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Courtship of the Compromised Bride

By

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Any newlywed bride should be enjoying her wedding spoils and her husband's favor; instead, Madeline sat alone, hiding behind a locked door.

The heavy tread of boot heels passed her forced encampment. She raised her head, waiting for the turn of the knob. Nothing, the footsteps fell away. She kicked the half-eaten tray of food bundled near her blankets.

Reading will help. Madeline picked up the worn pages from her gilded bed table, caressing Donne's poetry. Her finger lingered on Donne's Flea. *A tale of lovers' persuasion... Even Donne's passion night after night, grows dull.*

Madeline eased the book down and slipped into satin kid slippers. *The lady of Trenchard wants something new to read.* She scoffed at the title as she scraped at tears. *Why can't dreams leave as easy as these drops.*

She wiped her cheek on a lacey sleeve and unbolted the latch. The hinge creaked, bellowing the telltale noise down the long hall. Madeline waited, praying that the night swallowed the sounds. No footsteps; no movement; no one stirred.

Poking her head out of the room, she spied a pale glow emanating the entry to her husband's suite. *The clamor has not disturbed him.* She took an easier breath and toddled to the staircase, plodding down the mahogany treads on tiptoes.

She pirouetted into Trenchard's hallowed library, closing the heavy doors behind her. Madeline lit a candlestick, using the flickering rays to observe fine treasure, hundreds of linen spines on the burnished oak shelves.

"How are you this evening, my dear?" His boots shifted from the top of the desk to the floor.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I am well." *I am caught.*

"Does this mean you have worn out your bedchamber, or that you are ready to talk?" Justain Delveaux, the Earl of Devon put down the volume he read and stared at his wife. The light of the moon danced upon his shoulders making him appear powerful and dark.

"I only came to retrieve a novel, my husband." She clasped the bookcase's edge trying to calm the tremors in her hand.

The Earl crossed the room to stand beside his wife. His burgundy robe flapped in the wake created by the quick movements. He took the candle from her shaking hand and illuminated a wall fixture before dousing the wax between swift fingers. He placed it on the mantle as Madeline coiled away from his acute inspection.

"I've prayed that your courage would renew, for you to seek me so out, but I will let your leisure give me an opening." He stopped within inches of her. "Face me Madeline."

She turned examining the sacks under his eyes and his haggard tan complexion. *Justain hasn't been sleeping either.* Madeline stopped her hand from touching his cheek and peered down at the floorboards.

Justain's thumb traced her chin raising it from its stooped position. "I have missed you."

Lady Delveaux closed her eyes. *The soft coaxing of his hand on my skin ...* She missed his touch, but she refused to relent. "I will be heading back upstairs, sir."

Justain curled his fingers on Madeline's shoulder stopping her flight. "This common ground instead of our bedchambers should give you enough comfort to stay and listen." He waited for her to turn. "I loved Caroline once long ago."

"Yes, your childhood love; the woman you should have married."

"Madeline, when I became the heir and then titled, she began to return my affections. I wanted her love and respect. If I could claim it, I could prove to everyone that I was the perfect Earl. That I was finally worthy of this title."

She pulled her arms about her to keep the pieces of her heart contained. "I'm sorry to have spoiled that for you. I know how you worry about what others think."

The muscles in his jaw tightened. Justain's hand flew to his neck, rubbing along his sable hairline. "I am not going to be bated into giving up on you Maddie, or giving up on us."

"Answer me this, my lord." Madeline paused, her eyes trailing to the crystal pulls on the doors. "Would you not be engaged to her right now if we had not been compromised into marriage?"

"Look at me. Let your jade eyes witness my confession." His heated palm cupped her chin, drawing her to him. "I probably would be. It would have been the biggest mistake of my life."