

Arrangements

by Clara Ashwick

A marriage of convenience that became desperately inconvenient.

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She had read every clause of the contract before she signed it, which was apparently unusual. The solicitor had looked at her with the expression of a man who has just been asked to do something he wasn't prepared for.

"Lady Evelyn," said Lord Ashmore, her intended, from across the table, "I've read it also."

"Have you." She set her pen down.

"Twice," he said. "The third clause in particular."

She had spent some time on the third clause as well. It pertained to obligations of companionship and residence. It was carefully worded. It did not say what it was carefully worded not to say.

"Your solicitor is a precise man," she said.

"He does his best," Ashmore said. He had the kind of face that her mother's friends would describe as distinguished, which meant he was forty-one and had lived in it for forty-one years and it showed in a way that was not at all unpleasant. Dark hair going grey at the temples. Eyes that were paying attention.

She picked up the pen and signed.

Ashmore House was considerably larger than Evelyn had anticipated, which meant they could avoid each other with some efficiency if they chose. She had half-expected to choose this. What she had not expected was that Ashmore himself would be difficult to avoid on the grounds that he was consistently in interesting places — the library, the orangery, the back study where he appeared to be writing something substantial in between running his estates.

"What are you writing?" she asked him, on the third week.

He looked up. He had the quality of someone who organised his attention

carefully and gave it completely when he gave it. "History. Economic history of the wool trade in the north of England between 1740 and 1820. It's extremely dry."

"How much have you written?"

"Four hundred pages."

"That's a book."

"That's the first third of the notes," he said. "Whether it becomes a book is less certain."

She sat down across from him without being invited because the chair was there and she was tired of her own rooms. He went back to his writing. She opened the book she'd brought. An hour passed.

"You read quickly," he said, without looking up.

"You write quickly," she said. "That was three pages."

A pause that was almost a smile. He went back to his manuscript. She went back to her book.

This became their evening.

The specific nature of the contract's third clause remained unaddressed. She was aware of it the way you're aware of a letter you haven't opened — present, affecting the shape of other things, technically defeatable at any time.

She was also aware of her husband, which she had not anticipated being. Not in the way of finding him tolerable, which she'd hoped for, but in the way of noticing him. The way he moved through rooms. The particular patience of him — he did not rush decisions, people, or, apparently, manuscripts. The way he argued with his solicitor on her behalf about the management of her own inheritance, which she had brought to the marriage and which he treated as hers without qualification.

"You didn't have to do that," she said, after the solicitor had left.

"The income from your trust is yours," he said. "That seems fairly straightforward."

"Most men in your position would not find it straightforward."

He looked at her. "I'm not most men in my position."

"No," she said. "You're not."

The evenings in the study. The way he handed her books he thought she'd like without saying that was what he was doing. The morning she'd found a paper he'd written — published, she discovered, under an assumed name — on the ethical dimensions of enclosure reform, which was politically inadvisable for a man of his standing and exactly the kind of thing she'd have written herself if she could have published under her own name.

"You wrote this," she said, bringing it to dinner.

He looked at it. "Where did you find that?"

"The library, filed under P for Probably Yours."

Something moved in his face. Surprised and pleased and slightly caught.

"I file my own books," he said.

"I reorganised the library," she said. "Last week. While you were in York."

A pause.

"I know," he said. "It's considerably better."

"You found the reorganisation while I was still reorganising it."

"You left it half-done on Thursday. I found the system and finished it."

She looked at him across the dinner table. Six weeks of marriage. His

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manuscript. Her trust fund. The library they had apparently both reorganised.

"We are going to get along very well," she said.

"I had hoped so," he said. "From approximately the second clause."

It was a night in the seventh week when she knocked on the door of his study, which had not happened before — their evenings were in the shared study, but his private rooms were separately kept. He opened it quickly, which meant he had heard her step in the corridor and had not been asleep.

She stood in the doorway in her wrap. He was in his shirtsleeves.

"The third clause," she said.

He looked at her steadily. "Yes."

"I've been considering it."

"I've been waiting," he said, "for you to be ready to consider it. I didn't want to — the contract was a convenience for both of us, and I didn't want you to feel—"

"Charles," she said. His name. First time.

He stopped talking.

"I'm considering it favourably," she said.

Something moved across his face that was not at all distinguished and was entirely human. He stepped back from the door.

He was careful with her in the way he was careful with everything he found valuable — thorough and patient and specific, asking what she wanted with the directness of someone who had read the clause twice and thought about her comfort considerably more than his own. She told him. He listened. He acted on it with the same quality of attention he brought to his

manuscript and his reorganised library and her trust fund — like she was something he was taking seriously.

She said his name in the dark and he made a sound against her shoulder that was unguarded in a way she was already cataloguing. She held him tighter because that was what she meant by it.

Afterwards, his study was warm and quiet.

"I shall have to tell the solicitor the third clause has been resolved," he said, into her hair.

"I'd rather not involve the solicitor," she said.

He laughed — a real one, the kind she was beginning to understand he kept for rooms where nobody was watching. She pressed her face to his shoulder and felt it move through his chest.

"Evelyn," he said.

"Mm."

"I should tell you. I agreed to this arrangement for the convenience. I fully expected to find you tolerable and nothing more."

"And?"

A pause.

"You reorganised my library better than I had it," he said, "and you found the paper I filed under P, and you read three chapters in the time it takes most people to read one, and I find I'm looking at you across the dinner table and forgetting what I was planning to say."

She considered this. The warm study. The manuscript on the desk. Seven weeks of evenings.

"The contract," she said, "has several clauses we haven't yet addressed."

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"Indeed," he said. "I suggest we take them one at a time."

"A thorough approach," she said.

"I find thoroughness generally pays," he said.

Outside, the estate. Inside, the study, warm and specific, and a marriage of convenience becoming something not convenient at all.