



A Bride for the Cruel Duke (Claimed by Regency Devils #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Do you think you can survive five dates of me wanting you, Duchess?"

Stranded in the middle of nowhere, Caroline never expects to be saved by the Cruel Duke. Now, she must repay him. No matter the cost...

Finding a bride is impossible for a ruthless man like Duke Anthony. Until sweet Caroline falls into his arms...and she cannot escape him. Not before he claims her completely.

Caroline will not share her new husband's bed, though. Not until they go on five dates first. And Anthony is all too willing to make her beg for every night she dares demand...

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

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Chapter One

“Help!” Lady Caroline Hawkins cried out desperately as she ran full pace down the twisting road. “Help, please! Somebody, help!”

The road was narrow, surrounded on both sides by dense forest, empty of any signs of life save her own... and those who followed her. It wound through the forest like a slithering snake so that she could not see more than a dozen or so feet ahead, with no idea where it was taking her. The only thing she was certain of was that the way ahead was safer than behind.

“Anybody! Help!” As she ran, she was forced to hoist up the skirt of her dress so that she would not trip, although the heels she wore caught in the dirt and mud, skidding on stones and making it almost impossible for her to stay on her feet as she sprinted. The only thing that kept her from tumbling over completely was a keen sense of survival of which she had not known she was in possession until it became the only thing keeping her alive.

This cannot be how it ends. An accident, then a stupid decision made, ignorance because I did not consider the grave consequences of what I was doing until they were upon me.

“Help! Help!” voices cried out from behind her. They were mocking and glee—filled, sardonic in the way that they pursued her. “Help!”

She dared a glance over her shoulder. Through the bend of the road, around the trees, she spied movement; shadows which chased her. She gasped and forced her attention

ahead, not scared of the shadows so much as she was of those who made them.

Thankfully, the winding road looked to straighten ahead before widening considerably. The main road. Thank the heavens!

Determined, taken by a second wind, Caroline found a renewed sense of energy and pushed herself to run faster.

A moment later and the roadway opened into a crossroads, which didn't tell Caroline anymore about where she was but at least it might increase her chances of being found.

Breathing heavy, sweat drenching through her dress, she spun herself about, eyes darting in panic down the intersection. The road was wider here, and the trees around her thinned considerably. A quick glance back the way she had come told her the shadows chasing her had gone but they were likely just around the bend, and she didn't have time to think. She needed to make a choice and stick by it!

Think of the story this will make, at least. For once, I might not be considered the boring child.

She spun to her right and was about to charge for all her life was worth, only to catch the sound of something in the distance... a rumbling... the earth shaking as if it was about to split in two... no. It was a carriage!

Her eyes lit up, relief flooding her as a horse-drawn carriage suddenly appeared upon the road. Caroline could have cried she was so darn happy, but desperate too, because she needed to get the passenger's attention. Perhaps that was why she didn't notice how fast the carriage was moving until it was almost on top of her.

She ran for it, arms waving in the air. "Please! Help! You must help me!"

It came at her. Her eyes turned wide when she realized it wasn't slowing down. A gasp escaped her lips, her heart lurching through her mouth, the horses seeing her before the coachman as they reared up on their back legs in a vain effort to stop before crushing her beneath their hooves.

"Oh!" She dived out of the way, although it was more of a full-bodied heave. Through the air she tumbled, her hands scraping along the dirt, and her knees dragging painfully behind, before her shoulder rammed into the ground and she came to a sudden stop.

"Whoa!" she heard the coachman reign in the horses. "Easy there!"

"Wh..." The world turned and her body ached as Caroline rolled onto her back, somehow forcing herself to her knees and then her feet.

The carriage had come to a stop only a few feet from where she was standing. The horses, in a panic, neighed and trounced as the coachman tried to settle them. No doubt he would be angry with her, not that she cared one little bit. She needed saving and whoever it was inside that carriage was going to have to do.

"Please!" Caroline lurched toward the carriage. "Please!"

"Miss!" the coachman called out, only just now spotting her. "What on earth are you doing in the middle of the road?"

"There's no time!" she stumbled toward the carriage, throwing herself at it. Out the corner of her eye, she could see the way she had come, the shadows which had been pursuing her growing large once more. "We must go!"

"Go where?" he barked. "Is something the matter?"

“There’s no time!”

The door to the carriage suddenly swung open and where it might have been Caroline’s imagination, a breeze as cold as ice swept from the inside as if winter had come early. She felt it through the panic, through the sweat that coated her body, through her flesh and into her bones so that she gasped even before seeing who it was that lurked within.

“What is the meaning of this?” a deep voice carried from inside. It was like a storm gathering over the ocean in the dead of night, filled with foreboding and dread. “Mr. Gulliver?”

“There’s a young lady!” the coachman, Mr. Gulliver, answered as he turned back in his seat. “Came from out of nowhere, she did!”

“A young lady?” From inside the carriage, the owner of the voice climbed outside, the cold which exuded from his presence coming with him. It was a bright day, cloudless and sundrenched, but as his feet hit the dirt, and he stepped around the open door and fixed his gaze on Caroline for the first time, the sun itself seemed to retreat as even it feared who this man was and what he might be capable of doing. “You? What on earth do you think you are doing?”

Caroline froze. Her mouth was open to answer the question, but she found herself unable to form words as if the gaze of this man—whoever he was—smothered them before they reached her lips. That was not to say that he was scary, certainly not compared to what she ran from. Rather, he was intimidating, possessed of a raw power and sense of command that made it appear as if the world itself moved according to his whims.

He was tall, well over six feet, and taller than any man she knew. His shoulders were as wide as a horse’s chest, with a back that looked strong enough to support the

weight of one. His hair was as black as onyx, as if somehow absorbing the light, while his eyes... she found herself trapped by them. Dark green, fierce and menacing. Again, the word power came to mind as here stood a man who she had no doubt was used to getting his way.

“I... I... I...” Caroline stammered stupidly.

“Is something the matter” the dark stranger asked. “Did you hit your head?” He looked to Mr. Gulliver for explanation. “Did she take a fall?”

“She may well have,” Mr. Gulliver answered. “I very nearly ran her down.”

The dark stranger somehow managed to look both concerned and frustrated at the same time. “Wonderful. This is just what I need.” He looked to the sky, taking note of the time, before turning his fierce gaze back upon Caroline. “I am afraid that time is not something I have a great deal of, Miss. So please, whatever this is, I would appreciate a straight answer. Tell me, who are you and what are you doing in the middle of the...” He trailed off and his brow furrowed tight.

His head snapped up, and his gaze looked beyond where Caroline stood frozen. His expression, already one of sheer brutality, turned as cold as ice and rueful in ways that was it fixed on Caroline might have made her scream.

“‘Ello ‘ello ‘ello,” a raspy voice cooed from behind Caroline. “What have we got ‘ere then?”

Caroline’s heart leapt through her open mouth. She recognized the voice without having to turn around, for she had heard it once before. Ten minutes ago, by her estimation, as she had been walking along the empty road while wondering to herself how she had ended up in such a deplorable situation to begin with. It had come from the trees, first from behind, then the sides, until its owner had appeared right in front

of her.

“No!” Caroline cried out. Without thinking, she leapt at the dark stranger, grabbing him by the coat and then scuffling behind him. One hand was on his coat, the other grabbed his thick arm, forcing it before herself as if it was a shield of protection.

The owner of the raspy voice was as detestable a sort as Caroline had ever seen. Tall and willowy in frame, his skin was blotched with dirt and grime, his hair oily and hanging by his shoulders, his nose bent and broken, and the few teeth he had stained yellow. His clothes were rags, and he walked with more confidence than one of his ilk should have, perhaps because he wasn’t alone.

Two more men stood with him. One was big and fat, the other short and stout. Grubby like their leader, both deranged in temperament, their eyes like wild animals in search of prey. All three of them ambled toward the carriage, seemingly unconcerned by the dark stranger in ways that struck fear into Caroline because what sort of men would not see someone like this and turn to flee in the other direction?

Thankfully, the dark stranger didn’t seek to remove Caroline from his arm or push her out of the way. In fact, he straightened and then stepped forward, putting himself between her and the three men.

“Who’s this then?” the leader of the three men sneered.

“That is none of your concern,” the dark stranger said; his voice was calm, and where Caroline was shaking, she noticed that he stood tall and proud.

“We don’t want any trouble,” the leader said. “Just the girl and we’ll be on our way.”

“No...” she gasped.

“You will be on your way,” the dark stranger said. “The manner in which you do so will depend entirely on how smart you think yourself to be.” He scoffed. “Which, by my estimation, does not bode well for you.”

The larger man laughed. “Hear that? Who does he think he is?”

“Quiet!” the leader snapped at him. He stood ahead of the other two, doing what he could to instill a sense of control in the situation—out numbering the dark stranger, he likely thought he had all of it. But he was hesitant also, his beady eyes sizing up the dark stranger with a sense of caution. “You seem to be misunderstanding the situation.”

“I understand it just fine.”

“Do ya now?” the leader chuckled and looked back at his two men. “Seems to me that you’re outnumbered. And Bert here—” A flick of his head to the large man. “He makes a habit of wrestlin’ bears for fun. Me thinks he can handle you.”

“Is that so?”

“The girl,” the leader said, taking a step closer. “Leave her and be glad that you did.”

Caroline was shaking terribly. She did not know the dark stranger. And he certainly had no reason to help her. What was to stop him from doing as they asked and leaving her? Any sane man would!

She clutched harder onto his arm, her other releasing his coat and taking his hand as if to let him know that he’d need to tear his arm off if he wanted to leave her. Most surprisingly, the dark stranger’s grip on her hand increased, and for the first time since she had found herself running from these men, she felt safe.

“Unfortunately for you, I consider this young lady in my protection, meaning that if you wish to have her, you will have to take her from me.”

“That can be arranged.”

“Mr. Gulliver,” the dark stranger spoke to the coachman. “What will happen to these men if they are found to be stealing from me?”

“They would be rounded up and hanged, Your Grace,” Mr. Gulliver said.

His Grace! Caroline gasped and tore her eyes from the savage men to better look at the dark stranger. She did not recognize him, nor would she have guessed a man as cold as this to be of the peerage. And yet, somehow, it seemed so obvious she could not believe she’d missed it.

“If they are lucky to get that far,” the duke said calmly. “If I have my way, by the time I am done with them, they will be begging for the mercy of the noose. Now...” He fixed the men with a glare that was so cold Caroline felt it in her bones; she shuddered on the spot, and the world seemed to grow darker. “What is it going to be?”

The leader’s eyes turned wide and he took a step backwards. He looked back at his men, both shaking as they gingerly stepped back and out of harm’s way. He was back on the duke for a moment, sneering as if in a final attempt to scare the man off... only to spit on the ground instead.

“My mistake,” he said. “Seems we thought she was somebody else. Our apologies, Your Grace.” Shockingly, the leader of the men bowed his head before turning around and storming past his two men.

They followed quickly and within seconds the three of them were gone.

Caroline watched them go, and it was only once they were out of sight that she realized she hadn't taken a single breath since she hid behind the duke. Her heart was beating so ferociously that it hurt. Her body was shaking. Was she alone, she might have burst into tears.

But I am safe. I am alive. And I have this duke to thank!

"Thank you," she said finally, sighing with relief as she felt the panic slowly seep from her body. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am."

"Hand," the duke said.

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Hand." He turned to look at her, his eyes then trailing down her arm to her hand, which was still entangled in his own. His fingers were splayed apart, but her hand was gripped about them as if her life depended on it.

"Oh!" she gasped and released his hand. "I am sorry. I did not—I was not thinking."

"As I can see it, that is the least of your concern."

He looked down at her, again with an expression on his face that seemed caught in two worlds. There was worry behind his eyes, that was clear, but he did not look as if he wished to voice it. Rather, he glanced to the sky again, clicking his tongue as he took note of the hour.

"I..." She swallowed the lump in her throat, reminding herself that he was a duke and not someone she needed to be afraid of. Even if he's making such an assumption as hard to fathom as is possible. "I am forever in your debt," she said.

“You have still not answered me,” he said. “What are you doing out here? And why were those men chasing you?”

She tried to meet his eyes but the look he fixed her with had her looking away as if in shame. “It is an embarrassing thing,” she admitted sheepishly.

“Which part?”

“I... I was on my way to an engagement weekend—my older sister, to be held in a few days’ time. From London,” she stammered under his judgmental gaze. “My family and I were forced to stop over for the night. Not far from here. There is an inn only a few miles back. Perhaps you know it?” She attempted a chuckle as she indicated down the road.

He said nothing, still staring at her in cold judgment.

“Yes, well... it seems that in all the panic to leave, my family, they ah...” She clicked her tongue. “They seemed to have not realized I was not with them. An embarrassing happenstance, and I am sure that by now they are worried sick.”

If only that were true...

Caroline was one of six children in her family, the middle child in fact, buffeted on both sides by a brother and sisters who demanded their mother’s attention for varying reasons. Growing up under such circumstances, Caroline had been forced to develop a sense of independence because she had learned at an early age that if she wished for attention then she would need to act out to receive it. And acting out wasn’t exactly her strong suit.

Thus, she was the forgotten child. Not unloved. More realized by her mother that of the six of her children, Caroline was the one who needed the least amount of care.

And Caroline, understanding the pains her mother went through to keep order in their home, was never one to complain or draw attention to herself unless it was absolutely necessary.

In a strange way, Caroline hadn't even been surprised when she woke this morning to find her family gone. Having always had to take care of herself, there was no reason that her mother or siblings might have thought to check on her. Although... it still would have been nice if they did occasionally, just to remind me that they cared.

"So, you thought it a good idea to..." He shook his head and sighed. "To walk on your own? Is that what you are telling me?"

She smiled sheepishly. "In hindsight, it was not the smartest of ideas. I just did not want to cause a fuss, and I truly thought that my family would turn around once they realized I was not with them. Which..." She grimaced and looked away, her face turning red with embarrassment. "Which clearly they have not done yet."

The duke considered her a moment longer. She tried to meet his eyes to see what he might be thinking. Was he taking pity on her? Did he think that she was a fool? Or did he care so little that his only thought might be how to get rid of her?

"This engagement," he spoke finally. "To whom is your sister promised?"

"Oh." She blinked. "His Grace, the Duke of Aldworth."

It was subtle, but she could have sworn she saw a hint of recognition flash behind his eyes.

"And that would make you...?" he prompted.

"My name is Lady Caroline Hawkins."

The duke glanced at Mr. Gulliver, who shrugged and then nodded. The duke also nodded once, only to step around her and walk back toward the carriage door.

“Where are you going?” she cried after him.

“As luck would have it, I too am on my way to Aldworth Estate.”

“You are?” she blinked. “You... you know His Grace?” It was a silly question, she realized as soon as she said it. Being a duke, of course he knew her sister’s betrothed. Did that also mean he knew her sister? And her family?

“I do.”

“Might I ask for your name?” she dared.

He groaned, looking annoyed by the question. “I assure you, it is perfectly safe. Or it will be, assuming we leave immediately. I do not appreciate being waylaid, nor do I intend on arriving late.”

She considered her options quickly. What options? It is not as if I have any but one . “Thank you.” She hurried forward. “I cannot tell you how much I appreciate it. I am forever in your debt, Your Grace.”

He climbed into the carriage and then turned on her. “Duke Eggleton.”

“Excuse me?”

“His Grace, the Duke of Eggleton, for future reference.” And with that, he disappeared inside the carriage.

That name... it took Caroline a moment to remember where she had heard it before. I

know that name... Her eyes widened and she gasped, for she remembered it suddenly, and when she did, she found herself looking back down the road, wondering now if perhaps it would be safer if she just walked?

How do I manage to find myself in these situations... if only I knew.

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Chapter Two

“S o...” Caroline cleared her throat awkwardly. “You know the Duke of Aldworth well?”

The duke did not respond. At least not with words. Sitting across from her in the carriage, he tilted his head and stared at her, those dark green eyes of his brimming with a silent warning that told her to try and pursue this conversation would be to her detriment.

“You must do,” she continued stupidly. “As I said, my sister Violet is his betrothed, and I am well acquainted with everyone on her side of the family.” An awkward chuckle. “Most clearly. It would be strange if I did not know who my brother and sisters are...” Another awkward chuckle and she began to sweat with discomfort. “Having said that, they did leave me behind, didn’t they? So perhaps I do not know them as well as I think,” She tried to jest.

Still, the duke said nothing.

He appeared even larger in the confines of the carriage than he had when standing; a hulking mass of muscle and intimidation. Dark of feature too, the shadows inside the carriage fell across his square face, making his expression that much harder to read. Not that she needed to try too hard to understand what was on his mind.

“I swear this is not common,” she continued, feeling her tongue run away with her. “Being alone, as you found me. I am ordinarily much more well behaved—that is not to say what happened is my fault. Simply a misunderstanding...” Another awkward

laugh, swallowed by the silence which radiated from the duke's persona.

I do wish he would stop glaring at me like that. Whether or not his intent is to make me feel uncomfortable, that is precisely what is being achieved. I'm uncomfortable... and just a little afraid.

The carriage was moving alone at a steady trot, a relief to be sure, as Caroline knew that logically she was far safer inside the carriage than out of it. That wasn't to say that she felt herself to be perfectly safe, as her mind could not held but wander to thoughts of the duke and what she knew of him.

The Duke of Eggleton, informally known by many as the Cruel Duke. It was said that after his father died, he stole his own mother away and locked her indoors, keeping her there as a prisoner while refusing anyone to visit her. For years he held her under lock and key, that was until she eventually passed away, likely on account of the way he was said to have treated her. Some even said that he was the cause of her death...

Caroline was not one to give credence to rumors. And she reminded herself that this man had just saved her life. However, from the way he glared at her to how damn cold and dispassionate he was behaving, she could not help but think that there might have been more truth in what people said than she might have liked to admit.

For this reason, she began to feel nervous. And for this reason, her tongue continued to wag.

"You did not tell me how it is that you know the Duke of Aldworth," she continued, feeling herself sweat. "Personally, I do not know him well, having only met with His Grace a handful of times. I hope he is a kind man, as my sister deserves such a thing. Are the two of you close? How long have you?—"

"We do not need to do this," the duke spoke suddenly, his voice a low rumble that

started in his chest.

“Excuse me?” she blinked in surprise.

“We do not need to do this,” he said again, shifting then to look out the window.

Well... that was rude!

Caroline supposed that she should have been grateful. At least this saved her having to engage in small talk with a man who had said perhaps ten words to her since they met, none of which had been very nice.

Still, she could not help but look at him, unable to deny how ruggedly handsome he was, which in itself was a problem as such thoughts of this were not common to Caroline. In fact, they were wrong. Yet sitting closer to the open window now, the sun on his face, his cheek sharp, his nose straight, and his lips thick... no! That is wrong to think. So very wrong... He was cruel, she decided to focus on instead, and disinterested, and the sooner they arrived, the sooner she could start avoiding him. An action she suspected he might appreciate for a change.

They rode in silence for several minutes, Caroline shifting awkwardly, careful at the same time not to annoy him further. Silence was the aim here, to become invisible so he would forget that she?—

“Oh!” she cried out suddenly, unable to stop herself because it was just then than a bug of some sort flew through the window. “Oh no!” she jumped up as it came for her. “Argh!”

Despite her best efforts, Caroline thrashed wildly as the bug attacked her. She could feel it on her skin, in her hair, down her dress! She waved her arms, crying out, jumping to her feet where she hit her head on the roof and collapsed in pain.

“Get it out! Get it out! Get it out!”

The duke said nothing. In fact, he didn’t so much as move. Eyes closed, breathing heavily, Caroline forced herself to calm and then pried a single eye open. Unsurprisingly, the bug was gone. More surprisingly than that, the duke was smirking at her.

“What?”

“It flew away,” he said.

“Oh...” she blinked, her cheeks flushing red with embarrassment. “G—good.”

“Lucky that it did,” he continued, that smirk still upon his lips. “It is said that ten ladies each year die from bug attacks. I would hate for you to have become a victim.”

“Excuse me?”

He shrugged, still smirking, and then turned back to looking out of the window.

Her cheeks were still flushed red, although now the cause was anger. He is mocking me! The man has strung barely a sentence together since we started this trip and now he has the gall to make fun!

“It is not funny,” she snapped. A stupid thing to do, but Caroline hadn’t exactly been making smart decisions today, so what was one more bad one?

“Are you sure about that?”

“I thought you were a gentleman,” she said. “And from my experience, gentlemen are not in the habit of mocking young ladies.”

“Is that your experience?”

“It is.”

He shrugged, still looking out the window. “And in my experience, young ladies are not in the habit of having heart attacks at the sight of a mere beetle.”

“I did not have a heart attack!”

“Lucky you did not. I have been delayed once today already, and I would not appreciate another stop.”

Her eyes flashed with anger, and she sat herself up. “My apologies, Your Grace. I do not know what I was thinking. Upsetting you with my fright. Shame on me.”

“Upsetting me?” He turned finally, the amusement gone, the frustration he had carried with him since they first met, returned in full. “Your little panic attack right now did not upset me.”

“It was not?—”

“What has upset me is having to save you from a situation in which you should not have found yourself in the first place. Were you a stray at least, that might be understandable, as they do not know any better. You, however, are not so lucky to have that same excuse.”

“Did you just compare me to a stray dog?”

“In a fashion.” He said dryly. “Albeit a stray might be better company. They at least know how to do as they are told.”

“I will have you know that what happened earlier was not my fault, and the fact that you seem to think it is...” She folded her arms and glared at him. “It tells me all I need to know about you. A gentleman? Ha! I would have done better to have taken my chances with those brigands.”

“Careful, my pet?—”

“I am not?—”

“—you are dangerously close to proving my point for me. You wish to know what kind of man I am? I am one who appreciates peace and quiet. Now, do I need to be clearer, or are you going to behave as even the lamest of strays would know how to do?”

Caroline was not an argumentative type. Having grown up as the middle child, invisible to her mother just about, she was always careful not to cause a fuss where one was not needed as she found that rarely was there any point in being confrontational. However, this duke brought out a side of her that she could not control, and she found that all she wanted to do was make it known that she was not one to be walked over so effortlessly and rudely.

“I will say one final thing and leave it at that.” She raised her eyebrows at him in warning and he looked at her plainly. “When we arrive, as I hope we do soon, the first thing I plan on doing is putting as much space between me and you as is possible, from which point I plan on never seeing or speaking to you again. Which, by my estimation, will still be far too much for my own liking.”

The duke eyed her curiously, as if he was surprised that she had spoken up to him as she had just done. There was a hint of a smile behind his eyes, maybe even the sense that he was impressed. But rather than saying as much, he shook his head, sighed, and then looked back out of the window.

She felt herself shaking but she stayed her tongue and turned her head away, content to count the minutes until they arrived. Silence was what she wished for now. Silence and better company than this duke could ever afford.

Unfortunately, as was the case for today it seemed, luck wasn't on her side.

The carriage lurched suddenly, the coachman cried out, and then she felt them come to a grinding halt.

"What was that?" she asked, moving to the door.

"Wait here," he ordered, throwing the door open. "Mr. Gulliver!" the duke barked. "What is going on!"

"Your Grace..." Mr. Gulliver appeared by the open door, a grimace on his face and he fiddled nervously with his hands. "I am afraid that we have a problem..."

* * *

"I promise you, as soon as we arrive, my family will be sure you pay you back," Caroline insisted as she and the duke wandered through the foyer of the small inn.

"It is fine," he grumbled.

"We repay our debts," she insisted. "And this is twice now that I find myself in yours. Again, I promise that as soon as we arrive, my family will —"

"I said it is fine." He stalked past her, his shoulders hunched, each step taken heavy, shaking the wooden floorboards of the inn.

She had not known the duke for long enough to properly ascertain his moods, or the

reason for them, so Caroline found herself wondering if the sour temperament in which he currently existed was on account of their new situation or the lie she had just told.

The truth was that Caroline's family was broke. Worse than broke, they were destitute. It was her deceased father's fault, although blaming him now felt petty and pointless. What mattered was rectifying this ailment, a task her mother was working tirelessly toward and the main reason that her older sister was getting married. A marriage which she doubted her sister was excited for—as said, she had met His Grace a handful of times, and he was not exactly inviting—but knew to commit fully to for the sake of her family.

If the duke knew the Duke of Aldworth as well as he seemed to, there was a good chance that he also knew of her family's situation, which meant that he knew she was lying to him. And, if that was the case, his current state of foulness was perfectly justifiable.

On the other hand, maybe he was just annoyed because once again they had become waylaid and this time he had no one to blame.

The duke stalked to the front counter, which was empty. She heard him groan with vexation. "Is anyone there?" he called. "Innkeeper!" Still, the counter stood empty, and he groaned further as he muttered to himself. "This is unbelievable..."

Was it so wrong that she took pleasure in seeing the duke upset? Even a duke, it seems, is not beyond bad luck.

The carriage had broken down a mile up the road. One of the spokes of the wheel was cracked Mr. Gulliver had said, and would require the night to fix. A most inconvenient situation, forcing Caroline and the duke to trudge into the nearby town and find an inn to bed down in for the night. It was the only inn in town, a humble

little cottage which she assumed a man of the duke's status would rather be dead than seen in. Again, a smile was brought to her lips by the thought.

That smile faded just as quickly when a new realization dawned on her. And then her stomach dropped, and her face paled, and she started to shiver as if the flu had just taken her because she heard voices speaking in a whisper from across the room, coming closer, the conversation one that struck fear through her being.

"... I don't know what she looks like," one of the voices said. "Just that she is the daughter of a countess, left behind as they told it."

"And they think she is here?"

"They don't know where she is," the first voice explained. "A rider was sent back to where they left her, but she was gone. Could be halfway to Wales for all anyone knows it."

"What's her name?"

"Lady Caroline Hawkins. Word is being put out between here and London to look out for her. Her family is worried half to death, they say."

The second voice snorted. "Not worried enough to not leave her behind."

"True, true."

The voices were coming from across the foyer, and heading in their direction. Caroline turned quickly to find them, hopeful at first because she took some sense of gratitude to hear that her mother had at least noticed she was missing and had then the good sense to send for help in finding her. She saw immediately who it was that was speaking, two men, one young and one old, the innkeeper was her guess, and his son.

They had not seen Caroline yet, nor the duke, as they were too busy gossiping.

It was only once Caroline considered the situation a little more closely, her eyes falling on the back of the duke, that she realized how unfortunate her circumstance was. If these men were to learn of who she was, she had no doubt that word would reach her mother that she had been found traveling alone with a male companion. It did not matter that he was a duke and that he had saved her. All that would matter was that she was found in an inn, trying to book a room for the night, with a man who was not her husband.

She felt her brow begin to sweat, her stomach turning as the implications mounted. Her reputation would be ruined. Her mother's reputation would be ruined. Even her sister, who was set to marry, would likely have to deal with the fallout—it might even give the Duke of Aldworth a pretext not to marry her!

Panic now. The room turning. Her throat ran dry. Her tongue heavy. And all she could do was stand there stupidly as the two men appeared behind the counter, finally finding the duke waiting for them.

“Oh, no!” the elderly innkeeper gasped. “Didn’t see you there! It’s me eyesight—the reason I keep this one around.” He nudged his son.

“It is quite alright,” the duke said, the growl in his voice suggesting it was not alright. “I will be requiring a room for the night.”

“Just the one room...” The son peered around the duke and looked at Caroline.

The duke turned back, frowning at Caroline, likely wondering why her face had suddenly taken on the expression of utmost horror. She widened her eyes at him, praying he would understand the situation. If she wasn’t so frozen still, she might have cried out that they were together.

“Yes,” the duke said, turning back. “A single room for me and my wife, if there is one available.”

“Your wife?” the elderly innkeeper asked.

“Is there a problem?” the duke said warningly.

The innkeeper looked between the duke and Caroline, frowning as if trying to decide something. Then he shrugged and smiled. “Not at all. One room it is.”

Caroline breathed a sigh of relief. She tried to catch the duke’s eyes to offer him a silent thank you, but he busied himself organizing the room, purposefully so.

It wasn’t until the innkeeper led them up the stairs and then down the hallway toward their room that Caroline realized her mistake. Oh no...

The walk down the hallway was short, but it felt like a mile. The walls too, they were wide, and the ceiling was high, but it felt as if they were slowly closing in on her. She walked silently behind the duke and the innkeeper, her legs beginning to shake, her heart beginning to race, her breathing turning ragged with panic the closer they came to the room... the closer they came to a situation that was perhaps even worse than being found out.

“Here we are,” the innkeeper said. He unlocked the room and swung the door open. “It’s a modest dwelling, but I think you will find it to your liking.”

“I am sure it will be fine.”

The innkeeper wore a smile on his face as he looked between them expectantly. Rolling on his feet, hands behind his back, he waited for them to pass him into the room.

“Is there anything else?” the duke asked.

“Oh!” the innkeeper’s eyes turned wide. “No, no, just, ah... making sure everything is to your liking.”

“As I said, it is fine.” The duke glared at him in warning.

“Right...” The innkeeper cleared his throat. “I will just.... leave you to it.” He gave a nervous smile, looking between them again, and frowning as if unsure, only to shake his head and then hurry on past.

Caroline stood frozen in the hallway. Before her was the open door, leading into the little room. Before it stood the duke, his expression impassive, past the point of caring, clearly wishing to be done with this day so he could put it behind him once and for all.

“Well?” he said, indicating into the room.

“I...” Her tongue turned thick inside her mouth. “I...” She glanced into the room, all too aware of the circumstances. Is he serious? Surely, he can see how inappropriate this is! There is no way he can expect me to... to... Caroline felt her face drain of color, a real fear taking her as a most dark thought crossed her mind which very nearly made her scream. “I am not sleeping in the same room as you!” she blurted.

The duke suppressed a groan. “Shall I ask for another? I am certain the innkeeper will be happy to accommodate.”

“You can’t!” she cried.

He rubbed his eyes with his fingers. “I swear that your purpose on this earth is to frustrate me.”

“But... but... but...” she stammered. “It is not right. You and me... alone... the same room...”

Another smirk struck his lips, and he strode toward her. She stood frozen, her neck craning up to look at his hulking mass as he towered over her. He was just so big, taking up the entire breadth of the hallway, a monster from her nightmares that set her knees to shaking.

“You have nothing to fear from me,” he growled deeply as he leaned in close. So close that she felt the warmth of his breath on her ear; it had her skin breaking out in goose bumps, shuddering in ways that suggested fear, but she wasn’t quite sure that was the cause. “That is unless, you give me good reason.”

“G—good reason?”

“Stay that tongue. Behave yourself. And a good night’s sleep will be your reward.”

Again, that urge to argue, one which the duke alone seemed to inspire in her. “And if I don’t?”

He chuckled deeply. “Let us hope it does not come to that.” And with that, he turned and stalked back down the hallway, into the room.

Caroline stood frozen. Her eyes wide. Her mouth was dry. Her entire body shook. She peered into the darkness of the room, unable to see the duke but knowing he was there, like a monster in the shadows, waiting for her to step into his lair.

She was not afraid of His Grace like one might think because, despite him being a truly terrifying specimen, he had saved her life and had since done nothing to suggest that he meant her any harm. Rather, the fear which trickled through Caroline’s body was fear felt at her own rebellious thoughts and dark desires, those which she was at

pains to ignore but could simply not stop picturing and considering and wondering if His Grace was thinking the same...

These dark thoughts were ones that she had spent a lifetime fighting against, knowing that they were wrong, wishing she did not have them, yet enraptured at the same time by the way they made her feel. Rare as they were, today had seen them pummel her with relentless ferocity because every time she looked at His Grace... No! Please, Caroline. Keep your wicked mind away from such wicked thoughts as those!

She would try. She had to! Yet she peered into the dark depths of the room, inside of which the duke waited for her, and she was forced to consider the very real fact that she wasn't nearly as strong willed as she had spent her entire life convincing herself that she was. Not even close.

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Chapter Three

Caroline edged cautiously into the room and then, with just as much caution, she closed the door behind her.

“I see you made your choice,” the duke said.

“Did I have one?”

He was standing by the end of the bed, looking at her in a way that confirmed that perhaps this was not the best idea. It wasn’t threatening, and she did not think that he meant her any harm. It was the power in his stance that unsettled her, the dominance in the stare that he fixed her with.

He was so controlled, so calm and commanding, and not at all worried about the situation or concerned with how inappropriate it was. Did that mean he thought nothing of her? Or that it would not bother him if something untoward was to happen?

Her heart began to race and her limbs began to tingle... This, of course, brought with it shame—a feeling that was becoming far too common today for her liking.

“We always have a choice,” he said with a shrug. “Perhaps not the ones we wish for, but they are our choices to make, nonetheless.”

“Like the one that you made,” she ventured bravely, still hovering by the doorway.

“You did not have to ask for a single room.”

“True enough.” He turned his back on her and then, she realized, began to unbutton his shirt. “I felt it was the right choice to make, considering the circumstance.”

“And what circumstance is that?”

He turned around, his shirt open. Despite Caroline’s best efforts, her eyes strayed to his chest. It was covered in a thick layer of dark hair, a bulging chest hidden beneath. She felt her mouth open, and her pulse quicken.

“I expect to leave early tomorrow morning,” he said, ignoring her question. “At sunrise, assuming Mr. Gulliver has fixed the carriage wheel. Meaning, I expect an early night’s sleep.”

“I...” Still, her eyes lingered on his burly chest.

He smirked. “That won’t be a problem, will it?”

She tore her eyes free and glared at him. “I expect to retire immediately. I trust that won’t be a problem?”

He said nothing at first, his dark eyes roaming over her body in a way that made her skin flush. Another beat passed between them, and he nodded once. “Wait here.”

“What? Why?”

Without a word, the duke strode across the room and she gasped, for it looked like he was coming right at her, only for him to step around her suddenly and exit the room without so much as a glance.

Caroline blinked in shock, unable to comprehend what had just happened. Her heart was racing and her body was shaking, so she took a deep breath to calm herself as she

assessed what had happened. Where did he go? Why did he leave me here so suddenly? Hope then beckoned, as perhaps this meant he realized the same issue that she was having, determined not to spend the night in the same room as the implications of that would be dire.

She breathed a sigh of relief, even considering locking the door just in case... which she did not do, that pesky voice in her head keeping her from committing fully to her relief because a part of her, no matter how much she wished it would stay silent, wanted him to return.

The door flew open and in walked the duke again.

“What are you—” She caught her tongue when she saw that he was carrying what appeared to be a bowl filled with water, and some hand towels.

“You are hurt,” the duke said, indicating the bowl. “I presume from the fall earlier. They may not seem like much now but if they are left, they will fester. Best to take care of them early.”

“My injuries...” Caroline blinked in surprise and looked at her hands, only just now realizing how dirty they were. What was more, she began to feel a dull throb on her knees from where she had fallen earlier. And her shoulder, where her fall had been broken. Her entire body, in fact, pained her, and it was only now that she was considering bed that it came to her fully.

“You will be needing this.” The duke strode across the room and placed the bowl of water and towels by the end of the bed. From the bowl, Caroline could see steam wafting, and her wounds throbbed ever more painfully.

“I am fine,” she said stupidly, not sure how to react to this sudden kindness.

He shook his head and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Suit yourself, but I do not suggest it. As I said, they seem fine now but they will get worse." From there, he began to unbuckle his boots, kicking them from his feet.

Caroline eyed the bowl and towels, knowing it was foolish not to clean herself. Her hands mostly, but she suspected her knees too needed some care. Licking her lips, she considered what to do, wanting nothing more than this night to be over with, but she was not foolish enough to not be aware of the consequences of leaving wounds untended.

"I..." She took a step toward the bowl of water. "I will require privacy."

He laughed as he removed his second boot. "I am sure you would like that."

"I would appreciate privacy," she emphasized.

He stood. "I will turn my back while you clean yourself."

"I—"

"Do not push me," he said sharply. "I think you will agree that I have been more than accommodating. My patience, however, has its limits."

She almost laughed at that, as if the duke truly thought of himself as patient. She stayed her tongue when she saw the warning glare his dark green eyes fixed on her, and her heart skipped a beat as she remembered his threat from earlier.

"I suppose it will do." She walked to the bowl and sat herself on the edge of the bed. Then she picked up one of the towels and dipped it in the warm water. She wrung it out and began to gently dab at the scuffs on her palms.

The duke watched her curiously, a smirk on his lips in a way that she sensed was mocking.

“Something wrong?”

“It may hurt,” he said. “But that is nothing compared to the pain you will feel if you don’t clean those properly.”

“I know well enough what I am doing, thank you.”

He shrugged. “As you say.”

Despite her desire to ignore his advice, she was firmer with her next cleansing, rubbing her wounds roughly with the warm, wet towel. She winced and gritted her teeth at the sting, pushing through the pain. Soon, her wounds were clean, if not tender, and she hated to admit that the duke was right.

She dipped the towel in the water again and was about to lift her skirt to tend to her knees when she paused and snapped her head up. The duke was watching her, his arms folded, that smirk still on his lips.

“If you do not mind?” she said.

He scoffed and turned his back on her. She eyed him a moment, making sure he did not turn around. And then, carefully, she pulled back her skirt to above her knees.

Her knees were a horror show. Smeared with blood. Bruised and swollen. She could see the gashes through the mess, and she winced even before dabbing at them with the towel. Nonetheless, she continued to dab gently at them with the towel?—

“Ow!” she yelped in pain.

Eyes wide, she looked at the duke, who still stood with his back to her.

She glared at him for some reason, as if this was his fault. Then she wet the towel again, trying a second time to touch gently at her knees?—

“Ow!” she winced and pulled the towel back. She had barely managed to clean the blood from the first one, but just the thought of doing it again made tears well in her eyes. She eyed the wounds, looked to the towel, then at the duke, and came to a decision. “All done,” she announced and put the towel back in the bowl of water.

“Is that right?” the duke said, back still to her.

“It was not as bad as I thought...”

He turned around and looked at her, one eyebrow raised. She matched it with her own, daring him to question her. Why do I care what he thinks? And why am I so insistent on antagonizing him?

He sighed and strode right for her.

“What are you doing?” she scrambled back in fright.

“The wounds will infect if they are not cleaned.”

“I know that.”

He stopped before her and raised a judgmental eyebrow. “I have some experience with tending wounds. More than yourself, I would gather. And in my experience, it is always easier when someone does it for you.”

“I...” Caroline understood what he was saying well enough, that he was offering to

help her. But with her legs exposed as they were, her bare thighs showing, the thought of the duke between them as he tenderly touched and dabbed at her aroused within her the exact sensation she had been desperate to avoid. “I will be fine.”

He continued to look down at her. “There is no need to appear brave. Best to admit that you are not capable rather than the alternative.”

“The alternative?”

“Infection,” he said. “Which I assure you will be infinitely worse than anything I might possibly do.” Do you want a bet?

Caroline knew it was dangerous. She knew she should have told him no and not dared to put herself in such a position as that. Yet the duke spoke sense, she knew too that she was not capable of cleaning the wounds properly, and most of all... she wanted to see what might happen. As shameful as that was.

“Fine,” she sighed with exaggeration and shuffled back, opening her legs further for him. “Have it your way...”

The duke dropped to his knees before her, shoving his hand into the bowl and ringing the towel. Then he moved between her legs, his free hand going for the skirt of her dress.

“What are you doing!” she snatched at his hand; his wrist alone was too thick for her hand to wrap even halfway around.

“What did you think I was going to do?”

“I—” She caught her tongue, knowing she was being foolish. “Just be quick about it.”

He snatched his arm free. Then, quicker than a man his size should have been able to move, he reached up and wrapped a single hand around her waist to hold her down.

“What are you?—”

“To keep you from thrashing,” he said, holding her steady.

Panic flooded Caroline. That desire to fight, as if her life was at stake! She thrashed, but it was no good. She bucked, but he hardly seemed to feel it. She gasped when she noticed that her skirt had been lifted above her knees, and he was already attending to her wounds.

“Will you stay still?” he growled as he dabbed at them.

There was pain, that did not vanish. But Caroline was hardly able to feel it, her mind on his hand which still pressed against her waist. He was so strong. So large. So powerful. Kneeling between her legs the way he was, her mind went to places that made no sense to her yet made perfect sense at the same time.

Her breathing was heavy... more so as his hand moved from her waist to her thighs. He gripped her right one first, pressing it into the bed so she could not move as he wiped at her knee. She winced but he did not stop, dipping the towel back in the bowl of water and ringing it with a single hand.

Her mind now moved to his hand around her bare thigh. Squeezing roughly, but not painfully, his grip was so powerful and commanding. Somehow, the way he cleaned her wounds was soft and tender, even caring.

She found herself looking at his face, his expression tight and set as he worked, biting into his lip. There was more behind his eyes than mere frustration at having to help her as he was doing. It was a strange thing, but his hand on her thigh began to

squeeze a little bit more firmly, his eyes flicked from her wounds to her thighs, and she could see sweat beading on her forehead. His breathing, ordinarily so calm, became labored.

She felt the urge to relax under his touch, but she fought this back when the guilt flooded her. This is not right! It might have felt as if it was. Her mind might have gone to places she was determined for it not to. But deep down she knew that nothing about this was proper, a fear she'd had since she was a girl, coming to life in real time and proving herself to be a liar.

Panic flooded her as she remembered an incident she'd had when she was just a little girl, involving a romantic story she had read... although it wasn't so much romantic as it was scandalous. Descriptions given in the story which had made her flush, which had excited her! Only for her mother to stumble upon her in that moment and remind her of how wrong these stories were. And why.

“You are a lady!” her mother had shouted. “And this is filth! Not real life! Not what is expected of a wife and husband! You ought to know better!”

Caroline's eyes flashed open, and she went to push the duke away, guilt swarming her because she felt as if she was doing something wrong. Only by then, there was no need.

“Done.” He stood suddenly and she lurched forward.

“Wh—what?”

“It will do for now.” He walked across the room, his naked back to her. “When we arrive tomorrow, I suggest you get it cleaned properly. I will make sure to alert the staff.”

“I...” Caroline studied the duke, his back still to her, his breathing labored and his body trembling. She could not see his face, but she could imagine it. Not angry, as was the norm. No... there was something else there now. “Thank you,” she offered. “Truly, that was very kind of you.”

The duke’s body turned rigid at the compliment. She froze, feeling that she had said the wrong thing, certain he was going to snap at her. Silence grew between them, her heart beating with such force she was sure he could hear it. But still she said nothing, wondering what he would say, what he was thinking, and, most importantly, what he would do...

“It is time we retire.” He turned on the spot and stormed to the other side of the bed.

“Wh—what?” she stammered.

He sat down and the bed shook. “I will see you in the morning.” He kicked his legs up, rolled onto the bed, pulled the sheets over him, and then turned his back on her fully.

Caroline sat there stupidly for a moment, unsure of what had just happened, wondering if it was all in her head. No... it cannot have been. There was a moment there, I am sure of it, so subtle and quick that I nearly missed it. But if I did not know any better, I might have said that the duke... that he... She gave her head a shake, not daring to go there. Not wanting to, on account of the guilt.

The duke was called the Cruel Duke for good reason, and despite this one act of kindness, that wasn’t going to change. She eyed his hulking frame on the bed, curled her lip as she remembered how he had treated her all day, and then she stood up, walked over to extinguish the candles that burned in the torches, felt her way back to the bed, lay herself down as far from the duke as she could, and closed her eyes.

Sleep came immediately.

* * *

When Caroline came to, she felt... strangely comfortable. With her eyes still closed, and consciousness slow to arrive, she couldn't remember where she was or what had happened to bring her there. All she knew in those few seconds was how cozy her bed felt, how warm it was, how right the world seemed in the moment. She let forth a low moan, her eyes fluttering a little, her mind pulling her awake when she wished it would give her a few seconds more.

Slowly, she came to recognize that the reason she felt so comfortable was because of the pillow she had wrapped herself around in the middle of the night. It was large and firm, somehow also soft, protective and comforting and she squeezed it a little bit tighter...

"Sleep well?" a deep voice growled in her ear.

Her heart stopped beating and she caught her breath. With her eyes still closed, the pillow that she was holding shifted in her grip. Oh no...

"Not that I require a response," the deep voice said. "I can figure the answer out well enough for myself."

She snapped her eyes open and gasped to see a face mere inches from her own. Deep green eyes. A heavy brow. Full lips from which a warm breath traced her skin and filled her nose in a way that made her shudder... that was until she lurched back in shock.

"Oh no!" Caroline had been wrapped around the duke like a vine around a tree. Legs and arms holding him close, refusing to let go, demanding that he hold her too. She

scrambled back and nearly fell from the bed.

“I misspoke yesterday.” The duke, apparently undisturbed by both the way she had been holding him, and her hastened retreat, sat himself up and looked at her plainly. His hair was messy, his hairy chest on display, as were those broad shoulders and arms as thick as her thighs.

“Wh—what?” she stammered, unsure of what to say or what to make of the situation.

“Yesterday, when I likened you to a stray dog.” He continued to gaze at her with total self-control, as emotionless as if he was asking her with what she wished to break her fast. “It occurs to me now that perhaps you have more in common with a monkey, the way you clung to me last night.”

He did not smirk, but she could see the humor in his eyes. For one so dispassionate, he seems to take a sick pleasure from trying to upset me. All things considered, that really is the least of my problems.

“I was not... that was not what you... I was sleeping!”

“I have known men to keep monkeys as pets. Not my personal preference, but for you I might make an exception.”

The initial embarrassment fled her, and was replaced with anger—an emotion she was becoming used to around the duke. “How dare?—”

“We don’t have time for this.” He rose from the bed and started buttoning his shirt. “As I said yesterday, I wish to leave as soon as possible. So, if you would be so kind, save your tantrum for when we are on the road.”

“Tantrum! I was not throwing a —”

“As I said,” he cut through her. “For when we are on the road. Now is not the time.”

She widened her eyes and glared ruefully at him. Fury enveloped her, paired with a warmth which spread through her body and made her limbs tingle. Still, she could feel the duke’s body pressed against her own, the memory of him in her arms and how comforting it was, and how she hadn’t wanted to wake up ever. I did not know it was him! If I had, I certainly would not have enjoyed myself!

Again, that guilt returned. She had done nothing wrong, she knew. But that did not mean it hadn’t been close. Worse that if it had come to such things, Caroline was not sure she would have had the control to resist...

They readied in silence, Caroline purposefully not looking at the duke as she went to the mirror and checked her hair and makeup. She had fallen asleep in the same clothes she’d been in all day, so there was little to be done regarding her physical appearance. Annoying, as a quick glance at the duke confirmed he looked refreshed in ways which might have suggested he’d bathed and changed and had a better night sleep than she’d admit to.

The silence between them grew and Caroline could feel its weight on her. Those pesky thoughts returned to the previous evening, and this morning, and the fight that had raged inside of her as she had tried to control her amorous thoughts. It was as if the duke could read her mind, and the longer the silence held, the more sure she was that he could see exactly what she was thinking.

“I wish to remind you of what I said yesterday,” Caroline blurted, desperate to fill the silence and distract her mind. “In regards to my family repaying you for all you have done.”

“It is fine,” the duke said. “As I told you, it is not a concern?—”

“It is for me,” she spoke over him, which she saw made him flinch for he was likely not used to being interrupted. “And my family, for that matter. You have done us a great service and our honor demands that it be repaid. It is that simple.”

He scoffed. “And you think that your family is capable of repaying me?”

Her eyes flashed with anger. What he said might have been technically true, for her family had no wealth to speak of, but for the duke to speak down about her family like that was the height of rudeness! A man of his station should have known better.

“How dare you,” she said with more bravery than she thought herself capable. “That is my family whom you dismiss. And for no reason other than... than... than they are not here to defend themselves. Well, I am and I say it again, when we arrive, name your price and they will pay it.”

His brow creased and where she expected anger, what she got instead was curiosity. “Is that so?”

“It is,” she said firmly, feeling like a fool because words were wind in this instance, a promise that neither she nor her family could possibly fulfill.

“Your family cannot repay me,” he said.

“How dare?—”

“I know of their misfortunes. I know their financial worth.” He started across the room, straight for her. “Do not lie to me.”

“I... I was not lying,” she said as the duke came for her. “I merely meant?—”

“I know what you meant.” He was at her, standing over her so that she was forced

across the room, her back soon pressed against the door. “And I know you mean it too. I can see it in your eyes.” He held those eyes with such intensity that she was forced to look away. “Which is why you will repay me, only not with financial compensation.”

Again, Caroline glanced about the room, realizing how helpless she was. She wondered if she should cry out, staying that notion because she did not think it would make a difference. Also... she was not nearly as scared as she should have been.

“Wh... what do you... what do you want from me?” she gulped.

“We are to spend this weekend at the Aldworth Estate,” he said, staring right at her. “Across the space of the next several days, I suspect there will be many an eligible lady in attendance. Your task, which you have just told me you will be more than happy to assist in, is to find among these ladies a bride for me.”

Caroline did not understand what he meant. At least not at first. “A... a bride? I do not—what do you mean?”

“I did not stutter.”

“I know that,” she said. “And I understand what you said well enough —”

“Then there is no need for me to explain,” he continued over her. “I wish to marry, and soon. Before this weekend draws to a close, you will have found me a willing bride. Then and only then, will I consider your debt paid off.”

She stared at him blankly, understanding the words but still not comprehending them. He wishes for me to help find him a bride? In the space of a few days? How? And why? Surely, he is toying with me?

“Good.” The duke straightened up, took a step back, leaned forward and popped open the door, forcing Caroline to stumble forward as he swung it. “Now that we have that sorted, I will meet you downstairs. Do not dally.”

With that, the duke strode from the room, leaving Caroline behind to unpack and determine what to make of this most bizarre request. Not that she was able to do so in the space of a few seconds. Had she an entire day, she still might not have fully realized what was going on.

The duke, she was coming to understand, was a complete mystery to her and this moment right here was but another layer to a man whom she could not begin to fathom.

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Chapter Four

The duke sighed. “If you are going to continue to look at me like that, ask the question and be done with it.”

“Wh—what question?” Caroline balked, not even realizing that she had been staring.

“The one that is on your mind,” he said. “And do not tell me otherwise, for I can see it in your eyes. Unless you are staring at me for a different reason?” He cocked an eyebrow and that smirk from yesterday returned; the sense that he was mocking her.

Caroline felt her cheeks flush bright red, thanking God that in this instance she was not staring at him for reasons that had anything to do with his physical appearance; she found him handsome, of course, and she doubted there was a woman alive who wouldn’t. Brooding and dark, she wondered quietly why she was so drawn to these qualities when they should have frightened her.

Lucky that for once, her mind was far too busy to be wasted on such fancies. Sitting across from the duke, the carriage moving at pace down the winding road, Caroline’s thoughts were still back at the inn, the request he had made, and what on earth he was thinking by asking such a thing of her.

“I think you know what is on my mind.” She cleared her throat and looked warningly. “The only thing.”

He exhaled sharply, the smirk fading. “Go on then, before I change my mind.”

“I am struggling to understand exactly what it is that you require of me, is all—and I am not slow,” she spoke quickly, widening her eyes at him and glaring. “I understand the request, for you made that perfectly clear. What I do not understand is why.”

“Why I wish to marry?” He was sitting with his legs crossed, his comfort a perfect contrast to how awkward Caroline was feeling. “I would say the answer to that is perfectly obvious.” He looked plainly at her, and she indicated for him to continue. “I am a duke, thirty and one years of age, and single for my entire life, but marriage is expected of me. The real question should be why I would not want to marry.”

“That is not—” She caught her tongue, stopping her first thought because it was brimming with anger. “It just seems odd, is all. The suddenness of the request. That you should ask me to help you.”

“You said that you owed me.”

“Not this!”

“Speak plainly, Lady Caroline, for as much as I enjoy seeing you flustered, even I have my limits.”

She hesitated as she considered how to frame the question. It was clear to her that there was more going on here than a mere desire to marry because the duke thought it the right time and the proper thing to do. Based on what she had seen of the man, he did not strike her as one to care one wit about social expectations, nor did he seem the type who would burden himself with a wife because he thought it proper.

Her mind wandered back to the rumors she knew of him. The Cruel Duke and the things he was said to have done. Is that why he wishes for a bride? Someone else whom he can trap and torment... and then kill? She shuddered at the thought.

“You just do not seem like the...” She clicked her tongue. “Like one who cares for marriage.”

“Do I not?”

“I admit I do not know you very well —”

“Yet you speak as if you do,” he cut over her, his tone turning cold; it brought a chill through the carriage, and she shivered. “Which leads me to suspect the true nature of your hesitation.” He sat himself up and looked right at her, his lips pressed together, and his expression as cold as his tone. “Shall I ask what you have heard of me, or do you wish to pretend as if you do not know about what I speak?”

She gasped, her hand moving to her mouth to try and keep it from turning to a frightened cry. “I... I do not... what I have heard of you?”

He scoffed. “You are a terrible liar, Lady Caroline. And regarding that little nuisance, it is of no concern, nor is it something with which you need worry yourself.”

“I do not know what you?—”

“I am not seeking a love match,” he cut her off, suddenly annoyed. “I am not interested in falling for my wife and living a happily ever after, so you can dispel with the notion. What I want, the only thing, is a marriage of convenience and nothing more. Is that understood?”

It was the first time he had gotten truly angry with her. He had been annoyed by her before. Frustrated. Even short tempered. But in this, she saw a hint of why the name which people called him was very likely a fair moniker, well earned. Strangely, the fact that it annoyed him so spoke volumes, suggesting that perhaps he wasn't a fan of the name. Which makes sense, for why would he be?”

“A marriage of convenience,” she said. “I think I understand.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I am just trying to deduce the parameters of whom I should find for you, is all,” she said. “You have asked for my help, and I intend to do my best. What do you look for in a wife? Physical? Emotional? Her pedigree?”

“As I said, it does not matter.” He smirked again. “Unless you are considering putting up your hand for the position?”

Her cheeks flushed pink again and she looked away. “Of course I am not.”

“Good,” he said sharply. “Then none of that is cause for concern. What I require is a lady of the ton, one willing to marry me, and soon. Beyond that...” He exhaled sharply to himself. “I leave my future in your capable hands.”

“But —”

“We are done here,” he snapped at her, raising his eyebrows in warning, holding his glare on her to ensure that she did not push.

Caroline scrunched her brow and met the glare, because she did not appreciate being spoken to like this. So used to being ignored and walked over and treated as invisible, to suddenly be the object of focus like this, and done so with such venom, was perhaps an even worse fate.

The duke rolled his eyes and shook his head and then went back to looking out of the carriage window, and Caroline sensed that short of her slapping him across the face, he would do everything in his power to ignore her.

She fell back in her seat, still watching him, running through their conversation just now with keen interest and confusion. There was so much he wasn't telling her. But was it because he really did not care about her opinion or who she chose for him? Or was there another reason, one which for reasons she could only guess, he was determined to keep hidden?

Why do I even care? He wishes to treat me as if I do not matter, I should do the same—I will do the same! I will find him a bride, as I owe him that, and I do not break promises. Beyond that most bizarre of tasks, Caroline decided in the moment that once she was done, she would do everything she could to never hear from or speak to the duke again.

Watching him still, the way he purposefully ignored her, she got the sense that this was one decision made that the two might agree upon.

* * *

They arrived at the Aldworth Estate shortly before noon.

It was a breathtaking piece of land, spread across acres of rolling green fields and farmlands. At its center sat the manor, which itself was one of the biggest Caroline had ever seen; the front doors alone stood two stories high while the colonnades that framed the home were each as thick as the carriage in which she rode.

The carriage trotted through the iron gates at the end of the drive, steadily making its way toward the manor which was nearly another mile in distance. Caroline breathed a sigh of relief to see they had finally reached their destination, as she and the duke had not spoken in hours, and she was just about ready to see him out of her sight for good.

This good mood of hers faltered, however, when the front doors of the manor swung open, pouring from inside her entire family who rushed the carriage like locusts

devouring a field of wheat.

She grimaced, her eyes flicking to the duke, who she noticed was eyeing her family with an unreadable expression. Likely annoyance.

“My family,” she explained.

“I do not care,” he said simply.

She curled her lip at him, which he did not see. Why I waste any emotion at all on the man is beyond me!

The carriage soon came to a steady stop. Her family were still rushing for it, and Caroline took a deep breath as she prepared herself for the clamor. Back home, she might go days without being spoken to by her mother, practically ignored as if she was one of the help. Yet she had no doubt that, in this instance, her mother would treat her as if she was the favorite and her heart had broken to find her missing.

I would not be missing if she had looked for me in the first place. But I best not point this out, because that would only upset her further.

Thus, Caroline popped open the door and climbed down from the carriage, just in time for her mother to be on her.

“Caroline!” Her mother was on her instantly, pulling Caroline into a hug so tight that it knocked the wind from out of her lungs. “I knew you would be safe! I knew it!” She then took hold of Caroline by the arms and kissed her on both cheeks. “I did not worry for a moment.”

“Greetings, mother...”

“Did I not say?” Her mother looked back at the others, who were not quite as quick to crowd Caroline but were still coming for her. “Of all of you, if there is one child of mine who is not to be fretted over, it is Caroline.”

“That is simply your way of averting responsibility,” Caroline’s sister, Aurelia swept in next, kissing Caroline once on the cheek. “Which is what you have been doing from the moment you noticed she was missing.”

“I have not been!”

“It is good to see you safe,” Aurelia said before turning on her mother. “Perhaps next time you will save yourself the stress and not leave Caroline behind.”

“You can talk!” her mother blustered. “You were the one I asked to make sure everyone was ready. I cannot be expected to do everything!”

“Averting blame,” Aurelia shrugged. “There she goes again.”

“Caroline!” Her eldest sister, Violet came in next, shoving past Aurelia and her mother to hug Caroline; and thankfully cutting through their bickering. “What on earth were you thinking? Getting left behind like that.” Perhaps not the warmest or most caring of words, but that had always been Violet’s way.

“The blame does not lie with her,” Daniel said. He was standing back, eyeing the scene with a curled lip and sultry expression that was common. “Mother, you ought to count yourself lucky that no harm has befallen Caroline. The fact she was in this position at all...”

As compassionate as her older brother’s words might have sounded, Caroline knew them to be anything but. As the oldest of the troupe, and the only son, he was the official patriarch of the family, a role he took very seriously. What was more, he had

traveled ahead of them to be here, leaving a day early and entrusting his sister's care to that of their mother. The fact that his mother had made such a tremendous mistake no doubt irked him, very likely infuriating his own sense of worth

"I was not blaming her," Violet said rightly. "Merely observing a fact. And you are correct..." Violet looked to their mother. "This should never have happened."

Their mother flushed with embarrassment. "As I explained, Daniel, it was Aurelia who I entrusted with?—"

"It does not matter," he spoke over her. "Their care was in your hands. Although perhaps I should blame myself for trusting you in the first place."

"Daniel, do us all a favor and go practice falling over somewhere, will you?" That was Eveline, the third sister. She saddled in beside Caroline and winked. "Glad to see you well, Caroline. Although I hope you have a story for us, lest this all be for nothing."

"Caroline..." Sneaking through her siblings was Iris, the fourth sister—not counting Caroline. She was the youngest, the most shy, and the most doted upon by their mother. "I am glad you are safe." She smiled warmly, albeit with hesitation.

Her arrival to Aldworth Estate was nothing short of chaotic, but that was to be expected when it came to Caroline and her family.

The oldest of them, Daniel, was distant and closed off. The second eldest, Violet was the most proper and well-liked by their mother. The third sibling, Aurelia, was the black sheep of the family, always fighting with their mother because Aurelia was physically a little plump and this, to their mother, was the worst thing a young lady could be.

Eveline, who was younger than Caroline, had developed a wild side borne from the need to stand out from her older siblings, while Iris, the youngest of the group, was treated as the baby by all; overly looked after and yet to grow into herself.

“What happened?” Eveline demanded.

“Yes, tell us,” Aurelia perked up.

“Give her some space,” Violet sighed.

“Children, children!” her mother cried above them. “One at a time!”

They bickered and carried on like chickens fighting over freshly tossed seed, pulling this way and that on Caroline who did as she always did when she found herself in the throes of her family’s chaos. She shrunk back into herself. The best way to deal with them, she had found, was to let them tire themselves out and grow bored, then she could simply slip away and no one would even notice.

It was at that moment that the duke appeared in the carriage door. His hulking frame had the carriage rocking, and when he stepped down, the ground seemed to shake. A presence that was indomitable, one that was deserving of attention, he said nothing and still it was enough for Caroline’s family to fall silent and gape stupidly.

“Your Grace!” her mother squawked. “This is a most unexpected... we did not... our daughter...”

“Mother,” Caroline sighed and stepped around her siblings and mother. “His Grace was the one who assisted in ensuring that I arrived in one piece.”

“He did what?!”

“He found me,” she said. “And offered to bring me here. A coincidence and nothing more, but one for which I am grateful.”

“You... you did?” her mother balked, only to get a hold of herself and then sweep toward the duke. “Your Grace! We are forever in your debt.” She reached him and curtsied. “And if there is anything you need, you have only to ask. I cannot tell you how much this means, rescuing my daughter as you have done. Truly, words cannot do it justice.”

The duke looked down at her coldly. Then he swept his eyes over Caroline’s brother and four sisters. They were massed together, each staring wide-eyed and in fear—no doubt they recognized him and knew the rumors as Caroline did—none of them making so much as a sound as if hoping he might not notice them.

The duke’s lip curled. “Roderick,” he said.

Her mother reared back. “Roderick? What are you...?”

“Aldworth,” he corrected with a frustrated growl. “Where is he?”

“Oh...” Her mother frowned and looked back at her children. “I am not?”

“His study, Your Grace,” Violet spoke up. “I was just with him.” She was set to marry the Duke of Aldworth, this weekend being their engagement party, so it made sense that she would know his whereabouts.

The duke exhaled through his nose, stepped around Caroline’s mother, and stormed down the drive toward the manor. Not once did he look back. Not once did he give any indication that he was appreciative of Caroline’s mother’s thanks or gave a damn. The doors to the manor were already open and he strode inside, gone in an instant as if he never was.

“Was that the Duke of Eggelton?” Aurelia gasped.

“The Cruel Duke?” Eveline added.

“Eveline!” her mother cried. “Do not say such things!”

“That is what he is called!”

“It is only rumor,” Daniel sighed and rolled his eyes. “Everyone knows that.”

“It is not!” Eveline argued. “It is true!”

“What is true?” Iris asked, her voice barely heard. “What is true?”

“Ignore them.” Violet rested a hand on Iris's shoulder.

“He is a strange one, at the very least,” Caroline’s mother said, still watching where the duke had left them. “Caroline, how on earth did you come to be in his company?”

To this, Caroline shook her head to herself. A story that even now, she could not believe that she had found herself to be a part of. The damsel in distress, saved not by a dashing prince, but by a monster posing as a gentleman. Where to even begin?

She looked to her family, finding all eyes upon her, silent and expecting. For once, she realized, she had found herself at the center of their attention, rather than having to fight for it. Whether this was a good thing or not... she was not so sure.

Chapter Five

“Now that we are alone, tell me what really happened,” Aurelia demanded as she dragged Caroline into her bedroom, closing the door behind them.

“I told you already,” Caroline said, wishing that she was better at lying because the look on her face was sure to give the lie away. “It was as I explained it to mother.”

Aurelia blew through her lips. “Do not think I did not see the holes peppered throughout your little tale, Caroline. You might have mother fooled, and that dolt Daniel—which is no great compliment, as you know our brother only sees what he wishes to see. And to be fair, if he was to get even a whiff of foul play...” Her lip curled. “Honestly, he is turning more and more into our father by the day.”

“Aurelia...” Caroline felt her cheeks grow red. She tried to act aloof, walking across the room and opening the windows to allow in some fresh air, her back purposefully turned to her sister. “It is as I told you. I was being chased by some bandits, the duke saved me, and then he brought me here.”

“After a night spent together, you mean.”

Caroline spun about quickly, catching the accusatory tone. “We did not spend the night together!”

“Oh? Did the duke leave you on the side of the road last night? After having saved you. That is not very proper of him.”

“That is not what I meant. As I explained it just now?—”

“You two spent the night together.”

“I did not say that!”

“But the fact you are not denying it completely speaks volumes.” Her sister giggled. “Tell me true, what happened? And do not think I will allow you to leave before I wring the truth from you. Even if I have to do it with my bare hands.” Aurelia imitated shaking the air as if she had a hold of Caroline by the arms.

Aurelia was only one year older than Caroline, and of all her sisters, they got along best. She was perhaps the only one who treated Caroline as a real person, and she was certainly the only one who defended her against their mother and their older brother.

The two were similar in so many ways and different in so many others. Physically, Aurelia was pudgy, which was the cause of her and their mother’s constant bickering. But she was short like Caroline, had the same light brown hair, darker brown eyes, and even matching dimples when they smiled; some had mistaken them for twins. Caroline was no willow either, curvaceous and full-bodied, but still trim enough that their mother did not hassle her.

Regarding their personalities, Aurelia and Caroline were much the same in temperament and humor, even if Aurelia was outspoken about it and not as afraid of confrontation as Caroline was. Most importantly, Caroline trusted her older sister, knowing too that there was simply no way she could keep this from her.

She looked about the room, double checking they were alone. “You must promise you will tell nobody,” she hissed.

Aurelia’s eyes widened. “I was right! Something happened! Oh, it was so obvious,

the way he fled as soon as he arrived. Caroline..." She clicked her tongue and smiled wickedly. "You little she-devil."

"It is not like that!" Caroline cried. "Truly, the duke..." She sighed and shook her head. "I do not think I like him very much. He is cold and dispassionate and mean. More villain than hero."

"Easy on the eyes though," Aurelia giggled.

Despite herself, Caroline giggled along. She might dislike the man on a personal level, but there was no mistaking how handsome he was. And he was not typically goodlooking either, like the Duke of Aldworth. Rather, he was rugged and unrefined, messy about the edges, with a darkness to him that was dangerous, and had Caroline's heart fluttering as she remembered last night... his hands on her thighs... how powerful they were and?—

"Come then," Aurelia prompted, pulling Caroline out of her reverie. "What happened?"

Caroline sighed and then quickly told Aurelia everything. The moment they shared at the inn when he cleaned her wounds, the bed they shared after and how she woke wrapped over him, and then his most strange request demanding that she help him find a bride.

In Caroline's mind, that last point was the most important, not that she was surprised to see that Aurelia barely paid it a moment of attention.

"Caroline!" she cried out gleefully. "I cannot believe you! You slept with the duke!"

"Will you keep it down!" Caroline hissed. "And we did not sleep together. We?—"

“Shared a bed.”

“Yes. But it was not anything scandalous.” She felt her body turning hot, her heart beginning to thud, as her panic increased. “We had no choice! If the innkeeper had seen us together and learned that we were not married, it might have led to awkward questions.”

“Certainly not as awkward as those you will have to navigate when mother learns that you threw yourself at?—”

“I did not!”

Caroline felt herself getting annoyed. Again, guilty also. Shame flooding her because in Caroline’s mind, such night-time activities were reserved for duty only, a wife’s duty to produce children for her husband and nothing more. That wasn’t to say that her sisters felt differently to her, but it was also a matter they rarely discussed openly. Growing up as children of a cold, dispassionate marriage as they all had, each was likely affected by it in different ways. Ways which they had never delved into because such feelings were personal.

“I am joking,” Aurelia giggled. She could not have looked more excited. “You must admit, it is rather delicious though...” Her eyes flashed excitement. “The Cruel Duke...” A click of the tongue next. “You are lucky to return in one piece.”

Caroline scoffed. “He is not as bad as that.”

A raised eyebrow. “Really?”

“Well...” Caroline hesitated. She had thought quite a bit about the rumors of the duke and how much truth there was to them. Yes, he was a little cold. Yes, he was distant. But was he evil? Capable of such a thing as they said? Somehow, Caroline didn’t

think so. He had saved her, after all. Surely, that meant something. “That is not the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

“Did you not hear what I told you? He wishes for me to find him a bride, Aurelia. And this weekend! So, if you do not mind, I would prefer that be what you concentrate on. And you know better than I who is to attend this weekend, which means that I will need your help to—” She caught her tongue when she heard a noise.

It was hushed whispers, coming from the other side of the closed door. Caroline’s eyes widened and she rushed for it, not hesitating to throw the door open, not surprised either to find her younger sisters, Eveline and Iris crouched on the other side.

“You sneaks!” she cried.

Eveline grinned wickedly. “You can talk.”

“What are you doing?”

“Eveline!” Aurelia snapped and stormed toward them. “How long have you been there for? And Iris!” She turned her angered gaze on the youngest of their sisters. She was only twelve, a willowy thing, frail and constantly sickly in a way that made it impossible to ever be truly angry with her. “I thought you knew better.”

“It was not my fault,” Iris pleaded. “Eveline —”

“Don’t blame me!”

“Come here!” Aurelia snatched Eveline by the arm and yanked her into the room. Iris

was quick to follow.

Caroline swung the door closed, her heart racing even more now because she had no doubt her sisters had overheard every word said. “It was not how it sounds,” she hurried to explain.

“And how does it sound?” Eveline could not have looked more pleased with herself. She was just seventeen, still coming into herself as a woman, still deciding what kind of woman she wished to be. Like Aurelia, she was loud and outspoken, although unlike Aurelia, she did not know when to keep her mouth shut.

“What did you hear?” Aurelia demanded of them. “And do not lie to me.”

“Is it true?” Iris asked softly. She was fidgeting with her hands, unable to look her sisters in the eyes. “Caroline, that you... that you slept with the duke?”

Caroline groaned.

“So, when is the baby due?” Eveline chided. “How fun, a wedding and a new little sister. This weekend is turning out better and better.”

“Please!” Caroline insisted. “What you heard—it is not true!”

“Then why are you acting with such panic?” Eveline grinned.

“That is not—I am merely—nothing happened!” She looked to Aurelia for support. “Aurelia, tell them.”

“And you think Eveline will listen to me?” she snorted.

“Please,” she said desperately, looking between Eveline and Iris. “You cannot repeat

what you heard. Not one word! You must promise me.”

To this, Eveline grinned with a sense of mischievousness, while Iris continued to look confused.

It was the worst possible outcome. Caroline’s secret was out, likely to spread like a fire through a stable because she knew Eveline’s mouth was one not to be kept shut. Oh, she would beg, and she was certain Eveline would make promises, but she could see the future as clear as if it was happening and this scandal, as it had now become, threatened to be her undoing.

Her only hope was to somehow navigate through this weekend without making things worse. Find the duke a bride. Focus attention on the soon-to-be-married couple. And pray that her sister did not spill this secret for no other reason than she was bored and liked the attention.

Why do I get the feeling that things are going to get worse before they get better? Why do I get the feeling that this is but the first step in what promises to be a road filled with misery and scandal? And why oh why is it happening to me?

A lifetime spent avoiding drama and mischief and this was Caroline’s reward. All she could wonder now was why she had bothered at all.

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Chapter Six

“I suppose you think I am a fool,” Roderick, the Duke of Aldworth sighed as he took a long sip of whiskey.

Anthony, the Duke of Eggelton scoffed. “I do. Although I doubt it is for whatever reason you are suggesting.”

His best friend rolled his eyes and then nodded across the room, indicating to the family of his soon-to-be wife. They stood by the fireplace, massed together in a huddle as they argued and bickered loudly in ways that would suggest they were not guests in the home of a duke.

At the center of it was Dowager Countess Grayhill, her attention focused mostly on her second-eldest daughter, Aurelia. The two went at it like bulls with locked horns, tempers slowly rising without care or concern for how inappropriate it was.

Roderick’s betrothed, Violet, looked to be trying to calm them down. Of all the children, she was undoubtedly the most proper and mature, her expression one of pained embarrassment because of the scene her family was making.

Another of the girls... Eveline, Anthony was certain to be her name, had a wild look in her eyes as she goaded mother and sister, while the only son, Daniel, stood back a small distance and eyed the scene with disdain.

And then there was Lady Caroline Hawkins, by the fire, watching her family bicker, but doing nothing to get involved. Surely, a rare instance, as she is one who I assume

to be a constant cause of upheaval. At least as far as my own experiences are concerned.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” Roderick groaned and took another sip of his whiskey. “If they had knives, I am sure that by now blood would have been spilt.”

“They are a rather cantankerous lot,” Anthony agreed.

“Ha!” Roderick snorted. “That is a nice way of putting it. I have seen tavern brawls contained of more order. I say it now, Anthony, but when you find me in a year’s time with a noose around my neck, you will know the cause.” His lip curled as he watched the family. “Tiresome people.”

It had been a long, tiresome evening, and Anthony was already looking forward to its end. Was it not expected of him to remain for a drink, he would have retired as soon as supper had been finished with, happy to lock himself away and put this day behind him. Alas, Anthony was nothing if not a slave to expectation, thus his being here right now.

Supper had been a rowdy affair, spent mostly by the dowager countess trying to keep her children in line. Aurelia was without a doubt the most troublesome, but that Eveline gave her a run for her money. Anthony had spent the long hours saying little, happy to be ignored because he did not wish to find himself in the middle of the chaos. Even if it was all but unavoidable.

Once supper ended, Roderick had declared that they should retire to the drawing room for a drink before bed. Tomorrow, the guests would begin to arrive for the duration of the weekend, so this was the last chance they would have to spend time together as one big happy family.

One big unhappy family, I think he meant to say. I cannot help but wonder if Lady

Caroline Hawkins had been left behind by accident or if she had purposefully fled.

“I would say that I feel sorry for you,” Anthony chuckled dryly as he took a sip of his own glass of whiskey. “But you and I both know how little I care for your happiness.”

Roderick scoffed. “You think me a fool, but I am not as simple-minded as it might appear. Yes, I have agreed to marry into a circus hosted by hyenas, but I tell you now, once it is done with, I will see the back of that lot—” He flicked his head at the family. “—and then endeavor to never see them again. Which will still be too soon.”

“Oh? Moving overseas, are you? How lucky for all of us.”

“Not quite,” Roderick smirked. Then he checked that the family were not listening, dropping his voice slightly to ensure the fact. “You know I have no love for marriage, Anthony. The entire concept to me is as pointless as tits on a bull.”

“Yes, you have said so before.” Anthony could not help but smirk. “Yet here we are.”

“Blame my father,” Roderick said with distaste. “I did not care for the man, even if I find myself upset that he is no longer with us. Although not for reasons that might suggest I miss him.”

“So, it is his fault you are marrying?” Anthony chuckled. “Even from beyond the grave, he finds ways to ruin your life.”

“He was an old wart,” Roderick snapped. “And I know he is up there right now, laughing at me.”

“Perhaps he is proud of you.” Anthony could not help but smile, as he knew how little Roderick and his father cared for one another. “His only son, finally getting

married. What a happy circumstance, I would say.”

“A marriage of convenience,” he sighed. “You know as well as any how expected such a thing is from men of our ilk. Alas, even I was not able to avoid expectation, so when the countess approached with me the marriage offer, I figured why not...” He shrugged and had another sip. “Best get it over and done with.”

“How romantic of you.”

“Even more romantic are my plans post wedding.” His eyes flashed with wickedness. “Violet is a fine creature, do not misunderstand me. And if I was to succumb to the lure of wedded bliss, she is perhaps the only one who could coax such a thing from me.

As I have told her, I do not want a part of it.” His expression hardened suddenly. “Which is why once we are wed, we will be living apart. Separate homes. Separate lives. That, in my estimation, is the true definition of wedded bliss.” He held up his glass as if to make a toast and then drained the rest in a single mouthful.

Anthony studied his friend with a mixed feeling of emotions.

On the one hand, he wasn’t surprised to hear of this plan, for he knew as well as any other how Roderick felt about marriage—that was why he had been so surprised by the announcement in the first place.

Anthony’s relationship with Roderick was complicated, as both men were naturally closed-off creatures who struggled to share their emotions with anyone. This meant that their relationship always remained at the surface level, borne from a familiarity with one another, while unable to grow into anything truly meaningful.

Perhaps this will change with marriage? The irony that it might take getting married

to finally coax out those emotions which he guards with such venom.

That did not mean he wasn't annoyed with how lightly Roderick was taking his impending marriage. It was an arraignment that had fallen into his lap without much effort exerted, something that Anthony would never get to experience thanks to a certain moniker that had the entire ton convinced that he was the sort who'd best be avoided at their own peril.

"I wish you well," Anthony said bitterly, joining his friend in his toast.

"What of you?" Roderick grinned. "A night spent with a luscious young lady whom you have not been able to keep your eyes off all evening. Do I hear wedding bells?"

Anthony narrowed his eyes. "I would be careful of what you are suggesting, Roderick. Unless you plan on spending the rest of the weekend with a black eye."

Roderick held up his hands, laughing to himself. He was shorter than Anthony, and nowhere near as physically imposing. Not a weak man by any stretch of the imagination, but not nearly as large as Anthony. "I jest, I jest. Of course, it is but a joke."

"I thought the purpose of a joke was to be funny."

Roderick shrugged. "I know she isn't your type. And I know that you of all men are not one to take advantage of a young maiden who has found herself accidentally wandering into your lair." He flashed his teeth in a mocking grin. "Besides, I have a feeling that the countess might offer up the hand of her other daughter..." He flicked his head toward the family, noticeably at Aurelia. "Anything to get her out of the house."

"Are you quite done?"

“Oh, she is not so bad to look at.” He was chuckling and shaking his head. “A little plump, perhaps, but a man of your size would surely rise to the task. Shall I ask Violet if the match is one worth pursuing? I am sure she would be thrilled to help.”

Anthony knew Roderick was making fun, so he resolutely ignored him, turning his head away and focusing instead on the bickering family.

Despite himself, Anthony found his attention falling on Lady Caroline Hawkins, who was still standing back from her family, and still at pains not to find herself in the middle of their argument. Strange, as I would have guessed that of her siblings, she was the most outspoken.

Anthony had been doing his best all evening to put the previous two days behind him. A series of events that had not been in his control but had very nearly undone him, nonetheless.

He found his gaze locked onto Lady Caroline Hawkins, unable to keep himself from looking at her. She had frustrated him beyond belief for the entire time they were together, a woman who seemed designed to annoy him. Never had he met one so argumentative and forward, one who let her tongue wag before stopping to think what the consequences might be. Ordinarily he would despise such a trait as that, yet—where she was concerned—he could not help but be intrigued.

Oh yes, the fact that he was physically drawn to her did not help the matter. She was far shorter than he was, and her body was curvy in all the right places. Her round face was undeniably pretty; a mixture of wholesome and wicked. Her big eyes, round like an owls, had an innocence to them which contrasted mightily to her plump lips and the words they spoke.

Again, as he had been doing all day, his thoughts drifted to their night spent together. First, when he was between her legs, hands on her thighs, feeling her struggle and

then relax as she gave into him. As he made her his to control. And then when he woke in the morning to find her wrapped around him, her soft body pressed in close, her warm breath drifting across his face as her legs squeezed him...

“Anthony?” Roderick said. “Is something the matter?”

“Hhmm?” Anthony snapped his gaze back from Lady Caroline, as he had been staring without realizing it.

“That look on your face...” Roderick could not have looked more pleased. “If I did not know any better, I would say that you were?—”

“Off to bed,” Anthony announced quickly, cutting through his friend before he could even suggest the obvious joke. He downed the rest of his liquor and then shoved the empty glass into his friend’s chest. “And not a moment too soon.”

Roderick’s face fell. “Yes, a good idea, I think.” He glanced at the family and his lip curled. “Urgh, I envy you, you know. Being single, not having to worry with that ...” He shuddered. “Enjoy it while you can, old friend.”

“I intend to.”

Anthony left Roderick standing there, walking quickly past the bickering family with his head down, determined not to be seen by them. Despite his best efforts, he dared a glance, finding Lady Caroline Hawkins’ eyes following him. They met and their stare held, his felt a lump appear in his throat and his stomach twisted down toward his crotch...

A shake of the head and he looked away, still aware of her eyes on the back of his head, hoping that all she was thinking was how glad she was to see the back of him. Better that I keep my distance from her as best I can. For both of our sakes, I would

think.

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Chapter Seven

Anthony had only just removed his shirt when he heard a knock at the door. He groaned at the sound, certain it would be one of the members of staff coming to check that he had everything he needed. It was for that reason that he did not bother putting his shirt back on, striding across the room and throwing the door open with a sense of anger instead.

“What?” he snapped.

“Oh!” It was Lady Caroline Hawkins. Her eyes widened to see him standing there, her mouth dropped open. And she took a hesitant step back. “I am sorry. I did not... I did not mean...” Her eyes drifted down his front, her mouth somehow opening further, and then she swallowed. “I can come back.”

“Lady Caroline?” Anthony was certain he was seeing things. He had to be! Even she would not be such a fool to come and see me alone in my room. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“I was hoping we could...” She swallowed again, her eyes drifting before she forced them back up. “That we might talk?”

“Now?”

“It will only take a moment.”

Anthony rubbed his eyes with his spare hand. His first thought was to deny her and

slam the door in her face. If she was caught lingering outside his doorway in the middle of the night like this... he shuddered to imagine the consequences.

The only reason he did not slam the door and be done with it was because, before he got the chance, he thought he heard a noise. Footsteps, coming from down the hallway.

“Quickly!” Without waiting for her to respond, Anthony grabbed the woman by the arm and wrenched her through the doorway, slamming it closed behind them.

“Oh!” she yelped as he threw her. She stumbled, catching her footing halfway across the room. “What was that?”

“Are you insane?” He turned on her, wanting nothing more than to shout her down, but forced to keep his voice low so that he would not be heard. “Coming here like this! What if you had been seen?”

“I...” She blinked stupidly, as if the thought had not even occurred to her. “My sisters have retired for the evening. There is nobody to see us.”

“And the members of staff? What of them?”

“Oh...” She blinked again. “I was careful.”

“Careful!” he cried, wringing his hands before his face. “Careful would have been to stay in your room. This is not careful, Lady Caroline. This is foolish.”

She grimaced and looked away, her cheeks flushing red as she began to fiddle with her hands. “I suppose I was not thinking.”

“No,” he agreed. “You were not.”

This was the exact opposite of what Anthony had wanted. Determined to avoid Lady Caroline for the rest of the weekend, somehow, he had found himself alone with her once more. It did not help that he was half-dressed, and she could not stop glancing at his naked torso. And it did not help that she was dressed in a linen slip which...

...Anthony's eyes drifted before he could help himself. The piece of cloth was white and translucent, hanging loosely about her bodice as if it was a size too big.

Her breasts were even larger than he had thought, perky and full, her nipples poking out clearly so that he could not stop himself from gaping. He felt his mouth beginning to salivate. He felt his blood beginning to surge. Sweat formed on his palms, and all he wanted to do was cross the room, take her by the arms and?—

“What are you doing here?” he blurted, turning his head away, and then his body. She stood halfway across the room, and he was determined to keep it that way. “What could not wait until morning?”

“Yes!” she cried, excited it seemed to be given a reason to break the tension. “I am pleased to announce that I have already come up with a list of names which I think will please you.”

“Names?” He snapped his head up, and frowned. “Names for what?”

She blinked. “A bride, Your Grace. You asked me to find you a bride this weekend, and although the weekend has not yet begun, I have endeavored to do exactly as you asked me. My sister, Aurelia, is the one to thank, as she knows most women attending. I told her what you requested, and she was eager to supply with me the name of every young lady who is coming this weekend and is known to be searching for a husband.”

He stared at her in shock. “You have?”

She nodded proudly, standing a little bit taller. “What I suggest we do now is go through these names together, crossing them off one by one until we find one who is agreeable. My thinking is that by the time she arrives, you will know of her, and that way the entire weekend will not be wasted.”

“That is...” Anthony was still struggling to come to terms with what she was saying. “... an interesting notion.”

“I told you that I owed you,” she said rightly. A firm nod, which had her bosom wobbling beneath her slip. “You saved my life, and I intend to pay you back.”

As strange as it might have sounded, Anthony had forgotten entirely about the request he had made of Lady Caroline. Determined to put her out of his mind, he had done what he could to not think about her in any way.

Truthfully, when he had made the request of her earlier this morning, he had not seriously considered that she would attack it with such enthusiasm. In fact, he had assumed she might be of the same mind as he was, searching for reasons to avoid one another out of the interest of self-preservation.

The only reason he had asked such a thing of her in the first place was because Anthony knew well enough how broke her family was—that was why her sister was marrying Roderick in the first place—and figured that asking her to help him secure a bride would at the very least shut her up about owing him.

Did Anthony wish to marry? Sadly, he did. Like Roderick, he was a man whose life was controlled by expectation, and as a single duke, he knew that sooner or later he would be required to take a bride. Unlike with Roderick, Anthony’s marriage would serve a specific purpose. He wished for an heir, was why, one to pass his title onto when he died. That was, after all, the entire point of marriage. At least I have always assumed as much.

Perhaps there was a small part of him too that wondered what it might be like to find a bride whose company he would enjoy, and who would enjoy his company in return. Someone whom he could spend the day with, sup with at night, even look forward to seeing each day when he woke to the new sun...

Sadly, this was not meant to be. Just about everyone in the ton was terrified of him, for his nickname, The Cruel Duke, seemed designed to turn people away before they could get to know him. This in turn had led to Anthony's more reserved personality, hidden emotions, forced to project an air of strength and command because if he would not be liked, at the very least he would be feared.

All that was to say, what decent woman would ever have him? I know the answer to that, of course. None.

"It is quite alright," Anthony sighed.

"Excuse me?" Lady Caroline said. "What does that mean?"

"Our deal," he explained with another sigh. "I have changed my mind."

"You... you have?" she leaned back as if struck.

"Yes," he said. "So, I suggest you put it out of your mind and be glad that I have saved you the time." He turned and walked to the door. "Now, if you do not mind..." He reached for the door handle, his eyebrow raised at her to indicate that this conversation was finished.

"But why?" she blurted. "Why have you changed your mind?"

"That is not your concern."

“I disagree. After all you have done for me, it is the least that I can do—I am in your debt, and this is a way that I am able to repay it.”

“And as I said, you no longer need to.”

“That is not good enough.” She crossed her arms and glared at him. “Did I do something wrong? You have not even heard the list of names I have acquired yet!”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“Perhaps if you just listen,” she insisted. “I am sure that one of them?—”

“I said no!” he snapped, his temper getting the best of him. This woman... why does she get to me so? And why is she not terrified of me like everyone else? She should be thrilled for the chance to be done with me. She should be singing my praises!

“I...” Lady Caroline looked away as if ashamed. “Please, Your Grace, do not do this. I... I said I owe you and... and where I would love to be able to pay you back, my family...” She sniffed. “They are not exactly wealthy. This is the only way.”

He groaned, not at all upended by her tears, simply annoyed that she was using them to try and manipulate him. “You do not owe me anything. Not money. Not a favor. What you owe me, if you are so insistent on paying me back, is peace and quiet. So, if you do not mind...” Again, he indicated the door.

Still, she did not make to leave.

Anthony watched Lady Caroline closely, unable to believe the sudden sense of steely resolve that took her being. She became determined, a look in her brown eyes which suggested she was not going to just walk out of here and forget everything. It was strange to him, that someone might stand up to him like this, that they wouldn't

succumb to fear and simply turn tail and flee as so many had done before.

It caught Anthony completely by surprise, as he had never been very good at confrontation, simply because he'd never had the need.

“You asked for my help, and whether you wish for it or not...” She breathed in deeply and raised her chin. “I will help you find a bride, Your Grace. Only then, will I be out of your debt.”

Anthony could hardly believe what he was hearing. And seeing! In times like this, it would likely do best for him to ask her nicely, because that was what people did when they wanted something. Wasn't it? Anthony, however, had never had to do such a thing before.

Once more, he found his eyes drifting. With her arms folded under her bosom, her breasts looked even larger than usual. Firm yet somehow supple. Full and heaving. Anthony prided himself on his self-control, and he hated how she wreaked havoc with it. They had an entire weekend ahead of them and if they were forced to spend more time together... I wish I could trust myself, but I am only so strong.

A new tactic was required. She was stronger willed than he had initially assumed, but she was not so stubborn that, if he demanded it of her, she would still refuse him. As a duke, a man who was used to getting his own way, it was time that Anthony stopped playing games and reminded her of the power dynamic which should exist between them.

I am in control here, not her. It is time that she remembers that.

None of that was to say that Anthony wanted to frighten her or scare her away. He just didn't know what else to do. Thus, he fell back into old routines.

“You do not listen so well,” he said as he stalked across the room. “I knew you to be stubborn, but this has outdone even my wildest expectations.

“I am not stubborn,” she protested. “I am simply trying to do what is right.”

“What is right?” he scoffed. “What is right is what I say it is.” He stepped closer to her body, expecting her to scurry back, but she stood her ground. “So, I am going to say it one more time. And this time, I suggest you listen and then heed my words because I do not take kindly to being ignored.”

He could see her chin wobbling as she worked to maintain her composure. “So, I do not get any say in this? I told you, this is not just about me but my family. How is it fair that you can simply dismiss me without?—”

“Fair” he cut her off. “Is that what you think this is? This is not about fair. Not is it an argument. It never has been. And it is time that you understand that.” Anthony did not mean to, but suddenly he found his hand moving to her waist, which he gripped.

She yelped and tried to push him away but he hung on tight so she would know that she had no power here. That he was in control, and she would do well to listen.

“You do not get to argue with me,” he said, his voice a dark whisper. “You do not get to tell me no. I asked—no—I told you that I do not want your help, which as far as I am concerned is the end of the conversation. Is that understood?”

“You...” She was shaking beneath his grip. “You are not my master, despite what you think.” She grabbed his hand and wrenched it free. “And you do not tell me what to do.”

This had Anthony moaning unexpectedly. “You are...” His other hand moved to her waist also and squeezed. She gasped and grabbed his arm with both her hands; they

were tiny around his wrist. He could feel her trembling. He could feel her heavy breathing. “I will say this one more time, my pet. So, listen closely...” He pulled her toward him and leaned in close, his mouth going to her ear. “Do not argue with me. Do not think that you can win. I told you what I wish and the only thought that should take your mind is how quickly you might bow to my demand.”

“But—”

“No buts,” he breathed into her ear, his voice so low that he could barely hear it. “No arguments. I do not need your help. I do not want your help. What I want, the only thing you can give me, is peace and quiet. Is that understood?”

She said nothing. His hands were still around her waist. Her breathing was ragged. But her body... it was pulled into his bare chest so that he could feel her breasts against his skin. She was shuddering and shaking and dammit if it didn’t drive him to the brink.

“Answer me,” he breathed.

“I—I am sorry,” she stammered. “I did not mean it.”

“Yes, you did...” Anthony wanted to push her away. Perhaps drag her to the door and toss her outside and be done with it. But in the moment, holding her close as he was, his mouth right by her ear, he acted without thinking.

His lips found her earlobe and wrapped around them. His teeth then dug into her flesh and bit down gently. She gasped and he moaned, and he felt her melt into him. Sucking on her ear for a moment, his grip around her neck, still not too tight but still firm, his other hand was on her waist, moving toward her breasts, holding her into him in a way that he knew she wanted even if she would never say it.

She was his to do with as he pleased. Alone. Nobody to stop him. If he wanted her, he could have her...

Anthony groaned again and pulled his lips free. "Are you going to leave me be?" he asked, hoping she would say no.

"I will," she said, her voice trembling. "I promise."

"Good girl," he breathed into her ear. "Who knew a stray like you could be so easily trained."

A moment passed between them. Anthony holding her by the waist. Her body pressed against his bare chest. Lips by her neck now, her own lips dangerously close to his face. He was breathing heavily. Red hot blood surged through his veins. It took all his self-control not to act... more than I thought myself capable.

Anthony roared and let Lady Caroline go. Then he stepped around her, refusing to look back. His entire body trembled and he feared what he might do if he laid eyes upon her once more.

"Go," he snarled.

"I—"

"Go!"

She did not argue. He listened to the sound of her footsteps scurrying across the room. The door opening and then slamming closed behind her. And then, finally, silence. Silence, save for the thundering of his beating heart.

What was that?

Anthony's entire body shook, and he stumbled forward, collapsing onto his bed. He had known Lady Caroline to be trouble, but even he had not dreamed just how much she might be—how little control he would have if pushed.

So unlike him, as Anthony had spent his entire adult life hiding from his emotions—afraid of them, it had seemed. Now, after a lifetime spent doing what he could to control his urges, they were coming to the fore in a way he had never known possible. Worse than that, once they did, even he could not say what he might be capable of. And that scared him more than anything.

That settles it. I was determined to avoid her for the rest of this weekend but now I have no choice in the matter, for if I find myself alone with her once more... no, I cannot allow that to happen. For my sake, as well as her own.

Chapter Eight

Caroline did not sleep well that night.

She tossed and she turned. Her body flushed so hot that she began to sweat, forced to throw the sheets from her bed lest she drench them. She tried to close her eyes and force sleep, yet each time she did, her mind was filled with the image of the duke, his hand around her throat, his lips nibbling her ear, and his breath on her skin so that she could still feel him as if she was transported back into his bedroom...

Logic told her that she should have been glad to have been dismissed so resolutely by the duke. He wanted nothing to do with her, and she would do well to heed his request. Never mind that he was dangerous, for she could handle that. It was the very real fact that, in his presence, Caroline lost herself completely, and in ways that petrified her sensibilities.

And yet, just to think about being back in that room again... a warmth spread through her body, her heart pounded in her chest, and her limbs tingled each time she closed her eyes and found herself back in that bedroom, suggested that she was nowhere near as determined to avoid the duke as she should have been.

This is wrong! I should not be feeling this way; unable to stop thinking about the duke, wondering what might have happened if it had gone further. I know I should hate how he makes me feel, and yet...

It was thus that Caroline overslept the following morning, rising well after sunrise, having had maybe a handful of hours of true sleep, feeling wretched and looking, she

was sure, just as ghastly.

Voices could be heard coming from the front of the house, ones she recognized to belong to her noisy family. Still half asleep, she rose from bed, covered herself in a gown, and started down the hallway to see what was causing the fuss.

“...should we wake her?” she heard her mother say. “It will not do for her to spend all day in bed.”

“Leave her be,” Aurelia countered. “She is simply worn through. Can you blame her? The last two days she has had.”

“She will miss the entire morning!” her mother cried.

“Maybe she is sleeping in on purpose,” Eveline chided, as was her way. “Personally, I wish I had thought to do the same.”

“Enough of that!” her mother warned.

“I am surprised you have even noticed her absence,” Aurelia continued. “Feeling guilty are we, Mother?”

Caroline was surprised to hear that she was at the center of conversation, a rare instance in her life as she was often the last person her mother fretted over. No doubt Aurelia was correct, and her mother was simply feeling guilty for what had happened two days ago. It might have brought a smile to Caroline’s face, was she not still half asleep.

She wandered down the hallway, listening to her family bicker, appearing a moment later at the top of the stairs. Her entire family had gathered in the foyer, dressed by the looks of things for a day out in the sun. Even Daniel was there, although he wore

a grumpy expression that suggested he would have preferred not to have been.

The sight of Caroline materializing suddenly saw all eyes turn on her, again made the sole focus of her family. A feeling with which I am not familiar, and now I am starting to wonder if there is a good reason for this.

“Caroline!” her mother exclaimed. “There you are!” She rushed up the stairs toward Caroline. “We were beginning to worry!”

“Good morning, Mother...” She grimaced as her mother took her by the arms, holding her back to get a look at her.

“Are you ill?” her mother asked. “It is well past morning, child. What has gotten into you.”

Despite her best efforts, Caroline’s mind again drifted back to the previous night. The duke holding her. His lips around her ear. His warning which had elicited trapped feelings of excitement, because she knew that she ought not to feel this way, but could not help herself...

“Oh no,” her mother gasped. “It is a fever!”

“What?”

“Your cheeks, girl.” Her mother pressed a hand into her forehead. “They are bright red. Yes, just as I thought...” She clicked her tongue. “You are as hot as an oven.”

Caroline’s eyes widened with embarrassment. “I am not... I feel fine.” She looked away, hating that every set of eyes in the foyer was on her. “Just a little tired, I assure you.”

“Are you certain?” her mother pressed. “If you are ill, there is no shame. Best to be careful.”

“I am fine,” she said with more emphasis. Needing to change the topic, and quickly, she pulled herself from her mother’s grasp and started down the stairs. “What is going on? Where is everybody going?”

“We are going riding,” Aurelia answered as she made for the base of the stairs. “And we were just deciding if it was worth waking you to see if you wished to join us.”

“Oh...” Caroline considered, deciding quickly that a day spent outdoors might be good for her. Anything to take her mind off things, and a chance to be free from this house so she would not accidentally bump into the duke. “I... yes. Yes, I think I will. That is, if you do not mind waiting for me?”

Daniel groaned. “At this rate, we will never leave.”

“You are free to go without us,” Eveline snapped. “Please, do not wait on our account, Daniel. In fact, I insist.”

Daniel glared at her. “Careful, sister.”

“Quiet, Eveline.” Their mother swept down the stairs and put herself between them. “It is decided; we will wait for Caroline to get herself ready. Besides, that will give me another chance to convince Violet to join us.”

“Good luck,” Daniel snorted.

“Mother, she told you she is busy,” Aurelia sighed. “With the engagement this weekend, she has better things to do than join us for a ride.”

“Nonsense!”

Caroline only just now noticed that Violet was indeed absent. Not a surprise, she decided, as guests were due to arrive later today in preparation for the weekend’s celebrations. Likely, she was with her future husband now, going through the particulars.

“I will get ready.” Caroline said, turning to make her way back up the stairs.

However, no sooner had she turned about before she froze to the spot, her breath leaving her, her heart leaping through her mouth. Her eyes were trained on the top of the staircase, and it was in that moment that none other than the duke chose to make his presence known.

“Your Grace!” her mother greeted gaily. “What wonderful timing!”

The duke came to a sudden stop, his cold gaze sweeping over the scene before him, his lip curling as he came to realize what he had walked into. Caroline still stood frozen, wishing to look away but she was unable. It was as if her eyes were drawn to him, a part of her wanting to not be seen, another part desperate for it.

“We are just now readying to go for a ride across the estate,” her mother explained. “Would you like to join us?”

“No.” The duke started down the stairs. As he did, he found Caroline standing there staring. A moment passed between them, their eyes locking, that same warning he gave her last spoken silently. She looked away.

“Are you certain?” her mother pressed on him. “The day is wonderful, and we should take advantage of it.”

“I said I am fine,” he said sharply, reaching the bottom of the staircase. He made sure to walk on the opposite side of Caroline as if avoiding her purposefully. “Roderick and I have made plans to hunt.”

“A shame,” her mother sighed. “But perfectly understandable.”

Caroline breathed a sigh of relief, forcing herself to look ahead as the duke started across the foyer. There was a chill emanating from him, one which made her shudder. How can one so terrifying also tempt me the way he does? I know I should fear him, yet a part of me wishes he’d agreed to join us. It makes no sense!

The duke was halfway across the foyer when suddenly, Iris burst into tears. It came from nowhere, her strangled sobs hitting the group like a hammer so that even the duke was forced to stop and pay her attention.

“Iris!” their mother swept toward her youngest daughter. “Good gracious girl, what is the matter!”

“I... I... I do not want Caroline to join us,” Iris stammered through her tears. She was such a little thing, but her voice rang loud. “She can’t!”

“What? Why on earth not?”

“Because... because...” Iris found Caroline through the small group, a look of pain and worry taking her visage. Her chin was wobbling, and her eyes stained red as Caroline met them and knew immediately that her world was about to be rocked. “Because she should not ride if she is with child. It might hurt the baby!”

The announcement sent a panic through the family.

“What?” her mother cried and spun to Caroline. “With child! What are you talking

of!”

“Oh no...” Aurelia moaned.

“Oh, yes,” Eveline laughed.

“Caroline!” Daniel roared. “What is she saying?” He stormed toward her and grabbed her by the arm. “Speak!”

Caroline was stunned speechless. Her eyes wide. Her mouth hanging open. Stomach dropping through the floor and to the other side of the world, it felt like. The color drained from her face and all she could do was stare dumbly.

“The duke,” Iris continued. “He... I thought... is he not the father?”

All eyes turned to the duke, who was halfway across the foyer but had no choice but to stand his ground and meet the accusatory stares. Unlike the rest of the group, he did not appear nearly as bewildered as he might have done. Angry, clearly. Frustrated, without a doubt. But still calm and in control of his emotions.

“I assure you, there is no truth to what the girl says.” He set his jaw. “She is mistaken.”

“No truth!” Daniel erupted. He let go of Caroline and stormed across the room, heading for the duke. “Then why say it? Where did she get such an idea!”

“She is young,” the duke said. “Clearly, she has misunderstood.”

“Eveline said it!” Iris cried out and pointed at her sister. “She did! She did!”

Eveline grimaced. “I most certainly did not. I was simply making a joke about the

duke and Caroline sharing a bed together, is all. Iris has taken my comments completely out of?—”

“Sharing a bed!” Daniel roared. “Why would you make such a joke?” His eyes were wild with anger, his teeth bared as he looked between the duke and Caroline. “Your Grace! I demand an explanation at once!”

“He is not at fault.” Caroline found her bravery and hurried toward her brother. “Please, it is a simple misunderstanding. That is all.”

“I knew it!” her mother moaned. “I knew there was more to the story than what you told us. How much of it was a lie?”

“Do not blame her, mother,” Daniel said, his anger teeming in his voice. “For it is clear what happened. She was taken advantage of!” He turned to look at the duke. “You, Your Grace! How dare you sully my sister’s name! I demand that you?—”

“That I what?” The duke did not raise his voice. He did not snarl. He did not bother with performative anger to frighten her brother. All he needed to do was fix his gaze upon Daniel, a warning hidden behind his eyes that he would not be spoken to like this. “What is it that you demand of me, boy?”

Daniel reared back, the anger fleeing him. “I... I want to know the truth. What is my sister saying? Why would she... she think to say such things?”

“Perhaps you should ask her.” The duke’s tone was as cold as ice, and it sent a chill through the room. “But if you think to question my reputation again, consider your words carefully, for I assure you, they will be your last.”

The situation was spiraling out of control. Iris was still in tears. Her mother looked stricken with shame. Daniel’s head swiveled from Caroline to the duke, searching for

answers that he would likely voice once he found his bravery. Caroline could see it happening, and she feared for her brother. She knew as well as anyone how stubborn he was, and she worried what might happen if he pushed the subject.

She needed to defuse. She needed to make him and everyone else understand. Nothing had happened and once they knew this to be true, surely that would be the end of it.

“He tells the truth, Daniel,” Caroline pleaded. She crossed quickly toward him, resting a hand on his shoulder. “Please, you must listen.”

“I want answers!”

“The duke saved me, as you know,” she spoke quickly. “Our intent was to arrive here that same day, but our carriage broke down and we were forced to spend the night at an inn.” Her tongue was moving quickly, beyond what her mind could comprehend. Never a good sign. “The innkeeper was looking for me—as Mother had sent out word of me going missing. I feared what might happen if he saw me on my own with a strange man, so we opted to share a room for the night, thinking that better than?”

“You what?”

“Nothing happened!” She could feel herself losing control. The room was spinning around her. Words tumbling from her mouth. “I swear it! We slept, and that was it! You must know I am speaking the truth!”

“You slept in the same room?” her mother cried. “Caroline! What were you thinking?”

“We had no choice!”

Daniel was visibly shaking. “Caroline... you have no idea what you have done. What this means. You and His Grace... you... you... when people hear of this! What they will say?”

“Nothing happened.”

“It does not matter!”

The world was crashing down around Caroline. She felt herself stumble, the energy fleeing her body. Sweat falling from her, and her legs shook. Eyes wide, she searched the room for allies, landing on the duke who could not have looked more furious.

“Enough,” the duke growled and stepped forward. He fixed her in a glare that she felt in her chest, wincing back and looking away. “The fault is not with your sister, and she should not bear the brunt of your malice.”

“We must do something!” her mother continued, panic growing. “If anybody were to find out?—”

“I am the one who has erred,” the duke spoke over Daniel. “I am the one at fault. And for that reason...” Again, he met Caroline’s eyes, holding them so that she could see the fury. This was her fault, and he needed her to know it. “For that reason, I propose that she and I wed.”

Again, shock rang through the family. Daniel, most of all, stumbling back as if he had been slapped.

“A small wedding,” the duke continued. He was staring at Caroline now, and she could feel the heat coming from him. “To be held as soon as possible. That way, any rumors that might choose to make themselves apparent will be nipped in the bud.”

“Yes!” Caroline’s mother blurted. “We accept!” She could not have looked more delighted. “A marriage! A perfect solution.”

“Mother!”

“Think, Daniel!” she hissed. “This is the best we could have hoped for.”

She was right, and even Daniel could not deny it. He glared at his mother who raised her eyebrows back in warning. He grimaced, his teeth still bared, and his anger apparent, but good sense silencing him enough that he forced himself to look at the duke.

“Fine,” he said. “A wedding it is.”

And, through it all, not once did Daniel or her mother or the duke care to ask Caroline of her opinion. They didn’t so much as consider her. As was always the way, she was forgotten—a boat left adrift in the storm, moving to the whims of those around her. One would think that, by now, she might be used to it.

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Chapter Nine

For the second night in a row, Caroline found herself standing outside the duke's bedroom door.

She had been there for several minutes now, trying to work up the courage to knock. Last night, she had not hesitated, needing to see the duke and tell him of her plans so that she could be done with him. The difference that one night can make and now I wonder if this is such a good idea after all...

It was not as if she had much of a choice. Certainly, she could not simply turn around and leave. After what had happened today, and the events which followed, Caroline knew that if she did not see the duke right now and implore him to change his mind, she would regret it forever.

But the idea of being alone with the duke again, of putting herself in that position... her body trembled. Not with fear. It was something else. A feeling that made her body turn hot and her heart race so that she found it hard to breathe.

No! I must do this. My mind spoken, not to be changed or intimidated. And I will not leave until I get what I want.

Also, and this was most important, she needed to prove to herself that she could be around the duke and not give into temptation. That he did not control her...

Thus, Caroline took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

The door swung open a second later, revealing the duke on the other side. Blessedly, he was wearing a shirt this time. Predictably, he did not look happy to see her.

“Lady Caroline.” He could not have looked more surprised... and is that worry? A shadow passed behind his eyes, what she might have read as fear if she didn’t think the duke to be a man who would never experience such a thing. “What is the meaning of this?”

“We need to talk.”

“You cannot be serious,” he said, blocking the doorway. “And you should not be here.”

“It won’t take long.”

“I do not care.” His brow tightened and he looked past her. “It is actions like this one that are the cause of this mess we have found ourselves in.”

“Which is why we must talk.”

“And as I said, we will not. There is nothing that needs to be discussed. Now...” He stood taller somehow, over her, bearing down upon her like a dragon guarding its lair. “I ask you again—no, not ask. I am telling you to leave.”

She knew that she should have listened to him. Every single time she either thought of the duke or found herself in his presence, she was besieged by feelings of desire and want the likes of which she had never known—that she had felt a lifetime suppressing. To risk coming into those feelings again was foolish of her, the antithesis of everything she believed.

And still, despite her best instincts and what she knew was right, she could not bring

herself to stay away...

Caroline looked past the duke; a pang of worry felt in her chest as she remembered the last time she had been alone with him and how that had made her feel. A sensation that will be common, if I do not make him see reason . She did not want to do this. She simply had to.

“That is not good enough.” Caroline ducked under the duke’s arm and hurried into his room.

“What are you?—”

“I cannot marry you!” Caroline cried over the duke. “Please! You must understand. You must see! You cannot make me go through with this, I beg you. I will do anything you ask! Name it and I will make it so!”

The duke eyed her curiously; his brow was furrowed, a hint of a smirk on his lips. He closed the door behind him, turning fully now to face her. Then, he stood up straight and she took a step back as if on instinct. His size... his stature... the power of the man. What was I thinking, coming here?

“You speak as if this is something I requested personally,” he said. “As if I want this.”

“I am aware of how this has happened,” she agreed, forcing herself to meet his eyes and hold them. Her heart was racing but she would not be bullied. “And that is neither here nor there. The point is, you are the one who suggested this marriage. It is your doing, not mine.”

“Is that right?”

“It is irrelevant,” she continued. “For the result is the same. A result which I cannot in good conscience agree to. And I feel that you are of the same mind.”

“Do you, now?”

“I...” A lump appeared in her throat. “I want you to tell my mother and my brother that you have changed your mind. Tell them that you spoke in haste, that you do not wish to marry me—that I am a bad sort who you will not be saddled with. I do not care! But please, you cannot make me go through with this.”

The duke tilted his head as he studied her. “You are aware that I am searching for a bride. What makes you think that I want to change my mind?”

“Me!” she exclaimed. “Us! Surely, you see that we cannot work. This marriage...” She shook her head. “If it is to go ahead, it would be a tragedy. I know you agree.”

“You know that for a fact, do you?”

“Pe—peace and quiet.” She gulped. “That is what you said you wanted. You told me as much. And you must see that if you and I marry, that it is not what you will get. That alone is reason enough to call off this marriage before it is too late.” As good an excuse as any, for I cannot tell him the real reason...

To this, the duke said nothing. At least not at first.

He tilted his head and studied her, his dark eyes roaming over her body until they fixed squarely on her face. Caroline could feel her body shaking under his gaze, and when she tried to stand tall and firm and confident, she felt herself take another cautious step back. A cat cornered by a rabid dog, powerless and at the creature’s mercy.

“You are right,” he agreed finally. “Peace and quiet is what I wish for.”

“Then you must know?—”

“What I know is that you are not what you pretend to be.” He strode across the room quickly, stopping two feet away from her. She gasped and went to take another step back, only for her legs to hit the bed.

“I do not know why, where I am concerned, you are so...” He clicked his tongue. “Impetuous. But I have seen how you behave around your family. I have seen who you truly are. My thinking is that, as a wife, you will be exactly what I require.”

“You’re wrong!” she said. “I am not—if we marry, I will only frustrate you. Peace and quiet is not?—”

“Quiet,” he growled suddenly. The effect was instantaneous, like a hand reaching into her mouth and snatching the words before they could be spoken. Her mouth was open, and her eyes wide; she stared but could not speak. “There, much better.”

He was standing over her, his massive frame like a mountain blocking out the sun. She felt tiny by comparison, shrinking back as if she might turn invisible.

Again, she knew that she should leave. Memories of last night filtered through her mind. Her eyes flicked from his lips... her legs began to shake... she had the urge to speak up again so he might be forced to stop her... what is wrong with me?

“You are filled with presumption,” the duke continued, his voice now a whisper. “Barging in here, telling me what I require as if you know me.”

“I do know?—”

“You know nothing,” he spoke over her. His voice was still low, but powerful enough to silence her once more. “So do not presume that you do. The fact is, this marriage is now unavoidable, and there is no escaping it. So, I suggest that you accept this fate and make your peace with it. As I already have.”

“I... I...” Her chin was wobbling. “I cannot marry you.” She spoke so quietly that she barely heard herself. “Please...”

The ‘please’ caused a moment of pause in the duke. He leaned back, looked aghast at what he must have only just now realized to be a terrified woman throwing herself at his feet in mercy. Not Caroline’s proudest moment, but she was out of options.

“Lady Hawkins, you must know...” He almost looked upset. “There is no need to fear me. I hope, at the very least, you are aware of this.”

“I—” She caught her tongue, not even sure what she was going to say. “I do not fear you, Your Grace. That is not what this is.”

“What then?”

“Peace and quiet. That is what you want? Something which you and I will never have.”

“And why is that exactly?”

Her face scrunched with confusion, and she gestured about them as if the answer was obvious. “Well... because we hate one another, is why.”

“Is that what this is?” He almost seemed amused by the notion. “You hate me?”

“Do you not hate me?”

He considered her. “You frustrate me. You annoy me. And I do not think I have ever met someone so...” He clicked his tongue. “Damn troublesome as you have proven to be. But hate you?” He scoffed. “We are not quite there yet.”

“But we will be,” she insisted. “Unless you call off this marriage at once!”

“Is that a threat?”

“M—maybe.” Caroline had come here for one reason and one reason only, to force the duke to call off this marriage. And, for that, there was nothing she would not do.

Her heart was racing, the heat rising in her as she forced herself to meet his eyes. Strange that she no longer feared him as she did when they had first met. Nor was she as intimidated. That wasn’t to say that he wasn’t a frightening individual, but she didn’t think him to be cruel. Despite the rumors.

Rather, she sensed in him a man who was used to getting his own way, and certainly not accustomed to being told no or argued with. What she needed was for him to see that if they were to marry, this is all they would do. An impossible union that he would do better to avoid. She had to make him see.

“A threat that I will happily follow through on,” she continued, forcing herself to hold his stare. “Unless you...” She swallowed. “Unless you do as I ask.” She looked at him boldly. “Now.”

“Is that right?” he asked, his voice turning cold.

“That’s right. As you are—whoa!”

The duke stepped closer to her suddenly, his hands finding her waist just as they did the previous evening. He held her, forcing her to look into his eyes, behind which she

saw the anger she had been trying to elicit. Only now, she wasn't sure why.

"I do not appreciate being spoken down to," he said, his voice low. "Or being bullied, which you are clearly trying to do."

"I—"

"Am trouble," he growled.

"You have no idea," she shot back, doing her best to ignore his hands around her waist, despite the havoc they wreaked with her breathing.

"I am beginning to."

"It will only get worse," she pressed, finding herself leaning into him, which only made him pull her closer.

"I am starting to think I might not mind that so much." His hands squeezed her tighter.

"You—you will," she stammered, not even sure what she was saying anymore. Her mind was almost completely on his hands, and if not that, the feel of his chest, his warm breath tracing her face... and a look in his eyes which she understood a little too well. "Unless you cancel this marriage. It is what's best. For both of us."

"You do not get to decide for me what is best."

"I—"

It happened quickly.

The duke moved his face as his hands went around her, gripping her back and pulling her forward. Her eyes widened in shock, and her mouth half open. Her lips found their way to the duke's, and before she knew it, they were locked in a passionate kiss that was as unexpected as it was... as it was... as it was unbelievably debauched.

Their lips mashed. Their tongues wrestled. Teeth nibbled and then bit. The duke's spare hand was around the back of her head, pulling her face in harder somehow, his mouth opening wide as if he meant to devour her. Caroline didn't think to fight it. She didn't want to fight it! They kissed freely, openly, as if their lives depended on it. For only seconds, it might have been minutes, the duke and Caroline's lips and tongues mashed and pressed together, and she completely forgot herself...

And then he pulled away.

She gasped when he did, nearly crying out because it felt like he was tearing with him a piece of her.

"That is one way to shut you up," he said.

Caroline stared at him stupidly, with no idea what to say or do. Her chest hurt from how quickly her heart beat. Her body was drenched in sweat from the heat which he'd instigated. Her knees were trembling, her mind blank. In that moment, the only thing Caroline knew was that she both hated the duke... and wanted all of him at the same time.

"I think it is time that you leave," the duke said.

"But..." She didn't know what to say.

"This marriage is happening, and I suggest you make your peace with it. For once..." He took a deep breath to control himself, sighing next as if with regret "... do as I

ask.”

She was too stunned to argue. Too shocked to make sense of anything. Glad to be given a chance to leave, as she needed space, time, and reason to assess, Caroline put her head down and fled the room as if it had suddenly caught fire.

It was only once she was on the other side of the door that she fell back, using the closed door to keep her from collapsing entirely. Still, her body rebelled. Still, her mind was on that kiss. Still, her lips burned as did her thighs as if they had a mind of their own.

What was... how did... when did... what is going on?!

Caroline had never been kissed before. She had never even considered it. She was not a romantic. Not one to lust after men. She had never seen much point—she had been raised to think of marriage as a contractual bond only, never once considering the hidden passions that might come from such a union. But if that was what was in store for her from this marriage, she was starting to wonder if maybe this wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

No! I cannot think like that. And yet...

Was it possible to both hate someone and desire them at the same time? If she was to give a definitive answer in the moment, it would be a resounding yes.

And something tells me that for the second night in a row, I will not be getting so much as a wink of sleep.

Chapter Ten

“Caroline!” her mother snapped. “Will you at least try and pretend to look as if the world is not falling down around your ears.”

“Huh...” Caroline looked up, surprised to find her mother glaring at her.

“Honestly, girl...” Her mother rolled her eyes and sighed. “I had hoped that you—of all my children—would be the one to cause me the least amount of angst on today of all days. What has got into you?”

“I...” A flash of anger roared itself to life inside of Caroline. The desire for her to unleash it fully and tell her mother in no uncertain terms that she knew very well why Caroline was acting this way. That this was her doing. That she could at least pretend to care! Of course, as this was Caroline, she did no such thing. “I am sorry, mother. I will try to do better.”

Her mother sighed. “Would you? A smile might be nice. Not everything is about you, dear.”

It was ironic that it had taken this sudden marriage arraignment for her mother to start paying Caroline attention. Times were that Caroline could have burst into tears and her mother still might not have noticed. Now, the slightest sense that Caroline was not behaving as she expected, and her mother was on her like a mother attacking a flame.

It had been that way these past two days; for the entirety of the weekend. Caroline

was unable to get so much as a moment of peace because from sunrise to sundown her mother was at her, nipping at her heels and doing everything she could to ensure that Caroline behaved herself so that there was no chance she might ruin her betrothal and thus her name and her family's.

That was why she had been dragged by her mother into Violet's room on the final night of the weekend, there to be kept an eye on as Violet readied for supper.

"Mother..." Violet was standing back from there, before the mirror which she had been using to assess her dress. Now, she eyed Caroline with a sense of concern that was alien to her often distant sister, clear worry seen in her eyes. "May you give me and Caroline a moment?"

"What? Whatever for?"

"Because I asked it of you," Violet said. "Do not fret, I will call you back in when we are done."

"Violet, there is no time for?—"

"Now, thank you," Violet spoke over her. Not rudely, but with command borne from her soon-to-be found station. That of a duchess.

Her mother did not look pleased, and she widened her eyes at Caroline in warning before hurrying from the room. She and Violet were not particularly close, as Violet had always been the favorite daughter, she who her mother had put much stake in for the future of their family. And Violet, ever aware of her role, had taken to it as only the favorite daughter could.

"I am sorry, Violet," Caroline sighed and bowed her head. "I did not mean to cause a fuss. And I certainly did not mean to make this weekend all about me."

“All about you?” Violet chuckled. “Caroline, I do not think that once in your life have you made anything all about you.”

Caroline laughed softly.

“Which leads me to believe that something must be wrong.” She crossed the room and most surprisingly, put an arm around Caroline’s waist. “Do you wish to talk about it? Something tells me I might be the only one who will understand.”

Caroline frowned and leaned back as she took in her older sister. The offer was most unexpected, as was the look of concern etched across her face. And indeed, her words were true, as she—above all others—was the only person in this world who might understand Caroline’s current woes.

A forced marriage. A husband she did not want. No way out, stained by expectation because this was simply how things had to be.

“I think you can guess well enough,” Caroline mumbled. “Although I know there is no use complaining about it. Which is why I have tried not to be a burden.”

“And still, somehow you have managed it.”

She winced. “I am sorry.”

“And I am just joking, Caroline.” She hugged her a little tighter, then let go and walked back to the mirror, looking herself over. She was beautiful, Caroline thought, in her sky-blue dress, silver jewelry, and elegant makeup that had her skin shining. “You do not wish to marry His Grace.” It was not a question.

“What I wish does not matter.”

“True enough,” Violet said. “May I ask why?”

Caroline frowned. “Does it need to be said?”

“Well, I assume it is because His Grace is one who does not inspire typical notions of romance.” A light chuckle. “Admittedly, I hardly know the man, but he does seem a tad...” She considered. “Cruel.”

“Hence the nickname.”

“I am sure it is just rumor.”

“Maybe,” Caroline shrugged. “But the name did not spring from nowhere. He does not like me, Violet. And I do not much like him.”

“Is that all?” Violet pressed. “I admit, and this is a little embarrassing to say, but I realize suddenly that I have no idea what you want.”

“What I want?” Caroline frowned at the comment, not understanding what her sister meant.

“From marriage,” she specified. “I do not think I have ever asked you. Nor have I ever asked how you feel about it.” She looked at Caroline questioningly. “It is marriage itself you spurn, or the man?”

It was a good question and was without a doubt at the heart of Caroline’s trauma.

Caroline’s feelings about marriage were influenced heavily by her mother and father; that which she had grown up under and been forced to witness firsthand. To put it simply, it was not a happy union, her father treating her mother like little more than a means to an end—a tool he might use to sire children, giving her nothing in return but

contempt and apathy.

For many years, Caroline had hated knowing that her mother was in a loveless marriage, wondering how she could put up with such a thing. Wasn't the entire point of marriage to fall in love?

It was when she was only twelve that her mother dissuaded her of that notion. The incident with the scandalous story she was found reading, being the key instigator of her changed perceptions. When she was found reading it, she had argued with her mother, assuming that what she was reading was 'natural' and befitting of a wife and her husband. Her mother was quick to change this viewpoint.

Marriage was nothing but duty. A wife was not meant to love her husband. She was certainly not supposed to enjoy going to bed with him. She was there to have children, to raise their family, and to do as she was told to do. Nothing more.

This was why Caroline felt extreme guilt whenever she thought of the duke or was within his presence. That fact that she wanted him, even when she knew it was wrong. That she was so hopelessly attracted to him, even when hating him and fearing him at the same time. It made her feel like a failure, as if she was doing something wrong and unspeakable.

I do not want to feel this way about the duke. And that I do... surely, something must be wrong with me?

"It does not matter what I want," she said, her head still bowed, her voice pained. "I do not want to marry His Grace. Is that not reason enough to be upset?"

Violet considered her for a moment; Caroline was not looking at her, so she could not guess at what she was thinking. Probably, she is annoyed at me, this self-pity routine is very unladylike.

“Let me tell you about my soon-to-be husband, shall I?” Violet said with a sigh. “You have met the man, so you know as well as anyone else that he is... how can I put this kindly...?” She considered further. “A downright toad.”

Caroline’s head snapped up and she gasped. “Violet!”

Violet shrugged. “He is. I am only marrying him because he has agreed to help cover some of our family’s debts, and he is only marrying me because he thinks he must do for the sake of his name and title.” She snorted. “There is no love there and we do not pretend otherwise.”

“Why are you...?” Caroline studied her sister, not understanding why she was being so upbeat and positive about what was undoubtedly a tragic happenstance. “Why are you telling me this?”

“When Roderick came to me and told me he wished for my hand, I was blunt with him.” She giggled. “I asked him what he wanted from this marriage and Roderick, ever the not-so-subtle type, told me exactly. A marriage of convenience, he called it. He does not want an heir. He does not want companionship.

He wants my name on a slip of paper and that is all.” She shrugged again. “And to be honest with you, I was thrilled when he told me so. It did away with expectation and allowed me to approach this marriage with a clear mind. I know what he is, what is to be expected, and now that I do, I am looking forward to it.”

“You... you are?”

“It might be nice if he cared for me,” she laughed. “But knowing what he wants has saved me the pain of learning through trial and error. In this life, Caroline, we rarely get what we want. The best we can do is be as prepared as is possible. Now...” She looked right at Caroline, her expression hardening. “What does His Grace want?”

“I...” Caroline considered the question.

Initially, her mind went where it had been going these past few days. Those times where she was not lamenting in self-pity and hating her circumstances, where she had allowed herself to get lost in those few seconds that should have made her feel self-disgust but brought lust instead.

The kiss they had shared. The passion that had erupted between them. How had he done that to her? And why did I enjoy it so much when I know that I should not?

It was dangerous to think, she knew. And it would be better if she did not feel this way at all. Certainly safer. As to what she might do about it... there was good reason she felt so confused and unsure.

“I do not know,” she said finally. “The man is stone, you know this. How am I to know what he desires?”

“Then find out,” Violet said. “Ask the man what he wants. Better, decide for yourself what you want and then make sure that he knows it. Do not go into this marriage having to guess. Make it clear and you will be all the happier.”

The advice was smart, if not fraught with danger. “And what if he doesn’t tell me? Or what if we don’t want the same thing?”

“As I said, we rarely get what we want in this life, Caroline. And seeing as he has already taken from you so much, the least you could do for yourself is stand your ground. Trust me when I say you will be better off.”

Caroline studied her sister closely, seeing her in a way she never had before. Caring. Kind. Concerned. They had never been close, but this marriage of hers had bonded them in a strange way and she realized that Violet was, above all things, an ally. This

realization alone made her smile.

“Thank you, Violet.” She crossed the room and hugged her. “For everything.”

“What are big sisters for?” Violet said. “Now, go and fetch Mother before she has a fit,” she then giggled. “And, as to what we just spoke about...”

“I don’t even remember it,” Caroline said with a knowing wink as she turned to fetch their mother, flooded with a new sense of purpose now that had her smiling.

Chapter Eleven

Anthony found himself standing in the back corner of the drawing room, glass of whiskey in hand, free of company in ways that were all too familiar. There must have been over two dozen people spread across the room, drinking and chatting merrily as they reminisced on what was for them a splendid weekend. If only I could share the same thought.

Anthony had no love for the nickname that had been bestowed upon him by his peers. The Cruel Duke... given to him for reasons that were not true— of course they are not— even if he refused to correct them because he would not be seen to beg and plead and explain. That was beneath him entirely.

However, it was times like this one where he could see the advantages of being thought of as such, as it allowed him peace and quiet during a time when he needed it the most.

Thoughts of Lady Hawkins were what clouded his mind this evening, as they had done continuously since he had first come upon her on the side of the road. That first day, she had annoyed him more than anything, set it seemed on frustration because she was apparently unable to control her wandering mind or her ever-wagging tongue. If only that was where it had ended.

Now, they were engaged. Now, they were set to spend the rest of their lives together. As to how Anthony was feeling about this... that remains to be seen, but if these last few days are any indication, it is not something to look forward to.

Typically, it was as this thought settled upon his broad shoulders that Anthony spied Lady Caroline making her way through the crowd and straight for him. Her jaw was set. Her brow was tight. She looked determined. And when she caught him watching her, she did not balk and turn and flee—at this point, he wouldn't have expected it. Instead, she stood that little bit taller as if to warn him off trying to avoid her.

Despite his efforts to appear unconcerned at the sight of her, Anthony felt his chest tighten just that little bit as memories of the previous evening returned to him. That kiss... neither what he had expected, nor wanted, but a moment which had stuck with him... which still lingered on his lips in ways that made him squirm.

“We need to talk,” she said as soon as she was close enough to be heard.

Anthony took a sip of his whiskey. “Is that right?”

She nodded, suddenly seeming unsure. “We do.”

“And of what reason do we need to talk?”

“Our marriage,” she said. “I need to...” She bit into her lip. “There is something we must discuss. And no, it cannot wait.”

“If your intention is a repeat performance of the other night, I shall save you the hassle. Nothing has changed, nor will it. And badgering me incessantly might not be as clever a stratagem as you think.”

“That is not my intent. What I wish to speak about...” She considered and Anthony could see the effort it was taking her to stand up to him. On the way over, he had seen fire and brimstone burning behind her eyes as no doubt she had spent some time working up the courage for this little assault.

Now that she was before him, she was wilting. “It concerns the expectations of our marriage. What it is that you require of me. Of us.”

Anthony could not help but notice a few eyes drifting in their direction. Although he did not care what others thought of him in the traditional sense, he was still a duke and he still had a reputation to protect. It would not do to be seen bickering with his soon-to-be wife.

“Not here,” Anthony said, his voice low. “And not now. In the coming days, I will apply for a marriage license, and once it is acquired I will be sure to pay you a visit. When I do, I will happily listen to whatever it is you simply must tell me.”

“That’s not good enough.” She did not so much as blink. “We will speak now .”

As said, Anthony did not relish the name he had been given by his contemporaries, nor did he aspire to it. He had, however, lived with it for so long now that it had become a part of him, whether he liked it or not. That was why he was so careful to control his emotions, fearing that perhaps the name was as apt as people said. That I am indeed that monster ...

No. He was not those things. A short temper, perhaps. And yes, he hated being told no—what duke didn’t? But he was not cruel or mean, and he certainly was not evil. He only wished that people could see that.

This, beyond anything, was why he struggled to be around Lady Hawkins so much. The way that she fought him. The way that she pushed against his indomitable presence. She forced him to react and assert himself like he had never needed to before, to delve into the depths of his anger for no other reason than he felt he must. And when she really tested him... he lost control completely, but not in the way he might have thought.

Even now, just to look at her, I find my blood pumping as if I had just run a mile. What terrifies me most of all is what might happen if she pushes me too far. What will I become then?

Anthony was not a savage, uncontrollable madman. However, for Lady Caroline, and the lust she inspired in him, he just might be...

“Not here,” he growled warningly at her. A glance about the drawing room and he spied a door across the way. “Come, we can speak in private?—”

“Here is just fine.” She took a step back. “This will not take long.”

“Less than a second, the way you are going,” Anthony said. “For there is nothing to stop me from walking away. Which, under the current circumstances, you should find yourself grateful for.”

“I wish for a quick conversation only,” she hurried. “There is no need for...” She swallowed and her eyes looked everywhere but at him. “For us to argue.”

Anthony scoffed. “If only that were true.”

She laughed at that. “Is it my fault that you bring it out in me?”

“Funny, I was going to say the same to you.” He almost smiled but quickly pressed it down as Anthony almost never smiled. “Go on then...” He took a sip of whiskey. “What is it that you wish to speak of? That could not wait for a more appropriate setting?”

She stood a little bit taller, proud that she had won this round. “It occurs me to that I have been...” She clicked her tongue. “That I have been unfair to you.”

“You... you have been?” Anthony said, stunned by the admission.

“I accused you of forcing this marriage on me as if it was your fault and then became angered when you refused to do anything to stop it. I realize now that in this life we do not always get our way and that sometimes there is nothing to be done but accept the reality and move on from it.”

“How very...” He frowned at her with confusion, surprised that she was being so honest with him. “That is...” He did not know what to say. “Very kind of you.”

She shrugged. “Sometimes, I have it in myself.”

“Better late than never, I suppose.”

Her face dropped. “I am trying to be nice.”

He gave his head a shake, forcing his attention back to the matter at hand. “You want something? Somehow, I doubt you came over here merely to apologize.”

She narrowed her eyes angrily and it got Anthony’s blood pumping. Why am I teasing her? I know what it will do to her. Just as I know what it will do to me...

“The point I am trying to make is that there is no getting out of this, so the best that I can hope for it to find a way to accept it. To live with it, as you must do also.”

“Meaning?”

“What is it that you want from this marriage?” she said simply, the annoyance fading, earnestness evident in the way she looked up at him. “You never told me why you wished to marry to begin with, and I sense that you are not in it for love...” She snorted. “Somehow, I doubt you are capable of such a thing.”

“Careful...” He warned her. “Do not think that the presence of a crowd will save you.”

“My meaning is that there must be a reason you wished to marry,” she said quickly, careful to avoid angering him further. “And I would like to know what it is. What do you expect of me? If you tell me that, then I will at least know how to approach our union. Truly, it might make things easier on both of us.”

Anthony considered the question, and the logic behind it. It surprised him, that she was being so forthright and practical. It also relieved him, because he saw in it a chance to establish the exact boundaries that he needed. He did not want a marriage in which they were at one another’s throat the entire time. He certainly did not want her to push him, for he knew where that would lead.

What he desired... he looked across the drawing room and caught sight of Roderick, seated beside his soon-to-be wife. They were not speaking to one another. They were not even acknowledging each other’s existence. They would never be happy, nor would they be woeful. Perhaps in many ways, that in itself was the definition of a perfect marriage.

At least Anthony told himself as much, because he knew that to want anything else for himself would be folly.

“You want to know what I require of you?”

“That is all I want.”

“I have said it once and I will say it again.” He looked right at her. “Peace and quiet. I do not want to fight. I do not want you to test me. I want a marriage that to the world outside of our walls appears like any other. No gossip. No rumors. Peace and quiet.”

There was more to it than that. The true reason that Anthony had sought suddenly to find himself a bride. What he really wished from this union. But for the time being, his explanation would suffice. Somehow, he doubted the truth of it would please his soon-to-be wife.

Unsurprisingly, Lady Caroline was nodding along. “A marriage of convenience.”

He chuckled at the term. “If that is what they are calling it.”

“It is,” she said. “And I am. I think...” A smile reached her lips. It was a beautiful thing, reminding him again of how pretty he found her. Which annoyed him, as was typical. “I think this can work.”

“Do you now?”

“Yes.” She stood herself up and for a moment he thought she was going to extend her hand for him to shake. Rather, she nodded once and then... just sort of lingered, again unsure.

“You may leave me,” he sighed. “Before you do or say anything that might annoy me.”

“I would not want to disturb your peace and quiet,” she joked, and Anthony very nearly laughed.

Lady Caroline hesitated, her eyes roaming him, her tongue licking her lips, a sense that she had more to say. Or perhaps there was something else on her mind? Their shared kiss had not left Anthony’s mind these past few days, and he wondered if it was still on her mind too. More than that, he wondered how she felt about it.

Surely she felt nothing? For how could she? She was forced into this marriage and is

now trying to make her peace with it. That is all it can be...

A shake of the head and Lady Caroline turned suddenly and disappeared through the crowd, gone as if she never was. Anthony stayed in the corner, finishing his drink before retiring for the evening.

As strange as it might have been to think, that right there was by far the most pleasant conversation Anthony and Lady Caroline had engaged in yet. Still a little hostile, but by no means venomous. It gave Anthony hope.

What did he really want from this marriage? Apart from an heir, as was expected, he wanted a marriage in which his wife was not terrified of him. A marriage where she did not balk at the sight of him, or turn and flee when he entered the room. Dammit, he wanted a marriage where she laughed when she heard the name the Cruel Duke, rather than screamed.

Anthony had long since given up on such notions, knowing that when he married, it would be a forced affair, likely to a woman who feared him, and the best he could hope for was that she avoided him and pretended he did not exist. For her own sake, as well as his.

Peace and quiet...

Chapter Twelve

The following weeks passed by in a blur as Caroline's wedding day approached. She thought time might have gone more slowly, a ticking clock that never seemed to reach midnight, seeing as she was most certainly not looking forward to the day in question. Sadly, the complete opposite was true.

"There you are!" Caroline's mother burst into her room two weeks after her sister's wedding. "What are you doing?"

"Mother..." Caroline frowned. "I'm reading. What is the matter?"

Times were that it might have been strange for her mother to seek her out like this in the middle of the day. With four other daughters and a son to keep her busy, Caroline was rarely the subject of her attention and had always been glad for it. Why, she could have snuck out, tripped into London, gotten up to all sorts of mischief, and come home knowing that not a soul would be the wiser. Not anymore.

It seemed that every day now her mother was checking on her. Making sure she was well. Asking questions about the wedding. Ensuring that Caroline wasn't going to do anything foolish that might ruin everything. And in truth, it was starting to get on Caroline's nerves.

"His Grace is here!" her mother explained, rushing across the room and snatching the book from Caroline's hands.

"Mother! I was reading?—"

“Later,” she waved her down. “I’ve had the staff direct him to the sitting room, but we are to join him immediately.”

Caroline sighed and started toward the door. “Fine. Did he tell you why he has?—”

“Caroline! What are you doing?”

Caroline stopped and turned back, surprised by the aghast look of horror that her mother fixed on her. “Er... going downstairs to see?—”

“Dressed like that! No, no. You have not seen His Grace in two weeks! This is as good as a first impression, Caroline, and you only ever get one!”

Under her breath, Caroline mumbled, “unlike in this instance...”

Nonetheless, her mother directed her to change into something more appropriate. Caroline had been half-dressed, seeing as she was to spend the day sitting around the house. By the time she made her way downstairs, however, she was in full dress, closer to being ready to attend a ball than a simple visit from her betrothed.

I might have liked to have not looked so dressed up. If for no other reason than to remind him of the circumstances of this marriage—that it is purely of convenience and nothing more.

The truth was that Caroline had come around greatly to her impending marriage, resigned to it now. She knew there was no chance of its cancellation, but conceded that it would not be as bad as she had originally feared on account of the assurance the duke had given her when she’d approached him. A marriage of convenience, this was to be, and nothing more.

This would allow her to avoid him. This would give her an excuse to not spend any

time with him. It might be a loveless marriage, but it would not be one that saw her test the limits of her control...

She and her mother thus found the duke waiting for them in the sitting room. Caroline was unsure what she expected from this unexpected visit, conceding by the time it was over with that even she could not have foreseen how sterile it would be.

“Lady Grayhill,” the duke greeted Caroline’s mother as she and Caroline appeared in the doorway. “And Lady Caroline. Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

“Your Grace...” her mother purred as she crossed the room. “Think nothing of it. We are as good as family.” She reached the duke and dropped into a curtsy. “And we must begin to act like it. Shall I have some tea poured?”

“No,” he said. “There is no need for that. I will not be staying long.”

Caroline lingered in the doorway, admittedly taken aback initially because in the two weeks that had passed, she’d forgotten much of the duke’s physicality, and had been able to ignore what it did to her. But seeing him again in the flesh... he is just so big. And brawny. And intimidating. I should feel terror at the sight, knowing that soon he and I will be forced to live alone. Strangely, that is not even close to what I am feeling...

“Caroline!” her mother hissed at her and waved her over.

“Oh...” A shake of the head and she waded into the room. “Good morning, Your Grace.”

The duke looked her over, but quickly, and was then back on her mother. “I have come to inform you that the marriage license for your daughter and me has been procured. I was able to pull some strings, hence the suddenness, but I figured that,

under the circumstances, haste is necessary.”

“You... you have?” her mother blinked in shock. “That is wonderful!”

“Two weeks hence,” the duke continued, still looking at her mother, seeming to be purposefully avoiding Caroline’s gaze. “A small ceremony, as discussed, which I will leave to your discretion.”

“Your Grace, that is...” Her mother still looked surprised by the forthrightness of the announcement. “This is very considerate, and it will be done. Two weeks, you say?”

“Two weeks.”

The duke left almost immediately after that. He said goodbye to Caroline’s mother, he nodded once at Caroline—barely making eye contact—and then he strode from their home and was atop his horse before Caroline had so much as a chance to blink.

“That was unexpected,” her mother said as they watched his horse trot down the drive.

“No,” Caroline said to herself, her gaze caught on the duke as he was swallowed by the gate and gone from sight. “Not that unexpected at all.”

The past two weeks had been a confusing time for Caroline. Although she and the duke had discussed the terms of their marriage and he had confirmed for her that all he wished for was a marriage of convenience, she hadn’t been able to say whether she believed him or not. Worse than that, she still couldn’t say if she believed it herself.

For weeks now, all she had been able to think about were those two nights when she found herself alone with the duke—and that wasn’t even counting the night they had slept in the same bed! She could not stop thinking about that kiss. She could not stop

thinking about his hands around her waist. And she certainly could not stop thinking about what might happen once the two were married, alone, with no more excuses to stand between them...

It should not be this way! It should be the duke who I do not trust, not myself. And I should be happy that he has agreed to a marriage of convenience, not upset that he had said yes so easily. What is wrong with me?

Caroline could not allow even the most remote chance that the duke wanted more from her than a mere marriage of convenience. She feared that if she was put in a situation where her self-control would be tested, she would not be able to resist. And considering how little she believed the duke and his promise, she had every reason to fear that come the night of their marriage, he would do as she feared. And that I will not have it in me to say no.

Those next two weeks moved at a brisk pace.

During that time, not once did Caroline hear from His Grace. Her mother, she was told, had been in contact with him, merely to ensure that everything went ahead as expected. A couple of times too, Caroline thought to ask if the duke had asked anything about her... only to curb that notion because she did not care.

I do not care. The less he is thinking about me, the better.

Still, Caroline could not escape the nagging feeling that she was walking into a trap of her own making, and for that reason, she determined to speak with him one final time. To ensure that he was a man of his word and would not try anything once they were married... which also ensuring that if he did, she had it in herself to resist.

* * *

As Caroline rushed around the back of the chapel, she pontificated for a moment about how unlike her this was. Always, she was the well-behaved one. Never had she done anything that might cause alarm in her mother or even in herself. Yet these last few weeks, so much had changed in her. Changes she was yet to decide on whether they were positive or a trend which she needed to keep an eye on.

A worry for later as the necessity of it all means I have little real choice.

Her wedding was due to start at any moment. She was dressed in her gown; a canary yellow number with a billowing skirt, a tight bodice—always the case with her curves—and a modest neckline which she personally felt ran a little too deep toward her chest. The dress was hiked up as she hurried, her eyes on a tree which sat some twenty feet from the chapel's entrance.

Keeping low, she darted for it, knowing she would not be seen as everyone was inside the chapel already waiting for the ceremony to begin. The only thing missing was the groom.

That is what Caroline was doing out here in the first place. She had left her mother behind, citing a need to visit the washroom alone. Her mother had fretted because the ceremony would begin as soon as the duke arrived, and she did not want to keep him waiting! Caroline assured her that would not be a problem. After all, she planned on intercepting the duke well before he reached the inside of the chapel.

Indeed, it was just as she ducked behind the tree that she spied the arrival of his carriage. Inside, she knew the duke to be contained, no doubt lamenting this entire day and wishing it to be over. She grimaced to herself when she pictured the shock on her face that was sure to appear as she popped up by his doorway. Desperate times, unfortunately...

The carriage came to a stop and Caroline acted.

She rushed the carriage like a bull at a red flag and it was just as the door was swinging open that she stuck her body between the open doorway and the exiting duke.

“Good morning,” she said with a sheepish smile.

The duke’s eyes widened in shock. “Lady Caroline! What are you?—”

“We need to talk.” She climbed into the carriage and closed the door behind her. Her heart was racing from the endeavor, and never had she felt more alive. That was until she turned to find the duke looking right at her; his legs spread, his hulking frame taking up nearly the entire carriage so that she felt tiny by comparison. Alone suddenly and this idea did not feel nearly as clever as she had thought. “... ah... if that is agreeable with you.”

“That depends on what this is.” The duke eyed her with curiosity as much as annoyance. “If this is another vain attempt to cancel the marriage...”

“No, no, nothing like that I swear.” She tried to meet his eyes but she found that she could not. Her mind flashed back to those nights in his bedroom, when he had stood over her, those same eyes locking her in place so that she could hardly breathe. “And I do not mean to cause alarm, but there is something I must ask you.”

“And it could not wait?”

“No,” she said. “It had to be now.”

The duke groaned and shifted in his seat. It was subtle, but it looked to her like he was moving back from her, as if he was the one who was worried. Why would that be? I’m the one who should be terrified to be alone with him.

“Tell me then,” he said. “And make it quick, because if this is how you plan on approaching our marriage, Lady Caroline, you would do well to remember that I am not one who cares for such immature nonsense as this. Peace and quiet, remember? Or have you forgotten?”

“That is exactly what I wish to speak of,” she said, forcing herself to look at him. She regretted it immediately, her breath catching in her throat. The duke’s hulking mass was shadowed in the confines of the carriage, such that she could barely make him out clearly, save for his sheer size and the breadth of his power which radiated from him like a hand wrapping itself around her heart and squeezing. She found it hard to breathe. Sweat began to form. And her body began to tremble...

“Well?” he said. “Are you going to speak? Or did you come here just to gawk?”

“This marriage,” she blurted suddenly. “I need to hear you say it again.”

“Say what?”

“That it is one of convenience only,” she said. “I know that we discussed it already. I know you told me that was what you wish for. And I want to believe you. I do. It is only...” She hesitated, looking away and biting into her lip. “I need to hear you say it one more time. I need to know it is the truth.”

He groaned and shifted again; the entire carriage swayed. “That is what this is about?”

“I had to see you again. I am sorry, I just could not walk down the aisle without you confirming it one more time.”

“This is...” He clicked his tongue. “Highly irregular. And the truth is, I thought better of you. I had hoped that you would be more...” He groaned. “Well behaved than

this.”

“I am!”

“I find it curious...” The duke considered her for a moment. “That’s twice now you have come to me, determined to find out what I want from this marriage, but not once have you told me what you want.”

“What I want...” She frowned, caught by surprise from the question. “What do you mean?”

“As I said. I have told you that I want peace and quiet, which as things currently stand, look to be the opposite of what I have signed up for.” He breathed out sharply. “But what do you want?”

“I told you,” she said. “A marriage of convenience.”

“Which means what, exactly?” he followed up. “Do you intend to spend our entire marriage ignoring me? Fighting with me? Perhaps moving to the stables so you can avoid me altogether?” He chuckled at the notion. “I told you that when we are married, you will be free to do as you wish, but not once have you even suggested what that might look like. So, I ask you again...” The duke sat up and leaned forward and Caroline felt herself pulling back, careful not to let him get too close. “What do you want?”

The question should not have been so surprising. And it certainly should not have caused such shock. But it did. Growing up as she had, Caroline was never asked what she wanted, or given much thought to at all, because nobody ever seemed to care. It was so commonplace that in her mind it was normal. At least it had been.

Is this some sort of trick? A misdirection? Why does the Cruel Duke of all people

give a damn about me and what I want?

“I... I don’t... I just want... a marriage of convenience,” she said stupidly.

“Yes, you said that already,” the duke sighed. “Which could mean any one of a dozen things. Personally, I suggest that you give it some thought so the next time you attack me like this, you might be better prepared.”

What did Caroline want? Truly, she could not say. She knew what she didn’t want—a marriage like what her parents had experienced. But what did she want ? What could she even expect from a marriage like this? She had no idea.

“Is there anything else?” the duke then asked.

She looked at him blankly. There had been. Her reason for coming here in the first place, that purpose had not been properly addressed. Only now, it felt redundant, her mind awash with a new question to which she could not fathom an answer.

“As I thought...” The duke leaned around her and popped open the carriage door. “I suggest you hurry, before anyone notices your absence.”

“Yes...” She nodded vaguely, climbing from the carriage.

“And Lady Hawkins...” The duke smiled, but she could not tell if it was genuine or meant to intimidate. “I will be seeing you shortly.”

With the carriage door closed, Caroline gave her head a shake and was then quick to rush back around the chapel and into the room where her mother was still waiting for her. Luckily, before her mother had a chance to chastise her, the duke’s arrival was announced, and she was being rushed into the chapel to start the ceremony.

Still, her mind was back in that carriage, unable to pull herself away from the question which the duke had asked her. What did Caroline want? She was not a romantic. She was not looking for a love match. Again, those were things she did not want. Not what she wanted. Why is this question so hard to answer?

That was until she saw His Grace standing at the end of the aisle waiting for her. He turned back and met her eyes, and her heart began to pound once more, just as her skin flushed, just as her legs shook. What did she want? In that moment, Caroline knew for fact that she wanted her husband... not, however, for reasons that any would dare misconstrue as being romantic or love inclined. Then again, that was the entire problem.

Chapter Thirteen

“So, this is my new life,” Caroline said to herself as she wandered across her bedroom. It was the night of the wedding, she had arrived home less than an hour ago, sent to her room because the duke had had a long day and did not wish for supper. He had made sure to inform her that if she wished for it, she could ask the staff to fetch her some food, but there was no indication that he wished to join her.

Despite how short he had been with her, Caroline also felt relieved. This right here was further proof that the duke had not been lying to her, giving her some hope that at least she would not have to fight against her own pesky temptations.

Caroline was quick to undress for bed, choosing a simple shift to wear from her still-to-be unpacked luggage. I will have the staff help me with it tomorrow. Or perhaps I shall do it myself? It is not like I will have anything else to do. The room was bare, save for her bed, a couch by the fireplace, and a desk for writing. It did not feel like home yet, but she supposed that would change.

With nothing to do, Caroline decided to turn in for bed, only for a knock at the door to have her stiffening. She stood in the middle of the room, turned to face the door, her heart rate rising because she guessed who was on the other side, but couldn't imagine what for.

“Are you decent?” her husband's voice spoke through the closed door.

What is he doing? Caroline looked about the empty room as if she meant to run. There was nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide. Just her and her alone. Again, she

remembered the last time the two were alone like this, and where that had led to. Surely, he was not here for that? But then what was he here for?

“Your Grace,” the duke spoke again. “Are you decent?”

She had no choice. Even if she did, what difference would it make? She was married to the man now, trapped under his roof, and this right here was but the first time of what she was sure would be many instances of them being alone together. Likely, he just wished to make sure she had everything she needed. But what if... No. She shook her head and dispelled that notion.

“Come in,” she said softly, standing up tall and doing what she could to appear composed.

The door swung open and in walked the duke, her husband. He had dressed down from the suit he was wearing for their wedding, now in little more than a pair of breeches and a nightshirt. It hung loosely from his thick shoulders, an opening at the front revealing the matting of hair that covered him. Her eyes drifted to it unconsciously and she widened them when she realized what she was doing, looking away.

Then, she realized what she was wearing... not much at all. Feeling self-conscious and exposed, she folded her arms over her chest as if to cover herself.

“Ye—yes?” she stammered. “What is it?”

The duke remained by the doorway as he studied her. The light from the fire was soft, barely reaching where he stood; the effect was to cast him mostly in dark shadow, which made him seem somehow larger and more intimidating. The crackle of the fire. The pop of the wood. Her heart thudding in her chest. The silence grew...

“I wished to make sure that you have everything,” the duke said simply. “Do you?”

“I do,” she said. “Thank you.”

“If you require anything at all, the staff will be sure to acquiesce.”

“I will remember that.”

“Good.” He continued to look at her, his dark eyes noticeably falling to her bust. The look in his eyes as he took them in made her skin prickle, and once again she remembered his lips on her own... his hands around her waist... his teeth biting into?—

“Is that all?” she said quickly, forcing herself to focus.

The duke tilted his head, still looking at her. Then, he crossed the room, walking right past her, where he sat down on the couch by the fire. She turned to follow him, caught between panic at what he was doing and that pesky sense of excitement that seemed to follow her whenever she and the duke were alone.

“Come here, please,” he said simply.

“Ex—excuse me?” she stammered.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I would like to speak with you.”

She obeyed without even realizing what she was doing. Her feet moved as if of their own volition until she was standing by the couch.

“Sit,” he then commanded of her.

Her brow furrowed and it took all her self-control not to do as he said. “Sit? I do not... I do not understand.”

“You may continue to stand,” he said. “But I find it awkward. Please...” He gestured to the couch again.

She pushed her lips together, not at all certain of what he was getting at. Despite the nervousness she was feeling, anger was still very much a present emotion. He had the inane ability to bring it out in her, such that she was forced to wonder if he liked doing so.

Caroline sat awkwardly on the arm of the chair, being careful not to get too close, careful to be in a position where she could leap to her feet if need be.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked her.

“I am.”

“Liar.”

“I just want to know what you are doing? I did not expect to see you in my room tonight.” She spoke forward, refusing to look at him. But she could feel him watching her, his eyes lingering on her bosom as they had been since he walked through the door. “Or ever,” she finished.

“I thought that it might be obvious.”

Her eyes widened when she saw the look in his eyes. No... surely, he does not mean... but he promised. “I... I thought that... you said—whoa!” she yelped as his large hands wrapped around her waist and pulled her from the armrest, onto his lap.

“There,” he said. “Much better.”

Caroline sat frozen on the duke’s lap. Unsure what she should say. What she should do. And why it felt as comfortable as it did. His legs spread just enough for her to slip between them. His hands around her waist were strong but also protective. And his breath on the back of her neck... a shudder ran down her spine and right to her thighs.

“What... what are you doing?”

“This marriage does not have to be so hostile,” the duke began, his voice deep but a whisper. His breath still traced the skin on her neck but the grip around her waist tightened. “Even if you seem intent on making it so.”

“M—me?” She moaned as his thighs tightened around her. “And what of you? You’re the one who?”

“Careful now,” he continued, and she could feel him lean in closer, his lips brushing the back of her neck. “That sounds suspiciously like the beginnings of an argument.”

“You make it so easy to do...” Her body shook and she felt him poking into her buttocks. “Perhaps if you want...” More shaking. “... us to be more companionable, you ought to take a look at yourself.”

“And if I promise to treat you more kindly, will you do the same?” One hand on her waist, the other gripped her thigh now. “No more arguing. No more fighting. Peace and quiet.”

She did not answer. Her mind was in a dozen places. His breath and lips on her neck. His hand on her waist. His fingers digging into her thigh. Her body was quivering, and it was all she could do not to lean back as she so wanted, opening herself and letting him take her as he so clearly meant to do.

“Well?” he asked and his grip around her tightened further.

“I... I...” she moaned when the hand on her waist moved up and cupped around her breasts. His fingers pinched her nipple through the shift, sending a spark of pain right into her chest. Or was that pleasure? “I think I can...”

“Good girl,” the duke whispered, his lips finally finding her neck. And then, his hand moved from her breast to her throat once more. A soft grip, moving further up and finding her chin which he turned around so that she was facing him.

He did not speak after that. He did not need to. She could see in his eyes what he wanted, and despite what Caroline thought she knew about herself, in that moment, she wanted it too. He sat himself up and moved her face down to his lips, his mouth opening and then kissing her in ways that she had spent weeks dreaming about, a memory that had faded, now brought back to life in the most glorious of ways.

They kissed with passion. They kissed with fire. They kissed as if they were animals, a race to devour the other first. Lips mashed. Tongues lapped and wrestled. Caroline lost herself in that kiss, turning around more so that his other hand could find her breasts.

He did just that, taking it and squeezing it. He moaned and pulled back, she gasped, he then buried his head into her neck and began to suck roughly. The sensation drove her insane.

“Urgh...” she moaned as he licked and sucked at her neck. “What... what are we doing?” A final effort at protesting.

“I think you know.”

“I thought this was... a marriage of... convenience...”

“I...” He looked at her as if he didn’t understand what she said. “Of course it is.”

“Then what are you doing?”

Still, he looked confused. “You are my wife. I am your husband. It is our wedding night. I would have thought it was obvious?”

Until that moment, Caroline had been so close to giving in. How unexpected his sudden appearance had been. How quick he had been to take her. In her mind, it had almost been as if the moment had happened through pure lust and desire. The duke had been in his room thinking about her, unable to control himself, wanting her as she wanted him. They both knew it was wrong to do but they could not help it!

Perhaps it wasn’t the best of excuses, but Caroline had known how weak she felt around the duke, and for a few seconds there, she was almost able to believe that this was akin to some sort of accident...

But the spell cracked and shattered as soon as he spoke. Caroline remembered suddenly what she had been promised, what was expected, and what she told herself that she wanted. Certainly not this!

“No!” she cried out, pushing herself back with such force that she tumbled over and landed heavily on the floor. But she was quickly back to her feet, scurrying up and taking a hasty few steps backwards, expecting the duke to chase her.

He did no such thing.

He remained on the couch, a confused look on his face that suggested he had no idea what had gotten into her. As if he could not comprehend why she was behaving in this way.

“No,” she said again. Her body was flushed, her breathing wild and heavy, and her mind was still back in that chair. It was all she could do to keep herself calm. “I said no .”

“And I heard you,” he said. “I just don’t understand what it means.”

“The word no?” she said. “You do not know what?—”

“I know what the word no means,” he spoke over her. “I just do not know why you are saying it. Or why you are behaving this way.”

“This is...” More heavy breathing. “This is not what was promised.”

“Promised?”

“A marriage of convenience!” she cried out, more to dispel the emotion that flooded her than anything else. “You promised that this would be a marriage of convenience!”

“And it is,” he agreed. “Do not mistake what this is. This is not an effort to seduce you or break from what I said. I am not so dishonorable that I would lie to you so that I might trick you into sleeping with me.”

“Then what is it?”

“You are my wife, I am your husband, and this is our wedding night.” He continued to look at her as if only just now understanding why she was so upset. “I would have thought it was obvious what this was. The very reason that one marries in the first place.”

She balked at that, leaning back. “What are you...” It took a moment. Their eyes met. He raised an eyebrow. The meaning dawned on her. And she cried out and took

another step back. “No! You cannot be serious!”

“I assure you I am nothing, if not serious. Why do you think I married in the first place? Not for love. Not for companionship. Not even for expectation, as you might have guessed by now I do not care for what others think of me. I married for one reason and one reason only. To produce an heir.”

Caroline could not help in that moment but remember her mother and father’s marriage. Not what her mother had told her, however, but what she had seen with her own two eyes. The words the duke spoke sounded suspiciously like something her father would have said; he who was so mean and cruel to her mother. And her mother, unable to deny him, would have done exactly as was asked.

Is that what Caroline wanted? A wife whose only use was to bear children for a man who hated her. Whom she also hated. If her parents’ marriage was anything to go by, it would lead to a lifetime of unhappiness. Never mind a marriage of convenience. This would be a marriage of servitude.

All this was clouded by the confusion she felt toiling away at her desires for the duke. That she had enjoyed their kiss so much more than he clearly had hurt her, even if she didn’t fully understand why. He felt nothing for her and if she was to give in... guilt and shame would be nothing to the pain and loneliness I’d be forced to suffer.

She shook her head. “You... you told me this marriage was for convenience. You promised!”

The duke took a moment to himself, brow furrowed, confusion still apparent. He was not upset with her, at least. In fact, if she was to guess it, he almost looked regretful.

“It seems there has been a misunderstanding.”

“You think!”

“What I told you originally was not a lie, and nothing I promised you will change. As I told you, under my roof you will be free to do pretty much anything you wish. As long as it does not bring shame upon my name or this household, this marriage will be a simple affair. However...”

He rose from the chair, his towering frame standing so tall it was as if he might go through the ceiling. She gasped, her neck craning back to look at him. “The simple fact is, I am a duke, and as a duke, it is expected that I will produce an heir. I thought you understood this?”

Caroline could not believe what she was hearing! She was furious because she had known that this was too good to be true, embarrassed because she could not believe she had fallen for his tricks, and hopeless, because she did not know what she could do to stop him. If there is anything at all.

“I...” Her voice began to tremble. “I am surprised. You do not seem like the type who would care for a child.”

“A child?” He frowned as if he didn’t understand the word. “We are not speaking of starting a family together. What I wish for is an heir.”

“Which is a child!”

He considered. “Yes, in a manner of speaking. But you are a lady of the ton, Your Grace?—”

“Caroline,” she snapped.

“Excuse me?”

“My name,” she said. “It is Caroline.”

He chuckled. “As you wish, Caroline. The point I am making is that you know, as do I, that things are expected of us. This marriage alone is proof of that. Such is the way of the world that if we did not have a child together, it would be considered strange. We have no choice.”

Caroline could not believe what she was hearing!

On the one hand, she understood well enough what the duke was saying to her, and she knew the truth of his words. What was more, the general shock present on his face suggested that he truly did think that this was all so expected and obvious that it had never occurred to him to confirm it. Is he really that dense? Or is he just so used to getting his way that he didn't think it would be a problem?

Not that it mattered. Not that she cared! Caroline had made a promise to herself, and she was not about to break it because of expectation or what was considered right or any of that nonsense! Right was not being forced upon by her husband. Right was not being lied to.

“I said no!” she said, her eyes burning with defiant intensity as she locked them onto him. “You made me a promise. You told me...” She bared her teeth. “You told me what I wished to hear, a lie. That is what you did. You lied to me.”

“I most certainly did not.”

“Ha!”

He groaned and rubbed his eyes. “Peace and quiet...” he then muttered under his breath before giving his head a shake and looking at her again. “You mean to deny me?”

“I do,” she said bravely. “I am.”

He studied her for a moment longer. His eyes working over her, behind which she could see him trying to figure through the moment. “And I am afraid I cannot allow that. This is...” He pushed his tongue into his lip, the clear signs of frustration growing. “This is not something that I want, Caroline. It is something that I must do.”

“And what about what I want?”

“What you want?” The duke frowned and tilted his head. “Yes, you have told me. A marriage of convenience. But even in such instances?—”

“No, not that...” It had been earlier when the duke had asked Caroline what she wanted from this marriage, a question to which she still had no answer. The only half truths she could ring from her conscience concerned what she did not want, which wasn’t quite the same, but it would have to do. “You asked me what I wanted earlier. Did you mean it?”

“Did I mean it? What do you?—”

“Do you even care,” she cut him off. “Do you care about what I desire, or are your own needs the only ones which matter? Typical.”

The question appeared to anger the duke at first. His eyes flashed and Caroline sensed she had gone too far. It had always been this way with them, since the first time they had met. Even when he was trying to be nice, she simply could not help but push... I really need to get better at that.

But then his expression softened considerably and he took a deep breath. “I do,” he said. “Although I understand why you might think the opposite. This entire arrangement...” He scoffed and shook his head. “It has been a tempestuous time for

both of us, such that I understand why you think so little of me.” He raised an eyebrow at her, as if expecting her to deny this claim. She did no such thing. “As I thought...”

She grimaced. “I do not wish to fight with you either. That is not...” She clicked her tongue. “I am not such a fool to think that this is a love match or has any chance of being one. More than that, I doubt either you or I want such a thing.”

“I ask you again, what do you want?” He looked right at her, and for the first time she felt herself believing him. He wasn’t trying to trick her. He wasn’t trying to manipulate her. It was as if he cared.

“I...” She hesitated, considering the question once again. “I do not know what I want—but I know what I do not want,” she hurried when she saw his expression tighten. “I do not wish to be used. I do not wish to be little more than a...” She scoffed. “Then a vessel for children. If I was to say yes to you right now, I know exactly what would happen.”

“Which is?”

“You would forget me—worse than that, you would expect me to do whatever you command, whenever you command it of me. Called upon when you require me in your bed, forgotten as soon as the deed is done. And when the child is born, it will be the same. I will be little more than a tool with one purpose only.” Her lip curled at the thought. “I will not have it.”

The duke studied her closely, and she wondered what he was going to say.

Caroline guessed that he would care little for her worries. Why should he? Didn’t he say from the beginning he wanted little to do with her? So why would that change if they had a child together? He was likely confused, not understanding why she feared

being forgotten when she had told him herself she wanted a marriage of convenience. Isn't that the same thing?

There was the other side of the coin, also, a concern that Caroline would not dare to voice. What if she slept with the duke once and became obsessed with him? Their sexual chemistry was intense, proven as such moments ago when she had very nearly given in completely. If she slept with him one time and then he forgot about her, she was not certain how she would handle such an event. It would very likely break me. Not to mention the shame I would feel at giving in, in the first place...

"I have a proposition for you," the duke said suddenly.

"You... what is it?" she asked with caution.

"I understand your concern," he said. "And my hope is that you understand mine. I need an heir, Caroline. It is that simple."

"And I am not going to sleep with you simply because you think?—"

"But you are worried," he spoke over her. "Fearful that once you give me an heir, I will shut you out. A fair assumption," he admitted. "Considering what you likely think of me..." A shadow passed behind his eyes and he grimaced. "And how we have treated one another to this point. But it does not have to be that way."

"What do you mean?"

"Give me a chance," he said to her. "In fact, give me five chances." He held up a hand and splayed five fingers open. "Five separate occasions during which I will prove to you that this marriage does not have to be the hellscape that you have envisioned. Five nights and days of my choosing to demonstrate who I am and what this marriage might be."

“I don’t...” She shook her head, confusion reigning on her. “I don’t understand. You mean to seduce me?”

“To court you,” he emphasized, chuckling softly. “By the end of which, if you agree that I am not a monster whose only wish is to use you, then you will give me what I have asked for. An heir,” he confirmed.

“And if I refuse?”

He clicked his tongue. “Let us just hope it does not come to that.”

Caroline considered the proposition, doing her best to see through the words so she could get to their truth. Is this a trick? Some sort of trap? Surely, he cannot be serious. Based on everything I have heard of the duke, and seen with my own eyes, this is the exact opposite of what I should expect from him. And yet...

Was he really as bad as she thought? Yes, they fought often. Yes, they were constantly at one another’s throats. But he was not evil or mean. And he had never done anything that might cause her to fear him. Really, if not for the stories she had heard, told from outside sources, she might not have thought nearly as little of him as she did. Or as she had, anyhow.

The offer too, it was too good to be true. A way out, it felt like. A life raft thrown to her in the middle of the storm. It gave her control of this relationship, an excuse not to give into her amorous desires like she was so desperate to. Like she would right now, if not for...

No! She shook her head, deciding in the moment that this was the best offer she could hope for. On top of which, it would give her a chance to better know the man to whom she was now married. And maybe, however remote the chance was, it might lead to... No, no, Caroline. Do not go there. Do not even dream it.

“I agree,” she said quickly. “To your proposal. At the end of which, if I still do not wish to give you an heir?—”

“We will cross that bridge when it comes,” the duke cut her off, then he smirked. “Although somehow, I do not think it will be a problem.”

She scoffed. “You are not standing where I am.”

To that, he laughed. “Sleep well, Caroline...” Slowly, he stepped around her, his dark eyes holding her in his stare as he started across the room. “And try not to toss and turn at the thought of me just a few rooms away.”

She snorted. “Is that what I will be doing?”

“Based on how you were kissing me just now....” He winked and she felt her chest flush red. “I have given myself five chances, but I doubt it will come to that.”

“Y—you wish,” she stammered, feeling that flush in her chest grow.

“No, no...” He reached the door and popped it open. “I think you do.”

She opened her mouth to argue but he stepped outside and closed the door behind him, leaving her standing there with her mouth hanging open and confusion crashing down on her.

This entire situation... Caroline had no idea what to think of it. On the one hand, it felt like a smart move, because once he was finished trying to win her over, she would be able to simply deny him and be done with it. Once that time came, she could perhaps elect to move out, live her own life, do whatever she wished—the duke had told her as much.

On the other hand, is that what she wanted? Now that she really considered where this might lead and what the consequences might be. She did not want this marriage in the first place because she feared that she would be forced to live with a man who wanted nothing to do with her, who would use her and then discard her without thought. But if they could learn to like one another, develop a companionship, then perhaps this marriage stood a chance?

A chance at what? That was where she became stuck. Love and happiness... Caroline had never dreamed that she might be treated to such a thing. She did not even know the meaning of the concept! And with the Cruel Duke of all people. Somehow, it feels unlikely.

In the end, Caroline decided on perseverance. She would humor the duke. She would let him go through with this farce. As she did, she would endeavor not to give in because she still suspected deep down that he was not being truly honest. Then, once it was done, she would finally have what was promised. A marriage of convenience. As far as she was concerned, it was the best she could hope for.

Chapter Fourteen

Anthony sat patiently as he waited for Caroline to arrive so the two might break their fast together. This was not discussed as a prerequisite of their marriage, but Anthony felt that it was important. I was at pains last night to establish that there were certain expectations to be upheld in this marriage, the most important being the bearing of an heir. And where breakfast is not quite so traditional, hopefully she will see what I am trying to do.

Further to that point, although he hated to admit it, Anthony suspected that his wife would appreciate seeing that he waited for her before beginning.

While waiting, Anthony was sure to have a plate set for her with a standard array of breakfast stuffs. There was toast with butter and marmalade to spread. A pot of tea and hot coffee. As well as fried eggs and cold pork chops, both of which happened to be favorites of Anthony's.

By the time she arrived, Anthony was famished.

"Good morning," he said when she appeared in the doorway. She was dressed in a simple cream-colored muslin gown, paired with gloves, while her hair was worn up in a bun. Her cheeks were flushed pink, and he wondered if she had rushed to be here.

"Oh..." She started in surprise to see him. "You are here."

"Should I be anywhere else?" Anthony asked with a coy smile.

“I... I just did not expect you to join me.” She looked away sheepishly. “Based on my experiences so far, the less time we spend together the better.”

Anthony chuckled at that. “I am sure we can make it through at least one meal without wishing to attack one another. I mean, if we can’t do that...” He exhaled sharply, but there was a smile on his lips. “Then I don’t much like my chances.”

“Chances?”

“Five chances,” he corrected, his smirk coy. “And just to confirm, this isn’t one of them.”

“Oh, yes...” She rolled her eyes. “Thank you for letting me know. I will not have to be on my guard that way. Very kind of you.”

“A rare instance,” he said jokingly. “Do not get used to it.”

It was subtle, but already Anthony could sense the slightest of changes occurring between himself and Caroline. There was still some hostility there, a sense of distrust, but it was waning. That told him that she was at least open to the idea of him getting to know her. Maybe even that she was looking forward to it. Although I won’t get ahead of myself just yet.

“I have had a plate made for you,” Anthony said,, gesturing toward the seat on his right. “Please.”

Caroline hesitated before entering the room. Her brow furrowed as she moved between the plate of food and him

“It is not poisoned,” Anthony said. “If that is your concern.”

She snorted. “It wasn’t.”

“What then?”

She frowned as she looked between the plate of food and then him. “It is just unexpected, is all. In my house, I have to fight for the attention of the staff, and I don’t think I have ever arrived at breakfast to find my food ready for me.” She shrugged, but her smile was there. “It is nice, is all.”

“I surprise myself sometimes.”

She laughed again and shook her head before taking her seat.

As she did, Anthony tried his best not to stare. She was dressed simply this morning, more covered than she had been the previous evening, but no less attractive because of it. It made it difficult for Anthony to focus, and had him questioning as he had been all last night what it was exactly that he hoped to achieve from this little deal he had made.

I wish for an heir, is why. That is all this is. And as I am not the type to force myself on a person, nor will I beg, this seemed like the best option. A means to an end...

It was a lie that even Anthony was having a difficult time swallowing fully.

The truth was, there was a part of him that was excited for what this might bring. When he had first decided to marry, he had given up on the notion that his marriage would be a companionable thing, as finding a bride willing to be with a man of his reputation would be hard enough. Women, he had found, were generally terrified of him, not willing to give him a chance because that, they all seemed to think, would spell their doom.

He was not like that. Yes, he was emotionally distant, a little cold at times, and not exactly conversational or warm. But he wasn't evil or mean and he just wished people could see it.

Caroline was different. Putting aside how often they bickered, she at least stood up to him, even challenging him in ways he'd never experienced before. Sometimes she went too far. Sometimes, Anthony did also. Even last night, when she had been on his lap and they had been kissing... the animal inside of me threatened to emerge in ways that even I do not fully understand. There was a danger there, he knew, but one he wanted to explore.

First, he wanted a chance to get to know Caroline. More than that, he wanted a chance for her to know him. To see him as more than the Cruel Duke, and to understand that married life to him wouldn't be a death sentence.

For this to work, Anthony had to control himself. That, he knew, would be the real challenge.

"How did you sleep?" Anthony asked simply as he began to butter his toast.

"Fine," she said without looking at him. She eyed her plate of food as if unsure.

"No tossing and turning?" he asked with humor. She shot him a glare and he chuckled. "Just checking. What of your things? I assume most of what you brought is still packed?"

"It is..." She finally picked up a piece of toast and began to spread it with butter and marmalade before taking a bite.

"If you require any help, do not hesitate to ask the staff. That is what they are there for."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I will, thank you."

Silence descended as they ate. She focused mostly on the toast, while he attacked his eggs and pork. And as they ate, Anthony continued to study her.

He hated how attracted to her he was. This would be so much easier if I didn't find her so darn desirable. Again, that side of him that he did not very much like was the problem. The animal that he became when she pushed him. He needed to keep an eye on it, winning her to his side before daring to unleash it. He would not prove himself to be the Cruel Duke. That is not who he was.

"Is everything alright?" he asked as he continued to watch her.

"Hhmm?"

"Your breakfast?" He indicated the plate before her. The toast was gone, leaving the eggs and cold pork behind. And where she was eating the eggs without some sense of enthusiasm, he noticed her prod at the pork but not touch it. "Is it to your liking?"

"It is fine."

"Are you certain? I can have something else made, if not."

She put her fork down and looked at him flatly. "You do not have to keep doing this."

"Excuse me?"

"Pretending that you are something you are not," she said. "Being nice to me when I know how hard it must be for you. I have agreed to your proposition, and I will keep my promise. So please, all of this..." She gestured vaguely around them. "It is not necessary."

Despite himself, Anthony actually laughed. “You don’t trust me very much do you?”

“You haven’t given me a reason to.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed. “But not everything I do is some ploy or trick or game. I asked if you were enjoying your food because I wished to make sure you were, because I was serious last night when I told you I didn’t want this marriage to be a barrage of argument and hostility.”

“Oh...”

“I know what people say about me,” Anthony continued, raising an eyebrow at Caroline, which had her looking away. “And where some of it might be true...” He sighed and shook his head, his stomach turning because he hated being forced to remember his past. “Most of it is only rumor. Exaggerated rumor, at that.”

Surprisingly, Caroline did not attack him back. She appeared chastised, even embarrassed, and looked away. “I am sorry,” she said softly. “I did not mean...”

He sighed. “It is fine. Just know, you do not have to distrust everything I do.”

She rolled her eyes. “Only once the sun drops, is that right?”

“You make me sound like some sort of vampire.”

“Oh, most certainly not.” She smiled to herself, eyes flicking at him. “A vampire would be much better company.”

There was humor in her tone and a glimmer behind her eyes, which told Anthony that she was joking. That finally she was beginning to relax around him. He laughed at the joke and shook his head.

“Speaking of, tonight,” he then began. “I hope you have no plans.”

“I do not,” she said. “In fact, my entire next few weeks are free.”

“Good,” he said. “Once evening sets in, you are to meet me in the main dining room. Looking your best, I do not think it needs to be said.”

“The dining room?” She tilted her head.

“We are to have a feast,” he explained. “As part of my endeavor to...” He chuckled to himself, realizing how foolish it all sounded in the light of day. “To prove that you can stand to be around me, for want of a better description.”

“We will have to work on the phrasing,” she snorted as she went back to her plate of food. This time, she cut into the cold pork and took a bite, and he watched as she grimaced to chew and swallow. It was clear that she did not enjoy it. What was not clear was why she didn’t say anything.

Strange that she can be so shy and well behaved in one instant and so rebellious in another. Is it only me who brings out that side of her? Or is it always there, and she just needs a push?

Whatever it was, Anthony supposed he would find out tonight. A night that despite himself, he was looking forward to. But not because tonight might see him bed his wife as his more amorous side wished to do. Rather, it was a chance to do as he promised, and as he suspected she wanted. To get to know one another better.

How very strange that such a concept might excite him. Although that just spoke to the nature of this marriage, a most strange affair indeed.

Chapter Fifteen

As Caroline dressed for supper, she could smell the intoxicating aromas drifting from downstairs. Indeed, all afternoon she had been able to smell them building so that by the time that she was ready for this feast which Anthony had planned for her, she was famished. What was more, she was excited.

She was also nervous. I should not be. No matter what Anthony has planned for me, or what he tries, I am not going to give in to him. I have more self-control than that .

Their breakfast had been on her mind all day. It stood in stark contrast to every other time the two had spoken or spent time together, such that she was both confused and intrigued all in one. Was that the real Anthony? Not the monster, the beast, the Cruel Duke as he was known. Rather, a kind, generous man who seemed to only want what was best.

No... it was all a game to him. He was trying to trick her, is what. He had his plan, his goal in mind, and he would not hesitate to act as he thought he needed so that she would break. And once he was done, he would do as she feared. He would discard her and pretend that she did not exist.

I will not break. I cannot, no matter what he tries... or what I feel.

It was thus that she made her way downstairs once evening set in, determined to get through tonight while being on her guard.

“There she is.” Anthony was in the dining room, waiting for her. He stood by the

doorway, blocking the table from view. "I was just about to send for you."

"Worried, were we?" she chided.

"It is a rather large home," he said. "I thought perhaps you had become lost. I was ready to send out a search party."

"No need to worry," she said. "Where indeed the home is large, all I had to do was follow my nose." She sniffed the air. "What was it you compared me to once? A stray dog?"

"A stray dog would have been here on time," he joked. "Nor would it look as good as you do."

She looked away, feeling her cheeks flush at the compliment. Such a small thing but it was so rare for anyone to comment on her looks, and she could probably count on one hand how often it had happened.

"Speaking of food," she then started, changing the subject. "What is it that..." She trailed off when Anthony stepped to the side and revealed the spread that sat on the dining room table.

She had never seen so much food before. And such variety. From one end to the other, every inch of the table was covered, and with every dish imaginable.

Roasted chicken and duck. Baked pork and ham. Mutton chops, lamb, steaks, brisket, sausages and goose and indeed any meat she might think of. There were vegetables too, cooked in a hundred different ways. And soups and breads and pots filled with different types of stews which bubbled and hissed as steam wafted from inside.

Her jaw dropped as she stared.

“I take that to mean you are hungry?”

“What is this?” She edged closer to the table, her tummy rumbling.

“Dinner,” Anthony said simply as he came in behind her. He stood closer to her, his body mere inches away. She could feel his breath on the back of her neck, and she shuddered and had to fight the urge to lean back.

“What is that saying?” she said, forcing herself to step around him so as not to be too close. “The way to a woman’s heart is through her stomach. I see what you are doing.”

He shrugged. “My thinking is that as you live here now, it would do to have an understanding of what foods you do and do not enjoy eating. So, I have had the cooks whip up every dish they can think of.”

She snorted. “And we are to what? Eat it all?”

A slight smile, the most he would ever give her. “We are to sample one of everything, together. Starting from the end of the table, we will work our way down. Think of it as a game.”

“A game?” She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Not a race, but a test of...” He considered. “Of endurance. We eat until we cannot stomach anymore. The first one to stop loses.”

“Loses?” She shook her head. “And what does the winner get?”

“Whatever they desire.”

She rolled her eyes. “Ah, now I understand, Your Grace —”

“Anthony,” he cut her off. “Call me Anthony.”

“Oh...” She blinked, surprised, and a little bit thrilled by the formality. “Anthony,” she said. “You intend to simply out eat me and then as a prize demand that I give you an heir, I must say, I am disappointed in your unoriginality.”

“You misunderstand me,” he said. “And frankly, we really need to work on your trust issues. I was being serious when I said that I wanted to give you a chance to get to know me better, and I feel that I have done nothing to prove otherwise so far.” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Oh...” She winced with embarrassment. “I... I suppose you are right. For now, anyway.” She raised an eyebrow back, determined not to appear as if she was giving in.

He is right, however, and perhaps it is time I stop being so distrustful. At the very least I need to give him a chance. Isn't this what I wanted in the first place?

She looked back over the table of food and then dared to look at her husband. He was dressed in a dark suit, all black, which matched him perfectly. As always, there was a sinister nature to the man, a sort of danger which she sensed that he liked others to feel when around him. But there was something else...

There was a smile behind his eyes and on his lips. The suggestion that he was looking forward to this. That he was even excited. Again, she thought to this morning and how he had treated her, and now, not presumptive or overly charming. Kind and concerned, instead. It was a side to him that she was seeing more of, the complete antithesis to everything she had thought she'd known about him.

Despite herself, Caroline felt her excitement grow as she started to believe that maybe, just possibly, there was more to this marriage than she had expected... so much more.

“Shall we begin?” Anthony said, walking down the end of the table.

“After you,” she said, unable to keep herself from smiling and her mouth from salivating.

They started on the roast chicken, basted in a sweet glaze, paired with sweeter jam. It was succulent and moist and after having only a mouthful, she wanted more.

“Ah, ah,” he stopped her from going for a second bite. “Do not fill up on the first dish.”

“What’s the matter? Afraid I will win?” she shot back coyly.

“A part of me hopes you do,” he said simply.

She rolled her eyes at that but could not keep herself from smiling.

They moved down the table together, going from one plate to the next. Duck was the second option which they sampled, followed then by foie gras. After that, it was steak, and then brisket, followed by roasted lamb which he told her had been on the spit all day.

Her stomach began to groan but the food was simply too good to stop.

They ate vegetables in between the meats too, of course, most baked and sauteed, and all cooked to absolute perfection.

“What is the matter?” she chided as they took a spoonful each of baked carrot and brussels sprouts, sizzling in gravy. “Do not tell me, full already?”

“I could go on all night.”

They did not talk as much as she thought they might, but there was no need. Most of their conversation pertained to the food available, and they stood side by side as they ate. She did most of the talking, making sure to compliment and even laugh at those times when she missed her mouth or made a mess of herself.

“Careful...” Anthony stepped into her quickly and she gasped, leaning back, but unwilling to back up because she did not want him to have the upper hand. That’s what this was all about, after all. “You missed your mouth.”

“Oh...” She could feel some grease on her chin and moved to wipe it.

“No.” He snatched her hand and held it by her side. “Allow me...”

He stood over her. His large frame seeming to wrap around her like a shadow from which she could not run. One hand holding hers, the other moved up slowly and traced his thumb across her lips. Down her chin next, wiping up the grease, and then back to her lips. Despite herself, knowing it was the wrong thing to do, she opened her mouth, and his thumb ran itself over her tongue, which she licked clean.

A moan escaped her. Her eyes closed. Her lips wrapped around his thumb, and she sucked... her hand, which he held, squeezing his... his chest rising and falling... his breath across her face... she sucked and licked and cleaned his thumb until there was nothing left...

“Are you quite done?” he asked after some time.

Her eyes snapped open and she realized what she was doing. “Oh. I...” She turned away, embarrassed, her heart racing. “I did not realize how hungry I am.”

“Famished, by the looks of it.”

They continued down the table and she became more and more aware of the duke beside her. She could not help herself from glancing at him, watching his lips wrap around pieces of meat, teeth tearing, tongue working, the muscles in his jaw grinding.

Is this his plan? To seduce me with food so all I can think about is that mouth of his and what it might do? Truthfully, it’s not the worst plan...

Things came to a head when they reached the pork chops. Caroline had never told anyone this, but she hated pork. And ham. And any meat from pigs. She did not know why, but the taste always made her feel sick to her stomach. Annoyingly, growing up as she had done, she had never had the courage to tell her mother, assuming she would not care. She had been forced to eat it at least once a week and simply deal with the taste.

“Your turn,” Anthony said as he took a bite of a pork chop that looked succulent, but she knew would taste foul.

“Right...” She eyed the pork chop, used her fork to stab at it, brought it to her lips... “I am...” Her stomach began to turn. Her brow began to sweat. She was quite full, but she could still eat more. “This looks so... so tasty...” She grimaced as she went to eat it, opening her mouth, only to find that she could not go through with it. “Alas, I am afraid that I am feeling quite full.”

Anthony frowned. “You are?”

“Sadly, I am.”

“Caroline...” He clicked his tongue. “You disappoint me.”

“Not the first time, I am sure.” She tittered quietly and put the pork chop down, then pushed it away, eyeing it with a curled lip because she could not help herself.

She then caught Anthony watching her. His brow was furrowed, and he looked between her and the pork chop, his mind at work. “I guess that makes me the winner,” he said finally.

“Please, be gentle,” she sighed, laughing bitterly. “When you collect your winnings, I mean.”

Anthony said nothing at first. He wore a curious smirk which he held on her, and Caroline prepared herself for the worst, certain he was going to ask for something that did not cross the boundaries of their agreement but danced around them ever so dangerously. What could he possibly ask for? And will I have the will power to deny him ?

Their eyes held and she felt a lump rising in her throat. Facing one another, less than a foot apart, she tried not to flush as she pictured his request, as she imagined how far she might be willing to go without crossing that line. She needed to be strong. She needed to be?—

“You!” Anthony commanded suddenly at a member of staff who stood in the corner. “Fetch the head cook. Now!”

She frowned at the suddenness of the request. “What are you doing?”

“You will see,” Anthony said as he looked away from her, watching where the staff disappeared into the kitchens. A second later and he returned with an older-looking gentleman who was wearing an apron, covered in all manner of foodstuffs; his skin

was drenched in sweat and oil, the consequences of having been at it all day.

“Your Grace...” He bowed nervously. “I hope that everything was to your liking.”

“Alistair.” Anthony faced the cook. “The food was well cooked beyond even my expectations. You have outdone yourself.”

“Your Grace!” The cook, Alistair, looked stunned by the compliment. “Thank you, Your Grace. I am pleased to hear that?—”

“However, from now on there will be some changes. You are no longer to serve in this home any meal that contains even a modicum of pork, ham, or any other cut from a pig. Is that understood?”

“I...” Alistair blinked in confusion. “I believe I do.”

“I find I no longer have a liking for it,” Anthony explained simply. “And I trust this will not be an issue.”

“I will ensure it is not.”

“Good,” he said. “As to the rest of this...” Anthony swept his hand across the table, still well over filled with food. “We are finished for the evening. Eat what you wish and dispose of the rest.” He waved the food away. “

“Your Grace! Thank you, Your Grace.” He offered a deep bow. “We will.”

“Good.”

Caroline stared at Anthony, confused by what she was hearing. On the surface, it was clear enough what his purpose was, that he was simply doing a kind thing having

noticed that she didn't eat the pork chops, thus guessing she wasn't a fan of any meat from a pig. Yet it felt like more than that.

"You don't have to do that on my account," she said. "Truly, there is no need."

"You think I did not notice you this morning? Your face when trying to stomach the pork. And now, the pork chops. Correct me if I am wrong, but my sense is that you do not like meat cut from swine."

"You... you noticed that? This morning, I mean?"

"Of course."

Caroline didn't know what to say. Or how to feel. For her entire life, she had been forced to stomach ham and pork and bacon nearly every week, never daring to voice her objections to her mother, while wondering why her mother had never cared to notice her clear dissatisfaction. That the duke had seen her eat once and realized this about her, it was... she felt her cheeks flushing and she looked away.

She felt seen. Noticed. For once, the center of attention and not a mere background character. And it wasn't the first time that Anthony had noticed her either. Such that it was starting to become commonplace...

In a bid to change the topic, as she suddenly felt embarrassed, she cleared her throat and spoke up. "Your prize," she said. "I cannot wait to hear what you ask for."

He shrugged. "My prize? There is only one thing I want."

She looked at him flatly. "And here it is..."

"I want you to have whatever it is that you wish for," he said. She frowned and blew

through her lips, sure that he was teasing her. “I do not need anything,” he continued to explain. “You, however, living in a new home, my sense is that there are a dozen things you might wish for. So please, ask for anything.”

“But... no,” she argued, just because she felt that she should. “You won. You deserve a prize. That was the promise!”

“My prize is your happiness.”

Had the night gone differently, she might have rolled her eyes and dismissed him out of habit—another attempt for him to try and lure her into a false sense of trust. By now, however, Caroline felt herself moving beyond this mode of thinking.

The duke was not who she had thought he was originally. Nor were his motives ill—aligned or malevolent. She could see now that he had been nothing but truthful with her from the beginning, and this new arrangement that he had made was further proof of that.

The only downside she could see was that it would make it harder for her to resist him when the time came, which for now she still very much intended to do. At least it is easy to tell myself as such...

“I do not want anything,” she said.

“That is not true.”

“I did not win!”

“And I do not care.” He looked at her with a raised eyebrow. “Speak now, Caroline, for I am not one to have his mind changed once it has been decided. Do you wish for a puppy? A new horse? Perhaps a lock on your door to keep me out. Anything and it

is yours.”

“Anything?” she asked.

“Anything,” he said.

She pushed her lips together as she considered. She had never been asked before what she wanted. She had never been offered anything out of goodwill or pure generosity. Needless to say, the whole thing was confusing.

It was as she thought through the offer, that a memory came to mind from years ago. When she was a little girl and Violet had been taking lessons on the pianoforte, Caroline had asked her mother if she might also, only to be dismissed because her mother did not wish to waste the extra money on a tutor. It was just one instance of Caroline being denied something by her mother, for no other reason than she was the middle child. But it had stung her, nonetheless.

“A pianoforte,” she said. “I would like one very much.”

“You play?”

“No,” she said with a casual shrug. “But I might learn. Unless that is a problem...”

“Not at all.” He did not even hesitate. “Consider it done.”

Chapter Sixteen

It was the following morning and Anthony once again found himself waiting in the breakfast room for his wife, and after how well last night had gone, he had to admit that more than a small part of him was looking forward to seeing her.

“Good morning.” Caroline appeared in the doorway to the breakfast room.

“Good morning.” He rose when he saw her. “How did you sleep?”

“Well,” she said with a slight smile; the morning sun shone across the room, illuminating her features in a way that wasn’t at all unpleasant. “I suspect being filled with five pounds of food was the cause.”

He exhaled sharply from his nose in agreement. “As did I. Hopefully, your appetite has not vanished entirely.” He gestured to the table where a plate of food had already been set.

“So long as there isn’t any pork,” she said as she approached the table.

Anthony chuckled. “I was surprised to hear that there was anything left for us to eat at all. After how much you consumed last night. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like that before.”

“Me!” she pretended to look upset. “You ate nearly twice as much as I did.”

“I am nearly twice your size, and even I was struggling toward the end.”

She looked at him flatly. "Very amusing."

They ate in silence for a few moments, but it wasn't tense like it might have been. The silence felt companionable, almost natural, suggesting that, finally, they were getting used to one another. And not just used to the other, but accepting of the company. Dare I say it, this is beginning to feel like a marriage.

As they ate, Anthony tried his best not to study his wife, for he found that whenever he looked at her his stomach tied itself into knots. It was strange to sit across from a person who wasn't actively trying to leave as quickly as they could, who didn't tremble in his presence. Who might have even enjoyed sitting across from him.

"I was hoping I might ask of you a favor," she spoke eventually, finishing her eggs with a satisfied sigh.

"I am surprised that you are asking."

She giggled. "I wasn't going to, but I am trying this new thing where I at least try not to anger you with everything that I say."

"I don't think it's possible," he chuckled.

"Let me know, won't you," she shot back with a coy smile. "As much as I enjoy fighting with you, it does get rather tiresome."

Anthony couldn't help but smile. "Ask me what you will."

"I was hoping to visit my family today." She picked up her glass of juice, holding his eyes as she sipped from it. "I know it has been but a day, but I would very much like to see them."

“Oh...” Anthony blinked, surprised by the simplicity of the request. Although he no longer thought that Caroline was being purposefully combative or trying to push his buttons for the mere sake of it, he was still used to this being her natural state of being. As if she could not help it, just as he could not help falling into her traps. But this... it was such a small thing that he didn't really know what to say. “That is all?”

“Were you expecting something else?”

“No...” He considered carefully. “I have told you already what this marriage is. You are not my prisoner. You are not in servitude to me. You are free to go where you wish, when you wish to. All I ask in return?—”

“Is for a child.” She cocked an eyebrow at him, slightly combative, but the smirk she wore told him she was only teasing.

“For peace and quiet,” he countered, returning the smirk. “Which I suppose having you out of the house for the day will achieve perfectly.”

She shook her head and laughed. “I will be back by this evening, do not fear.”

“So long as you are,” he said. “I was thinking that again, we might spend the evening together.”

“Oh?” She looked at him curiously. “Is this another one of your... how did you put it? Chances?”

“Do I need an excuse to want to spend the evening with my wife?”

“In this instance, yes you do.”

He laughed. “Then consider is so. After how well last night went, I would be a fool

not to press my advantage.”

“Is that how you read last night? As it going well?”

“I did.” He looked right at her. “Unless I was wrong to do so.”

Caroline looked away sheepishly and he saw some color rise in her cheeks. This was all the confirmation he needed, that indeed last night had gone as well as it could have. And further to that point, tonight would be the same.

And just as I was this morning, I am looking forward to it.

* * *

Caroline’s visit with her family was a typically tumultuous experience. But what else could she have expected?

Her older brother, Daniel, was giving her the silent treatment, apparently still vexed with how this marriage had come about, treating it as a scourge upon the family name while furious that his own authority in the matter had been usurped. That wasn’t to say that he avoided Caroline entirely but chose to sit there the whole time and glare at her.

Her younger sister, Eveline, seemed intent on pushing Daniel’s buttons, trying to coax him into snapping at her by questioning why he was behaving in such a surly manner while also implying she might ask the duke to come and give him a talking to.

The youngest of the lot, Iris, was still upset that she was the cause of the marriage alliance, and she spent the entire time hiding behind her mother and refusing to so much as look at Caroline.

While Caroline's mother, in a bid to pretend that everything was normal and without incidence was even more flamboyantly noisy than usual, speaking at a rate of knots, carrying on as if the marriage had been her idea all along and how wonderful it was that everything had worked out for the best.

It was a long and tiring morning, during which Caroline barely got two words in. She was asked many questions, but before she was able to answer, her mother would either cut her off or Eveline would say something inappropriate. So chaotic was the morning that it wasn't until Caroline found herself alone with her sister, Aurelia, pulled into her older sister's bedroom with the door locked behind them, that she was finally able to breathe.

"I bet you are regretting this little visit," Aurelia laughed as she locked the door and waltzed toward her bed, where she collapsed in a heap.

"I used to hate being treated as if I were invisible," Caroline admitted as she sat herself down on the chair by the bed. "Now, I find myself missing it."

"Ha!"

"But what of you?" Caroline asked, wishing to turn the conversation to anyone but herself. "How have you been?"

"No, no." Aurelia waved a finger at her. "Do not think that because we are alone I am going to let you off. It did not escape my notice that you answered next to none of mother's questions just now and where she might be happy to carry on as if the world is turning and the sun is shining, I am not so easy to dodge."

Caroline pushed her lips together. "I really would rather not talk about it."

"And I would rather have a mother who does not treat me as if she did not give birth

to me but rather that I appeared on the doorstep one night by mistake. So, come now..." Aurelia folded her arms and raised an eyebrow at Caroline. "How is it? Tell me everything."

Aurelia and Caroline had always been the closest of the six children, and if there was anybody in whom Caroline could confide, it was her. In this instance, however, Caroline wasn't so certain that she wanted to. Part shame. Part embarrassment. While knowing too that her situation was beyond her sister's understanding—and even if she wanted to divulge, she had no idea where she would even begin!

It had been a constant battle raging inside of Caroline these past few days. One she wasn't so sure she was winning. Or if she could win. Or what victory might even look like!

Still, she clung to the foolish notion that it was wrong to desire her husband the way she knew that she did. She felt dirty when she considered it. She felt morally abhorrent. She felt as if she was doing and wanting something that was wrong! And she knew not how to get past these feelings.

But she supposed that was the entire point of the deal that she had made with Anthony. Wasn't it? To develop a relationship before they slept together. Even if it wasn't nearly that simple. Anthony wanted an heir. She wanted companionship. Somehow, they had found a middle ground where they might both get what they wanted. Assuming nothing went wrong in the meantime.

It was all very confusing for her. Mostly because the more time she spent with Anthony, the more she enjoyed his company. And because of this, she was beginning to consider the very real possibility that this marriage might be more than one of mere convenience—everything Anthony had done so far suggested it could be. And because of this, she had even begun to wonder if she would be able to last through Anthony's 'five chances' before giving in to her urges and letting him have her

completely.

“It is fine,” she said simply, an answer which she saw immediately was not to her sister’s liking. “It has only been two days! Far too soon to have formed an opinion.”

Aurelia blew through her lips. “I would have thought an hour with the man would have told you everything you needed to know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, come now...” Aurelia raised an eyebrow. “The Cruel Duke. That name did not materialize out of thin air. He has it for good reason, and I would have thought that by now you would have experienced firsthand what that reason is.”

“Oh...” Caroline blinked in surprise. “I... no. That isn’t at all what has happened.”

“Do not get me wrong,” Aurelia hurried. “It is not as if I want you to suffer, and I am glad that so far you have not. But... well...” Her expression turned worried. “You’re my sister, Caroline and I fear for you.”

“There is no reason for such a thing.”

“Is there not?” she pressed. “I wish to believe you, but then why the moniker? Why does everyone turn pale when his name is mentioned? And why are you the only one who doesn’t look as if they might wet themselves when they are around him!”

Aurelia had every right to be concerned about Caroline’s safety. Indeed, if the situation was reversed, Caroline would feel the same way. Based on what people said of Anthony, he was a terror unlike any other and no woman would count herself lucky to find themselves trapped in a marriage with him. How wrong they all are.

He wasn't at all what people said. Yes, he was a little emotionally distant. And perhaps his temper could be a little short at times. But these last two days, Caroline had seen a new side to him, one that she was very much growing to like. She had seen a kindness in him. A caring heart. Dammit, he was the first person she had ever met who asked her questions about herself—who noticed her where others had not.

That did of course raise the question. Why the moniker at all? It must have come from somewhere. It wasn't a fabrication borne from nothing. Was there more to Anthony than she had seen? Or was the Anthony she knew all a facade?

She needed to find out. And I will, even if it breaks apart this marriage and what it has slowly started to transform into. Whatever the cost, Caroline needed to know the truth. Thus, she determined that whatever it was that Anthony had planned for them this evening, she would broach the topic, and then deal with the consequences. Whatever they may be.

However, when she did return, it was just in time to see a pianoforte being delivered, as promised to her the previous evening. This had her smiling as she remembered the promise made, now given, and how kind he had been to grant her such a thing. He is so much kinder than people say. But then why the name? Why the rumors? Who is my husband truly?

It was time she found out.

Chapter Seventeen

“I think you have been lying to me,” Anthony said as Caroline moved her pawn to take his knight. She had been surprised that he hadn’t noticed her obvious trap but wasn’t about to look at a gift horse in the mouth.

“Me?” she said innocently. “Never.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “When I asked if you have played chess before, I distinctly remember you saying that you were not very good.”

“Correction,” she fired back. “I said that I had not played in a long time. How you chose to interpret that comment is your own failing, not mine.”

“You implied?—”

“I implied nothing,” she cut him off, unable to hide her smirk because she was enjoying how undone he was becoming in the face of her superior skills. “You simply assumed that I would be no good, and you chose to read into my comment to confirm this fact. That I am beating you, well...” She shrugged. “Perhaps I am not so good, but you are just that terrible.”

“Careful, Caroline,” Anthony said, pretending to scowl at her. “It is not such a smart thing to insult me.”

“Is that right?” she cocked an eyebrow at him, daring him.

“I have been kind to you thus far, but I can quickly change that. If anything, I might prefer to.”

“Ah, yes,” she responded with a coy smile. “The big, bad duke. I had almost forgotten that was who I married.”

“No, not that...” He leaned over and moved one of his pawns forward. “Just that I was going easy on you. Alas, I admit it was a ploy to lure you into a false sense of comfort so you would feel good about yourself. Now that you’re acting so...” He considered. “So bold, I might have to start trying.

“Do not hold back on my account.” She moved a pawn to match his move and shot up a challenging eyebrow.

“Be careful what you wish for.”

“Wish for? If history is anything to go by, I have never once gotten what I wish. Somehow, I doubt you suddenly learning how to play chess falls within the realm of my all my dreams coming true.”

“Is that what you think?” He moved another pawn.

“It is.” She matched the move immediately.

Their second evening together—and it wasn’t going at all how Caroline had suspected. In hindsight, she supposed she hadn’t known what to expect exactly. Something romantic, perhaps? Something bold? Something personal? The type of night together that she might expect couples who were in the midst of courtship to engage in?

What she’d gotten instead was a quaint evening that was so effortlessly simple that it

took her halfway through the evening before she even realized what Anthony was doing. He wished to prove how companionable and comfortable our marriage could be? This is perfect proof of that.

They had dined together, a simple supper that saw the two chat simply, no longer awkward or stilted, as they were way beyond that now. Caroline's guard was dropped. Anthony was no longer unsure or closed off. The days of them testing one another had passed, allowing for free flowing conversation and effortless times.

Once they had finished eating, he suggested that they retire to the drawing room where they might play a game of chess. Again, such a small thing, but that was the entire point.

As a young girl, and through her teen years, she had played chess often with Daniel and Violet, finding that she had a knack for it. The duke, it seemed, was nowhere near as good as he had made out, which had her getting carried away; both in her thumping of him, and the wagging of her tongue.

"How about we make things more interesting?" the duke said simply as he moved his rook.

"Oh?" she moved another pawn, setting it to block his rook from taking her knight, as she suspected he was trying to do.

"With how confident you are, it ought not to be a problem."

"That depends on what you mean by interesting?"

To that, Anthony grinned and the light from the fireplace caught his dark eyes, making them shine so she could see the mischief behind his gaze. They were sitting on the floor before the hearth, on a thick fur rug, perhaps a more romantic setting than

she had initially given credit to, now screaming at her to understand her mistake. All this time, she had tittered to herself at the ease that she was beating him, how effortlessly he was walking into her traps. Little did I realize that it was me walking headfirst into his.

“If you are as good as you claim, it shouldn’t bother you at all,” Anthony said casually. “But I propose a bet.”

“The terms?”

He looked at her across the chess board, the trap he had lain about to be unleashed. “My terms are this. For every piece of yours that I remove from the board, you remove an article of clothing.”

Caroline gasped before she could stop herself, and her cheeks turned bright pink which had nothing to do with the fire. Heart beating quicker now, she forced herself to look at her husband in what she hoped to be a derisive fashion. “That is... very bold of you.”

“It should not be,” he said. “And perhaps I just have that much faith in your ability to beat me?”

She rolled her eyes. “I hardly think so.”

“Is that a no? I will understand if you are too scared.”

“What happened to trying to get to know one another better?” she shot back.

He shrugged. “As husband and wife, you mean. And what could be more husbandly than trying to seduce one’s own wife?”

Despite her best efforts, Caroline felt excitement at the thought of what her husband was proposing. She was dressed modestly enough, and a quick calculation told her she could lose five pieces before having to take off her chemise, which would see her be completely naked. If tonight's game so far was any indication, things would not get that far. And yet... there was that part of her which hoped they might.

Oh, how she hated that she wanted it. That the thought of her husband seeing her naked body had her thighs tingling with desire. Why was she so weak? She had worried that she might not be able to hold out against Anthony across these five 'chances' that she had given him. That she would give in to her pesky desires. And if she said yes to this... even I am only so strong.

However, she also could not ignore the fact that her original reservations were no longer as compelling as they had been on their wedding night. Her distrust of Anthony. Her desire to not be trapped in a loveless marriage. Was this still a concern? Somehow, she doubted it.

And besides... she would be lying if she didn't admit that with all things considered, a part of her wanted to lose herself to him. Again, her reservations from before felt weak and misplaced. Not something that in the moment, she felt such a need to concern herself with.

"I suppose I can agree to those terms," she said casually, as if her heart was not racing. "But you must do something for me. It is only fair."

"Shall I remove my own item of clothing?" he said with a growl. "I might lose to you on purpose, if that is the case."

"You wish." She looked at him and smirked as an idea came to mind. All evening, she had been wondering how she might learn more about her husband without letting down her guard and falling into companionable conversation; she did not want him to

suspect she was interested. Now, she had the perfect means. “For every piece I take, you must answer a question I ask of you. Honestly,” she made sure to add.

Anthony frowned and she was certain she saw a hint of worry behind his eyes. “What sort of questions?”

“Whatever I like,” she said. “That is...” She widened her eyes at him and grinned. “... unless you are scared?”

His face dropped. “Done.”

And so it was that the real game began.

The mood in the room changed instantly; a growing sense of intensity, as if lives were on the line. Anthony made his first move, an obvious take that saw his pawn snatch one of hers from the board.

She snorted. “I see you’ve forgone strategy entirely.”

“Oh, I very much have a strategy,” he responded. “But it has nothing to do with winning. Now, if you do not mind...” He smiled pleasantly and his eyes drifted over her body. She looked at him flatly as she removed her necklace and earrings. “Two for one. Don’t I feel lucky?”

“Not for long...”

The next few minutes passed in silence as the two parried across the board, tactics forgotten entirely as the aim of the game changed beyond the previous goal.

“Ha!” Caroline cried out happily as she used her rook to take his second knight from the board. “I cannot believe you did not see that.”

Anthony scowled at her. "Ask your question."

Caroline had considered what she might ask, deciding to keep things simple at first so as not to give the game away. "His Grace, the Duke of Aldworth, how is it that the two of you know one another?"

"That is your question?" Anthony looked surprised.

"What were you expecting?"

He frowned as he studied her, clearly wondering at her ploy. "It is no great thing. We met as young lads, through our fathers, I believe it was. When you are the sons of dukes, it is a hard thing to meet other boys your age."

"Why is that?"

He sighed. "Because my father was a mean sort. And that is putting it nicely." He chuckled bitterly. "He believed that we should only mix with those of the same status, deeming anyone else to be beneath us. When I met Roderick, truly, I was just glad that my father allowed us to spend time together." He shook his head. "We are friends, and I know he would say the same. Sadly, it is a friendship that most would likely not wish upon themselves."

Caroline was surprised by the confession but tried not to make that obvious. "I assumed you and Roderick to be close?"

"We are," he said simply. "But Roderick is much like me." He looked at her and she frowned. "A mean old prick," he joked. "We both have trouble expressing emotions, or feelings, or being nice to each other half the time." He scoffed and shook his head.

"But you still enjoy his company?"

“Careful...” He pumped his eyebrows at her. “That is three questions I answered. Do not think I will fall for a third.”

“Just make your next move.”

The game continued and frustratingly, it was Anthony who again took the next piece. It was no big thing, however, as all Caroline was required to do was remove her gloves. This didn’t warrant any comment, Anthony studying the board now as if his life depended on it. A mode of concentration that worked well for him, as he took a third piece two moves later.

“Do you believe me now, when I said I was going easy on you?”

She glowed at him as she began to untie the corset holding her gown together. “It seems the only thing you were lacking was motivation.”

The corset came undone, and she dropped it on the floor. Still covered entirely, she noticed the way that Anthony’s eyes so very obviously lingered on her bosom, a hunger in his stare which made her flush. She opened her mouth to chastise him, but stayed her tongue, not wanting to draw attention to it. And because I like the way he stares...

She took the next piece, and she had her question ready. “You mentioned your father just now. Tell me more about him.”

“That isn’t a question.”

“Humor me.”

He sighed and she saw him curl his lip. But not at her, rather the memory of his father. “He was an old wart,” he said simply. “The kind of man who took pleasure in

the torment of others.”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” she joked.

He eyed her with exaggerated warning before sighing and looking away. “He was not physically violent. He did not hit me or my mother. It wasn’t like that. It was more...” He considered the framing, withdrawing inside of himself. Caroline watched, surprised that a mere memory could humble Anthony so much. “He liked the power he had as a duke. He liked how people acted around him. He liked that...” He winced. “That he could make others do as he wanted.”

“And your mother...” she pressed.

“She did not love him, but he did not love her,” he said, despite it being a second question. “The truth is, I do not think my father was capable of love. A shame too, as my mother...” A soft smile. “She deserved so much more than he was ever able to give her.”

Caroline found herself frowning as she studied Anthony. It was amazing what a few simple questions could do, forcing the duke to drop his armor and be honest for a damn change. What was more, it didn’t escape her notice how he spoke about his mother. There was love there, which suggested the rumors about him and the way he treated her were not entirely accurate.

“That’s another,” Anthony said with glee, bringing Caroline back into the room.

“Wh—what?” She shook her head and looked down to see her own rook removed from the board. “What? How?”

“Take it off,” Anthony said smugly. “Slowly, thank you.”

She tried to glare at him, but she could not maintain the farce. Her heart was racing, her body flushed red as she was forced to reach down and shuffle from her gown. It was awkward to do, and her chemise very nearly came with it. But she managed well enough, not that this made much difference.

All she had on now was her chemise. Why did I remove the earrings and the necklace as one! The chemise was made from thin cotton, and it was a little too tight so that her curves were pressed against it. In the light of the fireplace, she was certain it was translucent too, and the look Anthony held on her confirmed this.

He did not speak. Nor did she. In fact, and despite herself, Caroline leaned back slightly, pronouncing her breasts which had Anthony's eyes turning wide. She found that she liked the way he stared. The hunger he had for her. All this talk about him having power over her and she found in that moment that she was the one with power over him.

She made her next move.

He made his quickly, not once looking away.

She made another, followed by a similar move on his part.

This, she saw right away, presented a chance for her to take his queen! And when she did, she would ask him finally about his mother. After all, that was the reason she had agreed to this entire thing in the first place.

Only, as she moved her hand for the knight which she planned on using, she found that she couldn't do it. For some reason, Anthony's honesty just now had unsettled her, and she felt as if she was taking advantage by getting so personal. She wanted to know more about him. She wanted answers. Only, she wanted him to want to reveal them.

Despite herself, she did not take his queen. And this, she saw immediately, opened her own queen to being snatched from the board. In this, Anthony did not hesitate.

“And there she is,” Anthony said with clear pride. “If you do not mind...” He indicated to her chemise and purposefully licked his lips. “Again, slowly might be nice.”

She looked at him flatly while ignoring the goosebumps erupting across her skin. “I think that is enough for one night.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” It took all the effort she possessed to do so, but she stood quickly. “I am tired and...” She swallowed, her body shaking. Deep down, she wanted to do as he asked her. She wanted to drop her chemise and reveal her naked body to him. Only, she did not trust herself. Not even a little bit. “... and I think it is time that I retire.”

“That’s not the deal we made!” He was on his feet too.

“And now you know how I feel, concerning broken promises.” She raised a warning eyebrow at him.

He stepped over the chessboard and came for her. She did not step back, wanting him to take her. Perhaps even force her to remove the chemise. That way, at least, she could tell herself she’d had no choice. That she had not given in...

“I told you already, I did not break my promise. At least not on purpose.” He stopped when he reached her, his eyes moving from her bust to her lips to her eyes. He licked his lips. His hands half reached out to take her... hesitating, the effort it was taking him not to act surely on a par with Caroline’s own.

“Just as I told you...” She looked him over, lingering on his lips. Her body shook and she could feel her nipples stiffen under her chemise. “I will not go to bed with you. Nothing you say or do will change that.”

“We are not talking of that.”

“Are we not?” she shot back, pushing out her chest as she did, stepping in closer as if she was standing up to him, when really she just wanted him to feel her body pressed into his. “What happens next? If I remove my chemise?” A raised eyebrow. “We laugh together and call it a night? Somehow, I doubt it.”

Anthony’s body was visibly vibrating. Standing this close, she could feel him tremble. And his eyes, the way they looked her over, not to mention his hand half extended for her, she could see just how much he struggled to control his urges. It was enough that Caroline considered pushing him further, forcing him to break... I am a wicked sort. The most detestable type of person. Yet right now, I do not care.

“And as I have repeated time and time again, I am not simply trying to bed you. I wish for an heir.”

“Which will amount to the same thing.”

“And if it does? What does that matter—?” He caught his tongue, his anger rising. A deep breath and he forced himself to calm. But not by much. “I know what you fear, Caroline. I know you worry that once you give me an heir, I will forget about you. That I want such a thing.”

“Do you?”

“Do you?” he shot back. “I have been nothing but courteous since you arrived here. I have done everything I can to prove otherwise. Yet you are the one who continues to

distrust me. Such that I cannot help but think that regardless of what happens between us, the result will be the same. You want to be alone.”

Caroline leaned back as if struck. “I... I do not.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I...” Caroline did not know what to say.

Anthony’s words struck her harder than she had expected, because there was truth to them. All this time, she was so concerned with what Anthony might do with her that she hadn’t stopped to consider that she might be the cause of what she feared the most. By remaining distant, by refusing to trust her husband, what was left for her, other than abandonment and loneliness?

“I do not want to be alone,” she said, her voice dropping as if from shame. She looked away with embarrassment.

“What then?” Slowly, Anthony reached for her. He took her hand and it sent a pulse through her body. A warmth taking her. A tingling that rolled down her chest and to her thighs. Her heart began to pound in her chest.

“I don’t want to be used,” she said, her voice still soft. “I don’t want to be used once and then forgotten.”

“You won’t be.”

“How can I know that for sure?” she said, snapping her head up and meeting his eyes. “You say the right things. But your actions...” She gestured to what she was wearing, where they were, what they were doing. “Is all this just a ploy to lure me to your bed.”

“Not at all.”

“But how can I know for sure?”

Anthony considered the question. Still holding her hand, he bit into his lip, his brow furrowing as he considered what to do.

For a moment, Caroline thought she had pushed too far. That in a bid to prove to her that he was not what she thought, that he might agree that the night was over and leave her be. My big mouth . Despite her reservations, there was still that part of Caroline that wanted her husband. She wanted him so badly, while terrified of what that might mean at the same time.

How to reckon with that? How to find a middle ground?

As it turned out, Anthony had the perfect answer.

“I will not take you to bed,” Anthony said gently as he reached up, cupping a hand under her chin. “But if you think I possess the self-control to let you leave here looking like that...” His eyes flashed hunger. “Even I am only so strong.”

Her heart caught in her throat. “What... what does that mean?”

He answered her with a kiss. Not their first kiss as man and wife but easily their most passion filled. Dressed only in her chemise, Caroline felt her entire body catch fire as he held her by the face with one hand, and squeezed her other hand with the other. Then he dropped her hand and took her waist, pulling her in close. She gasped and caught her breath as his tongue slipped inside of her mouth and explored her.

“You...” He moaned as he pulled away, eyes shut, breathing her in. “You don’t know what you do to me.”

“I have an idea,” she said, following his lips with her own.

They kissed further. Harder. With more fire. Caroline felt her body erupt. She felt her will to resist him breaking. She felt a spike of fear, worried that he might try and take it too far and there was nothing she would be able to do to stop him. She felt... his hand reach for her chemise.

He lifted it hastily about her knees. She gasped and his other hand had since moved to her waist, wrapping around her and holding her body into him. She pretended to struggle, moaning as she did so he would know she liked what he did. And still kissing her, she saw the grin on his lips.

That was when he pulled back. He stared right at her, his gaze piercing as his hand moved up her chemise and his fingers began to stroke her thighs. It sent a ripple across her bare skin, her body shuddering, knees almost collapsing. And as his fingers traced their way further north, she just about cried out.

“What are you...?”

“Do you trust me” he asked, his fingers now finding their way to the edge of her lips.

“I...”

“Do you trust me?” he asked again, leaning in so that his lips traced her neck. “I made you a promise, and I will not break it.” His tongue licked her neck, and she moaned. “So, I ask again. Do you trust me?”

“I... I... I am not sure I do...” She was teasing him, sensing that was what he wanted to hear.

“You...” He ran his tongue up her neck and toward her ear, biting down on her

earlobe. She gasped and he tore his teeth back, breathing into her ear again. “I can stop, if you like.”

“No!” she gasped.

“Tell me then. Tell me that you trust me, or I will.” His fingers still traced her lips, stroking gently, sending her thighs to quiver and shake and melt.

Caroline found in that moment that she trusted him fully. A marriage she was forced into. A promise broken by accident. A new arrangement made. None of it was Anthony’s fault and he had tried from the beginning to be reasonable. Now, it was her turn to do the same.

“I trust you,” she whispered into his ear. “I trust you.”

“Good girl.” That was when his fingers slipped inside of her.

Caroline had never felt such pleasure. It truly was indescribable. Caught between fear and excitement, not sure if she should scream or moan, her body collapsed and then went immediately rigid, a gasp escaping her lips and then her breath catching as she felt him enter her.

He was surprisingly gentle. His fingers, they traced her lips and then dipped inside of her. They pressed softly against her walls, testing her to see how she moved and how she breathed. Her eyes were shut tight, imagining now the way he held her and forced himself on her, picturing the snarl on his lips and the hunger in his eyes. Those fingers started to move in and out, quickly now, and she could feel her wetness coating them.

“Oh... Anthony... that... stop...” she moaned, her body spasming as waves of pleasure rolled over her. “Stop—don’t. Don’t stop...”

“Now you want it,” he growled, his fingers still working her.

“I... I do,” she forced from her lips. “So much.”

“Do you want more?” he whispered in her ear as his fingers slipped from inside of her, finding their way to the small bud at the top of her womanhood. It was a center of nerves, and pleasure erupted as if from an explosion the moment he touched it.

“Yes.”

“How much more?”

“All of it,” she stammered and gasped. “All of you.”

He groaned as he continued to stroke her. The hand on her waist moved to her throat; not tight, but forceful. He held her pinned against the wall, nothing she could do, his to command and do with as he pleased. If he wanted to take her then and there, he could. Nothing would stop him. And Caroline, despite her protests, knew she would let him. Dammit, I want him to. God, how I want it...

“No” Anthony said finally, his voice tinged now with a sense of frustration which only served to arouse her further. “I made you a promise, remember.”

Still pinned to his body, Anthony continued to pleasure Caroline with his fingers. His stroked her. He slipped his fingers inside of her. He pressed against her walls and curled his fingers and moved them to the rhythm of her breathing. The way her body shook! Soon enough, Caroline could feel it coming inside of her. Like a flower opening to the light. Like a fire devouring through kindling. Like a keg of gunpowder lit by a fuse. It came on strong and when it did, it was all she could do not to explode.

“Oh... oh... oh...” Her body went stiff. Her breath caught. Her heart seized. Anthony

held her against the wall as her body rebelled. Sweat broke from her pores. She turned hot then cold then hot again. And when she screamed, it was so loud she was certain that even her sisters would be able to hear her.

Then, just as quickly as it had started, it was over.

Anthony stepped back from her and she opened her eyes finally. He wore a coy smile on his lips, pleased with himself. Although, there was something else there... a look she couldn't quite discern.

"Is something the matter?" she asked through heavy breathing.

He gave his head a shake. "Not at all. Just... just pleased to see you enjoying yourself. It's about time you did, I think."

She tried to roll her eyes but ended up blushing furiously instead. And then, most surprisingly, she laughed. It caught her by surprise. And Anthony too, who flinched and leaned back, before joining in himself.

Deep down, Caroline felt that she should be ashamed of what had just happened. It was not sex, but she had still given in to Anthony, getting lost in such pleasure that a small part of her felt dirty—as if she had done something wrong. Only, she also found that she did not care.

I can't help but feel that I have been lied to all this time. What my mother told me about sex, made out to be the worst and most shameful of things, something to be avoided at all costs.

That didn't seem to be the case at all. Anthony stepped closer to Caroline and took her by the hand. She squeezed it back, meeting his eyes and smiling for him. A smile that he returned. There was no sense that he was upset that they didn't go any further.

And certainly no indication that he would up and leave her now that they were done. In fact, she felt closer to him now than she ever had before. A marriage of convenience, slowly transforming into so much more.

A marriage that I am starting to enjoy, even covet, as unbelievable as that might have once sounded.

Chapter Eighteen

“Y ou are awfully quiet,” Roderick said after what must have been several minutes of brewing silence. “More so than usual, anyhow.”

Anthony brought himself back into the room, determined to keep his mind from straying to that same place it had been all day. “Is that a problem?”

Roderick snorted. “Should it be?”

“You’re the one who brought it up,” Anthony noted stonily. “What’s the matter? Missing my company? Getting lonely, are we?”

“Do not mistake curiosity for desire, Anthony,” Roderick scoffed. “The truth of the matter is, I prefer it when you speak little. The Lord knows that you make for tragic company at the best of times. At least this way, I can simply pretend that you are not a most rotten sort whom I often find myself wondering what might happen if I was to break this tankard over your head and be done with it.” He was holding a tankard of ale, and he took a large mouthful as if to suggest he might finish his drink and test this little idea of his.

Anthony shook his head at his friend. “Do not let me stop you. My only advice to you is do not miss. Somehow, I doubt you will like what will happen next.”

They were sitting in a corner booth at their favorite gentleman’s club, empty of the moment as it was still early. Having traveled south to pay visit to his bride-to-be, Roderick had sent word to Anthony, asking if he wished to meet for a drink. It was a

kind gesture; proof that the two were indeed good friends. Alas, as was always the way with them both, they could not escape from the patterns they had spent a lifetime establishing. A need, it felt like, to prove who was the more powerful and important and dispassionate of the two.

“I am only joshing, Anthony,” Roderick sighed. “Why do you have to take things so seriously?”

“Have I been known to take them any other way?”

“I suppose not,” Roderick snorted. “That’s what I always liked about you. Although I hesitate to use the word liked. Put up with, perhaps.”

“My tenacity for violence?”

“That you don’t mince words,” Roderick corrected. “If there is one good thing to be said of you, it’s that I can always tell what you are thinking. Which brings me back to my original query.” He cocked an eyebrow. “The aforementioned silence which sits upon your shoulders like a heavy cloak.”

“Which has me wondering why you care,” Anthony asked. “Do not tell me that your engagement has made you soft, Roderick. Do not tell me...” Anthony pretended to look aghast. “That you are developing feelings? Worried for me, are you?”

He scoffed. “Do not insult me. And I am sorry that I brought it up. Go on then...” He waved Anthony away. “Back to your silent pontificating. Why I even bother...” he muttered to himself as he took another mouthful of ale.

Anthony eyed his friend curiously. Roderick was indeed acting strangely. Not so strangely that anyone else might have noticed, for all he had done was ask Anthony what was wrong with him. But it was strange for Roderick because he had asked

Anthony what was wrong.

It's an odd friendship that we have , Anthony thought to himself with a shake of the head. Showing feelings and concern for one another is considered out of character.

Perhaps Anthony had hit the nail right on the head with his assumption. That being, Roderick's engagement had affected the man in ways he couldn't have predicted. It would not have surprised Anthony if that was the case, for he too was suffering from the same sense of confusion of character.

It was thoughts of his wife which pestered him. What happened last night. What happened this morning. What might happen tonight. And what on earth Anthony planned to do about it.

Anthony was attracted to his wife, and that was starting to become a problem. It should not have been. Truly, it should have been exactly what Anthony wanted—what he had told himself he wished for, right from the beginning. But Anthony was a complex character, damaged from a lifetime of distrust and loneliness, and thus, he found it difficult to accept the very real fact that if things continued this way, he might for once in his life be happy.

Last night had nearly seen him undone. Oh, the self-control it had taken him not to have her then and there was more than he thought himself in possession of. Indeed, the only thing that had kept him from having her was his desire to prove to her that he cared about her wellbeing. It was just so unlike him!

It had Anthony considering what it was that he really wanted from all of this. An heir, he told himself, the original goal of this marriage. Only now, that seemed inconsequential. An afterthought, because he had hardly even given it a moment of thought in the last two days. Yes, he wished for an heir, but more than that, he wished for a marriage that was more than one of mere convenience.

Only, Caroline wasn't making it any easier on him. He could sense her coming around slowly and was sure that she would. But what would happen if he broke before she did? Another night last like night, putting Anthony in that same situation, and he couldn't say if he had it in himself not to take his wife completely.

I am scared to sleep with my wife. As bizarre a realization that could possibly exist.

He was walking a fine line here, he knew. One wrong step taken and it would undo him and this marriage both.

"At least I can say one thing is true," Roderick started again as he finished his ale and slammed the tankard down on the table. "Marriage has not changed you."

"Is that right?"

"Ha!" Roderick laughed. "Not from where I am sitting. Still the same ice-cold prick you were before succumbing to the farce that is matrimony. Truth be told, I worried you might not come today..." He flashed his eyes mischievously. "Thought that perhaps your dear wife might have unmanned you."

"As your fiancée has you?" Anthony shot back.

Roderick's face dropped. "That is not—we are talking about you."

"Are we now?" Anthony responded coolly. "Then why does it feel as if you are projecting? Is it possible that you, Roderick, are starting to fall for your betrothed? I thought it felt chilly today, a sure sign that hell has frozen over."

Roderick scoffed. "Do not be absurd. If that was the case, then would I still be going through with my original plan? To marry Violet and then ship her off to her own estate, as far from me as possible?" He nodded rightly. "If it seems that I am eager for

this marriage to happen, it is only so I can be done with it once and for all.”

“Sounds like a match made in heaven.”

“The woman is pretty enough, do not get me wrong....” He drifted off for a moment, and Anthony might have been imagining things, but he could have sworn he saw a smile on Roderick’s lips. “But to have her there, always hovering about. No thank you.”

“I am sure she says the same of you.”

Roderick barked a laugh. “I am sure that she does. Honestly, I am doing her a favor as much as anything. Ending up with me as a husband...” He shuddered. “I can’t imagine a worse fate. Well....” He smirked at Anthony. “That is, of course, with the exception of ending up with you as a husband.”

“How very droll.”

Anthony watched Roderick guzzle more ale, unable to hide his disgust... or perhaps that was pity? Hard to say, as Anthony wasn’t one to waste emotions worrying about a friend who would never do the same for him. But in this moment, he could not help but wonder at how Roderick was behaving, as he saw in his best friend a side to him which was as ugly as it was miserable.

Is that what I have in store for myself? If I continue to deny how I feel or question it? If I refuse to accept what Caroline and I might be, and why? Because I am afraid of being happy? What is even the point?

“And how is that pretty little wife of yours,” Roderick said.

“What?” Anthony stiffened.

Roderick waved him down. “A compliment, man. Do not get so stiff about it. She is a fine sort, I must admit. But be careful. Women like that, they know what they are doing. Little use to them, besides the obvious, but she will have you slobbering like a hungry pup if you don’t set ground rules early.” He chuckled. “Lord knows she’s probably as dull as a bowl of porridge, anyhow.”

Despite his best attempt, Anthony turned rigid to hear his wife spoken about like that. He knew deep down that he shouldn’t have cared what Roderick was saying, as he had once thought the same. Only now...

Is it still worth trying to convince myself that I don’t care about Caroline?

“Careful now, Roderick,” Anthony said with forced calm. “That is my wife you are speaking of.”

Roderick frowned as if in confusion. “Truly?”

“Truly,” Anthony said with a snarl. “Now, apologize. Before I make you.”

Roderick leaned back. “I was only speaking in jest, man! Just in jest.”

“Apologize,” he repeated.

“I am sorry...” He blew through his lips and then took another sip of ale. “A man makes a joke...”

“A joke is one thing, but you speak of my wife like that again and you will be sorry that you did.”

Yes, Anthony was falling for his wife and with that in mind, as he rode home from the gentleman’s club, he found his mood soaring like it never had before. What had

started as a marriage of convenience had transformed into so much more; a marriage that had a real shot at being a happy one.

The only problem that Anthony could foresee now was the very real chance that he might screw it all up. Caroline still did not trust him fully. If he tried to force her in any way, she would assume his goals to be impure and rightly push him away—she had told him that she would, and he was inclined to believe her. Worse than that, if she did deny him and Anthony's temper roared, that amorous lust which he had managed to keep tame for all this time, then he might just prove to her and himself that he was exactly what people said of him. The Cruel Duke, indeed.

He needed to tread carefully. And most importantly, if I find myself in a similar situation to last night, I cannot allow it to go too far.

That, Anthony knew, would be the hardest part of all.

Chapter Nineteen

“Y ou look beautiful, by the way,” Anthony said from across the carriage.

The comment caught Caroline by surprise. “Is that so?”

“It is.”

Caroline blushed furiously, not surprised by the compliment, as it was becoming commonplace now, but taken by it nonetheless.

She took a moment to study her husband. He was sitting across from her, dressed in a dark suit, shrouded in shadow so that she could make out only the breadth of his large frame and the glimmer of his dark eyes. In them, she saw beyond the dispassion and coldness that she once did. More than the rude, short-tempered duke who she had married a week ago. If she didn’t know any better, she might have said he was someone else entirely to the person whom she had been forced to marry.

But he is not different, nor is he pretending to be. He is that same man, only now I know the real him.

“Thank you,” she said sheepishly, looking away as she felt her cheeks flush. “As do you.”

“Pretty?”

She snorted. “No...” Again, she looked at him. Glad for how hard he was to make out

in the darkness, as it would have made this carriage ride that much more difficult to sit through. Being alone with him like this, the tension existing as it did every time that they were together, it was all she could do to keep her mind on what mattered. Not giving in. “You look handsome.”

“Ah, yes.” He chuckled lightly. “Thank you. Handsome is what I was going for.”

“Consider it achieved.”

The conversation was not so much awkward as it was tense. They had not spoken of what had happened between them two nights ago, and there was no sense they meant to. Caroline was confused by this, as she was certain that Anthony would have wished to bring it up again, if for no other reason than to try for her a second time.

In a way, she supposed she was glad that he didn’t. If the conversation went down that road, with them alone in the carriage as they were, she doubted they would make it to where they were headed. She doubted that she would want to.

“I am looking forward to this evening,” Caroline said, simply because she thought she must.

“I am glad,” he responded. “I had hoped you might be excited.”

“I am. It is very kind of you. And generous.”

“I thought it might do for us to get out of the manor,” he said simply. “At the very least, so people do not begin to gossip. If you were hidden away for too long, the worst might be assumed.”

She laughed softly. “I did not think you would care what people thought.”

“I do not,” he said. “So, maybe I am lying. Maybe I just want you to have an enjoyable evening.”

“Maybe that’s the lie,” she shot back.

“I’ll leave you to decide that for yourself.”

Caroline no longer distrusted Anthony. She was well past that by now. The confusion she felt was entirely internal, afraid to admit how she felt and how much she wanted him, while desperate to do so at the same time. It was her stubborn nature that did it, a lifetime of convincing herself that sexual attraction was bad and not to be pursued.

What she needed was for Anthony to take over and force it from her, giving her no choice in the matter. If he did that, she knew that she would not be able to say no. Nor would I want to.

“I have a surprise for you after, too,” Anthony said.

“Oh?” She felt a ripple spread across her body, wondering what that surprise might be. Hoping... “And this surprise is?”

His smile was coy. “I said it was a surprise, didn’t I? It would not be much of one if I spoiled it.”

“Anything I need to be on my guard over?” She raised an eyebrow at him “You’re not going to try and find a way to trick me into undressing again, are you?”

“Perhaps if you were a better chess player than you claimed, that wouldn’t have been a problem.”

“I am an excellent chess player,” she said. “And I would have won, if we had

continued.”

“Won, possibly,” he agreed. “But you would have been naked when you had.”

Caroline’s body ran warm. Two nights ago... what might have happened if she had removed her chemise? I am glad I resisted, while I am somehow furious with myself for doing so.

“And no, nothing like that,” Anthony then assured her. “I promise.”

“I can’t wait,” she said sincerely, to which Anthony smiled.

As for where they were going tonight? It was Anthony’s third ‘chance’ as he referred to it to court her properly and prove resolutely that this marriage was more than a mere desire to produce an heir. Truly, the whole thing felt redundant by this point, as Caroline felt they had passed that point, with all that was left for them to go to bed together.

But she did not complain. Nor did she try and stop him either. If he wished to take her out and spoil her, who was she to try and resist? All this, as she saw it, was further proof of what this marriage had become. No more fighting. No more arguing. And they were much more than merely companionable...

As to where they were going? He had surprised her just two hours ago, announcing proudly that he’d procured tickets for the opera.

Caroline had been overwhelmed by the notion. As one of six children, it was rare for her mother to take them to the opera, as the cost was beyond her, not to mention the challenge in acquiring seven tickets for such an evening. A shame too, as Caroline had always loved the opera, harboring a romanticism toward it, relishing the spectacle, and admiring the beauty. She was nothing if not excited.

“Here we are...” Anthony sat up in the carriage as it began to slow. “Are you ready?”

“Ready?” Caroline frowned. “What for?”

He chuckled. “You really are new to this, aren’t you?”

She looked at him flatly. “I am not some bumpkin. I have been to the theatre before, you know. Obviously.”

“This isn’t the theatre.”

“And there is a difference?” she shot back.

It turns out, there was.

It was the crowds that Anthony had been referring to. The sheer volume of people crammed onto the street outside the theatre as they pushed and shoved to get inside. Even a duke and duchess were not immune to the chaos, meaning that Anthony was forced to take hold of Caroline as she climbed from the carriage and not let her go.

His hand was around her waist as he led her. A firm grip. A commanding one. He was power and strength incarnate, and he led her through the masses, which parted for him as if on instinct. Not once did he indicate he might let her go. And not once did she wish for him to. The feel of his arm around her, she had never felt so safe, despite the crowds.

What was more, she was surprised that it didn’t excite her in the same way that his touch usually did. Sure, she enjoyed the feeling of his arm around her. But it was more than amorous. It was, she assumed, how a wife should feel in the embrace of her husband.

Their seats were in the balcony, a private booth for just the two of them, allowing them to enter via a private door around the side of the theatre. Once they were ushered inside, he moved his hand from her waist, quickly taking her by the hand to lead her down the halls, up the steps, and into the booth.

There, they sat together, his hand still wrapped around her own. And even then, now that they were safe and secure, he held her hand tightly as he rested it in his lap, and Caroline found herself glad for it. It was not uncomfortable. It was not awkward. It was right. It felt natural. It was as a wife and husband should sit.

Despite their being alone, Caroline had nothing to fear about what might happen, as the show started not long after they were seated, providing a perfect distraction. Again, however, it didn't really matter. All this evening felt like was a night out between husband and wife, and thus she relaxed, enjoying herself like she did not think she ever would around him.

For four hours the show went on, and she was enraptured the entire time. Her mouth hung open. Her eyes were wide. Her breath held, it seemed, for the entire show. At one point, she caught Anthony watching her, smirking as he did.

"What?" she asked him warily.

"Nothing," he said, still smiling. "I am simply glad to see you are enjoying yourself."

"More than enjoying myself. This is... I love it."

This saw his smile grow and he squeezed her hand tighter.

When the show ended, Caroline was more upset than she thought she would be, wishing it could have gone for another four hours. That was until Anthony reminded her of the surprise.

“You haven’t forgotten, have you?” he said, pretending to look upset.

“Oh...” Caroline suddenly became aware of where they were. With the show having ended, their little booth had turned suddenly dark. They were alone. Nobody could see them. And with her hand placed firmly in his lap, she could not escape the feeling that something was about to happen. And that she would not want to stop it. “I... I just assumed you were joking.”

“Joking?” Anthony squeezed her hand tighter, meeting her eyes fully. He held them and her heart began to race. “I would never.”

“What...” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “What is it...?”

“You’ll see...”

A moment then. One in which he looked right at her, and she felt seen again. He sat up, leaned forward, and despite herself, she prepared for him to kiss her. More than that, she wanted him to kiss her.

“Come on.” He rose suddenly and pulled her to her feet.

“Oh...” Caroline’s heart crashed, disappointed because it was clear that whatever this surprise was, it was not what she assumed. Which is a good thing! And it is lucky for him he did not try anything... or so she told herself.

Anthony led her from the booth and down the hallway, but rather than heading for the exit, she realized he was taking her in the direction of the stage. From there, he led her toward the back until they were standing outside a dressing room.

“Anthony, what is...?” She frowned at him, searching for an answer.

“You will see,” he said, his excitement palpable.

He knocked on the door, they were called to enter, and through the door they went. Inside sat a small man with a large nose, dressed in a suit, sipping a glass of wine. He jumped to his feet and bowed as soon as he saw who it was.

“Your Grace,” he said. “It is an honor.” His accent was Italian, but he spoke English perfectly. “And who is this?” he asked when he spied Caroline standing nervously by the door.

“This is who I was telling you about.” Anthony turned and gestured for her to come closer. “Caroline, this is Antonio Abate, the composer of tonight’s opera.”

Her eyes widened. “Mr. Abate!” she said a little too loudly. “It is an honor to?—”

“Ah, ah...” He held up a hand. “The honor is all mine, I assure you.” He swept toward her, taking her hand and giving it a kiss. “But if it is such an honor, allow me please to repay it.”

“I... I do not...” She looked at her husband for an explanation, but he stood back, appearing rather pleased with himself. “There is no need.”

“Of course there is,” Mr. Abate insisted. “Shall we start as soon as possible?”

“Start what?”

Anthony stepped in. “Mr. Abate has offered to help you with your lessons.”

“Lessons?” She had no idea what was going on.

“The pianoforte,” Mr. Abate explained. “His Grace has told me that you’ve started

learning. A wonderous instrument, the pianoforte, and I should know as I consider myself a master. It has been a while since I have taught but for you, Your Grace, I relish the chance.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You... you are going to teach me?”

“If it suits you.”

“It does,” Anthony answered for her. “And I will send instructions at once, concerning dates and times.”

“I eagerly await.”

Caroline was rendered speechless. She looked between her husband and Mr. Abate, mouth still open, eyes wide, unable to comprehend what had just happened. Growing up as she had, not once had someone gone out of their way for her like this, seeking to help her for no other reason than it was the right thing to do.

She felt seen , she realized, something which was becoming a commonality in this marriage. More than that, she felt grateful and underserving.

“Anthony...” She did not know what to say. “I cannot —”

“It is fine,” he cut her off. “Truly, if you are going to learn, you best do it properly.”

Knowing not what to say or how to say it, Caroline did the only thing that she could think. She threw herself at Anthony, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him. And Anthony, surprised at first, hugged her right back. It was not sexual. It was not promiscuous. It was a showing of thanks, and she could feel in the way her husband held her how much he appreciated it.

“Thank you,” she said as she hugged him. “For everything.”

“For you, Caroline,” he whispered back, still holding her. “Anything.”

And this time, she believed him fully.

* * *

They climbed into the carriage together, this time sitting beside one another rather than across. Anthony had held her hand as he had led her back through the street, and Caroline hadn’t even thought to deny him. As for sitting so close, so that she was almost on top of him? Again, Caroline hadn’t given it a second thought. It simply felt right to do.

“Did you enjoy tonight?” Anthony asked once the carriage started forward.

“I think you know that I did.”

He was smiling. So strange for him, but a commonality across tonight. “I assumed as much. But it’s still nice to hear.”

She snorted. “Perhaps I should have been more obvious.”

“It would not have hurt.”

She looked at him with a flat expression, one that was meant to be dismissive of his comment. Humorous also, as she could tell that he was joking. However, she found that the time for such things didn’t quite suit, because despite the jokes and the humor, she truly was that grateful for all he had done.

More than that, Caroline wanted to show him how grateful she was. Earlier, she had

been worried about the notion of sleeping with Anthony too soon. And not because of what he might do, but because of how she might behave. That she would enjoy it. That she would want more. That she would become obsessed in ways that Anthony could not possibly match, forcing his hand and pushing him away as she so feared would happen in the first place.

Not anymore.

He cares for me. I can see that now. And I know that because of this, no matter what I do or where this night leads, that will not change. So, why do I keep on fighting it? What is even the point?

“Thank you again,” she said.

Anthony smiled at her. “Anything, Caroline. Despite what you might think of me, I want you to know—” And she was on him.

She reached up and took his chin in her hand, turned his face, and moved her lips to meet his. Anthony’s eyes went wide in surprise, but he was quick to succumb as he leaned in and kissed her fully on the lips. A growl emitted from his throat. His body turned rigid, and he moved forward quickly. And what started as a kiss... predictably, soon devolved into so much more.

Which was the plan, if I am to be perfectly honest.

Anthony wasted no time in taking control of the moment. As they kissed with passion, he moved his arm around her, scooped it under her leg, and then lifted her onto his lap so that she was straddling him. Her legs spread and she sank down, and his hands then took her face and held it as he continued to devour her lips and mouth and face.

From there, one of his hands found the back of her neck and grabbed it. The other was around her throat once more. He growled again, turned her head away as he began to kiss and suck her neck as she started to move her hips for no other reason than it felt so good to do so.

His hand at her throat moved down to her waist. Then it cupped her breast, and she heard him moan. He grabbed at the front of her gown, held on tight, and with a mighty roar he ripped it open as if it was paper. Her breasts spilled out and Anthony buried his face in them.

Caroline leaned back, her eyes shut, as Anthony's lips found her right nipple, and then her left. He moved between them, sucking and licking and nibbling. They turned hard in his mouth. There was pain... but it rolled through her body as pleasure. She moaned, letting him hear and feel what he was doing to her.

His hands then found her buttocks. He pulled her forward, helping her hips to grind as he squeezed. Again, they started to kiss; a messy thing, lips mashing, tongues wrestling, saliva dripping down their chins.

"Caroline..." Anthony pulled away slightly as she kissed down his neck. "I do not know if we should..."

"Should what?" She continued to kiss him.

"Is it not too soon?"

"Too soon? It is too late, by my count."

Anthony pulled back further and looked at her. There was confusion in his eyes, a sense that he wasn't sure if he believed her or not. Oh no... Had she gone too far? Had she misread the situation entirely? For a second, she worried that she had...

That was when his eyes hardened, and she saw the hunger behind them. Determination as a decision was made. One that she knew was perfectly in line with her own. Anthony moved quickly, lifting her effortlessly and flipping her onto the seat with her legs in the air. Then, just as quickly, Anthony slid down from the seat and crouched between those legs so that they were on his shoulders. Her eyes were wide, and she opened her mouth to speak.

“We had a deal,” he said to her, a smirk on his lip as his hands began to stroke her thighs above her dress. He gripped them, squeezing... “A promise. Are you trying to break it?”

“I...” She wasn’t sure what to say.

He smirked as he held her eyes, his hands moving up the skirt of her dress, pushing it down her thighs and exposing them. “I told you, I wished to court you, did I not? Five chances to prove that I am not what you think.”

“I know you are not...” Her voice cracked and she could barely think, her mind focused on his hands as they traced her thighs lightly. “I?—”

“I am a man of my word,” he said as he licked his lips. “And I dare you to say otherwise.” And then, without another word, Anthony dived, his head suddenly between her legs.

She cried out the moment she felt his mouth wrap around her womanhood. He latched onto her, devouring her as if he was desperate for her taste. His tongue then slipped inside of her lips, wiggling and licking and sucking so that it was all she could do not to fight him off because the pleasure was too great that it felt wrong. How can something that feels so good not be?

His powerful hands held her thighs steady as he continued to eat her. Each time he

sucked, she spasmed for she felt it ripple through her entire body. Each time he licked, she yelped, for she felt it strike right at her heart. How to even describe what he was doing to her? How to even comprehend? She could not! So, she simply let it be.

His head remained between her legs as he began to suck at her pleasure center. Slowly at first, making her breathe and moan and shake. Then, he began to do so with more conviction, somehow sensing the way she was building and moving to that rhythm.

She tried to clamp her legs shut but he held them wide.

She tried to push him away, but he would not budge.

She tried to cry out! Dammit, she wanted to beg him. Not to stop, but to take her finally! She was ready. She had never wanted it more. But she found herself paralyzed, her entire body rebelling against whatever it was that he was doing with those lips and that tongue.

“Anthony...” She stammered, barely able to form the words as she felt that same fire within her start to build. “Anthony... I want you to... I want you too... oh, God...”

She heard him chuckle but he did not stop. If anything, he only worked harder on her. His mouth was around her fully, sucking her and holding her between his lips. He had her. He could do with her whatever he wished!

“Anthony... I want you to... please... I want you to...” She could not get the words out. “Anthony.... Oh God! Yes!” It was here.

Despite Anthony holding her legs apart, she found the power to clamp them closed. They snapped around his head so he could not move. They held him there so he could

not stop. Her body writhed. It spasmed. It erupted with a force that had her lifting herself from the seat and convulsing.

“Yes... yes... yes...” she screamed as the sensation took her. “Yes!”

Who was she kidding? What was she playing at? Caroline had no control. She had no power. And she knew in that moment that she never really had. Anthony had her completely, in his thrall—his to do with whatever he damn well pleased. And as she exploded in his mouth and over his face, she decided that, for now, she was perfectly fine with that.

Now, she knew, there was but one thing left to do. No more denying it. No more pretending she did not want it. The next time she and Anthony were together like this, he would have her. Whether he wanted to or not!

Chapter Twenty

“Is that all you are going to tell me?” Violet chided her sister, a smile on her lips that was knowing; it perfectly matched the look in her eyes.

“I told you everything that you need to hear.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “You told me next to nothing. And you know you did.”

“I told you enough,” Caroline countered. She sipped her tea, but mostly just so that she could hide her smile. “Besides, there are some things that need to be kept a secret. Especially between husband and wife.”

“Between husband and wife...” Violet considered the phrasing as she too took a sip of tea. “So, not between monster and captive?”

“You will not goad me,” Caroline said. “So do not even try.”

“Alright, alright...” Violet sighed and eyed her sister with curiosity. “Fine, keep your secrets if you must. But just know, I see you. Do not think I do not.”

“What do you mean...?” Caroline felt her cheeks flushing.

“There!” Violet cried out and laughed. “Right there. You play coy with me, sister, but I see that look in your eyes and that flush on your cheeks. Do you think I was born just yesterday?”

Caroline was flushing furiously, and she refused to meet her sister's accusing and amused stare. "It is hot, is why... and I am tired."

"Tired." Violet laughed. "Whatever is the reason? Up late last night, were we?"

"Stop it!" Caroline cried, unable to keep herself from laughing. "You go too far!"

"Not nearly far enough," Violet countered. "But fine, if you insist, I shall hold my tongue. For now, anyway..." She winked at Caroline, smirking next as she took a sip of tea. It was so clear that Violet was able to read through the story that Caroline had told her, likely guessing darn near perfectly the reason that Caroline was in such a good mood. Not to mention the reason she had paid her sister a visit out of nowhere.

It was two days after the opera and Caroline found herself at her soon-to-be brother-in-law's home. Not the Aldworth Estate, as that was much further north, but a summer home where the Duke of Aldworth was staying for the time being so that it would be easier for him to pay a visit to Violet.

It was a good thing that His Grace was so close, and that Violet was with him today, as it allowed for Caroline to pop in unannounced, as she had a question that she sensed only His Grace could answer, and she was desperate to ask it.

Of course, that meant fielding her sister's questions first, mostly why on earth she wished to speak with her husband about Anthony to begin with. It was also clear to Violet how peaked Caroline's mood was— of course it is— which had her querying with relentless hostility as to why.

Caroline had never been much of a liar, but she also wasn't about to start telling her sister about her and Anthony's more erotic activities. I would die to see her reaction! So, she simply told her sister that she and Anthony were happy, more than she had thought she could be, and for that reason, she wished to do something special for him.

A half-truth... but enough of one, for the whole truth might have given Violet a heart attack.

“So, where is your betrothed, anyway?” Caroline asked. “I did not see him when I was brought inside.”

“Working, I would say,” Violet sighed. “But I have sent for him, do not fret. He will join us when he is ready.”

Caroline eyed her sister with a sense of sadness. She knew that Violet’s courtship was not a love match, but she had hoped that by now that might have changed. After all, their circumstances had not been dissimilar to her own—proof that the way things began were not the way they had to stay.

“I hope he will not mind me asking after him.” Caroline decided not to press the matter, simply because she did not wish to sully her good mood or make her sister feel worse.

“Oh, he will be fine,” Violet said. “Roderick is more bark than bite, and where he might seek to intimidate, I assure you it is all an act.”

Caroline chuckled. “You do remember to whom I am married? I think I can handle your husband.”

The two sisters were sitting in the back garden, enjoying a pot of tea and some sweetmeats. The weather was lovely this day, and where Caroline did not regret spending it with her sister, she found that she would have rather had been home so she could be taking advantage of her husband in ways that were reminiscent of the other night.

It is just so strange how quickly things can change. Two weeks ago, I hated the man,

convinced he was an evil, wicked soul who wanted nothing more than to see me with child so he could get about ignoring me for the rest of his life. And now...

Two nights ago still sat on the fore of Caroline's thoughts. She made sure not to think too much of them, because to do so in her sister's presence would see her unravel. It was just so unlike anything she had ever experienced before. And not just the pleasure. But the fact that Anthony had put her pleasure before his own. That was what she focused on.

Things were changing so quickly. She'd broken her fast with him the following morning, and it was not awkward at all. It was companionable. Enjoyable. Dare she say that it was everything she had ever dreamt a marriage might be. As was their supper that evening. And again, this morning. They were growing closer every day, and Caroline was thrilled about the fact.

But where to go from here? Most people might see fit to continue with the way things were progressing, as Anthony still had two more chances to try and prove to her that this marriage could work—whatever that still meant! The point was proven in Caroline's mind, which meant there was only one thing left to do.

She had been thinking about it a lot these last two days. Where they went from here and how they might get there. Caroline wanted to sleep with her husband, proving once and for all that this marriage was exactly what she suspected. She wanted to give herself to him completely, all of herself and her trust, consequences be damned.

The only thing was... and this is a most strange thought... it felt as if Anthony was the one resisting her. It was insane to consider! And she was quite certain she was imaging things. But was it possible that Anthony did not wish to bed her? Surely not.

For that reason, Caroline decided she needed to take matters into her own hands once and for all. Thus, her reason for seeking out His Grace, praying it would not all be for

nought.

“There you are!” she heard His Grace cry out from across the garden. “What on earth are you doing out here?” Caroline looked up to see the Duke of Aldworth storming through the garden toward them, looking a tad upset.

“Roderick.” Violet remained seated, and she did not smile to see her husband approaching them. “The day is too lovely to spend indoors, so we thought we would take advantage.”

“I was looking for you in the sitting room.” He hurried toward them.

“And as I said, the day was too lovely for such things.”

There was clear tension between the not-so-happy couple. Violet appeared dismissive, as if she was purposefully not rising to her husband’s mood. And His Grace appeared annoyed, if for no other reason than he wanted to assert himself. He was nowhere near as physically intimidating as Anthony, still quite tall, but not bulky. More athletic, Caroline decided, handsome also, but in a way that most would deem as ‘pretty’ not rugged.

“Your Grace,” Caroline said with a pleasant smile, if for no other reason than to break the mood. “It is lovely to see you again.” She remained seated. “And thank you for agreeing to see me.”

“Oh, yes...” Roderick turned on her. “Your Grace, lovely to see you again. And alone?” He looked about as if curious. “Where is your husband? Not hiding in the bushes, is he?”

“He is at home,” she chuckled. “Taking some much needed time from me.”

“I am surprised he allowed you out of his sight.” He smirked to himself. “I know Anthony to be rather possessive.”

“I assure you, that is not the case. Anthony is happy to let me do as I please. He is rather kind like that.”

“I am sure he is...”

Caroline furrowed her brow, finding herself annoyed by how the duke was speaking of her husband. She recalled then what Anthony had said of the man, how they were friends but also cold toward one another on account of their emotionally closed-off personalities. Thus, she tried her best not to allow herself to be annoyed.

“I was hoping that I might be able to ask you a question. I would not wish to impose myself, but there is nobody else to whom I might query.”

“A question?” Roderick frowned and looked at Violet. “Do you know anything about this?”

“I was trying to pry but Caroline has held her tongue.” She raised an eyebrow at Caroline. “Needless to say, I am as intrigued as you are.”

“It is nothing as exciting as you make it out to be.” Caroline did her best to appear nonchalant. “It is just that I wished to do something...” She considered the phrasing, not certain why she suddenly felt so awkward about her question. As if revealing it was a secret that only she and Anthony were privy to. “Something special for Anthony.”

“Special?” His Grace frowned and inclined his head.

“I know so little about Anthony,” Caroline hurried to explain. “At least regarding

what he likes to do for himself—what brings him pleasure. I know he is not a big reader. Somehow, I doubt that stitchwork is a passion of his.” She chuckled to herself at the image. “I was just wondering if you might have an insight into a favorite pastime of Anthony’s. Anything at all really.”

“And why would you want such a thing?” His Grace asked curiously.

“Is it such a strange thing,” Caroline said. “To want to do something nice for one’s husband?”

His Grace snorted. “If I was pressed...” His Grace clicked his tongue with consideration. “I suppose Anthony is fond of horses. Riding them specifically.”

“He is?” Caroline perked up.

“Anything outdoors, really. I would tell you to take him hunting but...” He chuckled. “Somehow, I doubt you would be very good company there.”

“Riding...” Caroline thought ahead, already forming a plan for how she might use this information. The notion excited her, as did the image of seeing how taken with shock Anthony might be when she revealed her surprise. That alone made her smile... “Yes, that is good to know. Thank you, Your Grace.”

“I do not know why you bother,” His Grace said and then scoffed. “For Anthony of all people. He would not do the same for you. Or anyone, for that matter.”

“Oh...” Caroline blinked, caught off guard by the rebuke. As said, she knew His Grace and Anthony were not exactly the kindest of friends, but she had not expected him to be so overtly outspoken. “I do not know about that, Your Grace. In my experience?—”

“I am merely trying to help you,” His Grace spoke over her. “Do remember, I have known the man close to my entire life, so I have an insight into these things that you might do well to heed.”

“I...” Caroline didn’t know what to say. “Perhaps you do not know him as well as you think.”

“I know that he locked away his own mother, making her a prisoner in his home. Although to be fair, everyone knows that.”

“Roderick,” Violet spoke up, her tone cold. “Now is not the time to?—”

“I am only trying to help,” His Grace spoke over her. “I am merely trying to do well by your sister. She is married to a man who in some countries would be locked away from society for their own betterment, lest he lost his temper one day and commit himself to a killing spree.” He sighed and shook his head. “At least that is how people view him.”

Caroline wasn’t at all impressed by this characterization.

She knew that the smart thing to do would be to say nothing. She was not here to defend her husband’s honor. And she certainly did not want to get on the wrong side of the duke. Keeping her mouth shut and leaving without causing a fuss was the smart move...

Only, Caroline found that she could not do that. Like the rest of the ton, she had heard the rumors of her husband, and she had believed them well enough. Why would she not? Nobody had ever told her differently. Nobody had ever thought to defend Anthony’s name when these malicious lies were spouted. And that was the entire point. People believed these things of Anthony for no good reason because, in her personal experiences, she had seen nothing to justify what was said about Anthony.

And with how she was feeling about him now, all that had happened these past few days, she simply could not imagine a word of these lies as being even half-truths. There is just no way.

“I will ask you kindly to take back what you said,” she said with great calm as she looked up at His Grace.

“Excuse me?”

“What you have said just now,” she continued with the same calm. “I will ask that you take it back. An apology too, would be welcome.”

“An apology? Who do you think you are?—?”

“That is my husband of whom you speak,” she spoke over him, still calm, but forceful. A little trick she had picked up from Anthony. “You are spreading lies about him. He is not what you say, which I think you know, which leads me to wonder why you would say such things in the first place.” She then cocked an eyebrow at the duke.

“Is that right?” he said, caught between annoyance at being argued with and amusement at the fact that she might dare. “They are lies, are they?”

“Even if they are not, what kind of man are you to say such things about another when he is not here to defend himself? A man whom you call a friend. Not much of one, I would say.”

“Caroline!” Violet cried.

At this, the duke studied Caroline, a sense that he was seeing her for the first time. Was he impressed? Was he upset? Was he about to tell her off and demand that she

leave his house and never return? It was impossible to say. He simply looked at her, and she looked back, refusing to blink. It was easy to do, she realized, as she was married to a man far more intimidating than His Grace. It is not even close.

“As you say,” His Grace said eventually, shrugged as if he didn’t care one way or the other. “At least that answers another question I had.”

“Which is?”

“How you truly feel about your husband...” He chuckled to himself, a smirk crossing his lips. “And I wager, how he feels about you. A match made in heaven, it would seem.”

“Yes, well...” Caroline looked away as if embarrassed. “We are happy, if that is what you mean.”

“Clearly.”

There was little else to do after that. With the information she required now attained, Caroline was quick to thank her sister and His Grace for their help and exit the home before she said or did anything else that might cause alarm. As she left, she heard over her shoulder her sister and His Grace bickering, tempers flared for reasons that she doubted had anything to do with her, as she was starting to understand that this was the natural state of her sister’s engagement. I do hope things change for her. She deserves happiness as much as anyone.

But there was no time to worry about that. It was just gone midday and Caroline needed to be home as quickly as possible. She had an evening to plan—one she was certain Anthony was going to love. As am I, if all goes how I expect it to.

Chapter Twenty-One

“You are allowed to smile,” Caroline said from beside Anthony. She was riding sidesaddle on her horse, seated so that she was facing him. On her face was a glorious smile that spoke of how pleased she must have been feeling with herself.

“Who says I wish to smile?” Anthony responded coolly, making sure to keep his expression flat.

“You do know, how, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Curious...” Her smile grew. “All this time, I might have assumed you had never learned. I can teach you, if that is the case.”

He looked at her flatly. “I know how to smile. The trick is doing something which causes such a reaction. So far, I am yet to see a reason.”

“So far...” She let the phrase dangle between them, the suggestion being that there was more to come from this most random outing. “I will remember that.”

“Do not get ahead of yourself,” Anthony responded. “You act as if I have never ridden a horse before.”

“And if this is all I had planned, I would not expect it.”

“And I suppose there is no chance of you telling me where it is that we are going?”

She winked. “I told you, it is a surprise. And it would not be much of one if I revealed said surprise too soon.”

“I could just turn around, you know.”

“You could.”

“After all, you are the one who has hijacked the afternoon. Who is to say that I did not have some glorious evening planned for us? An evening which has been stolen.”

“And I weep for it.” She could not have looked more pleased with herself. “Let us just hope that this matches whatever it is that you had planned.”

“And if it does not?”

She shrugged, her smile growing. “I will just have to learn to live with it.”

Anthony eyed her curiously, still not certain what to make of this most random little adventure he found himself on.

It had come from nowhere, this ride on horseback. Just an hour ago, Anthony had been planning a fourth evening spent with Caroline, one which was to end in a moonlit walk through the gardens together as hired violinists played for them in a way that could only be regarded as the height of romance. He had wanted to impress her. More than that, he had wanted to prove to himself that this marriage was on the right path.

This whole charade of theirs, the five chances, was beginning to feel redundant. It was so clear that they enjoyed one another’s company. It was so obvious that this had

become about more than whether or not Caroline would agree to give him an heir. They were past that now.

For Anthony, it was about confirming once and for all, in Caroline's eyes, that he was more than she had once thought, and that her fears about him were misplaced entirely.

She had come to him only a few hours ago, asking—no, demanding. She demanded that he cancel whatever plans he had made, as she had taken the initiative herself and organized a horseback ride across the estate, to end with a surprise that she could not wait to show him.

“A surprise?” Anthony has asked, not sure what to make of this request, or how he felt about it. “Remind me, am I not the one who is meant to be seducing you?”

“You will have your chance,” she had said with a coy smile. “But first, say yes. And I promise, you will not regret it.”

It suggested to Anthony that she was the one trying to prove to him how much she cared for him—and to prove it to herself, for that matter. Gone were the days of distrust. Gone were the days of not being sure. It was time to start admitting what this marriage was, because both parties could so clearly sense it.

That of course raised the question about tonight, and where it might lead. Sensing now that Caroline was falling for him as he was for her, was Anthony ready to give in to his amorous desires and take her fully, if she allowed it? Or did he still wish to hold off until their final night? I suppose time will tell...

“Tell me we are nearly there,” he asked.

“What's the matter? Growing bored?”

“Concerned for you,” he corrected. “I do not want you to bruise or chafe from riding your horse for too long.”

She chuckled. “I will be fine. Do not fear for me, when this is supposed to be about you.”

“I will remind you that I am the husband and you are my wife,” he continued haughtily. “I am the one who is meant to be wooing you. This is unheard of.”

“Then why are you enjoying yourself so much?”

“Who says that I am?”

Her eyes flashed delight. “Perhaps I know you better than you think?”

“Perhaps the man you think you know is all a lie,” he countered. “A mask I’ve worn this entire time.”

“Well, you’ve done a terrible job so far.”

“The evening is still young.”

She laughed and shook her head, that smile still very much there. “We are close, do not fear. See there...” She nodded her head across the field, toward the tree line. “Just beyond those trees.”

Anthony frowned as he followed her gaze, trying to piece together where she was taking him. This was his estate, so he knew the landscape better than anyone.

It was an hour or so before sunset; the sky just now was painted in dark pinks and warm oranges as the sun began to drift toward the horizon. They had been cantering

across the estate for fifteen minutes, mostly through the verdant paddocks which surrounded the manor and farmland. Their destination was a small forest which lined the border, beyond which was nothing particularly interesting that he could recall. Where on earth is she taking me?

The answer became apparent ten minutes later.

They reached the tree line where Caroline instructed Anthony to tie their horses. She was brimming with excitement, her entire body shaking, and he found it so adorable he couldn't help but follow her instruction.

From there, she led him through the forest. It was a sparsely packed, so they walked it with ease, and all the while Anthony searched for whatever this surprise was. That was when they came upon a small clearing.

“Here we are...” She stepped into it then turned back to face him, her eyes wide, her smile splitting her face in two. “What do you think?”

Anthony frowned. “And what is it that I am supposed to be...” He trailed off as he looked past her, spying finally what could only be this so—called surprise.

It was a picnic, set in the middle of the glade. There was a soft blanket at the center, on which were plates already set with foodstuffs; mostly snacks, such as breads and dips and cheeses, nothing too hearty from what Anthony could see. There was a bottle of wine with two empty glasses. While set around the blanket were four lamps, burning low. It was too early for their fire to be needed, but with the sun quickly setting, soon they would be the only source of light.

“What do you think?” Caroline asked, for the first time sounding nervous. “Do you... do you like it?”

Anthony didn't know what to say, or how to react for that matter. That she had gone through all this effort, and for no other reason than to impress him... it was more than he could comprehend. Nobody had ever done anything like this for him before. There was nobody in his world who would. Or rather, there hadn't been.

"I love it," he said with a smile.

"There it is," she said with a smile to match. "The smile. Just what I was looking for."

He laughed. "Like I said, I can, when it is worth it. And this..." He gestured to the scene. "I think this qualifies."

"So, you like it?" Caroline could not have looked happier; her eyes glimmered and her smile shone brightly. That had Anthony's chest tightening because he loved seeing her so happy. It has been so long since I've had that effect on anyone, forgetting too how it makes me feel to know that I do.

"It is perfect," Anthony said to her, still smiling. "You are perfect."

To that, she said nothing. Rather, she walked up to him and took his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze before then leading him to the blanket. There they sat, all pretenses dropped, no need to mention this as Anthony's 'fourth chance,' or whatever they were calling it. That was a thing of the past.

This marriage wasn't what it once had been. Both knew it now, and both seemed ready to take it to the next level. As to what that might be? From the look in Caroline's eyes, the hunger on her lips, and the way it made Anthony's heart beat, he didn't need to guess too hard to figure it out.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I cannot believe that you managed to swear the staff to silence,” Anthony said with a shake of his head as he dipped some bread in oil. “I thought I had them better trained than that.”

“Scared of you, you mean,” she teased him.

He scoffed. “It is not fear which keeps them in line. They are my servants, wholly aware of who pays and feeds and provides them lodgings. They ought to know better than to keep secrets from me.” She raised a questioning eyebrow at him and he grinned. “And maybe they are just a little bit scared of me.”

She laughed. “Not nearly as scared of you as they are of me, I promise you.”

“Is that right?”

“How else do you think I managed to convince them to keep their mouths shut?” She looked at him pointedly, as if what she was saying had any truth to it.

The reality of the situation was far more straightforward than what Caroline was suggesting. She had asked for help from a few key members of staff, directing them to the forest ahead of her and Anthony to set the picnic for their arrival, all but pleading with them not to tell him. They did not wish to lie to their master, so she simply asked that they do what they could to avoid him until then. That way, they were not lying. Not technically speaking.

“So, tell me,” she started. “How did I do?”

“How did you do?”

“This...” She gestured to the setting; an empty glade, the moon sitting full overhead, silence all around so that it felt as if they were the only existing people in the world. “I know that I stole your evening plans, for which I could not be more sorry.” She winked playfully. “I just hope you can forgive me.”

“I will try my best.” Where she was sitting on the blanket with her legs folded beneath her, he sat with his spread before him, leaning back on his hands while facing her. “It is perfect, Caroline. Truly, beyond anything I might have had planned.”

“All I heard was that I am perfect.” She shrugged and had another sip of wine. “And it is about time you said as much.”

The evening was going better than she could have hoped for. Gone were the days of being unsure how she felt about Anthony. And gone were the days of being unsure how he felt about her also. Now, Caroline was convinced that they were both of the same mind, their marriage of convenience a thing of the past.

That, to her mind, left just one thing for them to do. And I am through feeling guilty about it. Now, the thought excites me.

“Anthony...” she began softly, looking away because she suddenly felt nervous. “I was hoping I might ask you a question.”

“Oh?” Anthony picked up his glass of wine and had a sip. “I am surprised you are asking permission. Very unlike you.”

“That is not what I am doing.”

“It sure sounds like it,” he said with humor.

“It is a sensitive question,” she said. “And I do not want you to think that I am prying or trying to upset you.”

Anthony considered her as he had another sip of wine. “Ask me. And I promise I will do what I can to not get upset. No promises, however.”

She smiled at the joke, even if she was still nervous, for what she wanted to ask him was something that had the potential to ruin the entire evening. But she had to know.

“It concerns...” She hesitated, looking away and speaking into her chest. “It concerns your mother.”

She sensed Anthony turn rigid. “Oh? What about her?”

“You have spoken about her before,” Caroline started with caution, feeling the duke’s eyes on her. “And I could sense in that instance that you cared greatly for her. It made me think—wonder, really. What...” Her tongue felt swollen suddenly, and a lump appeared in her throat. “What people say of you. The rumors that they...” She swallowed the lump. “... that they speak.”

“What of them?” he asked stiffly.

“I think you know what...” She forced herself to look at him. Unsurprisingly, he was watching her without blinking, his expression flat, his eyes brimming with a sense that he was prepared to lash out if necessary. He rarely became truly irate. The only time she could think that he had been was when this exact topic was last breeched. “What they call you. The Cruel Duke. Is there any truth to it?”

“What do you think?”

“I think...” She hesitated, still meeting his eyes so he could see that she did not fear him. “I think they are lying. In fact, I do not think you are half the monster you seem to want people to assume that you are.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.” She nodded. “Unless I am wrong...” A nervous chuckle. “In which case, maybe being out here alone with you is not the smartest of ideas.”

“You are not what you seem,” Anthony said after some time, breaking his stare and looking away. “Although, I suppose you are. The real you, I mean, not that which you pretend to be in front of your family.”

“We are both good at pretending.”

He snorted. “And if I am not pretending?”

“I think you are,” she said bravely. “What is more, I think you like that people fear you.”

“Do you?” he asked her. “Fear me?”

“No,” she said. “And I never have.”

To that, he smiled. It was soft, a sense of relief hidden behind it. And when he looked at her again, it was done so in a way that seemed designed not for him to see her, but for her to see him. The real him. Not a monster. Not someone to be feared. Rather, someone who wanted to be loved, but had never thought himself deserving.

“You are right,” he said softly. “About my mother. I loved her. It was never enough, for she deserved more than the life she was cursed with by my father. But I did what I

could to show her that I cared.”

“I am sure you did...” She shuffled across the blanket, putting herself right beside where he sat with his legs spread. Then, she rested a hand on his right hand, and he didn’t pull it back.

“My mother fell ill shortly after my father died,” he continued, speaking into his chest now, his voice low as if the memory itself brought him pain. “I hated my father for that—stupid, I know. But when he passed I had hoped she might have the rest of her life to live as she always wanted. Free of tyranny,” he chuckled darkly. “But she fell ill and, being the good son I wished to be, I had her move in with me.”

“You did not force her?”

“I did,” he admitted. “But for her own good. I certainly did not lock her away as people say. Sadly, her sickness became worse by the day and within mere weeks of moving in with me, she was bedridden. Infectious too, the doctors told me, meaning I was not allowed to bring her visitors. The poor thing was trapped in her room, and I am ashamed to admit that I became distracted with my new duties as duke. I should have stayed by her bed daily. I should have been there for her always. Only...” He shook her head. “I was not.”

“It is not your fault,” she said, squeezing his hand.

“I know it,” he admitted. “And I did everything to keep her alive. For years, I managed it, forced to watch her wither, forced to keep her locked up and out of sight. The truth is, I did not even know what people were saying about me until after she passed...” Another dark chuckle. “And when I found out, I was beyond the point of caring. They wanted to believe that I had locked away my mother, and I did not see much point in correcting them.” He sniffed. “It was not as if it would bring her back.”

“Oh, Anthony...”

“I suppose a part of me liked it,” he continued, still looking away. “When she passed, the last thing I wished was to speak of it to anyone. And I found that people were less likely to ask me about her if they thought that I was the reason that she had died. A tad shortsighted, I will admit but...” He shrugged. “As I said, it changes nothing. She died, never having known the happiness which she deserved.”

“Anthony, that is...” Caroline felt her heart breaking. “That is not true.”

“It is.”

“No.” Her tone became hardened. “She knew that you loved her, and that would have been enough. You did everything for her and I know she would be proud of the man you have turned into.”

He laughed, but it was not with humor. “The man I have turned into? And what man is that?”

She shuffled in closer again so she was right beside him. Then, she reached out, resting a hand under his chin and forcing him to look at her. He was sad, she could see that in his eyes. But she saw something else. Was that relief? Found at finally having unburdened himself with a secret that she suspected nobody knew but him.

“A man...” She considered, not sure if it was the right thing to say but deciding in the moment that she was through playing it safe. She had wanted to know what kind of man her husband was. Was he cruel? Was he evil? Or was he simply misunderstood? She had her answer and in that, Caroline took a chance. “A man who I am starting to fall in love with.”

“Caroline...”

“I know this marriage did not start how either of us intended it to, but that does not mean it needs to finish that way either. Maybe I am wrong. Maybe...” She laughed softly. “Maybe I am misreading what this is—what I think we are both feeling. And if I am, tell me now because I need to know. But if I am not...” She held his stare so he could see in her eyes that she was speaking the truth. “...then I think we both know where this night ends.”

She held her breath as she waited for his response.

Her heart was open and all that was left was for Anthony to tear it out and prove her a fool... or to admit to the feelings that she knew she saw in his eyes.

He studied her closely. He licked his lips as his eyes flicked from her eyes to her lips to her body and back to her eyes. Body shaking. Breathing ragged. Those few seconds which he considered felt like minutes and she wondered briefly if she had misread him entirely.

That was when he kissed her.

She saw it coming, but it still caught her by surprise. His hand was moving to the side of her face. His lips were finding her mouth. His tongue, parting her lips and sliding inside her mouth. She gasped but then caught her breath quickly, relaxing as she gave herself over to him fully. No more fighting. No more pretending. She wanted this, and she needed him to know it.

They kissed with passion. They kissed with fire. They kissed with a sense that the world might end at any second, so they'd better take full advantage of the time they had. Both his hands were now on her face holding her, his lips and tongue devouring her as if she was life itself. This was not their first kiss, but it was the first one that they were both fully involved in. Both seeming to know that this time, the kiss would only be the beginning.

His hand moved down her body and went for her leg. She gave it to him, allowing herself to be lifted so that she was straddling him. He pulled his face back and then attacked her neck; wet kisses showering her collarbone, each one sending a pulse of pleasure through her body.

Her hands gripped him by the head, holding his face into her chest. But as much as she wished to concentrate on his tongue and his lips, she felt something between her legs which forced her attention.

It was through his pants that she felt it. His manhood; rigid and rubbing against her thigh. She moaned as she leaned into him, acting on instinct as she began to grind her hips into him so that he was pressed against the lips between her thighs. Her body was shuddering now. Wetness dripped from her. Caroline might have been relatively inexperienced, but she knew enough to know what she wanted next.

“Anthony...” She moaned as his hands cupped her breasts on the outside of her dress. He seemed frustrated, tearing now at her corset in an effort to open it without destroying the garment. “Anthony...”

“Caroline...” Her corset came open enough for him to pry it away from her body, both hands clasped at the neck of her dress, which he then tore down so that her breasts spilled over the top. His lips found her right nipple, and then her left.

“I want...” She breathed with pleasure, the way he sucked on her nipples making it hard to think, let alone speak. “I want you to... I want you to...”

Suddenly, Anthony pulled his lips free and looked at her. “Caroline...” He held her eyes, serious all of a sudden. “I want it too. If...” He held her eyes for a moment longer. “If you are ready.”

“I am,” she said without hesitation.

His eyes flashed with hunger and desire. She saw in them the answer, as words were no longer required. Still looking at her, his hands became busy by his crotch, and her heart raced as her eyes slowly drifted down his body, just in time to see him release his manhood for the very first time.

It was thick, swelling before her eyes, throbbing as if it had a life of its own. Despite herself, Caroline felt her mouth salivate and without even knowing what to do, she moved her hand for it, wrapping its girth and squeezing.

“Oh... God...” Anthony moaned.

“Like this?” she asked, squeezing again.

“No,” Anthony growled. His hands moved to her buttocks, lifting her in the air. “Like this.” He lowered her gently then, over his member, right on top and then down its length one inch at a time.

She gasped and her eyes widened. Her breath left her. Her entire body went stiff as if from panic... only to melt as she felt Anthony slide deeper and deeper inside. It was uncomfortable at first, even painful. But Anthony was gentle, ensuring that she didn’t take him all at once. And all the while he held her eyes so he could see how she might react, sensing her pleasure the deeper inside of her he went, keeping her steady as he stretched and filled her until she had taken all of him.

“Anth—” Anthony cut her off by kissing her. And he continued to kiss her passionately as he began to thrust inside of her.

His hands held her by the butt as he lifted her up and down on top of him. She rested on her knees, finding her own rhythm as she felt his member sliding slowly in and out of her. Up and down, she moved. Back and forth. Each time she did, it sent a pulse through her body which she felt touch at her heart.

She started to move faster. Anthony matched her pace. Still kissing, still devouring each other—it was messy but somehow perfect at the same time. The way he felt inside of her. How right it was. How explosive. Caroline thrust forward and backwards, refusing to let him from her for even a second. Up and down. Back and forth. She could feel it building with each thrust. She could feel it coming like she never had before.

“Oh...” She moaned. He took her by the back of the head, pulling it to the side as he attacked her neck with his lips. “There... Anthony... do not stop...”

“Nothing could make me.”

“Please... please... do not... keep going... oh...”

When Caroline felt herself about to explode, Anthony’s body suddenly turned stiff. He gritted his teeth and leaned back, his eyes closed, his breath rising. “Anthony...”

“I told you not to stop,” he growled.

This time, she obeyed him.

They were alone in that small glade. The lanterns burned bright. The moon shone in full. Darkness sat around them, making it feel as if they were the only two people to exist now and forever. Caroline leaned herself back, resting on her hands, still thrusting, feeling Anthony’s member begin to pulse inside of her.

“Yes...” she breathed. “Yes...”

“Don’t stop...”

“I won’t... I... I... Oh... God!”

It happened at the same time. Anthony, the noise that left his lips was a guttural howl that synced with the way that his body began to jerk. And Caroline too, screamed into the night sky, her entire body vibrating and shaking and tearing itself apart. She felt him filling her. She felt it dripping down her thighs. She felt... she felt...

My mother was wrong. I was wrong. There is nothing wicked about this. Nothing wrong or evil. This is the single greatest moment of my life. And never before has something felt so right.

Caroline might have lamented all the time she had wasted fighting these urges. She might have been upset that she had hated herself so often for what she had desired. But what was the point of that? There was none, she decided. Rather, she chose to enjoy herself. She chose to be free in ways she never had before. She chose to scream and cry out and give herself over fully to a type of pleasure which she knew would not be fleeting because she knew that this would not be the last time.

She was married to the Cruel Duke, and she was his to do with whatever he wanted. His prisoner, just as he was hers.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Despite having just left the small glade so that she and Anthony might make their way home—as the hour was getting late, and the night had brought with it a strong wind that chilled them both so they were shaking—Caroline’s mind was still very much on what had just happened.

She wore a smile which would not leave her. She had a skip to her step that made her want to break into a dance. And she laughed freely, not because something funny was said, but because she was just that happy.

“Are you going to tell me what is so funny?” Anthony asked her when he heard her laughter.

“Oh, nothing in particular.” As they walked, they held hands. “Think of it as general merriment.”

“General merriment?”

“I am happy,” she explained, laughing again. “Is that a problem?”

“Not at all,” he said, still holding her by the hand. “I like it when you are this happy. It tells me I did something right.”

“Oh?” She cocked an eyebrow at him. “That’s very bold of you.”

“Am I wrong.”

She grinned. “No comment.”

They broke through the forest, finding themselves on the paddock that surrounded the forest. The moon had vanished behind some clouds, turning the night near pitch black.

“Will you be fine to ride in the dark?” Anthony asked as he began to untie their horses. “Perhaps we should walk?”

“What’s the matter...” She flashed her eyes menacingly at him. “Scared you might fall?”

Even in the darkness, she could see the unimpressed look he fixed on her. “Is that a serious question?”

“One you have not answered.”

He considered her, glancing to the moonless sky. “Just be careful. The ground is uneven, and the grass is overgrown. We shall take it slowly.”

“I was right about you,” she crooned as she came in behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, he turned stiff, but she ignored it because she sensed it had merely caught him by surprise. “Not a monster at all.”

To this, Anthony said nothing, and Caroline chastised herself for being so stupid. I need to stop acting as if Anthony has changed or is different to what he once was. He has always been this kind and this caring, so why mention a side of him that was never real?

Still, Caroline could not believe how this evening had turned out. When she had planned their picnic, all she had wanted was to prove to herself that what she was

starting to feel for Anthony was reciprocated. That she wasn't a fool. A pleasant evening is what she had in mind, companionable conversation, perhaps a kiss or two to seal it.

That all changed rather quickly.

Truthfully, she was glad for the cover of night, because her entire body flushed when she thought of it. On top of Anthony. His manhood inside of her, pulsing as she rode him. The way they kissed. His lips around her breasts. And how he hadn't demanded that she beg him. How he had wanted her as much as she had wanted him.

That was what mattered and that was why she smiled.

They rode across the grassy fields in silence. Side-by-side, with Caroline sitting to face Anthony. She tried to catch his eye so he could see her smile. She tried to read his expression—impossible to do in the dark. She tried to sense what he was thinking, getting back nothing but stony silence.

Caroline was certain it was nothing. From the looks of things, he was just being cautious, his eyes scanning the way ahead as he continued to check on her to make sure she would be fine to ride in the dark. And where she knew she could have just continued on, not worrying about the silence, she was far too excited for that.

"Say..." she began with a wicked grin that flashed in Anthony's direction. Not that he noticed. "What's say that we make this interesting?"

"Interesting? What are you speaking of?"

She pumped her eyebrows. "If my memory serves, you still have one more chance to try and convince me this marriage is worth pursuing, yes?" She purred and then giggled.

“Oh...” He cleared his throat, looking ahead again. “Let’s not talk of that now. Tomorrow we can?—”

“No, no,” she cut him off. “That is what I was saying. I do not know what you might have planned, but I am thinking now that we have some fun with it.” She looked right at him, waiting...

“Fun?” he said eventually, with great caution because he must have sensed where her mind was going.

“The first one back to the stable gets to choose what we do,” she said. “And the other cannot say no.”

“Caroline, that is not a good idea.” There was no humor in his voice. “It is too dark, and the horses?—”

“—will be fine,” she spoke over him, waving him down. “That is unless you are scared.” She pumped her eyebrows and chuckled.

Even in the dark, she could see the unimpressed look on his face. She chose to see past it, figuring he was just being overly cautious and protective, which she loved. So, why not go a little further with it? Why not give him a chance to further prove how much he did.

“I do not think so,” he said.

“Oh.” She sighed, feigning at being upset. “That is a shame...” Then the smile returned and before Anthony had a chance to say anything else, she kicked her heels into the side of her horse and it took off.

“Caroline!”

“Catch me if you can!” she cried out with glee as she raced across the paddock. “But you’ll have to ride faster than that!”

Caroline laughed as her horse bounded ahead. It was too dark to see properly, the only real source of light being that of the manor well over a mile away. But she did not care. Nor did she worry. Behind her, Anthony called out again, sounding more worried than angry, and she took that as a good sign,

“Faster!” she shouted as she clung on. “You will have to do better than that!”

She could not see Anthony properly, but she liked to imagine he was laughing as she was. The great big brute like to pretend that sullen and morose were his natural settings, but she knew different. This even had proven that there was so much more to Anthony than anybody had known—himself, included.

“Oh!” Caroline cried out as her horse lurched suddenly. “Oh! She exclaimed as its knees buckled and it reared back. “Argh!”

It all happened so quickly.

Her horse whinnied and kicked back. Then it lurched forward, its feet slipped through the grass. It tried to find its balance, its rear legs kicking up, only to balk and then tumble, sending her flying from the saddle and through the air.

The world turned around her. Her stomach went through her mouth. Fear wrapped her like a blanket. She fell and crashed into the ground with a thump. And that was the last thing she remembered.

* * *

The first thing Caroline noticed when she woke up was how much pain she was in.

Her body felt bruised. Her head felt as if it was split open. And her eyes felt as if they were being gouged out by a pair of invisible hands. She winced as she regained consciousness, eyes still closed, doing her best to not to move because each time she did that pain rolled across her body.

“Caroline...” Anthony spoke softly from beside her.

“Anthony?” she said, smiling through the pain because hearing him by her side told her everything she needed to know. “What... where am I?”

“Your bedroom,” Anthony said. “In bed.”

She moaned and then groaned as she forced her eyes open. Luckily, it was still dark, so there was no pain from the light. The room was blurred, but she blinked it into focus as she carefully shifted herself to a sitting position.

“Argh—” She gasped as more pain stabbed through her body.

“Careful.”

Deep breaths, Caroline said to herself as she tried to relax through the pain. She was able to feel all of her body, and move her legs and arms and finger and toes, which she took as a good sign. Sitting now too, the room coming into focus, the first thing she saw clearly was Anthony. He was seated by the head of her bed, his expression unreadable as it was far too dark for her to make out. Even his eyes were covered in shadow.

“What happened?” she asked with a wince.

“You don’t remember?”

“I...” It came to her slowly. In hindsight, a most foolish thing to have done, and considering the result, Caroline could not believe she had been so stupid. “I came off my horse.”

“You make it sound like an accident.” His spoke without emotion, as if they were discussing the weather. She might have liked to have heard a sense of worry in his voice, but that he wasn’t shouting was as good a sign as she could have hoped for.

“No, not an accident,” she sighed. “I should have listened to you.”

“Yes, you should have.” His tone was harsher than she expected it to be, and she winced to hear it.

“I’m sorry, Anthony. I don’t know what I was—” She stopped short as more came back to her.

Caroline remembered well enough now why she had insisted on trying to race Anthony in the dark. It had been a foolish ploy to continue the good mood found earlier. What had I even hoped to achieve? Honestly, I cannot say. A stupid decision made in the moment, leaving me feeling mortified with embarrassment. Although...

That Anthony was by her side was a good sign. Dammit, it was a great sign. He did not have to sit here and wait for her to wake. Indeed, the Anthony who she thought she had known would have put her to bed and not thought twice about her wellbeing. So, that he was here, willing to sit in silence until she came to could only be read as a good sign.

She breathed a sigh of relief. He does care for me. I knew he did.

“I am sorry...” she said, bowing her head in what she hoped to be an appropriate amount of shame, trying not to smile because despite it all, she was beyond relieved.

“It is fine.” Anthony sighed loudly. “I am glad you are not seriously hurt.”

“Is that right...?” She chuckled sarcastically.

“You are bruised,” he confirmed. “Battered. But I have had the doctors see to you and they assure me that nothing is broken. A few days of rest and you will be back to your old self.”

“How horrible,” she tried for the joke. “And here you were likely hoping I’d be out of action for weeks. Give you some time to yourself, yes? That peace and quiet you are so desperate for.”

Oh, how she wished she could see his face properly. At least then she might have been able to see if her joke hit the mark. Or if Anthony even recognized it as a joke! But he did not chuckle. His body did not shake from laughter. He was a block of shadow, unmoving and unreadable.

No, Caroline, do not read into this. He is just tired. Worried, also. The fact that he is here! That is what matters!

“How long was I out for?” she asked, needing to fill the silence.

“Only a few hours,” he said. “The fall was not nearly as bad as it could have been. Honestly, Caroline...” His tone hardened and she braced herself for his reprimand, strangely hoping for it. At least that would show that he felt something for what had just happened. That it had affected him in some way. As things stood, she felt like an inconvenience, rather than his wife. “I am just glad that you are not too seriously hurt,” he finished instead, not sounding at all like he meant it.

She winced despite herself. Her head throbbed. Her entire body was one big bruise. Tired. Hungry. Dehydrated. Mind in a million places at once. There was little that

Caroline could do right now, so she decided to do nothing.

Let this tragic day play out and see what tomorrow brings. That will confirm that everything is fine and this is all in my head.

“I should be leaving you.” Suddenly, Anthony rose from the chair.

“You’re going?” she moved to reach for him but winced as pain shot through her right side.

“You need sleep.” He stood over the bed, but away from it, as if careful not to get too close. “Bed rest. Doctor’s orders.”

“But...”

“If you need anything, I will be right outside,” he assured her. “And I will have the staff check on you hourly—do not try leave your bed, Caroline.” Through the dark, she could see him looking down at her.

“Is that an order?” she said with a smirk.

“Good sense,” he said without humor.

“Oh...”

He turned on his heel and walked across the room. He did not take her by the hand first and kiss it. He certainly did not kiss her! Again, Caroline felt it was all likely in her head. It had been but one night, and she knew how hard this was for Anthony—a man who had spent his life being so distant and closed off was not going to change completely in a single evening. She knew this.

And yet, as he reached the door, Caroline felt a pain in her chest that had nothing to do with the fall. The door opened, light streamed into the room, and a thought came to mind that was almost as stupid as her decision to try and race him on horseback in the dark. Another vain effort to prove to herself that Anthony did care for her. Another idiotic decision made that was the height of self-sabotage.

“Anthony...” she said softly as he stepped through the door.

“Hhmm?” he turned back and looked at her, his face still drowned in the shadow.

“I...” Do not say it. Do not dare! “I love you...” She knew it was the wrong thing to say the moment it left her lips.

Unable to see Anthony’s face clearly, she was forced to imagine the horror that passed his eyes. He stood there frozen, looking at her, saying nothing and doing even less.

“Goodnight,” he said finally, a single word that felt like an arrow through her chest. “I will see you in the morning.”

Anthony closed the door and darkness fell upon the room once more. A darkness that Caroline felt in the pit of her soul. A darkness that ate at her until there was nothing left. Tomorrow will be different. Once he has some time to think on it. To catch up on his sleep. Then... yes, then all will be well.

She repeated this lie to herself again and again, knowing that’s exactly what it was. A lie. Caroline the fool had done the one thing she had promised herself she would not. She had slept with her husband, a man who she had thought loved her as she loved him. Only now, she was nowhere near as confident in that assumption as she had been.

What had changed? If anything? Had she been wrong this whole time, and all Anthony had wished for was an heir—to get her into bed, as he had told her wanted from the beginning? She found that hard to believe, looking back at this past week, focusing on the times they had shared, knowing those to be proof of his feelings for her.

But if they were true, then she would not be sat here in the dark alone, unsure and doubting everything she thought she had known. Was she wrong? Or had she not known her husband nearly as well as she thought?

Chapter Twenty-Four

There was a reason that Anthony had chosen to live a life of emotional unavailability. Most assumed he was born that way, the Cruel Duke who cared nothing for others and took pleasure from causing terror and misery in everyone he met. But this simply wasn't true.

His mother was the reason. Having suffered through her sickness, forced to watch her wither and die while being able to do nothing about it had broken him. It had made him question what the point of investing emotionally in somebody else was. Why care for those who might suffer and hurt when there was nothing you could do but sit by and wait for the inevitable? What was to be gained from being in a situation like that? Nothing.

So, he closed himself off. He cut himself out from the world. He took on the persona of the Cruel Duke, accepting this as his fate because at least then he would never be in a situation like that of his mother's again.

For a while there, it had worked, and he had been happy. So what if people feared him? So what if he was slowly becoming exactly what everyone said? At least that way he would never risk being hurt by anybody, just as he would never risk hurting them.

At least that had been the idea.

What had happened to Caroline just now made him question everything. Such a wonderful night, the first step toward a life he was truly looking forward to.

Happiness. Love. Investing in another who he was finally willing to admit that he cared for—who cared for him just the same. It was a dream, too good to be true... because it was.

She was in her bedroom right now, recovering from a fall that hadn't hurt her nearly as much as it might. That was what Anthony focused on the most. That she is only a little bruised and beaten is good news. News that I should feel thrilled by! Yet, typical me, I cannot escape the obvious downside...

He could still see the moment in his mind's eye when she was flung from her horse. He could still hear the sound of her body hitting the earth. And he could still feel the pain in his chest, the fear which spread through his body, for those few seconds where he did not know if she was alive or dead.

Anthony had admitted to himself days ago that he was starting to fall for Caroline. And tonight, when they had made love in that glade, he had accepted that he loved her. For the first time since his mother had passed away, he cared for someone else. He allowed himself to be emotionally open and available, giving himself to them, his entire being concerned only with them and how they were feeling.

The smile on Caroline's lips as they walked from the glade together. The laughter in her voice. The look in her eyes that told him how she felt. For those few moments, it was all worth it and Anthony was able to forget why he was this way. And then... the fall.

It was for this reason that Anthony paced outside of Caroline's bedroom door, while refusing to go in. It had been this way all morning, well after what would have been an appropriate time to check on her and see how she felt.

He knew that he should go to her—that he should be with her. Dammit, he wanted to! He wanted to sit by her side and tell her that he was there for her always, that nothing

had changed between them, and that nothing ever would. He needed her to know that none of this was her fault. Yet fear took him, that deep panic felt at what might have happened had things gone slightly differently. Worse than that, what would happen the next time if a similar happenstance was to occur?

Anthony had never thought himself to be a coward, but now he had little choice but to admit it. He loved Caroline, too much, and that had him questioning everything he thought he knew about what he wanted from this marriage.

Is a happy marriage worth the cost? What if I was right to wish for nothing more than peace and quiet? At least that way there would be nobody to love, and thus nobody to feel hurt by.

“Your Grace...” From down the hall, a member of staff appeared. “Is something the matter?”

“Mr. Jeffries.” Anthony straightened, pretending to look nonchalant and disinterested. “Good that you are here. I was just about to send for you.”

“Your Grace?” He started toward Anthony.

“I will be out for the remainder of the day,” he lied. “Meaning that I will not be able to watch over Her Grace’s recovery, as I would like to do. I leave her health in your hands, Mr. Jeffries...” A raised eyebrow and a stern look to emphasize the seriousness of the request. “I trust this will not be a problem.”

“Not at all.” Mr. Jeffries bowed deeply. “It shall be done.”

“Good.”

“May I inquire as to where you are going?” Mr. Jeffries then asked. “In case Her

Grace asks me, of course.”

“Nowhere of consequence...” He turned to look at the closed bedroom door, knowing he should be in there right now with her, while knowing that he didn’t have it in him. To see her there, as broken and beaten down as she was, would only compound the feelings he held for her. Feelings that weakened him in ways he needed to escape. “Let her know that I am thinking of her, however. And that I will visit her this evening upon my return.”

“Your Grace.” Mr. Jeffries bowed again.

Anthony turned and strode down the hallway, determined to put as much distance between himself and his wife as he could. He yearned to go and see her. He wanted to let her know that he was there for her. But he feared what this might do to him, breaking him beyond what he already was.

I am weak. A coward, is what I am.

He left the manor after that, deciding on a horseback ride to clear his head and get his thoughts in order. This marriage was only ever meant to be a simple arrangement, one that had long since outlived its usefulness. Was it thus worth reinstating the initial parameters to keep Caroline at arm’s length? Or should he give in to how he felt and accept the reality of what his heart wished? Accepting both the good and the bad.

Anthony had no idea. Did he want love or did he want peace and quiet? He felt he could not have both and thus had to decide what was more important to him.

Regardless of my choice, I sense nothing is going to be the same going forward. Why oh why did I have to get married? And why oh why did it have to be to Caroline?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Caroline had been on the verge of losing hope when the door to her room opened suddenly. As had been the case for the entire day, each time that door opened she held her breath, expecting it to be Anthony, only for it to be Mr. Jeffries or another member of the staff instead. And each time this happened, she felt her heart crack just that little bit further. Still in one piece, she wasn't sure how much more she could take until it shattered completely.

That's right. For the entire day Caroline had sat alone in her bed, recovering from her accident, and not once did Anthony pay her a visit.

That is it then, I suppose. My question answered. Everything he told me, and everything I thought I understood about our relationship was a lie.

Her mood plummeted as one would expect. Such was the despondence she was feeling that her bruised body was barely felt. She had taken a chance on a man who she had known that she shouldn't, it had backfired spectacularly, and she had only herself to blame.

Thus, when the door opened, she didn't pay it so much as a glance, content to lie on her back and stare at the ceiling as if it were about to collapse and bury her...

"Caroline..." Anthony's voice was like a bolt of lightning striking her where she lay. "Are you awake?"

Despite her bruises and the pain that she was in, Caroline sat up immediately, her

heart soaring to see Anthony lingering in the doorway. Just like that, all the self-doubt that she had felt, all the worry, second guessing, and depression that she had succumbed to faded away as if they had never been.

“Anthony,” she said, doing her best not to sound too overjoyed, even if she was. She smiled for him, glad for the fire which had been lit just an hour ago, because she wanted Anthony to see how happy she was. “I was wondering where you had got to.”

Anthony grimaced. “I should have come earlier.”

“You are here now, and that is what matters.”

Still lingering by the doorway, Caroline didn’t need to see Anthony’s face, or to look into his eyes, to know how unsure he was.

“How are you feeling?” he asked her.

“What was that? I cannot hear you from all the way over there.”

Finally, he smiled. It was subtle, a flicker across his face, but it was there. Then, he crossed the room for her, hesitating at the end of her bed before sitting himself down. He was by her legs, but still close enough that she was able to reach down and rest a hand on top of his. What was more, he didn’t pull it back at her touch.

“You look better,” he said.

“I feel it. Another night of rest and I am sure I will be as right as rain.”

“Good.” He smiled again, moving his hand so it was on top of hers now. He gave it a squeeze and met her eyes, letting her see that he meant what he said. “I am glad.”

This little moment was still thick with tension. The ease that the two had found in one another was not there as it had been in the glade. It felt more akin to those first couple of nights, when they were feeling the other out and getting a sense for how to act and what to say.

I cannot let this worry me. This is new for Anthony, as it is for me also. I cannot expect him to change overnight. Heck, I cannot expect that of myself either. What is important is that we are trying. That this is not the end, merely the beginning.

The silence between them built steadily. They looked at one another as it did, Caroline smiling, Anthony studying her with a discerning look. If not for how close he sat and the way he held her hand, she might have worried that he was here to dissuade her of her romantic fancies. But she knew Anthony well enough by now to know that he would not do such a thing. If he did not want her, he would simply stop talking to her.

It was because of this silence that Caroline felt the urge to repeat what she had said the last time they'd spoken. Foolish, she knew. A slip of the tongue, even if she had meant every word. But to admit that again might scare him off. So, she held back, as hard as it was to do.

"So..." she began. "What have you been doing to?—"

"I was thinking," he spoke over her. Not cutting her off, but more as if he hadn't heard her begin. "Tomorrow, how it might be nice to invite your family for supper."

She blinked in shock. "You have?"

He hesitated... "Yes. We have been married for two weeks now and it is right that they pay us a visit. That is..." He hesitated further. "That is what normal married couples do, is it not?"

“Is that what we are?” Caroline smiled. “A normal married couple.”

“I would like to be,” Anthony said, although his voice cracked as if he wasn’t quite certain of what he spoke.

Still, Caroline saw this gesture for what it was. Despite the way he had acted this past day, avoiding her, a decision had clearly been made by her husband, and that decision was that he wished to be with her. That this marriage was far from over.

“Me too,” Caroline said, smiling further. “I would like that very much.”

“Good.” Anthony rose suddenly and started across the room. “I will leave you to?—”

“You’re going?”

“Oh...” He paused, as if only just realizing what he was doing. “I... I thought you might need to rest. I did not want to disturb you.”

“You could never disturb me, Anthony. I hope you know that by now.”

Again, there was that sense that he wasn’t certain of what he wanted. Caught between going and staying, his expression turned serious and contemplative as he looked down at her. Behind his eyes, she could see him at pains to decide what to do and how to do it. The new him fighting with the old.

“I am not leaving you...” He walked to her, took her hand, and gave it a kiss. This sent a warmth through her arm, touching at her heart. She sighed with relief and smiled. “But if we wish for your family to be available, it is best I send word tonight, rather than wait for tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, I suppose that makes sense.”

“I will see you before I turn in for the night,” he then assured her. “I promise.”

“And I will look forward to it.”

He kissed her hand again, holding his lips to her skin. She held her breath, meeting his eyes as he kissed her, wanting to lean up and take him by the face and kiss him on the lips, but not having the strength. Why is he not kissing me as he did in the glade? He is worried he might hurt me? Or is he being careful not to be too forward...?

Once he released her hand, he started toward the door...

“Anthony,” she called out. He turned back to look at her and again, Caroline felt that urge to tell him how she felt. She was more confident this time that he would return it. Now, she was positive that he was committed in ways that he might not have been the last time he was here. Only... “Thank you,” she said instead. “For everything.”

“Of course.” His smile was tight lipped. “I will see you soon.”

“I’ll count the minutes,” she said with a soft laugh.

He then stepped from the room and closed the door behind him.

Well, that was certainly more awkward than I had hoped.

Still, Caroline took heart from the exchange, reminding herself that for how new all of this was for her, it was the same for Anthony. He had spent a lifetime alone, cut off from others, convinced that all he wanted in this world was to be alone—convinced that he was what people said. Now, with their feelings developing and their relationship growing, he would never be alone again. Clearly, it wasn’t as simple a thing to overcome as she might have hoped.

But he was overcoming it. And he was doing it for her. That was what mattered.

Tomorrow night, her family would visit them, seeing them as a married couple for the first time. This, Caroline realized, would be the ultimate test. To prove to Anthony what married life might be like and what the future for them might hold. Proving to the world at the same time that their marriage was nothing short of a success.

Caroline's stomach twisted, however when she considered the other side of the coin, that her family were far from ideal dinner guests, or bastions of familial bliss. Together, they were chaos, and that twisting of her stomach tightened as she wondered how exactly she and Anthony were going to get through the night without reverting to their old selves—arguing and fighting, that is.

She needed everything to go perfectly. She needed to prove to Anthony that he could have peace and quiet and be happily married at the same time. Easier said than done, where her family was involved.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Caroline and Anthony met her family in the foyer of their manor. It was early evening, the sun still setting but close now to disappearing entirely, and Anthony was still struggling to come to terms with how he was feeling.

A part of him wanted to embrace this romance entirely because he knew that he was falling in love with Caroline. The other part worried about what that might mean for him, because where he did indeed care for Caroline, he did not enjoy what this emotion did to him. How weak it made him feel. How shrunken. How dependent he was now on Caroline's happiness, and what would become of him if something went wrong.

Tonight, he knew, would be the ultimate test. Caroline's family were a tempestuous bunch, sure to bring out the worst in Anthony. Could he weather the storm for the sake of this marriage? Or would he break, likely reminding Caroline who it was that she had married and how unfit he was for such a thing. And did he want that? To scare her away so that there was no risk of this marriage going further?

I am a mess. Emotionally drained. As unsure as I have ever been. I want happiness. I want to be with Caroline. But I also fear what that will make me.

"How are you feeling?" Anthony asked as they waited.

"I might ask the same of you," she joked. "Are you prepared for the mayhem that is my family?"

“I will be fine,” he said a little too sharply. She frowned at the response and he forced a smile. “I am looking forward to it.”

She snorted. “Liar.”

“They are difficult,” Anthony agreed. “But they are your family, which means that they are my family also.”

She smiled at the comment, taking his hand and squeezing it. “It won’t be that bad. My family can be troublesome, but they are not without their positives.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Are we speaking of the same family?”

“They will behave,” she said with a grimace. “They know better than to...” She trailed off then, seemingly unwilling to defend her family as she must have known that with them came mayhem.

“I am sure they will be fine,” Anthony said, more for his own sake than Caroline’s. “I mean, how bad can they possibly be?”

Anthony had spent all day mulling over this exact question. More importantly, he had considered deeply how he was to behave tonight. He needed to be calm. He needed to be reasonable. He needed not to give Caroline a reason to question this marriage and the man with whom she would be spending the rest of her life.

This, Anthony knew, would be easier said than done.

They were still holding hands when it was announced that her family’s carriage was approaching, and Caroline took the moment to squeeze his hand tighter as if to tell him silently that she was here for him.

The door to the foyer swung open and through it swept Caroline's family like a hurricane. Her mother came first, trailed by Aurelia who was bickering with Eveline, behind which dragged Iris, and then Daniel who wandered into the home with a sense that he would have preferred to have been anywhere but there.

"Caroline!" Caroline's mother came for her, arms outstretched. "We heard what happened!" She took Caroline by both arms, pulling her into a kiss before holding her back to study her. "Honestly, girl, what were you thinking!"

"Good evening, mother," Caroline said with a wince. "It is good to?—"

"I thought you said that she fell from a horse!" Eveline cried out from behind their mother. "She looks fine to me!"

"What were you expecting?" Aurelia said.

"I dunno," Eveline shrugged. "More bruises, I suppose."

"Do not sound so upset."

"I did not say I was!"

"Girls!" Their mother turned and raised both eyebrows at them in warning. "What did we speak of? Aurelia, I expect you to keep your sister under control."

"Me!" Aurelia gasped. "I did not do anything."

"Exactly!"

"If Violet was here—" Aurelia started.

“Which she is not,” their mother cut them off again. “Which you will have to start getting used to.” Violet was with Roderick tonight, which Anthony had taken as a blessing as it was one less family member to deal with. “Your Grace...” Caroline’s mother curtsied deeply before extending a hand to Anthony. “Thank you so much for inviting us into your home. It is an honor, I assure you.”

Anthony took her hand and gave the back of it a kiss. “You are most welcome.”

“Sister.” Daniel came in behind their mother. His expression was cold, which had Anthony glaring because he did not appreciate a guest in his home behaving this way—and to his wife, no less. “And Your Grace,” he then greeted Anthony. “As my mother has said, thank you for your invitation this evening. It is most generous.”

“Of course,” Anthony said stiffly.

“Iris...” Caroline stepped around her brother and crouched down to get a better look at her youngest sister. “Look how big you are! You have grown at least a foot this past week.”

Iris blushed furiously and spoke into her chest. “I have not, Caroline. You are being silly.”

“Must be the accident,” Eveline chided. “How hard did you hit your head, sister?”

“Eveline!” her mother snapped. “And Aurelia...” She widened her eyes at Aurelia. “What did I tell you?”

This is going to be harder than I thought...

Anthony’s lip curled, and he did his best not to survey Caroline’s family with venomous frustration. Oh, how hard they made such a thing to do.

“So, Your Grace, a tour is in order, I expect,” Caroline’s mother began.

Anthony’s jaw tightened at the presumptuous tone. “We?—”

“Supper first, Mother,” Caroline spoke up. She took Anthony’s hand again and eyed him; telling him silently that she had this. Anthony frowned, not entirely certain he wanted such a thing. He appreciated her trying to ease the burden of her family, but this was his home and he was the one who should have been in control. “The food is ready, and I would hate for it to get cold.”

“Oh...” Her mother looked between them. “Your Grace, that sounds perfect. Which way is?—?”

“I will show you,” she spoke again, before Anthony needed to. She squeezed his hand again and smiled at him, which had Anthony frowning further, again not sure what to make of this shift in their power dynamic.

Caroline let go of Anthony’s hand and directed her family through the foyer and toward the dining room. There, she was sure to tell each where they were to be seated, starting with Anthony at the head of the table, her to his left, her mother to his right, Daniel next, Aurelia across from Daniel, and then Eveline and Iris at the end.

Seated, the staff poured them all a glass of wine, announcing that their meals would soon be plated and brought to them. This allowed for a few moments of idle chit chat before eating would begin and Caroline, seemingly determined to steer her family down a companionable path, took control of the conversation.

“So, Daniel,” she began. “How goes everything at home?”

Daniel seemed surprised by Caroline’s question. “Excuse me?”

“It must be quieter now, what with me and Violet no longer living there.” She smiled at her brother, likely hoping he would see that her question was not supposed to be antagonistic.

He scoffed. “Hardly. Violet was a voice of sanity, as I am sure you know well enough. And it is not as if you were ever the center of drama.” He looked pointedly at Eveline.

“What is that look?” Eveline cried out.

Aurelia snorted. “As if you do not know.”

“Girls!” their mother hissed down the table.

“I do not appreciate the implication,” Eveline continued, scowling at her brother. “As if he has been so easy to live with this past week.”

Aurelia laughed. “That is a fine point, Eveline. Daniel, have you stopped to think that perhaps you are the one who is the cause of mother’s headaches?”

“What headaches?” Iris asked, albeit quietly.

“It is fine, dear,” their mother assured Iris before glaring at her daughters. “And I will ask the two of you to not embarrass me.” Another scowl before smiling at Anthony. “I do apologize, Your Grace. The girls are a little pent up with energy, following the ride over.”

Anthony did his best to remain unfazed. “I?—”

“We are not children, Mother,” Eveline spoke over him. “There is no need to speak of us as such.”

“Then start acting like it!”

“Do not hold it against them, Mother,” Daniel sighed as he sipped on his glass of wine. He wore a cold smirk which he held on Aurelia. “Jealousy makes green-eyed monsters of us all.”

“Jealous!” Aurelia shrieked. “Of who? You?”

“I think you know,” Daniel said with a chuckle.

“Oh, please,” Aurelia rolled her eyes. “You wish.”

“He has a point,” Eveline chided. “You were saying just yesterday to me, how you could not believe that there were as many as two women who would even consider our brother as?—”

“Eveline!” Aurelia snarled. “I told you that in confidence!”

“Please do finish,” Daniel sat up. “Consider me as what?”

“Nothing,” Aurelia said quickly, widening her eyes at Eveline. “Nothing at all.”

“That two women would consider you worth marrying,” Eveline said with a wicked grin. “She was quite emphatic that you would die alone, a boon to the female population of the entire ton, as she said it.”

“I did not!”

The evening had only just begun, and it was already threatening to implode. Caroline looked desperately between her family members, no doubt beyond upset with the way they were behaving. And as for Anthony? He was very quickly losing patience.

He was not a cruel man by nature. Nor was he as quick to temper as so many expected of him. But he had his limits, they were being pressed, and he knew that if things did not redirect soon, they would be well and truly reached.

Control yourself, Anthony. Do not become that man. You must prove to Caroline that you are capable of dealing with her family, as difficult as they are making it.

“Two women!” Caroline spoke up before her mother could say anything. “Daniel, I had no idea you were in the process of courting.”

He blew through his lips. “Why would you?”

“It is not something I had known you to be interested in,” she continued, ignoring the jibe. “Who are these lucky women?”

“You mean unlucky,” Eveline added.

“Nobody you know,” Daniel said.

“Try me,” Caroline continued politely. “Perhaps I know their names.”

“And how would you?” Daniel said with a sneer that set Anthony’s teeth on edge. “It is not as if you were of that world. Before you went and embarrassed yourself, we thought you might never wed.”

“What did you say?” Anthony growled.

“I will ask that you not speak that way of me,” Caroline hurried to interject. “Regardless of what you think happened, it is irrelevant. I am married and the past is just that, the past.”

“Irrelevant, is it?” Daniel continued, lip curling. “That is easy for you to say, locked away here as you have been.”

“Daniel!” their mother warned.

Anthony stiffened and he felt his blood begin to boil. Hands clenched, jaw set, he glared in Daniel’s direction, trying his best not to erupt or say anything which he would not be able to take back. “I would ask that you watch what you say,” Anthony warned him. “While you are in my home, speaking to my wife, it would behove you, boy , to mind your tongue.”

“I am sorry, Your Grace,” Daniel continued, glaring at Caroline. “The evening is young and already I find myself sick to death of this charade. We have been invited here so my sister can parade her false happiness before us as if we are fools. As if we are not the ones who must deal with the consequences.”

“You tell her, Daniel,” Eveline goaded him.

“Eveline...” Aurelia groaned.

“I might have two ladies that I am considering,” Daniel continued as Anthony’s body began to shake. “But it should be twice that! And it would be, had you not gone and shamed us with your...” His lip curled. “Your wonton behavior. Filth, is what it was.”

Caroline leaned back as if she had been struck. “Excuse me?”

“Everybody knows what happened,” Daniel hissed. “Everybody knows that this marriage is a farce; nothing more than an effort to explain away your actions. Actions which I am now forced to suffer as a result!”

“Enough!” Anthony roared and thumped his fists on the table, causing everyone to

jump. “I warned you to watch how you speak of my wife. I warned you—and you took my warning, boy, and threw it in my face. I will not have it.”

“Offense was not meant,” Daniel said simply. “I am but a messenger.”

“You are but a fool,” Anthony snarled, which saw Daniel wince. “Thinking that you can come into my home and speak of me and my wife as you have. Although perhaps ‘fool’ is too generous a word. It suggests intelligence enough to understand the mistake made. Are you a fool, boy? Or are you so stupid that you think you can speak this way and get away with it?”

Anthony did not know Daniel well, but he’d got the measure of him by this point. Not brave by any means, but clearly stubborn and pigheaded and the type who thought a little too much of himself. What was more, having only seen the best of Anthony, he likely did not fear him as he once might have—and as he should do!

That will be the last mistake that he makes.

“I do not appreciate being called stupid, Your Grace,” Daniel began, sticking his chin in the air. “And I ask that you apologize.”

“Daniel!” Caroline cried.

“Get out,” Anthony snarled before he could stop himself.

“Excuse me?” Daniel blinked.

Anthony was done. Done pretending. Done trying to be someone who he was not. He had wanted to prove to Caroline that he had what it took to make a decent husband, a life of peace and quiet, not a monster and certainly not cruel. And for so long too, he had thought it might be possible.

Having cut himself off from the world, rarely had he been forced to test the limits of his patience. Dammit, he had even managed to convince himself that he was kinder than people said.

I am not husband material. I am not fit to be around others. It is time I stop pretending otherwise...

"I did not stutter." Anthony rose from the table, giving way to his anger like he never had before. "Nor am I in the habit of repeating myself."

"I—" Daniel started to speak but did not have time to get his words out.

Anthony was on him, grabbing the upstart lord by the scruff of the neck and yanking him from his chair. "I said, get out!" Then, with Daniel on his feet, he tossed him across the room as if he were a ragdoll.

Daniel stumbled and tripped, barely keeping his balance.

"Daniel!" voices cried, all the women at once.

"Have you lost your mind?" Daniel exclaimed.

"No," Anthony said. "In fact, I have very recently just found it. Now..." He took a step toward Daniel, taking a little too much pleasure in the way the boy scurried back. "Do I need to say it again, or this time will you listen? A first for you, I know. So I will not hold my breath."

Daniel looked to Caroline for support, but she gave him none. She was in a state of shock and surprise, unable to comprehend what was happening. Her eyes were wide, her mouth hanging open. She glanced at Anthony. Their eyes met, and in them Anthony saw something that he had never seen in Caroline before when she looked at

him: He saw fear.

“Go!” Anthony roared, giving in fully to his temper. “I will not ask again.”

“Caroline!” Daniel turned to his sister, but she looked away. Shame, it felt like, only not for her brother. Anthony had no doubt that shame was held for the man to whom she was married. “Fine!” Daniel snarled as he straightened up. “If that is the way it is going to be. Mother. Sisters. We are leaving.”

“Daniel...” Caroline’s mother began. “What are you saying?—?”

“Now, Mother!” he snapped. He widened his eyes in warning at his mother and then at his sisters, each of whom had no choice but to follow his example.

And, as Caroline’s family rose from their seats, Anthony continued to glare at Daniel, holding it on him until he and the others hurried from the dining room, without another word said.

It was only once they had gone that Anthony came back into himself, calming just enough to understand the magnitude of what he had just done. The exact opposite of what he had promised he would do. Worse than that, perhaps, as even he had not known he could go so far.

Caroline was still seated, looking down at the table, likely embarrassed, very likely ashamed. For the first time she was seeing Anthony as everyone else did, a man to be feared not loved. A man who nobody deserved to be trapped with for the rest of their days. Not husband material.

For a moment there, Anthony wondered if it might be worth apologizing, explaining himself, promising that he would not do it again—he hated seeing Caroline this way. He hated how it made him feel. But then again, wasn’t that the very reason he had

begun to question this marriage in the first place?

He had spent a lifetime guarding himself from such feelings as this. For so long he had lived as the Cruel Duke that he had begun to believe that's who he was. For a short time there, Caroline had eroded the facade and made him believe he could be more... that he could be happy. Tonight, however, this moment right here, proved the opposite.

What was more, it presented him a chance to end this marriage once and for all. Not because he wanted to, but because he felt he must. For his own sense of self-preservation. For Caroline's too, as she deserved so much more than he could give. This marriage could never work, would only lead to heartache, and it was time that Anthony admitted this. No more lies.

I am a coward, I know. But a coward for the right reasons. It is because I care so much for Caroline that I must do this. And it is because she has made me see what it is to care, that I know it is the right thing to do.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“I think you should go,” Anthony said, his voice so quiet that Caroline barely heard it.

She took a second to register what he had said, having been staring at the table as she tried to process what on earth had just happened. When she did, she snapped her head up to find Anthony looking away from her. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” he said, still refusing to meet her eyes.

“I don’t think that I did.”

He took a moment, still refusing to look right at her. She could see his body trembling as he worked to control his temper. Never before had she seen him lose control like this, an insight into the man other people told her that he was. But that isn’t him. Not that I have seen. Not the man who I am married to. Or so she thought.

Suddenly, he clenched his jaw and forced himself to meet her eyes. She gasped when she saw the anger pass behind them. They were stained red, glistening as if he was withholding tears. But he did not blink, nor did he look away.

“I said that I think you should go.”

“Go...” She frowned and leaned back. “Go where?”

“I do not care,” he said, almost a snarl. “Anywhere other than here.”

“Anthony...” She blinked, hearing the words but not understanding their meaning. “What are you?—?”

“Go!” he roared, and she jumped. “Leave, now! Before I change my mind.” He curled his lip at her in fury and shook his head as if in pity. “Consider it a mercy.” With that, he put his head down and stormed from the dining room.

Caroline remained where she was, rendered utterly speechless. Unsure of what had just happened, just as she was unsure what to think.

Her family had been typically antagonistic—Daniel, especially. It was no wonder then that it had upset Anthony as much as it had done, although the way he had acted upon it was more than a little surprising.

Not once since she and Anthony were married had she considered her husband to be an evil man. Not cruel. Not a monster, despite what was said. But this evening, right here... is that who my husband truly is? And all this time, I have simply failed to see it?

She could not believe it. Just as she could not believe what he had told her to do just now. He was simply upset was all, overreacting as was his right. And for that reason, Caroline did not hesitate in jumping to her feet and giving chase.

“Anthony!” she called after him as she breeched the foyer, by which point he was at the base of the stairs. “Wait!”

His foot landed on the bottom step, but he did not continue his climb. His body turned stiff and rigid and she could literally see him fighting to control himself. “I told you to go,” he said without turning around.

“And I am choosing to stay.”

He laughed darkly. “You think you have a choice in this?”

“Do I not?” she challenged him. “I am your wife, this is my home, and I have every right to stay here. You cannot just ask me to leave.”

“And yet that’s exactly what I am doing—no?” He took a deep breath, still not looking at her. “I am not asking you. I am telling you.”

“And I am ignoring you.”

“Caroline...” He groaned. “Please, don’t...”

“What happened just now...” She started across the foyer, wanting to go to him but unsure if she should. “It was not your fault. Daniel... he is the one who?—”

“It is not Daniel,” Anthony cut her off. “He said nothing that was not true or didn’t need to be said. I am the one who?—”

“Did nothing wrong.”

“Is that what you think?”

She continued closer to him, only a few feet away. “It is what I know .”

He shook his head and she heard him laugh. But it was cold and dispassionate, and it sent a shudder through her body. “You don’t know me nearly as well as you think you do.”

“I know you better than that.”

“No...” Slowly, he turned around to face her and she had to withhold her urge to gasp

as the man who glared at her was not once that she recognized. “I have been lying to you, Caroline. All this time, everything I have said and done, has been a lie.”

“What do you...?” She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“This...” He gestured vaguely. “Us! Did you really think that any of this was true? That you and me—that I was capable of this farce! A happily married couple. Peace and quiet. Is that what you thought was happening?”

“I...” Caroline felt her stomach twist, words he spoke that she didn’t want to believe. He is just saying these awful things. He does not mean them. Although why he is... “I know what I feel in my heart. I know that I love?—”

“Don’t,” he snarled at her. “Don’t say it.”

“I love you,” she spoke over him, forcing him to meet her eyes so that he could see the truth in them. A truth that she knew more than anything he felt for her also. “Just as I know you love me. That is not a lie!”

“I have been using you,” Anthony said. “This entire time, I have been?—”

“You are lying.”

“No,” he said, with a shake of his head. “Five chance? Were you really so naive as that? Did you really think that was all it would take to change me?” He laughed coldly at her. “I did not want five chances to prove that I could change, Caroline. What I wanted was...” He winced, looking away as if in regret, but then forced himself to look at her again. He bared his teeth and glared. “What I wanted was five chances to have an heir. That is all I ever wanted.”

“No...” Caroline took a step back as if she had been slapped across the face.

“Yes,” he said, stepping down from the stairs and taking a step toward her. He was trying to intimidate her with his size and indomitable presence, and for once it was working. “I wanted an heir only, just as I told you from the beginning. Everything else...everything... it was for your benefit only.”

“No...” She felt a stabbing pain in her chest. “I don’t believe you.”

He shrugged. “Believe what you want. I do not care. I...” He took a moment, struggling with what he was about to say. “The other night, in the glade, when you and I...” He swallowed. “I got what I needed from you. And now that I have, it is time for you to go.”

The world turned around Caroline as his words struck at her. Words that she still could not believe, even though Anthony gave no indication that they were a lie. Had she not felt the change in him since she had fallen from that horse? Had she not been worried that he seemed to be pulling away? She had tried to tell herself she was imagining it, but now her fears seemed well realized.

How can this be... after all we have been through... all we have done... it can’t be real. It can’t be.

“I don’t...” She swallowed as her chin began to wobble. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care.”

“I know you feel what I feel.”

“I really do not.”

“Anthony...” She took a step toward him, but he took one back from her. “Please, do not... I do not know why you are saying this. Is it because of what happened just now

with Daniel? If that is why, I do not care!”

“And how could you not?” He sounded disgusted, only with himself, not her. “How could you not care? This was what you feared, was it not? That you would be married to a monster who would eat you up and spit you out? That I am exactly what people say.”

“You are not.”

“I am!” he roared suddenly, and she cried out. “I am that thing! I am that monster! And you should be thanking me—on your knees in thanks because you have caught me in a good mood. Enough of one that I am letting you go.”

“Letting me go...?”

“What I told you of my mother...” His chin was trembling, his eyes were glistening with tears, and she could see the pain in him as if it was her own. “That was a lie.”

“No,” she said. “I don’t believe you.”

“I locked her up. I kept her here against her own free will. And...” He swallowed and took a deep breath. “And if you do not leave me right now, I will do the same to you.”

This couldn’t be happening. A bad dream, was what it felt like. Worse than that, a nightmare. The things Anthony was saying were indeed her greatest fears realized; that she would fall for a man, that she would give herself to him fully, and that once he had what he wanted, he would forget her.

How could she have been so foolish? How could she have let this happen? The only way Caroline was able to keep herself from breaking was to hang onto that dim belief

that, for some reason—although she could not guess why, Anthony was lying to her.

“You don’t mean it,” she said, the defiance in her voice well and truly gone.

“I do, Caroline. I mean every word...” His shoulders slumped and the anger began to fade. His eyes became filled with regret, but his words stayed the same. “I used you, that is what this marriage was for. I used you and now that I am done, I do not need you anymore.”

“I—”

“Go,” he spoke over her, turning away as he did. “Please, just go.” And with that, Anthony started up the staircase.

She watched him go, begging that he would turn around and change his words. That good sense would reach him before he reached the top, because—whatever this was, whoever it was, it was not her husband. It was not the man she had fallen in love with.

Yet he walked up the staircase. He reached the top floor. And then he turned the corner, not so much as pausing or glancing back to look at her.

Caroline felt her heart break in that moment. She felt her entire world shatter like a dropped vase. How had she been so foolish? How had she been so blind? How had she let Anthony trick her into falling in love with him, just to be used and discarded as she had feared she would be from the beginning?

She did not know what to do. She did not know what to say. She did not know how to feel—she could not feel, for her entire body had turned numb. So, with nothing else for it, Caroline did the only thing that made sense in that moment. She fell to the ground in a heap, held her knees close, and she wept. She wept for love lost. She

wept for her broken marriage. And she wept for Anthony, a man she thought she had known but never really had.

The Cruel Duke indeed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“I guess this proves the point now, doesn’t it?” Daniel said, looking and sounding a little bit too pleased with himself.

“Wh—what?” Caroline pulled back from hugging her mother and looked at Daniel, seeing right away how smug and proud of himself he appeared.

“About His Grace,” Daniel confirmed. “That he is exactly who we said he was—who I said he was, at that.”

“Daniel,” her mother hissed. “Now is not the time.”

“I am sorry, Mother, but now is the time exactly. You will remember that when His Grace first suggested this marriage, I was against it. I knew who he was and could not countenance my sister marrying such a monster.”

That was not true. Daniel’s concern for Caroline was on account of his own perception of himself, and how her actions might affect his reputation. But Daniel, sensing victory in the air, chose to ignore that fact. “We should just be grateful that she managed to escape when she did. And in one piece, at that.”

Caroline winced at her brother’s harsh words. And not just what was said, but that he was using this moment to say them. Not five minutes she had been home, throwing herself at her mother for comfort and care in ways she had not needed to do since she was a little girl, only for her brother to use what should have been a moment of tragedy for his own gain.

It was the same night that she had fought with Anthony. The same evening she'd had her family over for supper. By the looks of things, they had only just arrived home before she came stumbling through the front door, desperate and helpless and bereft of any sense of what she might do.

She and Anthony had fought. He had asked her to leave—a command that in this instance she knew better than to deny. And where she might have liked to have believed that he would change his mind and come for her, somehow, she was very quickly giving up on that notion. All this time, he was lying to me. And I was a fool to believe him.

“We can talk about this later.” Her mother held her still, as if to shield her from Anthony. “For now, Caroline, let us get you upstairs.”

“He is not like that...” Caroline spoke the words in a whisper.

“Excuse me?” Daniel said.

“Anthony...” Caroline tried to pull herself free from her mother, but her mother refused to let go. “He is not like that. He is not a bad man.”

“You are not serious?” Daniel scoffed. “After how he has treated you? You still try and defend him.”

“He—”

“Caroline!” Aurelia appeared at the top of the steps. “What are you doing here?” She hurried toward Caroline.

“His Grace kicked her out,” Daniel said. “And she is lucky that he did. The man is a monster. The Cruel Duke indeed.”

“Do not sound so pleased by it!” Aurelia snapped as she bypassed her brother and threw herself at Caroline.

“I am certainly not pleased,” Daniel said haughtily. “Quite the opposite, in fact. When word of this gets out...” He sighed and shook his head. “We will have to make it clear that Caroline left for reasons of her own safety. Not hard to believe, considering who she married.”

“I told you, now is not the time,” Caroline’s mother snapped. “Tomorrow, we will discuss this.”

“You can,” Daniel said. “I shall start sending letters tonight, however. Best that we get our side of the story out first.”

“Daniel...”

“No, Mother. I warned you. I did. And as tragic as this is, ignoring it will not make a difference.”

Aurelia glared at him. “You are such a pr?—”

“I would not finish that sentence if I were you.”

“You are!”

“Aurelia!” Caroline’s mother cried. “Hold your tongue!”

“He started it!”

“And I am finishing it!”

As her sister and mother and brother argued, Caroline felt herself wilting. She was still in shock over what had happened. She was still reeling from it, trying to piece together how it had occurred. Was it my fault? Is Daniel correct? Was this a natural consequence of a marriage that never stood a chance of working?

Strange that through it all, Caroline still felt a desire to defend Anthony. Even after what he had done, she did not hate him. Dammit, even after everything, I still love him as I did yesterday, and the day before that. I still want the marriage that we were so close to having. Yet, she said none of this, choosing silence as her family argued and slandered Anthony's name.

She was back home. Back to her old self. Back to being invisible and ignored and treated as insignificant. For all of Anthony's faults, at least he had seen her. At least it had felt that way. And despite what he had told her just now, she still could not believe his words fully. Still, she hung onto the hope that this was not the end...

But what could she do? How could she make him see the truth of what she knew he felt in his heart? She had no idea. And not because she thought what he had said was true, but because he wanted it to be. The reason that he did... that was what confused her the most.

And so it was that Caroline allowed her mother to lead her toward her room as Daniel disappeared inside his office, set on penning a series of letters that would get ahead of the gossip that was sure to follow this marriage's end. Caroline did not want him to write them, because she knew they would be false and filled with slander. But she did nothing to stop him, knowing he wouldn't listen to her anyway.

Her marriage was over. She still wasn't quite sure how it happened, and so quickly. But she also knew Anthony well enough to know that he would not come for her, he would not beg, and he certainly would not admit to how he truly felt. And where she might have thought to go back him... No, even that is not an option.

Her marriage of convenience had been a most inconvenient thing, and now that it was over, she could not help but wonder how she had fallen so in love with the so-called Cruel Duke, and how she could possibly hope to go on from here.

* * *

The letter came for Anthony three days after he had asked Caroline to leave their home. He was in the garden at the time, walking aimlessly among the hedges and flowerbeds, doing what he could to ignore the stabbing pain that pierced his heart such that he half expected to look down and see a trail of blood following him.

It will pass soon enough. A few more days and I will forget Caroline and our marriage. I will forget how she made me feel. I will forget what it was like to care for someone, and to have them care for me back. I will forget... hopefully, everything.

All Anthony wanted was for things to return to how they had been before his marriage. For years, he had lived a life of near isolation, happy to shut himself from the world as he ignored what people said and thought about him—he did not care! Let them call him the Cruel Duke. Let them think that he was a monster. It had no effect on his life, the opinions of lesser souls, so what did it matter how they spoke behind his back?

He was used to not caring. He was used to being on his own. Most of all, he was used to being feared. For years, he had convinced himself too that he liked it. Respect was one thing, but to be able to walk into a room and take command with little more than a look and a bit of posturing was the embodiment of how he saw himself.

Now, he wondered if he had taken it too far.

Being feared is one thing, but I know now that it is not nearly as satisfying as that other emotion to which I had never been privy until suddenly I was. Causing terror in

my peers does fill me with some sense of purpose, sure, but it was nothing when compared to how I felt with Caroline...

Caroline had loved him. Somehow, she had seen through the rumors and the icy facade that he presented as if it was a second skin. She had suffered through his moods and hostile temperament, willing to see past it to a side that even Anthony had not been aware of until it was too late. Love... caring... wishing to be with someone, not because of what they might do for you, but because of how they made you feel. And typical me, I did as I always do when faced with the unknown. I lashed out, snarled and snapped, and turned into a monster.

The irony here did not escape Anthony either. He knew that if he went to her and apologized that she would likely forgive him. But that would require him to admit how he felt. For how much he had changed this last week, he wasn't sure he was quite able to do that...

That was until the letter came for him, anyhow.

"Your Grace!" Mr. Jeffries hurried across the garden toward him. He held in his hand a piece of parchment, which he waved in the air. "I am sorry to disturb you, but there is something you need to see!"

Times were that Anthony might have chastised Mr. Jefferies, or any member of his staff, for interrupting him after they had been told not to. But times had changed, and Anthony couldn't find it in himself to do so.

"What is it, Mr. Jeffries?" he sighed.

"A letter, Your Grace." Mr. Jeffries pulled up before Anthony, holding out the letter. "It is?—"

“Leave it in my office,” Anthony said. “Whoever it is from, I am sure it can wait.”

“But, Your Grace...” He grimaced nervously, knowing better than to argue with Anthony. “The letter is not for you. It is... His Grace, Duke Aldworth sent it to be read at once. Apparently, it was delivered to him just this morning.”

Anthony frowned. “It is not for me, but Roderick sent it to me—what are you saying Mr. Jeffries? Speak sense!”

“It is a letter that has been sent to near every member of the peerage in London, Your Grace. And its contents...” He winced. “They concern you and Her Grace. It is imperative that you read it.”

Anthony’s stomach twisted as he understood finally what this letter likely contained. Although it was not official, he and Caroline would be putting an end to their marriage, probably through the process of annulling the union entirely. His guess was that she had taken the initiative, a final nail in the coffin.

Although, why she had then seen fit to send a letter out announcing such a thing...

Anthony took the letter and scanned it quickly. Or he meant to, but paused before finished the first sentence. His blood began to boil as he started again. His jaw clenched tight. His foot began to tap. Anger was what took him. Anger and disbelief over what he was reading.

The letter spoke of a necessary dissolution of his marriage. Phrases such as “ She was lucky to escape without serious injury,” and “ The horrors that she was subjected to during their brief time together,” stuck out specifically. The picture painted in this letter was one of a damsel in distress, forced into a marriage that was not her fault, subjected to torture and terror the likes of which nobody should have to endure.

“This...” Anthony was shaking. “This was sent to others?”

“Dozens of copies, I am told,” Mr. Jeffries said.

He might have laughed, were it not so shocking. Times were that Anthony would not have cared less about a letter such as this one. His reputation was that of the Cruel Duke, after all, and what was said in this correspondence was nothing new to him. If anything, he might have embraced it, a further chance to solidify himself as one not to be messed with. But times had changed.

He found now that he cared about what people thought of him. He was not a monster, and if Caroline could see that, then why couldn't others? What was more, he liked how it felt to be liked, rather than feared.

Beyond that, he thought of Caroline, knowing that she had not penned this letter, as it had painted her as a victim and she was most certainly not that. She was strong. She was assured. She was more than what this letter said of her. A more self-possessed woman he had never met! And this... this sullied her name even more than it did his.

Was that not the point? Did I not send her away because I did not want to admit how much I cared about her? This letter and what it says should not affect me at all. What does it matter what people say of a woman who I spurned?

The lies were becoming harder for Anthony to swallow, such that it was impossible for him to believe what he said or how he felt. He did not enjoy not caring about others. He did not relish being alone. And he hated thinking about the woman he loved being in pain because of him.

What was more, he hadn't driven Caroline away for the reasons he had told her. The exact opposite! He loved Caroline more than he'd ever loved before, and as he held that letter in his hand, his body shaking with rage, he knew that to deny that truth for

any longer would be to see him break completely.

A lifetime spent being the Cruel Duke and he was sick to death of pretending. That wasn't who he was. It never had been. Now, it was time that he proved it.

"I have to go." Anthony strode past Mr. Jeffries, a decision made.

"Your Grace!" Mr. Jeffries ran after him. "The letter! A response! Do you wish to?—"

"I will deal it with, Mr. Jeffries," he called over his shoulder. And he would, too.

He did not care about the letter—at least not in regard to himself. What he cared about was Caroline and how it had made her look. She was not a weak, helpless maiden. She was not a prisoner. She was the hero who had slain the beast, not through fury, but through kindness.

It was time now for Anthony to do the same for her.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:53 pm

“Daniel! Come back here!” Caroline powered across the garden as she chased down her older brother. “We need to talk!”

“And, as I told you, I have nothing to say!” Daniel did not turn around. He was heading in the direction of the stables, which sat beyond the edges of the back garden.

“I do not care! Will you stop and listen to me?”

Daniel sighed loudly as he stopped walking. Back to her, she saw him shake his head and run his hand through his hair. He was angry with her, she could tell. Annoyed that she had dared to question his authority. Not something that he was used to, clearly. Also, not something that she was used to either.

“If this is about the letter,” he started as he turned around. “It is done. Sent. And there is nothing more that needs to be said about the matter.”

She stormed toward him, the letter in her hand, shaking it before her face as she reached where he stood waiting. “How could you write this? And how could you send it without speaking to me first?”

“Why would I?” He looked genuinely confused by the statement.

“Why would you?” Caroline gawked. “Why would you not! It is about me, after all! And my marriage! The things you wrote in this letter?—”

“Are true,” he spoke over her. “And they needed to be said.”

“They are not! ”

“Caroline...” He shook his head as if with pity. “I do not know why you are so insistent on defending the man. Why you continue to try and convince yourself of a lie which we can all see through.”

“I am not lying. The only lie is?—”

“His Grace is a monster,” her brother spoke over her. “He did not deserve you. What is more, he did not deserve this family. We gave him a chance—more than we should have. And what did he do with it? He spat in our faces, is what.”

“That is simply not what happened?—”

“And this is not about you,” he continued, a snarl now to his tone. “And frankly, I am surprised that you are behaving so selfishly. You of all people, Caroline, must realize that this isn’t only about your marriage to the duke. It is about our family. About me.” He cocked an eyebrow at her.

She shook her head. “This letter... it made me look like a... like a helpless maid! Weak and pathetic and?—”

“Which you were,” he countered before she could finish. “And there is no shame in that. Anybody in your position would be the same, and anybody who reads that letter will understand this. We need to get on top of this, Caroline. We need it known that there was nothing you could have done.”

“But it is all lies! Anthony is nothing like what this letter says!” She waved the letter again. “Nor was our marriage anything like this depicts!”

He chuckled. “You are upset. I see that.”

“I am more than?—”

“But I will remind you of your place!” he snapped. “Remember, you are the one who returned to us! In tears! Broken and suffering. You are the one who fled. We did not force it. We did not come and save you. You ran!”

“I did not flee,” she said. “I simply?—”

“Enough!” he snarled. “I do not know what has gotten into you, but it stops here! I do not have time for this nonsense, Caroline...” He groaned and rubbed his eyes. “And nor do you, for that matter. How we proceed over this next week is paramount to our family’s survival and I expect you to play your part.” He looked warningly at her. “Questions will be raised. Answers will be needed. And when it comes times to give them, I trust I can count on you to do what you do best.” There was a beat as he continued to glare. “Behave yourself!”

To say that Caroline was furious would be an understatement.

When Daniel had told her that he was crafting a letter to send throughout the ton, she had assumed it would be several days before he dared to send it. Enough time at least for her to get her head on straight and assess how she felt. Still, she couldn’t say whether she had done the right thing or not. And still, she could not say if she planned on going back to Anthony and asking for forgiveness.

Not that I can do such a thing now! Even if I wanted to, this letter all but assures our marriage is over.

She shuddered to think of how Anthony might react when he read it, her only saving grace being the assumption that he probably wouldn’t care. This letter, as odd as it was to admit, was exactly how Anthony saw himself, such that he might even be pleased to read it.

Caroline, however, was not pleased. When she finally got her hands on the letter and read its contents... I do not think I have ever been so furious! Worse that it was only days after the fact. Worse that Daniel did not care.

Her brother expected subservience from her. He expected her to behave as she always did. Why would he not? That was the Caroline who he knew best. The coward. The quiet weakling. The good sister who never put a foot wrong. That was who she had always been... or rather, who she was.

Her marriage was over now, she knew, and there was nothing she could do about it. That did not mean that Caroline had not learned from it. She had changed irrevocably during her marriage to Anthony, finding a side to herself she had not known existed until it was screaming in her husband's face. And where Anthony might not have liked that side of her, she did not give a damn what Daniel thought.

"No," she spat at Daniel. "I will not behave."

"Excuse me?" Daniel frowned and leaned back in bewilderment.

"You heard me," she snarled. "I will not behave . And I certainly will not play along as you intend!"

"Is that right...?" His tone turned cold, and his posture stiffened.

"This is a lie." She scrunched the letter into a ball and tossed it on the ground by his feet. "And I intend for everyone to know it. In fact, I will write my own letter, one that tells the truth."

"Will you now?" He took a step toward her.

Once, Caroline might have shrunk back. Now, she stood up to Daniel and sneered. "I

will. And what is more, there is nothing you can do about it.”

Caroline fixed her brother in a glare which he returned in kind. He was taller than her by quite a bit, and bigger physically too. If he wished, he could overpower her with ease; something he had done many times in the past. But Caroline wasn’t afraid. After living with Anthony, having stood up to him on many occasions, she almost laughed to see her brother try and intimidate her.

“This is your last chance, Caroline,” he said. “Apologize. Go inside. And I will forget this ever happened.”

“Or what?”

“Or what?” He laughed coldly. “Or this—” He stepped forward and snatched her arm. She cried out and tried to pull free, but he refused to let go. “I did not want it to come to this,” he snarled, spittle flying from between his teeth. “But you leave me no choice. If you will not listen to reason, then I will have to force you to heed my words.”

“Let me go!”

“No!”

“Let me go !” she cried out.

“Or what?”

“I suggest you listen to her,” a voice spoke from behind Caroline. It was not a raised voice. It was not angry. Yet it cut through her and her brother’s arguing like a hammer smashing into the side of a gong. “That is, if you know what is good for you.”

Daniel's eyes turned wide as he looked over Caroline's shoulder. "Your Grace!"

While her arm was still held by her brother, Caroline turned about, gasping at the sight of Anthony striding across the garden. Again, he did not look particularly angered. Nor did he hurry. But such was the presence of the man that it was as if he had his own gravitational pull, forcing attention on him fully.

"Anthony..." she gasped.

"Did you not hear her?" Anthony said, coming to a stop several feet back. "She asked you to let her go."

"This... this does not concern you," Daniel said bravely. "As far as I am aware, your marriage to my sister has ended! As she tells it."

Anthony considered this. His eyes flicked to Caroline and behind them she saw something which made her heart leap through her throat. A smile. He fixed it on her, lips pressed together, but that smile in his eyes told her instantly that he was not angry with her as she might have thought. Not even a little bit.

"This is true," Anthony said. "But you misunderstand me, boy. It is not your sister who I am worried for." Then, a flicker of a smirk crossed his lips. "Your safety is my concern."

"What?" Daniel barked. "My safety? What are you on?"

"Handling Her Grace like that is not such a smart idea," he continued, speaking plainly. "Frankly, I am surprised she has put up with it for as long as she has."

Caroline looked with confusion at Anthony. What was he doing here? Her first thought was that he had read the letter and it had infuriated him. That he was here to

chastise her and her brother for daring to send it out. Not that he was here because he wanted to see her or make up, but to double down on what he had said before.

But again, Caroline found his eyes, and saw that smile in them. This time, it was paired with what looked like regret, a silent plea of an apology which told her the real reason he was here. It told her that she had been right all along.

“Let me go,” she turned back on Daniel. “I will not ask you again.”

He could not have looked more confused. “And if I refuse—argh!” Caroline did not hesitate. Rather, she acted on instinct, slapping her palm across her brother’s cheek with all the force she could muster. He released her instantly, stumbling back and clutching at his face. “You struck me!”

“I did warn you.”

Her brother saw red and lunged for her?—

“I don’t think so.” Moving quickly, Anthony stepped between them, his hand snatching out and grabbing Daniel by the arm before he had a chance to attack. Anthony was bigger than Daniel by quite some way, like a bear standing over a puppy, he barely struggled to hold Daniel’s arm back and then shove him away.

Daniel tripped up, not falling over, but stumbling to regain his balance. “How dare you!”

Anthony stood between Caroline and her brother. Calm. Collected. In total control. “The other night when you were in my home, I overreacted,” Anthony said. “For that, I apologize.”

“Move out of my way!”

“However, if you continue in this action toward my wife, I assure you that the way I treated you the last time we spoke will feel like a warm bath in comparison. Now...” Still perfectly calm, he glared at Daniel, almost daring him to overreact. “... if I let you go, will you do the smart thing? Or the stupid thing?”

Daniel looked furious! He glared at Anthony, then at Caroline, before he seemed to consider the situation and if it was worth pursuing. But Caroline knew her brother well enough to know how cowardly he could be, and where he might have happily taken his anger out on her, he would not do the same to Anthony.

“Fine!” he said, straightening himself up. “Have it your way. All I have done was for this family. But if you wish to... to sully our name! If you wish to be with him . So be it. I will not stop you...” He curled his lip. “Have her.” With that, Daniel turned on his heel and strode for the stables.

Anthony stayed where he was for a moment, watching after Daniel until he was certain that he had left. Only once he was sure that Caroline was safe from him, did he turn back. And once again, he was smiling.

“That was quite the performance,” he said.

Caroline gaped up at Anthony. Her heart was racing. Her mind was running in a dozen different directions. That he was here was one thing. But that he appeared amused, his mood clearly better than the last time she saw him, was another. It gave her hope.

He looked down at her, still wearing that same smile, still looking regretful but also confident, affirmed in his decision to be here and what had made him. Whatever that might be.

“I—”

“Please, Caroline,” he spoke over her. “Before you speak, there is something I need to say. So many things, truth be told.”

Caroline forced her mouth closed, nodding for him to continue, while ignoring the way her heart raced because she suddenly knew what he was going to say without him having to say it. That was how well she knew the man.

“I have been lying to myself,” he began, his voice cracking. “Worse than that, I have lied to you—about everything. I...” He hesitated, biting into his lip. “For my entire life, I have believed what people said of me. What they thought of me. The Cruel Duke...” He laughed bitterly. “So assured was everyone who I met that this was the real me that I let that persona take over. The truth is, I wanted it to.”

“Anthony...”

He held out a hand to silence her. “When my mother died, it broke me. It hurt in ways that even now I still struggle with. It hurt me so much that I made a promise that I would never let anyone make me feel that loss again. I would become cold. Dispassionate. Remove myself emotionally from this world because I figured that would be easier to do. And for a time there, it was...” He shook his head at that. “And then something happened.” He looked at her.

She knew what he wanted her to say, so she said it. “What happened?”

“You entered my life.” He was looking right at her, his eyes seeing her as they always did. There was no anger there. No frustration. No sense that he wished her gone from his sight. The way he looked at her, it was as if he was afraid to blink in case doing so would see her vanish. “I was telling you the truth, that night we first married. What I wanted from this marriage—not just an heir.”

“Peace and quiet,” she said with a smile.

He shook his head. “A marriage that is more than one of convenience. A marriage to a woman who sees me for more than what I am, beyond what people say of me, through me as you always have. You are the first person I have met who has done that, Caroline. Who has dared to give me a chance. At first, I thought it made me weak, caring about you the way I did—relying on your love, as I have done. But now, I know the opposite is true.”

“Which means...” she pressed him gently.

“It makes me strong,” he said, stepping into her. “It makes me whole. It makes me a better man than I thought was possible. What is more, it shows me a future that I had long since given up on. I should have never asked you to leave in the first place.”

“Is that right?” She cocked an eyebrow at him, her heart soaring.

“I want you to return with me. Not because of what your brother wrote, and not because I want an heir or because you might feel obliged. But because...” He hesitated, the lingering remnants of his old self toiling with his conscience.

“Say it,” she said to him. “Say it.”

He straightened up and looked down at her; even before speaking, she could see in his eyes what he was going to say. “I love you, Caroline. I am sick of denying it. I am sick of pretending that it is not what I want or who I am.” He took her hand and squeezed it; her body flooded with warmth at his touch, the same as it did every single time he touched her. “I love you and if you feel the same, I want to give this marriage another chance. I want you in my life, Caroline. Now and forever.”

Caroline’s heart swelled at the words. Indeed, such happiness took her that she felt as if she could fly. She wanted to tell him that she loved him back. She wanted to throw herself at him and kiss him until the world ended. She wanted him, her husband, in

ways that defied logic and reason, but she knew to be true.

However, before she did any of that...

“Another chance, you say?”

Anthony frowned. “I just meant?—”

“You have had more than enough chances. Five by my count.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “So tell me, why should I do such a thing?”

“To be fair...” He was grinning. “I have only had four. I am still owed one more.”

She laughed. “So, that is why you are here? To make good on your promise?”

“No,” he said. “To stop breaking them.”

“And after the fifth chance? What then?”

Through with words. Done playing games. And certainly not about to beg. Anthony reached a hand to Caroline’s face, pulling her lips toward his mouth, and kissing her. Proving through action how he felt about her.

She kissed him back. Her arms wrapped around his neck. Her body melded into his. She held on for dear life, their kiss saying everything that needed to be said, confirming the truth of what Anthony had told her, locking down fully what Caroline knew herself to feel for him, and realizing in them both how perfect they were for one another.

Caroline had known that what Anthony had said to her last night wasn’t the truth. She had known it because the love that she felt could not be faked. It was a type of love

that they had both fought against. That neither of them had wanted. But that had grown between them because of who they were and how perfect together they were.

Anthony was not the Cruel Duke. Nor was he perfect. But Caroline loved Anthony for who he was, just as he loved her for the same reason. She loved how she felt when she was with him. She loved how he saw her. She loved how he saved her, just as she saved him. She loved... well, she loved him, and it really was that simple.

This marriage of convenience, built on the premise of peace and quiet, had proven to be anything but convenient, anything but quiet, and anything but peaceful. But then again, that was what made it so perfect, the same as it was what made them so perfect for one another.

The End?

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:53 pm

Five Years Later

“Where do you think you are going?” Anthony demanded of Caroline.

Chapter One

“B last it. I should not be out here this late.” Charlotte tugged the hood of her coat tighter around her face and neck, shivering from the chilly wind that blew over her skin.

The night was dipping into his darkest hours, and she quickened her steps, desperate to reach her estate. She’d been sneaking out like this often enough that she’d familiarized herself with the street. Still, it did nothing to keep the edge of panic from creeping up her spine. London streets were nothing to trifle with, especially in the dark.

I must make it back before Magnus notices I am missing.

Clicking sounds echoed across the cobblestones as she rushed past locked homes and closed businesses. Charlotte’s pulse was a frenetic dance in her neck, and her thoughts were consumed by the need to get back home, unnoticed by anyone else who might be out on the street.

Being caught, after all, would be to the detriment of not only herself but her entire family, what few of them were left.

“...ugh...”

She stopped, her attention snapping in the direction of the low groan. It came from the shadowed alley just up ahead and to her right. It did not sound...pleasant. Frozen in place, Charlotte looked back and forth between the road ahead of her that led home

and where she'd pinpointed the noise.

Charlotte should not dally. She knew this, but...

Her chest squeezed, that horrid pull of guilt that she had always been so susceptible to. What if someone was hurt? She could not stand idly by when there was a person in need. It was not in her. But if her brother found her not at home, the consequences would be dastardly.

"Leave it, Charlotte. Just go home."

She still stood there. After a moment, she stamped her foot down onto the road and sighed.

"I can't. I just can't."

As quietly as she could, Charlotte slipped down the alley, sticking to the wall where the shadow was darkest. Pushing further into the obscured space, she heard more of that groaning followed by increased commotion.

"...you understand me? I want to hear you say it."

Rounding the corner, she halted once more, utterly shocked by what she saw. Two men were arguing with each other, one pinning the other up against the alley wall. Her hand flew up to her mouth, covering so that she might silence even her breathing. What on earth was going on?

"You don't frighten me." The pinned man spat at the other, the spittle landing on the taller man's coat.

Charlotte restrained a gasp from the act, but it had served to enrage the taller man. He

clenched the offender's collar tighter, reeling back his fist high into the air. The man was going to strike the other.

“Stop!”

The word had flown out of her mouth before she could think better of it, and Charlotte's stomach dropped. Drat .

Both men turned in her direction, and she was immediately drilled down by their glares. Shaking herself, however, Charlotte realized that she recognized the taller man, and her jaw dropped once more.

“Lord Emerton?”

Her voice barely cut through the air, but both men had heard her. Worse, Frederick, as she knew he was called, narrowed his eyes on her, the rage contorting his features truly menacing. She'd met the man at his house when she'd been invited as a guest with Amelia, her friend, the Duchess of Blackford. Why was he now in an alley getting in a fight?

His calculating eyes raked down her frame, and Charlotte stifled a shiver. This was not the man she'd seen at that dinner party. He'd been charming and fulsome, holding true to his reputation as a terrible rake, but this...this was different.

Lord Emerton looked wholly possessed with fury—and dangerous.

“What are you?—”

But before Frederick could finish his inquiry, the man he held jabbed a knee forward and directly into the lord's gut. Frederick was forced backward, losing his grip on the other man's collar. At once, the other gentleman rushed past Charlotte, paying her

such little attention that he knocked her to the ground.

“Oof!” she breathed, the stone coming up to strike her in the rear hard enough to rattle her teeth.

The sound of the man’s sprinting steps faded into the background behind her while Frederick hurried forward in an attempt to catch him. Charlotte had only caught a glimpse of the other man, his blazing stare like daggers aimed at her head. Still, he looked vaguely familiar, something tickling at the back of her mind.

But he was gone too quickly to parse it out, and Lord Emerton was off after him like a shot. Before he could leave the alleyway, Charlotte cried out.

“Lord Emerton?! Will you truly leave me here on the ground?”

He stopped short of exiting the alley, Frederick’s head hanging down as he sighed. There was a moment of pause where all the lord did was shake his head, but after a few seconds, he sucked in a new breath and turned to face her.

“Your Grace, actually.”

Charlotte furrowed her brow, not understanding Frederick’s meaning. Then it hit her. His father had just recently passed. They had printed it in the city papers. He was no longer Lord Emerton, but instead?—

“Apologies, Your Grace.” She gestured down at herself. “Would you mind?”

Mumbling something indistinguishable, Frederick approached her, and Charlotte waited for his hand to assist her to stand up. When it was offered, Charlotte took the man’s grip as he pulled her up and then wiped down over the back of her coat.

“What just happened? Why were you out here holding that man against the wall?”

Frederick still held her hand, cradling her arm gently as he intensely paid attention to how well she stood.

“Are you quite all right, Lady Charlotte?” He lifted her arm, checking around her side and then over the top of her head. “Did he hurt you?”

Heat rose in Charlotte’s cheeks as Frederick scanned her from head to foot. The rapt focus was novel and somewhat alarming, and the warmth of his hand through her thin glove settled into her skin like she was stepping into a hot bath.

She shook herself, blinking as she remembered who she was talking to. This man is a rake, Charlotte. You’ve heard the rumors. He is dangerous to your virtue. You cannot be out alone with him. You should not be out alone at all .

“Lady Charlotte? Are you well?” Frederick’s brows were knitted together, his stare singularly focused on her, and he held her arm with care, his other hand going to the opposite shoulder as if to stabilize her. “Your head? Have you been injured?”

The words were on the tip of her tongue, but the intense focus laid upon her was such a strange, especially new experience. She’d never had the occasion to court someone, and there had been few in her life who’d expressed interest. Being the center of Frederick’s concern made Charlotte’s pulse flutter beneath her skin.

“Charlotte, I?—”

“I am unharmed.” She slipped her arms free of his hold. “And do not think I have forgotten what I saw. What were you doing to that poor man?”

The pinch of Frederick’s brow shifted, relaxing only to be followed by a distinct

narrowing of his eyes. She could see the anger he'd displayed before creeping up at the periphery.

"Perhaps I will answer your question. That is if you can tell me why it is that a lady of your station has found herself alone on the streets of London well after dark."

Charlotte glared back at the man, refusing to be affected by his station above her or the way he set her skin buzzing each moment he eyed her so scrupulously. Furthermore, it was not his business why she was out, and Charlotte wasn't about to threaten her standing by conversing so openly with a known rake.

"I am returning to my home," she deflected. "And it is not I who was caught assaulting someone. It appears that the rumors of your rakish tendencies were just the start. You seem to be nothing more than a degenerate who accosts people in alleys."

"How dare—" Frederick pulled himself away from her, clenching his jaw and balling his hands into fists before pointing an accusing finger at her. "You're such a hypocrite!"

Reeling, Charlotte's jaw dropped. "What?!"

"Need I remind you, Lady Charlotte, that a woman of your station should not go out this late, particularly unchaperoned. Unless your aim is to set the ton abuzz with rumors of your own conduct."

"Of which you know nothing about! I have done nothing wrong, but just two minutes ago, I stumbled upon you leveling your fist at a gentleman in the street!"

Frederick scoffed. "Ugh! You know nothing of which you speak either. You do not know why I was confronting that man, so don't act like?—"

His words were cut off as the sound of mumbled words drifted up through the alley from the other end. Charlotte could make out crash language and the pattern of stumbling steps. She yanked herself out of the light cast by a nearby streetlamp, eyeing the direction of the sound.

Her unfortunate compatriot was there beside her in the dark, and soon, they both saw two very inebriated men wandering down the alley.

No, no, no. This is terrible. I cannot be seen here, especially not with Frederick!

Searching the end of the alley where she'd first entered, Charlotte found a parked carriage, the driver standing just past it and surrounded by the distinct sound of liquid hitting stone. It was just her luck that two drunken fools and a man relieving himself stood in her way of fleeing back home.

What could she do? Charlotte wouldn't allow herself to be spotted by any of them. Frederick was already one too many people aware of her being out here, and that said nothing of the man who'd run off.

I need to ? —

Frederick gripped her upper arm, pulling her further into the shadows of the alley. Holding her back against the cold wall, Frederick covered her with his body, shielding her from the eyes of the approaching men. But she wasn't stupid. The duke was making it look like he was simply out with another foolish girl, claiming her virtue in the street.

"Get off me," she whispered harshly.

"Shh." Frederick craned his head, blocking her view of the alley.

He held himself there, pressed to her like he was about to kiss her. Charlotte's pulse thundered through her head and chest, and she could scarcely breathe for the proximity of this rakish man against her. The men were walking past, and she flicked her eyes up toward Frederick.

Even in the dark, she could make out the sheen of his black hair. The broad width of his shoulder effectively obscured her from sight, and the fabric of his coat stretched around the thick biceps that framed her. Charlotte forced herself to swallow, tearing her eyes away from the uniquely lovely gray of Frederick's eyes.

"Well done, old chap!" one of the men called out, and then the sounds of both of them whistling filled the quiet.

A few moments later, however, they were both gone. Frederick's ruse had worked.

Charlotte swallowed, her throat overly dry, and lifted her stare up to the duke. He was already looking down at her.

"Thank you," she whispered, her breath catching as Frederick adjusted, his shoulder pressing in briefly.

The man had the gall to smirk at that, and Charlotte quickly pushed him back, furious that he found the situation so humorous—as well as herself.

"I'm going home," she announced, stepping past the duke and heading for the now unoccupied exit to the alley.

"I will escort you." Frederick nodded, stepping up to begin walking beside her.

"That is truly unnecessary. I am quite capable of reaching my home. It is not far."

Shaking his head, Frederick took hold of Charlotte's arm, ensuring their forward momentum. "Nonsense. The streets are not safe for a woman to be traveling alone. I will drop you outside your estate."

There was little use in arguing with him. Charlotte could see that the man had thoroughly made up his mind, and he was unlikely as ever to change it. Sighing, she resigned herself to accepting his accompaniment.

* * *

They approached the outer reaches of her estate, and Charlotte glanced over the exterior, looking for any sign that her brother might be awake and looking for her arrival. There was nothing noticeable from this distance.

As she stepped forward to circle around to the back of the estate, entering through the kitchen as she usually did, Frederick stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"You should not mention what has transpired this evening to anyone, Lady Charlotte."

Glaring, she yanked her arm free of his hold and eyed the duke with a frown. "Oh, and why not? Are you concerned over your actions against that man?"

Towering over her, Frederick sent his stare through her like daggers through flesh, the weight of his presence crushing her. He took one step closer, whispering into the dark as he held her eyes with his.

"You know nothing of what was going on in that alley. And don't forget that I have quite a bit of leverage to use against you myself. I doubt your brother will look kindly on your being out this late—alone."

Charlotte's pulse quickened, fluttering in her throat, and she forced herself to swallow. "You wouldn't dare."

Frederick took her chin, closing the distance between them so that there was hardly more than a breath that separated them. He locked his gaze on her, the corner of his mouth lifting in a slight smirk.

"Do you truly wish to risk finding out?"

Shivering, Charlotte stole herself away from Frederick. Her breath shuddered out of her before she managed to eke out a handful of words.

"Go on then. I will not speak of it. Good...Good evening, Your Grace."

The gentle color of Frederick's gray eyes was alive in the dim light cast by a streetlamp, and he tilted his head just a hair.

"Good evening...Lady Charlotte."

Chapter Two

“M istress? Mistress? Are you quite well?”

Charlotte groaned low, her head aching at the sound of Diedre’s voice cutting through her once blissful sleep. Suddenly, bright light cut into the room as well, and Charlotte flung herself away from it, burying her face in the pillow.

“Come now, my lady. You must be getting up.”

Diedre continued to open the drapes of Charlotte’s bedroom, and the lady continued to moan over the loss of her sleep. After a moment, Charlotte flipped onto her back, smacking her arms down on the mattress as her maid flitted about the space like a pixie.

“Ugh,” she whined, “you simply couldn’t allow me another moment of rest? I am beyond exhausted.”

At once, the woman was seated beside her on the bed. When Charlotte dared to crack an eyelid to look at her, Diedre scowled from her loftier position.

“You have snuck out again. Haven’t you?”

Charlotte didn’t answer, remembering her run-in with her brother when she snuck back into the house, and she couldn’t hold Diedre’s irritated stare for another second.

“Ugh, mistress. You’ll be the death of me.” Her maid stole the covers from

Charlotte's legs, making her shiver. "What would your brother do if he found out? What would he do to me for allowing you to leave? I'll lose my position."

Well, I've actually seen what he would do, and it wasn't all that bad, actually. Though being forbidden from leaving the house is a problem.

Sighing, Charlotte scrubbed a hand over her face before sitting up and offering Diedre a mournful smile.

"I am sorry, Diedre. I am. But you know that I have no choice. If Magnus will not see reason, which he has made abundantly clear, I am left with few other options." She squeezed Diedre's hand. "But I do not wish to worry you. And I am truly sorry for that."

There was a slight pause where her maid simply eyed her, but then Diedre was off, scurrying about the room in order to get Charlotte ready for the day. As she dashed about the room, Charlotte watched as Diedre chose today's dress for her and began to pour water from the pitcher into her wash basin.

"You cannot keep this up, mistress. The streets are more unsafe now. And after what happened with the baron. How can you even think about going out there?"

"The baron?" Charlotte furrowed her brow, scooting to the edge of her bed as Diedre approached with a new chemise and stays. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, of course. You have not yet heard as you have been asleep." Diedre assisted Charlotte with removing the clothing she'd slept in and hurried her over toward the wash basin. "Late last night, your brother was alerted to a disturbance by constables. They informed His Grace that the Baron of Halfacre had just gone missing."

Charlotte's stomach dropped. The baron, that was what her brother had been talking

about last night. She'd not heard anything because it had just happened. But as if that weren't enough of a revelation, Charlotte suddenly remembered the brief glimpse she'd gotten of Frederick's opponent last night.

Blond hair, brown eyes...yes, that was him.

"The constables will be taking to the streets in droves now, mistress. If you sneak out again, you will surely be caught."

Charlotte snapped her attention to Diedre, the unsettling thought still ringing loudly in her mind. The man with Frederick had been Baron Halfacre. She had no doubt about it. Lord above. What has Frederick done with him? I need to speak with him.

"I understand, Diedre. I..." Charlotte needed to speak to the man for herself, and she needed to smooth things over with her brother in order to do so. "Thank you. We shouldn't dawdle. There is much to do today."

At that, Charlotte worked with her maid to hurry through dressing. She was freshly clothed and presentable for the house in a matter of minutes. Her pulse too loud in her ears, Charlotte rushed out of her room and toward the stairs. Magnus would be in the breakfast room, and she would speak to him there before leaving.

If he allowed her to go.

Practically sprinting, Charlotte was down the stairs like a sudden storm. As she pulled herself around the corner of their hall to find Magnus in the breakfast room, she was forced into an abrupt stop. What on earth?

The duke was standing in her front hall.

"Frederick?" Charlotte shook herself, clearing her throat as Diedre followed after her.

“What are you doing here?”

Diedre stepped up alongside her, shooting Charlotte a stern glare. She quickly realized she had forgotten her manners, and Charlotte ducked into a hasty curtsy.

“Apologies, Your Grace. You startled me. How may I serve you this morning?” It was impossible to keep the disdain from her voice.

The duke looked between her and her maid, with no other indication that the man might be coming up with some con about why he was in the area. It undoubtedly had to do with the recent news of the baron. Worse, Charlotte had to assume that he wished to reveal her outing last night to her brother.

“I have come to speak with Duke Aldsworth if possible. I apologize for not planning my arrival beforehand.”

Diedre curtsied softly before standing to address Frederick. “I will see if His Grace is available, L?—”

“Careful, Diedre,” Charlotte cut in. “He is now a duke with his father’s passing.”

The jab in his direction was certainly noted, and Frederick flicked his stare to her for just a moment as the cut sunk in.

“Apologies, Your Grace. I will see if the master of the house is available for a meeting.”

Excusing herself with another bow, Diedre left the room. Only Charlotte and Frederick remained in the front hall now, and the tension that swam through the air was thicker than pea soup. She refused to look away from the man’s face even as her stomach clenched at the thought of him betraying her secret to Magnus.

Or worse still, coming forward with some horrible truth about what happened with the baron.

“Lady Charlotte, I?—”

“I had thought we made an arrangement, Your Grace.”

Frederick stopped short in the middle of a step forward. He eyed her hard, regarding her for a moment, but then sighed.

“I have actually come to speak with you, Lady Charlotte. Not your brother.”

As much as she would have wished it, Charlotte was at a loss for words. Why on earth would the duke want to speak with her? They had their agreement, and it hadn’t been long enough for her to have betrayed it—not that she would. She reeled slightly, taken off guard, and Frederick took a step closer, further into the home.

“I wished to check on you. Are you all right after last night’s...encounter? You stumbled fairly roughly, after all.”

His face was a mask of charming sincerity, but Charlotte didn’t believe it for a moment. The man was a dastardly rake, and she was almost positive that he had done something terrible last night.

“I am sure that isn’t your reason for coming,” she countered. “You have come to see if I’ve said anything about your baron. Rumors have already spread of his disappearance, and you wished to see if you could lay the blame on me.”

The man didn’t so much as bat an eye at her accusation. Frederick only held her stare intently, calmly gripping his hat between his hands.

“What have you been doing with the poor man since his disappearance, I wonder?”

At that, the duke’s stare went to the floor as he cleared his throat. After a moment, he looked up at her once more and took another step forward into the hall. Leveling her with a glower, Frederick kept his voice low—a dark edge to it.

“I have done nothing that the man did not deserve.” He ducked his chin slightly. “I assure you.”

A shiver ran down Charlotte’s spine. There was that look that she’d seen just a few hours ago. It was so different from the boastful charisma Frederick usually wore on his sleeves at all times. This wasn’t the man that she was used to, and the fact that he had so clearly been putting on airs signaled the worst.

I must tell Magnus about this.

“I believe it is a good thing then that you have sent for my brother. He should hear what you’ve done to him.”

The muscles in Frederick’s jaw worked, and he turned his face down toward the floor. “I truly wish you had not said that, Lady Charlotte.”

A flicker of nervousness dripped down her spine, skittering like spiders. The dark quality of Frederick’s voice made her pulse quicken, and she was not so foolish as to deny that she was scared of what he might do to her.

“I am in my own home, Your Grace. This would be an unwise place to try something untoward.”

The duke chuckled, the sound too beautiful for the intensity of the situation. “You misunderstand. I do not wish to harm you. Though, I believe that your brother might

have an interesting thing to say if he learned that you were out late last night in the streets—alone.”

“You can’t,” she snapped. “I have said nothing. And you agreed?—”

“Calm yourself, Lady Charlotte. I don’t wish to go down that road unless forced. Instead, I offer a solution, if an unorthodox one at that.”

Charlotte felt like some leaf blown about by a fickle wind back and forth, and she shook her head, scoffing at how Frederick continued to yank her about like a fish on a hook.

“A solution? And what, perchance, is this miraculous resolution to our situation?”

There was a brief pause where Charlotte noticed the deep crease between Frederick’s brows. He studied her, only the act of a moment, and then nodded as if solidifying himself to the decision.

“A marriage. One of convenience and mutual benefit.”

She nearly fell to the floor; the shock was so great. Charlotte couldn’t stop the immediate need to lean forward, her jaw dropping open. When she snapped it shut once more, she blustered, utterly taken off guard.

“You can’t be serious. You wish to marry? Me, of all people? Why on earth would we do that?”

Still as stoic and unreadable as ever—the odd change to his usual charming countenance persistent as a weed—Frederick only raised his brows a hair, staring straight into her eyes.

“You will not be compelled to testify against me as my wife.”

Charlotte expected more from the duke, but he allowed the statement hang in the air.

“And? That serves only you, Your Grace.” She glowered at him, becoming increasingly irritated with this entire conversation. “You have yet to tell me how the arrangement would be of benefit to me.”

Nodding once, Frederick exhaled hard. “I’d have thought that was obvious. I will not speak of what I saw last evening, and I shall provide for you utterly. You will be completely taken care of and provided with whatever you desire as the duchess of my estate.”

“Your Grace, I?—”

“Furthermore,” he cut in, not allowing Charlotte to speak, “I will permit you to go wherever you wish, including the clandestine location you were returning from last evening. So long as you can be discreet, of course.”

Charlotte was at a loss. Frederick was indeed an excellent businessman. The merits of the arrangement were evident, and she found it difficult to come up with reasons that she should not take him up on it. Her making the journey on a regular basis had been discovered by her brother, and only this morning had she begun to work on a way to continue her outings without notice.

The duke’s proposal offered a genuine answer to how she might carry on.

Can I trust him, though? He has said nothing about the baron, and ? —

“Your Grace,” Magnus strolled into the front hall, smiling evenly, “thank you for waiting so patiently. I do hope my sister was able to entertain you.”

He seemed in as pleasant a mood as could be expected, but when her brother stepped up next to her, he regarded her with a quizzical expression. Magnus's brows were threaded with curious skepticism, and Charlotte bowed her head in a show of respect.

"Please, if you'd like to join me in the study, we can discuss whatever matter has brought you all this way."

Charlotte turned to face Frederick, waiting for his reply as eagerly as Magnus.

"There shall be no need to take up your study, Your Grace." Frederick smiled coolly at Magnus. "I would, in fact, like Lady Charlotte to be present for my proposal."

She yanked her attention away from the duke to her brother, seeing Magnus's jaw drop as surely as hers had. His brows hit his hairline, and Magnus took a step forward, putting himself slightly between Charlotte and Frederick.

This is it, Lottie. What are you going to do?

Sucking in a hearty lungful of air, Charlotte licked her lips before stepping up past her brother and closer to Frederick. She plastered on her best smile, putting her hand to her chest.

"Finally, Your Grace. I had thought you might never ask."

Both men cast their glances her way. The surprise painted on Magnus's face only doubled down. In contrast, the duke still regarded her with that schooled expression. Still at the edges, in the depths of Frederick's gray stare, she could see a glimmer of delight—no doubt pleased that his plan had come to fruition.

Smile all you like, Frederick. I will do what I need to do, as I always have. And neither you nor my brother will keep me from my greater duties.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:53 pm

It was raining. It was her wedding day, and it was raining. Some said that it was good luck, but Charlotte had a feeling that the superstition had been created to make brides feel better when their nuptials were ruined by a sudden downpour.

“Oof,” Magnus’s low groan cut through her thoughts, and Charlotte glanced over at him.

The carriage ride was particularly bumpy today, or perhaps it was only that the ride was utterly silent, and so each jostle of the wheels was painstakingly noticeable.

Her brother looked the same way he had for the past few weeks since the first notice was posted in the banns. His brow was in a permanent furrow, and Charlotte could see tension pulling the muscles of his jaw tight. After a moment, he glanced back at her, and Charlotte attempted to duck her stare away.

It was unsuccessful.

“Why...” his voice filled the silence like a heavy thud, “...why would you marry someone like him? A rake like... him ?”

Charlotte’s stomach clenched. She knew exactly who Magnus was speaking about, and while she had a feeling that her brother was quite right about Frederick, she had a part to play.

“He is not like our father, Magnus. I assure you.”

Gaze hardening, freezing over with ice like a pond in winter, Magnus’s jaw worked

all the harder. He shook himself after a time, facing out the window as they passed by building after building.

“I do not wish to hear about that man on what is meant to be a joyous occasion.” He sighed, still not looking at her. “I only feel as if I am missing something in the success of this courtship.”

“Magnus, I...I am sorry if the surprise was too great. I simply did not know if Frederick would ever come to his senses and propose.”

All her brother did was offer a noncommittal noise, humming slightly before the carriage returned to utter silence. She stiffened in her seat, turning away from Magnus and glancing out the window. There was nothing more that she could say to ease him, and frankly, she understood his complaint.

Over the weeks, Charlotte had played her part as doting betrothed as best she could. But there was the timing in her way. It was nearly impossible to come up with a reason for such a sudden event. She could empathize with Magnus and his reticence to sign off on the marriage as it came so entirely like a bolt out of the blue.

I have tried so hard to fake an infatuation with Frederick, and still, he sees right through me .

Moments—or perhaps hours—later, they arrived at the church for the ceremony. Charlotte had lost track of time during the trip, and before she could comprehend what she was doing, she stood in the church, looking over the few assembled guests.

Her dearest friend, Amelia, was there, but the duchess cast her a concerned stare, and Charlotte felt compelled to go to her.

“Amelia,” Charlotte leaned forward, greeting her friend warmly, “I’m glad that you could come.”

“Of course, Lady Charlotte. Or shall I say Your Grace already?” There was a slight twinkle in Amelia’s eyes at the jest, but it was quickly swept away by ill-hidden worry. “You are truly going to wed Frederick then?”

Swallowing hard, Charlotte nodded. “Yes, of course. I am very happy. This is exactly what I want.”

Even Charlotte had trouble believing the words.

But before Amelia could speak another word, her husband, Richard—the Duke of Blackford—approached them with a smile, wrapping his arm around his wife’s waist.

“Has my wife professed her concern yet? She has been dreadful to live with these past few days.”

Amelia glared at him, swatting him discreetly with her small fan. Charlotte had to grin at the pair. They were indeed a sight to behold, having started so strictly as enemies and then falling in love with each other as profoundly as any Charlotte had ever seen. It gave her hope...if a small amount.

“I can assure you, Amelia, that Frederick is a good man. You have no cause for concern. And your dear friend is happy. Should that not be all that matters?”

It was painful to keep her scowl and scoff contained and out of sight, but Charlotte knew that Richard meant well. However, she could not believe that the goodness of Frederick’s character was unimpeachable. Richard was not aware of the other evening, of course, and with the baron still not found, each day made Charlotte more nervous.

“Of course.” Amelia turned to her, holding her stare with such love in her eyes that Charlotte was forced to hold back tears. “I am truly happy for you, my dearest Charlotte. And my husband is right. Shocking indeed.”

He only chuckled at the slight, the pair of them using their teasing as a language of love shared only between them.

“Your happiness is what I regard with the most seriousness. If you are glad, then I am glad.”

Charlotte had to swallow again, the emotions making her throat sticky and dry. “You are truly the best friend I could ever ask for, Amelia. I love you with all my heart, like a sister.”

A commotion started at the front of the church, and Charlotte knew it was time. She was needed at the altar because, on this rainy day in London, she was getting married.

* * *

Before she knew it, Charlotte was no longer a lady but a duchess of a new estate. The wedding went by in a blur and she was ashamed to say that she recalled little of it. Each moment of the ceremony, she had been preoccupied with trying to parse out the meaning of Frederick’s facial expressions, responding to the minister’s questions by rote alone.

They’d made their trek across the city to Mullens Estate, and Charlotte had been greeted by the state with her new title as she followed her husband and sister-in-law inside.

“Welcome home, Your Grace,” the butler said to Frederick, then turned to regard her. “And to you, Your Grace.”

It was still so odd to be called as such, and Charlotte forced herself to smile, offering what she could by way of a performance. They were quickly ushered to the dining room where a meal had been prepared for after the ceremony, and she could hear talk in the back of her mind from the staff regarding their potential honeymoon.

I'd forgotten about that part. We have not discussed it, though. I wonder if Frederick...

Abruptly, it struck Charlotte that she had not spoken to Frederick much at all—about anything. She was unaware of his expectations for their marital arrangement beyond what they had discussed that day in the hall when he'd proposed.

What might the duke wish for in terms of her role as mistress of the house? What did he wish for when it came to heirs for his family?

Charlotte stifled a shiver as she was seated at the table to dine across from her new husband at the opposite head. The day was hardly half over, and yet she knew that the remainder of the day would drag on until she had a chance to speak to Frederick alone.

And she was not looking forward to it in the slightest.

* * *

With each moment, less and less light spilled through the hall, and Charlotte's stomach twisted itself further into untamable knots. The sky was dark, night had come, and she would be alone with her husband for the first time since the ceremony.

"If he should decide to come to speak to me at all."

Charlotte sat on the edge of her bed. She was in a separate room from Frederick, and she'd dismissed the maid, choosing to undress for sleep on her own, which she had yet to do. The maid seemed to think it was a way of asking for privacy, the woman smirking knowingly at her, but Charlotte had no intention of engaging in marital visitation with the man she knew to be nothing more than a rake.

Knock, knock.

A soft rap of knuckles hit her door, and Charlotte straightened up. The room was not locked, as she'd hoped that the two of them might at least talk.

"Come in," she called out gently, and the door cracked open to reveal her husband, dressed down from the formality of his attire of earlier.

"Charlotte," Frederick nodded. "Good evening."

She narrowed her eyes at him, folding her arms across his chest as she set her mouth in a grim line. The large room seemed to barely contain the man's tall stature, but it was the size of her irritation that truly stretched it to the limit.

It was a lovely space, well enough supplied with the necessary furnishings—a wash basin and dresser, a fireplace with bed warmer, and even a standing mirror that sat in the corner near the far window. The room was decked out in wallpaper depicting alternating pale blue stripes and columns of blue cornflowers. There were pale white curtains over the windows on the wall to the right of her bed, and on the left was the closet door next to the dresser.

Simple and elegant, and as much as a prison as one with bars.

"You've graced me with your presence. Should I assume that you have something to say to me, or have you come to ignore me in person?"

With a frown, Frederick ducked his head. It was a moment before he spoke again, and Charlotte watched the muscles in his jaw work as he stood just a few feet from where she sat.

"I was not ignoring you. There were family members to attend to, and we have both been particularly busy through the entire day."

All Charlotte did was stare. She would not be giving him an inch of reprieve from

this. Frederick was well aware of what he'd been doing that day, and their lack of communication had nothing to do with "being busy."

The silence persisted until Frederick sighed, meeting her stare. "It is possible that perhaps I could have paid more attention to your status during the evening."

"Perhaps?" She stood up, taking a step forward and leaning toward him. "Perhaps you could have paid more attention? You have spoken to me as much as you have the plants in your greenhouse, Frederick."

The man had the gall to scoff, rolling his eyes before looking in her direction like he was tickled by Charlotte's complaints.

"Charlotte, I?—"

"Don't. You cannot make me see anything but the truth. You have paid me no mind since I arrived at the estate." She sucked in a breath of air, closing her eyes momentarily before leveling Frederick with a stare again. "Should you wish for it to remain that way, fine. I am more than happy to pursue separate interests. Still, I would appreciate a summary of what you expect from this arrangement beyond our mutual agreement to not leak the other's secrets."

"Separate interests? I'm sure I don't know what you mean. And surely you must provide me with a bit of time to consider matters. We've only been married for a handful of hours. I thought that at the least we could take the time to get to know one another, settle into our roles."

Slashing her hand through the air, Charlotte scoffed lightly. She was beyond aggravated with the duke at present, and the fact that he was so nonchalant about it all only made her mood that much more sour.

"You act as though this is some simple thing. I'm to be your wife. I am your wife."

There is quite a bit associated with that. An arrangement of convenience remains a marriage, nonetheless. You've allowed me no preparation for how I am to manage the estate, what might be required of me in terms of staffing the house, nor introduced me to those working here that I will be interacting with on a daily basis."

"This was the first day, Charlotte. There is time for those things. You shouldn't allow yourself to get so worked up."

Hardly believing her ears, Charlotte glared harder. Jabbing a finger in his direction, she looked up into Frederick's grey eyes as the sound of the fire crackling in the background mirrored the sparks firing in her blood.

"Worked up?!" Her voice ticked up louder. "You have coerced me into a marriage of convenience, and you expect me to be?—"

The words were silenced as Frederick reached out and took her face in his hands. She'd not realized that during this entire conversation, he'd stepped closer and closer, but now the reality of his proximity was plain as paper. Her heart rate was already furious, and with the man's warm skin against hers, it only took off for the stars. Frederick was so close she could smell the spice of his cologne, and her perception of the room around her dropped away as she was trapped beneath the weight of his stare.

As her lips gently parted, Frederick's fingers slid down the column of her neck—light and unhurried. The other hand suddenly found her side, wrapping around her waist to lay against the small of her back.

"Wh—What are you doing?"

Charlotte's voice was so small. It barely reached Frederick across the few short inches separating them. Her head felt fuzzy, as if she'd had too much of the drink, and even more, Charlotte could hear each frenzied beat of her heart screaming in her ears as the booms slammed against her ribs.

“You,” Frederick rumbled, his deep voice scarcely a whisper, “are something I’ve never encountered, Charlotte. You are headstrong and wild, and I find that I cannot wait another moment before I claim my wife completely.”

She was frozen in place, under the spell of some sort of trance. Frederick moved in all the closer, and before she could think to speak again or think at all really, his lips found the crook of her neck. The sensations were dizzying. Charlotte had never been kissed as such before, and her eyes rolled closed as she fought back the whimper that threatened to break free.

The feel of his teeth playfully biting her neck rocked Charlotte to her core, forcing her from whatever spell he’d cast.

“No,” she pushed back from Frederick, putting several inches between them, “you will not.”

Frederick cast her a confused look, his brows pinched together and low over his dark eyes—eyes that appeared to be trying to eat her up, swallowing her into the depths of the cool gray color.

“Why do you push me away? I can see the want in your eyes.”

Charlotte felt her cheeks burn, and she broke their eye contact, staring at the floor. After a moment, she looked back up at him, her resolve restored. Holding her chin high, she straightened her spine.

“I will not share your bed, Frederick. You will not get me to lie with you, no matter how many of your tricks you decide to use.”

No visible emotion passed over her husband’s face, and Charlotte didn’t know what to make of it. He was as calm and stoic as she’d seen him become that night. When he wasn’t peacocking himself like the rake she knew too well to expect, the man had

an awful habit of surprising her with how steely he could be.

“Do you intend to deny me my husbandly rights during the entirety of our marriage, Charlotte?”

No disappointment nor amusement. His voice held no clue as to what he wanted her to say. So, Charlotte only stood firmer in her resolution to keep the fiendish rogue at bay for as long as she could.

“Yes.”

He stepped closer again, and Charlotte felt dwarfed by how he towered over her.

“Why?” Frederick’s gaze had yet to lighten, his dark stare pinning her down. “Why do you wish to stay so far from me?”

Her throat felt dry, and Charlotte took a step backward, feeling the bed hit her at the back of her knees.

“That is none of your business.”

She would not discuss why the thought of siring children to a dastardly rogue hit her so profoundly. He needn’t know about her father.

But then Frederick chuckled low, the sound dark and too beautiful. She wanted to hate the sound. She wanted him to laugh like some out-of-tune crow or a squeaky train wheel. But he didn’t.

Charlotte’s throat was as dry as the inside of the fireplace, and she forced herself to swallow. As she did, Frederick moved closer, stepping to the side to take a seat on the mattress. He leaned back on one hand, casual and comfortable on her bed. Frederick’s brow rose as he glanced up at her, as nonchalant as ever.

“And of your duty to produce an heir. Am I to assume that you would not be acquiescing to the traditional tasks given to wives?”

It was so businesslike, the way he talked about an heir as an asset to the household and not like the actual child that would result from their union.

He’s only concerned with his reputation, his family name. Worse, he’s only thinking with his pecker, ready to stick it anywhere he wishes for little thought of the child he would sire .

Glaring so much that an ache formed within her skull, Charlotte was ready to burst when the words flew from her mouth.

“My wishes might not matter to you, Your Grace .” She bit out the words as her only weapons. “But if you choose to try and take what I have not given you, I will fight you every step of the way—until one or the other of us is left bleeding and broken.”

Frederick’s brows shot up to his hairline, and for the first time all day—perhaps ever—Charlotte could see the look of genuine shock painted all over his face. She held his stare with everything she had, gripping the sides of her dress so much that her knuckles screamed in protest.

He flew up off the mattress, standing before her with a horrendous grimace painted over his features.

“What kind of man do you think I am? Do you truly believe I would do such a thing? Take you by...force?”

Charlotte’s jaw trembled, so she bit down on her molars to stop it shaking. As she met Frederick’s stare, she reeled backward, blinking several times.

“I have heard your reputation, Frederick. I will not be another woman left without her

maidenhead because of your fine words and forward advances.”

“You have heard this?” His tone was accusatory. “Someone has said that I take maidens’ virtue?”

Shaking her head, she ducked it low, trying to back up and put space between them. Frederick pursued, and Charlotte stumbled until she wound up with her back against the wall. Her husband followed after, framing her with his arms as he trapped her in place.

“I do not need to explain myself to you,” she pressed.

“No,” Frederick’s voice was hardly above a whisper, and his dark stare devoured her, “you don’t. But I ask you this, Charlotte. Give me seven days.”

She shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

There was a hesitation, a moment where her husband roamed his eyes across her features, seeming to map each detail of her face. Charlotte felt strange under his scrutiny, and she couldn’t parse out what purpose it served. Though, she could not deny the shaded heat that billowed from his expression.

“I will never take anything from you against your will.” He leveled her with his stare. “Still, I cannot deny that...”

Clearing his throat, Frederick appeared to backpedal, reeling in the words that began to tumble from his lips. As he righted himself, regaining some of his composure, he released a slow exhale.

“I cannot give up on the notion of an heir. I do not wish to be the last of my family to carry on our name. So, give me seven nights to convince you.”

“Frederick, I?—”

“I will never do something you don’t want, Charlotte. Not during the seven days and not during any following moment of our marriage, regardless of the outcome. Should you still refuse me, I will leave it at that.”

Charlotte was at a loss. What was she supposed to say to the man? She understood his desire to continue his family. She knew that it was technically within his rights to demand an heir from her, but standing there before him—his arms trapping her against the wall—Charlotte was unsure what the best course of action was here. There had been a brief moment earlier when she’d nearly expected to lose her virginity by now, but so much had changed with just this single conversation.

Worse, Frederick had made it clear that this was a business arrangement that he wished only to take advantage of and perhaps sow more of his wild oats in the process.

I will not be a glorified prostitute.

“You will not change my mind, Frederick. It is pointless to attempt this foolish trick of yours.”

“Then,” he leaned forward, his breath tickling her skin he was so close, “you should have nothing to worry over. Perhaps, Charlotte, you should allow me to harbor the concern over my success since agreeing to the provision will so clearly not affect your standing.”

Expectation and curiosity smoothed over Frederick’s features as he looked down at her from his tall stature. Her blood rushed quicker through her veins, and a terrible heat crawled up from her chest to her cheeks. How was he doing this to her? What strange sorcery or substance was he using to affect her so?

Still, he was right. Agreeing to the deal would not change her mind. She was quite firm in her resolve. And the thought of seeing his expression upon his failure delighted Charlotte to no end.

“Fine, Frederick. Do your worst over seven days, and when my mind has not changed, I will hear no more talk of heirs or beds. Ever again.”

He straightened, leaving Charlotte to lean against the wall. “Deal.”