



A Duke for Opal (The Carmichael Saga #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: The #1 Rule among gentlemen: sisters are off-limits rules however, are meant to be broken.

Lady Opal Carmichael is a wild-spirited hoyden with a love for books, and absolutely zero interest in marrying a duke. Being the daughter of a ruthless duke, she knows firsthand to steer clear of those powerful peers. Opal can, however make an exception for one duke—Lockwood “Locke” Renwick, the Duke of Strathearn. She’s loved him forever. And with his winter, house-party, approaching, she intends to make him fall in love with her.

There’s just one small problem—Locke is England’s wickedest rogue, a consummate bachelor, and also her brother-in-law’s best friend.

Lockwood Renwick, the Duke of Strathearn answers to no man. He lives only for his own pleasures and pursuits. Among Strathearn’s favorite? Spending nights with London’s most skilled, lusty, widows and unhappily married women.

When he agrees to host a house party in honor of his best friend’s, little sister-in-law, it isn’t long before Strathearn finds himself dangerously tempted by the forbidden—an innocent, exquisitely breathtaking, and all grown-up, Lady Opal. As a duke he’s never been denied.

Now, Strathearn finds himself fighting a battle between the gentlemanly code of friendship that marks the young woman off-limits—and his all-powerful desire for Opal.

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London, England

Winter

1819

O n this fine, quiet, London, winter's day, with the majority of the ton gone, Lockwood Renwick, the Duke of Strathearn found himself spending the afternoon as he so often did—with a sensual beauty in his arms.

Perhaps the sameness of it all explained Strathearn's unusual ennui.

The Cyprian, Clarisse, draped her plump legs on either side of Strathearn—her frothy crimson skirts hitching about her waist so her cunny pressed against his shaft. “You like that do you, Your Grace?” she purred, rubbing herself hotly against him.

He mustered his patent rogue's grin for the eager creature's benefit. “You cannot tell for yourself, sweet?”

She bit his lower lip so hard, he winced.

Clarisse gripped Strathearn's length and stroked him through his trousers. Her brown eyes glazed over. “You're so hard, Your Grace,” she panted, fortunately, oblivious to how bored he, in fact, was.

Oh, his cock responded as it invariably did. He was as flesh and blood a man as they came. This time, this day, Strathearn remained detached.

Restless might be a more accurate descriptor of his mood.

Something... felt off.

He felt off.

Unsettled.

Discombobulated.

While his current companion continued petting him, Strathearn apprehensively searched his gaze around the club.

All of England's respectable lords retired for the season until Parliament returned, which meant the only fellows left in London were a sorry mix of: Dandies. University-aged lads. Degenerate rakes. And ancient lords who were either widowers or men with disturbingly young wives whom they'd tucked aside in the country.

That unscrupulous lot sat at their reserved tables, with a requisite bottle of spirits, crystal snifter, and nearly naked beauty—or two, or three—for company.

Clarisse moaned. She attempted to claim his mouth, but reflexively, he angled his head away.

The tenacious beauty's kiss landed on Strathearn's neck.

"Ooh, you want me there?" she rasped.

Actually, he hadn't and still didn't.

Violently catching Strathearn hard by the lapels, she dragged him closer. "I can start

here, Your Grace, but I know there's a place you'd rather have my mouth." Clarisse loosened his cravat and like some blood-thirsty vampire, proceeded to bite and suck his neck.

Another wave of boredom flooded him.

Christ, I'm getting old.

Perhaps that's what accounted for his restlessness.

With London nearly empty, he found himself confronted with the fact of how bloody old he was. Well, at least, when compared to the callow youths gambling and whoring and drinking. A duke, approaching thirty, with no family aside from a much younger brother who lived his own rakish existence, Strathearn was surrounded by mere boys. It left Strathearn feeling like an old roué.

He grimaced.

It wasn't every day a fellow found himself confronted with his advancing years, at a gaming hell, no less.

I'm not that old. Why, there were other chaps here his age.

Dimly, Strathearn registered Clarisse dropping her bodice and guiding his palms to her enormous, sagging, breasts.

"Yes, touch me like that," Clarisse rasped. She furiously rubbed herself like a cat in heat against him.

At some point, out of habit, he'd begun stroking her nipples. His movements proved as reflexive as the rest of his body's response this day.

His gaze alighted on Lord Buckley.

Some seventy-years old, the viscount entertained a pair of twins who were near in age to the old reprobate's eighteen-year-old bride.

Strathearn winced.

Definitely not the man to compare himself to.

Frustrated, Strathearn, did a sweep of the room.

There! Another duke! The Duke of Hastings, to be exact. Some four tables away, the rake, was near Strathearn in age and proved similarly busy .

As if they were two gents passing on a riding path, and not, even now, being attended by notorious courtesans, Hastings lifted a snifter and saluted Strathearn.

And hell, if that casual greeting didn't make Strathearn feel even more depraved.

Rogue or not, no honorable gent wanted to go about being compared to a licentious, cold-hearted fellow like Hastings .

Strathearn caught Clarisse by the waist. He made to set her from him when his gaze caught on a commotion at the front of Forbidden Pleasures.

What in hell?

“Grimoire ?”

“What is that, Your Grace?” Clarisse rasped.

Strathearn blinked several times but the sight remained. His closest—and only, real—friend, stood speaking with several guards at the entrance of Forbidden Pleasures.

Previously solely married to his work at a subscription library and now , married to—and very in love with—his wife, Lady Glain, Mr. Grimoire, had never once set foot inside a gaming hell, and never would.

The least of the reasons being the stoic man didn't possess a membership. The better reason being Grimoire had never been a roguish sort. Which also explained, the fierce exchange between the head guard, Mr. Latimer and the librarian.

Strathearn started to rise and go intervene on his friend's behalf, but Grimoire and Latimer appeared to reach an agreement. The unlikeliest of librarians possessed an ability to bring anyone around. That skill also accounted for Strathearn's sizeable investment in Chetham's Subscription Library and also why the fellow managed to secure some of the wealthiest donors in London.

Latimer pointed at Strathearn, and directed Grimoire's attention across the club.

The other man fastened a flinty gaze on Strathearn.

An impending sense of doom rooted around his belly. There could be but a handful of reasons why Grimoire was barreling down on him.

One: Someone died.

Two: There'd been a fire—or some other emergency—at the library.

Three: trouble had befallen Grimoire's sister-in-law, Lady Opal.

Four: the man's merciless father-in-law, the Duke of Devonshire had inflicted some

kind of suffering upon Grimoire and those he loved.

Or...

Strathearn's stomach muscles seized.

Or...Lady Glain Grimoire whose earlier pregnancies ended in loss, was encountering difficulties with her latest one.

Christ.

"I've displeased you." The forgotten beauty in his arms pouted. "I will do better, Your Grace."

"Huh?"

Catching his cravat between her teeth, she pulled the white satin fabric all the way free with a tug...the exact moment Grimoire reached Strathearn.

Heat climbed his neck, and if Strathearn's cravat weren't askew from the courtesan's efforts, he would have yanked it.

"If you'll excuse me, Clarisse." Strathearn helped the young woman from his lap. "I fear I'd forgotten about a meeting." He spoke in quiet, ducal tones that effectively earned everyone's compliance. The tenacious Cyprian proved no exception.

As she sauntered away, Strathearn, jumped up. "Grimoire."

A spark of disapproval flashed in the other man's eyes. "Strathearn." Grimoire motioned to the table. "May I?"

“Yes. Yes. Of course.”

And damned as they both sat, if Strathearn didn't feel like the mischievous lad who'd disappointed his father. Unlike Strathearn who'd been born lucky and handed a fortune from birth, Grimoire had risen up from nothing. Strathearn's own failings never stood out more clearly than when he was in the librarian's company.

“May I offer you refreshments?” Strathearn asked, starting to raise his hand to call for a glass.

“That won't be necessary.”

He let his arm fall. His own humility and sense of inadequacy forgotten, Strathearn leaned forward. “Lady Glain—?”

His friend headed off the remainder of that worry. “She is well.”

Tense and cryptic as Grimoire was, Strathearn couldn't make out what the other man was thinking.

His worry deepened.

Grimoire finally got to it. “You have done so much for my wife and I.”

Strathearn waved away his unnecessary thanks.

“Which is why I regret having to ask you for any further help than you already confer, Strath—”

“Anything,” he interrupted. “What is it you need?”

Some of the tension left Grimoire's big shoulders. "We're hosting a winter house party."

Oh, hell on Sunday.

He resisted the urge to squirm.

"It is a small gathering," Grimoire said, clearly reading Strathearn's desperate urge to run. "Just a handful of guests: Lords Brightly, Everhart, the Duke of Savage. The usuals, along with their families."

"The donors," Strathearn murmured. Some of the tension left him. "It is an event for the library, then?"

An event for Grimoire's circulating room was one he would always stand behind.

"Yes," Grimoire confirmed. "Of a sort..."

He eyed his friend guardedly. "Of a sort?"

The other man nodded.

Strathearn's frown grew.

"Opal is returning from finishing school, for the winter season," Grimoire explained.

"The event is not so much to raise funds, but, more a...a..."

"A?" Strathearn prodded, his dread growing.

"As she was denied a St. Nicholas's Day, we thought to bring Opal the same festivities...just belated. The duke allowed us but a week with her and he did so only

on the condition only certain guests were invited.”

Sure enough...

“Me?”

Grimoire gave a sheepish grin. “You.”

With a groan, Strathearn dropped his head face-first upon the table. “I preferred it when he hated me,” he muttered into the gleaming, oak surface.

“Oh, he still hates you.” Grimoire’s response contained a smile. “He values your title and will use it—and you—to increase his family’s place in society.”

Strathearn picked his head up. “A proper, respectable house party?” he mumbled. “I should cut my patronage.”

Grimoire chuckled. “You’d never.”

“I’d never,” Strathearn confirmed.

“There is just,” Grimoire held his thumb and forefinger a fraction apart, “one more thing.”

“I’m listening.” Reluctantly .

“Would you be so good as to host?”

Host?

Strathearn laughed until he noted Grimoire’s grave expression.

Bloody hell.

His amusement faded. “You’re not jesting.”

Grimoire curled and unfurled his fingers into the side of the table. “I’m afraid not.” Frustration and fury all leant a terseness to the other man’s words. “Given Opal’s movement are so carefully guarded by Devonshire, your hosting a party is the only reliable way to ensure Lady Glain and I may see her and Lord Linley.”

Where dukes were concerned, the only thing a man could rely on in terms of friends was that one didn’t actually have true ones. That’d certainly been the case for Strathearn—until Grimoire. He’d do anything for the other man.

Even so, Strathearn couldn’t keep from groaning.

Relief filled the other man’s features. “We cannot thank you enough.”

Strathearn waved off more—unwanted and unnecessary—gratitude.

Grimoire shifted in his seat. “My wife may have anticipated your response,” he said sheepishly. “Just as I was leaving to pay you a call, she informed me she’d sent out invitations on your behalf.”

Strathearn chuckled. “Did she?”

“With the help of your staff.”

Now, that sounded like the Lady Glain, daughter of his late father’s friend, he knew all too well. Once heartless and cold, she’d been changed by Grimoire into a warm-hearted, generous, caring lady. But then, that appeared to be Grimoire’s power. After all, Strathearn had once been a duke who lived only for his own pleasures and

pursuits, until a chance meeting with the head of Chetham's Subscription Library. From that moment, Grimoire somehow got Strathearn to not only care about books and the mass's ability to reach them but the man's in-laws, as well.

Strathearn took a much-needed drink. "Need I attend, Grimoire?" He dreaded—but already knew—the answer.

A frown flashed across the librarian's face. "Uh...we...Lady Glain and I certainly hope you will. At least for some of the occasion. Nor will you be required to take part in the festivities—unless you want to, that is. We'd both welcome your participation. If you are absent from the entire gathering it'll be talked about and Devonshire will undoubtedly bar Lady Opal from attending any further events hosted by you." Fury and frustration burned in Grimoire's eyes.

How hard it must be for a man as proud as Grimoire to be unable to fully protect his wife's family.

Strathearn took mercy. "Aside from the use of my property and my attendance for some of the affair, Grimoire, is there anything else you need to inform me about my house party?"

"Yes."

Strathearn collected his bottle of brandy and poured his snifter to the rim.

"Lady Opal wasn't due to return until the spring but Devonshire summoned her back early which leaves us an incredibly tight timeframe."

Strathearn set the decanter down. "Grimoire."

"It is in a sennight," he blurted.

Groaning, Strathearn let his head fall a second time this day, hard upon the table.

“Lady Glain wanted me to assure you that you needn’t worry about any of the details or planning. She will continue to handle everything and even act as hostess.”

“That is a consolation,” he muttered into the wood.

Grimoire didn’t again speak until Strathearn lifted his head. “Do you know what would certainly help you with those unwanted chores of hosting requisite, respectable, ducal events?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Picking up his glass, Strathearn toasted his best friend. “Perhaps having a friend who didn’t require I perform unwanted chores?” He took a sip.

“I was going to say, a duchess,” Grimoire drawled.

Strathearn choked and spewed his brandy in the other man’s face.

Without even flinching, Grimoire removed a kerchief and wiped the deep amber remnants from his person. “Obviously, my wife’s suggestion.”

“ Obviously .”

There came a scrape of wood on wood as Grimoire backed his chair up, and stood. “I’ll tell her you agreed to think about finding a duchess.”

He shuddered. “ Please , don’t.” Lady Glain could have stopped Boney in his tracks before he’d even begun his march through the Continent.

Grimoire laughed. “Good day, Strathearn.”

“Good day, indeed.”

His mutterings of misery were met by more of the other man’s amusement.

“Oh, come, you never know, Strathearn,” Grimoire said, patting him hard on the back. “You might find yourself having a good time.”

He snorted. “Of all the stories you’ve peddled from your library, Grimoire, that has to be the biggest yarn of all.”

The librarian’s laughter followed him out.

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After a half-day's ride by carriage, Lady Opal Carmichael found herself escorted through Lockwood "Locke" Renwick, the Duke of Strathearn's country estate by none other than her elder sister, Lady Glain Grimoire.

The way Glain led along the white Italian marble floors with their crimson velvet runners, one would think she was the lady of the house and not a woman whose husband was, in fact, a benefactor of said duke's largesse.

"Wasn't it most generous of Strathearn to allow us the use of his property?" Her sister prattled in the happy way only a woman free of their father's influence could.

"Most generous," she murmured, hating herself for envying her sister that blitheness.

"Here we are, Opal!" Glain tossed the pretty painted, white panel doors open.

As Opal entered, she took in the sunshiny accommodations. Everything from the white Aubusson carpet to the floral curtains, coverlet, and canopy overhead oozed warmth and welcome.

While her sister went on lauding the duke's praise, Opal continued walking until she reached the cozy window seat that overlooked the westward side of the duke's grounds.

She briefly closed her eyes.

How different this room was from the cramped, lonely, sterile chambers she enjoyed back at Le Innocence. There, the walls were white. The coverlets stark and crisp and

devoid of comfort. There, that hated place where young women were told they'd come to the instructors as similarly blank slates, and the knowledge they'd leave with would be valuable and seen to they not become vapid leaders of Polite Society.

Glain clapped her hands happily. "I promise it will be a wonderful house party."

"A house party?" she ventured hesitantly. That suggested...

The permanent smile she'd worn since catching sight of Opal slipped, as did Opal's heart.

"It is just a small gathering, Opal," her sister sought to reassure.

A small gathering hosted by the Duke of Strathearn.

For that was the only way Opal's father would allow his daughters to meet. Such had been the price paid for Glain—a formerly prized Diamond—marrying Abaddon Grimoire, the librarian at Chetham's Subscription Library. Opal loved her brother-in-law, and even as she'd never alter fate if she could and deny her sister the marriage she'd deserved—and needed—neither would it never not hurt that Opal had been sent away and allowed but limited contact with her siblings.

And him—the Duke of Strathearn. He'd come into her life when she'd been but a child and been everything, she'd never known a nobleman could be—funny, clever, kind, and, even more unheard of amongst the peerage, well-read.

She frowned. Something Glain said earlier gave her pause.

"Strathearn has been so good as to allow us the use of his property?" She frowned. "You make it sound as though the duke will not be in attendance at his own house party?"

At Glain's silence, Opal's frown deepened. "My God, he won't?"

Before her sister could confirm, Opal tossed her head back and laughed. "Hosting a respectable event, and then not even attending." Then, should she expect anything different of the contrary gentleman? "My if that is not the Duke of Strathearn to the T."

"He'll be here! He promised he'd be here for some . His Grace has just not arrived yet."

Which hardly proved promising for Opal's plans for the week, especially seeing as how Locke opened his household as a favor but didn't truly wish to attend the house party.

Glain brightened. "But me, you, Abaddon, and Flint, will be together."

That should have been enough, and, maybe in some small part, it would have, were it not for all the other details her sister had just revealed.

Wearily, Opal drew off her blue velvet top hat and tossed the costly millinery piece atop the window seat in her guest chambers. "How many guests will be present?"

"Five," her sister hurried to reassure.

Emotion formed a ball in her throat.

This was not the intimate family gathering she'd wanted or wished for.

Still attired in her white-fur lined, crimson-red cloak from the journey she'd only just made, she stared absently out the cool, frosted windowpane, at the rolling, snow-covered hills of the Duke of Strathearn's properties. This way, Opal didn't have to

meet her own regal, lady-like—and now, hated—visage or her sister Glain’s sad reflection.

Nothing for Opal these past years had been anything she wished for, or wanted. She’d been separated from her younger brother, Flint, older sister, Glain, and Glain’s husband, Abaddon. Sent to finishing school in Paris. Denied books she loved, and forced to read and study every last rule of decorum and propriety.

Here she was, back in England, reunited with her sister Glain, at the Duke of Strathearn’s country seat—and free of their father’s imposing, commanding company—about ready to cry.

“How generous of Strathearn to host a house party for the sad Carmichael family.” Opal didn’t even try to bury her bitterness. “Abaddon’s greatest , grandest patron to do all of this for us.”

She strove for icy indifference, and by the down turning of Glain’s lips, achieved the desired effect.

“ Opal ,” Glain chided. “Strathearn has been and continues to be exceedingly generous.”

No, in the way he’d used the power he had to look after Opal and her siblings had been heroic. It’s merely one of the reasons she’d fallen in love with him.

Her sister combed concern-filled eyes over Opal. “What is this coldness, Opal? I do not like seeing you this way.”

Being this way, was what her sister should really say. Opal had become a guarded, jaded, hopeless person, and, as much as Glain hated this new side of her, Opal detested it a thousandfold more.

“You are right, Glain,” she said tiredly. “I’m being atrocious. I am just...exhausted.”
And she was.

With herself.

Who she’d become.

Her life.

Her loneliness.

The future awaiting her—if she didn’t do something to thwart her father’s efforts to marry her to some ruthless, heartless, nobleman—as part of his attempt to make amends—and atone—for Glain’s rebellion and inferior union.

Opal pulled her gaze from the tranquil winter landscape and looked at Glain. “How many did you say will be in attendance?” she asked resignedly.

“Five.”

“Five people.” That wasn’t quite so grim.

Color splashed her sister’s high, proud, cheekbones. “ Families .”

Opal’s eyes slid shut. When she’d received the joyous and unexpected summons at Madame Touraine Le Innocence Finishing School in France, Opal had been happier than she had in all her years away. During the entire length of her long journey, she’d looked forward to an intimate, cheerful, game-filled house party at her sister and brother-in-law’s country cottage.

One would have thought these past years taught Opal better than to expect life, or any

part about it, to be fair or good.

When her sister didn't volunteer any more than that, Opal quirked an eyebrow. "Well? You mustn't leave me in suspense. Which families?"

"The Earl of Everhart, the Marquess of Brightly—"

Somewhere around the third lord, Opal's mind drifted off. Being herself from an illustrious, noble family with roots to William the Conqueror, she knew better than anyone, five noble families meant anywhere from twelve to forty-two, or even more, people.

"The Duke of—"

Opal's ears pricked up.

"Savage," her sister finished.

Her heart sank. A different duke. Not the one and only one whom she'd carried thoughts of these past years, and the hope of seeing.

That's what the sentiment known as hope gets you. As if you hadn't already learned that five years ago, you ninny.

"The Duke of Savage," Opal repeated drolly. "I trust he is as charming as his title suggests."

Opal waited for her sister to join in that scurrility.

Glain frowned. "Do not allow his title to fool you, he is surprisingly lovely."

Opal laughed softly. “Who are you and what have you done with my sister?”

She pressed a hand against Glain’s forehead and sought a fever. “I daresay I never believed I’d see the day when my sister would declare one gentleman, let alone numerous ones lovely , and invite them as guests,” she drawled, feigning levity, when inside she was only hurting at yet another reminder of how apart she and Glain had drifted.

“I’ve changed, Opal.” Glain gave her a delicate look; but one that did not strip away the gentle chiding. “You know that.”

Glain’s love for Abaddon had transformed Opal’s sister into a woman she didn’t recognize. Ironically, all the changes that’d befallen Opal, too, were because of Glain’s love for her husband, just not in any ways that were good.

“My apologies,” Opal said tiredly. “I was jesting.”

“I know.” Sadness wreathed her sister’s countenance. “Your jokes are different, Opal.”

Her jokes? Now, that was hilarious.

“I’m different,” Opal snapped back.

One would have to be carefree and happy to make quips and jests.

An awkwardness fell between them.

Inside the protective folds of her cloak, Opal curled into herself.

Since having fallen in love, her sister, once ice cold and emotionally detached,

possessed a warmth, tender-heartedness, and joy she never exuded before, while Opal saw those sad shades of who Glain once was, now, in herself.

As for Opal, everything had changed so much she wondered if she'd merely imagined a time when she was happy, carefree, and hopeful.

Every day, Opal found herself slipping further and further away until, soon, all the best parts of her would fade and then disappear altogether.

Opal couldn't and wouldn't be saved—unless, she herself found the same healing, freeing love Glain knew. And Opal? She'd discovered that great, all-powerful—and entirely one-sided love in the Duke of Strathearn.

Now, she found herself at the gentleman's estate, and without any promises he'd even come around.

Did you expect he'd be eager and happy to see you as you are to see him?

Her sister pulled her out of her self-pitying musings. "I am so sorry, Opal."

Not as sorry as I am.

"It is fine." That lie sounded trite even to Opal's own ears.

Again, Glain moved her gaze over Opal's features.

She could look all day. Opal had perfected the ability to reveal nothing.

"Are you... very disappointed?"

"Oh, no," Opal said, keeping a straight face. "I've come to adore stilted, ton events."

Her sister winced. “It was the only way, Opal.”

The only way, she thought bitterly.

Opal’s heart pounded hard in her chest; beating so fast, the organ’s frantic rhythm thundered in her ears, and painfully knocked the walls of her chest.

The same panic that’d built steadfastly during Opal’s time at Le Innocence threatened to overwhelm her.

No! Not here! Breaking down and apart when alone in her rooms at Le Innocence was one thing. That madness hadn’t besieged Opal when in the company of others—until now.

She focused on getting air into her lungs.

“I’ve missed you,” her sister’s words penetrated Opal’s fast-rising panic, but in the way she registered voices when she was swimming underwater at her father’s lake in Bath.

Only this time, Opal found herself not gliding effortlessly through, but sinking, suffocating, drowning.

Glain rested a hand on her shoulder and the unexpected feel of that soft, loving touch plucked Opal from the depths of despair.

Opal dimly registered her big sister taking her into her arms.

She tensed, but closing her eyes, she returned that hug. How strange. There’d been a time long ago when this was all she’d wanted; when this was all she’d thought she needed—the love of her sister.

She'd found the joy of being held by her sister but for a fleeting time before the duke had ripped them apart, and so, all this with Glain was still new.

Foreign.

Her panic came back in full force.

Glain patted her gently on the back and then released Opal from the sisterly embrace.

"I know this is not what you wanted, Opal," she said softly. "And I know what it is to feel like you are struggling to breathe under the weight of father's thumb and power, but you will find happiness again, and love."

She struggled to breathe.

She was wrong—Glain still saw so much. Too much.

Opal's skin went hot and then cold. Moisture slicked her palms.

The few times she came to London, the occasional meetings she had with the Duke of Strathearn—or Locke as she referred to the gentleman—sustained her.

And if her astute sister learned about Opal's intentions for him?

Her feet twitched with the urge to run and to keep on running until she was free of it all.

Which was the main reason for her being here. Yes, she missed Glain and Abaddon and Flint, but they could not free her. At least as long as Father lived, and not even the Devil appeared to want him.

In the end, it wouldn't prove to be her sister's love or warmth or embrace that pulled Opal back from the precipice of breaking down right there before her sister...but rather, the thought of him—Locke.

“Opal?” Glain ventured haltingly.

“Yes?”

Her sister appeared to consider her words carefully. “Is there perhaps a gentleman you do carry a tendre for?”

“No,” she answered flatly. “I don't carry a tendre for anyone.”

Opal loved Lockwood Renwick, the Duke of Strathearn, madly, deeply, desperately, and in every last way in between there was to love a person.

Glain studied her closely. “You're certain?”

Why must her sister be so tenacious with this topic?

Opal looped an arm around her sister's shoulders. “I'm absolutely confident, as you should be. I'd be well aware if I carried feelings for some gentleman.” And to head off further questions, she gave a playful wink.

Unrelenting, Glain peered at Opal.

She tried not to squirm.

A knock sounded at the door.

“Enter!” Glain called out, and a look of such profound relief washed over her face, a

fresh, crippling tide of hurt assailed Opal.

Opal's maid, Julia, or The Eyes of the Duke, as Opal referred to her in private, stepped inside like she herself was the daughter of a duke and not the lackey of one.

The woman, near in age to Opal, dropped a stiff curtsy to Glain, and then Opal.

"Splendid." Glain gave a happy clap of her hands. "I'll allow you to change and rest some before you join the festivities."

The festivities.

"It will be good fun!" Glain promised with such cheer and optimism, Opal almost believed her.

That fanciful delusion lasted only as long as Julia set about unpacking Opal's belongings.

Through her spiraling fear, she dimly registered smiling at Glain, hugging her, and then her leaving Opal alone with her maid.

While Julia, with a military-like precision, removed and hung Opal's garments upon the hooks and pegs within the armoire, Opal's dread continued to swell.

Locke had to come. Why, he was loyal to Abaddon and Glain, and would, if for no other reason than that.

And if he isn't...what then...

Everything hung upon his being here, winning his heart, and becoming his wife so she could break free of the chains that bound her.

The walls began closing in.

The pressure built in Opal's chest.

And alternately wanting to scream, vomit, and pull her hair out, she walked with numb steps out of the room where her maid worked, and ran.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:11 am

“ P our L’Amour de Dieu .” For the love of God!

It wasn’t oft Strathearn found himself wrong about something—or, for that matter, anything .

“ Tas de merde .” Pile of shite.

A sharp, biting, unforgiving, winter wind cut through Strathearn’s thick, woolen, fur-lined cloak.

He’d anticipated the polite, respectable house party Grimoire threw together at Strathearn’s own property would be crushingly boring. Upon his arrival a short while ago, he’d entered the drawing room to find a gathering of guests: ladies stitching away at their embroideries, chaps reading newspapers, gossips, gossiping—and confirmed his expectations.

Given he wasn’t an uncouth fellow, he donned a smile, greeted his guests, thanked them for attending, and promptly made his excuses.

Which also accounted for his hiding outside, in the gardens, amidst a rapidly growing winter storm. Alas, with several guests—young, unmarried, ladies doing readings for the guests, Strathearn far preferred the possibility of death by frostbite to the latter option.

He was more often than not—right. This time, with all his suppositions about Lady Glain’s winter house party, proved no different.

“ Fils de pute .” Son of a bitch.

Until now.

Now, Strathearn, in a shocking surprise, discovered he'd been egregiously wrong—but in the best possible way.

What do we have here?

He grinned.

Or, perhaps, more accurately, he should say ‘who’ did he have here?

At that particular moment, the colorful, enchanting beauty who'd chased away all Strathearn's previous tedium in a crimson, white-fur-lined cloak bent down and collected a perfectly formed snowball from the impressive mound of them that lay at her feet.

Drawing her arm back, the enchanting imp hurled the projectile at the frozen watering fountain, with an impressive force.

Crack.

The long, thick, icicle, protruding from a stone Poseidon's spare hand, split in half and hit the icy pond below the stone god's feet.

Strathearn lifted his eyebrows. Well-done, Mon Tresor.

“... Putain de merde ...” Fucking Shite.

It turns out, in his quest to avoid the determined mamas and elder brothers trying to

push Strathearn at their painfully shy and innocent daughters, he'd discovered a like-minded, delectable, and fiery beauty—an artfully messy, black-haired French beauty of all wonders.

With every frenzied, heartfelt, and spiritedly creative curse to fly from the French beauty's lips, so too did a snowball from the equally impressive pile of missiles at her feet.

Strathearn's grin widened.

“C'est le bordel !” This is a disaster.

To keep from giving himself away, Strathearn fought back a laugh.

A disaster ? Oh, he quite disagreed. In fact, he'd wager, she was the singular best thing to happen to Grimoire's—Strathearn's—house party since, well, since the librarian paid a visit to Forbidden Pleasures and enlisted Strathearn's help.

It begged the question: which one of the guests had come with the diverting French relative? Perhaps she was an émigré, and by the precision with which she wielded curses that nearly made Strathearn blush, was no innocent.

Even more delightful...

The lady launched another snowball. “Couilles !” Ballocks!

The mouth on her!

Strathearn's shoulders shook with the force it took to keep from laughing aloud and giving himself away.

She was an utter delight, and without any doubt about it, before the house party was through, she would soon be Strathearn's utter delight.

For months, he'd been filled with a concerning ennui not even the most skilled lover or mistress could conquer. Bed sport had become boring.

Just then, the minx who held him utterly and completely captivated, took out the remainder of the icicle that still clung to Poseidon's stone fingers.

Another time he would have marveled at the ease with which she could toss a makeshift ball and hit her target.

Not, this time.

Strathearn lowered his lashes.

The entrancing woman's ceaseless efforts set her loose, midnight curls billowing wildly about her narrow, regal shoulders. All the while she obliterated her chosen targets, her generously curved hips and well-formed buttocks swayed.

And while she alternately cursed and muttered indecipherable words in her low, sultry contralto, in Strathearn's mind, a different image merged and twisted with the one before him—debauched imaginings.

One of the mesmerizing and still nameless *la matiress* naked, and riding him, while those same beautiful curls bounced about her. Of Strathearn, tangling his fingers in those luscious, blue-tinged locks, and drawing her down, and mating his mouth with hers.

His breathing grew more ragged and those increased respirations stirred puffs of white in the cold afternoon air.

Oh, yes.

Strathearn happened to be—or would be—the actual beneficiary of the delightful thing’s company.

“Baiser!” Fuck.

His breathing grew more ragged.

Yes, that is very much what I would like to do with you, ma tigresse...and what I will do, he silently vowed. And she’d love every, single moment. He’d leave her gasping, weeping, breathless, and then hungry for more.

“ C’est un putain de cauchemar !” This is a fucking nightmare!

To think he’d stayed away; a travesty he needed to rectify—right now.

Strathearn stepped forward for a long overdue introduction. “ Au contraire, Mon amour ,” he purred. “ Je dirais que c’est un rêve délicieux —”

Letting out a high-pitched, startled squeal, the beauty spun and launched a snowball. Precision marksman that she was, the hard, icy projectile hit Strathearn squarely—and painfully—in the face.

“ Oommph .”

And it marked the first time since his university days his seductive advances had been met with violence.

“ Ou j’aurais dit que c’est un rêve délicieux, ma minette ,” he drawled, through blurred eyes and a mouthful of snow. Pulling a kerchief from within the front of his

cloak, Strathearn gave the crisp, satin fabric a snap. “Or I would have said it was a delightful dream—until this portion of our meeting.”

He wiped the remnants from his person.

His mystery woman possessed a sensuous oval face with delicate features that went through a series of emotions—luminescent joy that faded all too quick for Strathearn’s liking, to be replaced with shock. Confusion. Horror.

Certainly not the desired or preferred responses.

Bloody hell, if everything about this mystery guest and meeting didn’t make him feel more alive than he’d been in...in...maybe, ever ?

Strathearn couldn’t help it. Tossing his head back, he finally gave in and roared with laughter.

By the way his future lover stitched her arched and strong eyebrows into an angry line, his response was the wrong one. Strathearn knew that very well and the last thing he wanted to do was offend the mesmerizing chit and make his pursuit of her longer than need be. He needed her in his arms and bed immediately.

Knowing that to be fact didn’t help. He couldn’t keep from laughing all the more.

With an indignant gasp, she planted her hands on those ample hips, drawing his rake’s gaze—and appreciation—to those delicious curves.

“ Pensez-vous que c’est dr?le ?!” Do you think this funny?

The fire in her eyes and the coldness in her query only sent his desire climbing.

Donning a suitably solemn expression, he pressed a hand over his heart. “Not at all, Mon amour, ” he purred. “ I’d never be so foolish as to cross such a skilled markswoman.”

“ Va te faire foutre ,” she hissed. Go fuck yourself.

The feisty minx bent and hastily constructed a snowball, and hurled it with such speed Strathearn barely had time to duck.

This time, she knocked the top hat square off his head.

Perhaps he’d gone too far.

Strathearn and his tempestuous mistress-to-be locked gazes in a battle of the wills.

Nay, he had. For reasons he could not explain, he found himself remarkably refreshed at the woman’s spirited and honest responses both to him and in front of him.

When faced with his most daunting challenge yet, Strathearn went to his ultimate and most reliable palladium.

Then, with a slow, flick of his lashes, he winked.

Her eyes turned to thin slits, giving her the look of a fiery cat about to pounce.

And damned if he wouldn’t happily suffer her claws just to feel her in his arms.

Regretfully, Strathearn’s fiery companion, exercised greater restraint than he found himself capable of.

For the first time in his life, he the ultimate charmer, the skilled rogue who had

women from ages eighteen to eighty-eight falling at his feet, found himself confronted by the one lady who remained wholly immune to him. Along with that, born to be a duke, from early on, he'd grown accustomed to everyone currying his favor and fawning over themselves.

Perhaps that explained his fierce hungering to possess her.

Oh, when she discovered his real identity, there'd be horror and frantic apologies, but for now, he was a stranger she'd treat no differently than anyone else.

"I've offended you," he murmured. Taking one of her gloved hands in his, Strathearn tugged the article free, so that he could feel her naked skin upon his mouth. "You must forgive me."

Her eyes widened.

Turning her palm up, he lowered his lips and pressed a slow, sensuous kiss upon her wrist.

The uninhibited temptress's fingers trembled in his.

Oh, I've not even begun, ma dove.

Strathearn trailed his mouth to her silkily soft palm. He lightly licked her flesh.

A low, breathy moan escaped the beauty's lips; the tell-tale sounds of her desire inordinately and deliciously loud in the growing winter storm.

However, a different, stronger, more explosive tempest raged between Strathearn and the woman who'd be his lover.

From where he still worshipped the lady's hand, Strathearn stole a glance up.

“A bad start to the festivities, Mon amour ?” he purred. “If it is any consolation, I was of the same opinion.” Strathearn lowered his lashes and fixed a smoldering gaze upon the startled beauty. “Until now.”

His husky murmurings had the desired effects.

The anger faded from the young woman's eyes.

“ Je suis désolé ,” he said, making his apologies. “ Parles-tu anglais, ma minette ?”

Her enormous eyes formed an even bigger circle. Those eyes. Never mind, forgetting them. They were cerulean pools a man would happily drown himself in to be nearer to. Not a living, breathing, red-blooded man— especially not Strathearn—could forget those eyes, and yet, they were familiar.

He scoured his mind but could not place them. Worse, he could not place her .

“ Vous ne savez pas qui je suis ,” she whispered her husky voice a blend of hurt and shock.

Oh hell.

No. He didn't have a bloody clue as to the saucy and fascinating beauty's identity.

Rubbing his hands distractedly together in a bid to get warmth into them, he frantically tried to place her. When he still came up empty, Strathearn opted for that which had never failed to charm and distract a woman.

He employed silky, seductive, tones. “As if I could ever forget a woman of your

beauty, ma cherie .”

She snorted. “ Comme c’est banal, Strathearn .”

How trite, Strathearn?

He bristled.

Well, I never. And he hadn’t ever been accused of such an offense.

Through his indignation, something more important, registered.

Strathearn. The lady used his title with an ease that bespoke their familiarity. His mind raced even faster as he tried to sort out how they knew one another.

Strathearn slid closer and reached up. He brushed the backs of his knuckles along her right cheek.

“I would like to, ma petite ,” he said huskily. “I would like to know you in many ways.”

The minx curled her slightly fuller lower lip up into the perfect pout. “ Ah, tu dis ça à toutes les femmes, Your Grace. ”

Yes, yes. Strathearn did say that to a vast, many, women. This was the first time he meant it, however.

“Your Grace,” he echoed. There it was again. “You know me, ma belle ?”

“ Immensement .” By the frosty, contempt-filled once-over she gave him, she found him less than wanting, and...damned if he didn’t feel himself besieged by a powerful

self-loathing.

His all-powerful desire forgotten; he frantically contemplated the woman who'd so fascinated him.

Her porcelain white skin possessed a vibrancy and silky, soft quality. Her unscalable high cheekbones denoted royal bloodlines. A heart-shaped birthmark at the corner of her crimson, cupid's bow lips called a man's focus and demanded his attention.

He knew her. But God help Strathearn, he had absolutely no idea who she was.

He gave her a lazy smile. "Alas, you have me at a disadvantage. Let us rectify that with introductions, ma belle."

"Je n'aime pas les presentations." I do not care for introductions. She gave him another scathing once over. "Duc pompose."

Though in French, this exchange bore the hint of some long ago, distant remembrance; a hazy memory shrouded in a cloud, as thick as any heavy London fog.

"...Don't care for introductions..."

"Who are you?" he demanded.

The lady's graceful shoulders sagged. The fiery spirit seemed to go out of her, and she sank onto on the snow-covered fountain bench.

"I'm disappointed in you," she said softly, in crisp, flawless, King's English.

The stunning beauty briefly lifted accusatory eyes to Strathearn, before returning her focus to the frozen watering fountain.

The wheels in his mind raced, careening out of control as he strove to place her.

“You are disappointed in me?” he asked carefully.

His mystery woman nodded.

Who is she? Who is she?

“I’ve even said that in front of you, Strathearn.” The lady directed that reminder at the snow she now brushed from the bench, onto the ice. “But that was when I didn’t know you and those words were intended for another.”

She lifted her luminescent eyes to his. “But this time,” she said softly, sweeping her mesmerizing gaze over his face. “This time, I meant them for you.”

“...Don’t care for introductions...I just want to make sure he’s not some pompous fellow who’s going to take exception if I call you out in front of him... I don’t need him trying to shut down your library...”

Strathearn went stock-still.

Absolutely not.

Impossible.

And yet, as he scoured a panicky gaze over the lady who’d bewitched him, those details he’d not previously been able to place, came glaring into focus.

She was no daughter of some émigré.

The fascinating, experienced, beauty he’d been covetously and opening admiring was

none other than Grimoire's innocent, polite, proper sister-in-law, Lady Opal Carmichael.

All the air left Strathearn on a sharp, explosive hiss and the earth fell out from under him.

Baiser.

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“Where did I put it?” Strathearn muttered to himself, doing a sweep of the grounds. “Ah! There it is.”

Bemused, Opal watched on as Strathearn made a show of collecting and dusting off his satin top hat.

If she weren’t about to dissolve into a blubbing mess, she would have laughed at the zeal and attention he put into both his task and the obvious way in which he avoided her gaze.

She scowled. Why, she may as well be a flesh and blood Medusa.

Her insides twisted into painful knots.

But then, to Locke, you clearly are.

For a few, joyous, magical moments Opal had foolishly, optimistically, naively believed Strathearn had been as bespelled by her as she was by him.

She closed her eyes, recalling when he’d powerfully and possessively taken her hand in his. He’d stripped each finger free of the kidskin leather like he unwrapped a bowed, brightly wrapped Christmastide present, he knew and relished the contents of.

And then, he’d licked, kissed, and traced the lines upon her palm and wrist, and his kiss, his touch, his loving endearments were all she’d dreamed of and what sustained her during her miserable years at Le Innocence.

Be it her cruel, jeering father, or the devastatingly charming gentleman who owned her heart, she never had, and never would be, one to cower.

Maybe if you had, you wouldn't have been sent away ... a voice mockingly chided.

Thrusting aside those unhelpful lamentations, Opal reminded herself of one very important piece of information she should not and could not dismiss—Strathearn hadn't recognized her and when he'd believed Opal to be a stranger, he'd desired her.

All her knowledge and understanding of passion may have come from the books that'd been the final bit of straw that'd led to her being sent away—books and the occasions when she'd caught Glain and Abaddon, locked in one another's embrace. And Opal herself may have never been kissed, but the hot glint in Strathearn's eyes and the hungry, mellifluous quality of his baritone as he'd whispered forbidden endearments to Opal, bespoke a man who'd hungered for her.

That was, until he'd realized her identity.

In fairness, despite his rogue's reputation, Strathearn was first and foremost a gentleman. More than that, he was as loyal to Grimoire as any brother. Right now, he'd be silently flagellating himself for his and Opal's exchange.

Sweet, all-powerful hope came to life within her being.

Just then, Strathearn took such a forceful swipe at the luxuriant, satin article and knocked it from his fingers.

Opal's initial sadness vanished and amusement tugged her lips up at the corners.

Taking mercy on the flummoxed duke, she intercepted his efforts, retrieved the snow-dusted-once-more hat, and handed it over.

He grabbed it quickly from her hands and took an even quicker step away from her.

“Uh, yes, thank y-you.” Giving all his attention back to the article, Strathearn resumed his frantic cleaning.

“I’m fairly certain if you brush that brim anymore, Locke,” she drawled, “you’re going to take the sheen right off.”

Like a misbehaving boy startled by a stern tutor, and not one of the most powerful peers in the realm, Strathearn jerked his head up.

Bright crimson splotches suffused the sharp plains of his chiseled cheeks—color she’d wager a lifetime living at Le Innocence had far less to do with the cold and entirely everything to do with the fact he’d mistaken Opal for some French tart.

“Uh...yes.” Strathearn coughed into his hand. “Snow.”

The Duke-Glib-of-Tongue-Master-of-Words-Hearts-and-Souls had been reduced to one-word utterances.

Perhaps, the universe held more surprises and miracles in store, after all.

She cocked her head. “Uh...yes. It is snowing.”

“No,” he said on a rush. “That is, there’s snow on my hat.” Creases lined his high noble brow. “Or, there was.” Half-heartedly, he returned the object in question to its proper place, atop his dashingy unkempt, honey-blond hair.

Cocksure. Swaggering. Arrogant. They were all words that came to mind when she thought of Strathearn. This endearingly flustered side of him, she’d not only never seen, but never believed him capable of, either.

Opal took mercy on him. “Locke,” she said, gently. “It is fine.”

“Uh-yes. It is,” he noted, peering at his hat. “Quite cleaned it—”

She interrupted him. “I’m referring to our exchange earlier.”

The color in his cheeks heightened. “I don’t...I...”

“You clearly mistook me for someone else, Locke.”

He blanched.

“I won’t breathe a word to Abaddon or Glain or Flint or anyone else.”

The previously always unflappable Strathearn yanked and twisted at the fur lapels of his cloak. “I don’t know what you are talking about,” he croaked. “I was merely having fun—”

Opal slanted him a warning look. “Oh, was it?” she asked slyly. “If that’s the case—”

“It is!” he exclaimed.

“Then, perhaps you can discuss your idea of fun with Aba—”

Strathearn’s gaze grew frantic. “Won’t be necessary, Opal.” He stole a terrified glance about.

Her previous giddy joy died a quick death. Strathearn didn’t want to be here, any more than Opal in this moment, wanted him here.

Right now, with him horrified and frantically contemplating an escape, she wished

he'd hurry up and go on and scurry off so she could give in to a good, much-needed cry. Her improbable goal of getting Strathearn to fall in love with her was always going to be a difficult task. The most difficult variable she'd not, however, allowed herself to factor in, was that Abaddon stood as an almost impassable barrier between she and Strathearn.

It bloody figures. He would. As if the universe needed to send me any other signs, reminders, and warnings that she and Strathearn would never align.

The contrary dunderhead.

"May I?" he murmured, motioning to the seat beside her.

"I'd rather you didn't," she muttered, and by his pained expression, continued to say just how much he didn't want to, either.

Ever the gentleman, he didn't take that seat without permission.

Ever the rogue, he didn't leave.

Instead, he dropped a gleaming black boot upon the bench and rested his weight across his knee.

She couldn't bring herself to look him in those always sparkling, dark brown eyes. Lest she did and he saw all the pathetic, pitiful regret tearing away at her foolish heart.

Instead, she fixed her rapidly blinking stare on his gleaming black hessian, which proved just as costly to her senses, as she stared transfixed by his—of all things—muscular calves. Her mouth went dry and she tried to look away, but as if of their own volition, her eyes climbed the length of his long legs; athletic from riding

and boxing and swimming.

It was the wrong thing to recall—the time she'd come upon him swimming at his ducal seat in Cambridge.

He'd allowed Opal and her family to use his properties as a place where they might meet with the duke's consent. What other nobleman would have gone so out of his way for his friend, or for that matter, anyone?

Yet, he had.

Sad, that should matter the most to Opal, but didn't.

Emotionally depleted, she drew her knees up and folded her arms about them.

"Care to talk about it?" he ventured, and he spoke with such a quiet, commanding ease, she almost forgot the sloppy situation which preceded it.

She shook her head.

"You're certain I can't join you, Opal?"

Opal.

She'd far preferred: minette. Mon amour.

"I'm certain as you're a duke and these are your grounds, you are free to do whatever you w-want," she said bitterly, her teeth beginning to chatter from the cold.

Locke straightened and clasped his arms at his broad back. His black cloak whipped angrily about his warrior-like legs. "Yes, primogeniture and patrimony does say that,"

he said quietly, his focus out on the vast countryside, blanketed in white.

Locke moved his gaze to Opal. The searing intensity of his eyes robbed her of breath.

“I would not, however, force myself or my company on anyone—most especially not you.”

Most especially not me?

Her heart kicked up its cadence.

He cleared his throat. “Being Grimoire’s sister-in-law and all.”

Being Grimoire’s sister-in-law and all.

Of course.

Grudgingly, Opal nodded to the place beside her.

Unable to suppress a shaky, forlorn sigh, Opal buried the miserable expression in the folds of her wet skirts until her teeth clanked together so violently, she had to clench hard to keep from grinding them.

When Locke made no attempt to sit, she cast him a quizzical glance. He shrugged out of his cloak and in one fluid movement, he draped the enormous garment around Opal’s shoulders.

She made a sound of protest. “Locke.”

“Tsk. Tsk. I insist.”

His body's heat clung to the fabric and seeped into her body so that she'd never be cold again. She drew the article close about herself, wanting to climb inside it...and him.

The wool and fur-lined garment also bore the hint of sandalwood and cedar, and Opal couldn't help herself. She closed her eyes and breathed deep of his favored cologne; that scent the same he'd worn, as long as she'd known him.

"That bad?" he murmured.

It had been. Everything being with him was right and wonderful.

She sighed. "Worse."

When Opal didn't elucidate, he encouraged her to continue. "And?"

"And," she muttered, huddling deep. "I cannot talk about it."

She felt a slight rush of air, and another welcome blast of unexpected warmth amidst the cold as Strathearn sat beside her. "Can't or won't, ma petite?"

My little one.

He still saw her as Glain's little sister, but he had added love to it, and so there was that.

"Both?" Despite her racing heart, she managed to say speak calmly.

Locke leaned down and moved his lips close to her ear. "Ah, the whole 'you don't like dukes'?" he whispered, his breath setting off another firestorm of emotion within her. "And here I thought you made exception for me, Opal."

Dazed, she lifted her gaze to his. “No,” she murmured, unable to take her eyes from his. “I said I might make an exception for you.”

Locke shifted his mouth nearer. “And?” he repeated, and as he spoke his lips brushed the shell of her ear in an accidental kiss. “Have you made an exception for me, sweet Opal?”

Her eyes slid shut and she prayed Locke attributed her silence to stubbornness.

Too proud though to let him know the effect he had upon her, Opal drew back to look at him, and her brain in conjunction with her lips forgot their function.

His beautiful, hard lips quirked at the corners in a rogue’s half-grin.

She’d been wrong. There was something far worse than his not referring to her by any of his previous endearments. These past years, her heart raced just remembering his smile. Nothing, however, could have prepared her for seeing that devastating grin in the flesh and blood.

Yes! You are the one and only man I’ve ever made an exception for, Locke . She’d learned firsthand the cruelty a father could and oftentimes did wreak upon their daughters. She knew wives oft found themselves suffering that same fate at their husband’s hand.

But Locke? He was different in every way and would be the man she married.

For, if she couldn’t bring him around...

Her body recoiled and a blast of cold penetrated at the future awaiting her if this week ended in failure.

His grin faltered.

“ Ma petite ?” he murmured, concern leant a deeper, gruffer edge to his voice.

Ma Petite.

There it was again.

She swallowed convulsively.

“What is it?” he demanded, all commanding duke, but instead of one who sought not to crush a woman weaker than him, but to crush the one he suspected of hurting her.

Opal opted for the nearest thing to the truth. “It turns out the small gathering I’d expected is not so small, after all.”

“ Ah .” A palpable relief filled Locke’s exhalation. He rubbed his large, powerful hands together quickly to warm them. “Do you care to explain why that is a dilemma?”

The Duke of Strathearn, protector of the Carmichaels, the solver of her and her family’s problems, and seducer of only experienced women’s hearts, he’d see talking to Opal about the house party as both safe and harmless.

She smiled wryly.

He had no i—

Opal stilled.

Solver of her family’s problems.

Protector.

My goodness! Yes!

From the tiny, but imperishable seeds of hope, sprung the answer, and grew the plan she'd been unable to craft—until now.

Opal carefully chose her words. “You see, Locke—”

“Ah, I fear I do not.” He winked. “ Yet .”

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. “I imagined a smaller event—”

“Yes, you said as much.”

“So that I could spend more time alone with one of Grimoire’s patrons.”

The previously debonair grin froze on Strathearn’s lips.

Not so smug now, are you...

His dark blond eyebrows dipped. “Beg pardon?”

Opal gave a cursory wave of her hand. “I fear I’ve fallen hopelessly and helplessly in love with—”

“Who?” Locke’s sharp bark exploded like a shot amidst the unnatural quiet left by the storm.

Yes, seeing her as a little sister, he would be outraged at even the possibility of Opal and a grown, lofty lord.

With a feigned concern, she leaned closer to him. “Locke?”

“I asked ‘who’?” he gritted out.

“Who?” she echoed.

“What is his bloody name?” he shouted this time.

Glaring, she slapped a finger against his lips. “Shh!” The last thing she could afford was to have this meeting interrupted. She stole a glance about. After Opal confirmed she and Strathearn were still alone, she spoke again. “It doesn’t matter.”

Locke growled. “The hell it doesn’t. You are entirely too young, too innocent, too—”

“I’m nineteen,” she said, indignant.

“As I said, too young.”

Folding her arms, she gave him a pointed look. “You didn’t seem to think that when you took me for a French tart you wanted to get into your—”

Locke slapped a hand over her mouth, muffling the rest of her sentence. “Do not say it,” he whispered frantically.

“Say what?” She asked when he removed his palm. “I was going to say—”

“Opal!” he warned.

“Cloak, Strathearn.” Opal cocked her head. “What did you think I was going to say?” she asked, all feigned innocence.

“Cloak,” he croaked.

She flashed him a naughty smile.

Locke narrowed his eyes. He gently but firmly took Opal by her arm and pulled her to her feet. “We’re going back.”

Indignant, Opal dug her boots in. “Duke—”

“No.”

“I didn’t even ask you anything.”

But both of them knew once she did, Locke would do as she requested. He’d never been able to say no to her or her family.

Now, she could only hope the same held true for her eventual request that he marry her and spend the rest of his life, loving her.

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F uck.

And this time, Strathearn didn't even try to dress the vulgar curse in his head up in a fancy, French whisper.

Absolutely any other time, he would have plucked his eyes out and cut out his tongue for having broken a code of friendship that forbade one man from lusting after a friend's sister or sister-in-law.

Forget the fact Strathearn hadn't recognized Little—or not so little anymore— Lady Opal Carmichael. The sin, accidental or not, was still a sin.

And now, Opal had gone and fallen in love.

Fury flashed through him.

No, not just that. She was in love with one of the bloody bastards who was even now a guest under Strathearn's damned roof.

He'd kill the blighter.

He'd rip the cod sucker's limbs from his body, make the unworthy fellow chew them, and then choke the bastard to death on the remnants of his arms and legs.

Opal's quiet, hesitant voice cut through Strathearn's all-consuming, feral rage.

“Locke?”

“Hmm? Uh...” Aside from her confidence that threatened to turn him into a ruthless savage, he hadn’t heard another word to leave her ripe, sensuous lips. “You were saying?”

“I wasn’t saying,” she said, exasperated. “You know that.”

No, he hadn’t.

He did, however, wink, pretending he had.

All the while, Strathearn fought to rein in his temper.

No, Opal hadn’t asked anything of him or from him.

Which also meant if he hauled her back to Lady Glain and Grimoire, without the information she’d intended to impart, then Strathearn would have absolutely no bloody idea who he needed to kill.

Striving for a calm he was certain he’d never again feel, he released his hold on Opal and folded his arms. “What is it you want to say to me?”

“Ask you,” she demurred.

“Hell, Opal, you just said you hadn’t asked me anything.” He ran both hands over his face this time.

“And, at the time, I hadn’t.” She flashed a siren’s smile. “Now, I am.”

Strathearn gnashed his teeth so hard it was a wonder they didn’t break. “You’re trying to drive me stark, raving mad.”

She pressed her thumb and index finger together. “Maybe just a little.”

“ Opal .”

Her ebullient expression faded; all the joy inherently etched in her features melted away so that only sadness filled the lines of her cheeks.

And bastard that Strathearn was, he couldn’t stop from noting with a rake’s gaze how cheeks that’d once been chubby were now high and arched like those carved in homage of the Greek goddesses. As enrapt as he was with the beauty she’d become, it took a moment before her next words reached him.

“I’m in love, Locke.”

I’m in love...

There it was again.

Opal spoke with a gravity he’d never before heard from her.

But then, she’d been a girl. Over the years, she’d transformed from a bothersome duck to a breathtaking swan. He’d just happened to miss the transformation. Some other chap, however, had not.

This time, he gleefully entertained all the ways he could kill the blighter.

“And?” he asked between gritted teeth.

Fury brought her breathtakingly back to life. “And I am a prisoner,” she hissed.

His breath came harder. God, she’d be a siren in be—

He recoiled. Disgruntled with himself for lusting after Opal Carmichael even now, he spoke gruffer than intended. “Opal—”

“Is this where you tell me I’m not?” she cried. “Is this where you proclaim me hysterical and flighty?”

Oh, for all that was holy.

“I haven’t said any of that,” he bit out.

“But you were thinking it, Locke.”

Actually, he’d been imagining stripping both cloaks from Opal’s curved body, so he could assess for himself all the ways and places in which she was now a woman.

Either way, both thoughts—and most decidedly, acts—were forbidden.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, Opal,” he snapped. “Because you seem to know what I’m thinking or intend to say before I even say it.”

Her lower lip quivered.

Oh, hell.

“Please, don’t cry,” he implored.

He’d always been utterly powerless in the face of her tears. The last having been her last visit to Cambridge when she’d jumped from an oak tree into Strathearn’s lake, in water too shallow, and sprained her ankle so bad she couldn’t swim the rest of her time visiting.

She'd cried more over that loss than the pain of her injury.

"I'm not." The moisture that welled in Opal's eyes made a liar of her.

As she attempted to gain control of her emotions, Strathearn himself remained in tumult. Until Opal, he'd never believed a person capable of such innocence, cheer, and truthfulness. He'd first met the young woman years earlier. She'd been a small girl and stormed into Chetham's Subscription Library like a veritable Joan of Arc and shredded Grimoire for having hurt her sister. She'd been witty, light-hearted, and he hadn't a bloody clue how to help when she was this way.

Frantically searching about, Strathearn yanked his hat off and beat it against his leg.

"You're right," she conceded on an aching whisper.

"I'm not."

A watery smile hovered on her lips. "You don't even know what I'm referring to."

"It doesn't matter," he spoke swiftly. He'd have given up his title, wealth, and bloody full head of hair to keep her from hurting. "Just...whatever it is you're right and I'm wrong."

Her eyes sparkled with their old familiar, glimmer of joy and something shifted dangerously in his chest.

"You're just afraid I'm going to cry and you hate a woman's tears, Strathearn."

Correction: He'd otherwise been indifferent to the practiced, pretty weeping of experienced women who'd employed those crystal drops like weapons.

He hated this woman's tears.

Unnerved as all hell, he affected an air of insouciance. "Guilty. You have my full attention. I do love being told when I'm right about something." He waggled his eyebrows. "Which is, always."

She rolled her eyes.

Her expression became somber, once more. "I assumed you'd judge me so I didn't give you a chance to listen."

"I would never judge you," he said quietly. "But you were correct earlier; I wasn't listening. I'm listening now, Opal."

"You as a man and duke, have complete and utter control of every aspect of your life. Me, on the other hand?" She breathed deep, and her shoulders heaved from the force of that unsteady intake of air.

"The duke..." she began.

Every muscle in his body tensed.

God, how Strathearn despised he shared so much as the title 'duke' with the bloody monster.

"Yes?" he asked quietly and gently so as to not startle her into closing up.

She hugged herself in a lonely embrace, and it was all he could do to keep from taking her in his arms, the way he'd done the first time she'd returned from finishing school, and rushed at him.

“First,” Opal said sotto voce, in flat deadened tones that proved more agonizing than her palpable suffering.

“He took away everything here I loved,” she continued in that haunting way. “My sister, Abaddon, F-Flint. And when I lost my family, I turned to my books.” Misery bled from within her eyes. “And just like Glain said he would, he even took my b-books,” her voice trembled. “He sent me away, Locke, and he is going to do it again.”

A fresh sliver of agony speared his heart. “I know, ma fee .”

Determination sparked to life in her previously suffering gaze. “The duke will separate me from the man I love...If I let him.”

Separate me from the man I love...

Opal’s fervency and adoration for some undeserving bastard, sent vitriolic hate shooting through Strathearn’s veins, and goddamned if he didn’t find himself on the Duke of Devonshire’s side for the first, last, and only time.

Strathearn seethed. It was a good thing the man she loved , was here, after all. That way, it’d allow Strathearn to quickly narrow down the one he’d be killing this holiday season.

Opal touched his sleeve and he jolted, feeling like he’d taken a bullet.

“But you can help!” she said brightly.

“You want me to murder him?”

Opal gave him a peculiar look and then tossed her head back and laughed. “You are always so silly, Locke,” she gushed, swatting his arm like he was her dearest friend.

Hell, that's what he'd really been these past years, but then she hadn't looked and sounded like this.

A memory slipped in of the last time he'd seen her. Opal, seated at the river shore, with her legs stretched out, her skirts up about her knees, and her face, tilted towards the sun as she'd absorbed the summer ray—

She dropped her voice to a low, mellifluous whisper. "What I need..."

Between his sensual reminiscence of her and sultry voice, his rake's body responded as it always had and would to the husky promise contained within, but this was Opal. She was different.

Alas, lust didn't give a shite about right or wrong, friendships or betrayal.

Opal beckoned Strathearn closer, with a little wave. Like he was the serpent and she the snake charmer, he went.

The minx took a swift glance about, which was good, as one of them was alert for possible discovery. Shock of shocks, he, the masterful rake ceded the role to the innocent. In fairness, he couldn't have managed the task were his life dependent on it, which it might well be. If Grimoire discovered Strathearn here alone, lusting after his virginal sister-in-law, he'd be dead on the spot.

Funny, the threat of death didn't prove as compelling as it ought.

When Opal looked back, her lips curled in a soft, cat-like smile.

"I want you to help me capture his heart," she whispered.

Unbidden, his gaze went to her cupid's bow mouth, and he stared transfixed by the

gleaming, crimson flesh.

As such, it was a moment before he registered Opal's request.

His cockstand wilted. "Absolutely not," he gritted out.

Her radiant features fell. Any other time, he'd have immediately rescinded his rejection.

Not. This. Bloody. Fucking. Time.

"But..."

"I said 'no'," he said more sharply than intended.

Opal turned her palms up. "Why?"

The desperate entreaty in her voice brought his eyes sliding closed. "Opal."

"You believe I'm too young," she said with a calm that attested to how Opal Carmichael had matured and changed—further, changed, that was.

"As Grimoire's friend, it'd be—"

"I'm not your friend, too?" she asked quietly.

"Of course you are!" he exclaimed.

Or she had been, but that'd been when she was a girl and he a grown man enjoying bachelorhood. He slashed a hand through his hair.

Opal persistent, obstinate vixen she'd always been, pressed him further. "Do you not trust I'm capable of making decisions about my own future?"

"You know I do," he said brusquely.

"Then why not help me—?"

"Because the last bloody thing you should be doing, Opal, is out here scheming with me about how to capture some bastard's heart."

His raised voice echoed like a shout in the quiet of the winter storm.

With a quieter curse, Strathearn took Opal by her arm and steered them through the entrance of the garden maze.

When in the privacy of the snow-covered greenery, Strathearn spoke on a hushed whisper. "If the gentleman was in any way deserving of you, then he'd be the one doing everything in his power to woo you and win you."

Agitated, he drew her up on her tip-toes and pulled her closer so their bodies nearly touched. "And you certainly wouldn't be outside alone with me, asking me to show you how to earn his notice, ma fee ," he breathed against her lips.

Their chests moved in like quick, uneven rhythms of two who'd engaged in a chase.

Opal stared up at him with wide eyes, and a fresh wave of lust bolted through him—for within those innocent, expressive depths, he identified all too easily and clearly—she desired him.

He released her quickly.

Opal immediately drew her arm close and rubbed the place where he'd gripped her. "That is f-fine, Locke." She lifted her chin. "I will figure it out—"

He had her in his arms.

Opal's threat ended on a sharp gasp.

Cleverer than Hobbes, Hume, and Spenser combined, she certainly would.

"The hell you will," he gritted out.

If Strathearn didn't get involved, then he wouldn't ever figure out the man's identity.

She eyed him suspiciously. "Why the sudden change of mind, Strathearn?"

"Because I don't trust you on your own," he muttered, which wasn't completely untrue.

On an exuberant laugh, Opal launched herself at Strathearn. "Thank you, Locke," she cried.

On instinct he caught her.

While she hugged him so tight, Strathearn's arms hovered about her waist.

Devil rot his already blackened soul at the feel of her—her high, plump breasts crushed against his chest, the flat of her belly nestled against his randy shaft—every male urge demanded Strathearn snatch Opal closer, bury his mouth against hers, and touch her all over.

He grappled with the need to do what was right and the desire to do what he wanted.

Ultimately—and shockingly—his sense of honor, and loyalty to Grimoire, won out.

“Yes, there, there,” he patted her awkwardly on the back, and eased her away from him. “Enough of that. After dinner when the gentlemen retire for brandy, we’ll meet. The library.”

Opal beamed like he’d put the sun in her hands. “Splendid!”

“Yes, splendid,” he mumbled.

Without a bit or hint of the tumult besieging Strathearn, Opal laughed one of her infectious, jubilant laughs.

Going up on tip-top, she kissed him. “You won’t regret this, Locke,” she vowed, and with a quick, jaunty wave, took off.

After she’d gone, Strathearn gave his head a wry shake.

Nearly all the times he and Opal met were over books: the Circulating Room. Her father’s library. Strathearn’s library.

The library was safe.

Amidst all the smell of those old leather volumes and Opal’s admirable obsession with books, he wouldn’t be stuck entertaining all manner of debauched and sinful things to do with a grown-up Lady Opal Carmichael.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:11 am

“...Be it known, little Opal, no day that features haricot lamb and roast carrots can be a bad day...”

Such had been Locke, the Duke of Strathearn’s profession to Opal when he’d hosted a parting meal for Opal and her siblings, when she’d first been sent away to finishing school. Given haricot lamb too had been her favorite, she’d taken it as another sign they were destined to be.

While she sliced into a tender piece of Locke’s beloved protein, Opal repressed a snort.

It appeared Locke hadn’t gotten his own memorandum.

When Opal took her leave of Locke earlier that day, she’d gone with a boundless, unspeakable joy.

Locke had agreed to help Opal woo a lord— (a lord who was in fact, him.) He’d capitulated far more easily and quickly than she’d anticipated, which meant this very night she’d begin having time alone with him.

In the entire lead-up to dinner, she’d spent every last moment thinking about the coming time she’d have with Locke; during meals when, given their like stations, they’d find themselves seated near one another and afterward, alone.

Alas, Opal’s happiness and grand expectations for her first night reunited with Locke proved all too fleeting.

She made herself take a small bite and evaluated the festively decorated table glittering from the gilded candelabras and their long, white, tapered candles.

With Opal seated at the opposite end of the long, long dining table from Locke, her plans had hardly gotten off to a promising start. A truth made all the more miserable by the sullen scowl on Locke's face every time he happened to look Opal's way—which was rare.

Oh, every guest assembled, with the exception of Locke, appeared perfectly gay and merry.

The same, however, could not be said of the duke. He'd spent the better part of the night glaring, like a sullen Henry VIII at his porcelain plate. And when not frowning at his dish? Well, then, Opal found herself the recipient of his boy-like ire.

By Locke's sour, miserable demeanor, it couldn't be clearer—he resented Opal having wheedled him into helping her.

Her fingers trembled, and to keep her silver fork from clinking against the crystal, she lowered the utensil. Picking up her napkin, she made a show of wiping at the corners of her mouth, and then, smiling, she returned the white linen cloth to her lap.

Let Strathearn frown all he liked. The wider his frown, the bigger her smile. The bigger her smile got, the wider his frown became. She'd discovered that particular—and amusing—detail, somewhere between the first course of white soup and the second course of, the duke's favorite—haricot lamb, roast carrots, and asparagus.

In the past, she'd have done so to get the better of him. But nothing between her and Locke was the same, and if she had her way, it never would be, again.

Opal attempted to get Locke's attention.

As if he felt her gaze, he tensed.

Opal smiled as he angled his head...

Her brow dipped.

Locke's attention went not to her but instead to the eldest of the Marquess of Brightly's younger sisters, Lady Amelia. Recently widowed, strikingly beautifully and eminently kind, Opal certainly understood the reason for Locke's absorption. On top of that, the lady also happened to be a patroness of Abaddon's library.

The lady was utter perfection, and Opal was the pettiest creature in the kingdom for hating h—

“A pence for your thoughts, Lady Opal?”

That murmuring at her side brought Opal's attention swinging to the lady's, tall, slender, handsome brother, Lord Brightly, seated at her left.

Splendid. Here she'd sat resenting the benevolent gentleman's, benevolent sister.

Tongue-tied at her last ungracious and shameful jealousy, Opal attempted to fashion a reply.

It'd have been a grim, miserable meal entirely if it hadn't been for the unexpectedly pleasant company of Opal's tablemate at her left. Lord Brightly, with his pale blond hair, gleaming spectacles, and love—and knowledge—of books, had a name that all too perfectly suited him.

“A pence?” To the right of Opal, the Duke of Savage snorted. “That’s all, Brightly?”

Dark, dashing, and an unlikely—but most generous—patron of Grimoire’s, slid a wry glance Opal’s way. “Take that as a sign of Brightly’s frugality, my dear.”

Savage favored Opal with a roguish grin. Her heart should have fluttered.

Not unlike Locke, Savage was a young, dashing, handsome duke. But her heart danced for—and belonged to only one man.

Lord Brightly proved a sport and grinned. “A true gentleman doesn’t brag about wealth and money. Expect you should know that, Savage.”

The duke arched a black eyebrow. “It’s not bragging, Brightly, when you’re the one who set a price on the lady’s thoughts,” he drawled.

The jocular pair’s banter put the men’s clear friendship on display.

Opal joined in. “Now, now, gentlemen,” she threaded a teasing note into her rebuke.

She favored each with a smile. “It is my understanding Lord Brightly is a most benevolent patron of my dear brother-in-law’s circulating room, and I only hold in the highest esteem gentlemen whose generosity extends to literature and the arts.”

“It appears then, Savage,” Brightly splayed his hands before him, “the lady holds us in equal favor.”

“That is troublesome, indeed, Brightly,” the Duke of Savage drawled, pulling a laugh from the other man. “There remains but one way to rectify such a dilemma.”

Savage called down the opposite end of the table. “Grimoire?”

Pausing mid-conversation, Opal's brother-in-law looked at the peer. "Your Grace?"

"In addition to my annual contribution to the circulating library," the dashing lord said, "I'd like to donate another one thousand pounds to my sponsorship."

Grimoire's brows shot up. Surprised and happy cries and applause met the duke's unplanned—and generous—announcement.

"You may rely on two from me," Brightly vowed, just as toasts were starting to go up. "And," he jovially added, "payment enough for fifty subscriptions for those unable to fund the cost of membership."

An even greater, deafening furor ensued.

"How wonderful!" Glain cried happily.

"Ten-thousand and one hundred and fifty subscriptions for those unable to pay for memberships!" A sharp, angry shout cut through the celebration, and left in its place, an uncomfortable silence.

All eyes, including, Opal's, went to the cross host, slouched at the head of the table. She and Locke, however, may as well have been the only two present; their stares remained fixed.

Anger emanated from Locke's gaze and the breath in her lungs, it froze.

Why is he looking at me so?

Grimoire broke the awkward silence. "Uh...many thanks, to each of you," he said, drawing all eyes his way, except for Opal. "Your generosity will go far in improving the lives of a good many people."

Ever the proficient hostess, Glain echoed her husband's gratitude, then effortlessly slipped in and redirected the guests to the festivities planned following refreshments.

Confused, Opal's gaze remained moored with Locke's.

From down the length of the table, he glowered at Opal.

Ah, yes, I'm the source of his displeasure. Opal's throat moved wildly. The only reason he suffered through—and, hosted!—a polite house party was because of her. Locke's loyalty to Grimoire came first.

Not backing down, Opal edged her chin up and held Locke's hard stare.

The audience melted away. Opal and Locke remained embroiled in a tense, silent, battle between the two of them.

Catching his wine glass in his coolly elegant fingers, Locke took a sip.

Her body trembled.

She searched the sharp, defined, angular plains of his face. She'd never seen him so...so...mordacious.

Befuddled once more, Opal shook her head. "I ..."

That stare... Locke's stare, piercing, savage, penetrated her very soul.

All the while, the ghost of a cold, smile flickered on his hard lips.

Plink-Plink-Plink

The crisp, steady, clear clink as Glain touched her fork repeatedly against her crystal glass called the guests' attention—the other guests.

“On this happy note,” Glain’s warm, but regally commanding voice filled the room.

Locke tossed back the rest of his wine and the minute he shifted his focus to Glain, the terrible spell broke.

Opal gave her head a shake.

“May I suggest the ladies join me so we may discuss all the wonderful events His Grace has planned for us this week.” Opal’s sister dropped her voice to a pretend hush. “I’m sure the gentlemen would relish time alone where they can all raise glasses and toast their generosity.”

An answering laughter followed.

And as the guests came to their feet, Opal, still dazed, struggled to follow suit...and also to make sense of the silent, bewildering exchange between she and Locke.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:11 am

Strathearn stalked through ancestral halls that went back four centuries and headed for his meeting with the minx who'd charmed every last lord seated at his bloody dining table.

All the while, he recalled Opal as she'd been at dinner—and seethed.

He'd spent the entire course of dinner assessing each and every last bachelor present to determine exactly which undeserving blighter Opal had set her cap on, but by God, the way she'd charmed every last man, Strathearn hadn't managed to determine his rival among them.

My rival?

Strathearn hit the end of the hall.

Within the gilded floor-to-ceiling length portrait frame, the First Duke of Strathearn's stern, savage likeness glowered at him. The armored knight, stood with his feet planted apart and his claymore unsheathed, appearing all too ready to climb out and take Strathearn's head off for being so addlebrained.

A rival for what?

Or who?

Because of Opal?

He laughed.

The sternly frozen-in-time duke continued to glare his disapproval.

“Yes, yes, you don’t take me as a fellow who’d appreciate a good joke.” Strathearn gave Duke One a wry grin and continued his march to the library.

He wasn’t being possessive of Opal. Not as in a ‘rival-rival’ per se. Not as in the contender, or challenger, sort of way.

Why, the chit was like a sister, and as such, any fellow who called on her, courted her, married her, or any variation of something in between would find himself on the deserving end of Strathearn’s wrath.

The doe-eyed, worried imp who’d enlisted Strathearn’s help capturing her true love’s heart hadn’t shown up to dine that night. No, in her delectable stead, there’d been the bold, flirtatious, witty, goddamned Aphrodite, charming each and every last fellow present.

Which was the wrong thought to have...as it immediately whispered forward a thought of Opal: Married to her mystery fellow—of a certain, that was the only outcome. Opal, parting her generous lips and taking some stranger’s kiss, the same moment she let her legs splay. Bold, daring, and spirited, she’d be a tigress in the bedchambers.

Rage blackened his vision.

“Shite and piss,” he hissed.

Reaching the end of the hall, Strathearn took the corner fast and collided with a young servant.

Letting out another curse, Strathearn quickly caught the boy and set him back on his

feet.

“Y-Your Grace! M-My—”

“Apologies,” Strathearn muttered to the stunned lad, and, hastening around him, continued at a briskened pace.

Oh, the bloody hilarity, the blasted irony, of Opal appealing to Strathearn for help capturing some chap’s attention. Not because Strathearn didn’t know the surefire way to get a fellow looking. Oh, he did . Some of London’s most wanton widows, nubile ballerinas, and scandalous ladies had, at some point or another, each courted his favors.

Those lusty women, however? They wanted—and got—but one thing from Strathearn—sex.

But Opal? She didn’t want that from Strathearn or any man.

A savage growl worked up his chest.

Oh, she’d better not.

Strathearn forcibly thrust away the repugnant idea of Opal lusting for some man...

The devil on his shoulder pricked Strathearn with his pitchfork. Don’t you mean some man that isn’t you, eh?

He stumbled a step, righted himself, and then quickened his pace.

Yes, any and every flesh and blood man and hell, even the dead ones, would agree, Opal Carmichael would tempt even a saint to sin.

Yet again, Strathearn's observation came more from his history as a connoisseur of beautiful women.

He blanched.

Not that Strathearn now—or would ever—compare Opal to another woman. The stark differences between the black-haired, spirited, chit, and well...well...every other woman was so vast as to be laughable.

“Fuck!” Mad I’m going m—

A young lady glided into his path.

Strathearn let out a shout several decibels higher.

Bloody hell.

“My goodness, Duke,” Lady Glain drawled. “I cannot say I remember you in such a foul temper, but once, and that was when you learned my husband had fallen in love with me.”

Lady Glain.

Splendid.

Strathearn dropped a belated bow. “My apologies, Lady Glain,” he said, his face as hot as his damned neck. “I fear you took me by surprise.”

Lady Glain lowered her voice. “Alas, I referred to your temper in the dining room. The main course, I know was not to your like—”

Strathearn waved his hand. “The meal was fine,” he murmured.

Get yourself together, man.

Strathearn took in a silent, steadying, breath. “My apologies,” he repeated, a second time, calmer.

Grimoire’s wife, a former Diamond, had been known for her comeliness and icy-heartedness. This smiling, teasing, kind-eyed woman before him bore no hint of her former self.

In terms of beauty, though, Opal, with her glossy, thick, black tresses and glimmering blue eyes, outshone her elder sister.

Opal...

Strathearn glanced down the hall.

Opal, who would even now be waiting, and who might very well decide she’d waited long enough for Strathearn to show—in which case, lionhearted, effervescent Opal would take matters into her own hands, which was decidedly not for the better.

He frowned.

“Am I keeping you from an assignation, Duke?” Lady Glain asked with more dry amusement.

Strathearn whipped his gaze back so quick, he wrenched a muscle in his neck. “N- Never!”

Lady Glain snorted.

His scowl deepened. What the hell did she mean by that?

“This time, my apologies are in order,” Lady Glain demurred. “It was my turn to offend you. I was merely jesting.”

“I’m not offended,” he blustered.

“Of course not.” Opal’s sister inclined her head. “I will allow you to your company, Your Grace,” she whispered.

He bristled. “I...”

Oh, fuck it. Let her believe what she would. With his black reputation, Lady Glain wasn’t off the mark. The better question remained: why the hell was he so indignant?

Strathearn bowed deep.

Lady Glain hesitated. “Your Grace?”

What the hell is it now?

“I do not suppose you’ve seen Opal?”

“Opal?” he echoed dumbly.

“Opal, as in my sister?”

“I have not,” he blurted. “That is aside from dinner. I trust you saw her there, seated at the end away from m— you .”

Lady Glain looked at him weirdly.

Get a damned hold of yourself, man.

Strathearn cleared his throat. “I have not,” he repeated.

“Uh...yes. Very well.” Giving him another odd glance, she hastened off.

Strathearn politely waited until the lady had gone, and the echo of her footfalls had faded altogether.

He took off, running the rest of the way, and didn’t stop until he reached the library. Catching his hands on either side of the doorjamb, he took in several deep breaths, composing himself.

The last thing he needed was for Opal to open—

The panel cracked open a sliver.

Through that small slit, a lone blue-green eye squinted out at him.

“Strathearn?” Opal’s whispery greeting contained a wealth of joy, eagerness, and excitement that unleashed a strange—but not unwelcome—sensation in his chest.

Hell, everything about this house party, and his exchanges with Opal, and disordered thoughts, was strange.

A fellow might as well lean fully into whatever the hell it was, and for Strathearn? He’d never been one to turn away anything that made him feel good inside.

Strathearn dropped an elbow along the door frame. He flashed a half-grin. “Hull—”

Opal snaked a hand around his upper arm and tugged him inside.

“Where have you been?” she demanded.

Opal, singularly unaffected by his presence and smile, pushed Strathearn deeper into the room and went about locking the door behind them.

He felt his first feelings of...rejection, and with Lady Opal Carmichael—and he didn’t like her indifference—this, indifference, as in the general sort.

His jaw flexed. He didn’t like it one, bloody bit.

Strathearn rested his back against the locked panel and waited until she looked at him.

“Forgive me, ma fee ,” he said silkily, folding his arms before him. “I found myself... unexpectedly waylaid.”

Everything inside hurt.

The pain in Opal’s chest intensified when, with each passing minute, Locke failed to show up for their appointment.

But that was nothing compared to this all-consuming, wrenching pain.

His smug, proud, rogue’s smile and cocksure carriage spoke the tale all too clearly—he’d been with another woman.

Unable to meet Locke’s gaze, knowing if she did, he’d gather with one single glance, just how pitifully heartbroken he’d left her with nothing more than a veiled mention of the time he’d spent wooing some other woman. “I am sorry you had to end your assignation to help me,” she whispered.

To make herself busy, Opal hurried back to the chair she'd occupied when awaiting his arrival. She picked up the book she'd been reading and made a show of reading.

This is hopeless. Opal had a more likely chance of stopping the earth from turning and setting it spinning in the opposite direction than she did of getting the Duke of Strathearn to fall in love with her and forsake his rakish ways to be with her.

All the while, she felt his gaze on her.

A heat greater than the flames cast by the blazing fire in the hearth, washed over her, and she looked up quickly.

Her breath caught.

With just a heartbeat between them, Locke brushed his knuckles along the curve of her cheek. "Are you?" he asked softly.

She managed a shaky nod.

Locke winged a single seductive blond brow up. "Should I leave, then?"

"No!" she exclaimed, embarrassingly quick.

That same rogue's smile he'd trained upon Opal at dinner when the rest of the guests' focus was elsewhere made another appearance on his beautiful, hard lips.

He lowered his lips close to her ear. The hint of Dionysus's sweet gifts of wine, honey, and grapes clung to the warm, silky sough of his breath and left Opal drunk. "Dare I take your eager denial to mean you want me here, Opal?"

Oh, lord, help me.

Her lashes fluttered like mad. “I-I am a-always h-happy to see you, Locke.”

“Just happy ?” he teased, his lips still so close, that when he spoke, he brushed her right lobe in an accidental kiss.

Opal swallowed hard—or she tried to.

“Tell me, ma petite sirene ,” he coaxed. “I want you to tell me.”

She tried again. This time, with success. “Do you remember the first two years after Glain and Abaddon married, when I’d visit Turvey House, and you’d sometimes find me perched on a swing above the River Ouse?”

“Yes?” he asked, his voice also a whisper, his earlier levity now gone.

Amidst the hypnotic pull of his husky baritone, Opal closed her eyes. “I always pumped my legs as fast and hard as I could.”

She struggled in vain to recall the crystalline depths of that river she recalled—this new memory forming with him, proved an even greater magic.

Locke rested his hands upon her shoulders. “Yes,” he urged, that sonorous rumble set her entire body trembling.

“But then you’d come and in just a handful of pushes, you’d send me soaring until I was so giddy, I became breathless.”

With the pads of his bare thumbs, Strathearn slowly, tantalizingly, deftly edged the gossamer puffs of her sleeves down. He lightly, sensually glided the pads of his bare thumbs along her exposed skin.

Oh, God.

Opal's legs grew heavy under her. "That's how I feel with you, Locke," she said thickly. "Like I'm flying."

Locke slid his left hand to the small of her back. He curled his fingers into her waist and drew her close. The contoured muscles of his chest tensed against her. "Let me show you what it really is to fly, ma fee ."

Yes! I want that.

Locke lowered his head closer.

He's going to kiss me.

Opal trembled.

"It was your sister."

She cringed. Nothing could leave a lady colder in the arms of a man she loved, than mention of her sister.

Strathearn's husky laugh tickled her lips. "The meeting that found me waylaid, ma fee , was with your sister. She wanted to know if I'd seen you."

Which meant...

Opal stilled. Locke hadn't been with another woman. That was, he hadn't been with some ravishing, sophisticated beauty.

"And what did you say?" she asked on an exhale.

He chuckled. “I didn’t tell her where you were if that is what you are wondering. Being the rogue I am,” he flicked his tongue over her earlobe and she shivered. “I lied through my teeth, ma petite .” My little love.

She sighed. “D-Did you?”

“I did and I always will, Opal,” he said huskily. “When a gentleman hungers for a woman—propriety, respectability, what is right, what is wrong—none of it matters.”

Harsh, mesmerizing flicks of gold glinted in Locke’s brown eyes. “Nothing matters more than having you in my arms.”

Her breath hitched.

Even as Locke claimed her mouth, Opal leaned up and freely, happily gave it to him.

He growled, a harsh, utterance of masculine approval.

Nothing, not one of the thousands of dreams she’d dreamt, not her greatest hopes or most curious wondering could have prepared her for the all-powerful, luminous burst of explosive magic of Locke’s kiss.

Locke tasted her lips, learned them, and coaxed her to learn the taste and feel of his, in return.

With each slant of his mouth over Opal’s, there grew a burning fervor to his kiss.

Opal’s legs failed her. When did she stand up?

Locke caught her fast and held her hard against him, refusing to surrender her or their embrace. He cupped his hands under Opal’s buttocks and squeezed.

She gasped at the deliciously, forbidden, wonderment of the powerful feel of his hands on her.

“I’ve got you, mamour ,” he vowed between kisses, his deep baritone, a shade deeper and harsher. “ Je t’attraperai quand tu tomberas .”

I will catch you when you fall...

Opal cried out; his promise as dizzying as the magic he currently wove with his kiss and touch.

Drunk on his touch, this man who did and forever would hold her heart, Opal met each bold slant of his lips with an increasing desperation and fierceness.

Locke ran his hands all over her; those large, all-powerful fingers exploring her and learning of her with the same devoted effort he did her mouth. “ Je suis en feu pour toi, mon couer ,” he rasped, against her lips. I am on fire for you, my heart.

Je br?le pour toi, mon roi. I burn for you, my king.

With a savage growl, he drew back and burned his gaze into her flushed, heated body. “Tu es la perfection, ma minette.”

Emboldened, Opal tangled her fingers in Locke’s golden mane and drew his mouth back to hers.

They partook in a violent thrust and parry; dueling with their mouths for supremacy in a primal dance, Opal was destined to lose.

A shameful rush of wetness flooded between her legs. Moaning, she writhed and twisted her hips in a bid to ease the hot, unbearable ache.

“Locke,” she pleaded.

He stiffened.

Opal silently screamed, knowing she’d shattered the moment, and wanting to call back her use of his given name.

Tenderly, Locke kissed her forehead. “Your first lesson, love?” he said softly, easing the sleeves of her dress back into place. “The way to capture your gentleman’s heart? Is by being you, by telling him how you feel, and being free in your longings for him.”

Locke stepped out of Opal’s arms and a blast of cold hit her.

In a vain attempt to restore the heat of his embrace, she went to hug herself, but stopped. The last thing she needed to draw attention to was how affected she’d been by what they’d done here when he remained unmoved.

“Here,” Locke murmured and methodically went about righting strands of Opal’s hair that’d come loose back into her diamond snowflake combs. “I’ll have you know, the gentleman whose heart you’re determined to win?” he casually remarked as he worked. “He doesn’t deserve you.”

“He does!” That vehement denial ripped from Opal and resonated around the high, stucco ceiling, where Apollo, deity of arts, poetry, and crops issued guidance to the mortals at his feet.

Locke, about to tuck another curl into place, stopped.

His lips formed a grim line. That tensing of his mouth made his already strong, chiseled, jawline more prominent.

“We shall agree to disagree,” he said, icily mocking, with a glacial hardness she’d never before witnessed from this man, or for that matter, believed him capable of, and it hit her like a kick to the core.

Even while Opal relished being the recipient of his skilled attentions, vicious jealousy clawed at her thinking of all the women who’d come before her...and who’d come after her, if she didn’t succeed in making him fall in love with her.

“Turn,” he murmured, and with his usual tenderness.

Opal, jolted by Locke’s back and forth transformation from hardened stranger to sweet-tempered friend, looked up, confusedly, at him. “I...” What is he saying?

“Here,” he said softly.

Locke guided her into position, and her eyes slid closed at the sure, steady, but commanding way he took her head in his hands, and resumed working on Opal’s coiffure with a care her own lady’s maid didn’t even take.

“We’re nearly done,” he promised. “As I was saying, before your full-throated defense of Lord Mystery Sweetheart,” Locke continued with his usual teasing, good-humored tone, she wondered if she’d merely imagined that earlier break in his character.

The order between them restored, Opal playfully pinched his arm.

“Ouch!” Locke exclaimed.

He finished seeing to Opal’s arrangement. “Whatever was that for, ma petite ?”

“You’re making light of him, Locke.”

“How could I? Why, I don’t even have leave of the gentleman’s identity.” The shameless rogue stared back with such an over-the-top wounded hurt, she laughed.

He stared pointedly at her.

Opal stared back.

Leaning in, he placed his lips near her ear and spoke on an exaggerated whisper. “This is where you graciously volunteer the fellow’s name.”

Her heart tripped several beats. How could she ever be this near to him, have his mouth this close, and not think of that scorching, explosive embrace that’d curled her toes and left Opal forever altered.

She leaned up on tiptoe and mimicking his movements, whispered in his ear, in return. “And this is where you realize I don’t intend to do any such thing.”

Locke swept an opaque gaze over Opal’s face.

They locked stares.

His thick, golden lashes drifted low.

Her body trembled.

He is going to kiss me, again...

And she yearned for him to do just that...and more...

“I’d say, given you’re entrusting me to help you, you’d also trust me enough with the chap’s identity,” the charming rogue groused; he softened his grumblings with a

devastating wink.

By the nature of both Locke's all-powerful title and by the very favor she'd put to him, he had every reason to not only expect Opal share that information with him, but demand she do so, as well.

Locke, however, had never been a man to throw his title around—except to provide support and protection as he'd done when Opal's father rejected Glain's marriage to Abaddon.

And it was just one of the thousands of reasons she'd journaled about through the years, why Opal would love Locke, the Duke of Strathearn, until the day she died.

Locke released a beleaguered—and not at all desire-filled—sigh.

“You will not budge, then, Opal?”

“No. I am quite determined.”

He grinned. “When you have your stubborn head set on something, heaven help the one who tries to get in your way.”

Would Locke still be smiling if he discovered he was, in fact, the one she'd set her heart, soul, and dreams on?

Locke perched his right hip on the sofa. “Give me something,” he said, with a pigheadedness to match Opal's own obstinacy.

“Very well ...”

He inclined his head. “I'm listening, ma petite .”

“You have my promise I will eventually tell you, Locke.”

“Granted your assured success, it won’t be long before everyone knows.”

A twinkle glimmered in eyes that would never not melt her soul.

The levity in which Locke spoke of her with another man, though, would never not break her heart.

“Very well.” Opal stepped between his legs. She rested her hands on Locke’s chest. “I promise you will be the first person I tell,” she vowed, smoothing her palms over the silk lapels.

All the thick, corded, contoured muscles of his chest rippled and bunched.

What she’d intended as a placating, soothing gesture vanished under the whipcord tension in his body.

“That is enough lessons for tonight, Opal,” he said with a brusqueness that made her recoil. “With your sister having looked for you, it’d be wise if you left.”

Humiliation sent Opal’s entire body burning into a red-hot blush. “Uh...yes...” Hastily, she stepped out of his arms. “Time d-did get away from us...me,” she swiftly corrected. “Didn’t it?”

Mortified, she glanced toward the gilded ormolu clock across the temple. With the size of those hands and Roman numerals, she couldn’t make out so much as a hint of the time.

“Look at the hour,” Opal said anyway. “Glain has planned for guests to partner off and gather holly and ivy and hawthorn and—” I’m rambling. Opal took a breath. “As

such, tomorrow will come early.”

“Yes, it will,” he said, huskily. “We will be partners for the...festivities.”

He spoke it as absolute, ducal fact.

Her heart quickened.

“All so that we can have more time with one another, of course,” he clarified.

Her fanciful hopes were dashed. Regardless of the outcome, whether Locke did or did not fall in love with her, he had offered to help her in ways no other man would have, and without any proverbial strings attached.

“Thank you for all your help, Strathearn,” Opal said softly. “I will be forever in your debt.”

Dropping a curtsy, she hurried to take her leave.

Locke called out.

“Opal?”

She glanced back.

“You owe me nothing, love,” he said, quietly. “You are not a woman to be in any man’s debt, and if there’s even one stupid bounder who expects that of you, tell me, ma petite . That way I can kill him.”

That fierce, warrior-like vow sucked the breath from her body.

Then, he winked. “Night, Opal.”

Night, Opal?

Do you truly believe an enigmatic, worldly rogue like the Duke of Strathearn would speak proprietorial towards any woman—especially an innocent like you, you ninnyhammer?

That was, however, her hope for how all this ended.

Opal mustered a smile. “Night, Locke.”

And this time Opal, her resolve strengthened, slipped out.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:11 am

Your first lesson, love? The way to ensnare your gentleman? Is by being you, by telling him how you feel, and being free in your longings for him.

What in God's name had Strathearn been thinking last evening?

The long and short of it?

He hadn't.

Nor did the self-castigations which kept Strathearn awake the entire damned night—which, had made him late to meet Opal—have a bloody thing to do with the obvious, reprehensible sin he'd added to his long list of them: a shocking discovery of uncontrollable, savage, lust—the power and likes of which he'd never, in the course of his entire debauched life, known with any woman—for his friend's sister-in-law.

No, the greatest mistake, amidst a slew of many, many had been Strathearn's guidance .

Your first lesson, love? The way to ensnare your gentleman? Is by being you, by telling him how you feel, and being free in your longings for him.

That is the bloody guidance you gave her, you cummberground, dalcop, clodpoll?

Standing on the stone terrace overlooking his grounds, Strathearn rubbed his gloved palms vigorously back and forth, not for warmth, but to keep from using them to take someone apart.

No. Not: someone.

Rather, a specific someone.

Seething, even amidst the erstwhile, bitter cold, Strathearn glared into the distance.

Watching on, a voyeur to Opal some seventy yards away with the Duke of Savage, Strathearn had never regretted more the roguish guidance he'd doled out to the innocent, passionate beauty...or wanted to kill a person more than he did, Savage...and, Strathearn's current company of himself—included.

“First last evening's dinner, this morning's breakfast, and now, the day's festivities. I daresay my planning leaves much to be desired, Your Grace.”

Startled, Strathearn cursed and spun around.

“Lady Glain,” he gritted out. “Grimoire.”

God, had the lady made herself his bloody shadow? This time she'd brought company, in the form of Strathearn's friend.

Apparently undeterred by his churlish temper, Opal's sister offered a blindingly bright smile. “It is most lovely to see you, too, Your Grace.” She lifted her gaze to Grimoire's. “Isn't it, dearest husband?”

Strathearn's unwanted guests joined him at the balustrade. Fabulous.

“I'd say, under ordinary circumstances, considering Strathearn tends to be an amiable fellow, it would be,” Grimoire said dryly. “Given he's generously hosted the affair, and is unfailingly—until now—friendly enough, we can make exception for whatever it is that's left him with a bee under his bonnet.”

Another blast of wind gusted, and with the dustings of already fallen snow came the clear, bell-like sounds of Opal's silvery laugh, followed by Savage's deeper, booming guffaws.

A stygian, unreasoning, rage, blackened Strathearn's vision.

"I don't have a bee under my bonnet," he growled.

Which only recalled the glorious beauty who'd been wearing one earlier. That was until a gust of wind knocked the crimson bonnet free of Opal's head and left her glorious black strands whipping like an onyx flag amidst the snow-covered white terrain.

"Yes, I believe that's accurate," Grimoire drawled. "Considering you aren't wearing a bonnet."

Opal and Savage remained near the same tall rows of holly bushes. "Of course, I'm not wearing a bonnet," Strathearn muttered, distractedly.

The spirited chit appeared to be fiddling with the branches.

He clenched his jaw.

Savage, on the other hand? No, the roguish peer hadn't taken his damned gaze from Opal, but then...why should he?

Between Opal's radiant, elfin spirit, quick, clever wit, and form, grace, and a beauty to launch ten thousand ships, well, as Strathearn knew from the start, she'd certainly not required any help on his part capturing anyone's notice.

Hell, Opal could have roused a damn eunuch, which Strathearn, nor Savage, were

anything remotely close to.

There was no doubt as to what bloody, too-handsome-for-his-own-good bounder, Savage was up to, or rather, planning.

“There’s also the matter of all the bees have gone into hiding for the winter, dear husband,” Lady Glain reminded.

Why, in this instant, was Savage even listening to whatever Opal was saying?

“Do they hide?” Grimoire asked, raising his wife’s fingers to his mouth for a kiss. “Or hibernate?”

Likely not.

“Oh, they most certainly do not hibernate, dear husband. In fact, I read a scientific journal on that very topic at your library...”

Strathearn flared his nostrils.

The lady deserved a suitor who hung on each and every last word she uttered.

“Astounding information my wife is in possession of, isn’t it, Strathearn?” Grimoire asked.

“Yes, yes,” Strathearn said distractedly. “Most astounding.”

Likely, even now, Savage, the inveterate bachelor and rake, plotted where he could whisk the lady away to for a few stolen moments so that he could take her in his arms.

Just as Strathearn had done fifteen hours earlier.

She'd been pure, scorching hot, fire.

His hands still twitched in remembrance of the feel of those luxuriant, silken, tresses wrapped about his fingers. The feel of her supple lips and under his tutelage, the eagerness with which she'd learned from Strathearn...and the unabashed way in which she'd kissed in return.

Would she be all breathless moans and pleas with Savage?

It was the wrong and absolute worst, wondering to percolate in Strathearn's fevered brain.

Especially given at this very instant, the suave Duke of Savage drew Opal's bonnet back into place—but suddenly stopped.

Damn your eyes, Savage!

Strathearn's increasingly harsh breaths stirred clouds of white.

Do not even think about it, Savage...

As a fellow rakish gent himself, Strathearn knew his silent warnings came in vain.

Sure enough, the handsome, ungodly rich, powerful, respectable, most coveted bachelor in the damned realm, leaned close and whispered something in Opal's right ear.

That same delicate shell Strathearn himself had licked and teased.

Blood rushed to his extremities and filled Strathearn with a savage and uncontrollable bloodlust.

Cursing roundly, Strathearn slammed a fist against the railing. The dense, wet mound of snow blunted the blow, saving his knuckles from a sure break but wholly unfulfilling.

The ragged spurts of his harsh breathing punctuated a silence once filled by his friends' prattling.

As heat climbed his neck, he turned his head.

With matching, wide-eyed expressions, Grimoire and Lady Glain stared at Strathearn.

The happy pair looked at him as though he'd gone insane.

In fairness, Strathearn himself believed his logic, reason, and self-control had all fled and left him stark, raving mad.

"Forgive me," Strathearn said. "I recalled I have business I neglected to see to." Beating a hasty bow, he made to step around the pair.

Regal and unflappable amidst even Strathearn's humiliatingly explosive display of temper, the lady smiled. "I do hope you will find time to join in some of the events?"

"Most certainly, Lady Glain," he mustered, with a calm at odds with the tumult within. "Again, I appreciate the thought and care you've put into the festivities..."

The latest of which had Opal out alone with Savage.

Strathearn stole a glance out at the couple in question, just as the pair disappeared

into the forest.

Rage tightened his gut.

“It is I who should thank you,” Lady Glain’s murmur was all that kept Strathearn from leaping over the ledge and hunting Savage, like the wild animals that’d once roamed these lands. “You have given me, Abaddon, and Opal our first meeting together in too long.” Tears gleamed in the young woman’s eyes. “I long for a day when we are free to come together without...” The old duke’s certain retribution.

Grimoire drew his wife into his arms.

“I hope that day is one day soon,” Strathearn said quietly. “And if there is anything I can do within my power to make it so, you have my promise, I will.”

At this precise moment, however, he’d one specific someone he needed to see now .

Making another hasty goodbye, Strathearn hurried inside, and soon after, took an alternate way outside to his ancestral grounds.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:11 am

As guests gathered at the terrace that morning, and it became apparent Locke would not, despite his promise, join her, Opal found herself partnered with the Duke of Savage.

That pairing had earned more than a few envious sighs from the unmarried—and older matrons—present.

Certainly, there could be a great deal many fates worse than a lady finding herself in the company of the Duke of Savage, a fact that Opal, the daughter of a mercenary lord, knew all too well.

Opal's every meeting with the duke revealed the gentleman to be charming, intelligent, and possessed of an appealingly wry, humor.

Except, walking through Hackfall forest beside Savage, the gentleman's arms brimming from greenery they'd collected for Opal to arrange later, every moment she'd spent with him, she'd secretly wished he'd been another.

The duke spoke, pulling Opal out of her regret-filled musings. "Never say you are disappointed with our selections, Lady Opal?"

Giving her head a shake, she offered the charming nobleman a playful smile. "How could I ever be disappointed with such a grand collection, my lord?" she countered. "Why, you were gracious as to cut,"—At his insistence—"and carry every last object I set my heart upon." Locke would have let me clip the branches, twigs, and shrubs myself because he knows how much I enjoy doing so.

“I would be the last gentleman to deny you that which you’d set your heart upon, my dear,” he spoke in a most debonair way that should set her heart to racing.

Instead, the memory of Locke’s ‘ma petite’ and ‘ma fee’ and every other endearment he’d uttered filled her mind.

Opal carefully picked her way over the snowy, uneven earth. As she wandered, she stared wistfully at the small pond, which had iced over.

How funny. All the romantic tales she’d loved to read and the warnings issued to debutantes painted all rogues as being the same, where Opal had discovered only one, specific rogue so moved her; a different duke than the one accompanying Opal now.

It was a moment before she realized the Duke of Savage was no longer beside her.

Frowning, Opal stopped and turned around.

In his high, beaver top hat, and sapphire blue, box coat, Savage, wearing a lopsided smile, hung some four paces back.

Oh, hell.

The duke sent a single black eyebrow slowly arcing up. “I’d begun to suspect you’d make it all the way to the warmth of Strathearn’s estate before realizing you’d left me behind, my dear.”

Heat fanned her cheeks and blended with the rosy color left by the cold. “My apologies, Your Grace, my head is elsewhere.”

As soon as that blunt, and brutally honest reply, slipped out, Opal pressed her lips together. Bloody hell.

The duke stared at her.

And then, tossing his head back, the Duke of Savage roared one of his familiar, robust laughs until the objects in his arm shook so badly, he had to set them down to keep from dropping them all into a disordered pile.

Opal's entirely too gracious partner gave his head a wry shake.

"My pride is taking quite a beating, love," he said after he straightened.

She flashed him a playful smile. "Given you are met with, written about, and spoken to and of, with nothing less than the world's adoration, I hardly think you'll be wounded by my wandering thoughts,"—With thoughts of another— "Your Grace."

Instead of responding in teasing kind, Savage's expression grew serious.

Forgetting the stack at his feet, the duke clasped his hands behind him, like some great Greek philosopher of old, born anew in this modern, wooded forest. "It is interesting you say that, my dear," he murmured.

Even with the snow-covered grounds, Savage moved with impressively languid, even strides.

"What exactly do you find so interesting about it, Your Grace?" she asked. "Do you find my statement to be untrue?"

"Untrue?" He chuckled. "On the contrary. You are very accurate. I'm quite revered."

"But not modest," she riposted.

"You offered honesty and I'm merely offering the same," he said simply, and without

clear offense having been taken. “By your own admission, the world favors me, and at that, for nothing more than my title.” He paused, dipping his head close. “And perhaps in some part, my good looks?”

Her lips twitched. “More honesty?”

Savage gave her a wolfish look. “I shall let you be the one to decide that, my dear.”

The playful nature of their exchange evaporated like the warm sough of their breaths on the winter air.

This time, the charismatic duke’s expression grew serious. “In a world where people offer platitudes, I find I prefer your forthrightness. It is...rare.”

He spoke of her like she was some oddity he wished to figure out and not like a friend and equal the way Locke did.

Disconcerted, Opal looked back toward their bounty. “We should return, Your Grace,” she murmured.

“Yes,” he said, regret tinged his concurrence.

Opal took a step to go, but Savage caught her gloved hand in a tender, but firm grip.

Only one other man had held her so. And only that other man’s mere touch brought with it a penetrating heat.

Opal opened her mouth to gently, but stoutly rebuff his attentions.

Whoosh.

Opal gasped; specks of powdery dust peppered her eyes, stinging them.

Whoosh.

Opal just barely registered she'd been the secondary target of someone's furtive attack when a second snowball took the duke's hat clear off.

A third projectile came right behind it. This one caught the Duke of Savage squarely at the back of his head and exploded into a spray of icy, watery flecks.

Grunting, Savage whipped around. "What in—" Whoosh . "He ff ?" he muttered around a fourth ball of snow.

The crunch of scampering footsteps and high-pitched squeals and giggles identified their offenders.

"My siblings," the duke muttered, though a playful glint shone in his eyes, and were her heart not so fully belonging to Locke, she thought she might have understood the gentleman's appeal. "Run."

Before she knew what he intended, Savage stretched his arms out, and bolted.

With her teeth chattering from both the cold and—lest she give herself away—laughter she fought to suppress, Opal headed in the opposite direction, to the pond. The hems of her cloak, wet and muddied, slowed her pace, putting her at a decided disadvantage.

Breathless, she took a quick glance back to assess the threat of danger. Strangely, the melee seemed oddly, specifically, reserved for the duke, who by the sounds, or more accurately, fading sounds, indicated he had a lot of little ones bearing down on him.

Laughing, she looked about for a hiding place.

A tall, imposing figure, jumped into Opal's path and reached for her.

She gasped. The fist she sent flying was caught before it landed.

Opal flared her eyes wide.

Locke snatched her around the waist, and drew her close, so their bodies touched.

"I don't know about you, ma petite ," he whispered against her ear, and she prayed he attributed the hitch in her breath to the cold and not the power he had over her body and senses. "I'd say your doltish sweetheart would be better served properly arming himself with some snowballs than waving his arms about like an angry bear."

Her lips twitched.

"Worry not, Lady Opal," Savage bellowed from somewhere deep within the forest. "They shan't keep me away. I will come for you."

"I'd like to see you try."

She glanced in consternation up at Locke. "What...?"

He'd already scooped Opal under the knees and bolted.

Dazed, still breathless with laughter, she clung to his chest.

"What are you doing, Locke?" she asked, exasperated.

"Shh, you're going to give us away..." His obdurate jaw cinched. "Unless that's what

you hope to do?”

Reveal she and Locke were together and end the stolen time she had with him? “No.”
Never.

He smiled. “Splendid. We, ma petite , are winning the battle out here. Savage doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Aren’t Savage and I on the same team?” she drawled.

Locke snarled. “You most certainly are not.”

Opal searched and found no hint of levity or his usual light-heartedness.

The stone ruins of the ancient castle that’d stood on these grounds came into view, and like the medieval master of the keep, Locke carried her on through. Then, there, amidst their own private ice palace, hidden away from the world, Locke eased her body slowly down his. He did so with such languor Opal could feel his chest muscles roll and the contoured, flat of his stomach ripple.

She sank her teeth into the inside of her lower lip. No man had a right to be built as Locke, the Duke of Strathearn.

“You were supposed to be my partner, this day,” he said, crossly.

From her father’s oppressive rule, Opal had learned to fear noblemen. With the Duke of Strathearn’s honor, his selfless defense of those who did not enjoy the same luxury of power as he, and he, on the other hand, displayed a nobility of spirit.

“Yes.” Opal allowed in solemn tones. “But that would have required you to, you know, be present this morning, Your Grace.”

With the tip of his boot, he kicked at the snow. “I was...present,” he grumbled.

Folding her arms in a like manner of his, Opal prodded. “Perhaps I should ask where you happened to be present?”

“I was...sleeping.”

An even starker silence, filled the quiet forest. “Sleeping?”

He nodded.

“I...see.” And he thought this was a suitable defense of his absence because...?

Apparently, he either didn’t, or didn’t care to elaborate.

“Yes, well, while you opted to forego our plans in exchange for further rest, I was required to find another partner.”

Locke narrowed his eyes. “Required?”

“ Yes ?” Opal scrunched her brow up. What was he on about?

Locke eased closer until he’d anchored her body between him and the cyclopean wall. “Required, suggests Savage wasn’t your first choice, ma petite .”

“He wasn’t,” she said quietly. You were.

Smiling like the cat who’d gotten into the cream, Locke grunted. “I knew you’re too clever to fall for a rogue like Savage.”

Opal moved her gaze over his smug-set features. “I see...” she said, glancing past

him and out instead at the pond she'd once swam in.

Here, I'd dumbly, hopefully, and naively believed Locke's fiery reaction had been a product of maybe some small jealousy on his part.

Locke glided his knuckles along her cheek and forced her gaze back to his. "Oh? Do tell, ma petite."

She glared at him. "There's some manner of rivalry between you rakish dukes."

"There wasn't before."

Opal puzzled her brow in confusion.

Locke touched his brow to hers. "I need to know, Opal," he whispered, the sough of his breath fanned her lips and liquified her inside and out. "Tonight, I need you to tell me."

"Wh-Why?"

"I don't know," he rasped, frustration leant a graveled edge to his deep baritone. Just as suddenly, his anger dissipated. Folding his arms at his chest, he smiled widely.

Then it hit her...

"You staged this attack?" she said, her voice timorous. "All of it. You didn't join me so you could see who I paired with and then snatched me from the duke to question me."

A light flickered in his eyes, but before she could make sense out of whatever she spied there, it was gone.

Making a sweeping motion with both arms, Locke took a deep bow. “I did come prepared with a second lesson for you, Opal.” A shadow descended over his gaze leaving it as opaque and unforgiving as the winter’s hold and him darkly serious, once more. “Do not waste your time pursuing a gentleman who, even during a child’s game, would willingly part from you. If he’s worth a grain of salt, he couldn’t bear being without you, and if he had a lick of sense, he’d know the minute he was gone, there’d be some other attentive fellow there to take his place.”

Not unlike when Locke failed to show that morn and the Duke of Savage was there to take his place.

A blast of frigid wind whipped through the forest. Opal’s eyes stung not from the punishing cold, but an insurmountable amount of pain.

She’d been foolish to hope, nay , mad to believe she, an inexperienced young woman, could ever capture the debonair duke’s notice, let alone his heart.

Numb, Opal wandered along the snow-covered stone castle floor and stopped. Facing the westerly side of Locke’s ancestral properties, she wrapped her arms about herself and stared empty out.

She’d known in coming here to woo the Duke of Strathearn, she had but a ghost of a chance at success. She’d simply hoped that in reuniting, he’d come to see she’d become a woman and dreamed he might desire her. Never once, in all the time they’d known one another, had he given Opal leave to think he viewed her as anything other than a little sister of sorts. And if he did, well, there still remained the matter of his best friend, Opal’s brother-in-law, Abaddon. Everything she knew to be true of Locke said honor would never allow him to pursue a relationship with her.

She moved her gaze across the desolate winterscape.

The thing of it was, she'd known all of that.

But somewhere, deep, down, there'd been a secret place within Opal that'd envisioned only one outcome—Locke loving her in return.

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Splendid.

She'd attributed his efforts this day at chasing off Savage as a pissing contest between Strathearn and the handsome, dark, raffish lord.

It'd be far better and safer to believe that lie. Particularly seeing as how the truth couldn't be explained—not for her and not for himself. Hell, how could he, when Strathearn himself couldn't make sense of the cloying, unreasoning jealousy about the proud, spirited Lady Opal?

With her regal back and proud shoulders presented to him, Locke peered intently at the long-silent lady. She'd always been so very garrulous. No more.

He took in the whipcord tautness of her proud frame; with her spine so painfully erect, it would take but another harsh gust of wind to snap. Opal possessed all the gravity of a grown woman.

She's no longer a girl...

Of its own volition, Strathearn's gaze slipped over her exquisite form. Somewhere along the way, she'd not only become a ravishing woman, she'd changed.

Oh, her laughter still rang with unabashed joy and filled her glittering blue eyes. The smile she wore, as real as royalty.

But... her smile, came less frequently.

As a duke, he'd met in his life, only, and every, manner of false merriment: flirtatious smiles. Coy ones. Practiced giggles. Brittle laughter. From the moment Opal had come waltzing into Grimoire's circulating room and Strathearn's life, he'd marveled at the unrestrained way in which she went through life.

He'd never known such purity and good could exist, until her.

Somewhere, along the way, when he'd not been around to see it, time, as it invariably did all people, robbed Opal of her incorruptible blitheness.

No, time itself didn't account for a person's stoicism.

Strathearn's frown deepened.

Life and life alone accounted for withered happiness.

In the distance, there came an echo of children's giggles and laughter, a stark, painful reminder of Opal's transformation, and also an unwanted reminder there were others in this heavy forest.

Grim for reasons that no longer had a thing to do with Savage or whoever the hell her Mystery Love was, Strathearn ventured closer.

"I've angered you," he quietly remarked.

Opal spun.

Her eyelids flickered rapidly. "Locke," she said like she'd only just recalled his presence.

Strathearn raised an eyebrow.

The solemn beauty gave a brief, clearing shake of her head. “No,” she said softly. “How could I be angry with you, Locke?”

He’d never been that way with her. But now, Strathearn found himself remarkably at sea and fell back on his rakish ways. “Easy,” he flashed a slow, seductive, smile. “I’m a bastard with countless blackmarks against me.”

Her somber gaze grew impossibly sadder.

So much for a rogue’s humor. Given the sorrow surrounding Opal’s question, Strathearn may as well have dealt her, and not himself, that disparagement.

“Why would you say th-that, Locke?”

“Because it is true, Opal.” With a grunt, he focused on that tell-tale shiver in the lady’s voice. “You’re freezing.”

Before he realized what he intended to do, it was too late; he’d already drawn Opal against him. Then, folding his arms around her delicate frame, he began to rub his palms in small circles over the narrow expanse of her back to bring the lady warmth, and tried not to think of how bloody good she felt in his arms.

The way Opal rested her cheek upon his chest, he felt the moment she angled her head, and tensed.

“You truly believe that,” she said softly. “You do not see how good a man you really are.”

What he’d been foolish to believe was that she’d not press him further.

“You are blinded by my friendship to Grimoire,” he drawled. “I really am a bastard.”

“You are no such thing.”

Unnerved by the vehemence in her voice and the intensity of her unwavering stare, Strathearn set Opal away from him.

“I’m a Renwick, love.”

She leveled a sharp gaze on Strathearn, one that cut right through him. “And?”

More fatigued than angered by her unwarranted display of loyalty, he sighed.

“Opal,” Strathearn spoke to her in the same way he did when she’d been a child. “Renwicks, we are a horrid lot of dissolute lords. We’re hellraisers, whose greatest credit to the name is our skills in seduction, good fortune at gaming tables, and an ability to charm, but only for self-serving means and ends.”

“You’re speaking about your father.”

His skin pricked at the feel of her all-too-astute gaze on him.

“No,” he said flatly. “I’m speaking about my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, all the way back to the first debauched duke and ending with yours truly.”

Around them, the wind gusted sending fallen flakes of snow back into the air where those flecks sprinkled the earth for a second time. “Come,” he said gruffly, catching her lightly by the arm. “It is co—”

“You think you are the same as your father.” Opal rested her hands on his chest, covering that place where his heart beat and now raced from nothing more than her innocent touch. Lust fired through him.

His jaw tightened. Dreaming of bedding his best friend's virginal sister-in-law. As if any other proof were needed of his licentiousness than that.

"Do you believe I am the same as my father?" Opal quietly asked, so evenly she couldn't begin to fathom the caddish thoughts racing in his head.

Strathearn let a sardonic smirk play across his lips. "There's not a bit of his icy ugliness in so much as an inch of your entire being, and you know it."

"Yes!" Opal went up on tiptoes and surged closer. "Precisely, and yet you insist you are the same because of the one who sired you."

The entrancing minx spoke with all the earnestness only an innocent could.

"No, Opal. The difference being: you do nothing and behave in no way like your bastard of a father. While I?" His mouth twisted in a mocking smile. "I'm very much my father's son."

She shook her head. "I don't believe that."

"Have you read of my pursuits in the papers?"

Silence met his question.

Strathearn didn't let up. "Ah," he purred. "You have."

The color of her already red cheeks deepened in a telling blush that served as all the answer he needed.

He walked a slow, predatory circle about the suddenly silent Lady Opal.

“Have you doubted their veracity?” he asked silkily.

Opal dipped the tip of her pink tongue out and traced it along the seam of her heavy lips.

A fresh surge of blood sent his already impressive cock-stand rising to painful heights as he imagined teaching an innocent but spirited Opal how to take him in her mouth and showing her the way he loved. She’d be a masterful student.

His breathing increased.

“Hmm?” he taunted Opal and her newfound reticence.

At last, she found her voice. “I don’t know if they are true,” she said gravely. “I just know who you are.”

Strathearn chuckled. “And you believe the two can be separated?” He shook his head wryly. “Perhaps it is easier for you to justify your friendship with me, Lady Opal. Because I’ve been kindly to you and your family through the years, you allow yourself to shut out the manner of man I really am.”

She lifted her chin in bold defiance.

“But then,” he scraped his rake’s assessing gaze up and down her body, “maybe with the favor you’ve put to me this week, love, I no longer have to hide my true self from you. If I admit that I’ll eagerly seduce and bed unhappily married women and actresses, and really, any woman who tempts me, will that disabuse you of the high opinion you hold?”

Opal went as white as the snow around them.

Good. Let her know who she's really dealing with. Shatter her starry-eyed illusions.

Why then, when in doing so, did feel like he was driving rusted blades into his own heart and twisting them?

"What of happily married women, Locke?" Opal spoke in a voice so soft, another gust of wind and the distant echo of a lively snowball fight nearly drowned out the question.

Nearly.

His muscles went taut.

Their eyes met and held; with his unyielding gaze, he dared her to look away.

Sweat slicked his palm.

"I know what you're doing, love," he gibered.

"And what exactly is that, Locke?"

"You're trying to find decency in me because you need to see it to justify being associated with an unscrupulous scoundrel like your father."

Opal sucked a breath in and recoiled.

Good! Now, she'd finally see him for who he truly was.

Strathearn took her again by her arm, this time, harder. "Why do you think I agreed to help you with your ridiculous plan to seduce some other chap?"

Wide-eyed, Opal shook her head.

Clutching her tightly, he reeled her closer. “You came to me as a friend to help you,” he taunted. “Your dear brother-in-law’s loyal, reliable best friend who’d never deny you anything.”

Strathearn steeled himself against the fear and misery that spilled from the glorious depths of her eyes.

“Do you happen to know who else I’d never deny anything?” he purred. “ Myself .”

Strathearn wasn’t done with her.

“The truth is, Opal,” leaning down, he pressed his cheek against hers and whispered into her ear, “the only real reason I agreed to help you is because I want to make love to you.” Liar . You bloody care about her and her happiness.

Her body trembled against his.

Shutting out the irritating voices in his head, Strathearn spun her quickly and drew her tight against him, so even, through the protective layer of garments between them, she could feel the rigid length of his shaft.

She whimpered—with horror...

His brows flared.

Or desire?

“Feel this, love?” he jeered. When she didn’t say anything, like the rogue he was, he rocked his erection against her flat belly. “This is what drives me always—lust.” His

voice grew ragged. “My body responds to you the same as it would any other woman.” He lied a second time this day.

Pain flashed in Opal’s eyes and another blade struck his blackhearted chest.

Strathearn forced himself to keep on shattering every last illusion she wrongly carried about him.

“You asked me to teach you the art of seduction.” Desire leant a rough edge to his whisper.

He continued rubbing his manhood over her stomach.

Opal moaned.

Strathearn glanced down and his already strained lungs constricted.

Opal looked upon him with desire-laden eyes.

Any other virtuous lady would have run away wailing.

But then, Opal hadn’t ever been like anyone he’d ever known.

“I did so for entirely selfish reasons, Opal.”

That much had been true. He’d wanted to determine which of his guests he needed to kill and that dark, rakish place down deep inside him that he hadn’t acknowledged until now demanded he be the first to taste of Opal Carmichael and tutor her.

“I did so because my loyalty to Grimoire requires that I not ruin you,” he rasped harshly. “But my love of self and my own desire takes precedent before all and

demanded I sample you first.”

Their breathing both came deep and labored.

“Lady Opal!”

Savage’s booming voice filled the forest and came this time much closer.

But for the way her sooty eyelashes quivered, neither he nor Opal moved.

Then, as if in slow motion he hooded his gaze and lowered his mouth nearer hers, at the very same time Opal inched her neck back.

I have never wanted a woman more than I do her...

Somehow, with a restraint he didn’t believe himself capable of, he twisted his lips up into another mocking smile. “Go play with Savage, love. And when you do, remember which of the gentlemen here at this party in your honor is the real savage.” With that, he released her.

Opal stumbled and then caught herself. With horror stamped in her exquisite features, she backed away from Strathearn. Giving him one last look, she took off running toward the very gentleman whose direction Strathearn had sent her fleeing.

The moment she’d gone, he closed his eyes. God, he despised himself. It mattered not that he’d attempted to scare Opal away to keep her safe from him and the dishonorable imaginings tempting him to sin.

Every muscle in his body taut with strain, Strathearn coiled his hands into tight fists. To keep from calling Opal back, he rested his forehead against the jagged stone wall welcoming the pain as the ancient rocks bit sharply into his skin.

“There you are, Lady Opal.” Savage’s infuriatingly silky greeting penetrated the winter quiet and brought Strathearn’s eyes flying open.

Whatever Opal’s response, it emerged too quiet for Strathearn to hear.

Carefully, he edged his head just enough so he could peek at the couple.

Like two intimate lovers caught in their own winter paradise, the pair stood facing one another. Opal clasped the duke’s hands in hers and proceeded to steer Savage so he couldn’t see Strathearn, the seething foe who lurked amongst the ruins.

Or, maybe that’s what you are telling yourself. Maybe she’d linked her fingers with the other man’s because he was, in fact, the one whose heart she’d come to Strathearn’s own estate, to win.

Her cheeks radiated merry color and the lips Strathearn had moments ago brought to a frown, now slanted up in a winsome smile.

Discovery be damned, Strathearn stared openly at Opal with another gentleman.

Strathearn gritted his teeth so hard it was a wonder he didn’t give himself away to Savage. As enrapt as the rogue was with Opal, Strathearn suspected the earth could crack in two, and the bloody, besotted fellow still wouldn’t notice as long as she and he occupied the same sliver of ground.

Whatever Opal said brought the other duke into a full, sincere laugh.

But then, that was the effect the lady had on every person whose path she crossed.

Opal joined in so the couple’s mirth tangled and joined like the most harmonious symphony of sounds.

A bitter ache burned within Strathearn's chest and something that felt dangerously close to envy coiled about his heart.

"...I'll give us away," the duke was saying. "The pair hunting us are ruthless. Come." The consummate rogue used the opportunity to catch Opal's hand in his. "You appear to have found us the ideal hiding place."

Bloody hell.

Strathearn swiftly edged himself back into hiding.

"No!" Opal said, her voice slightly pitchy. "This way."

He glanced out to find her tugging the dashing duke along, and the bloody bastard went all too gleefully.

Strathearn stared after Opal and Savage's retreating forms until they vanished from view.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated on breathing; otherwise, he'd go mad at the thought of Opal alone with the handsome, charming Duke of Savage.

Nothing about this visceral response to the thought and sight of her with another felt brotherly, nor did it come from any sense of obligation to watch after Grimoire's sister-in-law. Nay, this was the black, unceasing jealousy all the greatest poets wrote of; the kind of sinister envy that robbed a man of logic and left him blind and battered.

Now it afflicted Strathearn in the worst possible way, for the last possible woman it ought.

Bloody hell.

This was bad.

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Opal glared darkly at the branches of evergreen, ivy, holly, and scattered fruit before her.

The kissing bough.

Of course, she'd been the lady Glain assigned the blasted kissing bough for a floral arrangement.

While the other cheer-filled guests put the finishing touches upon their respective pieces, Opal grabbed a strip of evergreen and twined it about her mostly bare willow wood.

Now she knew, Locke desired her. For most other women, that would be enough and all they yearned for from the Duke of Strathearn.

As for Opal? Opal wanted so much more from him. She ached for the heart he swore he didn't possess.

Emotion formed in her throat.

She'd known coming into her visit with Glain and Grimoire, she'd have but a limited time with which to try and capture Locke's heart.

Do not cry. Do not cry...

Setting her jaw, she snatched another spruce branch, wrapped it, and tied it around the thick wood.

Opal's had always been an unlikely—and nearly insurmountable—goal.

Without taking her gaze from the haphazard arrangement she currently crafted, she grabbed the closest twig at hand.

The prickly edges of ivy leaves bit viciously into her bare palm.

She'd just not expected that only two days in, she'd not even fully have a chance to do so, or that he'd do to her what he'd done to scores of other women—he'd break her heart.

Gasping, she automatically flexed her palm. Branch and barren arrangement slipped from her fingers.

Thwack.

Opal dimly registered the feel of curious stares and whispers.

Blast.

Opal picked her head up and flashed a sheepish smile to her small, and much unwanted, audience.

“Apologies!” she said, with such false cheer, she almost managed to convince herself of her own happiness. “Holly is a bit tricky sometimes, is it not?”

Assenting murmurs went up amongst the Duke of Strathearn's Flower Room.

To maintain the facade of nonchalance, Opal, humming to herself, resumed decorating her bough.

“The Sussex Waltz , Opal?”

For a second time, Opal lost her hold.

Silently cursing, Opal looked up at her incredulous sister.

“Since when have you begun humming The Sussex Waltz?” Glain asked amusement tinged her voice. “Instead of, say, some scandalous ditty or folksong?”

Since doing so had gotten her knuckles wrapped enough with a switch, the only thoughts that now came from thinking of a ditty brought fresh remembrances of the pain to be had from defying either their father or Madame Touraine.

Glain let an effortless laugh fly with such ease, Opal shamefully—and not for the first time in more years than she could remember—resenting her sister.

“What have you done with my sister?”

“Oh, growing up will do that to a woman,” Opal said dryly.

More specifically growing up with their ruthless duke of a father. Somehow, she managed to keep the bitterness out of her riposte enough that she didn’t earn another queer look from her sister.

“May I join you?”

Considering Glain was already seating herself, her big sister needn’t have asked.

Opal motioned to the stool next to her, anyway. “Of course.”

While Opal worked, Glain didn’t speak for a moment; she steeped her fingers and

peered intently over the top of her fingertips at the smooth mahogany table.

Please, don't ask me...

Opal's eyes burned.

Please, don't ask me why I can't bring myself to truly smile and why, after my interlude in the woods with Locke, I never will again...

"I see for the changes time has brought, your love of arranging floral pieces has not," Glain mused.

"Yes, well, you, know me." She gave a wag of her eyebrows.

The irony wasn't lost upon Opal. With her life now miserable, gardening and making floral arrangements was the one pleasure she'd managed to find at Madame Touraine's.

Opal tried not to imagine—and failed—Locke's someday-wife seated in this exquisite space, designing pieces for the couple's household.

Her throat wobbled.

While the rest of the guests finished and slowly trickled out, Glain kept Opal company. With each lady who made her goodbyes and took her leave, it became increasingly likely Opal would find herself alone with her sister.

Even after the flower room emptied out, Opal kept all her focus on her incomplete kissing bough.

"It is refreshing to find you have not changed into someone else," Glain said, just as

Opal collected a sprig of holly. “Not in the way I did while suffering Father’s oppressive rule.”

This time, when Opal’s fingers curled reflexively, she did not feel the leaves’ ragged edges that dug into the soft skin of her palm.

“I’d begun to fear you were still disappointed by the house party.” As Glain spoke, she did so with an earnestness that attested to her worry over Opal. “And I’ve been ever so w-worried,” Glain’s always steady voice cracked.

Hating herself for having caused her such anxiety, particularly as Glain, after so many years, finally found herself expecting her and Abaddon’s first child.

“Here, now.” Opal set her things down and grabbed Glain’s hands in hers. “You needn’t worry about me. When I lived with Father, it was...” She grimaced. “Not a pleasant experience,” she safely settled for.

Glain snorted.

They shared a small, private grin only the two of them could truly understand.

In Opal’s case, hers was as feigned as every last part of the happiness she’d manufactured for her sister’s benefit. During those interminable years, the best days of her life were when Locke called. Granted, he’d only come on Abaddon and Glain’s behalf to verify Opal was well. Still, those would remain the best days of her life.

“You are not miserable at finishing school?” Glain asked, moving a gaze searchingly over Opal’s face.

Opal scoffed. “How could I,”— Not — “be?” At least when she’d been in London, there’d been those occasional visits from Locke. She’d happily suffered living under

her father's oppressive rule for the chance to see him.

"Why, there are other young ladies,"—having their souls crushed— "for me to keep company with, and it is a good deal better than being with Father." Highly debatable, most days. "I've had the opportunity to read."

Glain brightened. "Indeed?"

"Oh, yes." *The Lady's Companion: An Infallible Guide to the Fair Sex* by A Lady . Richard Brathwaite's *The English Gentlewoman*. George Savile; the Marquis of Halifax's *The Lady's New Year's Gift: Advice to a Daughter*. "So many books," she added, somehow managing to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Before her sister could ask for details about Opal's latest literary passions, she hurried to change the subject and offered up the only truth. "I will never be truly happy as long as I'm separated from you, Flint, and Abaddon." And even then, she'd not be truly happy because she couldn't have as a husband the only man she'd ever love or trust.

"Oh, poppet, I know." Glain folded an arm around Opal's shoulders and gave her a sideways hug. "It shan't be for much longer. Soon you'll be finished with Madame Touraine's school." Her sister's brighter features proved Opal had been successful with the reassurances she'd given. "There'll be a London Season."

No, there'd be a marriage.

"And a legion of dashing suitors whom you are certain to have your pick from."

This time, Opal, at best, managed a wan smile. "I don't need a legion," she said softly.

She'd wanted but one and as he'd never be hers, there was another gentleman; one who'd already been hand-selected by their father.

Glain must have seen something in Opal's eyes.

Her sister froze.

"Opal?" she whispered. Eagerly, she scrambled to the edge of her seat. "Never tell me, there is some gentleman who already captured your notice?"

My heart.

She fumbled for a lie.

Her sister beat her to answering. "Why, there is !"

Glain clapped her hands together and laughed. "Abaddon insisted someone had caught your eye, but I told him it wasn't possible with you being away at finishing school, and all..."

"Glain," Opal said.

"It must be one of our guests." Glain glanced about as if she expected some mystery sweetheart to suddenly appear. "You must—"

"Glain," Opal repeated, with greater insistence.

"Yes?"

She opened her mouth to disabuse her sister of the erroneous conclusion she and Abaddon reached when the radiant smile wreathing Glain's fuller, joy-filled cheeks

held her back.

Glain's smile wavered. "Opal?" The worry of before stirred anew in her voice.

Resting her hands on her lap, Opal curled her fingers into fists and did what any good sister would.

"Please, do not ask me his name," she whispered.

Even as Glain's blonde eyebrows shot to her hairline, she let out a half-sob, half-laugh, and this time launched both arms about Opal.

Grunting from the force with which her sister squeezed, Opal, returned the embrace. To keep from crying, Opal buried her chin in her sister's shoulder. She squeezed her eyes shut and just clung to a joyous Glain. If only it were possible for her to absorb another person's happiness as her own.

When Glain finally separated from her, Opal had managed to compose herself.

Her teary-eyed sister placed her hands upon Opal's shoulders, and kept an arm's length between them, so she could look Opal over. "You're certain you won't t—"

"I will share," she lied. "Soon. I trust you won't say anything, but my maid is always lurking, and the duke has eyes everywhere," Opal found herself rambling, "and I know if he learns there is a gentleman whose—"

Her sister touched a finger to her lips. "When you do, you can rely upon our support...and Strathearn's, of course."

Opal strangled on her swallow.

“Never say you doubt he’ll not stand by you,” Glain chided, busily patting Opal between the shoulder blades. She didn’t give her a chance to catch her breath. “When you were living alone with the duke, Strathearn expressly paid visits at mine and Abaddon’s request.”

She’d suspected as much, and yet, hearing it confirmed sent a fresh wave of pain through her.

“No,” Opal murmured. “There is no doubting Strathearn is a good, loyal friend who’d do anything for you and Abaddon.”

“For you and Flint, as we - aww ,” Glain’s adamant clarification ended on a yawn.

Guilt filled Opal. Given how difficult pregnancy had come to her sister, her sister had done—and was continuing to do—too much on Opal’s behalf.

“Go rest,” she urged.

Glain rapped her fingers lightly. “Stop with that.”

“I didn’t—”

“You’re feeling guilty and I will not have it. I’m hale and hearty as alwa— aww .”

Opal managed to keep a straight face through her sister’s latest yawn.

“Perhaps I’ll rest some before dinner. There is the recital later.” Bussing Opal on the cheek, Glain glided off with the effortless grace she’d always possessed and that Opal required a steady switch on her back to help achieve.

Opal waited until her sister had gone, and then sat.

“Ah, I see, I am not the only one from whom you’ll withhold the fellow’s identity.”

She gasped and wrenched her neck up so quickly the muscles tightened up painfully. Her heart beat even faster and for altogether different reasons.

With a shoulder propped lazily—and so infuriatingly, sexily—against the doorjamb, the Duke of Strathearn stood framed in the same doorway Opal’s sister moments ago exited through.

A soft grin curved Locke’s lips. “Hullo, Opal.”

Even as Opal’s chest tightened, her belly fluttered as a warring mix of tension and longing raged within her.

What did it say about Opal that even after he’d bluntly likened her to any and every woman he’d ever bedded, the memory of his kiss and those wicked words he’d whispered in her ear, stirred her, still?

For the first time in all the years she’d known Locke, Opal didn’t return his smile. Instead, she came slowly to her feet.

Eyeing him guardedly, Opal sank into a flawless curtsy.

“Your Grace,” she demurred and then reclaimed her seat.

Locke’s raffish grin dipped, and then, faded.

Putting on the greatest performance of her life—which, given how she’d survived life with the Duke of Devonshire and French Finishing School, was saying a great deal, indeed—Opal retrieved another stem of rosemary, reattended her centerpiece, and pretended Locke was not there.

Or, she tried to.

She felt his approach and hated the way her fingers trembled with the telltale sign of her awareness.

Locke stopped beside her.

From the corner of her eye, she took in his tense position—legs spread, hands clasped behind him, like he was some master and commander of a ship, but then, Locke, with his power, ease, and charm, could command even the tides and seas, if he so wished.

Having secured the branch to the willow log, she reached for the nearest one—ivy—thought better of it, and opted for the bay branch.

Her palms had taken enough of a beating this day.

As had her heart.

“Since when have you ‘Your Graced’ me and dropped me a court-worthy curtsy?” His voice, low and displeased, rumbled around the conservatory.

“Since you became a stranger, Your Grace,” she murmured.

Opal finished affixing another shoot.

An evergreen branch of oblong, silvery, green leaves appeared under her nose. Unblinking, she stared at the tiny, feathery white flowers which had already begun to fade upon the stem.

She glanced up.

“It’s an olive branch,” he explained, twirling the stem. “It seemed appropriate.”

Opal collected the offering from his long, gloveless fingers.

When she still didn’t speak, Locke cleared his throat. “I went and collected an offshoot from the conservatory.”

“You have olive trees,” she said, as an olive branch of her own.

“Yes. Amongst...many others.”

Opal felt stirrings of envy of a different kind. His gardens and greenery and grounds were so vast they could have rivaled most king’s holdings.

He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

She hated seeing him this way—guilty and uncertain for reasons he had no reason to be. Even though she still hurt from the words he’d uttered, he’d only given her the truth and she admired Locke for never gilding the pill in her company.

Carefully, she tightened up the trimmings around her increasingly improving bough.

“I love it here,” Opal softly confided.

Locke stilled and then, taking hers as the invitation it was, he sat on the chair beside Opal. “Oh?”

“Your flower room,” she elucidated. “I used to hate gardening and creating floral arrangements. My sister believes I still do, but I’ve actually come to...enjoy it.”

More than a little afraid to look up and see his horrified reaction to this latest change

in her, she stole a peek.

He wore a bemused expression. “And that is problematic?”

“Ladies like flowers and gardening.”

“You are a lady.” There was a smile in his voice.

“Exactly.” She released a frustrated sigh. “I’m not the free spirit I once was.”

“Mine was not a criticism, Opal,” he said quietly. “With time, we grow and change.”

Opal set her kissing bough down hard and turned sideways on her chair to face him. “I’m becoming everything I ever hated, Locke,” she said desperately. “As a girl, I leveled the harshest charges against Glain. I railed at her for not challenging our father. I criticized her for not reading the books she loved. I swore I’d never become a shell of a person like she was, and then, in the end, that’s precisely what I am...” Her voice caught. “A shell, and soon I’ll cease to be anything other than the sorrowful woman, I don’t even remember, who birthed me.”

“Hey now.” Locke edged his seat around so he matched her positioning. His gaze met hers full-on. “That isn’t true.”

“You haven’t seen me in more than a year, Locke. I am changing. I’m angrier and quieter and,” she strangled on a sob, “I don’t recognize myself any longer,” Opal finished in a whisper.

Smooth, strong, fingers cradled her chin.

Locke edged her blurry gaze up to meet his eyes. “The parts that make you, you , Opal,” he said insistently. “Your strength, determination, intelligence, clever wit,

spirit; those are as much a part of the fabric of you as your own skin.” He ran his steady, impenetrable stare over her. “You can even make the most cynical bastard like me laugh and smile.”

He spoke those solemn words with such confidence, a tear slipped free from Opal’s eye.

With the pad of his thumb, Locke caught the drop and swiftly wiped away the ones to follow.

“I have been so unhappy,” she confessed, her voice catching.

Groaning, Locke tugged Opal into his arms. Her body absorbed his deep, resonant, rumbling of anguish.

“See? So much for making you laugh,” she said on a half-laugh, half-sob—one he joined with his own.

“What I do see is even now, Opal,” he said, smoothing his palms over her cheeks. “You cannot help from making a jest to ease my worry.”

I want to spend my life making you smile, Locke. I want to be for you, what you are, have been, and always will be to me...

“Every day, I lose more of myself,” she confided, and in sharing that, there came a lightness—a sense of freedom from the burden it’d been keeping the truth of her misery secret from those she loved. “And soon,” Barring the miracle of his love, “I’ll be lost entirely.”

“You’re not. You can’t.” He shrugged. “You won’t. You’re Opal.”

She let out a dry, hollow laugh. “The very nature of my name is associated with witches and sorcerers and evil powers.”

Locke scoffed. “From where did you get that rubbish idea?”

“When my father discovered my love for what he deemed scandalous literature, he saw all the books I loved were collected and burned. My sister prepared me.” She took a deep breath in. The pain was as fresh as it’d been then, and yet, she found an unlikely peace in sharing this part of her suffering, too. “He gave me but one book to read. It contained a story of the life and works about the 11 th century Bishop Marbode of Rennes.”

Opal paused to see if Locke recognized the name.

At her inquiring look, he shook his head. “Given Devonshire, I trust he selected something for you, unceasingly dull, and meant to quash your spirit.”

“On the contrary,” she said. “His work proved shockingly...interesting.”

“You are in jest surely.”

Locke sounded so sure she was being sarcastic, Opal laughed.

This here. This right here was why her heart and soul cried out for him. Even when plagued by the saddest of memories, Locke could chase it all away and leave her light and smiling.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:11 am

As long as he'd known Opal, Strathearn had been intrigued by the lady's laughter.

Where Strathearn was concerned, ladies employed tears the same way they did smiles and laughter.

Their actions were always contrived and all with the intent of getting something from him.

Be it a place in the Duke of Strathearn's bed, the title of mistress (or even more improbable, the title of duchess), jewels, power, influence, or favor.

Opal remained the one woman who spoke freely and desired nothing from him or of him.

Only when he'd begun noticing the changes that'd befallen her—her developing figure, a slight deepening of her musical voice, had he taken to steering clear of her at all costs. Time and distance hadn't helped. Since their time apart, her laughter and smile had become somehow more powerful to him—a lure that allowed him to imagine what it'd be like to live the rest of his life bathed in the slightly husky, lilting, sound of her happiness.

“Given the Duke of Devonshire, one would think I'm kidding.” Opal gave her head a rueful shake. “Alas, I'm quite serious. It proved a fascinating read.”

“Consider me, for the first time in the whole of my existence, absolutely stunned by Devonshire's generosity.”

The moment he spoke, it was like he'd reminded Opal of his presence, and her wistful smile faded like a glittering star that'd been forever extinguished.

"He was beautifully poetic," she explained, like a knowledgeable tutor schooling an intrigued student.

And Strathearn was just that, intrigued, but by her.

Opal gave another laugh, this one smaller and somewhat strained. "Not the duke, of course, but Marbode."

They shared a knowing smile.

"As one would expect of men, then and now," she added with a wry smile. "Marbode possessed a disdain for women."

Strathearn dropped an elbow on the table, and resting his chin on his fingers, he leaned in. "More the fool was he and all those other mindless chaps."

Opal's lips parted in a sweet, bemused, little moue. "Oh."

A queer sensation filled his chest. Strathearn equal parts wanted her to go on talking because he was endlessly fascinated when she spoke, but more appallingly, he needed a distraction from her full mouth and the rakish dreams of teaching her the pleasure she could give him with that soft, pliable, flesh.

Sitting up quickly, he gave up his previously negligent pose. "Tell me more about your Marbode." His voice cracked the same way it'd done when he was a lad becoming a man.

Like she'd been plucked from the sea and deposited back on solid earth, Opal's sooty

black lashes swept up and down in a slow blink.

I know the feeling, love...

“Uh...yes. Despite the time period, Marbode wasn’t just a theologian who wrote about religion—and what he did write about the saints of the period, pertained to those figures’ real-life experiences, and secular aspects of life.”

With every curious detail imparted, her body arched towards his. Opal’s airiness juxtaposed Strathearn’s total prepossession of this woman and every word to leave her lips. It both humbled and further captivated him.

“Did he?” Strathearn murmured, solely for the need to say something and break the spell she had over him.

His attempts had the opposite effect.

Opal nodded enthusiastically, and her buoyant black curls bounced wildly about her shoulders. “*Liber decem capitulorum* is oft considered his most popular book.”

“The Book of Ten Little Headings,” he translated.

“Yes! In each chapter, he focuses on the human condition. He writes about women, life, advancing age, death, writing, in the fallen world.” She spoke with an enthusiasm that bespoke her admiration for the long-ago poet.

The sight of Opal lost in her telling, Strathearn drank his fill of her. What was it that this woman’s spirited lecture on an ancient writer should stir Strathearn in ways not a single lover’s erotic words or touch had ever so moved him? What’s more—how could she have absolutely no idea the thoughts tumbling around in his head?

Her eyes went soft. “He composed poems.”

The almost bashful quality in her lilting voice grounded him. Some .

“Yes?” he murmured, needing her to continue.

“Erotic ones.”

But a single word uttered in that slightly breathy from this lady made Strathearn harder than a lad with his first Cyprian.

“Erotic poems,” he said; his voice sounded thick to his own ears.

She nodded. “They were...are. One wouldn’t expect a bishop in the 11 th century to compose verse on such topics, and yet, he did. His poems were about love—the emotional and... physical kind—between men and women and...”

He kept stoic.

A delicate blush dusted her cheeks and further captivated and seduced Strathearn. “Men and men and multiple men and a woman. He wrote about Saint Thais, a 4 th century Egyptian prostitute. They were deeply sensual.”

She was deeply sensual. With every word she spoke, his erection climbed and throbbed from a brutal, hungry lust to possess her.

Too satyric to feel so much as a smidgeon of contrition, he drank Opal, and her telling, all the way in, and urged her on. “Sensual?”

She curled her lips in a gently rueful grin. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“Is that so?” he drawled. Oh, you have no idea, sweet. If she did, she wouldn’t be wearing that blithe smile. If she did, she’d have hightailed it the hell out of the flower room.

“How sensual could an ancient theologian and bishop be?”

“Fair enough.” That was the thought he’d have were he speaking about Marbode with anyone that wasn’t Opal Carmichael.

A veritable Circe, Opal gracefully wagged a long, slender, finger at him, saying without words ‘she knew it’.

She leaned in and a moth to the flame, Strathearn leaned in closer.

“ Hanc puer insignis, cujus decor est meus ignis,

Diligit hanc, captat, huic se placiturus adaptat;

Quae, puero spreto, me vult, mihi mandat...”

This illustrious boy, whose beauty is my fire,

He loves her, he captivates her, he adapts himself to her, hoping to please her...

He drew a slow and silent breath in through his nose.

Who’d declared Latin wasn’t a romance language? Whoever it was hadn’t heard the language spoken in this woman’s melodic and rhythmical way.

Opal stared at him expecting him to interpose.

“You are correct,” he said, powerless to even try and conceal the husky, hungry, quality of his voice. “That is certainly sensual.”

She looked pleased as punch by Strathearn’s concession .

“He wrote about a love that was taboo then, now, and likely always will be, and did so eloquently and beautifully and fearlessly,” she said, clasping one of his hands in hers.

Both of them looked at their linked palms.

The hell he’d shake free of her involuntary, but intoxicating, touch.

She was the one to break that contact between them. Withdrawing her palm, she joined her own fingers together and lay them upon her lap.

Opal studied her hands. “At first, I was embarrassed that my father had selected verse about lovers,” she said timorously. “I believed he was trying to humiliate me, and yet, I found myself too fascinated by the verse to be shamed.”

Mention of her evil sire effectively killed his desire. Strathearn’s admiration for Opal, on the other hand, only grew to new depths.

God, she was breathtaking in her strength and honesty.

Like a restless soul who needed something to do with her hands, she fiddled nervously with her arrangement. Knowing she craved an anchor to the present, Strathearn sought to ground her in the moment here with him. Unsolicited, he handed Opal another branch.

She murmured her thanks. “There was no hope for it; I admired the Marbode’s

works.” Her shoulders climbed in a little shrug. “It was impossible not to. One evening, my father invited me to dine with him. He asked my opinion on the original Latin edition he’d secured on Marbode for my benefit.”

“As we dined and spoke, I thought perhaps with Flint and Diamond both gone and with only me remaining, he’d discovered a need for companionship. We conversed and even agreed in many ways about Marbode’s cleverness and progressive nature for then and now.”

She smiled sadly. That slight, downturn, of her lips erased every trace of warmth from Strathearn’s body.

Absently, Opal fetched rosemary sprigged with purple flowers and affixed the cheerful branch to her bough. “I actually managed to believe ours was a real-life moment between a doting father and a favored daughter.”

“And it wasn’t,” Strathearn said quietly, to spare her from having to utter that painful admission.

“It wasn’t.”

He should’ve known Opal was too courageous to take the easy way out.

“Once he’d affirmed that I greatly admired Marbode’s talents, skill, and intellect, he fetched a small leather volume. He’d personally purchased the rare work. He’d even had my name etched in gold lettering just underneath Marbode’s.”

He knew from the nuances of her body and the sadness that’d swept over Opal—and hell, by the admission, she’d herself made, this wasn’t a happy telling. Even with all that, he wanted it to be.

The same as when he'd been a boy seeing for the first time a live performance of Romeo and Juliet , and knowing the inevitable, outcome of that tragedy, who'd still hoped the end would turn out different, he prayed that'd be the case here.

Opal drew in a shuddery breath. "That book was called Liber Lapidum."

The Book of Stones.

She nodded, confirming he'd spoken aloud. "Devonshire marked a selection for me to read aloud. It was about opals."

Strathearn froze. Even without knowing what Opal would say, Strathearn knew the utterance to come merited ending the Duke of Devonshire's life.

"'Tis the guardian of the thievish race, Marbode called them . It gifts the bearer with acutest sight; But clouds all other eyes with thickest night."

His entire body hurt. Opal's rote recitation came in a way that indicated she'd read those words over and over and repeated them in her mind until she'd committed them to memory.

"As easily as my father earlier credited the Marbode's genius, so too did he speak about the bishop's accuracy in seeing opals as destructive to society and therefore should not be trusted. He told me how opals were symbols of famine, death, and plague. Unlike Glain, who came into the world with the brightest blonde hair, I possessed thick, black curls."

Amidst the heartbreak of her telling came the wistful thought of Opal as an adorable babe about to face the entire world. The painting in his mind shifted to one of Opal, grown, and with a little girl who had the same dark curls. The appeal of that vision stirred his unease but could not totally free him with his absorption of her.

“Opal,” he murmured. “Your hair...” He’d glibly given compliments and pretty words for other ladies, but for this woman, for Opal, every way in which to describe her and her splendor seemed inadequate.

Opal gave him a peculiar look. “Yes?”

“Is...is...beautiful,” he finished lamely.

Opal snorted. “If that were the case, men wouldn’t covet the pale, golden-haired, English ladies.”

“Yes, but we’ve already determined men have shite for brains.”

Opal laughed, and that he’d knocked the sadness from her, if even for a minute, left him awash in warmth.

“Well, the way Devonshire saw it, the color of my hair marked me as inferior in every way. It’s why he insisted upon naming me ‘Opal’. That night at dinner, he told me his appreciation for Marbode’s work had merely been feigned and that he’d only given them to me as a test.” Her lips were so taut, the blood had seeped from the corners of her mouth, leaving it white. “He proclaimed I had the makings of a whore and he’d cure me of my sluttish ways. That was the night he told me that I was being sent away.”

Towering, ungovernable furor rose up inside Strathearn. He wanted to pound his chest like a primal beast and hunt the father who’d hurt her so, and feast on the ravaged remains.

Opal lifted sad, accepting, eyes to his and the sight of her suffering hit him like a kick to the gut. “Do you know what, Locke?”

It took everything within him to contain his rage. Here in this moment, his anger didn't serve Opal. She wouldn't benefit from his indignation, and she was all that mattered, not he and his need to protect her.

“What's that, love?” he asked softly.

“I was glad to be banished. I wanted to be free of him and his household. I just didn't imagine...” Her words trailed off.

To keep from going mad, Strathearn focused on breathing evenly. “What didn't you imagine?”

She shook her head.

But she needn't have answered, anyway. Strathearn already knew what she couldn't bring herself to say—she just hadn't imagined it could be worse.

Growing up with his cruel sire, Strathearn encountered such emotional and physical abuse he'd believed himself immune to pain. Now, brokenhearted and hurting for Opal and all she'd suffered, he discovered how wrong he'd been.

Opal kept on examining and fiddling with her bough.

In the course of knowing the Carmichael family, there'd been any number of instances when Strathearn could have happily murdered Opal's father, the pernicious, execrable Duke of Devonshire.

Nevermore had the urge to separate Devonshire's beating, stone-cold heart from his body than it did now, listening to Opal share the suffering she'd endured these past years.

No. For the course of her entire life. She may have entered his life as a smiling girl, but she'd also been a girl who'd been hurting her entire life.

Fury sent his hands curling into tight fists at his side. His anger, however, wouldn't serve her here. As such, he forced himself to reign in his volatile emotion.

Finally, he managed to speak. "With your knowledge of history, I don't expect you'd ever claim medieval scholars and culture to be superior to some of the ancient civilizations?"

How many women, let alone men—that was aside from Grimoire and the librarian's sponsors—could Strathearn say that to?

She smiled. "No."

"The Greeks saw an opal as capable of amplifying the power of its wearer."

Opal eyed him dubiously. "You believe that?"

Strathearn didn't let her incredulity distract him. "The Romans saw them as gems of such beauty," he said. "They were the first to name them 'opalus'—precious stone."

She stared at him with eyes so wide and beautiful as to rival any precious gem.

Hooking his boot on the underside of his chair, he dragged himself closer. "They saw the kaleidoscope of colors that set the opal apart from the one-dimensionality of a diamond or pearl. Like a rainbow, they were considered more exotic for their effervescence. For those reasons, the Romans saw the opal not as something bad or evil, but as talismans of good luck...so much so that the Caesars gifted them to their wives."

“Truly?”

Strathearn nodded. “Truly. In fact, it wasn’t until the medieval era, when plague and famine struck, that people began to look for sources with which to assign blame. In the absence of clear answers, people come to fear that which they didn’t know or understand.”

He swept his gaze over the beautiful plains of her face. “Your spirit, your strength, and curiosity and intelligence terrify small men like Devonshire. So don’t you dare let those men make you feel as though you are something less when you are greater than all the peers of London combined, Opal Carmichael.”

Opal continued to look at him like he’d conferred the sun.

And...what was it about this woman that made him wish he could do just that for her?

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:11 am

Almost as long as Opal knew Locke, the Duke of Strathearn, she'd loved him.

She admired him for his vast interests in literature and the generous support he provided circulating libraries throughout London. Especially as most gentlemen tended to spurn literary pursuits for athletic ones.

Opal loved him for having used the power he held as a duke for good and boldly and fearlessly standing up for Abaddon and Glain's union, when the Duke of Devonshire would have gleefully separated the couple forever. As much as he'd been, Locke showed that same devotion to Opal and Flint.

She'd never, however, loved him more than she did in right now in this moment with him demonstrating the breadth of knowledge on history and so using it to vigorously affirm Opal's worth.

And no matter what came to pass at the end of this house party he'd allowed Glain and Abaddon to throw on her behalf, she'd never love another after him.

"I love this place," she said. She loved even more sharing this space with him.

Immense relief washed over Locke's face. "It was my mother's. She'd come here to," he grimaced, "escape my father's company."

She caught the way he curled his fingers into the side of the table and swiftly released his hold and the tension from his hands. They'd never spoken about their families. It'd just been an understood, unspoken bond they'd shared, two people with monstrous sires.

“I do not remember your father,” she said.

“You are better off.” Locke fetched a long stem of holly, abundantly peppered with crimson berries. “He was cut of the same cloth as yours.” He handed the branch over. “If you know yours, you knew mine.”

Murmuring her thanks, Opal accepted the next piece for her bough. “What of your mother?”

“She was all things good. As kind and gentle as a spring breeze.”

The wistful quality of his voice, drew her gaze to Locke. He wore a sad, smile of a man caught in past reminiscences.

Upon catching her stare, unmistakable color suffused his cheeks. “What?” he asked with an adorably boyish gruffness.

“It is nothing,” she said softly.

Opal grimaced.

It felt wrong to lie to Locke. As it was, she’d withheld enough from this man who’d become a friend to her over the years.

She came quickly to her feet so she could better meet his gaze. “No!”

He stared at her askance.

“It is everything , Locke.”

“I don’t—”

“What you said earlier...about my name. I’d always prided myself on shrugging off my father’s contempt. I’ve always known he’s a sadist. In fact, I used to pride myself for caring as little as I did about his cruel and small-minded opinions on me, my interests, literature.” She waved a hand about. “ Everything . But all these years, I’ve lied to myself. His disdain has eaten up at me.”

“He isn’t worth it, love,” he said quietly. “Don’t give him that power.”

Don’t give him that power.

The Duke of Devonshire might hold complete control of her life and future, but this good , kind, wonderful duke reminded Opal she herself could remain the keeper of her own thoughts, passions, and beliefs.

Filled with a welcome and soothing peace, Opal found the angry energy leave her.

Holding Locke’s gaze with hers, she rested both palms upon his chest.

Under her fingers, she felt the steady thump of Locke’s heart pick up a faster beat. In a bid to quell his concernment, she smoothed her fingers over the place where that organ erratically pounded.

Except, her efforts appeared to have the opposite effect, and so she did what one did when consoling another—Opal folded her arms about his neck and held him tight.

“I’ve been so unhappy. So alone,” she murmured against his neck.

His arms came up to wrap about her and blanketed in such radiant warmth, she could feel no pain.

With her face shielded as it was, Opal inhaled deep of the sandalwood scent he

avored. “I allowed the duke and Madame Touraine’s bullying wear me down. You reminded me of my self-worth.” For that, she’d be eternally grateful.

Locke tensed. “With every fiber of my being, I despise that you have a bastard of a father and that you’re away alone at that miserable school you have no place being.”

He seethed with a fiery rage, that had it come from any other man would have terrified her witless. “Devonshire sent you to punish you and humiliate you. Those schools are places aspiring families send unrefined daughters whom they wish to parade before the ton, when even a queen herself cannot command your majesty.”

Laughter bubbled forth from her lips; as carefree as it’d once been, and all because of this man. “Given the many times you caught me riding, hiding, or up to some mischief, and my complete lack of ladylike graces, I daresay queens everywhere would take deep offense with your high-praise on my behalf and at their expense.”

His mouth slanted up in one corner. “Were they to meet you, they’d understand.”

The playful air diminished beneath the weight of something far heavier and fraught.

The slight nob in Locke’s throat moved. “I am so damned sorry, love.”

Love. Uttered in that ragged, jagged way, she could almost believe she was the fortunate lady he loved.

“I don’t need your pity, Locke,” she said gently. It was the absolute last thing she wanted from him.

His eyes blazed with a force of emotion that stole her breath.

“I respect you. I’m in awe of you. I greatly admire you, Opal—your resilience, your

ability to laugh and smile despite the hell you've endured."

Had she been a better woman such words of praise from this man, of all people, would have been enough.

Locke drew back and she mourned that loss. "My regret though, Opal, isn't borne from any pity but of the fact that someone as magnificent and estimable as you should ever be so treated leaves me enraged."

She managed a non-committal sound.

He studied her with a thoughtful expression and then spoke in an equally pensive way. "Given the fact our sires were the closest friends, you're well-aware my sire also happened to be the miserable sort."

Yes, she suspected that was one of the reasons she'd bonded so quickly with him.

"When I was a lad, my father had but two requisites of the tutors he'd hire for me: one." He stuck a finger up. "The fellow be the sternest fellow in the kingdom, and two," he added another digit, "that the man be as strong as an ironsmith."

Opal grew queasy.

Most ladies would not understand the significance; but Opal had suffered the Duke of Devonshire and Madame Touraine's wrath enough times to gather the reason.

She wanted to weep. "So, your tutor, a grown man, could inflict the greatest pain on y-you." Her threadbare voice cracked.

He snapped his fingers. "Precisely!"

By the grin he quirked, Opal may as well have delivered a witty rejoinder. “Well, my ducal father didn’t refer to it in quite those terms. Rather, he hired the strongest fellow to oversee my discipline. As you can imagine they proved about as effective in crushing me as my father did. But they certainly gave it their best try.”

Tears clouded her vision.

“Oh, Locke,” she whispered.

“Mm. Mm,” he said with a waggle of his eyebrows. “I don’t want your pity.”

“It is not—”

His eyes glimmered and she knew the moment she’d fallen right for his trap.

Opal brushed away the moisture from her eyes.

“It is not the same, Locke,” she said under her breath. “You might think so. But it’s not.” Of that, she was certain.

On his own, he’d survived a lifetime of abuse and still laughed and smiled and what was more, he saw other people’s pain and did good for so many. Opal , on the other hand, proved so self-absorbed she hadn’t even registered when her sister was suffering. Unlike Locke, Opal who as a burden, conferred nothing. She needed so much from her small circle of family. They worried about protecting her because she couldn’t protect herself.

Locke dusted his knuckles back and forth across her chin. “The truth is, Opal,” he murmured, “it is the same. We’re alike. We just can’t ever see it the same when we’re the one on the inside.”

Something in the air shifted. His gaze slipped to her mouth.

He is going to kiss—

“I’m sorry,” he said gruffly. “For earlier. For how I conducted myself.”

An apology. He’d been merely intending to apologize, not embrace her.

Only, this time, guilt had become tangled with his apology, leaving his voice hoarse and hesitant as she’d never heard it.

She lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. “You’ve done nothing wrong.” He’d never had reason to express remorse—and he still didn’t.

Locke cursed blackly. “I’ve done everything wrong.”

He didn’t deserve to take this on. “You told me the truth, Locke.”

“But I didn’t,” he whispered harshly. “To me, you are not the same as any other woman.”

“Because I’m Abaddon’s sister-in-law,” she said, with a stoic calm she knew not from where it came.

Letting out another curse, Locke took her shoulders in his strong, powerful grip and drew her to look at him. “Because you are you.”

The wild, undefinable emotion in his eyes stole all the breath from Opal’s lungs.

Dazed, she shook her head.

“You are witty and intelligent, and you bloody smile.” He laughed hoarsely. “ Real smiles, and you laugh, Opal.”

Not as much as she used to.

His fingers curled deeper into her arms, in a touch as powerful as passionate as possessive. “You are a real woman in every way. There’s nothing false about you.”

There hadn’t been.

“I’ve changed, Locke,” she said, unable to keep pain from creeping into her voice.

“You haven’t. You just think you have but you are the same, and you deserve to be loved, and I’m so...” Frantic, raw, fervor leant a dark glint to his eyes. “So bloody...”

Opal stared at him as he struggled to finish his thought.

“Happy,” he gritted out and grimaced around the word, and sounded anything but that. “Happy, that you’ve found the man who makes you so deliriously happy , though I still don’t think he deserves you, Opal,” he added that second part as if in warning. “But you deserve to find the manner of love your sister and Grimoire share and I want that for you.”

As if she’d burned him, Locke released her quickly and flexed his fingers out.

How was it possible for one man’s profession to both fill her with a buoyant lightness and terrible, heedless grief all at the same time?

Locke did care for her, after all. He just, cared about her in a different way than she ached for him to care. This would be all she’d ever have from him, and it would never be enough.

Tears pricked her lashes.

A strained sound left him. “Please, don’t cry, Opal,” he entreated. “What happened earlier...those things I said,” Locke curled his fingers into the edge of the table so hard, his knuckles went white, “I...was a cad.” A harsh laugh ripped from his throat. “I am a cad.”

Never had she viewed eyes more ravaged than the ones boring into her now.

“You’re not, Locke,” she whispered, hating that he should flagellate himself so.

“No.” He took her again by the arms and steered her around to face him. “I am,” his smooth baritone dipped and turned his next whisper hoarse, “because the fact remains, I desire you, Opal and I should not, but I cannot help myself. Even as I wanted—want—to help you, being with you in this way, is torturing me,” he rasped. His fingers curled and uncurled reflexively upon her arms. “I have never wanted a woman the way I do you, and I have nothing to offer you that could even begin to make me a decent fellow.”

“That is not true.” You have everything to offer me. For it is you, you are all that I want. Opal needed to tell him—he was her one and only. He was the mystery love whose name she’d been unable to share in fear he’d run, and in larger part because she’d not believed Locke could want her, in the ways she longed for him to want her.

Opal made soothing sounds in his ear. “I am not sad now.”

“You are a terrible liar.”

“You have no idea,” she muttered.

Her response had the desired effect. Locke laughed and they were restored to the safe,

comfortable way it'd always been between them.

There came the tread of footfalls; shattering yet another moment.

They looked to the open doorway.

“I—”

“I know,” she said softly. They risked much by being alone here. Well, he did. Opal would be the beneficiary of a scandal being found alone with the Duke of Strathearn.

She didn't want him that way.

There was only one way she did want Locke—with he as desperately and beautifully in love with her as she was with him.

For a split second in time, she thought he intended to say something else—something more, but then, he dropped a bow. Without so much as a backward glance and with a mortifying alacrity, he took himself off.

Opal only just reclaimed her seat and began finalizing the details of her arrangement when her brother walked in. “Hullo, sister.”

Donning a smile, she looked up. “He—”

Flint cut her off. “I happened to pass Strathearn in the corridor.”

At her brother's un-ceremonial pronouncement, the reply died on her lips and her mouth felt painfully tight. “Did you?” she asked carefully.

Hooking a foot around the chair directly across from her, Flint turned it backwards,

and straddled the seat.

He gave her an expectant look.

Oh, blast.

“Is there something you wish to talk about, little brother?”

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

Opal made a show of examining her completed floral arrangement.

“You didn’t answer me, Opal.”

She shrugged. “It didn’t sound much like a question.”

“You should tell them.”

“Tell wh—”

He surged to his feet so quickly, the legs of his chair scraped loudly over the floor.

Opal jumped.

“Bloody hell, Opal,” he snapped.

A frown toyed with her lips. “I don’t like these shows of temper from you, Flint.”

When he’d been a young boy that admission from her or Glain had bothered him. Not anymore.

Flint's glower grew darker.

Unease tripped up and down her spine. Between him being away at Oxford and she in France, and Opal consumed by her own circumstances, she'd failed to see the darker transformation that'd befallen her youngest sibling. Not unlike Opal, Flint was still of an age where he remained under their father's restrictive control. With Glain out of the duke's grasp, Opal and her brother were the last two of Father's children whom he could punish and try and bend. Where Flint was concerned, however, their sire had limited time. Flint may be a very young man, but the fact remained, he also happened to be a marquess...and a male. The duke couldn't and wouldn't control him forever. The same, however, could not be said for Opal. Case and point being, the urgency of her plan to win Locke's heart and the limited time she had to do so.

That did not, however, change the fact, that for now, Opal's brother was as much a ducal prisoner as Opal. They were together and alike in this.

As such, Flint deserved more than stilted and evasive responses from Opal. He deserved the whole truth.

She stood and joined him on the other side of the table.

Opal hitched herself up onto the edge. "Flint, I can't tell Glain," she said quietly. "You know that."

His obdurate jaw tensed. "I don't."

Instead of giving him the fight he so clearly craved these days, she gave him a gentle look. "Yes, you do. You're cleverer than most and very much attuned to your siblings in ways that other gentlemen are not. Our sister is expecting and you know it has not been an easy path to any of her previous pregnancies." This being the furthest Glain had ever come in any of her preceding—and heartbreaking—ones.

“That doesn’t mean you don’t matter,” he said with such loyalty and adamance, tears filled her eyes.

“I know,” she said thickly.

“No, you don’t.” Grunting, Flint pulled himself onto the edge of the table next to Opal. “What of Strathearn?”

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “What of him?”

Her brother scowled. “Damn it, Opal. No one else has a bloody idea as to what is going on or what fate awaits you, but stop acting like I’m not all too aware of what’s coming if you don’t succeed.”

“He...” Opal bit her lower lip. She didn’t want to talk about this. “I...he is not one to marry, it appears.”

He snorted. “Of course, he is going to marry, if for no other reason than because he is a duke, which I—as a future duke, though one many years younger than Strathearn—am myself cognizant of my duties, and that includes marriage. Do you truly believe Strathearn doesn’t?”

“I won’t have him marry me out of pity or to save me, Flint,” she said through gritted teeth.

“You’d rather sacrifice yourself, then?”

God love her brother. He sounded positively outraged on her behalf.

“Rather than have Locke sacrifice himself for me?” she asked gently. “Yes, I most certainly would.” And will...

He deserved far more than that. “I would never have him give up his freedom to marry where his heart is not engaged.” Even if in doing so, she’d be saved.

Flint examined her with an unnervingly old-for-his-years stare. “I’ve always admired you, Opal,” he said quietly. “Glain loved and still loves literature, but you? You’re spirited and funny and have an even wider breadth of knowledge and depth of love for books.”

Touched, she rested a hand on his. “Thank—”

He gave her a stern look. “But for someone who’s so damned clever, how can you fail to see that which is as plain as the nose on your face?”

“Well, that took an all-too-quick turn from heartwarmingly comforting to brutally blunt,” she mumbled.

“I’m not trying to be comforting or insulting,” he said, matter-of-factly.

Flint glanced around; lingering his attention on the entryways in and out of the room.

When he returned his attention to Opal, he spoke in a hushed voice. “Opal, I’ve seen the way Strathearn cannot take his eyes off you.”

Her heart jumped, and then promptly settled. “By his own admission, he admires and respects me. He appreciates my mind.” And though those were further reasons she loved him, the fact remained, he’d given no indication that he loved her in return. “He sees me as Abaddon’s younger sister.”

His jaw flexed. “Opal, you may be older than me, but I’m a man and possess greater authority on the subject.”

He continued over her protesting. “I’ll tell you this: If it were any other man but Strathearn?” Barely suppressing his anger, Flint balled and un-balled his fists. “I’d kill him and happily for the way he looks at you.”

Tears formed in her throat. Having been alone for so long, separated from her family, she’d forgotten what it was to be loved and cherished. In just a short visit with her siblings, Abaddon, and... Locke, it’d brought the warm sensation of belongingness back into her heart.

Oblivious to the enormous fissure in armor she’d unknowingly erected in their time apart, Flint continued in seething tones.

“But it is Strathearn, and given Devonshire’s plans for you, when presented with the idea of you marrying Strathearn or some ruthless chap the duke’s got picked for you, then I’ll make allowances where Strathearn is conc—”

It proved too much.

“Oomph .” Flint’s neck went red. “What the hell is that for?” he grumbled.

“Just...because.” In spite of the clear evidence that her brother was no longer a small lad, she ruffled the top of his head a second time.

He grunted. “I’m right, you know,” he groused, reminding her for all the ways in which he’d grown and matured, there were hints of the small child he’d been when they’d both been the best of playmates.

And as much as it’d always pained her to admit either of her siblings were correct, this time Opal found herself secretly and silently hoping this time, her younger brother was right.

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Earlier that afternoon, Flint had been so, so adamant in his asseveration about Locke, Opal went through the remainder of the day actually...believing him.

That'd been until all guests gathered for dinner and he'd spent the better portion of the meal speaking with the Duke of Savage's young, sadly, recently widowed sister, Lady Emerald. Exquisitely golden and full-figured, kind, and a devout reader and patroness of Abaddon's, the lady was perfect for Locke in every way.

“Youth's the season made for joys,

Love is then our duty;

She alone who that employs,

Well deserves her beauty...”

Seated at the last row of the Duke of Strathearn's music room, Opal fought with everything she had to keep from staring at the gentleman in the adjacent aisle, just one row in front of hers.

Hers was just the perfect vantage to stare.

But she had some pride left. As such, Opal had settled for sneaking furtive glances at Locke and the enthralling, buxom, blonde-haired beauty who occupied the seat next to his. His partner for the evening's entertainments also happened to be the same woman who'd sat beside him at dinner.

A detail made all the more painful by the fact that after her and Flint's discussion, she'd gone to search Locke's library for a book about the ancient Romans. What she'd uncovered was that Locke had been truthful about the details surrounding opals in gemology. What he'd carefully omitted was one small but not-so-insignificant fact—opals were second to emeralds.

Let's be gay,

While we may,

Beauty's a flower despis'd in decay.

Let us drink and sport to-day,

Ours is not tomorrow."

Yes, opals symbolized hope, love, and good fortune. But emeralds were the superior stones that were associated with Venus, the goddess of love and fertility, and which adorned the king's crowns.

Where opals came to symbolize ill-fortune and disease during the plague, emeralds were heralded for mythical healing powers that protected its wearer from disease and famine.

Flint's droll voice intruded on her silent suffering. "You know, in the absence of telling Strathearn the duke's plans for you, you always could just tell the gentleman how you feel?"

"Love with youth flies swift away,

Age is nought but sorrow."

She wrenched her gaze away and glared up at her brother.

“Dance and sing,

Time’s on the wing,

Flint shrugged. “I am just saying.”

“Well, just don’t .”

Frantically, she looked about to see whether anyone had heard them. Fortunately, at that moment, the room erupted into applause for the latest lady to sing this evening.

“You needn’t say anything,” she said between tightly clamped lips.

“ One of us should and it’s increasingly clear that someone is not going to be you.”

Opal shot a glare up at her brother to keep him from saying a word more.

A young lady near in age to Opal took her place at the pianoforte. The shy beauty dipped a curtsy and seated herself.

They settled in for the next performance.

“Can you make me a cambric shirt,

Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme,

Opal attempted to give the haunting, lilting, performer’s tune the proper attention she deserved.

“Without any seam or needlework?

And you shall be a true lover of mine...”

Her feat proved an impossible one.

Lady Emerald whispered something to Locke and his lips quirked in the same real, affable smile that’d endeared him to Opal at their very first meeting.

“Can you dry it on yonder thorn,

Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme,...

Here Opal believed nothing could hurt more than being forced to wed a bastard picked by her father and watching someday as Locke, Duke of Strathearn, declared his love, life, and fidelity to some breathtaking creature who managed to snag his heart.

“Which never bore blossom since Adam was born?

And you shall be a true lover of mine...”

Only, now, seeing him ply his charm on a winsome beauty and realizing how wrong she’d been.

The handsome couple returned to watching the performance—only for a moment. This time, it was Locke who said something to Lady Emerald.

The hitch of Opal’s breath was as painful as loud, earning a concerned look from Flint.

“Now you have asked me questions three,

Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme,...”

“He’s charming to everyone,” her brother comforted.

Opal couldn’t even bring herself to care she sat so obviously in her misery. A weighted pressure lay like a blanket upon her chest making it impossible to take air into her lungs.

“I hope you’ll answer as many for me,

And you shall be a true lover of mine...”

The enchanting lady at Locke’s side blushed.

Absolutely nothing could be worse than the torture of witnessing Locke bestow his affections elsewhere.

Locke and his lady shared another private, carefree smile that Opal sat as a miserable voyeur to. She felt bitter, insupportable jealousy crest like a wave that threatened to draw her under. For, seated here, witnessing how effortlessly Locke charmed another, she was reminded all over again of the futility of what she’d set out to do.

“He is just being polite,” Flint insisted on an urgent whisper.

“...Can you find me an acre of land,

Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme,

Between the salt water and the sea-sand?

And you shall be a true lover of mine...”

It is over...

Her throat wobbled. “Stop it.”

“Can you plough it with a ram’s horn,

“I’m not just saying that because I’m your brother.”

“And sow it all over with one peppercorn...?”

Tears blinded her and she glared at Flint through the sheen.

“You are seeing what you want to see,” Opal hissed, ravaged inside, and uncaring about the stares she felt on them.

“And you are failing to see that which is as clear as the bloody nose on your face,” he whispered in like fury and annoyance.

“Because he chose to sit beside another,” more beautiful, more elegant, more graceful, more everything lady than Opal, “woman. Because at no time of the duke’s own volition does he seek me out, and the only reason he does is because I’ve requested his assistance.”

That managed to make her brother flinch.

Her victory didn’t make Opal feel any better—just the opposite.

Deflated, she sagged in her chair.

“Can you reap it with a sickle of leather,

Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme...”

“Why are you so determined to make yourself a martyr?” Flint asked so quietly she barely hid him.

“...Where no water sprung, nor a drop of rain fell,

And then she shall be a true love of mine...”

Her brother’s unrelenting questioning broke her frayed self-control. “Is that really what you think I’m doing? Do you believe I want to feel this way?”

“Opal—”

Opal came to her feet just as the Duke of Savage’s extraordinarily skilled younger sister concluded her rendition of Scarborough Fair. The room took an unintended cue from Opal and paid the talented widow a lively round of applause.

Taking advantage of the distracted guests and her brother’s stunned state, Opal bolted.

The next singer’s voice grew distant and then disappeared altogether, and still, she continued at a breakneck speed.

Gasping for breath, Opal stumbled out the back entrance of Locke’s household and raced to the one place no one would venture on a cold, dark, night.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:11 am

Throughout the evening's performance, Opal and her brother, Lord Linley, remained involved in a tense row.

Strathearn knew so because he'd positioned himself strategically so that while he engaged the guest beside him in conversation, he could freely observe the pair.

It's also how he'd discovered Opal's seat vacant. Something had befallen her. Something Lord Linley was aware of, something that'd left Opal's eyes and features ravaged before she left.

He'd scoured his household. He'd paid a visit to each spot he knew Opal favored—or in the case of the flower room, cherished, and he hadn't turned up so much as a trace of her.

Why, panic eventually sent Strathearn streaming above stairs to her guest rooms, those chambers he'd discovered years earlier were her favorite. There, he'd found only her maid as annoyed at being interrupted packing Opal's garments as she'd been suspicious of his appearance—which she rightly should be.

Strathearn had no place seeking Opal out and certainly deserved to be called out for visiting her chambers. He hadn't given two shites.

His search of the household complete, Strathearn stood in the middle of Grand Hall. With his hands on his hips, he did a slow, restless circle on the Bianco Carrara marble tiled floor.

It was as though she'd simply vanished into thin air.

Strathearn seethed.

What if the bastard rejected Opal? Impossible. But then, the only thing England was known for other than fog, rain, and tea, was doltish noblemen.

He'd kill the blackguard who'd been responsible for her sadness throughout the recital, resurrect the scoundrel, and murder him all over again for wounding her.

Or what if it wasn't that the fellow rebuffed Opal's affections, but that Opal's brother didn't approve of the match? That idea took root and froze Strathearn in his tracks. Lord Linley hadn't ever had a problem with Grimoire—who could? But did he know the identity of Opal's sweetheart and took issue with the gentleman? He frowned. That would certainly explain the uncharacteristic enmity between the sib—

“Ahem.”

Cursing, he spun and faced his loyal butler, Mr. Burrell.

“Burrell,” he greeted, his neck hot.

The tall servant inclined his head. “My apologies, Your Grace.”

“No apologies necessary.” I was just lost in thought about a stunning minx who I have absolutely no business lusting for or chasing after. “Is there something I might help you with, Burrell?” he managed to calmly ask, even as his gaze did an impatient sweep of the foyer.”

“I hope I've not offended you, Your Grace, but I took the liberty of giving the stable hands the evening off.”

Befuddled, Strathearn just looked at his servant. Burrell had started out in the

Renwick household when Strathearn was but a young man. With two decades in of service, Strathearn had more of a relationship with him than anything he'd ever had with the late duke. The last details Burrell came to him with were staff assignments.

"I trust your judgment comp—"

"Though Mr. Boucher intended to remain working, I insisted he too might retire for the night." Burrell held Strathearn's gaze, and nodded pointedly.

What in hell was the man on about?

"Uh- thank ...you, Burrell?"

Strathearn made to head back from the route he'd traveled and conduct a second search of places Opal always sought in his household. He'd likely failed to cross paths with the lady and—

"Lady Glain has certainly done a most exceptional job with the house party, would you not say, Your Grace?"

"Indeed." This time, Strathearn had to fight harder to tamp down his impatience. "I—"

"If you were perchance in need of a reprieve from the evening's festivities, the stables, quiet as they are for the evening, might be just the place you'd go to find that...uh, rest, Your Grace." Burrell held his stare.

Strathearn stilled as the servant's meaning became clear.

Catching the distinguished fellow by the shoulders he planted a loud kiss on the cheek. "I don't pay you enough, Burrell."

Burrell, more like an older brother than a servant to Strathearn, snorted. “You pay me ungodly sums, Your Grace,” he called out as Strathearn raced outside.

He didn’t look back. “I owe you a raise, Burrell.”

“You provided one during the Christmastide Season, Your Grace.”

“Yes, overdue, entirely.”

Laughing, Burrell brought the doors shut.

A short while later, Strathearn quietly entered the vacant stable. His brief moment of levity with Burrell faded. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he peered about. Amidst the occasional whinny of his prized horses and the crunch of hay while they stomped about their stalls, Strathearn heard it—a faint, but distinctive, snuffle.

Dread twisted at his stomach muscles.

Then, he found her. The sight of her proud, regal shoulders slumped and the slight shake that occasionally rocked them hit him like a fist to the gut.

Standing here a helpless, silent observer while she silently wept alone in his stables, Strathearn realized how wrong he’d been.

He’d thought there couldn’t be a thing more miserable than watching Opal marry some undeserving cur.

This though? Seeing the effervescent, enchanting, Opal Carmichael hurting and defeated wrecked him. A tight knot of grief cinched about his throat.

Funny, he had a wealth of experience at affecting the role of carefree rogue, but in

this instant, with this woman, Strathearn fought to come up with a suitable—with any hint—of easy charm.

In the end, he realized how wrong it was for him to stand as a voyeur to her sorrow. She deserved more than that.

“I wondered where you’d gone,” he said quietly.

Opal’s slim, narrow back went proudly erect.

Discreetly, she rubbed her tear-stained face upon the smooth cheek of his beloved stallion, Zephyr. “Did you?” she asked, guarded as he’d never heard her.

Strathearn’s heart cracked.

With a relaxedness he didn’t feel, he joined her at the stall. Together they studied the majestic black stallion in silence. Strathearn fished a handkerchief from his jacket and offered it over.

Wordlessly—and reluctantly—his proud Opal accepted the embroidered cloth. To preserve her pride, he made a show of stroking Zephyr’s neck, while Opal wiped away the evidence of her sorrow.

At his side, Opal froze. “She was all things good,” she whispered.

Askance, he faced her.

Opal’s gaze remained directed upon Zephyr.

“As kind and gentle as a spring breeze, you said. You named Zephyr in honor of your mother.”

“I did.”

Her lips drew gently up at the corners, and it was everything he could do to keep from kissing that very mouth he wickedly hungered for. But even more than that? He wanted to keep seeing her radiant smile.

Opal rested her cheek on the top of the railing. “You have a way of making me feel like I’m the only person in the world you share secrets with.”

“You are,” he confessed before he could call the admission back.

Opal’s lips parted in that surprised little way of hers and Strathearn gave thanks for the dark quarters that—hopefully—hid his flushed cheeks.

While he revealed little to nothing about himself to anyone, speaking openly with Opal came somehow naturally. Hell, he’d even withheld painful parts of his past from Grimoire—his sole friend in the world.

“It just feels natural speaking with you,” he said quietly. That raw admission only served to remind Strathearn the same couldn’t be said about Opal—at least, not this time in their relationship.

He slid Opal another glance. “Given all this talk of openly communicating with one another...”

Opal’s expression became wary. “Yes.”

“I believe you promised to share something with me this evening.”

Now, he’d discover the man whom she’d given her heart and self to, and the moment Strathearn did, he’d have to contend with a harsh, inescapable reality.

And try to not kill whichever charming house guest was responsible for her current state.

I believe you promised to share something with me this evening...

When Locke discovered her here, the despair that'd sent her fleeing the recital vanished, and only ebullient joy remained. His desire to see Opal was so great, he'd abandoned the beguiling Lady Emerald!

When in truth, it hadn't a thing to do with a desire to see Opal. It's just he was that determined to discover the identity of her imaginary sweetheart.

If she weren't about to turn into a blasted watering pot, she'd have laughed.

"That's why you sought me out?" she whispered, detesting the catch in her voice.

"What...?" Strathearn looked at her with such a dazed confusion she could almost believe his act. "I...?"

Opal hopped off the bottom rung and glared at him. "Are you here on behalf of Abaddon?"

"No!" His affront was too real to be false.

Opal sharpened her gaze on him. "Glain?" The betrayal in that brought her voice up an octave.

"No," he gritted out.

There was a warning there.

To hell with him.

The truth crystallized in her mind.

Dampness collected on her palms. “Flint,” she exhaled.

His blond brows snapped together in a ferocious line.

“Have a care, love,” Locke cautioned. “I’ve been eminently patient, certainly more patient than any gentleman would be at having his honor called into question.” He took sleek, panther- like steps toward her. “The one and the only reason I’ve come is because you solicited my help this week and vowed to share your sweetheart’s identity.”

Her trust in this man outweighed any and all unease; it’s why her breath caught and her belly pooled with warmth and awareness and not dread as he backed her against the wood stall, and took her lightly by the arm.

Furious with herself for responding to his slightest touch, and to keep from drowning with misery, she fed the flames of her anger.

“You may rest assured, Your Grace,” Opal forced her chin up at a defiant angle, “it was always my intention to tell you. You needn’t have given up Lady Emerald’s delightful company.”

Locke’s eyes formed menacing pinpricks. “My God,” he whispered. His fingers suddenly spasmed around her arm.

She seized up. She’d revealed her insupportable jealousy. That coupled with Locke’s indifference of Opal made her want to howl and weep.

He released her like he'd been burned, and with his gaze growing ever blacker, he did a sweep of the stables.

Opal frowned. What had angered h—?

Her silent question went unfinished as he whipped his focus back on her. "You are meeting him," he snarled like an angry lion.

"Him?" Baffled, she shook her head.

"Don't lie, Opal. I chose that seat next to Lady Emerald because it afforded me the perfect vantage to observe you throughout the night."

From the ashes of desolate dreams sprung a well of hope. "Y-You did?" That's why he'd joined the widow in that particular chair, in that particular row?

"That's right, ma fee ." His nostrils flared, putting his fury on full-display. "Lest you forget, I'm one of society's worst rogues—"

"I've not forgotten," she grumbled. As if she could.

"It takes little for a man of my reputation to deduce the reason for your quarrel with Lord Linley."

Opal twisted her fingers in her skirts and prayed for the stable floor to open and swallow her up.

"You do?" she asked weakly.

Locke bared his gleaming, even, pearl-white, teeth. "Lord Linley, a gentleman of sound judgment knows where your affection lies,"

I'm going to cast up my accounts.

Her eyes slid closed.

Locke, however, remained set on torturing her. "Based on your and Lord Linley's volatile exchange," he jibed, "your brother heartily disapproves of the man you've gone and fallen in love with."

"What?" she blurted.

It was her turn for complete and utter confusion.

He scraped a furious stare over her person. "As your brother should," he hissed. "Given the fact you've secreted off to my bloody stables to meet the damned bastard."

"That's the conclusion you reached?"

"What other one is there?" Locke fired back.

Flummoxed, Opal rocked on her heels. My God, what if all this time, Flint was...right? What if the reason for Locke's concern and anger even now, and his having followed her to the stables in the middle of the night's festivities, was, in fact, because he actually held some affection for her?

Feeling shy as she'd never been with him or anyone, Opal laid her palms upon his chest.

His rigid pectoral muscles jumped.

In order to carry through with everything that'd brought her to this moment here with

Locke, Opal needed to be forthright and honest—in her yearnings...and feelings. Were she to duck and hide this night, he'd never see the woman she'd become—a woman who loved and hungered for him. When this night ended, however Locke felt—or did not feel—about her, she was determined to experience lovemaking with him.

Opal lifted her gaze and spoke without preamble. “I...wanted to be with you tonight.”

Confusion brought his eyebrows together. “At the recital?”

She shook her head. “I wanted to be alone with you.”

His taut brow relaxed. “Ah, you wanted to tell me the name of—”

“I want you,” she said bluntly.

Opal succeeded in stunning him into silence.

His blank expression and the rigidity of his muscular frame caused her to falter.

For him, she could swallow her pride.

Opal took a breath. “I desire you, Locke.”

His eyes flared a fraction. “That’s normal,” he squawked.

A smile tugged at her mouth. “Because all women desire you?”

“Yes.” His brows shot up. “No. But...yes?” he finished so sheepishly-boyish, she fell in love with him all over again. “Opal, I’m terrible. The absolute worst.”

“You aren’t. You are all that is good.”

Locke pounced. “That’s the thing, I’m really not. I’m a bloody rogue. I’ve gambled, drank, and...and...worse.” His voice sank to a whisper. “You are my best friend’s sister-in-law. I’ve done things with you and want to do things with you that mark me thoroughly loathsome.”

How to make this man see he was more than good? He defined honor and goodness and kindness and generosity and compassion. But to tell him as much, to profess her love now, would only scare him away.

Locke believed himself capable of only offering a woman desire. She’d begin with that.

“I enjoy being in your arms, Locke. Does that make me a bad woman?”

“No!”

“And what about the man who’ll soon be my husband.” Reality intruded on her joy and again tears threatened. “Am I sullied and whorish for having experienced pleasure with you?”

Rage contorted his features. “No!” he said, his tone sharp enough to cut.

“You’re certain?”

Locke drew her up on tiptoe and brought her body flush with his. “I’m certain that you are a desirable woman who deserves to know pleasure and be pleased, and any man who’d judge you for your body’s yearnings doesn’t deserve to stand in your shadow let alone have you in name.”

Locke's eyes darkened; the color deepening as he centered a searing gaze upon her mouth.

Opal's heart beat faster. He wants to kiss me in the same way I yearn for him to.

A familiar ache stirred between her legs.

"Locke?" she whispered.

His response came strained and guttural. "Hmm?"

Opal traced the tip of her tongue over her lips. "Will you teach me about passion?"

When he answered, Locke sounded like he was strangling. "Teach you about passion?"

She nodded.

Of course, he'd have to be looking at her, and not, say, the ceiling, to have noticed her unspoken confirmation.

"I..." Love you with all I am and all I will ever be . "Trust you," she settled for. "Aside from you, my brother, and Abaddon, I don't trust any man, and I, for most obvious reasons, certainly cannot put this request to them ." She forced a smile.

Her attempt at humor landed far from the mark.

To Opal's ever-lasting mortification and hurt, Locke eyed the exit in that same way he'd done after mistaking her identity at their reunion earlier this week.

He took a step toward the door. She could not let her pride get in the way. Not when,

in so doing, she risked leaving his home without not only his love, but the joy of being in his arms. Which also meant, Opal would be left with her virtue intact for the stranger her hateful sire would bind her to.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

His body sagged with such palpable relief it landed like another fist to her heart.

He spoke on a rush. “It is fine. You are young, and of course, have questions about desire and passion and wish to experience both, and you will , Opal, with,” his voice dipped and his tone became sharper, “some good, decent, fellow...”

Opal replaced the step he’d placed between them, with one of her own, and the rest of his assurance went unfinished. “I wasn’t finished, Locke,” she murmured. “You misunderstood the reason for my apology.”

Locke’s guard immediately went up. He eyed her with a healthy dose of wariness. “Oh?”

“I was apologizing for not being clearer.” Before her courage deserted her, she lifted her gaze to his, and finished the rest. “I want you to make love to me.”

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Under that sweet, trusting, innocent avowal of Opal's desire, Strathearn's body fired hot. Lust pumped through his veins and left him hard in an instant and simultaneously enraged.

I want you to make love to me.

The harsh drag of breath he pulled in through his nose filled the stable.

The latest favor Opal enlisted his help with—lovemaking. She wanted him to prepare her for the one she loved; an honorable chap who'd give her his name and until his last dying day, live beside her.

With every rotten fiber of his selfish being, Strathearn despised the blackguard.

She wished to learn from Strathearn so she could give the gift of herself to another man—a man who'd not be a mystery to him, forever.

Strathearn wanted to hiss and snarl like a pitiless, bloodthirsty beast.

And yet...a primal, possessive satisfaction came for Strathearn in imagining he'd be the one to teach Opal; to tutor her. The roguish part of him—and it was the biggest, greatest—and also, the worst—thrilled at the prospect and relished knowing one day, when she belonged to another, that it had been he, Strathearn, who'd first coaxed her body to passion.

He went to war with himself, fighting the very battle Adam himself once toiled over in the Lord's paradise.

Opal rested a hand upon his chest; she lay her palm upon the place where his heart pounded and lifted her gaze in supplication to meet his.

She was a grown woman. Opal knew what she wanted. That's what he told himself to silence the angel on his shoulder demanding Strathearn not commit this greatest of sins against his best friend.

He wasn't this strong.

"Opal," he begged.

"Please ," she issued that husky, stark entreaty of her own that pilloried the last of his restraint.

He was done for.

His shaft throbbed; his breath hitched. This was utter lunacy.

Something about Opal Carmichael left him completely and totally mad and rendered him defenseless.

He sensed his own capitulation and knew the fall coming, yet remained powerless to stop it.

Looping a hand about Opal's waist, he brought her body flush to his, drawing a breathless gasp from her trembling lips.

Jeeringly, Strathearn rubbed his rock-hard erection in deliberate circles over her belly. "You want me to take you, do you, mon Coeur ?"

His crude words and lewd undulating didn't raise any terror. Instead, she sank her

even white teeth into her lower lip and moaned.

“No, Locke,” she whispered.

No?

Strathearn jolted. Being a blackguard through and through, he’d have preferred Opal run him through with the five-foot-long, Renwick ancestral, steel-arming sword before ending this.

He squeezed his eyes shut. But he’d just as soon cut off his own right hand with that same weapon before placing his desires ahead of hers.

Warm, delicate, fingers rested on the top of his hand.

His eyes flew open and his gaze collided with Opal’s unwavering, hypnotic one.

Without taking her eyes from his face, Opal, with the sensual allure of a self-assured woman who knew precisely what she wanted, guided his palm to her right breast.

Strathearn’s breath hitched. Like a starving man who’d just been given a loaf of life-saving bread, his fingers reflexively curled upon her bountiful flesh.

A low, guttural groan reverberated in his chest.

“Opal,” Strathearn bade, unsure whether he pleaded for her to spare his soul from this sin, or to let him make an altar of her body, and be the first to lay worship there.

The latter. God help me, it is the latter.

“I want you to be the first man I give myself to. I want you to show me what it’s like

to know real passion.” Her luminous eyes glittered with all her truths. Her every avowal sent a fresh, fiery, bolt of lust through him, shattering his already broken defenses. “And I want you to make love to me right now, right here.”

His vainglorious pride burgeoned. She’d chosen Strathearn .

I’m going straight to hell.

And he was going to wear a smile when he did...

Strathearn curled his palm about her nape and angled her head to receive him. “I am lost, love because I’ve never been able to disappoint you,” he said huskily.

“I am found,” she said with a solemnness that scared the everlasting hell out of him and compelled him to stop.

He was too far gone.

Guiding her back against Zephyr’s stall door, Strathearn ultimately consecrated his soul to the ultimate sin and brushed his mouth over Opal’s. He worshipped the generous seam of her lips.

Unlike their passionate exchange before, now Strathearn kissed her slowly, deeply, easing her into the violent battle he intended to wage over her.

Looping her arms about his neck, Opal leaned up and into him, surrendering fully to his embrace.

His heartbeat surged. All his senses tunneled on one thing and one thing only: the innocent woman in his arms.

Strathearn savored the taste and feel of her. She was all intoxicating fire, and he reveled in the illicit pleasure that'd sent Icarus soaring for that fiery star.

Having become bored over the years, his tastes in lovemaking had become more violent and debauched. Not a single act he'd performed with any woman in the whole of his existence had possessed the potency or intimacy or majesty of this act now, here, with this woman.

"Locke," she moaned.

Strathearn's name emerged throaty and tremulous, and his blood thickened under the sultry, musical quality of her plea.

Not a single lover had ever used his given name.

Not a single person had.

He was: Duke. Your Grace. Strathearn. Only Opal addressed him in that intimate and confident way she did—and it set him afire.

Strathearn slipped his tongue inside and drank of her goodness.

In a deliberate, teasing, tempting parry, he glided his flesh about hers in sweeping movements that invited her to take part, only to retreat so Opal became the innocent lead in a dance more complex than the quadrille.

They each took time to explore and exult in the taste and feel of one another until they merged to become complete partners in the only set he wished to ever be part of.

Their breaths came fast in a matched rhythm to the pounding of Strathearn's pulse hammering away in his ears.

Enflamed, he filled his palms with Opal's well-rounded buttocks and massaged the flesh; he sculpted his fingers into the generous swells, luxuriating in the feel of her in his hands.

He crushed her gown in his hands. The fabric rustled noisily like the fireworks that crackled and fizzled at Vauxhall. It, combined with Opal's low, hungry moan, contributed to a hedonistic symphony that drove Strathearn wild.

He kissed the corner of her mouth. "Do you like the feel of my hands on you, Opal?"

"M-More than anything, Locke."

By the way she rocked her untried hips against him, Strathearn already knew the answer but hearing it on her lips further fanned the flames of his desire.

He buried his nose in the crevice where her shoulder met the slim, graceful swan's length of her neck; he sucked lightly at the silken flesh and then blew softly upon the laved skin.

She cried out.

"You are so responsive to me, ma fee ."

Opal tipped her head, opening herself further to his erotic assault.

"I-Is that a good th-thing?" Her chest rose and fell like she'd run the lengths of his property.

"Oh, a very good thing." Hiding a smile, Strathearn placed a tender kiss on her heated skin. "But there's just one problem."

“Su-Surely not,” she gasped.

“My hands.” Strathearn gave her a little nip.

“They are l-lovely.”

“Thank you. Though, we were discussing whether my hands were on you. They aren’t really on you, mon minette .”

An indistinct reply came followed by her low, agonized moan. Thrilling as much at her desire for him, as his power over her, he stroked his hands along her narrow waist and flared hips.

He glided his tongue and lips along her collarbone and collected the slight sheen of perspiration.

Moaning, Opal rubbed herself against him. “ Mmm . Y-You know, Locke.” She sank her teeth into her lower lip. “I-It feels very much as though your hands are on me.”

His breathing grew labored.

“ Are they ?” To illustrate his point, Strathearn tugged one strand of the gossamer lace bow at her waist.

He gave the other lace a pull. Her gown sagged.

Enflamed, Strathearn dipped his tongue within the crevice between her breasts.

“O-Oh, my,” she panted.

His amusement died a swift death. Oh, my, indeed.

Excitement and desire blazed within her eyes. Opal held his stare with both fearlessness and ferocity. This was why Caesar had risked his political power and people's wrath for Cleopatra.

This was also what Strathearn knew it would be like to make love with fiery, undaunted, Lady Opal Carmichael. After she'd last visited, Strathearn hadn't been able to fight that which he'd denied for so long—Opal had become an alluring, enchantress and he lusted and longed for her like the unrepentant rake he was. In some of the most depraved moments of his life, he'd lain in bed and been tortured by thoughts of the woman she'd become.

Now, she is mine...

Like the base, ravenous, animal he'd become, Strathearn pushed his body more firmly against hers, driving her more stolidly against the stable door, and anchoring her there.

"Do you want to feel my hands on your naked breasts, love?" he demanded; he continued running his tongue between the glorious orbs.

She attempted to rock herself into his cock, and cried out when he continued to deny her. "I want it!"

Strathearn drilled his cock more firmly into her belly. "The words, Opal. Give me the words."

"I want to feel your hands on my naked breasts!" she rasped.

"Good girl." He rewarded her honesty by freeing her some to move in her body's natural rhythm.

Strathearn drew on a life's worth of lust-filled instincts and restraint. As casual as a Sunday, he finally slipped her evening gown all the way past her breasts. He eased the material lower, until the shimmery garment slid along her hips, and pooled in an iridescent pink and white pool at their feet.

He gazed into her dazed eyes and waited.

Her cheeks flush, her mouth swollen and wet from his attention, Opal nodded.

Strathearn unfastened the ties at her waist. His pulse pounded erratically in his ears. Her stays took the same path her luxuriant dress had traveled moments prior, leaving Opal nude before him.

The earth stood still.

Hungry as he'd never been in his life, he rabidly devoured her with his eyes. Like she'd been designed by the Creator for Strathearn, Opal's high, full breasts were the perfect fit to his palms. The blush pink of her areolas stood out vividly glorious upon her alabaster skin, that contrast made all the brighter by the enormous cherry-red nipples; nipples that begged for his mouth and lips. He could have spent his sorry existence dreaming about her ample flesh bared to his gaze and not once imagined their absolute and utter perfection.

He feasted on all of her—her slender waist, the curve of her hips, and long, supple legs that traveled on forever, and then he lingered at that thatch of midnight curls at the apex of her thighs.

Upon his venerated study, Opal's creamy skin reddened. She hunched her shoulders slightly.

"No shyness," he said hoarsely, unable to remove his gaze from her. "You are too

exquisite a queen to hide from me, love.”

Her breath caught. “I am?”

From another Opal’s shy disbelief would have been coy and contrived. “You’re a goddess among mere morals,” he said thickly.

Strathearn stopped torturing them both and filled his hands with her fullness.

Moaning, Opal frenziedly rolled her hips against him, grinding her flat belly into his cock.

He hissed and fought the urge to yank his placard open, and draw her long, innocent fingers to where he needed her touch.

But this night was all for her, and he tunneled his on pleasuring her.

All the while Strathearn played with her breasts; tweaking her nipples, rolling them between her fingers, he worshipped a path along the soft, graceful length of her swan-like neck. As he went, he kissed, then lightly sucked each place his lips touched.

Opal’s head fell back and she opened herself even wider to him. Awed by the faith she put in him, he lowered his head and rewarded her by drawing one of her pebbled nipples deep into his mouth.

“Locke,” she cried out, his name both an erotic plea and invitation.

Afire, Strathearn fighting for breath, scooped his palms under the generous swells of Opal’s buttocks and lifted her up. Like the Venus she was, Opal brought her legs about his waist so the only barrier between her sweet cunny and him was the placard of his wool breeches.

“I want you so badly,” he rasped, massaging her flesh?

With a siren’s mewling that spilled from her lips, Opal rubbed herself against Strathearn’s length.

The rhythm of their breathing shifted and grew more frantic; the air grew charged and sparse between them.

“I want you, too, Locke. More than anything.” She gazed upon him with eyes like glittering, luminescent stars. “You’re the only one I want.”

Her vow threatened to send him into an all-out panic. Before he let reality intrude all the way in, Strathearn’s long history as a rogue, allowed him to drown out the terror and guilt at what he did here with his best friend’s innocent, young sister-in-law.

Bearing her in his arms, he led them to the vacant stable master’s quarters, grateful to Burrell and prepared to offer sizeable salary increases to each fellow who’d retired this night.

The minute he lay Opal upon the narrow cot, he stood over her and drank the sight in. With her hair hanging in a shimmery black waterfall of tangled curls about her waist she had the look of a siren at sea. “You are gorgeous, Opal.”

Her lashes fluttered. “Oh.”

How was it possible she had absolutely no idea the extent of her beauty or greatness?

Impatiently, he yanked his cravat free and tossed it aside. “If I were a good man, I’d end this,” he warned. “But I’m not a good man.”

She needed to know that. Before he went and completed his descent into hell, he

needed her to know that. “I’m fast approaching a point of no return, and only you have the power to command me to stop and end this madness.”

“You are the best of men,” she spoke with a fervor that almost made him believe her. “Of everything that’s come to pass in my life, or will, or will ever be,” she said thickly, “the absolute only thing of which I’m certain is my need for you, Locke. You are the only man I—”

Terror sent his eyebrows into a full flare.

“I want to know first in this way,” she finished.

The man she wanted to know first in this way ...

Instead of an appropriate relief, there came a sensation remarkably close to...regret. He chased it away.

Raw, primitive, masculine satisfaction freed Strathearn of his bothersome restraint. He shrugged out of his jacket. His white lawn shirt was next to follow. Then, his boots.

“You are the apple, mamour .” His fingers went to the waistband of his trousers. “You are the sweet, forbidden fruit worth carrying all man’s sins for.”

Daring her with his gaze, he pushed the garment down and kicked them aside, until he stood naked before her.

With the same zeal she went through life, Opal pushed herself up onto her elbows. She looked boldly at him with such innocence and zeal, his erection grew and throbbed.

Her eyes formed perfectly rounded moons. “Oh, my,” she whispered faintly.

His lips twitched. “A ‘good’ ‘oh, my’ or a ‘bad’ ‘oh, my?’”

“A ‘you are more exquisitely made than the statues of David and Perseus combined’ oh my.”

Her reverent awe threatened to undo him.

“Part your legs for me,” he purred, his was both an order and an invitation.

The demand hadn’t even fully left his lips when she let her sweet thighs splay.

His body temperature soared.

“Good girl.” With a growl of appreciation, he came down over her.

As Strathearn took her lips in a voracious kiss, he stroked his right hand up and down the satiny expanse of her thigh.

Opal slid her long fingers through his hair and urged him closer. “Please, Locke,” she spurred him on.

“Do you know what you are begging for?”

“You!”

“That’s right.” His pulse pounded so hard, it filled his ears, near deafening.

Strathearn cupped her breasts and brought the supple flesh together. He played with the orbs; tweaking her nipples, tugging them lightly at first.

He lowered his mouth near one of the taut, rosy tips and stopped. “I am going to kiss you here, Opal,” he whispered. “I’m going to take your big nipples into my mouth, one at a time, and suck until you’re begging for surrender.”

Opal’s breath grew shallow, her body, listless.

A sheen of sweat popped out at his brow. “That excites you, doesn’t it?” he asked hoarsely. “The thought of me drawing these beautiful tips inside my mouth.”

He did just that—briefly. Strathearn came off the peak with a noisy pop.

Opal’s cry of frustration rang around the room.

“Yes, you love it.” His rough, graveled voice ruined the casual tone he attempted to adopt. “But...” He flicked his tongue back and forth over that sensitive flesh, drawing another wanton moan from her. “You also enjoy when I’m talking dirty to you.”

She arched her hips in answer.

“Mm. Mm,” he chided. “That will not do. Tell me,” he demanded.

Opal stared at him with fiery eyes. “I love both.”

Strathearn proceeded to reward her honesty; he licked and suckled her, lightly at first, and then with an increasing pressure and intensity that had Opal lifting and lowering her hips, simulating the exquisite act he’d initiate her to this night.

That only served to remind him of the favor she’d put to him. Hungry for her, he’d become so lost he’d forgotten the way this ultimately ended—with her marrying some other man.

A man he now prepared her for.

Rage briefly blinded him and he threw himself more fully into pleasuring her.

“What of your mystery love?” he snarled angrily, kissing her neck, and his question and ministrations were alternately used to tease and taunt. “Should he not be the one whose arms you seek?”

Her sooty black eyelashes lifted like it was a herculean chore. “I don’t... what ?” Confusion filled her eyes.

A pleased chuckle rumbled in his chest. He’d made her forget all about the man she wished to call ‘husband’ and Strathearn was more than happy benefitting from the other man’s neglect.

She isn’t yours. She can never be yours. Even if there weren’t some other man she loved. He was a rogue with a wicked past; an ugliness flowed in his veins. And there was Grimoire.

“Worry not,” he purred. “I will show you the way, mon Coeur .” Lowering his mouth to her breast, he drew the already puckered, moist tip deep into his mouth and suckled harder this time.

Opal sank into the thin mattress and keened so low and long that all the mounts within the stable grew restless.

Strathearn didn’t let up the attention he paid her breasts. He pressed the heel of his palm over her mound and applied just the right amount of pressure.

Opal’s breath caught on a sharp intake.

Growling like the monster he was, he pressed the long ridge of his erection against the small of her belly, so she could feel his hungering for her.

“He must not just prepare you to receive him,” he educated her on how it should be, “but so that you achieve surrender.”

Her eyes widened.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” he asked sharply.

She shook her head wildly.

“I’m going to show you how it can be; how it must be,” he said harshly, rocking himself against her.

“Locke,” she moaned.

Yes. That was right. He’d show her pleasure the likes of which she’d never know again, and imprint upon her mind and body so that long after she left and married the husband, he now prepared her for, she’d think only of Strathearn.

“I’m going to touch you, Opal.” The jagged, serrated quality of his whisper leant a lie to the steadiness of his voice. “I’m going to touch you in a way that you will love, and you can use your fingers the same way I do to bring yourself exquisite release.”

There. Thinking of Opal frigging herself with her fingers, as opposed to some stranger helping coax her to an orgasm, made the flame of his lust burn hotter.

He reached down between them and threaded his fingers through her feathery soft nest of black curls covering her mound.

A hiss exploded from between Opal's teeth and her hips shot up.

Reaching between their bodies, he slipped a finger inside her folds.

Opal cried out.

“Bloody hell.” A hiss slid between his tightly clenched lips. “You’re so hot for me.”

He rubbed his aching shaft in a circle along her silken thigh.

More of her sweet wetness coated his fingers. “That’s it, love,” he encouraged, as she rode his fingers.

Strathearn shifted his mouth and made to claim hers—and then stopped. “He must kiss you—everywhere...” he coached, and lowering his mouth to her breast, he drew the already puckered and pebbled tip deep into his mouth and suckled.

A hiss exploded from between Opal's teeth and her hips shot up.

Hiding a smug smile, he used one hand to tease, touch, and explore her drenched center. With his other, Strathearn stroked her jaw and coaxed her. “Open for me,” he demanded.

Sighing, Opal granted him entry, and the same moment, he swept his tongue inside to feast, he slid a finger inside her channel.

Opal cried out; that hungry, ardent exclamation lost to his mouth. He stroked his tongue against hers, twirling the flesh around Opal's again and again.

She was a quick study, as passionate in lovemaking as she was in every other aspect of her life; Opal tangled her fingers in his hair and forced Strathearn's head so she

could better lash her tongue against his.

The entire time, he switched between teasing her nub and gliding a finger inside, mimicking a rhythm as old as time.

Moaning, Opal rocked against his hand; undulating her hips.

Sweat trickled down his brow. His ballocks drew up tight. He wanted to bury his cock deep inside her. When had he ever had to wage a fierce battle against his animalistic urge to fuck?

Because with her, with Opal, it was...more.

Because she is Opal. Because she is everything.

He wanted her to know every happiness and feel unutterable pleasure with him.

That selfless hungering sent him slithering down her body. Going up onto his knees, he straddled her body and lowered his head to the only place he needed to be.

“L-Locke?” she asked, tremulously.

Tenderly, he placed a kiss along the inside of her inner thigh. He breathed in deep of the musky, womanly scent of her desire and his body trembled in response.

He focused on breathing. “Do you trust me?”

“M-More than anything.”

Her faith in him was nearly his undoing. “I’m going to make love to you with my mouth.”

Then, burying his face in the nest of her womanhood, he slipped his tongue inside her sodden sheath and proceeded to do just that.

A cross between a scream and sob left her lips and soared to the ceiling rafters.

Unrelentingly, Strathearn stroked Opal. He began slow and then drove up the speed with which he slid his tongue inside.

Knowing it'd drive her mad, he sucked on her nub.

Tangling her fingers in the thin cotton blanket upon the small bed, she arched her hips violently, grinding herself against him.

“Looocke!” The way she stretched the lone syllable of his name into three ravaged his fraying self-control.

Lost in her, lost in the driving need to bring her surcease, Strathearn forced himself to stop.

This time, Opal wept openly.

“Shh, my love,” he crooned, ragged, his chest heaving. “I am going to take care of you.”

Strathearn settled himself between her legs, and with the tip of his shaft poised at her entryway, he froze. His damp hair hung over his eyes, and he flung his neck to the side, to clear his vision, needing to see her as badly as he needed to be inside her. He drank in the vision of her here; wanting to cement the memory of her—of them—in his mind, and draw on it, forever.

Later he could wonder at why, and worry over it. For now—

Opal caught his damp face in her trembling fingers. “Do not stop,” she pleaded, lifting her hips in supplication.

“Never, love,” Strathearn vowed, and accepting that most glorious of invitations, he slowly entered her. Her molten wetness eased his way.

He gritted his teeth. Bloody hell, he’d never felt a channel as hot and tight as hers. His shoulders shook with the effort it took to not drive himself inside her.

Opal’s long, sooty, eyelashes fluttered. “What is it?” she whispered.

Incapable of words, Strathearn shook his head, and with their gazes locked, he plunged inside, joining his body with hers.

Hating himself for bringing her pain, he swallowed her sharp hiss under his kiss.

“I’m so sorry, Opal,” he whispered imploringly and placed his lips against her temple. “I’m so—”

“Why are you...? Why did you stop?” she whispered. Her features quavered. “Did I do something wrong?”

An anguished groan rose inside him. “No, love. You’ve done everything right. Everything you are, everything you do, always is.”

He lay his brow upon her glistening one. “I hurt—”

Opal writhed. “I’m not in p-pain.”

Strathearn froze. “You’re not?”

“No, you silly man.” Opal tilted her hips up. “Please—”

He kissed away the rest of that entreaty. “It’ll be my pleasure, love,” he purred and began to rock inside her, slow at first.

Twining her hands about his nape, she locked in on Strathearn and raised her hips to meet each of his downward thrusts.

They began to move as one.

No words were spared. None were needed. With the discordant tempo of their breaths, he and Opal remained captives of one another.

Strathearn palmed her right breast, and raised it to his mouth, making love to the flesh the way he now knew she loved. While he did, with his other, he massaged and caressed the neglected orb.

She’s close...

I’m close...

Moaning, Opal brought her knees up, and gripped him tight with her athletic legs.

With each rhythmic push, he plunged deeper until her movements grew jerky and uneven; urgent.

Opal gasped and rocked to his rhythm. Their slick bodies strained against one another.

“Locke?” Dismay sent her husky voice creeping up into a question.

“I’ll help you,” he rasped. “It’s all right, love.”

Strathearn bloody lied.

It wasn’t. Would it ever be again? How could it? Certainly, it wouldn’t for him.

His thoughts raced dizzyingly in time to the mayhem of his passion.

Drawing himself up onto his elbows, he gripped Opal harder by her hips, and drove himself deeper into her, until he felt her body tensing.

“Locke.” Each word came as a punctuated gasp. “I. Want. Please .”

Opal bit her lip so hard she drew blood.

Strathearn leaned down and gently sucked away those drops. Then, shifting his mouth near hers, he coaxed her, begged her. “Come for me, my love,” he pleaded.

When had he ever been this close to losing control? With Opal, everything was different. Nothing made sense, and at the same time, everything did.

Her eyes grew large; a look of surprise spread over her face, and then arching her back, Opal’s body spasmed. All the while she came, she sobbed Strathearn’s name.

Sweating, he flexed his hips violently, pumping himself inside, until a shuddery gasp left Opal’s lips and she collapsed under him.

Still, he wanted this moment to keep going. He wanted to live inside her like this, forever.

Gritting his teeth, he fought his own release. The glove-like feel of her channel still

spasming around his cock, proved his breaking point.

Opal.

With a dying gasp, he wrenched himself out of her and came in long, juddering spurts onto the stable floor.

And then, sapped of energy, emotionally and physically replete, he collapsed in her arms.

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While Opal's heart and breathing struggled to return to a normal rhythm, she clung to Locke's glistening back.

Unable to open her eyes, unable to end this wondrous moment, unable—and unwilling—to let him go, she held him all the tighter.

And, maybe I don't have to...

Hope fluttered in her breast.

Maybe Flint was right in that Locke did care about Opal. By his own admission, he respected her, admired her, enjoyed being with her—and now he'd made love to her. And there wasn't a thing on God's green earth that could ever compare to lying in Locke's arms.

Locke rolled onto his side and cradled her close like she was a priceless artifact, to be cherished and preserved forever, and ran his hands over her back. "Was it good, love?"

Dazed, she stared dreamily into his eyes. "It was..." She sought for any way to try and do even some justice to the splendor she'd known. "It was fireworks and summer sunsets and soaring in a swing."

As if to reward Opal for her poetic honesty, Locke captured her lips in a long, drugging kiss, that addled her already wooly senses—that ended too quickly.

Humming to himself, Locke leaned over her and grappled for his jacket.

“Leaving already?” she drawled teasingly.

Instead of the intended grin or laugh, the color seeped from Locke’s cheeks.

“I’m teasing, Locke,” she said gently.

His previously open expression now shuttered, he fished something from his jacket and said nothing in return.

Without a word spoken, Locke guided Opal onto her back, and then poignantly, reverently, cleaned between her legs.

She blinked back tears. Love. How easily he referred to Opal so, and how tenderly he held her after having made breathtaking love to her. How could he do all those things if he didn’t love her—if even just a little?

Worriedly, he looked up. “What is it?” He paled. “Did I hurt—?”

“N-No!”

With an apparent mistrust of that hastily given assurance, Locke restlessly examined her.

Against her body, she felt all Locke’s muscles bunch up. The kerchief slipped from his fingers, and Opal followed its sad white dance to the floor.

Sitting up, he swung his legs over the side of the small bed and dropped his head into his hands. “Oh, God.”

Frantic, she scrambled onto her knees beside him. “What?”

Locke exhaled a horrified whisper. “You have regrets,” he said, his beautiful baritone low and ravaged. “I’m so bloody sorry, Opal. I should have never—”

Opal took his arm and lightly shook him. “Never, Locke!” She gave him a squeeze. “I wanted you to make love to me. I wanted you to be the first.” I want you to be the only. “What we did here...” She attempted to somehow put it into words. “It is and will always be the singular most special, earth-shattering moment of my life.”

Locke must have heard something in Opal’s earnestness; he picked his head up to look at her. The blood rushed from his cheeks. “Christ,” he hissed.

She shook her head. “Wh—?”

He held up his hands, warding off the rest of her imploration. “I see how you are looking at me, Opal,” he croaked. “And... don’t. It’s my fault. You are young. Confused. I’m your first lover. This—” He dragged a hand back and forth between them, knocking her fingers from his person—intentional or not, she did not know. “This was always going to confuse it, and I should have anticipated that, and I never would have...”

She scanned his face. “And you would never have made love to me if you knew I had feelings for you?”

At his damning silence, a heaviness settled in Opal’s chest and limbs. She rubbed at her arms. “I see.”

That he could feel that way—that he could even think that—about the singular, most beautiful, astounding, thing to ever happen to her...

Opal let her arms drop. “I’m not confused, Locke,” she said solemnly. “I’ve never been surer about anything in my life. I love you.” Her voice didn’t so much as quiver.

Rather, she felt freed by sharing that admission with him.

Locke didn't seem to hear her. Feeling exposed in every way, Opal gathered the blanket and brought it about herself to conceal her nakedness. Were it another time, she'd have laughed at the ridiculousness of modesty being bare in front of him after they'd already been as intimate as a man and woman could be.

His complete silence and blank expression was the response she'd dreaded. Truthfully, it was also the one she'd expected. Having repeatedly played out this very exchange in her head did nothing to ease the crushing weight of Opal's sorrow.

See me. Please, see me.

When he said nothing, Opal said it again, for him. "I love you," she vowed with greater insistence. She'd continue to speak them until he acknowledged her.

However, the unfailingly collected, stouthearted Duke of Strathearn merely snatched up his black wool trousers. The speed of his actions spoke of a man about to run.

She frowned. Where she'd been concerned, she'd long considered herself a coward, but she hadn't taken him for one.

When he stuffed one strong, defined calf into the leg hole of his trousers, she stared incredulously at him. "Locke, I love you."

"Opal," he said, his voice strained as his features, and condescending, too— Oh, the great big lummoX . If she didn't love him so, he'd have driven her utterly mad.— "You do not just fall in love with someone after...after what we've done here." Infuriatingly he tugged his trousers up and set about stuffing the length of his fine lawn shirt into the waistband.

“No, I am well aware of that,” she said calmly.

Appearing relieved and pleased with her concurrence, Locke jammed his other leg inside the trouser opening.

She waited until their eyes again met. “It is you, Locke.”

He froze in a crouched position and stared blankly at her.

“It is you , Locke,” she repeated. “It has always been you.”

Straightening slowly, he finished pulling his trousers up. “Me,” he repeated dumbly.

“Always,” she said softly.

Locke shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

He didn’t understand or he didn’t want to?

His cravat still forgotten at their feet had left his shirt gaping at the top and she had full view of his neck; the corded tendons in it taut.

He eyed her with a growing wariness that set off the first stirring of disquiet.

Opal scrambled with the thin blanket in her hands. She’d come this far.

“When I told you the first day I’d fallen in love with one of,” do not mention Abaddon , “the library’s sponsors—” It was too late. Locke’s eyebrows soared up, knowing what she’d been about to say. “I spoke the truth. I do, in fact, love one of those patrons, and that patron is and always has been you .”

Out of his inexpressiveness, she tried—and failed—to make sense of Locke’s feelings but he remained unflaggingly straight- faced. And, for a long, horrible stretch of time, she believed he intended to ignore this latest confession and leave it where they’d last ended to never speak about it again.

“When you asked that I...help you earn the affections of some gentleman...”

She was already nodding.

“That gentleman was in fact—”

“You.”

“Me,” he finished over her.

Somehow, she found the courage to keep speaking. “I have loved you as long as I’ve known you.”

“You were a child when we met,” Locke said, his tone flat.

His gaze traveled to the rumpled bed, her stays, gown, and slippers strewn around them. So much blood left his cheeks, for a moment she feared he’d hit the floor. She jumped up to go to him, got tangled in the blanket, and came back down on her knees.

Opal lifted a solemn gaze to his, willing him to see. “I’m not a child now. I want to marry you, Locke.”

That knocked him from his inertia.

A strained laugh gurgled in his throat. “Opal, did you just...propose marriage to me?”

Hers had been more of a statement, but it wouldn't benefit either of them getting caught up in wordplay.

To be fair, when she'd set out for his estate and put her plan into motion, it'd never ended with Opal being the one to ask for his hand. She loved him too much for that.

You loved him and you lied to him.

Stricken by that realization she fished about for something—anything—to say in the face of his anger. “Are you saying if I'd told you from the beginning, I loved you, you'd not have avoided me at all costs, Locke?”

Will he feel anything for you now that you lied to him? a voice in her head taunted.

His rigid jawline rippled.

She only ever saw this suppressed fury from him when they were in her father's company. Never had Locke's rage been directed at her.

An increasing chill built rapidly inside Opal, brutally obliterating all the warmth and good and light of this night. Within the shadow of his resentment, the splendor of earlier may as well have been a daydream she'd carried out of her own selfish, desperate yearnings.

What is he thinking? Opal dampened her mouth. But, do you truly wish to know?

“I didn't do this to trap you, Locke,” she said haltingly. “Surely, you know I—”

“Of course, you didn't,” he said with an adamance she most certainly did not deserve. “Your abhorrence for dukes and dukedoms is second to only mine.”

“Given you’re a duke and reap many benefits from that title, I’d say with certainty yours is second to mine,” she groused.

For a moment, her recalcitrance appeared to penetrate his outrage. His well-formed lips twitched at the corners, but a true smile never formed.

His countenance grew more serious. “From the very beginning of our time together here, Opal, you’ve been untruthful with me. Instead of honesty, you chose duplicity.”

“I had no other choice,” she cried softly, regretting her girl-like outburst.

“You always have a choice, Opal,” he chided her like the child he saw her as. “In no world is deceiving a man one of them.” Then, the words began flying fast from his lips, growing tenser, angrier, until she was drowning in the oppressive weight of them. “You played games with me. You made me believe there was someone else. You continued to dangle the promise of his identity with me.”

He was right. About everything.

“Opal, my God,” he said, horrified. “Think about who you are. Think about who I am...your brother-in-law’s best friend.”

Despairingly, Opal watched him there.

Everything was happening so quickly. She’d had so much time to think what she’d say...and she hadn’t.

Even though she’d reminded herself over and over her chances of making Locke fall in love with her were about as likely as goats flying, the truth was, she’d not actually let herself imagine failing. For when she did, then Opal would have to acknowledge to herself the future she dreamed of with Locke as her partner, friend, lover, and

husband was over, and all that awaited her was the same, terrible, heartbreaking fate endured by the mother Opal didn't remember.

An ugly curse tore from Locke and echoed in the stable. "I'm a bloody fiend."

"No," she beseeched. "You are good and honorable. I'm the one who—"

"I'm so honorable I took the virginity of my best friend's sister-in-law." Bitter recrimination and self-loathing dripped from his voice.

I did this to him.

Unable to face Locke, Opal climbed down from the bed. On trembling legs, she performed the same unsteady hunt for her garments. Her teeth knocking loudly and viciously together, she stupidly drew her stays on before remembering—

Gentle hands brushed her back. "Here," Locke gruffly ordered and fastened the white article.

Wordlessly he helped her into her dress, and with exquisite regard, he righted her hair.

Their gazes locked.

"Do you know what I admired most about you, Opal?" he murmured.

Dumbly, she shook her head.

"It was your honesty," he said, matter-of-factly, continuing to speak in that past tense way that pushed spikes into her lungs and left her breath serrated and shallow.

Opal's entire body curled into itself. Were Locke to drive his fist into her stomach it wouldn't hurt more than this.

I cannot bear this...How am I still standing...?

"Where other women are false and deceitful, and in search of the title duchess, power, jewels, my sexual attentions, you were the one honest and good one."

Were.

Opal's lower lip trembled. She managed a threadbare whisper. "I didn't want any of those things." She inched her tear-filled gaze up to his shadowy eyes. I just wanted your heart.

But he didn't ask what she'd yearned for. He already knew all he'd decided he needed to know.

Opal drew a slow breath in through her nostrils and released it from her lips.

"You are right." Who was this calm woman speaking? The voice sounded very much like hers. "I conducted myself abominably and you are right to feel the resentment, disgust, and anger you do."

Suddenly, it was as if he'd awakened from a dream. Locke blanched and his body began to tremble.

"Opal," he said, taking a hasty step towards her. "I am sorry."

Just as quickly, Opal put that same space between them. "N-No." She'd not allow this good man his misplaced guilt on her behalf. "You are right ." She was beginning to unravel. She felt it. She had to get out of there. "I wronged you." Her teeth chattered

more violently. “I...I do see it.”

Locke groaned. “Don’t do that.”

Fresh tears pooled in her eyes. “What did I do?” Now.

Another tortured sound rumbled from him. “Please, don’t cry.”

“I’m n-not crying.” The crack in her voice and the tear sliding along her cheek made a liar of her.

A bigger liar, there never was.

“Opal, I—”

Her heart climbed.

But he didn’t give her that vow she’d have sold her soul to Satan for. “Opal, I care about you.”

Locke cared about her.

She glanced at her bare toes. “I...understand.”

“What do you understand?” he asked, affectless, and it was that unemotional voice that threatened to undo her.

“You care about me, but you don’t love me.”

He had a faintly ill look.

“Opal,” he said, his voice strained. “Were things different, were I different, and you were not who you are and—” Locke dragged both hands through his hair. “But, if I’m selfish and take every gift you are offering me, you’d have no Season and no opportunity to meet some good, decent, worthwhile, gentleman.”

“Please don’t do this, Lockwood,” she besieged.

He was unrelenting. “You won’t find a one of them deserving of you, but you’ll at least find someone better than me.”

There is no one.

Opal didn’t realize she’d spoken aloud until his face contorted into a paroxysm of grief.

“You haven’t even made your debut, love,” he begged.

As if, in pleading with her, he could just stop Opal from feeling the way she did about him. Then again, his stature afforded him the dominance to control all. Were the same true of his power over her emotions, how much better off they’d both be.

“I never will,” she said quietly.

He favored her with a brass, sanguine grin. “As if Devonshire would allow you that pleasure.”

This is where they’d normally share a smile and laugh and jibe at the Duke of Devonshire’s expense.

Opal didn’t even attempt a false smile. She’d always delighted in their battle of wills and wits. How empty being right over him this time.

It is done...

She lied to him for a second time. “It is fine.” Unable to meet his eyes, needing a purpose, Opal retrieved her shoes and slipped them on. “I want you to not only be loved, I want you to be desperately and madly in love .” I’m actually speaking these words to this man . “I want you to lose yourself so completely in some woman and her love, that you’ll do absolutely anything for her. I want you to have a love so great you couldn’t even bear the thought of your lady with another and w-would lay at her feet and beg b-before setting her f-free.”

Locke’s low, mournful, moan rumbled around the stables. He stretched his arms out for her, but Opal evaded his pitying embrace.

“I-I should r-return, lest our absences are—”

“Of course.” His relief was palpable and the alacrity of his agreement nearly collapsed the thin control that kept her from sobbing until she broke.

Where before she’d been unable to meet his gaze, this time, she didn’t want to. This time she didn’t want him to see how weak she was.

Contrarily, when she reached the stable doors, Locke finally called out.

“Opal.”

Her heart jumped. From the fragile ashes of despair, hope stirred anew, and brought her around to face him.

They gazed at one another.

“Maybe...if in the future, Opal,” he said gruffly, “after you’ve had a chance to see the

world and meet other gentlemen and you still feel—”

She cut him off with a jerky nod. “Maybe.”

An inhuman, plaintive wail begged to be set free. Yet, Opal hesitated once more at the threshold.

“Opal?” There was a question in his husky baritone.

If she were honest with him now as he’d urged before, if she told him the reason there’d be no Season and why, would it make a difference?

It shouldn’t. Were he to love her, nothing else would have mattered to him.

Opal scrambled with the door, and stumbling out into the cold, she ran like the devil himself was after her. Free to cry and lament what would never be, she sobbed, leaving streaks of tears that felt frozen upon her face. Her vision blurred, and breathless and out of breath, she tripped upon a slick patch of ice on Locke’s front steps.

Gasping and panting through her misery, Opal yanked the door open and stumbled to an immediate stop.

She stood there, her skirts and slippers dripping melted snow upon the marble floor, and stared.

The tall, hateful and hate-filled figure before Opal, did a contemptuous—and worse, knowing—once-over, taking in her disheveled state.

Funny, she’d intended to outrun the devil, only to find herself face-to-face with him.

The Duke of Devonshire sneered. “Hello, daughter .”

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I love you...

Strathearn remained frozen to the same spot where he'd watched Opal proudly, but silently and sadly, take her leave.

No one aside from his mother had ever loved him, but Opal did. With the passionate way Opal lived her life there could be no doubting the lady knew her heart, and when she loved, she did so fiercely.

What had he done with that gift? He'd responded with shock, horror, outrage, and a supercilious indignation.

His chest ached.

His heart hurt far worse.

To be exact, like he'd been speared through the organ with a barbed arrow that continued to twist and turn, and which was certainly no less than he deserved.

How singularly odd how in the span of an hour, where there'd previously been clarity in life, a man's well-ordered existence could be flipped on its ear.

"...You care about me but don't love me..."

His throat spasmed.

No. He loved her madly.

There didn't come any rush of fear or horror or shame, and Strathearn suspected it was because he knew it all along. She'd claimed to love him when they'd first met, back when she'd been a small girl. For Strathearn? He couldn't pinpoint a precise day or occasion, only that as she'd grown, so too had the way in which he viewed her. First, he'd been protective of Opal and entertained her the way he might a younger sister.

Then, days turned into years, and along the way, his and Opal's relationship evolved. He'd begin to notice her in ways he'd had no right noticing. He'd delighted in matching wits with her. He'd been intrigued by her views of literature and the fairer sex and the place they held—and the one they should hold—in the world.

Sucking in a jagged breath, he set about removing any and all traces of what'd happened here.

While he worked, he repeated every word they'd spoken; punishing himself. "...I didn't do so to trap you, Locke..."

Strathearn cringed. As if she ever would. But he'd spewed enough vitriol at Opal for her to think he could feel that way, and he hated himself for that. Just one of a thousand and one reasons and transgressions he could never forgive himself for.

When he finished tidying the quarters, he eyed the blanket he and Opal had lain upon, the same small fabric she'd wrapped protectively about herself. His throat continued warbling.

It didn't belong out here alone in the stables with the grooms and stable boys. Carefully, Strathearn picked it up and folded and continued folding. Then, holding it close to his chest, he flattened the fabric and tucked it inside his jacket so no one else could set eyes upon the article.

Bloody liar. You want to hold onto it forever...

The irony didn't escape Strathearn. He'd spent the entire week thus far with Opal seething with jealousy and abhorring her secret beau. When all along...it was— me .

He had to find her. He owed her apologies and explanations. As if she'd want to see him. Hell, Strathearn couldn't even face himself in a bloody mirror.

On dull steps, he made the same march Opal had, and just as she'd done, he stopped and stared fixed at the doorway.

"...Were things different, were I different, and you were not who you are...But, if I'm selfish and take every gift you are offering me now, you'd have no Season and opportunity to meet gentlemen..."

What in hell had he been thinking? He'd rather chew his fingers off one at a time than watch her marry anyone that wasn't him.

But he knew...Opal was nineteen. At nearly thirty, he'd had years with which to grow and discover himself. To marry her before she had a chance to be presented to Society would be the ultimate selfish act.

He'd believed himself noble in sacrificing his desire and love for. He sneered derisively. In the end, he'd only hurt the both of them.

Strathearn didn't even remember making the long, slow walk from the stable yard to the entrance of his household until he found Burrell waiting for him.

"Burrell," he greeted and damned if he didn't feel like a lad who'd got caught.

To his butler's credit, the other man didn't show any outward reaction to Strathearn's

state of dishabille.

“Mr. Grimoire asked for an audience in the library upon your immediate return.”

Fuck.

He briefly closed his eyes.

This was the moment of reckoning where he confessed to his dastardly deed, and lost a friend, but where he gained a wife in the only other friend he'd ever had.

That was, if she'd have him...

Knowing he'd rejected Opal, didn't ease his anguish. He'd been a colossal ass, an unmitigated fool for failing to see that which was right in front of him—as Opal had. He'd simply have to beg her for a lifetime to rectify his wrongs and love her properly in return.

There was also the very high probability of Grimoire calling him out—which he absolutely should.

“Your Grace,” Burrell said, with a greater urgency. “Mr. Grimoire indicated it is a most grave, highly-sensitive matter, and requested he not be kept waiting.”

Oh, it certainly was all those things his friend—certainly, former friend now—said.

As expected, when Locke reached the library, he discovered Grimoire waiting. Pacing to be exact.

Grimoire knew.

With his dark countenance, the other fellow's name hadn't ever been more apt than it was now.

Unexpectedly, Lady Glain also happened to be present for Strathearn's skewering.

Opal's weary-looking, previously unnoticed until now, sister caught sight of him first.

Her cheeks glistened from a trail of tears Lady Glain shed. Those tracks stood in stark juxtaposition to the rage radiating from her proud person. "Abaddon!"

Strathearn's about-to-be former best friend whipped around.

The loving couple both knew Strathearn's crimes this day: that he'd taken Opal's virtue. But could they know he'd broken Opal's heart, too, and, in so doing, his own, as well? Strathearn deserved his suffering, but Opal? She deserved the entire star-studded universe as her personal playground.

In a coward's moment, Strathearn thought of fleeing.

"Bloody hell," Grimoire cursed, racing across the room.

Strathearn flinched; prepared for the powerful strike—that didn't come.

"Where have you been?" he demanded, shaking an envelope at Strathearn. The astute librarian looked him over. "Never mind." He shoved the note into Strathearn's chest. "Here!"

"Opal?" he asked hoarsely.

At the mention of her sister's name, Lady Glain, always a model of dignity and grace broke down sobbing.

Grimoire brought his enormous arm around his wife's delicate shoulders and drew her in. "Shh," he whispered. "It will be all right."

Forgotten by the couple, Strathearn looked at the missive and Lord Linley's seal.

Not Opal.

A sense of foreboding wove Strathearn's muscles into a tapestry of tangled and constricting ties that left him paralyzed and mute.

With Lady Glain wrapped in her husband's arms and her face buried in his chest, Grimoire looked over the top of his wife's head. "Devonshire came for her," he more mouthed than spoke. "She is gone."

All the air left Strathearn on a sharp, serpent-like hiss.

Devonshire came for her.

She is gone.

Gone.

Gone.

Strathearn tore into the note.

Strathearn,

I trusted Devonshire would come and when he did there'd be no time to speak. Though Opal asked I not betray her confidence by speaking to you or anyone, I've been of the opinion all along that you'd want to know.

That mindless dread grew to a fever pitch. Know what?

He read more quickly.

Devonshire didn't allow her to return from finishing school for a visit. The real urgency on Devonshire—and Opal's—part stems from the fact the old bastard has a husband picked out for her.

“A husband ,” he exhaled.

That sentence sucked all breathable air from the library. How else to explain the gaspfuls of it Strathearn tried and failed to bring into his lungs?

Neither Lady Glain nor Grimoire seemed to suffer that like fate.

“H-Husband?” the lady cried. “Husband?” her voice grew shriller.

“... I will never have a Season...”

“...As if Devonshire would allow you that pleasure...”

Strathearn grabbed a fistful of hair in his other hand and pulled hard.

She'd known. She'd known all along.

My dear sire, being the devil he is, scheduled Opal's nuptials for a month from now, though I will not put it past him to obtain a special license and move the damned thing up...

“And what about the man who'll soon be my husband...Am I sullied and whorish for having experienced pleasure with you...”

His fingers curled reflexively into the note, wrinkling the pages.

“...You are the man I want to give myself to...First...”

Even her bloody pause now made sense.

“Oh, my God,” he whispered.

“Strathearn?” Grimoire and Lady Glain’s like, fear-filled queries only faintly registered.

I believe as a punishment for Glain’s defiance and happiness—an opinion my eldest sister must never know—Devonshire chose Opal’s intended—The Duke of Ravenscourt.

His eyes bulged. Ravenscourt? The fellow had formed a triumvirate of evil with his and Opal’s father. The debauched, ancient Duke of Ravenscourt had littered London—and the English countryside—with illegitimate issue. And this is who her father would sell her to?

A thunderous bellow burst from Strathearn, the terrific, primordial cry of a wounded beast.

While Lady Glain sobbed all the harder, Strathearn clenched his eyes tightly shut to keep from joining in that grief-filled lamentation.

His eyes flew over the rest of the information imparted by Opal’s devoted brother.

My stubborn sister refuses to tell you of her circumstances. She believes you’d marry her out of pity, and even as I’m of the opinion—and hope—that you do, in fact, care very much for her, my utmost concern is Opal’s safety, well-being, and happiness.

With each revelatory sentence, the sick feeling in Locke's stomach grew.

If I'm in fact correct and you do care deeply about my youngest sister, I'd ask you to please use the power I do not yet have and save her from the wretched fate Devonshire intends to commit her to.

Your Servant,

Linley

All the air seeped from Strathearn's lungs on a ragged hiss.

"Maybe...if in the future, Opal, after you've had a chance to see the world and meet other gentlemen and you still decide—"

"Maybe."

Maybe.

Maybe.

There'd be no future. Not for him. Not if Opal wed another.

Not unless he hunted her father's carriage down, beat the old man within an inch of breathing, and begged Opal's forgiveness for having failed her.

"Grimoire," he growled. "Lady Glain. Permission to marry Lady Opal?"

Lady Glain clapped her hands. Her sobs turned swiftly to joyous ones. "Y-Yes!"

"Permission granted." Grimoire hurled his arms up. "Bloody took you long enough."

Stunned, Strathearn rocked back. “You knew?” he whispered.

“We knew,” Lady Glain intoned, cheery color returned to her full cheeks. “Flint. All of us. That is, all of us, with the exception of you and my obstinate sister, who were the last to know.”

“We’ll talk all about it later.” Grimoire grabbed Strathearn by the shoulders and gave him a shove toward the doorway. “Get the hell out of here; that is, unless you want Lady Opal marrying some other blackguard.”

The hell he did.

Bellowing for his horse, Locke took off running. With every step that brought him closer to the foyer, thoughts and memories of this week with Opal rolled forward; every reminiscence brought plunging forward a crystalized clarity.

His chest threatened to explode. “My bloody horse,” he bellowed when he reached the front and found Burrell still in position there.

Burrell already had the door open. “Being readied as we speak, Your Grace.”

Once a servant hurried over with Strathearn’s mount, Strathearn swung himself up into the saddle. “Hyah!” he cried.

And as he’d never done in the course of his life owning and caring for horses, Locke put the ultimate favor to his cherished mount and rode reckless. Zephyr, however, luxuriated under the aberrant freedom, and soared like a veritable Pegasus born of the Gods and meant to fly.

The harsh, unforgiving wind battered Locke’s face and sent his hair whipping.

To keep from going mad, he let his body feel and absorb each thunderous reverberation within his core.

She'd known when they parted, she'd have to marry. Devonshire treated her wretchedly and planned to inflict an even greater suffering upon her. And throughout, she'd faced all of it alone. She'd placed worry for her sister, Grimoire, and the couple's babe above her sorrow and circumstances.

God, how he loved her.

Tears stung his eyes.

For the first time in all his miserable twenty-nine years, he found himself crying. He blinked furiously to clear his vision so he might see the road ahead of them.

What must it have taken for proud, selfless, Opal, to come to Strathearn on a ruse? This, when he'd already loved her more than he'd ever love another soul. He'd fought the bloody truth so damned well, he hadn't acknowledged his feelings to even himself—until she'd walked away.

“...From the very beginning of our time together here, Opal, you've been untruthful with me. Instead of honesty, you chose duplicity...”

“I had no other choice,” she cried.

She'd laid herself bare before him, in every way. Hell, she, of her own volition, revealed everything to him.

No, that wasn't true. She'd withheld one important detail—her impending marriage to the Duke of Ravenscourt.

“You always have a choice, Opal. In no world is deceiving a man one of them. You played games with me. You made me believe there was someone else. You continued to dangle the promise of his identity with me. Opal, my God. Think about who you are. Think about who I am.”

And what’d Strathearn done? He’d met her admissions like some sort of holier-than-thou, sanctimonious bastard.

The acrid taste of bile stung his throat and Strathearn swallowed to keep it down.

I failed her spectacularly.

For Strathearn loved Opal more than everything and everyone under the sun and hadn’t had the courage to tell her so in return—because he’d been too gutless to acknowledge his feelings to even himself.

I won’t survive this.

Then, he heard it. The rattle of carriage wheels on the road ahead. The chains of his desolation broke free. Lethal determination, rage, and hope took its place. Leaning lower over Zephyr’s shoulders, Strathearn headed for Opal so he could declare his love and spend the rest of his life earning her forgiveness.

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Most people feared large, sturdy, muscular brutes who bellowed and cursed.

In reality, there was nothing more terrifying or dangerous than an inscrutable man's silence. When confronted with blustering and bellowing a lady knew precisely what she was up against. A deathly quiet was altogether different. It was ominous. Uncertain. Much like when a person came face to face with a lethal snake poised to strike and waited in stiff, dreaded anticipation for the inevitable venomous bite.

That'd been the only real valuable lesson Opal learned from the Duke of Devonshire.

The current silence still reigned in her sire's opulent carriage, from the moment one of Locke's kindly footmen closed the door behind Opal, Flint, and their father, till now.

Spoiling for a fight, she was waiting and ready for the duke's assault when it did come.

"You look like a slut, Opal."

She knew how she looked. Her father hadn't even afforded her the opportunity to change into her traveling clothes. Instead, he'd marched her from the foyer, back outside into the icy cold, without even the benefit of a cloak, and into his obscenely sizeable carriage.

At her side, Flint, who stared out the window at the passing roadway, tensed.

Furtively, she touched the side of her brother's rigid arm.

Queerly numb after Strathearn's rejection, Opal discovered herself immune from the pain life might throw at her. It was hard to care about the insults the duke hurled Opal's way or even what the future held, at this point. When one's heart remained as spectacularly broken as hers, fear ceased to be.

"If you were so worried over my appearance, Your Grace," Opal spoke with a calm Devonshire would detest, "perhaps you should have allowed me to change into proper attire for the carriage ride."

As anticipated, a vein bulged and pulsed across the duke's forehead. "And give you the chance to meet your lover for another tuppung?" The duke snorted. "I think not."

Her lover.

Locke.

That's all he'll ever be. Her former lover, at that.

Crippling pain threatened to drag her to the carriage floor, sobbing. She'd been wrong; she was and would always be filled with the crushing weight of sorrow at losing Locke.

You can't really lose what you never really had...

The Duke of Devonshire ground the bottom of his diamond-studded cane upon the floor in a grating beat, commanding Opal's attention.

"It behooves me to point out, dearest daughter, it's not your whorish hair, but rather your sinful and swollen lips."

Unbidden, her fingers flew to the place where Locke worshipped that same flesh her father now shamed her for. Opal shrunk into the corner of the carriage to make

herself as small as possible—feeling as small as a woman possibly could.

A master marksman when it came to inflicting maximum pain, the duke wasn't even close to finished. "Take greater care with your next lover," he sneered. "You have your current one's marks on your neck, too."

A sharp snap quieted the last of His Grace's derisive jibe. There came a flutter as Flint settled his cloak about Opal's shoulders.

Stricken, Opal looked at Flint to silently thank him. Before she could, the duke's short, scornful laugh filtered around them.

"Touching," His Grace mocked. "But I'd say you're a tad late when it comes to the role of protective brother."

Flint's face was pained as she'd never before witnessed.

"You've done nothing wrong, Flint," she said passionately. Unlike before, Opal's willful display had nothing to do with annoying the duke, and everything to do with bolstering her brother.

"No, he hasn't," their blackhearted sire shockingly concurred. "Either way it doesn't matter if you're bearing some man's bastard. The Duke of Ravenscourt won't be deterred. He has legitimate issue, enough bastards of his own, and a taste for debauchery. In fact, he'll most likely be pleased that another man's broken you in for your wedding n—"

Flint let out a guttural roar. Surging across the carriage, he grabbed their father by his throat, and drove the back of his head into the wall.

Opal cried out.

“You bloody, frigging, shit-fire,” Flint hissed. “I have allowed you to insult and hurt my sisters too many times. It is done, old man.” He gave their father a shake. “ Done !” he thundered.

The duke wheezed and scrabbled with his son’s fingers, but Flint exercised a superhuman strength.

Oh, God.

A mad glint lit her brother’s eyes unnaturally dark.

He’ll kill him .

“You have to stop this, Flint,” Opal entreated. “Please, let him go. It is not worth it.”

“It is to me.” Flint had the crazed look and voice of a man possessed. “You will not speak to her that way ever again. Do you understand me?”

Their father’s death-like gurgling filled the confined space.

Flint handled the older man with the same ease he would a just-caught chicken. “ Do you understand ?” he raged.

Opal shook. She’d been wrong. There was something terrifying in seeing her quiet, kind, smiling brother fly into a homicidal fury.

“Flint, he can’t speak. Release him,” Opal said quietly, with false calm.

His cheeks mottled; the Duke of Devonshire’s bulging eyes moved wildly between Opal and Flint.

“Flint,” she said with a greater sense of urgency. “you’ll kill him.”

Her brother slackened his hold, but remained pinning Devonshire the way an entomologist might spear an insect. “He deserves to die.”

She agreed, but to concur would see their father dead.

“I need you!” she repeated a third plea with a greater urgency. “And if you do this, then I will have no one. Please, do not do this.” Her voice finally broke. “P-Please.”

Flint loosened his grip even more, but still did not release him.

A blast filled the air. The carriage lurched and then stopped with such ferocity Opal had to dig her feet into the floor to keep in place.

The duke slumped.

Then, there was only quiet; quiet and the shallow rasps of her and Flint’s breathing, and choking and gasping from their father.

For a horrifying moment, Opal scoured the duke’s person for the fatal gunshot wound.

“Stand down!”

Stand down.

Relief brought her eyes sliding shut. That shot had come from outside. On the heel of that was the realization—they’d been stopped by a highwayman.

A half-mad giggle escaped her.

Funny that, a highwayman had spared her brother from an eventual noose.

For his part, Flint remained the model of composure. He peeled back the gold curtain and viewed the display outside like he might a production at Covent Garden Theatre.

His brows lifted slightly.

Inversely, the duke struggled still to bring his breathing under control.

“I say, you cannot do this, sir,” His Grace’s driver, Thomas, called out indignantly. “This is the Duke of Devonshire’s carriage.”

“Well, the Duke of Strathearn has business with the occupants in His Grace’s carriage.”

Opal went stock still.

“Locke,” she whispered. Her heart clamored.

As if he’d heard her whisper, the door suddenly opened, and Locke was there.

His features haggard, Locke took her in from head to heel.

“Opal,” he greeted, his voice thick and hoarse.

“Wh-What is the m-meaning of this, Strathearn?” her father barked, puffing and blowing.

Opal, too, struggled to breathe.

Flint jerked their sire back on the bench. “Shut up, Devonshire.”

In a deliberate slap in the face to the other duke, Strathearn addressed the younger man. “Lord Linley, I’ve come to speak with your sister, Lady Opal. May I—?”

Opal's father sputtered. "You m-may certainly n-not !"

Once when she was in Paris, she'd attended a tennis match. Much as she'd done at that thrilling match, Opal whipped her head back in forth in this most horrific of games that threatened to see Flint earn the duke's wrath.

"You may, Strathearn," Flint said, clearly relishing the power over the old duke. He cleared his throat. "That is if Opal wishes to speak with you."

The trio of gentlemen finally fell quiet; they looked at Opal.

Her heart thundering, she managed to nod.

Locke looped his hands at her waist, and gently lifting her from the conveyance, he set her on her feet; never once did he take his eyes from Opal.

Her father scrambled out with the ease of a man thirty years his junior. Flint was immediately on him. He caught the duke and shoved him against the carriage. "I said they can speak, Devonshire," he gritted out.

The Duke of Devonshire thrashed against his son's stronger hold. "My God, Linley, you are my heir, but you won't see a goddamned pence until you're twenty-one. Nay, longer!"

Flint smirked.

Devonshire frothed at the mouth like a rabid dog. "I'll cut when you can access your portion of the estates. You're done at Oxford. You'll be the only duke no one wants an alliance—"

"You can do all those things, Devonshire," Locke said calmly. "But I promise you won't make your son a beggar until he reaches his majority." He addressed Flint next.

“Lord Linley, be it funding your education or any other form of assistance, financial or otherwise, you have my full and unflagging support.”

Opal felt her pulse in her throat. This is who Locke was. Composed amidst chaos. Fearless when faced with the Devil. Savior to the Carmichael siblings. He’d go head to toe with a ruthless lord, and promise to financially care for and support that ruthless lord’s son.

Silently, Locke extended an elbow to Opal. She rested trembling fingers upon his sleeve and allowed him to escort her away. While they made the walk, emotion threatened to overcome her. He truly doubted she could possibly love him? My God, Locke made it impossible to not fall in love with him each and every time they were together.

When several paces were between them and their small audience, Locke stopped.

They spoke at the same time.

“Opal,”

“Thank you, Your Grace, for—”

Locke brushed off her apology. “Please, don’t,” he said gruffly. “You never have to thank me, Opal and you never, ever have to ‘Your Grace’ me. In fact, I’d prefer if you did not.”

“Regardless, you have my eternal gratitude.” And he always would. “I...what are you d-doing here?” she finally asked the question that needed to be asked.

His expression grew strained. “You didn’t tell me about Ravenscourt.”

Oh .

Opal scrunched her toes up inside her slippers. “That is why you’re h-here?” Her voice faltered.

Had he come to save her or scold her?

Locke opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off.

“I didn’t lie, Locke!”

His shoulders slumped. “Is that why you believe I followed you?” he whispered. “To call you out as a liar?” The column of his throat moved.

“I...” Opal turned her palms up. “I don’t know why you’re here.”

“God, I am an utter blackguard.” He swiped a hand over his face.

“You are not, Your Grace. You are—”

Another spasm rippled along Locke’s jawline. “Please, don’t call me Your Grace,” he begged again, his voice ragged. “I want to be ‘Locke’ to you. Why didn’t you tell me about Ravenscourt?”

“Well...” Opal clasped her hands and stared at them. “It did not seem to matter.”

Ah, he’d come as her savior. Because Locke without fail always came to the rescue of the Carmichael siblings.

“Not matter?” he whispered. “Not matter? Opal, I returned to the household to find you, because I had a confession to make, but you were gone.” Emotion blazed in his eyes. “In the stables, I lied to you. And mine was far more egregious than any transgression I’ve committed in my life. It’s one I’ll spend the rest of forever atoning for. That is, if you’ll allow me?”

Her brow dipped. “I don’t...” She shook her head.

“There is a woman,” he explained on a rush. “Not long ago, she professed her love for me.”

Opal gripped a fistful of her borrowed cloak.

This is why he’d rebuffed her.

“And Opal?” Locke continued through her dawning horror. “I understand precisely what you were saying to me in the stables, because I am even more madly in love with her than she could ever be with me.”

Over his broad shoulder, she sent Flint a desperate look. He’d become her protector this day. Now she silently implored him to rescue her a second time. She needed him more than ever.

Where before he’d extricated Opal from further hurt at their father’s hands, now Flint stood inscrutable. He remained holding the duke in place, and leaving Opal alone to wade through her misery.

Their father, however, like the sadist he was, gleefully took in Opal’s abject misery.

Locke gently cupped her shoulders. “Opal, you said...”

“You don’t have to do th-this.” She was torturously aware of what she’d told him back at his estate. “I understand.” Her voice trembled and she prayed he attributed it to the cold. “Please, don’t say a word more.” She meant to assure him, instead, she begged.

A glimmer sparkled in his eyes. “You do?”

She nodded miserably.

Alas, Locke would put her through this living hell.

“I love her with all I am and all I’ll ever be. Opal, I will do absolutely anything for her. I exist solely to be her protector, defender, her best friend, her partner, her lover. Her husband,” he said hoarsely.

Opal shredded the skin of her inside cheek between her teeth and welcomed the pain. He’s punishing me for having deceived him.

Through her borrowed cloak, Locke rubbed the pads of his thumbs in quixotic circles “Her happiness, Opal, matters more to me than the air I breathe,” he spoke with a gentleness that nearly sent her plummeting to her knees. “I’ll find a way to climb to the heavens and return with stars just to see her smile.”

And she knew Locke, the Duke of Strathearn, could and would do so because that was the power he held and the strength with which she knew he’d loved. A light and joy the likes of which she’d never before seen in him, even in the throes of his merriest days, transformed the contours of his face.

Oh, God. What to say to this? What to respond or answer when, if she did, she’d crumple before him and wail like a banshee at the moon above.

Her cheeks burned from the night’s icy hold. Then, she realized— I am crying. She had no pride left, nor did she want it. She wanted nothing; only him, this man whom she’d never have.

Opal looked to her brother once more for salvation. As if beyond frustrated, Flint rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Opal,” Locke murmured. “I—”

She couldn't take any more. "Th-that makes sense. Th-thank you for coming this way to tell me, L-Locke. I-I would have u- understood." But it would have and it was killing her slowly and violently like an insidious poison.

Locke dropped his hands from her. "I haven't finished."

Odd, she'd die if he touched her while continuing to talk about his true love, and also wanted to die from the loss of that same tou—.

Locke fell to his knees upon the cold, hard ground.

Struck dumb, Opal stared at the top of his head. What was he...?

Then, stretching his arms out upon the old Roman road, Locke bowed his head as if in prayer. He lay before her in reverent supplication. "Opal, my love, my heart, I cannot bear the thought of you with another..."

A sob burst from her lips; she buried her fist against her mouth.

"I lay before you, Opal," he murmured. "Begging you, pleading with you, beseeching you to have me as your husband."

Opal's shoulders shook from boundless joy. "Me ? I'm the w-woman?"

In the background, her brother let out a sound of exasperation. "Oh, for God's sake, Opal. Who else would it be?"

At last, Locke lifted his head. "Yes, Ma raison de vivre ." My reason for being . "Who else would it be?" His eyes danced with a tender, gentle mirth, and so much love it stole her breath away. "If that wasn't clear, my heart, then I've made a muck of my prop—"

“I love you!” Laughing and crying, Opal launched herself full force into Locke’s arms. He easily caught her to him and held her close.

“God, Opal,” he buried a kiss against her temple, “I love you so bloody much. It’s you. It’s always been you. It will only ever be you.”

She lifted tear-filled eyes to his and found his shimmered.

Opal captured his face gently between her hands. “Only us .”

Locke bobbed his head shakily. “O-Only us,” he promised, his voice rich with emotion.

As one, they found one another’s lips, in a kiss to seal their vow.

The End