

Man and Wife

By

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# Chapter One

*August 16, 1890*

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride."

He reached for the lacy edge of her veil, bringing it up and over her head, exposing her delicate, tear-stained face and noting the copious dark wet splotches that marred the otherwise perfection of her beautiful white gown.

A part of him he didn't feel very often twisted painfully, somewhere in the region of his heart, but his remorse, such as he'd experienced before in regards to this woman, and it hadn't been enough to stop him from doing what he wanted to—was now truly too late.

She was his, and she was going to *stay* his, despite her obvious unhappiness at the prospect.

So he didn't follow his first instinct, which was to gently brush away the moisture from her cheeks and kiss her chastely on the forehead in consideration of what he knew was her very innocent state. Instead, he firmly tilted her chin up, wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her clear off her feet. He gave her no choice but to drop the big bouquet of obscenely expensive roses she had been holding in front of her like a protective shield, in order to cling to him as his mouth descended on and thoroughly ravaged hers in full sight of God, the Right Reverend, and her parents. And, despite the horrified gasps—and in some cases titters—of the church full of guests, proceeding to kiss her for much longer than could be considered propriety, and even well through the loud ahems and not too subtle attempts at throat clearing from both the clergy and his new wife's father.

He didn't let up until he had kissed her most thoroughly—as he had kept himself from doing until then, no matter what he knew she'd thought to the contrary—holding her head still for it between his large callused hands when he knew she would have much preferred to turn away from him.

Finally, he set her down on her own two, now unsteady, feet, although that big arm remained locked around her waist. Marielle Loretta Constance DeVane—now Wetherby, and a Duchess at that, did her best to try to move away from him. The disparity in their sizes brought into even sharper focus the fact that she would always be swimming upstream against his strength.

And even in her, thankfully, rather limited experience with him, he hadn't hesitated to demonstrate to her that he wasn't at all above using that considerable difference to his advantage and her sincere regret.

Why, he'd had the audacity to spank her the very first time they'd met, before they were even properly introduced! Granted, he hadn't seen much beyond copious petticoats and, perhaps, a glimpse of the ruffles and bows of her bloomers as she had kicked and bucked and tried to wrestle herself out of his grasp. Still, even just the mere *attempt* to do so was indelicate of him in

the extreme. And her bottom was sore enough when he finally let her up that he'd surpassed trying to spank her and had definitely achieved his goal.

She'd since learned that "indecorous" was his middle name, and had, to some extent, curbed her tendency to challenge him—a bit—for fear of a repeat performance, which he had promised her. Even then, when she was engaged to another man, he wouldn't hesitate to repeat it, especially once he wed her.

She had, quite literally, scoffed in his face at the absurdity of his outrageous assumptions; secure in the knowledge that such a thing would never happen between them.

And now, here they were.

Wed.

She'd been sold like so much grain or sheep.

Chattel.

It was nearly the turn of the twentieth century, and she had, in the blink of an eye, just a few short weeks ago, been purchased like a high priced slave.

No, she corrected ruthlessly in her mind.

Like a whore, because she would satisfy a much more specific, much more prurient purpose.

She could scarcely believe it. In fact, she had barely allowed herself to contemplate the idea of just whom it was that she was marrying, in favor of pretending that all was as it should be and she was marrying the man she had set her heart—and sights on—since before she was out from under her Nanny's watchful eye. Her fate was, it seemed, for the first time in her life as the spoiled youngest daughter of the Earl of Cumberland, *completely* out of her hands. Bought and sold to prop up her father's fading fortunes, spent, as they were, like just so much water by her profligate older brother.

Indeed, she knew for a fact that her new husband was so eager to have her that he had blithely waived the usual custom of *receiving* the dowry he had every right to expect and had, instead, upon securing her father's permission to marry her, "gifted" to the family such an obscenely large amount of money that it had inspired her father to sever her previous engagement immediately, despite the long and happy association between the two families, and quite without thought to Marielle's happiness in the least, nor even feeling the need to procure her consent in the matter. Probably because he knew, she would never have given it, anyway.

Granted, she had to credit her new husband, however reluctantly, with the sense to do so only with the caveat that although it would settle Geoffrey's *current* debts, it was not to be used to satisfy any further ones that he might accrue. *In addition*, to insist that any distributions from the enormous sum must be cleared through him, conditions that she had no doubt at all her father had hastily agreed to. Her, then, fiancé had no problems at all in contributing to the welfare of his wife's family, but he would not see such a sum squandered on his ne'er do well brother-in-law, a position he had enumerated to her and, although she hadn't admitted it to him, one which she fully supported. Geoff, as the heir, was even more spoiled than she was.

Evan was a family friend, of a rich bloodline himself, with several kings in his lofty ancestry. But he wasn't rich, certainly nothing on a scale that would help the morass of debt they'd fallen into. Not that any of that mattered one whit to Mari. She loved Evan and he loved her, and they were going to live happily ever after together.

Before she knew it, she found herself jolted rudely out of her reverie, her small, gloved hand tucked into the crook of his elbow as she was escorted—in somewhat of a daze—back down the aisle she'd just come down as slowly as she dared on her father's arm. Past men who

looked at her husband with grudging admiration, and females who—depending on their age—either looked at him with naked lust, or that, plus a healthy dose of fear.

She knew, in her own experience, that when her eyes landed on those broad shoulders or—much less often—his somewhat somber face, she leaned much more towards the latter than the former, although there was a heap of anger and dread in there, too.

Apparently, he wasn't much of a fan of tradition, as, despite what had been rehearsed the night before, they didn't stop to form the usual receiving line on the way out of the church. Instead, he almost force-marched her to his waiting carriage, a surprisingly ornate affair with his family crest in deep crimson and azure blue with gilt touches everywhere. He handed her in himself rather than allowing a footman to do so, and then followed her in, giving the order to go as he did so.

It was a comfortable carriage, she had to admit, as she sank down into the pillow soft cushions, wedging herself as far into the corner as she could. She kept her eyes averted from his but still on him; as if he was a wild animal she knew she couldn't trust not to charge her if she challenged him by meeting his gaze.

At least, he didn't immediately try to sit next to her, preferring instead to draw the ornate jacquard curtains, which made her even more nervous to be alone with him than she already was. Mari happened to glance out the window as he did so, becoming a bit alarmed at what she saw.

"This is not the way to Alden Hall."

There he was, settling his not inconsiderable bulk on the bench seat next to her, instead of on the unoccupied seat across from her, as she would have much preferred, or even more towards his own side of the bench. He had deliberately sunk down quite close to her, neatly trapping her where she was by sitting on the voluminous skirt of her gown.

"No," he replied evenly. "We need to get to London in time to catch the tide."

"Why?"

Connor Xavier Wetherby was not used to being questioned, and if she hadn't already sensed that about him, his expression would have more than conveyed that to her, and yet his tone was low and quite patient. "Because we're going to France."

"We are?"

There was that infuriating hint of a smile he wore all too often when he was around her. "Yes. Since you didn't seem to have much of an opinion about where we went on our honeymoon, I decided that I'd make it more of a working holiday than I had planned originally, and I have business in France."

Mari was stunned. "But...then...we're not even going to go to our own wedding reception?" What she didn't say was what she actually meant—that she wouldn't get the chance to see the man she loved before she was cloistered away from him, her friends and her family and with a man...

With a man who, literally, held her life in his hands.

At the very least, he held her future happiness, as well as that of her family, not that she expected to experience any.

What she had just a small inkling that she was going to experience—this evening, when they were alone for the first time as man and wife—at his hands, was going to be bad enough.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. His normally not very open face closed up tightly, and she could see him clenching his jaw.

Mari half expected him to light into her, although he had not really shown that to be his style in the past. But instead, he surprised her by asking softly, "Is that what you wish to do? We won't be able to spend very much time, but we can turn around if you would like to do so."

She nodded automatically, desperate for a chance to see Evan for what might well be the last time. He hadn't been invited to the wedding, but she knew that he was escorting his sister, her closest friend Rachel, to the reception that was being thrown for them at her parents' place.

If she was lucky, she might manage a few minutes alone with him, perhaps, providing her eagle-eyed husband's watchful vigilance in regards to her failed momentarily.

She could only hope.

As it happened, they were really only there long enough to receive the collective congratulations and well-wishes of their guests and to stand through a somewhat rambling toast from her father as well as a shorter, more risqué one from her new brother-in-law, about whom she knew almost nothing, who had been Con's best man. His arm remained firmly around her the entire time, so she had no chance to wander away from him.

She didn't catch sight of Evan at all until she was being firmly but gently herded out the door and towards the carriage. Mari turned back to hug her mother and father and saw him out of the corner of her eye.

Evan stared back at her, but suddenly turned away, as she felt herself pulled out of her mother's arms and into his.

And not at all the right "his," either.

He even went so far as to turn her, bodily, away from her mother, and thus Evan, as he resolutely crowded her into the carriage.

Mari resumed the same position, crammed into the corner, as he resumed what she still considered to be his all too familiar spot—one that, had he been Evan, she wouldn't have raised any objections to, whatsoever. But no, there was really no getting away from him. He was a big man, and he dominated any space he was in.

"We'll be in Paris by this evening," he mentioned casually.

"I've been there. I was horribly seasick the entire way across the channel." She kept her tone neutral, although her words were clipped enough to convey her dissatisfaction with his plans.

She found her hand captured by his, imposing fingers lacing with hers, and held on his strong thigh. "Well," he began, with surprising patience. "I would have taken you anywhere you wanted to go, Mari, but you were being bratty and stubborn and wouldn't talk to me about it, so I decided for us. The next time I ask you where you'd like to go on a trip, tell me where or what you're interested in seeing, and I'll do my best to get us there."

He'd said "the next time." There were going to be more trips with him. Her life was no longer her own, it was inextricably entwined with his. She wasn't the earl's youngest daughter anymore: she was the Duke of Whitford, Connor Xavier Wetherby's wife.

His *wife*.

She just couldn't believe it.

She'd spent so much of her time and energy over the past few hurried, harried weeks trying not to think about it, and now it had actually happened. She would never have her happily ever after. She was married to Con now, and Evan, she had heard last night, was betrothed to Lucinda Windsor-Rutland.

She blinked back the tears that flooded her eyes as best she could, pushing the curtain a bit away from the window with her free hand so she could stare out at something—anything—as some of them inevitably escaped, despite her best efforts.

Suddenly, she was air born, lifted with surprising gentleness onto his lap, tears dabbed away with a beautiful square of pink silk that matched the print of his waistcoat—a color she liked but she had more deliberately picked to provoke him, somehow—a small jab at his masculinity.

It hadn't worked.

It seemed he didn't have much care about what he wore—and she had to grudgingly admit that the ridiculously feminine color had done nothing but enhance his rough, masculine beauty.

As he tucked the fabric into her hand for future reference, he said, "I'm sorry we didn't have time for you to change into something more comfortable, but your trunks will be in our stateroom, and Danvers has undoubtedly already selected something for you to wear once we board the *Titan*."

She wished she could suppress her curiosity, but she found she couldn't. "The *Titan*?"

"The ship we're going to cross on. It's big enough that I don't think you'll experience much seasickness."

"Oh."

"And if you do, I'll take care of you. I was sick as a dog the first time I sailed, too. The trick is to keep yourself busy—keep your mind off it."

Mari didn't want to think how he might propose to do that.

They passed the trip in a relatively companionable silence, although he had stifled each of her attempts to slip off his lap. Gently, but firmly, he kept her right where he wanted her, feeling her remain stiff against him for the longest time until his sheer determination to keep her near him wore her down and she finally—with obvious reluctance at first—relaxed against him. He found his arms automatically tightening to bring her even closer. He was doing his level best not to paw at or grope her, knowing she had no idea just how much he wanted her and how much it was costing him to control himself so tightly, despite how the evidence of such was making itself known quite rudely.

But he was of a mind that—as much as he had an idea that she resented having been forced into a marriage with him—he could see a spark of sensuality in her that he intended to exploit to his own—and her—benefit. Perhaps that might be the way to entice some more tender feeling from her towards him in the future.

She might have *thought* she was in love with Evan Holyoake, but he saw it as a childhood infatuation. What he felt for her went beyond the pure lust that was coursing madly through his veins, making him unable to keep himself from touching her—rubbing her shoulder, patting her back, even going so far as to cup her hip—all attentions that she did her best to shy away from, not that he allowed that.

He reached up and loosened the laces of the corseted bodice of her wedding gown—one that, upon his eyes lighting on her in it for the first time as she'd started down the aisle with her father, had only cemented in him the budding feelings he already had for her that terrified and enticed him at the same time.

Just when he was beginning to shift beneath her, his long since rampant cock cradled entirely too enticingly against her bottom, the coach came up short and they had arrived.



After helping her out by simply lifting her with a firm grip on her waist, he brought her down the promenade and then up the gangway and onto the ship. Suddenly, all of the normal hustle and bustle of seamen making a vessel ready to be underway stopped and a man in an elaborate uniform with a lot of scrambled eggs on his shoulder, who saluted him smartly, met them.

"Your Grace. We weren't expecting you this soon. We would have piped you aboard."

Mari saw him smile—really smile—for the first time. Granted, she spent most of her time avoiding looking at him, but it seemed that what she'd seen of his amusement was either slightly condescending or somewhat sarcastic—both of which were usually aimed in her direction. She'd often wondered—if he thought she was so stupid and laughable—why he had been so interested in marrying her.

"No need to bother with such formalities, Captain."

The crew had gathered and was standing at attention. Con returned the salute, saying, "At ease, men. I'm sure you all have work you should be doing rather than putting on any kind of a show for me."

The captain leaned a bit towards him. "If I may, Your Grace, I would like to take a moment to offer my congratulations—as well as that of the entire crew—on the occasion of your marriage."

"Thank you, Captain Lawson." He took Mari's hand in his, drawing her forward a bit and presenting her with something akin to pride in his voice, which startled her. "Captain Lawson, this is my wife, Marielle. Marielle, meet the captain of this fine ship, Sinjun Lawson."

They had been friends for more years than he would like to count, although the rascal was more of a corrupting older brother than the faint praise of "friend" could convey. They had fought and drunk and whored together all over the world during his stint in the Navy and were thus both of a mind that even a privately owned vessel needed strict discipline. All of his family's very successful ships were run in a manner patterned directly after the British Navy—that's where the majority of his crew had gotten their experience, too, so it just made good business sense and appealed directly to Con's love of order.

The captain bowed low over her hand, and when he rose, he commented slyly, his eyes still on Mari, "You always were one with a taste for fast ships and lovely ladies, but you've outdone yourself, sir, if I may say so."

Grinning broadly, he responded, "You may not, Sinjun, and stop drooling."

Was that teasing she heard between them? His words might have sounded like a reprimand, but it was suddenly apparent that there was quite a camaraderie between the two of them, which was something she'd never seen before in him.

Not that she'd looked for it.

"Do you want to take her out of port, sir?" the older man asked.

Con laughed. "No, no, on this trip, I'm just a passenger."

"No, sir, you will always be the captain of this ship. Anyone else is merely a faint stand-in for you as far as she and the crew are concerned."

She watched a dusky color begin to rise in her new husband's cheeks and realized with a start just how little she knew of the man she'd married.

"No amount of compliments from you are going to turn my attention away from my bride and get me to do your job, you old sea dog. Speaking of which, I'm sure my wife is exhausted from all of the excitement, and I believe we're going to retire to our cabin."

"The crew has taken great pains to make ready your old—my quarters—for you, sir, as a bit of a small wedding present for you and the Missus."

Another big smile. "Why thank you, Captain, and please convey my thanks to the crew. In celebration of my recent nuptials, I should like it if every man could have an extra ration of beer. Will you see to that for me, please?"

"Thank you, sir, for your generosity." He came smartly to attention, as did the crew at his example, and they all saluted him again. Then, Mari was guided below decks to a large, substantial looking door that read, "Captain's Quarters."

Con opened it and stepped in ahead of her to extend his hand to her, asking softly, "Join me, wife?"

Mari knew what she wanted to do—she wanted to run back up the stairs and down the gangway and get lost in the crowds around the docks in London. But she also knew she couldn't do that—where would she go? To whom could she turn?

The answer was nobody.

She had begun to learn, during this horrible turn of events in her life, that the only person she could truly rely on was herself.

The man who held his big hand towards her notwithstanding.

Mari took a big breath, placing her hand tentatively in his. He didn't capture and crush it, didn't yank her into the room and fall on her.

Instead, he curled his fingers around hers just a bit, allowing her to decide whether they should remain there, pulling just a bit to guide her decision to come inside, closing the door slowly and quietly behind her.