



# My Dark Duke

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** In fear for her life, Miss Lillian Hamilton takes a new name and flees to London, desperate to hide from those who wish her harm. A chance encounter with the sinfully handsome Duke of Thorncastle affords Lillian the opportunity to take on a new identity – as his mistress. Though it goes against everything she believes in, Lillian accepts his offer and finds herself catapulted into a world of wealth, luxury, and pleasure. As Lillian surrenders her innocence to the duke, she realises that she is faced with another danger – losing her heart to a man who claims to have none of his own.

Sebastian Beaufort, Sixth Duke of Thorncastle learned from a young age that love was merely make-believe. Having spent his formative years attempting to emulate his philandering father, he is finally ready to put an end to his life as a rakehell...until he sets eyes on Miss Mary Smith. Beautiful, feisty, and charmingly naive, Sebastian is determined to have her under his protection and safe from harm. As Sebastian claims Mary's body for his own, he is surprised to find mere pleasure is not enough to satisfy his desire. His ingénue awakes feelings within him, that he did not think he was capable of. Soon, he wants to possess all of her – including the secrets she keeps hidden from him.

As foes from Mary's past surface once more, can Sebastian find the courage to reveal his true feelings, before it's too late?

**Total Pages (Source):** 62

## CHAPTER ONE

LILLIAN BEAUFORT EYED the imposing house looming over St. James' Square warily. It was home to the notorious Duke of Thorncastle; a man whose reputation was so sordid that he was oft referred to by the sobriquet The Devil of Thorncastle instead.

According to the papers, Thorncastle was a rake of the highest order. Not to mention a philanderer, a gambler, and a womaniser to boot.

He would also, if all things went to plan, soon be Lillian's employer.

A pious woman would never even think to set foot in the home of such a scandalous duke, let alone entertain the notion of entering into his employ, but Lillian could make no claims at piety.

No murderess could.

Squaring her shoulders, in the hope that it might make her feel more confident, Lillian climbed the steps of Thorncastle House to meet her fate.

The front door was black, its gleaming brass knocker fashioned in the shape of a coiled snake; a most ominous sign, if one believed in such things.

Her single knock was answered swiftly by a footman, sombre faced and darkly dressed, but nevertheless far more respectable looking than what Lillian had anticipated. She had expected Thorncastle's staff to be as dissolute as their master, but

it was not so. Nor was the home the bawdy house that Lillian had envisioned; instead, she found herself in an elegantly appointed entrance hall, which spoke of an owner blessed with taste, refinement, and wealth.

"Mr Danvers, the under-butler, is expecting you," the footman said once she had introduced herself, before leading Lillian down a corridor toward the rear of the house.

An under butler, Lillian noted with a wry smile. The position she was applying for was not important enough to merit the attention of the senior butler, who no doubt saw himself as being above such things as interviewing a woman.

Stifling a sigh of regret at the turn her life had taken, Lillian followed the butler through the maze of corridors, their progress watched over by the portraits of Thorncastles past.

"Just in here, Miss Smith," the footman said, as they finally reached their destination.

The young man opened a mahogany door, to reveal a small, neat office, whose tidy shelves and sparse desk told of a very organised occupant.

"Mr Danvers will be along shortly," he continued, as Lillian followed him inside. "Do take a seat by the fire. If you need anything, just call."

After he had left, Lillian followed the footman's solicitous suggestion and arranged herself on a chair by the fire while she waited for Mr Danvers to appear. The frost of February had chilled her toes, and she was enjoying toasting them by the small fire burning in the grate, when the door of the office was thrown open.

"Are you in here?" an irritated voice called, as a gentleman sauntered—for there was no other way to describe his confident gait—into the room.

Lillian sprang to her feet, hastily smoothing her skirts with nervous hands.

"Mr. Danvers," she replied, her voice shaking slightly; after the solicitousness of the footman, she had not been expecting such abruptness from the butler.

Mr Danvers' head turned at her voice, and Lillian had to refrain herself from gasping aloud at the vision of male beauty standing before her.

But beauty was not the right word, she corrected herself, taking in Mr Danvers' exquisite features. The word beauty evoked softness, but there was nothing soft about Mr Danvers' face. It was beautiful, yes, but almost cruel in its perfection. His jaw was hard and square. His cheekbones so high and so sharp that one might cut themselves upon them. His nose was decidedly Roman; the perfect shape for looking down upon people, which Lillian instinctively knew Mr. Danvers did quite often. Even his eyes, a brilliant blue, were notably cold, as they traversed Lillian from top to toe.

The hard perfection of Mr Danvers' face was softened somewhat by his hair, falling elegantly—and most untidily, for a butler—across his forehead. Unfortunately it also lent him a rakish edge, which set Lillian's heart racing in her chest.

It was not right for an under-butler to be so handsome, she thought peevishly, as she tried to regain control of herself.

"I am Miss Smith," she continued, when it became apparent that Danvers was waiting for her to speak. "I am here about the position."

"Which position?" Danvers queried in a lazy drawl.

Lillian blinked; was the household so large that the under-butler could not keep tally of all the positions which needed filling?

"Assistant to the housekeeper," Lillian replied, glad she had not stammered. Mr. Danvers was most intimidating—not to mention impudent, with his wolfish eyes and smirking mouth.

"I could think of a better position in which to put you," Mr Danvers replied, his lips quirking slightly at the corners, as though he had made a joke. Lillian flushed, certain that there was a doubleentendre to his words which she did not understand.

"Sit," Danvers continued, ignoring her blushes as he waved a careless hand to the chair before the desk.

Lillian, who was feeling more and more uncertain of her choice to venture into Thorncastle House, obediently placed herself in the proffered seat. She arranged herself in the most ladylike and demure manner possible, folding her hands primly in her lap and crossing her ankles together.

## Page 2

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"Tell me a little bit about yourself," Mr Danvers commanded, as he took a seat, before leaning back in his chair. His demeanour was so lackadaisical, Lillian almost expected him to prop his feet up on the table. Thankfully, however, he refrained.

"I hail from Kent," Lillian began, taking care to ensure that the "t" in Kent sounded clipped enough to convey her displeasure at his manners. "I kept house for the local vicar and his family, and oversaw the church accounts—as you will see in my letter of character."

Danvers narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, and to avoid a telling blush, Lillian reached into her basket to retrieve her letter of character. It was, of course, a work of fiction, but Danvers did not need to know this.

Her hand shook slightly as she handed it across to Danvers, who whipped it from her grasp and scanned it quickly.

"Good character," he mumbled, as he read through the missive., "Excellent with figures."

Here, the under butler paused, and offered Lillian a lascivious smile. "And an excellent figure, as well. If I might add my own addendum."

"I would rather that you did not add anything that might sully Mr. Hamilton's words, Sir," Lillian replied, bristling with indignation at his impudence. "He was a fine man and would not broker any such talk under his roof."

"Well," Mr Danvers threw the letter down on the table with a sigh, "You're a loyal

employee, I'll give you that. Tell me, Miss Smith, why did you leave the employ of Mr. Hamilton if you held him in such high esteem?"

Lillian slowly let out the breath she had not realised she was holding. Here at least, was something she had anticipated. She had not expected a handsome but rude butler, but she had prepared to be quizzed on her backstory, and she had made pains to ensure that it would be as near to the truth as possible.

"I worked for the Hamilton family for five years," Lillian said, as she began to retell a story which belonged not to her, but to her old housekeeper. "As I have said, I kept house for the vicar and the accounts for the church. I was most happy and grateful for the position, but when my mother became unwell, it was necessary for me to return home to care for her. Thankfully, the daughter of the house was then of an age to take over my duties."

"How fortuitous," Danvers replied, his eyebrows in danger of disappearing into his hairline. "Might I enquire as to your age? You look quite youthful for one who professes to have so much experience."

"I am five and twenty, Sir," Lillian replied, raising her chin defiantly against his skepticism. In truth, she had only just turned twenty years of age, but she had thought it necessary to borrow the real Miss Smith's age, as well as her history.

"If you say so," Danvers replied with a shrug, before pushing back his chair and rising to a stand.

He was, Lillian noted, impeccably dressed. How wealthy the Duke of Thorncastle must be, if he could outfit his servants in such fine attire. His black coat looked to be made of merino wool, his breeches so well-fitting that they might have come from a Bond Street tailor, whilst his silk waistcoat—a dark grey—was so luscious that Lillian almost wished she might reach out and stroke it.

As Danvers moved from behind the desk to in front of it, Lillian was gifted the opportunity to appreciate his form, which was tall and athletic. His shoulders were broad and strong, and his thighs—Lillian gulped—were muscular, as though he spent most of his days riding.

"Why do you need this job?" Danvers queried, leaning back against the mahogany desk to survey her. His blue eyes were so piercing, Lillian almost believed he could see right through her, to her very soul.

Worrying, she thought, as she dropped her gaze, for her soul was tarnished with the blood of another.

"I am alone in London, Sir," Lillian replied, opting to offer the truth this time for she did not think she was capable of lying under such intense scrutiny. "I have no family here and require a position that offers lodgings. Mr Fortesque, of the employment agency, did say that the position needs urgent filling, and that I might begin straight away, if accepted."

Danvers remained silent for a few moments, digesting the tale Lillian now regretted sharing. She did not wish for him to think she was begging for charity. Nor was she glad she had revealed to this man just how alone she was in the world.

It felt almost akin to telling a fox that the door to the hen-house had been left ajar.

"A beautiful woman like you might find more enjoyable employment elsewhere," Danvers finally offered, his hooded eyes giving away little emotion.

Silence reigned, as Lillian struggled to comprehend what he was suggesting by enjoyable employment. Was it possible that Mr Danvers was proposing that Lillian take up a position in a bawdy-house or a brothel?



"I am afraid that I do not understand the meaning of your words, Sir," Lillian finally spluttered, her cheeks burning red. Of course, she had understood him well enough, but she was offering the wretch a chance to redeem himself.

"You are beautiful," the butler shrugged, his eyes sparkling with amusement as he saw how flustered she had become. "A woman of your beauty might find that there are men who would pay her to do so much more than keep their accounts."

Lillian gasped; the brute! How dare he suggest that she sell her body to the highest bidder. She was the daughter of a vicar, she had not been brought up to suffer such insult from despicable creatures like Mr Danvers. No matter how much she had sinned, she had not fallen that low.

"Sir, you insult me," Lillian cried, springing from her seat and preparing to leave.

"I wasn't suggesting you walk the cobblestones of Covent Garden," Danvers replied with a bark of laughter, not looking the slightest bit remorseful. "I was thinking a gentleman—a wealthy one, mind—might think to take you on as his mistress. Wouldn't you rather spend your days in bed being pleased by a man, than wasting them toiling away in boredom?"

"I would rather be bored than a whore," Lillian snapped, taking a step toward the door.

Mr Danvers, who until now had been indolent in posture and manner, moved quickly to block her path.

"I wasn't suggesting you become a whore," he drawled, his dark eyebrows narrowed in annoyance. "You could be a mistress. It can be considered a most prestigious position, if the right man takes you under his protection."

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"You, Sir," Lillian drew herself up to her full height, "are a swine. I wonder what your master would think, if he knew that you were using your position to try and find a body to warm your bed."

"I think he would heartily approve."

In all her life, Lillian had struck only one man, and, as she struggled against the urge to lash out at the abominable Mr Danvers, Lillian bid herself remembering how badly that particular scenario had ended.

"It would be best if you moved out of my way, Sir," Lillian finally said, amazed that her voice sounded so contained.

Inside she was reeling from insult and something else—a strange, delicious churning in her stomach, as she briefly imagined herself entangled in bed with the dashing man before her.

"Best for whom?" Danvers raised an eyebrow, his expression now dangerous and lupine.

"For you, Sir." Lillian tilted her chin defiantly, taking courage from the memory that, if necessary, she was capable of defending herself against any man who might think to use violence against her.

Mercifully, Mr Danvers—though quite despicable—was not that type of man, and with a flourishing bow—more mocking than courteous—he took a step back to allow Lillian to pass.

"We will meet again soon, Miss Smith," he called, as she reached the door.

"I doubt that very much, Sir, for I have no immediate plans to visit the belly of hell," Lillian replied, without missing a beat.

Her hand touched the door knob and she twisted it, relief flooding over her as she opened the door to her escape. No longer caring for social niceties, Lillian slammed from the room, only to come face to face—or rather face to chest—with another gentleman.

"Miss Smith, I presume?" the man said brightly, his face wearing a congenial smile. "Do forgive my lateness, I was waylaid below stairs...were you leaving?"

Lillian blinked in confusion; who on earth was this?

"Yes," she answered with a sniff, hoping her rigid posture would convey her displeasure at having been delayed. "My meeting with Mr Danvers has come to an end."

"Meeting with—" the gentleman took a handkerchief from his pocket to mop his brow. "But I am Mr Danvers, my dear."

Lillian met his announcement with silence, as she tried to work out just whom it was that she had been speaking to moments before, if this was Mr Danvers. Who on earth had been confident enough—no, mad enough—to think they might get away with impersonating the under-butler in his own office?

Lillian heard the door open behind her and the sound of someone taking a noisy, deliberate step out into the hallway.

"Your Grace." Mr Danvers was not looking at Lillian now, but over her shoulder.

"Perhaps you might be kind enough to clear up all the confusion."

Your Grace...

Lillian felt all the blood drain from her face, as she realised who it was that the real Mr Danvers was addressing. She turned her head slightly to find the Duke of Thorncastle watching her closely, his expression one of thorough amusement.

"I should be happy to clear up any confusion," he stated, as his sensual lips quirked at their corners.

Lillian felt a strange jolt of desire course through her whole body, as this powerful man watched her, in the way a cat might watch a mouse it had trapped between its claws.

Thorncastle was a predator, and he wanted her for his prey. He had offered her *acarte blanche*; a chance to earn her keep through pleasure, rather than hard work. For a moment, Lillian allowed herself to be tempted.

A man like Thorncastle would, no doubt, be most skilled at pleasuring a woman. Lillian, despite her innocence, knew instinctively that the cock-sure, arrogant duke would make a most attentive lover.

But he would never be her lover, she vowed, as anger replaced desire in her veins.

"I have no need for you to do anything, your Grace," she snapped, leveling a cool glance Thorncastle's way. "The only thing I require is to leave this house at once. Your reputation, your Grace, does not do you service—you are twice the devil you are reported to be."

With all the dignity she could muster, Lillian took her leave, pushing past a rather

confused Mr Danvers and racing down the corridor as fast as her feet could take her.

She should never have come to Thorncastle House, she thought, as she escaped through the front door, back into the frigid air of St. James' Square. She had known of the duke's sordid reputation; what on earth had made her think that he was suited to offer her employment?

Desperation.

Lillian, whose funds were rapidly dwindling, had needed the position far more than she cared to admit. She had already pawned all the jewels she owned, and the monies she had received for them were disappearing at an astonishing rate.

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Better a free pauper, than a servant to that fiend, she told herself, as she pulled her shawl tight against the February wind.

But as she made her way back to her lodgings, she was ashamed to find that the memory of Thorncastle's eyes possessively traversing her body, warmed her insides and protected her from the worst of the chill.

### CHAPTER TWO

YOUR REPUTATION DOESnot do you service...

Sebastian Frederick Waldo Beaufort, Sixth Duke of Thorncastle, frowned as he recalled—not for the first time—the parting words of Miss Mary Smith.

He had oft been accused of a lack of conscience, but today his heretofore missing morals had made themselves known to him.

He had been a cad to flirt so outrageously with the prim Miss Smith. And worse, he had thoroughly enjoyed flustering her.

Sebastian had known many women during his three and thirty years—his reputation as a rake could attest to that—but he had never stooped from his self-set limits and dallied with an innocent.

Which, he knew instinctively, Miss Smith was.

Now, his mind wandered down dangerous paths, as he imagined all of the things he

would like to do with the strait-laced vicar's housekeeper. Primitive desire stirred in his belly, as he thought on how—should he pursue his urges—he might be the first man to lay claim to Miss Smith's delectable curves. How pleasurable it would be, to introduce the young lady to the world of lovemaking. To instruct her. To command her. To take her completely.

Get it together, man, Sebastian scolded himself, as he attempted to focus on sorting through the pages of correspondence on his desk. Just forget her. His conscience now prodded him most sharply and Sebastian was not at all taken by the feeling of guilt it produced.

What need is there for guilt, a wicked voice whispered in Sebastian's ear. You do not want her for a quick tumble in the hay, you want her for your mistress.

Sebastian lay the quill he held in his hand down upon the table as he considered it. Miss Smith had applied for a position in his household, one which paid well enough, but not outlandishly by any stretch of the imagination. If he wished to offer her another position, one which might gift her wealth and status, was that such a bad thing?

I would rather be bored than a whore...

Again, Miss Smith's dulcet tones echoed through Sebastian's memory. As did the defiant way she had tilted her chin and the flash of anger in her emerald eyes.

Spirit is something one looks for in a horse, Sebastian reminded himself sternly, not in a mistress. He had a stable full of hot-blood Arabs, whom he could attempt to tame into submission if that was what he desired. He had never had to battle for submission in the bedroom, for most women came to him quite willingly.

Perhaps this was the problem, Sebastian mused, giving up all pretense at getting any

work done and resting back in his chair. All of his previous mistresses, though beautiful and accomplished lovers, had been too compliant. Too eager to shower him with affection and pleasure.

What he needed, he decided, was a challenge. And the sweet but steely Miss Smith, might be just the thing.

Though his conscience roared in protest, Sebastian found his hand—almost of its own volition—had reached for the bell.

"Higgins," Sebastian drawled, as the young footman entered the library. "I have a task for you."

"Yes, your Grace," the lad nodded. "Of course, your Grace."

"I will need you to discover the whereabouts of Miss Smith, who visited here this morning."

Higgins blinked, as his cheeks slowly flushed. No doubt the lad had witnessed Miss Smith storm out like a tempest, and now his young mind was adding two and two together. Given Sebastian's reputation, there was no doubt the lad suspected his master's interests in the beautiful Miss Smith were far from noble—and he was correct.

"She mentioned that she was sent by an employment agency, run by a fellow called Fortesque," Sebastian continued, opening a drawer in his mahogany desk and taking out a coin purse. "Be a good lad and run along and see if this Mr Fortesque might be kind enough to furnish you with Miss Smith's address."

Sebastian took a handful of coins from the purse and proffered them at the footman, who rushed forth and pocketed the coin.



"Money might help to lubricate Mr Fortesque's memory if you find it rusting," Sebastian added with a wink. "Though keep some for yourself, my lad; whatever amount you deem is a suitable price for your silence on this matter."

"Yes, your Grace," the footman beamed, before hastily rearranging his expression into passivity, as was befitting of his station.

"Off you go." Sebastian dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "I want you straight back here once you are done. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, your Grace," the lad parroted again, before turning on his heel and dashing for the door.

The young man would, no doubt, take his time, Sebastian thought with a grin. It was rare that a servant had coin in his pocket and time which did not need to be accounted for, and Sebastian guessed he might take a detour or two before setting out to find Mr Fortesque.

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Perhaps he would take an ice at Gunter's before sauntering along Bond Street, for a glance at the plates in the window of Ackermann's. Or, Sebastian grinned, perhaps he might take his coin and gift it to a lightskirt in Covent Garden for a quick tumble.

The latter was what Sebastian would have done at his age. And if the lad was anything like Sebastian had been in his youth, that particular detour would not take too long.

Sebastian turned his attention back to his correspondence, impatient but aware that the best things came to those who waited.

While it was far from the most prestigious of neighbourhoods, Cheapside was, Sebastian thought, at least somewhat respectable. When Higgins had returned, late in the afternoon, with a page bearing the address of a boarding house on Gracechurch Street, Sebastian had been rather surprised to find himself relieved to learn his country-mouse was not staying in the dangerous Seven Dials.

That he had—unconsciously at least—been worried about Miss Smith's safety, leaving him feeling rather irritated, and thus, he had put off calling on her until later that evening.

In fact, after supper, as he was smoking a cheroot and stubbornly telling himself his interest in Miss Smith was purely carnal, Sebastian decided he would leave off calling on her until the next day.

However, once he had finished his cigar—an excellent Turkish tobacco from Fribourg and Treyer's in Haymarket—his supposed apathy disappeared, and he found

himself summoning the footman to prepare a carriage and four.

"I wish to take the Landeau this evening" he instructed, and the footman gave a knowing nod.

The Landeau was one of Sebastian's plainer vehicles, one which he used when he wanted anonymity. Or namely, when he was off to do something scandalous and did not wish to be noted.

Not that he considered offering Miss Smith a chance to reconsider his proposed *carte blanche* as scandalous, for it wasn't really, by his standards at least.

Still, the *chit* might take umbrage if he caused a scene by arriving in a vehicle which bore the ducal arms, and so Sebastian set forth for Cheapside in his plain Landeau with anticipation bubbling in his stomach.

It had been a long time since he had felt this aroused by a woman, he thought, as the carriage wound its way through London's evening traffic. He had come into his title at the mere age of twenty, and at that young age he had been determined to sample every delight London had to offer a man of title and fortune. But a decade of having his every desire sated had left him feeling rather empty and, though the papers reported the opposite, Sebastian had, for the past few years, been far less inclined toward raker.

Of course, he had kept a beautiful mistress or two, for the sake of keeping up appearances, but his desire for partaking in the pleasure of the flesh had ebbed and waned to almost nothing.

He had resignedly decided that the vanishing of his libido was age finally catching up with him, until Miss Smith had wandered into his home with her tempting curves and beautiful but impertinent mouth.

Desire had made a reappearance, coursing through his veins, and causing him—and other parts of him—to stand to attention.

Now he just needed to persuade Miss Smith that attending to his desire would be an advantageous adventure for them both.

The carriage soon drew to a halt outside a house which could only be described as unremarkable. It was a three-story dwelling with a short flight of steps leading to a black front door, flanked on either side by homes of identical banality. The only thing that distinguished the home from its neighbours, was a polished wooden sign on the railings outside, which read; Mrs Harrod's Boarding House for Christian Women.

It was, Sebastian thought with a wry smile, the least provocative name one could think of for an establishment. Still, he felt rather pleased to learn Miss Smith was not sharing a dinner table with any gentlemen, and that her virtue was being guarded by Mrs Harrod, who Sebastian pictured as being rather formidable.

The carriage had been drawn up outside but a minute, when from one of the windows above, Sebastian spotted an fierce-looking older woman frowning down at the vehicle suspiciously.

Mrs Harrod, Sebastian guessed, and when her face disappeared from the window, he had the sneaking suspicion she was headed his way.

"Drive on," he called, rapping on the roof of the carriage.

He had no wish whatsoever to have to interact with this Mrs Harrod, or explain to her his reasons for being there. He was quite certain that were he to divulge to Mrs Harrod that he wished to spirit one of her charges away to live as his mistress, she would scream blue-murder.

As the carriage neared the end of Gracechurch Street, Sebastian rapped on the roof again to indicate for the driver to stop.

He had not prepared any kind of plan, he realised, as he peered out of the carriage window at the dark, empty street. Desire—and a dash of arrogance—had made him assume he could simply stroll up and knock on Miss Smith's door and be gratefully received. This, he realised irritably, was not to be the case.

Not only would Mrs Harrod refuse him entry, but he might inadvertently damage Miss Smith's standing in her eyes, if Sebastian were to call so late in the evening. If Sebastian were a cad, he might think this point in his favour. If by calling he accidentally made Miss Smith homeless, she might be far more amenable to his proposal of *acarte blanche*.

But Sebastian, for all his faults, was no cad. Nor would his pride allow him to force Miss Smith into his bed. He wanted her, he was willing to pursue her—but when he bedded her, he wanted her to come willingly to him.

Sebastian sighed as the minutes passed and no inspiration as to what he should do next struck; pursuing an innocent was far harder work than chasing after one of the *demi-monde*.

Outside, the lamplighter arrived to light the single gas-lamp which stood on the corner of Gracechurch Street and Lombard Street. He was late, Sebastian noted, for darkness had long fallen, though perhaps that did not matter so much in an area like Cheapside, where the streetlamps were so few that they made little difference to the darkness.

The lamplighter clambered atop his ladder, and as he brought the gaslight aflame, its yellow light illuminated the footpath beneath, bathing a passing figure in its glow.

Miss Smith.

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Sebastian sat to attention, though he hesitated as he resisted against his urge to spring forth from the carriage and pounce on her. It did not take a genius to realise that surprising a woman walking alone on a darkened road was the opposite of romantic. Not only would he earn Miss Smith's ire, but he might also earn himself a black eye.

As Sebastian pondered what his next move might be, a second figure was briefly illuminated as it stole under the gaslamp's glare. A young lad, shabbily dressed, and judging by his expression, his intentions were equally as ghastly as his clothes.

A startled cry from outside soon proved Sebastian's suspicions right, and in a second he had sprung forth from the carriage, and sprinted toward Miss Smith.

"No!" he heard her cry. "My basket! You're not taking it—argh!"

Sebastian raced faster, though the way was so dark, he almost tripped over Miss Smith when he reached her. She picked herself up off the footpath, having evidently been pushed to the ground by the fiend.

Behind him, Sebastian heard the sound of footsteps running toward them, and Higgins materialised out of the gloom.

"See if you can catch whoever took Miss Smith's basket," Sebastian ordered, jerking his head in the direction the thief had run. Higgins disappeared, and Sebastian turned to Miss Smith, who had returned to a standing position without his assistance.

So much for being her knight in shining armour.

"Miss Smith..." He stepped forward, allowing concern to lace his tone. "Are you hurt? The fiend. I saw him steal upon you from my carriage, but I was too late to stop him."

"What on earth were you doing spying on me from your carriage?"

Gratitude. Awe. Perhaps a feminine whimper of thanks. Sebastian had expected at least some sort of acknowledgment from Miss Smith for his heroic endeavours to save her, but he had not anticipated this cool outrage.

"I was not spying on you," he countered, trying to temper his irritation. "I was merely parked upon the corner when I happened to see you pass by."

"Does His Grace often park on the corner of Gracechurch Street?" Miss Smith inquired, as she furiously brushed the dust from her skirts.

"Never." Sebastian could not suppress his shudder of distaste at the very idea that he often lingered in Cheapside.

"Then what," Miss Smith looked up from her skirts and cast him a withering glare, "are you doing here, if not spying upon me?"

"I was waiting for you," Sebastian retorted, hotly. "It's entirely different to spying."

"Different, but no less sinister," Miss Smith hooted, and to Sebastian's surprise, she took a step toward him, her green eyes alight with anger. "Do you think me a green-girl, Your Grace? One silly enough to think it is a coincidence that the man who offered me a position as his mistress just happened to be present to save me when a thief makes off with my basket, and my purse, and all that I own that is valuable?"

"When you put it like that, it does sound rather suspicious," Sebastian conceded. "Though I assure you that it is simply bad timing on my part."



"A likely story," Miss Smith laughed, though it was a hollow sound, empty of anything but derision.

"Now, hold on one minute," Sebastian bristled. He would not have her slander him so unjustly. There were plenty of other accusations she could level at him which would be quite true, but thief was not one of them.

"I did not organise this charade," he growled, meeting her stormy gaze with one of his own. "It was merely a coincidence—an unfortunate one, I'll grant you that. Yes, I came to see if you would reconsider my proposal, but I had no wish to place you in such sorry circumstances that you would be forced to accept it. I am dashedly sorry I did not apprehend that footpad, but I will compensate you for the loss of your purse, Miss Smith."

Sebastian had not realised it, but with each word he had spoken, he had moved closer and closer to Miss Smith, so that he was now inches from her. He felt the warmth radiating from her body, and he longed to pull her against him. The night was cold, bitterly so, and he saw each breath she took as they rose like a cloud from her lips. She was not unaffected by him, he was gratified to see; her bosom heaved beneath her too-thin shawl, and her lips were parted, as though in longing.

Sebastian was tempted to lower his head and steal a kiss from her rosebud mouth, but as well as being beautiful, Miss Smith also appeared to be clairvoyant, and she leveled him a frown.

"I don't need anything from you," she whispered, sounding much like she was trying to convince herself more than Sebastian.

"I fear," Sebastian drawled, stepping closer again, "we are both about to become stuck on a point of pride, Miss Smith. Pride will not allow you to accept my offer, whilst it will also not allow me to permit you to leave without accepting the

compensation I offer. It comes with no caveat; I am merely a man who wishes to prevent a young woman from falling into destitution."

"I am not yet destitute, your Grace," Miss Smith argued, her cheeks staining prettily with indignation. "The thief might have made off with what little money I have, but I have just secured a position and shall be able to support myself quite adequately. I have no need for your charity. I will earn my keep with honest labour."

Sebastian glowered at her pious tone; Miss Smith did not believe that his offer of compensation was in any way magnanimous. Even he struggled to comprehend the strange urge filling him. He wanted to know Miss Smith was safe for his own peace of mind—and not for the sake of the bulge in his breeches.

It was something of a revelation that he, The Devil Duke, could be in any way altruistic. And, annoyingly, the first pure urge he had ever had toward another was being misinterpreted.

Sebastian was struck by the memory of an old fable, as he quashed down his irritation. Though he was not so much the boy who cried wolf, as he was the duke who cried chivalry. Perhaps he could not blame Miss Smith for her mistrust, when he had offered her a position as his mistress, just that very morning.

"Now, see here," Sebastian growled, desperate to explain himself. Though what it was she was supposed to see was never to be revealed, for another voice cut across him before he could finish.

"Is that you, Mary?"

The voice was thusly accompanied by the body of another young woman, wrapped tight against the cold night in a thick coat. The interloper cast Miss Smith a worried glance as she assessed the situation, before landing her hostile gaze upon Sebastian.

"Is everything all right?" she queried, in a voice hinting that should everything not be all right, that it was Sebastian who would pay the price.

"No." Sebastian adopted his most charming manner—a chore, for as a rule, he was never charming. "Miss Smith has had her basket stolen by a footpad. I came to her assistance but I was unable to apprehend the ruffian. She is now refusing, rather stupidly, my offer to reimburse her the moneys which were stolen."

The interloper, who at first had been rather taken aback by Sebastian's smooth, Etonian accent, now looked him up and down from top to toe. Her eyes, Sebastian noted, were shrewdly calculating the cost of his coat of superfine, his Hessian boots, and the beaver hat upon his head.

"You should let the man help you, Mary," she advised, having evidently decided that Sebastian could well afford to act as Miss Smith's saviour.

"I have no wish to be helped by His Grace," Miss Smith shrugged, moving away from Sebastian to link her arm through that of her friend. "Come, Sally, I wish to warm myself by the fire. Good evening, Your Grace."

Miss Smith tugged her friend away, in the direction of the boarding house, leaving

Sebastian with a sense of loss, which he quickly quashed with a feeling of irritation.

Silly chit, he thought, as he turned on his heel; to refuse a magnanimous offer of assistance.

Sebastian gave an irritable sigh, as he stalked back to his carriage to await the return of Higgins. After a few long minutes, the footman returned, his nose red from the cold.

"Begging your pardon, Your Grace," the young man said, apologetically, "but I could not find the lad. Reckon he's back in St Giles by now."

"Thank you, Higgins." Sebastian waved a lazy hand. "That is much what I expected. There is no magic that could trump a footpad's ability to disappear into thin air. Now, back to your post, and tell the driver I wish to visit one of my clubs. White's should suffice."

Higgins nodded and closed the carriage door, leaving Sebastian alone to stew in its dark recesses. He was vexed. He was irritated. He was thoroughly put out by Miss Smith's refusal of his assistance.

And, he realised with a wry smile, he was also extremely aroused.

His blood coursed through his veins, he felt an ache of desire within his belly, and—he snorted with laughter, once he realised it—his breeches bulged with longing for the vexatious Miss Smith.

Perhaps the chit was right not to trust my intentions, Sebastian thought, as the carriage wound its way through the night. True, he wanted her safe, but what safer place was there for the young woman than under his protection—and between his bedsheets?

## CHAPTER THREE

LILLIAN GAVE A sigh of relief as she neared home. Her day had been long, and the walk from the West India Docks even longer.

Her feet within her sturdy boots ached, along with her lower back, and she longed for the respite of her bed in Mrs Harrod's Boarding House.

As she finally reached the corner of Gracechurch Street, Lillian stiffened in awareness. She would not, as had happened the previous night, allow herself to fall victim to any villainous footpads—not that she had much left for them to steal.

The memory of the previous night rose in her mind's eye, as she traipsed along the footpath, which was lined with uniform, brown-brick houses. The thief had come out of nowhere, snatching at her basket with great skill, though Lillian had unconsciously held on to it for dear life—a fool's errand, for she had found herself shoved to the ground for her efforts.

For a moment, Lillian allowed despair to overwhelm her, as she recalled that the young lad had made off with everything she held dear. Not just her coin purse, but her mother's locket, and the leather-bound Bible which her father had gifted her last Christmas.

Mrs Harrod ran a respectable establishment, but she had warned all her girls not to leave any valuables in their rooms, and Lillian had duly obeyed. She regretted her choice to lug that heavy book around London every day, now that it was lost to her forever. And it was not just the loss of a dear father's gift which worried her, but the fact that her name—the name of a murderess—was written upon the inside jacket.

If anyone were to recognise her, she thought, before pushing away that ice-cold thought.

She was being fanciful, she assured herself; there was no one who would think to link the hardworking Mary Smith with Lillian Hamilton. No one would ever think that the daughter of a Reverend—himself the second son of a Baron—would ever deign to live in a boarding house for women, and eke out a living working in the purser's office of a shipping company.

Lillian paused at the steps of Mrs Harrod's, readying herself for the stream of questions which she was certain the inquisitive Scotswoman would throw at her the moment she walked through the door.

However, as Mrs Harrod answered her knock, she was not brimming with questions, but instead with excitement.

"You should have warned me, lass," she hissed, as she steered Lillian down the hallway toward the parlour room. "I only had some dry Madeira cake to offer him; had I known he was coming, I would have baked some fresh shortbread."

"I—what—who?"

Lillian had no idea what it was that the neat, little Scotswoman was speaking of, but as Mrs Harrod pushed open the door of the parlour room, comprehension dawned on Lillian.

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"Ah, Miss Smith. How nice to see you again."

The Duke of Thorncastle stood as both ladies entered the room. Lillian, through a mixture of surprise and exhaustion, merely stared back at him dumbly.

"Say hello," Mrs Harrod whispered beside her, giving Lillian a sharp elbow to her ribs in encouragement.

"Ouch," Lillian grumbled, wincing at the bony prompt. "I mean, good evening, Your Grace."

There were one hundred questions on the tip of Lillian's tongue—not to mention a hundred obscenities she longed to fling at the duke—but she remained silent.

One did not speak to a duke, unless first spoken to, after all.

"You are probably wondering what I'm doing here," Thornecastle said, waving a casual hand for Lillian to sit.

"That's quite right," Lillian answered in clipped tones, before hastily adding a "Your Grace" at Mrs Harrod's scandalised glare.

A brief, wicked smile crossed Thorncastle's face, before he reassumed his air of hauteur. He took a seat, once both ladies were seated, and cleared his throat before he deigned to illuminate Lillian as to the reason for his presence.

"As you well know, having been both his housekeeper and keeper of Parish

accounts," Thorncastle began. "The Reverend Hamilton contributed to many charitable organisations—especially ones which assisted spinsters required to earn their own keep."

Lillian frowned; what on earth was the man wittering on about?

"I myself am patron of such a charity and having heard that the previous housekeeper of my old friend, the Reverend, had fallen on hard times, I felt compelled to offer assistance."

"Such a good man," Mrs Harrod breathed, her eyes glistening with tears as she listened to the duke.

Such a good liar, Lillian thought dourly to herself—though, on the lying front, she wasn't exactly in a position to cast stones herself.

"I have spoken with Mrs Harrod," Thorncastle bestowed a smile upon the Scotswoman, who quivered with delight, "and I have arranged for your board here to be paid for by my charity."

"That's really not necessary, Your Grace."

This time it was impossible for Lillian to conceal her true feelings, and the definite bite to her tone earned her another definite poke in the ribs from Mrs Harrod.

"Don't be so ungrateful, girl," the boarding-house proprietor hissed, her round cheeks rosy with indignation. "'Tis a fine thing His Grace has done for you."

Lillian took a deep breath to compose herself. She would not allow Thorncastle to waltz in and upend her day for his own amusement, she thought.



"Indeed, it is," she agreed, plastering a sickly-sweet smile upon her face for Mrs Harrod's benefit. "But I am thinking of the other ladies that His Grace might help, instead of me. Ladies who might truly need—and want—His Grace's assistance. I cannot accept his offer, for their sakes."

"Such a good girl," Mrs Harrod sighed, beaming across at the duke. "Always thinking of others."

"You are a great judge of character, Mrs Harrod," Thorncastle's voice was deadly serious, though he caught Lillian's eye as he spoke, and despite herself, she smiled.

Poor, unassuming Mrs Harrod had become caught in their crossfire, and was so innocent that she believed herself seated betwixt two saints instead of two sinners.

"Despite your protests, however, Miss Smith," Thorncastle continued, "I am afraid it is too late to object. Your bill for this month has been settled."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Lillian replied, through gritted teeth.

If the blasted man wished to squander his money for nothing, she thought, then who was she to get in his way? At least his generosity might allow her the opportunity to put a little of her wages aside for a rainy day.

"Mrs Harrod tells me you have taken up employment at a shipping office?" Thorncastle continued, as he lifted his cup of tea to his lips.

His tone was idle, but Lillian knew instinctively that this was an act. There was a slight draw to his thick, dark eyebrows and an almost imperceptible edge to his tone, and he was completely still as he waited for her to answer.

Thorncastle, Lillian realised, did not approve.

"Yes." She lifted her chin defiantly. "In the purser's office. I manage the wages for the sailors."

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"I hardly think that a fitting occupation for a lady of your gentle breeding," Thorncastle frowned, his mouth sulky.

"Oh?" Lillian resisted laughing, as she boldly met his gaze. "And what do you think is a fitting occupation for me, Your Grace?"

He held her gaze with his blue eyes and gave a slow, laconic raise of his eyebrow. Lillian felt a delicious pang of desire, as she allowed herself to imagine just exactly what the duke thought to be a suitable occupation for one such as she—his mistress.

A brief image flashed across her mind's eye, one of her and the duke, limbs entangled, lounging on velvet sheets. Her fiery red hair was spread across the pillowcase, whilst Thorncastle rained kisses down upon her exposed neck.

Lillian felt a stirring, deep within, so forceful she flushed and looked away.

"I always have need of staff," Thorncastle suggested lightly, though he gazed forcefully at Lillian as he spoke. "I am certain I could find a position for you somewhere, Miss Smith. It would be much preferable to you slaving away at the docks—don't you agree, Mrs Harrod?"

"Oh, yes, Your Grace," the Scotswoman nodded violently. "The West India docks are no place for a woman. How kind the duke is, Mary, don't you think?"

"His kindness is such that it is almost unbelievable," Lillian demurred, with a quick scowl at Thorncastle, who simply smirked.

Outside in the hallway, the gong sounded for supper, causing Mrs Harrod to jump to her feet in a flap.

"I shall have to oversee the scullery maids," she wailed, with an apologetic glance to Thorncastle, "or they might set the whole house aflame with their incompetence."

"Please," Thorncastle stood to his feet, the perfect gentleman, "I do not wish to keep you from whatever needs attending to, Mrs Harrod. Not when you have already shown me such courtesy. I will finish my tea, and Miss Smith may show me out?"

"Of course, Your Grace," Mrs Harrod beamed. "And thank you. Such a fine man you are. A good and upstanding man of the book. You are most welcome in my home, Your Grace, any time you wish."

Thorncastle preened under Mrs Harrod's effusive compliments, though his smug smile faltered a little when she closed the door behind her and Lillian rounded upon him.

"I told you I did not need your assistance," she hissed, mindful the house was busy and they might be overheard.

"And I decided you did." Thorncastle smiled lazily. "You cannot be vexed with me, Miss Smith. I merely wanted to be assured you have a roof over your head and would not end up cast out upon the streets. Though I am not entirely certain you are not already half-way there. What on earth were you thinking, taking up occupation at the docks?"

"You make it sound as though I am working in a bawdy-house," Lillian frowned.

"Perhaps it would be better if you were," Thorncastle retorted angrily, his handsome face wearing the expression of a man who was trying valiantly to suppress great

anger. "At least then you would be paid when a man sets out to take your maidenhead, and not have it stolen by some nefarious oaf on your walk home."

A blush stained Lillian's cheeks at his words; no man had ever spoken so boldly to her about such matters. Then again, she reasoned, Thorncastle was not a man, but a devil.

"If I was to entrust the safety of my maidenhead to anyone, Your Grace, you would be at the bottom of the list," Lillian snapped, surprised at how the duke somehow managed to summon the tomcat hidden within. Usually she was a gentle soul, almost placid, but when Thorncastle was near, her claws came out.

"Perhaps you have some sense, after all," the duke replied, giving her a wicked smile which set her stomach fluttering with want. "I am indeed the last person you should entrust your virginity to, if you wish to keep it intact. But, unlike other men, Miss Smith, I would only take you if you agreed to it—I would not take you by force. If you come to my bed, it will be willingly."

"You shall be waiting a long time for that," Lillian bit back, though within her chest, her heart beat erratically with want and need.

"Patience is one of my many virtues," Thorncastle said lightly. "Along with generosity, compassion, and passion."

"And sticking your nose in where it's unwanted," Lillian added, with a snap.

Her temper was frayed by his presence; her whole body felt as though it were not her own, and it was most disconcerting. She had never had such a visceral response to a man in all her years. Her heart beat quickly, her breath caught in her chest, her stomach tightened, and she had an overwhelming urge to flee the room. An urge which was juxtaposed by a second want to throw herself into Thorncastle's arms.

"My interest in you might be unwanted," the duke shrugged, "but I feel it is necessary, if only to assure your safety. London is a cruel town, Miss Smith, and I worry it might eat you whole if you have no one to look out for you."

"How kind." Lillian was dry.

"I am capable of some kindness, despite what you may think."

Was it her imagination, or did a look of hurt flash across Thorncastle's eyes? As soon as she noted it, though, it disappeared, and the duke was as cold and hard as ever.

"Another of my attributes is that I am always keenly aware when I am not wanted," Thorncastle said evenly, standing to his feet and reaching for his ebony cane. "No need to see me out, Miss Smith. I bid you good evening."

Lillian was silent as the duke swept past her toward the door. A lurch of something in her stomach—perhaps guilt—propelled her to speak.

"If your assistance comes without strings, then I am grateful," she said, and he paused.

### CHAPTER FOUR

SEBASTIAN WAS NOT the type of man who liked to loiter. He was a duke, and should the need to loiter arise, he had umpteen servants to whom he could delegate the task.

However, this particular spell of loitering also involved guarding—though some might call it spying on—Miss Mary Smith, and Sebastian found he had no wish to delegate such matters to anyone else.

The idea that he was being possessive did not even cross his mind, though many other things did as he sat in his carriage, idly perusing the paper. Most of them involved he and Miss Smith in various lovemaking positions, though occasionally, he imagined them in more sedate—almost domestic—scenes.

Darkness had fallen, though it was not yet five o'clock, and he had to squint to read the words in the dim light which shone through the window from the streetlamp outside.

The sound of revelry from the nearby inns and taverns filled the night, and as a particularly loud shout rang out, Sebastian frowned in annoyance.

What on earth had Miss Smith been thinking? Sebastian had only to glance out the window to see the docks were no place for a woman. Alongside the inns and taverns

were dozens of bawdy-houses, where from the windows lightskirts called out to the men below, trying to entice them inside.

The docks—after the Seven Dials—were one of the seediest parts of London, and it was not safe for a lady to walk there alone after dark.

A few more minutes passed, during which Sebastian cast his eye over the advertisements filling the pages, vaguely wondering if anyone really believed Gowland's Lotion really cured every ailment, from pimples to scrophula—before he wracked his brains to try and recall what scrophula actually was. It sounded rather like something one might pick up in the doxyhouse next door, he thought with a smile.

From above, there came a knocking on the carriage roof, a sign from Higgins that Miss Smith had left the offices of Macdonald, Humbert, & Co. for the evening.

Sebastian folded the paper and cast it aside, before peering out through the carriage window to try and spot his prey.

Miss Smith was wearing a neat bonnet over her red tresses, and had a light shawl pulled tight around her shoulders. Sebastian, who was wearing several layers, including a coat of superfine, gave a frown as he noted this—was she not cold?

"She will catch a chill," he muttered irritably to himself. Though, as he then watched her dodge a group of drunken sailors falling out of a tavern, he realised a chill was the least of her worries.

Sebastian pushed open the carriage door and stepped down onto the footpath, wrinkling his nose against the smell of saltwater and decay greeting him.

"I shall walk," he called to Higgins, whose long years of service meant he did not



betray any surprise he might feel.

"Follow along at a slow pace," Sebastian instructed. "And make sure that you are not seen."

"Yes, Your Grace," the footman replied, with a nod.

Sebastian took off after Miss Smith, careful to remain at a respectable distance.

The path beneath his feet was dark with dirt, soot, and other unmentionable things. Sebastian, who did not often walk anywhere, lamented that his Hessian boots might never recover from the outing, and that Graves—his rather grave valet—might also never recover.

Miss Smith walked quickly and Sebastian had to keep a brisk pace himself, in order not to lose sight of her. She made her way along the main road, toward Limehouse, where Sebastian assumed she would follow the river along through Southwark before veering inward toward Cheapside.

Another mark against her, he thought with a scowl; her route might be quicker, but she would be safer to walk north, toward town, and then cut across.

Irritated, Sebastian continued his pursuit. If anyone were to observe him—including Miss Smith—they might think he was the villain in this piece, following a lone woman home. But Sebastian had no wish to accost Miss Smith, he merely wished to shadow her, until he was certain she was safe inside Mrs Harrod's.

It was a ridiculous, almost undignified thing for a man of his status to do, yet the urge to ensure Miss Smith was safe and well had overridden his sense of pride.

No small feat, given Sebastian had oft been accused of an overinflated sense of self.

The pursuit continued for a few minutes more, until Miss Smith had passed the Limehouse Basin and the newly established Regent's Canal Dock, where her journey was rudely interrupted.

A gang of young men, wearing the uniform rags of Arab street rats, materialised out of the shadows and encircled the unsuspecting Miss Smith.

"Wot a piece of skirt, eh lads?" the leader of the pack called, with a leer.

"If you're looking for something to steal," Sebastian heard Miss Smith reply warily, "then I am afraid you have picked the wrong lady. I have nought but an apple left over from lunch."

"If you ain't got no money, there's somefink else we might have," the original speaker replied, and he reached out a meaty paw to grab at Miss Smith.

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A cheer went up from his friends, as Miss Smith valiantly fought off her attacker. Though Sebastian could only have been a furlong away, it felt like miles as he ran to her aid.

"Get off her," he roared, as he neared.

With a strength Sebastian was unaware he possessed, he hauled the young man away from Miss Smith, and flung him to the ground. The lad's friends roared in displeasure and advanced forward with menace in their eyes.

"Stay behind me," Sebastian whispered to Miss Smith, attempting as best he could to shield her with his body. "And if you get a chance, run, and don't look back."

At home, Sebastian had a grand collection of pistols—double barrelled Flintlocks with ornately carved handles—but they were hidden in a drawer in his library, and no use to him now.

With a sigh, Sebastian rolled up his sleeves, and prepared himself for a bout of fisticuffs. Luckily, like many men of the aristocracy, Sebastian trained weekly at Gentleman Jackson's, and was quite adept at delivering an uppercut.

His skill took the first lad who approached by surprise, and he fell to the ground howling as Sebastian's fist made contact with his cheek. The second lad, likewise, was not prepared for the force of Sebastian's punch, and he found himself levelled to the floor with a follow-up knee to the stomach.

Alas, six against one was always poor odds, and by the time the third attacker

advanced, Sebastian was already winded.

He weathered a punch to the eye quite well, though he felt a trickle of blood run down his brow. Another punch left him dazed, and Sebastian was certain he would soon end up unconscious on the floor, when the sound of clattering hooves and shouting sent the whole gang packing.

"Your Grace," Higgins was breathless as he reached them. "Are you all right?"

"Perfectly fine," Sebastian drawled, as he reached for the silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, and dabbed at his bloodied brow. "Thanks to your good timing."

"Nothing can scare a pack of feral brats quicker than driving a carriage and four at 'em." Higgins grinned. "Though you managed to hold 'em off long enough alone, Your Grace."

"Thank you, Higgins," Sebastian replied, feeling really rather pleased with himself. He might be three and thirty, but there was life left in him yet.

"Miss Smith..." Sebastian turned to Miss Smith, who was silently shaking beside him. "Might I instruct you to take a seat inside the carriage? I am afraid I do not have the patience tonight to listen to any of your objections."

Miss Smith complied silently, allowing Higgins to walk her to the waiting carriage and assist her up the step. Her meek acquiescence almost made Sebastian feel guilty—almost.

"Did I not warn you that the docks were no place for a woman?" he grumbled, once he himself was safely ensconced inside the carriage, and the door shut behind him.

Sebastian dabbed irritably at the small cut above his eyebrow; it was but a scratch,

but as with most head wounds, it was bleeding profusely.

He scowled in annoyance as he awaited her answer, but to his surprise, he was not met with indignation but something else—tears.

Dash it, Sebastian thought fearfully, he was no good with tears.

"Don't cry," he said gruffly. "I've no handkerchief to gallantly offer you, as this one is covered in blood."

His weak attempt at humour sent Miss Smith into a louder wails of despair, and Sebastian realised nervously that he may have to offer actual comfort.

"Hush now," he said, moving across the compartment to sit beside her. "You're all right, Miss Smith. Everything will be all right."

She was near convulsing from her sobbing, so Sebastian, acting on instinct, drew her against his chest and held her as she cried.

Previously, the only emotion that had overwhelmed Sebastian when he held a woman was passion, but now he was consumed by another feeling altogether—concern. He knew Miss Smith had suffered a terrible fright, but her sobs went deeper than mere shock. They were cries of anguish and despair.

"There, there," he said, rubbing a consoling hand up and down her arm. "It's all right."

"Nothing is all right." Miss Smith sniffed. "Nothing has been right since my father died."

Sebastian stiffened and she must have felt it, for she hastened to compose herself.

"I thought you left the Reverend's employ to care for your ailing mother?" he questioned, as Miss Smith pulled away from him.

Sebastian deliberately kept his tone light, but the young woman was as undeceived of he, as he of she.

"Yes," she answered, clearing her throat, before blowing into a handkerchief she had fished from the pockets of her skirts. "But before that, my father passed, and nothing has been the same since."

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Her tone was stubborn and flat, and Sebastian knew that even if he pressed her she would not budge from her tale. Miss Smith was harbouring secrets, but they would not be cajoled from her tonight.

"I am sorry for your loss," Sebastian said simply. "And I am sorry for what happened this evening."

"Do not apologise, Your Grace," Miss Smith replied, averting her eyes from his. "If you had not been there, I shudder to think what might have happened."

"If I had not been such a boor when you came to Thorncastle House, you might now be safely in my employ. The under-housekeeper to the under-housekeeper, or some other-such fanciful title."

Miss Smith was silent, and Sebastian briefly wondered if she were thinking she would be less safe under his roof than down on the docks. He bristled with indignation at the idea, though he knew she had not actually accused him of anything.

"My offer still stands," he said gruffly, aware that the carriage was nearing its destination. "I can set you up most comfortably—I have a house in Mayfair that would suit your needs."

"As it has suited all the women before me," Miss Smith replied, sharp as ever despite her upset.

"If that bothers you," Sebastian shrugged, "then I might let another. I would house you, shower you with gifts, trips to the theatre and the Vauxhall Gardens—"

"And make me your whore."

"Mistress." Sebastian winced at the word whore; he was hardly asking her to walk the cobblestones of Covent Garden.

"They are one and the same, are they not?" Miss Smith queried archly. "Mistress or whore, you would have your pleasure either way. My body would be yours for the taking."

"I would not take anything without your permission," Sebastian argued hotly. "It would not be a tumble in the hay, as you seem to think, but a relationship between two passionate beings. If I need to woo you and court you before I bed you, then so be it, I can wait. I just want you under my roof, and under my protection, before you walk yourself into any more danger."

Sebastian usually prided himself on being cool, calm, and composed—some might even say indifferent. But it was impossible to be cool around this woman, when she filled him with such fiery passion. And it was impossible to be calm, when she appeared so keen to vex him.

The carriage began to slow, and Sebastian realised they must now be approaching Gracechurch Street, and that Miss Smith would flee as soon as the carriage came to a halt.

He had said everything there was to say to the chit, and there was now only one means of persuasion left at his disposal.

"Don't think that you would be the only one giving," he said throatily, reaching out to stroke her cheek. "I can offer you pleasure you have never even imagined, my dear."

Miss Smith was wide eyed and still, as she warily watched him. But there was



something else in her eyes, something Sebastian recognised well—desire.

She was tempted by the Devil of Thorncastle; as much as she tried to fight it, she wanted him too.

And who was Sebastian to deny her the pleasure?

With a low growl, he reached for her, pulling her once more into his arms. But this time his embrace was not soft or gentle, but hard and fraught with want and need.

His lips met hers, hungry and demanding, and he was gratified to find no resistance. No, instead Miss Smith acquiesced to his desire, opening her lush mouth and permitting him to probe its soft recesses.

She melted against his chest, her soft curves pressed against him. As she writhed in pleasure, her breasts rubbed against him, and Sebastian's restraint was sorely tested.

He had offered to wait for her, but if he continued on like this he would end up taking her in the carriage as it rumbled through Cheapside...

"Enough," Sebastian said gruffly, slightly breathless as he pulled away from her.

Miss Smith's lips were plump and bruised, and Sebastian had to glance away, lest he was tempted to kiss her further.

He was gratified to hear her breath was as ragged as his; she was as affected by their embrace as he.

A few moments passed, in which they both composed themselves, and in that time, the carriage drew to a halt.

"We're here," Miss Smith said, in a tone which Sebastian could not decipher.

Was she relieved, or disappointed?

"I will wait, until you are safely inside," Sebastian said, as Higgins opened the door to assist Miss Smith down.

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"Thank you, Your Grace," she said, bestowing him with one last glance. "And thank you for saving me this evening, truly I am grateful."

"I do not want your gratitude," Sebastian shrugged, "I want you under my protection. My offer is there, Miss Smith, all you have to do is accept it."

She inclined her head to let him know she had heard him, but she said no more. Instead, she took Higgins' proffered hand and allowed him to help her from the carriage.

The door shut behind her and Sebastian was once more alone. The evening had offered him more questions than answers about Miss Smith, but it had also gifted him some pleasurable memories. Sadly, they would be the only company in his bed that night.

## CHAPTER FIVE

LILLIAN COULD NOT deny how tempted she was by Thorncastle's offer - and not only for the safety that his protection might afford her.

Her whole body hummed and thrummed with desire, as she climbed the steps to the boarding house, and there was a strange ache between her legs. Though she did not fully understand it, she knew it was an ache only Thorncastle might soothe.

She was discombobulated. Not only from the attack, during which she had been certain she would suffer an egregious assault on her person, but from Thorncastle's kiss.

Lillian had always considered herself an innocent, so the strength of desire she had felt when the duke had pulled her into his arms had shocked her.

She had not resisted his advances, in fact, she had welcomed them eagerly. She had pushed her breasts against his chest, begging for his touch. All sense of reason had left her, as her body had been consumed by fire and longing. She had felt wanton - and, worse, she had enjoyed it.

Lillian tried to compose herself, as she rapped upon the door to the boarding house. It would not do for Mrs Harrod to notice there was something amiss, for she would spend the evening scolding Lillian for not taking the duke up on his offer of employment.

After a few moments, the stout woman answered Lillian's knock, but from the dark look on her face, Lillian could tell she was already angered.

Had she seen her clambering from the duke's carriage? Mrs Harrod was fond of peering out her window and spying upon her neighbours and the boarders. There was every likelihood she had spotted Lillian exiting a strange vehicle.

"I need a word with you," Mrs Harrod said, confirming Lillian's fears, as she gestured for her to follow her to the parlour room.

"Is there something the matter, Mrs Harrod?" Lillian questioned, as she followed her down the hallway.

"Aye, there is," the Scotswoman confirmed, as she wrenched open the door and ushered Lillian inside.

"I run a house for Christian ladies, Miss Smith," Mrs Harrod hissed, once they were alone in the cosy parlour. "I cannot have rough gentlemen knocking upon my door, in

search of you.”

Lillian paused before she replied, glad that Mrs Harrod was not annoyed about the duke, but confused as to what exactly she was speaking.

“I don’t understand?” Lillian replied, furrowing her brow. “Two gentlemen called forme? I am not acquainted with anyone in London, let alone any strange men.”

Mrs Harrod harrumphed unhappily, as though she was unwilling to believe her.

“They were looking for a red-haired young lady with green eyes,” she groused, her eyes narrowing. “And you are my only boarder who matches that description. I know what those types of gentlemen are like and, I must say, I’m most disappointed to learn you are mixing with them.”

Mrs Harrod continued on, lecturing her about lost morals and the dangers London posed to a young lady, but Lillian was not listening. Her heart had stopped, as she realised that somehow Lord Bailey had found her.

The Bible, she thought, as panic began to grow in her chest. Her name had been written across the first page, in big bold strokes. It was possible that the footpad had sold her things on to a fence, who had been warned to keep an ear out for any news on her. Had the two gentlemen knocked on the door of every boarding house on Gracechurch Street, or just Mrs Harrod’s? How much did they know of her whereabouts?

While Mrs Harrod droned on and on, Lillian’s mind was whirring as she tried to plan her escape.

Were the two thugs watching the house at this very moment? She would have to leave London, perhaps for Bristol or Liverpool, if funds allowed. If she was to leave, she would have to escape when darkness fell, lest she be sighted again.

The thought of stealing out into the dark danger of London at night, filled Lillian with dread. She was not a city cat, able to navigate nighttime paths, but a country mouse, who would walk herself into more danger.

Despair threatened to overwhelm Lillian, and though she fought against it, hot tears pricked at her eyes.

“Oh,” Mrs Harrod paused, her voice suddenly filled with concern. “Oh, don’t cry, my dear. I was only trying to scare you into being more careful. I know you’re a good girl, but you’re too pretty to be working with sailors, just like the duke said. Those types of men get ideas into their heads and then they act upon them; I beg you to reconsider His Grace’s offer. You’d be far safer working as a housekeeper for a duke, than mixing with salty tars down on the docks.”

Despite her fears, Lillian could not help but give a watery smile at Mrs Harrod’s words. The poor woman was all mixed up; if she was concerned about Lillian’s virtue, it was the duke she should be wary of.

“Think on it, dear,” Mrs Harrod finished, awkwardly patting Lillian’s arm. “I should hate to see a good girl ruined; you’ll find protection with Thorncastle. Perhaps you might even meet a nice groomsman or footman, and start a family of your own.”

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“Thank you, Mrs Harrod,” Lillian replied, her voice thick with emotion. “Please forgive my tears; I have had a very long day and I long for my bed.”

“I’ve a stew heating on the stove, would you not have a wee bite?” Mrs Harrod pressed, but Lillian shook her head.

“Thank you, but no,” she said, firmly. “I’m really too tired. Goodnight, Mrs Harrod, thank you for your concern.”

The Scotswoman gave Lillian’s hand a squeeze, before bustling off to the kitchen to prepare supper for the other boarders.

With weary legs, Lillian traipsed upstairs to the room she shared with Sally, her mind still preoccupied by her unexpected callers. How long did she have, until they called again?

Sally, who was washing for supper in the basin atop the battered washstand, did a double-take when she spotted Lillian’s tear-stained face.

“What’s the matter, duckie?” she asked, as she dried her hands. “Old Harrod been on at you? Bridget said she was fit to burst earlier over some gentlemen who called looking for you.”

“I don’t know who those gentlemen were,” Lillian replied, as she sat down upon the bed they shared and removed her boots. Her feet ached and the excitement and energy she had felt after her kiss with Thorncastle had dissipated entirely, leaving her flat and lethargic.

“That’s what Bridget said to Mrs Harrod,” Sally answered, with a smile. “Said they were probably just two gentlemen who’d caught sight of you walking down the road, and wanted to learn your name. No harm done, Mrs Harrod will have scared them off.”

Lillian nodded, but was unable to form a response to Sally’s bracing words. The other girl looked at her strangely and Lillian struggled to keep her face impassive.

“You’re not in any sort of trouble, are you, Mary?” Sally pressed, as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “There’s no shame in it. We all have secrets.”

Lillian met Sally’s brown gaze, and the other girl deduced from her eyes that something deeper was troubling her.

“Bridget said the Duke of Thorncastle offered you a position on his staff,” Sally said, in an abrupt volte-face.

“His attentions are not as honourable as he portrayed them to be,” Lillian replied, dryly, as she resumed taking off her boots.

“A man like that, a man with wealth, can protect you far better than Mrs Harrod, if you are in trouble,” Sally answered, with a shrug. “Think about it; life is long, and sometimes it’s easier to share the burden with someone else.”

The gong for supper sounded from downstairs, which caused Sally to smile.

“Thank heaven for that,” she said, brightly. “I’d eat a nun’s habit right off her head, I’m that hungry.”

“That might be more palatable than Mrs Harrod’s fare,” Lillian replied, with a weak smile.



Sally chortled in response and left the room. Once the door had closed behind her, Lillian washed quickly at the washbasin - not minding that the water was cold - and changed into her nightgown.

As she untied her hair and brushed it out, she padded over to the window to look out at the street below. A few pedestrians wandered the road, all rushing home for their suppers. A gentleman loitering outside the house opposite Mrs Harrod's caught Lillian's eye, and her heart began to beat at a faster pace.

Was he one of Lord Bailey's thugs?

Lillian stepped back, so that she was out of sight, and peered at him closely. The man, from what she could see, did not look like a ruffian, but what reason did he have to linger outside her window?

Just as the thought crossed her mind, the gentleman gave a wave to a young woman walking towards him—his wife, perhaps.

Relieved, Lillian pulled the thin curtains closed on the scene below. Despite the innocent explanation for the gentleman's presence, she could not help but feel a chill of fear. Just because she could not see Lord Bailey's thugs did not mean they were not there.

After all, they had managed to track her to Cheapside, had they not?

Lillian pulled back the wool blankets which covered the bed she shared with Sally. The feather mattress was thin and lumpy, but she welcomed the respite it offered. She pulled the blankets up to her chin and rested her head against the pillow, but she knew sleep would not come.

We all have secrets.

Lilian wondered what secrets Sally had hidden away from the world and if they were as deadly as Lillian's own.

Unbidden images flashed through her mind. Mr Hope at the back door to the rectory. His harsh voice when he had told her that the elderly Lord Bailey had finally passed, and that Felix was to take his place.

And then?

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Lillian scrunched her eyes so tightly against the memory of that night that she saw stars, but she could not ward off the memories.

Mr Hope had stepped inside to the kitchen, ostensibly to discuss Lillian's future. Old Lord Bailey had been generous to allow Lillian to stay on so long after her father's passing, the new baron might not be that way inclined. She was a burden, a dependent on the estate's coffers and a distantly related one at that.

Lillian had been startled by his words. Not because she had not been expecting them - she had known she would have to leave when old Lord Bailey passed - but because they had come so soon. The baron must not have even been cold, when Mr Hope had come to seek her out.

"His Lordship might allow you to stay, should you decide to prove yourself useful to him," Mr Hope had finished, his watery eyes watching her closely.

Though he had made no untoward moves, or said anything particularly debased, Lillian had understood exactly what he had meant.

She had tilted her chin defiantly and glared at the odious Mr Hope, so he would know just how little thought of him.

"I would rather choke," she had snapped, which, in hindsight, had been a poor choice of words.

Mr Hope had lunged for her and grabbed her by the neck. Lillian still recalled being momentarily frozen by shock, until his hands at her throat had begun to constrict.

“Stuck-up little madame,” Mr Hope had growled, as the air had left Lillian’s lungs.

He had pushed her against the wrought-iron stove and the heat from the dwindling fire within had burned through her skirts, igniting her will to live.

She had grappled behind her for something - anything - with which to defend herself. Her hand had clasped the handle of the cast-iron kettle and she had lifted it and swung it at Mr Hope’s head.

The first blow had stunned him. The second blow had forced him into retreat. The third blow...

Lillian curled into a ball and drew the blankets tightly around her, as she recalled how the third blow had toppled Mr Hope over, so that he fell backwards, his head hitting the flagstone floor with a nauseous crack.

Silence had then filled the kitchen, a deathly one.

Mr Hope had lain on the tiled floor, completely still. For a moment, she had watched him, searching for signs of life, before panic had taken hold. She had killed a man, worse, she had killed Lord Bailey’s man. There was no familial love there; he would make certain that she was punished. Her pleas of self-defence would fall on deaf ears.

Lord Bailey would gladly inform the authorities that Lillian had attacked Mr Hope whilst being evicted. He would paint her as mad, as a deranged woman fit for Bedlam - and he would be listened to, for the word of a man - a titled one at that - was worth far more than the word of a woman.

She had to leave. Despite her panic, she had seen that there was no other way. She had to flee.

It had taken her no more than a quarter of an hour to pack what she needed into a battered portmanteau. Some clothes and undergarments, a bonnet and a mob cap, her mother's locket, her father's Bible, and the remaining moneys from the tithes her father had collected before his untimely death.

After that, she had left, without a backward glance at the house she had called home for the entirety of her twenty years on earth.

Though the road had been cloaked in darkness, she had traveled along it with ease. When the morning's light had broken, a farmer on his way to Maidstone had offered her a lift, and from there she had caught the stagecoach to London.

She had lived in a daze ever since, her mind heavy and muddled, as she trudged her way through each new day. The only moments of brilliant clarity had occurred in the presence of the duke. His presence was too commanding to escape even Lillian's notice; his cruel beauty demanded attention.

Was Thorncastle the answer to her current predicament? He had offered to house her, to protect her, to care for her - for a price, of course.

Lillian had a vague idea of what it was that happened between a man and woman in the bedchamber, but she had never imagined herself partaking in the act - especially with a man who was not her husband.

Her earlier chills subsided, as she recalled her embrace with the duke. As she recalled the feel of his body against hers, she became warm and flustered, as that same strange ache sprang to life between her legs. If Thorncastle was the only one who could soothe that longing, perhaps he could soothe her other longings too?

A safe house, a warm bed, a few weeks rest for the bone-crushing weariness which followed her...

The door to the room creaked open and Lillian heard the sound of Sally's footsteps pattering across the wooden floor. The other woman made minimal noise, as she changed into her night garments and crawled into the bed beside Lillian.

"Night, Mary," Sally whispered, so low Lillian guessed she assumed her already sleeping.

Earlier she had been convinced she would not sleep through the night, but as Sally's breaths slowed and steadied, Lillian found herself lulled by the comforting sound of another at rest.

I'll just close my eyes for a moment, she thought, as the heaviness of her eyelids became too great to fight against.

As she drifted into unconsciousness, Lillian imagined a strong pair of arms holding her.

## Page 16

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The next morning, as Lillian took breakfast with the other boarders, a knock came upon the front door.

“In the name of God, who’s calling at this hour?” Mrs Harrod grumbled, as she waved for the scullery maid to answer the door.

The girl set down the pot of porridge she was dolling out and left the room. Lillian kept her eyes trained on the table, but inside she was a nervous wreck. Was it one of Lord Bailey’s goons, come to apprehend her?

Lillian strained to listen to what was going on outside and a few moments later, she heard the sound of two sets of footsteps approaching.

“There’s someone here with an urgent message for Miss Smith,” the scullery maid said, as she returned to the dining room.

Every pair of eyes turned Lillian’s way.

“Excuse me,” she said, standing with as much grace as she could muster. “I will be but a moment.”

She walked across the room with the same feeling as a man walking towards the gallows. There was no chance of escape, she was done for.

Outside in the hallway stood a gentleman, whose back was turned as he inspected a framed map of Scotland Mrs Harrod had hung on the wall.

Lillian cleared her throat and the gentleman turned. He was wearing the livery of one of Thorncastle's servants.

"Oh," Lillian gasped with relief, her knees weak as jelly. "Excuse me; I was not expecting you."

"Excuse the early intrusion, ma'am," the young lad answered, the tips of his ears pink. "But His Grace bid me to call on you, to ask if you'd reconsidered his offer, now that you've had time to sleep on it?"

Only the Duke of Thorncastle would be so impertinent as to make demands of a lady before breakfast.

Lillian opened her mouth to deliver a resounding "no" to the footman, alongside a lecture on manners, but hesitated.

She needed safe refuge, did she not? While Thorncastle might not wish to defend her honour - rather the opposite, in fact - he would protect her against harm. He had a retinue of servants at his disposal, surely he would spare one or two to make certain she was safe?

Her decision to escape Kent had been made in a split second - this decision took only a moment more.

"Please tell him I accept his offer," Lillian said, surprising both herself and the footman.

"Er, I will," he replied, his face worried. "I am afraid he did not advise me as to what to say if you said yes; I don't think he was very optimistic about your answer."

"No, I don't suppose he was."



For some reason, Lillian felt a slight thrill at learning she had bested the duke. He struck her as a fastidious man, who liked to be in control at all times. It gave her a small amount of pleasure to think she would now have upended his morning.

“Tell him to send a carriage, when he has worked out the particulars,” Lillian decided, before impishly adding, “Though, if it is not here by three o’clock, I shall have to rescind my offer of acceptance.”

“Yes, Miss Smith,” the footman nodded, keen to assure her he would convey the message. “I shall tell him at once. Good morning to you.”

“And to you,” Lillian inclined her head graciously.

The young man then fled down the hallway, in a rush to tell his master the news. Lillian followed behind him and closed the door, double checking the lock to be sure it was secure.

The enormity of what she had agreed to had not yet sunk in.

She had just agreed to become a man’s mistress.

Worse still, she felt no shame, only excitement.

## CHAPTER SIX

SEBASTIAN IMPATIENTLY PACED the length of the drawing room, as he waited for Miss Smith to make an appearance.

Her surprise acceptance of his offer had thrown his morning into disarray, and he had spent a good part of the day searching for a suitable pied-à-terre for his new mistress - as well as for staff to attend to her.

## Page 17

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Working against Miss Smith's arbitrary deadline - which Sebastian looked forward to punishing her for later, in the bedroom - he had selected a modest town house just off Berkeley Square, and an old friend's acquaintance and his wife, to act as caretakers for both Mary and the house.

A knock came upon the drawing room door and Sebastian paused, his senses heightened. Was it Miss Smith, at last?

"Come in," he bid, but to his disappointment, it was not Mary who appeared, but Polly Browne.

A former actress, Polly commanded attention, even dressed as she now was in the plain clothes of a servant.

"Miss Smith is just finishing her toilette, Your Grace," Polly stated, her expression neutral. "I did not anticipate it would take this long, but one forgets how luxurious a warm bath can be, when denied one for some length."

"Yes, of course," Sebastian nodded, as though he had any understanding of what being denied luxury felt like. "She may take all the time she needs. I did not get a chance to mention, Polly, that Miss Smith will require a new wardrobe. A trip to Bond Street tomorrow, shall do it. Day dresses, evening gowns - whatever she requires. Have the bill sent to my man of business."

"Yes, Your Grace," Polly replied, her plump mouth struggling to suppress a smile. "As you're feeling so generous, might I request a girl for the kitchen and a lad to assist Michael with the heavier tasks?"

Michael, Polly's husband, had been honourably discharged from the army a year ago. The injuries he had sustained fighting Napoleon's forces, had rendered him incapable of heavier manual labour. Sebastian had received correspondence from an old friend, but a few weeks past, asking him to keep Michael and his wife in mind had he any need for discreet servants. The country that Michael had fought for had very little care for its crippled soldiers once they returned to English soil.

"You have my permission to hire whomsoever you might like, Polly," Sebastian replied, with a lazy wave of his hand. "If anything is required for the house, just have the bill-"

"Sent to your man of business," Polly finished for him, her eyes dancing.

Polly was no green girl and knew exactly what position Miss Smith was about to enter into.

"I must go and see if Miss Smith requires any assistance dressing, Your Grace," Polly continued. "Is there anything else you need?"

"I sent out to Gunter's for dinner - when the dishes arrive, just set them out on the table with the wine. That will be all, Polly. Thank you."

Polly's eyes disappeared into her hairline, so surprised was she to learn that a toplofty duke was happy to serve himself.

"I can cook, Your Grace," she offered, as she left. "No need to send out to Gunter's each evening for your supper."

Sebastian, who had sampled some of Polly's "cooking" earlier, when he had called into the rooms she and Michael kept in Covent Garden to offer them the position, hid a smile.

“Hire a cook while you’re at it,” Michael decided. Seeing the look of suspicion on Polly’s face, he hastily added, “You will be kept busy attending to Miss Smith; it is not fair to expect you to cook as well.”

Somewhat satisfied with that explanation, Polly took her leave, leaving Sebastian to continue his quest to wear out the Axminster carpet with his pacing.

With each minute that passed, his anticipation rose tenfold. It had been a long time since he had desired a woman and he intended on savouring every moment with Miss Smith - when she eventually deigned to sit with him, that is.

Finally - a brandy, two cheroots, and a half hour later - Polly knocked on the door again.

“Miss Smith will be down in a moment,” she stated. “The dining room is set up. If you have a need for anything else, I shall be in the kitchen.”

“Very good,” Sebastian answered, surprised he could speak, for his mouth had gone suddenly dry.

He drank what remained of his tumbler of brandy and made for the hallway, just in time to witness Miss Smith descend the stairs.

She was dressed simply, in a dress of pale blue muslin. Her auburn tresses were gathered into a neat chignon, which emphasised her heart-shaped face and high cheekbones.

She looked, Sebastian thought ruefully, every inch the innocent. Had he the heart to corrupt her? If not, did he have the willpower to overcome his own urges?

“Miss Smith,” he gave a short bow as she reached the bottom step, “How glad I am to

see you here.”

“I was not expecting such...”

Mary waved a hand around the hallway, which was lit by dozens of candles in brass sconces and papered with silk-damask paper hangings. Above their heads, a chandelier twinkled, adding to the opulence.

“If the house is not to your liking, you may choose another,” Sebastian offered, innocently.

“The house is perfect,” she answered, finally turning her green eyes his way. “I was not expecting it to be so luxurious, that is all.”

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“Did you expect me to hide you away in some fall-down terrace in St Giles?” Sebastian arched an eyebrow. “I am wounded, Miss Smith. I promised you the best - and I am a man who always delivers his promises.”

He had not meant for his words to sound quite so loaded, but as he finished speaking, he realised the double entendre. Miss Smith realised it too, for her plump lips parted slightly and her expression turned more guarded.

Dash it, Sebastian thought, as he offered her his arm - he would have to go slowly. She was like a doe; beautiful, but easily startled and likely to bolt.

In the dining room they found the table set for two and laden with silver platters. Sebastian’s seat was at the top of the table, with Mary’s to his right. He pulled out her chair and gestured for her to sit.

“I am afraid I am not entirely certain what it is we will be eating,” he said, as he uncorked a bottle of wine and poured her a generous glass. “But I am sure it will be edible; Gunter’s provides only the finest fare.”

“After suffering through Mrs Harrod’s mutton stew, I can eat anything,” Mary answered, her tone amused.

Sebastian set to work, lifting the lids off the platters to reveal what hidden delicacies awaited them. Venison steaks, dressed in rich gravy, potatoes roasted in goose fat, a Soupe à l’Oignon Gratinée to start, and what looked to be syllabub for dessert.

He ladled out two bowls of the hearty broth for them both and took his seat.

“Eat up,” he commanded; she was worryingly thin, to his eye.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she answered, with mild impertinence and a discreet roll of her eyes.

Sebastian stifled a sigh; he had been told on numerous occasions that he could be rather high handed. He would have to rein such impulses in around Miss Smith, if he wished her to relax in his presence - for a while, at least.

The soup was delicious; buttery and rich. Sebastian was gratified to see Miss Smith finished her serving, and when both their bowls were empty, he plated up the main course.

“Do you often entertain here, Your Grace?” Mary queried, as she speared her venison with a fork.

“If we are going to become intimate, Miss Smith,” Sebastian answered, “you might address me less formally. In private, you may call me Sebastian. In public, Thorncastle will suffice. As to your query: no, I have never entertained her. I leased the house just this morning, for your sole pleasure.”

“Do you have many such establishments across town?”

Though she had posed the question lightly, Sebastian could not help but feel a stab of irritation at her presumption that his reputation was warranted. That she was merely one of the many mistresses he kept to satisfy his raging libido.

A few years ago, perhaps, her assumption might have been correct, but not now. The rage and anger which had consumed him for much of adulthood had left him; he had made peace with his past. There were no ghosts left to haunt him and he no longer sought solace in hedonism.

“I do not,” Sebastian stated, feeling almost prim. “My reputation is based on the actions of a man who no longer exists. I had thought myself done with women, Mary, until my eyes alighted upon you. You rekindled a flame I thought long extinguished.”

He let his words sink in, before changing the subject, “Do you always ask this many questions at supper? It can’t be good for your digestion.”

“If we are to be intimate,” she answered, not falling for his ploy, “then I wish to know something of you. You cannot expect a lady to fall into your bed, merely because you demand it.”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” Sebastian agreed, offering her a rather wicked grin.

She frowned primly and he found himself charmed by her naivety; most women would not make him work so hard at seduction - for they knew how rewarding it would be to have him as a lover.

“I should like to know more about you,” Sebastian decided, as he stood to clear the plates and serve dessert. “You said you hailed from Kent; which part exactly?”

“Just outside Maidstone,” she answered, shifting her gaze to her lap. “A small village; you would not know it.”

“Try me,” Sebastian offered, as he set a glass of elderflower and strawberry syllabub down before her. “I have an estate near Dover, I often pass through Maidstone on my way there.”

“One of your estates, Your Grace?” Miss Smith teased. “How many do you possess?”

“I will not seek to bore you with talk of my lands,” he replied, well aware that she was trying to distract him. He recalled her slip of the tongue the previous night, when



she had mentioned her father's death, and how quickly she had changed the subject then. Was Miss Smith hiding something? "That type of talk is what my man of business is for. Is there a particular reason why you are so reluctant to share the name of your hometown, Miss Smith? Or do you simply wish to remain mysterious?"

"The latter," she stated, lifting her eyes to his. "What if I decide to return there one day? I should not like to think of you arriving to look for me; I would be known forever more as a fallen woman."

A strange, primitive feeling of possessiveness overcame him at her words. He did not at all like the thought of her disappearing on a whim, forever out of his reach.

"I hope that you are not intending to run away?" he asked, as he reached over to top up her glass. "You have not yet seen what I can offer you."

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“Oh?” It was her turn to arch an eyebrow, “And what’s that?”

“A life of luxury and pleasure,” he answered, with a Gallic shrug. “The freedom to come and go as you please - within reason, of course. The power and the wealth that comes from being associated with the Thorncastle name. Dresses, jewels, sparkling champagne, trips to Europe, if you wish. The theatre, the opera, a carriage and six - you can have it all, Mary.”

“I may have everything I wish for, except for your heart,” she surmised.

“I’m told I don’t have one,” Sebastian grinned, “So I’m afraid you’re correct; that’s not on offer. But I will care for you, treasure you, and protect you, until you decide you are done with me.”

She reached for her wineglass and brought it to her lips, her brow furrowed in thought. For the first time in his life, Sebastian felt a stab of doubt. He had offered Miss Smith everything he was capable of offering to a woman, but for the first time, he wondered if it would be enough.

Nervous that he might lose her, Sebastian decided that a demonstration of what else he could offer might tempt her further.

He pushed back his chair and stood, before holding out his hand for her to take.

She looked at it for one uncertain moment, before allowing him to pull her to her feet.

“You are nervous,” Sebastian stated. “That’s only to be expected; but you accepted

my offer, Mary, because you trust me. Am I right?"

She nodded, slowly.

"Then I will ask you to trust me a little bit more," Sebastian whispered, as he placed one hand at the small of her back and pulled her towards him.

He kissed her softly, glad that this time they were in a warm room and not a rattling carriage. As she relaxed into his arms, Sebastian's mouth drifted from her lips to her ear, dropping gentle kisses along her delicate white skin.

A sigh of pleasure let him know he was on the right path and he gently continued his exploration of her skin. From her ear, all the way down to the nape of her neck, he rained hot kisses, before returning with zeal to claim her mouth once more.

This time he did not go softly; he captured her lips with the full force of his desire and claimed her mouth completely. As his tongue caressed the soft recesses of her mouth, Sebastian's hands slipped from the small of Mary's back to her bottom, and he pulled her against him so that she might feel just how much he desired her.

She gasped as he pressed his hard length up against her. Her hands fell from around his neck and roved his chest. Sebastian shivered with longing as her fingers slipped through the gaps of his shirt and caressed his skin. Her innocent touch was more arousing than any of the practiced strokes of a lady of the demi-monde.

"Enough," he rasped, pulling away from her. "I won't take you on the table. Come."

In one swift motion, he lifted her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. He carried her from the dining room, all the way to the top of the stairs, where he encountered a slight hurdle.

“Which room?” he rasped, and she nodded towards the end of the hall.

Once they had reached the bedchamber, a pretty room decorated in shades of pastel, Sebastian set her down and began the torturous process of undressing her.

His fingers felt clumsy, as he undid the buttons of her dress. After what felt like hours, it fell to the floor with a sigh, revealing her slim curves. She wore no stays, he noted, and the pink of her nipples was visible, even through the material of her chemise.

With her clothing out of the way, Sebastian drew Mary towards him again, though this time he felt her tremble slightly.

“Are you cold?” he inquired, to which she shook her head.

Her cheeks were aflame with passion and desire; it was the fear of that which had her trembling, Sebastian realised with a pang of guilt. She had been brought up to be afraid of her desire, to see it as something bad and wicked.

“Go lie on the bed,” he ordered her.

Mary obeyed, padding gently across the thick carpet to the bed, unaware that her thin petticoat gave Sebastian a tantalising view of her bottom.

He removed his boots with haste, then shrugged off his coat and waistcoat, and pulled his shirt over his head. His breeches, sadly, would remain in place.

“Lie back against the pillow,” Sebastian instructed, as he reached the bed.

She complied, though he could tell she was still nervous, for her green eyes followed his every move.

“Just relax,” he commanded. “I am not about to relieve you of your maidenhead. At least, not tonight.”

“Then what is it you wish to do?” she asked, confused.

“Pleasure you.”

Her mouth parted into a perfect “o” of surprise. Sebastian, never one to miss an opportunity, leaned over her and captured that mouth in another kiss.

Though he inwardly cautioned himself to go slowly, his excitement was difficult to resist. He felt as he had when he was a young buck, coupling for the first time. Hopefully he would manage not to spill his seed in his breeches - as he had unfortunately happened on his lovemaking debut.

His hands longed to explore, so he allowed them. He placed one under Mary’s chemise and stroked the smooth skin of her stomach, marveling at her feminine softness. From there, he traced a feathery line to her breasts, which he circled slowly, delighting in torturing her a little.

Mary bucked underneath his touch. Her nipples, Sebastian was gratified to note, were proudly erect, begging for his attention.

With practiced skill, Sebastian tore her chemise open and dropped his head to suck on the pert rosebud mounds he had revealed.

“Oh, please,” Mary whimpered, her hips pushing up against his, “I beg you.”

Sebastian leaned back and surveyed her through lustful eyes. Gone was the prim and proper lady of earlier, replaced by a flame haired vixen who wanted more. And Sebastian was not the type of man to ever refuse a woman’s wishes.

“Show me,” he growled, as he pulled her petticoats up to her waist, revealing a pair of slim legs and a neat mound of auburn curls.

“Show me,” he said again, taking her hand and guiding it down. “Show me where you want me to touch you.”

He nudged her legs open with his knees, so that all of her was on display. She gasped, shocked as she realised what he wished for her to do.

“Do you wish for me to touch you...here?” he queried, running a finger along her wetness.

“Or here?” he mused, as his finger stroked her pearl of pleasure.

“There,” she panted, her hand reaching down to join his.

Her answer was instinctive, her need now outweighing her modesty. Sebastian stifled a moan of longing, as she rubbed her finger around her clit in a circular motion, her eyes half-closed in longing.

He was, he realised, dangerously close to losing all control - and if he continued to watch her pleasure herself, he would be lost completely. His erection strained against his breeches, with agonising pleasure, and for a moment he contemplated unleashing it, just to sate his primal urges...

But as Mary watched him, with innocent trust, he realised he could not. He could not take this moment of pure pleasure away from her.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, as he watched her. “I want to taste your beauty, to feel it on my lips.”

“W-what do you mean?” she stuttered, her hand suddenly pausing.

“Allow me to demonstrate.”

Sebastian slid down, so that he was lying between Mary’s legs. He kissed the inner softness of one thigh and then the other, before lowering his mouth against the pearl of her womanhood.

She gasped aloud, her hands reaching to grasp his hair. She tugged on it, as though she wished him to stop, but when he lifted his head, she gave a mewl of protest.

Hair pulling was a confusing method of communication, of which the true meaning might be misconstrued, Sebastian thought with a smile, before he dipped his head again to taste her sweetness.

As his tongue worked against her nub, he traced the silky soft lips which guarded the entrance to the Altar of Venus - an altar which he hoped to spend a great deal of time worshiping. With great care, he stroked and coaxed her open, and slipped the tips of three fingers gently inside.

Her muscles tightened around them, but he did not push any further - he simply moved them gently in and out, as his tongue continued to lavish attention upon her nub.

“Sebastian!”

She cried his name, as though begging for surrender, but he did not listen. Instead he increased the pressure of his tongue, willing her over the edge.

At last, her whole body went taut, before she succumbed to her shuddering climax. Her body shook as waves of pleasure overcame her; the muscles of her womanhood



lapping against Sebastian's fingers.

He waited a few moments for her to return to Earth, his cheek resting against her thigh. When at last her breathing slowed, he emerged from his worship, with a feeling of satisfaction almost as great as if he taken his own release.

Almost.

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Sebastian pulled himself up the bed and took Mary in his arms. She looked at him in bleary confusion, her eyes hazy with sated desire.

“What was that?” she questioned, her voice thick and sleepy.

“A small demonstration of the pleasure I can offer you,” Sebastian replied, dropping a kiss upon the crown of her head.

“Oh,” was the only reply she could muster.

Sebastian pulled her against his chest, savouring the warmth of her body. As a rule, he did not linger long in the beds of his mistresses, but he was reluctant to leave. He pulled the heavy blanket over them, cocooning them in warmth.

“There’s so much more I can show you, Mary,” he whispered, as he tenderly stroked her hair. “If you will just let me.”

He awaited her response but, to his surprise, the only sound he heard was of her soft, steady breathing.

She had fallen asleep.

Rather than feel insulted, Sebastian felt strangely touched by the trust shown. Mary shifted in her sleep, so her back was to him, and instead of slipping away as he usually would, he curled his body against hers and threw a protective arm across her body.

I'll just rest my eyes, he told himself, as his eyelids grew heavy, just for a moment...

The last thing he recalled, before he drifted into slumber, was feeling completely at peace.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN LILLIAN AWOKethe next morning, she found herself momentarily disorientated by her strange surroundings. The luscious drapes above her head, the softness of the feather mattress, and the languid feeling in her muscles were all completely foreign to her, until she recalled just where she was.

She was in a grand house and had just spent her first night as mistress to the Duke of Thorncastle.

Heat flooded her face as she recalled her evening of pleasure with the duke. She had behaved in a most wanton manner; she had allowed him to touch her intimately, she had exposed her breasts and most private parts to him, she had allowed desire to consume her so completely that she had been lost to the world.

And she had enjoyed every second of it.

As she recalled the climax she had experienced, Lillian's face was not the only part of her consumed by heat. She squirmed as she relived the all-consuming need that had filled her as she had approached the peak of her pleasure, and the earth-shattering moment when her body had been consumed by waves of ecstasy.

As the daughter of a vicar, she knew she should feel some remorse, yet she did not.

The duke, or Sebastian as he wished to be referred, had not made her feel wanton or base, he had made her feel that her desire was natural.

The devil works hard, but the Duke of Thorncastle works harder, Lillian thought to herself, as she slipped from her bed. Of course a man of ill-repute would think such wild need was natural; she should not forget herself and believe it too.

Her bare feet made contact with a plush carpet, and as she padded across to the washstand, she noticed there was a small fire glowing in the grate.

Someone had been in to light it while she was sleeping - such luxury. Even at home, she had not experienced such comforts.

A washbasin of water stood atop the dresser. Lillian picked up a soft cloth and washed herself, glad to find the water was still warm. She then dressed, into the practical, plain daydress she had worn for years.

Once she was fully clothed, she deliberated on what she should do next. Her stomach rumbled, prodding her to move, but she hesitated.

Thorncastle had assured her this was now her home, but she did not yet feel it.

Mercifully, a knock came upon the door, and when Lillian bid the visitor enter, Polly appeared.

“Oh.” She looked mildly surprised to find Lillian already dressed. “I was just checking to see if you needed any help.”

“I managed alone,” Lillian smiled, “I am not a cosseted miss, Polly; there will be no need to dance attendance upon me.”

“Not yet,” Polly agreed, with a grin. “But when your new wardrobe arrives, I’ll wager that you’ll need my help. The modistes of Bond Street are free with their buttons and laces - it’s a lot for a lady to attempt alone.”

“I cannot visit a Bond Street dressmaker,” Lillian objected, somewhat confused. “I do not have the funds for that. If a new dress is needed, I can sew it myself.”

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“Oh my days,” Polly laughed, “you are an innocent; His Grace has said he will foot the bill for whatever new dresses you require. The man’s pockets run deeper than the Avon Gorge - he can well afford to outfit you in silks and satins, my dear. Now, breakfast is served downstairs. I have left some of the newest issues of La Belle Assemblée on the table. You can peruse them while you break your fast and decide on which fashions you prefer.”

Polly left, still chuckling to herself, while Lillian remained, nervously biting her lip.

Thorncastle’s generosity was beyond doubt, but where was he expecting her to wear all these new dresses?

Still troubled, Lillian made her way downstairs to the dining room. There, she found the table set for one and a selection of breads and cold meats upon the sideboard.

“Coffee, Miss Smith?” Michael, Polly’s husband queried.

He was standing sentry by the sideboard, like a soldier.

“Tea, if there is any,” Lillian answered, gratefully.

Michael hobbled from the room to fetch her tea and Lillian felt a stab of guilt. It did not feel right to have an injured man wait upon her - though she would never voice this thought to Michael. Even though she had only known him a few hours, Lillian knew instinctively that he was too proud to accept any form of pity.

She loaded up her plate with chicken, ham, and when Michael returned, she filled her

cup up to the brim with tea. She was ravenous; last night she had been too nervous to eat the fine fare sent from Gunter's.

Michael slipped away discreetly, leaving Lillian alone. Without an audience, she tore into her bread, slurped her tea, and ate with a child's abandon - and table manners.

Once her hunger was somewhat sated, she pulled across one of the copies of *La Belle Assemblée*, which Polly had left for her.

Lillian flicked through the pages, examining the fashion plates nervously. Did Thorncastle expect her to wear something similar to the gowns depicted here? In her twenty years, she had never had any need for a ball gown. The dances in the local assembly rooms in Linton were open to all with the means to purchase a voucher, and people did not overly care for fashion.

She flicked to the next page, where a plate depicting a lady in an elegant evening gown caught her eye. The dress was rather daring, with a low neckline and a short waist. The sleeves, which fell somewhat off the shoulders, were full, while the skirts fell to the floor in an elegant cascade.

For a moment, Lillian imagined herself wearing such a gown; the description described the material as being made from emerald green, Spanish tulle, which would admirably compliment her hair...

Lillian pictured herself in the dress; her hair piled high atop her head, wearing kid-skin gloves and ballroom slippers. She would clutch a fan, as all ladies of means did, and perhaps have a reticule on a gold chain hanging from her elbow.

At her side, in dark evening attire, would be the duke, regarding her with eyes that were filled with warmth and admiration...

It was there that Lillian's fantasy ended; the duke, generous as he might be, regarded her as his mistress. She doubted that there was much he admired about her, apart from her body.

She pushed her plate away, her appetite now vanished. Mercifully, before despair had a chance to overwhelm her, Polly appeared.

"Did you find anything of interest?" she asked, peering over Lillian's shoulder to look at the page.

"Oh, that would suit you perfectly, Miss Smith," Polly declared, as she viewed the fashion plate. "We'll bring this with us to the modiste."

Lillian made to protest, but Polly hushed her. "If His Grace wishes to spend his fortune on you, then we must not argue. When you're ready to leave, let me know and I shall have Michael meet us outside with the gig."

"I'm ready," Lillian replied, glancing nervously down at her plain gown. "I'm afraid I do not look the part for a shopping expedition on Bond Street."

"We shall remedy that soon enough," Polly assured her, with a wink. "If there's one thing I'm accomplished at, it's spending a gentleman's money. Meet me in the hall in a few minutes, Miss Smith, and we shall be on our way."

Polly disappeared in search of Michael, leaving Lillian alone. She pulled the periodical towards her, to take another glance at the fashion plate.

A few weeks ago she would never have imagined herself wearing such a dress, but a few weeks ago she would also not have been able to imagine herself as a duke's mistress. She would not refuse Thorncastle's generosity out of a sense of guilt inspired by her old morals - after all, he would soon be expecting a return on his



investment.

Lillian stood atop a stool, in a thin muslin gown, as two seamstresses poked at her with pins. They were measuring a mock-up dress, which they would use as a guide when they began work on the half-dozen gowns which she had ordered.

“A riding habit, a three daydresses, an evening gown, and a ball gown,” Mrs Delacroix, themodiste, barked to one of the seamstresses. “Remember that, girl. Now, Miss Smith, have you an acute need for more new gowns? Lovely as your own day dress might be, it is not exactly the height of fashion. I have several off the peg dresses which might suit while you are waiting for my girls to finish your order. They were to go to the daughter of a baron, but a little bird whispered in my ear that her father lost heavily at the card table last night and his bills might go unpaid.”

“Oh, I don’t think-” Lillian began to object, but Polly interrupted.

“Bring them in for her to fit on,” she instructed. “If they fit and are suitable, then Miss Smith may take them.”

“Very good,” Mrs Delacroix smiled with cat-like satisfaction. “I shall have one of the other girls fetch them. HILDA! Where have you got to?”

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Mrs Delacroix ambled from the room in search of poor Hilda, one of her many seamstresses. She was rumoured to have twenty girls working for her, in a warehouse in Spitalfields, and delivered exquisite gowns at speeds few others could offer.

“I’m not certain I require anything immediately,” Lillian whispered to Polly, once Mrs Delacroix had left the room.

“What if His Grace takes a fancy to the idea of taking you to the theatre, or Vauxhall Gardens?” Polly answered, with a shrug. “You’ll stick out like a sore thumb, mixing with the ton in your usual clothes.”

“Do you think he will wish to take me to such places?” she whispered back, suddenly filled with nerves. “What if someone recognises me?”

Polly frowned, then cast a shrewd glance at the seamstresses pinning Lillian’s dress.

“We’ll discuss this later,” she decided; keen ears were listening.

A young woman - most likely Hilda - appeared a few minutes later, with several gowns draped over her arm. When the other two girls had finished their measuring, Hilda and Polly assisted Lillian with fitting them on.

“They’re rather simple,” Polly commented, as Lillian surveyed herself in the mirror.

“The young lady they were designed for was to make her come-out,” Hilda replied, a little primly. “Such ladies do not require much adornment.”

“I am quite taken by them,” Lillian interjected, as she eyed up her reflection. She wore an evening gown of white muslin, with a pastel pink, silk overlay. It was trimmed with lace at the neck and sleeves and had matching lace flounces at its hem.

“If you are taken by them, then we shall take them,” Polly answered, before turning to Hilda. “Have Mrs Delacroix add them to the account. Leave the walking dress, Miss Smith shall wear that home.”

“Yes, miss,” Hilda nodded, before scurrying out the door to add the garments to the bill.

Polly assisted Lillian into a merino-wool walking dress, clucking in disapproval as she noted how badly her old boots looked in contrast to the new material.

“Next stop, Harding and Howell,” Polly stated firmly. “You are in desperate need of accessories.”

Polly bundled Lillian into her shawl, then out the door to the waiting gig.

“Pall Mall,” she instructed Michael, who sat in the driver’s seat.

As the vehicle trundled into the busy London traffic, Polly turned to Lillian with a frown.

“What’s all this about you not wishing to be seen out and about with His Grace? Most women would give their left eye to be in your place.”

Lillian waited a moment before replying, desperate to think of an answer which wasn’t “I am afraid that I’ll be identified as a murderess.”

“I was brought up with the expectation I would one day marry,” she answered,

exhaling slowly. "I did not expect to become anyone's mistress; I am afraid that I will be judged a fallen woman."

Polly gave a hoot of laughter, much to Lillian's annoyance. Her upset must have shown, for the older woman apologised.

"Forgive me," she said, clearing her throat, "I was just amused by the idea that you are afraid you will be judged for assuming a position that most women would trade their mother for."

"So you keep saying," Lillian answered, a little petulantly. "I am afraid that country-folk do not hold the same aspirations as those from the city. What if word was to get back to someone I know, at home?"

"They would most likely envy you," Polly answered, but upon seeing the worry which remained on Lillian's face, she relented. "If you're nervous of being recognised, we might visit a milliner; a few hats and headdresses with a lace veil over would conceal most of your face and project an air of mystery."

"Won't people think me strange?" Lillian wondered.

"This is London, my dear," Polly replied, with another amused chuckle. "Ladies go out with half an ostrich on their heads, no one shall look twice at a scrap of lace."

With that settled, Polly and Mary spent the rest of the afternoon happily perusing the many floors of Harding, Howell, and Company - a grand store on Pall Mall. The store was divided by glass partitions into four departments: furs and fans; haberdashery; jewelry, ornaments and perfumes, and a milliner.

Polly, whose taste ran towards the theatrical, picked out several headpieces for Lillian, as well as several pairs of gloves, some stays, and material for petticoats.

After that, they visited the cobbler next door for kidskin boots and ballroom slippers.

After what felt like hours, they returned to their gig, heavily laden with boxes and tied paper parcels, their feet aching.

“I hope His Grace won’t be upset, when he sees how much I have purchased,” Lillian said, as they set off for home.

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“The duke won’t care a fig,” Polly assured her. “He might have a dark reputation, but from what I know of him, his heart is kind and generous.”

“Were you acquainted before you came to work for him?” Lillian replied, with feigned nonchalance.

Her ruse was not a success, for Polly gave a chuckle.

“I moved in some of the same circles in which he moved,” she answered, “but I did not know him, in that sense. From what I have heard, he is generous and kind to his lovers. You will not find one with a bad word to say about him, which is odd enough, for nothing can inspire a woman to hate a man more than sharing a bed with him.”

“Oh,” Lillian frowned; she had much to learn.

“How did you end up in this position, eh?” Polly prompted, looking at her with motherly concern.

“A sprinkling of chance, a dash of desperation, and an offer from a duke,” Lillian replied, lightly. Though Polly had treated her kindly, Lillian was not sure of her yet.

“Desperate women have done worse,” Polly consoled. “Though, if you are truly against the idea of being Thorncastle’s mistress, then tell him. I am certain he would not object to you returning home - nor would he refuse you coin, to see you safely on your way.”

Tears pricked Lillian’s eyes; she knew that Polly spoke the truth, but returning home

was impossible. She might never set foot in Linton again, a thought which brought her great sorrow.

“We’re nearly there,” Lillian said brightly, seeking to change the subject. “I want nothing more than to rest with my feet up - who knew that shopping could be so exhausting?”

“Hark at you,” Polly chuckled, “You’ll settle in well to this life, I believe.”

It would not be difficult to become accustomed to a life of luxury, Lillian inwardly agreed, as she returned to her bedchamber to rest. The nagging fear which had haunted her since her midnight escape from Linton had subsided; while Lord Bailey still lurked in the shadows, he was not quite so fearsome to imagine without the worry of having to find food and shelter.

She indulged in a short nap, after which Polly woke her to see if she wished to bathe before the duke arrived.

“Did he send word that he would be here?” Lillian asked, as Maud, the new maid-of-all-work, lugged buckets of water to the tub in her dressing room.

“He did not,” Polly said, lightly, as she added a dash of bath salts to the water and set up lotions, potions, and creams on the dressing table. “But it is good to be prepared, just in case.”

Lillian made no reply to this statement. It irked her a little to think that her every move would be dictated to by the whims of the duke, though it felt ungrateful to voice this. Would she spend every evening preened and plucked and waiting for him to arrive?

Maud arrived with the last bucket of water. As she poured it gently into the tub,

lavender scented steam filled the room.

“Would you like me to wash your hair, Miss Smith?” Polly asked, as she handed Lillian a bar of soap.

“Heavens no, thank you,” she answered. “I can manage from here. And, please, Polly, there is no need to be so formal. You may call me Lil-”

Lillian broke off, cursing herself for her slip of the tongue.

“Mary,” she clarified, quickly. “You may call me Mary.”

“I will call you whatever it is you wish to be called,” Polly winked, “And don’t fret; as a former actress I’m well aware that a lady might choose to adopt a stage name when she’s putting on a show. Ring the bell, if you require anything. The sheets for drying-off are on the dresser.”

Polly slipped quietly from the room. As the door closed behind her, Lillian allowed her robe to slip to the floor - along with the mask she had worn all day.

Over the course of one day her entire life had changed drastically - again - and she was weary from pretending to be someone she was not. Though, truth be told, she wasn’t entirely certain who she was anymore.

As the warm water soothed her muscles, she relaxed and allowed her mind to drift. The previous night had been forgotten, with the excitement of her shopping expedition, but now it was at the forefront of her mind.

As she soaped her body, Lillian was acutely conscious of how her body felt. Her nipples were pleasantly tender to the touch after Thorncastle’s attentions and, between her legs, her womanhood ached with longing.



Unlike last night, the duke was not there to assure her that these feelings were natural, and a sense of disquiet settled over her. She quickly washed each part of her body and, once she was done, she stepped from the bath, despite the water still being warm.

Once out, she dried herself with the soft, linen bath sheets, then wrapped herself in her robe. In the bedroom, she fetched her mother-of-pearl hairbrush from the bedside table and made for the chair by the fireplace.

She had just brushed out her thick locks, when a knock came upon the door.

“His Grace is downstairs, Mary,” Polly stated. “Do you need any help?”

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“My hair is not yet dry,” Lillian replied, tugging at it nervously. “Do you think His Grace will mind me with wet hair?”

“His Grace can wait,” Polly said, firmly. “I’ll not have you developing an ear ache on his behalf. Keep brushing it out and I shall go and tell his highness that he may wait.”

Lillian did as she was bid and by the time Polly had returned her hair was almost dry.

“We’ll dress you first,” Polly decided, “then brush it out a bit more when we’re done.”

In the dressing room, Polly kept up a stream of chatter as she helped Lillian into the evening gown they had purchased earlier. She then brushed out Lillian’s hair several more times, until it was bone-dry, before arranging it into a loose bun.

“You’re pretty as a picture,” Polly assured her, as she pulled a few tendrils of hair out, in order to frame Lillian’s face.

“Thank you,” she answered, surprised her voice did not crack, for she was filled with nerves.

“He’s in the drawing room,” Polly added, as she cleaned the dresser. “Maud left a tray of tea.”

Lillian nodded, whispered her thanks again, then slipped from the room.

As she made her way downstairs, a strange urge to flee overcame her.

Would Thorncastle expect to claim her maidenhead this very evening? As enjoyable as last night had been, she was not certain she was ready to lie with the duke. Though, when she thought on it some more, she was even less certain she had a choice in the matter.

He said he would not force you, Lillian reminded herself, as she hesitated outside the door to the drawing room. The duke was many things - intimidating, demanding, and overbearing - but she did not think him a liar.

Her nerves slightly settled, she rapped her knuckles upon the door, and was greeted by an amused bid to enter.

“You do not need to knock in your own house, my dear,” Thorncastle called.

He sat in the Queen Ann chair by the fireplace, his long legs crossed, and a glass of what she assumed to be brandy in his hand. As she entered, he rose to stand, and caught a glimpse of her in her new attire.

“What have we here?” he asked, his eyes traversing her from top to toe.

“Do you not like it?” she asked, for his expression was rather troubled.

There was a moment of silence, before he broke into a rueful smile.

“You would not be out of place at Almack’s with the season’s debutantes,” he replied. “Tell me again your age?”

It was Lillian’s turn now to hesitate, as she struggled to recall what age she had given at their disastrous first meeting.

“Five and twenty,” she replied, after a pause, her tone sounding more like she was

trying to hazard a guess, rather than state a fact.

“Indeed.”

Thorncastle’s dark eyebrows disappeared into his hairline, though he made no further comment. He gestured to the Queen Ann he had stood from - the most comfortable chair in the room - and bid her sit.

“Polly tells me you visited Bond Street,” he said, as he took the seat opposite.

“We did.” Lillian nodded her head. “Thank you for your generosity, it is too much.”

Thorncastle frowned, obviously annoyed.

“I do not wish for your thanks, Miss Smith,” he replied, his expression troubled. He was clearly agitated, for he sprang from his seat and began to pace the room.

Lillian remained in her seat, her eyes unable to resist following his tall form. She had glimpsed something of his body last night - his strong shoulders, broad chest, and gently muscled abdomen - and she was struck by a wish to see him again in that state of undress.

“Do you play the pianoforte, Miss Smith?” the duke questioned, spinning around on his heel to face her.

“A little,” Lillian admitted. “Though I am far from accomplished.”

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“Who taught you?”

Was this some kind of trick? Lillian hesitated, as she pondered over the duke’s question, before eventually deciding the truth would reveal little of her background.

“My mother,” she answered, tilting her head so that she was looking the duke in the eye.

“Your mother,” he echoed, his expression unreadable.

After a moment of silence, which Lillian could not decipher, Thorncastle shrugged and offered her a grin.

“Might I trouble you to play something for me?” he asked. “There is one in the library, as I’m sure you know.”

Lillian, who had barely explored any of the house, nodded her head. “Of course,” she said, rising to stand. “Lead the way.”

The duke snatched his tumbler of brandy from the table and led the way from the parlour room to the library, which looked out upon the garden. The room was well lit, despite being unused, and a fire glowed in the grate.

The walls were lined with mahogany bookcases, which were empty of books. By the window stood a pianoforte, a Broadwood of gleaming mahogany.

Lillian walked towards it and pressed a few keys, quietly considering the notes as

they broke the silence of the room.

“It has been recently tuned, I believe,” she said, as she pulled out the stool and settled herself down to play.

Thorncastle came to stand behind her; though he was silent, she was acutely aware of his presence.

“There is no sheet music,” she noted, as her fingers played out a few scales.

“That can be remedied tomorrow,” the duke answered. “Just play what you remember.”

What she remembered.

Lillian closed her eyes as she recalled her mother, who had passed when she was thirteen. Her memories of her were usually hazy, but in the quiet of the library, they were bright and brilliant.

Her soft voice, her long elegant fingers, her delight when Lillian mastered a complex piece - it was all so clear.

To Lillian’s surprise, she found herself close to tears. Determined not to betray herself before the duke, she squared her shoulders and urged her hands across the keys of the pianoforte.

Though she stumbled a few times and hit the wrong key - or completely forgot whole sections of a piece - Lillian was quite pleased by her performance. Without being urged, she began another piece and another, until she realised she had been dreamily playing for almost an hour.

“Forgive me,” she said, as she crashed back down to earth. “I quite forgot myself.”

She had also forgotten him, but did not think the duke would appreciate being told this.

She turned and her eyes found his. Her stomach flipped nervously, for she could not understand the dark tempest which brewed behind them.

“You play very well,” the duke offered, his tone formal. “I shall have some sheet music sent here tomorrow. Goodnight, Miss Smith - thank you for indulging my need for music.”

Goodnight? Was he leaving so soon?

Despite her earlier fear, Lillian felt a crashing wave of disappointment, as she realised the night would not end with Sebastian cradling her in his arms.

“Goodnight, Your Grace,” she answered, disguising her hurt with a tone as formal as his own.

Thorncastle acknowledged this with a half-amused quirk of his cruel mouth.

“Until tomorrow,” he said, taking her hand and placing a chaste kiss upon the back of it.

Lillian did not trust herself to reply, such was the hurt and anger she felt, so she merely inclined her head and remained silent, as the duke left the room.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:33 am*

GUILT WAS AN emotion which Sebastian had become uncomfortably familiar with, since Miss Smith had entered his life.

Not dallying with an innocent had been the only rule he had followed, during his long career as a rake-hell. It was a rule he had now broken, and wished to break repeatedly, with Miss Smith.

His guilt tortured him - though, not as much as his need for Mary.

Having excused himself from her presence, for the fear that he would not be able to resist bedding her, Sebastian slipped down the hallway to the kitchen. There, he found Polly, seated by the fireplace, humming to herself as she sewed.

“Your Grace.” She looked up, startled, as he entered the room. “Have you a need for something? There’s no need to traipse all the way down here; ring the bell and I - or Maud - will attend to you.”

“I am not in need of anything, Polly,” Sebastian replied, stiffly. “I merely wished to ask how you think Miss Smith is settling in?”

Polly’s eyes flew to his face, and Sebastian could read exactly what she was thinking: Why don’t you ask her herself?

“Well enough, Your Grace,” Polly answered, tactfully avoiding speaking her mind. “She is a sweet girl, unused to the ways of London; I think it is all overwhelming for one as young as she.”



“She is five-and-twenty,” Sebastian answered, a little defensively.

“If she is five-and-twenty, then so am I,” Polly chortled, though she quieted herself when she saw Sebastian was not amused.

“She is a good girl,” Polly finished, with a shrug. “A country lass from good stock - that is all I know of her, Your Grace.”

Sebastian nodded, but Polly wasn’t finished.

“And I’ll not spy on her on your behalf,” she added, with a fierce scowl his way. “Who knows how a girl like that ended up alone in London, but I’ll not press her for details. She can style herself Miss Smith, or the Queen of Sheba for all I care; I’ll not harangue her for her true name or history.”

“Her real name is not Miss Smith?”

Polly paused, her cheeks aflame.

“Perhaps it is, perhaps it isn’t,” she answered, unconvincingly. Despite having spent a decade treading the boards, Polly was not the most gifted of actresses.

“Thank you.” Sebastian inclined his head. “I will not press you for any further information on Miss Smith, Polly. Though, I do want you to promise me that if it appears she is in any kind of trouble, you will come to me. It is my duty to protect her.”

“I will, Your Grace,” Polly promised.

“I shall return tomorrow evening,” Sebastian finished. “You might tell Miss Smith to dress for an evening out.”

With that, Sebastian took his leave. Outside, his carriage was waiting, and he instructed the driver to take him to White's, his club.

As the carriage travelled towards St James' Street, Sebastian pondered upon the mysterious origins of Miss Smith. When she had arrived in the drawing room, dressed in her new gown, he had been struck by the notion that his country-mouse would not have looked out of place in any drawing room in London.

His suspicion that her lineage might be more genteel than she let on, was confirmed by her skill on the pianoforte. Few, except the landed gentry could afford to tutor a daughter to play with such a level of skill.

Miss Smith had come from good stock and Sebastian wished to know how it was a young lady such as she had arrived in London penniless and alone.

And then what?

Sebastian frowned, as he realised that even if he knew the reasons why Miss Smith had absconded from Kent, it would not solve his dilemma. She would still be an innocent and he would still be driven by a desire to claim her body for his own.

The carriage drew to a halt outside White's and Sebastian gave a deep sigh of relief. He might not find an answer to his problems within the walls of the club, but he would find some fine brandy with which to soothe his more troubled thoughts.

Given the early hour, the club was rather empty. Sebastian made for the drawing room, which was populated by a few old bachelors. He took a seat at the back of the room near the fireplace, as far away from the fray as was possible - not that old Colonel Edgewood or the aged Lord Hardbottle counted as much of a fray.

"The usual," Sebastian said to the footman, who had silently materialised at his side.

The man returned a moment later with a decanter of the finest French cognac Berry Bros & Rudd could smuggle in from the continent.

Sebastian poured himself a generous measure, then took a sip, savouring its warmth and complexity. As the alcohol burned its way down his throat to his belly, he felt some of his earlier tension leave his body.

Unfortunately, the calming effects of the cognac did not last long, as his silent contemplation was interrupted by a familiar face.

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“Thorncastle,” Bertie, his cousin, called in greeting, as he barreled across the room. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Yes, one does not often sight a man in his club,” Sebastian agreed, though his drollness was lost on poor Bertie. His scowl of annoyance at being interrupted was also missed, for Bertie pulled over a chair and settled himself beside him. The footman got in on the act, materialising with a second tumbler for the interloper. Sebastian supposed the poor man thought he was being helpful.

“How good it is to see you, dear cousin,” Bertie continued, as he poured himself a drink from his decanter. “I have not seen you out much of late. I thought, perhaps, that you might finally have set your cap at a lady, but as the papers have made no mention of you courting, I suppose I was quite wrong.”

“Quite wrong,” Sebastian agreed, stifling an impatient sigh.

Bertie was a romantic, inspired by the works of Byron and chums to believe an ideal love waited for those enlightened enough to search for it. Byron also inspired his sartorial choices, and Sebastian cast a despairing eye over his cousin’s unruly hair and undone collar.

“One day,” Bertie consoled. “You’ll get there one day, Seb.”

“It never fails to astonish me that you seem so determined to do yourself out of a dukedom in the name of love,” Sebastian guffawed. “If I take a wife and beget myself an heir, where does that leave you, eh?”

“In much the same place.” Bertie shrugged. “Heir to my father’s modest estate and fortune, and leading a life of quiet anonymity.”

Sebastian frowned; that did sound more appealing than a life of notoriety - an unfortunate accompaniment to a ducal title.

“You are not your father, Sebastian-” Bertie began, in a lowered voice, but Sebastian quickly cut him off.

“In most ways I am not,” he agreed. “Though much like the late Duke of T, I do like to pull rank when it suits me - and it suits me now to end this conversation.”

Bertie was momentarily stunned into silence, but his amiable nature soon recovered.

“As you wish,” he shrugged, flashing Sebastian a grin. “Far be it for me to insult the man who’s footing the bill. Shall we call for another decanter? I can’t recall the last time I tasted brandy this good.”

“Not since that Corsican Fiend crowned himself emperor, I’d wager,” Sebastian answered, waving down the footman to fetch them another.

Discussion turned then to the war on the continent, the current skirmishes in Parliament, and the ever important issue of horseflesh. As they talked, the drawing room filled with men who had slipped away from whatever ball, musicale, or other dull outing their wives had dragged them to.

“There’s Lord Bailey, he inherited his title just recently,” Bertie noted, with some surprise, as a stocky young man entered the room.

Sebastian cast him a cursory glance, not particularly interested in the newest addition to the aristocracy.

“I’m surprised to see he can afford the membership fees,” Bertie commented, a font of knowledge when it came to the current gossip of the ton, “His predecessor willed everything that was not entailed, to some chit, leaving Bailey with only an impoverished estate in Linton.”

“He has most likely been extended credit,” Sebastian guessed. “Perhaps while he fights the will in the Courts of Chancery. He might try and have it overturned; it’s unusual for a lord to leave a fortune to a mistress, rather than the estate.”

“Not a mistress, an illegitimate brat,” Bertie corrected him, with a wink. “I think you’ll find the courts will have little to say on a man providing for his offspring. By all accounts, the will is decades old, and cannot be contested on the grounds that the baron was of feeble mind.”

“Where do you get all your information from, eh?” Sebastian queried, amused at Bertie’s extensive knowledge of the secrets of the ton.

“People are rather forthcoming when conversing with a friendly face,” Bertie answered, before adding cheekily, “You might try it some time.”

Sebastian did not deign to reply; he was a duke, he was expected to be unfriendly.

And, speaking of unfriendly dukes...

“Falconbridge.” Sebastian stood to greet his peer. “What brings you here?”

Sebastian would not describe Hugh De Wolfe, the Sixth Duke of Falconbridge, as a friend per se, but he was a close acquaintance. Both men were of a similar age, and had attended Eton and then Oxford at the same time.

“I had come in search of Lord Mosely,” Falconbridge replied, casting a lazy glance

around the room. “Though it appears he is hiding from me.”

“Lost a fortune to you at the tables?” Sebastian guffawed; Falconbridge was notorious for stripping men of their fortunes at the gaming tables.

“Actually, he lost his daughter,” he replied, offering Sebastian a grin that could only be described as wolfish. “Don’t look so shocked, Thorncastle. I intend to marry the chit, not ruin her.”

His words caused Sebastian a certain amount of shame; he had been about to judge Falconbridge as a cad, but it appeared he was more moral than Sebastian could claim to be. He was the one intent on ruining a woman for his own pleasure, not Falconbridge.

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“Have you heard the news about Graystone?” Falconbridge continued, rocking back and forth on his heels as he spoke, “He’s due an appointment with St Peter any day now.”

“Good God, what happened?” Sebastian pressed, shocked by the news. Graystone was only a few years older than he, far too young to be meeting his maker.

“Crashed his phaeton into a tree.” Falconbridge grimaced. “Not what you’d expect from such an accomplished whip but, by all accounts, it was a malfunction of the vehicle which caused the accident. He’s not expected to last much longer.”

“Will Lewisham be sent for?”

Lord Lewisham, another of their peers, was Graystone’s younger brother and was currently fighting on the continent with Wellington’s army. It was he who had written to Sebastian about Michael and Polly, as Michael had served under him. As the Duke of Graystone had no male issue, Lewisham was heir apparent to the title.

“I expect so.” Falconbridge shrugged again. “He won’t like that. Hark, who’s that I sight? Lord Mosley! Excuse me gentlemen, I have to see a man about a bride.”

With that, Falconbridge left them, striding across the room to accost poor Lord Mosley.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting to hear so much gossip in such a short space of time,” Bertie commented, as he watched Falconbridge’s departing form. “Can’t say I envy Miss Farthington, having her hand gambled away by her own father.”



“She could have found herself betrothed to worse than he.” Sebastian shrugged. “His reputation does him a disservice.”

“Like someone else we know,” Bertie commented.

Sebastian made no reply; his dalliance with Miss Smith had led him to the conclusion that his reputation as a rake was well warranted. He might once have hidden behind notions that he was a Corinthian of sorts, that he never took advantage of innocents, that he was nothing like his father...but he had been wrong.

Worse, he knew he could not resist the lure of her. In his life, he had never felt so physically drawn to a woman as he did toward Mary. He longed to possess her and was tormented by images of the one night they had shared together.

“I believe I have socialised enough for the evening,” Sebastian decided.

“Yes, you wouldn’t want to get a reputation for being sociable, then where would you be?” Bertie queried, dryly.

“There’s nothing wrong with being aloof, it spares one having to endure tedious conversations,” Sebastian answered, tartly. “Present company excluded, of course.”

“I’m honoured.”

“You’ll understand how I suffer when you inherit the title,” Sebastian assured him.

“Now, I’ll leave you to run up an outrageous bill on my behalf. Take care, Bertie.”

Sebastian swept from the room, careful to avoid catching anyone’s eye, lest they believed him to be in a convivial mood.

Outside in the hallway, a footman called for his carriage, which promptly arrived to

convey him home. As he slipped inside, to its plush, dark compartment, an image flashed before Sebastian's eyes.

His father, whom he had not thought on properly in years.

The duke had spent many a night travelling around London in a carriage with a large "T" emblazoned on its side, instead of the customary coat of arms. It was the carriage which had earned him the moniker The Duke of T, while his predilection for whores and doxy-houses had made that same moniker synonymous with debauchery. Even now, Sebastian's own reputation was somewhat exaggerated on account of what his father had been.

The public and newspapers had reveled in tales of the duke's insatiable libido and depraved appetites, little caring what effect his actions might have on his family.

At home, as his father caroused his way from Land's End to John O'Groats, it was Sebastian who had to deal with the consequences of his father's exploits. Georgina, his mother, had been but sixteen when she had married the duke, a mere child.

Over the years, Sebastian had tried to piece together the tale of his parents' marriage. From what he had learned, from relatives and servants, his father had doted on his mother, until she had produced the requisite heir. After Sebastian's birth, the duke had grown bored of his wife, seeking his pleasure elsewhere.

The withdrawal of her husband's affection, as well as the humiliation of having his infidelities widely discussed, had driven Georgina to a mild form of madness. She had retreated from the world, sedated by the laudanum the family physician had prescribed for her "malaise".

She had held no affection for Sebastian, whom she blamed for the sad state of her marriage. For the entirety of his childhood, until he had been sent down to Eton,

Sebastian had walked on eggshells, afraid of provoking her into a foul-mouthed tirade by reminding her of his existence.

Between his mother's hostility toward him and his father's indifference, Sebastian's childhood had been mostly miserable. If it hadn't been for his Uncle Benjamin, whom he visited most summers, Sebastian might not have believed in happiness at all.

But, at Ludlow Hall, his uncle's modest estate, he found a home filled with love, laughter, and peace. It was there Sebastian had come to understand that love was possible, though perhaps not for one as broken as he.

His uncle's kindness led Sebastian to believe the wrong Beaufot brother had inherited the title - a fact which he vowed to remedy. He would not marry to fetch an heir, as his father had done. He would leave everything to Barty, so the cruelty of his father and the madness of his mother would not be allowed to continue to taint future generations of the Thorncastle line.

His vow had been easy enough to keep, until now. The women he had bedded had regarded him as little more than a trophy; a wealthy lover who might offer them a chance of fame and fortune. Sebastian had been happy enough to indulge them materially, and even happier that none had made demands for a love he could not provide.

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Mary, however, was a different matter.

I may have everything I wish for, except for your heart...

Her response to his offer of wealth and prestige had been tellingly astute, despite her innocence in such matters. The sadness in her voice when she had uttered those words, had also been rather telling.

She wanted his heart; perhaps she was the first woman who had ever wanted it.

As the carriage trundled through the streets of London, Sebastian waged a battle against his inner demons. His need to possess Mary was all consuming, but his conscience fought to be heard.

Mary wanted love. She deserved love. And, Sebastian realised with surprise, if he was capable of offering it to her, he would.

But he had told her the truth; he had no heart to give her. And, if he could not give her what she wanted, he might just have to set her free - no matter how much he wanted her.

## CHAPTER NINE

THE DUKE'S ABRUPT departure had left Lillian in a state of anxiety. Over the course of a sleepless night, however, her anxiety had turned to anger.

As morning broke, Lillian's mind was filled with the outrage of her situation.

She had promised herself to a man in exchange for his protection, she had not realised this exchange would also include the loss of her independence.

Thorncastle had not stayed, nor had he offered an explanation for his abrupt departure. He would pass his day, attending to his ducal duties, while she was left to await his return.

If he chose to return, that is.

If he did not arrive this evening, would he deign to send an excuse, or would she be expected to remain quiet, grateful for any crumbs from the table of his affection?

Indignation burned in Lillian's belly, carrying her through the day. At noon, she refused the offer of luncheon, so filled was she with righteous anger.

It was only when Polly arrived at her bedchamber to help her dress for the evening, that her fury dissipated somewhat.

"His Grace said to dress warmly, for an evening outdoors," Polly said, cheerful as ever. "I expect that means he's taking you to the Vauxhall Gardens."

Lillian, who had been lounging in the chair by the fireplace, glanced up from her copy of *La Belle Assemblee*.

"His Grace did not say anything to me about an outing this evening," she answered, struggling to keep her tone even. "In fact, he said very little to me at all."

She looked up to find Polly biting nervously on her lip.

"Did he say something to you?" Lillian questioned, as she rose to stand. "I have spent all day awash with confusion. His Grace spent weeks trying to convince me to come

live here, and after only one day, it appears he has grown bored of me. I would rather chance my luck with London, than live miserably at the beck and call of an arrogant sod like Thorncastle.”

Lillian had not meant to sound so angry, but as she finished speaking, she realised she had failed at that endeavour. Polly, to her credit, did not look put out at having had to bear the brunt of Lillian’s frustrations.

“I make no claims of being a mind reader,” Polly replied, after a pause, “so take what I say with a large pinch of salt. I do not think you angered His Grace in any way, nor has he grown tired of you so soon. Rather, I believe, he was having a crisis of conscience.”

“What?” Lillian hooted, completely bemused. “I did not think the duke had one.”

Polly offered her a look which could only be described as disappointed, and Lillian felt a jolt of shame. Apart from last night’s unexplained departure, the duke had shown her only kindness. That his morals regarding sexual congress were dubious, was beyond doubt; but, behind it all, he had a good soul.

“Last night you looked like a fresh faced debutante,” Polly continued, her eyes once again filled with affection. “I believe His Grace found the image rather jarring. He does not have a reputation for chasing after green-girls, like some men I’ll not mention. Perhaps, he needed to leave to grapple with his compunctions. Perhaps he had not realised until last night, just what an innocent you are.”

Lillian flushed at her last remark; was it so obvious she was a virgin?

“If the duke feels that way,” she replied, eventually, “then I wish he would voice his worries to me.”

“The world would be a much easier place, if people spoke aloud their worries, instead of bottling them inside,” Polly agreed, with an earthy laugh. “Now, shall I have Maude heat some water for a bath?”

Lillian nodded, unable to speak, for Polly’s words were still jumbling around her mind. She found it difficult to comprehend that Thorncastle, of all people, had been overcome with moral worries about bedding her. It was she who should be fretting, yet she was not. Part of her earlier anger had stemmed not only from her hurt, but from her frustration that the mysteries of lovemaking had not been revealed to her.

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The duke's body, his scent, and his touch had brought her to heights of pleasure she had not believed possible. The idea that she might be denied the chance to experience them again was unbearable.

Maude spent the next hour dutifully filling the cast iron tub in the dressing room. Once it was filled, Lillian submerged herself in the warm water, luxuriating in it until it went cold.

After toweling herself dry, she slathered her skin in the various lotions and potions Polly had set up on the dressing table. The bottle of Olympia Dew made promises of eternal youth, while the label on the bottle of Pomade de Nerole, swore it would deliver thick, luxurious locks.

Lillian was not entirely certain she believed in the supposed powers of the cosmetics, but they coated her in divine floral scents, which she supposed was good enough.

Once finished, she brushed her hair out to dry and was soon joined by Polly.

"There's not much to choose from in the wardrobe department," Polly said, her brow furrowed in annoyance. "The evening gown we purchased yesterday will have to suffice. I took the liberty of removing the fichu she had stitched across the bosom, it was too matronly for a girl of your age. You can wear your new cape, for warmth."

"And a headpiece," Lillian reminded her, feeling a sudden flutter of nerves. This was to be her first time mixing freely with London society; she would not want to be outed on her debut.



The next hour was spent on dressing Lillian's hair, which Polly arranged into charming curls - with the help of a searing hot fire poker. Once that was done, she helped Lillian to dress, fussing around her petticoats and pushing her stays up as high as they could possibly go.

They finished with the gown; white crepe, trimmed with satin ribbon, and the bodice & sleeves spotted with white beads. The bodice was cut daringly low, in Lillian's mind. The creamy expanse of her neck gave way to the swell of her breasts, which pushed against the bodice as though seeking their escape.

"Are you certain it's not immodest?" she questioned, biting nervously on her lip.

"You could be a nun in that," Polly answered with a wink, leaving Lillian to wonder if the lady's maid had ever met a nun in her life.

Her outfit was completed with the addition of her headpiece; a dark green velvet headband, appliquéd with glass beads of gold and a lace veil which fell over her eyes.

As Lillian surveyed the final effect in the mirror, she had to admit, even without the lace veil, she would be unrecognisable to anyone who knew her.

The woman reflected back at her was not the sweet, unassuming Lillian Hamilton of old, but a glamorous, new entity. Her dress highlighted her curves, her piled-high hair gave her a height she did not possess, and even her posture was more regal.

"His Grace won't know what way to look," Polly said cheerfully, delighted by Lillian's awe-struck silence.

"I feel his gaze will be directed wholly toward my chest," Lillian shot back, bringing a nervous hand up to fidget with her neckline. "Are you certain it's not lewd?"

“Saint’s have mercy,” Polly grumbled. “Wait until you catch sight of the demimonde proper, then you’ll see what lewd really looks like. Now, enough fussing; you need gloves and your cape. Why don’t you wait downstairs in the parlour room? I’ll send Maude in with a glass of wine to steady your nerves.”

Lillian followed her instructions and when Thorncastle arrived, a half hour later, he found her even more composed than she had hoped to be.

Her composure threw his own reaction to her appearance into sharp relief.

Thorncastle’s mouth briefly formed an “o” of surprise as he caught sight of her. His eyes, as Lillian had so shrewdly guessed, fell momentarily to her bosom, before quickly returning to her face.

She allowed herself a smirk, which he acknowledged with a rueful smile.

“Forgive my momentary lapse in manners,” he said, stepping forward to take her hand. “Though, you can’t blame a man. You look ravishing, Miss Smith.”

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it, his expression decidedly wicked.

Despite her earlier anger at him, Lillian could not help but feel a frisson of excitement at his touch. He looked especially handsome dressed in dark evening attire, which gave him an air of severity. A silk burgundy cravat at his neck was his only concession to colour and brought out the vivid blue of his eyes, while his dark hair fell rakishly across his forehead.

Lillian could see the beginning of a shadow upon his strong chin and she shivered as she recalled the feel of his stubble grazing her inner thigh.

“Are you feeling unwell, Miss Smith?” the duke queried, with concern.

Lillian started; she had not realised she was staring. It was not only he who had momentarily forgotten their manners. The duke's earlier exuberance looked set to disappear, as he surveyed her with worry.

"I feel very well," she assured him, not wishing for him to return to the previous night's mood. "I am looking forward to seeing where it is you are taking me."

Thorncastle paused, as though inwardly debating how he should answer.

"I had planned a trip to the Vauxhall Gardens," he said, his tone almost reluctant.

“How thrilling.”

“They are a sight to behold,” he admitted. “Though their beauty will pale in comparison to yours.”

Lillian resisted rolling her eyes at his flirtation; Thorncastle could be very charming when he wished to be. He offered her his arm, which she took, and they made for the hallway.

“Your carriage is outside, Your Grace,” Michael said, rushing to open the door.

“Thank you,” Sebastian’s tone was clipped, “I left a copy of today’s newspaper in the parlour room, Michael. It has some details of the army’s most recent movements, which you might find interesting.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Michael answered.

“Graystone is not expected to live much longer,” the duke added, his voice low. “Lewisham has been sent for; I’m told we can expect him back on English soil before the month’s end.”

Michael did not reply, he merely nodded, his jaw clenched.

Lillian did not understand a word of the exchange, but she could tell whatever news Thorncastle had delivered was upsetting.

Thorncastle offered him a brief nod, before placing his hand over Lillian’s, and

leading her down to the waiting carriage.

Higgins, the footman who had called for her at Mrs Harrod's, sprang to attention to open the door, when he sighted them. Thorncastle assisted Mary inside with excessive care and hands which lingered far longer than necessary around her waist.

Inside, the interior was plush; thick brocade curtains, deep velvet cushions, and even a warming stone for her feet.

"There is a blanket for your legs," Thorncastle said, as he slipped into the seat beside her. From underneath the bench, he extracted a wool blanket, which he tucked around her legs with great solicitousness.

"Thank you," she smiled at him, charmed by his care for her comfort.

"We can't have you catching a cold," he answered, rather formally, as though she was his aged-aunt and not his mistress.

She frowned into the darkness of the carriage. The duality of the duke's character grated on her nerves. One moment he acted as though he wished to ravish her completely, while the next moment he acted as though he would go to battle to protect her virginity.

As the carriage made its way across town, the duke obliged her with some idle chatter. He was well versed on current affairs, the progression of Napoleon's troops, and the goings-on in Parliament.

Lillian listened politely, though her mind was elsewhere. She could not suffer through another evening of uncertainty. If Thorncastle did not wish to bed her and keep her as a mistress, then she would need to know so she could plan her future elsewhere.

“Ahem,” the duke cleared his throat pointedly, interrupting Lillian’s musings. Her inattentiveness had been noted.

“Oh,” she blinked stupidly, “I’m afraid my mind drifted for a moment, what was the question?”

“I was just pointing out we are nearly there,” he answered, not at all put-out to find he had been ignored but, rather, concerned. “Are you certain you feel well? You have been distracted for most of the evening.”

Lillian held her breath and willed her impertinent mouth to stay quiet. Alas, the anger which had been bubbling inside her all day, could not be stopped from boiling over.

“Since you ask,” she replied, folding her arms across her chest, “I am not well, Your Grace. In fact, I am livid at having been treated so shoddily.”

“Treated shoddily by whom?” Thorncastle answered, though the penny soon dropped. “By me? I don’t see how, my dear. I have acted most gallantly towards you - despite my desire for the opposite.”

“So you do desire me?” Lillian replied, her tone dry. “You did not give that impression last night; you appeared to me to have grown tired of me already. You can’t fault me for wondering, Your Grace, if you are a man who prefers the chase to the acquisition. In fact-”

Lillian’s next barb was not to be voiced, for the duke had decided to take charge of the impertinent mouth she had failed to control.

His lips crashed down upon hers, strong and possessive, silencing her completely. As he kissed her, Thorncastle pulled her into his lap, his hands clutching her bottom. He plundered her mouth, sparing no mercy for her innocent sensibilities. His hands

slipped from her bottom to her hips and he urged her into a straddling position.

She gasped, as she felt his male hardness pressed against her through the material of his breeches.

“Don’t accuse me of having grown bored of you,” he rasped, pulling his head away. “So help me God, I would take you now if I wasn’t afraid of hurting you.”

The gnawing ache between Lillian’s legs urged her to tell him to do it - to take her there and then. She brought one of his hands up to her chest, to rub against the bodice of her dress. How she wished they were both free of the clothing which was keeping their flesh from meeting.

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The duke's eyes were dark with desire; a blue as stormy as the sea. He held her gaze as his fingers moved across her bodice, searching for the nub of her nipple. When he found it, he smiled up at her - a wolfish grin - and squeezed it gently.

Lillian moaned with longing, thrusting her chest towards him, begging to be touched.

Thorncastle obliged and with great deftness, plunged his hand into the bodice and lifted her breasts so that they spilled out, ready for his attention.

She gasped as she felt the cool air on her skin. It felt deliciously wanton to be so exposed inside the carriage, as it moved through the streets of London.

The duke tugged her downwards, capturing one of her nipples in his mouth. Her hips bucked of their own volition, as she felt his tongue upon her aching nub. She was seated now atop his manhood and only his breeches and her drawers were protecting her maidenhead from its destruction.

She bucked against him as he suckled on her nipple, savouring the tingles of pleasure the friction brought.

If only...

The carriage came to an abrupt stop, throwing Lillian forward.

"Careful," Thorncastle said, as his hands wrapped around her waist to steady her. The sudden jolt had awoken Lillian from her dazed desire, and she was overcome by a fit of modesty.



“Forgive me,” she whispered, as she slipped from his lap.

Her hands worked furiously, pulling up the bodice of her dress, in an attempt to conceal her breasts.

“Forgive you?” The duke raised a brow. “I should be on my knees thanking you. That was, by far, the most enjoyable carriage drive of my life.”

As he spoke, his hands worked to assist Lillian back into her dress. It appeared he had a talent for both dressing and undressing women.

“You’re perfect,” he assured her. “No one would ever guess.”

She nodded, too dazed to make an actual reply. The duke fixed her cape, so it sat over her dress, concealing her completely.

“It’s cold,” he said, before adding with a frown, “And I don’t like to share.”

A knock upon the carriage door signaled the arrival of Higgins.

“Open,” Thorncastle ordered, his voice surprisingly calm.

Lillian inwardly wondered at his composure; was an amorous encounter in a carriage not such an unusual occurrence for the duke?

He disembarked first and held out a hand to help Lillian down. Her jealous musings on Thorncastle’s previous romantic liaisons came to a halt as she witnessed the whirl of activity before her.

Crowds of people made their way towards the Coach House Gates - the entrance of choice for those unable to make the journey by boat - which was lit up like a beacon

against the dark night's sky. The sound of revelry and orchestral music drifted out from within, adding to the palpable air of excitement amongst the crowd. "Hold on tight," the duke commanded, as he tucked her arm under his.

He led her through the crowds of people walking toward the entrance gates. As they moved, Lillian saw the attendees were not all as glamorous as she had first thought.

Peddlers, lightskirts, and hawkers mixed freely amongst the crowd. One man, with a Bible in hand, cried out for the salvation of the souls present. Beside him, a woman

It was a mass of colour, sounds, and smells, and Lillian felt almost giddy as her senses were assaulted by the scene before her.

At the gate, Thorncastle presented their vouchers, and they were whisked away from themilieutoward a private dining box.

Lillian held tight to Thorncastle as they walked the gravel paths, which were bound by topiary hedges and trees. Their way was illuminated by an endless number of lanterns, arranged in different figures of suns, stars, and constellations. Around them, the air was filled with the sound of mirth, laughter, and freedom.

Lillian felt as though she was floating, such was the lightness within her. All the pain, darkness, and misery of the past month floated away from her body, ebbed along by the joy of the crowd.

At last, they arrived at their supper box, a colonnade decorated with paintings and hangings. The table faced out, so they could view the comings and goings of those outside.

Thorncastle pulled out a chair for Lillian and once she was seated, took the seat beside her.

“What do you think?” he queried, as the waiter filled up their glasses with a rich, red Claret.

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“I have never seen so many people,” Lillian confessed. “The nearest thing I have experienced is the Hopper’s Fair in Maidstone, though it’s hardly comparable.”

The words had slipped carelessly off her tongue, though if Thorncastle had noticed her mistake, he gave no sign.

“Vauxhall is a little more refined,” he agreed, then winked. “Though only a little; the Dark Walk is something else entirely.”

Lillian did not have a chance to query what carry-on happened on the Dark Walk, for a stream of waiters arrived with their fare. They placed plates of cold meats, bread, fruit, and sweetmeats upon the table - a feast fit for twelve, rather than two.

They spent an hour supping wine and sampling the plates of food which, to Lillian’s disappointment, was rather poor.

“The chefs here are notorious for their parsimony,” Thorncastle commented, as he speared a slice of ham with his fork. He held it up to the light, so that Lillian could witness how thin it was.

“I expect most people don’t come for the food,” she conceded, as she set her wine glass down. She had drunk more than she had thought, for her head felt fuzzy and her face warm.

“No,” Thorncastle agreed. “They attend for the music and the festivities. Come, we can not spend the whole evening wrapped up inside, let us go explore.”

He led the way, guiding her down enchanting paths, lit by coloured lanterns and decorated with sculptures and statues. As they walked, the sound of the orchestra grew louder, until they emerged at last into a brightly lit grove. At its centre stood a towering edifice of wood, painted white and bloom colour. It was at least three stories high and at its top was an organ, its gleaming pipes reaching high into the sky.

The orchestra was playing a country tune, much to the delight of the crowd, who were enthusiastically engaged in a set dance. Thorncastle led Lillian by the hand to the makeshift dance floor, where they joined in the festivities.

It was much like the assembly in Linton, Lillian thought, as she whirled from one partner to the next - with one exception, the duke.

Thorncastle glowered at each partner Lillian was joined with, his expression one of jealousy. It was only when she was returned to him, that his brow relaxed from frowning.

“You are not keen on dancing, Your Grace?” Lillian questioned, a little breathless from exertion.

“I am not keen on watching you dance with another,” he clarified. “Let’s explore a bit further, eh?”

He took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm, then led her away from the bright lights of the grove. They took a different direction this time, past The Rotunda and The Triumphal Arches, to the Grand South Walk. There were many couples and groups promenading, all dressed in fine fashions of silk and satin.

Lillian noted the eyes of the ladies followed Thorncastle with admiration, before slipping toward her with barely concealed curiosity. One woman even leveled her quizzing glasses Lillian’s way, and squinted, as she tried to assess just who she was.

“The tabbies are watching,” the duke commented, as he too noted the woman. “I’m afraid it goes with the territory. As a duke, I am an object of fascination to society, which renders you one too, by association.”

Lillian said a silent prayer of thanks to Polly, for adding the veil to her headpiece. Though she did not know anyone in London, she did not wish to gain recognition as Thorncastle’s mistress.

“This way,” the duke said, as he veered off the main walk.

This path was darker and less crowded, and - according to Thorncastle - named The Lover’s Walk.

“Not quite so nefarious as The Dark Walk, but it does allow for privacy,” he added, with a grin.

“Do you intend to ravage me in an alcove, Your Grace?” Lillian teased, lightly. “Or at all? You have not yet answered my earlier question, and I’m afraid I still do not know where I stand.”

The wine had loosened her tongue, emboldening her to voice things she otherwise might not have had the courage to say. Thorncastle paused his step, his hand dropping to her waist.

He spun her around to face him, his eyes bright, despite the darkness.

“I would like nothing more than to make love to you,” he growled, his voice tense with emotion. “But, I told the truth when I said I am not capable of love; I cannot bed you, unless you understand it. If you cannot accept that, then I will see you safely back to Kent. I will make certain you are provided for, safely, away from London.”

“You would happily let me go, to return home and, perhaps, marry another?” she replied, gratified to see the flash of jealousy which crossed his face.

His hand on her waist tightened, so that his fingers dug into her flesh. His expression was one of tightly controlled rage, which should have frightened her, but instead she found it thrilling.

“I want you to remain here with me,” he finally answered. “I want you in my bed, but I do not want you to make a decision which you later regret. I cannot offer you marriage, or a child. I am afraid too, that you are too innocent to understand, I see making love as separate from love itself. I am afraid of hurting you in more ways than one; I cannot feel anything for you, apart from fondness.”

She blinked, shocked to learn he could be so removed from human emotion. That he could claim her body, without feeling anything for her beyond a remote affection.

She took a step back, trying to comprehend it.

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“Perhaps,” she stuttered, turning her eyes toward him, “you have never tried to feel love for the one you make love to? Perhaps you’re not incapable, you just don’t wish to.”

He was silent for a moment, as he tried to think of an answer.

“It’s one and the same,” he eventually replied. “I cannot love any woman.”

His confession was too much for Lillian to bear; though she knew being bedded as Thorncastle’s mistress would be purely physical, she had not expected it to be so devoid of emotion. Unable to look at him, she turned on her heel and fled down The Lover’s Walk.

“Mary,” she heard him shout, though she did not stop.

A strange madness had overcome her; her chest felt tight, as though she could not breathe, yet her feet urged her to run. In her mind, she envisioned herself racing from her past, throwing off the shackles of her sins.

She saw the path’s end ahead of her, where the topiary hedging ended, giving way to the brightly lit walk beyond. She slowed her pace, unsure of where to go next, and as she paused, a pair of figures turned on to The Lover’s Walk.

A man and a woman; he, finely dressed; she, wearing the garish bright silks of a lightskirt.

There was something familiar about the man, she thought, as they approached. His



bearing, his height, his dark silhouette against the far lights...

Lord Bailey.

Lillian shrank back into an alcove which held a Romanesque statue, willing them to pass by unnoticed.

From the sound of his voice, as he approached, she deduced that her distant cousin was deep in his cups, but that did not mean he would not recognise her. Lillian held her breath as they neared, afraid to even move lest she be noted.

“I could set you up in a house on Grosvenor Square,” she heard the baron say, in a nasally whine. “Visit you each night. What say you, eh?”

“Oh, my la-wd, t’would be ‘eavenly,” his companion replied, her accent pure London Estuary.

The pair were too engrossed in each other to even glance Lillian’s way, and they passed by without event.

She waited a moment, for the sound of their footsteps to recede, before letting out a long sigh of relief - she was safe.

Or was she?

“Thorncastle,” she heard Lord Bailey salute the duke. “What brings you here?”

“I am looking for someone,” he replied, brusquely. “And I was not aware we had been introduced. If you wish to solicit me for something, Lord Bailey, have someone in White’s set-up an introduction. Goodnight.”

The sound of Lord Bailey's indignant spluttering filled the air, though Lillian barely heard it over the pounding of her heartbeat. Would Thorncastle reveal her hiding place?

She heard the duke's footsteps approaching and she held her breath. He moved slowly, as though he knew just where he would find her.

Indeed, a moment later, he came to a halt before the alcove and looked in at her.

The fear which had grown inside her, threatening to overwhelm her, stopped dead as her eyes met with his. The world held no danger when he was there to protect her. A bruised heart was all she had to fear...

"I apologise for upsetting you," he said, formally.

Lillian shook her head, afraid to speak lest Lord Bailey still lingered nearby. Instead, she reached out her hand and pulled him towards her.

"Take me home," she whispered in his ear, as he embraced her in a hug. "Take me home and make love to me - I don't care about the rest."

He stiffened.

"Are you certain?"

As his strong arms held her, filling her with a sense of safety, Lillian felt she had never been more certain of anything in her life.

She nodded, looking up at him shyly. "Take me home," she repeated, though the home she envisioned was not the house off Berkeley Square, but in his warm embrace.

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The duke's eyes darkened with wicked desire and he gave a curt nod.

"Come," he commanded, pulling her from their hiding place. "We must make haste, for I am not certain my resolve will last much longer."

She smiled as she followed him, her body filled with need. They raced down The Lover's Walk together, though at the end of it, Lillian stole a glance backwards.

Just as Lot's wife had rued looking back on disaster, so too did Lillian. Cold crept into her heart, as she spotted Lord Bailey standing at the far end of the walk, watching their progress.

It is too far for him to guess it is me, she thought to herself, as she gripped tighter on the duke's hand.

A sense of doom stole over her nonetheless, but it was easily banished by Thorncastle's reassuring presence.

Nothing could hurt her whilst she was with him - except his cold heart.

## CHAPTER TEN

SEBASTIAN COULD NOT quite believe the level of restraint he managed to show, on the journey from Lambeth back to London.

As the carriage moved through the city's dark streets, he showered Mary with tender, lingering kisses, which greatly juxtaposed the wild beast of desire, roaring within

him.

He wanted her. He wanted her beneath him, writhing in pleasure. He wanted to sink himself into her warmth and spill his seed within her.

Careful, a voice in his head chided; that was the very thing he should not do.

Sebastian pulled Mary against him, allowing his hands to wander her body, as his mouth explored hers. His body hummed with pleasure and triumph, though his treacherous mind insisted on plaguing him with doubt.

Something was not right; one moment she ran from him, at learning he could not love. Whilst the next, she insisted it did not matter.

Sebastian's conscience prodded him to question her, to seek reassurance that she came to him freely. As loudly as his conscience roared, however, it could not drown out the screaming demands of his body.

You will care for her, Sebastian reassured himself, as his hands cupped the swell of her breasts.

You will protect her.

You will cherish her.

No matter how many promises he repeated in his mind, Sebastian still worried he was somehow letting Mary down. She deserved better than his broken dark soul; she deserved to be loved.

"Is something the matter?" she whispered, as he broke apart their kiss.

This was the moment, the moment in which he might redeem himself before her. He could send her back to Kent, pay for her keep there, allow her to live a life free from his rottenness.

Allow her to marry some other man?

The very idea filled Sebastian with a jealous fury, and instead of releasing Mary, he pulled her closer. His lips crashed down on hers in a bruising kiss, his resolve weakening completely.

His hand fell to his breeches, against which his erection strained painfully. He would have her as his own, he would not share her. Not now, not ever.

Mercifully, the carriage came to an abrupt halt, ending Sebastian's surge of jealous passion. He had been dangerously close to stealing her virginity in a moving carriage, he realised with a jolt of shame.

"We're here," he said, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

For her part, Mary looked just as dazed as he. Her headpiece had come askew and her auburn tresses had escaped their pins, framing her face in a charming halo. Her green eyes were alight with pleasure, while her plump red mouth looked like it had been thoroughly kissed. Her breasts were heavy, swollen with desire, demanding their release from the bodice which caged them.

Sebastian bit back a groan, as he felt every ounce of resolve leave his body.

He would take her tonight - slowly and thoroughly, he would claim her body as his own.

He did not wait for Higgins to come open the door, instead unlocking it himself. He

sprang from the carriage, then turned to assist Mary with disembarking.

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“Return in the morning,” Sebastian whispered to Higgins, who had just climbed down from his perch at the back of the carriage.

The young lad nodded discreetly and disappeared without a word.

Sebastian took Mary’s hand and led her up the steps to the door, which he rapped upon loudly. It was opened within a minute, by a young lad in dark clothing - the lad Polly had hired, no doubt.

Sebastian offered him a curt nod, but did not deign to exchange any pleasantries. Instead, he led Mary by the hand toward the staircase, lifted her into his arms and carried her up the stairs.

When they reached the bedchamber, he set Mary down, his breath strained from exertion and lust. She stood pliantly, watching him with her emerald green eyes.

There was trust there, a trust Sebastian did not feel he truly deserved. He hesitated, pondering if this was the time to act on his conscience, but she reached out to him first.

Her hand grabbed onto his shirt and she tugged him towards her. She was as unwilling to break the spell of desire as he.

Her signal was all Sebastian required to lose control completely. With a growl, he captured her mouth in another kiss, as his hands worked furiously to remove her clothing.

She too was busy; frantically trying to work his shirt out from his breeches, and to undo the many pearl buttons of his waistcoat. They fumbled and bumbled, in urgent passion, until Sebastian finally lost patience.

“One moment,” he whispered, breaking apart from her.

He spun her around, so that her back was to him, and with expert hands began to undo the buttons of her dress. Sebastian kissed each patch of skin as it was revealed, and once the offending garment was loose enough, pulled it down past her hips.

Her undergarments were of a higher quality than those she had worn on their first night together, but Sebastian had no time to admire their silk and lace intricacy. He undid her stays, lifted her chemise above her head, then pulled the ribbon tie of her petticoats open, so they fell to the floor with a sigh.

“Your drawers,” he commanded, as his hands began to work on the tight knot of his cravat. As she slid them from her hips, Sebastian busily undressed himself. Coat, waistcoat, shirt, then his boots, until finally he was left in only his breeches.

He felt her curious eyes upon him and hid a smile. She had never seen a man in all his nakedness, nor the male appendage. Perhaps, he mused, it might be best to reveal it slowly, so as not to frighten her.

He crossed the divide between them in two long strides and pulled her once more into his embrace. He shivered, as her hands explored his abdomen. Her touch was tentative and light as she stroked his skin, though her innocence was far more alluring than any practiced touch he had felt.

His own hands reached for her peach bottom, pulling her against him, so that his hardness was pressed against the softness of her belly. His desire roared loudly in his ears; so close, yet not close enough.



“We’re far too vertical for my liking,” Sebastian commented, before lifting her into his arms and depositing her on the bed.

“And I am far too clothed,” he added, as he undid the buttons of his breeches.

Her eyes followed him, as he slipped them from his hips, wide with nerves and excitement. Sebastian could not help but feel a surge of masculine pleasure, as she gasped when his manhood sprang forth.

“I was not expecting it...” she said, apologetically.

“Yes?” Sebastian raised a brow, wondering if he was about to be issued a soul-crushing set down.

“To be so big,” she finished, nervously glancing at him to see if he had found insult in her remark.

He preened a little, for though a duke, he was still a man. “It will fit,” he assured her, as he padded across the carpet to the bed.

His words soothed her nerves somewhat, though he could tell she was still nervous. She would have to be relaxed, if her body was to receive him, he realised.

Sebastian lowered himself onto the bed, so that she was trapped beneath him. He kissed her again, slowly and sensuously, before moving from her mouth to her neck, right down to her swollen breasts.

He captured one nipple in his mouth and with his free hand, he gently teased the other. Mary’s hips bucked, as she gasped with pleasure. His hand then fell to her womanhood, stroking the mound of auburn curls which guarded it.

As he suckled on her nipple, he nudged her legs apart, his fingers gently stroking her silky lips. They were slick with desire and temptingly warm, though Sebastian did not dare take yet.

She needed to be pleading for release, before he slipped inside her.

His fingers found her pearly nub, swollen with need and longing. She gasped as he slowly stroked it, tracing a circle around its mound. His fingers coated with her wetness pressed harder, assessing what level of friction she desired. Once he had discovered it, he increased his speed, stroking her clit until her hips bucked in wild abandon.

“Please, Sebastian,” she whimpered.

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Sebastian lifted his head from her breast and found her watching him with dazed eyes. She was lost to pleasure, near her peak; it was time.

Sebastian brought himself up the bed and placed a tender kiss upon her bruised lips. He then placed his body over hers, so that she was trapped beneath him.

Her eyes went wide, as she realised this was the moment.

“Open your legs for me,” he whispered, and she complied.

He kneeled back, wishing to witness all he could of the momentous occasion. He had been so focused on Mary’s needs and desires, that his own had been forgotten, but as he looked at her, spread open before him, it returned with full force.

Sebastian held his breath, as he placed the tip of his erection against her entrance. Her lips were slick and wet, warm and tempting. He groaned aloud, as his sensitive head received its reward.

Go slowly, a voice in his head cautioned, though it was difficult to listen to when all he wished to do was plunge deep inside her.

“Look at me,” Sebastian ordered Mary, as he held himself just outside the gates of heaven.

Her green eyes met his and he held her gaze as he slipped slowly inside her.

Her tight, warm wetness wrapped itself around him, so pleasurable Sebastian almost

lost his restraint. She gasped, as she felt herself stretch to accommodate his girth, though she made no complaint. It was only when he met resistance within, that she gave a nervous cry.

“It will hurt but a moment,” Sebastian assured her, his breath laboured from the effort of his restraint. “Trust me.”

She nodded and with that signal, Sebastian thrust himself inside her completely.

He experienced indescribable pure bliss, as he pushed past her maidenhead and all of his manhood filled her. She was his, he had laid claim to her body, and he would be the first and last man to do so. His desire was mixed with a strange, primal possessiveness - something which he had never experienced before. It was a heady feeling and dangerous too, for it urged him to keep going - to thrust and thrust, until he had filled her with his seed.

Sebastian restrained himself and paused for a moment, his erection still deep inside her.

“Are you sore?” he questioned, searching her face for any sign of pain.

“It lasted but a moment,” she answered, echoing his earlier assurances.

Her words were like a starting pistol and all of Sebastian’s restraint disappeared. He lay down atop her, supporting his weight with his arms, and thrust deeper inside her.

Her gasp was one of pleasure. Her eyes held his as he moved within her, her mouth open as she panted in pleasure.

“Please,” she whimpered, as her muscles tightened around him. “Please don’t stop.”

She was climaxing.

He realised it, just as he realised he was reaching his own peak of pleasure. His head told him to withdraw, to spill his seed on her belly and forget about her needs, but he did not listen.

He thrust deeper inside her, his desire to possess her body a roaring beast demanding fulfillment.

As Mary's pleasure broke, her muscles contracting and releasing in waves of pleasure, so too did Sebastian's.

He groaned, as his ecstasy peaked and released itself into her warmth.

He should have felt horror, for putting his oath so at risk, but as his liquid filled her, the strange, primal beast within his chest purred with pleasure.

Sebastian collapsed, cradling Mary's body against his.

Her skin was slick with sweat, her breath still uneven, and he could hear her heartbeat skittering within her chest. The room was silent, bar the sound of their breath, as they both recovered from their exertion.

After a few minutes, Mary spoke, her voice heavy with sleep.

"Is it always like that?" she questioned, as she curled herself against his chest.

Sebastian shook his head, still overwhelmed by what had happened.

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“I have never experienced anything like that in my life,” he confessed, his fingers stroking her hair.

It had been a first for her, but also for him. The act of making love had never consumed him like this; it had never made him lose sight of himself, or who he was. When inside Mary, he had not felt like one person, alone in the world. He had felt like a broken piece that had found its match. He had felt they were one.

It was worrying.

At that moment, he was too spent for worry, and he pushed the thought from his mind as he felt his eyes grow heavy. His arm curled around Mary, pulling her closer, delighting in her warm presence.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

LILLIAN BLINKED HER eyes open, momentarily startled to find a man slumbering beside her.

A naked man, at that.

Her cheeks burned, as memories of the previous night flashed before her eyes. She had made love to the duke, with reckless abandon. She had cast off any vestiges of the prim and proper Lillian Hamilton of old, and had embraced her inner vixen.

She suspected she should feel shame at what she had done, but she could not. Last night had not felt tawdry or wrong; it had felt perfectly natural.

When Thorncastle had entered her, the sharp stab of pain had quickly receded, leaving her with only a sense of wholeness. Perhaps she was a fool to view lovemaking as the joining of two bodies into one, but that was how it had felt.

How it had felt to you, a voice in her head goaded her.

She stole a glance at Thorncastle, wondering if he had felt anything at all, bar carnal satisfaction.

In slumber, the duke was far less forbidding. His closed eyes were framed by delicate dark lashes, his cheeks mashed against the pillow.

Laughter bubbled within, as Lillian imagined herself pinching them, as one would a baby. No doubt that would put the duke in a tremendous mood for the day.

Between her legs ached pleasantly, though she felt a dire need to refresh herself.

Quietly, she slipped from the bed and made for the dressing room, where a basin of warm water awaited her.

Maude had been in, she guessed, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

What had the young woman thought, when she had opened the door to find a duke slumbering beside her mistress?

It did Lillian no good to dwell on this thought, so she set about washing herself. With a damp cloth, she soaped between her legs, removing any traces of last night's activities. She then donned a fresh nightgown and crept back to the bed, wishing to savour the duke's warmth a while longer.

As she pulled back the bedsheet, she noticed a small bloodstain - further evidence of

her lost virginity. What would Maude think? And Polly?

Her earlier thoughts, that what had transpired between her and Thorncastle was perfectly natural, would not be viewed the same way by others. Though Lillian did not judge herself, she knew others might.

Troubled, she slipped back into bed, nuzzling her body against the duke's to steal some of his warmth.

Her feet were especially chilled, so much so, when she pressed them against Thorncastle's legs, he gave an unhappy growl.

"You've been wandering," he said, in a voice thick with sleep.

He rolled over and threw a heavy arm across her body, drawing her close.

"Don't wander too far from me," he continued, pressing a kiss against the back of her neck.

Lillian shivered, as she wriggled against him. She curved her bottom back to meet his pelvis, and was rewarded by the feel of his manhood pressing against her.

"Lord, you are a temptress," the duke groaned, moving his hips against her.

Lillian, who had never considered herself remotely tempting, felt a thrill at his words. She turned, so she was facing him, and tentatively, she reached down to take his erection in her hands.

"It feels like silk," she whispered, confused as to how something so hard could also feel soft.



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Thorncastle groaned, momentarily unable to respond. He placed his hand over hers and guided it into a stroking motion. Once she had grasped the rhythm, he then moved his hand to her breast.

“You dressed,” he noted, with a frown, though he did not give her a chance to mount a defense. Instead, he captured her lips, kissing her slowly and languidly, the opposite of their frenetic embraces the night before.

His fingers found her nipples beneath the thick material covering them, and they gently teased them until they were hard and aching for his mouth against them.

Lillian, whose hand was still clasped around his thick girth, moving it upwards and downwards, mewled with displeasure.

“I quite agree,” Thorncastle replied, his eyes glinting wickedly.

In a moment, he had maneuvered it so she was beneath him, and in another, her nightgown was discarded upon the floor.

“We should make it a rule you are never dressed in my presence,” Thorncastle decided, as his eyes ravished her body.

“I don’t believe that would be very practical,” Lillian replied, both amused and aroused by his obvious admiration for her form.

“Dash practical,” Thorncastle murmured, lowering his head to capture one of her nipples in his mouth.

Lillian moaned as his hot mouth encased her aching nub. As he suckled upon it, jolts of desire stirred deep inside her. She needed to feel him within her, to feel filled by him.

Impatiently she arched her back, presenting herself for him to take. If she had not been so consumed by need, she might have blushed at her flagrant behaviour - not that Thorncastle complained.

He positioned himself between her legs, gently stroking her lips with the head of his manhood.

“Are you certain you’re not too sore?” he whispered, with somewhat tardy chivalry.

“I’m fine,” she answered, with a smile. “Excepting the fact that you’re leaving me wanting...”

He raised an amused brow, still teasing her lips by pushing against her, but not quite giving her what she desired.

He brought his free hand to her nub, stroking it absently. Lillian’s breath constricted, as his action caused her muscles within to clench. He did it deliberately; driving her to distraction for his own amusement. It was the most pleasurable torture one could imagine.

“Please,” she whimpered, unashamedly begging him for mercy. “Don’t tease me.”

He stroked her for a moment longer, his eyes dark with mischief, but then she bucked her hips, and whatever resolve he’d held crumbled.

“Temptress,” he groaned, as he pulled her towards him, and thrust himself inside her.

Lillian gasped, as she felt herself stretch to accommodate his thick member. He felt so large, pressing against her walls, consuming all she had to offer him.

Last night, he had lain down atop her, but this morning he remained kneeling and lifted her hips, so she came to meet him.

He thrust slowly inside her, his eyes burning with hunger.

“Touch yourself,” he commanded her, his voice hoarse.

She whimpered, bringing her hands to her womanhood. She rubbed her fingers against the pearl of her desire, as Thorncastle thrust, harder and harder. Her need became more frantic, her blood pounded through her veins as she sought release.

At last, she reached her peak, and for one earth-shattering moment, she was consumed by pure bliss, as she broke into waves of pleasure.

Her gasps of rapture pushed the duke over the edge; he gave one last thrust, before he pulled himself from inside her and spilled hot liquid upon her belly.

Even in her dazed pleasure, Lillian felt somewhat confused. Had he done the same last night? Had she been too lost to her senses to notice?

Thorncastle came to lie beside her a few moments, his breath heavy as he struggled to regain his composure. After a few moments, he spoke.

“Let me get you something for that,” he said, waving a lazy hand in the direction of her abdomen.

He rolled from the bed and padded across the floor to where he had left his jacket. From its pocket, he extracted a handkerchief and when he returned to her, he used it

to gently clean Lillian's stomach.

“What..?” she began, slightly hesitant, “What was that?”

Thorncastle took a moment to answer, as he slipped back under the bedsheets. He gathered her in his arms and held her close, before finally replying.

“My seed,” he said, placing a kiss upon her head. “I cannot spill it inside you, or you might end up with a child.”

“Oh.” Lillian felt rather stupid; surely she should have known about such matters. Had her mother not died when she was so young, she might have been better schooled on such things. Her brow furrowed, as she recalled he had not had such qualms last night.

“I’m afraid I rather lost control of myself,” Thorncastle confessed, when she put it to him. “Which has never happened to me before. Luckily, as it was your first time, there’s little risk. We cannot be so unlucky.”

Her earlier feeling of contentment quickly vanished at his words, which were a timely reminder their union was not a proper one. She had always assumed she would one day have children of her own, though she had never thought much upon it. Indeed, she had never planned anything much for her future, foolishly assuming her life would follow the same path as other girls her age.

Marriage, a home, a child; all were lost to her now.

“You do not wish to father a bastard,” she surmised, surprised her tone sounded rather accusing.

There was a queer feeling in her stomach, an irritating jolt, she soon realised was jealousy. Thorncastle would not sire a child with her but, no doubt, he would one day marry and fetch himself an heir.

Where would that leave her?

For one moment, she envisioned such a terrible future; one where she lived on the margins of the duke's life, while he spent happy days with his family. She pushed it aside, for it was most unrealistic - the duke would no doubt cast her off, rather than leave her to linger.

"I do not wish to father any children," he replied, his voice calm. "As I have already told you."

"But, that's absurd," Lillian blurted, sitting up to look at him properly. "A duke must have an heir."

"I do." Thorncastle raised a dark brow, deeply amused by her reaction. "My cousin, Barty; a far more good and moderate man than I. He - and his issue - deserve the ducal seat far more than I."

"A title does not pass to the most deserving," she argued, startled by his statement. "It passes from father to eldest son."

"That I well know," he agreed, seating himself up so that his back rested against the headboard. "However, I do not believe primogeniture rights to a title means one will serve said title well. My uncle would have cared for his tenants and the ducal seat far better than my father - who only managed to avoid gambling away the family fortune by the sheer luck that his propensity for pleasures of the flesh outweighed his other vices."

Lillian remained still as he spoke, sensing he was unleashing a burden which lay heavy upon his shoulders.

“It is only right that Barty inherits,” Sebastian continued, his lip petulant. “He has not one, but two parents of outstanding character. His chances of siring a bad apple are far lower than mine. Between a cruel, base father and a fit-for-Bedlam mother, any issue I fetch is certain to be as damned as I.”

He drew a breath, his expression vaguely surprised, as though he had not realised just how passionate his outburst had been.

In the silence which followed, Lillian fretted. He had told her he was not capable of love, but was that just because he had never received it?

“You are not damned,” she said, her voice soft.

His blue eyes turned to hers, searching deeply, as though he wished to read her soul. She reached out to take his hand, clasping it tightly, willing him to believe her.

“I must look ghastly, if you are defending my honour, when I failed so spectacularly at defending yours,” he answered, with a wry chuckle.

“Failed twice,” Lillian reminded him, with a shy smile. “And, hopefully many more times again. Come, do not wallow in past unhappiness, when we have so much to look forward to. I should not have pressed you so, on why you wish the title to pass to Bertie. Though, your reasoning is flawed and I cannot accept you are too damned to sire children, I can accept you will not have them. Selfishly, I am rather glad of it.”

Her words brought another troubled look to his face. Rather than risk opening her mouth - for each time she did, she seemed to put her foot in it - she opted to snuggle up against him.

He responded by gathering her in his arms and pulling her against his chest. She could hear his heart within, beating slowly and steadily.

It did not sound broken, to her ear.

They stayed entwined for another hour, speaking little, but exploring each others' bodies with gentle strokes and touches. His body was a marvel to her; all sinewy muscle and long limbs. Her fingers traced the outline of his abdomen, searching in vain for an inch of fat which she might pinch.

“Your assessment of my stomach is as thorough as Gentleman Jackson’s,” he noted, referencing the famed pugilist who instructed wealthy men on the art of fisticuffs. “Though, I’ll admit, it’s far more pleasurable.”

“Do you spar often?” Lillian queried, realising suddenly she knew very little of what he did when he was not with her.



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“Not as often as I should,” he admitted, grabbing her hand and lifting it to his mouth, to place a kiss upon it. “I am usually accused of running to fat, whenever I venture in.”

“I wonder what he would say, if he saw my stomach,” Lillian laughed, poking at it with her finger. Though she was slender, her stomach was soft, especially when compared with his.

“He shall never have the opportunity to see you in such a state of undress,” the duke replied, his tone less amused. “Besides, you are perfect. A vision of feminine beauty.”

Lillian rolled her eyes at his ridiculous possessiveness; it was highly unlikely she would ever waltz into Gentleman Jackson’s club and request he assess her physique. There was no need for him to take such umbrage with what had been a joke.

She did not get a chance to voice her chagrin, for the bells of St George’s rang out the hour, causing Thorncastle to start.

“I forgot the time,” he said, offering her an apologetic glance. “I am required in the House of Lords; there is a vote on a member’s bill.”

He pulled her into his arms one last time, for a slow lingering kiss, before letting her go with a sigh.

“I would stay here all day if I could,” he said, as he threw back the covers. “Once the season has ended, we shall retire to the countryside, where I will have fewer duties to attend to.”

Lillian watched him as he padded across the room, to where his clothes were strewn. He was unabashed by his nakedness - though, given his fine physique, one could understand why. He was built like a Greek statue; broad shoulders, narrow hips, muscular thighs and calves. Though, unlike a Greek statue, Thorncastle's skin was gold and peppered with whorls of dark curls.

"Are you enjoying the show?" the duke queried, as he caught her spying on him as he dressed.

Lillian grinned, unashamed. "Very much," she answered, tartly. "I am hoping you will stage a repeat performance."

"I'm dedicated to my craft, Miss Smith," he said, with feigned formality. "I shall endeavour to perform for you nightly."

"With an afternoon showing on a Saturday," she finished, earning herself an amused chuckle.

"I believe you shall have me worked to the bone, my dear," he said, loosely tying his cravat, as he returned to her.

His disheveled appearance afforded him a rakish air; dark stubble shadowed his jaw, his thick locks fell over one eye, and his unbuttoned collar offered a faint glimpse of chest hair.

"Careful," Lillian cautioned, as he leaned over her. "Or I shall undo all your good work and demand you undress again."

Thorncastle closed his eyes, as he inhaled a sharp breath. When he opened them, he looked no more in control than before.

“I will acquiesce to any demands you make of me,” he whispered, sounding almost mournful.

“Then I shall not make unreasonable ones,” Lillian answered lightly, to break the mood. “You have your duties to Parliament, far be it for me to stand in the way of governance. Go, vote on your bill - just promise you’ll return to me later.”

“I will always return to you,” he said, dropping a kiss upon her lips.

Though he sounded sincere, Lillian was not foolish enough to take him at his word. The permanence of his affection was no certain thing, she would be silly to fall for platitudes.

“Go,” she said, waving her hands to urge him away. “You cannot waltz into Westminster with half your buttons undone. While I appreciate your half-dressed state, I do not think your peers will.”

“One or two might,” Sebastian jested, though he heeded her advice and returned to finish dressing.

When he was done - and following several deep kisses - he took his leave, leaving Lillian alone.

She remained in bed for a while, allowing her mind to wander over the previous night - to assess it piece by piece. So much had happened, so much had been said, yet in the end, it had only taken her a moment to decide to give herself to Thorncastle.

Another life changing decision, made on a whim.

A knock upon the door stirred her from her reverie.

“Come in,” she called, and Polly pushed the door open.

“Shall I send Maude up with water for a bath?” she questioned, her face betraying no sign she knew just what Lillian had been up to all night.

“Please,” Lillian nodded; a bath sounded divine.

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What was left of the morning was spent on washing and dressing. When Lillian reemerged from the dressing room, into the bedroom, she found the linens on the bed had been changed. She blushed, for that meant both Polly and Maude had learned her virginity was no more.

They know well you are the duke's mistress, a voice in her head chided, as she began to fret. It wasn't as though they had believed her a nun.

By the time she arrived downstairs, it was time for lunch. Maude set out a plate of bread and cold meats on the table, alongside a pot of tea, and a copy of the morning's paper.

Lillian fell on the food with glee; lovemaking was rather draining on one's appetite. When she'd had her fill, she poured herself a cup of tea, and idly perused the papers.

The high of the night before was beginning to wear off. The whole day stretched before her, with little to do except wait for Thorncastle's return.

A gossip column caught her eye, one which detailed the whispered scandals of the town. She read of a mysterious baron, who had lost a fortune at the tables to a duke, and the return of a prodigal son, set to inherit a title from his brother. The tales meant little to her, but the last paragraph caused her to draw a sharp intake of breath.

The D of T, once a regular feature of this column, was seen yesterday evening at Vauxhall, in the company of a mysterious young lady. Just who she is, is anyone's guess, but we expect we will soon learn more about her, for the D looked most enamoured by her.

Lillian's hands grew clammy, as she nervously reread the paragraph. Sebastian had warned her that being his mistress would attract attention, but she had not thought said attention would be from the papers.

Her mind flew to Lord Bailey, who loomed like a spectre over her. Had he recognised her? Surely, if he had, he would have shouted out? She was, after all, a murderess.

Too worried to read any further, Lillian pushed back her seat and made for the window. She peered out onto the road, wondering if she would catch one of the baron's spies lurking outside.

It was a fanciful idea, borne out of fear, but still she looked.

It was a perfect spring day; the sun shone down, casting a bright glow over the neat houses and cherry blossom lined footpaths. There was not a soul in sight - no ominous presence to scare her.

"It's a beautiful day."

Polly's voice startled Lillian, who jumped a little. She had not heard the lady's maid enter.

"Lovely," she agreed, stepping back from the window.

If Polly had noticed her strange behaviour, she gave no sign. She bustled around the room, humming lightly as she collected the empty plates.

"Perhaps we shall take a walk later?" she suggested, glancing at Lillian kindly. "It would be a shame to waste such lovely weather - it might be bucketing down tomorrow."

A hysterical giggle bubbled in Lillian's throat; she searched for spies, while Polly wished to discuss the vagaries of the English weather. She could not venture out, not now, when Lord Bailey might be on her trail.

"Not today, Polly," she answered, carefully. "I think I would prefer to rest for the afternoon."

"As you wish." Polly was unperturbed. "I'll be in the kitchen; if you need anything, just ring."

She swept from the room, still humming her country tune. As the door clicked shut behind her, Lillian sagged with despair.

She had thought herself safe with Thorncastle, but now it felt like she had merely locked herself in a cage. A gilded one, but a cage nonetheless.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

SEBASTIAN HAD NOT set foot in White's in weeks. The lure of a club full of drunken gentlemen betting and carousing, paled significantly in comparison to the lure of spending time with Mary.

He had dedicated his every spare moment to her, a fact which had not gone unnoticed by some.

"I thought you dead," Barty called in greeting as Sebastian arrived at the drawing room of White's.

Barty was seated at the club's Bow Window, the spot reserved for its most illustrious members. As Barty was not included amongst those ranks, Sebastian could only presume he had invoked his name when securing it.

“Actually,” Barty continued, as he waved down a passing footman, “everyone’s been wondering where you are. I’ve been battling questions about your whereabouts for weeks; there’s rumours you’re suffering from a terrible ailment, though I can think of only one thing that could keep you so occupied...”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow, waiting for Barty to illuminate on his theory.

“A filly,” his cousin said, triumphantly. “You’ve obviously fallen hard for this one, old boy.”



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“Can we refrain from referring to the female sex in terms of livestock,” Sebastian answered, annoyed to hear Mary referenced in such a manner.

Barty’s mouth formed an “o” of surprise, though he soon recovered - very little could render Barty speechless for long, unfortunately.

“You’ve fallen hard and hit your head,” Barty commented, with evident satisfaction. “You’ll have to furnish me with the details, cousin. I should like to know all there is to know about the woman who finally stole your heart.”

“I have none to steal,” Sebastian replied glibly, though, inwardly, he began to wonder.

A woman had never consumed him, in the way that Mary had. His every moment when he was not with her, was spent thinking of her. When he was in her company, he spent every second worshiping her body and savouring her company.

She was gentle, good humoured, yet sharp and quick witted. She was also free with her affection; warm hugs, soft caresses, tender kisses. She enveloped him like a strong embrace, a feeling which Sebastian did not feel at all worthy of.

All in all, if Sebastian had not known any better, even he might think he was falling in love with Miss Mary Smith.

Though how could one love a woman whose name was still a mystery?

“In the matter of your missing heart, I think you doth protest too much,” Barty noted,

with a wicked smile, before swiftly changing the subject. “There’s one person who is most agitated to meet with you. He hounds me daily, asking where you are.”

“And who is that?” Sebastian queried, genuinely curious.

“Lord Bailey,” he answered, with a shrug. “Though he won’t say what he wishes to discuss with you, just that he’s an ardent admirer.”

Sebastian recalled the small, weedy Lord Bailey. He had met him once, on The Lover’s Walk in Vauxhall. Perhaps Lord Bailey’s persistence in meeting him was because Sebastian had given him the cut. Being thought of poorly by a duke would plague some men, especially those seeking to climb the social ladder.

“You may tell him our paths will cross when fate divines it,” Sebastian shrugged, “I am not about to arrange a meeting with the chap.”

“Nor am I, for I am not your social secretary,” Barty reminded him, with a pointed sniff.

Sebastian grinned; there were few people who would pull him up, when he was acting high on the instep, but Barty was one of them.

“Forgive me,” he apologised. “I did not mean to insinuate you were. Pray tell, how can I make amends?”

“Rumour has it, there’s a bottle of Royal Accord in the cellars,” Barty swiftly answered. “My wound might heal quicker, if we add it to your bill.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes, but duly summoned the footman. He returned with a bottle of the Rémy Martin and two fresh, crystal tumblers.

He had not intended to stay much longer, but he could not resist sampling such a fine Armagnac.

As the two men set to work on the bottle of brandy, Barty shared the latest gossip. Falconbridge's engagement to Lord Mosley's daughter was not going to plan, for she was not at all taken with the idea of having her hand won at a card table. Lord Lewisham, or Graystone as he was now titled, had returned, but no one had seen much of him.

"Young Lewisham is putting it about that Graystone's nerves are shot after all the combat he faced," Barty said, with great delicacy. "Which of course has led to rumours that he's fit for Bedlam."

Sebastian frowned; young Lord Lewisham was Graystone's half-brother, born from their father's second marriage. After Graystone, Lord Lewisham was next to inherit the title.

"Do you think it's a ruse?" Sebastian wondered aloud, "Is Lewisham after the title himself?"

Barty shifted uncomfortably in his seat. His good nature meant he did not relish being the bearer of bad news.

"By all accounts," he replied, running an awkward hand through his blond locks. "There are some returned soldiers who are suffering from a malady, which causes twitching of the body and confusion of the mind."

Sebastian's stomach lurched; he could not bear to picture the Lewisham he had known for years suffering from such an affliction.

"They're calling it wind contusions," Barty finished, with distaste for soldiers

accused of cowardice were often called “windy”.

“I shall call on him,” Sebastian decided. “See what assistance I might offer. There must be a physician in London, who has experience in dealing with such matters.”

The bottle of brandy did not seem so appealing now, and Sebastian decided it was time to make his excuses.

“I’m certain you’ll find another willing to help you polish it off,” he chortled, as Barty protested.

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“I’ll need another duke, if I am to remain in this coveted spot,” Barty answered, his cheer likely attributed to the half-bottle they had put-away. “Until next time, Sebastian. Try not to leave it so long, eh? I know you’re not one for sentiment, but when you’re not here, you are missed.”

“You’d best slow your pace, old boy,” Sebastian replied, gruffly. “Or you risk becoming mawkish.”

He slapped Barty heartily on the shoulder, to express his own affection, and quickly took his leave. Barty was prone to excessive bouts of misty-eyed sentimentality when in his cups, and when he reached that stage, he was also liable to burst into song - Sebastian had the patience for neither.

He swept from the drawing room, surprisingly steady on his feet, despite the alcohol he had consumed. Outside in the hallway, his composure came undone, as he walked straight into another man seeking to enter the drawing room.

“Excuse me,” Sebastian said, politely.

“No harm done, no harm done, Your Grace,” a whiny voice answered from a foot beneath him.

Sebastian looked down and found it was Lord Bailey whom he had collided with. He stifled the epithet which tickled his tongue - after all, he had said he would speak with the baron when fate deigned to divine it.

“I hear you have been seeking me out, high and low,” Sebastian drawled, moving

aside so they no longer blocked the door.

Lord Bailey nodded, nervously licking his thin lips. He could not be more than thirty years, Sebastian deduced, but he looked far older. What hair he had was heavily oiled with pomade, and a few longer strands had been swept across his scalp, in an effort to disguise his bald pate. His thin face was long and drawn, and gave way to a decidedly weak chin. The only redeeming feature was his eyes. A vivid green, putting Sebastian somewhat to mind of Mary - though he quickly pushed that thought aside.

“I have, Your Grace,” the baron answered, rubbing at the back of his neck as though it ached. “I wished to make an inquiry.”

“Yes?” Sebastian prompted, impatiently.

“It’s rather delicate...”

“Then, perhaps you might wish to think on whether it is wise to voice whatever it is running through your mind,” Sebastian’s patience was at breaking point. “After all, we do not share an acquaintance, Lord Bailey. Delicate inquiries are usually made of friends.”

Perhaps sensing Sebastian was on the verge of leaving, Lord Bailey began to stutter.

“The woman I saw you with at Vauxhall,” he said, his words so rushed they were almost joined together, “What is her name?”

Sebastian, who had expected to be petitioned financially or politically, was momentarily lost for words.

“Have you known her for long?” Lord Bailey continued, fatally misreading Sebastian’s silence as permission to continue. “Where did you meet? Perchance, is

she working in a doxy-house of some sort. If so, I would ask you to furnish me with the details and-

Lord Bailey was unable to finish his sentence, for Sebastian's fist had made contact with his jaw. The baron staggered backwards, clutching his face, his eyes wide and fearful.

"You are lucky I do not carry a weapon," Sebastian panted, his blood roaring in his ears. "For you would not be alive right now, if I did."

"I meant no disrespect, Your Grace," Lord Bailey sniveled. "I did not realise the woman was a respectable."

The foolish baron was fishing for another box, with a comment like that. Luckily for him, the door to the drawing room opened, and a startled footman looked out.

A man caught in a bout of fisticuffs might find his membership revoked. A duke, on the other hand, might have such a transgression overlooked, provided he did not step too far over the line.

"Good evening, Lord Bailey," Sebastian said coolly. "I hope I have been of some assistance to you. If I might offer another suggestion - purchase yourself a book on manners and etiquette, yours are sorely lacking."

Sebastian offered the footman a stiff nod and swept from the club, out to St James' Street. His carriage was parked within view, on the other side of the road, and rather than wait for the formality of having it called, Sebastian made his own way to it.

"Berkeley Square," he called to Higgins, who was huddled together with the driver, on the driver's bench.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the lad answered, throwing off the coaching rug which covered his knees. “Let me get the door for you.”

“I’ll get it myself, just make haste,” Sebastian answered, struggling to control his rage.

It would not do to take his anger out on his staff, for it would be sorely unfair; it was Lord Bailey who deserved his ire. The gall of the man, to imply Mary was a lightskirt, with whom he could also take a tumble, for the right price.

As the carriage made its way through London’s dark streets, Sebastian seethed in rage. His anger was complicated by a sense of guilt; before her chance meeting with him, no one would ever have assumed Mary to be anything less than a decorous young lady, of upstanding morals. His company had corrupted her in the eyes of the world; thank goodness they had not ventured out in public together since, so more people could not condemn her.

Alongside his guilt, something else had irritated him too.



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Lord Bailey had asked for Mary's name, which was something Sebastian could not provide. Despite their closeness and the intensity of their lovemaking, Mary had not revealed anything of herself to him. No hint of her past, or of her family; she shared everything with him, except her true self.

Sebastian had felt to press her on such matters would be a step too far. Greedy almost, to ask even more of her. Yet now, a burning desire to know just who she was, consumed him.

He knew she was not a lightskirt, after all, it was he who had claimed her maidenhead, but who was she? What had made her flee Kent, to fend for herself, alone, in London?

The carriage drew to a halt and Higgins swiftly opened the door.

"Thank you," Sebastian said, as he disembarked. He slipped the lad a coin as he passed him, an apology for his earlier snipping, and made for the house.

Inside, he found Mary in the library, dressed in a simple evening gown, a book in hand.

"Sebastian," she said, looking up from her book with a smile. "I was about to give up on you and retire for the night."

"Forgive my tardiness," he answered, as she put her book aside and moved towards him for a kiss. "I was waylaid..."

“By a bottle of brandy?” she guessed, as she neared him, perhaps smelling the alcohol on his clothes.

“Just a few glasses,” he assured her. “Though, it was a vintage bottle, which might explain the lingering aroma.”

“My father adored a good cognac.” She grinned. “I should take offence that you are late, but I am well aware that very little can compete with a well-aged bottle.”

“You are far more appealing than brandy,” Sebastian assured her, drawing her into his arms. “It was Barty who delayed me; he had to be reassured I was not dead, given my absence from society of late.”

Her brow creased into a slight frown, as it always did when he mentioned his life outside their lovers’ nest. He was not dense; she regretted there was a part of his life which she would never share. She would never know his family or his friends - of which Barty made up the bulk of both groups - and it saddened her.

It saddened him, too.

For all he wished to hide Mary away from society’s censure, he also longed for people to see her on his arm. For others to witness the way she looked at him, with warmth and affection. Her regard for him was a testament to the fact he was not truly a devil, that he was capable of being...loved.

Sebastian frowned in confusion. The brandy had addled his mind.

“Tell me about your father,” he said, not wishing to miss the opportunity she had presented. “You never speak of him.”

At his words, she stiffened in his arms.

“It still pains me to speak of him,” she answered, pulling away from his embrace. “He was a kind man; he had an ear for everyone, without regard for their status. If any of the tenants on the estate had troubles, they knew they could petition him to speak on their behalf.”

“The estate?” Sebastian prompted, holding his breath as he waited for her to answer.

Mary started, perhaps realising she had revealed more than she was comfortable with.

“I believe, Your Grace,” she said tartly, “that you are fishing for the name of the village I grew up in. I thought we had agreed some things were to remain secret?”

“Yes, in case you wish to run away from me,” Sebastian recalled, irritably. The thought of her disappearing filled him with dread; for one wild moment, he considered carrying her away to one of his country estates, where he might keep her forever.

“If I run away it will not be back to my village, Your Grace.” She gave a rueful laugh. “I would make for Bristol, where I would take a ship to the Americas.”

“I would find you even there,” Sebastian whispered, crossing the space between them. A primal hunger stirred in his belly; the talk of Mary escaping had awoken the beast inside him yearning to possess her.

He reached out with one hand and pulled her towards them, silencing her gasp of shock with his lips. He claimed her mouth with a hunger so passionate, it might have been the first time he kissed her, rather than the hundredth.

A frenetic madness urged him on; his need made desperate by the thought that she might leave him.

He pushed her against the mahogany desk, lifting her up by the buttocks so she sat facing him. His face fell to her breasts, concealed by the soft, white muslin of her bodice. He growled with displeasure at being denied the taste of her nipples on his lips. With impatient hands, he tore the material, so that her breasts were revealed to him.

“Sebastian,” Mary gasped, in shock.

He simply offered her a wicked grin and fell atop her bounteous bosom. Her nipples were hard and tight, the pink of her areolas vivid against the whiteness of her skin.

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Sebastian captured one nipple in his mouth, whilst pinching gently upon the other with his free hand. Mary gasped again, as he suckled, this time with pleasure. Her hips bucked, her longing mirroring his own.

As his erection pressed painfully against his breeches, Sebastian continued to lavish attention on her breasts. He wanted her slick and wet when he entered her.

At last, his need could no longer be ignored, and he lifted his head to face her. He held her gaze as he unbuttoned his breeches, to allow his erection spring forth.

“If you run away, I will find you,” he whispered, as he lifted her skirts around her waist. “Do you understand me?”

She nodded, breathless with passion. He spread her legs and pulled her so her bottom sat at the edge of the table, her female core wide open. Her lips were full, plump with passion, and gleaming with her slick need for him.

With a growl, Sebastian caught her lips in a searing kiss and thrust his way inside her.

Peace enveloped him, as his cock was wrapped in her hot, wet warmth. It lasted but a moment, for he was taken over by the need to go deeper, ever deeper.

He placed one hand on the table to balance himself, the other clutched at her bottom, pulling her to meet his every thrust.

His eyes held hers as he moved within her; he did not break his gaze, even when his strokes became more frantic. He held her gaze as she broke, the muscles of her

womanhood rippling in waves of pleasure around his swollen cock.

As her pupils dilated, rendering her green eyes dark with pleasure, Sebastian reached his own climax. Rather than withdraw and spill his seed outside of her, the mad beast in his mind urged him deeper. Possess her, all of her, the voice urged. Fill her with your seed, so she belongs to you always...

Sebastian gave one last thrust, clutching her tightly against him, and groaned as he felt his liquid spill inside her.

For a moment, he lay slumped atop of her, taken aback by the ferocity of what he had felt. It was only when Mary's hands began to caress his hair, he felt himself return to earth.

"You did not..." she ventured, as Sebastian stood up.

He held out his hand to help her to a stand and fetched her his coat, to cover her ripped bodice. He then buttoned up his breeches and straightened his shirt, striving for some sort of respectability.

"It is no matter," he whispered, finally answering her. "You will be fine; it is unlikely that one tumble will leave you with child."

He said this, merely to reassure her, for he was well aware she might soon be quickening with his seed. The thought did not fill him with fear but, rather, a sense of masculine pride.

He tucked his coat around her and led her from the library, up to the bedchamber. Once there, he undressed her with tender care. Kissing each part of her skin as it was revealed to him. In the dressing room, he found a basin of water - warm, thanks to the diligent chambermaid - and a sponge.

He called Mary in and tenderly washed between her legs, removing all traces of him from her skin.

Once she was dry, he fetched her night-rail and helped her into it. Then he picked her up and carried her over to the bed.

He tucked her in under the thick sheets, before undressing himself and slipping in beside her. He threw his arm over her body, cradling it protectively. Now that the ferocious desire which he had claimed her with was spent, his primal urge was to protect her. To cherish her and keep her safe.

“Are you certain it will be fine?” Mary whispered, her head resting against the pillow. “You said that you do not wish to sire any children.”

“It will all work out,” Sebastian whispered, as he nuzzled against her back.

It would not be a problem, if she became pregnant, he thought, as he drifted towards sleep. In fact, it would be a joy.

They would have to marry, of course, for Sebastian wanted their imagined child to be legitimate. He wanted what he had with Mary to be recognised as legitimate too. For he was beginning to understand that what he felt for her was not affection, but love.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LILLIAN AWOKE LATE the next morning, to find the spot where Sebastian should be empty. A note lay on the pillow, explaining he was needed in Parliament.

She sighed, unsure of how to feel. Though she was put-out that there would be no morning caresses, she was glad for the time alone to assess just where it was she stood with him.

For the past few weeks, she had fooled herself into believing that her past was behind her for good, now she was not so certain.

Sebastian was becoming somewhat suspicious of her, though she could not blame him for that. After all, she had concealed from him that the woman he shared his bed with, had killed a man dead.

Worse than his suspicion was her own lack of guardedness around him. Her comment on her father had slipped thoughtlessly from her lips, such was her comfort in his company. The happiness which she had felt these past few weeks, now seemed more fragile than ever. It might shatter at any moment, though she had been foolish to imagine that it would not.



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A known rake and a secret murderess were not guaranteed a happy ending, no matter how much she willed it.

As she stretched in the bed, a knock came upon the door, and Polly poked her head in.

“Shall I send Maude up with a tray?” she queried.

“Please,” Lillian nodded, no longer ashamed of the luxury of being served tea in bed.

Maude arrived a few minutes later, bearing a tray laden with tea and bread, and a copy of the morning’s paper.

Lillian poured herself a steaming cup of tea and settled in to read the news-sheet. It was a habit she had developed over the last while, scouring each column to see if there was a mention of Lord Bailey, or her, or the murder of Mr. Hope in Linton.

She never found a mention of it, which left her puzzled. The papers usually thrived on lurid tales of murder, even more-so when the culprit was still on the loose. It was possible Lord Bailey had managed to keep the scandal confined to Kent, but still she wondered...

Lillian paused at the gossip column, where she had last read her name, and scanned it for any mention of either herself or Thorncastle. After reading about several predicted engagements, and a thinly veiled reference to a countess who was conducting an affair with a marquess, she sighted a reference to Thorncastle.

The lesser spotted D of T was sighted for the first time in weeks last night, supping brandy in his club. Given he later engaged in a bout of fisticuffs with another club member, this columnist is left to wonder if it is better if he simply remains unseen.

Lillian frowned; had Sebastian been involved in a fight at White's? He had not said anything, nor had he shown any signs of a scuffle, but surging male emotion might explain the ferocity with which he had made love to her last night.

She flushed, as she recalled his uncontrollable passion. She had not expected him to take her upon the desk, but she had thoroughly enjoyed it. The only worry was he had lost control so much he had spent himself inside her.

She wriggled her legs together, aroused by the idea the duke was so drawn to her his usual control was lost. It was a foolish femininity to feel so satisfied by having him spill his seed inside her, yet she was.

It's dangerous, a voice in her head cautioned. Her lovemaking with Thorncastle was so deeply passionate, she sometimes forgot it was only she who was making love. Thorncastle did not want children; she could not wish a child into a union where it was unwanted. She, who had grown up in a home where she had been doted on by both parents, could not wish for a child whose father resented him. Nor should she allow herself to fall in love with a man incapable of loving her back - though she feared it was too late for that.

Maude arrived, to take the tray away, pulling Lillian from her confused thoughts.

"Water for a bath ma'am?" Maude queried, cheerfully, as she lifted the heavy tray with ease.

"Please," Lillian nodded, "and send Polly up after, to help me dress."

It took a half hour for Maude to fill the tub, which Lillian then soaked in for another hour. She remained, soaping her skin until the water was stone cold, glad for the distraction of it.

Her days were measured in time which either went too fast or too slow. When Thorncastle left in the morning, she had hours to fill until his return. Hours in which she dared not leave the house, in case Lord Bailey might spot her. She kept herself occupied with her morning toilet, then another hour might be whiled away eating lunch. The afternoons and early evenings were the longest - though, if she had a good book, it was not so bad.

The duke would arrive mid-evening, bearing little trinkets and tales of his day. They would eat together, sip on wine, or he would have her play for him on the pianoforte in the library. Inevitably, they would retire early to bed and spend the remainder of their time together in a state of bliss. Limbs entwined, skin touching, the seconds melted away to nothingness.

Sometimes it felt like she was living half a life, though she did not wish to complain. If it wasn't for Thorncastle, she might be locked up in Newgate, or swinging from Tyburn's Tree...

"Knock knock," Polly called, as she bustled into the room.

She held a stack of freshly laundered bath sheets in her hands, which she set down upon the dresser. She then picked one from the pile and stretched it out wide, so as to screen Lillian when she stepped from the bath.

"Thank you," Lillian said, as she wrapped the towel around her. "I fear you are spoiling me, Polly. I shall forget how to brush my hair, soon enough; then where shall I be, if Thorncastle decides he is tired of me?"

“I don’t think His Grace will tire of you anytime soon,” Polly answered, knowingly.

Lillian blushed, as she wondered if Polly had heard their lovemaking in the library? They had not attempted to stay quiet, nor had Lillian tried to hide her gown, which had been ripped in the midst of their passion.

“Still, I must not forget myself,” Lillian said, mostly to remind herself. “The future can change in the blink of an eye.”

Polly remained silent, as she folded away the linens. Lillian’s words had obviously had some impact on her, however, for a few moments later she gave a great sigh.

“I have been meaning to ask you, Mary,” she said, as Lillian turned to her in question. “If you have any need for napkins, or a belt? You’ve so many pretty dresses, it would be a shame to go without a guard and see them stained.”

It took Lillian a few seconds to understand the meaning of Polly’s question. She had never discussed her courses openly with anyone, barring an aunt, who had taken on the task of informing her about such matters. The conversation had been quick and cold, leaving Lillian to discover the finer details alone.

“Yes, I expect I shall need some, Polly,” she said, keeping her voice steady so the older woman would not guess how flustered she was.

“When do you expect you will need them?”

It was impossible to mistake the urgency in Polly’s voice. Lillian blinked, as she tried to recall when she had last bled. She had been at Mrs Harrod’s, for trying to find the privacy to wash, had been an ordeal in itself. Which would mean...

“I was expecting them at least a fortnight ago,” Lillian realised. “If not longer.”

She looked to Polly for reassurance, unsure as to what it all meant. Polly returned her gaze, with kind eyes and a soft smile.

“I expected as much,” she whispered. “Not only did you not ask for napkins, but in a month, your dresses have become strained around the bodice. You’re with child, my dear; we’ll have to wait a bit longer to be certain, but all the signs are there.”

With child?

For a moment, Lillian felt as though she might faint. Luckily, Polly was beside her in an instant, supporting her weight as she walked her to the chair.

“Easy now,” Polly whispered, as she wrapped another towel around Lillian’s shoulders. “It will be all right.”

“How?” Lillian whispered, as she struggled for breath. “Thorncastle does not wish for children, not with me - or anyone.”

To her surprise, Polly gave a snort of laughter. “He wasn’t trying very hard to remain

childless, if that is the case.”

Lillian blinked, for Polly’s words were true. Even last night, he had been almost casual about having not withdrawn. It was probably easier for a man to dismiss such things, when it was not he who would bear the brunt of his mistakes.

“What shall I do?” Lillian whispered, as the blood began to return to her head.

“Wait a while longer, until you are certain,” Polly said, swiftly and firmly. “Then inform His Grace. He will care for you and the babe; come what may, you will both be provided for financially.”

Come what may...

Lillian moaned a little, as she wondered what that might mean. Would Thorncastle be horrified to learn she was carrying his child? Would he banish her to some house in the country, never to be heard from again, apart from the requisite annuity?

It was not fair, she decided, suddenly incensed. It was he who had declared the risk of pregnancy was negligible when one was a virgin. She had not known; it was he who’d possessed the knowledge on preventing pregnancy, yet had failed to put it into practice. If he blamed her in any way, then he truly was the devil he was rumoured to be.

“There, there,” Polly consoled, as she rubbed her back. “It will all be alright, but what won’t be alright is your hair, if we let it dry like that. Come, I will brush it out and then we can get you dressed.”

Polly’s approach was the right one, for the instant she began to move, Lillian felt much better. Once her hair was brushed and dressed, and she was clothed in a walking gown, she felt almost back to herself again.

It wouldn't do good to worry too much, when the matter was not even confirmed.

"A walk?" Polly suggested, as she finished buttoning Lillian's gown. "The fresh air will blow the cobwebs off you and make you feel revived."

Lillian nodded, tempted for the first time to leave the house. The idea of spending the rest of the day in a state of waiting, watching the clock until Thorncastle arrived, was unbearable. Even worse, she could not imagine spending a whole evening with him, attempting to pretend that everything was as usual.

"I'll fetch your cape," Polly said, breathing a sigh of relief. "It's high-time you explored London a little; it's not good for a soul to spend all day cooped up."

"Perhaps we'll visit Green Park, Polly?" Lillian called, suggesting the quietest of London's parks. Its wide open fields were almost pastoral, which rendered it dull in the eyes of the ton.

"I'd accompany you all the way to Greenwich, if that's what you wished," Polly answered, her eyes dancing. "Though, I do hope you won't suggest it. Let me call Michael to prepare the gig and we'll be away as soon as it's ready."

Lillian smiled in thanks; it would be good to taste freedom once more.

The Green Park was located away from the hustle and bustle of town, close to the Queen's residence in Buckingham House. To Polly, who was a true Londoner, it was almost rural. To Lillian, it was a slice of heaven.

"There's no statues or fountains," Polly grumbled, as they paced the sedate, oak-lined paths. "There's not even any flowers."

"Rumor has it King Charles picked flowers for his mistress here, two hundred odd

years ago,” Lillian explained, sharing a tale her mother had once told her. “When Queen Catherine discovered what he was up to, she ordered all the flowers be pulled from their beds, never to be replaced.”

“Good for her,” Polly answered, her distaste for the park mollified by the tale. Polly’s declaration that she would follow Lillian anywhere had been near rescinded when Michael had warned them that highwaymen had once lurked the paths. He had offered to accompany them on their jaunt, but Polly had refused, sensing Lillian’s need for female companionship.

They had walked a half hour and were now midway along the The Broad Walk. The path was cast in darkness thanks to the canopy of branches above their heads, and Lillian realised Polly was becoming nervous.



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“Shall we turn back?” she suggested. “We can walk toward Constitution Hill and see how the works on the Queen’s Residence are progressing.”

Buckingham House was the London Residence of Queen Charlotte. It was rumoured the Prince Regent intended it to replace St James’ Palace as the site for official ceremonies, and he spent lavish amounts of the Crown’s coffers having it renovated. The work was an object of both curiosity and annoyance for Londoners, and its funding was frequently debated in Parliament.

The two ladies turned around, intent on retracing their steps back to the main walkway. Twigs crunched beneath Lillian’s kidskin boots, sounding out her every step.

Polly was right to feel nervous, she thought, as she drew her cape around her. As the day was dark and overcast, walking beneath the ceiling of branches felt almost like they were walking at dusk. Though it had been many decades since highway men had stalked Green Park, she still cast a nervous eye out for them.

“Nearly there,” she said, with forced cheer.

They had neared the end of the walkway, when a figure emerged from the main path. Beside her, Polly started, but Lillian remained calm.

It was clear the person was a gentleman; even from a distance, she could see he wore a fine beaver hat and carried a cane. There were not many highwaymen who dressed with such aplomb, she guessed.

She linked her arm through Polly's, urging her on, but as they neared the stranger, her step began to falter.

The figure before her was no gentleman, but the spectre who had haunted her nightmares.

"Miss Hamilton," Lord Bailey grinned, revealing his pipe-yellowed teeth. "What a coincidence; I did not expect to see you in London."

Even Polly could tell his tone rang false, and she cast Lillian a worried look. Lord Bailey spotted the glance which passed between the lady's maid and mistress, and gave a forced chortle.

"Have no fear, miss," he said, addressing Polly now. "Miss Hamilton and I are family - though, she must be chastised for failing to keep her blood updated as to her whereabouts."

Lillian was so paralysed by fear that she was unable to speak. All Lord Bailey need do was call for a constable and she would be hauled straight to Newgate. A hand slipped into hers, soft and warm, and it squeezed it reassuringly.

"If Miss Hamilton does not wish to keep in contact, sir, that is her prerogative," Polly answered, boldly. "And, as she quite obviously has no wish to engage you in conversation, even now, then I'm afraid we must leave. Good day to you, sir."

Lord Bailey scowled at her impertinence and stepped forward, his eyes full of menace. Mercifully, they were interrupted, as a group turned onto the path; a group consisting of several tall men, who looked the sort who would step up to assist a lady, if chivalry demanded it.

Polly seized the opportunity their arrival presented, and tugged Lillian away. As she

walked past Lord Bailey, he tipped his hat and offered her a sly smile.

“Mr Hope sends his regards,” he called quietly to her.

Her heart froze, but she kept her face impassive. She merely nodded, to acknowledge she had heard him, then hurried along after Polly.

They emerged onto the main walkway, where there were more people out walking. Granted, most were governesses with young charges, but Lord Bailey would not think to assault her so publicly in front of witnesses.

He might follow you home, Lillian worried, before she realised that he had probably followed her from her home to the park. There was no other explanation for his appearance.

Polly remained silent as they walked towards the main gate, their pace brisk. It was only when they were in sight of Michael, that she stopped and turned to face Lillian.

“Are you all right m’dear?” she whispered, taking Lillian’s hand again. “Thorncastle insisted Michael keep a Flintlock in the house, so you’ll be well protected once we return home.”

“Thank you, Polly,” Lillian answered, truly grateful for her reassurance. It was useless, however, no matter how well intended. She was not frightened that Lord Bailey would try to attack her in her home but, rather, he would arrive with a dozen Bow Street Runners, and drag her off to hang.

“Who was he?” Polly whispered, casting a glance back at Michael, who was waiting on them.

Lillian frowned, wondering how much she should share with the lady’s maid. Her

first instinct was to carry on with the ruse, to continue guarding her secret, but she quickly realised it was futile.

She was caught; no matter what she said now to Polly, Thorncastle would still learn she was a murderess.

“A distant cousin,” Lillian said, before continuing in a firm tone, “I wish to leave, Polly. I should not like to run into him again.”

“Of course.” Polly put her arm around her and hustled her toward the gig.

As the gig made its way back toward the city, Polly kept up a steady stream of inane chatter; the price of flour, the thick fog which hung over the city, the vehicles which clogged the roads. Lillian was grateful for her efforts at maintaining a some sense of normality, for inside she felt as though she was falling apart - shattering into a million tiny pieces.

The fragile happiness she had found with Thorncastle was gone, and she was now in a worse position than when she had arrived, with a baby to think of.

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Not quite, a voice in her head scolded, you have far more money at your disposal than you did when you arrived in London.

The duke had lavished her with dozens of expensive pieces of jewelry, as well as copious amounts of pin-money - which she had not spent, for she went nowhere. Lillian totted up what coins she had in her purse, and realised it was enough to take her far away from the city. Far away from England, if she so desired.

As Polly talked, Lillian's mind whirled away, trying to establish just what her jewelry might fetch in a pawn shop.

When they arrived back at the house, Polly began to fuss over her, offering to fetch her a warming-pan for her bed, or to have Maude fill the bath again.

"Or, a brandy," Polly continued. "To warm you and send you to sleep."

"Really, it's not necessary," Lillian answered, trying to keep the impatience from her voice. "I will fall asleep without aid, Polly. All I ask is that I am not disturbed for the next while."

She felt a stab of guilt, as Polly reached for her hand to squeeze it reassuringly.

"If you need anything at all, just ring the bell," the lady's maid said, with motherly concern.

Lillian blinked away tears and nodded her head. Her mind was focused solely on Lord Bailey, but Polly was probably more concerned with her other news.

Upstairs, Lillian set about packing, folding dresses and other garments into her battered portmanteau. The act brought on a sense of déjà vu, and she was momentarily transported back to the night she had fled from Linton.

A great weariness came over her, as she wondered how she could possibly make another escape. Even if she managed to flee from London and Lord Bailey, then what? Would she spend a lifetime looking over her shoulder, waiting for him to appear?

Tears stung her eyes, as a longing for Thorncastle pierced her heart so sharply, she almost staggered.

The duke had the power to fix everything, to make Lord Bailey disappear. But, when he learned of Lillian's duplicity, of her transgressions, would he still wish to do so?

She could not bear the idea of having him look at her with scorn in his blue eyes. Nor would she be able to tolerate the removal of his affection, of having him lost to her, forever.

Nor could she tarry over sentimental thoughts, when her life - and the life growing within her - was in danger.

With a renewed sense of urgency, Lillian finished packing. She carefully tucked the necklaces, earrings, and rings Thorncastle had gifted her into a pouch and placed it at the bottom of the bag, alongside her coin purse.

With a sense that her heart was breaking, she took one last look around the bedchamber - the room in which she had lost her virginity, as well as her heart, to Sebastian - then left, fleeing down the servants' stairs and out the garden door, towards an unknown future.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A DEBATE INThe House of Lords was never the most pleasant activity, but that morning, Sebastian found it even more painful than usual.

His mind was unable to focus on the intricacies of the budget extension proposed for the renovations of Buckingham House, for it was filled with thoughts of Mary.

It was not just the memory of last night's fierce lovemaking which had him distracted, but also the niggling idea that her true identity had already been revealed to him somehow.

Lord Bailey popped into his mind; there was some connection there, if Sebastian could only recall it...

There was a reason why the weedy baron had been so intent on asking him about Mary, and it was not because he was hoping to take a tumble with her in a doxy-house.

As the room erupted into a loud chorus of "ayes", which far outweighed the "nays", Sebastian finally recalled Barty's tale about Lord Bailey's inheritance woes. The story had something to do with some illegitimate chit being willed most of the former baron's fortune; was it possible Mary was the lady in question?

The Speaker called the vote in favour of the "ayes" - a travesty, in Sebastian's opinion, for Prinny seemed intent on bankrupting the country - Sebastian leapt from his seat.

"Excuse me," he murmured, as he pushed his way through the throngs of Prinny's Tory sycophants, congratulating each other on a job well done.

His carriage awaited him outside, in the courtyard of Westminster, and he brusquely informed his driver to take him to Mount Street, where Barty resided, in a suite of rented rooms.

When they arrived outside his building, a distinguished brown-brick townhouse, Sebastian sent Higgins in to inform Barty he was waiting.

“Shall I take a card, Your Grace?” the young lad asked, to which Sebastian shook his head.

“I am not requesting an audience with Mr Beaufort,” he answered, carelessly waving a gloved hand, “I am demanding one - be sure he understands that.”



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Higgins dashed off, his ears pink. No doubt the lad would be mortified to repeat his edict, but Sebastian did not wish to wait while Barty fuffed around getting dressed. The young man's toilette lasted almost as long as Beau Brummel's, though with half the result.

Higgins returned a few minutes later and breathlessly informed Sebastian that Barty would receive him.

"He said to say he's not happy about it neither, Your Grace," Higgins said, flushing as he repeated Barty's words verbatim.

Sebastian chuckled and set forth in search of his cousin. He found Barty in the drawing room of his apartment, garbed in a silk banyan, with the curtains drawn against the early afternoon's light.

"I am suffering terribly," Barty called, weakly, as Sebastian entered the room. "Please don't add to it."

"Late night?" Sebastian guessed, hiding a smile.

"Early morning, in fact," Barty sighed, though he perked up as his man arrived with a tray laden with sweetbreads, tea, and two tumblers of brandy.

"Hair of the dog," Barty toasted, as he lifted the glass to his lips. He downed it all in one go and, when Sebastian declined the other one, downed that too.

"Much better," Barty declared, before turning his attention to the tea and

sweetbreads. “Now, tell me cousin, what is it that was so important you had to drag me out of bed at this godforsaken hour?”

“It’s afternoon,” Sebastian observed, though he did not press the matter - he had been a young blood once too, and had rarely ventured from bed before evening. “I wish to ask you what you know of the young lady who was willed the late Lord Bailey’s fortune,” Sebastian continued, with feigned casualness.

Barty raised a brow in response; no matter how much Sebastian tried to sound offhand, it would not erase the fact he had roused Barty from the bed to get his answer.

“I shall want to know the reason as to why you’re asking,” Barty answered, as he reached for a slice of brioche. “But, as it stands, I know quite a lot about the missing young lady; my curiosity was piqued, you see.”

“And, you’re an incorrigible gossip,” Sebastian reminded him.

“Hush, or I shan’t share what I know.” Barty now spoke through a mouthful of crumbs. “The girl’s mother was from good stock in Linton. The late Lord Bailey began courting her, even though there was a marriage arranged to another young lady, whose hand came with a sizable dowry.”

Sebastian bit back a sigh; he could already see where the tale would lead.

“Unfortunately, the late baron put the girl in the family way.” Bart rolled his eyes in distaste. “Which left him in quite a quandary. He did not wish to cast her aside, but neither could he afford to keep her.”

“So, what did he do?” Sebastian prompted, as Barty paused theatrically.

“Nothing.” Barty shrugged. “As weak men are wont to do. It was his younger brother who stepped up - by all accounts, he had held a torch for the young woman since they were children. He married the girl and gave the babe his name. The late Lord Bailey showed his thanks by bestowing on him the living at Bailey Manor.”

Sebastian blinked, as he recalled his first meeting with Mary. She had handed him a letter of character, purportedly from the vicar who had employed her. A Mr Hamilton, if he recalled correctly.

“The girl’s name?” Sebastian croaked, as it began to dawn on him he had truly solved the mystery of Mary’s background. “What is it?”

“Miss Lillian Hamilton,” Barty said, with a flourish. “The only child Lord Bailey ever managed to sire, for his rich wife turned out to be barren. With the title set to go to a second cousin, Lord Bailey decided to secure Miss Hamilton’s future by bestowing all that was not entailed to the title upon her.”

“Did she know that?” Sebastian questioned, suddenly puzzled again.

“Most likely not, for who would run out on a fortune like that?”

“Who indeed? “

Sebastian rehashed all he knew of Mary, or rather, Lillian. She was a well-bred girl, who had taken up work on the West-India Docks to fund herself, rather than remain safe at home in Kent. Why on earth would a girl from a background like hers do such a thing?

Most would not, unless they had no option.

He felt rather foolish now, as he realised that for the entirety of her stay with him,

Lillian had not been living, but hiding. She had demurred his every suggestion to go out, apart from their one trip to Vauxhall.

She was living in fear, but why was she so afraid of Lord Bailey? Surely, she must have known Sebastian would lend whatever help he could in securing her future?

“Have you taken an apoplectic fit, dear cousin?” Barty queried, with amusement. “Or has my tale stirred something within you? Perhaps you already know the whereabouts of Miss Hamilton?”

Sebastian made no reply, but Barty was not fooled.

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“Your secret is safe with me,” he promised, drawing a cross over his heart with his hand. “Though, I will insist you keep me abreast of how matters progress.”

“I shall endeavour to do so,” Sebastian agreed, as he rose to stand. “But, until I share such news, I will hold you to your promise of silence. Adieu, Barty.”

Sebastian grabbed his hat, which he had left on the seat beside him, and raced for the door. Outside, he breathlessly requested his driver take him to Berkely Square.

He had a number of questions to put to Miss Lillian Hamilton, the first one being why she had not trusted him to help.

When he arrived at the house off Berkeley Square, however, he discovered Lillian was not there.

“What do you mean she’s gone?” he demanded of Polly, who’d had the unfortunate task of sharing the bad news.

“Gone,” Polly shrugged, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. “I went up to check on her an hour ago - she was most upset after what happened in the park - only to find her room empty. She’s taken some of her things, as well - clothes and jewels. She’s gone, Your Grace.”

Polly’s voice wobbled as she finished addressing him, and she promptly dissolved into a puddle of tears. Despite his agitation, Sebastian tried to remain calm; he would get no new information from Polly if he did not keep his temper in check.

“A brandy,” Sebastian decided aloud. “You need a brandy, as do I.”

He walked Polly to the library, where he poured them both a large measure. He handed a tumbler to her first, which she took with thanks, before taking a large gulp from his own glass.

“Start from the beginning,” Sebastian said, as the colour returned to Polly’s cheeks.

“This morning, I went up to help Miss Smith dress after her bath,” Polly began, causing Sebastian to close his eyes as he willed himself not to shake her.

He had wanted her to start at the beginning of the story, not the beginning of her day. He had no time to listen to Polly rattle off the long list of tasks she had completed across the duration of the morning, he needed her to get to the crux of the matter.

“Polly,” he began, but she did not hear him.

“I asked Miss Smith if she required any napkins,” Polly blushed, but rushed on, “for I was suspicious she had not yet asked for any.”

Sebastian halted, a little confused. What on earth did napkins have to do with bathing - surely, they were only used at the dinner table?

“Well...” Polly gave a hollow laugh, as she continued, “Imagine my surprise, when she informed me that she should have needed them at least two weeks ago, but her courses had not yet arrived.”

“I-what?” Sebastian stuttered; she was speaking in riddles now. How many courses did one serve a woman whilst bathing? Eating in the bathtub did not sound like a particularly pleasant activity, especially not several courses.

“Miss Smith’s courses are two weeks late, Your Grace,” Polly said, slowly this time, so that he might better understand her meaning.

Sebastian stilled, as finally her wittering began to make sense.

“She is nearly certainly with child,” Polly added, clearly thinking him slow on the uptake.

Sebastian waved his hand, to let her know he had understood her at last. His mind was reeling; only last night, he had imagined how happy he would be to father a child with Lillian. Pride stirred in his chest, as he imagined her growing large with his son or daughter.

Polly cleared her throat, calling Sebastian back from his imagination.

“So,” he clarified, slowly, “she has absconded because she found out she was with child?”

“No,” Polly shook her head, offering him an exasperated glance. “I’m not yet finished my tale.”

Sebastian said nothing in response, he merely leaned over to refill both their glasses. Polly’s haphazard storytelling method was not doing much good for his nerves.

“Miss Smith seemed overwhelmed by the news, so I suggested a walk,” she continued, as she took a measured sip from her glass. “We went to The Green Park; not much of a park without flowers, if you ask me.”

“Did something happen there?” Sebastian interjected; he did not have the patience to listen to her musings on landscaping.

“Yes.” Polly bit her lip. “We bumped into a gentleman who knew Miss Smith. It was obvious she was frightened of him, but we were able to get away without incident. When we returned home, she said she wished to nap. I didn’t realise she was so upset - I would have checked on her sooner -”

Polly’s lips trembled, as she trailed off. She was on the verge of tears again.



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“This gentleman, did he give his name?” Sebastian pressed, urgent to find out all he could, before he lost Polly to hysteria.

“No.” Polly shook her head. “But he said he was family.”

Lord Bailey.

There was no one else it could be, but just to be certain, Sebastian pressed her to share anything else she knew.

“He called her Miss Hamilton,” Polly whispered. “He was a weedy sort; small, with a big beaver hat on to make him appear taller.”

“I know exactly who he is,” Sebastian scowled. “Thank you, Polly - you’ve been most helpful.”

Sebastian nodded at her encouragingly and left the room. In the hallway, he found Michael waiting for him.

“Is there anything I can do, Your Grace?” the former soldier queried, his posture erect as though he was addressing a higher officer. “I can send some scouts to the Seven Dials, to see if she’s been spotted.”

Sebastian winced; he hoped Lillian would have the sense not to set foot in The Rookery, the insalubrious slums which bordered Covent Garden.

“Very good.” Sebastian nodded his head. “I shall pay a call on an old friend, who

might have some contacts we might also utilise. Send word to Thorncastle House, if you have any news.”

With that, Sebastian departed, in search of the only man he could think of who might help.

Despite holding one of the highest titles in the land, the Duke of Falconbridge kept some rather low company. Not that Sebastian was judging him, for it was these friends who aided with the search for Lillian.

He had found Falconbridge in The Bird’s Nest, the famed gaming-hell in Pickering Place. The duke, who had been laying waste to some young bloods at the card table, had abandoned his spot to help Sebastian mount a search party.

“Very little fun to be had, when playing with simpletons.” Falconbridge had shrugged when Sebastian had apologised for ruining his sport.

The duke had led Sebastian from the main gaming room and up a set of rickety steps, to an office which contained Killian Shatter, the prince of London’s underworld.

“Thorncastle has lost his filly,” Falconbridge stated, idly. “He needs help finding her.”

Shatter looked up from the paper and assessed Sebastian from top to toe, unimpressed.

“Does the lady wish to be found?” he grunted. “I’m not in the business of returning unwilling girls to cads.”

Sebastian bristled with indignation; in his life, no one had ever dared speak to him in such a manner.

Beside him, Falconbridge grinned, amused by Shatter's antics.

"The girl is willing," he vouched. "She is fleeing a family member, rather than our friend. He is her protector."

"Must not be a great one, if she thought herself better alone." Shatter gave a gravelly chuckle.

Sebastian moved forward, filled with an urge to rain punches down upon the man's head, but Falconbridge placed a warning hand on his shoulder.

"Can you help?" the other man queried, shortly. "If you can't, I will seek help elsewhere."

Shatter sighed, pushed the ledgers on his table to one side, and nodded.

"I can help," he decided. "Tell me all I need to know."

Sebastian sighed, a mixture of relief and frustration, before divulging an edited version of events.

"She might be anywhere," he finished. "She might have taken a stagecoach, or been apprehended by her cousin."

"Time is of the essence, in that case," Shatter said, as he stood from the table. "Wait here, I will return when I have news."

He strode from the room, leaving Sebastian and Falconbridge with little to do but wait.

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“Brandy?” Falconbridge called, as he opened a press - he was clearly at home in the place.

“Please,” Sebastian replied. “This might take a while and I’m not certain my nerves can stand it.”

As it was, Shatter was only gone an hour, during which time Falconbridge had laid waste to half the bottle.

“I’ll add that to your tab,” the proprietor said, with a nod towards the brandy.

“In that case, I might as well finish it,” Falconbridge answered, pouring himself one final large glass.

“Is there any news?” Sebastian interjected, impatiently. He had no time for high jinks.

Shatter nodded, his strong jaw grimly set. “You’re not the only one keen to find this Miss Hamilton,” he said, in a low rumble. “Lord Bailey’s been paying lookouts for over a month. She was sighted, just a few hours ago, trying to buy a ticket for the Bristol stage. Two of Bailey’s men were alerted and they apprehended her; she was last seen being bundled into a carriage.”

Sebastian’s heart filled with rage at the idea of anyone manhandling Lillian. When he got his hands on Lord Bailey, he would knock him into next week.

“I must set out at once for Lord Bailey’s, he is certain to have her held somewhere close by,” Sebastian said, rising from his seat.

“Not so fast.” Shatter held up a meaty paw. “Lord Bailey’s carriage was then seen heading for the Kent Road, a while later. The driver was hard on the whip, so he must have been in a hurry.”

“Do you think Lillian was inside?” Sebastian wondered aloud, though he was already half-certain.

Shatter nodded, while Falconbridge gave a derisive snort. “I’d bet the house on it - and I never lose a bet.”

“Then I must make haste to Kent,” Sebastian decided, as he inwardly debated as to whether he should go on horseback or with his carriage. The former would be faster, but the latter would afford him a means in which to ferry Lillian home - home to Thorncastle House. He would not let her out of his sight once he found her, not tonight, or any night to follow.

“I shall accompany you,” Falconbridge declared, his words echoed - surprisingly - by Shatter. Sebastian did not know why the gaming-hell proprietor had taken on Lillian’s disappearance as his own personal mission, but he was grateful he had. Another tall strong man would come in useful, if matters with Lord Bailey became violent.

“I’ll task my driver with fetching Miss Hamilton’s lady’s maid, then following us to Linton Hall,” Sebastian decided. “Then we shall depart.”

His words came fast and urgent; there was no time to waste. He had to find Lillian and he would not rest until she stood safely by his side, as his legal wife.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LILLIAN WRIGGLED HER wrists, discreetly trying to loosen the rope which bound

them. A handkerchief was tied around her mouth, preventing her from crying out the obscenities she longed to hurl at her cousin.

Lord Bailey sat across from her, on the other side of the carriage, his eyes closed and his mouth open, as he slumbered.

She scowled, irritated by his indolence. As if kidnapping her wasn't enough, the dolt didn't even have the manners to stay awake while he secreted her across the country.

Though the curtains on the carriage were drawn, Lillian had a vague notion they were travelling in the direction of Linton. They had stopped to change horses several times, and when Lord Bailey had exited to stretch his legs, she had caught glimpses of familiar taverns and coaching inns.

Even the accents sounded most familiar. The last lad who had changed the horse had spoken with a familiar Kentish-burr. She had almost caught his attention, by banging her foot furiously against the compartment wall, but Bailey had quickly returned to silence her.

As the carriage rumbled along, the light grew ever weaker, suggesting they were nearing sunset. Her cousin stirred, but did not wake, as the carriage began to slow.

At last, it came to an abrupt stop, which sent an unsuspecting Bailey flying from his seat - which offered Lillian a brief moment of satisfaction, in what had otherwise been a very unsatisfactory day.

"We're here," the baron mumbled, as he righted himself. He glanced at Lillian, as though waiting for a response, before recalling she was incapable of one.

"I'll loosen them before we get out," he said, approaching her cautiously. "But you must promise me you won't make a fuss. Do you understand?"

Lillian furiously nodded her head, despite intending the opposite. As though reading her mind, Lord Bailey reached beneath the bench of the carriage and produced a Flintlock, which gleamed dully in the darkness.

“I mean it,” he said, as he licked his upper lip. “One wrong move and I’ll shoot.”

She stilled at the sight of the weapon, her heart pounding loudly in her ears. A fear like she had never felt before stole over her. She was not just frightened for her own life, but for the life she possibly carried within.

It was not fair; she had not even had time to process the idea she was carrying Thorncastle’s child, yet her cousin threatened to end her journey before it had even begun.

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“Good,” he nodded, accepting her stillness as acquiescence.

He leaned forward and untied the gag first. Once he was certain she would not scream, he gingerly undid the ropes around her wrists, then leapt back theatrically as though she might bite.

“Very good,” Lord Bailey said brightly, in the same tone that one might use with a child. “We’ll go inside now - remember, don’t make a sound, or it will be the last thing you do.”

Lillian nodded, remaining mute. The cretin did not deserve the effort it would take for her to speak. Lord Bailey exited the carriage first, then held out a hand to help Lillian down. His arm remained firmly clasped around her elbow, his fingers digging deep into her flesh.

“Run to the stables and fetch one of the grooms,” he called to the dark-clad driver, as he pulled Lillian away. “He will set you up with a bed for the night.”

Though it was dark, Lillian knew at once where they were - Linton Hall. The house loomed large against the twilight sky, a massive dark shadow. Given that few of the windows were lit up, she assumed the servants had not expected their master to return.

Lord Bailey led Lillian across the courtyard to the front door, which he banged upon furiously until it was thrown open.

The baron pulled Lillian forward, urging her inside, but she was frozen to the spot,



for she had sighted a ghost.

Mr Hope.

“I see you have returned, Miss Hamilton,” Mr Hope called, watching her with beady eyes.

“You’re,” Lillian stuttered, still unable to move, “You’re not dead.”

“No thanks to you,” he answered, dryly.

Her escape had been for nothing. Everything she had suffered through, all the time she had spent hiding, had been for naught. She was not a murderess - just a fool. Why had she bolted so quickly? She should have checked for signs of life, instead of running away in a panic.

Along with relief she had not killed a man, Lillian felt a stab of regret - she should have confided in Thorncastle. Had she told him the tale of her flight from Linton, he would have investigated the matter and relieved her of the burden of guilt months ago.

“No time for chit-chat,” Lord Bailey grumbled, interrupting their strange tête-à-tête. “Miss Hamilton needs to freshen up before the vicar arrives.”

“The vicar?” Lillian echoed, completely confused by the turn of events.

When Lord Bailey had bundled her into a carriage, she had thought he would ferry her to a magistrate. With Mr Hope alive, the possibility of her swinging from Tyburn’s Tree was now gone. So, what was it her cousin wished to do with her and why did he require a vicar? Nothing made any sense.

“Yes, I bestowed the living your father held onto an old chum from Eton,” the baron answered, his tone far too bright. “He has agreed to marry us. He’s a master with a quill and can make it look as though the banns were properly read.”

“You wish to marry me?” Lillian queried, pinching herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. His words had brought more questions rather than answers.

“Yes.” He nodded, wiping his upper lip with the back of his hand. “It’s for the best - especially now that you have been...compromised.”

He whispered the last word with great disdain, as his eyes leered at her. Lillian bristled with indignation, unwilling to let him make her feel small.

“It was not you who compromised me,” she noted, baldly.

Lord Bailey flushed, his sweaty face growing puce. “Be that as it may,” he said, pompously. “Your reputation is at stake - as is mine, as we are related. I see no reason for you to refuse; once Thorncastle casts you off - and he will, he has a reputation for it - you will be left to fend for yourself. I would not like to see you working in some doxy-house on the docks, riddled with the pox or some other venereal disease. I am offering to marry you, to make you a baroness. It is an offer you cannot refuse.”

“I think you’ll find I can,” Lillian retorted, placing her hands upon her hips.

Lord Bailey scowled and opened his coat, to reveal the Flintlock which nestled in the inner pocket. His eyes, green like her own, looked wild, and for a moment she feared he might actually shoot her.

His madness was without reason; Lillian could not think why her cousin would want her dead. Similarly, his wish to force her hand in marriage was also inexplicable.

“I do not wish to kill you,” Lord Bailey continued, as he restlessly paced the room. “Mr Hope suggested it as the best solution to remedy matters, but when you absconded, I felt some relief. I realised I could not live with your death upon my conscience, so I decided marriage was the next best thing.”

Best for whom and why? The question was on the tip of her tongue, but self preservation kept Lillian quiet. It was impossible to extract reason from a madman.

Lord Bailey halted and turned to her, his expression unhappy. “I would ask that you come around to my way of thinking, dear cousin. For, the longer you dally, the less inclined I am to follow my plan instead of Mr Hope’s. Go upstairs and freshen up, Mr Hope will escort you.”

The other man beckoned for Lillian to follow him, and she duly obliged. Outside, in the dark hallway, he turned to her with a scowl.

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“No funny business,” he whispered, as he grabbed her by the elbow. “You’ve five minutes to fix yourself.”

Lillian struggled, wishing to be free of his grip, but it only made him hold tighter. His fingers dug into the flesh of her arm, so deep she was certain there would be a bruise there tomorrow. He frog marched her up the stairs to one of the guest bedchambers.

The room was dark, lit only by a tallow candle. On a dresser stood a basin of water, cold as ice, and on the floor beneath was a chamber pot. Lillian hastily relieved herself before washing as best she could in the frigid water. She longed for a fire to warm herself, but unlike the late Lord Bailey, her cousin appeared to be budget-conscious when it came to fuel.

Once she was done, she took a steadying breath, as she tried to assess what avenues of escape were open to her. Not the window, for they were high up on the third floor. The door was also barred to her, as Mr Hope stood guard outside.

Perhaps, Lillian thought, as she looked frantically around the room, she might seek to overpower him? Not with her strength, but with a weapon.

Her eyes came to a rest on the fire poker by the fireplace. If she was to sneak up on Mr Hope from behind, then maybe...

A fierce thudding on the door brought her back to reality, and Mr Hope barged in.

“Enough dawdling,” he snarled. “The vicar has arrived. Don’t embarrass yourself in front of him; he’s indebted to his lordship and any pleas will fall on deaf ears.”

Mr Hope placed his hand once more on Lillian's arm to drag her back downstairs. What fight she'd had left her body, as she realised there was no hope of escape. She should have taken her chance with the window, she thought, her body turning to ice.

In the drawing room they were met by Lord Bailey and the vicar, a bumbling chap called Mr Figgis, who had obviously arrived in a rush, for his shirt was only half tucked into his trousers.

"What a happy occasion," the vicar commented, misreading the room entirely. He rocked to-and-fro on the heels of his boots, waiting for someone to speak. When no one answered him, he cleared his throat awkwardly. "Right. Shall we get started?"

"Please," Lord Bailey snapped, as he reached out for Lillian's hand to pull her forward.

Though unable to speak, for fear she might earn herself a bullet, Lillian was still free to use non-verbal means to convey her displeasure.

She wrenched her hand from the baron's and crossed her arms across her chest, as Mr Figgis began the sermon. He had obviously been coached to make it as short as possible, for he skipped most of the traditional readings and dove straight into the VOWS.

"Do you, Charles William Hamilton, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" Mr Figgis' voice asked, a detectable shake to his voice.

"I do," Lord Bailey agreed, with a brusque nod. "Now do hers, quickly."

If the situation were not so dire, Lillian might have laughed at how decidedly unromantic it all was.

“Yes, of course,” Mr Figgis stuttered, as he turned to Lillian apolitically. “Now, Miss Hamilton, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold unto death - good Lord, what’s that?”

Mr Figgis’ shocked addendum came as a chorus of shouts from outside went up. Lillian stilled, barely able to breathe; had Thorncastle somehow, miraculously, found her?

She turned on her heel and made a dash for the door, but her escape was thwarted by Lord Bailey, who grabbed her before she had a chance to escape.

“Hold them off,” the baron called to Mr Hope, before turning to Mr Figgis. “Finish up, quickly.”

The vicar looked as though he was about to comply, but Lillian was not so easily ordered about. She wriggled furiously, trying to escape Lord Bailey’s grasp, hope giving her new energy.

“Will you hold still?” Lord Bailey roared, his patience snapping. He reached into his coat pocket and retrieved his Flintlock, the barrel of which he pressed against Lillian’s temple.

Mr Figgis gave a gasp, his eyes bulging, as he finally realised the wedding he was performing was not a usual one.

“Continue,” Lord Bailey grunted.

“I really don’t think...” the vicar demurred, his voice a faint whisper. “That this is legal, my lord.”

“I really don’t think a man with your level of debt can afford to hold such scruples,”

came the strangled retort.

Mr Figgis visibly debated this, his fleshy face a picture of moral confusion. He gave a deep sigh, before turning to Lillian apologetically.

“Terribly sorry about all this,” he said, as affable as though he had just stood on her toe. “But needs must. Now, where were we? Do you Lillian Hamilton, take this man to be your lawfully wedded - ”

His words came to a halt, as the door to the drawing room was thrown open. Framed by the doorway, stood Thorncastle, his eyes as steely as the pistol he held in his hand.

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Relief flooded Lillian; she could not understand how she had ever doubted the duke would save her.

“Release her,” Thorncastle bellowed, as he advanced.

Lord Bailey’s grip on Lillian grew even tighter, but as he held her so close, she could hear the frantic, nervous beating of his heart in his chest. He was afraid - desperately afraid.

“If you let me go, we can pretend that none of this happened,” Lillian whispered, pleading with him to see reason. “Let this end peacefully, my lord.”

Thorncastle appeared as though he might argue, but saw sense. The best way to end matters was without the discharge of weapons.

Lord Bailey dithered, mumbling to himself about debts and wills - nonsense which Lillian did not understand. He had finally reached a conclusion, when two other figures raced into the room - two tall, strong men, clutching weapons in their hands.

Their appearance startled the baron, who took a step back, dragging Lillian with him. The unexpected move caused Lillian to lose her balance and the world tilted, as she fell backwards atop Lord Bailey. As she fell, time felt as though it was moving at a snail’s pace; she saw Thorncastle’s startled look, then shuddered as a long, slow booming sound reverberated through the room. Lord Bailey’s pistol had discharged.

Her skin was pierced by fire and for a moment she wondered if she had been hit - but, only for a moment, for her head made contact with the floor and she slipped into



unconsciousness.

Lillian's head pounded and she longed for water. Darkness swam before her eyes, but she could hear muffled sounds from beyond it. A low male voice, reading words which sounded almost melodic. She longed to open her eyes, to see the face of the one who spoke to her, but the darkness called her back again...

A while later, she awoke again. This time, light tickled her eyelids, bright and insistent. The same voice was still talking, though now she could make out the words.

"Racing at Chepstow is expected to go ahead, despite heavy rain. The turf was soggy, but has dried, allowing for -"

"I thought you were reading me poetry," Lillian complained, as she turned to find Thorncastle seated in the chair beside her bed. "This is decidedly less romantic."

"Forgive me," he answered, with a grin. "The Racing Post was the only reading material available. How do you feel?"

"Very thirsty," Lillian decided, still a little confused. Where was she? The room was unfamiliar; large enough and very comfortable, but with a decidedly rustic feel to it.

"The King's Head Coaching Inn, just outside Linton," Sebastian answered, as he returned to her side with a glass of water. He handed it to her and she gulped it down, glad of how it soothed her scratchy throat.

"How did I end up here?" she asked, puzzled. "The last thing I recall was Lord Bailey's pistol going off and feeling as though my skin was on fire."

As she spoke, her arm began to burn again, and she glanced down to find it was wrapped in a bandage. She had been shot.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” Sebastian said, as he sat down again and leaned over the bed to clasp her other hand in his. “It was the knock to your head, which sent you to sleep for so long”

Lillian glanced out the window, trying to assess the time. The strength of the sun indicated it was past noon; she must have been asleep for almost twelve hours.

“The physician who assessed you, assured me you were well. The wound required only a few stitches.”

“And..?” Lillian broached, wondering if he knew.

“No harm done to the baby,” Sebastian whispered, his hand clasping hers so tightly now, it was almost painful.

She nodded, surprised by the strength of her relief. Though the child which grew inside her had been conceived in less than ideal circumstances, she already loved it fiercely. Come what may, it would always have her.

“I don’t understand what it was that drove Lord Bailey to madness?” she said, changing the subject. She did not feel strong enough yet to discuss the baby with Sebastian. She did not trust herself not to cry, if he was to tell her he wanted little to do with it.

“You, my dear,” he answered, his eyes dancing with merriment, “are a very rich woman.”

“I am?”

“You are,” he grinned, though his face then grew somewhat somber. “The late baron willed what money he had that was not entailed, to you.”

In a soothing voice, Sebastian explained just why the late Lord Bailey had seen fit to leave her his fortune. To say Lillian was surprised to learn she was his illegitimate daughter was something of an understatement.

But, she was not illegitimate at all. Her father had given her his name. Not only that, he had loved her as though she was his own. Perhaps it was her own precarious situation, but Lillian felt no betrayal at having been lied to - only a rush of love for the man who had saved her from a life tainted society's censure.

"If circumstances were usual," Sebastian finished, his voice now deadly serious, "I would accept it if you wished to leave me. As a woman of means, you would be free to live your life however you wish."

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He frowned, before continuing, “However, circumstances are not usual. You are carrying my child, I am afraid I will accept nothing less than your hand in marriage, Miss Hamilton.”

Despite valiantly trying, Lillian could not hold back the bubble of laughter inside her. Even when proposing, Thorncastle could not help but do so in a high-handed manner. The duke scowled, displeased with her response.

“It’s no laughing matter,” he grumbled. “I love you - heaven help me, I could not stop loving you, even if I tried - and I want you by my side as my wife. I will not take no for an answer, Lillian.”

His words silenced her laughter - had he truly said he loved her?

“Do you?” she whispered, unable to believe it.

He nodded, his blue eyes misty. “Fiercely, passionately, and madly,” he confirmed, lifting his hand to her cheek. “Even before I knew of the baby, I realised I was falling in love. When I learned you were with child, I realised I now loved not one, but two people. I thought I had no heart, but now I know I do, for it is filled by you.”

Despite the pain she was in, Lillian leaned forward and threw her arms around him. She inhaled deeply, savouring his masculine scent of tobacco and sandalwood.

“Is that a yes?” Sebastian whispered, nuzzling his head against hers.

“Yes,” she replied. “A thousand times, yes.”

He kissed her then, a slow, gentle kiss. His lips upon hers were tender, his hands gently cradling her face. She felt cherished and loved, and she vowed she would always show him the same.

Somehow, she had helped Sebastian to find his heart, and she would guard it fiercely forever.

## EPILOGUE

POLLY FUSSED ABOUT, as she finished dressing Lillian's hair. Her auburn curls were piled high atop her head, ornamented with pearl and ruby combs -a gift from Sebastian.

"You're a picture," Polly declared, as she stepped back so Lillian could fully appreciate her appearance in the mirror.

Lillian smiled as she saw what was reflected at her; she looked like a duchess, even though she did not feel like one. Though, this was understandable, for she was not yet a duchess - not officially at least.

She plucked nervously at the skirts of her gown - an empire-line creation of silk and satin, complete with flounces and beading - as she wondered wildly if Sebastian might decide his proposal had been a terrible mistake.

"You'll wrinkle it," Polly tutted, as she noted Lillian's fidgeting hands.

"I'm sorry," she apologised, curling her hands into fists so she was prevented from carrying out any further damage.

"Don't say sorry," Polly answered, her tone kind. "I just want you to look your best for the duke; I'm sure he's wearing a hole in the carpet, while he waits for you. By all

accounts, he's rather nervous you might change your mind."

It was so like Polly to know exactly what to say to make her feel better. Lillian smiled gratefully at the lady's maid, who had eased her nerves considerably.

Sebastian had not wished to travel back to London to be wed, he had wanted to do it the day she had awoken in Linton. As the only vicar in the locality was Mr Figgis, the idea had been put to bed, for the man of the cloth had vanished during the altercation at Linton Hall. Instead, they had remained for one more night in The King's Head Inn, before returning to London the next day. Sebastian had procured a special license from the Archbishop of Canterbury, allowing them to hold an immediate wedding, but Polly had insisted they wait another few days to allow Lillian's arm to heal and a dress be made up.

Since her return, Lillian had remained in the house off Berkeley Square, but this morning she would travel to Thorncastle House, which would become her new home.

"Well," Polly sighed, as she cast one last appraising glance over her, "I can't improve on perfection - you're ready."

Lillian nodded, suddenly eager to be away. "Tell Michael I am ready when he is."

Polly nodded, then disappeared to find Michael. Once she had left, Lillian took one last look around the room. All of her belongings had already been packed and sent across to St James' Square. The room appeared bare, but she did not feel at all nostalgic about leaving it. It was just a room - her home was with Sebastian.

Polly returned a few minutes later, to tell her the carriage was ready. Maude and Thomas stood waiting at the bottom of the stairs, to see her off. She hugged them both and wished them well in the new employment Thorncastle had secured for them.

Then, in a flurry of silk and satin, Polly bundled her out the door and into the waiting vehicle.

Lillian watched the passing scenery with vague detachment - everything felt like a dream. She had never imagined herself as a duchess, had never even dared to dream she might become one, yet here she was.

When they arrived at Thorncastle House, Barty, Sebastian's cousin, stood waiting for her on the top step.

"Thank heaven," he called, as Michael assisted her down. "My dear cousin is in a state. He was about to call a mounted search party to seek you out. I assured him t the bride is always late - but you are not even that. You are just on time. I am afraid, Miss Hamilton, you are marrying an autocrat - if you wish to make your escape, now is your last moment to do so."

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Lillian smiled at his antics; Barty's playful personality was the chalk to his cousin's cheese.

"I do not wish to abscond, Mr Beaufort," she assured him, as he walked down to meet her at the bottom of the steps.

"Very good," Barty said cheerfully, as he offered her his arm. "Don't tell him I offered you a last-minute reprieve, or I shan't last to see you wed. This way, Miss Hamilton; I have been given the great honour of delivering the beautiful bride to the gruesome groom."

Barty led the way up the steps of Thorncastle House. In the entrance hall, the servants were lined up in a guard of honour. They each bowed or curtsied as Lillian passed, adding to her feeling she was dreaming.

Barty halted outside a set of double doors and gestured for Polly to enter first.

"Tell him to look lively and no slouching," Barty winked.

He waited a moment, until he was certain their arrival had been announced, before turning to Lillian and offering a flourishing bow.

"I have the honour of addressing you as Miss Hamilton for the final time," he said, somberly. "I would like you to know it means the world to me. You have brought Sebastian a happiness he thought himself incapable of ever possessing - and for that, I am forever grateful."



Lillian felt her eyes grow misty, at his heartfelt words. Barty observed this and gave a rueful chuckle. “La! I did not mean to make you weep. Come, let us away; I cannot deliver you to Thorncastle whilst sobbing, or he might decide to throw a punch my way.”

He offered her his arm again, which she took with a light hand. As he pushed open the door to the drawing room, she saw it was flooded with bright, morning light. For a moment, she could not see Sebastian, but then her eyes adjusted to the brightness, and he came into focus.

He stood at the top of the room, towering over the vicar. His expression was one of impatience, but it softened the moment his eyes met Lillian’s.

She was home.

The ceremony passed in a quick blur; after what felt like mere minutes, the vicar pronounced them man and wife, to great cheers from the small audience. Afterwards, they dined on a luscious breakfast, which the staff had prepared.

Lillian and Sebastian sat at the head of the table, side by side, as their guests - who included Polly, Michael, Barty and his father, and the Duke of Falconbrigde -dined on cold salmon, eggs, and bread. The breakfast was followed with a heavy fruit cake and glasses of sparkling wine to toast the happy couple.

“Here’s to love,” Barty cried, his cheeks pink as he raised his glass in a fifth toast. He was, Lillian realised, in his cups.

“Here’s to whoever has to deal with you when you sleep the wine off,” Sebastian answered, raising his own glass which he had not refilled. “And to all of you for bearing witness to our union. I am deeply appreciative that you chose to spend this day with us - however, my wife and I shall soon have to depart, if we are to reach

Hampshire before dark.”

With that, the farewells began. Lillian exchanged a misty-eyed goodbye with Polly - which was rather ridiculous, for she would see her when she returned to London, as Polly was to stay on as her lady’s maid. Barty, likewise, was equally teary - though Lillian suspected the sparkling wine had played a part.

At last, they were ready to leave and Thorncastle took her hand to lead her to the waiting carriage.

“Alone at last,” he sighed, as he climbed in after her.

“It has been too long,” Lillian agreed.

Out of superstition, she had asked him not to stay in Berkeley Hall until the wedding. The three nights they had been apart made her regret her whimsy, but tonight they would be reunited as man and wife. And not a moment too soon; she longed for him; longed to touch his skin, to feel his arms around her and feel him move inside her. Her desire was so great, she decided she might not be able to wait until darkness to feel his touch.

She opened her mouth to suggest they might begin a prelude to their wedding night right there, but Sebastian spoke first.

“I have warned the driver to go slowly,” he said, as he fussed about, placing a blanket across Lillian’s knees. “And to avoid any visibly bad patches of road.”

“We shan’t make it out of London, if that is the case,” she chortled, but quietened when she saw the worry on his face.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him, taking his hand in hers. “We are driving across the

country in a well-appointed carriage, you haven't booked me a ticket for the roof seat on a stagecoach."

"I just want to be certain you and the baby are safe," he answered, half apologetic. He drew her towards him, so she was nuzzled against his chest. "Rest up, it's a long journey."

Lillian wanted to object, but she rather thought her idea of having a slightly more amorous cuddle might fall on deaf ears. Besides, she had not slept much the night before, and the idea of a nap was most tempting...

The drive to Hampshire took the best part of the day; by the time they arrived at Chawton, the sun had set, and Lillian's bottom ached terribly.

"We're here," Sebastian commented, as the carriage turned off the main road. He pulled back the drapes on the windows, to afford her a view of her new home. Even in the twilight, the view took her breath away.

As they approached, along a gravel path with manicured lawns either side, the house loomed large against the violet sky. It was a two story building, built of flint, with stone dressings. Its many mullioned windows were lit up like beacons against the night, welcoming their new mistress.

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The carriage drew to a halt at the circular courtyard by the front entrance. At its centre was a stone fountain, its trickling water a compliment to the spring sounds of bird calls and insects.

Sebastian did not wait for the footman to open the door, he did so himself, leaping forward with enthusiasm. He held a hand out to Lillian to help her down, but to her surprise, he did not allow her feet to touch the floor.

Instead, he swept her into his arms and proceeded to the front door - intent on carrying her across the threshold. Much like the servants in Thorncastle House, the servants of Chawton House were lined up to greet them in the entrance hall.

Lillian heard a few giggles from the maids, as they witnessed Sebastian's public display of mischief, but she did not mind.

"Mrs Buckley," Sebastian called to a stout woman of middling years,. "Might we wait until tomorrow to do the introductions? My wife is tired after a long journey."

"Of course, Your Grace," Mrs Buckley answered, smiling warmly Lillian's way. "I'll send one of the maids up to fill Her Grace's bath in her dressing room."

"Very good," Sebastian answered. "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

With strong arms, Sebastian carried Lillian across the entrance hall towards the dark, mahogany staircase. He carried her up the stairs, past the portraits of Thorncastles past, which lined the walls, their way illuminated by a bronze chandelier.

Within her chest, Lillian's heart beat a tattoo of anticipation; soon she would feel her husband's touch upon her skin. She allowed her hand to rest on his broad chest, coyly toying with the buttons of his coat.

"Here we are," Sebastian said, as they reached a set of double doors. "Your chambers, dear wife."

He pushed the door open to reveal a large room, with a grand four-poster bed at its centre. A fire blazed happily in the hearth, while the door to the adjoining room lay open, revealing her dressing room.

Sebastian crossed the floor and placed her down upon the bed, so gently it was as though he feared she was made of glass.

"I shall have to bathe," Lillian apologised, for she felt dusty after their long drive.

"Of course," he answered, as he placed a kiss upon her forehead. "I shall have the kitchen send you up some spiced milk when you're done."

Spiced milk? Lillian wrinkled her nose at the idea, but was unable to argue, for a knock came upon the door and a line of young maids arrived with water for her bath.

She took her time bathing, luxuriating in the warm water. When she was done, she massaged oils and lotions into her skin, before dressing in the nightgown which Polly had ordered be made for the wedding night.

Its skirts were made of silk, the bodice of flimsy lace, which only scantily covered her breasts. In the mirror, Lillian could see her nipples were clearly visible; on another day, she might have blushed, but this was her wedding night...

Nervous a servant might still remain in the bedchamber, she donned a dressing gown

for modesty. However, when she pushed the door open, she found only Sebastian present.

He was seated in the Queen Ann by the fireplace, dressed in loose breeches and a shirt.

“I brought your milk,” he said, standing as she entered the room.

He gestured to the table, where a steaming cup of spiced milk awaited her.

“You must be tired after the long day,” he continued, stepping forward and cradling her face. “Drink this up and go to sleep; I shall be in the next room if you need me.”

“Go to sleep?” she echoed, dumbly.

He nodded, as he tenderly tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“It’s our wedding night, Sebastian,” she protested. “I do not wish to sleep - I wish to be bedded by my husband.”

His posture stiffened as his face assumed the look of a tortured man. “I want nothing more than to bed you,” he confessed. “But, I am afraid that I might hurt you, or the baby...”

He stepped back, as though even admitting his desire aloud might harm her. Lillian smothered a smile, touched by his concern.

“You won’t,” she assured him, reaching out a hand to touch his chest. “I swear to you.”

He shivered at her touch, his arousal now visible in his breeches, yet still he hesitated.

Sensing his resolve was weakening, Lillian allowed her nightgown to slip from her shoulders, revealing her scandalous nightrail.

“Take me,” she whispered. “Take me as your wife.”

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Her words had the hoped-for effect; Sebastian's pupils dilated, his breath hitched, and he reached for her.

"Temptress," he accused, before his lips crashed down upon hers, claiming them fiercely. "Do you know how much I've struggled, resisting you? I've wanted to ravish you since I saw you walking towards me this morning."

"I imagine the guests would have been slightly put out," Lillian teased in return, "Though you might have tried in the carriage - we were in it for seven hours."

He growled; his desire now fully unleashed. He pressed her against him, so she could feel his hardness against her. He kissed her again, his tongue hungrily exploring the recesses of her mouth - but it was not enough.

With a groan of longing, Sebastian lifted her into his arms, to carry her to bed - but it was not her bed he took her to. He moved towards the other side of the room, to a door which Lillian had not yet noticed.

"I don't know how I expected to resist you, when you were sleeping but a small distance away," he chuckled, as he pushed open the door to reveal his own bedchamber.

It was slightly larger than her own, decorated in dark wood paneling and shades of blue. A four-poster bed, with blue velvet drapes, stood at the head of the room, and Sebastian made a beeline for it.

"I wish to take you as my wife, in my bed," he whispered, as he laid her down atop



the sumptuous quilts.

He placed his body over her, his arms pinning her beneath him. Lillian wriggled in anticipation, as a delicious tingle of longing ran through her.

Sebastian dropped a kiss on her lips, then continued down the soft skin of her neck, until he reached her breasts. He did not have the patience to remove her nightrail; instead, he captured her nipple in his mouth, suckling it through the flimsy lace.

Lillian whimpered, as the feel of his hot mouth set off an ache of longing deep within her. She bucked her hips, rubbing herself against his manhood, in an attempt to hurry him on.

“Patience,” he whispered, as he pulled up her nightrail to her hips. His hand casually stroked her hips, his fluttering touches sending shivers through her. Lower he went, teasing the delicate skin of her inner thighs with feathery touches.

Gently, he nudged her knees apart, so she was displayed to him, and ran a finger along her lips.

“Are you certain?” he teased, as his fingers -slick with her wetness- found her nub.

“Certain,” she replied, though her answer was lost as she gasped with pleasure.

She closed her eyes, lost to sensation, as her husband’s wicked hands drove her closer and closer to climax. She was almost there, when Sebastian’s resolve shattered.

He pulled away to shrug off his shirt and pull off his breeches, before returning to their initial position, with her trapped beneath him.

“I take you as my wife,” he whispered, in an echo of his earlier vows.

He pressed the tip of his erection against her entrance, leaning down to capture her mouth as he plunged inside her. Lillian moaned against his lips, pleasure rippling through her as he filled her very being.

He thrust deep inside her, his expression one of ecstasy.

“I love you,” he whispered, as his movements became more urgent.

She clung to him, her hands clinging to his back, as he drove them both to the brink.

“I love you too,” she whimpered, before her climax took hold. She broke, as waves of pleasure lapped through her body. The feel of her orgasm brought Sebastian to his own climax and he groaned as he spilled himself within her.

They were one, she thought dreamily, as she stroked his hair. Joined body and soul, forever.

The End