

My Husband \$Chose Her Over Me Novel

Chapter 16

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I kept tossing in bed until the clock struck 11 pm, the steady ticking mocking my restlessness. Sleep refused to come, my mind racing with the day's revelations about Elara. The sheets tangled around my legs felt like chains, keeping me prisoner to my own thoughts.

“Damn it all,” I muttered, punching my pillow into submission for the fifteenth time.

I had asked for Elara as soon as I got back home, desperate to speak with her after learning the truth about her identity. The servant's response still echoed in my ears.

“The Princess has been out all day, Your Highness. She left with Captain Marcus before noon.”

Princess. The word had a different weight now. Not just any noblewoman, but the crown princess of Verdana. And she was gone.

I flung the covers off and paced the room, my bare feet silent against the cold marble floor. Where had she gone? Had she left me forever? Was she already putting her divorce plans into motion? The questions circled like vultures, picking at my conscience.

“Stop it,” I told myself aloud. “This isn't helping.”

I threw on a dressing gown and stepped into the hallway, needing air, space, anything to clear my head. The palace corridors were eerily quiet at this hour, with only the occasional guard standing at attention. They bowed as I passed, but I barely noticed.

A movement at the far end of the hall caught my eye—my father, moving slowly toward the grand staircase. Without really deciding to, I found myself following him.

His private chambers were in the west wing, a place I rarely ventured unless summoned. Tonight, though, I needed answers that only he might have. I knocked once before entering.

Father looked up from his desk, not particularly surprised to see me. “Can't sleep either?” he asked, his voice gruff with fatigue.

“How could I?” I approached, taking the seat across from him without invitation. “My wife is the heir to Verdana’s throne, and apparently you knew but I didn’t.”

He was silent as he poured amber liquid into two crystal glasses. He slid one toward me.

I accepted the drink but didn’t touch it. “Why would King Dorian keep her identity a secret from us? What possible purpose could that serve?”

Father’s eyes narrowed. “You have no right to question a king’s motives, Caden. Even as my son.”

“I have every right to question why my marriage was built on lies!” The words exploded from me, louder than I intended. “Was I just a pawn to both of you?”

“Lower your voice,” Father commanded, but there was no real heat behind it. He looked tired—more tired than I’d seen him in years. “Politics between kingdoms is complex. You know this.”

I leaned forward, hands flat on his desk. “Then explain it to me. If Elara is truly the Verdanan heir, why did you push me toward Islode? Why arrange another political match when I was already married to the most valuable alliance possible?”

Father sighed heavily, taking a long drink before answering. “That was your mother’s doing. I didn’t support it.”

“But you didn’t stop it either,” I countered.

He shrugged, the gesture dismissive and infuriating in its simplicity.

Anger flared hot in my chest, burning away the last of my restraint. “Do you have any idea what this has done? Elara wants a divorce. She’s been humiliated by our family for months while mother parades Islode around like she’s already my wife. And now we discover she’s not just any noblewoman but the crown princess of Verdana?”

“What’s done is done,” Father said flatly. “The question is how we move forward from here.”

“Move forward?” I laughed bitterly. “I don’t even know if she’s coming back! She’s been gone all day, and no one knows where she went.”

Father’s gaze sharpened. “She went to Verdana to see her Father. I have her the permission to go.

“What?!” I shot to my feet. Father finished his drink and set the glass down with deliberate care.

“If you’ve never listened to any advice I’ve given you, listen now: do not let her go.”

The intensity in his voice caught me off guard. There was something he wasn’t telling me—something beyond politics. Before I could press him further, he stood up, signaling that our conversation was over.

“It’s late. We both need rest.”

I rose reluctantly, frustration churning in my gut. As always, I was left with more questions than answers. “Good night, Father.”

I slipped out of his chambers, mind racing. The hallway seemed darker now, the shadows deeper. As I turned toward my wing of the palace, a movement startled me.

Kaela was pacing outside my chambers, her nightdress swishing around her ankles. She jumped when she saw me.

“Gods, Caden! You scared me half to death!”

“What are you doing here?” I asked, exhaustion making my voice sharper than intended.

She twisted her hands together nervously—a gesture so unlike my usually composed sister that it gave me pause.

“I’m waiting for Elara to return,” she admitted, not quite meeting my eyes. “I need to apologize to her.”

I stared at her, momentarily speechless. “You? Apologize?”

Color rushed to her cheeks. “Don’t look so shocked. I can admit when I’ve made a mistake.”

“Since when?”

“Since I discovered I’ve been tormenting the crown princess of our most important ally!” she snapped. “Mother explained everything. I need to make this right before she decides to cut ties with our family completely.”

I studied my sister’s face, trying to determine if her remorse was genuine or merely calculated.

“Go to bed, Kaela,” I sighed finally. “It’s too late for Elara to return tonight. Whatever amends you need to make can wait until morning.”

“But what if she doesn’t come back?” The question was small, voicing the fear I’d been fighting all evening. “Did she leave you? Oh my God, Caden—”

“Enough!” I gripped her shoulders firmly. “To bed. Now.”

She nodded reluctantly, turning toward her chambers. “You should sleep too. You look terrible.”

“Thank you for that assessment,” I replied dryly, guiding her down the hall.

By the time I’d escorted Kaela to her room and ensured she would stay there, exhaustion had settled into my bones like lead. The night had yielded no answers, only more complications and the gnawing fear that I might have lost Elara before I truly had the chance to know her.

I trudged back to my chambers, pushing the door open with a weary hand. The lamps were still lit from earlier, casting a warm glow over the room—and illuminating a figure I hadn't expected to see.

Elara stood by the window, stifling a yawn behind her hand. She wore riding clothes, dusty from the road, and her hair had come partly loose from its braid. She looked tired but resolute.

Our eyes met across the room. Something electric passed between us, surprise, uncertainty, and something else I couldn't name. Without conscious thought, I stalked forward towards her.

Chapter 17

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“Where have you been all day? I’ve been so worried about you?!” Caden exclaimed, his voice strained with an emotion I’d never heard from him before.

He sounded worried and I raised a single eyebrow, studying him. Golden prince of Verloren looked disheveled, his perfectly coiffed hair now tousled as if he’d been running his fingers through it repeatedly. The impeccable royal mask had slipped, revealing something raw underneath that I wasn’t prepared to see.

I walked past him, the scent of his familiar cologne making my heart clench despite my determination to remain unmoved. “Since when did Prince Caden begin to worry about a nobody like me?”

His expression changed in an instant, recognition, then guilt, then something that almost resembled pain flashing across his features. I savored it, this small victory. Let him feel a fraction of what I’ve endured these past months.

“And why are you in my room?” I asked pointedly, moving toward my dressing table and removing my earrings with deliberate calm. Each piece of jewelry clattered against the polished wood, filling the silence between us.

“Our room,” he corrected, his voice softer now.

It was indeed our matrimonial chamber, adorned with the royal blue and silver of Verloren intertwined with the emerald and gold of Verdana, a symbolic unity that had never extended beyond these walls. I couldn’t even remember the last time we had slept together in the same room. The bed had remained cold and empty, much like our marriage.

I ignored him and walked to the closet to get changed into my pajamas. The weight of his gaze followed me, heavy and insistent. I could feel it burning into my back as I pulled out a silk nightgown.

If Father hadn't insisted on my leaving, I wouldn't have come back. Dani made sure I was in before he left in his carriage.

"Leave, Caden," I said without turning. "I need some privacy."

"You're my wife," he replied, as if those three words explained everything, excused everything.

I wanted to tell him I was no longer the only wife he had, I wanted to hurl accusations and grievances that had been building for months. But I kept my mouth sealed, unwilling to reveal how deeply his betrayal had cut.

"I need to get changed," I said instead, my voice carefully neutral.

"You're my wife," he repeated, as if the title alone granted him unrestricted access to me, my body, my space, my heart.

Something inside me snapped. The careful control I'd maintained in public, the dignified silence I'd wrapped around myself like armor, it all crumbled in an instant.

"So is Islode," I said, the words escaping before I could stop them.

His face darkened, shadows gathering in the hollows of his cheeks. "Elara..." he began, taking a step toward me.

I held up a hand, stopping him. "Because you know about my real identity doesn't mean you should change your ways towards me," I said, my voice growing stronger with each word. "Continue being nonchalant like you've always been, Caden. Don't treat me differently because your trick won't work."

"I'm not tricking you or anything," he protested, running a hand through his already disheveled hair. "I was shocked, fine, but that doesn't mean—"

I laughed, the sound foreign even to my own ears—brittle and sharp-edged. "Can you please leave?"

He didn't move, his tall frame blocking the path to the door. The stubborn set of his jaw told me he had no intention of going anywhere. Fine. If he wanted to play this game, I would call his bluff.

With deliberate slowness, I began to undress, my fingers working at the laces of my gown. I felt a small, vindictive satisfaction as his eyes widened slightly, but he made no move to leave. Instead, he stood there watching as I changed into my nightgown, his expression unreadable in the dim lamplight.

When I finished, I moved to the bed and slouched in, dragging the duvet over me. I expected him to leave then, to retreat to whatever corner of the palace he'd been occupying these past months. Instead, he surprised me by sitting on the edge of the bed, removing his boots with methodical precision. Before I could voice another protest, he jumped in beside me, the mattress dipping under his weight.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, clutching the duvet tighter.

“Going to sleep,” he replied simply, as if we did this every night, as if nothing had changed between us.

“We can’t sleep together on the same bed,” I said, inching away from his warmth.

“Why not?” he asked, turning to face me. The lamplight caught the angles of his face, highlighting the aristocratic nose, the strong jawline that graced every royal portrait in the castle.

“Because I asked for a divorce, remember?”

The words hung between us, heavy. I expected him to argue, to negotiate, to employ the diplomatic skills he’d been trained in since birth. Instead, he said nothing. His expression turned sour, a muscle working in his jaw as he processed my rejection.

With a sudden movement, he dragged the duvet away from my grasp, the loss of its warmth momentarily startling me. But it wasn’t the cold that made me shiver, it was the look in his eyes. Beneath the hurt and anger swirling in those blue depths, I glimpsed something I’d never seen directed at me before: desire.

I was about to say something when he snapped his head towards me. Before I could react, he grabbed me, one hand cupping the back of my neck, the other pressing against the small of my back, pulling me against him.

And then he kissed me.

His lips were warm and insistent against mine, not asking but demanding a response. For one treacherous moment, I felt myself melting into him, my body recognizing what my mind refused to acknowledge.

Chapter 18

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This was the first real kiss we’d shared since our wedding day, not the perfunctory pecks exchanged for appearance’s sake, but something desperate and genuine.

The realization jolted me back to my senses, but she pressed her hands against my chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath my palms. Suddenly, she pulled away, her breathing ragged, as she stared into my eyes.

Then her lips crashed into mine like a hurricane. I could taste her, mint and something darker. She wasn’t asking; she was taking, and my cock twitched in my pants. My hands were already clawing

at her waist, pulling her closer until her tits were pressed against my chest, her nipples hard enough to cut glass.

Her mouth was a masterpiece, all softness and heat, her tongue sliding against mine in a rhythm that made my brain short-circuit. I could feel her breath, ragged and desperate, as she ground her hips into mine. I could smell her arousal.

She moaned into my mouth, a low, guttural sound, and I lost it. My hands were everywhere, cupping her ass, squeezing her cheeks, sliding up her back to tangle in her hair. She arched into me, her body a symphony of curves and heat, and I could feel her heartbeat racing against my chest.

Her lips left mine, trailing down my jaw, my neck, her teeth nipping at my skin like she wanted to mark me as hers. I groaned, my cock straining against the fabric of my pants, and she smirked against my throat, her hand sliding down to palm me through the material.

“Fuck,” I hissed, my hips bucking into her touch. She laughed, a low, dirty sound that made my stomach tighten, and then she was on her knees, her fingers working my belt with a speed that left me dizzy.

Her mouth was on me before I could even process what was happening, her lips wrapping around the head of my cock like she was born with it. Her tongue swirled around the tip, teasing the slit, and I saw stars. She took me deeper, her throat opening up for me, and I could feel the wet heat of her mouth.

“Good Heavens,” I choked out, my hands fisting in her hair. Her eyes met mine, dark and hungry, and I could feel the pressure building in my balls, my orgasm coiling tight in my gut.

She pulled off with a wet pop, her lips swollen and glistening, and stood up, her hands already working the buttons of her nightgown. Her tits spilled out, perfect and round, her nipples hard and begging for my mouth. I didn’t hesitate, my lips closing around one, sucking hard as she moaned, her fingers tangling in my hair.

“Fuck me, Caden,” she whispered, her voice rough with need, and I didn’t need to be told twice. I lifted her up, her legs wrapping around my waist, and carried her to the nearest surface—a table, a wall, I didn’t give a shit. Her pussy was already dripping, her panties soaked through, and I ripped them off with one hand, my cock pressing against her entrance.

She was tight, so tight, and I groaned as I pushed into her, her walls clenching around me like a vice. She cried out, her nails digging into my back, and I started to move, my hips slamming into hers with a rhythm that left us both gasping.

Her pussy was a dream, wet and hot and perfect, and I could feel her orgasm building, her body trembling beneath me. I reached between us, my thumb circling her clit, and she came with a scream as I fucked her through it.

I wasn’t far behind, as I buried myself deep inside her, my cum flooded her pussy in hot, sticky spurts. She moaned, her body still shaking with aftershocks, and I collapsed on top of her, both of us panting and sweaty..

Chapter 19

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I woke with the phantom sensation of Caden’s mouth still pressed against mine, my fingers unconsciously touching my lips before I caught myself. The sun streamed through the curtains I’d forgotten to close, painting golden patterns across the empty side of the bed where he’d slept.

Where was he now? And more importantly, why did I care?

I pushed myself up, the silk sheets sliding against my skin, and noticed a tray on the small table by the window. Steam still rose from the porcelain teapot, surrounded by an array of pastries, fresh fruit, and my favorite honey bread. Someone had gone to considerable effort.

“Well, this is new,” I murmured to myself, reaching for the tea.

A note sat tucked beneath the saucer, written in a bold, slanted script I recognized immediately:

Perhaps we could start again. – C

I crumpled the note and tossed it aside. After months of neglect, he thought breakfast would smooth over everything? I had plans to meet with Father today at Dani’s, to discuss Verdana’s position now that my true identity was known. The last thing I needed was Caden’s sudden, convenient change of heart, complicating matters.

I mentally mapped out my morning: finish eating, take a bath, and head to Dani’s chambers without encountering any Verlorens if possible. The palace suddenly felt too small for all the emotions swirling through its corridors.

The door swung open without warning, and I nearly choked on my tea. Kaela, my tormentor for months, stood in the doorway. Her usual smirk was nowhere to be seen, replaced by something that resembled a smile? My stomach clenched.

“Good morning, Elara,” she said, her voice missing its customary venom. “I hope I’m not interrupting your breakfast.”

I set down my cup carefully. “Since when do you care about interrupting me?”

She winced, and the expression looked genuine enough to startle me. In her hands, she clutched an elegantly wrapped package tied with emerald ribbon—Verdana’s colors.

“I deserve that,” she admitted, stepping fully into the room. “I’ve been... well, there’s no nice way to say it. I’ve been horrible to you.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” I replied, reaching for my robe and wrapping it tightly around myself. “What do you want, Kaela?”

She approached cautiously, as if I might bite. Perhaps she thought I would, now that she knew I had teeth.

“I want to apologize,” she said, extending the package toward me. “And I brought you something. It’s not much, considering... everything. But it’s a start.”

I stared at the gift without taking it. “You think a present makes up for months of humiliation?”

“No,” she said quietly. “Nothing could. But I’m asking you to forgive me anyway. Not for my sake, but for our kingdoms. For Caden.”

I laughed, short and sharp. “Don’t bring your brother into this. He’s just as culpable as you are.”

“He’s an idiot,” she agreed, surprising me again. “But he’s suffering now. We all are. Mother hasn’t slept since we learned who you really are. The court is in chaos. And Caden—” She stopped abruptly.

“What about Caden?” I couldn’t help asking, hating the eagerness in my voice.

She placed the gift on the edge of the bed. “He ended the arrangement with Islode yesterday. It was quite the scene. Mother’s furious.”

My heart skipped traitorously. “That’s not my concern anymore.”

Kaela nodded, accepting my words at face value though I could see she didn’t believe them. “Well, I’ll leave you to your breakfast. The gift is yours whether you forgive me or not.” She walked to the door, then paused. “I truly am sorry, Elara. I wish we could start over.”

After she left, I stared at the package for a long time before curiosity won out. Inside was a beautifully bound collection of Verdanan poetry—rare editions I’d mentioned once in passing, months ago. She’d actually been listening.

I closed the book with a snap. I had no time for this, not Kaela’s sudden remorse, not Caden’s breakfast offering. I had a kingdom to think about.

I rang for bath water and was halfway through washing when a soft knock came at the door.

“Yes?” I called, sinking deeper into the perfumed water.

“Princess Elara,” came a servant’s voice, “Her Majesty is requesting a moment of your time.”

I nearly laughed. “Tell her I’m indisposed. I have an appointment with my father.”

“She says it’s urgent, Your Highness.”

Of course she did. Everything was urgent now that they knew who I was. “Very well. I’ll be out shortly.”

I took my time finishing my bath, partly out of spite and partly because I needed the extra moments to compose myself. When I finally emerged from my chambers, wrapped in a simple morning robe, I found the Queen pacing the corridor outside my door.

She froze when she saw me, her usual imperious demeanor replaced by something I’d never seen on her face before: embarrassment.

“Elara,” she said, then corrected herself, “Princess Elara.”

“Your Majesty,” I replied with a slight nod, not quite a proper curtsy but just respectful enough to avoid outright insult. “You wished to speak with me?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, her eyes darting to the guards stationed at the end of the hall. Whatever she’d planned to say, she seemed to think better of it.

“It can wait,” she said abruptly, her mask of composure slipping back into place. “You’re obviously busy.”

Before I could respond, she turned and walked away, her back straight and her head held high. The queen of Verloren, retreating from the guest she’d once treated as little more than a servant. How the tables had turned.

I shook my head and went back inside to get dressed. When Mercilla was done, I thanked her. “Thank you, Mercilla. For everything.”

“It’s my pleasure, Your Highness.”

With a deep breath, I headed for the door, only to collide directly with someone in the corridor.

“I beg your pardon,” I began automatically, then froze as I registered who stood before me.

It was Islope, and beside her, was the man who had kissed me with such desperation just last night, arm in arm.

Chapter 20

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I watched Elara’s face transform from shock to hurt.

“Princess Elara,” Islope crooned beside me, her fingers digging into my arm like talons. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Elara's eyes, green as Verdanan emeralds, flicked from my face to our entwined arms. The judgment in them was crushing. I'd meant to end things with Islode this morning, but Mother had intercepted me, insisting I escort Islode on one final walk to soften the blow. Now, seeing Elara's expression, I knew how this looked.

"Excuse me," Elara said, her voice arctic.

She made to brush past us, her green gown rustling like leaves in a storm. Without thinking, I disentangled myself from Islode's grip and stepped after her.

"Elara, wait!"

The corridor suddenly felt too small, too public. A pair of servants paused in their duties, poorly disguising their interest in the royal drama unfolding before them.

"Caden?" Islode's voice rose an octave. "What are you doing?"

I ignored her, my focus entirely on Elara's retreating figure. "Please, just a moment of your time."

Elara paused, her back still to me. "I don't have a moment to spare, Prince Caden."

Prince Caden. Not just Caden. Not husband. The formality was a wall between us, one I'd helped build brick by brick with every slight, every absence, every time I'd chosen court politics over her.

"Five minutes," I said, trying to keep the desperation from my voice. "That's all I ask."

She turned slowly, and for a heartbeat, I saw vulnerability flash in her eyes before it was gone, replaced by cool disdain. "I'm all ears."

Islode stepped forward, her painted lips compressed into a tight line. "Caden, we were in the middle of our walk."

"Not now, Islode," I said, not sparing her a glance.

Elara gestured to an empty antechamber off the main corridor. As I followed her inside, I heard Islode's indignant huff behind us. The door closed with a soft click, and suddenly we were alone, truly alone, for what felt like the first time in months.

The room was small, lined with bookshelves and dominated by a single window that cast Elara in golden morning light. She looked regal, untouchable—everything a crown princess should be. How had I never seen it before?

"Your five minutes are ticking away," she said, folding her arms across her chest.

"I don't even know where to begin," I admitted, running a hand through my hair.

"Perhaps with an explanation of why you were arm in arm with Lady Islode after kissing me last night?"

Her directness caught me off guard. “It’s not what it looked like. Mother insisted I give Islode a proper goodbye—”

“Goodbye?” Elara arched an eyebrow.

“I’m breaking off the engagement,” I said. “I should have done it months ago. I should never have agreed to it in the first place.”

Something flickered across her face, surprise, perhaps, or disbelief. “And this sudden change of heart has nothing to do with discovering my true identity?”

The accusation stung, not because it was cruel but because there was truth in it. My awakening had come too late, spurred by revelations that shouldn’t have mattered if I’d been the man I should have been.

“I won’t lie to you,” I said, taking a step closer. “Learning who you are forced me to see what I’ve done, what my family has done. But that’s not why I’m here now.”

“No?” Her tone was skeptical.

“No.” I took a deep breath. “I’m here because last night, when you were in my arms, I realized what I’ve been too blind to see. That you, Elara, not the princess or the heir, are everything I’ve been searching for without knowing it.”

Her expression softened almost imperceptibly. “Pretty words, Caden. You’ve always been good with those.”

“Not words,” I insisted, closing the distance between us until I could see the flecks of gold in her green eyes. “Truth. I was a coward and a fool. I let my mother dictate my choices. I let court politics overshadow what matters. I allowed you to be mistreated when I should have been your fiercest defender.”

I reached for her hand, half-expecting her to pull away. She didn’t, but neither did she respond to my touch.

“I’m asking for your forgiveness,” I said, my voice dropping to little more than a whisper. “Not because you’re Princess Elara of Verdana, but because you’re my wife, and I’ve wronged you in ways I’m only beginning to understand.”

For a moment one beautiful, hope-filled moment I thought I saw her walls crumbling. Her fingers twitched in mine, and her lips parted slightly as if she might speak words of absolution.

But then she withdrew her hand, taking a step back. “You speak with passion now, Caden. But where was this passion when your sister mocked me at dinner? Where was it when your mother relegated me to the farthest corner at every function? Where was it when courtiers whispered behind their hands as I passed?”

Each question was a knife, precise and deserved. I had no defense.

“Nowhere,” I admitted. “I was nowhere when you needed me. That’s why I’m asking for a chance—not forgiveness, not yet. Just a chance to be the husband I should have been from the beginning.”

She shook her head slowly. “It’s too late for that. What happened between us last night was a mistake.”

The words hit me like a physical blow. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do,” she said firmly. “I was... I wasn’t thinking clearly. I’d had too much wine at dinner.”

I frowned, certain she was lying. “We both know that’s a lie, Elara”

“It was a mistake,” she repeated, more forcefully this time. “One I don’t intend to repeat. Now, if you’ll excuse me, my father is waiting.”

She moved toward the door, but I caught her arm gently. “Don’t do this. Don’t push me away when we’re finally being honest with each other.”

For an instant, her composure slipped, revealing the hurt beneath. “Honest? You want honesty, Caden? Here it is: you broke my heart. I came to Verloren ready to love you, to build a life with you. And you showed me exactly how little I meant.”

“I was wrong,” I said desperately. “I see that now.”

“Yes, you were wrong. And I’m glad you see it.” She pulled her arm free. “But that doesn’t mean I’m ready to forget.”

With that, she swept from the room, leaving me alone with the wreckage of my mistakes. I stood motionless, watching her disappear down the corridor, the green of her gown the last thing to vanish from my sight.

I don’t know how long I remained there, lost in thought, before Islode’s voice jerked me back to reality.

“May I know what happened between you two?” she demanded, standing in the doorway with her arms crossed.

I looked at her. Lady Islode was beautiful, politically connected, but completely wrong for me.

“No,” I said simply. “You may not. It’s none of your business.”

Her eyes widened in outrage as I brushed past her. “Excuse me?”

I kept walking, suddenly exhausted by the constant performances, the political maneuvering, the emptiness of it all.

“Caden!” she called after me, her voice rising with indignation. “Don’t you dare walk away from me!”

I continued down the corridor, my strides lengthening.

“This engagement is over!” she shouted, loud enough for everyone within earshot to hear.

I halted mid-step, a weight I hadn’t realized I was carrying suddenly lifting from my shoulders. Slowly, I turned back to face her, unable to suppress the smile spreading across my face.

“Thank you for making things easier for me,” I said, meaning every word. “Good riddance.”

Her mouth fell open, shock replacing anger as she realized I wasn’t going to beg her to reconsider.