

# *Lord Blackwell's Rude Awakening*



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## Chapter One

July, 1814

Max approached the library. He was about to announce himself to Richard, one of his oldest friends, when he caught a snatch of the conversation in progress on the other side of the door. The words “It’s a large expense, I know, Diana, and I’m sorry I failed to mention it to you earlier” stopped Max from entering the room. He half-turned to go, knowing he should give the pair within their privacy. But something – call it curiosity – caused him to stay.

He overheard Richard informing his sister, Diana, of all that had gone awry during the recent repairs of the cottages on the east edge of their estate. The bungles seemed to have begun with the purchase of a great deal of thatch that turned out to be mouldy, and the repairs went downhill from there. Since Max had himself just inherited cartloads of mouldy thatch, so to speak, he hardly listened to the details of the discussion. Instead he listened to the tone, to Diana’s questions, and to her responses to Richard’s answers. She was calm. She was thoughtful. She did not assign blame. Then came a rather long pause. Diana broke it by saying,

“It’s a large expense, yes, and horribly wasteful, but we can absorb it. I know the places in my budget where I can make adjustments.”

Thereafter the discussion wrapped up quickly. When Max sensed Diana was about to leave the room, he pulled himself into an alcove around the corner. He waited until her footsteps disappeared down the hallway before returning to the library door. He knocked once then entered before being invited in.

Richard looked up from the papers littering his desk and exclaimed, “Max!”

He rose and crossed the room to clasp Max to his chest. "So glad you've come. Was hoping you would. Heard the news."

Max accepted the sympathy implied in the greeting. He had originally come to absorb this sympathy. However, as a result of the overheard conversation, his goal had now changed. When he was released from Richard's embrace, he said, simply, "Yes, the news."

Richard's expression affected appropriate dismay. He gestured for Max to sit then gestured at a decanter on a side table. "Brandy?"

Max chose a worn leather chair in front of the desk and sat down. He glanced over his shoulder to the wall of windows. He beheld the vista of rolling hills of Surrey disappearing into the distance where it merged with the boundary of his newly inherited estate.

"I was going to wait until the sun went down to, ahem, celebrate," Max said, "but it has sunk low enough now, I think, to justify it."

Richard splashed enough brandy into two glasses to make the drinks stiff. "A healthy, new-born child is always cause for celebration," he said in such flat tones that Max had to laugh.

Accepting the glass Richard offered him, Max raised it and said, "To my newest niece. May she thrive."

Richard repeated the toast, took a sip, and asked, "And Eleanor?"

"She's an old hand at childbirth now. She's doing well."

Richard nodded and sat back down in the chair at his desk. He said, "Even if your sister-in-law had delivered herself of a boy, you would not have been let off

scot free.”

Max rubbed his chin. Richard had said the truth, but only part of it. “It’s one thing to act as the guardian of the estate until an heir is of age. It’s quite another thing to have to secure the line.”

Richard ventured, “At least you now have the title.”

Max appreciated Richard’s attempt to put a good face on the disaster that began two months before with Max’s older brother’s sudden death and culminated this morning with the birth of his brother’s fourth daughter.

Max pronounced, “Lord Blackwell.” He took a sip and savoured the taste of the brandy but not his new title. He shook his head. “Never wanted it.”

“You weren’t raised for the position, it’s true, but you’ll adapt.” Richard swept his hand above the papers on his desk. “It’s not so bad, once you get used to it. And I believe Jonathan was a good enough steward to have left Thornton Park in reasonable shape.”

“Reasonable enough,” he agreed but refrained to mention the very rough financial edges he had discovered in the course of recent weeks.

Richard opened his mouth then closed it again. He dropped his cheery demeanor and said, “It’s a damnable hand you’ve been dealt. How are you holding up, man?”

Max considered the question. Since Jonathan’s death from what seemed little more than a head cold, he had felt many things. Grief, certainly. Selfish anger at having his pleasant life turned upside down. Resentment of the weight of his new burdens. A touch of fear of the unknown. Since this morning, an urgent desire to find

a way to restore some of his old life. And uppermost was abhorrence of not being in control. However, he was good at getting what he wanted. To get what he wanted now, which he had determined all of five minutes ago, he would have to use both art and surprise in this interview – as well as in the next one he would engineer.

He began honestly enough, “I’m not going to cheapen our friendship by telling you I’m fine. I am not. Jonathan and I had different temperaments, as you well know, but we were always close. Losing him ... well, it’s like losing a part of myself, and now I have to take over his reins. But I’ll adapt, as you’ve said.” He veered into misrepresentation when he continued, “And since it was always possible the baby would be a girl, I’ve also had these weeks to consider my future.” In point of fact he had spent the past two months avoiding thoughts of his future and praying desperately for a boy, but the statement served nicely to set up his finishing touch. “I know my duty, and I’m prepared to fulfill it.”

Richard nodded once, as if impressed with Max’s resolve, but then shook his head in mild reproof when Max added,

“And feel I must do so immediately.”

Richard sighed. “Ah, Max, ever impulsive.”

Now came a bald lie. “No impulse this time, Richard. Rather a well thought-out plan, which involves marriage to a woman who, I daresay, is perfect for me.”

Richard’s brows rose. “You have a particular woman in mind?”

“I do, and I’ve known her for most of my life.”

“Good, then. Your plan might work. Who is it?”

“Diana.”

Richard's face suffused a dull red. "*Diana?!*"

Max waited to let the idea sink in. Then, very deliberately, "I am not sure if your shock betrays an insult to me –" here he paused delicately "– or to Diana."

Richard gobbled a couple of words before he managed, "As your friend I've never given your reputation a second thought, but – but, in the context of my *sister*, well! Let's just say your reputation doesn't recommend you to a future father-in-law or, in my case, brother-in-law."

Max's argument was ready-made. "My relationship with women until now was determined by the fact I had nothing of true substance to offer. My resources have now changed and, as you've remarked, my estate is in respectable order. Furthermore, if it's of any concern to you, I broke amicably with my latest mistress even before Jonathan's death."

Richard was speechless for several moments before he was able to say, "You're known for your high-fliers. Beauties, all of them!"

"And so? We're speaking now of marriage and a wife."

"But – but ... Diana ...."

Max raised his brows in challenge. Under other circumstances, Richard's visible consternation would have been an object of amusement. Under this circumstance Max did not hesitate to use it to his advantage. When it was clear Richard could not finish his thought, Max slid in under his friend's guard and said with a sly smile,

"You don't want to give up your comfort, do you? You've had Diana to yourself all these years since the death of your dear Jane. Diana has been a mother

to your son and the manager of your household, and my guess is she does it all perfectly. But perhaps she would also like to be a wife one day.”

Richard’s face was now bright red.

Pressing his advantage Max added, “What would you say to the idea we let Diana decide whether or not she would accept my offer?”

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## Chapter Two

Diana had her list of names in mind. The young women she was going to recommend to the new Lord Blackwell as eligible *parties* were all lovely and lively and, as long as she was alliterating, lithe. In short, they were everything she was not. She had never made any bones about her plain face and full figure. Thus, when she learned the new earl had requested a private interview with her, she was not at all chagrined to imagine he intended to enlist her help in finding a suitable partner. She was a good enough neighbour to wish to lend him a hand. She was also a woman, which meant she had long considered the new earl – oh, for heaven’s sakes, she had known him her whole life as her brother’s friend *Max* – to be an attractive specimen of masculinity.

And now here he was in her drawing room, standing at one of the long windows, facing away from her, his hands clasped behind his back. He seemed to be gazing over her garden, evidently collecting his thoughts. She admired the figure he cut with his dark hair curling around his collar, broad shoulders, trim waist, and muscular legs. She began to imagine each of the young women she had in mind for him at his side and was surprised she had time to entertain every name on her list.

The present moment seemed to be the one occasion when Max was taking his time, for he was known for acting quickly. Richard called him rash.

At last she saw his back straighten slightly, his shoulders perfectly square. He turned. He smiled. The thought came into her head: *Some lucky woman is going to see this smile every day for the rest of her life.*

He said, "I've just been to see Richard."

"So I was told."

"He recommended I come directly to you." He bowed minimally. "Perhaps you can guess why I am here."

"Yes," she said, suddenly curious to learn which of the women she had in mind would appeal to him. "I'm happy to help."

His dark brows quirked slightly. It seemed her response had stopped what he was going to say next. "Help?" he repeated, as if bemused. "Perhaps, yes. Then I'll get right to it, with none of the roundabout I had thought might be appropriate. As for your help, Miss Wiley – Diana, if I may – I am hoping you will do me the honour of accepting my offer of marriage."

Diana blinked. She had the oddest notion the final rays of the dying day darted out from behind Max's back and into her body, jangling her nerves with surprise, disbelief, elation, and even fear. She opened her mouth, found herself incapable of speech then closed it again. Since her gaze was riveted on his, she was aware his expression had changed, as if he, in turn, was surprised by her evident surprise.

The frown between his brows deepened. He took a step back and bowed

again, more deeply this time. "Perhaps my offer is a distasteful one?"

"Oh, no, no," she assured him quickly, nearly choking. "You caught me unawares, that's all."

His smile was kind. "I beg your pardon. I should have led up to my proposal more slowly, as I had originally thought. But your offer of help made me think you and I were of like mind."

In her continuing surprise, she asked, "Why would I think my offer of help would be attached to a proposal of marriage?"

Max bowed now with great formality. "Given the relationship between our two families and the contiguity of our two estates, I imagined your strong sense of duty was asserting itself."

Before she could formulate a coherent response, he came and sat down next to her. His nearness caused her thoughts to wobble. He continued, his smile now rueful,

"I leapt too quickly to conclusions. In my eagerness I thought you meant you would come to my aid just as you came to Richard's when he needed you most. The difference being, of course, that your help this time comes with a change in marital status."

Was he serious? Wait. Did he say he was eager? She had no time to think the questions through because just then he took her hands in his, and her thoughts spun completely off balance.

He pressed her fingers. "Ah, but I see now what it is. You're currently entertaining another offer of marriage."

Diana dismissed thoughts of the vicar's recent broad hints. "Good heavens, no!" she exclaimed and looked away.

"I'm glad," he replied.

At the warmth in his voice she braved a glance at him and saw him looking at her as a woman in the way she imagined a man would look at a desirable woman. Added to her confusion was now embarrassment. She felt herself blush and looked away again.

"So," he said, "you're not entertaining another offer. And you've said you do not find mine distasteful." His tone turned teasing, and she looked up to see his dark eyes twinkling. "I'm curious what kind of help you thought to provide me, if it was not to become my wife."

Would telling the truth be appropriate or even relevant at the moment? It took her but a flash of a second to realise the answer was No. She cast about for something to say and grasped at a straw. "I was going to offer to continue my support of Eleanor as I've been doing in these recent difficult weeks. Naturally I attended the birth earlier today."

"I know, and I thank you for that kind support."

This morning at Thornton Park she had overheard someone mention that Max received news of the birth in London. "Oh, have you been to see Eleanor, then, before coming here? Did she mention to you I was with her?"

He responded to her questions with a non-committal smile and then leaned forward so their foreheads were almost touching. She caught the intermingled scents of fresh linen, shaving soap, and his skin, earthy and intoxicating. He said

gravely, "Speaking of Eleanor, think how much more easily you can continue to support her as her sister-in-law, as my wife."

She leaned away from him in an attempt to dispel her continuing confusion. She fell back on her ever-ready practicality. "Surely you've given your choice much thought."

"Indeed," he assured her.

"And run through your mind the eligible women of your acquaintance, considering each in turn."

"No, you're the only woman I've considered."

He stated the matter so simply she was further astonished. Then it occurred to her his principal aim was to have her shoulder the burden of helping Eleanor raise her four daughters. Perhaps he intended a marriage of convenience, one that did not include an intimate relationship. How could she ask about such a thing?

She attempted to pull her hands away, but he did not release them. As she tried to imagine life as his wife in name only, her swirling thoughts boggled and came to a stop. She needed to think his offer through. She needed to regain her mental footing. She was acutely aware how closely he was watching her. She opened her mouth, hoping to say something intelligent, but no sound came out.

"I have surprised you," he said gently, "and you have acknowledged as much. Once again, I should have framed my offer from the beginning with some explanation. Instead I am doing it backwards, and I regret any unpleasantness I have caused you. I should have explained from the first that I have long thought of you as the perfect wife and mother. Before Jonathan's death I had never given a thought to

having children of my own, but in the past weeks my desire for children has been constantly on my mind, and so you have been the only woman in my thoughts.”

“Oh, I see,” she said, seeing little beyond the fact he evidently imagined her as a real wife. Naturally he would need heirs. Why would he marry otherwise? Really, she needed to come to her senses. She had no time to do so, however, because the next thing he said were the magic words,

“And in imagining you the perfect wife and mother – ” here he tugged her hands playfully “– it occurred to me you might like children of your own, while still remaining close enough to your nephew so you would not be abandoning him.”

Thereafter the conversation did not last much longer, and eventually the words “Yes, I will marry you” managed to leave her lips. He sealed her acceptance with a kiss that left her tingling. He departed on the declaration that she had made him a happy man, adding he would do what was necessary to procure a special licence.

Before Richard burst into the room, she had just enough time to realise that before this interview, she would have been inclined to say Max barely knew she existed, much less imagined her perfect in any capacity. She appreciated his appeal to her sense of duty and her own desire for children in equal measure to his lack of appeal to tender emotions. She would have been horrified if he had revealed any knowledge of the way she admired him and if he had traded on it to win her acceptance. Nevertheless, and despite the fundamentally business-like nature of his proposal, she had the sense she had just been swept off her feet. She was in too much turmoil to formulate the idea that a positive response to an offer of marriage

could be secured as effectively by surprise as by a declaration of love.

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Max was pleased with himself. Once seized by an idea he always moved swiftly. Little more than forty-eight hours after being struck with the plan to leave the running of Thornton Park in Diana's capable hands, he was a married man preparing for his wedding night.

At one point in this preparation, his valet cleared his throat and took the liberty of remarking, "Been with my missus twenty years now, as your lordship knows, and so I hope you don't mind me telling you the first rule of marriage."

Of a sudden the phrase *Darden's Rules for Marriage* sprang to life Max's head. He decided to impose them this very night on his little mouse, as he had come to think of Diana over the course of the day. He said brightly, "Quite right to remind me." He clapped his hands once. "Time for you to retire, dear Bailey. I'll manage from here on."

Bailey protested, "But I've only removed your tailcoat and Hessians, and I haven't yet told you -"

Max smiled his charming smile, the one Bailey never resisted, and cut him off with the words, "You're going to tell me the first rule of marriage is: A husband should never disagree with his wife."

"Yes, your lordship, that is, -"

Still smiling Max said, "I'm perfectly capable of removing my waistcoat and cravat myself" - he glanced in disapproval at the proper dressing gown Bailey had laid across the bed for him - "and I have a rule of marriage requiring a direct

approach to my bride, one dispensing with several layers of propriety.” He winked then wagged his finger. “Off with you now.”

Bailey hesitated then left, clearly befuddled by his abrupt dismissal.

After Max stripped down to his shirt and pantaloons, he went to the closed door between his chamber and her ladyship’s, upon which he rapped smartly twice.

He opened the door and strode into his new wife’s quarters. Diana was seated at her dressing table with her back toward the door. Her abigail was behind her, unpinning her hair. At his entrance they both turned toward him and stared.

While he crossed the room, Diana rose to stand next to her abigail, mouth slightly agape. Before she could point out the obvious, he stopped a few feet from them, bowed toward his wife, and asked politely, “My dear, what’s your maid’s name?”

“Annie,” she managed.

He turned toward the maid. “You’re excused now, Annie. There’s a good girl.”

Annie, eyes wide, cast an enquiring glance at her mistress. Diana recovered enough to say with some dignity, “We’re not finished.”

“I can see that,” he said. “I’ll take care of the rest.” He made a shooining gesture. “Run along, Annie. You deserve time off. It’s been a long day.”

Annie’s gaze darted back and forth between her master and mistress. After a moment Diana gestured toward the door, giving Annie permission to leave.

The second the door closed behind the girl, Max stepped up to Diana and skimmed his fingers across her scalp, bringing her thick hair tumbling down her back and a shower of pins to the carpet. Her gasp of protest was stifled when he

further unnerved her by sliding her dressing gown from her shoulders and letting it puddle at her feet. He then went to work on the bows and ribbons holding her night rail together. A moment later it too floated to the floor. He grasped Diana's hands, holding them down at her sides, and drew her to him, not passionately, only protectively. He lifted his chin and set it on her head.

"I'm naked," she said on a shaky breath against his neck. Threaded through her soft voice he detected equal notes of outrage and disbelief. She began to tremble.

"I know," he soothed.

"But I'm naked," she repeated. Outrage seemed to take the upper hand.

He rubbed the crown of her head with his chin. "You'll get used to it."

"I don't think I will."

"Over time you will. It's the first of Darden's Rules."

Her body stilled. She said, "I've never heard of such a thing."

He lifted their clasped hands and rested them between her generous breasts. "Some of the married men in one of my clubs follow a set of guidelines." He released her hands and turned her so that her back was to him. He pressed gently against her shoulders to propel her toward the bed. He glanced down at her backside, which was shapelier than he had suspected. "The first rule is this: When the husband and wife are alone together in their bedchambers, the wife is always naked."

"Always?"

"Yes." He led her to the spot where the bedcovers had been turned back and drew her down so that she sat on the sheets. He took his place next to her on the counterpane. They were close but not touching. The branch of candles on the side

table cast a warm glow over her skin and created a deep shadow between her breasts. He had determined from the beginning he would enjoy his wedding night. He began to think it might be better than he had anticipated.

“Don’t look!” she cried in some alarm, apparently feeling his scrutiny.

He obligingly turned his head away. “I won’t until you’re comfortable.”

“I won’t get comfortable,” she complained. “Whatever the rule is, it’s not fair.”

“You think not?”

“Not now, with me naked and you dressed, and especially not in winter.”

He chuckled quietly. “Ah, a practical point. In winter I’ll make sure the fires in our chambers burn brightly. But there’s a good reason why I’m dressed and you aren’t.”

“There is?” she echoed skeptically, still obviously vexed.

“A woman’s arousal is deeper and takes much longer to emerge than a man’s, which is right on the surface most of the time. I’m dressed so I can restrain my own desire and attend to your pleasure first. You’re naked primarily so you can settle into your body, which will make it easier for you to accept mine. I’m hoping that over time you’ll also come to find my admiration of your nakedness enjoyable. For the moment I’ll not look, as I’ve said, until I feel you’re ready.”

“That may take a while.”

Was that a glum note he heard in her voice? She was honest in the expression of her feelings, in all events. He smiled. “We have all night.”

She paused then ventured, “There’s no hurry?”

“None whatsoever.”

She said nothing more, apparently content to absorb his comments in silence. She was a quiet little thing. On their tour of the estate following the wedding breakfast, he had thought she didn't have much to say for herself. Thinking back on their ride now, he had to acknowledge, in fairness to her, that she already knew a good deal about Thornton Park and so did not require a lot of discussion about it. Her thoughtful appraisal of her current situation, even while he could sense she was struggling to hold on to her dignity, struck him as desirable. She had made her dislike of the first rule clear without enacting him a drama about it.

After a moment she asked, "Does the same rule hold for mistresses?"

He had to suppress a smile at the inappropriate nature of the question. "No, it's a rule only for wives."

"I see," she said slowly. "Mistresses probably already know to be naked without the rule."

He now had to suppress a laugh. He also wanted to divert her from the topic of mistresses, so he made a swift offensive maneuver. Keeping his face averted, he placed his hands on her knees and spread them apart. Her horrified intake of breath expressed her great displeasure, and she put all her muscle power into closing her knees again. She was no match for his strength.

"No, no," he said gently. "You need to keep your legs open. I'll show you why." He closed her knees and held them together with one hand. With his other hand he caressed her back. "When your legs are together, your whole back is tense." He placed both hands on her knees again and opened them. "Now your low back is more relaxed. Sitting this way is a release for you."

He kept his hands on her legs until he felt her resistance lessen. When she settled into the position, he lightly rubbed her knees before withdrawing his hands. He made sure to keep his gaze away from her.

“I want all of you to be relaxed,” he said. “Every muscle.”

Again she said nothing, but he could feel her quivering in shock and indignation. Her breath pattern suggested she was striving for equilibrium. Relaxation was well beyond her. He would leave her be for the moment.

Now that Diana had brought up the subject of mistresses, his thoughts drifted to his last one. Juliana had always been powdered and perfumed for him, with his gifts of jewelry winking on her earlobes and wrists. In his presence she was not always naked, strictly speaking, because she would greet him wearing a charming negligee meant to tease. She had a predilection for fur-lined mules with little heels that clicked gaily against any uncarpeted flooring. Juliana’s conversation was sparkly and enticing and utterly without content.

His little mouse made quite a contrast. At the moment he found her quiet simplicity attractive. He attributed his reaction to the charm of novelty.

After a while she asked, “What’s the second rule?”

Her question brought him out of his reverie.

“If there’s a first rule,” she said to his lack of response, “there must necessarily be a second.”

The contrast between Juliana and his wife widened. Juliana would never have been capable of such a feat of logic. “The second rule is that the husband makes all the decisions regarding the couple’s sexual relations.”

He could feel her gaze swerve to him. He turned and looked directly into her eyes. They were her best feature, narrow but long and slanted up at the corners. The candlelight turned them bright silver when the sunlight earlier in the day had rendered them a flat grey. The candlelight also turned her masses of drab blonde hair to caramel. She would never be a beauty with her snub nose and wide mouth. But her eyes, her hair, her breasts, her arse, and all her fresh skin were more than enough to tempt a husband on his wedding night.

Still holding her gaze he answered the question he read in the depths of her eyes. "Yes, all the decisions."

"But only in our bedchambers, is that right?" she asked.

He smiled. "I said all decisions regarding our sexual relations. I do not limit them to a place, such as the bedchamber." He saw her eyes widen at the idea that sexual relations might take place somewhere else, but he did not develop this theme. Instead, he answered the essence of her question. "In all matters other than our sexual relations I will take as much direction from you as you do from me."

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How many rules were there? she wondered. Furthermore, what did it mean for him to make all the decisions regarding sexual matters? And where could sexual relations take place other than the bedchamber? The stables came to mind, but she had no way to imagine a scene there in any detail. Nor did she ask the other questions because she was too overwhelmed to be sitting, naked, on the edge of her bed next to a man – her husband! – with her legs spread, as if she were some vulgar woman or a country boy with no manners. She said the thing uppermost in her

mind,

“This is embarrassing.”

“Then let’s take your mind off matters.”

“How?”

“Tell me about your beaus, which is to say now, your *former* beaus.”

“I’ve never had a beau.”

He replied lightly, “A woman is always at her most interesting when she is lying.”

She countered swiftly, “I’m not lying.”

“Do not tell me the vicar is not interest in you.”

“I don’t think he ... that is ... well ....”

“Precisely,” he said on a humourous note. “And a certain doctor in the village.”

She was surprised into saying, “Doctor Marsh?”

“Ah, so that’s his name.”

She saw her mistake. She should not have named him. However, she had lately wondered about Doctor Marsh’s regards and comments, all of which were friendly and some of which were warm. At the moment she was having the first conversation she had ever had in her life with a man alone, and she was having it naked and acutely embarrassed. Fortunately, the turn in conversation caused curiosity to trump embarrassment. She saw no reason not to ask,

“What makes you say the vicar and the doctor were interested in me?”

“When I encountered the good doctor in the village yesterday, his hostility

toward me was only slightly better concealed than that of the vicar, who, poor fellow, had to pronounce us husband and wife this morning.”

At the brief ceremony in the village church she had hardly noticed anything beyond her own nervousness. She ventured, “You might be mistaken.”

“A man does not mistake when another is interested in his woman.”

She wondered if this were true. Since she did not have any real experience in this domain, she couldn’t pursue the topic. She decided to be honest. “Normally a woman my age would know such things, but owing to – ”

He interrupted, “How old are you?”

“Four-and-twenty.”

“Ah, that’s right,” he said. “You’re six years younger than Richard.”

“Yes, well, the fact is my one and only season was interrupted by tragedy.”

“Jane’s passing. Of course I remember.”

She said, as if from far away, “It was such a perfect pregnancy, no one could have predicted the outcome.”

“And then you stepped into the role of mother.”

Her memory of that horrible time was a blur, but she recalled how Max had been a good friend to Richard in those dark days and months. She counted in her husband’s favour his ability to be constant in his masculine friendships. She wondered whether constancy would mark his love relationships, but then she had no way of knowing if he had ever been in love. She put the topic out of his love life out of her mind in order to concentrate on the matter at hand.

She nodded and said, “Yes, I became mother to Sebastian.” She shrugged. “But

even before that, early on in my season, I can't say I had any great experience with men."

"Did you dance at the balls?"

"I danced."

"Then where was your lack of experience?"

During her abbreviated season she had assumed the vast majority of her partners asked her to dance out of duty, since her fine family name was her main attraction. She had always been philosophical: not every woman could be a beauty. Since her husband could see her plainness for himself, his question was a strange one. She didn't know how to respond.

Fortunately he didn't require an answer. Instead he asked another question.

"Have you ever been kissed?"

She couldn't help but smile. "Once."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What happened next?"

She had no idea what he was asking. "Why, nothing."

"I see," he said gravely. "His kisses did not awaken in you any response and so he went away to sea, crushed, never to lay eyes on you again."

She laughed. "Absurd! He lives in Surrey and in London, and I see him often."

"However, you did refuse him."

She wasn't going to talk about this subject, because it was still a little painful and probably always would be. Thomas Wilford was her first love from childhood

and, she had thought, her true love for life. At a ball during her truncated season he had kissed her once on a balcony. The very next day, it seemed, her brother had suddenly needed a housekeeper and baby Sebastian a mother. A year later, when Thomas told Diana his parents required him to marry Caroline, she had understood. He needn't have invented the story. She had been his childhood playmate, while Caroline was his adult love. Caroline was pretty. And lively. Yes, Caroline's father was not only a marquis but also richer than Diana's family. Nevertheless, Diana had no difficulty working out what must have been Thomas's real feelings toward Caroline. She sighed. None of it mattered at the moment, because she realised Max was only trying to goad her into telling him her secrets.

"No, I didn't refuse him," she said. "He married a dear friend of mine, I wished them happy, and the three of us remain fast friends to this day. There's no sad story here."

He paused at length before he said, "You took on a heavy burden that wasn't yours, and I'm sure the first few years were difficult. However, Sebastian has been well out of the nursery for some time and you could have had your choice of any number of men these past few years."

"No one has offered for me," she pointed out.

He flicked a finger under her chin. "A man needs some encouragement."

"You didn't need any."

"That's because after careful deliberation I knew exactly what I wanted."

Her mouth dropped open, and she turned to look at him. "You didn't think about your proposal at all, did you?"

He frowned a bit. "I believe I just said the opposite."

She felt smug, and her smile no doubt reflected her feeling. "When you proposed, you assured me you had given your choice much thought," she reminded him, "and so it was your slight emphasis on the words *careful deliberation* that gave you away – as if you needed to reinforce the misimpression you gave me earlier."

He murmured, "I have just married a woman who listens, analyses, and then speaks her mind. I'll have to remember that."

She wasn't going to speak her entire mind. She had just determined he hadn't needed any encouragement from her because his emotions were not engaged, as were – according to Max – the vicar's and Doctor Marsh's.

In some triumph she said, "So you're not going to deny it."

"If we're speaking of impulsive action, my dear, I can only wonder why you accepted my entirely spur-of-the-moment proposal."

She was shocked – no delighted! – no shocked that he admitted his proposal had been whimsical. He really was as rash as Richard always said.

"Well, wife?"

She could not tar him with the brush of rashness without also getting some on herself. She said rather primly, "You convinced me to do my duty."

He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. While he kissed her fingers, he slanted her a very sly glance. He shook his head. "That's not it, and so I ask again. Why did you accept my proposal?"

She said what she thought was the truth, "I want children."

"Then we're of like mind."

She felt her heartbeat quicken and thought she felt fear at mention of children, which could only be begot one way. She said in a rush, "What if this doesn't work? Me being naked, I mean, and ... and with my knees like this .... I'm not relaxed."

He lowered their clasped hands to her thigh. With his free hand he cupped her chin, turned it toward him, and tilted her face up. His gaze was piercing, causing her heart to spasm. His lips curved up in a half-smile. "Your pupils are dilated a delicious black leaving only a slim ring of silver around your irises, and your breathing is just the way it should be now." He let go of her chin. He released the hand on her thigh. "I'm going to touch you." So saying he put his hands on her shoulders and smoothed them first up her neck and then down her arms. Still holding her gaze with his, he circled her wrists with his thumbs and forefingers. "Your skin is also just right, warm and a bit dewy."

She didn't know what was happening to her, it was all so new, with her heart racing and her skin tingling.

"I'm going to look at you now," he said. "I believe you're ready for it." He lowered his eyes, and his gaze roamed her body. He nodded. "Yes, definitely ready. See how your nipples have peaked on their own?"

She looked down at herself at the same time he released her wrists. The next thing she knew, he grasped her waist and lifted her up as if she weighed no more than a baby. He turned her so that she was sitting on his knees, facing him, her legs spread on either side of his thighs. When she recovered from this latest surprise of finding herself straddling his legs, she discovered she was not as embarrassed as she

might have expected to be. Her half-acceptance of this new position might have been due to the distraction of his hands caressing her breasts and her fascination with his absorbed expression as he played with her nipples. While he rolled them gently between his thumbs and forefingers she squirmed on his thighs. This action caused his lips to curve up a fraction, but he did not lose his concentration or focus of interest.

“Beautiful,” he said after a moment. He slid his hands around her back and pulled her closer to him. He lowered his head and put his lips first on one nipple and gave it a lingering kiss then moved his lips leisurely to the next.

She gasped at the pleasurable sensations ricocheting through her body.

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He tilted his head up. “You like this?” Since his question required no answer, he continued, “We’ll introduce kissing on the lips” – he paused to reflect then decided – “later. For now it’s enough to keep our attention” – here he slid his hands back around her sides, smoothed them over her thighs, and brought them to stop so that his thumbs were pressed at her very crux – “here.”

He parted her delicate folds with his thumbs. He sought her pearl and found it already slick. He caught the sweet scent of her arousal. Very inspiring. With both thumbs he circled her pearl slowly then slid his fingers into her folds, gathering the moisture. He glanced up and met her gaze. Her lips were slightly parted. He read on her face and in her eyes her confusion and desire and eagerness and embarrassment, and he decided the combination of emotions was entirely charming. He was inclined to congratulate himself on his choice of wife. Outside the

bedchamber his little mouse would give him not a moment of trouble, while inside it – and anywhere else he decided to engage in sexual relations – she was likely to give him quite a lot of passion.

Which was beginning to grow before his eyes and at his fingertips. Lovely. He saw her close her eyes then open them determinedly. She blinked once and closed them again. She suppressed a moan. Such a promising beginning. His patience was paying off. Before it wore off, however, he needed to make adjustments.

He stilled his fingers, bringing her eyes open. He whispered into her ear. “Help me to take off my shirt, if you would, please.”

She reached out and moved her fingers down the row of buttons, managing a little clumsily to release each one in turn. Arriving at his waistband she tugged and withdrew his shirttails. She hesitated then opened his shirt to slide it off his shoulders. He liked the interest she gave to his bare chest.

In order to get the shirt off, he had to release the hold on his treasure. With a few shrugs he was able to toss the shirt aside, after which he laid her down. He arranged her with her arms above her head, wrists crossed. He placed his palms against hers and smoothed his fingers up hers, to open their slight cramp. He feathered his fingers over her eyelids, closing them. Then he ran his hands down her arms to her armpits, over her breasts, down her belly, around her hips, and under her thighs. He put a forearm under each knee and bent them so that her feet were on the bed. Then he delicately widened her knees. This time she did not resist him. He ran his eyes over her and thought he had never seen a more delicious expanse of soft, white, firm flesh. He was going to enjoy sinking into it.

He removed his pantaloons and small clothes and stretched out beside her. He propped an elbow on the bed and put his head in his hand. With the other hand he dipped his fingers back into her folds. When she opened her eyes at his touch, he bent over her and kissed each eyelid in turn, forcing her to close them again. Then he brought her to her point of points, which was a very good thing, because by now the sight and feel of her had strained his patience, and the sounds of her moans were near to breaking it.

He moved over and lay on top of her, keeping most of his weight on his elbows, which were crooked at her sides.

Before he entered her, he whispered. "I'm going to have to hurt you."

She whispered back, "I know. It's not your fault."

He pushed in a fraction. She was hot and tight and wet. "Are you all right?"

She took a deep breath. "I think so."

He loved the feel of her breasts against his chest. "Good, but let me know, if you're uncomfortable" – he continued to enter her – "or want me to go more slowly."

He met her natural resistance to his entrance and paused.

She said, somewhat doubtfully, "Are we supposed to be doing this?"

"Yes," he assured her, preparing himself to break the barrier.

"No, I mean talk, while you're ... um ....."

He'd never bedded a virgin. "Normally, no. In this case, I thought it'd be better for you if you could tell me what was on your mind."

She paused then said, low and sweet, "The talk in Parliament concerning proposed corn laws is causing a stir in the village."

When he registered what she had said, an involuntary thrill coursed through him. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her. She opened her eyes, which were dancing with mischief, put a hand over her mouth, and started giggling.

He knew just what to do. He withdrew from her, sat up then pulled her up, rather roughly, while he simultaneously swung his legs over the side of the bed. He slung her across his knees, face down, arse up. He planted a hand firmly in the middle of her back and caught her legs between his to minimize her thrashing.

With his free hand he rubbed his palm over her shapely white globes – she had a very attractive arse – and said, “Naughty wives need to be punished. It’s Darden’s third rule of marriage.”

“Oh, no!” she said, trying to pull her head up so that she could see him. “I didn’t mean to be naughty. It’s just that it felt so absurd to be stuck ... like a pig! ... that I couldn’t resist saying the most absurd thing I could think of.”

“As I said: naughty.” He continued to rub her buttocks in order to bring the blood up to prevent her from bruising.

“No, not naughty,” she countered with spirit, “absurd!” Her writhing to be released had no effect on him whatsoever. “That’s what my comment was!”

He stilled his hand and queried quietly, “Are you contradicting me?”

She caught her breath and went limp, but only for a moment. The next her whole body tensed again. “Does this count as one of those decisions the husband gets to make regarding sexual relations?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re not really going to spank me, are you? That seems a bit ... strange. Extreme, perhaps.” She added, “Not – not what I would expect from a well-bred gentleman.”

He chuckled softly and commented, “What a valiant attempt to appeal to my better nature.”

“Yes,” she said brightly, if a little indistinctly because her hair was falling all over her face, “your better nature!”

He removed his hand from her buttocks, took a handful of hair, and lifted it so he could look at her. “My dear,” he said in dulcet tones, “you have shown me that you like to play. Given that, I’m going to deny neither of us this pleasure.”

“This pleas -? -aarg!”

He had let go of her hair and smacked her a sharp one where her buttocks met the tops of her thighs. He had no intention of hurting her, and he knew the exact force to exert for the initial pain, slight enough, to resolve itself into desire. Such a beautiful arse to redden with a only half-dozen swats, for he wanted this be over almost as soon as it began, so that she wouldn’t have a chance to get into her head and decide she needed to be resentful or angry.

When he finished the quick spanking, he thrust his fingers between her legs and found exactly what he had hoped. She was now even wetter, so he determined she had loved this little bum burning. Just to make sure, he pulled her head up by her hair and saw her eyes glistening with tears and desire. With no further ceremony, he let go of her hair then grasped her waist and lightly tossed her on her back on the bed, stretched out over her again, and in one stroke entered her hot

liquid silk smoothly and completely.

He pushed right through her barrier. He didn't worry about the possible pain he had caused her because she was already milking him and moaning so loudly he no longer felt the need to attend to her. He gave himself over to a very delightful ride.

When they were finished, he eased off of her. He got out of bed and went to the washstand where a bowl of now tepid water sat. He brought it and a washcloth back to bed. He placed the bowl by the bed, dipped the cloth then moved over her. When he began to pry her legs apart, she sat up.

"Oh, my goodness, no, no!" she protested, trying to scoot away from him. She swiped at the washcloth. "I can do it myself!"

He held the cloth away from her. "You are not the one to decide."

She halted her movement but not before clamping her legs together. "It's too ... too intimate. After everything else, please, no, no more."

He merely shook his head and leaned toward her. He spread her legs and attended to his task, enjoying himself greatly and thinking that ownership of a woman's quim was a fine thing. When he finished, he wiped himself then let the washcloth fall into the bowl on the floor. He lay her back down and pulled her against his side. "There now," he said quietly, as he stroked the top of her head. He slid his hand down her hair so that he could free it from being pinned to the bed by her shoulder.

"Thank you," she said then murmured meditatively, "So this is what all the fuss is about."

He chuckled and went back to stroking the top of her head.

Some good while later, he turned her sleeping body toward him. She was neither fully aware nor fully aroused, but he didn't care. He entered her without further ado and took his pleasure. By the time he was finished she was fully awake and possibly even a bit confused, because she didn't seem to know whether to fight him off or embrace him. He decided the matter by slinging her legs around his hips and wrapping her arms around his neck. He nuzzled her nape and placed his lips against her skin. He inhaled her sweetness that combined a tang of woman with vanilla.

He simply wanted her to get used to him, but he could tell she had felt a spurt of pleasure during this passage but had not come to completion. Unmet desire on her part would be good for the next passage he had in mind. Just for good measure, he fished for the washcloth in the now cold bowl of water and cleaned up his wife who turned cranky at his efforts. He settled them back to sleep, confident she would enjoy the way he would warm her up later.

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She slowly came to awareness of her surroundings. The candles had long ago guttered in their sockets, and it was still the dead of night, just as it had been the last time she had been roused from slumber to wakefulness to find a man on top of her and in her. This time she was lying on her side, and she felt something poking at her buttocks. Her first thought was: *Oh no, not again.*

Oh yes, again.

The next thing she knew she was turned on her stomach, her hips were

hoisted in the air, her breasts pressed against the linens, and he was behind her. She felt his hands frame her hips and his knees spread her legs. He pressed his groin flush against her buttocks, and his member slid between her legs. His hands slid around her hips, over her belly, and he found the places he had found earlier, the ones she had previously hardly known existed.

His fingers stroked the bud between her legs. It swelled beneath his touch, just as it had the first time he had touched her, when she had been straddling his legs. This time the new position – starkly submissive with her legs splayed and her arse high up – increased her sensitivity, and her eagerness for more flamed through her instantly and beyond her control. His fingers glided and slid. He explored her nether lips, swirled around her entrance, gathered moisture then moved back and put exquisite pressure on her nub. She was vaguely aware of moaning her pleasure. When one of his fingers started to go back high and press at a different entrance, she froze.

He stilled the movement of his finger at her puckered rosebud. He bent forward and whispered into her ear, “Don’t worry. Nothing with happen now, love. I’m simply awakening you to all of your body, particularly the parts that interest me most.” He took a deep breath and braced a forearm around her waist, pulling her tight against him. With his other hand he guided himself into her slick entrance.

Being stretched and filled was still new but now not so alien. She felt the benefits of the position because he could be both inside her and manipulate her in the way that was shocking, humiliating, and pleasurable all at once. Soon her shock and humiliation were swamped by her pleasure, and she realised her husband now

had both more control and more ability to unleash his power. With his hands on her hips, he pounded into her. She felt the force and wanted more. She pushed back, reveling in the exquisite unspooling of all hesitation, limitation, and inhibition. When that mysterious, unexpected, beautiful feeling glittered through her veins and muscles and sinews, rendering her body rigid with the touch of the infinite, she further lost all will to consider herself a separate entity, to live apart from his body. At the same time he collapsed on her back.

She savoured the aftershocks of pleasure darting through her each time he pulsed against her, evidently continuing his own pleasure. She lay there boneless, hazily experiencing her body as a bowl of thick white cream. He eventually withdrew. He rearranged their limbs so that she was on her side, he was on his back, and his hand lay heavily on her raised lip. As she regained normal breathing and the mental gauze created by her sensual intoxication cleared, she began to collect herself. She was dimly aware of the power of this act of joining. She had no words to name what this power might do to her, but she felt an uncomfortable feeling lurking behind a dark corner in her mind, and a thread of fear rippled through her. It was thick enough to snag her wandering attention. An errant memory drifted into her head of the moment her husband had proposed. Her nerves had jangled with surprise, disbelief, elation ... and fear. But fear of what?

Her mental gears were too crunchy, and she had no energy to sift through her feelings to find an answer. However, even in half-consciousness she was ever practical. Before falling off the edge into a deep sleep, she registered a far-off thought to keep some part of herself to herself.

The next thing she knew a man's hand was moving between her thighs and another hand was at her shoulder, turning her over.

Groggily she swatted at the hand between her thighs. She managed to say, thickly, "Don't bother me. Go away."

To her relief she felt him leave the bed. She cracked her eyes. She could tell from the scurrying shadows the day had not yet broken, but it was creeping close. She snuggled into the covers, lazing between sleep and consciousness, enjoying a capacious space of mental ease, which was all the more delicious for the marrow-deep satisfaction she felt in her every bone in her body. This exceedingly pleasant state came to an abrupt stop. One moment she felt her husband's weight on the bed and the next moment her wrists were imprisoned and her arms drawn up over her head.

Her eyes flew open. She tugged at her arms and turned her head enough to see her husband tying her wrists to a slat in the headboard with a long silk tie. She looked up at him. He was kneeling at her side, looming above her. He looked down at her. Through the shadows she could just discern a slight gleam in his eyes and the outlines of a dressing down he was wearing. The bedcovers had been disarranged, and her breasts were completely exposed. He couldn't see every detail of her body, but with him now dressed and her naked, she felt unbalanced and embarrassed, as she had been at the beginning of the evening.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, wide-awake now and indignant.

He pulled the bedcovers completely off her body, spread her legs, and shifted his body to kneel between them. "You forgot that I make all the decisions concerning

our sexual relations.”

She caught the note of humour in his voice. A fizz of excitement spurted through her. She understood her situation. “You’re going to punish me for telling you to go away?”

He nodded. “You’re quick. I don’t have to explain why you are to be punished.”

She managed, breathless, “Will you tell me what my punishment is to be?”

“Orgasm denial.” He nudged her thighs farther apart. “Tit for tat.”

She wasn’t sure exactly what he meant, but she soon found out. He stroked and slid his fingers over and around her slit, and when she was about to find the current in the stream that would send her over the glorious waterfall, he stopped his ministrations. She searched in the darkness to meet his gaze. She saw his brows raised in anticipation, and she was able to read the challenge in the depths of his eyes.

When he didn’t say anything, she realized he was waiting for her to speak. “I was half-asleep when I denied you,” she said in her defense, “and didn’t mean to deny you.” She was going to say *It’s not fair*, but she didn’t think such a statement would get her very far. Neither did her excuse of being half-asleep. He shook his head.

She tried again. “I’m sorry.”

Still no good.

“All right then,” she said. She made a move to get up but succeeded only in rattling the headboard. “You can untie me now.”

He clamped his hands down on her thighs then slid them down and around her crux. He stroked and feathered and swirled. Once again when she was about to dive with abandon into the warm and wonderful river, he drew back and put his hands on his hips. Once again he seemed to be waiting for her to say something.

She could think of nothing to say.

He repeated the process one or two more times. Her discomfort mounted.

At one point he said, "I said you were quick, but apparently I misjudged." He glanced toward a window. The curtains were drawn, but slivers of early morning light squeezed through. "We can keep this up all morning, if need be."

She imagined that whatever this torture was about, it would be far worse if he could see every crevice of her body and every expression on her face. There were still enough shadows to give her a measure of cover, and she wanted to end this as soon as possible.

"No, please," she said, "not all morning. Please."

His expression lighted. "Ah?"

"Please?" she ventured again in a small voice.

He nodded and gave her a smile of satisfaction. "Please what?"

She groaned involuntarily. He wanted her to beg for it. She twisted against her bonds, which only made him smile wider. She writhed inside. Begging for his touch seemed a more humiliating prospect than anything else they had done so far.

He sat back on his heels, waiting. When he was through waiting, he moved toward her again, and she said quickly, "Yes, please ... I'm ready. Really I am. I'm begging you to end this."

He paused mid-movement. "Surely you can speak more sweetly than that."

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath then said, as evenly as she could, "Dear husband, how you pleasure me. I beg you to touch me and burst the dam to let me swim out into the ocean with you."

He cocked his head. He formed his lips soundlessly around the words *swim out into the ocean*. His expression was considering. Then, "Very prettily said."

She was relieved once by his verdict and twice by decision to end her quivering frustration, which he did by quickly bringing her to quivering pleasure. He then released her wrists from their prison of the belt to his dressing gown. A few moments later he satisfied her again with his own satisfaction. This time he didn't linger at her side. Instead he took his tie, belted the gown he still wore, and got out of bed. He pulled the covers down, turned her on her stomach, and administered several quick spansks on her bum.

"Ow!" she exclaimed, turning her head to look up at him. "What's that for?"

He gave her three more then replied, "You can sleep as long as you like, but since I won't be at your side, I'm giving you a way to remember me." He reached between her legs and touched her in a way that raised her attention but did not fully arouse her. "I'm leaving you with this: Darden's fourth rule is that all the wife's orgasms belong to the husband."

She did not immediately seize his meaning.

At her momentary incomprehension he laughed. "I didn't mean to put an idea in your head, but at the same time I'm glad I did, since it wasn't already there. What I mean is, when I leave, you are not to touch yourself to seek pleasure."

“I hadn’t been intending to do so,” she said. She had also not been intending to put the provocative note in her voice when she said so, but there it was.

He chuckled. “You may think about it, but you may not act on the thought. I’ll know if you do. And then you’ll experience real punishment.”

She could only gape at him.

He gave her one last light swat and said, “You’d be wise to practice sitting before coming down for breakfast. You won’t want to display your discomfort to the world.”

He turned and left the room.

She pulled up the bedcovers in a huff. Now she had four rules to conjure with. Rule number one: the wife is always naked in the bedroom. Rule number two: the husband makes all the decisions concerning sexual relations. What was the third? She momentarily drew a momentary blank. Oh, yes, naughty wives get punished. And now rule number four: all the wife’s orgasms belong to the husband.

She turned the last rule over in mind. Good thing she was too tired to try breaking it. As she drifted off, she wondered if rule number four couldn’t be considered a corollary of rule number two. By that logic, so was rule number one. So, then, what about rule number three? Logic. No logic. And who was this Darden of Darden’s Rules? Finding no answer to any of her questions, she fell into much-needed sleep.

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Max was feeling quite energetic when he returned to his bedchamber. Bailey was naturally not in attendance, since Max did not ordinarily rise before ten o’clock,

and the sun was only now just cresting over the horizon. His uncharacteristic early rising meant that he could attend to the first item of business: flush out the curious and satisfy their curiosity.

He strode to his bedchamber's door to the hallway and pulled it open. His action was so swift and unexpected that the pair of servants hanging about her ladyship's bedchamber door were startled into begging his lordship's pardon and stammering inventions of what they were doing precisely there at this unlikely hour.

Max figured the two fools to be the unfortunate pair who had drawn the short straw to stand the last watch of the wedding night. He waved away their incoherent explanations with a trenchant, "Tell your colleagues his lordship took his pleasure four times and pleased his ladyship six times – at least. Now be good fellows and send me Annie."

Their mouths dropped open in a comical mixture of awe and dismay.

Since, in any case, some account of his wedding night was going spread to the staff in all the major houses of the county by nightfall, Max was happy enough to let his prowess be known. However, at no time did he wish to figure as a satyr. "I need to give Annie instructions for her ladyship's morning. Enough now!"

With another wave of his hand the hapless pair stumbled off down the hallway.

Bailey arrived a minute later, full of mortification to have not been in his master's chambers at the appropriate moment. Max soothed him with the information that nothing could spoil his good mood, whereupon Bailey firmly

pressed his lips together, which told Max all he needed to know about how quickly the tally of his wedding night had spread throughout the manor house.

Max was ready for the day at the extraordinary hour of seven o'clock. When he left his room he found Annie wide-eyed and fair trembling outside his door. He was a dab hand at putting young girls at ease. He smiled benignly and said, "Thank you so much for coming, Annie, for now you and I can make her ladyship's morning all that she deserves." He had to suppress a smile at Annie's visible relaxation in the face of his mild words. "I would like you to look in on her every fifteen minutes to half-an-hour to see if she has stirred. I'd like her to be able to rest as long as she'd like. When you see she's ready to rise, please have a nice hot bath ready for her."

Annie was near to glowing pink with pleasure at this prospect of serving her ladyship the morning after her wedding night, and she assured her kind lordship she would do exactly as he requested.

He descended to the dining room where he made very good work of a copious breakfast of ham and eggs, some fried potatoes, a cheese soufflé, several biscuits, two bowls fresh strawberries, and a tankard of small ale. Then it was off to his library where he thought to tackle some of the thornier financial issues his brother had left behind. He asked to schedule a late-morning meeting with his bailiff, but this worthy meeting had to be postponed because shortly after ten o'clock he received two unexpected guests, namely Richard and Sebastian. He met them in the dining room, the butler having imagined the hour suggested the pair would want breakfast.

Richard presented himself under the pretense that Sebastian – a strapping

boy of seven who likely did not appreciate having to don a dress coat, crisp shirt, and nankeens he was not supposed to soil – greatly desired seeing his auntie and would not be put off. Richard explained, entirely unnecessarily, that of course Diana figured in Sebastian’s life not so much as his auntie but rather as his mother, and so Max was to understand it would have been cruel on Richard’s part to deny Sebastian’s fervent desire to see her.

It seemed to Max that Sebastian was more interested in the strawberries than in seeing his beloved aunt, but he kept this thought to himself. “Sebastian will have to wait,” was his somewhat amused response, “because Diana’s not down yet.”

Richard blinked, astonished, “Not down yet? What is she about?”

“At the moment I don’t know,” Max said, “but my guess is she’s sleeping.”

“Sleeping?” Richard repeated, still incredulous. “Sleeping at this hour? Diana’s hardly slept beyond seven o’clock a day in her life, and her one day later than that was due to a slight head cold.”

“When I left her at six o’clock,” Max informed him, “she seemed to have every intention of staying in bed and sleeping.”

Richard glanced at Sebastian, noted his son was engrossed in choosing the plumpest of the berries, and fairly hissed at Max, “What did you *do* to her?”

Max derived an ignoble pleasure from being in full possession of a woman another man desperately desired. Yes, the other man was her brother, and, yes, the other man was a good friend. Nevertheless, he had not foreseen that his whimsical choice of bride would afford him such disparate pleasures as a wife who was playful and passionate in bed and the spectacle of a brother-in-law jealous enough to make

a complete cake of himself. In all ways Max's day was off to an excellent start.

With cool civility he inquired, "You don't mean for me to share the particulars of our wedding night, do you, my good man?"

Richard's chest puffed up, a flush crept up from under his collar, and he looked ready to deliver himself of his scathing opinion of Max's inglorious past, but Max headed him off with the query,

"More coffee?" Max lifted a finger, which brought a footman around to refresh his guest's cup. "Help me out, if you would, Richard. I've been meaning to ask you about the ins-and-outs of haying season."

With a little more coaxing, Max was able to get Richard onto the topic of estate management about which he was generally well informed, that was to say, better informed than Max. The more Richard spoke, the more Max decided to listen, and the more Max learned. Talk ran along friendly lines for the next hour and came to a stop only when Diana put in her appearance.

She entered the dining room and was about to utter her greetings, but the words never left her mouth because Sebastian immediately sprang up from the table and threw himself against her body, crying in delight, "Nani, Nani!"

Diana took him in her arms, pressed his face against her bosom, kissed the top of his head, and smiled down on him. She chided lovingly, "Little scamp! Did you tease your father to leave his accounts so that you could come plague me?"

Sebastian smiled up at his aunt with such blinding love and devotion that Max was moved to think that perhaps Sebastian had been the prime mover in engineering this most wildly inappropriate social call.

Sebastian had also stolen Max's march, and Max needed to retrieve his position. He rose and crossed to Diana's side, holding out his hand to her. She naturally had to accept it, at which point she also disentangled Sebastian from her, abjuring him to "be a good boy and show your new uncle your fine manners."

Max led Diana to the chair on his right, and as he seated her, she looked up at him with a bland smile and took her place without the least trace of wincing or squirming. His response was a nod of appreciation.

He, Richard, and Sebastian accompanied her for her late breakfast, after which Sebastian insisted she read him a book, his favourite, which he had had the foresight to bring. So Sebastian and Diana went to one of the saloons, while Richard and Max took a ride around Thornton Park, whereupon Max learned even more about the running of a large estate.

After a late luncheon the guests left. Diana made no comment to Max about the intrusive visit of her brother and nephew. He would have dearly loved to know her opinion about it, but he could not read it on her face. He forbore to ask.

The next few days and then weeks developed into a comfortable routine. Their nights were athletic, and they were together almost every night except for the few times Diana had been called to Wiley Cross for some emergency or other concerning either Sebastian or Richard. Their days were devoted to work. Max leaned ever so slightly on Diana for help, and ever so slightly more and more as the days passed.

The day came when Diana informed him, "Dear sir, I am indisposed. Is there a rule concerning this circumstance?"

He did not immediately understand.

“It’s not that I do not want to be naked this evening,” she explained, “it’s rather that I cannot in all practicality be naked.”

“Ah,” he said and hastily invented a rule. “During the wife’s courses the rules are suspended, and the husband retreats.” He saw his opportunity. “I’ll leave for London in the morning. There’s much for me to catch up on there.”

She nodded.

He left the next morning. She saw him off, but she did not ask him how long he was going to be gone or what he was going to do. It was just as well, since he did not know the answers to these questions. He knew only that he felt relief to leave the dust of Thornton Park behind him and looked forward to taking up the reins of his old life to the extent possible for as long as possible. He hardly spared a thought for his dependents. With Diana at the helm, she would not only look after the estate but also do all that was right for his brother’s relic and children ensconced in the Dower House.

His first act upon arriving in town was to open Blackwell House on Hanover Square, still festooned with black crepe. Once he moved in, having transferred his belongings from his snug house on Upper Curzon Street, he confronted another mountain of accounts, most of which looked to be in disarray, especially because he had been avoiding them for the past two months. As he sifted through them now, he suspected they had not been in good shape to begin with. The thought crossed his mind to bring Diana to town at some point and let her straighten them out. The next thought to cross his mind was to find a new mistress. However, somehow in the

press of things, the thought passed on, and he made no inquiries into the latest crop of delectable opera dancers.

Instead, he began to make the round of his clubs. Because his brother's death was still so recent, he could not engage in large social affairs. He could, however, attend smaller ones, such as respectable card parties. He could also attend less respectable ones, the kind frequented only by men or only by men of his class and women of another. Of course he had free rein to haunt the less respectable parts of town for boxing matches and deeper play where no one cared whether or not he was observing strict mourning. After a few days he noticed that things in town felt a trifle flat, but the slight pall was probably due to the fact that several of his most amusing cronies were somewhere else at the moment.

Wherever he went he received congratulations on his marriage, which he had duly announced in the usual places. No one seemed concerned he had not brought his new wife to town, but there were repeated and quizzical attempts to place her.

"Richard Wiley's sister, no?" was the usual opening. "Heard of her. Can't say I've ever seen her. Did she have a season?" When Max explained the circumstances of her life, his friends were inclined to suggest that Max must have found some kind of hidden treasure in Sussex. Max shrugged such comments off.

Somewhere in the midst of his second week in town he began noticing the speculative glances one or two of the respectable wives of several of his friends were casting him. Not openly, no. Only when they thought he wasn't looking. He'd long been the object of open regards from the less respectable wives of at the edges of his social circle. He never hesitated to flirt, and he sometimes accepted clear

invitations. However, these new looks from the respectable wives were not flirtatious. Then, what? He shook off the notion. He was imagining things.

After ten days in town he ran into George Lovehorn, a friend he regularly encountered at Brook's.

"Sorry you couldn't make our small dinner party last night," Lovehorn said by way of greeting.

Max was slightly taken aback, because he had not known of an invitation to this party. His social sense prompted him to caution. He coughed delicately into his fist and said, "A previous engagement, yes."

Lovehorn accepted the excuse without a blink. "I've already congratulated you on your marriage," he said and continued with a suggestive wink, "but now that I see your Diana, my wife's good friend, you know, in the role of Lady Blackwell, I'll simply say that you're a sly one."

Max bowed civilly. His thoughts took a quick turn to infer that his wife had recently dined with the Lovehorns. He made some noncommittal remarks, agreed to play a few hands of whist with Lovehorn later that evening, and the conversation came to its natural conclusion.

Max could not identify the emotions prowling around his breast, because they were unfamiliar, unsettling. By coincidence he had planned to return to Thornton Park the very next day, having decided that duty called. However he now delayed his return for another two days. Perhaps he hoped to prove to himself he was not keenly interested in the comings-and-goings of his little mouse.

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Diana was horrified to discover she missed her husband physically. At the same time she was glad for the distance from him. A couple of days after his departure, she was at his desk in the library, totting up a column of figures, when the whole of his plan unfolded in her mind's eye like a morning glory. She felt a rather strong pang – she couldn't help it – but she quickly buried it. Instead she decided to admire the beauty of his plan and how easily she had been led to go along with it.

He had surprised her with a proposal, married her two days later, imposed a strange set of rules for marriage that, just as strangely, were very effective in cementing her to him physically. She felt affection for him, as well, but she kept this budding feeling in check as much as she could. In the first weeks of marriage he had been consistently charming to her to the point, at times, of being solicitous. He was furthermore even-tempered and frequently lighthearted. However, when he was engaged with estate business, he always distant, as if he were somewhere else. In bed his focus was on her and pointed, too pointed sometimes, she thought, given the way he could never keep his hands away from those places between her legs. And he was a passionate man.

Her husband was also beloved by his staff. After that first morning, she noticed his retainers regarded him with awe, while Annie had put him on a pedestal. As a result of Annie's worship, Diana alternated between laughing and crying on the inside when Annie, while brushing her mistress's hair in the evenings, prattled on and on about his lordship's evident love for his new wife and how he was everything wonderful and good.

She didn't mind the responsibility he had tacitly turned over to her. She didn't resent him for it, either. She was good at what she did, and she rather liked having the full control at Thornton Park she never had at Wiley Cross, which was too frequently bedeviled by Thomas's ineptitudes. So, she didn't mind her responsibility, she didn't resent Max for it, but her calm acceptance didn't mean she wasn't also a little hurt. She attributed the dent in her emotions to a chink in her emotional armour, the one last part of her little girl's heart that had never shriveled as a result of constantly witnessing her prettier sisters on this earth turning the heads of handsome young swains. This part of her heart still yearned to be loved and admired. It – willful organ knowing nothing of reality! – still clung to a belief that such was possible.

Diana was not surprised that Richard, once he heard Max had gone to London, solicited her help on a more frequent basis. At some point, however, she knew her involvement in Wiley Cross had to stop. Of course, she would always be mother to Sebastian, and she was happy for the times he and his tutor spent the day at Thornton Park. On those days Richard rode over to have luncheon, and in this manner the three of them reconstituted their family. Nevertheless, her life had changed, their lives had changed, and all three had to adjust accordingly.

At the end of the first week of Max's absence, Diana awoke with a blindingly brilliant idea, which she immediately acted upon. She sent a note over to Richard to inform him she would be going to London for a few days and would open the house on Grosvenor Square. In the days after her marriage she had sent personal notes to her many friends. This morning she sent another note to Laura Lovehorn, her

dearest friend, inquiring if she could call on her two days hence at Laura's London townhouse.

The reunion of the two friends was gratifying for both. Diana had an instant feeling of being her old self again as she was swept into Laura's arms and given a warm, welcoming hug. Laura was happy to clap eyes on her friend – her newly married friend! –and to hear about, as she phrased it, *absolutely everything!*

Laura drew Diana into her parlor saying, “Naturally we understand why your wedding had to be private, strictly family!, but you cannot imagine how much Jane and Elizabeth and Emma and I lamented not being able to be there with you, to dress you, counsel you, celebrate with you – oh, any numbers of things!”

Diana laughed and agreed and said whatever nonsensical thing came into her head as a response.

When they had settled themselves on the settee and Laura had rung for tea, Laura said with a provocative note in her voice, “And you married none other than Maximilian Routledge, the new Lord Blackwell! My!”

“Yes, well,” Diana said, colouring a bit, “we're neighbours.”

“Indeed you are,” Laura said with a playful arch to one brow.

“And ... and he needed a wife,” Diana added.

Laura dismissive “Pish!” stopped what Diana was going to say next. “You're going to unpack a bag of moonshine, and I'm not going to hear it. Instead, tell me your plans for Blackwell House.”

The tea arrived. Diana accepted a cup. She said offhand, “I have no plans for Blackwell House.”

Laura seemed surprised by this. "I'd imagine you'd want to put your personal stamp on it. Rehang a saloon or two. Nothing extravagant, necessarily. Just a change from what Eleanor might have done."

Diana stirred her tea meditatively. "Perhaps. I'm in no hurry. First, I'd have to go there and survey the situation."

Laura sat up. "You're not staying at Hanover Square?"

"No, I'm at our house in Grosvenor Square. That's where I always stay when I'm in London. Not that I come here so frequently."

"As I know!" Laura interpolated, somewhat vexed.

"Yes, well, it didn't occur to me to go to Blackwell House. I went to the place that's familiar."

"But you're a married woman now," Laura said with some deliberation.

"I have no intention of interfering with whatever my husband is doing in London," Diana said then added with a twinkle in her eyes, "Besides I came for a very particular reason of my own."

Laura responded with an answering twinkle and the words, "Which you will tell me about in a minute." Her expression became serious again. "But I am now going to press you on the point of not residing in Blackwell House."

Diana shook her head and said quietly, "It's not a love match, Laura."

Laura might have heard a note of hurt in her dear friend's voice because she next said brightly, "Well! And how long are you planning to stay?"

"A couple days. Two nights at most. More I cannot spare."

"And your particular errand in town, my dear?"

Diana was heartily glad of the change of subject. "I'm here for you to help me find a wife for Richard! Until he does, he will run me ragged, imagining I am still his trusty housekeeper."

Laura clapped her hands, completely delighted at the prospect of match-making and of helping Diana shed duties no longer rightly hers. Once they had run through likely names and devised ways that stopped short of being glaringly obvious for Richard to meet the marital prospects, their talk turned to other matters: Sebastian, Laura's children, the latest on-dits, household tips. They finished with plans for a social hour the next morning for the inner circle of five fast friends.

None of the ladies could have had the most distant guess this social hour would prove so revelatory. Since Laura arranged it, she held it at her house. Diana, Emma, and Jane arrived all at once. Elizabeth came a few minutes later. After much excited chatter and all manner of suggestions to Diana to bring her hair and dresses up to the latest stare of fashion, Emma asked, in all innocence,

"Tell us what the most surprising thing is you have discovered about being married!"

Diana laughed and said the first thing that came to mind, "I had no idea the term 'wedding night' referred to the whole night! It never before occurred to me that marriage would be such an interruption" – she trailed off when she saw four inquiring gazes fixed on her, and she finished her thought in a small voice – "to sleep."

The silence was electric.

Emma broke it. "You didn't sleep the whole night?"

Diana hastily repaired the misimpression. "Of course I slept! I only mean I didn't sleep the whole time." She added lamely, "You know."

It was apparent her four friends didn't. At first their questions were hesitant. They quickly became bolder. What time did the newlyweds retire? Diana estimated it at around eight or eight-thirty in the evening. And what time did her husband leave her side? Diana guessed it was just before the dawn. So her husband did not retire to his own bedchamber? Diana replied, well, no, he did not.

It took quite a bit of round-about-ation before one of the women was able to formulate the question, left delicately unfinished, "How many times ....?"

Diana frowned and contemplated her teacup. She looked up, made a face of extreme discomfort, and said, "It depends on what you're counting."

A full minute of exclamations followed this comment. When the hubbub died down, Laura said,

"Perhaps you will enlighten us, dear Diana." Her tone was almost reproachful, and she was looking at Diana as if to say *And you said your marriage isn't a love match!*

Diana was now acutely embarrassed, as embarrassed as she had been on her wedding night when she had first been stripped naked. Only this time she did not feel aroused. Rather she felt ashamed. She felt herself blushing.

"I'm not sure I can enlighten you," she said quietly. "I don't have the words for it. We all know that men, um, like women and" – she shot Laura a look, hoping Laura would understand Diana was talking about sex and not love – "what I've learned is that some husbands also like ... um ... to play with their wives."

“Yours is one of them, I gather,” one of them dared to say.

Diana managed to express in disjointed fashion the thought that, yes, he was.

“And do you like him playing with you?” another one of them dared to ask.

Diana’s blush became furious.

Although the conversation thereafter was more suggestive than explicit, Diana’s four friends acquired some very interesting ideas. They decided to continue their interactions with a shopping spree for Diana. Emma and Jane eventually went home. Diana was not permitted to dine alone, and so she ate with the Lovehorns who had also invited Elizabeth and her husband. Laura and Diana agreed to tell George, Laura’s husband, that dear husband Max was otherwise engaged this evening.

The next day Diana returned to Thornton Park.

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A few days later Max returned to his principal seat to find his wife in a front parlor in conversation with the head housekeeper. The two women were pouring over an inventory. At his entrance, his wife looked up, gave him a slight smile, and informed him she would be with him in a few minutes.

He was not pleased. In fact, if he were to indulge in a moment of honesty, he would acknowledge he was angry. This, however, was not that moment. Instead he regretted having limited his power of decision-making to their sexual relations. He would have very much liked to snap his fingers, demand her immediate attention, and have her explain her sojourn in London. And then put her over his knee. Or perhaps he would start by putting her over his knee and then let her explain herself.

He was used to thinking only of himself, which meant he was a self-centered man. But he was not an unfair one. Now that he was married he knew he could not alter willy nilly the dynamics of the relationship he himself had established.

So he cooled his heels in his library where he surveyed the unaccustomed order on his desk. He picked up the topmost ledger and began to flip through the pages. He easily saw where his brother's hand had ceased and his own began. Then he turned to the most recent pages and ran his eye down the columns. At the sight of Diana's neat numbers he felt something turn over in his chest, but he was in no mood to examine what it was. He put the ledger down and walked to one of the long windows. He looked out over a beautiful view of a prosperous estate in splendid summer. He hardly registered it. All his efforts were bent toward mastering his impatience.

By the time Diana arrived a few minutes later, as she had predicted, he had himself well in hand. He turned and smiled and held out his hand as he walked toward her.

She came forward, accepted his hand, and curtsied slightly.

He bent over her hand but did not quite kiss it. He had not yet introduced kissing into their interactions. He ran his eye over her. She wore her toilette with her customary unassuming air, but he had a nice enough eye for ladies' fashions to discern she had acquired a few of the latest touches, and her hair was more becomingly arranged to frame her eyes.

"You are looking well, my dear," he said.

She withdrew her hand and thanked him. She gestured toward the desk.

“Would you like me to show you what I’ve done in your absence?”

“I would rather hear about what you’ve done,” he said, gesturing away from the desk and toward a pair of chairs arranged near the window where he had stood.

She accepted his escort, and he helped to seat her. When she had settled her skirts, she put her hands in her lap, and looked at him, expectantly.

He sat down and put his elbows on the armrests of his chair, clasped his hands together, and propped his chin on them. He returned her enquiring gaze. After a moment, he said lightly, “I have already expressed my eagerness to hear about your activities.”

She seemed surprised. “I would prefer to show you,” she said, glancing at the desk, “because what I have mostly done is organize the accounts.”

“But that is very dull.”

“To you, perhaps,” she said. She must have seen on his face or in his eyes some flicker of the anger he was not yet willing to name because her eyes widened slightly and she opened her mouth only to close it again. “To – to many people, I am sure,” she said, “but not to me. I like making order of accounts. It’s like having all the sheets and pillowcases and towels neatly folded in the linen closet.”

He regained his composure. “I’m delighted to hear it. Your love of order is charming. But surely you did not sit, day after day, at the desk doing sums.”

She shook her head. “No, certainly. Sebastian came over. So did Richard on occasion.”

He dropped his forearms to the armrest and asked directly, “Why do you not tell me you went to London?”

Her expression was blank. "Why would I do that?"

"Because it would interest me."

"Oh," was all she said to this. She paused a moment then asked, "Would you also like me to tell you of the visits I made in the village while you were gone?"

"No, not particularly. I'm rather more interested in London, because I didn't see you there."

She looked uncomfortable. "I stayed at my home there."

"Your home is with me now."

Her discomfort increased. The harsh feeling in his chest eased. He liked playing the cat to his little mouse. She said, a bit hesitantly, "I didn't want to interfere with you." She brightened. "And I had an excellent reason for going, one I am sure you will approve of."

"Ah? I hope it is an excellent reason, and I hope I approve of it."

These expressed hopes threw her off a bit. With great pleasure he could practically see the gears of her mental machinery working, wondering if she was to be punished. He dearly wanted to spank her. However, he could think of no rule she might have violated by choosing not to go to Blackwell House. Until he thought of the reason, he would have to be content with seeing her less sure of herself than normal.

"Well?" he invited.

"I went to find Richard a wife," she said defensively, which would have been enough, but then she overplayed her hand by adding, with a ridiculous and endearing touch of hauteur, "I cannot run two estates alone, you know."

He smiled. He was glad his little mouse had a measure of feminine pique and was willing to show it. "Did you discover any promising prospects?"

"Oh, yes, quite a few."

"Good," he said and stood up. "This evening we'll dine at six, and we'll retire at eight."

She stood as well. "So, you approve of my reason for going to London?"

"I approve of the reason, but that is all I approve."

She waited for him to say more. When she understood he was not inclined to do so, she glanced once more at the desk. "Do you want me to show you -?"

He cut her off with the words, "You've been exceedingly helpful thus far, my dear, but from now on, I can manage."

She left him wearing a slightly puzzled expression. He did not seek her out the rest of the day, nor did he see her again until dinner. He remained in his library, at his desk. He bent his full attention to mastering an activity he had thought only a few scant weeks before would not be necessary for him to do and certainly not enjoyable.

Recent experience had enlarged his perspective on enjoyment. He had long known his principal pursuit was that of control – control of his personal life, his social life, and his sexual life. A man controlled his mistress from the day he engaged her to the day he dismissed her. Although Diana was now part of his sexual life and he was in control of their relationship, he was forcibly struck by how different was a wife from a mistress. He had already given his wife his name and all his worldly goods, so there was nothing further she had to ask of him. Or, at least, Diana had not

asked for anything further, not even a share in his social life. Which left hers out of his control. Having been made aware of one part of her life out of his control, he was fired with a desire to rein her in and curtail all her domains of influence, beginning with the one affecting him the most, namely the running of his estate. When so inspired, all was pleasurable to him.

He was fortunate to have a head for numbers.

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Over the next few days Diana became aware of a change in her husband and in the balance of their relationship. He hadn't said anything more about his disapproval about her trip to London, but she had a sense some feeling floated around him, hovering, one she couldn't quite put her finger on it. The best she could say was that she had the sense he had become, contradictorily, both more absent to her and more present. He was more absent in the sense he did not request her help as much as he had previously done. He did not request her help at all, now that she came to think about it, although they did routinely communicate on matters requiring coordination. He was also more present because she knew through various comments dropped here and there by the staff that he had come to take a strong interest in the running of the estate. The bailiff, in particular, seemed extremely pleased with the new lordship's stewardship.

She should have been pleased not only that her husband had taken up the reins but also that he had taken them up so efficiently. But she was not pleased. Not wholly, anyway. She didn't understand what he was doing, because his involvement seemed to negate his reason for marrying her, and although she had been hurt by

the realization he had originally thought of her as little more than a living breathing crutch, the withdrawal of his need for her made her feel a little useless. She hoped to be breeding soon in order to fulfill one of her duties. She made sure she attended to her sister-in-law and her daughters, because their care was another of her duties. She wanted to do it anyway, because she liked Eleanor so much. Nevertheless, no matter what she did, she had the growing feeling of being the wrong woman in the wrong position. Or something. She didn't know what, other than that she was out of sorts.

Unfortunately she could not attribute being out of sorts to pregnancy. The next time her women's courses came around, her husband did not decamp to London. He did not express disappointment and commented mildly only that it was early days yet. After three days he asked whether he could return to her bed, and when she asked him to wait another night, he did so, respectfully. The very next night he was back.

She was growing accustomed to the first rule of being naked in their bedchambers. She still found it a little odd, but she also found that her desire stirred the moment she was naked and in his company, making her very responsive to him when he decided to begin the night's activities. He had told her on their wedding night she would come to find his admiration of her nakedness enjoyable. She remembered thinking at the time he was not truly serious about admiring her nakedness, that he was only saying such to make her comfortable. But over time she had to acknowledge that, yes, he must find her body, at least, attractive, because there was no doubt he found her desirable and enjoyed their sport.

But it was easy for a man to take sexual interest in a woman, wasn't it?

One night, when they had finished their love making, she was wrapped in his arms, with her back to his front. She was relaxed enough to say,

"Oh, I do like this, you know."

He nuzzled her neck. "I'm glad."

"I wonder what it would be like with another man."

His nuzzling stopped. "You have one in mind?"

She laughed at his icy tone. "No, of course not. I was just wondering." She shrugged. "It's not as if I'll ever find out. I'll drop the topic."

He turned her smartly to face him. "Oh, my dear, you are treading on very thin ice now. You cannot drop the topic."

"No?"

"No. Now tell me why you asked the question."

Surely prompted by a freak of temper, she said in all honesty, "I was led to thinking about other men because I wondered what it's like for you with other women."

"You mean: What it *was* like for me with other women," he corrected.

She snorted daintily, quirked her brows skeptically, and began to turn away. The moment she moved her shoulder was the moment he hoisted her up, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and spread her across his lap. He caught her scissoring legs in his, pushed her torso down, and began to rub her upraised cheeks.

She was about to protest and beg his forgiveness, but he started spanking her, and the light stinging sensation was so perversely pleasurable she had no will

to resist. She writhed and wriggled and moaned her reactions. She was so aroused that when he stopped and sat her up again, she put her hands on his shoulders and shoved him down on the bed and immediately straddled him. Since he too had been aroused by the spanking, she impaled herself on his erection. She would have given herself over to the wash of sensations flowing through her except his hands immediately clamped her hips and stopped her motion.

“I make all these decisions,” he reminded her quietly.

Her imp of mischief was wide awake. She allowed herself the impudence of lifting one knee, twirling around with him still inside her, to face away from him. She thrust her bum toward him, looked over her shoulder at him, and tossed out,

“So punish me.”

“With great delight,” he said.

Instead of giving her the truly burning spanking she wanted, he lifted her off of him, pressed her face down on the bed, spread her legs, and thrust his hand between them. He played with her pearl and folds until she was aroused to the edge of release. Then he withdrew his fingers, got out of bed, and headed for the door to his bedchamber. Before he left her room, he said, sternly,

“You know the rules.”

He did not return that night.

She arose unrested, unfulfilled, and miserable. She could not imagine being more miserable, but the day was young, and she was soon to discover she lacked imagination. She took the coward’s way out by dawdling so long getting dressed that Annie was moved to ask if her ladyship was ill or – on a hopeful note – feeling the

effects of some other condition. She descended to the dining room to see her husband seated at his usual place at the table, far past the time he had established of late to take his breakfast. He was reading what looked to be correspondence, making notes, doing whatever. He did not look up when she came in. She bid him a very quiet Good Morning. He did not return the greeting.

Misery was too mild a word to describe what she was feeling. She was not going to reveal it, however. Not if she could help it.

She tried a few bites of egg. They did not go down easily, but she was determined to make a show of an appetite. She buttered a piece of toast with some deliberation and added jam. She nibbled. She drank her coffee. She nibbled some more. When her heart was so heavy she thought it would fall into her feet if she did not leave the room, she pushed her chair back and began to rise.

“You’ll accompany me to the library,” her husband said. He gathered up his papers, rose from his chair, and came toward her.

She wanted to say *Yes, what a relief you’re speaking to me*. She wanted to say *No, I’m really very busy*. Her moment of indecision allowed him to reach her side, and before she replied one way or the other, his hand was on her elbow. He escorted her out of the room, down the hall, and to the library. Upon crossing the threshold, he closed the door, and locked it.

He walked to his desk and sat down in the chair behind it. He placed the papers in his hand on the desktop and returned to working on them. He did not look up when he commanded her to “Undress.”

“Excuse me?”

He looked up. His gaze was not friendly. "You heard me."

"Here?"

"Yes, I want you naked."

She looked around the room. There were three long windows overlooking the gardens, one near his desk, one in the middle of the room, and one at the far end. Only the curtains on the window at the far end of the room had been opened. If she approached his desk to undress, she would be safe from being seen by anyone passing by outside the library. It occurred to her he had planned this particular punishment.

"Now."

This one word got her going. When she was in front of the desk, she looked back at the far window with the curtains open, just to make sure no angle would be afforded to prying eyes. Satisfied, she began to fumble with the buttons at the back of her dress. She eventually managed to peel it off her and let it billow down to the floor. Her white clothes came next then stocking and shoes.

She was standing naked in front of the desk, but he did not look up. He pointed to the right of the desk and said, "On your knees."

She did as she was told. She was now less than a foot away from his booted leg.

"Sit back on your heels and open your knees." Only then did he look down at her. "Wider." He looked her up and down. "Still wider." He paused again. "Although it's dim in here, I still want to see everything. Yes, that's it."

These were the last words he spoke to her. He began to apply himself to his

work.

She sat there, prey to conflicting emotions. She understood she was being punished for having taken the initiative in their sexual relations the night before. She would have preferred a spanking, but of course he was not going to indulge her preference. She wanted to point out he was wasting her valuable time, but she didn't think it would have any effect, because he already knew it. Her misery dissipated in her struggle to understand, in light of her present punishment, that he hadn't rejected her the night before. He had simply asserted the initial conditions she had agreed to. And if part of her discipline was to be at his side, she had to be happy, because it felt good. Oh, no. Maybe it was feeling too good.

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He congratulated himself on not having confined the rule about the conduct of their sexual relations to the bedchamber. He was enjoying himself immensely and quickly concluded that the execution of tedious correspondence should always been done in the presence of a voluptuous naked woman. In a better-regulated world, such attendance would figure as a wifely duty.

He rather liked that her hair was pinned up for the day, because its arrangement emphasized her nakedness. Such a lovely angle he had on that nakedness, too. Her shoulders sloped beautifully to rounded arms. Her breasts were magnificent with pretty nipples of the palest pink, her waist was curvaceous, and she had just the slightest, most enticing belly. He loved her breasts, but at the moment he decided her thighs were his favourite part, especially when they were wrapped around him. No, it was her arse, of course, he preferred. He imagined

asking her to change positions, to get on all fours and raise her arse up and toward him. On second thought, if she did that, he would cease working and take her. No, he wouldn't ask her to change positions, because her gratification was not part of her punishment.

And gratified she would be, because he could tell she was aroused. Her nipples had puckered. Her sweet musk wafted lightly in the air. He saw her arousal on her face – or, rather, he could see her attempts to not display it. Her eyes were cast down, but he had no doubt her pupils were dilated. From his angle he admired the curve of the plump cheek of her face and the cut of her jaw. He was coming to see that her face and figure harmonized in their own particular way.

He glanced at her from time to time, but he did not need to be looking at her continuously in order to derive pleasure from her presence. He could tell she was in some emotional turmoil, but he guessed that on balance those emotions were pleasurable, even titillating. He had known she had been unhappy at breakfast, but he completely underestimated the degree of misery she experienced. She was so unexpectedly sexually playful at times that he did not suspect how easily she could be wounded and how closely she guarded her heart.

He did not know her feelings and did not think he was on the whole terribly interested in them. However, he did wonder how she came to mention mistresses on their wedding night and express a curiosity about other men the night before. He was accustomed to the cajolery and flattery of mistresses who coyly fished for compliments. He did not know what to make of a woman who had frank sexual interest but no turn for sweet-talking.

At last he finished the correspondence he had begun in the dining room while waiting for Diana to descend for breakfast. He stood up and put a hand down to her to help her up. At his gesture her lashes swept up, and she gazed at him. He was taken aback by the strength of the desire in her eyes. The entreaty he saw was as naked as she was herself. He was on the verge of giving in, giving her what she wanted, but he pulled himself back, knowing that if he gave in to her now, his control over her in this domain would unravel.

She placed her hand in his and rose to her feet. He said, "You have pleased me, my dear. I thank you for your obedience."

Her gaze never wavered. Her desire was as clear as her demand.

It was a test of wills. He was determined to win.

He said, "You may get dressed now."

She looked down at the puddle of her clothing and frowned. "Can you help me? I doubt it's a good idea to call Annie."

He helped her, although touching her put his decision not to be intimate right then and there to a severe test. Once she was put to respectable rights, she turned to go. Before she arrived at the door, he said to her back,

"We'll resume our usual arrangement tonight. I'll demand you try again what you did last night, and this time I'll reward you with a nice spanking."

At that she turned to look at him over her shoulder. The glance she sent him was full of speculation and promise. She said, "You have my complete and continuing obedience."

He was stunned anew. His little mouse could be quite the saucy minx.

But only at times, it seemed.

A few weeks passed. Although he was still far from setting Thornton Park completely to rights, he felt he could spare some days in town to set about putting things in order on Hanover Square and to gad about with his wife. One morning at breakfast he told her of his idea for their proposed visit two days hence, and she replied,

“I’m so sorry I won’t be able to accompany you. Those are the very days Mrs. Cunningham is coming to stay with Mrs. Welsh in the village.”

He had no notion who these women were or what they had to do with his wife’s inability to accompany him to town. He said as much, hopefully phrased in a way to conceal both his ignorance and his irritation.

He had not, evidently, concealed his ignorance. “You don’t have the least idea what I am referring to, do you?” she said with an air of amusement. “Mrs. Cunningham is the first of the women I want to introduce to Richard. She’s a young and attractive widow, and I have always liked her! Of course it would not be good to invite her here, because it would be too obvious I was trying to set him up. So I arranged for Mrs. Welsh to pose as a cousin to Mrs. Cunningham and to host her. Then, since Mrs. Cunningham is a good friend of mine, I can call on her and go with her hither and yon and, of course, introduce her to my brother.”

Some parts of this account sounded vaguely familiar. The name Mrs. Welsh was known to him, for he was sure Diana had mentioned her.

“I did tell you of these plans,” she said earnestly. “Perhaps more than once.”

He considered the matter. “And both Mrs. Welsh and Mrs. Cunningham are

agreeable to inventing a family relationship between them?"

"Certainly!" she said without hesitation. "And if Mrs. Cunningham is not to Richard's taste then Mrs. Welsh will discover in the coming months she has quite a lot of new female relatives."

"So you cannot come with me day after tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "I really cannot. It's all planned."

The idea of cancelling his plans to town was one only to be dismissed. First, his movements were not to be determined by his wife's agenda. Second, he hardly needed to be witness to the machinations of women with marriage on their mind. He would have warned Richard of what was to befall him, but Max did want Diana's involvement with Wiley Cross to end, and so he hoped for everyone's sake – but mostly his own – that Mrs. Cunningham would appeal to Richard.

"I assume your first guest is the most likely candidate," he ventured.

She gave his statement some thought. "Not necessarily. We had to start somewhere, and I like her so much that the worst to happen is she and I will have a very fine visit."

Other than being reminded of his wife's plans to marry off her brother, what he gained from this discussion was a renewed sense of the wide circle of his wife's friends. From her conversations in the evenings at supper he had determined she knew everyone in the county at least within a thirty-mile radius. She had explained this circumstance to him as a result of the fact she had lived here her whole life and had been able to circulate in the past seven years as if she were a matron rather than an unwed girl. He had doubted she had been considered a matron, but he did

not argue with her phrasing. Then, too, he was aware she maintained contact with many friends in London to whom she sent and from whom she received a great deal of correspondence.

But get her to come to London with him he could not.

A month after his first invitation to her, he tried again. This time he was more strategic and chose his moment for when they had finished making love, and she was in his arms.

"I'm planning a trip to Hanover Square next week," he told her. "I'm selling my house on Upper Curzon Street along with the horses. They're an unnecessary expense. I thought I could do the sale from here, but there are too many details to settle from a distance. I'd like you to come with me."

She turned to look at him, a strange expression in the depths of her eyes. Perhaps she was surprised because they had never before discussed business in bed. She said without a blink, "Miss Carlyle is coming then. For Richard, you know. It's all arranged."

He had the oddest sense she had just lied, flat out, to his face. He searched his memory for a name. "Ah, I see. Mrs. Cunningham did not take."

"Sadly, no. It seemed promising at first, as I told you after her visit. But, alas."

He let the matter drop. If he pressed, she could easily cover her lie.

The next week he went to town as planned and did what he needed to do, which included wrangling a dinner invitation from the Lovehorns. He used the occasion to prompt Mrs. Lovehorn into having the perfectly wonderful idea to hold a belated wedding party in town for Diana and Max at the beginning of the Season,

now that October was approaching. When the idea struck her, he demurred slightly, for the sake of form. She did agree that the former Lord Blackwell's death was still so recent that no real celebration could be had. Nevertheless, she felt confident some sort of occasion could be engineered, even if it wasn't explicitly to celebrate Max and Diana's marriage.

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Diana was calmly attending to her correspondence at breakfast one morning when she eagerly opened a letter from her dear friend Laura. She began reading and her smile immediately reversed itself into a frown.

"Anything the matter, my dear?" her husband asked from across the table.

She collected herself. "Oh, no," she said, summoning a smile. "I misread a line, but now I see everything is just fine in the Lovehorn household. Just fine."

Her husband's response was noncommittal.

She returned her attention to the news Laura had sent her. It seemed her dear friends – all four of them! – were inventing ways to circumvent proper mourning befitting her husband's household in order to celebrate Diana's marriage at the beginning of the Season in some public way. She would find equally inventive ways to nip their ideas in the bud. Propriety had weight. She would wield it in her favour.

She finished her breakfast and set about the day's duties. She was grateful for all she had to do, because her household activity occupied her thoughts front and center while her back burners simmered with a very different sort of problem. It had been waiting in the wings all these weeks. She had felt it, but it had been out of

sight. Now it had swooped out of hiding to perch on her shoulder like an ugly black bird. It cawed,

“Little fool!”

She recalled, once again, the fear mixed with surprise, elation, and disbelief that had coursed through her at the moment of Max’s proposal. Now she could identify the source of that fear. It was the fear of being seen with him. These past weeks she had been perfectly content to socialize with Richard, Sebastian, her friends in the village, and everyone else she knew in the neighbourhood and to interact with Thornton Park’s servants and tenants, most of whom she already knew. All these people were accustomed to her. She was an old shoe, comfortable, well known and welcome. She dreaded facing the critical eyes of London society as Max’s wife. He so attractive! She so plain! It did not bear thinking on.

She recalled saying to herself on her wedding day, “Thank goodness the household is in mourning. No one outside the immediate family has to witness the ceremony or attend the wedding breakfast.” She immediately regretted the unkind thought, for she was sorry for Jonathan’s passing and Eleanor’s grief. However, she did not regret the lack of fanfare and fuss over her on her wedding day. Unfortunately, on the London stage, even the most sedate occasion to mark her marriage would necessarily be magnified – especially since Laura had informed Diana that Emma would be the hostess for the occasion, since she had the grandest house.

She could not now avoid going to London with Max. She could also not avoid being seen in company with him. She could, however, organize her social life there

as she usually did, especially at large events: buffered by the company of her loving women friends, off center stage and on the sidelines. She was sure her friends would understand.

As it turned out they did, to a certain extent.

October came, as it inevitably would, and Diana, equally inevitably, entered Blackwell House as its mistress. Her long experience stood her in good stead, and she settled into her role with no difficulty. Her arrival in London as the new Lady Blackwell was off to a good start. The next day Laura's visit furthered allayed her initial fear at the prospect of being in town with her husband.

"Thank you for coming," Diana greeted her friend. "Now you can see me in all my grandeur and help me make plans for the house, as you wished me to do."

"Most happy to help!" Laura replied. "Indeed, the house is very grand. And how fortunate Emma's is just as spacious and across the square from you."

"About that –" Diana began, leading her friend into one of the well-appointed saloons as she motioned for a tea service to be brought.

"Not another word," Laura interrupted. "Your response to the initial idea was perfectly civil, but I could read between the lines and saw you weren't as enthusiastic about the idea as Emma, Elizabeth, Jane, and I were. So we decided not to associate your wedding with Emma's event next week, which she was then free to turn into a ball. You and your husband won't dance, of course. Only Emma, Elizabeth, Jane, and I – and then, of course, you and your husband – will know that the event is in any way connected to you as a celebration."

"So it's to be a private understanding among us, then?" Diana asked.

“Yes, and I’m guessing this is what your dear husband wants, as well.”

“Oh?”

“When he dined with us last month,” Laura said, “the idea of such a celebration came to me, and when I voiced it, your husband – very correctly! – expressed some hesitation about any acknowledgement of your marriage that might offend, given the circumstances. He was appreciative of my desire to do something for the two of you, but it seemed he would not be comfortable with anything large or public.”

“Oh?” Diana repeated.

“You know he dined with us when he was in town?”

“Yes, he mentioned it, of course,” Diana acknowledged, “however, he said nothing to me about having discussed your plans for the event.”

Laura shrugged. “Husbands rarely take an interest in social events. He would never even have remembered our exchange by the time he saw you next.”

They settled themselves on a charming settee. The tea tray arrived, and Diana was feeling better and better about Emma’s ball. No dancing. No one to think of her as half of an honoured pair of guests. A dampening response to the proceedings from her husband. All good signs of an occasion where she could blend into the background and perhaps even enjoy herself.

Their discussion veered toward the gowns, whereupon Laura informed Diana she had already made an appointment for the two of them the next day at her favourite modiste’s. Laura was concerned they only had one week to have their gowns made and to make sure every detail was correct! Diana was informed that

Laura was going to choose her customary blue, but Laura was going to very particular about the exact shade of green to best compliment Diana's eyes, hair, and skin tone. Diana thought it all sounded like grand fun.

Diana's relatively calm feathers were ruffled the next day at the modiste's. She and Laura had concluded their business and were on the point of leaving, when a very pretty young woman entered the shop. This was the very moment the modiste said, "Good-bye, Mrs. Lovehorn. Good-bye, Lady Blackwell, what a pleasure it is to serve you." Diana felt the pretty young woman's eyes sweep over her. The woman's perfectly arched brows rose.

When they were outside the shop, Diana had to ask if Laura knew the woman.

Laura shook her head. "Not really. I've seen her, but she's not in our circle. I have a vague feeling she has a marquis in her family. Good enough birth, I'd say."

Diana also had to ask, "Did you see the look she gave me?"

Laura's expression turned arch. Her smile was broad. "She gave you a look? Envy, my dear, envy. Get used to it!"

Diana did not think the woman's expression had been envious. It was rather contemptuous. Fear returned. The ugly black bird on her shoulder squalled,

"Watch out!"

Could that pretty young woman, whoever she was, have been one of her husband's flirts? Diana didn't know where his powder kegs were buried and considered the real possibility one could explode in her face. She tried valiantly to keep unpleasant questions about his past and his present out of her mind. The

closer the time came for Emma's ball, the larger the thicket of thorny questions about her husband's love life had grown in her mind.

On the evening of Emma's ball the only question on her husband's mind was whether they should walk across the square or take their carriage?

She had to laugh and decry his suggestion they take a carriage. "We can walk very well, I think, with no loss to our consequence!"

"That's not what our next-door neighbours think. I just saw their carriage being brought around to transport them the fifty yards." He pinched her chin and patted her cheek. "When we arrive on foot, everyone will know my wife was raised in the country."

"Everyone knows it already," she scoffed at his teasing but rather pleased by his mood, for it had served to calm her down.

He had been light-hearted all evening. While she had been getting ready he came into her bedchamber to bestow upon her the Blackwell diamonds. He complimented her extravagantly on her toilette and insisted she wear the drop earrings and necklace. She loved the earrings the instant she put them on, but when he placed the necklace around her neck, she balked.

"What is it, my dear?" he asked given her reaction. "You don't like it?"

"It's beautiful," she said, "but see how its V-shape is like an arrow pointing straight here." She touched her cleavage. "My décolletage is modest, and I don't wish to draw attention to this precise spot."

He withdrew the necklace and said, "Another husbandly lesson learned. Yes, I'm happy to keep that spot to myself. Try the bracelet, then. What do you think?"

Your arms are very pretty. I want to keep them to myself as well, but if some man wishes to admire your wrist, I will not object.”

Thus it was by the time they crossed Hanover Square to Emma’s elegant house ablaze with light, Diana was relaxed and encouraged to think the evening would be all right.

And it began enjoyably enough. Max’s black armband guaranteed they would be treated with both warmth and reserve, and Diana’s friends had made it clear in advance to the invited guests that the new Lord and Lady Blackwell were attending the occasion not as a grand ball but more in the light of a neighbourly gathering. This explanation was easily swallowed by the majority who, unbeknownst to Diana, were very curious either to set eyes on her for the first time or to judge her anew as the unexpected choice of a very dashing man. Also unbeknownst to Diana were the whispers stirring about her and her husband. Emma had unmoored Diana’s little barque of a comment *It depends on what you’re counting* by telling it to a friend, whereupon it sailed widely in the social sea. Over quite a few days speculation about the new Lord and Lady Blackwell’s sexual life had grown to proportions that came to match the actual intensity of it.

The first hint of anything amiss in the evening came when Diana encountered Thomas and Caroline. Caroline was generous in her expressions of health and happiness for the newlyweds. Thomas was correct in offering his congratulations, but Diana, who had known him her whole life, could sense he was aggrieved. The first thought to cross her mind was that Thomas did not approve of her husband, whose reputation Thomas must know but she could only guess at. The second

thought to cross it was that Thomas did not approve of her being married.

Her second thought was confirmed when Thomas maneuvered her through a set of open doors out onto the balcony and a pleasant October night.

When she looked around and realized they were alone, she said, "Oh, Thomas, we've become separated from our party."

He slanted her a glance rich with emotion. Facing out into the gardens below, he put his hands on the stone balustrade and said quietly, "I always knew this day would come, and you would be married."

She placed her hands on the balustrade as well and let her gaze absorb itself in the soft dark before her. Deliberately misinterpreting his comment, she replied, "Well, then, you were more sanguine about my marital prospects than I ever was."

"Diana –" he began.

Her heart quickened. She cut him off with, "Don't say another word."

She suddenly saw he meant to declare himself. During these last seven years of his marriage to Caroline, he always held Diana's hand in greeting longer than strictly necessary. He always smiled at her more warmly than she was willing to acknowledge. He always found ways for a private word or two with her, asking her how life was at Wiley Cross and how Sebastian was getting along. She had chosen to interpret these exchanges as examples of the continuing affection of a childhood playmate. At large social events he always hovered near her. She thought he was good protection from judgmental eyes. Now she wondered if he had played a game of keep-away. He couldn't have her but neither could anyone else.

Thomas did not obey her injunction. "Does he love you? Well?"

Surely he did not expect her to answer such a ridiculous question.

As if he could not help himself, he asked, "Do you love him?"

She replied quietly but her voice rang with reproach, "Thomas."

She took a moment to catch her breath then returned to the ballroom. Her gaze searched for Max, but he was nowhere to be seen. She was a jumble of nerves, and she wondered how soon they could leave without seeming horribly rude.

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Max was standing on the sidelines of the dancing near an opening to a corridor. He was idly twirling a glass of champagne and intermittently watching his wife on the other side of the ballroom converse with her many friends and acquaintances. For the first fifteen minutes after their arrival, he had circulated with her. However, he had no desire to live in her pocket all evening, so he excused himself when she fell into easy conversation with a group. He usually liked to be in the mix of the dancing, the drinking, and the cards, but tonight he did not miss these diversions. He was happy to survey the situation. To see what he could see.

At one moment he felt a clap on his shoulder. He turned to see a handsome older gentleman with a shock of white hair and crinkling blue eyes.

"Darden! Good to see you!" Max gave the man a hearty handshake.

"I've been looking for you," Darden said. "Didn't expect to find you on the sidelines, but here you are. So many new turns in your life."

"I'm glad you've found me," Max replied, "because I owe you thanks."

The older gentleman immediately understood. "Yes, the rules," he said. He followed the line of Max's gaze to Diana. "So simple. So effective. So little known and

practiced. Except by painters, of course. Artistic expression is only a small part of why painters choose to study the female nude. In point of fact, they know their models are aroused by their nakedness and the rapt attention of the artist on their bodies." He waved this away. "But I wander. Tell me. The rules, they're working well for you?"

"Famously."

"So I gathered," Darden said, "which is why I was looking for you."

Max frowned. *So Darden gathered?* Max looked at the man in inquiry.

"Your little wren is causing a minor ruckus," Darden said.

"My little – ?" Max began then broke off. He was speaking with a man who once boasted he could read the sexual energy of any woman at fifty paces. He was also the man who had created the rules. It behooved Max to listen.

"Yes, wren," Darden repeated. "How did you have her figured?"

Max hesitated then relented. "Little mouse."

Darden shook his head. "She's lighter than that. Airy. And she does an excellent job of hiding herself in the branches. Or she likely has until now. But tonight people have been interested enough in her to discover her hiding place."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Only that – for no reason I can quite identify – it has become widely believed you have a marked preference for your wife who, it is also widely believed, is extremely satisfied with your attentions."

Max thought of the speculative looks he continued to receive on occasion from respectable women. He felt a stab of anger to imagine the men in the room

speculating about his wife. “Good God!” he said savagely under his breath, “Could the word my servants at Thornton Park spread about my wedding night have seeped into general knowledge?”

Darden dismissed the idea. “Don’t think so. All servants from the big houses compare notes on their master’s and mistress’s nightly activities, but they always keep it among themselves. It’s a matter of status and a competition they jealously keep to themselves.”

“Then how does the speculation arise?”

“I am quite at a loss to explain it, dear boy. My best guess – not an entirely satisfactory one – is that your acquaintance has noticed you have shown no interest in mounting a mistress.”

Max cracked a cynical laugh.

“Amusing, I agree. Or have you managed to hide one of your fine-plumed lady birds in some remote nest?”

Max shook his head.

“Any plans for one?”

“None.”

“Why not?”

Max looked at Darden. The words *Because I love my wife* hovered on his lips, but he did not utter them. He shrugged.

“Well, then. It’s customary to congratulate a man on his marriage, but we are not having that conversation. Instead I’ll congratulate you on your choice.”

Max was about to take offense.

“No, don’t poker up,” Darden said. “I can see it from here, you know, the thick bluish pinkish light around her, quite dense. It fairly pulses. The woman to whom she is speaking – Caroline Wilford, I believe – has a very thin pale yellow light. It hardly quivers. The difference between them is visible to me. And so what I really want to know is this: how did you know to choose her?”

Max was about to say he had known her his whole life, she was a competent housekeeper, and she was already a friend to his sister-in-law and so could easily help with his four nieces, but Darden amended,

“I’m mean, quite frankly, how did you know she was a sexual natural?”

Max would not have tolerated the question from another man. He was not sure he could tolerate it from this one.

“I ask, dear boy, only because I thought I was the only one with the gift.”

Max recalled Darden telling him, some years ago, how Max reminded him of a younger version of himself. However, he had said it in a context not necessarily complimentary to Max – or to Darden’s younger self. Now Darden’s comment was made as if Max were his equal. Max had the impression he had just been invited into a very exclusive club. He gave the question some thought.

“I overheard her speaking with her brother,” Max said, “calmly resolving a problem he had created. I thought I could do no better than to have a wife like that. But now that you ask your question, I think I was responding not to what she said but rather to her voice.” He put it into words. “She has a siren’s voice.” His heart suddenly filled with happiness. “She doesn’t speak a lot, but when she does, her voice is beautiful.”

It was a revelation.

Darden looked at him, impressed. "I'm glad I asked. Every woman wants to be considered beautiful in her lover's eyes or, in your case, ears."

Max was suddenly anxious to be at Diana's side. He looked around but she had left the spot where he had last seen her.

"Go, my man," Darden recommended. "We've finished our conversation. I'm glad we had it."

Max agreed, a bit absently, that he too was glad they had spoken. As he moved through the crowd, he thought he glimpsed the skirts of a green dress, the shade of Caroline's, sweep around the doors to the balcony. He made his way there, but stopped when he heard the voices.

A man said, "Diana."

His wife replied, "Don't say another word."

Max peered around the corner and saw them standing a foot apart. Their backs were perfectly straight, their hands out resting on the stone coping, not touching. He withdrew and flattened himself against the interior wall.

The man persisted. "Does he love you? Well? Do you love him?"

Diana's answer was soft but vibrated with emotion. "Thomas."

Max did not wait to hear more. He made his way from the door toward an exit. The heart he had lately found turned to a hot burning coal inside his chest. He needed to be alone. To think. To collect himself. When he had overheard Diana's conversation with Richard these few months ago, he had thought himself so clever to imagine Diana as the way to solve all his problems. Overhearing her conversation

with Thomas now, he had very different thoughts about himself, none of them at all flattering.

He was reminded of the old adage that eavesdroppers were rarely rewarded with glad tidings. Of those tidings only one word filled his ears. *Thomas*. Just that one word, ripe to bursting with Diana's emotions. He had heard in it her stinging reproach. Now in a jealous rage he interpreted it to mean, "Thomas, you should know better than to ask." Thomas, the man who had kissed her and married another. Thomas from Surrey. Thomas Wilford, surely. The man she couldn't have. The one she evidently had in mind when she had wondered *out loud!* what it would be like to be with another man.

Thomas. The one who should know better than to ask. The one who should know of her undying love.

Max was in a state of shock. He had married on a whim a woman he had thought was a plain little mouse who would be his ticket back to his old life. Instead, she rendered his old life dull, pleased him beyond measure, and had made him – dare he acknowledge it now? – happy. His delectable little wren, deep in a tree, nestling with him. And he had given not one thought – *not one thought* – to whether she had a preference for him. Oh, he knew he satisfied her sexually. Apparently everyone present knew that! But where had she given her heart?

He had been thoughtless. Careless. He winced away from the term *arrogant*. He circled around it, tried to confront it. He had always had any woman he wanted. That wasn't arrogance. That was his reality. Now he was confronting a new reality. He did not like it. He could not get his thoughts off one name, uttered with complete

passion on a balcony. It caromed through him, rattled his very being. When had she ever uttered *his* name – on a balcony, in their bed, anywhere?

Two thoughts: *Better that his eyes were open. And: He loved his wife.*

He paused to absorb these fresh observations. He felt a little better for facing the truth, painful as it was. Yes, *better that his eyes were open* both to the fact that she loved elsewhere and that he loved her. And, if he was thinking of better and worse, it was very much better to be Diana's husband than to be the idiot who had passed her over for whatever reason. Max would consider at a later date whether or not he had been an arrogant bastard. One thing was for sure: he had ample pride. He was going to act on it.

His interior was still in disarray, but he summoned his pride and felt in enough command of himself to reenter the ballroom. He made his way through the crowd, pausing to speak here and there, senses sharpened, able to more easily interpret the inquiring looks coming his way.

He spied Diana at the other end of the room on a settee, which formed part of a small furniture grouping. She was speaking with three other women. Perfect. He knew just what to do to. He stepped up to the ladies, made his bow, and went around behind the settee and laid his hand heavily on Diana's right shoulder. He bent his gaze down on her and turned his lips up.

The contact of his hand on her shoulder was comforting to him. She was his and his alone. She turned and looked up at him. In her long grey eyes he read relief and another strong emotion. He could not identify it, but it seemed like anguish. If it were, he could only hope Thomas Wilford was watching them, suffering in his turn

for what he could not have. Max came to stand in front of Diana and to help her from the settee. Linking her arm in his, he made their excuses to the group then sought out their host and hostess to thank them for a very enjoyable evening.

Enjoyable, hah! His evening had ended in disaster, but it would get better. He was going to take his wife home and make violent love to her. But first he was going to exorcise Thomas by making her confess.

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Diana was grateful Max had come to rescue her, but she was mortified by the way he had done it. Throughout the evening the suspicion had been growing on her that she was an object of curiosity. She had become aware of both covert looks and frank stares from men. She was never one to imagine herself the center of attention, but she could not shake the idea that women were whispering about her as well. Beautiful women, graceful women, some young, some past the first blush of youth but still lovely. How many of them had been Max's flirts? How many of them were laughing behind her back? Wondering what strange idea had come into Max's head in offering for her? She didn't want to be looked at. She didn't want to be talked about. That was bad enough, but then Thomas had been horridly vulgar and had all but ruined their long friendship. At last Max had come, and she could make her escape, but not before he put his hand on her shoulder. She felt the entire room take notice of his gesture. She wanted to shrivel up and die.

They were leaving, and for that she was grateful. She was grateful, too, for her many kind friends, but neither could they make her beautiful, nor could they make her disappear. If only she hadn't said her impulsive Yes to Max's proposal, she

could have spared herself this public scrutiny. This public mortification!

They walked out into a beautiful evening and down the wide shallow steps to the square. Once outside she could take cover in the shadows. But her husband was with her, and she was now embarrassed to be with him in a way she had not been in the country when there were no other women to compare her to. After a glittering evening where the most sensational beauties in London were on display, what could he possibly think of her, about her?

When they were halfway home he said, "I suggest you mend your mood sooner rather than later."

*That's* what he was thinking of her, about her? After her mortification she was supposed to mend *her mood*? She objected loftily, "I don't have moods."

"It's true you don't play to the last row in the rafters," he said, "but I know you to have strong emotions, which you keep to yourself." He added, "Mostly. Now, tell me what's wrong."

She would be damned first. She preserved her silence.

"You can have an erotic spanking or a punishing one. Your choice."

She retorted swiftly, "What I have to say – or not say! – to you has nothing to do with our sexual relationship."

"It has everything to do with our sexual relationship."

What? How could she as the object of amused derision have anything to do with sex? It was the opposite! She wanted above all things this night to be left alone. She wanted to nurse her wounds in private. Her emotions were welling up behind the stout dam she had constructed over the years. She hadn't shed a tear when

Thomas told her he was going to marry Caroline. She wasn't going to cry now. But she was going to be alone.

She tried to pry her arm from his but was not successful. "Not tonight," she said low and threatening. "No rules, no nothing. Me in my room. Alone!"

He secured her arm more tightly and laughed in a way that did not bode well for her. "If I called the mood you tell me you're *not* having 'contrary', would you also deny that?"

She did not find the comment amusing. Upon arriving home she also did not find herself alone in her room. Rather, after repeatedly refusing to tell him what was wrong, she found herself naked and draped over his knees as he sat on the edge of her bed. His hands were slowly rubbing her buttocks, getting her ready. She decided to take whatever he had to give her without saying a word. Perhaps the mortification of her flesh would negate the mortification of her emotions. She looked forward to the physical pain obliterating her emotional pain. She surrendered her body utterly and completely.

The moment she went limp, he stopped rubbing her. He did not move. The energy in the room shifted. It seemed he was reconsidering. Then he caressed her shoulders and ran his hands down her back to lift her up by the waist. He turned her to face him. He arranged her legs around his hips and cupped her face with his hands.

"No, love," he said looking straight into her eyes. His were soft. "I'm not going to beat it out of you. But I would like you to tell me."

His gentleness almost undid her, but she held firm. She blinked several times

and caught her breath. It sounded suspiciously like a sob.

He slid her arms over his shoulders. He put his arms around her back and pressed her to him. He nuzzled her neck. "We have all night."

She chuckled in a watery way. The tears were starting. Valiantly fighting them she said, "You've said that before."

"I did, and I recall that night went rather well." When she did not respond he turned her chin to look at her. "What, no?"

She was blinking back the tears madly now. "Yes, rather well," she agreed then put her head back down on his shoulder so he would not see her.

He shook her gently. "What would you call this embrace?"

She was wrapped naked around his clothed torso. She would call it comforting. She also found it arousing. She couldn't think about arousal now, of course, and in any case she was such a swamp of emotions she wouldn't have been able to distinguish the erotic from anything else at the moment.

"Would you say we're in an embrace of conflict?" he asked.

"N-no."

"Would you say we're embracing in a loving manner?"

That's exactly what she would say. The dam was cracking.

"It's all right," he said gently. "I have you. I have you, little love, and I'll protect you."

The dam broke, and she began to sob. She wept her hurt, her humiliation. She cried for all the diversions she missed as a very young woman when she had been called to motherhood. She let out every slight, imagined and real, she might have

received at the hands of careless young men who looked past her – or worse! – ogled her breasts before asking the pretty girl next to her to dance. She gave herself over to the luxury of this release, no longer having to hide her emotions, no longer having to hold her head up and carry on with her duties. All the while her husband – her dear, dear husband – held her and murmured soothing nothings.

At length she was spent. She came to the end when she took a large gulp of air and then sighed gustily.

He asked, “Would you like me to dry your tears now?”

She shook her head.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not a woman who is beautiful when she cries,” she said into his shoulder.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He took her chin and lifted her face to his. He surveyed her. “Indeed, you’re a mess.” His voice was a caress, and his smile was so loving she had to laugh. It came out as a gurgle. “I can say, however, that your sobbing is very musical.” He picked up the tail of his shirt and began dabbing at her eyes. “I’m sorry, however, for the pain that caused it.”

She half-laughed, half-whimpered. “It’s nothing.”

He wiped away the last of her tears. He stroked her hair and said quietly, “Be assured of my love, even if you love another.”

She heard the second half of his statement and straightened slightly. “Another? Who would I love but you?”

He seemed surprised. “You love me?”

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “Probably. I don’t think I would want to love anyone else.”

“Then why were you crying?”

She registered the first half of his statement. “You love me? *You*” – she pointed at him then at herself – “love *me*?”

“Yes, I’ve been in love with you for a while, but I realised it only tonight, fool that I am. Now, why were you crying? I think after my handsome admission,” he said with mock pique, “I deserve an answer. Finally.”

Her chuckle was still watery. “Everyone was looking at me tonight,” she said. “It was - it was *horrible!*”

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He was speechless. Her problem was that everyone had been looking at her? From the look on her face, he granted that she was telling the truth. However, he had no understanding of the gravity of it. He first made sure he had heard her aright. “Everyone was looking at you tonight?”

“Yes,” she said.

“And it was horrible,” he repeated, just to make sure.

“Worse than awful. I was *conspicuous.*”

He let the information sink in. His heart had opened to her, and he was now able to listen deeply. He had thought of her as a little mouse, which name came with an assumption she would take care not to be seen. Darden called her a little wren who sought safety by blending into the branches. He thought back on her words *I’m not a woman who is beautiful when she cries*. He now heard her true meaning: *I am*

*not a woman who is beautiful.* It was obvious: only women who considered themselves beautiful wished to be seen. His heart writhed for her. He had married a woman unlikely to turn any man's head on her own, and then he – and he alone – had brought her out of hiding and put her on display. He nearly hated himself for it. For the flash of a second he was angry at himself and at the world for her sake.

The next flash of a second he had a vision of Sebastian looking up at her with blinding love and devotion, and Max knew Sebastian thought she was beautiful. He recalled how Laura Lovehorn spoke of her dear friend, and he knew Laura thought she was beautiful. Perhaps even that horse's ass Thomas thought she was beautiful.

"My darling, please forgive me. I was happy tonight for the whole world to look at you. For the whole world to know you're mine."

"You were?" she said skeptically.

"I am but a poor fool in love," he explained. "And I think you're beautiful."

She turned her head and drew away from him.

He lifted her up and gave her a sharp spank.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded, indignant.

"Disrespect," he answered and added for clarification, "Of my taste. I have said you are beautiful, and you are to accept my judgment. I will also say I wouldn't change anything about you." With one finger he traced her eyebrows, touched the tip of her nose, and outlined her lips. Then he pinched her cheek as one would a child. His smile was challenging, enticing. "Do you dare to contradict me, Miss I'm Not in Contrary Mood?"

She looked away again. She paused before saying, "Let me think about it."

He kissed her neck. "While you're thinking about it, do you want to do something?" He nipped her earlobe. "I have an idea."

She pushed him away, playfully. "I'm not finished with this conversation yet. I may actually be liking it."

"Should I tell you every day, then, that you're beautiful?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather you tell me every day that you love me."

"I will be happy to do so."

She asked, somewhat shyly, "Have you never regretted marrying me?"

"No, and you?"

"No, but I'm not the one who made the impulsive offer."

"That's right. You're the one who made the impulsive acceptance."

"It's not the same thing."

"Enlighten me as to the difference."

She frowned and swatted at him. "You're impossible."

"So says the person who cannot tell me the difference. Really, my love, why did you accept my offer?"

He held her chin as he looked into her eyes. He saw realization dawn in their grey depths. "I - I - well, I think it's because you smell good."

No response could have pleased him more. He chuckled. "And do you know why I made my offer?"

"Because you wanted me to run Thornton Park."

He winced and commented mildly, "Who was that arrogant ass? I'm sure I'd like to punch him in the nose. No, I offered for you because your beautiful voice

drew me. Say my name.”

“Max?”

“With more conviction, please.”

She tried again. “Max.”

He smiled and sighed. “I’m hoping you’ll remember to say my name again at the appropriate moment.”

She paused to interpret his meaning then bumped her fist playfully on his forearm. “I’ll remember,” she assured him then insisted, “Are you positive you wouldn’t change anything about the last few months?”

He felt the great wonder of having a true partner, the one person in the world in whom he could confide. Giving Diana a place in his heart gave him room – paradoxically, so it seemed – to expand his understanding of himself, an understanding that had been limited when he thought only of himself. Now that he had true feelings for another person, he no longer felt the fear he that had come over him when confronted with his new life. So, too, were his initial anger and resentment gone. However, he did allow himself to feel and acknowledge his grief. “One thing, my love. I wish Jonathan hadn’t died.”

She hugged him, stroked his hair, and he was comforted.

“I can’t explain it,” he said with a heavy sigh, “because I wouldn’t want to give you up now for anything. If he hadn’t died, I doubt I would have had the wit to offer for you. There it is: a contradiction. I want both my brother alive and me married to you. In the end I can only have one.”

“I know,” she said, and her siren’s voice told him in these two words that she

understood his conflict and shared his grief. "Life is strange the way it gives and takes at the same time. It's unpredictable."

He was able to dwell on the loss of his brother now, safe in his love's arms. He did not have to bury his feelings or distract himself with idle pleasures to keep the pain at bay. He could sit with his loss and pain at the same time he could feel grateful for the comfort surrounding him while he mourned. Diana had known Jonathan, of course, but Max now wished to tell her about him the way he had known him.

But not right now with Diana naked and wrapped around him. At the moment he desired a different kind of communication with her.

"Do you know, love, that we've never kissed?"

She nodded.

"Do you want to?"

She nodded again, now somewhat eagerly he thought.

He smiled and brought his lips to her. "Well, then, this is how it goes."

The End