



# A Season for Christmas

## (Desire and Discipline #3)

**Author:** *Golden Angel*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Tis the season to surrender to second chances...

Widowed after years of dutifully submitting to the will of others, Lady Catherine is quite satisfied to finally be in charge of her own affairs—and any man who dares to join her in the bedroom.

When a chance visit with friends brings Catherine face-to-face with the man whose courtship swept her off her feet as a young debutante, she can't resist his wicked proposal to put himself at her mercy for the holidays. Having powerful, handsome Samuel North at her feet is too tempting an offer to refuse.

With both their hearts on the line for a second time, she's determined to put his pretty words to the test. A test he'll have to pass with flying colors... while on his knees.

**Total Pages (Source):** 14

1

Catherine

Lady Catherine, the Dowager Countess of Cross, thoroughly disliked Christmas.

It was not that she was a Scrooge, by any means, but Christmas was a time for family, and she had none she wanted to spend time with. There were friends she could call upon, but not on the day of.

Looking out the window of her London home, she stared at the passersby who were braving the cold December day. Mayfair was much less busy this time of year, most of the ton having left for their country homes months ago and not returning until after the new year. Some remained, of course, mostly politicians and bachelors; others like herself who had no one to spend the holidays with.

Perhaps she should gather them all together, so they did not have to be alone.

Though she knew many of them were alone because they were detestable wretches whom no one else wanted to spend Christmas with. Sometimes, she wondered if she was fooling herself and if she was the detestable wretch. But no. The wife of her late husband's heir always sent an invitation to join them on the family estate for the holiday. Catherine had gone once and been treated as one of the family, but she'd had no appetite for returning.

She'd been treated as one of them, but she was not one of them, and being embraced in their warmth, surrounded by their children, had been... painful. Painful in its stark

contrast to the Christmases of her youth, which had been full of cold ceremony, and painful in seeing what could have been hers if her husband had lived. If they'd had children.

Absentmindedly pressing her hand to her barren stomach, Catherine watched a carriage roll by the house.

The current countess would hardly send an invitation every year if Catherine was detestable, though. She was a strong-willed woman who suffered no fools. So no, Catherine was not the problem when it came to a lack of company for Christmas.

Her problems were her detestable parents and the envy that gripped her when she visited the current Earl and Countess Cross. And the lack of anyone else to spend the holiday with.

She heaved a sigh, dropping her hand away from the stiff fabric of her stomacher and resting it back on her lap.

Only a few more weeks, then Christmas would be over, and it would be January, with all its promise of new beginnings.

Refocusing out the window, Catherine blinked when she realized the carriage that had just passed by had come to a halt in front of her house. The coachman jumped down and opened the door. Blonde hair flashed from beneath a green hood as he helped the occupant down the steps from the conveyance .

Mrs. Joseph Stuart, formerly Miss Priscilla Bliss.

A friend, despite the awkwardness of how they'd met. Joseph Stuart, Priscilla's husband, had been an intimate of Catherine's. Not a lover. They'd never crossed that line. But she'd administered physical discipline to him during Society of Sin events

both before and after his marriage to Priscilla until his wife had attended one such event and caught him out.

Somehow, rather than hating Catherine on sight—and Catherine would not have blamed her if she had—Priscilla had taken control of the situation and her husband. First, Catherine had been her mentor, and now, they were friends. Priscilla had a generosity of spirit that was unmatched by anyone Catherine had ever met.

She watched as Priscilla moved up the front stairs to Catherine's door. Heard the knock, then her butler, Watson, answering it. A few moments later, he appeared in the doorway of the parlor.

"Mrs. Joseph Stuart here to see you, my lady," he intoned formally. Despite his stiff demeanor, there was a hint of demand in his voice, as if he was daring her to turn company away.

Watson was very disapproving of her lonely state over the holidays.

"Thank you, Watson," she said, getting to her feet to greet her friend, amused by his nod of approval as she answered him.

He stepped away from the doorway, and Priscilla replaced him.

"Catherine," she said warmly, coming into the room with outstretched hands.

Watson had taken her cloak, revealing her to be in a green dress a shade lighter than her cloak had been, edged with cream. As she came closer, Catherine could see the tiny red berries hidden in the pattern on the fabric. It was a dress that was very much in the holiday spirit, unlike her own navy day dress.

"Priscilla." She smiled, taking Priscilla's hands, and they exchanged kisses on both

cheeks in greeting. "I did not know you were still in town."

Truthfully, she had not been keeping track of who was and who was not. She rarely did. If invitations arrived, she attended; if they did not, she frittered her days away, waiting for the new year.

"Oh yes, we're spending the holiday here this year. There's quite a bit to do, what with... well, the dukes and all." Priscilla's smile grew a trifle strained as she referenced the recent tragedy. At the end of the Season, eight dukes had been killed in a horrific accident involving a hunting lodge and a barrel of gunpowder.

"I see," Catherine replied, though she did not quite see. Priscilla's father-in-law was a marquess, but what that had to do with the dukes, she did not know. All of them had heirs and all the heirs had stepped up to the task, though their households were still in mourning. Why the Marquess of Camden might need to be in London, in relation to the dukes, was unclear, but she did not want to admit it when Priscilla seemed to assume she would know the reason.

Catherine cleared her throat, letting Priscilla's hands go. "Please, sit. Shall I ring for some tea?"

"No, thank you," Priscilla replied to Catherine's disappointment. "I cannot stay long."

More disappointment. But Priscilla did sit, which meant she would stay for a short time, breaking the tedium of Catherine's morning, which was appreciated. She would take what she could get .

"Well, I am glad to see you, regardless," Catherine replied, taking her own seat on the couch next to Priscilla. "You are in town for the whole holiday?"

“I believe we’ll remain in London until the end of the upcoming Season,” Priscilla replied, folding her hands on her lap. She seemed rather cheerful about the prospect, and hearing it cheered Catherine. Having a friend about during the winter months in the city was a boon. “The whole family is coming in to celebrate the holiday. Evie and Anthony never left, of course, but Josie and Elijah arrived yesterday, and Adam is due to return this morning. Rex and Mary have also been invited to spend the holiday with us.”

Well, that was very interesting and caused another pang of envy. It was well known, though not much talked about, that Lady Mary Hartford’s parents were rarely in the country, much less in the same hemisphere as their daughter. They were intrepid explorers and preferred far-flung countries to their own. But she was close friends with Mrs. Browne, formerly Miss Evangaline Stuart, and Lady Josephina, who was married to the marquess’ heir. Apparently, the lack of parents did not affect the Hartfords as they had close friends they could rely on for company.

Catherine did her best to be glad for them rather than envious.

“How lovely,” she said, because it was. “So then, what brings you here?”

To her surprise, Priscilla fidgeted, clearing her throat.

“Well, I was rather hoping you would come to tea this afternoon. If you are free.” Her chin jerked upward before lowering again. “Lily is coming over as well.”

Lily was the Countess of Talbot and also a very close friend of Lady Hartford, Mrs. Browne, and Lady Josephina. Catherine understood that the four of them had grown up together. They were all also members of the Society of Sin, though they had a very different relationship with their husbands than Priscilla had with hers.

Sudden understanding hit.

Priscilla was hoping Catherine would come as her friend. Though the other women were very kind and very open, they had a history Priscilla was not a part of, a connection Priscilla would likely never be able to match. And Priscilla was hoping for a friend to be there for her while they all gathered together.

“Of course.” The enthusiasm in her voice was unmistakable. Rather than having to fake any, she had to try to tamp hers down, so as not to appear overly eager. “I would love to.”

“Wonderful.” Priscilla lit up, both with enthusiasm and relief, her blue eyes shining with emotions. “Diana will be there as well, of course, but we are keeping it close.”

Very close. Warmth touched Catherine as she realized the invite was not only because she was convenient and Priscilla’s friend, but that Priscilla considered her such an intimate that she would be invited to such a gathering. Diana had recently married the Marquess of Camden only a few months earlier. This tea would be family and their closest friends.

“I’m honored to be invited.” Her heart actually strained a little at how honored, how touched she was. Though she considered Priscilla one of her closest friends, one never really knew how someone else felt. There had been times in the past when she had felt close to someone, only to discover they did not hold her in the same regard.

Priscilla beamed at her. They chatted for a little longer, catching up on the very light gossip that was available this time of year, before she made her goodbyes. Feeling buoyed by both the visit and the invitation, when Priscilla left, Catherine found herself wandering to the music room to practice her harp rather than staring moodily out the window again.

Samuel

Shrugging off his greatcoat, Samuel heard the sound of feminine laughter echo down the hall. He raised his eyebrows at Stims, the butler for Camden House.

“The ladies are having tea, sir,” Stims said, draping Samuel’s coat over his arm. “If you would follow me. The marquess and Captain Browne are waiting for you in the library.”

Nodding, Samuel followed the butler to the left, in the opposite direction of the laughter. He was not loathe to avoid the ladies of the house. Returning to London had made it clear to him that he was now a desirable target for the intrepid matchmakers of the ton . He might not have a title, but he had plenty of money now, and he was young enough and handsome enough, the debutantes were as eager as their mamas to catch him.

Unfortunately for them, there was only one lady who had caught his interest. The same lady he’d fallen for when he’d been younger and much less wealthy. Now she was older, a widow, and free to court again... but very different from the young woman he’d known.

His mind flashed to the last time he’d seen her—at a private event for a secret club—when she’d been flogging a duke.

Yes, his Catherine had changed greatly since their youthful declarations of love and devotion. Had it been her marriage or her husband’s death that had done the trick? Did he really want to know?

What was he prepared to do to make her his?

The questions had been turning in his head for weeks now, driving him batty and leaving him wavering. He wanted Catherine. He did not know if he could give her what she wanted. Not once he’d witnessed her in action at the Society of Sin. So,



instead of pursuing her, the way he'd planned, he'd... hedged.

Taken the time to think.

And he still had no answers other than acknowledging that avoiding her was not helping him at all.

"Mr. North has arrived," Stims said, jolting Samuel out of his thoughts.

They'd made the passage from the front door to the library without him really noticing. That was how twisted up Catherine had him. Stims stepped back, gesturing Samuel forward. He entered the well-lit, well-stocked library, nodding his greeting to the two men already inside.

Both of them stood, looking down at a large table with a map of England spread out on it, eight identical little black stones laid out upon it and one red stone on the location of London. Oliver Stuart, the Marquess of Camden, looked up and smiled.

"Samuel. Good to see you again." He gestured to the younger man beside him. "You've met Captain Anthony Browne?"

"The brave soul who married Evie? Yes, we met at your wedding." Samuel smiled as he strode forward, shaking the man's hand in greeting. Evie was Oliver's niece, and a more independent, strong-minded young woman Oliver had never met .

"I'll let Mrs. Browne know that Mr. North has arrived," Stims said from behind him.

Samuel started to turn before he caught himself and looked at Oliver and Captain Browne, raising one questioning eyebrow. Oliver smiled, though it looked more like a grimace on the older man's face.

“Anthony and Evie have taken over for me with my duties to the Crown,” Oliver explained. “And we have a favor to ask of you.”

Samuel blinked in surprise. Though he had known Oliver was the spymaster to the Crown—he’d done his duty by the Crown on his own travels at times, under Oliver’s direction—he had not known the reins had been passed. He certainly hadn’t expected them to be passed to the man’s niece. Her husband, perhaps, but quite frankly, he’d expected Oliver’s eldest son Elijah to take up the mantle.

“Though not before Evie joins us,” Captain Brown said cheerfully. Unlike Oliver, he seemed unperturbed by the idea of his wife helping to run their country’s intelligence organization.

“Right.” Samuel tilted his head down at the map they’d been looking at. It only took him a moment to note where the eight black markers had been laid down—Clarence, Hereford, St. Albans, Bolton, Montagu, Ormonde, Grafton, Northumberland... “The dead dukes.”

“Yes.” Oliver sighed, looking down at the map as well. He didn’t get a chance to say anything more before the door behind them opened again. Samuel lifted his head, turning to meet Mrs. Browne’s green gaze as she entered the room. She looked every inch the lady in a dark red damask gown and her hair pulled up and out of her way.

“Mrs. Browne,” Samuel said, nodding his greeting, which was returned .

“Mr. North. Thank you for coming.” Her brisk tone belied her delicate appearance as she moved to the table.

“Well, I cannot say I’m glad to be here until I know exactly why I’m here,” he said with an easy smile, turning the statement into a jest.

Her lips curved in return.

“You’re here because we need you to be a spy, of course.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:32 pm*

2

Samuel

The bald statement from Mrs. Browne made Samuel raise his eyebrows again. Oliver had always been much more genteel when he'd recruited Samuel's services, asking for a favor or a package to be passed on. Occasionally, he would ask Samuel to keep an ear out for specific information or to deliver a message. He certainly would never make such a bold statement.

He glanced at Oliver, who appeared amused by his niece's opening. Beside her, her husband was studying the map again.

"You have been invited to spend Christmas with the Duke of Clarence, have you not?" Mrs. Browne asked, pushing forward into the silence.

"I have." Though he wondered at how they'd come by the information. He had not exactly bandied it about. On the other hand, he had not kept it a secret either. "I leave in three days for his estate."

He and Gregory had met and became friends at Oxford. Good friends. They'd managed to keep in touch during Samuel's long travels, maintaining the connection even as others were lost. Upon his return to England this summer, Gregory had been thrilled to renew the friendship in person and had insisted Samuel join him and his family for the holiday when he'd discovered Samuel had no plans to celebrate.

Considering the man had just lost his father, Samuel had not felt able to say no. He

was used to spending his holidays alone, as his parents had both passed when he was young, and the grandmother who'd raised him had also said her final farewell just before he'd decided to leave London. Losing Catherine to Lord Cross had been the original impetus for him to take his leave of his home, but he would have returned to visit more often, if not for the loss of his grandmother as well.

"I know you and Clarence are friends, but..." Oliver started to speak, then hesitated.

His niece had no such compunction.

"We need to know if he had anything to do with his father's death." Her statement landed like lead in the room, and beside her, Captain Browne put his hand on her shoulder.

Samuel looked at them all.

"You... you can't possibly think..." His voice trailed off because, obviously, they did think. It was true Gregory could be rash and that he was a bit of a ne'er-do-well. He was a rake, a bit of a gambler, and admittedly irresponsible in many aspects of his life. But patricide? Not only that, but multiple deaths on his head? "I thought it was an accident."

The other three exchanged another glance.

"It's possible, but we have recently uncovered some information that makes us think otherwise. We are not accusing the Duke of Clarence, you understand." Captain Browne tapped on the map where the duke's lands were. "We are looking to see if there is any motive that he might have to... hasten his inheritance."

Closing his eyes, Samuel pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to fend off the headache that was now threatening. He wanted to say that no, of course, Gregory

could never do such a thing, but...

He had been away from England for a long time. For years, their relationship had been confined to letters. The young man he'd known had changed. Grown. Become a murderer?

"I will be honest... I think it unlikely," Oliver said. "We have far more compelling suspects with much more motive. But I want to be sure. And if Gregory had nothing to do with his father's death, I still want to know if there is anyone on the estates who might have the motive he lacks... if he lacks."

That settled a little more easily in Samuel's gut. He could not believe that Gregory was a murderer, much less that he'd killed his own father, but he could certainly look for someone who might have had reason to. Gregory had never had the aspiration to be a duke. He preferred cavorting without the responsibility.

On the other hand, the former Duke of Clarence had been a hard man, extremely disapproving of his wayward son, and certainly the kind of man who likely had an enemy or two lurking in the woodworks. While Gregory might not want to have hastened the road to his legacy, others might have.

"I will keep my ears and eyes open, but I can promise you, Gregory did not do this," he said resolutely, metaphorically standing behind his friend even if Gregory was not there to witness it .

"Did not do what?" The female voice behind him had Samuel jumping in alarm as he spun about.

The door to the library was hanging open and full of women, but his gaze went straight to one of them standing at the back—the most unexpected one. Lady Camden, he would have expected, as well as Lady Josephina and Miss Stuart. He

knew Lady Talbot and Lady Hartford were long-time close friends of the family, so their presence was not remarkable.

While Catherine had been at the marquess' wedding, that had been an extensive enough guest list that he could not have said she was a particular friend of the family. And besides, what the devil was she doing here in London rather than out at Cross estates with her late husband's family? Or with her parents at their country house?

Samuel pressed his lips together before turning back to the others to see what excuse they might come up with. He was surprised Mrs. Browne had left the door open, though less surprised that the ladies had followed her to listen.

"Mr. North is celebrating the holidays with the Duke of Clarence, and we are asking him to find out if Clarence had any reason to... hasten his inheritance." Mrs. Browne made a face, and so did Samuel, though his was a shocked expression as she spoke as baldly to the other ladies as she had to him.

"Oh, that's good," Lady Josephina said, walking into the room as if she had every right to be there and looking down at the map. "He's one of the few we have not been able to reach yet in any other manner."

We?

My God , he realized as the others came forward, without a hint of confusion in their expressions. They all knew. They were all in on it .

At least Catherine looked as baffled as he felt. If she was also one of Oliver's spies, he might have blown his top right then and there. There were only so many revelations a man could take.

Catherine

What on earth was going on?

First, Stims had come for Evie—all the ladies had requested Catherine call them by their first names this afternoon—then Josie had barely been able to sit still before deciding to follow. It had caused a mass exodus from the parlor to the library, and Catherine was having trouble understanding exactly what was going on.

Especially because she was wildly distracted by Samuel's presence. She'd thought he'd left London again. She'd seen him, not long after the marquess and Diana's wedding, at a Society of Sin event. And he'd seen her. He'd watched her flog the Duke of Kent, then he'd left... and she'd told herself it did not matter.

Samuel was hardly the kind of man to accept the kind of lady she'd become. She'd seen the shock on his face, the confusion, then the understanding. And then he'd left. Because he did not want her.

She'd told herself it did not matter, that she did not care, then she'd put him from her mind. The same way she'd done when she'd had to marry Lord Cross under her parents' orders. There was no point in thinking about what might have been. Catherine was far too pragmatic for that—she focused on what was .

Which was why she could hardly push him from her mind again when he was standing here, in the Marquess of Camden's library, talking about reporting on whether the current Duke of Clarence had killed the previous one.

Why would Evie and her uncle and husband be sending Samuel to discover if the Duke of Clarence had killed his own father—not to mention seven other dukes?

Why were they investigating at all?

She thought it had been deemed an accident.



And even if it was not, what business was it of theirs?

Yet all the other ladies were not only acting as though this was normal, they were also clearly involved.

Catherine knew when to keep her mouth shut and her ears open, and that was precisely what she did right now.

“Exactly how many of you are involved in these operations?” Samuel asked—nay, demanded to know. He was heated. She could see it in his face, in his body language, the way he held himself. Was it only because he was being asked to spy on a friend or because of the women’s involvement in the request?

“All of us.” Diana smiled at him as she made her way to her husband’s side. “Though at least one of us is supposed to be retired.” She gave the marquess an arch look. He snorted, though he looked at her with pure affection.

“Eight dukes. All my contemporaries, not Anthony and Evie’s,” he said in the tone of someone who was repeating themselves. “I knew them better, and my insights are necessary, especially with something so unprecedented.”

“It is that,” Lily murmured. She shook her head, then looked at Samuel. “There is very little information coming out of Clarence, in part because there is very little family there, and Clarence’s grandmother is not the social sort. She has very few friends she has any kind of communication with. His father was more sociable, though the only reports I can get is that there was not any great affection between father and son.”

Watching Samuel’s face as the ladies discussed the possibility of the Duke of Clarence being involved in his own father’s death was highly entertaining, despite the serious subject matter. It was also a revelation for her. As the discussion went round,

it was clear all the ladies were a part of the investigation.

Why she was being trusted with all this information was unclear. She held herself quietly in the background rather than break their consciousness.

“You know, that’s a good point about his grandmother,” Mary said, tapping her finger against her lips. She and Rex, her husband and the Marquess of Hartford, held themselves slightly apart from the others rather than crowding around the map. “The Dowager Duchess likely has more information than her grandson since she was living on the estate with the previous duke... but will she speak with Mr. North of her knowledge?”

Everyone in the room looked at Samuel.

“Ah... well, I’ve never met her.” He spread his hands out in front of him. “My friendship was always with Gregory, and this will be my first time visiting his home.”

“Hmm.” Captain Browne frowned and glanced at the marquess, who sighed.

“We cannot just send a lady in to talk to her without invitation,” the marquess said. “I have never met her either. It’s possible my mother might have, but I can hardly claim a connection based on a possibility.”

Evie turned to Samuel. “Could you bring a lady as a guest?”

Unexpected jealousy ripped through Catherine at the idea of Samuel bringing a woman with him to Clarence for Christmas, so hot and fierce that it nearly took her breath away. She stiffened, freezing in place, the skin on her face hardening like a mask to keep her emotions from showing.

There was a roaring in her ears as she struggled to control herself, so loud she almost

did not hear Samuel's response—and when she did, she froze for another reason altogether.

“I could bring Catherine.” For the first time, he met her gaze across the table.

Everyone else turned to look at her as well, but the only person she saw was him.

Catherine

Catherine blinked, flushing as she suddenly became the center of attention. She'd been hanging back, watching and listening, but now all the focus was on her, and she had no idea what to do with it. She'd been listening as quietly as she could, taking in her surroundings and the shelves and shelves of books around her. The room was large but comfortable, the shelves well-stocked, warmed from the fireplace, and she'd been lulled into a sense of safety by both the room and the lack of attention on her.

"I..." She blinked again, shaking her head, her hands flicking at her skirts as if she could flick away the many gazes now burning holes into her. "I do not even know what is going on."

"Ah." Diana coughed delicately. "Yes, I do believe we skipped a step, did we not?" She gave Catherine an apologetic smile. "You felt so much a part of things, I forgot you were not, and I believe the others did as well."

"The marquess is the former spymaster to the Crown," Priscilla said, reaching out to take Catherine's hand with an apologetic smile. Catherine met her fingertips, allowing Priscilla to give them a supportive squeeze before they both dropped their hands. "Evie and Anthony have taken over from him—mostly—since he was injured last year."

"I... oh." The information clicked into place, like tumblers in a lock, as so much became very suddenly clear to her.

“Last year, we also foiled a plot against the Crown and unearthed a traitor.” Priscilla smiled. “It was rather exciting.”

“And now we are investigating the tragedy of the dukes,” Evie interjected, tapping her finger against the map right next to the marker for Clarence. “The Crown wants answers, and we are going to do our best to find them. At the moment, we do not think this year’s events have anything to do with last year’s. There seems to be no Russian involvement in their deaths, whether it was deliberate or by misadventure. At least, no connection we’ve been able to find so far.”

“But we have not been able to fully reach a conclusion, either,” Captain Browne said, taking over where his wife left off. “So far, we have not found any evidence that any of the heirs are responsible, but there are a few like Clarence who we have not been able to mark off the list, either.”

“And with so many victims, there is a myriad of suspects other than their heirs.” Evie’s expression was a study in frustration as she scowled at no one in particular. “We do not even know if all of them were the target, some of them, or just one of them, and the rest a cover.”

“Or it could still have been an accident, though I admit that’s looking less likely,” Lily said, brushing a strand of dark hair back from her face as she sighed. “But until we can prove otherwise...”

“Clarence has been reclusive, which is not at all like him,” the marquess said. “That is why we need Samuel’s help. Montagu has also been difficult to pin down, especially as he has no close family to help us achieve access, and Hereford has been avoiding everything and everyone.”

“Though his mother has been bemoaning his lack of support to everyone who will listen,” Mary murmured.

“He’s likely recently discovered that he’s out of money,” Catherine offered up, causing everyone to turn toward her again. At least this time the focus was not so much on her as on the information she had. “The previous duke did not have a head for money.”

Something she knew because, for a while, Hereford had wanted to pay her for her services. Catherine had turned him down. She indulged her desires for her own satisfaction, not for money. There were men who enjoyed spending vast sums of money at the behest of their chosen lady, allowing her to dominate him financially rather than physically, but that had never been Catherine’s preference. Her initial refusal had not stopped him from sending her elaborate and expensive gifts to try to entice her to change her mind. Eventually, he’d happened upon Mrs. Rebecca James, who had been all too happy to accept his financial generosity.

Though she did not run in quite the same circles as Mrs. James, Catherine did hear about how eagerly the duke had emptied his coffers for her, on top of his own expenses, as well as indulging in quite a bit of gambling. From what she knew, he’d spent and spent and spent his way directly to the creditors. Rather rough ones, as the more ethical ones had closed their doors to him.

“Interesting,” Oliver frowned. “He did a good job of covering.”

“Speak with Mrs. Rebecca James when you have the chance,” Catherine advised. She had no doubt the woman was in mourning for her lost duke, and she would likely be all too willing to help. Though Catherine doubted the creditors would be to blame—it was very difficult to collect a debt from a dead man, after all. Whether or not the new duke would be willing, or able, to honor the debt was also questionable.

Immediately, Evie reached for a pen, dipping it quickly in the inkpot beside it to write down the name on the edge of the map.

“That still leaves Clarence and Montagu,” Evie said. She looked up at Catherine. “Would you be able to accompany Mr. North for the holidays? I know it is a lot to ask, but his grandmother is far more likely to talk to another woman than her grandson’s friend. Priscilla trusts you, and we have all seen how well you can keep a secret.” Samuel frowned at Evie’s statement but did not interrupt. “It would be a great help to us.”

“And you always did love a good mystery,” Samuel murmured, his gaze meeting hers again. Clashing with hers, challenge clear within his eyes.

“I...” She could not find the right words. She wanted to do her duty by the Crown. It did sound as though her presence could be of use. She was honored that Evie and the others trusted her so much. Not just with their secrets but with an assignment.

But...

Traveling to Clarence for Christmas with Samuel?

Madness. The very idea was madness. As was the inescapable fact that he’d been the one to suggest it. What on earth was he thinking? He’d run after seeing her with the Duke of Kent, though it had been no more than a flogging. She and Kent had no relationship beyond discipline. But that had been too much for Samuel. That was not the kind of man he was, not the kind of bedroom play he’d enjoy. She’d known it then, and he’d proven it when he’d left. Again.

So, why on earth was he suggesting she accompany him to Clarence now?

Samuel

He could bring Catherine. She was the only woman in the world who might not rouse Gregory’s suspicions because Gregory had been there for him through the heartbreak

of courting her and losing her. Gregory had been the one to tell Samuel when Lord Cross died. It had taken Samuel some time to wrap up his business and return home, but Gregory had been the first to know he was on his way... and why.

Gregory would not only understand why Samuel had brought an extra guest, but if the guest was Catherine, he would encourage it.

It was not until he'd made the suggestion that he realized how badly he wanted her to say yes. To choose him. The idea of her rejecting him—again—even though this was an entirely different kind of offer, made his chest tight.

“If I could have a moment alone with Catherine,” he said, keeping his gaze locked on hers. He could see her chest heave as she took in a deep breath, but she did not protest.

There was curiosity in her eyes, along with a kind of... fear? Longing?

Or was he putting his own emotions on her?

All he knew was that this was likely his one and only chance with her. He did not want her to see how desperate he was for her. She'd already refused him once and looked to be on the verge of doing so again. He did not even know if the people they'd become would love each other the way the people they'd been in their youth had loved.

But he wanted to know.

He wanted to try.

The others nodded at each other and filed out, Mrs. Stuart taking a moment to touch Catherine's hand and whisper a word of encouragement. He also thought he heard her



say that she would be right outside if Catherine needed her.

Hopefully, Catherine would not need her.

Samuel was moving on impulse now, following his gut rather than his head, which could be dangerous at the best of times. However, his gut was also responsible for some of his best investments. Sometimes, a man just needed to follow his instincts, and his were telling him that this was his chance with Catherine.

If he blew it now, he was pretty sure he would not get another one.

Trying to see if he liked what she wanted, if he could fulfill her needs, would be far better done away from London and all the prying eyes. He certainly did not want to make an attempt at a Society of Sin event, only to fail and embarrass them both. Or lose his nerve and humiliate himself.

Traveling together would make it impossible for them to stay apart. They'd be in forced proximity, unable to avoid each other the way they had been. It would be as much for him as for her.

As the door closed behind Mrs. Stuart, Catherine huffed a breath, crossing her arms across her chest in a manner that was rather defensive. Despite that, she also immediately started talking rather than hearing what he had to say.

"I do not know what is going on, but I am not traveling anywhere with you."

Well then, if that was how it was going to be.

"Why not? Do you have other plans for the holiday?" If she did, of course, he would not interfere, but from the way she winced, he was fairly certain his arrow had struck its target. Since both her parents and her late husband's family's homes were far from

London—as far as he knew, none of them were currently in the capital—traveling to either would take a substantial amount of time. Much more time than she had before Christmas.

“My plans are none of your business.” Her chin went up in the air, stubbornly defiant. “Suffice to say, I am not going to change them just to travel with you to a home I have not been invited to.”

“I am inviting you now.” He smiled easily, leaning against the table and tracing his fingers over the map. “Gregory certainly would not mind. He said I could bring anyone I wanted.” He had not, but Gregory would back him up. He understood the importance of bending the truth when necessary. “And you would not be doing it just to travel with me. You would be doing it in service to your country.”

Fire lit in her eyes, along the curiosity. Yes, he remembered how much she’d loved to read mysteries, always trying to figure out the villain before the end of the book. She loved her puzzles. That was clearly something that had not changed, even if so many other things had.

Pressing her lips together, she took another deep breath, obviously thinking. Samuel took the moment to enjoy watching her, his gaze traveling over the way her blue day dress hugged her curves and the tendril of hair that curled beside her long neck.

“You are very impertinent,” she said after a long moment.

“Perhaps you should flog me for it.”

The words were out of his mouth before he could think them through, but he did not regret them. The challenge hung in the air, waiting for her response.

Catherine

The afternoon was one shocking revelation after another. And the morning had been so calm. So sedate. She'd had no idea her entire world would be turned upside down mere hours later, but here she was.

"You do not mean that," she retorted immediately, not believing Samuel would actually want her to flog him... though some small part of her quivered in hope. No. She pushed that away.

He was challenging her, taunting her. That was the only explanation.

Raising one eyebrow, he tilted his head.

"I never say what I do not mean." The corner of his mouth curved upward. "If I am impertinent, perhaps you should flog me for it. That is what you like to do, yes?"

"I..." She cleared her throat. There was no point in denying it. He had seen her at the Society of Sin, after all. He knew what she did to men. What she liked to do to men. But she could not believe he was offering himself up to be one of those men. He had fled from that night, and she had not seen him again until today, and suddenly, he was trying to wrangle her into going on a trip with him and flog him, both at once?

It made no sense. No sense at all.

Squaring her shoulders, she gave him a look.

“That is what I like to do. That is not what you like to do.”

“I do not know if I’d like it or not; I’ve never tried it.” The slow grin spreading across his lips was sheer challenge. Straightening, he tugged on his jacket, pulling it back into place over the red waistcoat beneath.

Catherine got a sudden vision of pulling both things off him...

Stop it.

She was going to drive herself mad if she did not get a handle on her emotions and her fantasies.

“And what if you do not like it?” she asked, doing her best to keep the tremor out of her voice.

Samuel carelessly shrugged one shoulder.

“Then we will both know instead of making presumptions.” Though his tone was indifferent, his blazing eyes were anything but. He did not feel as sanguine about the prospect as he was pretending. “I will admit, I would prefer not to explore the options in front of a crowd or at a party. Coming with me would provide us with the privacy to experiment, and on top of that, you’d be doing a service for your country. Are you not curious about what happened to the dead dukes? Who might have done it?”

“You do not believe your friend had anything to do with his father’s death,” she retorted accusingly. He was dangling bait in front of her without truly believing it was a worthwhile catch .

A wry smile twisted his lips, though it did not quite reach his eyes.

“But I might be wrong. It’s also possible someone else in the household or on the estate might have reason to want to hasten the former Duke of Clarence’s demise, which is another avenue of investigation I’ll be pursuing during my visit.”

Which would be something the former duke’s mother might know about, but she would likely not speak freely to Samuel. She may not speak freely to Catherine, either, but as another woman, there was a higher likelihood of being able to establish some sort of bond. Catherine huffed.

Damn the man for making sense. Damn Priscilla and her friends for being so much more than they seemed.

Yet, the spark of excitement that had kindled in Catherine’s breast was no one’s fault but her own. She was the one who yearned for adventure. She was the one who was intrigued by the mystery.

She was the one who found the prospect of unraveling clues over Christmas to sound far more appealing than waiting out the holiday alone in London.

She was the one who was tempted by the idea of flogging Samuel... and so much more. Though many of her relationships with the men she punished had been chaste, there had been a few that included further intimacies. She could not help but wonder how far he would be willing to go and what it would be like.

Could not help but think about what it would feel like to be in bed with him, his hands on her, his tongue serving at her pleasure. He was a strong man, a powerful man in personality, and now he was offering to lay down that power for her.

At least, that was what it sounded like .

And that was the most tempting possibility being offered.

Did she not want to know?

Was she willing to take the chance?

Catherine pursed her lips. This was not a decision to be made in haste.

“I need to think about it,” she said finally. Think about it. Perhaps discuss it with Priscilla. Find out more from the other ladies about what information, exactly, they expected her to be able to gather. What kind of information they normally sought.

Think about how she was going to protect her heart. Because Samuel was showing no indication that he wanted anything more than to experiment. He had fled from the Society of Sin the night he’d seen her, but perhaps that had been because he’d been fleeing his own desires. She’d seen that happen with men who struggled against their innermost passions, thinking it made them less of a man. That was the entire reason for the Society of Sin, after all.

That was how she and Priscilla had become friends. Because Joseph had not initially felt like he could admit his true desires to his wife. He’d feared she would see him as less than before.

If Samuel was willing to face his desires now, it made sense that he would trust Catherine with the exploration. They had a past, and there was still a spark of attraction between them. Those two things combined made her an ideal partner for such an exploration.

But she could not let herself hope it was more than curiosity. For all she knew, it might even be payback for the way she’d rejected him in the past when she’d chosen to marry Lord Cross instead. Granted, she had done so under extreme pressure from

her parents, but she had known Samuel would run away with her if she'd been willing.

They could have eloped.

He did not seem to hold it against her now, but she also did not know him the way she had before. He might have changed.

In fact, that he was willing to even consider being dominated by her already demonstrated he was not the man she'd once known.

Then again, she was not the woman he had known, either.

Samuel

Dinner at Camden House was boisterous. Now that Catherine had been let in on the secret of who Oliver was, conversation revolved around how the ladies had become involved in various investigations. They'd also all given Samuel permission to use their Christian names, which, considering they were all related, made things a good deal easier. The men had done the same with Catherine.

The feeling of closeness and camaraderie drew her in as much as the conversation, he could tell. Catherine had always been a bit of a loner. Though she'd been well versed in making conversation and had always had people around her, she'd often been alone in the crowd, never quite coming out of her shell. Except with him.

Now, he got to see her coming out of it with others, and he was both glad of it and protective.

Seated beside her at dinner, he enjoyed watching her reactions—and joining her in them at some points. Though he'd known of Evie's occasional involvement in her

uncle's business, he had not known how involved her friends had become in the recent hunt for a traitor who had attempted to assassinate the Duke of York. Thankfully, that attempt had been unsuccessful, and the Duke of York still lived, and the traitor behind the plot had been caught. The Russian delegation he'd been working for had been sent back home as well.

Samuel had known some of this already, but he was still shocked by the details.

Like Evie's connection to the Tramp, who was well known but only in certain circles that young ladies of the ton should certainly not be acquainted with. And the fact that Josie had visited the Tramp's gambling hell while disguised as a boy. There was the revelation that the Earl of Talbot had only become an earl because the traitor had murdered his brother. The Countess of Talbot had been crucial in that investigation.

And the Marchioness of Hartford, who he'd always thought of as demure and retiring, was anything but when she was with her friends. Though he'd assumed there must be some hidden depths to her, once she'd married Hartford and he was clearly being led around by his nose (or possibly his cock), he was becoming acquainted with an entirely different side of her now.

He would never make the mistake of overlooking her in a crowd again. She was full of wicked observations and gossip that she'd picked up when those around her did not notice her presence. Though, of course, as Hartford's wife, she was less able to blend into the background now than when she'd been as a wallflower debutante, but she still managed it well enough to tell a hilarious story about the Earl of Spencer and his wife planning an amorous encounter right in front of her .

"Perhaps you should stop sitting in alcoves at balls," Josie told her, obviously amused by the story. "Remember when the Marchioness of Dunbury nearly ended up on top of you?"



“Last year, at the Windhams’ ball,” Mary said with a sigh, leaning over to make sure Catherine was aware of the gossip. “They sneak off nearly every ball, and one time, I had to sneak out of the room they went into, but that was the first time anyone has almost ended up on top of me.”

“My goodness,” Catherine laughed. “I would expect such behavior at the Society of Sin, but it’s harder to imagine at a duchess’ ball.”

“Watch them this Season,” Evie advised with a smirk. “Every event they attend, at some point, they both disappear for a quarter to half an hour and reappear slightly mussed.”

“Or more than slightly,” her husband joked.

“They are hardly the only ones guilty of sneaking off, but they are certainly more consistent about it,” Elijah said, leaning over to wink at Josie. “We could take a lesson from them.”

His wife snorted indelicately. Though she was stunningly beautiful and had been declared a Diamond of the First Water during her Season, Samuel was beginning to realize she rivaled Evie for being the wildest of the foursome.

“This is why I do not go to balls,” Oliver grumbled, causing Diana to laugh.

“You do not want to sneak off with me?” she asked with a seductive tone, causing much consternation among the rest of the table. Elijah looked horrified at the idea, Evie’s pale complexion turned green, and Joseph groaned. Lily, Josie, and Mary all paled at the thought, though they did not change color quite as dramatically as Oliver’s niece. Only Nathan and Anthony seemed unperturbed.

And Catherine, of course, but she was not related to Oliver in any way. She was

clearly amused by the varied reactions.

Leaning over, Samuel took the opportunity to whisper in her ear.

“I would sneak away with you if you wanted.”

Immediately, Catherine flushed bright pink, her gaze dropping to her plate. No one else seemed to notice their little byplay, which was good.

“I should flog you,” she muttered, making him grin.

Whether or not she’d said the words out loud, she was going to go with him. He could tell. She was taking the time to think about it, but the answer was going to be yes.

And then he was going to find out what it would be like to be flogged.

5

Catherine

Looking over her packed bags, Catherine put her fingers to her temples and tried not to feel as if she was making a terrible mistake. It was not an easy feeling to shake. Despite the thought she'd given her decision—and the many thoughts she'd had since she'd made it—it still felt impulsive. Rash. Risky.

All things she did not consider herself.

But it was also exciting.

For the first time in a long time, she felt truly alive. She was doing something rather than sitting and watching as life passed her by. The most alive she felt was normally at Society of Sin events, and even those had become passé in the past year or so.

Today, her blood hummed, her breath came a little faster, and she did not dread the interminable drag of time before supper. She felt energized. Hopeful. And at the same time, anxious over those emotions.

“Is that everything, my lady?” Watson asked, coming up beside her and casting an eye over the bags .

“I believe so. Thank you.” Catherine let out her breath. “Mr. North should be arriving soon.”

Off to the side, her lady's maid, Anna, stood with her hands folded in front of her, her eyes alight with anticipation. Unlike her employer, she was excited about the trip without a hint of hesitation. Catherine felt a little pang of guilt. She was probably not the most exciting lady to work for. She did not travel often, she was not as social as many other ladies, and she rarely wore out her gowns—though she did make sure Anna was kept well clothed regardless of her own unchanging wardrobe.

Of course, Anna did not know there was also a mission to be undertaken on this trip.

The maid looked out the window at the sound of a horse's whinny, and from the way her dark eyes widened, Catherine knew who it was before Anna said a word.

"He's here, my lady!" The younger woman sounded breathless. "And he looks so dashing."

Immediately curious, Catherine made her way over to the window closest to her to look out at the scene on the street. There were two large carriages—one for her to ride in and one for their luggage, as it was going to be a long stay—but Samuel was in neither of them. No, he was atop a horse beside them, looking as dashing as Anna had exclaimed him to be.

Dark breeches hugged his legs, his long forest green coat set off nicely by the darker color. Atop his head was a brown fur hat that looked very warm and was nearly the same color as his hair. He had a good seat, his back straight, shoulders wide, as his stallion pranced in place.

The geldings pulling the carriage closest to him eyed the stallion suspiciously.

Catherine smoothed her hands down over her gown. Traveling made for long days, and she had chosen her clothing for comfort... but she had also picked out her favorite colors. Today was a deep red that gave some extra color to her lips and

cheeks and picked up some of the hints of red in her dark hair. Her pelisse was an even deeper shade of red, trimmed with a green that nearly matched Samuel's coat.

Not something she had done on purpose, yet there was a part of her that was pleased at how well they would look together. Which was not at all the point because they were not together.

That was when she realized one of her hands had drifted up to pat her hair, checking for stray tendrils. Immediately, she snatched her hand down. Of course, she wanted Samuel to find her attractive. They had not discussed the explorations he wanted to engage in on this trip, not since that private discussion in Camden's library, but she would not assume he had changed his mind since then.

Though part of her was afraid he had.

Either way, she would be making the trip and doing a service for her country.

Was it too much to ask for a little something for herself as well?

Over the past day, as she'd rushed to pack her things and prepare for the trip, she'd had more than one fantasy about what it would be like to have Samuel under her lash... under her. She pressed her thighs together and gave her head a little shake, as if doing so could shake the image from her mind.

Dismounting, Samuel handed off the reins of his horse to her footman, who rushed out from the sideyard to greet him. Already, Watson was ordering her assembled footmen to gather up her suitcases. Only one would be going in the carriage she was riding in, as well as a bag for Anna; the others would all go in the luggage carriage, which would go on ahead of them so when they arrived at Clarence House, their things would be ready and waiting for them.

Watson opened the door as Samuel approached, and Catherine took another deep breath, lifting her chin and brushing her skirts down again before facing him. Thankfully, no one was paying attention to her. The footmen were lifting their burdens and moving toward the door, Watson was greeting Samuel, and Anna was watching the man with stars in her eyes.

Catherine could not blame her for the reaction. She was feeling a little starry-eyed herself, though she did her best to suppress it. Samuel was already cocky enough; no point in giving him another reason to be.

He moved to the side, giving the footmen room to go past him and out the door, turning to Catherine with a wide smile.

“My lady.” He strode forward, bowing in front of her and taking her hand so he could kiss the back of it. Her skin tingled where his lips landed, and she felt heat flush through her as he squeezed the tips of her fingers.

“Mr. North. You are precisely on time.”

“I do my best.” He flashed a smile at her. “The carriage has more than enough room for all of us, but I plan to ride Herod for the morning, so he’ll be more amenable to following the carriage in the afternoon. You and Anna should be comfortable throughout the day.”

“I see.” She glanced at the window. “You are not bringing a man with you?”

Samuel shook his head. “I have no need of one, and if I do, Gregory will provide.”

Catherine was not surprised Samuel eschewed having a personal manservant. While he now had the wealth for one, he’d been raised to do things for himself. She certainly had not, though she made it a point of pride to do as much for herself as she

could. There were certain things that were difficult on her own, though, that having a lady's maid made things far easier.

He glanced over at the suddenly empty foyer.

"It looks like we should be ready to be on our way." He smiled at her, and it was only then she realized he had not released his hold on her hand. "Shall we?"

Ignoring Anna's big, curious eyes, Catherine nodded her head. It was going to be a very interesting trip.

Samuel

The day passed far faster than he would have expected. He'd planned on riding Herod to Clarence and had told Gregory that he'd be bringing the stallion as his friend had an interest in possibly pairing him with one or more of his mares, but with Catherine in the carriage, he'd almost regretted that decision. Still, once Herod had gotten to do some runs during the morning, he'd more than settled enough to be hitched behind the carriage for the afternoon.

Tomorrow, after a day of travel, he should be even more even-tempered from the very beginning.

During the afternoon he and Catherine had not been able to talk of anything of consequence, not with her lady's maid present. The young woman's suspicions were already roused, and she did her best to be silent and discreet while he and Catherine conversed. Mostly, he told them stories of his travels overseas, the places he'd seen and the adventures he'd had. He only embellished a few, enjoying Catherine's reactions as he told her about lions in Africa and the huge whale that had decided to play with one of the ships he was on.

In return, she updated him on some of their mutual acquaintances he'd lost touch with while he was moving about the world rather than spending time in London. He got the impression she had not personally kept up with them, either, other than in a superficial way. She seemed... lonely. He was glad she had made friends with Priscilla because that group of ladies was clearly prepared to welcome her into their fold.

By the time they reached the Partridge and Pear Tree, the inn he'd planned on staying at for the evening, he was feeling more than a little frustrated at being in such close confines with her yet having to remain on entirely proper behavior. Though she'd had an audience for the flogging she'd administered at the Society of Sin, that was very different from an amorous interaction in a carriage with her lady's maid pressed against her hip.

Besides, an audience was not something that had ever appealed to him.

He kept his hands to himself, no matter how he fantasized about touching her. Tasting her. All the improper things he could do to her if only they were alone.

"Welcome, Mr. North, so good to see you again," Innkeeper Klaus greeted Samuel with his slight German accent. Coming up to the carriage as Samuel descended, the rotund man wiped his hands on the apron he wore round his ample waist. He fair beamed with goodwill and cheerfulness. With his rosy cheeks and white hair, dressed in dark red under his apron, he was the very picture of holiday cheer.

"Klaus." Samuel smiled at the other man, reaching out to shake his hand in greeting. "Good to see you again. Did you get the runner I sent?"

"Yes, yes, we have rooms for you and your lady," Klaus said, grinning even wider. Samuel did not bother to correct him. "Not to worry. Ah, and this must be she."



Samuel turned, reaching out his hand to help Catherine down the steps. She smiled at Klaus as she stepped down into the courtyard, her gaze darting around to take in the scenery before landing back on the innkeeper.

“Lady Catherine, this is Mr. Nicholas Klaus, our host for the evening. Klaus, this is my long-time friend, Lady Catherine Cross.” He let his hand linger around hers for a moment before dropping it.

“My lady, welcome to the Patridge and Pear Tree,” Klaus said with a slight bow, ducking his head. “We’ll bring your things right in and get you settled. Please, follow me this way to your rooms.”

As he turned, he waved his hand, and a multitude of inn workers, all dressed in green, descended.

The inn was decorated for the holiday with boughs of evergreen over every mantle, bows hanging from the windows, and the scent of spiced wine filling the air once they walked inside. There was a roaring fire in the hearth, and the tables were about half full of patrons, mostly men, though a few women were sprinkled throughout. At a quick glance, Samuel was certain Catherine was the highest-ranking person in the room, though she did not put on any airs as they walked through.

Unlike her parents, she had never been one to turn up her nose at those of lower rank.

“You can come down for supper, or I can have it delivered to your room,” Klaus said, leading the way to the stairs. “The fires have already been lit, so you should be nice and warm. If you need anything laundered, we can do that this evening and have it back to you by tomorrow morning.”

“We plan to get an early start,” Samuel replied. “We have at least another day and a half of travel.”

“Mmm.” Klaus nodded, but his expression sobered. “Old Maude says there’s a storm coming in tonight.”

“Really? But the skies were completely clear,” Catherine said, sounding both surprised and a little apprehensive.

“I’ve never known Old Maude to be wrong, but there’s always a first time,” Klaus replied as they mounted the stairs, the sounds from the common room fading away as they moved to the upper hallway. The closed doors meant there was no light from the outside, but gas sconces flickered along the walls, somehow making the hall seem warmly cozy rather than dark and creepy.

“Here you are, my lady,” Klaus said, coming up to one of the doors. He opened it, then handed her the key before pushing the door open so she could precede him into the room. Her lady’s maid scurried in behind her, turning to look about the room. “I’ll send up one of the maids to turn the bed down for you when you are ready. Would you like a hot bath as well?”

“No, thank you.” Catherine turned around to smile at him. The drapes were open, leaving her backlit against the fading light of day coming in through the windows, her figure clearly outlined by the dimming sunlight. “This is a lovely room.”

It truly was, which was one of the reasons Samuel had chosen the Pear and the Partridge. They had some of the best rooms he’d found on all his travels. Her room was exquisitely feminine, unlike the rooms Klaus had provided him with in the past, with blue and cream stripes decorating the walls, light wood furniture carved with decorative curves, and a deep rose bedspread and matching canopy and drapes on the bed. The curtains had blue and pink flowers adorning them and were secured to the sides of the window with ivory cord.

“Of course. The room for your ladies’ maid is through that door,” Klaus said,

pointing to one of the doors on the right. “And the washroom is through the other.”

Anna immediately went to open the door to her room, making a soft sound of happiness at what she found there.

“Your bags will be up momentarily.” Klaus grinned cheerfully, taking his leave of the room. Samuel cast one last longing glance at Catherine before Klaus had him moving down the hallway, just one door over. “And this is your room.”

Not one Samuel had stayed in previously, but as he followed Klaus into the room and took it all in, he realized why the man had put him there. He had not been able to see it from his view into Catherine’s room because the door had blocked his view of the left of her room. Now, he could clearly see the door adjoining the two spaces.

He waited until Klaus had handed over the key and exited the room before he went to check.

And he smiled because the adjoining door was unlocked.

Bless, Klaus.

Catherine

They had dinner in Samuel's room. Anna chose to go downstairs and eat with Samuel's groom, Lewis, in the common room, leaving her and Samuel alone in his room. As a widow, it was not very scandalous. She got the impression that Anna was doing her best to give them time and space alone, which she appreciated, even as it amused her. She would not have thought Anna would have a penchant for matchmaking, but she appreciated it, regardless.

There were other matters at hand as well, though.

"Tell me about Clarence," she requested. With Anna in the carriage with them, some of Samuel's stories had included the then-heir, now-duke, but of course, they had not been able to openly discuss the mission they'd been sent on. While she might request Anna keep her ears open for any gossip, she was not going to talk out of turn about the investigation.

After all, Clarence might be innocent, and she did not want Anna inadvertently casting suspicion on him to his own servants. Nor did she want to accidentally put Anna in any danger if it turned out Samuel did not know his friend as well as he thought, and the man turned out to be a murderer.

Samuel huffed a breath with just a touch of exasperation, leaning back and raking his hands through his hair. His mostly finished supper languished in front of him. She had waited until they were done eating, and he had been set at ease on purpose. This

was hardly going to be an easy topic, as he considered the man a friend.

“There are not too many other stories I have about him, as we have kept our contact to letters over the years.” He frowned. “The man I knew... he could have never killed his father. The two were not close, but neither were they at odds. And Gregory was harmless. A lover, not a fighter, is how he would describe himself.”

“He never got into a fight? No boxing, no fencing?” she pressed.

Samuel made a face.

“Fencing, because he had to, but no, he was not much of a boxer. Too concerned about messing up his pretty face.” A nostalgic smile curved Samuel’s lips as he ran his finger around his own face. “Besides, if every man who boxed or fenced was a murderer, we’d be overrun with them. And we are not.”

“No, but some enjoy it more than others,” she pointed out. “But no, he does not sound like the bloodthirsty type. Unless someone damaged his face?”

Samuel snorted.

“He does not like that, but he does not retaliate, either. I accidentally popped him a good one in the nose once, made him bleed like a stuck pig, and all he did was go running for the ice, then proceeded to lecture me for a good hour on being more careful with my fists. That was back in our school days.”

“But he could have changed.”

“He could have, though I struggle to see it.”

So did Catherine from Samuel’s descriptions, but she was withholding judgment until

she met the man himself.

“I can see him arranging things to harm innocents even less.” Samuel shook his head. “Gregory does not have a mean bone in his body and avoids any kind of confrontation. When asked to do something he does not want to do, he does not say no or deny you, but you will not see him again for a while. It is the most frustrating thing about him. But he is also very good at helping others work their way through a conflict, if he must, though he tends to avoid any kind of tension or anger, whether it is directed at him or not. If his father angered him or was angry at him, he would just avoid his father.”

Hm. One could say a bit of the same about Samuel. Rather than watch her marry another man, he’d left the country and had not come back until now. She was not going to bring that up, though. After all, it was not quite the same situation.

But she understood his point. Just as he had not confronted Lord Cross or her parents—or even her—Gregory would not confront his own father. She wondered if Samuel saw something of himself in Gregory and if that motivated part of his defense.

Suddenly leaning forward, Samuel put his hand on the table halfway between them.

“I would never bring you with me if I thought you were going to be in any danger,” he said earnestly, his gaze boring into hers, filled with sincerity .

Catherine blinked. She had not even thought of the possibility.

“Of course not,” she said, reaching forward to put her hand atop his in reassurance. “I never thought you would. That would be entirely against your character.”

“Thank you for that.” He turned his hand over, so their palms were together. Heat

curled in her stomach as the warmth between them grew. His fingers tips curled around her hand, the tip of his forefinger stroking the soft spot on the inside of her wrist. Arousal flared, her mouth going dry as her body responded to his touch.

“Gregory is not the only person I have not seen in such a long time... though you have gone through many changes, I would say the core of you is still intact.”

“Oh?” She was suddenly intrigued at how he viewed her. In many ways, he had not changed. He was still forthright, confident, and flirtatious—if anything, he was more so those things than before. But she knew that she was no longer the shrinking debutante, doing her best to fit the mold her parents tried to wedge her into, no longer desperately trying to be whoever her suitors wanted her to be so she could escape them.

In many ways, Samuel had been the only person she’d felt like she could be herself with when she was a debutante, yet, back then, she had not truly known who she was. It had taken marriage, disappointments as she was unable to get pregnant, her husband turning to other women, and his subsequent death for her to even begin to explore who she was on her own and what she wanted out of her life.

Becoming a widow had given her freedom she’d never expected to have, and she’d grabbed onto it with both hands.

But how did Samuel see her now ?

He smiled, an easy, charming smile with a light in his eyes, his finger still making little strokes against her sensitive skin and sending little tingles along her arm to her core.

“You are more self-assured, more settled in your person, but you are still thoughtful and generous. You still sit back and watch a situation before deciding whether or not

you are going to insert yourself... and how. You still do not jump into things very quickly.”

Unlike him. Samuel had been much faster than her to make his decisions, and she did not think that had changed.

“Until now,” she murmured, making him chuckle.

“Even now. You did not immediately accept the invitation to accompany me. You had to think about it.”

That was true, which made her feel a little better. She’d had to think quickly, but she had taken the time to think about it. And she’d taken the time to think about what she wanted to happen on this trip.

If Anna came back to the room to find it empty, she would just retire to her own room. She was discreet, though Catherine had never pushed the boundaries of her maid’s discretion. But Anna had never given her any reason to think that she would betray a confidence.

The time for thinking was over. She did not want to think anymore.

Catherine stood, her hand still in Samuel’s. His eyes lit up, but he did not stand the way a gentleman normally would. Instead, he watched her as she moved to the side, her fingers tightening around his wrist, then stepped toward him. The fact he was waiting for her, waiting to see what she would do, despite the instincts that would normally have had him jumping to his feet, intrigued her.

He was waiting for her lead.

Which did not feel like the Samuel she had known... and at the same time, it did.



While he had always made the moves in their courtship, as a gentleman should, he had also waited for her decisions, had he not? If she had been more secure, more confident, if she had taken the lead, even as a debutante, he would have followed her. He would have followed her all the way to Gretna Green and married her.

That was not in the cards now, but so many other things that had not been an option before were now open to them.

Catherine moved his hand, forcing him to turn in his chair—no, he moved his chair along with him, the wood scraping over the carpet so his body was now facing hers. That was even better for what she intended.

She slid onto his lap, letting go of his hand so she could wrap her arms around his neck.

“I am tired of thinking,” she murmured and bent her head to his.

Samuel

It felt like a dream he’d once had.

Catherine on his lap, her soft curves pressed against his body, her hands on the back of his neck, lips against his, with her tongue softly teasing them open. When she’d been a debutante, he’d stolen a kiss or two. There had been an element of danger to those kisses, of anxiety, even as part of him had hoped they might be caught. Not that he’d wanted her ruined; he’d just wanted her to be his, and even then, he’d known—deep down—her parents would never choose him for her husband.

He'd known, deep down, that Catherine would not have the backbone to defy them.

Not then .

But now?

Now, she was her own woman. Confident. Assured. And when he opened his mouth to hers, their tongues danced, allowing him to taste her in a way he'd never gotten to when he was courting her. Samuel groaned, his hands going around her, shifting her on his lap as his cock filled, coming to attention with alacrity in response to this sudden change.

Catherine was still careful, still measured in her decisions, but it was true she had changed as well. Before, she would never have been the aggressor. Every time he'd kissed her, she'd needed time to think about what they had just done. How it had made her feel.

Obviously, she had no such need for a break now.

Samuel did not want to think about how many men she'd kissed since he'd stolen her first.

It does not matter.

I had her first, and I shall have her last.

Though he was not going to be telling her the latter part yet. He did not want to scare her off. Even though, with her on his lap, in his arms, he already knew he was willing to do whatever he needed to do in order to keep her there. He could take any flogging, any pain, anything she demanded of him... as long as he never had to let her go again.

He should not have gone running after seeing her with the Duke of Kent. To be fair, he'd been wrestling with both jealousy and the realization she'd changed far more than he'd anticipated... Not to mention his own insecurities over whether or not he

could do what she wanted...

But he felt it now, deep inside himself, the utter surety of how she fit against him, the way there had always been a space open for her in his heart.

His arms tightened about her, and he felt her moan against his lips as she shifted on his lap again. There was pressure against his cock for a moment, then it lifted as she did, rearranging herself so that she was kneeling over his lap, one leg on either side of his thighs.

Samuel shifted his hands down, filling them with her bottom, and he squeezed as he pulled her more tightly against him. Need surged, hot and furiously demanding, wanting more of her.

Her hands were on either side of his face, sliding back into his hair as she kissed him, matching his need with her own. He groaned, his hips thrusting upward, trying to rub against her, but the position was too awkward.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, reaching up to unbutton the back of her dress. Was he making assumptions? Yes. But she was the one who had climbed onto his lap in the first place.

“Too many clothes,” she muttered, tugging at his cravat.

Thank God they were on the same page.

Catherine

All the thinking she had done beforehand had not helped prepare her for the reality, for how she would feel in the moment, for the effect Samuel's hard body against hers, his hands on her, would have. Her late husband had been a traditional man, visiting her bed mostly to try to beget an heir... and when no heir was forthcoming, he'd mostly lost interest. Though bedding him had not been unpleasant, it had also not been as pleasurable as she had found such activities could be after she'd joined the Society for Sin.

There, she'd learned about her own pleasure rather than merely tolerating the whole process.

But none of those men had ever set her body aflame the way Samuel did.

None of them had made her want to throw caution—and her clothing—to the wind the way she wanted to right now.

Her reputation at the Society of Sin was one of control. Coolness. Distance .

She felt none of that right now.

Not just physically but emotionally, she could not find any distance.

Could not cool off.

And her much-vaunted control was slipping through her fingers at a rapid rate, if she'd ever had it to begin with.

Everything was different with Samuel.

She gasped as his lips slipped away from hers, moving to the sensitive skin on her neck. Arching her back, she pressed her breasts against him as he moved his lips over her throat, squirming on his lap with the need pulsing through her. She felt breathless from the sensations curling through her, shocked by the intensity of the passion rising inside her.

She had to get control again.

Pulling away, she scooted back on his lap, panting for breath.

Hoping he could not see how unsettled she was, she reached for the end of his cravat and tugged, pulling it off of him. He was panting for breath as well, his fingers still curved around her bottom, eyes hot as he watched her.

“Since I do not have my ladies’ maid on hand, you will have to take her place. Help me undress,” she said once she was sure her voice would remain steady. Lower than normal, huskier than normal, but steady.

“Yes, my lady,” he replied, a slow grin spreading across his lips. It helped her sensibilities that his voice was also strained—nearly as strained as his breeches were across his erection when she stood. Satisfaction thrummed through her.

Moving back, she brushed her skirts down as he got to his feet, undulating from the chair so they were standing a mere inch apart. He looked down at her, eyes still gleaming. She raised an eyebrow at him, shrugging her shoulders. Now that she was standing, she could feel how loose her dress was and knew that he'd managed to undo

quite a few of her buttons...

Nearly all of them, it turned out.

“You are so damn beautiful,” Samuel murmured as he helped her out of the dress, then laid it over the chair he’d just vacated to keep it from rumpling too badly. His eyes roved over her body, sincerity shining in his eyes.

She felt beautiful when he looked at her like that.

Sometimes, it was difficult to tell, with so many silver-tongued devils wandering the ton, whether or not a compliment was truly meant, if it was merely paying lip service... or if a rake was trying to seduce her. There was no question with Samuel, though. She could tell he meant it, even without the prodigious bulge at the front of his breeches.

In some ways, it felt very odd to be here with him, alone, stripping down... getting ready to do things she could have never imagined the first time he’d courted her. Then, she’d dreamed of kisses, of being held, of him touching her body. She’d had no idea what happened between a man and a woman in the bedroom.

The difference between then and now...

She actually blushed as he slowly stripped her bare, despite herself. It was hard to reconcile the young debutante she’d been with the confident woman she was now. Hard not to feel like that blushing innocent again because she was with Samuel.

Not that it seemed to bother him. He knelt before her, his shirt hanging open in the front, his fingers reverently rolling down her stockings, his breath hot on her upper thighs. Catherine lifted her foot, letting him pull the stocking off entirely, leaving her naked in front of him... but he was the one on his knees. Reaching down, she grasped

his hair, sliding her fingers through the strands and gripping at the root so she could tilt his head back.

“How good are you with your mouth, Samuel?” she asked.

A slow smile spread across his lips.

“I have never had any complaints.” There was a cocky surety to his demeanor that she found shamefully attractive. Then again, she had always liked a confident man, as long as he was not over confident.

“Well, let us see what I think then.” The chair he’d been sitting in was still beside them. He was tall enough that she could not step over him, even kneeling, so she lifted one foot to rest it on the seat of the chair, spreading her thighs wide. She could feel the cooler air of the room against the heated flesh of her cunt, and she used her hand in his hair to draw him forward, directly into that heat.

Surprise flashed in his eyes, but he went quickly, easily, his lips and tongue seeking those wet folds. Catherine moaned, moving her hips as his tongue slid against her sensitive spots, tasting her, savoring her.

With her other hand, she reached up to cup her breast, pinching her hard nipple and shuddering as the delicious sensations began to roll through her. It was not the easiest position to maintain, but it was well worth it to have him on his knees, servicing her for her pleasure.

Turning her head, she was able to see them in the looking glass—Samuel’s hard head buried between her thighs as she stood over him, one hand on his hand, the other on her breast. It was an erotic tableau worthy of an etching, and the sight of it aroused her even more.

And he was very, very good at it, even in the awkward position. His hands came up to cup her bottom, helping hold her in place as he began to feast with gusto, his tongue delving between her folds, exploring the sensitive flesh. Catherine shuddered, moaning, as her grip on his hair tightened, and she rolled her nipple between her fingers, tugging the little bud. The jolt went straight through her, down to her pussy where Samuel laved his tongue over the little pearl of her womanhood.

“Samuel...” She gasped his name as he suckled at her font, devouring her with all the earnest need of a starving man.

Pleasure was curling inside her, making her position even harder to maintain. His hands squeezed her bottom as she began to rock herself against his mouth. It was his hands that helped her not to fall over. His hands kneaded, squeezing, adding to the tumult of sensations... and Catherine let herself go.

Let herself trust him to hold her up.

She cried out as her pleasure broke, ecstasy swirling through her, her hand dropping from her breast to Samuel’s head to keep her from falling. He held her up, suckling her as he supported her, holding her as he pleased her while she gripped his hair and cried out his name.

Samuel

Bloody hell.

If this was what Catherine required of him, he was more than happy to serve.

He’d always enjoyed using his mouth on a woman, watching her writhe for him, hearing her cry out for him, knowing that it was his skill that elicited such pleasure from her. However, he’d never pleased a woman who was standing over him



before. This was an entirely new experience and one he relished.

There was something extremely arousing about being on his knees for her while she stood over him, yet also relied upon him for her support. Casting his eyes upward to her, watching her pluck her nipple, her breasts jiggling as she moved, was a sight to behold. The perspective was a newly discovered enjoyment as well.

Though his neck might feel some of the strain, it was more than worth the slight ache in his muscles. Especially when she finally pulled away, panting for breath, her face and chest flushed from her passion.

Her hands were still in his hair, gripping his head tightly, holding him in place, still on his knees. With her moving away from him, her leg coming down from the chair seat, he was forced to relinquish his grasp on her bottom—a pity.

“Very good,” she murmured after a long moment, bending down to brush a kiss over his lips, tasting herself on them. She licked her own lips after doing so, sending a new surge of arousal to his cock, which was already hard as a rock. “Now... my turn.”

By which she meant it was her turn to touch and taste him... but not in the same position. No, she quickly had him stripped on the bed and tied to it with his own cravat. Samuel tugged on the fabric around his wrists, holding him to the headboard, testing its strength.

“Do not tug too hard,” she cautioned him as she straddled his hips, her cunt hovering over his cock, though she did not lower herself enough for the two to connect. “You do not want it to become too tight around your wrists. ”

“Hmm.” He tugged again, then jolted as she pinched his nipple. The sharp sting was not particularly painful, but it did surprise him, making him jerk beneath her. He met her gaze, staring with both surprise and indignation.

Catherine raised her eyebrow at him. Despite being completely naked, her breasts swaying in front of her, pert pink nipples budded, she somehow managed to look every inch the proper, intimidating lady of the ton.

“What did I just say, Samuel?” Her fingers rolled the little bud threateningly.

“Ah... my apologies, my lady.” He grinned at her. “Sometimes, it is hard to resist testing things for myself.”

“Do your best. Otherwise...” She let go of his nipple and raked her fingernails over his chest, starting at his shoulders and scraping them down.

He cried out at the sensation, which was both painful and arousing, his hips lifting so he could feel the underside of his cock brushing against the wet heat of her pussy for one delicious moment.

She smiled at him, a sadistic gleam in her eye. “I do not need a flogger to punish you.”

Samuel stared up at her. She was definitely not the young woman he remembered... she was so much more. For the first time, he felt a little nervous about the changes. Being secured to the headboard of a bed could do that to a man. She’d tied the knot quite well—he was not sure he would be able to break free—and it certainly would not be easy to do so, even if he did manage it in the end.

He’d never been naked and vulnerable to a woman like this, not for pleasure or pain, and it was clear Catherine enjoyed inflicting both. And his cock apparently did not care which she chose to focus on. The damned appendage did not deflate in the slightest despite the little punishments—if anything, it might have hardened even more.

“I’d prefer pleasure,” he finally replied once he was able to find his tongue again. The taste of her still lingered, adding to his arousal.

“Hmm, would you?” she asked, though she was not looking at his face or seemed to be particularly interested in the answer. Instead, she was focused on tracing a nail across his chest and down the little pathway of hair that led to his stomach and below—though she was stopped by the position of her own body before she could go any lower.

“Yes.”

She shifted atop him, moving her body down so his cock was no longer beneath her pussy. With her knees on either side of his thighs, her weight pressing down on them, he was now even more trapped than he’d been before. Thrusting upward with any force, with any real leverage, was no longer an option.

“It doesn’t seem to have had any effect on your arousal,” she commented, wrapping her hand around the body part in question. Samuel groaned as she gripped his cock, his hips immediately attempting to move upward as she slid her palm down the thick length, proving he was right about how much mobility he had with her atop him the way she currently was.

Very little.

“In fact,” she said, cradling his balls with her other hand and giving them a sharp yank that had him crying out—and thrusting up again. “It seems part of you likes it very much.”

The breath strangled in his throat as she held his tender sack, squeezing lightly but with enough pressure to feel like a warning. She was holding his most sensitive, most delicate parts in her hands and threatening to hurt them... and yes, his cock liked it

far more than it should. The rest of him was conflicted, struggling to land on an emotion, caught between anticipation, excitement, and anxious apprehension.

He had no idea what she was going to do next... and, unexpectedly, he loved it.

8

Samuel

“This is a very nice cock,” Catherine said, admiring the appendage she was holding in her hand.

Samuel gritted his teeth. He appreciated the compliment. At the same time, he wanted her to do a great deal more than hold and look at the damn thing. She swept her thumb across the underside of the mushroom head, making his senses tingle and at the same time, not giving him anywhere near what he wanted, what he craved.

He’d never had to wait like this before, and he hated it as much as he loved it. Being so out of control was a completely new experience, and he was struggling with the emotional aspect as much as being so physically restrained.

When she lowered her head to swipe her tongue over the crown, Samuel groaned, trying to thrust upward again. He shuddered, his inability to move in the ways he wanted working out of his body by other means. His cock throbbed against her palm, the hot, wet sensation of her tongue sending pleasure shooting through him. Catherine moved her hand up and down, pumping his cock, then tugged on his balls hard enough to make him gasp.

The pain and the pleasure were wrapping around each other within him, making it difficult to discern which he was truly feeling.

“Catherine...” He gritted her name out through his teeth.

She ignored him.

And he was utterly helpless to do anything about it.

“Bloody hell!” Her mouth engulfed the head of his cock, her tongue exploring, and he writhed against both the cravat around his wrists and her weight across his thighs. His hands itched to touch her, yet being denied the ability made his insides heat even more than if he could fill his palms with her breasts the way he wanted to.

He was entirely at her mercy.

And she showed none as she slowly slid her mouth down his shaft, taking her sweet time. There was nothing he could do to hurry her, nothing he could do to reciprocate her sensual torture. All he could do was lie there and take what she was doing to him.

His head tilted back against the pillow as he panted for breath, doing his best to stifle his whimpers as she teased him with her tongue and mouth, occasionally tugging or squeezing his balls painfully. Each hard tug made his cock jerk in her mouth. Each squeeze made him writhe.

The entire time, she moved slowly, as though she was savoring his cock rather than trying to work him toward release. It was maddeningly arousing.

“Catherine... please...” He was not sure how much more he could take. It seemed as though she was content to go on this way for hours. She tugged on his sack in response, and he jerked. “Please... bloody hell... I need... I cannot...” Fuck, he could not find the words.

And he was not sure if his begging was helping or harming his cause.

She hummed around his length as her lips descended again, and he cried out, his

fingers flexing, then grabbing onto the spindles his wrists were secured to.

“Catherine!”

She lifted her mouth fully, to his consternation and relief, his cock protesting at the loss of slick heat. Her dark eyes were full of desire and power as she looked down at him, hand still wrapped around the base of his cock, holding it upward for her to impale herself on.

Finally.

“You are not to climax until I say you may,” she told him, teasing the head of his cock as she placed it against her entrance, but did not lower herself onto him yet. He was at the gate of the promised land and so eager to enter, but he was also aghast at her demand.

“What if I cannot help myself?”

A slow, sadistic smile curved her lips. It made his sack want to shrivel, but his cock was too engaged, too engorged, to pay heed to the warning. His mind raced, wondering what she could do—would do—if he was unable to comply.

He was fairly certain he did not want to find out.

More than that, he wanted to please her. He wanted to give her what she wanted. What she needed.

Rather than answering him, she released her grip on his cock as she began to sink down atop him. Samuel groaned, thrusting upward—something he could do more easily now that she was straddling his hips and not his thighs—to meet her. It was pure ecstasy... More than that, it felt right.

She felt right .

He had been with many women since she'd rejected him and married Lord Cross, but none of them had felt quite like this, even disregarding the way she'd bound him to the bed. None of them had engaged his heart as much as they had his body.

Emotion flared in her eyes, her gaze connecting with his, and he could not help but wonder if she was feeling the same thing. The rightness. The feeling that this was how it was always supposed to be.

She settled against him, rocking herself on his groin, his cock fully embedded inside her. Heat spread through him, the slick walls of her body contracting around him, and he groaned as he shuddered through the wave of pleasure. After being tormented by her mouth, keeping control of himself was incredibly difficult. The urge to thrust, to move her atop him was running rampant through his body... yet there was only so much he could do.

Catherine sighed happily as she began to rise... then fall... hands on his chest, her breasts swayed beneath her as she moved, riding him. Using him for her pleasure. Because it was certainly not for his.

Though he felt a great deal of pleasure, her slow ride, grinding down atop him every time she seated herself, was just another round of erotic torment for him. He needed more. Harder. Faster.

But all he could do was grit his teeth and let her use him as she willed, doing his best to hold back the need growing inside him.

Catherine

She'd thought that binding his hands would help with the aching intimacy of their



connection, but it did not. Samuel might not be able to touch her, but his gaze caressed her every curve, his body intimately joined with hers in a manner that felt more than physical.

Perhaps because it had been so long since she'd had a lover. That must be why it felt so exquisitely and unexpectedly poignant.

His gaze caught hers as she lowered herself onto him, his lips parting as she rocked atop him, rubbing her clit on the hardness of his groin. Pleasure sparked through her, hot need searing her senses, yet she lingered... teased... because she was not ready for this moment to be over yet.

She was not sure what would be on the other side of it.

“Catherine...” Samuel’s voice was hoarse, husky, as he said her name again.

God, she loved to hear him say her name like that.

“More, please.”

She loved hearing him beg, too. Loved knowing she had done that to him. Because Samuel was not a man who begged. Even when he'd wanted her to run away with him, when he'd been trying to convince her to defy her parents and go to Gretna Green, he had not begged.

Asked. Cajoled. Argued.

But not begged.

Not until now.

Her own need was swelling, and she could not deny him, not when he pleaded so beautifully. So needily.

Rising up, she sank down again, moving faster now, riding him harder as her ecstasy mounted. Her own moans joined his, filling the air as they began to race toward the finish, her body tingling all over as her climax neared.

“Please... Catherine... I cannot...” He thrust upward into her, and she knew he was close to his own climax .

“A little longer, Samuel... a little more...” she murmured, shuddering as her body clamped down around him. Her clit pressed against his groin, and she leaned forward, her nipples brushing against the wiry hair on his chest, the sensation tingling through her adding to the ecstasy. She rocked, igniting all her senses and pushing her up to the very edge of the precipice.

“Come for me, Samuel. Come for me now.”

He cried out, a wild, hedonistic cry, as he finally let loose his pent-up desires. Catherine felt him surge beneath her, thrusting up hard, filling her so deeply, and it was her turn to cry out. She rubbed herself against him, feeling him swell and pulse inside her as he reached his release, calling her name over and over as he poured himself into her.

Hot bliss wrapped around her, spread through her, wreaking havoc on her senses until she finally slumped over Samuel, collapsing on top of him, utterly spent.

They breathed together, his rapid heartbeat pattering in her ear. Closing her eyes, Catherine breathed in the scent of him, unwilling to move, because that would mean disengaging. She could feel him shrinking inside her, but she did not want their connection to end a moment before it had to.

“My lady,” he murmured, and she felt the words vibrate through his chest against her cheek. “I would like to hold you.”

She felt the movement as he tugged gently on the bonds around his wrist.

Ah.

Yes, well. She supposed she should take care of that.

Lifting her head, her breasts squashed against his chest, she did her best to reach up and untie his wrists without moving her lower body. Unfortunately, there was only so much movement that could happen, and she sighed internally as she felt his cock fall away. Scooting upward, she found the end she needed and tugged on it. The knot quickly unraveled.

Sighing happily, Samuel wrapped his arms around her before she could even scoot back down to her former position, leaving them face-to-face. Accepting the new position, Catherine propped her elbows on either side of his head, her fingers stroking the sides of his face as she stared down at him. His gaze was contemplative as he looked back up at her, his arms secure around her.

Being held by him like this was almost as good as having him inside her. It was a different kind of connection, but the connection remained.

“Hello,” she said, smiling down at him, hoping that her expression hid some of her inner uncertainty. The fact he wanted to hold her seemed like a good sign. Or perhaps he was about to tell her that he did not want to do anything like that again, but he did not want her to run when he did so.

But she thought he’d liked it.

“Hello.” He smiled at her, and she relaxed internally. There was a softness in his gaze, a warmth, which soothed some of the battered edges of her emotions.

“Was that everything you’d hoped it would be?”

The chuckle that rumbled through his chest lifted her body atop his.

“That was far more than I expected.” He raised his eyebrow at her. “How did I do?”

There was an arrogance to the question, an assumption that she would answer positively. Which, perversely, made her want to needle him. But the truth was, he was the best lover she’d ever had. More, he’d responded in ways that she had never thought to expect from him. He’d been everything she wanted, everything she could have dreamed, and more.

There were still unexplored avenues he might balk at, but as a first encounter, she could not ask for more.

“More than acceptable,” she responded after a long moment of pretending to think about it, then laughed when he growled, his fingers digging into her sides to tickle her, the way he’d done when they were younger, pushing her to admit the truth. “You were delightful, and you know it.”

“I still like to hear you say it.”

That made her laugh as he pouted playfully up at her.

Sliding her fingers into his hair, she gripped it hard, tilting his head back slightly. His eyes widened, banked heat flaring.

“You were a very good boy.”

Oh, yes. She could practically see the little click in his eyes. He liked that a lot.

Samuel

Waking up with Catherine in his arms, in his bed, was how he wanted to wake up every morning for the rest of his life. He would have to ensure that Gregory put them in rooms near each other when they reached Clarence. Now that he'd had her, he did not intend to spend another night apart if he could help it.

She shifted against him sleepily, her warm bottom rubbing his cock...

It was that very warmth that made him realize how cold the rest of the room was. Frowning, he lifted his head. They had left the drapes on the bed open, and the fire had gone out, but it was still colder than he would have expected.

Klaus' words about Old Maude's prediction ran through his head.

Grabbing a blanket from the foot of the bed, Samuel wrapped it around himself and hurried over to the window. Opening the curtain, he was nearly blinded by the white outside. The rising sun was shining on swaths of snow, the light reflecting off it .

"Bloody hell," he murmured.

Old Maude had been right. The snow had come overnight while he and Catherine were wrapped up in each other, and it must have fallen fast and furious. It was beautiful, covering the trees and the grounds, but also frustrating because the road was clearly covered as well. Klaus already had some of his workers out front, doing

their best to shovel the courtyard free, but Samuel very much doubted anyone would be able to be on the road this morning. Perhaps not even today at all. The snow looked to be at least fifteen centimeters high, higher where the wind had banked it.

Though he'd wanted to hurry to Clarence, Samuel felt a strange sense of relief. He would have Catherine's complete attention for at least another day, and he could give her his. He would not have to share her with anyone or spend his time with Gregory, trying to fulfill a mission he knew would be futile.

Hopefully, there would not be more snow. He did not want to entirely miss the visit for the holiday, but a delay did not seem like such a bad thing right now.

"What is it?" The sleepy voice behind him made him turn. Catherine, deliciously ruffled, was sitting up in the bed, pulling the sheets up around her as she shivered.

"Old Maude was right." The confusion in her expression made him grin. "It snowed last night. I will have to speak with Klaus, but I feel it unlikely we will be leaving this morning. Possibly this afternoon, but that might not be possible, either."

"Oh." She blinked, assimilating the information, then tilted her head as she looked at him, as if she was trying to figure out how he felt about the news. He kept smiling at her, and a returning smile spread on her lips. "Well then. I suppose we shall have to find something to keep us occupied while we're here."

"I suppose we shall." He turned. "First, though, I am going to get the fire going again."

Freezing his bloody balls off was not the way he wanted to start his day.

He thought that, then two hours later, he was in the snow with all the other patrons of the inn, freezing his bloody balls off and having the time of his life. Lords, ladies,

maids, grooms, footmen, local farmers—it did not matter their status, the inn had almost emptied out to engage in a massive snowball fight.

Exactly how it had started, he was not sure. The courtyard had been cleared, and Klaus' people had dug out to the road, but the road itself was still covered. Eventually, a crew would be along to clear it, but who knew when. Klaus had given his people a break. Samuel and Catherine had gone outside to walk about and enjoy the snow-covered scenery, stretching their legs and spending some time together without the knowing eyes of her maid and his groom upon them.

Neither of them said a word, of course, but Catherine's maid, at least, had to know her mistress had not spent the night in her own bed. He was certain Whittaker, his driver, suspected as well. They seemed to have their own flirtation going on to distract them, thankfully.

They had also come outside to walk about, Whittaker escorting the maid in much the same manner Samuel was doing with Catherine.

Someone had thrown the first snowball. Another one must have been flung back. Then, somehow, everyone who was outside had gotten in on the fun, and more people had come running out of the inn to join in, likely having seen the fracas from the windows.

Laughing so hard, she could barely throw her snowballs, Catherine was clearly having the time of her life. Her cheeks were bright pink from the cold, despite the thick pelisse she was wearing and the black wool shawl wrapped around her neck. Samuel chuckled as she barely managed to duck a snowball thrown by one of the stableboys.

Hearing him, she turned her head, eyes gleaming with amusement as she packed another snowball between her gloved hands.



“Were you hoping that would hit me?”

“Of course not, my lady.” He grinned back at her. “Though if it had, I would certainly have defended your honor.”

That got another laugh out of her.

“What if it is your honor that needs defending?” Without giving him time to answer, she lobbed the snowball she’d just packed right at him. He was too startled and the distance between them too short for him to react appropriately. Though he backed up a step, he did not dodge, and the snowball hit him squarely in the middle of his chest, some of the icy droplets exploding upward to sting the lower half of his face.

Laughing even harder now, Catherine was already darting away, running to get away from him.

Growling through his own chuckles, Samuel went after her, both of them dodging around people and snowballs. Though she was long legged and surprisingly fast, as well as having a head start, he was faster. It only took him a minute to catch up to her, just as she was passing by one of the largest snow drifts.

Catching her around the waist as she was taking another step, they both spun, his arms going around her, their feet tangling together, and they went tumbling into the snowdrift—her atop of him. Her back was to his chest, and he cushioned her fall as the freezing snow wrapped around both of them.

He could not hear her giggles, but he could feel them against his arms as she squirmed her way back up. The cold ice sliding down the back of his neck was the only reason he let her go so easily.

Rather than running off again, she stood before him, taking his hands in hers and

helping him out of the drift. As chaos reigned around them, he pulled her into his arms for a warm kiss amidst the freezing fun.

Catherine

“Mmmm, yes, right there...” Catherine moaned as Samuel dug his fingers into her sore calf. The fun of the morning had given way to sore muscles in the afternoon. Between being confined to the carriage for a full day yesterday, then running about the whole morning, her body was both confused and a little achy.

Samuel was doing his best to soothe those aches with his fingers after they’d shared a nice hot bath. Klaus and his staff had been diligent in ensuring everyone who came inside had access to one. Where he got all the hot water from, she did not know—it seemed like magic or perhaps a Christmas miracle.

Not that she believed in magic or Christmas miracles, but she did not have another explanation.

“I must admit, as much as I enjoy those noises you are making, this was not how I anticipated eliciting them from you,” Samuel said with a chuckle, digging his fingers in and making her moan again.

She laughed softly at his confession.

“I am sure we can arrange some other methods,” she replied coyly, glancing over her shoulder. She let her head drop again as he moved his hands from one calf to the other. “Mmmmmmm.”

She was feeling incredibly relaxed.

The snow had created a kind of bubble away from the rest of the world. No one could

reach them here at the inn, and they could not leave. Nor did she want to. It was such a far cry from sitting in her lonely house and waiting for the holiday to pass her by.

Though she was rather looking forward to being hosted by a duke for Christmas, since that was an experience she'd never had before, she would have also been perfectly happy being trapped at the inn for the holiday. As long as the food and fuel for the fires and lamps did not run out, that was. Klaus had not seemed worried—he'd been in the thick of the snowballs—which helped soothe any concerns she had.

He'd also reassured them the road crew should come through sometime today, and they'd be able to be on their way again tomorrow.

Catherine turned her mind away from that, focusing on Samuel's hands on her. No point in thinking about having to leave in the morning when she should be enjoying the moment she was in. It was a very good moment. One that deserved her full attention.

Especially when his hands completed their progress down her legs and reached her feet. Her feet did not particularly hurt, but it still felt so good when his thumbs pressed against her soles. She moaned again, smiling at his answering chuckle .

"I feel like I should do something for you after this," she murmured.

There was a moment of silence before he answered, though his hands never stopped what they were doing.

"I do not need anything. I am enjoying doing this for you for the sake of your enjoyment."

Warmth flushed through her chest. Could he be any more perfect for her? Yet, the fact remained that she did want to reciprocate in some way.

“If you were to ask me to do something for you, what would it be?” She wanted to know what he wanted, what he desired. If there was a fantasy he had that she could fulfill.

Not that having him rub her from head to toe was a fantasy she’d had, but she likely would in the future. She might have him rub her all over every day if she could.

But she wanted to give him something as well.

“A flogging,” he said so softly, she almost did not hear him.

“What?” she asked, just to be sure. Rolling over, she faced him, propping herself up on her elbows. His gaze immediately went to her naked breasts.

Neither of them had gotten dressed again after their bath.

His gaze met hers, completely serious, as he cleared his throat.

“I want to try a flogging. I want to know what it feels like. I want to know if I can handle it.” He cocked his head. “Unless you did not bring...”

“I have it.” She had brought it just in case. She did love to administer a flogging. She’d hoped she might have the chance since Samuel had said he wanted to use this trip to explore. It did surprise her when he was being offered whatever he wanted, that was what he chose .

His hand moved along her leg, sliding over her foot and up her calf to her knee. A small smile curved his lips.

“Then that is what I want.”

Catherine tilted her head at him, returning his smile with her own.

“As you wish.”

10

Samuel

There was no equipment, no frame for him to hold on to the way the Duke of Kent had the first time Samuel had witnessed Catherine with the flogger in her hand. Instead, he found himself braced in front of the bed, his hands above his head, gripping the carved wooden post that led to the canopy. They'd pulled the draped fabric to the side to keep it out of his way.

He rolled his shoulders, trying to get them to settle into place, which was difficult as anxiousness made him want to tense up.

"Relax," Catherine murmured, running her hand over his back. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I am not afraid." Mostly. Fear was not the word he would use, though he could not deny he felt a bout of nerves at the thought of her using him as a kind of whipping boy. He had not been whipped since his school days and had no pleasant memories of that. "I am having trouble reconciling the fact I asked you to hurt me rather than pleasure me. "

Which was part of the truth. At least a portion of his discomfort came from knowing he'd requested this flogging.

Yes, he'd watched her flog Kent—a duke—so it could not be that bad... Anything he can do, I can do. Surely, it was not a difference of rank that might make such an act

palatable.

Catherine laughed softly at his confession but not in a manner that made him feel mocked. It was a warm laugh, a comforting one that said she understood his concerns and was not worried.

“I hurt you yesterday, and you liked it.” She ran her hand down his back, over his muscles, to his arse and gave it a sharp, stinging smack that made him jerk—more in surprise than in pain. Almost as soon as she’d smacked him, her hand returned, rubbing the spot she’d injured and sending a wave of heat through him. His cock jerked.

Samuel opened his mouth to retort, then closed it.

The truth was, the swat she had just given him had not hurt all that much, and his cock had clearly responded, though he was unsure if it was due to the swat or the way she soothed the spot. The lingering sting did not feel bad. And she had hurt him yesterday. With her nails. With the way she’d tugged on his sack. When she’d made him hold back his release.

One way or another, those things had all hurt... yet he’d also enjoyed them.

So, maybe the flogging would be the same. Painful in some regards and enjoyable in others. Yesterday, some of that pain had even enhanced his pleasure, almost as though giving his body a comparison point had made the pleasure even greater.

“I think I see,” he said after a moment, making her laugh again .

“In a moment, you will feel . If you want me to stop at any time, say stop. Eventually, I may give you a word like ‘marmalade’ or have you choose a word to use when you want me to stop, but for this time, ‘stop’ or ‘no’ will be sufficient.”

“Marmalade?” Samuel’s voice rose in confusion. His head turned, though in his current position, he could not twist far enough around to actually look at her. Was she bamming him? But she sounded perfectly serious...

“A word you would not normally say in this setting, yes? So, if you said it, I would know you were asking me to stop.”

“Why would I not say ‘stop’ to ask you to stop?” It made no sense. Why choose another word?

Again, Catherine laughed softly, but for some reason, this time, it made the small hairs stand up on the back of his neck. Some instinct heard that laugh and said... danger.

Her hand ran over his back again, down over his ass, then she reached between his legs and gripped his sack. Samuel sucked in a breath. She was not holding him gently.

“Because sometimes, you might say ‘stop’ or ‘no’ but not truly mean it. Sometimes, I will want to push your limits, and you might not be able to stop yourself from begging. You might even enjoy begging me to stop.” Her grip tightened, and she tugged, making him groan and go up on his toes as the ache spread through his lower back. His movement only increased the erotic agony, though it was instinct to try to pull away because she did not let go.

Bloody hell.

This time, when she tugged, his feet fell back down to remain flat on the floor. His jaw was locked against any words escaping him, but he now understood what she meant. The word “stop” wanted to explode from his mouth because it did hurt... but at the same time, deep down, he did not truly want her to stop. It was not hurting so



much that he could not take it, yet the idea of telling her to stop and having her keep going appealed on a level he found slightly disturbing.

On the other hand, he was not sure he could say marmalade with a straight face while she had his balls in her hand, so they were going to have to choose another word.

Her hand pulled, gripping and rolling his balls between her fingers.

“Catherine...” His voice had a desperate edge to it as he said her name. Stop. Please do not stop. He was not sure which he wanted more.

Laughing softly, she released him, and his body relaxed, shoulders slumping in a way he had not been able to make himself do before.

“If you want me to stop, say stop,” she said again, patting his shoulder before he heard her step back away from him.

His muscles were just starting to tense again when the flogger landed against his upper back.

That... did not hurt at all. Not really.

It felt like a lot of tiny blows coming down on his skin, tapping against it, enough to sting but not enough to register as true pain. The flogger came down again, the thin lengths of leathering pattering against his skin, and he rolled his shoulders as the sensations ran through him.

He liked it.

A lot.

Dropping his head down, Samuel groaned, giving himself over to the flogging. It was almost hypnotic, both the sound and the sensations, like the patter of steady rainfall but without the cold and the wet. Yet, as relaxing as it was, one particular part of him stood, very much not relaxed .

His cock stood at attention, eager and aching as the leather fell over his shoulders and then moved to his buttocks. Rocking up on his toes, he thrust into the air, groaning again as his arousal pummeled him harder than the flogger.

Fuck.

Now, he wanted to go punch Kent in the face.

No wonder the man had let her do this to him.

But unlike Kent, when this is over, she's mine.

Catherine

Putting Samuel on his back again after she'd just flogged the backs of his shoulders and his buttocks was not exactly cruel, but it was not kind, either. She could tell he had not realized how sensitive those areas would be when he plopped onto the bed. His arse hit first, and she could see the shock on his face, his mouth opening and eyes widening, but it was too late.

His upper body was already falling back.

"Bloody hell!" he cursed, gasping as his stomach muscles flexed, automatically trying to sit back up again.

Laughing, Catherine straddled his lap, using her hands to push him back down again.

He glared up at her.

“A little sensitive?” she asked, her tone light but not mocking.

His glare deepened, anyway.

“You know I am.” His hands grasped her hips, holding her above his cock. His feet were still on the ground, the tops of hers hanging off the edge of the bed and pointing toward the floor. Minute shifts in his body as she watched him indicated he was trying to get comfortable—and struggling with it.

The pressure of his body weight on his sensitive skin as it rubbed against the bedding beneath him would be uncomfortable... but she also intended for it to add to the sensations he'd be experiencing.

“I will make you forget it soon enough,” she promised, smiling as she lifted her knee. One eyebrow raised, he watched her as she turned on his body, so she was facing away from him, hand around his cock, and pointing it up to her pussy. This time, she was going to ride him while facing away from him, giving her access to his sack.

Though she did not reach for it yet. His hands moved over her hips, fingers curving around them as she positioned his cock at her entrance.

He groaned as she sank down onto him, matching her sigh of pleasure. The thick shaft stretched her open deliciously, her muscles clenching as she lowered herself, her body shuddering with delight as he filled her. Bracing her hands on his thighs, she moved herself up and down, rolling her hips as she rode him, letting them both bask in the enjoyment of his initial insertion.

Up and down, up and down, then she reached between his legs and gripped his sack. Samuel jerked beneath her, his hips thrusting upward as he let out a gasp.

“Bloody hell!”

She did enjoy making him sound like that.

Tugging on the tender flesh in her hand, she rose up again, then gave him some relief as she sank down.

She could feel him shifting beneath her but did not realize his intention until his front was hot against her back, his breath on her neck, his hands sliding up to cup her breasts. Catherine moaned, leaning forward into his hands as they closed around her breasts, squeezing the tight buds of her nipples between them. He kneaded the soft flesh, making her whimper as she rocked on his cock, the power exchange between them flowing back and forth.

She was on top, she was in charge, yet she was also very aware that with his hands free, he could easily turn them both over and take control. But he did not. Despite the ability, he chose not to... and that choice to submit to her was a power headier than any she'd ever experienced before.

“Oh, yes.” She leaned back against him, moaning again as his mouth clamped down around the base of her throat, his hands fondling her, massaging her breasts, pinching her nipples, and adding to the tumult of sensation flowing through her. The new position had her tugging on his balls even more, pulling them upward. He groaned, shuddering beneath her, his hands gripping her tighter in retribution. “Yes, Samuel.”

He thrust upward, hard, bouncing both of them on the bed as she arched against him, crying out as she moved.

“Catherine... my lady...” He could not finish the sentence, but it did not matter. She understood what he was asking, what he was requesting, as the ecstasy spiraled up to engulf them both.

Her pussy clamped down around him.

“Yes, Samuel, now!”

She cried out as well, grinding herself down atop him, releasing his sack so she could rub her fingers against the swollen nub of her clitoris. Pure rapture shot through her, from the little bud to her tightly pinched nipples as they throbbed in his grip in time with the pulsing spurts from his cock .

It was pure, hedonistic pleasure—both of them shuddering and gasping together, their bodies wrapped around each other. She fell back against him, still rubbing, as he finished emptying himself into her.

### Samuel

Their stolen time together was everything Samuel could have hoped for, but the next morning, the road had been cleared, and they got back on their way to Clarence. Once again, he'd chosen to spend the morning riding Herod rather than in the carriage to help wear the horse down. Herod had been mad with joy and extra mischievous after being cooped up in the stables during the snowfall. He enjoyed playing in the snow.

He bounced around with Samuel on his back, gritting his teeth, much to Catherine and Anna's delight as they clapped their hands in appreciation from the carriage.

After they stopped for a midday meal, Samuel rejoined them in the carriage—which was much warmer. Anna was mending clothes, keeping her focus on her hands, so he and Catherine could talk. The conversation meandered, from the books they'd read recently to the current art exhibits in London to politics.

When she was younger, Catherine had been interested in all those things but loath to speak on them. Her parents had deemed them improper topics of conversation for a young lady. Apparently, either her husband had not minded, or she had pursued her interests after his death, and now she was as strongly opinionated as she had been meekly curious as a debutante.

Samuel rather enjoyed the debates and was pleased when she listened to his points based on his experiences abroad and his business acumen and was rather startled to find himself changing his mind on several points based on her experiences in London.

It was clear she spent a lot of time talking about her favorite ‘improper topics’ when she was socializing.

She also took a great interest in what he was doing with his business, insisting he explain it to her, and some of the questions she asked opened several intriguing lines of thought that he fully intended to pursue. If they were to marry, she would be an equal partner in his ventures.

And marriage was very much on his mind.

His greatest concern—whether or not he would be able to handle her desires—had been soothed by their extra day together. He was sore but far more satiated than he’d ever felt before. Taking her lead was no hardship; in fact, it was a joy. And his greatest pleasure was her pleasure, something he could feel assured of giving her—she would not accept anything less.

Being with her was oddly restful. He did not have to think about what she might like or what she wanted from him because she stated it from the beginning. Being helpless to her whims was exciting. Giving up the reins of control was freeing.

When they finally pulled up to the Clarence estate late afternoon as the sun was beginning to fall in the west, he was disappointed their conversation had to come to an end, even though they’d been talking for hours. It was not enough. He was not sure he would ever have enough of her time and attention.

Truly, marriage was the only solution.

Hopefully, this time, she would agree.

But he could hardly ask her now.

She and Anna leaned to peer out the window, though it was hard to see the landscape when it was covered in snow. There were quite a few trees and bushes and some statuary, but the details were lost under the blanket of white. In order to see the house, they would have had to stick their heads out the window, which neither of them did, waiting until the carriage was pulling around in front of it to get the first glimpse.

The windows at the front were lit up with candles, like a beacon against the growing dark, though daylight was not so far gone yet. Samuel wondered if Clarence had wanted to ensure they'd be able to find their way in case the weather turned again. It would be very like him. As feckless as he liked to pretend to be, he was also always thinking ahead.

"How beautiful," Catherine murmured as the driver opened the door. Samuel went down first before turning and helping Catherine down. His driver gave him a look, and grinning, he turned away to let the man take care of assisting the maid. Samuel would have been happy to do so himself, but who was he to stand in the way of a flirtation—or even love?

Catherine tilted her head back, taking in the house. It was a grand old estate, well maintained, though clearly the kind of house that had housed generations of a family. Gregory had mentioned that his father was a stickler for ensuring the house and grounds were always spruced up—he'd been far more interested in that than in his own son. The grey stone looked a bit darker than he remembered against the white of the snow, the three stories rising above them with three rows of paned windows lit by candles to brighten its appearance.

The large black doors of the front entrance swung open, and Gregory came striding out, looking almost exactly as Samuel remembered, beaming with his arms wide open.



“Samuel!”

“Gregory!” Letting go of Catherine’s hand, Samuel went to meet him, and they embraced each other with a slap on the back before Samuel stepped back.

“I hear you brought a lovely lady to visit me as well,” Gregory said, turning his attention to Catherine with his most charming smile.

Samuel felt a small twinge. Gregory was a very handsome man. When they’d been at school together, everyone knew that there was no point in trying to charm a lady Gregory had expressed interest in. She would always choose the ducal heir, with his poetically dark waving hair, his intensely penetrating black eyes, a face like an angel, and a body fit to pose for the Statue of David. The fact that he was also the heir to a dukedom, and incredibly charming and good-natured only increased his appeal.

In the time since Samuel had last seen him, Gregory had only grown more rakish, his hair now down to his shoulders and a brooding intensity hovering behind his charming smile, as if begging a lady to discover what hurts he was hiding beneath it. That he was now a duke, and not the heir, only made his appeal more potent. The unrelenting black of mourning made him appear dangerous rather than withdrawn or pallid.

Samuel had not meant their meeting to be a test. After all, Catherine had been a debutante, beholden to her parents, when she’d refused him in favor of a lord... but he felt a sudden sick twist to his stomach as he realized history could easily repeat itself.

“Gregory, this is the Dowager Countess of Cross,” Samuel said, hiding his sudden uncertainty behind the social mores of a polite introduction. He did use Catherine’s name, as a kind of reminder of their intimacy. Though he knew Gregory would not intentionally poach, the man seemed physically incapable of turning off his charm or

even putting a damper on it. “Catherine, this is the Duke of Clarence.”

“My lady. Welcome to my humble abode.” Gregory bowed quite properly over the gloved hand she offered him as she curtsied to the exact degree owed to him as a duke.

“Your Grace,” she replied from the dip of her curtsy before straightening again.

“Very humble, just like its owner,” Samuel said dryly, relieved when Catherine dropped her hand back to her side and smiled at Gregory with her polite, social smile. It was not at all flirtatious, nor did she look at him with anything like the special light in her eyes that so far had been reserved for Samuel himself.

Some of the tight bands around his chest loosened in relief.

“We all have our virtues.” Gregory grinned. “Damn, but it’s good to see you. Let’s get you inside and settled, then we can talk over supper. All of your things are already in your rooms.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Catherine said as Gregory led her inside. His staff swarmed around the carriage, easily unloading. “I apologize for the short notice on my attendance, especially during your period of mourning. ”

“Oh, very happy to have you,” Gregory said cheerfully. “My mother is currently taking her afternoon rest, but she will be delighted to meet you when she emerges from her rooms.” His smile turned a little more brittle. “She is desperate for more feminine company in the house, as she keeps reminding me.”

“Oh, dear,” Catherine murmured, glancing over her shoulder at Samuel with some trepidation. He was happy to see it. “She will not think...”

“You should be safe, and since you are Samuel’s, I will not be offended that you do not intend to prostrate yourself at my feet,” Gregory replied with a laugh, patting her hand on his arm as they moved up the stairs.

Samuel chuckled, the last of his nerves falling away. Though Gregory and Catherine were clearly immediately taken with each other, it was not in a romantic sense at all. He appreciated being able to witness Catherine’s alarm at the very idea of the dowager duchess attempting to matchmake between them.

“My mother has very firm ideas about what constitutes a proper wife for a duke, and a widow does not meet her criteria. However, I appreciate that you will help distract her from her current focus.”

Though Samuel could not see Gregory’s expression, he could practically hear his friend rolling his eyes.

“You are going to need to marry eventually, you know,” Samuel pointed out with some amusement, which grew even greater at Gregory’s exaggerated shudder.

“As I keep telling my mother, there is plenty of time. I’m still young.” The defensiveness in Gregory’s tone had Samuel backing off, though he did wonder if Gregory had considered the notion that he might be in danger from whoever was behind his father’s death. Something else he would bring up this visit, though it would hopefully not put a damper on the holiday spirit.

Catherine

Her room was directly beside Samuel’s.

Despite his rakish nature, the Duke of Clarence was doing his best to ensure that Samuel had easy access to her. Which was just as well. She was very glad not to have

to fend off any advances when her heart was already secure in Samuel's palm. Not that she had admitted as much to him.

She'd scarcely been able to admit it to herself. The young man he'd been had grown and changed, though he was still the same person at his core. His life experiences had seasoned him, maturing him and turning him into the kind of man she would want by her side. The kind of man who could make her break her vow never to marry again.

Because he was the kind of man who would be worth it. He even knew about her inability to provide the late Lord Cross with an heir and was unbothered by the notion. Perhaps it was because he was not part of the ton, but she thought it more than that. He valued her more than he valued any progeny she could give him. Which was a heady feeling.

At least, she thought he did. That or he was unbothered because he did not see a future for them. But considering how he'd reacted to his introduction to her preferred perversions, she hoped he was of the same mind as her. She did not want this trip to be the end of them.

"There," Anna said smiling as she finished pushing in the last pin to Catherine's coiffure.

Since Clarence's mother, the duchess, would be partaking in the evening meal with them, she wanted to ensure she looked her best. Though she doubted that Gregory would be able to avoid his mother's intentions for him forever, she would at least attempt to assist him.

Besides, it was very likely his mother would have knowledge of his father that he did not. She might know of someone who had wished the late duke ill, perhaps even kept the knowledge from her son. Or she might not. Catherine was going to do her best to find out.

She caught Anna's eye in the mirror.

"While you are getting to know the duke's staff, see if you can get their impressions of their new master," she instructed. Anna immediately lit up, her eyes gleaming with interest. "If he's the kind of man who might have wanted to speed up his inheritance."

"Coo, do you think so?" Anna asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

"I do not," Catherine admitted. "Samuel does not think so, and I do trust his judgment. Having met the man himself, he comes off as charming but blunt, not particularly apt at pretense... but one never knows."

Mouth firming, Anna nodded.

"I will let you know anything I hear."

"Thank you."

The knock at the door ended the opportunity for any further conversation, but Catherine knew Anna would have plenty to report the next morning. Her maid was very good at listening, and her trustworthy face often had others divulging information they might not have otherwise. It did not hurt that Anna was happy to trade information as well, and Catherine had been very clear on what information she did not mind Anna trading .

Giving tit for tat was often the best way to learn something one might not otherwise.

Opening the door, Anna stepped back to reveal Samuel standing there in his evening wear. His black jacket and trousers were set off by the emerald green waistcoat beneath them, his freshly starched collar points accentuating his strong jawline, and

the complicated knot on his cravat begged to be untied. Perhaps not everyone would agree with her on that last point, but her fingers itched to strip him of all that finery so she could touch the hard body beneath.

Sadly, duty called.

His gaze ate her up the same way she had him, and she smiled as she brushed her hands over her jonquil skirt. Taking a deep breath, she moved to him, placing her hand on his offered one.

“My lady.” He lifted her hand to his lips, brushing them against the back of her glove. She could feel the burn of it through the fabric. “You look stunning, as always.”

“Thank you. And you look impeccably handsome, as always.” This close to him, she could see the way his gaze lingered over the swells of her breasts, his eyes darkening with interest. Likely having the same thoughts about stripping her as she was about him.

It was a very good thing his room was right next to hers.

Winding her hand about his arm, he turned to escort her down the hall.

Their personal lives were going to have to wait. Right now, they had a duchess to meet, a supper to get through, and a mission to accomplish.

### Catherine

The Duchess of Clarence was nothing like Catherine expected. From the way the duke had spoken, she'd thought his mother would be a formidable woman, determined to see her only son marry well—as long as he married a virginal young debutante who understood her duty to the title—and become the dowager duchess. Instead, she was greeted with what most of the ton would call an eccentric.

Dressed in bright red and yellow, with yellow feathers bobbing above her head as if she was attending a ball rather than a family dinner, the duchess was about a foot shorter than her son, plump and beaming with goodwill. With all the ruffles descending down her dress, she looked like a very bright cupcake, all of them swaying as she flitted about like a dramatic sparrow. From the moment she met Catherine and Samuel, she chattered—which only bolstered Catherine's opinion of her as being bird-like.

She complimented Catherine's dress, scolded Samuel for the length of time since his last visit, and chided her son about moving too slowly to seat himself at the table, all in the same breath. Gregory appeared resigned by his mother's antics, while Samuel was delighted. Catherine landed on amused.

If she had not seen Samuel's expression, she would have chided him for not warning her about the duchess' eccentricities, but it was clear he had somehow forgotten. Or perhaps time had dulled his memories of how eccentric she was... or perhaps she had grown more so over time, or he had not seen her as outlandish when he was younger.

All explanations were highly possible.

“You must call me Marguerite, and I will call you Catherine, and we shall be friends. You shall also call Gregory by his name. Since we are all to be together for the holiday, we should not stand on formality.”

It was hardly in Catherine’s power to refuse a duchess’ declaration of friendship—not that she was given the chance to accept or reject before the duchess had already turned her attention to her son.

“She is very pretty, is she not? If only she were a little younger. And not a widow. Though, she is a very young widow.”

“Mother.” Gregory appeared pained as he looked at Catherine from his place at the head of the table. He was as handsome as Samuel, perhaps even more so, yet looking at him did nothing to make her heart jump the way it did for Samuel. “I apologize for my mother. Her need to see me married has apparently obliterated her good manners.”

“Oh, posh.” The duchess waved her hand at him. “She seems like a very sensible young lady, and she is a widow. She understands the way of the world.”

“It is a miracle you managed to garner all that about her when you have barely let her get a word in,” Gregory retorted .

Rather than appearing chastened, his mother just laughed and winked at Catherine.

“I am a very good judge of character.”

“You are a terrible judge of character,” Gregory muttered. Then cleared his throat when Samuel glared at him. “Though, in this case, you are correct about Catherine.



But... anyway.” He looked between Samuel and Catherine rather desperately. “Please, tell us about your journey.”

Hiding her laughter, Catherine joined Samuel in recounting their travel and the inn at which they stopped. It turned out both the Duke and Duchess of Clarence were familiar with both Klaus and his inn, and the duchess was delighted to hear he was doing well.

The conversation wound about as they ate their way through several courses, sliding naturally from their travel to the current gossip of London. The duchess was clearly eager to hear all about the goings-on of the city but balked at the idea of going to London herself—something which tightened Gregory’s expression. He quickly changed the subject by asking about the current play at the Globe. His mother immediately perked up again, full of interest.

Whether the duke was annoyed by his mother’s lack of interest in leaving the estate and thereby giving him a reprieve from her matchmaking aspirations or if there was something else amiss was rather unclear. Catherine got the impression there was more to his reaction, though she could not guess what.

After dinner, the duchess stood and beamed at the two gentlemen. “Catherine and I shall retire to the drawing room. Come join us when you have finished your brandy.”

Although Catherine would have liked a nip of brandy as well, one did not argue with a duchess. Especially because she did want some time with the woman away from her son, to see if she might talk about the late duke and what suspicions she had of his demise.

They retired to the drawing room, where—rather than calling for tea—the duchess immediately went to a sideboard.

“What would you like, dear? I have sherry, brandy, cognac, ratafia, orgeat... we could open the bottle of champagne, though I will need to call for Paulson to open it for us.” The duchess looked over her shoulder at Catherine. “I believe I’ll be having a sherry, myself.”

Catherine laughed, partly at herself for thinking the duchess would do anything by the book other than push her son toward a proper marriage. Everything else about her was decidedly improper. The gleam in her eye put Catherine in mind of a naughty child getting away with something they knew they should not be doing.

“Sherry sounds perfect, thank you.” Even more so because she had noticed during dinner that the duchess’ tongue loosened with every drink she had. A sherry or two might help lubricate the flow of information Catherine was looking for.

“Sit, sit,” the duchess commanded as she picked up two glasses, bringing both of them and the bottle to the couch. “Now. Tell me about your intentions with Samuel.”

Blinking in surprise, Catherine coughed delicately into her hand to give herself a moment. She was beginning to understand where the duke got his bluntness from, though he kept his bald way of speaking far more socially appropriate than his mother did. Then again, allowances were often made for older women, especially those among the haut ton.

“We are still deciding,” she replied after a moment.

“He is a good boy. Very solid. And I do not think he means to be traveling overmuch now that he has returned to England, if that is your worry.” The duchess handed Catherine a glass of sherry, then began pouring her own. “Even while he was away, he remembered to write me every month. He is a good boy.”

He was, though Catherine meant it in a very different way than the duchess did. She

clearly still saw him as the young student he'd been when she'd been introduced to him. Catherine thought it rather telling that he'd been so dedicated to writing to the duchess while he was away.

"I do not think he means to travel much, either, but I would have no qualms about joining him if he did mean to travel." Catherine sipped her sherry rather wistfully. "I have always wanted to see more of the world."

"As have I." The duchess sighed. The comment was probably innocuous, but coming on the heels of a dinner when she had shown no interest in going to London rather surprised Catherine. Her hesitation must not come from an aversion to travel if she had always wanted to see more of the world.

Perhaps it was an aversion to London itself? Despite the interest she'd shown in hearing about the goings-on of the city?

"Will you travel once your period of mourning is over?" Catherine asked, trying to hedge around the question rather than approach it directly. She did not feel she knew the duchess well enough to speak so plainly, even if the duchess felt comfortable enough to do so. There was the matter of rank, after all.

"Oh. Oh no, I do not think so." The duchess took another drink from her glass, her free hand picking at the lace decoration on her ruffled skirt. "I stay on the estate."

The way she said it made Catherine frown. It sounded as if a myriad of meanings were hidden in those simple words. There was such a finality to it, as if the estate was the only place she could be... which was completely crossways with the yearning for travel she'd just expressed.

"You cannot leave the estate?"

“I...” The duchess’ gaze darted around, her shoulders rounding slightly in a hunch, and the animation drained from her face. “My husband prefers me to stay on the estate.”

Catherine took a small sip of her sherry to cover her surprise. The duchess spoke of her late husband as if he was still alive, and from what she could see now, she had a feeling the duchess had feared him when he was so. She feared him so much that the fear lingered, even now.

It also suddenly, forcibly, occurred to Catherine that neither the duchess nor the new duke appeared to be in mourning. There were no draperies around the house to indicate mourning. The bright colors the duchess was wearing were that of celebration, not grief. And not once had the late duke come up in conversation throughout the whole of supper. None of the staff were wearing armbands.

Perhaps because she had not known the duke or because she was so distracted by Samuel and her own affairs, she had literally not noticed the absence of the trappings of mourning. As his widow, the duchess should certainly still be dressed for mourning.

Yet, it seemed entirely natural that she was not.

She wondered if the duchess might have reason to want her late husband dead. Perhaps the son had nothing to do with it at all but a different member of the family. However, the way she spoke of him might indicate otherwise. Why would she fear someone she’d killed or had killed?

“Did your husband stay on the estate with you?” she asked, as it was the most innocuous question she could think of.

“Oh no, he preferred London.” The duchess brightened again. If she had been fearful

of him, that would explain why she had no interest in visiting the city. “We spent most of our time apart. Do not worry. I am sure Samuel will not be parted from you in such a manner. You two are a love match. I can tell.”

And the duchess still believed in love. That belief shone from her honest and open face, along with a kind of yearning. However her late husband had treated her, he had not been able to stamp out her dreams completely.

Samuel

“So, you and Catherine. Again.” Gregory raised his eyebrows suggestively as he swirled the brandy around its glass, leaning back in his chair as if he had not a care in the world.

Samuel knew better.

Unlike Catherine, he had quickly cottoned on to the lack of mourning around the household. Marguerite’s dress had been an immediate indicator that no one missed the old duke. Did Samuel think that meant Gregory had engaged in patricide? Absolutely not. But it could not be denied that there was something going on.

Still, he would not immediately force his friend to delve into such heavy matters.

“Again,” he agreed easily. “Though very different this time.”

“Indeed. What are your intentions with her?” There was nothing but pure curiosity in Gregory’s voice, wondering what Samuel would do. Possibly because he was looking at his own prospects for the parson’s trap.

“To marry her. As soon as possible.” Samuel grimaced. “Perhaps see if this time I am more successful at convincing her to run off to Gretna Green with me.”

That made Gregory chuckle, though his amusement only lasted so long.

“Are you so sure of her answer?”

“No, but I must try.” Samuel sighed. “I promise not to run off again if she tells me nay. If all she wants from me is a lover, then I will be that. If she wants nothing to do with me, then I will still remain in England.”

“That is good to hear.” Gregory lifted his glass in appreciation for the sentiment. “I have missed you.”

“And I you.” Samuel hesitated and lowered his voice. Unlike some members of the ton, he did not forget that there were footmen within earshot of his normal speaking voice. “I gather your father is not so missed.”

Gregory snorted.

“Who would miss him?” he asked dryly. He met Samuel’s gaze for a brief moment, then his own skittered away. “I did not wish to speak of it in my letters, but his temperament grew worse and worse while you were away.”

That was saying something because when Samuel had met the man, he would not have described him as having a good temperament. He’d been demanding, cold, and disgusted with a wife who had only been able to bear him a single heir rather than the brood of children he’d felt like he deserved. He’d been self-involved and far too obsessed with appearances. The complete opposite of Gregory’s mother, which was likely why he kept her tucked away in the country while he gallivanted all about town. Gregory’s charm brought him women; his father had used his wealth and position since he’d had no charm.

Gregory rubbed one hand along his leg, shaking his head as his leg bounced, as

though he was attempting to soothe its motion but could not manage it.

“I have four half-siblings now.” Gregory’s smile held no amusement as Samuel’s mouth dropped open in shock. “All young enough to be my own children. All from different mothers. My father got the brood he wanted, not that he was doing anything to take care of them. All girls, you see.”

“I presume you are taking care of them now?” Samuel asked, though the hairs on the back of his neck tingled. Abandoning his children could be a motive for murder, though why the other dukes were killed... it would take someone particularly cold-blooded to kill so many bystanders for one man.

“All their mothers are now receiving a stipend from the estate,” Gregory nodded. “My mother sent a massive parcel of clothing to each of them as well as soon as she found out.”

Of course, she had. The duchess was as warm and generous as the old duke had been cold and stingy.

“I tell you,” Gregory continued, musing into his brandy. “If it were not for the other dukes, I would have been looking into my half-siblings’ families for my father’s murderer.”

Samuel stilled immediately.

“You believe your father was murdered?”

“I do. He received several threatening letters before his demise.” Gregory canted his gaze in Samuel’s direction again. “I have not yet been able to track down who they are from or even why he was being threatened. They said, ‘he had better take care of things or else.’ ”

“A mystery,” Samuel murmured. Certainly something he could report back to Oliver.  
“Interesting.”

“Very.” Gregory sighed. “As yet, I have not received any communication from whoever sent the letters, so either the sender gave up after his death, or they were the cause of it.”

Samuel hesitated for a moment, then went ahead and asked. Samuel would not have told him this information if he did not want Samuel’s opinion.

“Can I see the letters?”



Catherine

“Threatening letters,” Catherine mused as Samuel pressed his lips against her throat, his hands tugging at the laces of her stays. Her skin hummed with anticipation even as her mind turned over the mystery. The duchess had not had very much information—from what Catherine could tell, the duchess had avoided her husband at all costs.

On the other hand, despite all her chattering, she was good at keeping secrets when she wanted to. She had not mentioned her late husband’s other children once. Though, of course, she and Catherine did not have the long history together Samuel and Gregory did. Perhaps it was not so much secret-keeping as not knowing her well enough, which was understandable.

“Vague threatening letters, with no indication as to what the sender wanted him to do.” Samuel scraped his teeth against her skin as her stays sagged. His hands moved up to cup her bare breasts, warming them against his palms as the cool air of the room wafted against her skin. Her nipples, already puckered, hardened further, pulsing against his fingertips as he squeezed them. “Though, I feel like this conversation means I do not have your full attention.”

Moaning, Catherine leaned back against him, letting him hold up her weight as he played with her breasts. She could feel the hard bulge of his cock pressing against her backside. Shifting slightly, she pushed her skirts off her hips, leaving her standing completely naked and rubbing her backside against him.

She let him play with her breasts, kissing the back of her neck for another few moments before turning in his arms and kissing him back. Moving them back to his bed, she pushed him onto it and straddled his legs. Their joining was rough and fierce, needy in its urgency. His fingers dug into the cheeks of her bottom as she moved atop him, rubbing herself against him in the quest for mutual ecstasy.

She made him beg for his release before she gave it to him, crying out as he surged beneath her, her body clamping around him as she milked wave after wave of pleasure from him. Eventually, she slumped over him, panting, her cheek against his chest to listen to his heartbeat. He sighed, running his fingers over her cheek.

“I am not sure I will survive having your full attention,” he murmured, and she felt his chest lift, vibrating as he chuckled. She laughed softly.

“There is still much more I can show you, too,” she replied, lifting her head to lay a kiss on his lips. “But not here.”

“Mmm.” His hands moved over her back, down to curve around her buttocks again. “Then when we return to London?”

She smiled at him.

“When we return to London.” It was more than a declaration; it was a promise. The kind she had never been able to give in the past because she had never known whether she would be able to keep it. Now, she could make her own decisions, make her plans for herself.

It was not an offer and acceptance of marriage, but it was far more than they’d had before.

Even that could not keep her mind quiet, however.

“Do you think we are in any danger here?” she asked. “I know Gregory told you he has not received any letters, but that does not mean the danger is gone. Someone wanted his father to do something. They could come here to try to do it themselves.”

Samuel’s expression turned more serious, though his hands continued to explore her backside.

“I do not think we are. The last letter was marked a fortnight before the hunting lodge. I cannot help but wonder if they got what they wanted.”

“I hope so.” Catherine shook her head. “Which sounds horrible of me because it was a huge tragedy, but I do not want Gregory or his mother to be in any danger. Or his half-sisters. Or anyone here. Everyone has been wonderful. Anna said the other servants welcomed her and your groom without hesitation and treated them like honored guests.”

“The late duke is unlamented, and having met him, I understand why. It might have been a tragedy for the other families, but for this one, it might have been a boon. Especially if you did manage to convince her grace to visit you in London.” He smiled crookedly. “She has not been back since the Season when the old duke chose her, but she always wants to hear about it. Gregory will be glad she is stepping foot off the estate.”

“I do not think Gregory will thank me since her biggest reason for leaving the estate is to find him a wife,” Catherine murmured with a laugh. She could only imagine the kind of debutante the duchess would choose for her son. It promised to make for a very entertaining Season.

“Well, that part he might not thank you for, but the rest of it...” Samuel chuckled. “He cares more about his mother’s wellbeing than her motivations. She might drive him batty, but as long as she is happy, he will be, too.”

Which spoke very well of him, despite his rakish ways. Hopefully, he did not make his poor future wife too miserable. She had a feeling it would depend on who triumphed in the choice for his wife—him or his mother. He would likely choose for logical, rational, calculating reasons... but his mother would want him to choose for love.

Catherine had already had a marriage of the first. She was now hoping for a marriage based on the second.

“I feel as though I have lost your attention again,” Samuel murmured, not realizing that her thoughts had already shifted to be full of him rather than Gregory. However, with the way he was moving his hands over her, she was not going to protest. His lips brushed against the underside of her chin. “Do you think we could try our exertions with me on top this time, my lady?”

Catherine smiled.

“Oh, yes.” She rolled off him and onto her back, head against the pillow. Before he could roll atop her, she held one hand up at where his chest was, keeping him on his side, and pointed behind him. “Go get the crop first.”

The crop she’d left conveniently propped against the wall. Anna had fetched it for her, knowing better than to ask any questions. Samuel’s eyebrows went up, a look of consternation crossing his expression, but he pushed himself up from the bed and went to fetch her the crop.

Once he was between her thighs, she used it to spur him onward, peppering the backs of his thighs and his buttocks with the leather end as he rode her, giving him pain and pleasure in equal measure.

When she woke the next morning, she found that he’d tucked the crop under their

pillows.

Samuel

There truly was no sign of a house in mourning for the holiday season, and Samuel understood why Gregory had wanted to invite him and no others. The lack of other houseguests was not out of respect for their state of mourning but because Samuel would not judge the disrespect of its lack.

The duchess flitted about, Catherine at her side, both of them laughing and enjoying decorating the house like a couple of schoolchildren. Rather than being weighed down or aged by grief, the duchess appeared younger, lighter than Samuel had ever seen her. The house was one of joy, of light, and of yuletide decorations and delicious smells as the traditional foods were prepared.

Branches were gathered to deck the windows, the yule log was lit, the pudding was served, and presents were exchanged. He was unsurprised to find that Catherine had managed to bring small tokens with her for both Gregory and the duchess or that they both had procured items to give to her as well, despite the short notice for all involved.

He had a small pile of presents, sent to his home during his travels, to bestow upon them. For Catherine, of course, he had no such bounty, as he had not known whether or not he'd see her again... but he did have a scarf he'd found in Turkey in a stunning deep red that he had been unable to resist buying. Even at the time, while she'd been married, he 'd had her in his mind when he'd purchased it. As though it had been made for her.

Though, at the time, he'd never imagined he would be able to actually give it to her.

As merriment bounded through the household, Samuel pulled her aside into one of

the many doorways where mistletoe had been hung. Smiling, she looked up at it, tilting her head back as she waited for her kiss.

Instead, Samuel pulled her against him, his arm around her waist, and when she reached up to touch his cheek with her fingers, he covered that hand with his own.

“Catherine...” Her name came out roughly, his voice husky with emotion. It was too soon, he knew it, yet at the same time, it felt like it was not nearly soon enough. He had to know what she wanted from him, at the least, before his heart became any more involved. “I still love you.”

Sudden tears glimmered in her dark eyes as her thumb gently touched the side of his lips.

“I still love you,” she whispered back. “I think I have always loved you. I... I am sorry...”

“I know. I am as well.” He took a deep breath. “I was angry at you for a long time, and you did not deserve that anger. I was not in your position. The more I have thought about things, the more I wish I had been more understanding. I could not have changed the circumstances, but I could have changed my reactions to them.”

“You do not need to apologize. I was not strong enough back then. I led you on?—”

“Did you love me the way you say?” he asked, raising his eyebrows at her because he already knew the answer. He’d known it then, too. But in his youth, he had not understood that love was not necessarily enough. There had been too many obstacles, too many expectations laid upon her by people she cared about.

“I did. Which is why I should have?—”

“Stop.” He shook his head. “You loved me; therefore, you did not lead me on. I know if the choice had been your own, you would have chosen me. I came to understand that, even though I hated it. But I never hated you. I always loved you. I still want to marry you.”

Her breath hitched, and he continued before she could make any response.

“You do not have to answer me now, but I wanted you to know. So if that is not even a possibility for you, that you can tell me. And?—”

“Yes.”

Samuel blinked at the interruption, caught off guard and having to rethread his line of thought. She’d said yes. Did that mean...

“I... you want to marry me?” His voice went higher, stunned into disbelief. He’d wanted nothing more than to share his intentions, not to actually propose—though if she was saying yes, he was not going to walk the words back.

Her smile widened, eyes sparkling, as she lifted her hands to either side of his face.

“Yes.” She curled her fingers around his jaw. “Now, kiss me.”

Laughing, he lowered his lips obligingly to hers and kissed her. Deeply. Thoroughly. Every part of him internally cheering. No, he had not meant it to be a proposal, yet, somehow, it was the perfect one, the perfect moment. He was so caught up in his personal happiness, in their passionate kiss, he did not hear the cheering until he was pulling away from her.

Gregory and his mother stood watching them from in front of the fireplace, applauding and adding their vocal encouragement for the kiss.

“We are to be married,” Samuel called out to them, unable to hold back the news. Catherine laughed as the duchess squealed in delight and rushed to them to give them both an embrace of congratulations. Gregory followed, though a little slower than his mother, not from lack of enthusiasm but from a greater sense of propriety.

“You are such a good boy,” the duchess told Samuel, patting his cheek as she beamed up at him.

He was not sure exactly what kind of expression he had on his face, but whatever contortion happened, it sent Catherine into gales of laughter.

They finished out their visit in great spirits, departing with some reluctance and also a great deal of enthusiasm as they made their way to Gretna Green before returning to London.



Three weeks later – in France

Catherine

It had turned out Christmas was not so bad when spent with the right man, and the same held true for being married. They had only been married for three weeks, yet somehow, it felt as though they'd been together forever. She knew it was not true, but something had happened to the way time passed ever since they'd left for the Duke of Clarence's estate.

Upon their return home from Gretna Green, they'd visited with the Marquess of Camden and his family, reporting their findings from Clarence. Samuel was quite firm that the duke had nothing to do with the demise of his father but passed on the discovery of the threatening letters, which gave Camden another avenue to pursue.

Then Samuel had arranged for a honeymoon trip to the continent for them. If there were any updates to the investigation, they would not hear of them until they returned. She'd thought she might be more impatient to hear if any of the mystery had been further uncovered, but once she and Samuel were away together, she found it hard to care. All of her attention was on their time together, the incredible places they were visiting, and their deepening love.

And here, in France, they had made a very special purchase that she was eager to utilize for the first time.

"I am not sure about this," Samuel said as she pressed him back against the bed, his expression caught between consternation and excitement. She put her hand in the

middle of his chest and pushed, forcing him down, his dark hair stark against the white pillow.

“We have already been using the dilators,” she replied teasingly, reaching down to stroke the leather cock that was strapped to her with leather straps secured around her thighs and hips. There was a little piece that pressed firmly against her clit when she put pressure on the dildo. It was smaller than his cock in girth and nearly as long, but considering what she wanted to do with it, she could understand his consternation. “I will be gentle.”

Probably.

She’d seen other men taken this way at the Society of Sin, and it had always interested her in theory. She’d witnessed men with other men and men with women wearing false cocks much like the one currently harnessed around her body. Many of them had both loved and hated it; all of them had found it uncomfortable before finding inexpressible pleasure. Samuel was the first to make her want to make an attempt. She did not mind his discomfort since she liked knowing he was taking it for her because he wanted to please her.

She’d known something of what to do, so she had done her best to prepare him with the dilators over the past few nights of their honeymoon, stretching his anus until he could take the third largest of the set.

Last night, he’d moaned and writhed for her with the thick dilator pumping back and forth in his tight hole while she’d bobbed her head up and down on his cock. She’d swallowed every drop of his essence when he’d no longer been able to hold back, milking him as she simultaneously and vigorously assaulted his rear entrance.

Today, she wanted to take him as a man, her false cock bobbing in front of her, giving her an exquisite sense of power as he lay beneath her. No wonder men liked this position so much. Putting her hands on his knees, she pushed them back toward

his chest.

“Hold on to your legs for me,” she purred. “I want you just like this.”

While he held himself in position, she was able to slick up the cock with the oils they’d purchased to go with it. Fisting the shaft, she shuddered with pleasure as the harness piece pressed against her clit. The thick length of leather looked very large compared to the small, wrinkled hole she was about to insert it into.

Samuel stared at her, his cock bobbing above his body, a single drop of pearly liquid at the tip of it. The apprehension in his expression had grown along with the excitement. His tongue flicked out against his lower lip as she pressed the lubricated tip to his entrance.

His chest filled and fell as she rubbed the tip against him, not pushing in yet but ignoring the sensitive nerves there.

Catherine felt her gaze soften as she looked down at him.

“I love you. ”

He mock-scowled back at her.

“Clearly, I love you, or I would not be in this position.”

The smile on her lips spread wider. She leaned forward, feeling the pressure against her clit as the tip of the false cock began to push inside him. Samuel groaned, the same way he did when she inserted the dilators, his eyes closing for a moment as he threw his head back against the pillow, exposing his throat to her.

“Bloody hell...” he said hoarsely as the tip pushed inside him, stretching him open.

Catherine put one hand on his shin, holding his left leg in place while her other wrapped around his cock. It had started to soften, just slightly, but as soon as her hand touched him, it sprang back to full life, making him cry out again.

“Fuck!”

Samuel

Despite the points Catherine had made about the dilators, this was entirely different, and he was not sure he would be able to explain the differences to her. There was something incredibly vulnerable about being beneath her like this, not with her atop him riding him, but with her invading a part of his body he'd never expected to have invaded. And doing so not with a toy in her hand but with a cock strapped to her groin.

He felt small, exposed, and entirely at her mercy.

Her hand on his cock sent pulses of pleasure through him as she withdrew a small amount before pushing forward again. When he opened his eyes, he could see the pleasure on her face as she thrust into him, his hole aching from the intimate stretch. It burned as she went deeper, his body trying to clamp down and squeeze the cock back out, but it was relentlessly stretching him as she sank in.

Groaning, he found his back arching as the sensations became overwhelming—the burn, the discomfort, the pleasure—as she moved her hand up and down his rigid cock.

“My lady... please...” He shuddered as he made the plea, his fingers digging into his knees as he held himself splayed open for her.

“Good boy,” Catherine crooned, withdrawing again, a sensation that made him ache in an entirely new manner as he felt the false cock sliding back out of him. It rubbed

against raw nerves, feeling as if she was pulling his entire being with her, then she thrust back in again, a little harder, a little deeper. “Relax. You can take it for me.”

Her words, as much as the sensations, had him shuddering and gasping again.

Discomfort made him squirm.

Pleasure made him moan.

The false cock hit a spot inside him that the dilator had broached multiple times, sending a pulse of ecstasy so intense through his body, it punched the air from his lungs. It was not until she began to withdraw that he was able to breathe again.

“Catherine!” His voice came out on a ragged, pleading yell.

She leaned in, her hand squeezing his cock as she thrust in deep, filling him completely. They both moaned as she bottomed out. She held herself in place, shifting subtly against him, rubbing her clit on the leather pressed against it and making the cock twitch inside him. Samuel whimpered and shuddered, closing his eyes as her hand moved up and down his cock, drowning him in a tumult of sensations.

“Good boy,” she murmured again, sending another pulse of pleasure through him. Her hand moved up and down, sliding over his sensitive cock, making his muscles clamp down around the one inside him. “Very good boy.”

Then she began to slide out. And back in.

This was what it felt like to be on the receiving end.

Helpless.

Pleased.

The fires raging inside him clashed, the discomfort and sting of being taken warring with the pleasure of that spot deep inside him, of her hand working his cock. Samuel held onto his legs for dear life as the agonizing ecstasy swirled within him, sending him higher and higher.

He was not going to be able to hold back from cumming, no matter what she wanted from him.

“Catherine... I cannot...”

“Hold it for me... hold it for me, Samuel...” She gasped as she slid inside him again, her eyelashes fluttering with her own pleasure. “Just a little longer.”

It was pure torture, his balls aching, spine tingling, as his need grew sharper, more demanding.

“Please... please...”

Her hand gripped him tighter, almost to the point of pain—if he was capable of feeling such things anymore. The pain and pleasure had melded together, blending until he could not tell where one began and the other left off.

“Now, Samuel... now!” Her cry went higher, wild, as she reached her own peak, slamming so deep into him that he felt it in his chest. A chest that was suddenly splashed with hot, wet liquid as his own release spouted, his cock throbbing against her pumping hand. Stream after stream of his seed splashed across his body while his muscles shuddered around the cock inside him.

Unlike him, it did not deflate as Catherine climaxed, and his own pleasure went on and on long after his balls were empty, leaving him spasming despite the lack of fluid

to fount.

It was the most intensely erotic experience of his life.

Catherine

Cleaned and rested, Catherine snuggled into Samuel's shoulder. His arm was around her, her head pillowed on his body in that delightful little nook beside his chest. She stroked her fingers through the wiry hair that had so recently been covered in his seed.

Watching him climax while she was inside him had been uniquely powerful and incredibly pleasurable. She liked her new toy very much and gathered he did as well.

"Are you happy, love?" he asked, his fingers stroking her arm.

"Very." She tilted her head back so she could look at him, and he twisted onto his side—depriving her of the nook but also putting his other arm around her so she was held securely in his arms. "You are the best Christmas gift I have ever received."

The tiny lines in the corners of his eyes crinkled as he laughed.

"As you are mine."

He moved, their lips coming together in meeting, and Catherine felt her heart swell in her breast.

For the rest of her life, Christmas was going to be her favorite holiday.

\*\*