”

“Clearly, Hannah doesn’t.” Beatrice chuckled.

“And the Duke...” Charlotte clicked her tongue. “Can you believe he proposed marriage? What on earth was he thinking?”

“That he wants to marry.” Beatrice shrugged. “And soon. You know how these dukes are. Although to be fair, we both do.” She smirked.

Both Beatrice and Charlotte were married to dukes, and both had entered these marriages under less-than-ideal circumstances. Charlotte had been forced to marry the Duke of Hayward because Beatrice was supposed to marry him but fled at the last minute, and Beatrice had married the Duke of Walford because she’d tricked him into a scandal to avoid marrying a baron who she wasn’t so keen on.

Neither were love marriages initially, even though romance had blossomed later on. From what Hannah knew of their marriages, both her sisters were in love and very happy. Which might have inspired her if it didn’t fill her with dread.

Even more so when she looked at them both, noting the acceptance on their faces... even the excitement. They were not there to help, but to convince her that maybe things won’t be so bad. As if!

“A marriage of convenience,” Charlotte sighed. “As if that’s the only reason to ever marry.”

“It is starting to look that way,” Beatrice agreed. “Although I think we can both attest to the success of such arrangements. I know I can.” Another smirk.

Hannah shrugged off her sister’s hand and then jumped to her feet. “Do not even

think it!”

“Think what?” Beatrice asked.

“That you will be able to convince me that this isn’t the most awful, horrible, tragedy-stricken thing to ever occur! I do not want to marry the Duke of Thorne!”

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“Want rarely comes into it, I am afraid,” Charlotte sighed.

“But he is supposed to marry Selina!”

“Not anymore,” Beatrice pointed out.

“And Father!” Hannah added desperately. “He will just... he will just sign my life away like that.” She snapped her fingers. “Surely, he will not want me to marry someone Selina objected to? That is?—”

“Good politics,” Charlotte cut her off. “I mean, he is a duke, Hannah. There is little Father will not do to secure such a marriage. Again, I speak from experience.” She looked pointedly at Beatrice.

“Oh, how often are you going to bring that up?” Beatrice snapped.

“Only when it serves to make a point.”

“You should be thanking me!”

“I do nearly every day.”

“Enough!” Hannah shouted over them. She was beginning to gather herself, having overcome the initial embarrassment and the shock of it all. The reality was setting in, and it was not one she was all too pleased with. “I will not marry His Grace. Father cannot make me.”

Beatrice snorted. “Would you like to make a bet?”

“But what about Selina?” Hannah asked desperately. “She was the one set to marry him.”

“Yes, well, that clearly isn’t happening.”

“She will never forgive me,” Hannah groaned as the guilt from what had happened began to sink in. “How could she?”

“There is little use fretting about it now.” Charlotte sighed with sympathy. “What’s done is done and?—”

“No. I do not accept that. I cannot accept that.”

Hannah began to pace as she tried to form some semblance of a plan. The Duke was meant to marry her cousin, also her best friend. And if she were to marry him instead... well, Selina might never speak to her again!

That, she simply could not bear.

What she needed to do was convince the Duke that Selina was the better option and that she herself was even more of a liability than anything he might have imagined.

“Accept it, Sister,” Charlotte said. “Even now, Father is likely doing everything that he can to lock His Grace in before there is even a chance he might change his mind. It is done.”

“Father, yes,” Hannah agreed as a plan began to take shape in her mind. “But His Grace... I will simply have to demonstrate first-hand that marriage to me should be the last thing he wants. Seeing as he agreed to this marriage to avoid a scandal, what

will he do if I threaten him with an infinitely worse scandal than that?"

Charlotte narrowed her eyes. "And how do you plan on doing that?"

Beatrice clicked her tongue but could not hide her smile. "Sounds like my sort of plan."

To that, Hannah gave a wicked grin, her eyes flashing because she knew now what she had to do. She had no doubt that by now, the Duke and her father had come to an agreement, one which would likely see her married before the end of the Season. But it was hastily arranged and did not take into account the most important factor: how determined she was not to marry.

What the Duke needed was to be reminded of this, and as far as Hannah was concerned, there was but one way she could do it. Perhaps not the most tactful plan ever devised, but after having already undressed in front of the man, and having been caught by her entire family half-naked, tact wasn't something that she was too concerned about.

It was well after the house had retired to sleep that Hannah found herself standing outside of the Duke's bedroom door. She had been patient tonight, lying in her bed, listening until even the sounds of the house's many servants scuttling about faded into obscurity. And only then, when she was certain that she would not be caught out, did she slip out of her room and sneak down the hallway.

She stood by his door, mentally preparing herself for what she needed to do. The Duke was supposed to marry Selina, not her. And he would marry Selina. From what Hannah could understand, the Duke had decided to marry her instead because a scandal might arise from the situation they had been caught in. Surely, he still preferred Selina to Hannah? And surely, if he was to be made to understand how much better Selina was for him than Hannah, he would quickly change his mind again?

As to how Hannah would make him see such a thing? Well, one scandal got them into this mess, so why not another to get them out of it? There was, after all, a reason that she was dressed only in a very light slip...

She took a deep breath. A final moment to steady her beating heart. Then she knocked lightly on the door, held her breath in anticipation, and exhaled when she heard him call, "Who is it?"

She did not respond, instead pushing the door open and stepping inside wordlessly.

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“Lady Hannah?” the Duke asked from across the room. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“I had to see you.” She closed the door behind her and pressed her back against it as she scanned the room, finding him sitting at the writing desk. “I could not wait any longer.”

“Wait for what?”

She smirked as she forced herself to look right at him—a wicked stare that she hoped spoke to her intent. A sort of hunger in her eyes that she was certain the Duke would be able to read instantly.

And sure enough, he furrowed his brow as he took in her meaning, only for his face to drop suddenly. “Oh, I see.”

“Do not sound so surprised.” She giggled. “Surely, you felt it too?”

“And what was it that I felt, exactly?”

She rolled her eyes. “Come now, Your Grace. There is no need for games. I...” She swallowed, feeling her nerves begin to build. “I saw the way you looked at me earlier. And...” She swallowed again, forcing herself to look at him. “And the way you touched me.”

Still, he sat at his desk, cloaked in shadow, head tilted as he took her in. It was hard to gauge what was on his mind, for his face was mostly hidden in the darkness, and his

eyes were all but impossible to see. Just a hulking figure who, she hoped, was beginning to wonder what on earth he had gotten himself into.

“I am afraid that you will need to be more clear,” he said eventually

Hannah was so darn nervous that it was all she could do to keep her body from shaking. She was still pressed against the door, using it to steady herself, but she could not stay there forever. Especially if she wished to sell what it was that she was trying to do.

A deep breath and she reminded herself that this was necessary and that, if she had read the man correctly, it would work. It had to! A few minutes of shame and she would be free...

“Do you really think it was an accident, what happened earlier?” she purred, pushing herself off the door and walking deeper into the room. “Me, stripping down like that in front of you, as if I had no idea that you were in the room?” She giggled and shook her head. “I did not take you for a fool, Your Grace.”

“Is that so?” he asked evenly.

“My only regret is that we were so quickly interrupted. Although...” She let out another giggle, followed by a smirk, as she reached the middle of the room. “I suppose we can make up for that, can’t we?”

“And that is why you are here? To pick up where we left off?”

“Why else?”

“You surprise me, Lady Hannah.” He was so calm and collected, nowhere near as surprised as she had hoped. “I did not take you for that type.”

“Oh, well...” She shrugged. “You do not know me that well, is why. I am not like my cousin.”

“Clearly not.”

“Selina is...” She felt sick, utterly ashamed. But this was for Selina, and it was that higher goal that forced her to continue this charade. “She is far more proper than I. With her, you would have had a boring marriage. But with me...” A forced smirk that made her stomach churn. “Let us just say it will be the complete opposite.”

Her heart beat so furiously in her chest that it hurt. And her body ran so hot that she could feel herself sweating through her slip. But she stayed the course, kept her hungry gaze fixed on him, waiting for him to do what she knew he would do—denounce her actions as scandalous and uncouth and unbecoming of a lady.

Hopefully, it would make him realize the error he had made. Hopefully, come tomorrow, everything would be back to the way it had been.

It was a risk. But it was a risk that she had no choice but to take...

The Duke did not answer her right away. Still cloaked in shadow, his hulking mass watched and studied her for far longer than she had expected. Surely, it was because of shock? That he was unable to form the words needed to expel her from his room and then his life. Surely?!

“I must say,” he spoke eventually, “this is most unexpected.”

“And as I said, you simply don’t know me,” she purred. “I am unlike any lady you have met before. My cousin, especially.”

“Clearly.”

“And if that is too much for you...” A casual shrug, another giggle. “You best tell me now, lest we get into all sorts of trouble together. In fact, if this is too much for you, I am sure that Selina will happily take you back.”

“I did not say it was too much for me.”

She blinked. “Ah... excuse me?”

“On the contrary...” The Duke rose slowly from his chair. “I knew from the moment I saw you the exact type of lady you are. And you, Lady Hannah...” He chuckled deeply. “Are the exact type of lady I have been looking for.”

“I-I am?” She took a step back as he rounded his desk.

“Oh yes,” he growled. “Very, very much so. While I am somewhat surprised by this late-night visit, that is not to say I am not pleased by it either. It is as if you have read my mind...” Another growl rumbled deep in his chest.

He was bigger than she had remembered. As he strode toward her, his breadth was such that the room seemed to shrink around him. There was a purpose behind each step, a power to his gait that made Hannah feel hopeless and weak and completely at his mercy.

This was not the plan at all! She had completely misread the man, thinking him to be a typical gentleman of the ton, a proper gentleman, not one who would welcome an unmarried woman in his bedroom late at night. One who would be ashamed at the thought!

Her heart skipped a beat, and her legs began to shake as she felt the blood drain from her face. The Duke was wearing a shirt, but it was unbuttoned, his chest and abdominal muscles glistening with a light sweat. His pants, too, were undone, and he was barefoot. He was practically naked, or in the process of getting so, and while Hannah felt a spike of fear for the position she put herself in... dammit, she could not

help but stare.

He came to her, she took a step back, but he was on her before she could do much of anything.

“I... I must warn you, if my father finds out?—”

“He will not,” the Duke interrupted her, looming over her now. “I promise I will not tell.”

“I may be loud,” she warned, not even certain what that meant. “Too loud.”

“There are things we can do about that.” His voice was low and deep, and she could feel his warm breath on her cheeks as he leaned in closer.

“But Selina,” she tried again. “Surely, you would prefer a wife who is not as scandalous as I. If people were to find out about this...” She swallowed. “I know how much your name means to you.”

“Forget about your cousin. “ He chuckled, and his eyes flashed. “It was you who came to me, remember? Let us not play this game. You want me. I want you. Why pretend any longer?”

“I—”

“Am shaking...” He trailed a finger down her cheek, his touch making her tremble even harder. “Let us see if we can make you shudder.”

He stood less than a foot from her. Tall and commanding, she was forced to look up to meet his eyes—forcing herself not to gawk at his muscular chest. His deep green eyes drank her in, his toothy smile was enchanting, and for a moment, Hannah

beganto wonder if maybe married life would not be such a bad thing, after all?

No! That was not why she was here. Selina was who she concentrated on, and for that reason, Hannah knew that a final push was needed. One more chance to remind the Duke that she was a no-good sort who he would do best to stay away from.

“Per—perfect,” she purred, and then she reached up and took his hand, holding it to her face as she looked into his eyes. As nervous as she felt, there was something else there that she could not ignore. A fire brewing inside of her... a desire that she had not known was possible until now. “What shall we do?”

He chuckled deeply. “You are the one that came to me. Surely, you have an idea?”

“I—”

“Or do you need some help?” His eyes twinkled, and she gasped, her breath catching as suddenly this plan she had concocted took on a new meaning.

She had not wanted to marry this man. She had felt guilty for it. Awful about the way things had happened. But now, with how he looked at her, Hannah began to consider the other side of the coin—that being the benefits of being trapped in a marriage with such a... such a... such amanas him.

He growled as he wrapped his large hand around her waist. She gasped, feeling her pulse quicken as her heart leapt in her throat. That same sensation grew inside of her, one that began between her thighs and built in her stomach until her body ran so hot that she thought she might catch fire.

And as he leaned in, Hannah found herself slowly closing her eyes, her lips parted, waiting for a kiss that she had not known she wanted until it was right upon her...

She felt his lips graze her own, his warm breath touch her skin, another growl leave his lips, and she could barely take it.

Kiss me! Do it!

She wanted to grab his head and pull his face toward her own, but then he moved his lips toward her ear. She gasped, for she thought he was about to nibble on it, and she nearly melted when she felt his breath on her earlobe.

“You must think I am an idiot,” he breathed softly.

Her eyes shot open. “Excuse me?”

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“An idiot,” he repeated. “A moron. The last man on this earth. You must if you thought a plan as blatantly obvious as this one would work.”

“I...” She had no idea what he was talking about. “What are you?—”

“Drop the act.”

He let go of her waist suddenly and stepped back. Hannah felt her stomach drop. The hunger in his eyes was gone, replaced with disgust and anger and disappointment, most of all.

“It is beneath us both.”

Hannah’s mind raced. “The act? What are you... I am not sure what... There is no act, Your Grace.”

He laughed. “And still you keep at it. I must give you full marks for your commitment. I would be impressed if I wasn’t so perturbed with this entire charade.”

The Duke knew what she had come here to do. Somehow, he had figured it out. And while a part of Hannah was almost relieved, seeing now that he had simply been playing with her, she was disappointed, for the thought of his lips on her own still lingered in her mind. And dammit if her heart wasn’t still racing.

Strange...

“Do not look so surprised.” He chuckled, thankfully misreading the look on her face.

“Do you really think that I would have agreed to marry you in the first place if I did not know what I was getting myself into?”

“Getting yourself into?” she echoed. “I have no idea what that is supposed to mean.”

“Oh, I do not mean likethat,” he said acidly. “I know you are not so verbose as you are pretending to be. But you are trouble, Lady Hannah. There is a good reason you are still unwed, and it has everything to do with your character.”

Ah, now she understood. Not that this made her feel any better.

“How dare you!” she hissed. “That is not... that has nothing to do with... it is my choice that I have not married yet.”

He chuckled. “Whatever makes you feel better.”

“And what about you, then?” she accused. “If I am such a... a troublemaker, why have you agreed to this farce of a marriage? Surely, a duke like you can have his pick of any woman he desires.”

“I do.”

“Selina!” she tried. “Surely, Selina is a better option than I! And there is no reason you cannot go back to her. I know Aunt Teresa would?—”

“I do not care what Lady Langham wants. She slighted me. Calling my honor into question as she did, refusing to listen when I gave her every reason to.” His tone was cold. “No, there is nothing in this world that would make me reconsider marrying her daughter.”

Hannah’s world turned on her. This entire plan was folly! Even before she walked

into this room, her plan had never stood a chance, the only possible outcome being her total and utter embarrassment.

“And what if I do not wish to marry you? Did you think of that?”

He chuckled coldly. “You ask the question as if I should care.”

Her eyes flashed with anger, fueled partly by her embarrassment and also by the total and utter contempt that he seemed to have toward her. This marriage, as far as he was concerned, had nothing to do with her. She was but a pawn on the chessboard for him to move around as he saw fit.

The Duke saw the look in her eyes and laughed. “Oh, do not give me that look. If anything, you should be thanking me for saving you from becoming a spinster, as would most likely have happened. Admit it.”

“I’d rather be a spinster than marry a scoundrel such as yourself. Honestly, it is no wonder that you have remained single this long. I suspect you had no choice in the matter.”

He frowned and tilted his head. “Is that what you have heard? That I am a scoundrel?”

The truth was, Hannah didn’t know much about the Duke. Rumors of a marriage from long ago that had ended when his wife died. The odd word spoken about his reputable character, the respect held for him among his peers, but nothing untoward or noteworthy. By all accounts, he was very much marriage material, and any lady would be glad to find herself in Hannah’s position.

Well, almost any lady.

“If the boot fits,” she said. “The way you were just behaving, I have half a mind to go and tell my father.”

He scoffed. “Oh, please. That was for show. I knew what you were doing...” He waved her off. “An interesting ploy, and quite the gamble, I must say. Tell me, Lady Hannah, what would you have done if I did not pull away?”

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Her eyes went wide, and she felt her cheeks flush. “I would have pushed you away. And then told my father that you attacked me.”

“Ha. If you say so. But you need not worry,” he continued, folding his hands behind his back. “I am aware that you have no desire to marry me, Lady Hannah. You have made that perfectly clear.”

“How very perceptive of you.”

“And if it makes you feel any better, I am not exactly thrilled to be marrying you either.”

She blinked at that, not sure whether to be happy or insulted. “What does that mean?”

“This marriage, like the one intended with Miss Gouldsmith, is solely for convenience. In our circles, certain things are expected, marriage being one of them. So, although we shall marry—and yes,” he added with emphasis, making sure to look her in the eye, “this marriage is going ahead, do not worry yourself with expectations.”

“Expectations...” She frowned at the wording, for it felt like a dismissal—water being thrown over a fire.

“I will not touch you,” he clarified. “I will not force myself on you. We may be man and wife in name, but that is where it ends.”

“R-really?”

“Yes.” He laughed, likely at the surprise on her face. “And to hammer home the point, let us go one step further. Once we are wed, I hardly expect the two of us to see or speak to one another. Surely, that is something that you can appreciate? With me being the scoundrel that I am.”

“Well, that is...” The words left her before they came, as she had no idea what to say to that most bizarre announcement.

Hannah did not know if she should have felt thrilled or insulted. Oh, sure, deep down she knew that this was as good an option as she could have hoped for, seeing as this marriage was proceeding. A marriage of convenience with a man who refused to touch her. It was the best of a bad situation.

Yet, on the other hand, it felt like a slap in the face. The Duke had already seen her practically naked. He had witnessed her at her most vulnerable, even getting so close that she could still feel his lips softly grazing her own. And his grip on her waist! The way her body shook when she thought he was going to finally kiss her.

That thought alone had her heart racing, wondering what it might have been like to complete the action. Clearly, the Duke was not of the same mind.

Was he rejecting her for a specific reason? Or because he had seen her without her clothes on and didn’t desire her? And if that was the case, why did she care?

It was all very confusing, leaving Hannah standing in silence as her mind raced to come to terms with everything he had said. And most of all, most importantly, her true feelings about the man she was set to wed.

“That is enough for one night,” the Duke said suddenly.

“Excuse me?” She blinked, snapping herself back into the moment.

“It is late,” he said simply. “I am tired. And I would hate to think what might actually happen if we were seen alone together—and do not get any ideas,” he warned her.

“I wasn’t...” she said a little too softly. “I mean, I wouldn’t.”

“Good.” He walked right past her and popped the door open. “I know you might still be struggling to reckon with the turn of events today, Lady Hannah, but if all goes to plan, our marriage should be perfectly agreeable. I even dare say pleasant.”

“That is... good to know,” she muttered vaguely, not at all certain it sounded like that at all.

“Good night,” he said, resting a hand on the small of her back and guiding her out of his room. Almost shoving her. “We shall speak shortly, I am sure.”

“Yes—I mean, no!”

At the door, she suddenly came back to her senses. The Duke had taken complete control of the situation, and if she allowed it as such, it spoke volumes to what their marriage might turn into.

“Not until you give me some answers.”

He frowned at her. “Answers?”

“Yes.” She forced herself to meet his gaze. “If you expect me to just... to just go along with this marriage—if it could even be called that. I want to know, why even bother? What is the point of marriage if you are not going to... to...” Her cheeks flushed, but she held his stare. “To touch me.”

He smirked. “Is that what you want? For me to touch you?”

“What I want is to understand,” she said defiantly. “Otherwise, I will... I will... I will... not make life easy on you.”

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What a pathetic threat, and she knew it as soon as the words left her mouth.

The Duke looked amused for a moment, only for a shadow to pass behind his eyes. His expression turned steely, and he stepped toward her suddenly, pulling the door closed and trapping her between himself and the wood.

“You want me to touch you? Is that it?”

“I—” The words got caught in her throat. Fear. Excitement. That feeling of utter helplessness... all the same, as far as she could tell.

“You want me that bad?” he growled, bearing down on her. Their bodies were close. His teeth were bared. The look in his eyes similar to that of a lion cornering its prey.

“I never said that I did,” she whispered, her body shaking, her mind turning blank as she seemed to forget what she was protesting.

Why would she in her right mind turn down a marriage to this man? The thrill she felt trapped between him and the door like this was so great that she could not imagine a marriage now where he did not wish to touch her. Surely, those were just words.

“Let me be clear, Lady Hannah. If I wanted to touch you, I would have...” He reached up and hooked a finger under her chin. She gasped and leaned into it, pushing her lips out because oh how she wanted to tempt him. “It is I who will decide such a thing, not you. And as for my reasons...”

“Y-yes?”

“They are not your concern.” Suddenly, he dropped his hand and stepped back.

“W-what?” She half moved as if to follow him, but he was already opening the door behind her.

“Good night, Lady Hannah.” He stepped forward so quickly, his hulking mass so powerful, that she reacted on instinct, stepping through the open door and into the hallway. “I will be seeing you.”

And then, without so much as another word, he slammed the door shut in her face.

Hannah stayed where she was, staring vaguely at the closed door, her mind still adrift and fractured as she tried to make sense of everything that had just happened. She had gone in there to try and convince the Duke to take her cousin back, had failed miserably, and very nearly given in to a temptation that she suspected would never have occurred, for the Duke seemed to enjoy teasing her.

But that temptation... Her body was still hot, and her knees wobbled as she walked down the hallway to her room. Oh, she wished to feel guilty for her cousin. She wished to curse this arrangement she was now trapped in. But despite those efforts, even she was not such a fool as to believe either of those was a concern.

This marriage, whatever it became, whatever it was, would not be boring. Of that, she had no doubt.

Chapter Four

“What do you mean, he left?” Hannah exclaimed in shock when her father told her why the Duke was not joining them to break his fast the following morning.

“Exactly as I said,” Lord Ramsbury responded simply as he bit into a piece of cake,

the crumbs falling down his front. "He left with the rising sun. But do not take it as a bad sign," he assured her. "He made sure to seek me out before leaving."

"Is that right?" she muttered bitterly, feeling her stomach sink.

"Yes, yes," he said. "He wanted to assure me that the wedding is still on and his reasons for leaving have to do with the arrangements that need to be made."

"Arrangements?"

"Breaking off his engagement to your cousin, of course. Not to mention the need to apply for a special license to marry you. But do not worry yourself with that." He flicked his wrist. "He assured me that he will take care of it, and then he shall call on you when the wheels are in motion."

"That is... that is..."

"Good to hear!" Lord Ramsbury said merrily, looking pleased with himself.

"Yes." Hannah slumped into her chair, staring blankly ahead, not at all sure that 'good to hear' was how she would have described this development. Not that she could think of anything better to say.

She did not get much sleep at all the previous night. But that should not have come as a surprise. What surprised her were the reasons why.

When she returned to her room, she did what she could to feel angry, for that felt like the most reasonable response. The way the Duke had tricked her, played with her, purposefully humiliated her for no other reason than to see if he could. She hadn't had a chance to form an opinion about the man just yet, but by the time she crawled into bed, she decided that she did not like him very much at all.

What was more, the terms of this marriage only angered her further. It wasn't enough that she was being forced into this marriage, but it was to be a marriage with a man who wanted nothing to do with her! He did not want to kiss her. He did not want to fulfill his husbandly duties. By the sounds of things, he barely wanted to see her once they were pronounced man and wife!

A marriage was all he wished for, the perception of one, so that he could then go about his day, caring not that he was all but ruining her life.

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But then she started to drift off to sleep and her thoughts shifted, her mind wandering to that near kiss, the way her heart had thumped in her chest, the excitement she had felt when she thought he was going to take her. Not to mention what happened just before he kicked her out of his room, when he pressed her against his door, completely dominating her as he bore down on her and said in no uncertain terms that if he wished it, he could do with her as he pleased.

And how much she wished he might do just that...

She tossed and turned and threw back her bedsheets for she felt too warm. And while she might have dared to feel some sense of excitement, as the man who was giving her these thoughts was to be her husband, he had already told her that they would not lie together in any capacity. Not so much as a kiss! So, why feel anything other than fury? Which was exactly what consumed Hannah the following morning.

“Personally, I was rather pleased with his eagerness,” her father continued as he took another bite of his cake. “With how rushed everything has been, the very fact that he is acting so quickly bodes well. I suspect that the two of you shall be married long before the end of the Season.”

“Lovely...”

“And I must say, Hannah.” Finally, he looked at her. “I am nothing but impressed with your decorum. When I think of how your sisters behaved when they were set to wed, well...” He chuckled. “Let me just say, you are proving yourself to be far and away more mature than they were. It is not even close.”

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling as if lost in a memory.

As for Hannah? She forced a smile, not at all sure how she should be feeling about any of this. Pleased that her father was so happy with her? Furious that the Duke had left without a word? Annoyed that she was being treated like a pawn on a chessboard, for if her father was paying her any attention, then he would see that she was not handling this nearly as well as he liked to think.

This marriage was happening, and Hannah realized now that there was nothing that she could do to change that. But that was no longer the problem.

Although she had long since convinced herself that she did not wish to marry as many young women did, she was also forced to admit that the idea of a happy marriage to a man whom she loved might not have been such a bad thing. Her sisters were perfectly happy and in love with their husbands, happy to tell her how wonderful the experience was, as if it was a thing to be coveted and sought and, indeed, worshipped. And now that Hannah knew she would never have this... well, it left her feeling somewhat empty inside.

Last night, when the Duke had told her the specifics of this arrangement, she had struggled to decide how exactly she felt about it. Happy that she did not have to pretend to love a man whom she did not know? Or devastated that he wanted nothing to do with her?

The Duke was a man she did not know at all. The Duke was a man she might never get to know. A marriage of convenience was what she was now trapped in—a marriage of coldness and separation and loneliness. Worse still, she would remember the way he had treated her, teasing her and bearing down on her as if he meant to take her right then and there, only to pull away and remind her that he never would.

Hannah had no choice but to admit that she was attracted to the Duke. After a

sleepless night, the word ‘attracted’ fell painfully short. But what was the point of this desire if it would go unfulfilled? What was the point of being married to a man she wanted if he did not want her in return?

What he wanted was to pretend that she was not his wife. What he wanted was to treat her as a stranger in his house. Fine. If that was the case, then that was exactly what he would get. Hannah might never be happy, but she also refused to let him control her.

A marriage of personal freedom was how she decided to think of this arrangement. A marriage that was not a marriage at all. A marriage that she would pretend did not exist, living her life now as she had always done—any way that she chose.

“You!” her aunt cried suddenly as she strode into the room. “I see you are still here!”

“Good morning, Teresa,” Lord Ramsbury groaned.

“I thought you might have shown some sense of decorum and left before I woke up this morning. It is the least you could have done.”

“And as I explained yesterday, I did nothing wrong!”

“Oh, nothing wrong!” Teresa huffed. “Is that how you see it?”

“Aunt Teresa,” Hannah interjected, “is Selina awake? I would very much like to see her.”

“She is not in her room,” Teresa said without looking at her. “I believe she had gone for a ride. Likely, she will not be back for some time.”

“Oh...” Hannah’s stomach twisted with guilt.

The marriage was one thing, but knowing now how much she had hurt her cousin... she supposed it was just one more tragedy to add to her life.

She wished desperately to apologize for what had happened. That was assuming that her cousin ever spoke to her again.

Married to a man she did not know. Hated by her cousin for stealing him. Alone in this world because nobody seemed to care.

Life, Hannah knew, was about to get infinitely worse for her. Likely, it would continue to do so, long after she and the Duke were pronounced man and wife.

How had it come to this?

Chapter Five

What a week!

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As the Duke of Thorne, otherwise known as Frederick, gently led his horse down the driveway of Ramsbury Estate, he could not escape the feelings of stress and frustration that had dogged him the entire week, weighing heavily on his shoulders in a way that had him hunched over in his saddle, such that his back was hurting him.

It had been messy. It had been hectic. It had been one of those weeks that he was glad to see the end of. Yet, when the week was finally over, he was not so out of the woods yet that he could finally relax. Before him stood one final task, a task that promised to be as painful as it was drawn out as it was awkward as it was tedious.

Wedding preparations. A task that no man should have to suffer through, yet one that had befallen him, as the strange circumstances surrounding this wedding all but demanded it.

“One more day,” Frederick muttered to himself as he approached the house. “One more day, Frederick. Then it will all be over...”

He did not want to involve himself in this most arduous procedure. But he felt that it was owed. Considering the hazardous nature of this arrangement, how quickly it was all happening, and the state of his bride-to-be, it was best that he involve himself to ensure that nothing untoward happened, for he wanted a wedding without complications and without drama.

To be married. To have that little annoyance sorted. To be able to put this all behind him and continue on with the rest of his life in peace... if such a thing was possible.

But before any of that might happen...

He presented himself at the front door and knocked loudly. It swung open a moment later, and he was greeted by a butler who led him into the large house, through the foyer, and in the direction of the drawing room. There, he was not surprised to find Lord and Lady Ramsbury waiting for him, although the absence of their younger daughter was worrying.

“Your Grace!” Lord Ramsbury was up and striding toward him, extending his hand for him to shake. “So glad that you could make it.”

“Yes, well, I thought it best that we get this over with.” Frederick eyed the Earl’s pudgy hand but did not take it. “Lady Ramsbury,” he said pleasantly as the Countess walked over to him, but he did not move to kiss her on the cheek, as he was not the type to do so. “You look radiant.”

“Oh, please.” She blushed and waved him off.

“I am glad that we are finally getting this dealt with,” Frederick told them both. “My hope is that by this evening, we will have the bulk of these procedures finalized. I want a small wedding, nothing too extravagant.”

“We could not agree more. Friends and family only.” Lord Ramsbury nodded.

“And I have been thinking,” Frederick continued. “I am amenable to the ceremony taking place in your parish. Mine is quite far away, and if it means less hassle for both parties, then so be it. Anything to make this process more simple.”

“Oh.” Lord Ramsbury blinked. “That is very thoughtful.”

“As I said, I want this to be as smooth and effortless as possible. After the week I have just had...” Frederick shook his head to himself.

“All went well, I hope?” Lord Ramsbury asked. “You were able to call off your engagement to my dear niece and procure a new wedding license?”

“I would not be here if I had not.”

“Marvelous!”

“Now, before we begin...” Frederick looked around the drawing room once more, just in case he had missed Hannah. “Is your daughter joining us? Seeing as it is her wedding that we shall be discussing, I cannot help but feel that she should be here.”

Lord Ramsbury’s expression tightened, and Lady Ramsbury pressed her lips together. The weight sitting on Frederick’s shoulders grew heavier at the sight, as he came to realize that this week, as long and painful as it had been, was far from over.

“I have sent for her,” Lord Ramsbury explained. “I expect her to be down here shortly.”

“We can begin without her,” Lady Ramsbury suggested. “Really, there is no reason that we cannot. I know my daughter well, so you can assume that my words are spoken as if from her mouth.”

Frederick clicked his tongue. “I was really hoping she would be here. It would be proper.”

“And she will be.” Lord Ramsbury placed a hand on his arm. “How about a drink while we wait?”

“I think that is the best idea I have heard all week,” Frederick agreed with a sigh of relief. “Please, whatever you are having. But make mine a double.”

“Good show!” Lord Ramsbury chuckled as he rushed to the liquor cabinet, where he went about making drinks. He was shaking as he did so, nervous in a way that Frederick could not help but take note of.

No need to guess what was causing said nerves. That, Frederick was certain, had everything to do with Lady Hannah.

He had been thinking about Lady Hannah all week. Far more than he had expected, truth be told. Honestly, the more he thought about her, the more he wondered if this marriage was as good an idea as he had originally thought—a marriage of convenience that was quickly becoming very inconvenient.

It had been a gamble. Faced with the situation, Frederick had elected to propose marriage to Lady Hannah because he knew that if he did not, there was a good chance a scandal might arise, and then any chance he had of marrying again would all but vanish.

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What he hadn't considered, what he wished he'd stopped to consider, was the woman herself and what this marriage might mean for the both of them.

He had spent most of the week in a state of annoyance.

Frederick had allowed Lady Hannah to bait him. Dammit, he had leaned into it! A bold gamble, one that he decided to use to teach her a lesson. Ironical then that he was the one who came to learn something from it.

He had very nearly lost control. When he had leaned in close to her, when he had held her, his mind had flashed back to her half-naked form in all its beauty, his lips had salivated, his pulse had quickened, and the smell of her... it was all he had been able to do to pull away and scold her for trying to seduce him. And, in an effort to demonstrate how little he wanted her, he had said some not-so-very-nice things.

A marriage of convenience where he would all but treat his wife as a stranger? No kissing. No touching! It was what he needed, and his mind would not be changed on the matter. But the more he thought of it, the more he decided that he could have presented the circumstances to Lady Hannah with a touch more tact.

"M'Lord." A maid suddenly appeared in the doorway, looking nervous and not at all like she wished to be there.

"Ah, Miss Write!" Lord Ramsbury said as he handed Frederick a glass of brandy. "My daughter, is she on the way? Where is she?"

"I am sorry to say, M'Lord, but..." She was shaking, she looked so nervous. "I am

afraid that Lady Hannah had instructed me to tell you that she will not be coming down.”

“What?!”

“She has asked that I act as an intermediary between you and her. Anything you wish to ask can be said to me, and I will relay the message.”

“Did she now...” Lord Ramsbury’s eyes widened, and his face began to turn purple. “And she is aware that His Grace has come all this way?”

“She is, M’Lord.”

“And she is aware?—”

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” Lady Ramsbury cut him off. “Miss Write, please tell Hannah that she is expected here. And do not take no for an answer.”

Miss Write could not have looked more terrified, but she nodded her head, turned around, and hurried away.

“I am so sorry about this,” Lord Ramsbury groaned. “And I swear, she is not usually like this. In fact, all week, she had shown nothing but excitement for your impending wedding.”

“Is that so?” Frederick asked as he took a very large sip of his brandy, feeling now that he would need it.

“It is,” Lady Ramsbury affirmed. “All of us are. Perhaps she is simply feeling ill?”

“Let us hope...”

Frederick wasn't in the least bit surprised, but that wasn't to say that he wasn't annoyed. Yes, he had been somewhat callous and cold toward Lady Hannah when they had spoken, but the way she had behaved wasn't much better!

He had spent the entire week trying to find the words he would eventually say to her when the time came. How he would explain to her what he wanted from this marriage without upsetting her further—a marriage of convenience, without any preconceived notions of romance or physical affection. Even just thinking it made it sound less than desirable.

But Frederick also had no choice in the matter. The truth was, he didn't want to marry. Until recently, he had known that he would never marry again! He was only doing so now because he felt that he must, a state of being that his status and circumstances demanded. And then there was Amelia...

"M'Lord." Miss Write appeared in the doorway again. Alone. "Lady Hannah has instructed me to tell you that?—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Lord Ramsbury exclaimed. "Curse that girl!"

"Phineas!"

"What?" he snapped at his wife, only for her to cock an eyebrow at him. He winced. "I am sorry, dear. I did not mean it. It is just that girl! She is far too like her sisters. As stubborn as..." His eyes went wide, and he spun to look at Frederick. "I mean, she is a lovely girl, Your Grace. A true gem. And I know she is as excited about this marriage as we are."

"Is that right?" Frederick asked plainly. "I am beginning to see that."

"Miss Write," Lord Ramsbury tried again. "You get your butt up there and tell my

daughter?—”

“We shall tell her,” Lady Ramsbury cut him off. “Your Grace, if you do not mind waiting a moment?”

“I suppose so,” Frederick sighed, taking another large sip of his brandy.

“We will be one moment...”

Lady Ramsbury snatched her husband’s arm and dragged him across the room. Then they put their heads together, bickering under their breaths as they hurried out of the room. And Frederick watched them, wondering if perhaps this was not the worst idea he’d ever had. Maybe he should just cancel the wedding and resign himself to living the rest of his life as a single man. Not a bad idea, although... Amelia.

A shake of the head and he walked over to the door, leaning against the frame as he cast his gaze down the hallway. As he did, he attempted to listen for what he was sure was the sound of shouting from upstairs, another sign that this marriage was off to a less-than-perfect start.

But then he noticed movement down the hallway. What was more, he saw a body darting from doorway to doorway as if trying to hide. They glanced back over their shoulder, a wicked grin spread across their face, and then they ducked through another door which Frederick guessed led outside and into the back garden.

He could not help but laugh at the sight. It was Lady Hannah, doing all that she could to avoid her parents and him by extension.

For a moment, Frederick wondered if he should wait for Lord and Lady Ramsbury to return so he could explain what he just saw, only for a new idea to occur to him. A better idea.

He wanted to speak with Lady Hannah and clear up a few misunderstandings, hopefully convincing her to go through with the marriage while assuring her it would

not be as tragic as he had made it out to sound. And he couldn't very well do that with her parents looking over his shoulder.

But she was alone now. Likely hiding in the garden. So, what was to stop him from speaking to her now, directly, free from prying eyes and ears?

Frederick took a final sip of his brandy and put the glass down. He chanced a glance back toward the foyer, making sure that Lord and Lady Ramsbury were not there. And then, moving quickly, he swept through the house and made for the back door.

It was time, finally, to get this marriage back on track. And then, hopefully, put this awful week behind him once and for all.

Chapter Six

Frederick spotted her the instant he stepped outside. She was sitting with her back to the house, hidden by a large oak tree that grew toward the back of the garden, cloaked in shadow. Had he not been looking for her, he might have missed her.

He was about to go to her, only to pause and take a closer look, for he realized that not only was this the first time he had seen his bride-to-be in over a week, but it was also the first time he had seen her in daylight. And, strangely, when she was fully clothed.

No need to confirm her beauty, for he had noticed that the first time he had seen her. Dark brown hair that fell down her shoulders, porcelain white skin, and features that were round and somehow defined at the same time. But her body was what had stood out to him, and still did. Curves... plenty of them. Even sitting down as she was, even with her dress bunched up, he could see them clear as day.

Memories of his hands tracing her curves flashed in his mind, how they had felt as

she shuddered beneath his touch. Thoughts of tearing that dress off her so he might see those hips and those br?—

Frederick gave his head a shake and straightened up. He was here to set boundaries, not cross them. Fantasies such as that... well, they were nothing but dangerous.

Keeping his expression neutral, he hurried across the garden, careful to remain silent until he reached the tree. Then he stood over her, choosing to lean against the trunk so that he was half-facing her, half-turned away. He crossed his arms and adopted on a casual stance, grinning to himself because, although he stood right over her, she still did not notice him.

“I am not disturbing you, am I?” he asked.

“Oh!” she yelped, half-jumping to her feet, half-stumbling forward as she lost her balance in an effort to turn around. She ended up on her hands and knees in the dirt, looking up at where he stood, a look of utter shock on her face. “You!”

“Me,” he said simply, still leaning against the tree. “Tell me, how is it down there? It looks cozy.”

“What are you doing here!” She pushed herself back and scrambled to her feet.

“Your parents invited me,” he replied. “Did you not hear?”

“Not here!” she snapped as she dusted the dirt off her dress. “Buthere. In the garden! And sneaking up on me!”

“Well, seeing as you were attempting to sneak away, I thought that sneaking up on you was my best option. Personally, I think it worked rather well.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What do you want?”

“To talk.”

“I think we have spoken enough, don’t you?”

“On the contrary,” he responded coolly, despite the heat radiating from her. “I have been thinking about the other night, and there was a lot left unsaid. I was hoping we might be able to remedy that.”

“And what if I do not want to?” She crossed her arms and glared at him.

“Then this promises to be a rather dull marriage, wouldn’t you say?”

“And whose fault is that?”

She was even more upset with him than he had thought. The way she looked at him, the antipathy that she directed at him, he had no doubt that she hated him. Worse than that, he could not blame her.

The other night, he had been caught by surprise by her sudden appearance. And then caught further by surprise by the way she had acted... and his reaction to it. He had wanted to get her out of his room, needing some distance so that he could cool down and hopefully remind himself what this marriage was supposed to be. But in his haste, he had hurt her, and then he left her for a week so that hurt would fester.

She was being rude to him, and while Frederick wanted nothing more than to assert his position because he did not appreciate being spoken to like this, he realized that for now, that might not be the best option.

“Can we start again?” he sighed.

“No, I do not think?—”

“I am trying to apologize,” he snapped, to which she balked. “But you are making it next to impossible.”

“Apologize?” She narrowed her eyes, as if looking for the trick. “What for?”

“For the other night, the way I acted and...” He sighed and attempted to look regretful. “And for the things I said. I spoke in haste and rather rudely, and I realize

now that some of the things I said might have been misunderstood.”

“Misunderstood?” she scoffed. “It was rather hard to misunderstand anything you said. From what I remember, you were perfectly clear in explaining that our marriage is to be solely one of convenience. Your convenience,” she hissed. “You do not want anything to do with me. I might as well be a houseplant for how you spoke.”

“I did not mean it like that.”

“Then how did you mean it?” She raised a warning eyebrow at him, the look on her face suggesting that no matter what he said, she would not listen.

“You are right about one thing,” he began carefully, struggling to look into her eyes and not at her body. “I do wish for this to be a marriage of convenience—but that is not a bad thing,” he hurried to add before she could cut him off. “My marriage to your cousin, Miss Gouldsmith, was supposed to be the same. A perfectly natural arrangement.”

“You made it sound a little more than that.”

“I am not marrying for love,” he continued, still trying to meet her rueful gaze. “Nor should you expect me to. And nor do I expect the same from you. Considering how this arrangement came to be, I cannot imagine that was even a consideration.”

She opened her mouth to argue but bit her tongue as the obviousness of what he said sank in. “Still,” she snapped, “it is one thing not to marry for love and another to tell your wife-to-be that you don’t want to so much as touch her...”

“Is that what you want?” Frederick could not help but smirk. “For me to touch you?”

Her eyes went wide, and her cheeks flushed. “N-no!”

“No?” He chuckled.

“I mean—what I meant was, marriage is more than just a man and a woman living together. There are...” Again, her cheeks flushed such that her entire face turned red, and she had no choice but to look away. “There are expectations.”

“Touching, you mean?” His eyes flicked over her suggestively, lingering on her body just long enough that he caught himself, realized what he was doing, and looked away.

She forced herself to look at him, leveling him with a glare. “Is marriage not a means to produce children? An heir! And unless you know another way to do it, then yes, touching is part of the expectations.”

Frederick studied her for a moment as a sudden realization dawned on him. Clearly, she was angry at him for what he had said. And clearly, she did not like the idea of being treated as a near stranger in his house. But was it possible she wanted more from this marriage than even that? Was it possible that she... that she wanted him?

“Your expectations, perhaps,” he said slowly. “Not mine.”

“And why not? Why are you so insistent on avoiding me?”

“I am not here to justify myself,” he scoffed. “And if I had known how desperate you were for my touch, I might not have bothered.”

“I did not say that!”

Oh, she was fiery. A storm in a teacup, the way she simmered and stewed. And while that might have turned him off, for some reason, it sparked a sense of excitement in him. He had met many well-bred ladies before, most of whom were proper and

boring and not worth his time because he did not wish to pursue someone who bored him. What was the point?

“Can we please do away with the pageantry?” Frederick sighed, opting for a slightly different approach.

“Excuse me?!”

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“This effort to make me feel sorry for you, as if I am the only one at fault.”

“What does that?—”

“I have apologized once already, and that should be enough.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “And yet, not once have you seen it fit to extend to me the same courtesy.”

“Apologize? Why would I apologize to you?”

He scoffed. “For obvious reasons, I should think. Or do I need to repeat them? Somehow, I doubt you will like hearing them spoken back to you nearly as much as you enjoyed performing them.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she looked away. “I was only trying to... to change your mind and force your hand.”

“Can I be frank with you, Lady Hannah?”

“Have you been anything but, so far?”

“As I stated, I am not marrying for love. But that does not mean this marriage has to be antagonistic. The way that I imagine it, there is no reason that the two of us cannot be friends. That, I think, is more than most could hope for.”

Her brow furrowed. “Friends?”

“Why not?”

She rolled her eyes. “Exactly what any bride wishes to hear. And on our wedding night? I suppose we will shake hands?”

“Again...” He flashed her an amused look. “You come back to the same point. This desire you have for me to touch you.”

Her eyes widened, her cheeks flushed, and she looked away. “I said nothing of the sort.”

“That is not how I heard it.”

Why was he baiting her like this? Why was he baiting himself? A desire to look at her body, curbed again... only it was becoming harder to suppress it.

“Does it matter what I want, now that I know what you wish for? Friends, yes?”

“It is not personal,” he explained slowly and carefully. “I simply... I cannot promise that. Further to that point, although it might pain you to hear, I must confirm again that for as long as we are married, I will not touch you. That is one thing I cannot offer in this marriage.”

“Good,” she said determinedly. “That is exactly what I want.”

“That is not how it looked like the other night.”

Again! He spoke words he did not mean, as if he wished to plant the idea in her head.

“That was not what it—” She bit her tongue again, glaring at him, only to turn it into a smirk. “You speak rather boldly, Your Grace, but you seem to forget that I was in that room, as were you.”

“And?”

She shrugged. “For all this speech of self-control and a lack of desire to kiss me...”
Her eyes flashed. “That was not how it looked to me.”

Frederick forced himself to look right at her, his eyes narrowed. “I was playing a role.”

“You were very good at it.”

“I was never going to kiss you.”

“I am sure you were not.”

“If it was not for what I knew you were doing, I would have dismissed you immediately. But seeing as you were there, I thought I needed to make a point.”

“And it was very well made...”

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Was she toying with him again? Was she testing him as she had the other night? Or was this real? It was hard to tell, where Lady Hannah was concerned, for the way she looked at him right now was half-seductive, half-mischievous. Oh, he wanted to believe that she was simply teasing him... but it felt more than that.

Again, Frederick was reminded of that night when he backed her up against the door, when he leaned in to kiss her, when her lips parted to accept his kiss. She might have claimed that she did not want him and it was all an act, but he knew otherwise.

He only wished he could say that he had not felt the same pull.

“And I told you,” he spoke through gritted teeth, mostly to force his mind to focus on the point at hand. “Anything I did that night was pure performance. Starting from now, you know exactly what to expect from me.”

She fluttered her eyelashes at him. “And what can I expect?”

“Nothing,” he said, ignoring how hot he was feeling and the way those big brown eyes bored into his own.

“Good,” she quipped with a casual shrug as she leaned in closer. “Because I think that you and I might make excellent friends. I would hate to ruin it with a kiss. Or anything else, for that matter.”

“So, we are in agreement?”

“We are, and you have nothing to worry about from me. It is your resolve that I

question. But feel free to prove me wrong.”

“I look forward to it,” he murmured.

“As do I,” she responded with a low, breathy voice, still leaning in just a little as if trying to tempt him.

His eyes went wide when he noticed for the first time a locust the size of a tennis ball sitting on her right shoulder. The sight of it was enough to snap him back into the moment, forcing a grin on his lips that he could not hide.

“What?” She pulled back slightly, her cheeks turning red. “What is it—I wasn’t going to do anything. I was just testing you!”

“Do not be alarmed, Lady Hannah...” He flashed her a smirk. “But there is a rather large locust on your shoulder?—”

“What?!” Her eyes widened like saucers, and she shoved him away, her arms flapping and flailing as she tried to dislodge the bug. “Where! Where! Get it off! Get it off!!!!”

“On your shoulder,” he tried to explain as she hopped about as if she had stepped on a fire. “No, the right shoulder. No, not there!”

She had become frantic in an effort to shoo away the locust which had latched onto her shoulder as if its life depended on it. Jumping about, her arms swinging, screaming and crying out, if anyone was listening, they might think she was being attacked. “Is it off?! Where is it?!”

“It is—no, not—on your right—oh, here!”

Frederick had no choice but to step toward her and wrap his arms around her. He lifted her off the ground, ignoring the way she flailed, holding her with one arm as he plucked the locust off her shoulder and launched it into the sky.

And then he continued to hold her, keeping his arms wrapped as her breathing slowly returned to normal. Still facing him, her face bright red, her hair a mess, she looked at him in a way that he could read only too well—as if he were a savior, for he could see how grateful she was.

And again, he felt that pull. Her body pressed to his. Her breathing matching his own. Their faces inches apart. Her big brown eyes impossible to look away from.

He held her for a moment longer, met her eyes, and was lured in by her plump lips and the feeling of her warm breath on his face. His body stiffened, his pulse quickened, his mind went blank, and all the self-control that he so heavily touted seemed to vanish.

“I knew it,” she said in a throaty whisper that made his legs shake.

“Knew what?” he asked, his voice just as low, forgetting completely where he was and what he was supposed to be doing.

“That you would not be able to resist.”

“I have not done anything yet.”

“The key word there...” She made sure she was looking him right in the eyes. “Yet.” And then, seeming to think that she had him, she closed her eyes and leaned in to kiss him...

Frederick released her immediately, for he came back to his senses at that moment.

He stepped back, straightened, and did what he could to look composed. “And as I said, this marriage is one of convenience and nothing more.”

Her expression shifted between embarrassment, shock and anger... settling in the end on anger as she narrowed her eyes at him. “You are not nearly as strong as you think you are, you know?”

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He scoffed. “I do not require strength to resist kissing you.”

“How about touching?” she shot back. “From what I recall, your hands were all over me just now. How very bad of you.”

His face dropped. “That—that hardly counts.”

She shrugged, a satisfied smirk tugging at her lips. “It is a slippery slope, Your Grace, and you are standing right on its precipice.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“A statement of fact.”

They glared at one another. Frederick, feeling annoyed because he sensed that she was mocking him. And Lady Hannah, looking a little too pleased with herself, as if she had won something here today. Which she most certainly had not! He had come here to confirm with her the boundaries of this marriage, and he had done that. Hadn't he?

The words were spoken well enough, but Frederick got the sense they were ignored. Also, the way he could not stop looking at her, from her curves to her pouty lips, he almost hoped they had been.

“There you are!” Lord Ramsbury's voice called from across the garden. “Your Grace! Hannah! We were looking everywhere for you!”

“Father!” Hannah called back, waving them over.

“What are you doing out here?” Lord Ramsbury hurried toward them. “And why were you not in your room?”

“Oh, we were just talking...” Hannah smirked at him. “About the wedding. Your Grace...” She turned to the Duke, her smile still triumphant. “Shall we go back inside? To discuss the upcoming wedding, I mean.”

Frederick looked at her flatly. “Sounds like a wonderful idea...”

That did not go as well as he had planned. It went so poorly, in fact, that he realized that to even be alone with Lady Hannah was dangerous.

But they were to marry! How could he possibly avoid being alone with her? For now, he knew, the best thing he could do was avoid her until he came up with a solution. Their wedding was in two weeks—more than enough time to do so.

Although as he watched her walk back to the house, her wide hips swaying suggestively, his mouth salivating at the sight, he wondered truly if this was not the worst idea he had ever had. Or, conversely, the best.

Chapter Seven

It was Hannah’s wedding day, and as expected, it was as confusing as it was unsettling.

Confusing because despite two weeks of preparation and mental readiness for the day that would come to define the rest of her life, Hannah felt that she knew her husband as well as she had known him the first day she met him. That was to say, not at all. It was a stranger whom she was set to marry, and a man who had been at pains to keep

his distance, as if the idea of getting to know her frightened him.

And unsettling because with two weeks to consider how she felt about this marriage, and what she wanted from it, she had decided that a marriage of convenience to a man who wanted to be little more than friends with her wasn't at all appealing.

This marriage was happening whether she wanted it or not, so why not at least try for something more than what he had offered her? Why commit herself to a life of loneliness when, from what she could see, there was no good reason that her pairing with the Duke would not work?

Two weeks ago, when they had spoken in the garden, he had agreed to at least be friendly with her, as if that was an olive branch that she should have been grateful to accept. And yet, in the two weeks that had followed, she had hardly even seen the man. He had avoided her purposefully, but there was little she could do about it.

Oh, and she knew why that was too. Therealreason. Of that, she had no doubt.

Today, all that would change. Due to marry any minute now, he would have no choice but to see her, speak with her, bewith her. Surely, even he was aware of such a thing?

And it was after this realization that a plan took shape in Hannah's mind.

"You look beautiful," Charlotte crooned. She was standing right behind Hannah, taking her in for a final time before the ceremony started.

"Agreed," Beatrice said. "Breathtaking."

Standing next to each other, the two sisters looked on the verge of tears. Never had Hannah seen them both so happy—certainly not on their own wedding days.

Although she supposed there had been a good reason for that.

“You do not think it is too much?” Hannah asked, keeping her focus on her reflection in the full-length mirror. “Mother was not at all pleased with how much skin is showing.”

Beatrice blew through her lips. “Mother is far too prim.”

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“Father, too,” Hannah pointed out.

“It is your wedding day,” Charlotte said as she put her hands on her younger sister’s shoulders and looked at her in the mirror. Eyes glistening with unshed tears, she could not have looked more proud. “And if this is the dress you wish to wear...” She hesitated for a moment, looking a little concerned. “Well, there is little they can do.”

“It is,” Hannah affirmed with a firm nod and a smirk. “I just hope His Grace likes it.”

Beatrice snorted. “Little chance that he will not.”

The three sisters had sequestered themselves in an antechamber in the church as they waited for the ceremony to start. A typical procedure, giving the bride a final chance to check her dress and makeup so that all was as it should be. And, most importantly, a final chance to swallow down any last-minute nerves.

Those nerves were starting to rise within Hannah. This plan of hers had only been thought up a few days ago—a real risk, she thought, but a necessary one. The Duke wished to avoid her? Hewished to just befriends? Somehow, she doubted the strength of his resolve very much.

It was their conversation in the garden that had made her understand better what she needed to do. And also how she felt about the Duke. Their near kiss... the tension that had lingered between them... that desire that radiated from him as he held her and very nearly pressed his lips to her own...

He thought he had the self-control necessary to never touch her? Ha! They would see

about that.

“Perhaps it would not be the worst idea to cover yourself a little...” Charlotte bit her lip as she glanced at Hannah’s plunging neckline. “A shawl of some kind? Just to cover?—”

“Oh, do not listen to her,” Beatrice scoffed, swatting her sister away. “I think it looks alluring.”

Charlotte clicked her tongue. “Is alluring what one wishes for on their wedding day?”

“Do not forget, the wedding day is followed by the wedding night,” Beatrice grinned. “So, it cannot hurt.”

“We are in a church!” Charlotte hissed.

“They are not going to fornicate on the floor,” Beatrice sighed. “This is simply a taste for the Duke. Right, Sister?” She winked at Hannah. “After how he has been behaving these last few weeks, my thinking is that he will need it.”

“I still think it would not kill you to cover yourself a little,” Charlotte muttered.

The dress in question was tactical... and scandalous, to say the least. Sleeveless. Backless. Strapless. It was held up by what seemed a pure force of will alone, the neckline sitting just above Hannah’s breasts, which were pushed up by the very tight waistline—a tightness that ran down her backside, past her thighs, making the dress appear to strangle her entire body.

Hannah had always been curvy, and today she was putting those curves to good use. She still did not know how she felt about the Duke. Did she like him as a man? Did she enjoy his company as a friend? What she did know for a fact was that she found

him incredibly attractive, and she suspected he felt the same about her.

So, this dress was chosen with a purpose. Today, when she and the Duke were pronounced husband and wife, he would kiss her—something he swore he would not do. Oh sure, he did not have to do it. But Hannah wondered how he would manage that once he saw her in this dress.

A devilish plan... and she could not help but grin as she looked at herself in the mirror one last time. Today was the first day of the rest of her life, so best to get it off to a good start.

A knock at the door had her and her three sisters turning around.

“It’s time, dear.” Her mother poked her head around the door, pursing her lips when she saw the dress. “Are you...” She exhaled as if to calm herself. “Ready?”

“As ready as I will ever be.”

“We will see you out there.” Charlotte kissed Hannah on the cheek. “Good luck.”

“Not that you need it,” Beatrice offered with a wink as she hurried to join her sister.

“Father...” Hannah trailed off.

“Waiting for you,” her mother said, again looking at the dress. “Hannah, dear, I know that you had your heart set on?—”

“It is done, Mother,” Hannah cut her off. “Please remember how easy I have made these past two weeks for you. This is what I want.”

Lady Ramsbury sighed and nodded in understanding. “Well, come on then. Let us get

you married.”

A smile next as she held out her hand for Hannah to take, pride flickering in her eyes because at the end of the day, her daughter was getting married to a duke. What more could a mother wish for?

Lord Ramsbury was waiting for Hannah just beyond the door. Like her mother, he gave her dress a disapproving look, only he chose to say nothing. Forcing a smile, he offered her his arm, and Hannah, relieved that he had chosen to drop the matter, took it.

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It was a small ceremony, made even smaller, as Teresa had decided not to attend... as had Selina. Less than a dozen guests populated the nave, most of them from Hannah's side of the family while the rest, she guessed, were the Duke's family and friends. But she didn't take much notice of them as she reached the end of the aisle, for all her attention was focused on her husband-to-be.

He stood at the altar beside a man she did not recognize—his younger brother was her guess. They were chatting quietly until his brother spotted her and nudged him to indicate her arrival.

The Duke straightened up before looking at her. As soon as his eyes landed on her, his mouth dropped open.

Hannah beamed as she started walking down the aisle, relishing the way he gaped at her. Oh, she could see his efforts to look away and control himself. She could tell that he wanted very much not to gawk and stare. But the closer she came to him, the more obvious it became that for this moment at least, he was completely in her thrall.

From there, the ceremony got underway in a typical manner. The minister began by welcoming them all and then proceeded to read from the Book of Common Prayer. Soon, he was asking Lord Ramsbury if he would give his daughter to the Duke, to which the Earl said, "Yes."

Hannah held out her hands for the Duke to take. He hesitated, eyeing her hands as if they were snakes that might bite him. But he relented and took them gently, holding them by slightly trembling fingertips. She tried her best to meet his gaze, but he refused to give it, looking down at his feet in a very purposeful way.

But he could not do so forever, and Hannah listened to the minister, waiting for the words that she knew would come to define this marriage.

“Your Grace, do you take Lady Hannah Bolton to be your wife?” he asked.

“I-I do.”

“Lady Hannah, do you take His Grace to be your husband?”

“I do.” Hannah was looking right at the Duke, refusing to blink, waiting for him to meet her eyes.

“Under the eyes of God Almighty, I pronounce you man and wife,” the minister announced.

It was as if the entire church held a collective breath. Or perhaps that was just Hannah. She could hear her heart thumping as she waited for the Duke to act. Slowly, his eyes traveled from his feet and up her body, until they met her eyes. He looked right into them, steadying himself, exerting all the self-control he could muster as he smiled politely.

And Hannah took her chance.

Still holding his hands, she licked her lips as she leaned forward, gazing into his eyes, willing him to do what he had promised he would not.

A moment of hesitation. She could literally see the conflict in his eyes. And for a brief moment, she worried that all of this would be for naught and that her husband would deny her.

“Oh, give her a kiss, Brother!” The Duke’s brother called from behind them, to which

those in the audience chuckled and cheered along.

The Duke grimaced, but she could also see a sort of relief on his face. Eyes flicking down to her bare neck, over her breasts, that same look that she had come to recognize crossed his visage, and he nodded to himself, smiled lightly and pressed his lips together.

Hannah stepped forward and met his kiss, wanting to be close to him as they joined as man and wife. And what started as a simple peck—for clearly that was what the Duke wanted—very soon turned into something that even she had not expected.

They had nearly kissed twice already.

Both times had been awkward and unexpected. The first one she had tried to trick him, the second one had come about due to an argument and again an effort to try and almost force the other to admit to something. Near kisses that had lingered on Hannah's mind as she had wondered time and again what it might feel like should their lips finally meet.

Even in her two weeks of imagining and yearning, she had not in her wildest dreams thought it would feel like this.

She lost herself in that kiss. As his skin finally caressed her own, as he melted into her in a way that she hadn't expected, as his lips finally parted and he breathed her in while cupping her face in his hands, for a moment there she forgot that she was in a church in front of her entire family, very nearly grabbing her husband by his shirt and holding him there.

They kissed for a second, but it felt like an age. Her chest tightened. Her heart was racing. Her mind turned blank. Her tongue was just starting to find its way inside his mouth when?—

The Duke pulled away, and the congregation erupted in applause.

Hannah, only just now realizing how inappropriate their kiss was, blushed furiously and cast a glance at her husband, who too was doing everything he could not to look at her. He smiled for the small crowd and accepted their plaudits, but he would not look at her. No need to say why.

Her goal today was to prove to the Duke that his determination not to touch her was a fool's errand, and if she had to evaluate her success, she would say she was triumphant. There was a problem now, however.

She wanted him more than she had realized. That kiss... her lips still tingled from it, and if her plan was not as successful as she thought and somehow the Duke stayed strong, she did not know how long she could survive without another kiss.

Tonight was their wedding night, and it was as her parents approached her, crying and cheering and looking joyful, that she decided that she would not see sleep tonight until she proved that this kiss was not a flash-in-the-pan type of thing.

The Duke would take her tonight, or she would embarrass herself trying.

Chapter Eight

“Tell me, Brother, do you intend to spend the rest of your life ignoring your new bride? Or are you getting it all out of the way today?” Lord William Campbell tittered as he sipped on his glass of brandy.

Frederick looked at his younger brother flatly. “I am not ignoring her.”

“Are we dealing in semantics, now? Because not speaking with her is the same as ignoring her. Or it was the last time I checked.”

“I am not not speaking with her either. I am just...” Frederick looked around the room for an answer, making sure not to look in Hannah’s direction. “Playing host. It would be rude not to.”

“Playing host?” His brother snorted. “This isn’t even your home to play host in.”

“But it is my wedding breakfast.”

“All the more reason you should be spending it with your bride,” William shot back with a very self-satisfied grin.

“There is time for that later,” Frederick said warningly, hoping his tone would be enough to dissuade his brother from continuing this conversation.

“Later?” William sipped his brandy, his body now shaking from withheld laughter. “From what I saw earlier, later might be too far away for you to wait.” A wink next.

“Honestly, Brother, I am surprised that the two of you even made it to this breakfast. That you didn’t whisk her way in the carriage and perform your husbandly duties before even the sun had begun to set?—”

“Will you keep it down!” Frederick snapped, his eyes widening as he glanced around the room, making sure nobody heard. “And I have no idea what you are talking about.”

William could not have looked more pleased. “If that is what you need to tell yourself. But between you and me, even God was blushing at your little performance.” He clicked his tongue, grinning from ear to ear. “Shame on you, Brother. I thought you had more self-control than that.”

Frederick scowled warningly at his brother, choosing to ignore the comment because he would not dignify it with an answer. It was the kiss to which his brother referred, and despite the jokes, Frederick didn’t think it wasthatbad.

He and William were standing in the back corner of Lord Ramsbury’s ballroom, the chosen location for the wedding breakfast. It was supposed to be hosted by Frederick, but seeing as the church was so close to Ramsbury Estate, they opted to have it here instead. At the moment, there were a dozen or so people occupying the ballroom, most standing in small groups as they gossiped about the wedding.

Among them was Frederick’s new bride, Hannah. She stood with her sisters on the other side of the room, with her back to him, almost purposefully, as if she wanted to make a point of not looking his way.

Frederick stole a glance at her. Only a glance. It was meant to be a second... but his eyes were captivated by the sight of her bare back, her round hips. The memory their kiss and how utterly entranced he had become by it flashed in his mind. He had lost himself for a moment, his walls shattered in a way he had not expected.

He knew what she was doing, of course. The dress. The performance. She was trying to seduce him, to prove his claims that he would not kiss or touch her were false and foolhardy. But was she doing so because she wanted him? Or simply because she enjoyed making him squirm? Based on the little he knew of her so far... it was impossible to tell.

“So, I suppose that introductions are out of the question?” his brother asked, noting the way he stared at his new wife.

William was his younger brother, the black sheep of the family for the way he had chosen to live his life—with vigor, as he put it. Loudly. Boisterously. Putting fun first above all else. The very opposite of Frederick. But Frederick, being the older brother, having accepted that the burden of the title fell on his own shoulders, had never begrudged him the fact. If anything, he had envied him.

“W-what?” Frederick tore his gaze away from Hannah and turned back around to find his brother still grinning stupidly.

“I was saying, are you going to introduce me to my sister-in-law? Or are you still ignoring her?”

“I am not?—”

“Avoiding her, then. Scared to approach her—and do not say otherwise.” William raised an eyebrow. “I know you, Brother, and I know what this is. But she is your wife now, and you cannot ignore the poor woman forever.”

Frederick grimaced. “I do not intend to.”

“And seeing as I am yet to meet the woman, I would very much like an introduction. It is proper, Brother. For me to go over there alone... well, how would that look?”

“Do not take it personally...” Frederick looked across the room again, certain now that she had turned her back to him on purpose. “Even Amelia has not met her yet.”

“Truly?” William chuckled. “It’s been two weeks, Brother. How have you managed to avoid such a thing?”

Frederick could not help but laugh, but more in mockery of his own actions. “By doing what you have accused me of, is how. Avoiding her.”

And he had been doing that too. For two weeks, Frederick had avoided Hannah the best he could simply because he felt he had no choice. Their near kiss in the garden that day was the reason for it, the fear it struck in him at how close the two had come. For all his talk of not wanting to touch her, having no desire for such a thing, he had come so close to breaking that his only answer was to run and hide and hope that some distance would solve the problem.

If anything, it had only made things worse.

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Hannah was either toying with him, trying to seduce him, or doing everything she could to prove him a liar. Whatever it was, it was working a little too well, and Frederick knew that to be alone with her would be to court danger—a very tough situation to be in, seeing as they were now man and wife.

“Well, come on then.” William nudged him. “No time like the present.”

“Yes...” Frederick swallowed as he fell into step with his brother. He could do this. There was no reason that he could not. “I suppose we may as well get this over with...”

It was the Duchess of Hayward, Hannah’s older sister, who saw them coming. She nudged Hannah and nodded over her shoulder. Hannah hesitated, before finally turning around. Slowly, a satisfied smile spread across her lips, which she directed at Frederick.

“Ah, hello there,” she crooned as he joined them. “Dear husband.” She fluttered her eyelashes at him.

“Dear wife,” he responded.

All eyes were on him as Hannah stepped back to allow him into their circle. He considered leaning in to give her a kiss on the cheek, but then he quickly dismissed that notion. For obvious reasons.

“I hope I am not interrupting.”

“Not at all.”

“I wished to introduce you to somebody.”

“Oh?”

“This is my brother, Lord William Campbell.” Frederick turned toward his brother, who was standing a few feet back, smirking as he took note of their interaction... and how painfully awkward it was.

“Your Grace.” William bowed to her. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you. I had hoped to meet you sooner, but my brother has been somewhat hopeless at making introductions.”

“Oh, do not blame him...” Hannah smirked. “He has simply been busy with wedding preparations. Believe me, I know it firsthand.”

Frederick stiffened at the jibe. “Yes, well, it has been a very busy two weeks. Unlike some, I haven’t had the pleasure of being able to sit back with my feet up, just expecting everything to come together as it has.”

“And you have done a wonderful job,” Hannah assured him, still smirking. “I might have told you sooner, again, had I been given the chance.”

“No matter,” Frederick responded coolly. “You have done so now. And I thank you for your appraisal.”

“You are most welcome.”

The subtext of their conversation was obvious to Frederick, and most likely obvious to everyone lucky enough to be listening. And if it hadn’t been, the way the two

looked at one another surely must have made it more so.

Hannah wore a coy smile, satisfied as she poked and prodded at him, seemingly doing what she could to elicit a reaction from him. He had been avoiding her these past two weeks, and she wanted it known that she had noticed... and that she knew why.

While Frederick was doing his best to play things cool, standing between her and his brother, he was careful not to look at her directly—that dress!—to keep his distance, and not to rise to the bait that she was setting him.

“So...” the Duchess of Walford, her eldest sister, began somewhat carefully. “I am sure that the two of you are looking forward to heading back home after this. A chance to finally get to know one another a little better.” She glanced at Hannah and gave a secretive smile. “Seeing as these past two weeks have been so busy.”

William latched onto that. “Oh, he is. My brother was just telling me that, weren’t you?” He clapped Frederick on the shoulder.

Frederick glared warningly at his brother. “Yes... that will be most welcome. There is no rush, however,” he added quickly. “It would be rude to leave so soon, with all the effort Lord and Lady Ramsbury have put into this breakfast.”

“Oh, they will not mind,” the Duchess of Walford assured him. “If I know our father, he’ll be glad to get everyone out of his house as soon as possible.”

“Wonderful!” William said cheerfully. He took a sip of his brandy, grinning behind his glass and making sure that Frederick saw it.

Frederick glared at his brother again, quickly, not wanting the others to see it. And then he forced a smile, his mind racing as he was forced to consider the reality that

his days of avoiding Hannah were over. Come tonight, they would return to his home together as man and wife, at which point he would be forced to prove the self-control that he so heavily touted once and for all.

A quick glance at Hannah, who was watching him closely. He tried just to meet her eyes, but he could not help but look down at her dress—or more specifically, her exposed shoulders and the swell of her breasts. Dammit, she was stunning, so tempting and sumptuous that Frederick dared to wonder if perhaps he had been a tad rash in proclaiming celibacy?

“Is everything alright, Your Grace?” Hannah asked him, as if she could see what was on his mind. “You seem a little quiet.”

“Am I?” Frederick laughed awkwardly. “Perhaps I am just a little tired. It has been a long day.”

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“Not too tired, I hope...” She was staring right at him, the faintest smirk on her lips, and Frederick very nearly balked because the implication was all too clear. “I am hoping for a tour of your home when we arrive later on.”

“Oh, yes, I am sure that will be fine.”

“Wonderful. I had worried what it might be like to move into a new home. Feeling like a stranger and everything.” She laughed. “But I know that with you, that will not be a problem.”

She reached over and stroked his arm. Frederick ignored it the best he could, and also ignored the coy smile she wore, knowing all too well that she was baiting him.

“I will endeavor to make you as comfortable as possible.”

“I look forward to it.”

“As do I.”

“Personally, I am looking forward to where we left things off the last time we spoke alone,” she murmured.

Frederick met her gaze but was careful not to be sucked into it. “As am I. What we spoke about, it is my thinking now that a reminder might be needed.”

“What we spoke about?” She pretended to consider. “Oh!” Her eyes went wide. “Yes, I had nearly forgotten. I was referring to the end of the conversation. I cannot help but

feel there was much left wanting.”

“Unsaid is perhaps a more accurate description.”

“Either way...” She stroked his arm again. “I look forward to it.”

“As do I.”

Stiff. Awkward. Highly suggestive. Hannah continued to look at Frederick, and Frederick looked away. But it was becoming more and more difficult to do so. Anyone listening to their first conversation as man and wife would not have to work too hard to discern the underlying meaning.

Hannah either wanted him or took far too much pleasure in teasing him. But it did not really matter. Frederick understood now more than ever that if he was going to get through this marriage, he was going to have to set boundaries—remind her what he had explained two weeks ago, and make sure she understood that he was not to be tested like this.

Because if he did not, and if she continued to tease him like this, another glance at the swell of her breasts and shoulders... her plump lips... and Frederick knew that he would only be able to control himself for so long.

He was, after all, only human.

Chapter Nine

The carriage ride home went exactly as Hannah had expected—mostly silent. Frederick spent the entirety of it sitting across from her, staring out the window. Oh, she had tried to speak with him, of course, but he had rebuffed her in a way he wouldn’t have dared if they weren’t alone.

“I never had a chance to ask you earlier,” she began once the carriage took off, their next stop being Thorne Estate—her new home. “What do you think of my dress?”

Frederick, still staring out the window, stiffened. But he did not turn back to look at her. His jaw ticked, and his hands clenched in his lap.

“My mother and father did not like it...” She purposefully shuffled forward, pushing her chest out and running a hand lightly down her front. “I cannot imagine why. Can you?”

“I know what you are doing,” he said, still not looking at her. “And I will not fall for it.”

“Doing?” she asked innocently. “I have no idea what you?—”

“Stop it,” he snapped. “Just stop it.”

Finally, he forced himself to look at her—but her eyes only, holding them with a sense of frustration, not once looking down at her low neckline.

“When we spoke two weeks ago, I had hoped that we’d come to an understanding. And that you had accepted it—that you had made your peace with it.”

She frowned and tilted her head. “You may have to elaborate, for I do not know at all what you?—”

“You will not bait me,” he said warningly. “As I explained—and I will explain one more time so that there is no misunderstanding—what we have here is a marriage of convenience only, in which there is no expectation for...” He swallowed. “For copulation. What I had hoped for was that we could still be friendly, that we might find some sort of middle ground so that this marriage is not an awkward, unlivable

situation. But if you insist on behaving this way...” He shook his head and turned back to look out the window.

That little outburst might have upset Hannah, if she hadn't been expecting it. What was more, the words were not what she chose to focus on. Rather, it was that look in her husband's eyes that told her his true feelings. His refusal to look at her properly. His hunger for her. His self-loathing because he feared what might happen if she continued to 'bait' him, as he put it.

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He wanted her. She knew that he did. If he did not, he would not treat her like a pariah, as if touching her might see his hand bitten. Oh yes, she did not doubt the Duke's true feelings. She did, however, wonder about her own.

Hannah smirked to herself as she shuffled back in her seat, content to continue the rest of the journey in silence. There was no rush, she decided. They did, after all, have the rest of their lives to spend together. The rest of their lives to figure out what this was. So, let him have the carriage ride.

Tonight was to be their wedding night, and she would see then just how self-controlled the Duke was. Not to mention, finding out once and for all what potential this marriage might have.

“Amelia!” Frederick called as soon as he walked into the foyer. “Amelia!”

Hannah was right behind him, hurrying to keep up as he strode ahead, doing her best not to look annoyed by the way he was acting. It was one thing to try and set boundaries, but this was bordering on rudeness and discourtesy. As soon as the carriage pulled up, Frederick climbing out of it, striding ahead of her without so much as checking that she was following him.

And then there was this ‘Amelia’ whom he called. A name that she had heard several times before but still had no idea to whom it belonged! Initially, Hannah had wondered if it was a woman who held his heart, and if she might have been the reason that he didn't wish to touch her.

But surely not. Was she a maid? Why did she live here? And why was Frederick so

eager to see her?!

“Amelia!” he called again, looking around the foyer expectantly.

“Do not trouble yourself,” Hannah huffed angrily. “I am right behind you. Not that you cared to check.”

Surprisingly, Frederick grimaced as he turned back to see her coming toward him. Even looking embarrassed.

“I am sorry,” he offered. “I did not mean to—I should have helped you down from the carriage and shown you inside.”

“It is a little late for that.”

Again, he grimaced. “My mind is elsewhere, I am afraid. I haven’t seen her the whole day, and surely she is eager to meet you.”

Hannah could not have been more confused. “And who is it that you are speaking of?” She did her best not to look or sound worried.

“Amelia, of course.”

“And who is?—”

Her words caught in her throat when a woman walked into the foyer.

She was about Hannah’s age, dark of hair, light of skin, and pretty with big blue eyes and pixie-like features. The way she was dressed suggested that she was a maid, and this, paired with her relief at the sight of Frederick, made Hannah’s stomach churn.

So... Amelia was a maid. More than that, she could only be his paramour. It was almost ridiculous to consider that this man, who seemed to pride himself on self-control and propriety, might see fit to marry while also having a mistress he was happy to parade in front of his new wife!

Hannah had been wondering to herself how she felt about her new husband, if this urge to seduce him was anything more than a mere desire to be proven correct, or if she actually had feelings for him. But at the sight of this gorgeous woman swaying her hips as she made for Frederick, she had no choice but to admit to the jealousy that rose up within her.

“Your Grace,” the woman, presumably Amelia, greeted with a smile. “You’re back.”

“I might have been back sooner,” Frederick said. “But the wedding breakfast lasted a little longer than I had hoped. How is everything?”

“Oh, she is becoming restless.”

Frederick chuckled. “I am not surprised. She wasn’t at all happy that she could not come today.”

She?

Hannah started, looking between the woman and Frederick, not entirely sure what was going on.

“I tried to explain to her why that was, but...” The woman sighed and shook her head. “She is stubborn.”

Again, Frederick chuckled. “Like her father, so try not to hold it against her. Where is she?”

In answer to his question, a shrill cry suddenly rang out through the foyer.

“Daddy!” The cry was followed by the sound of footsteps, and then by the body of a little girl hurtling itself across the foyer and right into Frederick’s arms. “You’re back!”

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“Wow!” Frederick took the brunt of the impact, effortlessly lifting the little girl into the air and then spinning her around. “There she is! My little angel!”

“What took you so long!” The little girl, Amelia, pouted. “You said you would be home by noon!”

“I said I would try to be,” he explained as he put her down. “It is not the same thing.”

Amelia pursed her lips, seeming none too pleased by his explanation. “Miss Temperton said I need to be patient.” She kicked at the floor.

“She is a smart woman...” Frederick looked at the maid, Miss Temperton, and gave her a grateful smile. “And I hope that you have been listening to her.”

“I have been...” Amelia gave a wicked smile. “Sometimes.”

Through all of this, Hannah stood back somewhat awkwardly. Shock was what she was feeling. Immense surprise because not once had anybody bothered to mention to her that Frederick had a daughter! Oh, she knew that he had been married once before—he had told her as much. But a daughter? That changed everything.

The little girl looked about six years old, with the same coloring as her father, and with similar facial features too. Hannah had little experience with children, and she suddenly felt very uncomfortable at the thought of having to live with a man who wanted nothing to do with her, and his daughter, who was likely going to despise her on principle.

“Amelia...” Frederick took his daughter by the hand and led her to Hannah. “I would like you to meet someone. This is Hannah, my new wife and your new mother.”

Hannah tried to look excited. “Hello there...” She bent down so she was at eye level with the little girl. “It is wonderful to finally meet you. Your, ah... your father has told me so much about you.”

She glanced at Frederick and glared at him.

He grimaced. “She is eager to meet you, Amelia. And what do you say...?”

Amelia was looking at her feet, pouting, behaving in the exact same way Hannah had expected.

“Amelia,” Frederick prompted. “We spoke about this.”

“I do not want a new mother,” Amelia said.

Again, Frederick grimaced. “Amelia, what did we talk about?—”

“I do not care!” She pulled her hand free, turned around, and then sprinted to Miss Temperton. She threw her arms around the woman’s waist and shoved her face into her stomach as if to hide.

“I am sorry, Your Grace.” Miss Temperton winced. “I tried to prepare her better, and she promised that she would behave, but?—”

“It is fine,” Frederick sighed. “Perhaps you might take her outside for a short walk? Give my new wife and I a moment to talk?”

“Of course,” Miss Temperton agreed. “Come on, Amelia.”

She shuffled out of the foyer with the little girl, who still clung to her without so much as looking in Hannah's direction.

It was only once they were gone that Hannah spoke.

"So... you have a daughter."

"I do." Frederick nodded. "Usually, she is far more friendly than what you just saw. But she will come around, once she gets used to you."

"It would have been nice if you mentioned something earlier," Hannah said pleasantly, making sure he could see how annoyed she was. "But I suppose that would have required you to speak with me."

The corner of Frederick's mouth twitched, and she could literally see him doing everything in his power not to give a scathing response.

"You should know that Amelia is my world," he spoke slowly and carefully. "Everything I do is for her, and I expect the two of you to get along. Is that understood?"

"Are you implying I might mistreat a six-year-old?"

"I am simply pointing out that this right here—" He gestured to her with a wave of his hand. "You enjoy antagonizing me. I know you do."

"Not nearly as much as you enjoy shutting me down," she shot back.

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“When my daughter is around, I would appreciate it if you did your best not to purposefully frustrate or bait me. I meant what I said about us being friends, you know. But if you insist on using snark whenever we speak, especially around my daughter, I don’t see how even that will be possible.”

“And what about you?”

Frederick frowned. “What about me?”

She sighed and folded her arms. “You wish for me and Amelia to get along? Is that right?”

“Of course.”

“And how is she going to do that if every time she sees us together, you pretend as if I do not exist?” Hannah raised an eyebrow at him, and Frederick, about to respond, was forced to reckon with the reality of her observation. “I understand that sometimes I can be a little...”

“Immature?”

“Combative,” she offered instead. “But that is only because if I did not act that way, you would treat me as little more than a houseplant. If you wish for me and Amelia to get along, you need to make it clear to her that you don’t hold me in such disdain that you would rather I sleep outside with the horses.”

Frederick winced and looked down at his feet. “I do not hold you in such disdain as

that...”

“Then prove it,” Hannah said sincerely. “It is still early, there is still plenty of time for Amelia and I to get to know one another better. If that is what you wish for, it’s going to fall on your shoulders.”

“And you?” Frederick asked, his head snapping up to look at her. “Do you promise to behave?”

She touched her chest as if insulted. “I do not know what you mean. But,” she added quickly when he opened his mouth to argue, “I will promise that when your daughter is around, I won’t try to...” She scoffed. “I cannot believe I have to promise this. But I promise I will not try to seduce you or whatever it is that you think I am doing.”

He chuckled at that. “There, was that so hard?”

“You tell me.”

She could see him visibly relax, only for his eyes to flick over her dress. “And about that dress?”

“What about it?”

“My daughter is six. She does not need to see you walking around in... in something so scandalous.”

“You did not seem to mind,” she shot back with a smirk and popped her hip out.

His eyes dropped to her hip, and he licked his lips, only to look up and shake his head. “What did we just agree to?”

“I do not see your daughter anywhere, do you?” A smirk next and she stepped closer to him, sensing a moment between them that she had to capitalize on.

He hurriedly took a step back, keeping his gaze fixed on her face. “Please, change, then meet me outside, and we will try again. How does that sound?”

Truthfully, it sounded better than Hannah had thought. In a way, it felt like a truce between them, a very strange step in the right direction of what was turning out to be a very strange marriage.

The Duke would treat her with respect when his daughter was around, even being nice to her and friendly! It was a chance for them to actually get to know one another better, and even Hannah had to admit that was sorely needed.

And when his daughter wasn’t around... well, she would cross that bridge when she came to it. Clearly, and despite what her husband claimed, he was having second thoughts about this so-called arrangement they had made. From the kiss to the way he could not stop looking at her, there was no doubt in her mind that his self-control was being sorely tested.

And as for her... She had not forgotten how she felt when she thought that Miss Temperton was the Duke’s mistress, and those feelings of jealousy and relief followed her as she headed upstairs to change her clothes. But then again, so did Frederick’s eyes.

She could feel them on her back, and she could not help but smile. This might have started as a marriage of convenience, but it was very quickly turning into so much more.

Chapter Ten

Hannah was doing her best, and for that, Frederick was beyond grateful.

Admittedly, he was also surprised. Introducing Hannah to Amelia was always going to be a risk. Knowing his daughter as he did, he was prepared for her to treat Hannah as a threat and spurn her.

Amelia was not naturally a rude person, but she and Frederick had a special bond, and no doubt she now worried about what might happen to said bond, with another woman in the house. And then there was the issue of her feelings toward her mother...

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But it was Hannah who Frederick had worried about. From the little he knew of his new wife, she was antagonistic and troublesome. The type of woman not to take being spoken down to without putting her foot down and asserting her position the best she could.

Two unstoppable forces going head-to-head—it was a recipe for disaster. And yet... well, it was like he said; Hannah was doing her best.

“Amelia,” Frederick began as the three of them walked through the garden. He was holding his daughter by the hand, and Hannah was walking on her other side. “Why don’t you tell Hannah what you and Miss Temperton have been doing today?”

Amelia pursed her lips. “Why?”

“Because I am sure she would love to hear it.”

“I would,” Hannah assured her pleasantly. “Please, tell me, Amelia. Remember, I was once a little girl just like you, so it might be fun to be reminded.”

Amelia looked at her as if she was a mouse that had found its way into her room. “When were you ever little?”

“Amelia,” Frederick groaned. “That is not very nice. Apologize, please.”

“It is quite alright.” Hannah chuckled. “She has her father’s sharp tongue. Don’t you?”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“Oh, I am sure I do.”

“No, you don’t!” Amelia stomped her foot. “You don’t know me or Father! And you don’t belong here!”

“Amelia...” Again, Frederick groaned, feeling embarrassed now as much as anything. “I have explained to you that Hannah will be living with us from now on. This is her home as much as it is yours.”

“I don’t care!”

“Amelia—”

“No!” She freed her hand from his grip and sprinted away, across the garden, toward a large oak tree which she quickly ducked behind.

This was going about as well as he had expected—that is to say, not very well at all.

Frederick could not help but blame himself for it, too. Since Amelia had been born, he had committed himself to her fully, putting aside any notions of meeting women and marrying again. Done so, ironically, for her sake, as he had never wanted to imply that she was not everything to him.

But now he wondered if perhaps he should have warmed her up to this new arrangement. What was more, perhaps his insistence on ignoring Hannah these last two weeks was not the genius idea he had thought it was. If he had brought her here a few times so the two could meet, then surely Amelia would have warmed up to her by now?

“Well, she certainly has spirit, doesn’t she?” Hannah chuckled as she watched Amelia disappear.

Frederick grimaced. “She is not ordinarily like this, I promise you.”

“I am sure she is not,” Hannah assured him. “In fact, I cannot really blame her. Even if it might be easy.”

“Really?” Frederick asked curiously, eyeing her because she was behaving far too pleasantly for his liking, as if she was trying to trick him.

“It is you who I blame,” she said rightly, with a smirk. “If you had not spent the last two weeks hiding away, you might have thought ahead and ensured that we met. That way, I wouldn’t be spending my wedding day trying to coax a six-year-old out from behind a tree.”

Frederick snorted. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“Look at us.” She laughed. “Finally, we are on the same page.”

“She will come around,” Frederick promised her. “Just give it time.”

Hannah winked. “Lucky, then, that time is something we have plenty of.” Her eyes flicked over him, and she flashed him that coy smile she always wore.

Frederick waited for the follow-up comment. The derision. A chance to put him down. Only...

“Now, come on. We best go and make sure that she is alright.”

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Hannah turned around and started walking across the garden, her hips swaying, a motion that one might have assumed meant that she was enjoying herself. But surely, that could not be the case?

Frederick stayed back as he watched her go, again finding himself struck by how congenial she was. Oh sure, she had promised that she would be amiable when Amelia was around, but he had not taken her at her word simply because every time they spoke, their conversation devolved into bickering.

More than that, the fact that she was trying gave him hope. He wanted this marriage to work—at least on the terms that he had set. And if Hannah could keep things this friendly, while avoiding the temptation to tease and trap him, there was no reason it could not.

“Amelia!” Frederick called then as he hurried after them both. “Come out, now, please!”

Hannah was already by the tree, and she glanced up and motioned for him to wait. Then, she crouched down and spoke with his daughter, trying to coax her out of her hiding place.

Frederick frowned as he slowly approached, feeling something else swelling inside of him. Pride? Relief? Hope? There was just something about his new wife trying so hard with his daughter that had him smiling properly for the first time in weeks.

“... I know that your father loves you,” Hannah was saying in a hushed whisper. “And trust me, it is far more than he could ever love me.” She saw him coming and

winked. “But there is no reason that you and I cannot be friends. I would very much like a friend.”

“R-really?” he heard Amelia ask from behind the tree.

“Of course,” Hannah replied with a big smile. “Would you like to be my friend?”

“Maybe...”

“Only maybe?” Hannah pouted. “How about this? Let us be special friends, then. What that means is that if you ever need to speak to somebody about things you cannot tell your father or even Miss Tempelton, I will be there to listen. I won’t say anything. I won’t judge. I will be a friend only. How does that sound?”

“Things I cannot tell Father? Like what?”

“I have no idea.” Hannah laughed softly. “But come out, Amelia. I promise that if you get to know me, you will see that I am not so bad as that...” Again, she looked at Frederick, sticking her tongue out playfully this time. “You might even end up liking me, as crazy as that sounds.”

“That does sound crazy...” Frederick heard his daughter giggle.

“That’s because I am crazy.” Hannah laughed and extended her hand. “I would have to be to marry your father, right?” She let out another laugh, one that Amelia shared this time.

And then, slowly, Frederick saw Amelia extend her hand from behind the tree, allowing Hannah to take it.

He was smiling so broadly that his cheeks hurt. It was such a simple thing, yet it

spoke volumes. A step so far in the right direction that he wanted to cry out, only refraining from doing so because he did not want to scare his daughter.

But he could see also how proud Hannah was of herself. As her hands wrapped around Amelia's, she looked at him, her eyes twinkling with satisfaction and triumph, a sense that she was almost as happy with herself as he was.

Until that moment, Frederick had been decidedly unsure about Hannah. He had only seen her when she was at her most hostile, but he had a rare few glimpses of her softer side. Mostly, she was antagonistic toward him because of something he had done or said. But this right here, watching her now with his daughter, Frederick began to consider the very real possibility that this marriage might be even more than—

“No!” Amelia cried suddenly.

She jumped to her feet, ran out from behind the tree, and shoved Hannah with two hands.

“Oh!” Hannah yelped, stumbling backward, her arms flailing as she tried to regain her balance.

“Amelia!” Frederick roared.

“We don't want you here!” Amelia shoved her again, this time with enough force that it made Hannah trip, spin about, and fall face-first into a flower bed.

“Amelia!” Frederick cried out, caught between scolding his daughter and rescuing his wife.

In that split second, Amelia sprinted past him, heading for the house. He could hear her crying too, and the sound broke his heart. He did not want to be angry with her.

And he certainly did not want to upset her. But he'd need to talk to her, for this could not go on.

"Never mind me!" Hannah cried from the flowerbed as she tried to push herself back up.

"Oh!" Frederick's eyes went wide, and he rushed toward her. "I am so sorry!"

Without thinking, he bent down, wrapped his arms around her waist, and scooped her up out of the flowerbed.

"Oh!" Hannah gasped as he lifted her and then lowered her to her feet in front of him. She was covered from head to toe in pollen and petals.

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“Oh no...” Frederick pulled pieces of grass out of her hair as she patted herself down. “I am so sorry. That was... I don’t even know what to say.”

“Not the success I was hoping for.” Hannah chuckled as she smoothed down her skirt. “But I suppose it was too much to hope for.”

Frederick grimaced as he plucked a petal from her hair. “She will come around, I promise.”

“So you keep saying.”

“She is just...”

“Stubborn, like her father?” Hannah shot back.

Frederick’s face dropped, and he fixed her with a no-nonsense glare. But the sight of her, bedraggled, dirty, a real mess, made him burst into laughter.

“What?!” she snapped. “What is so funny!”

“I am sure you can guess.” He tried his best to stop laughing but was unable to.

“Oh, I am just so glad that my misery brings you such joy.”

“At least it does to one of us...” He took a deep breath, calming himself, his body still shaking. “And to be honest with you, I could use the laughter. It has been a while.”

She rolled her eyes. “Alright, but you owe me. One embarrassing situation so I can laugh at you, thank you.”

“Deal.” He grinned.

It was only just then that Frederick realized that they were once more alone. Standing less than one foot apart. His hands all over her as he plucked petals and leaves and pollen. And standing this close to her, looking at her properly... again, he was forced to admit just how stunning she was.

Her deep brown eyes were playful. Her smile was mischievous and fiery. And even though she had since dressed herself in a more conservative pelisse and jacket, Frederick remembered how she had looked earlier today in her wedding gown.

“Ah... I should thank you, too,” he said awkwardly, his eyes flicking past her so as not to stare.

“For?”

“For doing as you promised. For at least trying with my daughter.”

She scoffed. “I did not have much luck.”

“But you tried,” he emphasized. “For now, that is as much as I could have hoped for.”

“Oh, well, you are welcome...” She looked away sheepishly, her cheeks coloring.

“And for—” He bit his tongue. But at that moment, as close as they were, as alone, as unable to stop looking at his wife as he was, Frederick felt his self-control slipping. “For behaving yourself. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Her eyes flashed, and she looked at him again. “I am not the one with the problem. That, Your Grace, is you.”

He scoffed. “Me? I will remind you that you are the one who keeps... throwing herself at me.”

“I have done no such thing!”

“And you would be a fool to try,” he said, looking into her eyes, his heart fluttering. “For it will do you no good. I told you, ours is a marriage of convenience. Nothing more.”

“Are you sure about that?” She raised a challenging eyebrow at him. A quick glance about the garden, as if to double check they were alone.

“Do you doubt me?”

“I think you know that I do.”

She leaned closer to him. Close enough that if he wanted, he could reach out and pull her into his arms. Something that he very much wanted to do.

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Why Frederick was so insistent on putting himself in these situations, he had no idea. Or rather, he knew why, but he didn't want to consider what that might mean.

There was just something undeniably alluring about Hannah, a hold she had on him that made him say and do things that he knew better than, but he could not stop himself. He wanted her, it really was that simple. And from the way she looked at him now, she wanted him too.

Only...

"I should go," he said quickly, taking a step back and breaking the tension. "I should see Amelia and make sure she is alright."

"Oh..." He could literally see the disappointment on her face. "Yes... yes, that is probably for the best."

"Thank you again." He cleared his throat, forcing himself not to look at her. "For today, I mean. For trying with Amelia."

"Anytime," she said simply, softly, as if resigning herself to her fate.

Frederick thought to say one more thing, to meet her eyes and thank her for what turned out to be a wonderful day with a woman who he was beginning to see there was more to than met the eye. But his mouth had turned dry, his pulse had quickened, and he needed to put some distance between them before anything else happened.

"I will see you later," he barked and then scurried away.

“When...” she trailed off, for he was too far across the garden to answer.

That was dangerous, and Frederick chastised himself for it. He could not seduce Hannah. He could not allow himself to be seduced! His reasons for such a commitment were complex, far too much to explain to the poor woman. The simple fact was that he had made himself a promise years ago and would stick to said promise no matter what... no matter how hard it was.

And with the way his heart was pounding, his blood was pumping, and his mind was spinning, this promised to be a lot harder than he could have ever thought possible.

Chapter Eleven

Hannah ate her supper alone. It was her wedding night, and there she sat by herself at the dining table, wondering why she had even bothered to get dressed and come down, to begin with.

Oh, and she had gotten dressed, too. Having been covered in flowers and dirt earlier, she bathed and chose an appropriate dress to dine in. One that was not too scandalous—for she had expected to have supper with both Frederick and Amelia—but one that she hoped Frederick would appreciate, nonetheless.

And yet, when she arrived at supper, she was informed that Frederick was still with his daughter in her room and that she should start without him, for he was not certain when, or if, he would be able to join her.

At first, Hannah was angry. Even furious. After how hard she had tried with Amelia, the least Frederick could have done was return the favor by putting in some effort. She had made a promise, and she had kept it, proving that she could behave, so there was no reason for him not to join her. And even if Amelia was refusing to come down, surely he could have just left her in her room?

But then Hannah started to think, and when she did, she came to realize something, and when she realized this something, she could not help but smile.

She was starting to get to him.

Oh, she had felt their moment after Amelia had pushed her into the flowerbed. She had seen the look in Frederick's eyes, the hunger in them, similar to the last time they were in the garden together. He had wanted her at that moment and, in an effort to deny himself, he had fled and then stayed away because even he was not so self-disciplined as that.

Hannah was starting to break through his walls, and thus she decided that tonight she would give it one final try. Her wedding night—a night that she and her husband should be spending together, a night that would not end until she proved to both of them that there was more to this marriage than the potential for mere friendship.

It was once she had finished her supper, and after having a few glasses of wine to steel her nerves, that Hannah made her way silently through the house and toward her private quarters. She had been assigned a separate chamber, but tonight that would not be needed.

On the way, she stopped outside Amelia's room and listened at the door, hearing the little girl and her father speaking. At that moment, she came to a decision—she headed to Frederick's room, not hers. He would not be expecting her. His guard would be down. And then, she would pounce.

His room was warm when she entered it, the fire roaring in the hearth, bathing the room in hues of orange and red. Her dress tonight was another strapless piece but with a high neckline, and she had chosen to wear gloves. Hannah took off her gloves and undid her hair, letting it fall down to her shoulders as she sat on the edge of his bed, faced the door, and waited.

And waited... and waited. Her heart pounded as the minutes ticked by. Her resolve was wavering. Was she really doing this? Was she really going to take this chance? The potential for embarrassment and mortification was extreme.

To keep herself calm, to remind herself that this was a good idea, she thought back to that moment in the garden earlier and the look in Frederick's eyes. And before that, the kiss they had shared at the altar. And before that, the near kiss in the garden at Ramsbury Estate. So many near misses, so many indications of the fire that simmered between them whenever they were alone together.

This was a good idea. It was the right idea. And if Frederick was not going to take the chance and act, then it would fall on her shoulders. What did a wedding night truly entail? What was supposed to happen? Hannah had no idea, but she was excited to find out.

And finally, after close to an hour of waiting, the door popped open, and Frederick walked inside.

Not paying attention, he closed the door behind him, shaking his head to himself as if frustrated, and then began to unbutton his shirt. Hannah watched him do so, licking her lips, heart now racing as his shirt came undone and he moved his hands toward his pants...

Only to freeze, for finally he looked up and saw her sitting there, watching him.

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“Hannah!” he stammered, taking a surprised step back. “What are you doing here? In my room?”

“Please, do not stop on my account.” She gestured toward his hands, which were still hovering over his pants. “Things were just getting interesting.”

He leveled her with a glare. “I ask again, what are you doing in my room?”

She snorted. “Do you need me to explain, or do you think you can figure that out on your own?”

“I thought we had an agreement.”

“We do,” she said innocently. “And from what I can see, your daughter is nowhere in sight.”

“My daughter has nothing to do with it. Regardless, we spoke about this already. Or do you need me to tell you again?”

He was angry, she could tell. Or at least he was trying to be. And she very nearly shrank under that anger. The glare he fixed her with was hotter than the flames in the fireplace. Truly, a part of her wondered if he might grab her by the arm and drag her out of his room. Only... well, that would require him to touch her.

“Tell me,” she said, keeping her voice level. Sitting on his bed still, facing him, she leaned back slightly and then... spread her legs. “I seem to have forgotten.”

Frederick swallowed as he saw her legs part. For a moment, he seemed to forget what he was about to say, his mouth hanging open, a look on his face that she recognized well by now. But then he gave his head a shake.

“This marriage is?—”

“For convenience only, I know.”

He narrowed his eyes. “And seeing as it is, as I told you, I will not touch you. And I would appreciate it if you would respect my wishes.”

“Why?”

He blinked. “Why would I like you to respect my wishes?”

“No,” she sighed. “Why do you refuse to touch me? It has just occurred to me that through all of this, you have never given me a good reason.”

“I—” He bit his tongue and gathered himself. “My reasons are my own.”

“But they concern me.”

“I do not have to explain myself to you.”

“And I do not have to leave your room if I do not wish it. I am your wife, after all.” She cocked an eyebrow at him. “This room is as much mine as it is yours.”

“You’re really not going to leave?”

“I would ask if you might drag me out, but that would require you to touch me...” A wicked smirk. “Which I know you will not do.”

“Do not tempt me.”

He took a step toward her, and her breath caught in her throat with the thrill, the sense that he was about to grab her.

“Go on, then.” She waggled her eyebrows at him, daring him to do it. Still leaning back, she pushed her chest out, spread her legs further—made herself totally vulnerable. “Do it.”

“I...” He hesitated.

She could see his resolve wavering. Oh, until now, Hannah had been certain that her husband wanted her and was only stopping himself for reasons she could not imagine. But now, she knew it. Not a doubt in her mind about the matter. And, like a deck of cards, one small push was all it would take.

Her heart hammered in her chest. Sweat began to bead on her exposed skin. She was nervous, yes. Terrified of what might happen if she went too far. But she was here now, her husband was alone with her, and nothing would stop her.

“You want to, don’t you?”

“Throw you out? More than anything.”

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“No...” She tittered and fixed him with a sensual look, licked her lips, and purred.
“Not that.”

He stood with his shirt open, the flickering firelight accentuating the hard planes of his chest. His hands were on his pants now, and she looked at them as if doing so might make his pants fall away. A suggestive look at his crotch, so he could see what was on her mind.

“I... I told you...” He took a step closer to her. “I will not touch you.”

“Then leave,” she dared. “I cannot stop you.”

“This is my room.”

“Then stay. I do not mind.”

A step closer. Her breathing became labored. Her lips parted. It was happening. She knew in her soul that it was.

He stood less than five feet away from her. His eyes roved over her, traveling from her legs to her waist to her breasts to her lips. She could sense his inner turmoil... and the decision he was coming to.

“I made a promise to never touch you.”

“Promises are made to be broken.”

“But...” He licked his lips.

“Yes?”

“I—” A deep breath, his body shaking. “I never said anything about you touching yourself.”

Hannah frowned and leaned back, caught off guard by a comment she did not wholly understand. “I do not... I am not sure what you?—”

“Tell me, wife,” he growled as he took a step closer, “do I arouse you?”

She swallowed, her cheeks suddenly flushing, the reality of the moment hitting her. “Y-yes. Yes, you do.”

“How much?”

“I...” Her mind scrambled for an answer. “More than I knew was possible.”

“Show me, then.” He stopped two feet away, his arms crossed. He looked down at her and cocked an eyebrow. “Well?”

Now it was her turn to feel confused.

“I do not... What do you mean? I am here. Is this not me... I am showing you now.”

He chuckled deeply, the hesitation gone, confidence radiating from him now as he was no longer fighting himself. It was a side of him that she had not seen before—a more powerful, determined, masculine side. He knew what he wanted, and he was going to get it.

“Spread your legs further for me.”

Her eyes went wide. “Like... like this?” She did as he asked.

The fabric of her skirts fell between her thighs, covering everything, but that didn’t seem to matter.

“Pull your skirt back,” he commanded. “Above your thighs.”

Her hand shook as she reached for her skirt.

“Look at me as you do it,” he growled.

She swallowed again and forced herself to look at him. She gasped. The look in his eyes was animalistic. Savage!

“Is this...?” She pulled the dress up slowly, her thighs quivering as they became exposed.

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“Now take your finger and tell me how aroused you are.”

Finally, Hannah understood what he meant. Her pulse quickened at the thought, for she had never done such a thing. Oh, she had heard of it. But to actually do it herself... There was a reason her entire body shook the way it did.

Nonetheless, she held his gaze—which had her heart racing—as she slowly moved the index finger of her right hand between her thighs, and touched herself in a way she had never done before. And all while her husband watched.

“Tell me.”

“It is...” Her finger slid between her nether lips, so warm and wet. “It is wet. I am wet.”

“How wet?”

Her eyes flashed. “Soaking wet.”

He groaned. “Rub yourself gently.”

She frowned, her face flushing with embarrassment. “I do not—what do you mean?”

He chuckled. The sound was deep and enticing. “At the top of your lips, you will find a... a bud.” He smirked. “It will be sensitive to the touch, but if you are gentle, you will enjoy it.”

Somehow, she knew what he was talking about. As she slowly moved her finger to the apex of her sex, she could feel this ‘bud’ he mentioned throbbing. Her finger gently rubbed it, sending a pulse of pure pleasure through her body.

“Ah!” she gasped.

“Do not stop.”

“I... I... I won’t...” she stammered, trying not to moan as her finger gently massaged her bud.

“Good,” Frederick growled hungrily. “Keep going.”

As he watched her, she saw his own hand move to his crotch and begin to rub it. The sight excited her further, and she moaned, making sure that he saw her eyeing his hand. He grimaced and pulled his hand away, then fell to his knees so he was level with her legs.

“Just like that...”

“It feels... it feels... oh God!”

How to even describe it? Hannah had no idea. Sitting on the edge of Frederick’s bed, touching herself for the first time, being watched and idolized and devoured by his eyes, it was unlike anything she had ever felt before. Anything she could imagine!

Oh yes, she wished he would touch her, too. But this... well, this was not a bad trade.

“Frederick,” she moaned as she continued to rub herself. The sensation inside her grew, spreading from her thighs to her stomach and her chest. Like a fire building within her! “Something... something is happening.”

“Keep going,” he commanded. “Faster. Do not stop until I say.”

“I... I... I—oh God!”

It was an explosion! Somehow painful, somehow pleasurable, all-encompassing like a wave crashing down on her. Her body spasmed. Her legs snapped shut. Her spine stiffened. Her head fell back. She opened her mouth to scream but then closed it as waves of pure pleasure racked her body.

“Good,” Frederick purred. “Very good.”

She fell onto her back, hardly able to breathe, her entire body shaking as those same waves of pleasure still coursed through her, only softer now and nowhere near as intense. And as she lay there, she hoped desperately that Frederick would come to her and take her in his arms.

Typically, he didn't.

His footsteps echoed across the room, and she sat up just in time to see him at the door.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“To check on Amelia and make sure you did not wake her up.” He popped the door open without even looking back.

“Are you—will you return?” she asked, feeling somewhat nervous.

He hesitated, and she could see that same inner conflict raging inside him. “I am not sure.”

“I will wait for you,” she said quickly.

Again, he hesitated, but then he nodded once, gave her a soft smile, and quickly vanished as he stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

Hannah knew right then that he would not return. And while she was upset by this, she could not help but smile at what had just happened. He had not touched her, as he promised. But somehow, this felt like more than that. More personal. More intense. A step in the right direction, one which she knew would soon lead to one place and one place only.

Oh, Frederick might try and resist for as long as possible, but tonight proved he was only human. And with tomorrow being another day they might spend together, and the day after that and the day after that, Hannah was certain that sooner rather than later, she wouldn’t need her finger the way she had tonight.

Chapter Twelve

“Remember what we spoke about last night, Amelia,” Frederick warned. “You promised to behave today.”

“I remember, Father,” Amelia said solemnly, looking at the empty plate in front of

her as if upset.

“You promised you would at least try.”

“I will, Father.”

“And as for pushing Hannah as you did yesterday...” Frederick trailed off, raising a warning eyebrow at his daughter.

She did not look at him directly, but he knew that she saw it and knew its meaning.

Her face contorted into a tight ball. “I did not mean for her to fall.”

“I know.”

“It is not my fault that?—”

“Amelia,” he growled.

She continued to pout. “I will not push her.”

He chuckled lightly as he reached across the table and took her hand. He gave it a squeeze, then brought it to his lips and kissed the back of it.

“I promise that if you give her a chance, you will learn to love her. Trust me, this is...” His stomach twisted with guilt. “This is a good thing.”

To that, Amelia did not respond, only staring at her plate. He knew his daughter well enough to know that sometimes silence was the best response he could hope for.

Frederick had made sure to prepare his daughter early today so that they would be in

the dining room to break their fast before Hannah arrived. That way, he could have one final chance to speak with his daughter alone and let her know what was expected. After what had happened yesterday... Well, needless to say, a fresh start was needed. And many a stern warning.

But Frederick resolved that Amelia and Hannah should get along. That was, after all, one of the main reasons he had chosen to remarry. A little girl needed a mother, a role model, someone to look up to in a way that a father simply could not fulfill. And whether Amelia liked it or not, Hannah would become that person.

For that reason—and Frederick knew that this would be the true challenge of the day—he too had to make sure to treat Hannah with respect.

“Good morning,” Hannah said as she appeared in the doorway of the dining room.

She was dressed in simple daywear, a light dress that had shoulders and a back, thankfully. But the sunlight filtering through the window shone right where she stood, and the sight of her, beaming, brought back memories that had kept Frederick up most of the night.

“Good morning,” he returned as she sashayed into the room. “Amelia...”

“Good morning,” Amelia muttered to her empty plate.

“I slept wonderfully last night,” Hannah crooned as she made her way toward them.

“And you, husband?”

“Well enough...” He could not even look at her, as if she might know the truth of his rough night... and its cause.

“I am glad to hear it.”

She made right for him, not so much as breaking stride, and then when she reached him, she leaned forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Frederick’s eyes went wide in shock. Caught between pulling away and snapping at her, forced to remain composed because his daughter was now watching him with a very curious look, he cleared his throat and offered her a grateful smile in return, to which she smirked with smug satisfaction.

“Is the food nearly ready?” she asked as she sat down across from Amelia, to Frederick’s left. “I am famished.”

Frederick’s mind was still on that kiss. His cheek tingled. His skin grew warm. His neck and chest flushed. It was a reminder of what had not happened last night while somehow emphasizing what had.

He still could not believe that he gave in the way he had. And while he liked to tell himself that he had not broken any rules, that was flimsy logic at best. On his left, Hannah was watching him with a wry smile, as if she knew what was on his mind, and while he hoped she might be more embarrassed, for some reason he was the one feeling as such.

It was a good thing she did not know what happened after he left her. When he snuck into the washroom and pleased himself furiously at the image of her with her legs spread, touching herself. If she had known that...

“Father, are you feeling alright?” Amelia asked.

“W-what?” He hadn’t even realized that he had been staring, his mind lingering on last night. He cleared his throat and pounded his chest. “Yes, perfectly fine.”

“He looks like he has seen a ghost. Right, Amelia?” Hannah chuckled.

Amelia almost smiled, but forced herself not to, back to looking at her plate.

“I am just.... hungry.” He looked around and caught the eye of one of the footmen, motioning for him to check on the food.

“Me too,” Hannah sighed. “I could eat an entire horse—I am that hungry.”

Amelia snorted, but then her eyes went wide with shock, and she forced herself to keep looking down at her plate.

Hannah saw her reaction and grinned. “Or perhaps two horses. One time, I was so hungry that I ate an entire cow.”

“You did not!” Amelia cried, unable to keep quiet any longer.

“I did too,” Hannah said rightly. “Of course, it was far too much for me, and I did not eat after that for an entire week.”

“You are lying!” Amelia said, trying to look angry but failing. “Father, tell her she must tell me the truth!”

Frederick held out his palms. “I am not getting involved.”

“An entire cow?” Amelia scrunched up her face. “Even the hooves and the tail?”

“And the teeth and the tongue and the ears.” Hannah nodded as if she was being serious. “Although I do not recommend it. Also—and this was most strange—not only did I not eat for an entire week, but for a full month, I drank nothing but milk.”

Amelia began to giggle. “You’re being silly. Father, tell her to stop being silly!”

Frederick caught Hannah’s eyes, and she winked at him. A small moment, a silly one, but he could sense his daughter slowly starting to come around.

Oh, it would take more than that, he knew, but suddenly he wondered if the day might not be as tragic as it could have been.

What was more, the gratitude he suddenly felt for Hannah... well, it was enough that he was able to look at her and smile without feeling a burning intensity well below his belt.

“So, what are we doing today?” Hannah asked conversationally. “Amelia? Any ideas.”

Amelia was still hesitant. She eyed her curiously, a little bit nervous, then looked at Frederick, who nodded for her to speak.

“I... I want to explore the forest.”

“Oh, fun.”

“There is... there is a pond there that...” Amelia bit her lip. “That I want to swim in.”

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“I told you, Amelia, you are far too young for that,” Frederick explained.

“Nonsense,” Hannah spoke up. “I was about your age when I first learned to swim. That is unless...” She frowned at him. “Frederick, you do know how to swim, do you not?”

He looked at her flatly. “Do not be ridiculous.”

“What do you think, Amelia? Is your father lying?”

Amelia giggled. “Maybe.”

“I think he is.” Hannah winked at her.

“Careful, you two,” Frederick warned jokingly. “There will be no ganging up on me. Understand?”

“Girls versus boys,” Hannah said. “What do you think, Amelia?”

“Yes.” Amelia giggled excitedly. “Girls versus boys.”

Frederick caught Hannah’s eyes again, and they shared a relieved smile. He had been telling the truth all those weeks ago when he had told Hannah that he wished for them to be friendly, and this here was a perfect start. Even if that word ‘friendly’ didn’t feel adequate anymore.

But Frederick also remembered that Hannah had promised to be on her best behavior

when Amelia was around, so for today, at least, he did not have to worry about her doing anything untoward, like trying to seduce him again. A relief... if not for the other worry that lingered deep within.

She might not try and seduce him overtly, but just to be in her presence, to see her and be reminded of last night and what it had done to him, might mean that she didn't have to do anything. Frederick was the one who would need to control himself today, a task that once seemed infinitely possible only to now feel the very opposite of that.

Honestly, what was happening to him?

"I don't think I can..."

Amelia looked nervous—damn terrified, in fact. She stood by the edge of the pond, staring at the water as if it were a monster from her nightmares.

"Oh, nonsense," Hannah said cheerfully. "The water isn't that deep. It will barely come up to your waist."

"But... what if I can't?"

"Then your father will happily dive in and save you. Won't you, Frederick?" Hannah turned around and raised an eyebrow at her husband. "Personally, I wouldn't mind seeing him go in."

"If you are not feeling up to it, Amelia, there is no pressure whatsoever," Frederick assured. "In fact, I would prefer it if you didn't."

"Oh, we all know that," Hannah said dismissively, before turning back to Amelia. "But he is right. You do not have to do anything you do not want to."

“I...”

“Just the fact that you considered it is a huge step forward,” Hannah continued. “Honestly, most girls your age wouldn’t be nearly that brave.”

“I... I want to,” Amelia forced herself to say, her body shaking now. “I do. It is just...” She half-stepped forward, her feet on the edge of the pond. “It is scary.”

“There is no need for it to be.”

“And wet.”

“Yes.” Hannah chuckled. “That is the idea.”

“Amelia...” Frederick rested a hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Perhaps this was a bad idea? As Hannah said, just the fact that you considered doing it is enough. More than enough, truthfully.”

Amelia looked undecided. On the one hand, he could see the stubborn determination in her eyes, that willfulness to not back down because she was so very much like him. But on the other hand, she was only six years old, and this was a rather big ask for anyone her age.

Truthfully, Frederick had not even thought things would go this far. What he had expected from today was pleasant conversations, a little bit of exploring, and a chance for Hannah and Amelia to get to know one another a little better. Not to mention a chance for him to spend time with Hannah in a friendly, platonic manner.

And it had started that way, too. Once they had broken their fast, the three of them took two horses from the stables and crossed the tracks of land that surrounded the estate, where a small forest sat on the edges. There, they tied the horses to a tree and

began their trek through the wilderness.

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It was a sparsely grown forest, easy enough to walk through. Amelia would run ahead, call out excitedly, and then come back with her face red and her eyes wide with glee.

Hannah played her part perfectly, too. She didn't say anything untoward to Frederick. She didn't try and touch him or even mention the previous night. She kept almost her entire focus on Amelia, who was slowly but surely warming up to her.

But then they came across the hidden pond, and everything changed.

Amelia wanted to learn how to swim. She wanted to go in. At the sight of the pond, she ran to its edge and demanded that she be allowed. And while Frederick would have ordinarily said no, Hannah stepped in and made that all but impossible.

"I am sorry." Amelia pouted, looking away from the water. "I... I can't."

Frederick breathed a sigh of relief. "You have nothing to apologize for." He took her by the hand and began to lead her back from the pond's edge. "How about we head back home? It's getting late, and someone has earned themselves a slice of cake."

"Might I still go in?" Hannah asked suddenly.

Frederick turned back and looked at her. "What?"

"Might I go in?" She nodded innocently toward the pond. "Seeing as the weather is nice and we have come all this way."

“You’re serious?”

“I have never been more serious.” She cocked an eyebrow at him and then, still holding his eyes, began to unfasten the front of her dress.

“Hannah!”

“It is quite alright,” she sighed. “I am wearing a pelisse underneath. And it is just the three of us. Amelia doesn’t mind. Do you, Amelia?”

Amelia looked as if she could not believe what she was hearing. Partly shocked. Partly amused. Her eyes were wide, her smile was eager, and her body shook from withheld laughter.

“Are you really going to go in?”

“Only if your father does not object.”

Hannah could not have looked more smug. It was a test, Frederick thought, for she knew he wished they would get along, and to deny her this would upset his daughter.

Frederick’s expression was flat and cold, and he made sure that Hannah could see it. “I have no objections. So long as you do not mind getting wet.”

Hannah’s eyes flashed. “I haven’t minded in the past.”

That comment alone had his knees shaking, for the underlying meaning was obvious! And then, as Hannah began to unfasten her dress slowly, watching him the whole while, he could feel the rest of his body join in, growing hot. His breathing became labored.

Her fingers gently undid the ties around her bosom, opening the dress and allowing it to pool around her ankles. Sure, she was wearing a thick pelisse underneath, but that hardly seemed relevant. Even though it was loose, hiding her curves from view, Frederick's heart began to thud so loudly that he wondered if Amelia could hear it.

Still watching him, smirking to herself, Hannah started toward the water's edge. She dipped a toe first. Then she lifted the garment to her knees and stepped into the water.

"Oh, it's cold," she gasped. "Amelia, are you sure you do not wish to come in?"

"N-no." Amelia giggled to herself, then she looked up at Frederick. "Father, she is crazy."

"She is something..." He barely even heard his daughter, unable to look away from Hannah for even a second.

She waded deeper into the pond, her dress now falling into the water and trailing behind her. Deeper and deeper she went until the water reached her waist. She spun about, splashing the water around her, laughing and giggling with delight.

The dress had been loose before, but now it clung to her waist. Those curves were on full display. Her skin shimmered in the sunlight. And when she dipped her hands into the water and ran them through her hair, flicking it back as she closed her eyes and basked in the sunlight...

Subconsciously, as if he had lost control of his body, Frederick found himself walking toward the pond. As if a hand was grabbing him and dragging him forward. He might have tried to fight it if he had been so inclined, but... well, with how he was feeling right now, he wasn't that.

Images from last night flooded his mind. Watching her pleasuring herself on his bed,

somehow resisting the urge to join her. Frederick couldn't fathom how he had managed to do even that. He wanted her. It really was that simple. A fact made all the more tempting by the very real fact that she wanted him, too.

“Oh, are you coming in?” Hannah asked him, seeing him hesitating by the water's edge.

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Frederick blinked, snapping himself back into the moment. “Ah... No—no. I don’t?—”

“Daddy, you should! Please!” Amelia giggled. “If you do, I will.”

Frederick’s eyes widened as he realized the trap Hannah had set. “I really don’t?—”

“Oh, come now!” Hannah splashed water at him, enough that it reached where he and Amelia stood, hitting them without soaking them. “It’s lovely in!”

“Yes!” Amelia cried. “Daddy! Can I? Can I?”

Frederick knew he had no choice. But more than that, he didn’t care. This marriage had been about finding a woman who could help him raise his daughter, a woman who Amelia might come to like, given time. And seeing that happen before his eyes... it was more than he could have hoped for.

What was more, his desire not to touch Hannah, the reason for it, was now seeming less and less relevant. Tonight, he had no doubt that she would try and seduce him again, and while he wondered if he would be able to hold himself back like he had previously, he now questioned if he cared.

“Fine,” Frederick sighed, making sure to act as if it was the last thing he wished for as he began to unbutton his shirt. “But when we are all cold and wet later, do not say I didn’t warn you.”

“Yay!” Amelia cried.

Frederick's shirt came undone, and he made sure to look at Hannah when it did. Her eyes widened with delight. Then she looked up at him, and he met her gaze. They shared a grin. Memories from last night and the implication of what this really was. And then Frederick took off his shirt, dropping it to the ground.

"There he is!" Hannah laughed.

Frederick took off his boots next, kicking them away before wading into the pond. The water was indeed cold, but he did not care. He laughed as he stepped into it, wading forward until it came up to his knees. Hannah splashed him playfully, and he widened his eyes at her in warning, only to splash her back.

"My turn!" Amelia squealed and charged into the pond fully clothed.

"Amelia!" Frederick shouted as she tripped and fell face-first into the water.

A collective gasped rang out, but then her head emerged from the water, and they erupted in laughter and cries of delight.

"I told you!" Hannah cheered. "Nothing to be afraid of."

She waded through the water until she was standing beside Frederick. Her hand moved toward his, and she looked at him, raising both her eyebrows in question.

Frederick paused for a moment, rolled his eyes, and then took her hand. It was warm compared to the water, soft and somehow cozy. He held it tight, feeling a pulse shoot up his arm at her touch. In that way, he was glad that his daughter was here, for she kept his desires in check. But in another way...

It was a shame that his daughter was here, for with Hannah now drenched from head to toe, her pelisse clinging to her curves, her breasts heaving beneath, it was all he

could do to only hold her hand.

Today was special, Frederick realized. And he relished it for what it was. But tonight, he did not know what would happen. He did not even know what he wanted. But deep down, even he had to admit that he was excited to find out.

This woman had unmasked him, and from the way she looked at him, he knew that it was only the beginning.

Chapter Thirteen

Hannah was just leaving her room when one of the estate's many butlers, Mr. Farrow, rushed to meet her. Having just bathed but still feeling a slight chill, she walked with a blanket draped over her shoulders, her hair drying and her skin glowing. Her hope was to see Frederick and pick up where they had left off earlier, but one look at Mr. Farrow told her this was not happening.

"Your Grace!" he called to her.

"Ah, Farrow." She smiled pleasantly. "What has you in such a rush?"

"There is a visitor, Your Grace," he said. "They have arrived just now."

"Oh..."

Hannah bit her lip as she glanced down the hallway in the direction of Amelia's room. She knew Frederick was in there now with his daughter, reading to her before putting her to bed, as it had been a very big day for the little girl. So big that the sun was only just now setting, yet Frederick had been forced to carry her home, as she could hardly keep her eyes open.

“Well, I believe that His Grace is with Amelia at the moment, but I am sure he will be available soon.”

“The visitor is not for His Grace,” Mr. Farrow clarified. “But for you, Your Grace.”

Hannah blinked in surprise. “For me? Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” he said emphatically. “They asked that I bring you to them at once.”

“That is...” Odd, to say the least.

Although this was indeed Hannah’s new address, she had only lived here for a day, and she did not yet see it as her home.

“Who did you say is calling?”

“Her Grace, the Duchess of Hayward,” he replied. “Your sister.”

“Charlotte?” That was surprising and somewhat concerning. “Who is she with?”

“She is alone, Your Grace. What is more, she insisted that she meet you in the foyer, for she said that she did not have time to stay. I offered her a drink, of course,” Mr. Farrow made sure to add. “But she was quite adamant about the urgency of this meeting.”

Hannah frowned as she considered what the butler was telling her. She knew there was nothing malicious about this sudden visit, as she and Charlotte were close. But the urgency of it suggested a deeper meaning than simply stopping by to say hello. Charlotte was here for a good reason, a purpose that could not wait.

What was more, that she wished to see Hannah alone spoke volumes, and it made Hannah suddenly feel nervous in a way she could not quite explain.

“Thank you, Farrow,” she said. “I shall go to her at once. And if His Grace comes out of Amelia’s room in the meantime...” She hesitated. “Tell him where I am. I am sure he would love to see the Duchess of Hayward.”

“Of course.” Mr. Farrow bowed to her before he left.

Hannah made for the stairwell that led down to the foyer. As she walked, her mind raced as she tried to puzzle out what this sudden appearance might mean. Hopefully, it was all in her head, for everything was going so well here—far better than expected—and the last thing she needed was for it to come crashing down on her like a crumbling house.

As promised, her sister stood in the foyer, waiting.

As soon as Charlotte saw Hannah on the landing, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hannah!” she said. “Thank God!”

“Charlotte...” Hannah hurried down the stairs, taking note of her sister’s aggrieved state. “What a pleasant surprise. Surprise being the key word.”

Charlotte met her at the bottom of the steps, took her hands, and gave her a kiss on each cheek. “I am so sorry for turning up without prior notice. Ordinarily I would not, but I thought I must.”

“Oh, it is quite alright,” Hannah assured her. “Hopefully, it is nothing too troublesome?”

Charlotte winced in response.

Hannah’s heart sank. She could only conclude that it had something to do with

Frederick, and although she could not imagine what, the timing could not be worse. Today had gone wonderfully for so many reasons. Not only had she managed to make great progress with Amelia, but her relationship with her husband had come on leaps and bounds.

He was no longer cagey. He was no longer reserved and standoffish. Dammit, he was finally beginning to act as a husband should, for she saw the way he looked at her when she stripped off her dress and waded into the pond. That self-control he touted was cracking, and Hannah knew that one more night together and it would shatter entirely.

Last night... how many times today had Hannah thought about it? Too many to count. She still had trouble believing it had happened and?—

“Hannah?” Charlotte said. “Is everything alright?”

“Hmm?” Hannah blinked, realizing that for a moment there she had zoned out. “Oh, yes. Sorry.” A shake of the head next. “You were saying?”

Charlotte frowned at her, her eyes narrowed in concern. “I was saying that I simply had to come and see you. To tell you firsthand before you found out for yourself.”

“Tell me what? Shall we have some tea...” Hannah half-turned to gestured back inside the house.

“No, no, there is no time. I was passing by and thought I should stop in. This is purely me playing the older sister, because someone has to.”

“Has to what?”

“Look out for you, Hannah,” Charlotte said rightly. “What with this marriage and

how—” She clicked her tongue. “How little you wished for it, the last thing I want to see is things made even worse. Which they will be, I am afraid.”

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“Will you speak plainly, Sister?” Hannah demanded. “You are starting to make me nervous.”

“It is Aunt Teresa,” Charlotte began, her face stricken with worry. “Even since the Duke opted to marry you instead of Selina?—”

“Oh!” Hannah took her sister’s hands again. “How is Selina? I have been meaning to write to her ever since...” A wince. “Well, you know what happened. I know she is upset with me, and I cannot blame her. But if I just have a chance to explain myself. Have you seen her? Do you know how she is feeling?”

“That is just it,” Charlotte said, her worry growing. “Although I cannot speak for Selina specifically, Aunt Teresa seems to be making it her life’s mission to ruin your husband’s reputation, and yours by the way. She is telling all and sundry that it was Selina who rejected the Duke—the reasons for this rejection vary, but none of them are good. And what is more, she is doubling down by insisting that you were some sort of last-minute resort.”

Hannah felt her stomach twist. “She... she is?”

“As if you had no other option, and the Duke simply chose to marry you out of desperation. Oh, Father is furious of course, but anything he says only gives credence to the rumors.” Charlotte looked her right in the eyes. “She is trying to ruin you both to save her skin, Hannah. And you know Aunt Teresa as well as I do. The woman will go to any lengths to get what she wants.”

“Huh.”

“Huh? That is all you have to say?!”

Hannah didn't know what to say. Or what to think. At first glance, the news was undoubtedly bad. She did not much like the idea of her name being dragged through the mud for something that was not her fault, and knew that Frederick certainly wouldn't. But on the other hand...

With how well everything was going right now, she wondered if it really mattered. Right now, her biggest concern was this marriage and what it might become. Did some silly rumors started by her aunt really matter?

“I am not sure what you want me to say.”

“That you are upset?” Charlotte suggested. “Furious, even. Aunt Teresa is talking about you behind your back in a most unbecoming manner.”

“Yes, but there is no truth to it.”

“As if that matters! And while you might not care, how do you think your husband will feel?” Charlotte raised a knowingeyebrow. “Something tells me he will not take this news as lightly as you have.”

“Ah...” Hannah's stomach sank. “That is... a fair point.”

“You need to tell him,” Charlotte urged. “He should hear it from you, not somebody else. Now, before these rumors have a chance to spiral.”

“You're right,” Hannah sighed, seeing the sense in it. “But then you usually are.”

This was the last thing she wanted. After today, Hannah very much looked forward to a lazy evening, one in which she and Frederick would take advantage and hopefully

pick up where they left off last night. But if she was to tell him about this, what was happening, there was no telling how he might react.

Somehow, she got the sense that when he learned about it, pushing their boundaries as husband and wife might be the last thing on his mind. A wonderful day, now promising to be an awkward night. A night that would likely see her sleep alone once more... only without any sweet memories to keep her warm.

“Thank you, Charlotte,” she said sincerely. “You did not have to do this.”

“I needed to,” Charlotte insisted. “What with how this marriage started—speaking of.” She took Hannah’s hands and squeezed them. “How is everything going between you and your husband?” She clicked her tongue. “Any progress?”

There had been, Hannah thought to herself bitterly. But that mattered little now.

Chapter Fourteen

Hannah and Frederick were supposed to sup together once he had finished putting Amelia to bed. That was the plan that they had agreed upon, but considering what Hannah had just learned, she decided that a different plan was needed.

If they dined together, the setting would steer the conversation away from anything pertaining to them giving in to their passions and desires. She would have no choice but to tell him about Charlotte’s visit, and that would likely lead to an awkward conversation, nipping in the bud her goal of making her husband lose control and take her.

So, once she bade farewell to Charlotte, she tracked down Mr. Farrow and asked him to inform her husband that she would like to speak with him privately in his bedroom before supper. And then, she hurried to said bedroom and prepared herself.

Tonight, there would be no need for a dress.

She dropped the blanket to the floor, removed her dress so that she was in just a light slip, and then wrapped the blanket around her shoulders once more. The fire was lit and left to simmer. The curtains were drawn. And as with the previous night, she found herself sitting on the edge of his bed, waiting.

After some time, Hannah heard Frederick leave Amelia's room. She listened to the sound of his footsteps as he passed the door and went downstairs. A few minutes later, she heard his footsteps approaching down the hallway, heading in the direction of his room.

Hannah did not feel as nervous as she had been the night before, and that was for good reason. After the day they had, she had managed to convince herself that Frederick wanted this as much as she did. Oh, he might need some convincing, but she knew that he would not threaten to throw her out as he had done last night.

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They were finally going to consummate their marriage, and the more Hannah thought of it, the hotter she became under her blanket.

The door opened suddenly, and Frederick stepped inside.

“Hannah...” He stood in the doorway, studying her, hesitant to close the door behind him, as if that might announce his intentions. “Farrow said you wished to speak with me.”

“I did—I mean, I do.”

He frowned and tilted his head. “I assumed that was what supper was for?”

A flirtatious smile spread across her lips, and she fluttered her eyelashes. “Would you close the door, Frederick? I am still cold from earlier.” She shifted the blanket. “And you are letting the heat out.”

Again, he hesitated, his dark eyes flicking over her. He licked his lips, considered... and then closed the door.

“I did tell you not to go into the pond. You may have caught a chill.”

She tittered. “No, I am fine. Well...” She looked right at him, making sure he did not misinterpret her words. “Now that you are here, I am feeling warmer already.”

An obvious line, one which she hoped that he would pick up on. But still, he seemed intent on keeping that barrier between them, as if he honestly thought he might stand

a chance of denying her tonight.

Remaining in the doorway, he looked at her without looking right at her.

“I am guessing you wish to speak about your sister’s visit?” he asked.

Hannah blinked. “My sister?”

“The Duchess of Hayward,” he clarified. “Farrow said that she paid you a visit earlier but could not tell him the reason. That is why you wished to speak before supper, yes?”

“Oh...” Hannah’s eyes widened with the sudden realization of how rushed and unthought-out this plan was.

She had not considered that Mr. Farrow might inform Frederick of Charlotte’s visit—a ridiculous misstep, for of course he would. And while Hannah had every intention of telling her husband all about it, she had hoped to wait until tomorrow, when they would both be in an infinitely better mood. But now...

“Yes, she... ah, she came to see me.”

“And?”

“Oh, it is nothing.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Not worth discussing, really. But why don’t you come closer, Frederick.” She shifted on the bed and patted the space beside her. “I can hardly hear you when you’re standing all the way over there.”

Frederick frowned. “Farrow said that she insisted on speaking to you only. And that she was only here for a few minutes. Surely, there must have been good reason.”

“She just wished to see how I was doing.”

“And she came all the way here for that.” He raised an eyebrow, disbelief plain on his face. “Surely, a letter would have sufficed.”

Hannah’s mouth went dry. “My sister has always been a worrier.” An awkward chuckle next. “And with how this marriage came about, she simply wished to make sure that everything was fine. That is all.” A smile, a little over-the-top, a final effort to dismiss his questions. “Really, it was nothing.”

“Hannah.” His tone was sharp, as was his stare. “Tell me the truth.”

“You... you think I am lying?” She looked away, for to meet his eyes would be to let him see the lie.

“Are you?” He folded his arms over his chest and stepped further into the room, but was careful not to get too close. “I have a six-year-old, remember? I know when I am being lied to.”

“I...” She grimaced, still unable to look at him.

“Tell me,” he urged, his tone slightly softer. “Whatever it is, you should know there is nothing you cannot say to me. We are married. Your troubles are my own, and if there is something wrong...” he trailed off, for there was no need to finish the thought.

She forced herself to look at him, her stomach twisting with guilt, for it was not anger that she saw in his eyes but worry. Concern, even. He seemed to think that something was seriously wrong, and most strangely, he wanted to know. He wanted to help.

Again, Hannah was forced to admit that she knew little about the man who was her

husband—a cold man, a harsh man... a caring man, it seemed. At least when he had to be.

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She had not wanted to tell him this tonight. Oh, how she had tried to avoid it. Now she knew there was no point in lying further, even if she was beginning to feel rather foolish, dressed the way she was, for it looked like that would be a pointless endeavor.

“I was going to tell you,” she sighed.

“Tell me what?”

“I just did not want you to get upset.” She forced herself to look up and meet his eyes, so he might see how sorry she was. “That is why I did not say anything right away.”

“And why would I get upset?”

“It is my aunt,” she began carefully, grimacing as she considered how to phrase it. “It seems that she is still a little upset over what occurred between you and Selina.”

“Upset how?” A low growl rumbled in his chest.

“She is... According to my sister, she is going around the ton, telling people that it was Selina who canceled the wedding and not you.” She winced in anticipation of his outburst, but his set jaw and narrowed eyes told her that he was doing what he could to remain calm. “Further to that point, she did so for—well, according to my sister, she did so for many reasons. Mostly to do with the type of man that you are.”

“Go on,” he growled.

“And... and...” She hesitated, for she could feel the anger rolling off him in waves. “And she’s been telling people that our marriage was one of desperation. That you only agreed to it at the last minute to save face—but nobody is going to believe that,” she added quickly. “Surely, who would believe such a thing?”

Frederick did not respond right away. Standing in the middle of the room, his arms crossed, his eyes steely, he stared into the void, his jaw clenched, his foot tapping, his face turning red. She could see the cogs in his mind turning as he tried his best to remain calm... or so she thought.

“Your aunt... she is... she has gone too far.”

“And everyone will know it,” she assured him. “Anyone who has met my aunt will know that she is lying.”

“It does not matter,” he continued carefully, still looking past her. “Once the rumor is out there, it will gather momentum. Regardless of the folly.”

“Let it, then,” Hannah said. “Who cares what people think? It does not matter if they?—”

“Of course, it does!” Frederick snapped, and she flinched. “Of course, it matters! How can you think otherwise?! Your aunt is slandering my name, smearing my reputation. Everyone who hears this—this filth!—even if they do not believe it, they will wonder. They will consider. They will talk! True or not, the very fact that it is spoken of at all is a slight against me. And you, for that matter!”

He was seething, his face turning puce, his body shaking.

“Perhaps... perhaps if we were to... to disprove the rumor?” she tried next, her voice quivering. “If we tell people that we are happy and there is no truth to it. If we tell

them the true reason why?—”

“I will not be drawn into a war of words with your aunt,” Frederick hissed. He was not angry with her, she knew, but that seemed irrelevant. “It is undignified and beneath me. My name alone should be enough that people do not question it!”

“And they won’t!”

“They will,” he seethed. “Or else your sister would not have come. No doubt she heard the rumor secondhand.”

“Then we visit my aunt together,” Hannah suggested. “If we speak to her and ask that she stop?—”

“Grovel? You wish for me to grovel at your aunt’s feet like... like some pauper?! Is that what you think of me?”

“I am just trying to help.”

“You are not helping!” he snarled, and again she flinched. “This entire thing...” He groaned and ran a hand through his hair as he began to pace. “This will only get worse. I know this town, these people. If there is any chance to drag down someone above them, they will not hesitate.”

“I am sorry,” she mumbled. “Truly. I am sorry, Frederick. This should not be happening.”

He shook his head, his back to her now. “This is your fault.” That stung. It felt like a slap in the face. Personal and purposefully mean. “If you had not come into my room that night...” Another shake of the head.

Hannah didn't know what to say. What could she say? Frederick was spiraling, and she knew that any attempts to placate him would only make things worse. She wanted to go to him. To hold him. To tell him there was no need to be upset. A part of her still wondered if she should try to salvage the night, for surely it was not completely ruined?

"You should go," he spoke, still not looking at her.

"G-go?" Her voice trembled. "But I can help. If you will just let me, I can?—"

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“You have done enough,” he said acidly, still refusing to turn around and acknowledge her.

Hannah felt her world crashing down around her. All her hard work these past two days gone in an instant because of something that was not her doing. Yet, what could she even do? Nothing, it seemed. But if she walked out that door, she felt like that would be it—giving up, admitting that this marriage was as flimsy as it had seemed at first.

She half made to stand up and leave, only...

“No.” She stood up anyway, but she did not leave.

“Excuse me?” Frederick turned around, looking at her as if he had not understood. “What did you say?”

For all her attempts to seduce her husband, Hannah had forgotten what had brought them together in the first place. Their original attraction. That original fire that exploded when they were together. Born from bickering and arguing and a supposed dislike toward one another. Brewed in the cauldron of temperamental passion that had been lost these last few days.

If Hannah wished to seduce her husband once and for all, she knew now there was one sure-fire way to do it. This right here was nothing if not perfect.

“I said no, I am not leaving.” She crossed her arms under the blanket but raised an eyebrow at him, making sure he could see that she wasn’t about to back down. “And

honestly, Frederick, if you think that I am going to just accept this disgusting treatment, then you have another thing coming.”

“Hannah...” He bared his teeth. “Now is not the time for this.”

“Oh, I am sorry. Is my unwillingness to be talked down to inconvenient? Heavens, how awful that must be for you.”

“You will remember that this is my home that you are?—”

“Our home,” she hissed. “This is our home. Not yours. We are married. Or have you forgotten?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I am in a mood right now, Hannah—tread lightly.”

“Or what?” she scoffed. “What will you do?”

“Do not test me.”

“Ha! It has occurred to me that all you are, Frederick, is hot air and bluster. A child throwing a tantrum. You do not get your way, so you kick and scream until somebody yields to your demands. Well, I am not somebody.”

“That is not...” The corner of his mouth twitched again, and she could see he was trying to hold back. “You should be grateful that all you have to face is my so-called kicking and screaming.”

“And to blame me?” she continued hotly. “When you were the one who forced my father to accept this marriage. You were the one who orchestrated this entire thing. One would think that by now, you would learn a little humility. That you would

accept fault when it falls at your feet.”

“My fault? You were the one who?—”

“Asked you to leave the room as soon as I saw you. But you, the ego on your shoulders, refused! You were the one who made certain that we were caught the way we were. So, before you blameme, perhaps it is yourself whom you should focus on. But oh, wait, that would require you to accept blame for a damn change! And we cannot have that.”

“Careful, Hannah...”

She laughed. “Again, empty threats!”

They stood perhaps five feet apart. Frederick was only half-turned away from her, as if not facing her was a means to keep his wrath in check. But she could see him stirring, his body shaking. Each jibe, each barb she hurled at him slowly pierced through his ice-cold façade, exposing the raw emotions beneath.

She made sure to fix him with a scathing glare, standing, not backing down, willing him to explode as she knew he wanted to. What would happen from there, she was not sure. But her heart raced with the thrill of it, a sense that if it was to come to such a thing, she might not mind so much.

“They will not be empty for long.”

“And if you throw me out, what then? You have already said you refuse to rise to my aunt’s bait, so what? Bury your head in the sand and hope that your name saves you? I know you will not fight, for the fight left you a long time ago.”

“Careful...”

His growl reverberated through the room—Hannah felt it in her chest. She half-stumbled, her body quivering from it.

Her husband was a big man. A giant in this small room. He turned further to face her, bearing down on her in a way she liked more than she would admit. She forced herself to straighten up and glared at him.

“Or what?”

“I told you what.”

“You’re going to throw me out? I would like to see you try.”

“Do not tempt me.”

“I tempt.” She laughed coldly. “I tempt knowing that there is nothing you will do. You will not touch me, remember? A man might. But you, husband, are certainly not?—”

He crossed to her in a flash, and she gasped as he was on her. His large hand grabbed the blanket around her shoulders and tugged at it. She let go, allowing it to be pulled off her near-naked body.

Frederick stumbled back, blanket in hand. It took him a moment to realize what had happened. His eyes moved from the blanket to her near-naked form, his brow furrowed, the anger inside him still there... a building passion that grew as he drank her in.

Hannah felt exposed and utterly defenseless, like a deer cornered in the wild. But she did not falter, pushing her chest out and holding his gaze, licking her lips and curling them as if to bite him.

A moment passed between them, frozen in time as he took her in and she welcomed his gaze. He wanted to remain angry. He wanted to remain furious with her. But the sight of her near-naked body had the desired effect—it did not calm the beast within, but unleashed it.

Without another word, he crossed to her again, dropping the blanket as he went. He cupped her face in his hands, pulled her in, and kissed her as if his life depended on it.

It was not their first kiss, but it felt like it. A dying fire being re-lit. Lightning striking a lone-standing tree. That breath one takes when they breach the surface of the water, thinking themselves near death only for life to embrace them. It shot through Hannah's body, struck her heart, had her gasping even as she moved her lips to better kiss her husband.

He gripped the side of her face as he ravished her. His lips parting her own, his tongue darting into her mouth and tasting her. He bit her lower lip next, tugged at it with his teeth, and then kissed her all the harder. She had sensed the beast unraveling inside him, but she'd had no idea what that meant until now.

And oh, how she loved it.

The way he kissed and held her, she could feel his suppressed desire finally springing forth. The way he had resisted her. The way he had held back. Totally uninhibited now, he held her so she could not leave him, kissing her mouth, moving down and licking and nipping her neck...

He dragged her to his bed and then sat down, his hands quickly sliding under her thighs and lifting her onto his lap so that she was straddling him. His lips trailed down her neck as his hands gripped her waist and squeezed. Her head tipped to the side, giving him more access, and his hands moved up until they wrapped around her breasts.

"Urgh..." she moaned as he licked down her chest, pulling down her slip and exposing her breasts. "Frederick—urgh!" she yelped as his lips found a nipple, biting and sucking on it like a starved child.

His lips then moved to her other breast and lavished the same attention on it.. His hands slid under her buttocks and squeezed them roughly. He then began to move his hips, coaxing her to gyrate hers, already able to feel his member stiffening.

Hannah thought to speak. To ask what to do. But she feared to break the momentum, to remind him of what he was doing. So she stayed silent, letting her moans do the talking.

She gasped as his hand slid between her legs, his fingers tracing her inner thighs until they found her nether lips. One finger gently stroked her, testing and teasing before slipping inside. She let out another gasp and buried her face in his neck, but he fisted his hand in her hair and tugged as he continued to stroke her sex.

“Ah... yes... right.... ah...” she moaned, biting his shoulder. “Do not stop.”

“Do not tell me what to do,” he growled.

“You a-are not in charge of me,” she stammered as his finger continued to stroke her, massaging her bud, making her body shake as it had just last night.

“Would you like a bet?”

He pulled back and looked right at her, his eyes flashing with lust. She met them with a steely gaze, as if in a warning. He smirked, growled, and then, suddenly, he stood up, lifting her with him. He turned around and dropped her back onto the bed, where he hovered over her.

His mouth found her neck and breasts again. Each lick sent a pulse to her sex. Every suck had her shaking and spasming and begging for more. As he sucked on her nipples, his hands fiddled with the buttons of his pants, undoing them. Then he pushed them down his legs and stepped out of them.

Her eyes widened as they landed on his throbbing member. Not knowing what to do, but knowing what he wanted, she reached down and wrapped her hand around it. His body went stiff, and he groaned.

“Oh God...”

“Like this?” she asked as she twisted her hand, stroking him up and down.

“Just like that. Do not... stop...”

She flashed him a wicked smile. “Do not tell me what to do.”

Hannah knew what was coming next, for there could only be one thing. With Frederick on top of her. With her legs wrapped around him. With his member hard and throbbing in her hand, and her sex wet and ready, there could be but one thing.

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Frederick pulled back for a moment. His hand stroked her waist as he looked down at her. No words spoken, but a raised eyebrow as if in question. She nodded, suddenly feeling nervous yet infinitely excited.

Shaking, quivering, wanting what she did not know, Hannah spread her legs further. Frederick lowered himself between her thighs and lined himself up with her entrance.

“Ah...” She gasped. “That... stop... don’t... yes... keep going...”

She felt him slide inside her inch by inch. Opening her, burrowing in deeply as she accepted him. She felt a slight discomfort at first, but she soon relaxed as he fell forward, thrusting slowly until he was buried to the hilt inside her.

Ten minutes ago, he refused to touch her, and now he was inside her. This marriage, she knew, would never be the same again.

Frederick held her down as he thrust into her. Slowly at first, sliding out of her and then all the way back in. She gasped at the sensation, moaned and quivered as her heart raced and her breathing quickened. He started moving faster then, harder, greater thrusts that had the bed shaking. She wrapped her legs around his back, she ground her hips against him, and she screamed to let him know how good it felt.

She could feel him pulsating and throbbing inside her. She could feel his body begin to shake. No expert on marital copulation, even Hannah knew what was about to happen. She took his face and kissed him as he continued to thrust into her, wanting him to spill inside her.

Only then, suddenly, he pulled out of her.

“Wh—” She followed him, but he pushed her back down.

“Stay there,” he commanded as his hand wrapped around his member. His eyes drank her in, and he licked his lips as he stroked himself. “Do not even think of moving.”

“What are you...”

“Do... not... urgh!”

His body spasmed and then stiffened as his white, hot, sticky seed spilled all over the inside of her thigh.

Again, Hannah knew what was supposed to happen, and this certainly wasn't it. As good as it had all been, that final moment felt strange to her, a signal that things were not quite as perfect as they might be.

But she did not say anything, as Frederick then fell down beside her, wrapped her in his arms, and kissed her on the lips and neck and cheek.

“That was... unexpected,” he panted, half-chuckling to himself. “Most unexpected.”

She frowned, still feeling the sticky mess on her inner thigh. “Most,” she muttered, not sure what else to say.

At best, she told herself that this was a step in the right direction at least and that clearly her husband's resolve not to touch her had finally shattered. At worst... they were still not a perfectly married couple.

Oh sure, things might never be the same, and for that she was grateful. Her body was

still hot. Shaking. Her heart was racing. Her breathing was slowly returning to normal. And in his arms, she felt happier than she had ever been.

But that mess on her inner thigh... what it signified spoke volumes.

Chapter Fifteen

Frederick woke up to the feeling of sunlight on his face. Eyes closed, it spread across him, warming him, making him smile as the fresh day dawned. He was having a good dream.

Hannah lay across his chest, her eyes closed, her breathing soft and peaceful. Frederick looked down at her sleeping face, smiling to himself—frowning also, for that smile confused him as much as anything.

There had always been the chance that upon waking, Frederick would feel waves of guilt and disappointment for what he had done last night. After all his talk of self-control and chastity, he had lost that control, his walls coming down as he had taken his wife in ways that just the thought of them made him stiffen beneath the sheets.

How had it happened? There was no need to question it, for it had felt like a long time coming. Really, the fact that he had heldout for so long should have been what impressed him most—at least that was what he told himself.

But it had happened, and he knew for that reason, there was no point in pretending that it had not, or trying to re-institute his rules of no touching or kissing. With how intense last night had been, how animalistic and raw and passionate, the only way he could keep himself from doing that again was if he was chained down.

“Good morning,” Hannah croaked, her eyes still closed, likely half-asleep but somehow sensing that he was awake.

“She wakes.”

“And he watches.” She chuckled. “See anything you like?”

“A few things.” He laughed. “I confess, this is not the worst way to wake up.”

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“And to think...” She kissed his chest, and it sent tingles through his body. “You almost missed out.”

“Is that how you remember it?”

She pulled back and sat up, raising a derisive eyebrow at him.

God, she was beautiful in the morning. The way the sun lit her face. Her breasts, rising and falling with her soft breaths. Her messy hair, falling around her face in clumps. And those lips...

“It is not how I remember it. It is as it happened.”

“You should know, I was playing with you the whole time,” he said with a shrug, forcing himself not to grin. “I always knew it would come to this and was just waiting for the right time.”

“Liar!”

“Are you calling me a liar?” He pretended to clench his jaw and scowl at her. “You better watch what you say.”

“Or what?”

His eyes flashed, and he wrapped his arms around her waist. She yelped as he pulled her to him, and then she moaned as he took her lips in a searing kiss.

Naked, she rolled on top of him, her thighs straddling his waist. Her body was soft, perfect. His hands massaged and squeezed her buttocks. His mouth found her breasts. Her hand wrapped around his throbbing member. It was all he could do not to lift her immediately and sink her onto his length.

For a moment there, the guilt threatened to overtake him.

There was a good reason that Frederick had denied himself this pleasure for so long. And there was a good reason that even when he decided it was time to marry, he knew he would continue to deny himself it.

But he pushed that thought away as Hannah kissed down his neck, licking his nipples and giggling all the while., He could already feel her wetness as she rubbed herself against his thigh, and he wanted to sink himself inside her more than he had wanted anything.

As to that guilt, there was a way to curb it for now. The same method he had used last night. While he might sleep with her, while he might enter her and give himself to her as any husband should, he would not finish inside her. Again, for that same reason, a burden he had carried with him for six years now.

He just hoped that Hannah did not realize it and did not question him, for if she asked, he wasn't sure what he would say. Such was the weight of his burden.

"Frederick," Hannah whispered in his ear, "I want you inside of me."

"Do not tell me what to do..."

Still, without delay, he lifted his wife as if she weighed nothing and sank her onto his member. She gasped, he groaned, and together they welcomed what was surely the first of many glorious mornings to come.

“Tell me, please!” Amelia begged, completely ignoring the plate of food before her—so very unlike her.

“Amelia,” Frederick sighed. “It is not a story for little girls. Nor is it appropriate for the breakfast table.”

“But—”

“I said no.” He looked at her, his expression one that she knew well enough by now.

Amelia half-opened her mouth to argue but thought better of it. A scowl was her response, then she pressed her lips together and began to pick at the cakes on her plate as if they were poison.

Across from her sat Hannah, who was watching the interaction with a coy smile that Frederick was beginning to recognize a little too well. Her eyes flicked from him to Amelia, and even before she spoke, he was forced to stop her.

“Do not even think about it.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were going to.”

“Lies!”

“Hannah,” he groaned and ran a hand through his hair. “It is not an appropriate conversation. You know it is not!”

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“Oh, only if we tell the full story.” Hannah waved him off.

“The truth, you mean?”

“I think Amelia deserves to know,” she said simply. “Otherwise, she will be forced to come to her own conclusions, and the imagination of a little girl is far worse than anything we could come up with.” She winked at Amelia. “Isn’t that right?”

Amelia giggled. “Yes.”

“So...” Hannah looked at Frederick pleadingly, even going so far as to flutter her eyelashes. “How about you let me tell her, and if you think I have crossed the line at any point, you can stop me.”

“Why do I get the feeling I am going to regret this?” he sighed.

She laughed. “Because you know me, is why. But it’s too late now.”

“Tell me, tell me!” Amelia cried joyously.

“Right.” Hannah nodded her head, flashed a smile at Frederick, and then focused on Amelia. “The story of how your father and I met...”

The morning had started pleasantly before descending into a tale that Frederick knew to be far too inappropriate for his six-year-old daughter. By the time he and Hannah had made it downstairs after another rigorous lovemaking session, Amelia was seated at the table, waiting for them.

She was eager this morning and excited. Having been tentative toward Hannah the previous day, their little dip in the pond had changed her attitude completely. Now, she was obsessed in that way that only children could be. She seemed to think that Hannah was the funniest, most interesting person in the world, while her father was nothing but a big, old bore.

As they settled in, she fired question after question at Hannah, all about who she was and where she had come from. How many sisters did she have. Who were her friends. What was her favorite food. What was her favorite animal. What was her favorite color! Anything she could think of.

Once Amelia calmed down a little, the conversation turned to the rumor the Dowager Viscountess had been spreading around the ton, and with Amelia sitting there watching them, Frederick had no choice but to control his temper.

“She will not get away with it,” he had said.

“Who?” Amelia had asked.

“I still think we should speak with her,” Hannah had argued.

“Speak to who?” Amelia had asked again.

“I will not,” Frederick had insisted. “It is beneath me. It is beneath us.”

“Then there isn’t much else we can do.”

He had growled angrily at that. “That aunt of yours... she will not get away with this.”

“She is just upset,” Hannah had sighed. “And I am certain that come a few days, she

will realize that she has made a mistake.”

“A few days will be too many. This rumor needs to stop, now.”

“What rumor!” Amelia had then demanded.

It hadn’t taken long for the conversation to shift to the wedding itself, and it was at that moment that Amelia had seized the chance and demanded that her father finally tell her how he and Hannah had met.

“... and that was when my aunt caught us!” Hannah explained.

“Wrestling?” Amelia’s face contorted into a ball, and she could not have looked more confused. “But why were you wrestling?”

Hannah was doing her best not to giggle. “That is a good question. Frederick?”

Frederick shook his head at her and sighed. “Because I had mistaken Hannah for your uncle William. The room was dark, so you can see my mistake.”

“Uncle William?” Amelia echoed, confused. “You thought Hannah was Uncle William?”

“Well, we have a similar build,” Hannah said, her body now shaking with suppressed laughter. “So when your father jumped on me and I tried to fight him off, we were caught in the act, and rather than announce to the ton that your father lost a fight to a girl like me?—”

“You lost?!”

Frederick looked flatly at Hannah. “Yes, I lost.”

Hannah took a deep breath, and then another to keep herself from losing it. “And rather than risk this humiliation, your father had no choice but to marry me.”

Beaming, she reached across the table and took Frederick’s hand in her own.

Frederick continued to look at her with a very unimpressed expression... even though he was also working rather hard not to chuckle.

“Father...” Amelia could not have looked less impressed. “You lost to Hannah. But she is half your size!”

And that did it. Hannah burst into laughter, which had Frederick doing the same. He tried to cover his mouth, and Hannah slapped his arm as she snorted and giggled and made noises that were unlike any he had ever heard. And all the while, Amelia watched them, having no idea what was going on or why it was so funny.

Yes, Frederick felt some guilt for what had happened last night and this morning. And likely, he would continue to feel it for a while—a problem that he was not sure how to solve. But moments like this certainly helped, for it was as he laughed along with Hannah that he was forced to admit that right here, right now, he was the happiest he had been in a very long time.

Who would have guessed that a ‘wrestling match’ could lead to such a thing?

Chapter Sixteen

Hannah loved how Frederick felt inside her. Loved it. His body pressed as close to hers as could be. The feeling of his member throbbing as he moved his hips back and forth. His teeth biting her neck. His lips sucking. His hands grabbing her hips and squeezing as if afraid to let go. There was nothing about it that she did not relish.

“Frederick,” Hannah groaned as her husband began to thrust harder and faster. “We... we have to...”

“Have to what?” he growled in her ear, before nipping her earlobe.

“Hurry,” she breathed. Her eyes were closed, and her head was tilted back, as lost in the moment as could be while still frustratingly aware of the time crunch that they were on. “We have to hurry.”

“Do not rush me.”

“But—”

“Or command me.” His hand covered her mouth, and he began to thrust even harder—a sharp, quick motion.

“Oh...” Each thrust sent a pulse from her loins to her toes. “Oh... yes... right... there... urgh!”

It was early in the morning, although not as early as Hannah would have liked. She had hoped to wake up even earlier, before the sun, so that she and Frederick might have time to explore one another’s bodies without having to worry about the time. But they had been up late the previous night—for obvious reasons—which caused the delay.

The way Frederick had woken her this morning was common now. While she was sound asleep, she felt his lips between her thighs, but then she continued to feign sleep because she knew that the longer she did so, the harder Frederick would lick and suck. Eventually, his ministrations had her gasping, which had Frederick pulling her down to him, which had him wrapping her legs around his waist as he entered her without delay. One peak out the window and Hannah knew they did not have time for this, but... well, she was only human, after all.

It had been a week since they first spent that glorious night together—and what a week it had been. Every morning they made passionate love, and every night they did the same. Frederick no longer bothered with pretending he did not want her, such that Hannah wondered if they would ever stop if Amelia wasn't always around.

However, as perfect as it all seemed, there was one issue that Hannah could not quite look past, or fathom how she might do so.

Frederick's body began to shake. His groaning and panting became louder and more aggressive. His thrusts were shorter and sharper and quicker, and the way he held her became purposeful, as if he was concentrating. Hannah knew by now what this meant, and again she wondered if today would be different.

Suddenly, Frederick pulled out of her. She gasped at the sensation and then frowned with disappointment as he spilled on her thigh. She might have said something or objected, but each time he did, he then fell down next to her, pulled her close, smothered her with kisses, and seemed to do everything he could to draw attention away from that act.

“Amelia is probably wondering what is taking us so long.” He chuckled. “No doubt she has been up since before sunrise.”

“Yes...” Hannah could feel his sticky mess on her thigh. “She has been talking about

nothing else for two days now. I am surprised she hasn't come in here to check on us."

"She knows better than that," Frederick said, even though he turned in the bed and eyed the door... just in case. "Or she should."

Hannah laughed and pushed him off her. "We best hurry, anyhow. We did promise that we would leave first thing."

Frederick groaned and reached for her. "Can we not just stay in bed all day?"

"Do you want to risk your daughter's wrath?"

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He grimaced. “Good point. But tomorrow, I am going to instruct Miss Temperton to take her out or distract her until at least noon. Because...” He shuffled forward, wrapped his arm around her, and pulled her back to him as he began to kiss down her shoulder. “Once a morning is simply not enough.”

“And in the evening,” Hannah pointed out as goosebumps erupted wherever he placed a kiss.

“Still not enough,” he growled.

The two fell back into bed together, and Hannah laughed. “I could not agree more.”

He was saying all the right things. Dammit, he was doing all the right things. This past week had been nothing short of amazing, and if their marriage continued this way, then Hannah was certain that a lifetime of happiness was what awaited her. And yet...

He refused to finish inside her. The only reason she could think of was that he did not wish to have children. And while Hannah had not really considered such a thing before now, the more she had thought about it lately, the more she came to realize that if she wanted a happy marriage, if she wished to spend the rest of her life with a man she was falling for, why should they not have children together? Was that not the entire point of marriage in the first place? And if Frederick did not want such a thing, did that mean he didn't see this relationship as she saw it?

Troubling thoughts. Hannah knew that soon, she would need to mention them. Only how she would do so without ruining what they had... that was an answer she had yet

to find.

“Amelia!” Frederick called after his daughter. “Don’t go too far! Amelia!”

“Oh, let her run.” Hannah laughed. “She will be fine.”

“It is not Amelia whom I worry for...” Frederick’s lips were pressed together, the concern evident on his visage. “It is everyone else who concerns me.”

“What could possibly happen?” Hannah sighed.

“That is a question I would rather not find the answer to—Amelia!” Frederick grimaced as he watched his daughter disappear in the crowd. “I do not wish to point fingers, but ever since you came along, she has become more and more unruly.”

“Oh, you do not wish to point fingers?” Hannah snorted.

“I am just saying...”

“I know what you are saying.” Hannah pulled her hand back and crossed her arms as she looked away, as if upset. “I am a bad influence.”

“Are you not?” He chuckled.

She fixed him with a warning glare. “I would watch what you say next, husband.”

He grinned. “Until you came along, I will remind you that my daughter was nothing but obedient and proper and exactly the type of young lady that any father would be proud to call his own.”

“And now?”

“She is already starting to take after you... the bad influence that you are.”

“I am not a bad influence!”

He took her hand and pulled her to him, wrapping his big arms around her as she feigned trying to pull away. “And I have not even gotten to the terrible influence you have had on me,” he growled in her ear, an act that had her shivering in only the best of ways. “That is a conversation for another time.”

She rolled her eyes, letting him squeeze her tighter. “And what about me? And the terrible influence you have had on me. Before we met, I was?—”

“Amelia!” Frederick called out suddenly, for his eyes had drifted over her shoulder, again landing on his daughter. “What did I—come back here!”

Hannah sighed. “Go after her, then.”

He grimaced. “You will be alright on your own for a moment?”

She laughed. “I am sure I will manage. Now, go...” She slipped from his arms and shooed him away. “I am already getting sick of you.”

He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “I will be back in a moment.”

A loving look was shared between them, that sense that he had no desire whatsoever to part ways. But then he looked over her shoulder again, his face dropped, and he was quick to hurry after his daughter.

Hannah laughed as she watched him go, finding the whole thing terribly amusing. As strong and brave as Frederick was, when it came to his daughter, he was worse than an overbearing mother who thought the world might end if her daughter so much as

scraped her knees.

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She also had to admit that this was a big step for Frederick, one he likely wouldn't have taken was it not for Hannah's pestering and persistence for the sake of Amelia. Frederick was manythings, but fun certainly wasn't one of them, and today could only be described as just that: fun.

They had traveled an hour north to be here today, a smaller county that sat just outside of Thorne. One of his tenants was hosting a fair, and upon hearing of said fair, Amelia had begged and pleaded that they attend. Frederick had denied her, of course, for he did not think it was proper to mix this way with his tenants and common folk. But after three days of Hannah badgering him, he finally gave in.

The fair itself was similar to the few that Hannah had been lucky enough to attend in her childhood. Mostly, it was a hodgepodge of tents and awnings erected to form a small village of sorts, each stall selling a variety of trinkets and garments and foodstuffs and homemade wares. But there were also games, visual entertainment such as jugglers and fire breathers and musicians, plenty of options for drinking and eating, and, of course, people.

So many people. Hundreds of them, by Hannah's count. Most of whom were certainly not members of the peerage. They laughed and ran and shouted and joked and gathered in groups, moving to and fro without a care in the world, enjoying the beautiful day, for they had little else to do but frolic and socialize with friends and family.

This was certainly not Hannah's usual crowd. And dressed as she was, in a gown made of rich, colorful fabric paired with plenty of jewelry, she knew that she stood out like a sore thumb. Frederick, too.

Even now, having lost Frederick for a few minutes as he chased after Amelia, it was easy enough to spot him as she navigated the stalls. Bigger than most, he wore a clean suit that likely cost more than most made in a month. And his stiff back and general sense of awkwardness stood out like a beacon amid the crowd.

When Hannah did eventually see him, she thought to call out, only to notice him speaking with a villager. Amelia was there too, holding his hand, but she was distracted as she looked around eagerly, her eyes wide with wonder. The conversation Frederick was having with the villager, however, looked serious... and the scowl on his face, one that deepened by the second, told her it must be.

She came to a halt a few feet away and watched them converse, focusing on Frederick's body language. He was angry, that was clear. But not at the man with whom he was speaking.

There was nothing noticeable about the villager, who was dressed as a farmer and looking very much not like the type of person Frederick would usually speak with. But Frederick steamed and scowled and sneered as the farmer continued to talk, and the way his foot began to tap on the ground was a sign that Hannah knew all too well.

Once the farmer finished speaking, Frederick shook his hand in thanks and then turned around to leave, only to spot Hannah watching him. She attempted to drop the angry façade, acting as if nothing was the matter.

"There you are," she said with a smile as she walked over to them.

"Hannah!" Amelia cried. "Did you see the man breathing fire? Fire! Like a dragon!"

"I didn't." Hannah chuckled as she eyed Frederick curiously. "You will have to show me."

“He’s just over there!” Amelia pointed through the crowd.

“In fact, Amelia, how about you go there now, and I will find you in a moment. I wish to speak with your father quickly.”

Frederick opened his mouth to argue but caught sight of the look on Hannah’s face—one that told him he needed not bother. This past week had seen many changes happen between them, one of which was their power dynamic. Oh sure, Frederick was still in charge and dominant in the ways that mattered, but on the odd occasion, such as now, he seemed to understand that keeping his wife happy was a priority.

“Go on then.” He released Amelia’s hand. “But do not go too far,” he then warned her. “And I will be watching.”

“Alright!” Amelia took off in the direction of the fire-breather.

Frederick grimaced as he watched her go, clearly wishing to go after her. But then he turned back and saw Hannah watching him with that raised questioning eyebrow.

“Do I need to ask?” she said simply, taking his hand and stroking it so that he knew this conversation wouldn’t turn into an argument. “Or are you going to tell me?”

“I was rather hoping I would not need to.”

“You should have been more careful, then.”

He curled his upper lip in derision. “That was Malcolm Hastings, one of my tenants—the man putting this thing on.”

“And I take it he wasn’t asking how your day was? Or thanking you for stopping by?”

Hannah noticed he kept looking around them in a way he hadn't earlier, taking note of the people passing by. Worry flickered in his eyes as he looked at them. Even embarrassment, as strange as that was.

"Frederick..." She forced him to look back at her. "What is the matter?"

"It's your aunt," Frederick sneered. "Apparently, those rumors that she has been spreading have begun to take hold. Malcolm was kind enough to warn me of a particular one he heard about my ex-wife."

"Oh..." Hannah hesitated, for she knew that his ex-wife had died giving birth to Amelia. And she also knew that it was a particularly sore point with him. "What... what did he say?"

"That I killed her," he said, his teeth bared in anger. "At least that is what he heard. He knows it is false, of course, and he has promised to tell anyone repeating that filth as much. But still..." He cast his eyes about the crowd again, and this time, Hannah understood why.

She followed his eyes, noting now that he was looking at those who passed by who also happened to be staring at them for a little too long. Hannah had seen a few do so earlier, but she had assumed it was because of who they were and the oddity of their presence here. But with this freshly added context, she could not help but notice the way those people whispered behind their hands as they looked at them, the gasps and fear in their eyes.

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She and Frederick were being spoken about. Spoken about in a most undignified manner.

“Oh...” Suddenly, she wasn’t enjoying herself nearly as much as she had been. “It is not... perhaps it is not as bad as it seems.”

“How can you say that?” he hissed. “It is bad enough that your aunt insists on spreading these rumors. But now that common folk believe they are true, I have half a mind to...” He clicked his tongue.

“You can still speak with her,” Hannah suggested. “I know you said that you do not wish to debase yourself like that, but if we were to approach her together?—”

“Absolutely not.” He pulled his hand free. “I will not beg your aunt. I should not have to.”

“Then all we can do is ignore it until it stops.”

Even as she said the words, Hannah knew them to not be an option. Rumors like this had a way of growing, and until someone put a stop to them, they would only get worse.

“And if they don’t? My name...” He clicked his tongue. “Ourname, and that of Amelia, will be worth little more than the mud in which we now stand.”

“We will think of something,” she said with little confidence.

“I sincerely hope that we do.” He was back to looking at the crowds, his confidence diminishing. “But until then, we cannot afford to be seen in public like this.”

“Frederick, that sounds like exactly what we should do. If we hide, that will lend credence to the rumors, and?—”

“I do not care,” he hissed at her. “I will not stand here and be judged. In fact—” He looked past her, toward where Amelia had vanished. “Let us fetch Amelia. It is time to go.”

“Oh, but she will be so upset.”

“We are leaving.” He shot her a warning glare, one that she knew better than to argue against. “Now.”

“Alright,” she sighed and nodded in understanding. “I suppose it is for the best.”

And that was the end of their day. A rather sour end, at that.

Frederick was quick to track down Amelia and explain to her that they needed to leave, an announcement that was met with pouting and complaining and a small tantrum because she very much wanted to stay. This resulted in a very awkward journey home, which led to a very tense night in general.

Hannah could see where this was going and knew that something had to be done. Frederick was stubborn and proud and would happily shut himself inside until the rumors died down and were forgotten. But he was also a fool because if he did that, they would only grow and mutate and become ungodly things that might follow him and Hannah to the grave.

If that was allowed to happen, it would chip away at their marriage in ways that could

only cause pain and suffering. And with everything going as well as it was, Hannah wasn't about to sit back and allow such a thing to occur.

Her aunt must be dealt with. She must be told to stop. She must be reminded that what happened was nobody's fault and that these rumors she was spreading were causing harm to those she supposedly loved. And if Frederick wasn't going to do it, then it would fall on Hannah's shoulders.

Oh, she had no doubt that Frederick would be angry when he found out, but that was a risk she needed to take. For the sake of her husband, her marriage, and her future.

Chapter Seventeen

"Hannah, dear! It is so good to see you!" Teresa crooned as Hannah walked into the foyer. Her arms wide, she swept in and pulled Hannah into a tight hug. "It has been too long."

"Nearly a month now," Hannah agreed pleasantly. "I was sad that you missed the wedding."

"Oh, yes, well..." Teresa sighed and shook her head. "It was all so sudden that I was simply unable to clear my schedule. You understand."

"Completely."

"But do not take it as a slight," Teresa insisted. "Truly, I could not be happier for you and... Say, where is your strapping husband?" She looked past Hannah, as if expecting Frederick to step through the front door at any moment. "I was under the impression that he would be joining us."

"Oh yes, about that..." Hannah frowned regretfully. "He was all set to join me, but

some urgent business matter came up as we were about to leave. I begged him to leave it for the morrow, but he insisted it had to be dealt with. The life of a duke,” she sighed. “One never knows when they might be called away.”

“Yes, well...” Her aunt clicked her teeth. “That is most upsetting.”

“Still...” Hannah took her aunt’s hands. “There is no reason that we cannot enjoy one another’s company. We do not need my husband for that.”

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“Certainly not.” Teresa giggled. “In fact, now I am thinking, without him here, we might enjoy ourselves more. Men.” She rolled her eyes. “A blight that we spend far too much time thinking of, do you not agree?”

“Better off without them.” Hannah chuckled.

It had taken two days of careful planning to organize this mid-afternoon meeting. On the one hand, Hannah had to communicate with her aunt in a manner that suggested she and her husband wanted to stop by and say hello at her earliest convenience. Not for supper, but perhaps tea and cakes, because it had been far too long since they had spoken, and a catch-up was much needed. And all without Frederick finding out.

On the other hand, Hannah also had to lie to Frederick about where she was going today. To see her sisters, she had told him—a lie that he swallowed without question, one that left her feeling infinitely guilty.

But her intentions were good. Frederick would rather die than beg her aunt to stop spreading these rumors, which meant that they weren’t going to stop anytime soon. As such, Hannah felt that she had no choice but to intervene by herself, which—if she was successful—would surely be reason enough for Frederick to forgive her.

And if he did not forgive her... well, she had ways of making him do just that.

“Shall we sit outside?” Teresa suggested. She stepped in beside Hannah, placing a hand on the small of her back as if to lead her. “The weather is lovely, and we must take advantage.”

“Oh, I would like that very much.”

“I have already alerted the staff of your arrival,” Teresa continued pleasantly as they walked. “We will be served refreshments soon enough.”

“Wonderful...”

As they walked, Hannah looked around the large foyer and toward the stairs.

“Say, will Selina be joining us? I assume you told her I was coming?”

Teresa sighed and bowed her head. “I am afraid that she is out today, dear.”

“She... she is?” Hannah’s stomach twisted. “Did you not inform her that I was?—”

“I did, I did,” her aunt cut her off. “Alas—and I am sorry to have to say this—some wounds cut deeper than others, and she is still not quite ready to see you.”

Hannah’s stomach now churned with guilt. “She said that?”

“Not those words exactly,” Teresa said. “But I am her mother, remember. And since the, ah... since His Grace decided not to marry her, she has been little more than a ghost around the house. Oh, she has told me that she is fine, but her actions speak louder than words, dear.”

“I... I would very much like to see her and apologize.”

“For what? It was not your fault, and I am certain Selina knows as much. I can only suggest that you give it time. My daughter will come around, I promise you.”

Hannah bit her lip and looked back toward the stairs, certain that Selina was upstairs

right now, avoiding her. She could not prove it, of course, but somehow, she just knew.

“The two of you were like sisters once,” her aunt continued pleasantly. “And I seem to remember Charlotte stealing Beatrice’s husband, and that didn’t come between them now, did it?” She laughed gaily as if she had said something funny, even if the words were cutting... seemingly on purpose.

The truth was that Hannah had not chosen to come here solely to ask her aunt to stop spreading malicious lies about her and Frederick. Yes, that was the main reason, but it occurred to Hannah two days ago that this visit might allow her to kill two birds with one stone.

She still had not seen or spoken with Selina since the night of the incident. Selina had been upset then, mortified and embarrassed, as she had every right to be. Worse, Hannah suspected that her cousin laid the blame squarely at her feet. Hating the idea of her cousin being upset with her, she wished to seek her out and explain that what had occurred was not her fault, that there was no ill intent behind it, and that she would do anything for her cousin to forgive her.

More than that, Hannah wanted to make sure that Selina was healing. With how happy she had been feeling of late, her guilt for what happened was getting worse and worse, and she had to do something about it. Alas, it seemed that her cousin did not wish to see her, did not wish to speak with her, and, worst of all, did not wish to forgive her.

“Ah, there we are...” They stepped outside, and her aunt gestured toward a table and two chairs beneath a small awning to protect them from the sun. “Our platter awaits.”

The saucers and teapot sat ready and waiting, as did plates filled with cakes and scones. Hannah wasn’t particularly hungry or thirsty, but as she sat down, she made

sure to take a cake and have one of the footmen pour her a cup of tea. This needed to appear friendly... at least until it no longer was.

“So, tell me,” her aunt began once they settled. “How goes your marriage? I remember you were not too happy with the arrangement your father made on your behalf.”

“The truth?” Hannah made sure to smile as she sipped her tea. “It is going wonderfully.”

“Is that right?” Her aunt did not sound very happy to hear that.

“His Grace is a treasure beyond compare. Oh sure, I was a little hesitant initially—as you rightfully pointed out. But it has been nearly two weeks now, and I could not be happier.”

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“I am so glad to hear it.” Again, Teresa sounded nothing of the sort.

“It was not easy, mind you,” Hannah continued simply. “But what marriage is? We have been lucky enough to understand this, and now that the growing pains are dealt with...” A shrug and a smile that boarded on smug. “I foresee a pleasant marriage from here on out.”

“I could not be happier to hear that. Surprised, but happy.” Teresa’s tone was bitter, as was the look she gave Hannah as she took a sip of her tea. “Truthfully, I worried about you, dear. I did. Although I was the one to arrange the initial marriage between His Grace and Selina, it was no secret that His Grace was a little... Oh, how should I put this? Cold. Many men of his station are, of course, but the Duke was said to be a special case.”

“Is that right?”

“And I did worry about what might become of his and Selina’s marriage,” she continued in a not-so-pleasant tone. “My daughter’s happiness is my first concern, after all, and the thought of trapping her with a man such as that...” She sighed and then tittered. “But I suppose I do not have to worry about that anymore.”

“You certainly do not.”

“And the fact that the two of you have found happiness...” A forced smile. “It is nice when everything works out for the best, is it not?”

“It seems that way.”

“Selina will find someone soon, I am making sure of it. A good man, I hope. Someone better than His Grace—no offense, dear. I did not mean anything by it.”

“None taken.” Hannah chuckled pleasantly. “I am simply glad that there are no ill feelings held.”

“By me?” Teresa touched her chest as if offended. “Of course not. These things happen, dear, and nobody is to blame. Even your father cannot possibly bear the weight of such a happenstance.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“As I said,” she continued, as if to labor the point home. “I am happy about what has happened. My daughter has avoided a cold, ugly marriage, and you...” She smiled and fluttered her eyelashes. “Have somehow managed to find what I can only assume to be a love match, for how you talk.”

“It is certainly looking that way.”

“Quite.”

If Hannah had any doubts about her aunt’s involvement in spreading the rumors, they were now confirmed. Oh, her aunt might have feigned happiness and forgiveness, but she was clearly still bitter. In her mind, something was stolen from her, something that she had every right to claim. This wasn’t even about Selina, but her own name, which she thought to have been slandered.

Hannah had wondered to herself how she might broach the subject, if she should be gentle around the edges or delve into it like a bull. If her aunt had been a little more congenial, Hannah would have opted for kindness and forgiveness. But after this little conversation, blunt force was clearly the only way her aunt might respond.

“I must say...” Hannah took a sip of her tea and then put down her cup and saucer. “I am surprised to hear how happy you are for me and His Grace.”

“Oh?”

“Well, forgive me, Aunt Teresa, but I had come here expecting you to be a little more upset with me. After all, I did steal Selina’s intended from her. And from you, by extension.”

“Nonsense, dear. What is done is done, and I do not hold a grudge.”

“I am glad to hear it.” Hannah sighed as if relieved. “And seeing as that is the case, you might be able to help.”

Her aunt tilted her head. “Help? With what, dear?”

Hannah shook her head as if embarrassed. “I am sure that you have heard by now...” She looked at her aunt expectantly. “The rumors that have been spreading about my marriage. And my husband, for that matter.”

“Rumors?”

“Oh, they are as false as they are defamatory, of course. Why, just yesterday, I heard one that claimed I was pregnant!” Hannah laughed bitterly. “And that is the reason His Grace was forced to marry me.”

“Oh no,” her aunt gasped as if from shock.

“And that is only the beginning,” Hannah continued. “Each one is worse than the next—Frederick even refuses to leave the house! Everywhere he goes, he insists that people are talking about him. You can only imagine how upset he is?”

“I can, I can.”

“His name is his legacy, and these malicious lies are slinging mud that may never be scrubbed clean.”

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“Some people...” Teresa clicked her tongue. “Gossip is poison, dear, one that is passed about like wine. Dreadful business.”

“The only way that I can see us putting an end to them is to find the source of said lies,” Hannah continued, looking right at her aunt now, studying her and gauging her reaction. “If we do that and tell this... this beast to cease their slander, that will go a long way in helping.”

“Certainly, it would.”

“More than that, we would need them to tell everyone they know how happy our marriage is and how it actually came about. Replace the lies with the truth, as it is, for that is the only way.”

“And you wish for me to help you find this person?” Teresa did not sound at all worried, still sipping her tea as if the conversation was a most pleasant one.

“Would you?” Hannah affected a pleading look. “I have tried my best but have come up empty. But you, Aunt Teresa... Well, nobody is more respected and well-known among the ton than you. Surely, you of all people will be able to track down this... this monster and ask them to put a stop to it.”

“I would love for nothing more,” Teresa said with a little too much sincerity. “And I am glad that you came to me—that you trusted me with this. I assure you that within a week... maybe two, I will find the source and strike it down.” She clicked her tongue and sighed. “Anything to help my favorite niece.”

Hannah breathed a sigh of relief. “I knew I could count on you, Aunt Teresa. You have always been someone I trust and love.”

“And it means the world to me to hear it.”

“Ever since I was a little girl, in fact, when Father and Mother were too much to bear, it helped to know that you’d always look out for me.”

“Of course, I would...”

It was subtle, but Hannah caught a slight twitch at the corner of her lips.

“And when this marriage did occur, when I was at my worst, it pained me to know what I did to you and Selina. But I also knew that if anyone was to forgive me, it would be you.”

“I...” A slight grimace, which Teresa masked immediately. “For you, dear, I’d do anything.”

“I cannot tell you the pain this has caused,” Hannah continued, her eyes hardening. “That someone would do such a thing. And for what? Spite is my guess.”

“People do strange things for strange reasons.”

“It is personal, too,” Hannah said, her upper lip curling. “It must be. Which leads me to suspect that it is someone I know well and likely trust. My first thought, and I am embarrassed to say it”—she feigned a grimace—“was that Selina might be behind it.”

Her aunt gasped. “Certainly not! And I can promise you, hand over heart, that she is not involved. That she would never be.”

“Oh, I know that now.” Hannah waved her hand dismissively. “Selina is too kind for such a thing. And she loves me too much. Which is why it hurt so deeply that someone so close could do such a thing...” She made sure to look her aunt right in the eyes, so her words could not be mistaken.

Teresa shifted nervously, sipped her tea, and then looked away. “Assuming it was someone close to you. For all you know, it could be a disgruntled tenant.”

“No...” Hannah’s face clouded, and her tone sharpened. “This was too personal for that. This was someone I know. Someone I trust. Someone I love. Someone who...” A beat. “Someone who wants my marriage to fail.”

It took her a moment. Not looking at Hannah, Teresa heard the words, digested them, nodded her head, and then her eyes went wide.

“Hannah! I do not know what you are—why you would—what are you saying?”

“You know what I am saying.”

“I think I do, and if what you are saying is what I think it is, then...” Teresa attempted to look offended. “Then I might have to ask you to leave.”

“Is that what you wish to do?”

“That you would accuse me o-of such an act?” She laughed awkwardly. “I have never been so insulted in my life.”

“I can only imagine.”

“And that you come to my home under false pretenses. That you... that I am forced to listen to this slander against my name—for that is what this is.” Teresa put down

her teacup, her hands visibly shaking. “I have half a mind to write to your father and tell him about this, you know?”

“Why not my husband? I am sure he would like to hear it.”

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“I told you, I am happy for the both of you. Why would I do such a thing? No, I do not want to hear it.” She looked away. “You have gone too far today, Niece. I would ask that you either apologize or leave.”

Hannah remained composed, her tone dispassionate, for she would not be guilted into pitying her aunt. “I know it was you, Aunt Teresa. My sister told me.”

“Lies!”

“I know it was you,” she repeated. “You can fake outrage. You can pretend otherwise. But that will not change the truth. You have sought to undermine my marriage to His Grace, and you have done so for no other reason than to take revenge for an incident that was nobody’s fault.”

Still looking away, Hannah could see her aunt’s chin begin to wobble. “I... I did not mean?—”

“I do not want to hear excuses,” she said evenly. “I do not care for them. What I want is for you to do as I have asked and quash the malicious rumors that you started. Is that understood?”

Teresa forced herself to look at her. “I did not mean it.”

“You will quash these rumors,” Hannah insisted. “You will tell everybody you spoke with that you lied.”

“It got out of hand,” Teresa begged. “I was only speaking out of turn, and I... I... I

got carried away and?—”

“And now you will do everything you can to right this wrong.”

She bowed her head. “I am sorry.”

“I do not care for your apology. I only care that you do what is right here. Will you do that?”

Teresa did not respond.

“Aunty?”

“Alright...” She sniffed. “Please, do not tell your father. If he finds out...” Her chin continued to wobble, and Hannah almost felt sorry for her.

“I will keep it to myself if you do as I have asked. If you don’t, you are not the only one capable of spreading false rumors.”

Teresa winced. “I am so sorry, Hannah. God, I am so—” She sniffed. “Please, forgive me.”

As a little girl, Hannah had both respected and feared her aunt. Not that the Dowager Viscountess was a scary woman per se, but she had inspired the type of fear that little girls often had for powerful figures in their lives. Seeing the way she argued and stood up to Lord Ramsbury, it had instilled in Hannah this belief that her aunt was this all-encompassing figure like a mountain that God himself could not shift.

Marriage to Frederick had changed all of that. It had changed Hannah.

She now knew what true strength looked like. What was more, she not only knew

how to stand up to it but also how to embody it herself. The way she had spoken to her aunt just now was similar to how she imagined Frederick might have done it. She was, after all, a duchess, and despite her aunt being older than her—a figure of authority even—she needed to know that actions like this would not be tolerated.

Why, Hannah was so thrilled with how their discussion had turned out that she could not wait to tell Frederick. Surely, he would be proud of her.

“And one more thing,” she added. “In a day or two, you will receive an invitation to dinner with me and Frederick. And you will accept it.”

Her aunt winced. “Of course. I would never... it would be an honor.”

“My husband will know what you did, but he will not mention it, and nor shall you. You will be pleasant and polite, and we will finally put this little incident behind us for good. Understood?”

“Thank you...” Teresa bowed her head, looking utterly ashamed. “I look forward to it.”

“My father and mother, too, shall attend. It will be a reunion, one where I expect the very best behavior.” A raised eyebrow.

Her aunt nodded. “Anything. Anything at all.”

“Wonderful...” Hannah exhaled in relief and smiled gaily, as if their conversation had been a most pleasant one. “By the way, this tea is divine.” She reached for her cup and took a sip. “What leaves are you using?”

Her aunt did not answer, her head still bowed, mortified by the looks of things. And so she should be. She had tried to break Hannah and Frederick’s marriage, thinking it

a weak, brittle thing. But she had thoroughly underestimated them—a mistake that she would not make again.

Their marriage was strong. It was near perfect. And with this now behind them, it had the chance to finally blossom.

Chapter Eighteen

Frederick was in the library reading when he heard Hannah arrive home. It surprised him, in fact, as he hadn't expected her to return so soon. Yes, she said that she would be home for supper, but seeing as she was visiting her sisters, he half expected them to lose track of time.

Truthfully, he had been looking forward to having the evening to himself. Amelia was busy with Miss Temperton and would likely be for a few more hours yet. And Frederick, for how much he had enjoyed these past two weeks, came to realize that he hadn't had any time to himself of late. He had some reading he wished to do. Work he needed to finish. Just a chance to sit back with a glass of brandy and savor the silence...

Funny that the sound of his wife arriving home didn't dampen his mood. While he thought he might have gotten a tad upset, as this free time he had thought to cherish vanished in an instant, the opposite was true. In fact, the sound of her footsteps had him closing his book and hurrying out of the library to greet her.

Gone for but a few hours, and already he missed her. How very strange.

"Hello there, darling!" Frederick greeted as he met her in the hall. With a big smile on his face, he swept toward her, pulled her in, and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "How was your afternoon?"

"Frederick, we need to talk."

Even before she spoke, Frederick could tell that something was wrong. She didn't smile when she saw him coming. She didn't melt into his arms as she usually did. And when he kissed her, he could feel how stiff and uncomfortable she was.

"Oh..." He swallowed, then attempted a chuckle. "Nothing bad, I hope."

"Can we..." She stepped out of his embrace and gestured down the hall, toward the drawing room. "Please."

He tried not to panic. Surely, nothing that bad had occurred in the few hours since he last saw her.

He nodded once and placed his hand on the small of her back as he led her to the drawing room, again unable to ignore how stiff she felt beneath his touch.

His mind raced as they entered the drawing room. Had he done something wrong? Had he said something wrong? Or had her sisters planted a seed of doubt in her mind? And to what effect?

For two weeks, everything had been going so well between them. Surely nothing untoward would change that?

And yet, as he closed the door behind them, watching his wife standing in the middle of the room, unable to even look at him, Frederick could not help but feel that the conversation they were about to have might come to define their marriage. For better or worse.

"Hannah..." He chuckled awkwardly. "Is everything alright?"

She did not speak, now looking at the fire crackling in the hearth.

“You’re scaring me, Hannah.” He wanted to go to her, but he felt that was not the best idea. “Please, if something is wrong, you know that you can tell me. You can tell me anything.”

“I did something,” she said, her voice soft and hesitant. “Something you will not like.”

“Oh?”

“You will be happy to know that the rumors about us...” She took a deep breath. “They will no longer be a problem.”

Frederick frowned, not understanding at first. But as he looked at his wife’s back, as he sensed her fear, he realized now why she was acting this way. What it meant.

“And why is that?” he asked carefully, feeling the anger rising but working to keep it at bay.

“I... I went and spoke with my aunt.”

“You did what?” he almost snapped, again pushing down his rage.

“I had no choice.” She spun around to face him, her face stricken with regret. Her brown eyes were wide. Her brow was furrowed. And her shoulders were hunched down. “The things people were saying—it had to be stopped.”

Frederick exhaled, his jaw clenched. “You went and saw your aunt?”

“I did.”

“You spoke to her even though I told you not to. After I explained?—”

“They would not stop,” she hurried to explain. “If we did nothing, the rumors were only going to get?—”

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“Do not interrupt me!” he roared, and she flinched. “And do not try and justify what you have done.” Anger flared within him, fire seeming to spew from his very pores. “I told you that to seek out your aunt and beg her to desist was not an option. I told you that we do not beg.”

“But I did not beg,” she insisted, wringing her hands, trying to meet his eyes but unable to. “I told her to stop. That she could no longer?—”

“I do not care for the words you used,” he snarled. “I do not care if you think you bullied her. The fact is that you debased yourself by seeing her in the first place. You made us look weak!” His body was shaking. “And now, regardless of what happens, she will know that she... that she has this to hold over us.”

“I had no choice,” Hannah pleaded. “The rumors were only going to grow worse, and you insisted on hiding?—”

“I was not hiding!”

She winced, and the fear in her eyes had Frederick itching to comfort her.

Yes, he was angry. Furious! But he took no pleasure in shouting at his wife, and he certainly took no pleasure in making her afraid of him.

“I needed time to think,” he said in a calmer voice. His body was still shaking, his breathing was ragged and raw, but he composed himself. “To figure out what needs to be done. Anything would have been better than... that seeking out your aunt and asking her to stop.”

“I am sorry,” she said sincerely. “I... I just wanted it to stop. And now it will,” she assured him, begging him to see the positive. “She will make sure it does. I know this was not what you wanted, but surely you can see the good in it? Please, Frederick, tell me that you understand.”

He did understand. And on the face of it, this would likely turn out for the best. Those rumors, as horrible as they were, threatened to chip away at their marriage, at his name and title. Like a worm burrowing into an apple, they would rot it from the core if left unchecked. On the face of it... he could see the good in what his wife had done.

Sadly, now Frederick was forced to face another problem, one which he hadn't considered until this very moment.

He could not trust his wife. She had lied to his face. She had gone against his word. She had undermined him fully. For how close they had become these last two weeks, he wondered if that was where he had erred, letting her think that she had full reign over him and could get away with anything she liked.

He was starting to fall in love with Hannah. Of that, he had no doubt. But was it worth it? To love someone who clearly held him in such little regard. He had been down that road once already...

“I understand well enough,” he sighed with regret, the anger gone as quickly as it had come. “And I understand why you thought you needed to do what you did.”

Hope flickered in her eyes. “You do?”

She went for him, but he took a step back, which made her hesitate.

“But you do not realize what this...” He bit his lip, unable to look at her. “I told you what must be done. I thought that would be enough. But you went against me without

even... without considering why I asked such a thing. Because you did not care.”

“That is not true! Of course, I care! That is why?—”

“I trusted you,” he cut her off, his voice cracking. “And you broke that trust, Hannah. Perhaps you are right and this was needed. Perhaps one day, I will be glad that you did what you did today. But right now...” He looked right at her, pain in his eyes, enough that he could see it mirrored in her own. “I do not know if I will ever be able to trust you again. Not fully.”

It was as if he stabbed her in the heart. She stumbled back, wincing in pain. The look on her face was one of agony and disbelief, unable to fathom that he could say such a thing—that her actions could cause it.

“I am sorry,” he continued, his voice turning soft. “And perhaps I am to blame. These last two weeks have been...” He chuckled lightly and shook his head. “They have been better than I could have hoped for, and in that, perhaps we made a mistake. I made a mistake.”

“What... what do you mean?” Her voice broke.

“This marriage was always meant to be one of convenience, but I have been weak and succumbed to my base desires. I have...” A deep breath, for he could not believe he was about to say this. “I have let you think that this marriage might be more than what it should be. What it is. And for that, I am sorry.”

“What...”

Her body trembled, and oh how he wanted to go to her. But he held fast, needing to get through this because he felt that he must.

“What it is? And what is it?”

“As I said.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “A marriage of convenience and nothing more.”

He might as well have slapped her for her reaction. Pain at first, radiating through her body. To hurt someone you loved was its own sort of agony, and Frederick was living it right now.

But then came the anger. Breaking through the pain so that she was snarling at him. In a way, Frederick had expected it. Why, he almost smiled to see it. Hannah, never one to go down without a fight, was surely not going to take his rebuke so easily.

And seeing that light in her eyes... the urges that Frederick had been suppressing surged. The fire simmered inside her. Her skin glowed. Her breathing was heavy. Her breasts were heaving. Her anger had his skin burning and his blood pumping, pulling him forward, as all he wanted to do was take her any way he wanted...

Self-control.

Frederick tried to keep himself in check. He had to.

“A marriage of convenience?” she snorted. “Is that what this is?”

“It’s all it has ever been.”

“A marriage at your own convenience,” she snarled. “Not mine.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “You did not seem to mind it.”

“Ha!” Her laughter was bitter. “Oh, I am so grateful that you were finally able to touch me. So, so grateful. Why, you almost had me convinced that the sight of me didn’t disgust you.”

Frederick winced but straightened up. “And I told you, my feelings for you had nothing to do with... with that. My reasons for not touching you were my own. I simply regret that I wasn’t able to resist as I should have. And for that, I am sorry.”

“Don’t!” she spat. “Don’t you dare apologize.”

“It is the last apology you will get from me,” he shot back, loving the way she snarled at him in response. It made his blood pump through his veins “That, I promise you.”

“I don’t need your apology.”

Her body shook with anger; hands clenched by her sides, her teeth bared, her eyes ablaze. Was it wrong that Frederick found it all so darn tempting that he could hardly stand it?

“I just wish I could take it all back. Save myself the effort it took to be with you.”

His eyes flashed, and his jaw clenched. “Is that what it was? An effort?”

“A mistake,” she hissed. “It is funny in a way, that for a second I believed that—” She scoffed. “That I ignored your words and believed that this marriage could turn into more. That I might want such a thing.”

Frederick could feel it happening. For over a week now, their love making had been fueled by pure attraction and an acknowledgment of their desire to be together. No need to fight or argue to spark that passion. It was there, ready and waiting. And that was good. It was needed. But it had also been missing something.

As Hannah spat fire at him, she slowly stepped closer to him, her body shaking. Her eyes, wide and full of anger, were exactly what had made him want her so much in the beginning.

To leave now would be the smart thing. Frederick could turn around and walk away and be done with it—would likely be done with it for good. But dammit, he was a weak, weak man. And dammit, he did not care.

“You wanted it well enough this morning,” he said with a smirk that he knew she would hate. “And last night. And yesterday morning?—”

“I thought I did,” she cut him off, taking another step toward him. “But I wanted it about as much as you did. That is to say, I forced myself to believe it. Now...” She laughed. “You could not pay me to touch you.”

“You played your role well,” he said, still smirking, as if he was somehow winning this argument. “You almost had me believing.”

“Not me...” She hesitated. Considered. And then smiled to herself with grim satisfaction. “How could I believe that of a man who could not even bring himself to finish inside me?”

Frederick balked at that. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” she hissed triumphantly. “I knew the first time we were together that this—” She gestured between them. “That this was nothing. If it was, you wouldn’t have treated me like some... some whore.”

“Is that what you want?” he snarled. “For me to finish inside you? Would that have made you happy?”

“You could not do it, even if you tried.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“A statement of fact!”

They looked at one another. Glaring daggers so hot that Frederick could feel them piercing his skin. A moment passed between them, fueled by such intensity that he almost wondered if Hannah might strike him. He growled. She sneered. Their beating hearts raged as one. And then...

And then they lunged at one another.

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Frederick cupped Hannah's face in his hands, roughly pulling her in and kissing her on the lips. No, not a kiss. That was too gentle. Too loving. This was as if he was trying to devour her, consume her. He wrapped his lips around her own, and his tongue plunged into mouth, licking and sucking as if he hadn't eaten in days and she was his last meal.

And Hannah, as he kissed her, grabbed his shirt and tore it open. Her hands then moved to his pants, ripping at them also, doing what she could to remove his clothes as if they had caught fire. She broke their kiss and trailed her lips down his chest, his nipples, his neck. She licked and bit and sucked on his flesh as his pants fell by his ankles.

Frederick made to do the same for her dress, only for Hannah to slap his hands away. He tried again, but she grabbed his hands and held them. Her face flashed with a warning, and she bared her teeth, snarling at him to leave her be. Then she pushed his hands away again, flattened a hand on his chest, and held him there before dropping to her knees.

Her lips wrapped around the tip of his member, and his body stiffened. Her tongue ran up his shaft, her hands cupped his testicles, her lips sucked and sucked and sucked, and his knees shook. Nearly stumbling, he had no choice but to fist a hand in her hair and hold himself steady as she bobbed her head up and down on his shaft, sucking and licking the whole while.

"Hannah..." he groaned. "That is... God... that... yes!"

Her tongue flicked over the tip, licking gently, before she swallowed him whole

again. Then she took the base of his shaft in her hand and began to twist as she continued to swallow him.

It was unlike anything she had done before. Hannah, taking full control, being in charge like this... She had a point to make, and whatever it was, she was making it well. And Frederick, realizing that he had once again lost control, did not care.

A few more moments and Frederick had no choice but to taste her. Using his strength, he lifted her off the floor. She protested and slapped at him, but he carried her across the room and tossed her on the sofa. Like a petulant puppy, she snarled at him, but he bore down on her, his hand around her neck as the other ripped her dress off her. Next, he wedged his knees between her legs, still holding her down, looking into her eyes and warning her not to fight him on this. It was his turn.

He dove between her thighs next. The taste of her was as sweet as he remembered, and the way she grabbed his head and held him there, pressing his face against her sex until he could hardly breathe, made his length stiffen further. But he licked and sucked on her nether lips, then wrapped his lips around her bud so that she began to shake and cry out.

“There!” she commanded him. “Right—don’t stop!”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” he growled into her folds.

“Oh, shut up for once!” Her legs wrapped around his head, and he continued to eat her.

As he devoured his wife, Frederick could feel his member pulsating. It throbbed so hard that it hurt. Already, he knew that within seconds of thrusting into her, he would climax, and for once he simply did not care.

He pulled away, and she gasped. “What did I?—”

He was on her, kissing her just to shut her up. She accepted it, falling back onto the sofa and pushing her hips up. Her hand found his member, and he very nearly climaxed right then and there, but he held on as she guided him toward her entrance.

“Urgh...” They moaned together.

“This is what you want, isn’t it?” Frederick growled as he thrust deep and hard into her. Faces inches apart, they were like rabid dogs daring the other to attack.

“You know what I want,” she panted as she ground her hips against him. “If you can.”

“Do not tempt me, woman.”

“Do not tell me what to do!”

He thrust again and again. Her wetness was indescribable. The feel of her wrapped around his member was heavenly. Each thrust sent a pulse from his legs to his soul, and within minutes he could feel himself about to erupt.

Harder thrusts. Faster. He bit her shoulder, and she grabbed his head to hold him there. Deeper thrusts. Faster. His body began to shake as the pleasure built.

“You better not,” she moaned.

“I will do as I... as I... as I...” And then it hit him.

Buried deep inside his wife, for the first time Frederick finished inside her. And Hannah, feeling it, wrapped her legs around his waist so that he could not pull away,

forcing him to stay inside her until every last drop was spent.

And when they were finished, Frederick knew that one of two things might happen.

They could come to their senses, realize that the words they spoke were true and this right here was the last time either would dare touch the other. One would storm away. The other would stay. Both would feel great shame and sadness and regret while knowing it was the only way...

Or they could understand that sometimes things happened in the heat of anger and words spoken could be taken back. Yes, they had said some hurtful things to each other, but they knew what this marriage was and what it could be, and one fight should not change that. Surely not?

Silence fell between them as Frederick slowly pulled out of her. Awkward. Tense. Unsure. Frederick, unable to look his wife in the eyes, tried to sense what she might be feeling. For all that was said, he realized right then that he did not want this to be the end, not for a moment, and he prayed she was of the same mind.

Slowly, he looked up and met her eyes. A hardened glare. The sense that she hated him... And then a smile.

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Hannah snorted, and he burst into laughter. He fell back onto the sofa, and she was immediately on him. She climbed into his arms, he kissed the top of her head, and together they laughed at the stupid things they said, knowing now that this marriage was exactly what they both wanted.

Words were meaningless, but actions mattered, and the action that had just occurred... there was little chance this marriage would be ending anytime soon.

Surely not.

Chapter Nineteen

They lay on the sofa together, wrapped in one another's arms. With the vigor and intensity of what had just happened behind them, it might have looked to anyone watching that things had finally returned to normal. And in a way, they had. The anger was behind them. What needed to be said had been said. It was a perfect chance for the two to move forward, and yet...

The silence gave Frederick a chance to consider and contemplate what had just happened and what it might mean. Not the fight, not the insults. Rather, it was the action that haunted him, and what it might mean going forward.

He had finished inside Hannah for the first time, something which he swore he would not do. For all his talk of not wanting to touch her, it was but a symptom of a larger cause. Touching meant closeness, which would lead to love, which would inevitably lead to what had just happened. A normal enough affair for a husband and wife, but in Frederick's mind, it was cataclysmic.

He shifted uncomfortably—Hannah’s head rested on his chest—as if trying to separate himself from her without actually doing so. He loved the feel of her body against his, the sound of her breathing, the scent of her hair. He knew deep down that he was happy and that there was no need to feel what he was feeling. But still, he could not escape the feeling that he had done something wrong.

Hannah must have felt him tense up, for she shifted and sat up to look at him, her expression etched with concern.

“Is everything alright?” she asked.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” he responded simply.

“You seem tense, is all.”

“I am not.”

“Is it the sofa? We can move to our bedroom if you would prefer? It is a little snug here.” She laughed.

“No, the sofa is fine.”

Her brow furrowed as she studied him, knowing something was wrong but not knowing whether she should push or not.

“Alright...” Slowly, she settled back down on his chest. “Just making sure.”

There was something wrong. Yes, what they had hurled at each other in the heat of anger might have been exaggerated, but there was truth behind it still. An indication of Hannah’s true feelings and what she expected from this marriage. Only spoken about once, back when they had both agreed that this marriage was purely one of

convenience, it was becoming harder and harder to ignore.

Frederick wondered if he should do just that, to see how long he could go on pretending. Or if he should bring it up now and then strike it down so that there would be no confusion.

The guilt roiled inside him. But a voice in the back of his head cried for him to keep his mouth shut and enjoy the moment. But unfortunately, and ironically, his feelings for Hannah meant that he could not. She needed to know how he felt, and it really was that simple.

“Hannah,” he began awkwardly. “May I ask you something?”

“Anything. You know that.”

“We have spoken of it once before but have not touched on the topic since. And with what just happened...” He exhaled. “I think we must revisit it again.”

“Alright...”

He could feel her tense up as she lay on top of him, bracing herself for what she knew would not be a pleasant conversation.

“It is about...” He took a deep, calming breath. “It is about starting a family.”

A beat as she registered his meaning. “Oh?”

“I told you weeks ago, when this marriage was first arranged, that I had no interest in starting a family. And at the time, you said that you were of the same mind. I just want to confirm that...” He clicked his tongue, for no matter how he said it, it would not come out right. “That you still feel the same way. That you have no interest in

starting a family.”

As expected, she did not answer right away. In fact, he could feel her pull away slightly. Confusion, she must be feeling, for what had just happened suggested the very opposite of what he had just said. But then again, that was why he felt the need to bring it up.

“I...” She hesitated. “I am not sure.”

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It sounded like a lie, said to appease him.

“So, the fact that I have no interest in starting a family with you does not upset you? You are perfectly at ease with such an arrangement?”

“I would not say that I am at ease.”

“So, you do wish to start a family?”

“Well...” She clicked her tongue. “It is not that simple.”

“It should be. It is a yes or no answer, is it not? You either do or you do not.”

She pushed herself up again and looked at him, the expression on her face betraying her inner conflict. “When we first spoke about this, I did not consider starting a family with you. And I was fine with that...” An awkward chuckle. “You may remember that when we had that conversation, you had just told me that you would never touch me.”

“I remember.”

“So...” Another awkward chuckle. “There was no reason for me to think that it would ever be a problem. But things have changed since then.”

“Some things have,” he agreed carefully, making sure to not look away from her. He needed to be strong in this, give no sense that he was hesitant. “But my opinion on this has not changed.”

“That is what you said about the touching.” She tried for a coy smile, but it fell at his somber expression.

This was not a personal slight against her, and she needed to know that.

“That was different.”

“I don’t see how.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “My refusal to touch you... that was never personal?—”

“So, this is?” She leaned back as if he had struck her.

“No,” he said quickly, half-moving as if to comfort her, but stopping himself because he needed to stay strong and emotionless. “My meaning is, I opted for a marriage of convenience specifically because I did not wish to start a family. As you well know, marriages among our class are arranged almost exclusively to produce heirs, and I wanted to make sure it was known that there would be no such expectation in our marriage.”

“By refusing to touch me?”

“It seemed the safest course.”

“And now that you have touched me...” she trailed off, looking away as if ashamed.

Again, he made to reach for her but then held back.

“This marriage has grown into something that even I could not have foreseen, and I need you to know that I do not regret anything that has happened between us. I relish

it, in fact.”

She scoffed softly. “That is lovely to hear.”

“What I wanted was a mother for Amelia, a role model, and you are that. The fact that the two of you had bonded the way you have is everything I could have hoped for. I could not be happier about it. However...” He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “When it comes to starting a family of our own, that is an option I cannot consider.”

“And an heir?” she asked, still not looking at him. “What about your need to produce an heir?”

“I have already decided that my brother, William, will be my heir.”

“It seems you have thought of everything,” she said coldly, shifting further down the sofa and away from him.

Frederick hated that he had to have this conversation right here and now, but he felt it was the right move. With how upset Hannah was, it was best to get it out of the way and pray that she not only forgave him but was able to see his side. That she might accept it.

“You are upset...” He reached for her, and she moved out of the way.

“What do you think?”

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“I did tell you from the beginning that this was how things would be, remember? I never lied to you.”

“And that is supposed to make me feel better?”

“It is simply a fact.”

“Yes, well,” she scoffed. “I will remind myself of that each time I am forced to remember that you have no desire to start a family with me. Hopefully, it will keep me warm.”

He frowned. “So, you do wish to start a family?”

“I did not—” She stopped and took a deep breath to gather herself. “The truth is that up until a week ago, I did not even consider it an option. The way that we were with one another...” She scoffed. “Why would I? But this last week, Frederick...” She turned and looked at him, sadness plain on her face. “Everything has changed. I know that this marriage has grown into something that we did not foresee, and a part of me was hoping that we would grow with it.”

“We will...” He sat up now, wanting to reach for her still. But he knew if he did that, he would be at her mercy, for he needed to keep his emotions in check if he was to get through this. “There is no reason we cannot. The fact that we are here right now...” He indicated their naked state on the sofa. “Does that not tell you how far we have come?”

“And it is as far as we will come,” she insisted. “For what else is there after this? If

not a child, then what?"

"We have Amelia."

She grimaced. "And I love her, I do. Only... well, she is your daughter, not mine."

That hit Frederick a little harder than he had expected. He leaned back, taken by surprise, his cool façade dropping instantly. While it might not have been that shocking of a comment, it was a little too real, speaking to the true nature of what this marriage really was.

"She is our daughter," he said coldly.

"And would she not like a brother or another sister? Would that not be fair to her?"

"Do not use Amelia as a bargaining chip. This is not about her."

"You are the one who has made it as such," she shot back, her anger rising again.

"You are the one who has made this... this rule, with her at the center."

"This has nothing to do with Amelia."

"What, then?" She fixed him with a glare. "Since the day you told me of your... your ridiculous rule, what you have not done is provided me with a reason why." She raised an eyebrow. "So, tell me, why? Why do you not wish to start a family with me? Give me a damn reason."

Frederick's lip twitched again, his anger returning. "It is not so simple to explain."

"It is," she snarled. "You just don't want to. Either that or you don't care to. Whatever it is, the result is the same."

“You won’t understand.”

“Better that than having nothing to understand at all. Tell me, Frederick. Make me understand.” Her expression softened, and her eyes turned pleading. “Please. After everything we have been through, I have a right to know.”

How could he possibly explain it? How could he make her see? The reason for all of this, it brought back memories that had Frederick wanting to stand up and storm out of the room, grab a chair and throw it against the wall.

A worse memory he could not imagine, a worse time in his life he could not fathom to have existed. It made him feel pathetic and weak in ways he did not enjoy, and the idea of explaining it to Hannah, of putting himself out there like that...

But he had to tell her, he had no other option. He just prayed it would be enough and that she would not judge him for it.

“You wish to know the reason?” he asked, looking down as if from shame.

“Tell me.” She took his hand and held it to her chest. “Please. If there is a reason, I must know it.”

He breathed in deeply to calm his racing heart, to stop himself from shaking and sweating. This was not a conversation he wished to have but one that had to happen.

“As you know,” he began solemnly, his voice soft with regret. “I was married once before. It was a marriage arranged by my father, a man who I would have done anything for. Raised as I was, I knew my role in the family and was happy to take it.” He scoffed bitterly. “As ridiculous as it now sounds, I was proud to do it. I even thought”—his stomach churned—“that despite not knowing the woman whom I was set to wed, we might learn to love one another with time.”

Hannah did not speak, even though he could see the obvious question on her lips. Did you? she wished to ask. Learn to love one another?

“Typically, my wife did not wish to marry me either. But while I had made my peace with it, willing to do what it took to make the marriage work, she was the opposite in every regard. She hated me...” The words tumbled off his tongue like poison. “Reviled me. Wished me dead.”

“I am sure that is not true...”

He chuckled bitterly. “I have always been a cold man. Not by choice, but it is simply my way. And while I tried not to be that with her, she treated me as if I were a stranger in my own home. It made it impossible to forge any sort of bond until, eventually, the two of us stopped talking. We would stand in the same room and simply pretend the other did not exist...”

His stomach churned as memories from a time he wished to forget flashed in his mind.

“But Amelia...?”

“My wife knew her duty, and we lay together until she fell pregnant. Funny that I thought once Amelia was born, things might change, that she might see that there was a chance at happiness with me. But she died in childbirth, and we were never given that chance.”

“Oh, Frederick...” Hannah shifted closed to him and kissed his hand. “I am so sorry.”

That wasn’t the end of the story. There was one more chapter, the one that still haunted Frederick to this day—the true reason for his pledge to never love again, to never touch the woman he married, to keep his distance because it felt safest.

“As my wife lay dying,” he continued, his voice dropping, darkness seeming to envelop the room, “she did say one thing to me. Barely conscious, barely alive, she made sure to say one last thing so that there would be no mistaking how she felt.”

Hannah hesitated. “What... what did she say.”

“That she hated me,” Frederick sighed. “She told me that she hated me and that she always had. Our daughter had been born for less than a minute, and rather than asking to see her, she made sure to tell me that.” His lip curled. “From the moment we met to the moment she was taken from this world, she despised me to my core, and for that reason...” he trailed off as the pain began to roll over him.

Hannah did not speak at first. Still holding his hand. Still looking at him. She pondered the story he had just told, caught between wanting to comfort him further and press him for more details.

And even before she spoke, he knew what was coming, and he hated it.

“That it awful,” Hannah said. “Truly, I cannot even imagine...” She sniffed and kissed his hand again. “But, Frederick, I do understand why you might not want anything from this marriage—I do. But surely, now you can see that our situation is not the same.” A soft chuckle. “I do not hate you. I certainly do not despise you. And if we were to have a child together, I know that it would only bring us closer together. You must see that.”

He did. On the face of it, everything she said made sense. But for six years now, Frederick had lived with the burden of trapping a woman in a loveless marriage, forcing her to conceive a child, and then watching as she died. For six years, he had felt guilt for what had happened, swearing that if he was to marry again, he would not burden his new wife with the same expectation. That his marriage would be one of convenience, giving her the freedom to have the life that his previous wife never had.

“I know,” he spoke into his chest, looking down because he could not bring himself to look at Hannah.

“Then why...?”

“As I said, it is not so easy to explain.”

“But you have explained it,” Hannah pressed. “And while I understand your initial reservations, I am not your ex-wife. I want this, and...” She hesitated. “I think you want it, too.”

He shook his head. “And I told you, I cannot.”

“But why?”

He had no answer to that. None that made sense. Guilt that he could not explain. A feeling that if he was to have a child with Hannah, it would be the beginning of the end for them. A promise he had made that he refused to break. Perhaps from stubbornness? Perhaps from superstition? Or perhaps because he was just scared.

“I have told you why...” Slowly, he pulled away from her and rose from the sofa.

“Frederick—” She went to take his hand.

“Please!” He pulled it away, still turned away from her. “This is not about you, Hannah. I told you from the beginning what I wanted, and...” His body was shaking. “And my hope was—is... I hope that you can respect my wish.”

He then forced himself to take a final look at her, seeing the pain on her face, wincing because it hurt him as much as it did her.

He knew it made no sense. He knew that he should have sat and spoken with her, made her see, or at least given himself a chance to see her side. But Frederick had always been stubborn, and with the memories of his past marriage crashing over him

like waves, he felt as if he was about to fall into a bottomless pit from which he would never return.

He grabbed a blanket, covered himself, and stumbled out of the room. When he reached the door, he gave Hannah a final pleading, regretful look. If he walked out the door right now, he knew that to come back would be near impossible, that she might never forgive him, that he would only be doing to this marriage what he had done to the last...

But he walked out anyway.

This marriage was only ever meant to be for convenience, and now, it seemed, that is what it had become once more.

Chapter Twenty

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:41 am

Frederick was already fast asleep when Hannah crept into their bedroom later that evening. Or perhaps he was faking it? Pretending so that they would not have to continue their discussion—argument, more like.

It had not been a discussion, for that suggested reason and compromise. What had transpired between them was something else entirely.

Hannah stood in the doorway, eyeing her slumbering husband, torn between waking him and letting him sleep. If he woke up, they would likely continue from where they had left off, and while Hannah felt such a conversation was needed, she wasn't even sure what she wanted from it.

Did she wish to have children with Frederick? Did she wish to force the issue and make him commit? Or was she happy with what they had, for it was more than she had ever dared hope for, and to risk it now might ruin everything?

She vacillated between both options, deciding at the moment that she would give it the night. Sleep. Wake up beside her husband. Hopefully, remind him in the morning how happy she could make him—she knew exactly how to do that. And once the tension between them faded, she might dare to broach the subject again.

It was a restless sleep. She eyed her husband's naked back, hoping he would shift and throw his arm over her as he did so often in the night. A small thing, but a sign that he still cared for her and that his threats of returning their marriage to one of convenience was simply spoken in the heat of the moment.

Alas, he did no such thing.

Eventually—she did not know when—Hannah drifted off to sleep, looking forward to tomorrow, certain that when she woke up, it would be to happier times...

But the following morning, Hannah woke up alone.

Every morning since their first night together, she had woken up to her husband between her thighs. Licking her where he knew she loved to be licked. Smothering her in kisses. Pressing his naked body against her own. Wrapping her in his arms. Making love to her because what better way to start the day?

This morning, there would be none of that.

Hannah sat up slowly as she looked around the empty room. Then to the side of the bed, where her husband should have been lying. It was still early, just past sunrise, yet he had woken up and snuck out without waking her—determined not to, by the looks of things. If Hannah had harbored any hope that they might have been able to forget the previous night, now she knew that dream to be folly.

She readied herself for the morning in a state of confusion, panic, and bewilderment. Bathing, she tried to convince herself that what she needed to do was tell Frederick in no uncertain terms that she was fine with not starting a family with him, that she was happy with what they had, and if this was as far as their relationship went, then so be it. Better that than to risk ruining everything.

Dressing herself next, she could not escape the feeling that to do so would be to lie to herself, for although she had not considered the possibility of a family before now, the more she thought about it, the more she came to realize that it was the next logical step in their relationship. If Frederick truly did care for her, he should want such a thing, and his determination not to have children spoke to the truth of his feelings.

Leaving her room and making her way down the hall, she again came to the decision

that she would just leave it... only to go down the stairs and change her mind once again.

Did she love Frederick so much that she would happily go along with this strange desire to keep their marriage stagnate? Or did she love him so much that she needed to stand up for herself and demand that he treat her as a wife, not a plaything?

What to do... what to do...

Her mind whirled, her stomach twisted, and by the time she wandered into the dining room to find Frederick and Amelia already seated at the table, she still had not a clue what she would do.

“Hannah!” Amelia cried out at the sight of her. “Where have you been?”

It was the sight of Amelia that finally answered Hannah’s question. The little girl, for how much Hannah had grown to love her, was not her own. To walk into the dining room as she had and to see her own daughter sitting there, buzzing with excitement at the sight of her...her mother... Just the thought had Hannah’s heart soaring, only for her stomach to drop when she spotted Frederick eyeing her as if in a warning.

Hannah forced a smile. “Sorry I am late...” A quick glance at her husband, who suddenly looked guilty, even though he did smile at the sight of her. “I must have slept in.”

“I was going to come get you, but Father told me to let you rest.”

“Is that right?” Hannah eyed her husband curiously as she made for her seat. “How very... considerate of him.”

Frederick did not speak at first. Watching her still, his expression was impassive, and

for a heartbeat, Hannah realized what this must mean. He was true to his words. Determined to go back to the way things had been. A marriage of convenience was all she could hope for.

This broke her, and she stumbled slightly as she reached her chair, unable to look at him, for she might shatter right then and there.

“You looked so peaceful,” he said suddenly, his smile returning. “And I thought you could use the rest.”

And then, most shockingly, he rose from his seat, leaned forward, and kissed her on the cheek.

Hannah straightened up at the kiss. Trying her best not to react in a way that might seem strange, she looked at Frederick, who simply smiled to himself as he sat back down. But the kiss lingered on her cheek, tingling, as if to pull her out of her funk and let her know that the situation wasn't nearly as dire as she had allowed herself to believe.

Frederick wasn't done with her yet. Maybe he had come to realize that a marriage of convenience wasn't possible? And if that was the case...

Hannah sat up straighter in her seat at the thought, wondering now if maybe there was still a chance.

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“What are we doing today?” Amelia asked excitedly. “I want to go to the pond again!”

Frederick looked pointedly at her. “You have lessons today, Amelia. Miss Temperton is expecting you.”

She scrunched up her face. “No fair!”

“Besides, I am busy...” His eyes flicked to Hannah, causing her to frown. “I will be out most of the day.”

“W-what? You are leaving?”

He had not told her that he would be out today, which suggested it was a sudden decision, which suggested that he had made said decision after their conversation.

“Nothing exciting,” he assured her. “Work, mostly. I don’t want to bore you with the details.” He paused for a moment. “You will be alright by yourself, I trust?”

“Oh.” She blinked “Yes, I am sure I can find something to do.”

“Good.” He took her hand and gave it a comforting squeeze, paired with a smile that reached his eyes.

It was all very confusing. On the one hand, Frederick seemed to be doing the little he could to remind Hannah that they were still husband and wife and that his ‘no touching’ rule was a thing of the past.

On the other hand, Hannah could sense a gap widening between them. A tension. An awkwardness that hadn't been there before.

"Hannah," Amelia began. "Not today, but one day soon, do you think..." She bit her lip, looked at her father as if concerned, but then nodded her head. "Might you teach me to swim? I so want to learn."

Hannah chuckled. "You did rather well the last time."

"That does not count." Amelia scrunched up her nose. "The water was not deep, and I didn't do anything!"

"Amelia," Frederick warned her, "I have told you, you are not old enough."

"I am! Please, Father. I wish to learn! Hannah!" Amelia looked pleadingly at Hannah. "Tell him!"

"I told you no," Frederick insisted.

"Hannah!" Amelia continued to look pleadingly at her.

Hannah was about to laugh it off and tell Amelia that she would discuss it with her father first. Not wanting to overstep, aware of the precipice that her marriage stood on, she figured it might be best to play it safe.

Only before she got the chance, Frederick interrupted.

"Enough, Amelia," he said warningly. "Hannah is not your mother."

That statement, said so assuredly and simply, knocked the wind out of Hannah. Frederick did not raise his voice. He did not snap. But the words were enough to

remind Hannah of the reality in which she lived.

He was right. Amelia, for how much Hannah loved her, was not her daughter and never would be. Not the girl's fault, of course. Simply a fact.

Hannah tried her best not to look taken aback by the comment, even if it lit something inside of her that she had been trying to ignore since the previous night. Frederick could treat her like a wife. He could kiss her and make love to her and be the very best of husbands. But it was all surface level, a distraction because that was easier than dealing with the truth—that this marriage had come as far as he was willing to let it.

Anger rising, frustration surging, Hannah forced a smile and looked at Frederick, who frowned when he saw the look in her eyes.

“That reminds me,” she began, knowing already it was foolish but unable to stop because dammit, she needed to do something. “I wish to have my aunt and my cousin Selina over for dinner tomorrow night.”

Frederick balked. “Excuse me?”

“And my father and mother, too. And my sisters and their husbands. We have not hosted since our wedding, and I think it might be a good idea.”

She gave him an over-the-top smile that had his mouth twitching.

“That is... something we should discuss in private.”

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“It is needed,” she pushed rightly. “And it is smart. With everything that has happened recently—concerning my aunt, I mean—I think we should make amends, and inviting her over for dinner is a sure way to do that. We don’t want to look petty.”

She could see Frederick struggling to contain his anger in front of his daughter.

“Again, I think this is something we should discuss in?”

“Furthermore, it will give everyone a chance to see how far our marriage has come.” She took his hand again and squeezed it, looking into his eyes, making sure he saw the point she was trying to make. “And that those nasty rumors were just that, rumors. Isn’t that what you want, after all?”

“I...” Frederick clenched his jaw, forced a smile for Amelia, and then looked at Hannah. “The timing is queer. Perhaps if we wait a few weeks and?”

“No, no,” Hannah spoke over him, taking a little too much pleasure in the way it made him stiffen. “I insist we do it tomorrow night. I mean... this is my home too, is it not? I should be allowed to host a dinner party?” She chuckled as if it were a joke. “Unless there is a good reason that I cannot? Is there, Frederick? Surely, you would not begrudge me that?”

It was a nasty trick, but it spoke to Hannah’s desperation... and annoyance at her husband.

Knowing that Frederick hated the gossip that had surrounded their marriage, and his

desperation for it to stop, a forced social setting like this one meant that he would have no choice but to display his affections. Furthermore, with her sisters and their husbands in attendance, he might see what a happy marriage looked like, the boon of bearing children and starting a family, as she knew both her sisters and their husbands were beyond besotted with their children.

And also, perhaps most importantly, he needed to be reminded that she wasn't to be walked over and treated like an 'other' in this house. They were married. This was her home, too. And it would be that way from now on until her dying breath.

"It will give me something to do today," Hannah continued triumphantly. "Seeing as you are away all day, that is. You don't want me growing bored and complacent, do you? After all, a wife needs ways to fill out her day."

Frederick looked at her ruefully, for surely, he could see what she was doing. The protest. The denouncement of the power he tried to wield over her. The announcement that this marriage wasn't going to be on his terms only.

"Sounds like a wonderful idea," he said carefully, keeping his anger at bay. "As you said..." He narrowed his eyes at her quickly, then gave her a smile. "This is your home too, and I would hate to begrudge you that."

"Thank you, dear." She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, which he accepted without hesitation.

Did Hannah want to raise a family? Did she want this marriage to be more than it was? She decided right then and there that she did. And while she suspected that Frederick was hoping to ignore what had happened last night, slowly letting things settle and then returning to how things had been, she needed to let him know that such fancies were not an option.

Consequences be damned.

Chapter Twenty-One

The dinner party got off to a very awkward start.

Hannah had tried to organize the arrival of her guests so that her sisters and their husbands would be the first to arrive, providing a much-needed buffer for when their aunt and their father were in the same room together. But for reasons that she would learn later—a sick child, and a horse that had thrown a shoe—her sisters ended up arriving late.

That left Hannah and Frederick to entertain her aunt Teresa, her cousin Selina, and her mother and father alone.

Upon their arrival, the two parties were directed to the drawing room for pre-supper drinks and what Hannah hoped to be some light conversation. She sat on a sofa with Frederick, making sure to hold his hand and stay close. Her mother and father sat on the sofa beside them, while her aunt and cousin sat directly across from them.

Close quarters. Father and aunt sitting opposite. Brandy flowing. The fire crackling. In hindsight, it was always going to be tense.

“This is delicious brandy,” her father said awkwardly, raising his glass and then taking a sip. “Where is it from? If you do not mind my asking.”

“Northern France,” Frederick answered. He had been quiet all evening, contemplative and very clearly not having as good a time as he might.

“Ah...” Lord Ramsbury nodded in understanding and waited for an explanation, but got none, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “You will have to give me the name

of your supplier.”

“Gladly.”

“I thought you were cutting back on the drink, Phineas,” Teresa said politely. “We all know how you get when you have one too many.”

Lord Ramsbury narrowed his eyes at her. “Not that it is any of your business, Teresa, but I have made strides in that department. This here is my first drink in...” He turned to look at his wife. “How long has it been, dear?”

“Two weeks,” Lady Ramsbury said, taking his hand and squeezing it as if in warning. “And you have done very well.”

“Ah, but that is the way of it, is it not?” Teresa sighed as if she truly cared. “It starts off as just one, and the next thing you know, we’re being forced to carry you out the door. I think we all remember what happened two years ago at Christmas.” She tittered.

“That was not—” Lord Ramsbury bit his tongue, taking a calming breath. “I had food poisoning.”

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“There is a difference between food poisoning and eating so much that you get sick, Phineas. And I think we all know which one it was.”

“I was in bed for three days,” Lord Ramsbury growled. “Your chef is to blame, and I told you to fire the man.” He looked around the drawing room for support. “I asked him personally if the veal had turned, and he assured me it had not.” He blew through his lips.

“I promoted him, in fact,” Teresa said with a smirk. “The man should not be punished because your eyes are bigger than your stomach.”

“It was food poisoning!”

“Paired with an entire bottle of brandy. Your Grace...” She turned and smiled pleasantly at Frederick. “I should warn you against giving Lord Ramsbury the name of your supplier, for once he gets his talons into him, the chances are that he’ll drain the poor fellow’s supply within a week.”

“Speaking of talons...” Frederick muttered under his breath, fixing her with a pointed look.

Hannah nudged him and chuckled, hoping he might smile at her playful reaction, but he continued to watch her aunt coldly.

“And I told you, I have quit!” Lord Ramsbury cried.

“Says the man with a glass of brandy in his hand.”

“That is not?—”

“Mother!” Hannah spoke loudly over her aunt and father’s bickering. “How are Nathaniel and Stephen? I have not heard from them in so long.”

Nathaniel and Stephen were Hannah’s younger brothers. Sixteen years of age, they did not live at Ramsbury Estate, having spent the past year studying in the south of England.

“They are well,” her mother said, seeming relieved to change the topic. “They were sorry that they missed your wedding, however. They made sure that I let you know.”

“I was sorry not to see them. Weren’t we, Frederick?” Hannah stroked her husband’s arm.

“We will have to invite them over when they return home,” he agreed simply, saying no more to the matter.

Hannah frowned, sensing the tension and beginning to wonder if this dinner party was such a good idea. More so when her father spoke up.

“Just one of many noticeable absences that day,” Lord Ramsbury said pointedly as he looked in Teresa’s direction. “A very small reception.”

“I am surprised you were not too drunk to remember,” she shot back smoothly.

“On my daughter’s big day?” Lord Ramsbury responded coolly. “I don’t expect you to understand the importance of such an occasion, Teresa, but I would not dream of doing anything to ruin it.”

Teresa stiffened at that, curled her upper lip, and she looked just about ready to

respond in a typically scathing manner.

“Mother!” Hannah started quickly, again speaking over her aunt and father. “Are you and Father still planning a trip to Spain at the end of the Season?”

“We are, dear...” Lady Ramsbury gave her husband’s hand another tight squeeze and a warning glare to match. Not that he noticed, as he was glaring at his sister. “And we are both looking very forward to it.”

“Where will you go?” Hannah asked quickly, before anyone else might interject. “I know Frederick has been to Spain manytimes, so if you have any questions...” She looked pointedly at her husband.

“Hmm?” Frederick murmured, having not been paying attention, still glaring at her aunt.

“Spain,” Hannah said pointedly. “Mother and Father are going there in a few months.”

“Oh.” He blinked, snapping himself back into the room. “Yes, I have been often. A lovely country, if not a little hot. I would be happy to recommend places to stay and dine in, of course.”

“How generous.”

“He is, isn’t he?” Hannah kissed him on the cheek. “One of his many qualities. Certainly not his humor, that is for sure.” She chuckled, to which Frederick frowned.

Frederick was proving impossible to get a reaction out of. He wasn’t rejecting her completely, but it was similar to how he had been behaving for the last two days. Barely present. Distant. Mind clearly on other matters...

“Very generous, Your Grace,” Teresa interjected the moment she had a chance to. “Is there nothing my brother won’t use you for? He’ll be asking to move in here next time.”

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Hannah suppressed a groan, once again forced to consider if this dinner party of hers wasn't one of the worst ideas she'd ever had.

Her father and her aunt's bickering was expected, even if it was worse than usual. But that was only half the problem. To her aunt's right sat her cousin Selina, who since arriving hadn't so much as looked at her. She sat with her eyes cast downward and her shoulders hunched over in an effort to look invisible, which suggested to Hannah that her cousin was still angry about what had happened but possessed more tact than her mother and knew better than to cause a scene... thankfully.

As to Frederick? He was a mystery that Hannah was still struggling to solve, even though she was beginning to understand his intentions toward her and their marriage. Hannah needed her sisters here. She needed to change the topic. She needed... she needed... She needed a miracle, truth be told.

"... all I am saying is that His Grace has surely done enough for you, Phineas," her aunt was saying. "You keep pestering him like this, and he would be within his rights to cut you off."

"You make it sound as if I am hounding him day and night like some overzealous innkeeper! I have done nothing of the sort."

"Some gratitude, perhaps," Teresa huffed. "The way you treat His Grace, it is as if you think he owes you, when the opposite is true."

"Your bitterness gives you away, Teresa. Green is a most unbecoming color on you."

“What bitterness? Selina could not be happier about what happened—Isn’t that right, dear?” She nudged her daughter.

“W-what?” Selina looked up, her eyes wide in shock.

“In fact, it might interest you to know that she has received many offers of courtship from many interested gentlemen. The past is behind us, which is where I will ask you to leave it.”

“Me!”

Hannah leaned into Frederick and whispered in his ear, “I am so sorry about this. I should have known inviting them here would result in such foolery as this.”

“Is it fine,” Frederick assured her, a soft smile on his lips, and he squeezed her hand, though he didn’t look at her. “I have met your aunt before, remember.”

“It isn’t fine,” Hannah insisted. “But you are being wonderful about it.” She squeezed his hand back, begging him to look at her, to give her a hint that he was fine and not looking for a way out. “I will be sure to make it up to you.”

“I told you, it is fine...” He finally looked at her, offering a gracious smile, followed by a soft kiss on the cheek. “I am having a good time, I promise.”

Again, to anyone watching, that alone would have signaled that the two were happy and nothing was amiss in their marriage. And indeed, Hannah caught her aunt eyeing them ruefully, which should have made her feel better if she hadn’t caught her cousin frowning. The guilt rose within her once more.

Lucky then that moments later, Hannah’s sisters and husbands arrived, which gave them an excuse to adjourn to the dining room, where the seating arrangements had

been pre-designed to keep her father and aunt at opposite ends of the table.

And for a few minutes there, the evening finally began to look like what she had envisioned initially. Pleasant chatter. Everyone getting along. And, of course, the conversation shifting to the one topic that Hannah had hoped that it would, spoken in a way she knew could only bolster her conviction that she had made the right choice.

“... and would you believe that Henry wants another one?” Charlotte was laughing as she looked at her husband with love in her eyes.

“Can you blame me?” The Duke of Hayward chuckled as he kissed the back of his wife’s hand. “Honestly, I don’t know what all the fuss is about. Who would have guessed that raising children could be so easy.”

“Easily said when you are not the one who has to carry them for nine months,” Beatrice chided from across the table.

“Exactly!” Charlotte piped up.

“Careful now.” Beatrice’s husband, the Duke of Walford, laughed. “It will just give your wife something else to hold over you. Are you sure you want such a thing?”

“Oh, she likes to pretend that it was the hardest thing in the world, but from what I saw, it was nothing too taxing,” Henry chided his wife.

“Excuse me?” Charlotte rounded on him. “What did you just say?”

“Just making a joke, dear.” He chuckled and held up his hands in surrender.

“I thought the prerequisite of a joke was for it to be funny.”

“They think it is so easy,” Beatrice sighed as she took a sip of her wine. “Men. What they do not realize is the work that we must put in long before the babe is born. It doesn’t just appear one day, you know.”

“Is that why your stomach was so swollen all this time?” The Duke of Walford grinned and nudged her. “I just thought you were getting fat.”

“How dare you!”

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“Careful now, Your Grace,” Lord Ramsbury interjected. “I must ask that you treat my daughter with respect. Especially if you wish to see more little ones running about the place anytime soon.”

“Exactly,” Lady Ramsbury chimed in. “Do not dare deny me of it.”

“You, Mother?” Beatrice snorted. “I had no idea your considerations were to be taken into account.”

“Of course, they are,” Lady Ramsbury said rightly. “As a grandmother, it is my right to request as many grandchildren as possible. From all of you—” She looked over her three daughters. “And I will remind you each that you owe me.”

“And how is that?” Charlotte laughed.

“Why, I gave birth to all of you, is how. I brought you into this world, so it is the least you can do.”

“Agreed,” Lord Ramsbury said with a proud nod.

“Oh, please, Phineas,” Lady Ramsbury sighed. “Do not act as if you had anything to do with it. Well, apart from the obvious.” She smirked coyly.

“Letitia!” Lord Ramsbury gasped, his cheeks flushing.

“Mother,” Charlotte groaned, “please do not go there.”

“Oh, I am only joking.”

“Enough wine for you, I think,” Beatrice said with a giggle.

Her family was in the swing of things, a sight that Hannah recognized well. Growing up with them, and seeing how other families often acted around one another, she had always been thankful for how close she was with her sisters and parents. How well they all got along. How happy they were. This, more than anything, was vindication for the dinner party.

Across from them sat her aunt and Selina, both notably silent. With the sisters taking over the conversation, there was little chance for Teresa to interject. She looked terse the whole time, seeming to become more frustrated as the conversation continued, and Selina... well, she was still acting sheepish.

And as all of this was happening, Hannah held Frederick's hand and looked at him time and again, making sure to smile and check that he was enjoying himself. And in a way, he seemed to be, chuckling lightly here and there, smiling to himself, nowhere near as distant as he had been.

It was almost as if her plan was working...

Yes, he was still not entirely present. And yes, he was not involving himself as she might have liked. But he was listening, hearing what her sisters and their husbands were saying, seeing for himself what married life could be like.

Now, all Hannah needed to do was hammer the point home.

“Speaking of children.” Charlotte looked quickly at Beatrice and winked before looking back at Hannah. “Can we assume that you and His Grace are planning on bringing a little one into the fold soon, Hannah?”

Holding Frederick's hand, Hannah could feel him stiffen at the question. No doubt this was the last thing he wanted to talk about. Although surely by now, he realized what she was doing?

"And what makes you say that?" she asked innocently.

"Natural curiosity," Charlotte said. "You have been married for two weeks. I think it is a fair question to ask."

"Charlotte," her husband warned. "That is none of our business."

"I disagree," Beatrice piped up. "I rather like the idea of being an aunt."

"Which you already are," her husband reminded her.

"Still..." She fixed her gaze firmly on Hannah and Frederick. "Come on, tell us truly, has it been discussed?"

Hannah shrugged casually. "For now, Frederick and I are simply happy to take each day as it comes. Happy being the key word."

She smiled at Frederick, who did the same, albeit with less enthusiasm.

Beatrice snorted. "That is dodging the question."

"Just a statement of fact."

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“No need to be coy,” Charlotte pressed. “I wouldn’t have asked if it wasn’t for what I see with my own two eyes.”

“And what is it that you see?” Hannah asked, knowing where her sister was going, and glad for it.

“How happy the two of you are, of course! Are they not?” Charlotte looked around the table for support. “I’ll admit, coming here tonight, I was somewhat worried it might not be the case.”

“Charlotte...” Her husband groaned.

“But I am wrong,” she said rightly. “Why, with the exception of you and I, dear, I might go so far as to say they are the happiest couple at this table.”

“I will pretend you did not say that,” Beatrice chided.

“We are happy.” Hannah looked at Frederick and smiled, squeezed his hand, willed him to play along. “And for now, that should be enough. Right, Frederick?”

All eyes were on Frederick, waiting for his response. He had been silent for much of tonight, happy not to be involved with the chatter. But now that he had been asked directly, he had little choice in the matter.

And Hannah held her breath.

“We are indeed happy,” he said carefully. “I know that lately there has been some...”

His eyes flicked to her aunt, lingered on her for a moment—a harsh glare—and then he looked back at the table. “... rumors about our marriage, things said that I hope you all know to be lies.”

“Of course,” Lord Ramsbury assured him.

“Nobody listens to rumor anyhow,” the Duke of Walford said. “Who has time for it?”

“Good,” Frederick uttered, seeming to relax considerably. “It is as Hannah says. We are happy.” Another quick glare at Teresa, which had her lip curling. “And that should be enough, I would hope.”

“Oh, nonsense.” Charlotte waved him off. “As happy as you are, a child will only add to that. Right, dear?” She nudged her husband.

Frederick stiffened again. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. As you said, it has only been two weeks. So why discuss something such as that so soon?”

“I do not think we waited so much as a day.” Beatrice laughed as she nudged her husband. “Right, dear?”

“We have discussed it,” Hannah cut in, seeing her moment. “And let’s just say...” She looked at Frederick, who eyed her warningly. It was a look she was half-expecting, but one that she decided to ignore. He was stubborn, but surely tonight had shown him what could be? What he could have if only he would allow it? “Nothing is discounted yet.”

“That’s a yes!” Charlotte laughed.

“Wonderful!” Lord Ramsbury beamed.

“I knew it!” Beatrice squealed. “Did I not tell you, dear?”

It was a sneaky ploy but a necessary one. Everything tonight was going so well, and Hannah knew Frederick well enough to know that he would not risk causing a scene—not with her aunt present. His insistence that he did not want a child was based on an unfounded fear, and he needed to see that. What was more, he needed to see the positives that such a thing might bring.

Hannah knew that later, they would have another discussion. Possibly a fight. But she also knew that she would be able to use tonight as an argument in her defense, reminding Frederick of the positives of starting a family together.

Really, she was just betting on his love for her as keeping him from doing or saying anything rash.

“Hannah,” Frederick spoke out the side of his mouth so that only she could hear. “What do you think you are doing?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she said simply, not looking at him as she addressed the room. “I told you all, it has not been discussed. We are happy as is, and that is enough for now.”

“Yes, yes.” Her father waved her off. “As you say...” He could not stop smiling.

“So, a boy or a girl?” her mother asked. “Which would you prefer?”

“Mother!” Hannah sighed but could not keep from smiling. “Do not start.”

“It is just a question. Your Grace.” Lady Ramsbury looked at Frederick again. “Any preference?”

Frederick looked like a deer caught by a huntsman's bow. His grip on Hannah's hand tightened. His back stiffened. The urge to denounce the claim was brimming inside him. But he was nothing if not controlled, which meant that he would likely see himself through the night without losing his temper. Surely.

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“It is as your daughter said,” he began carefully. “We have not discussed it.”

“Oh, come now.” Lady Ramsbury waved him off. “You are among family here.”

“Still...” The corner of his mouth twitched. “This is a conversation I’ll only have with my wife.” He eyed Hannah warningly, and she responded in kind.

“Perhaps a toast?” Lord Ramsbury raised his glass. “To new beginnings or something of that sort?” He looked at his sister and smirked. “Oh, do not look so glum, Sister. I am certain that one day, you will be lucky enough to be making a toast like this.”

Teresa glared at him. “I consider myself lucky that I am not.”

Lord Ramsbury grinned. “I see someone is still bitter.”

“How dare you!”

He shrugged. “It is quite alright, Teresa. As you said, Selina has many gentlemen chasing her. I am sure you will have grandchildren of your own soon. Do not be petty.”

“I am just grateful that you do not have any more daughters,” she snarled. “Lest they steal another husband from my daughter.”

“Mother!” Selina gasped suddenly, the first time she had spoken all night. “Please, don’t.”

“No, I am sick of this,” Teresa hissed. “All night, my brother has acted like a bore, and this is the final straw. Anyone with two eyes can see how uncomfortable His Grace is.”

Lord Ramsbury snorted. “Shows what you know. Tell me, Sister, have you spread any more rumors lately? Or did you give up when every man and his dog realized the source? No doubt they knew the true reason you were saying such things.”

“I... that is not...”

“Face it, His Grace and my daughter are happy,” Lord Ramsbury said proudly. “I am sorry for what happened, but it really is time that we move on. Would you not agree, Your Grace?”

Frederick’s jaw was clenched so tight. Hannah eyed him, fearfully now because this was not a topic she wished to broach. And the way he was beginning to shake... she could not imagine what he might say. Or how.

“Your daughter and I are happy,” Frederick said carefully and slowly. “That is all that matters.”

“They might not be if they knew the truth!” Teresa said suddenly.

“Mother!” Selina gasped. “No!”

“Truth?” Lord Ramsbury barked. “What truth?”

“Mother, please!”

“No, I am sick of this, Selina! Sick of my brother holding this over my head like some victory!” Teresa glared at her brother. “Do you wish to know the real reason

your daughter was in His Grace's room that night?"

Lord Ramsbury frowned. "We know the reason..."

Hannah's eyes went wide as she looked at Selina, who dared to meet her eyes, a look in them that spoke to how sorry she was for what was about to happen.

"My daughter set the whole thing up!" Teresa cried. "Not wanting to marry His Grace, she tricked Hannah into going into that room dressed as she was. She made sure we would all see it. She was the sole cause of this marriage, which you, Brother, have been rubbing in my face since the second it was arranged. A marriage which..." She smirked as she looked at Frederick's stricken face. "I am suspecting is nowhere near as happy as we are being led to believe."

Silence rang through the room. Heavy. Thick with tension. A truly shocking statement that had Hannah looking at her husband, desperate to see how he might react. But his expression was indecipherable, even if she could see the shadow passing behind his eyes...

Chapter Twenty-Two

Frederick sat in a state of shock as the announcement settled on his and his guests' shoulders. Already confused by tonight's proceedings, already feeling unsure in ways he did not like, this new development hit him like a slap across the face.

"W-what did you say?" Lord Ramsbury stammered, his eyes wide.

"You heard me!" the Dowager Viscountess declared proudly. "And although it brings me no pleasure to say it, I am afraid I have been left with little real choice. You were tricked. We all were. And this marriage..." She swept her eyes over the table. "Has been a sham from the beginning!"

“Mother!” Miss Gouldsmith moaned. “Please! It was not like that.”

“That is exactly what it was like.”

“How dare you!” Lord Ramsbury snarled. “How dare you burden us with these lies!”

“Lies?” Lady Langham scoffed. “Truths, more like. I am sorry, Your Grace, I truly am. I did not wish to mention these most unfortunate happenings, but I think it is for the best that the truth is known.”

“You are simply jealous!” Lord Ramsbury cried, pointing an accusatory finger at her.

“Jealous?” the Dowager Viscountess snorted. “Relieved, more like! Anyone with two eyes can see that His Grace and your daughter are not as happy as they’re pretending to be. I cannot help but be glad that my daughter escaped such fate.”

“Take it back!”

“I told you at the time not to cross me, Brother. You should have listened.”

“I said, take it back!” Lord Ramsbury was on his feet. “These lies are beneath you.”

“Tell them!” Lady Langham was looking at her daughter. “Tell them the truth, dear.”

“Mother...”

“Now!”

Miss Gouldsmith looked as ashamed as she did upset. Eyes still cast downward, she

spoke softly, her voice barely above a whisper. “I... I did not mean for it to come to this. It is just...” She stole a glance at Hannah and then looked away again. “I did not want to marry His Grace. Everything I heard... I... I simply could not bear it—I am sorry, Hannah. God, I am so sorry! Please forgive me.”

Lord Ramsbury fell back in his chair as the shock overtook him.

“Told you!”

“Selina!” Hannah gasped. “I—how could you?”

“I did not think that you would be forced to marry him. I swear, I did not know!”

“Do not apologize,” Lady Langham said. “It is my brother who bears the brunt of the blame. He saw an opportunity and pounced, and now it is his daughter who must suffer.” She looked at Hannah sympathetically. “I am so sorry that you had to find out this way, dear. You should know, I have nothing but sadness in my soul for you.”

The look on Hannah’s face was unreadable. Eyes wide. Face contorted. She looked from her cousin to her father to Frederick as if searching for an answer. And as to Frederick? There was so much here to unpack that he didn’t know where to begin.

Frederick had spent the last two days trying to decide what to do.

On the one hand, he knew in the depths of his soul that he did not want to have children with Hannah. But it had nothing to do with his feelings for her, as he knew now that he loved her deeply. If he did not, he would not be feeling so confused. She was a light in the darkness of his life, and it was these feelings he bore that had him vacillating between his determination to not have children and that voice in his head that questioned if maybe he should...

He did not want to hurt Hannah. Dammit, he did not want her to hate him. And it was clear the next morning, the second she walked through the door to join him and Amelia for breakfast, that her mind was made up and she would not accept a marriage that threatened to ‘stagnate,’ as she had put it.

As to this dinner party? Frederick had seen through his wife’s plans, knowing the true reason that she had insisted upon it. And while he had thought to simply get through the night and talk with her tomorrow, most strangely, her plan had begun to work.

Her sisters were happy. Their husbands were happy. Her father and mother were happy. They were a family unlike any he had ever met, and to see them converse and laugh and enjoy one another’s company as they were, all centered around the promise of children and adding to the joy of familial bonds, Frederick had begun to wonder if maybe, just maybe, he might be able to change his mind.

But then the Dowager Viscountess made her announcement, and the mood of the room shifted considerably.

“You are a horrible person,” Lord Ramsbury was saying to her. “Despicable.”

“Do not shoot the messenger. The truth had to be said.”

“I know what this is! It is an attempt to ruin my daughter’s marriage. Admit it!”

“I admit no such thing!”

“Oh, and it was not you who has spent the last two weeks spreading rumors and lies! You claim to not be jealous, Sister, but your actions speak volumes.”

“Jealous! Of what?! Look at your daughter, Phineas! Listen to her! Oh, she may say the right things, but I do not believe them for a moment! I am sorry, Your Grace,

truly I am for what my daughter has done.”

“Mother...”

“But I will not sit here and be slandered!”

“My daughter is happy! It is you who are... a bitter, old crone, Teresa!”

The two were shouting as if they were the only ones in the room. Miss Gouldsmith was in tears. The two sisters and their husbands looked as if they would rather be anywhere else. And Hannah... it was impossible to say what was on her mind.

Frederick tried to meet her eyes. He did not believe a word of what her aunt was saying, but each word spoken was like a knife through his heart, for he knew what it was like to force someone into a marriage they did not want, and now he was living it again.

“A crone, am I?” Lady Langham spat. She was standing now, bearing down on her brother across the table. “Better an old crone than the overweight, trumped up, pathetic excuse for a man that you are.”

“Take that back!”

“Ha! I take back nothing!”

It was getting out of hand. And Frederick, taken aback by the suddenness of it all, was finally starting to come back to his senses. Among the shouting. Among the yelling. Among the shock! He felt his anger rising because at the end of the day, this was his home, and he would not be spoken to or about like this. Not by anyone.

Certainly not by the Dowager Viscountess.

He opened his mouth to shout them into silence, only for Hannah to beat him to it.

“Quiet!” she screamed. “All of you! Quiet!” She was on her feet, her eyes blazing as she leveled her aunt with a scowl. “Aunt Teresa, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“Me?”

“I invite you to my home to make amends, and this is how you repay me? Us!” She gestured to Frederick, who was watching with a half-smile on his face, taken by her sudden rancor, recognizing it only too well. “When I came to see you two days ago, what did I tell you?”

Lady Langham pretended to look confused. “I do not know what you?—”

“I warned you,” Hannah snarled at her. “I warned you to behave, for after what you have done, behaving was the least you could do. A second chance is what I offered, and you threw it back in my face.”

“Now, listen here,” Lady Langham shot back. “I have done nothing wrong. I am simply?—”

“Doing everything you can to break me and my husband apart. Just like you have been doing these past two weeks. You act as if you are happy about what happened, yet you work to undermine us at every turn. Do not say otherwise!”

“I... I...”

“And, Selina...” Hannah looked at her cousin. “Do not be upset, please. It is I who

should be apologizing to you—who has been trying to for these past two weeks. I thought you hated me.”

“What? No! Never.”

“I thought you were furious that I stole Frederick from you.”

“No! I could never be! Please, Hannah. I am the one who should apologize!” Selina was on her feet, pleading.

“There is no need.” Hannah gave her a smile and looked down at Frederick, who was still watching her with that same half-smile. “Despite what your mother claims, Frederick and I are happy. As happy as we could be, and nothing”—a glare at her aunt—“anyone says can change that. I am glad for what happened and...” She bit her lip and looked at Frederick again. “And I know my husband is, too.”

“Is that true?” Lord Ramsbury asked, as if desperate.

“It is,” Hannah affirmed. “We are in love, and no amount of fearmongering is going to change that. Isn’t that right, Frederick?”

It was a strange thing that Frederick felt at that moment.

Admiration for his wife, for he had never felt more attracted to her than at that moment. The confidence. The control. The command. This was the woman he had fallen in love with, and he knew right then and there that every word she spoke was the truth. She loved him, and he loved her, and that was a fact.

And yet, there was a sinking feeling in his stomach as another realization dawned on him. He loved his wife, she loved him, and that was a problem that he knew would have untold consequences.

“She is right.” Frederick rose from his seat and took Hannah’s hand. Despite the guilt that he was feeling—for he knew what would come later tonight when they were alone again—right now was the time for unity. “Lady Langham, you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Your Grace! I did not mean?—”

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“You meant as you said,” he cut her off with a growl. “And for two weeks, you have spoken behind my back and worked to besmirch my name at every turn. My wife saw it in her heart to give you a second chance. There will not be a third.”

“But... but?—”

“I ask that you leave,” he said sternly, fixing her with a glare. “And be warned, Lady Langham, this is not the last you will hear from me. You wish to ruin my life? I will see personally to ruining yours.”

Lady Langham looked stricken, stumbling back and clutching her chest. “I was only trying to help.”

“You were only trying to hurt. Now, be gone, for I cannot stand to look at you.”

The Dowager Viscountess looked as if she meant to argue, but with everyone at the table glaring at her, she seemed to understand that she was beaten.

She put a hand on Miss Gouldsmith’s shoulder. “Come, dear. I know when we are not wanted.”

Selina, still frozen with worry, looked up at her mother and then at Frederick and Hannah. “Do you mean it?” she asked hopefully. “I did not ruin... You are both happy?”

“We are,” Hannah said with a sincere smile, before planting a kiss on the back of Frederick’s hand. “Happy and in love.”

That was like a dagger to Frederick's heart, but he ignored it and forced a smile. "And grateful for what you did, as strange as that is to admit."

Selina looked on the verge of tears—but they were tears of joy. Chin trembling, she rose from her chair, smiled at Hannah, and then hurried after the Dowager Viscountess, who was already out the door.

"That woman!" Lord Ramsbury growled the moment she was gone. "Your Grace, I cannot tell you how sorry I am."

"It is fine," Frederick sighed as he fell back into his chair.

Hannah joined him, still holding his hand, still looking at him with such love that he could not bear it.

"I am just glad to hear how happy you both are," Lord Ramsbury said.

"Yes," Lady Ramsbury chimed in. "We did not believe the rumors, of course, but to see it with our own eyes..." She breathed in deeply, her eyes glistening. "Oh, we are both so happy."

"Unbelievable," the Duchess of Hayward grumbled. "Aunt Teresa? The nerve!"

"Enough of that." Hannah waved her hand dismissively. "Let's not talk about it. The night is already almost ruined, so I suggest we try and save it."

"And what better way to return to the matter at hand," the Duchess of Walford said, her eyes flashing. "I believe we were talking about children?"

"Beatrice..." Hannah groaned.

“What? You just said how happy you are! What better reason is there than that to start a family?”

Frederick’s stomach churned. More so when he saw the satisfied smile on Hannah’s face. This dinner party was a revelation for somany reasons. It confirmed that he did indeed care for Hannah, that he loved her, that he wanted to be with her.

Conversely, this was also the problem.

As their love deepened, he knew that Hannah would continue to pressure him for children, that she would not stop because with her sisters as happy as they were, she no doubt wanted the same. And while Frederick wanted her to be happy, that was the one thing he could not give her, which meant that he was doomed to break her heart.

For now, as they sat and ate dinner with her family, he smiled along and laughed at jokes and did what he could to feign happiness as the walls closed in on him. Because once they were alone, they would need to have another conversation... one that was sure to end in heartache.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Well... that was something.” Hannah laughed the moment they were alone.

They had just walked back into the house, the front door closing behind them.

“That is one word for it,” Frederick agreed, somewhat awkwardly, for he had spent the last hour or so thinking about what he needed to do, realizing now more than ever how unpleasant it was likely going to be.

“Awkward? Unexpected? Not as bad in the end as it could have been?” Hannah walked to the middle of the foyer and spun about, smiling coyly. “Or all of the

above?”

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Frederick remained by the door, several feet away from her, too nervous to approach her because he feared what might happen if he came too close.

It had been two days now since they had last made love, and with the buoyant mood Hannah was in, the way she was looking at him, he could see exactly what was on her mind.

“Your aunt is a menace,” he said simply. “And as I said before, it was foolish to invite her over for dinner.”

Hannah grimaced. “You were right, I admit. But...” Her grimace turned into a smile, and her eyes twinkled. “I prefer to see the positive.”

“And what positive might that be?”

“She won’t do it again,” she stated. “What is more, now she knows the truth of the matter—about us, I mean. Why, I would not be surprised if in the next day or two, she sends us an apology letter.”

“I do not want her apology.”

“Nonetheless, my aunt is no longer a problem. Also...” She smiled to herself. “I admit, I am somewhat glad that my cousin is not angry with me. Can you believe what she did?” She chuckled. “Honestly, the fact that she conspired that way...” A shake of the head.

“It was surprising.”

Her eyes twinkled again. “And most welcome. No doubt she has spent the last two weeks fretting, believing her mother’s lies, thinking that she had ruined my life. When nothing could be further from the truth.”

Hannah, seeing Frederick still standing by the door, sauntered toward him, the look in her eyes sensual.

Frederick stayed where he was, even wishing that he might have been able to take a few steps back. Alone with his wife finally, the look she fixed him with, knowing that Amelia was in bed sound asleep, he felt that familiar pull deep in his belly. Eyes flicking over her gorgeous body, thoughts drifting to what he would do with it, he very nearly decided to leave their conversation for tomorrow... to have one final night of pleasure before everything would surely go to hell.

“Now...” She could read his mind, licking her lips as she came closer. “I should warn you, Frederick, I have had a few drinks. So my inhibitions are lowered. Try not to take advantage, if you can resist.” A soft giggle as she swept into him.

She reached for his hands and took them. She stepped closer, pressing her body against his. Her breath was warm on his neck as she leaned in, purring gently, her fingers stroking his hands and his body already shaking at just the thought of the pleasure he could coax from her body at any moment.

And Frederick, again, nearly gave in. Pulse rising. Temptation surging. Oh, how he wanted to...

“We need to talk,” he somehow managed, pulling his hands free and stepping around her. “Now.”

“Oh...” She blinked, looking hurt. “What... what do we need to talk about?”

He looked at her. “I think you know.”

She grimaced. “The dinner party. You... you know what I was doing, I take it?”

“Clever,” he said, forcing himself not to smile at the sheer cheek of it. “Flaunting your happy family in front of me while forcing me to be congenial for the sake of reputation.”

She tried for an innocent smile. “Is that what I was doing?”

“Hannah,” he warned.

Her face dropped. “Well, alright, if you must know—even though you have already guessed it. Yes, I was trying to force your hand. Happy?”

“Should I be?”

“Admit it,” she said. “You had fun tonight. Putting my aunt aside, everything else—you saw how happy my sisters are. And their husbands. You saw the joy that overtook them when they spoke about their children.”

“I am not the Duke of Hayward or the Duke of Walford.”

“I never said you were.”

“Their circumstances are?—”

“Not so different,” she pointed out. “When my sisters married them, neither of them wished it. Nor did their husbands, for that matter. But they took a chance, Frederick. They took that chance, and I know they don’t regret it for a moment!”

“That may be so, but as I said, I am not them.” He was looking right at her, forcing himself because she needed to see that he was not joking with her. This was as serious a moment as he could have imagined. “And while I understand the point you are trying to make...” He clicked his tongue. “I thought I made myself perfectly clear.”

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Her brow furrowed. “I know you did, but... but I thought that?—”

“You did not think,” he cut her off. “You did not listen, Hannah. When you asked me two nights ago why I did not wish to have children, I told you the reason. I...” He bit his lip as those memories dredged up old pain. “What I told you was not a story I expected you to dismiss or look past as if it did not matter.”

“That is not what I am doing!” she cried.

“It is!” he insisted. “You have no idea how hard my marriage to my first wife was. How... how much it hurt, the way it ended. The pain it has caused me every day since, knowing that I as good as killed her.”

“But that’s not true!”

He laughed bitterly. “Semantics. If she had loved me, even a little...” He was shaking, his fists clenched, his breathing ragged. “If she had cared enough, I know she would not have died. She let herself pass because of who I was.”

“It was not your?—”

“It was!” he shouted over her, anger taking over. “She hated me. Every day that we were wed was agony for her, such was her loathing. And I knew it, too,” he snarled, more to himself than Hannah. “And I did not care because I was so desperate for a child! I was happy for her to live in misery because of what I thought I wanted.”

“But we are different.” Hannah swept toward him, reaching for his hands, only for

him to step away. She stumbled, looking hurt by the gesture. “I do not hate you, Frederick. And I know you do not hate me.” Her chin began to wobble. “Do you? Do you hate me?”

“Of course not!”

“Then what?”

Frederick looked away, for the shame he felt was too great. “I have given you my reasons, and that should be enough.”

“Well, it is not enough! Quite frankly, the only reason I can think of that you are being so... so stubborn is that you are scared. Which is hardly a reason to act this way.”

“Of course, I am scared!” he cried. “I am terrified! I do not deny that. Perhaps one day, I will not be. Perhaps one day, things will change, but right now...” A deep breath as he felt the world spinning. “Right now, I cannot offer you what you want.”

“I...” She hesitated, almost didn’t say it. “I can wait.”

He laughed. “I saw you tonight, Hannah. I saw the way you looked when your sisters spoke of their children. I saw that glimmer in your eyes, that desire to start a family of your own. Do not deny it.”

“I...” Her face was stricken with pain, and oh how he wanted nothing more than to go to her. “I can wait,” she said again softly.

“And if I never change my mind? What, then?”

She winced. “I do not believe that will happen. I know that... that I can change your

mind.”

“But that is the point. The problem. I do not want my mind changed. It is made up! It has always been. And I do not wish to be in a marriage with someone who is trying to trick me or cajole me or... or force me to do something they know I do not want.”

Hannah seemed to only just now understand what he was saying. Ironic, as Frederick was only just now starting to understand what he was saying.

When he had pictured this conversation, he had not known where it might go. He had not wanted to think about it, for the fear might have made him postpone it or not have it at all.

But now, in the face of their arguing, their refusal to compromise, he knew exactly what was going to happen. The only thing that could happen, as much as it killed him to consider it.

“What are you saying?” she asked, her voice soft, cracking.

“I think you know...” He looked down, unable to meet her pain-filled gaze.

“No.” She went to him, forcing him to take her hands. They were trembling, sweaty, so frail that he felt they might break if he held them too tight. “You do not mean that. I know you do not.”

“This marriage...” Frederick’s chin was wobbling too. His heart was pounding, his stomach was churning. “It was meant to be a marriage of convenience only.”

“No.”

“But I see now that even that is impossible. Hannah...” He raised his head and looked

into her eyes. They were glistening with tears, red and raw. “When we first got married, I told you I would not so much as touch you. Back then, it seemed like a decent compromise, a means of safety that I so sorely needed.”

“No...”

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“I see now that it was always fraught with danger. A fool’s errand because to be around you and not be able to touch you...” He freed a hand and stroked the side of her face. It was soft and tender, and oh how he wished to cup it in his hand. “I do not have that strength.”

“Don’t say it.” She held his hand to her face and looked into his eyes. “I can take it back. We can go back to how it was.”

“You deserve better.”

“You are what I deserve.”

“You deserve to be happy.”

“I am happy!”

“Tell me.” He held her face with one hand, staring into her eyes so he could see the truth. His body shook as it threatened to collapse. “Can you tell me honestly that you do not want children? That you will be happy to be with me forever knowing that you will never have a child of your own? Can you tell me that? Can you make that promise?”

“I...”

“Because if you can, then I take everything back. But if you cannot, then you can never truly be happy. And, Hannah....” His heart broke as he spoke the words. “I love you too much to hurt you that way.”

The despair on her face told him her answer before she spoke a word. The look in her eyes. The pain he could feel radiating from her. She wanted to lie to him, he could see. She wanted to tell him what he needed to hear, for she loved him too. But deep down, he could see the truth of it, and she seemed to understand that as much as anything.

Slowly, she lowered her hand and let go of his other. Slowly, she stepped back and dropped her head. And slowly, she spoke the words that hurt her just as much as they hurt him.

“I cannot make that promise.”

Frederick felt his knees buckle, but he stood tall. “I am sorry, Hannah, but?—”

“Don’t say it. Please!”

“This marriage... it has gone as far as it can.”

“No.”

“And I think it would be for the best, for both of us, if... if...” A lump in his throat, unable to swallow past it. “If you move back to your parents’ home until we work out what can be done.”

“Frederick...” Her knees gave out, and she fell to the floor.

Frederick almost moved to stop her fall but forced himself not to. Looking at her there on the floor, her body shaking, her tears falling, her world collapsing, he wondered again if this was the right move. For if it was, why did it hurt so damn much?

“I love you, Frederick,” she said, weeping openly now. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He forced himself to turn around and walk away. “That’s why I have to do this.”

And there he left her, weeping openly on the floor. The pain it caused him to hear those cries of anguish, to know the woman he loved was in a state of emotional agony... The only way he was able to ignore her and continue to walk away was by telling himself that by doing so, he was saving her from future suffering.

Even if she agreed now to never have children, he knew that in the future, that would change. Again, he would deny her, again they would fight, and that was a fight that might well and truly break her, for there would be no going back. At least this way, she still had a chance to find someone else, to raise a family of her own, to fall in love.

Not with Frederick, sadly. But he was used to not being loved. What was more, he didn’t think that he deserved it. Not anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“I still cannot believe it,” Charlotte said. “Truly, I would have never—are you sure he meant what he said?”

“I would not be here if he did not,” Hannah muttered, wishing to have any conversation but this one. Not again.

“But still,” Charlotte pressed. “Things spoken in the heat of the moment can often be misunderstood or taken the wrong way. I am sure that if you spoke with him once more, he would realize?—”

“He won’t.”

“If you make him see?—”

“That will not work.”

“There is just no way?—”

“Charlotte!” Hannah snapped, unable to keep herself from doing so because she was feeling a mix of many things right now, and one of them was certainly anger. “He said what he said, and he meant it. And if you know Frederick half as well as I do, you would know that he isn’t the type to change his mind.” She curled her upper lip. “At least not about this.”

She could see Charlotte wanting to push. The concern on her older sister’s face, paired with worry and despair, brought about a refusal to accept the facts as they had been presented. It was her love for Hannah that did it, that sisterly desire to do whatever she could to make things right.

Sadly, there would be no making things right, and thankfully, Charlotte seemed to realize as such—or perhaps she simply recognized the look on Hannah’s face and decided that now was not the time to push.

“You can stay here as long as you need,” she offered, shuffling closer and wrapping her arm around Hannah. “As long as you need,” she emphasized.

“Thank you,” Hannah mumbled. “But one night should do it. Tomorrow, I will have to go home and face our parents.”

Charlotte grimaced. “What are you going to say?”

“The truth,” Hannah said absently, not wanting to think about that conversation either. As hard as everything had been, that promised to be calamitous, for there was little chance her father would be so willing to accept the facts as Charlotte had. “Or a version of it,” she added bitterly.

“Father will understand.”

“I doubt it.”

“Mother, then.”

“She will do as Father says.”

“They will understand, Hannah.” Charlotte squeezed her tightly. “This is not your fault. It is your husband who should take the blame. And knowing Father, once he sees that, he will make sure of it.” She chuckled lightly in an effort to break the tension. “Truly, I will not envy Frederick when that happens.”

“Perhaps...” Hannah said, more to herself. “We will see.”

She might have liked the idea of Frederick being on the receiving end of her father’s wrath. She might have taken a little bit of pleasure in knowing that he would surely suffer for what he had done. She might have liked... No, she could not even bring herself to pretend to take pleasure in the thought.

Charlotte seemed convinced that this was all Frederick’s fault and Hannah was the victim here. And while that was mostly true, a small part of Hannah could not help but wonder if perhaps she should have done things differently, and if she had, whether the result have been the same. Likely not.

It was just yesterday when she and Frederick had their fight. A fight that left her

sprawled on the floor in their foyer, weeping as if her world was about to end—in her mind, it very much was.

She had not tried to seek Frederick out after their fight, knowing there was no point. Rather, she had gone to one of the spare rooms and slept there—or tried to. She spent the night awake, knowing that Frederick would be too, wondering if he would come to her or if she should go to him. More than once she considered it, feeling that need to apologize and explain that she was wrong, that she could change, that this was an overreaction.

In the end, she did nothing of the sort. Frederick wanted one thing. She wanted another. And as she knew her husband so well, there would be no changing his mind. So rather than seeking him out, she spent the night in tears.

The next morning, she left early, not surprised that Frederick remained in his room until after she was gone, sneaking out and taking a carriage to Charlotte's house, where she decided that she needed one more night before facing her parents. Charlotte was the more levelheaded of her two sisters, and that as much as anything was what Hannah needed.

A little more crying. A little more soothing. Eventually, Charlotte led Hannah to the spare room, where they sat right now, both reckoning with the reality of the situation and what was to be done. What could be done.

“An annulment, then?” Charlotte suggested eventually, still sitting with her arm around Hannah.

They sat together on the bed, although Hannah very much wanted to crawl under the blankets and cry her eyes out.

“What?”

“That is what Frederick will seek, yes?”

“Oh.” Hannah blinked at the question. “I am not sure. I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Forget I asked,” Charlotte said hurriedly. “It is not important. All that is important is that you are comfortable and...” She bit her lip, her chin beginning to wobble. “And that you realize you are better off without that awful, awful man.”

Hannah forced a smile and, feeling her emotions about to get the better of her, shoved her head into her sister’s chest to keep herself from weeping. Always the strong one, always the dependable one, even now she did not like the idea of crying openly in front of Charlotte.

She wished she could believe what her sister said. About how terrible a person Frederick was. About how awful a husband he had decided to be. That was, after all, the reason she had given for having to leave. His sudden announcement that their marriage wasn’t working for him, and he wished to never see her again. A lie... but it was easier to tell than the truth.

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An annulment? Was that even possible? Hannah did not want to think about such a thing. Yes, she had cried. Yes, she had accepted her fate the best she could. But deep down, she wondered if maybe Frederick would change his mind, if this wasn't the end, if there was still a chance...

But that would require her to give up on the notion of having children entirely. To make him believe that she had. To accept that their marriage would not progress, for how could it if they didn't start a family?

Even as sad as Hannah was feeling, even as broken, she wasn't sure she could do such a thing.

And then, as if to confirm this point, a little head poked around the door of her room—Charlotte's four-year-old son, Sebastian.

"Mummy!" He saw Charlotte sitting on the bed and ran for her, holding out his little arms expectantly.

And Charlotte, spotting him coming for her, was quick to let go of Hannah, lean forward, and scoop her son into her arms. "Oh, what are you doing up here?"

"Where were you?" Sebastian pouted. "I want to play!"

"You're supposed to be with Miss Emily," Charlotte said in her motherly voice. "You didn't sneak out, did you?"

There was a look of mischief on the little boy's face.

“Oh, Sebastian. What am I going to do with you.” She pretended to be angry but could not keep herself from smiling.

With her son sitting on her lap now, it was impossible not to see the pure love and adoration that Charlotte held for her only child.

Hannah watched the two with a sense of melancholy. Charlotte had just one child, whereas Beatrice had even more. Each as loved as the other, adored and worshipped as any mother would adore and worship her children. And Sebastian, his little arms wrapped tight around Charlotte, giggling as she began to tickle his stomach while telling him he needed to behave, was typically enchanted by his mother as any young child would be.

It was hard to watch. Harder to sit through. A reminder now of the fight that Hannah and Frederick had, while seeming to confirm that Hannah had made the right decision. The only decision.

She wanted what her sister had. She wanted a child of her own. Someone to love and care for and raise in her image. What was more, she wanted to share that with the man she loved. And if Frederick was not willing to be that man...

The tears came suddenly. Hannah tried to stop them, but they burst as if from a broken pipe, and she fell onto the bed, shoving her head into her pillow, ignoring Charlotte, who was trying to put her son down so she could comfort her.

Hannah's marriage was over, and now, a day afterward, she was finally beginning to accept that fact. Not that this made things any easier, but she supposed that was what the crying was for. And with how she was suddenly feeling, she had no doubt that there was plenty more to come.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“You’re not going to like what I have to say,” William began in a solemn tone.

“I rarely do.”

“Just promise me that you will not get mad.”

“I promise nothing of the sort—and hand me that bottle, will you? My glass has been empty for close to five minutes now, which is beginning to look like a problem.”

“Well, that’s just it...” William held the bottle close to his chest. “What I wanted to say is that I think you have had enough.”

Frederick narrowed his eyes at his brother. “I do hope that you are joking.”

“Ordinarily, yes, for few enjoy a joke as much as I do. But in this case...” William looked at Frederick, no sense of humor whatsoever in his eyes. “I am afraid that I must put my foot down.”

“How about you put that foot down closer to me...” Frederick leaned forward to snatch the bottle back, but William was quick, leaping to his feet and dancing away.

“It is for your own good, Brother.”

“Get back here!”

“You will thank me tomorrow.”

“If I do not kill you first.”

“Ha!” William stood at the back of the room, one eyebrow raised in derision. “And how will you do that? You can barely stand.”

“You want a bet?”

“How about this...” William smirked. “If you can lay even a single hand on me, I will happily hand you this bottle. But if you cannot, I will pour it out before your eyes in a display of brotherly love. For that is why I do this, Brother. I do it for—woah!”

He started as Frederick lunged at him.

It was the epitome of a poor display.

Sitting on the sofa in the drawing room, Frederick pushed himself to his feet and threw his body toward his brother, figuring to tackle him and then wrestle the bottle from his hand. But he had been drinking since noon, it was now nearing early evening, and the liquor had hit him a little harder than he thought.

His knees gave way beneath him. He managed to catch himself before falling, stumbled forward, attempted a leap, only to trip and land hard on his knees. Even then, attempting to push himself up, there just wasn't enough strength in his arms. He rolled over onto his back and stare up at the ceiling... just in time for the room to begin spinning around him.

“Told you.” William stood over him, looking down at his face. “You have had more than enough.”

“I am the older brother here,” Frederick scoffed. “And I will not be spoken to like that.” He swung his hand back, thinking to smack William's legs and declare himself the winner, only for William to easily step out of the way.

“This is for your own good.” William walked to the fireplace and uncorked the bottle, before holding it over the flames.

“No!” Frederick scrambled to his knees, reaching out a hand to stop him, but it was too late.

William poured the liquor into the flames, an act that made them roar as they consumed the flammable liquid. Heat spewed from the fireplace, which had William dancing backwards to avoid getting burned.

“Oh!” he cried. “Yes, I should have seen that coming.”

“You idiot,” Frederick snarled. “That was my last bottle!”

“A good thing, I think.”

“Now, what will I do?!”

“Sober up,” William said rightly as he put the bottle down and walked to where Frederick was still on the floor. There, he sat down cross-legged and rested a hand on his brother’s back. “For drinking this way is unbecoming of you, Brother, and I should know, seeing as I am the boozehound of the family.”

“Not anymore,” Frederick muttered bitterly.

“It is not an answer,” William sighed. “And it is certainly not a panacea. It dulls the senses, but it does not erode them, leaving them raw and exposed for when the inevitable hangover kicks in later.”

“Which is why I will drink as soon as I wake up...” Frederick groaned as he forced himself to his feet, then collapsed back onto the sofa. “It has worked well, so far.”

“Brother...” There was no humor in Willima’s voice, only worry. “This is not you. Please, you must see what you are doing.”

“And what is that?”

“Running,” he said matter-of-factly. “Running because it seems easier than facing the truth.”

“The truth?” Frederick scoffed. “The only truth is my sudden thirst, which will now go unquenched.”

“The truth that you miss her,” William corrected. “That you pine for her. That you cannot face the world sober because if you do, you might suddenly realize the horrible mistake you made.”

Frederick snarled. “You could not be further from the truth, Brother.”

William snorted. “Like drinking, lies do not become you. Not even a little bit.”

Frederick bared his teeth at his brother, thinking that another rebuke was in order. But his brother fixed him with a no-nonsense glare, a clear indication that he wasn’t here to argue. What he was here for was to console, to help heal, to make sure that Frederick didn’t do anything stupid. Even if it was much too late for that...

It had been five days now since Hannah had left. Five of the worst days in Frederick’s life, and it wasn’t even close.

The first two had been the easiest, for Frederick had been able to convince himself that he had made the right choice. A hard choice but a necessary one. He and Hannah wanted different things, there was to be no getting around them, and rather than prolong the inevitable, he had made the difficult choice and ended it before there was

a chance for it to become worse and more messy.

It wasn't easy doing the right thing, but... but he told himself that she would forgive him. He had freed her, he thought. He had given her an out. Now she was free to find someone new, someone else to love, someone who might give her what he could not. And for two days, he had held that thought close, for it was all he could do to keep himself from breaking.

But break he did.

It became harder to go to bed at night, the room empty, the bed cold. It had become harder to wake up each morning to the same. Time and again he questioned if he had been a stubborn fool and if he had acted hastily and without thought. So what if she wanted another child? So what if his last experience had been tragic? They were different. They were in love. Surely, that would be enough?

But the days passed, Hannah did not return, and to Frederick, that was a sign that she agreed with his decision. She would not change her mind and did not expect him to either. That this marriage was well and truly over.

Cue the depression. Cue the anger. Cue the sadness. Cue the drinking! For three days, Frederick did little more than drink. And when his brother arrived on the fifth day following Hannah's departure, Frederick hoped that he might join him in his wallowing, rather than doing as he was and trying to save him.

"Have you considered going to see her?" William asked as he took a seat beside him.

"I do not want to see her," Frederick lied.

"How about a letter, then? Reach out. See how she is doing? You might be surprised."

"I do not care," he lied again. "What's done is done, Brother, and I hope that you would see that. I hope that you are here to drink with me, because that is what I need from you. Not this..." He waved between them. "This attempt to console me, for I do

not need it.”

“What do you need?”

“A drink!”

William snorted. “You never were much of a drinker, Frederick, and now I can see why. Go to her,” he urged. “Speak with her. It is not too late!”

“Do I need to ask you to leave?”

He rolled his eyes. “You think I would leave you in this state? You think I would leave Amelia to this?”

That had Frederick reeling back in guilt. He had not been a good father of late. Dammit, he had been a terrible one. These last three days especially, unable to deal with the tantrums and anger that his daughter had spewed at him when she had learned that Hannah wasn’t coming back, he had ordered Miss Temperton to look after her until he was able to do so himself.

That Amelia was so upset with Hannah’s departure spoke to Frederick’s decision, in some ways confirming that it was the right one. Although he had not wanted to use Amelia as an excuse, he had thought that Hannah would make a good mother. But she wanted a child of her own, and surely that would upset Amelia further?

No... even that was not an argument that he could stomach. Amelia was devastated to learn that Hannah had left, and he had no doubt that Hannah would miss her, too. Again, all Frederick could do was double down on his initial decision to never have children again.

“Where is Amelia, anyhow?” William asked. “I have not seen her since I arrived.”

“Some uncle you are...” Frederick muttered bitterly.

William scoffed. “Too busy looking after you. Now, come on...” He slapped him on the thigh and stood up. “Let us go find her.”

“Why?”

“To remind her that you are her father and still love her,” he said rightly. “For as bad as things are right now, imagine how she is feeling? The least you can do is ensure her that she is still loved and not forgotten, and that Hannah did not leave because of her.”

“She knows that.”

“Let us make sure...”

He held out a hand for Frederick to take. Frederick eyed it. William raised an eyebrow, and Frederick groaned, before taking his brother’s hand and then pulling himself to his feet.

From there, the two brothers trudged through the house, much needed by Frederick, as it worked to flush the drink out of his system. They made for the nursery, where Frederick expected Amelia and Miss Temperton to be, only to find it empty.

Next, they tried several of the playrooms and drawing rooms and areas of the house where lessons were taken. Again, empty. Her bedroom after that, the washroom, and a little nook that Frederick knew Amelia hid in when she was feeling down. Once again, empty.

Now, Frederick was beginning to panic.

“Outside,” he said, storming through the house and toward the back garden. “She is likely taking advantage of the warm weather.”

He willed himself to believe it, despite his rising panic.

The sun was just beginning to dip beneath the horizon, painting the sky in dark orange and purple and red—it seemed to match his mood perfectly.

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He stepped onto the porch, and he sighed in relief when saw Miss Temperton hurrying across the garden and back toward the house. It looked to him like she was chasing Amelia, or the two were playing a game of hide and seek. Only then he noticed the look of worry on her face.

“Your Grace!” she cried out when she saw him. “Have you seen her? Please, tell me you have! Oh God!”

“Miss Temperton!” He strode toward her. “Where is Amelia?”

He looked around the large garden, his eyes searching frantically.

“Forgive me!” she wept as she reached him. Her entire body shook, and tears were already brimming in her eyes.

Frederick’s stomach dropped at the sight. Another glance around the garden confirmed it was empty. “Miss Temperton, where is my daughter?”

“I sent her outside to read,” she explained frantically. “I told her I would be out in a minute, but I used the time to clean her room, leaving her alone for only an hour, I swear! It can’t have been long, but?—”

“My daughter,” he growled, his nerves getting the better of him. “Where is she?”

“That is just it, Your Grace! When I came outside, she was gone! I don’t know where or how or... or... or where she is! Oh God!”

Miss Temperton threw herself at him, weeping openly, her body shaking with worry.

And Frederick, suddenly sober, felt as if he might vomit. Again he looked around the garden and then to the plains beyond the house, the setting sun, for darkness would be upon them soon.

His daughter, his little girl, had run away. And not so deep down—for it was too obvious for that—he knew that it was all his fault.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“The important thing is that we get ahead of this,” Lord Ramsbury was saying. “If we can do that, we might come out the other side not looking the worse for it.”

“I have already started writing letters,” Lady Ramsbury stated, “to everyone I know.”

“Saying?”

“What do you think?” she said, sounding almost insulted that he would even ask. “That His Grace was the one who erred—I did not say so specifically, but I have implied that he was abusive. Verbally, for we do not want to suggest anything violent.”

“Good idea, dear,”

“And that Hannah was the one who demanded a divorce,” Lady Ramsbury said rightly. “It will look better if she took action and sought a way out. Better that than the alternative.”

“Yes, yes.” Lord Ramsbury nodded his agreement. “We must mold the narrative to our favor, ensuring that Hannah’s name is not damaged. That will make it easier

come next Season, when it is time for her to be courted once more.”

“My thoughts exactly. No gentleman is going to want her if he thinks she is a problem. But if we prove that His Grace is the problem, it will go a long way.”

“Wonderful.” Lord Ramsbury took his wife’s hand. “And who are you writing to, exactly? My thinking is that we need to be strategic. If you simply write to every person you know, it will look desperate and disorganized. But to the right people...” He chuckled. “Let the words spread on their own, rather than forcing them down everyone’s throat.”

“No, no,” Lady Ramsbury argued. “We must tell everyone. We cannot risk His Grace getting the upper hand.”

“Letitia, tactfulness is what will see us through.”

“Force, dear, is the only way.”

“A subtle hand.”

“A firm one.”

“But His Grace?—”

“Better hope he does not try and stop me, or else there will be hell to pay!”

Lord Ramsbury chuckled. “I am glad you are on my side.”

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“I know, dear. Something His Grace is about to learn the hard way.”

Hannah sat there listening to her parents talk about her as if she was not there. They spoke about her, not to her, happy to scheme and surmise and plan as if it were their own lives they were speaking about. And while Hannah might have wanted to interject and ask them not to do anything foolish or harsh or too outwardly aggressive, she had long since reached the point of not caring.

They were sitting in the dining room, about to have an early supper. Her father was sitting at the head of the table, her mother on his right, and Hannah on his left. She was certain she could rise from the table, walk away, and she wouldn't be noticed.

She'd felt invisible these last few days, barely seen or noticed or acknowledged. At first, she thought that her parents were simply giving her space to grieve because when she had turned up on their doorstep four days ago, such was her pitiful, sodden state that all she wanted was to be left alone.

Now, however, having passed the point of true grieving, she was beginning to see the truth. As upset as she was about what had happened, her parents were ropeable. Not with her, thankfully. Rather, it was Frederick who bore the brunt of their wrath, for it was not just her name that was threatened with slander and ruin, but their own!

And so they schemed and plotted and spoke about ways to 'get ahead' of this calamity without once asking Hannah what she thought. They didn't care what she thought. From the beginning, her marriage had been as much about them as it was about her, and now she was starting to see it.

“First thing tomorrow morning,” her mother continued proudly, “I will send them out.”

“Good,” Lord Ramsbury said, smiling at his wife. “That is a start. His Grace thinks he can do this to us...” He scoffed. “We shall see about that!”

The way Hannah’s stomach churned at that spoke to how much she cared for Frederick. She did not hate him. She did not begrudge him. Truly, she blamed herself as much as she did him, knowing that if things had been just a little different, it would never have come to this.

For five days now, she had wondered if it was worth going back. Again! She vacillate between yes and no, debating with herself, trying to decide what to do. And again and again, she wanted to believe that she could be with him and not wish to start a family. She wanted nothing more! She loved Frederick, she did, but that was a deal breaker.

Still...

“Please,” she said quietly, looking down at the table. “Please don’t.”

“Excuse me?” Her father blinked. “Please don’t what?”

“Send out those letters. Or do anything. There is no need...” Still she spoke softly, unable to meet her father’s eyes.

“Of course, there is! After what he did to you! The man is a monster, and he will pay!”

“He is not...”

“Hannah, dear,” her mother sighed. “I know this is hard, but we do not blame you.

You must know that we are here for you, and all we want to do is help. This will do just that.”

Hannah’s stomach turned. Guilt. Depression. Sadness. Even worse, they were also speaking of her meeting someone else in the future, something that she had no desire for. Something that she knew she could not stop because once again, she was at the mercy of her parents and their needs.

About to speak and ask them again to desist, one of the manor’s many butlers suddenly strode into the dining room.

“M’Lord, M’Lady!” he said as he approached the table. “I am sorry to disturb you, but there is someone here to see you.”

“What? Now?!” Lord Ramsbury snapped. “At this hour?!”

“He says that it is urgent. I tried to send him away, but he refused!”

Hannah’s heart leapt in her throat. Could it be? Surely not. She spun in her chair and looked toward the foyer, fully expecting the Duke to storm into the room. And if he did just that... she was not sure what she would do. She wanted to believe that she would tell him the same thing she did the last time they spoke, but with how she felt, she was not so certain...

“A Lord William Campbell, M’Lord. He is waiting in the foyer.”

“Campbell!” Lord Ramsbury barked, his eyes going wide as he looked at his wife.

“His Grace’s brother!”

“What does he want?”

Hannah's heart began to race. Frederick's brother was here? But what for? She could not imagine Frederick sending Lord William of his own accord, which told her that her brother-in-law was here in secret. Possibly to beg her to come back... maybe.

Was there a chance that Frederick was so heartbroken over what had happened that this was a last-ditch effort to see her return? And would it make a difference?

"Isn't it obvious?" her mother said rightly. "He wishes to make sure that we do not do anything rash—likely to beg us to keep this all under wraps. Good luck!"

Lord Ramsbury's nose twitched. "Send the man in, Harrington. We shall deal with him ourselves."

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He took his wife's hand, and the two sat up straight, their eyes fixed on the door as they waited. And Hannah, doing her best not to get her hopes up, ignoring the way her heart thundered in her chest, did the same.

Oh, she wanted to believe that if Lord William was here to beg her to go back to Frederick, she would turn him away. Only... could she do it? Was she strong enough?

"Lord Ramsbury!" Lord William called as he strode into the dining room.

Hannah gasped when she saw him, for he was the spitting image of his older brother. Not as big in size, nowhere near as imposing. But his face was similar, enough that Hannah could not help but stare.

"Lady Ramsbury, I am so sorry to disturb you like this."

"What is the meaning of this?" Lord Ramsbury barked.

"Your Grace." Lord William turned and looked at Hannah with a soft smile, a tinge of sadness in his eyes... which was quickly gone as his expression suddenly turned serious. "I am sorry to come, but I had little choice."

"W-what is it?" Hannah asked, doing what she could to keep the hope out of her voice.

"It is Amelia," he said. "She is missing."

Hannah's eyes went wide. "What? Missing? How?"

Without thinking, she jumped to her feet, as if she meant to bolt out of the room.

"We do not know," Lord William said quickly. "She ran away, it seems. We thought she could not have gone far, which led us to search the estate. But it was when he got as far as the surrounding forest that Frederick had a thought."

"H-he did?"

Her heart was racing. Part fear. Part worry. Part elation that Frederick's thoughts had led Lord William here.

"That she might have come to you," Lord William admitted. "He knows how much Amelia loves you—and with the way she has been acting these last few days, it only lends credence to his theory."

"The way she has been..." Her voice caught in her throat. "Acting? How has she been acting?"

He gave her a knowing smile. "She has been upset, Your Grace. Like Frederick, she has been miserable."

"Really?" Again, hope in her voice.

"She was not happy to hear of what happened, and Frederick thinks she might have come here as a form of protest. He is searching the neighboring estates as we speak, but he asked that I come here immediately."

Despite her worry, Hannah could not help but feel a strange sense of elation at Lord William's words. Even pride. Oh, she had known how close she and Amelia had

grown these last two weeks, but to think that the little girl was that upset with her leaving, and to think that even Frederick might have assumed that she had run all the way here just to see her. It was... it was... it was enough that Hannah could not help but smile.

She was not the little girl's mother, and yet she felt a sudden kinship that she had never expected. A bond that she had seen between her sisters and their children, that desire to protect and love that all mothers must feel.

Hannah wanted children of her own, but was it possible that Amelia, the little girl who she had grown so close with, might be enough? And had Hannah been too selfish to see that as a possibility?

"Is she here?" Lord William asked desperately. "Have you seen her?"

"She is not here," Lord Ramsbury said. "And you can tell His Grace that perhaps he should take better care of his children, that is if he was not so busy ruining?—"

"Father!" Hannah snapped at him. "Will you be quiet?!"

"Hannah!" her mother gasped. "Do not speak to your father like that!"

Hannah ignored her as she turned to Lord William, her mind racing as she tried to think what to do. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"Only a few hours ago," Lord William explained. "She was sent to the back garden on her own and has not been seen since!"

"And you said you searched the estate?"

"As far as the forest."

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“The forest...” Hannah frowned as she considered... as she pictured the little girl and what she knew of her... as she came to realize the likelihood of where she was. “Find Frederick,” she said immediately.

“And tell him what?”

Hannah might have smiled if she wasn't so worried. For although she now knew where Amelia likely was, that didn't make the situation any better. If anything, it only made it worse. Amelia was in danger, and if there was any chance of saving her, Hannah would need to hurry.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It was dark outside. The moon was not full, but it waxed such that the light shone before Hannah, enough for her to see the way ahead as she charged through the forest. Holding up her skirt, she jumped over felled tree trunks and darted around stray bushes and trees. She stumbled but did not slow down. She tripped but kept her footing. Nothing could slow her down, for time was not a luxury that she had.

Perhaps running was not necessary? Perhaps she would arrive to find Amelia safe and sound? That was what she wanted. That was what she prayed for—and had been doing so since she left home not thirty minutes ago. But something told her that she might not be so lucky as that.

The motherly instinct that she did not even know she had roared to life, and so she ran as if her life, as if Amelia's, depended on it.

No idea how far away she was, it felt like she had been running through the forest for an age. Out of breath. Out of her mind. She called out, hoping to hear a response.

“Amelia!” she cried out as loud as she could. “Amelia! Are you there!”

“Hannah?!” a frightened voice echoed in the darkness. “Hannah! Help me!”

Somehow, Hannah’s pace increased. Through the brush she charged until she eventually came upon a small clearing that she recognized immediately, for she had been there once before.

Not a large clearing by any means, it was perhaps half the size of Frederick’s house. Tall trees stood like a barrier around the edges, allowing the moon to shine in full on the center. And at this center, spread to the edges of the clearing, was a pond. Placid and tranquil it sat, until her eyes swept over it, spotting in the middle a struggling, little girl desperate to keep her head above the water.

“Amelia!” Hannah cried and ran to the edge of the pond.

“Hannah!” The little girl thrashed in the middle of the pond, desperate and scared, her head barely above the water. “Please! Help! I’m—I’m stuck!”

It was hard to see what was happening exactly. Although there was nothing keeping Amelia where she was, the little girl thrashed and paddled desperately with her hands, her head bobbing, only to go down, only to emerge from the water again, followed by a scream. There must be something under the water, latching onto her dress, keeping her from swimming freely.

Again, that motherly instinct roared inside Hannah. Amelia was not her daughter, but at that moment, it felt as if she was, for Hannah knew there was nothing that she would not do to save her, even if it meant giving her own life. Such was the love she

had for her.

“I’m coming!” Hannah cried out. She was quick to undo her dress, as keeping it on would only weigh her down. “I’m coming!”

The dress was off, and the cool night air whipped at her body. She wore a thin pelisse, barely a cover from the cold.

“Hurry! I can’t... I can’t... I—” And then the little girl was gone.

“Amelia!”

Hannah ran into the water without pause and dove headfirst into its depths, ignoring the cool spike that shot through her body like a knife, constricting her chest, knocking the breath out of her lungs, seeming to try and pull her down as if the water itself had a life of its own.

She kicked her feet and pushed with her arms until she came to where Amelia’s head had been moments before.

“Amelia!” she cried out, before taking a deep breath and diving beneath the surface at a straight angle.

It was too dark to see beneath the water, but she reached out with her hands and grabbed hold of the little girl. Then, still holding on tight, she pulled her to the surface, forcing her head out of the water so she could take a breath.

Amelia coughed and spluttered as she gasped for air. Her body still thrashed, kicking desperately to stay afloat. Hannah held onto her, her own legs now growing tired as she tried to kick them back to the surface. Only... the little girl refused to move.

“I’m stuck!” Amelia cried out through mouthfuls of water. “My dress! It—I can’t move!”

Hannah had her arms wrapped around the little girl. Her legs kicked powerfully, even though by now, they were sore and near useless. Her chest burned. Her body shook from the cold. But nothing, no force in this world, could stop her.

“Hold on!” Hannah shouted over the noise of Amelia’s screams. “Amelia!” she shouted, forcing the little girl to look at her. “Look at me! Amelia!”

It must have been something in her voice. A calm that washed over Amelia, for she managed to keep herself from panicking for long enough to look Hannah in the eyes. Oh, she was terrified, that was clear. But now there was something else, and understanding that so long as Hannah was there, everything would be alright.

“You need to stop kicking,” Hannah told her, still holding her tight. “Stay perfectly still.”

“But—”

“I will get us out of here!” she assured her. “But you must trust me!”

Amelia’s eyes went wide, only for her to see her rescuer’s composure and somehow calm down. A nod shared between them, and Hannah smiled.

Then, holding Amelia to her body with one arm, she reached beneath the surface and pulled on Amelia’s dress. Indeed, it was caught on something, likely a submerged tree. Another tug, still the dress refused to budge.

“Argh!” Hannah cried. “Amelia, I am going to let go of you?—”

“What? No! Please! Don’t!”

“Kick with your feet!” Hannah told her. “Use your arms to keep your head above the water. I will only be a second, I promise!”

“But... but... but I am scared!”

“You don’t have to be.” Again, Hannah made sure the little girl was looking at her. “I am here, Amelia, and I promise that nothing will happen to you. Alright?”

The little girl understood, and what was more, she accepted it. Her face hardened, and her brow furrowed. Slowly, Hannah let her go, making sure that Amelia was keeping her head afloat on her own. And then, she dove beneath the water a second time.

She could not see what she was doing, but she followed the dress with her hands, finding where it was snagged around a tree branch. Using both hands and all her might, Hannah tore the dress apart, ripping it down the seam, stretching it out and then wrenching it free from the branch. The moment she did so, Amelia's feet kicked all the harder, and the little girl was off.

By then, Hannah was exhausted. She could not feel her arms. She could not feel her legs. Her lung burned. Her chest ached. With all her might, she managed to kick her way to the surface, pulling in a final lungful of air and seeing Amelia scramble toward the shore.

She was safe.

Hannah smiled to herself, knowing that she had rescued her. But then, all the energy she had used to save Amelia vanished in an instant, and despite knowing what it would mean, she could not fathom what it might take to swim back to shore. Impossible, it seemed.

A final look to ensure that Amelia was safe, and Hannah stopped kicking. Her body shut down. Her eyes fluttered shut. And then, slowly, she began to sink into the water, all the while smiling because at least she would die knowing that she had saved someone she truly loved...

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Frederick tried not to panic as he raced through the forest.

Everything was going to be alright. Hannah had been wrong. He would arrive at the pond to find it empty. Surely, this night would not turn into the worst night of his entire life...

He tried to tell himself these things as he ran, but he had trouble believing them. As soon as William had found him and told him what Hannah had theorized, he'd known the truth of it.

As unbelievable as it might seem, he had little doubt now that his daughter had indeed gone to the pond where they had first bonded all those weeks ago.

If it wasn't for the fear that was crashing down on him with each breath that he took, he might have smiled at the notion. Had that day really meant so much to Amelia? It had felt so innocuous to Frederick, just one of many wonderful days the three had spent together, and yet to his daughter, its significance must have been huge. It was the first time she had begun to accept Hannah into their little family, the first time she had begun to consider Hannah as her mother, the first time she had realized that she and Frederick would no longer be alone.

The choice of escape spoke volumes to the effect that his and Hannah's separation was having on his daughter, and it spoke volumes to something that Frederick should have seen days ago.

But he could not worry about that now. Not until he knew they were safe!

Through the forest he ran, eventually breaching the trees and stumbling into the clearing. He ran his eyes over the pond and then the shore just in time to see Amelia clambering onto dry land.

"Amelia!" he cried, his heart soaring as he raced toward her. "Amelia!" He reached her, fell to his knees, and pulled her into his chest. "You're safe! God, you're safe! I'm here!"

"H-Hannah!" Amelia stammered, pushing away from him.

“No, it’s your father.”

“She’s drowning!” Amelia spun back desperately, pointing to the placid pond.

“Hannah?” Frederick searched the pond, unable to see what his daughter was talking about. “What do you mean? Where is?—”

“Father, please! She is drowning! You have to hurry! You must!”

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Frederick didn't understand. At least not at first. But then he looked at his daughter. The fear and plea in her eyes. The way she shook. How wet she was. The tear in her dress. And that was when he knew.

"Hannah!" He was on his feet, again searching the water. "Where is she!"

"There!" Amelia pointed to the middle of the pond, but Frederick saw nothing. "You have to hurry, Father! You have to hurry! Please!" She grabbed hold of his hand and shook it, desperation in her voice. "She's dying!"

Frederick could not see what Amelia was referring to. He did not know if Hannah was in the water. But he knew his daughter was not a liar, he knew Hannah had come here to save her, and he knew there was little he would not do to rescue the woman he loved.

Without another word, Frederick charged into the pond, hands held before him and diving into the cool depths like a fish. He kicked his feet and moved his hands, and he surged across the placid water, reaching roughly where Amelia had pointed.

"Father! Down! Go down!" Amelia cried out from the shore.

Frederick dove straight down. He couldn't see through the darkness, reaching desperately with his hands until he grabbed hold of something... or someone! Down further, he wrapped his hands around Hannah's body and dragged her to the surface, putting all the effort he could into his legs as they propelled him up... and up... and up... and?—

They broke the surface of the water. Frederick took a deep breath, but Hannah did no such thing. Fear gripped him, and he held her close as he swam them back to shore.

“Please,” he begged as he kicked and swam. “No... please...”

He was too late. It was all he could think. The fool he was. The short-sighted idiot! He had condemned the woman he loved, and for what? Because he didn’t want to raise a family with her? She had saved Amelia, it seemed. She had done what any mother would do. They were a family already! Had they not always been? And for reasons that Frederick could not fathom, he had not wanted to add to it.

He pushed those thoughts out of his head as he dragged Hannah to the shore. There, he lay her down on her back, his heart racing, his hands shaking as he checked her throat and then pumped on her chest.

“Please...” he begged. “Don’t...” He pushed on her chest again, leaned forward, and breathed into her mouth. “Come on!” he shouted, breathing into her mouth again. “Come on!” And again, he breathed into her?—

She sputtered suddenly, coughing, and her body spasmed as she drew in a breath of fresh air.

“Hannah!” he cried as she did so again, bending over, her body shuddering, gasping for air. “Hannah! You’re alright! Thank God, you’re alright!”

“Hannah!” Amelia threw herself at Hannah, wrapping her arms around her so tightly as if she might never let go.

Hannah fell back, her body shaking as she continued to breathe. Each breath sounded painful, but she kept going, confirming that she was very much alive.

“Hannah! God...” Frederick was on her, wanting to take her in his arms, but keeping himself from doing it. On his knees, he looked down at her, his hand resting under her face, his smile broad, his heart soaring. “You’re alright. You’re... you’re... I thought... God, I thought I was too late.”

Frederick couldn’t recall another time that he had been so happy. To think that he had wanted to end his marriage to this woman. To think he had resigned himself to never seeing her again. Now, with how he was feeling, he might never leave her side for as long as he lived. He would do anything for her. Anything!

“Hannah,” he said softly, stroking her face. Her eyes were closed, but she was breathing softly. “Say something. Anything. Please...”

A moment passed as her eyelids fluttered. Her breathing evened. Her body was no longer stiff, seeming to relax. And finally, she opened her eyes, saw Frederick looking down at her, and the smile in them... Frederick knew at that moment that their fight was a thing of the past.

“Hannah...” he said softly, his chin trembling, tears welling up in his eyes. “You’re alive. I thought... I thought I was too late.”

She cleared her throat, then reached up and touched the side of his face. And then she opened her mouth and said, “Frederick? What took you so long?”

Frederick frowned at the comment, saw the smile on her lips, and burst into laughter. He fell upon her, smothering her with kisses, holding her, laughing, because the emotions sweeping through him would allow him to do nothing else.

And Hannah, smothered by his weight, coughed and sputtered and laughed also, more so when Amelia threw herself onto them.

He thought he had lost her. He thought he had lost them both. It was a mistake that Frederick would never make again.

Frederick watched Hannah as she slept. She had been asleep for hours now, having drifted off in his arms as he carried her back home from the pond. Not wanting to disturb her, he had placed her down gently in bed, lit the fire in the hearth, and then pulled up a chair by the head of her bed. Happy to sit and watch and wait.

There was so much he wanted to say. So much he had to say. For hours now he had thought about nothing but that, determined not to let this night end until he had his chance to tell Hannah how he felt.

His only real regret was that it had taken an incident like this for him to realize the truth of his feelings. Laughable, he now realized. Idiotic for how stupid he had been. All this time, he had feared what a pregnancy might mean for him and Hannah, as if he was somehow trapping her in a marriage that she might one day want to be free from. As if there was a chance that she might grow to hate him, but a child would force her to stay.

No... Frederick now realized how wrong he was.

Hannah wasn't with him because she had to be, but because she wanted to be. She loved him. She loved Amelia. This was her family, and all she wished for was to add to it. And Frederick, having seen what she was willing to go through for his daughter, knew that as good as a mother she already was, she would be an even better one, given the chance.

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He had made the mistake once, and he would not make it again. And so, he sat and waited...

Hours passed by before she eventually woke up. A slight stirring. A soft cough. A groan, for she likely had a terrible headache. And then, ever so slowly, her eyes opened.

“Hannah!” He was already by her side, taking her hand and holding it tight. “You’re awake.”

She coughed and cleared her throat, frowning as she looked around. “How did I...?”

“I carried you back,” he explained. “Do you remember what happened?”

“Oh?” She raised an eyebrow at him. “You mean you saving me? Yes, I have vague memories.” She chuckled, but it sounded painful.

He laughed and kissed her hand. “And Amelia. You... you saved her. She told me what you did. I can’t... I cannot believe that you?—”

She pulled her hand free. “That what? That I would risk my life to save your daughter?”

“Ourdaughter.” He took her hand back and looked at her, refusing to blink or allow her to look away. “I don’t know if this is the right time. Likely, you want to rest but... but... I need to tell you. I have been an idiot, Hannah. A moron of the highest order. The things I said, I—” He swallowed thickly. “I was wrong. About

everything.”

Her brow was tight, and her stare was confused. “You might have to be a little more clear than that. My head...” She gently touched her head. “I have a terrible headache.”

“I want to have children with you,” he said, not seeing any point in being subtle. “After what you did today... I can’t believe I ever doubted you. You care for Amelia, Hannah. You care for her as any mother would, and I know that you would make an even better mother to a child that you bear—one that is a part of both of us. I was wrong.” He kissed her hand as he felt a weight lift off his shoulders, relieved that he had finally said it. “And I want to start a family with you. My only regret is that it took me this long to realize it.”

“And Amelia?” she asked. “What about her?”

Frederick smiled. “She might not be your daughter through blood, but after today...” He kissed the back of her hand. “You are her mother. And I know you will continue to be so, even when you have a child of your own.”

She was silent for some time as she studied him. Searching for the lie, it felt like. But Frederick made sure to look at her the whole while, so she could see the truth in his words. He was done pretending that he did not want this. He was done lying to himself. And he was past the point of living alone because he thought that was what he deserved.

“It is a funny thing,” she said eventually, her words spoken carefully and assuredly. “I have spent the last five days trying to decide what it is that I want. Hurting, you can probably imagine?—”

“I am so sorry,” he interjected. “I should never have?—”

“Please, Frederick.” She cleared her throat, pulled her hand free, and then sat up so she could meet his eyes. “Let me...” A deepbreath. “What I realized during that time was that yes, I want a child. Yes, I want to be a mother. But I don’t want those things just because I have this yearning to start a family, as my sisters have. I want those things...” She sniffed and then smiled. “I want them with you. And if I can’t have them with you, then I do not want them at all.”

His heart swelled. “We can have those things, Hannah. And we will. I was wrong, this whole time, I was a fool.”

“Be it Amelia only or a baby of our own, Frederick, I need you to know that I am not trapped in this marriage.” She chuckled. “I never have been. And no amount of... of grumpiness or stubbornness is going to change that.”

He laughed. “Do not hold me to that.”

“You really want to start a family with me?”

“More than anything.”

Hannah hesitated a moment. Something flashed behind her eyes, a look that Frederick thought he knew but was certain he misread. She was still pale and worn from earlier. Still weak and fragile and frail. Surely... surely not that?

“Then prove it,” she said, raising a single eyebrow at him. “If you can.”

Frederick leaned back, unsure. “Are you saying...”

She pushed the covers off her. Dressed in the same thin pelisse she was wearing earlier, it hugged her body—barely even covered her, truth be told. Frederick eyes looked over her body, and he felt his heart begin to hammer, his blood begin to

simmer, his amorous desires?—

“But you... you must be tired.”

“Perhaps as tired as I have ever been.”

“And hungry.”

“Famished.”

“Surely, you?—”

“Frederick.” She shot him a look. Her hand reached out and took his, held it tight. She kept her eyes on him, her lips curling into a smirk. “After all we have been through, have you not learned the most important thing?”

“Which is?”

“Saying no to me is never a good idea. Now...” She pulled him toward her. “Will you just put a baby in me already?”

Frederick laughed, but only for a second, for no sooner had the laughter escaped his lips was he on her, his lips meeting her soft ones, their tongues lapping playfully as he kissed his wife for the first time in days.

He had forgotten what she tasted like. He had forgotten how much he loved to feel her body shuddering beneath his touch. He climbed onto the bed and mounted her, hands clawing at her dress as he tore it off her. She moaned as he began to kiss down her neck. She purred as his tongue licked and his lips sucked. And she growled in his ear as his hands cupped her swollen breasts and squeezed.

There would be no foreplay, for that felt unneeded. There would be no time wasting, for they had wasted enough time as it was. This right here, it was love making with a purpose, proof that they both wanted the same thing, a chance to put the past five days behind them once and for all.

Hannah helped Frederick with his pants, and he was quick to shuffle out of them.

Those hands of hers then wrapped around his member, squeezing it, stiffening it, making his body shake and shudder as she readied him. His fingers found their way between her thighs, testing her wetness, ensuring that she too was ready, despite how weak and feeble she must have been feeling.

He then held her eyes and stared deeply into them. No words spoken this time, a silent understanding of what that look meant. It spoke of love. It spoke of desire. It spoke of a willingness to take this marriage to the next level.

“I’m ready...” Hannah fell back and opened her legs wide.

“I love you,” Frederick whispered in her ear as he moved down with her, positioning himself between her thighs and slowly entering her.

“I... I... I love... I love you too...” She moaned as he slid inside her, inch by inch, slow and steady until he was buried as deep as he could be. “For now, and forever.”

He held her eyes as he made love to her. No hair pulling. No slapping. No commands or dirty talk or any of that nonsense. This was slow and melodic, precise and careful, Frederick’s hips moving to the steady rhythm of Hannah’s breathing, building in intensity the harder she breathed and the faster she panted.

She felt better than he remembered. He rested on his elbows. One hand stroked her face, the other gripped her waist. They kissed deeply and passionately as he thrust into her. They giggled together. They smiled. They looked into one another’s souls as if somehow they knew that this would be it.

For what felt like seconds but must have been minutes, Frederick’s thrusts were long and intense and hard. Hannah’s eyes closed, and her head fell back. She bit her lip and moaned. Frederick could feel her pleasure building, he could feel her shaking, he could feel that explosion ready to erupt inside her. And the thought of such a thing,

the feel of it, produced the same effect in him.

“I’m... are you ready?” he asked as he began to thrust faster and harder.

“I... I am...” she stammered, her breathing now intense and labored.

The sensation built in his legs and through his thighs. It swirled in his stomach and touched his chest. It grew and grew and grew until he could take it no more and then, just as he felt his wife’s body begin to shake and spasm, he finished inside her.

“Urgh!” he moaned.

“Oh!” she groaned. “Frederick... don’t... ever... stop...”

He stayed inside her until well after he was finished. Keeping himself there, ensuring that every last drop was spent. He needed her to know that he was serious about this, and when he did finally roll off her, they both seemed to understand that very fact.

“I love you,” he said again, pulling her into his arms and holding her close.

“I love you too, obviously.” She giggled. “Although I should warn you, when this little one comes out, my love for you might take second place.”

He laughed. “Are you that sure.” He moved his hand to her stomach.

She smiled coyly. “Just a feeling I have.”

Perhaps she was just saying that? Perhaps she somehow knew? Either way, Frederick could not help but beam. The love he had for his wife. The love he had for his daughter. The love he had for this new child, whenever that may become a reality. Frederick had spent so long feeling guilty over his past that he had failed to live in the

present and look forward to the future. Now, that was all he would do.

He and Hannah would start a family together. They would love one another unconditionally. And he would look back on these past five days and wonder what the hell it was that he was thinking, for he almost lost the woman he loved.

Now, luckily, he had the rest of his life to make it up to her. And he planned on doing just that.

Epilogue

“Push! Push! Yes, just like that...” the midwife, Miss Robinson, commanded gently as she stroked Hannah’s hair. “Push?—”

“I am pushing!” Hannah snapped.

“Keep pushing,” Miss Robinson continued gently, ignoring the rancor spewing from Hannah’s mouth. “We’re almost there.”

“Argh!” Hannah cried out through deep, strangled breaths. “Frederick!”

“I’m right here!” Frederick was indeed right beside her. Down on one knee, he held her hand—or rather, she clutched it and squeezed as if trying to break his fingers. “You’re doing so well.”

“Don’t patronize me!” she snarled in between breaths.

“Deep pushes,” Miss Robinson continued from between Hannah’s open legs. “Any second now...”

“See,” Frederick continued, “you’re almost?—”

“Argh!” Hannah cried out again, her body shaking, sweat dripping, inhuman sounds escaping her lips.

“Any second now...” Miss Robinson said again. “One more big push... there you are... and another...”

“I am so proud of you,” Frederick crooned. “So proud.”

“Quiet!” Hannah snarled at him again. “I don’t care how pr—argh!!!!” She threw

back her head and screamed so loud that the walls of the room seemed to shake.

It was a scene that Frederick recognized only too well. One that he had seen in his nightmares more times than he could count. After the death of his first wife, he would wake up covered in sweat, his body shaking, his heart racing as his thoughts returned to that most dreadful night time and again. And once Hannah had learned of her pregnancy, again he would dream of this moment, again waking up in a cold sweat, for that dream always ended the exact same way...

Needless to say, it had been a difficult nine months. Oh, Hannah had tried to assure him that there was nothing to worry about. She had done what she could to ease his fear that something might go wrong. But there was only so much she could say, and ultimately Frederick knew that he would not feel remotely close to calm until it was all over. Assuming that everything went well.

So far, it was hard to say exactly how things were going.

Frederick ran over in his mind the differences between today and that same day six years ago now. Comparing them and marking off what he counted as positives, clear signs that things would not end in tragedy.

The weather, for one. It was a sunny day, not a cloud in the sky, God himself seeming to have produced it so that their child would be born into a perfect world with nothing to fear and only love to guide them.

There was no blood this time either, for with his last wife, it had gushed out of her as she had been sliced wide open. Miss Robinson was far calmer. There wasn't a litany of maids rushing about with towels and buckets of water and panic on their faces. And even Hannah, for all her screaming and shouting, didn't look to be nearly in as bad a state. Although...

“Push!” Miss Robinson commanded, her voice growing firm. “Push!”

“I am pushing!”

“One more,” Miss Robinson urged. “One—there! I can see the head! Another push!”

“I can’t! I can’t!”

“Hannah...” Frederick’s hand was numb, his body was shaking, but he reached up and stroked Hannah’s sweaty forehead, willing her to listen. “You are so close. Please, one more push.”

“I am tired...”

“One more...” He kissed her on the cheek. “You’re going to be a mother, Hannah. Any second now.”

That seemed to do it. A determination took over her face as she bit her lip, furrowed her brow, took a deep breath, and then gave one more push...

“Argh!” she cried out such that the walls did shake this time, the noise so violent and loud that it pierced Frederick’s ears.

He reeled away and nearly fell on his bum, only to be brought back into the moment and to sanity by a singular sound that was perhaps the most beautiful thing he had ever heard.

It was the sound of a baby crying.

“There we are,” Miss Robinson crooned as she gently pulled the babe free, cutting the cord expertly and then wrapping it in a blanket. “Well done, Your Grace. You did it.”

“I... I did?” Hannah stammered, her voice weak and unsure.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:41 am

“You did.” Miss Robinson rose, the baby cradled in her arms, a tear rolling down her cheek. “A beautiful baby boy.”

“A... a boy?” Frederick choked out. “You’re sure?”

“Very sure.”

He did not know what to do. A part of him wanted to fall onto his wife and hold her, to make sure she was alright, to confirm that nothing was the matter. But another part of him wanted to take the baby from Miss Robinson’s arms, to hold it, to see it for the first time. To let it know that from this day until its last, it would be loved.

“Frederick...” Hannah’s voice was weak. Her grip on his hand had loosened, and her skin was drenched with sweat and pale. “I want to see my child.”

Frederick smiled at her and then reached for the crying babe. Miss Robinson handed it to him, and he didn’t even try and stop himself from weeping as he looked upon his son for the first time. So small. So helpless. So damn beautiful that he could not stand it.

“Frederick...”

“Oh!” He dropped down quickly and handed the baby to Hannah.

Her arms shook from exhaustion, so he held the baby as she brought him to her chest.

“A boy...” Her eyes sparkled, and her smile split her face. “He is beautiful.”

“He is, isn’t he?” Frederick agreed as he sat down by his wife, one arm around her, his other stroking the baby lovingly.

What had Frederick been so worried about? It seemed absurd now that he had spent the last nine months living with such fear in his heart. Still convinced in some small way that this would be a repeat of last time and that once again his life would be torn asunder because of a decision he had made. But he need not have worried.

Hannah was not his last wife. She loved him as much today as she had nine months ago, and he knew that she would keep on loving him—maybe not as much as she did their son, but still more than enough for his satisfaction. And it was this love which gave her strength today, for Frederick should have known that there would have been no force on this earth great enough to separate her from her firstborn child.

Amelia and now a son... That day six years ago, as much as it had pained and wreaked havoc on Frederick’s life, now ought to be left where it had always been—in the past.

The future was what Frederick had to look forward to.

“Do we have a name picked out?” Miss Robinson asked.

“We do,” Hannah said. She looked up at Frederick and smiled, and he returned it. “James.”

“A beautiful name,” Miss Robinson crooned.

“A perfect name,” Frederick said. “For a perfect son.”

The End?