

THE SUBSTITUTE DUCHESS



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

PROLOGUE



Andrew traced the soft wet skin of his lover's back with his fingertips. He followed the trough of her spine down to the dimple above her ass that he loved to dip his tongue in so much.

So this is what love feels like, he thought to himself with a foolish grin on his lips.

He always thought the emotion was equal to stories told in the nursery. How could he not, he had never experienced it. Not from previous lovers or from his own parents—they were too busy trying to show each other off with the number of lovers they had within and outside the ton. They despised each other and Andrew had feared that would be his fate as well until he met her.

Angelic... a name befitting of an angel. That was his first thought when he saw her during his visit to Kenwood a year ago. He'd been passing by her chamber door on his way to that of his friend when the sound of rushing water halted his progression. He'd turned to the sound and his entire body instantly went rigid with lust. She stood in her bathing tub, her wet raven hair plastered to her back and top of her pear shaped ass, water dripping from its tendrils down her shapely thighs and long legs. Then she turned and Andrew felt like the air had been sucked out of his lungs. The

bounce of her large breasts drew his attention right before his eyes dropped down her flat belly to the dark curls at the apex of her thighs. He winced at the pain of his cock trying to fight its way out of his pants and into her. Never had he ever experienced such desire.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there staring at her but it must have been long if he hadn't even noticed that she had left the tub and had walked to him with a distinct sway of her hips. Only then did he look up at her face and realize his mistake. Shame faced, he took several quick steps back, apologizing profusely before he made his quick exit and resumed his quest. He'd been lusting over his friend's mother! But, by god, any sane man would if he saw what Andrew just did. He'd had a hell of a time keeping his eyes from her and his erection unnoticed during supper. He couldn't see himself lasting the one week visit without doing something insane as to visit her chambers again. His friend would hate him if Andrew added his mother to his roster of conquests. He would have to avoid her at all cost and find a way to survive the visit.

But that night, she took the choice out of his hands. In the middle of a lustful dream, he woke up to find he wasn't dreaming at all. His friend's mother was truly on top of him, riding his cock with aggression and speed. Her skin glistened with sweat under the light of the moon and he realized she'd been riding him for a while judging from her desperate moans. She was close to her release as was he. He wanted nothing more than to have her under him, but instead, he grabbed her breasts, amusing his hands with the large masses as his hungry cock slipped in and out of her wet channel. Soon they were both coming with loud groans. She dropped on his chest with a laugh, proclaiming her only intent was to see his nakedness, but after she drew the cover away and found him erect, large and pulsing, she just had to have a taste. Andrew felt his ego grow a little more when she declared he was the biggest she'd ever

had inside her and he spent the night proving that he was the best she would ever have.

He had no illusions about widows keeping their virtue. They had suffered through an unwanted husband, so why not finally have a choice of bed partners of their liking. The men surely did.

He'd expected a week long tryst but this day marked a year to the day he woke up to her riding on him. A year had passed and he'd had just one lover, coveting no other but Angelic. He was truly in love. Like an excited pup, he leaped off the bed, snatching up his coat where it lay on the floor and rummaged through it impatiently. When he finally had what he was searching for in his hand, he dropped his coat, and with sure steps, moved to her side of the bed and dropped to one knee.

"What's this?" she asked, pushing herself up on her elbows.

"Angelic Kenwood, you have made this year of my life the best in all my twenty-five years and I would be a fool not to make you mine and live fifty more years in loving bliss. Would you do me the honor of marrying me?"

She stared at him for a long while before her lips curved up in a large smile. Andrew smiled back, his heart beating hard in his chest as he waited for her obvious acceptance. But instead she laughed, rolling away from him onto her back. Her breasts bounced with her laughter but they didn't distract him from the bare truth.

"Surely you jest! You are young enough to be my son. The ton would cut us and I have no intention of living an ostracized life out in the country." She sat up and slid over the bed until his face was between her thighs. "Now be a good boy and place your mouth on me."

"Do you not love me? Truly love me and not what I can give you?" With anxious breath labored in his chest he demanded, "If I were a common pauper, would you be with me?"

With a look of disdain, she declared, "Why heavens no!"

His insides crumpled in despair and tears filled his eyes. "Our year together... was it not one spent in love?"

She shook her head sadly at him. "It was one spent in lust. What on earth gave you that idea?"

He stared up at her, his heart breaking in his chest. "You never did love me," he stated the obvious.

"I never said I loved you. I said I loved how you make me feel. No other man has ever fucked me the way you do. I still haven't found one who can."

He fell back on his ass. "You've kept other lovers? Why the hell did you demand I don't if you have a rotation in your bed?"

She shrugged. "I don't like to share attention. Are you going to eat me or not, because I can easily call one of the footmen to do so if you are reluctant?"

Andrew felt disgust coil inside him. Who had not visited her bed? If all the male staff already knew every inch of her naked skin, then they must think him a besotted fool as he would practically skip to her chambers excited about sweets they already had their mouths and cock inside. And this was the woman his heart had chosen? This whore with no sense of loyalty? Of decency?

He pushed up to his feet and quickly dressed. "I advise you to call one of your staff to pleasure you, madam, for from this day henceforth, I will never visit your bed."

She rolled her eyes heavenwards before falling to the bed. "Such melodrama. It matters not anyway. This was to be our last meeting."

He paused, pulling his shirt and waistcoat over his shoulders. "What is that supposed to mean?"

She smiled seductively at him and he cursed himself for wanting her. "I am to be married in three weeks to your uncle. The banns are to be read this day."

"What!" he bellowed. "For his wealth is it? With me you would have more wealth than you can ever imagine and a title to boot!" He found himself on his knees before her again, her hands clutched in his, begging. "Please, Angelic, marry me, build a life with me. We can live wherever you choose and to the devil with the ton. I want

to be the only man in your bed. I want you to bear me children. We will have a wonderful life together.”

She yanked her hands from his, her face twisted in disgust. “Why on earth would I want to subject myself to childbirth again? I’ve done it twice already, gave my late husband an heir to his title and a daughter to spoil. Furthermore, I can’t stand children, they are a bother. Now that I am free of mine, you would want me to subject myself to that again? Not on your life!”

Deflated, Andrew sat back, wishing this was all just a nightmare. His uncle was to marry the woman he loved. He couldn’t stand it. He turned his head into her touch and kissed her petal soft palm.

“The season is coming along. Pick yourself a bride, get her with as many children as you want, then come to me. I will be waiting, naked and lusting, to congratulate you on being a father with each spawn she bears.”

“And my uncle?” he asked hopefully. If he couldn’t have all of her, he would take what he could.

“What about him? I will still marry him if that’s what you ask.”

He twisted his lips in disgust. “For his money.”

“And other things the men in your family obviously share.” She rolled her lower lip hungrily between her teeth. “But out of them all, you are my best.”

Andrew recoiled as if he’d been burned. There were five men in his family—his father, his younger brother who was just ten and eight, his cousin who was the same age as his brother, his widowed uncle and himself. And they had all been in rotation.

“Dear God have you no shame!” he roared, shoving onto his feet and going back to dress with haste. “Do you plan on making my uncle your husband and the rest of us your lovers?”

“Yes, I do,” she admitted shamelessly.

“Over my dead body, madam,” he declared, marching out of her room with her harsh laughter chasing behind him. He would kill her before he permitted that to come to pass.

CHAPTER 1



Ana Hughes wasn't sure she heard right. This couldn't be happening, not to her. Nothing good ever happened to her and this was fabulous!

"I'm sorry, Father, did you say—"

James Hughes nodded excitedly. "Yes, my girl. You are to be a duchess, and you deserve it, my princess!" He stood from his seat, rounded his desk and sat in the chair next to her. He took her hands in his and kissed her knuckles. "My darling daughter, a duchess. I couldn't imagine a better life for you. You deserve it, my love."

Ana smiled at her dear father. How he loved her so and she adored him as well. He had such a misplaced sense of guilt when it came to her. She'd tried many a time to dissuade him of that, but he'd held fast on the popular belief that he was to blame for her substandard looks. Her other two sisters were renowned beauties like the rest of her mother's family but she took after her father. His looks were handsome in a subtle way. Which she didn't believe were so terrible, until she was compared to her sisters. But she had come to live with that. Two decades and three seasons of being

pitied as the ugliest of the three, she'd built a hard shell to protect her already battered heart.

And now she was to become a duchess.

"You have yet to tell me who my husband is to be."

His brow creased with worry. "You don't mind that the marriage is arranged? That you weren't consulted?"

She shook her head, kissing the back of his hand. "I trust you, Papa. You love me too dearly to saddle me in a life of misery. I know you have considered the match carefully and do believe 'tis the best for me if you are so excited."

He smiled widely at her. "Yes, dear. I would never make a decision that could cause you harm. Well then, the gentleman in question has just come into his title. His father passed six months past—"

Ana caught her breath. She already knew who it was. The Duke of Kelfield, Andrew Stone or the stone hearted duke as he was popularly known amongst the ton. Years ago, he'd interrupted her aunt's wedding to his uncle declaring he couldn't in good conscious let his uncle marry the family whore. She was just ten and five then, and from what she heard, it was quite a scandal. Her aunt had left for Paris immediately after and hadn't returned since, to Ana's mother's relief. Her sisters were having their coming out soon and she hoped the scandal would have died down by then. Three years later, it was still the talk of the Season and her father had been forced to make matches for them such as her own with large dowries as incentive. Her sisters were married to a viscount and an earl and they seemed content with their marriages. Though Ana couldn't understand how with all their husbands' rumored mistresses.

"Papa, I wish not to question your judgment but... are you certain? The mourning period for his father has just reached its middle. Wouldn't it be scandalous and disrespectful?"

She didn't want to state the obvious and extinguish her father's excitement but their two families had stayed clear of each other

since that fateful day. Her cousin, the Earl of Kenwood, had been Kelfield's best friend until then. Ken barely tolerated the mention of his name let alone the sight of him at parties they both paid attendance.

Her father's smile faltered. "I know you have concerns but... I truly believe you will have a content life by Kelfield's side. All he wants is an heir and he promises you a life lacking nothing if you swear loyalty to him." He winced at that last part.

Ana nodded her understanding. Her aunt's indiscretion had brought a bad light to all of them—well, except her. No one expected such indiscretion from her. She didn't have their same beauty that would bring a rotation of lovers to her bed. She always felt slighted by that, but at this moment, with the knowledge to whom she had been affianced, she was glad for it. Her plain homely looks had become her advantage.

"I understand, Papa. He will have no worries with me."

A content life. A content and lonely life void of love from her husband. Love matches weren't common, but she had hoped to attract a gentleman who would love her for who she was and her lack of beauty. What an irrational fantasy. But, it would be no different from her current life; ignored. Well except for her dear papa.

He patted her hand. "Insist on children, dear, even after you have given him his heir and spare. A life full of children is better than a love match that may turn sour, because you will love them as they will love you. Like I love you."

She cupped his cheek in the palm of her hand and stared tenderly at him. "As I do you. Very well, I will insist on many grandchildren for you, Papa. When are we to be married?"

He pulled away, a blush filling his cheeks. "Well, dear, you see... he wishes to have the wedding post haste. But for propriety's sake I convinced him to wait three weeks and have the banns read this day. We have had enough scandal attached to our family as it is."

Three weeks? She thought fearfully. “Will I even meet him before the wedding?”

He shook his head. “Sadly no. Dear, do not worry. I know this is the best for you.”

She stood on her shaky legs. She had been excited to finally come off the shelf but this, this was a little too much. She was to be married in three weeks to the stone hearted duke and without meeting him beforehand. Would their first true acquaintance be in their marriage bed? Dear Lord!

She rubbed her throat, suddenly feeling suffocated.

“Ana?”

Forcing a smile to ease her father’s worry, she said, “I am fine, Papa. I’m just worried I won’t have a wedding gown ready by then. There is so much to get done in three weeks. I must begin the preparations post haste if I am to have the wedding. Am I to have the wedding that I desire?” she asked, her question tinged with a slight tone of panic.

Her father stood, taking her shoulders into his hands. “I insisted on that too. My favorite child must have all she wishes for before I hand her over to another man.” Then he brought her to a tight hug against his chest.

Ana held on to her dear papa, hoping that all would be as well as he hoped.



“I WILL NOT PERMIT THIS, Uncle. That marriage will take place over my dead body!”

Ana was drawn to her father’s office door by the loud shouting. Now close enough, she recognized one of the raised voices as that belonging to her cousin Ken. She sighed sadly and leaned against the wall next to the door to listen more. If found, her mother would box her ears for such unladylike behavior. That was, if she was in the house. She was rarely home longer than it

took to pass the night and ready herself to leave the next morning.

Ken had found out about her engagement to his once long ago best friend and now enemy. Ana had an inclination his reaction would not be favorable. She loved her cousin dearly, and wished not to cause him further distress. His mother had done irreparable damage to the poor man already, though his sister had borne the brunt of it as the scandal had occurred before she was safely married. But this marriage was Ana's last hope. She couldn't give it up. She wouldn't.

Her aunt had no business marrying before her daughter was settled but that was Auntie Angelic. Selfish to the very center of her rotten core. She paid her children no mind. They'd been raised by their nursemaid, who'd sadly recently passed away. This news was not coming at the right time for Ken. Ana would be forever depressed if she lost her nanny.

"You do understand why he wishes for this marriage, and at this time, do you not? Uncle, please do not play into whatever sinister plans he may be plotting! Do not let him use Ana."

Ana's heart stuttered at that. What did Ken mean? What was so special about the timing of the proposal and the marriage?

"Leave it be, Ken!" her father demanded.

Ana knew it was time to step into the room then. With a quick rap on the door, she pushed it open and walked in with a serene smile on her face.

"Cousin Ken, how nice of you to visit." She went up to him and he lowered his head to receive her kiss on his cheek. She clasped his forearms. "Tell me, how is Cousin Julia and the babe?"

He smiled softly, his eyes brightening. "My sister and nephew are doing well, sweet Ana. She waits for your visit to show off her son."

Ana smiled widely, glad her cousin had found happiness with her husband of a year after her mother's scandal. She did hope Julia was happy.

“Answer me truthfully, Ken, is Julia happy? Is her husband treating her well?”

He nodded. “Yes, Charles is good to her. And if I do say so myself, very much in love with her. Apparently he had been for a while. I thought my friend was stepping in to help my family save face and my sister the shame of a forced shelving, but ‘tis not so. Julia is smitten with him as well. I couldn’t wish for anything more.” Then his smile turned down. “But I will for you.”

He took her hands in his. “Please, Ana, do not marry that devil!”

Gently, she reminded him, “That devil was your friend once. You must have had a strong reason to maintain that friendship since the schoolrooms before—” She pressed her lips shut.

A thunderous look overtook his face. “Before he decided to make my mother his mistress. Think, Ana, that’s the life you should expect being his wife. A man with a battalion of mistresses.”

She hoped not. She prayed the duke would respect her enough not to have a battalion of mistresses. At the most one or two and to be very discreet about the whole affair. It was the norm in society for a married gentleman to keep a mistress. She should expect the very thing, especially with her homely looks.

She tilted her head to the side. “Tell me, cousin, do you not keep a mistress?”

By the look on his face, she’d shocked him thoroughly. Because she was homely and barely ventured out of the townhouse when they were in London, everyone expected her to remain very naïve about the world. But Ana was an avid reader and she very much liked scandalous books. Especially those with treacherous pirates and timid maidens.

He sputtered before he found his words. “That’s neither here nor there!”

She nodded. “You are a very attractive man, cousin, with those blond locks and come hither blue eyes. Why, your height and breadth alone has ladies in the ballroom swooning.”

“How on earth!”

With a teasing shrug, she said, "I do read, you know."

His eyes grew larger and he quickly turned to her father. "What on earth do you let her read?"

Her father, just as surprised, replied, "I'm beginning to wonder that myself."

Ana suppressed a smile, then spoke, "I'm also not that much of a wallflower not to recognize a hypocrite when I see one."

Ken's lips twisted in disdain. "She's my mother, Ana!" he shouted.

She flinched at his anger but didn't release his hands. She knew he would never hurt her. He'd always been her great paladin against many, especially their family. He loved her more like a sister than a cousin. She saw Julia more of a sister than she did her very own. The three of them were very close and she could understand his objection. He felt that his sister was being given away to a devil he hated with all his being.

"But, Ken, she is your mother."

He deflated, her words explanation enough. Ana would bet all the pin money that she'd saved up all her life that Aunt Angelic began the affair. She had instigated all her other affairs. Even those before Ana's uncle's death.

"He was my best friend. More like a brother than a friend," he whispered dejectedly.

And there it was, the reason for his anger. Ken had lost a brother to his mother's lust. They'd all lost a number of friends because of it. Well, everyone else, she didn't have friends in the peer.

"Oh, Ken." She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight.

"Son, he probably tried to resist her but... we all know your mother doesn't like the word no," her father offered. It seemed that was the wrong thing to say.

Ken stiffened in her arms. Gently he pulled her arms away and stepped back, turning to face her father. "As my friend he should

have tried harder! Uncle, if you persist with wedding Ana to that man, I promise I will not attend the ceremony.”

Ana’s heart broke, but she refused to let it show. “And I understand if you don’t.” He turned to her with a sad look on his face. “Ken, I love you but, you will not marry me. My twentieth year is almost over and I cannot face another failed season. I refuse to go through that shame.”

“One of my friends—”

“No, Ken,” she interrupted him mid-speak. “You have tried that and it was disastrous. And besides, I am marrying one of your friends.”

His face hardened. “I don’t like this, Ana.”

She smiled cheekily at him. “All the more reason to leave the past where it is, in the past. Try to be civil with each other, for my sake. I’m sure you’ll be able to tolerate each other in a short time.”

He shook his head. “No, sweet Ana. That will never come to pass. But if you’re determined to go through with this foolhardy plan, I will try my hardest to be civil with him in your presence.”

She wrapped her arms around her cousin’s waist and hugged him. “That’s all I ask for, Ken.”

Her father stepped into view and raised both thumbs up. She bit her lips together to keep from laughing. She’d won this battle, like she always did. Ken was too kind and loving to deny her his presence in her wedding. Which only made her wonder how the stone-hearted duke was before her aunt infected him with her poison. Her father told her the two were thick as thieves once. That kind of friendship must have been one to envy. She certainly did. Now they were enemies pulled apart by one woman. It must be a true loss for both men.

I wonder... will I be the woman who brings them together? It would be quite an achievement in her life. Her second to landing a duke.



THREE WEEKS LATER...

Ana placed one foot before the other in what she hoped were sure steady steps. She felt anything but. Her legs trembled worse than the rest of her as she walked up the aisle to her fate. The murmurs and snickers as she walked by the wedding guests didn't help her confidence much. She struggled to ignore them and dared not look up at the groom in case she lost her courage, turned tail and ran from the chapel as fast as the tight slippers would allow. She tightened her hold on her papa's arm, grateful for his closeness. It must look odd to the rest. She was practically clinging to her father, her shoulder pressed against his. But by her father's loud sniffles, he appeared to be clinging to his favorite daughter, reluctant to let her go. She was grateful. It wouldn't do well if the duke perceived that it was she who was very reluctant to be parted from her papa.

Oh, Papa. A fresh wave of tears filled her eyes, but she refused to weep. She would not make a spectacle, as requested. More like ordered. The stone-hearted duke had sent round a missive that morning requesting her to get over whatever bridal hysterias she might have in the confines of her room and spare them in the chapel. He would not stand for the nonsense—his words. Their first communication ever and it was a stern directive.

She took a deep breath and composed herself. She was to be a duchess. Behavior to anything less would be shameful, not just to herself, but to her husband and his title. It was bad enough they were marrying before the mourning period for the late Duke of Kelfield had passed. That had caused quite a stir in the ton these past few weeks and she was sure more was to come. She slowly let out the breath as to not billow the veil and draw attention.

Her father patted her hand on his arm and whispered, "Do not fret. All will be well. Now walk tall, make your husband-to-be proud."

Ana immediately pushed her shoulders back and tilted her chin up, but made sure to appear demure and not adopt the haughty air

her mother was infamous for. When other ladies did it, it never looked quite as insulting as when her mother took the pause, staring down her nose at whomever was unlucky enough to have her attention at the moment.

As they grew closer to where her husband-to-be stood, Ana's grip on her bouquet tightened and her breaths grew shorter. Was she truly about to marry a complete stranger? One she hadn't said a word to? One she'd never been properly introduced to? One not only feared but highly disliked for his abrasive, cold, arrogant and rude demeanor? One she'd never laid eyes on?

Her father pulled her to a stop and her lungs followed suit. She watched, numb as he took her hand from his arm and placed it in another, far larger than his own. Ana swallowed hard when that dark hand closed around her very pale one. Paler than it was before the chapel doors opened and the wedding march began. He shook her papa's hand in a hard shake and spoke a few words to him which were returned which did not sound anything like English to her. But her mind was muddled at the moment so there was a strong possibility they were speaking English. Then her beloved papa stepped away and she couldn't help follow him with her gaze.

The large hand tightened around hers and pulled. "Ah ah. You're not going anywhere, Miss Hughes. You're staying here with me."

Ana's head jerked up at the lethal whisper. Her eyes widened when they fell upon his hardened face. His lips twitched as if he was fighting a snarl and his eyes were filled with rage. Dear Lord she'd made a mistake!

She tried to pull her hand away, but he grabbed her elbow and forcefully stepped them up to the altar.

"Let's hurry this along, Father," he gruffly demanded.

Ana was sure her father would say something, only if he'd heard. The Duke's words were covered well by the sound of the guests taking their seats. For an unpopular man, he filled a chapel.

The priest huffed and began the ceremony. Most of what he drawled was lost to her. All Ana could think of was how to escape

without shaming her family. What if she were to pretend she suffered the vapors? They surely would halt the ceremony, postpone it to when she was better. Only she didn't plan on getting better. She couldn't marry this beast of a man, who glared at his bride the first moment he laid eyes on her. Honestly, what groom did that to a nervous bride? It just wasn't done!

The sharp pain in her elbow made her jump. She hissed as she turned to her assaulter, meeting again the chilling glare. If he hadn't had such a tight hold on her, she would have retreated.

"Miss Hughes?"

"Yes," she responded, turning to face the priest.

"That suffices. Next," the duke demanded again in a whisper, so only she and the priest heard.

"But she's—" the priest began only to be rudely interrupted.

She looked up at the duke when his grip tightened punishingly around her elbow. Through clenched teeth with a threatening look on his face he growled, "Move it along, Father."

Before Ana knew it, they exchanged rings and were declared husband and wife. She stood, facing her new husband with bated breath, waiting for him to bestow upon her the kiss that would seal their fate in the view of society. She refused to think of the night to come. She may just lose her morning repast all over the scary duke.

He pulled her into his arms and Ana watched, her eyes growing large as he lowered his head to hers. She prayed a quick prayer that he wouldn't be rough or uncaring. That he wouldn't do something that would make her a joke before the ton for months to come. Recently, there hadn't been any juicy scandal to entertain the vultures, so being slighted by her new husband so publicly would be all they needed.

His lips touched hers and Ana gasped at the contact. She'd never been kissed before so she did not know what to expect. But the soft touch and how his lips rubbed tenderly against hers was not it. Butterflies filled her belly and she pushed up to her toes and leaned into him to receive more of his wonderful kiss. All too quickly,

hands on her shoulders pushed her away and her eyes fluttered open to meet his disapproving ones.

What did I do now? Was this to be her life? To be at the side of her ever angered husband?

But mayhap he was always like this. Angry. She'd never met the man afore this, and the business with her aunt must have sullied him further. His lover, and that of his entire family. That still amazed her. The woman had no shame.

She flinched away. Was that it? Was she too eager for his kiss? Did he now believe her wanton? Was her behavior as shameless as her aunt's?

But what would she know? This was her first kiss ever!

"I..." She began to speak, but he turned away, tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and led her off at a fast pace.

She nodded and smiled politely at the well-wishers as they made their way out of the chapel but he did the exact opposite. He looked straight ahead, ignored all around them and walked purposefully towards the chapel doors.

"Wait, my papa!" she cried, looking back as he ran her down the steps.

"You'll see him at the wedding breakfast."

His hands clasped around her waist and lifted her. She yelped, quickly turning to look ahead in time to miss bumping her head against the carriage door. He deposited her inside unceremoniously and quickly followed her in.

He leaned his head out the window and yelled, "Get us out of here, fast!"

The carriage jerked forward and Ana scrambled to hold her seat. With her back against the corner of the fast moving carriage, Ana stared at the man she now called husband. His head was leaned back, his eyes closed and his lips pressed in a thin white line. But it was the hands on his knees that kept fisting and unfisting only to fist again until they shook that drew her attention.

Would he ever beat her? Dear God she hoped not. One punch from one of his large hands would surely kill her.

He frightened her, and now that they were married before man and God, there was no way for her to escape. She should have fainted when she'd had the chance.

"Stop staring at me like that. I will not harm you." The gruff words made her jump.

That was fabulous news. If this were to go on, she would be leaping out of her skin, running and leaving it behind before she'd even been a week into her marriage.

"Why do you speak to me so?"

He sighed, brushed his hand over his face and softer than before said, "Speak up. I can't hear you."

She swallowed to wet her throat and tried again louder, "Have I done something to displease you?"

"Why would you ask that?"

She shrugged. "Every word you've spoken to me has been in anger."

He didn't respond. He remained with his head leaned back, eyes closed though his jaw was clenched tight. It was a lovely jaw at that.

Ana realized she hadn't taken the time to examine her husband. What with him glaring and speaking harshly at her, she'd been too panicked to do so. But she did now. He was quite handsome, with his dark hair tied to his nape with a black ribbon. He was tall and broad judging by how he fit quite barely in the carriage. He cut a fine figure in his navy blue velvet jacket, black pants with matching boots. For a man who seemed like he did not want this marriage, he looked dapper in his wedding dress.

"If you did not wish for this marriage just yet, we could have waited until the mourning period for your father had passed." Then Ana remembered her manners. "My condolences for your loss, Your Grace."

Her well wishes were met with silence. She sighed. Better silence than his harsh words.

“Do you know when your body will be ready to conceive?” he asked abruptly.

Ana blanched. Her mouth fell open as she stared horrified at her husband’s profile.

“What?” she croaked.

He turned to her then, a blasé look on his face and one thick brow raised. “I’m sure I don’t need to repeat myself.”

No, he didn’t. But it was possible she’d misheard. Her mouth moved like a fish out of water as she tried to speak.

“Any time today is quite fine,” he said, expressing his impatience. But as much as she tried, she couldn’t speak. He went back to his former pause. “No matter. A month in my bed should secure a child. Then you wouldn’t have to suffer my attention again. That is if you conceive a male.”

She heard hissing noises, and only when he jerked his head toward her with a questioning look, did she realize they were coming from her. He cursed under his breath and reached for her. She backed away, swatting at his hands.

“You little fool! You’ll faint away soon if you don’t calm yourself.”

She shook her head, pushing his reaching hands away from her. But the moment he wrapped his meaty hands around her wrists, blessed darkness took her. She hoped when she woke up, that it would all have been a bad dream. A very bad nightmare but unreal nonetheless.