



Curves and Counterfeit

(Curves & Cravats)

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Category: Historical

Description: Miss Lucy Jones is all curves and covert operations.

She escorts endangered women out of London in the dark of night, guiding them to safety. She'd rather face a sword point than hear a man say he loves her. She's married to her cause and needs no other suitor, not even a terribly handsome stable hand who makes her laugh.

Keaton Godwin, Earl of Ennis isn't a stable hand.

He didn't even mean to pretend to be one. Things happen fast when whisky is involved. And he finds himself following a lush goddess wrapped in velvet out of London one dark midnight and to a house in the country. There he discovers a few uncomfortable truths:

He's a nodcock.

And he just might be in love.

But a fool like him has no chance of winning a brave goddess like Lucy. Unless he lies a little. Hiding his identity seems his only opportunity to remain at the women's refuge and learn how to be a better man. And to become better acquainted with the woman he can see himself marrying—her likes, her dreams, the taste of her lips...

Love grows like a wild weed in the country, but can it survive the truth?

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One

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It could be the fog. Or it could be the whisky fogging his brain. Or it could be that his sister was stealing into a coach behind their house and... what? Going where? At this godforsaken hour? Only bounders were about this late at night. Early in the morning? Time didn't matter, but Alexandra did. Alexandra climbing into an old beaten unmarked hack. Bounders were about!

And Keats. But then Keats was— hiccup —a bounder, so he pushed away from the wall and the woman he'd been kissing.

"Keatsy, come back." She tugged at his lapels, her dark curls falling from her coiffure, the rouge that carefully shaped her lips smeared and faded. "If you die tonight, we'll never get to kiss again."

They would never kiss again, even if he lived. Keats never kissed the same woman twice.

"Off with you, love." He pushed her down the street with a hearty smack to her arse as a parting gift. Too hearty. He swayed and sought the strength of a solid wall to lean against. The box he cradled under one arm thumped against the brick, and he braced for an explosion.

Got only silence, thank God. But... curse God because it looked like the coachman was about to pull away. With Keats's sister.

“Shit.” He ran and the world spun, but before the carriage could pull away from the dark alley behind his father’s townhouse, he jumped aboard it, sat beside the rather shocked coachman, and set the box neatly on his lap.

“Hey there, now,” the coachman cried. “Get off!”

Keats calmly opened the box and pulled out the dueling pistol. He pressed the barrel against the coachman’s ribs. “I was going to use this in Green Park at dawn, but I don’t see why I can’t use it now instead. Besides, this is rather new and novel.” He hiccupped. “I’ve dueled before, but I’ve never demanded answers from a coachman”—hiccup —“at gunpoint. Feel like a highwayman, I do.” He grinned and dug the barrel deeper between the man’s ribs. “Did I load this gun earlier? Or did I mean to do so at the park? Hm. Can’t remember.” He shrugged. “Shall we see?”

“You would’na loaded it and put it in the box.” The coachman’s hold of the reins tightened.

“Oh, who knows, really. I’m that foxed, I assure you.” He hiccupped again. Proof of his circumstances.

“What do you want?” the coachman asked, his body a block of ice.

“Where are you taking my sister?”

The coachman’s already tight jaw became flint—hard and sharp and breakable.

“Come, come. I’m the Earl of Ennis, and I have more right to my sister than you do. Tell me.” Those last few words as hard as the man’s jaw. More unforgiving. He could simply pull Alex from the carriage and toss her back into the house, but he’d never find out her destination that way, her intentions. She’d lace her lips up tighter than a lady’s corset and with unbreakable ribbons. The coachman would at least know their

destination.

The coachman swallowed. "Hawthorne House."

"And where the devil is that?"

The hack shook before the man could offer an answer, and the door swung open. A figure emerged, settling into a pale circle of light cast by the gas lamp above. A woman. No, not a woman. A bloody angel.

Her golden hair glowed in the soft gas light. She'd bound it tight atop her head in a practical twist of some sort, but wisps of it escaped here and there, little curls to make a man's hands ache with need. Those wisps curled a halo about her head. Fitting. And she lifted her full, lush, heart-shaped face to him. No, to the coachman. But no doubt she saw Keats, too.

Bloody hell. Keats would be found out before he got any answers. The whisky fog had begun to roll away from his brain, dissipating like a sour-smelling morning mist, and he dug the gun deeper into the man's ribs.

"You give me up," Keats hissed, "and I'll find out with the flex of a finger if I loaded this gun earlier."

"What in hell do you want me to say?"

"Figure it out."

"Mr. Sacks," the angel said with full, pink, kissable lips, "why aren't we moving? You know time is of the essence."

"Y-yes, miss. I... well, Mr. Beckett asked me to pick up a new boy for the stables."

“Boy? Do you want me to pull this trigger?” He was a man of eight and twenty. Nothing about him boy .

The coachman swallowed. “He’s just jumped up, and... we’re ready to go now.”

The angel scowled. “Mr. Beckett told me nothing of it. And it’s most unusual. Risky to add another body to tonight’s activities.”

Activities? Bloody hell, what had Alexandra gotten herself mixed up with?

“It was a last-minute thing, miss,” the coachman said. “E’s my nephew. Just found out he was willin’ ta leave his London post.”

A wealth of dark and shadows separated the lady and Keats, but she peered at him through it as if she could see him as clearly as she could see her own reflection in the daylight.

“Very well. Quick now. No more dawdling. Lady Alexandra deserves our greatest care.” Then she pulled a dark velvet hood up over her head and stepped back into the coach.

She took all of London’s air with her, leaving none for Keats to breathe.

“Who was that?” he asked as the coachman whipped the hack into a lurching trot forward.

“Not telling.”

“Please?”

Silence and the stubborn set of a chin.

No matter. “I’ll find out one way or another.”

“Men like you !” the coachman exploded. “That’s why Miss Jones does what she does. That’s why Hawthorne House exists. Bounders, rakes, scoundrels, rogues. Devils, you are. Vipers. I should throw you from the coach, bullet to my chest or no.”

“Miss Jones, then... that’s her name.” Too common a name for a goddess.

The coachman cursed, and the horses trotted a bit faster through the London streets, headed south. “To hear her name on the lips of a rogue like yerself.” He cursed again.

“I’ll not argue with you on my moral failings, but I’d rather not be thrown from the coach. Tonight is proving much more interesting than a duel. And again, you’ve got my sister inside. As well as my future wife, probably. I don’t know. Probably not. But damn .” He whistled. He’d not seen much beneath her voluminous cloak, but there’d been no doubt—she was voluminous, too.

Voluminous? Not quite the right word, but the letters would rearrange themselves in the whisky fog. Perhaps it wasn’t clearing after all.

Ah. Now he had it. Voluptuous . Curves for days, likely. Paired with bright eyes and a heaven of hair, with a sharp nose and a chin that tipped up with defiance, confidence... What a woman. He needed a closer look. To see if she had freckles scattered over her nose and cheeks, or a beauty mark near the corner of those kissable lips or?—

“Get off,” the coachman demanded.

“I don’t think so. I’d like to see this Hawthorne House.” What was it? Where was it? Hell, if only his whisky-muddled brain could fully grasp the half thoughts yelling warnings at the thick walls of his skull, but they were like bouncing bumblebees, and

if he ever managed to catch one, it would sting.

“Don’t you have a date with a bullet in Green Park?”

“Or the other fellow does.”

Mr. Sacks snorted. “Not in your state.”

“Then it’s best for me to do something else, don’t you think?” He tickled the man’s ribs with the gun barrel, though—damn—his arm had started to tire from holding it up.

“You’ll lose what remains of your honor.”

Keats’s turn to snort. “I abandoned notions of honor ages ago. Let all of London say what they will. I want to know what sort of place abducts a young woman in the dark hours of morning.” And as soon as he found out, he’d take her away from there. He’d bring Alex back home and convince his father to lock her up in her room. “Now, my good chap, settle in for the drive and find something entertaining to converse about because I’m already bored.”

“You can take your conversation and shove it up your arse.”

“Oh, that’s a delightful start. I find conversation terribly dull unless there’s some conflict to make it exciting.”

“What do you think is going to happen when we arrive? What are you going to do in the country? Where will a toff like you go?”

“I’ll take my sister and return?—”

“You won’t touch her, do you hear? You’ve got the gun, but I’d jump in front of a bullet for the ladies that find themselves needing Hawthorne House. But what would you know about honor?” He snorted. “I’d place money on it—you’ve likely sent a lady here yourself at some point. Or if you haven’t yet, you will one day.”

“I could answer those uncertainties for you, if I had any idea what Hawthorne House was.”

“A house for ladies in trouble. And if your sister is headin’ there, she’s?—”

“In trouble. Damn.” In trouble . What did that mean? What kind of trouble? Why hadn’t she told Keats? Or their father? Why run away with strangers?

Probably because of her engagement to Lord Provolone. Lord Provenance? Sir... oh hell, what was his name? Didn’t matter because the man was old enough to be their grandfather. Their grandfather , and Alex had been given no choice. But why did she need one? Their father, the Marquess of Rainsly, knew what was best for her.

These people were after her dowry. Or after something else entirely.

Whatever it was, Keats would take them down, would save his sister from these shadow-shrouded con men.

But perhaps he should be sober first. The world spun a bit too much for heroics.

Keats dug the pistol harder into Mr. Sacks’s ribs. “As long as you comply, you’ll reach this Hawthorne House without an extra hole in your body. I need to know that my sister is safe. If Hawthorne House proves to be so, I’ll leave on my own.” But if he discovered she wasn’t... he’d burn this house down.

Mr. Sacks flinched, his hands tightening on the reins. He gave a curt nod, and the

hack rumbled south in silence but for the groan and crunch of wheels over pavement.

Keats wriggled. “How long is the trip?”

“You’ll see.”

“And what should we speak of until we get there?”

“Nuthin’.”

“I can suggest a better topic of conversation.” He sighed. “Miss Jones.” Another reason to drive into the night, a secret stowaway on his sister’s flight from London—another glimpse of the angel.

But if the angel proved a demon, he’d not hesitate to burn her with the rest.

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Two

Men were devils. Lady Alexandra had stopped crying an hour ago and slept soundly now, her head nestled on Lucy's shoulder. Poor girl. Lucy hadn't gotten much out of her except that she was engaged to a man triple her age and seduced by another who'd disappeared after she'd given herself up to him. The girl was bruised, too.

See? Devils. Particularly aristocratic men. A scourge upon humanity.

No wonder Lady Alexandra had cried until she'd run out of tears. And to think, Mr. and Mrs. Beckett, the owners of Hawthorne House, didn't want titled ladies there.

She patted the girl's shoulder and looked across the way at her friend and accomplice. "Peggy, did you get her valise?"

"Naturally." The former actress sniffed. "How many valises have I yanked from rose-decorated rooms over the years?"

"Many, I'm sure."

Peggy nodded. Then giggled. "There's going to be a duel this morning. In Green Park. I heard whispers about it in the stables. Can we stop by and see it before heading back to the house?"

Lucy had heard that bit of gossip, too, tumbling from drunken lips in the room right next to Lady Alexandra's, muffled by the wall, but clear enough. Lady Alexandra's brother had need of a pistol to meet a man in Green Park, and his mistress would

rather him stay abed. Apparently even the peerage possessed thin walls.

“No time for that,” Lucy said.

“There’s always time for drama,” Peggy sighed.

“Not when we have a vulnerable charge to carry to safety.”

“You’re no fun. Not like your sister-in-law. She could have done well on the stage. You won’t even dress in men’s garb.” Peggy sighed. “You’d cut an excellent figure in pants and a waistcoat. And your brother would surely allow you to borrow a greatcoat.”

“I prefer my gowns, thank you.” They fit her hips better than trousers, allowed for greater movement, particularly with the large slit she’d hemmed up the side of her voluminous skirts. Gowns were simply... prettier. She’d abandoned most of her frivolous self years ago, but not this bit. This inch of girlish Lucy she kept for herself—silks and satins, ribbons and tiny, perfect buttons in a row.

She picked at the split hem of her skirt. She’d lined it with a ribbon the same color of the gown. It added texture and depth, and something to fidget with when trying to order her mind.

There was much to consider. A new lady at the house always meant a variety of things. A visit from her brother, Dr. Jones, to ensure good health, the construction of a list of necessities for the new inhabitant, and the consideration of what kind of life she would like to pursue after leaving their safe haven. Lucy liked that part of her work best: listening to the ladies talk about their hopes and dreams, doing what she could to turn those dreams into reality. Nothing better.

“Lucy.” Something hesitant in Peggy’s usually boisterous voice sent a ripple of

unease down Lucy's spine. Peggy was looking out the window, tapping lightly on the glass. "I've something I need to tell you."

"Oh?"

"I'll not be doing this much longer."

"What do you mean by this?"

"Kidnapping the women."

"Saving the women."

"Yes, that."

"But why not?"

Peggy finally looked at Lucy. Difficult to read her eyes in the shadows, impossible to guess what she would say next. "I'm getting married."

"Peggy, no!"

"Peggy, yes." She put her fists on her hips. "I've been at this six years now, and it has been worth every minute, but I'm tired. I want to hang up my greatcoat and have another babe or ten."

"Ten!" Lucy shivered. She did not want to imagine. She'd seen child after child come into the world at Hawthorne House. A warm, loving world. But who knew what awaited them once they left with their mothers, once they returned to a world that made Hawthorne House necessary.

“Yes, ten. I like children. And I like Rían .”

“Rían? The blacksmith? Rían Morgan?”

Peggy grinned, and the stars likely fainted. That bright it was, that joyous. “Yes. Rían . You remember the night I ran off in the rain?”

Lucy nodded.

“That’s when I realized I needed to propose.”

“Right then ? No matter the state of the roads?”

“It happens like that. One moment you’re perfectly fine and the next you’re riding through a downpour to kiss the man you love.” Peggy leaned forward. “Don’t be angry with me. You’ll find a new partner. Or perhaps a husband of your own.”

“Hm.” She had been considering marriage of late. For practical purposes. Lucy reached across the carriage, took her friend’s hands in her own and squeezed. “I am happy for you, Peggy, and for Rían. You will invite me to the wedding, I hope.”

“Naturally.” The carriage rocked to a stop and Peggy looked out. “We’re here. Now let’s wake up the new girl and get her inside.” Her eyes glinted wicked in the dim morning light. “You think the Devil Doctor will be up and about yet?”

“Don’t let him hear you call him that.”

“Or he’ll scold me.” Peggy threw open the coach door and jumped to the ground. “Not much of a threat when he’s so attractive angry.”

“Don’t let Rían hear you say that.”

“He has my heart in his big, strong hands, Lu, not my eyes. Though I’m sure you’ll agree my blacksmith is sweeter to the eyes than even the estimable doctor.” Peggy winked and strode toward the house. “So many delicious muscles. All mine.”

When Peggy disappeared inside the house, Lucy looked to the sleeping beauty in the coach, shook her shoulder lightly. “Lady Alexandra. My lady, wake up. We’re here.”

Lady Alexandra sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes with her fists. “Hawthorne House. Are we really here?” She never even looked at Lucy, her gaze drawn to the house outside the coach like a moth to the flame, but not nearly as dangerous. Not dangerous at all, in fact.

“You are home, my lady, for however long you need to call this place home.” Hopefully. The Becketts had not been keen on bringing a titled lady here.

They stepped out of the coach together, but Lady Alexandra took the lead, her steps long and eager. “It has seemed like a fairy tale to me. But there it is. And here I am. Is this a fairy story, Miss Lucy?”

“Not at all. It’s real.” Lucy squeezed the other woman’s hand. “And you are safe.”

The door popped open, and the Becketts spilled out. They were of the same height, short for a man and tall for a lady, and they wore opposing expressions, Mr. Beckett a wide, welcoming grin and Mrs. Beckett a cautious, serious sort of half smile. Both possessed dark, tightly curling hair and open arms.

“You are Lady Alexandra?” Mrs. Beckett asked with a deep curtsy.

“Oh yes, and do not do that. Please.” Lady Alexandra hugged herself. “And please, call me Alex. I... do not wish to stand out. And my brother calls me that, so I am used to it.”

Mr. Beckett took Alex under his wing and ushered her into the house.

Lucy followed them inside, but Mrs. Beckett stopped her short in the hall. She peered over her shoulder at her husband and Lady Alex until they both disappeared up the stairs. “Did anyone see you?”

“Of course not.”

“Her father’s a marquess. If he discovers where his daughter is, he’ll?—”

“I’m aware.”

“Powerful men do not enjoy having their political and dynastic pawns simply... disappear. If they know where she is, they will use all that power to chase after her. And to destroy Hawthorne House if they must. Do you understand the risk we take in doing this?”

The walls seemed to narrow, and chains squeezed Lucy’s lungs. She left the house, the morning air no easier to breathe than that indoors.

Not when Mrs. Beckett followed closely behind. “We risk the futures of those who need us.”

“Not all those who need us.” Lucy spun, standing her ground on the gravel drive. “Just those who won’t be missed, the working women, the plain miss and missus. But there are others.” Like her mother. “It may seem they do not need us because they have lovely gowns and jewels and—” She exhaled a large push of air. “Wealth does not protect them. Not really. They need us, too. Lady Alex needs us.”

“It is a risk.”

“But shouldn’t we try? Shouldn’t we at least discover if it is possible?”

“You know I’d like to, but...” She cursed, looking up at the house.

“Lady Alex will be our great experiment, Mrs. Beckett.”

“Or our great ruination.”

“It will not come to that. I have an idea.” She took Mrs. Beckett’s hands, pulled her into the shadows close to the house, and lowered her voice to a whisper. “We need someone in their circles, a woman who can move among them, learn their routines, gain their trust.”

“And you know someone?”

“Me.”

Mrs. Beckett pulled away.

“No, listen. My grandfather is a viscount, and though my mother fell out of favor with the ton”—a euphemism for having birthed a bastard and married a farmer—“my father is wealthy, and I have a large dowry. My sister-in-law’s father is an earl. For the right price, I can find the right husband. One who will not question what I’m doing as long as I appear to do as he says.” Or one who supported the cause as well. Finding that sort of man would be like finding a fresh inch of water in the Thames—impossible.

“You’d marry yourself off for Hawthorne?”

“In a blink.” It was her whole life, her meaning, her only purpose.

“That might work,” Mrs. Beckett said after a pause. “You’d have to be careful. It still has its risks.”

“But I would better know which risks were worth taking and which were not.”

“I can’t let you marry like that.”

“Not everyone can enjoy a great love like you and Mr. Beckett do.”

“Your brother and Ophelia.”

“They are rare.”

“Your father and mother, too. Perhaps it’s not as rare as you imagine.” Mrs. Beckett wrapped Lucy in a hug. “I say no. But as far as I know, no one’s ever stopped you when you’ve made up your mind. Go home now. We’ll speak more on this later.” Mrs. Beckett whirled her around and nudged her toward the stables, then disappeared inside.

As Lucy passed the stables and headed toward the field that led most directly to her brother’s home in the village, the warmth that usually hugged her after a successful mission drained away, replaced by... nothing. A chilling emptiness pulsed through her. She changed direction, moving toward the gardens instead.

Slowly, light spilled across the horizon like a yellow ribbon unspooling, but the hope that accompanied a new day (or a new ribbon) did not lift her spirits. Peggy was moving on. And Lucy was considering moving on, too—marrying a stranger. For a good cause. That mattered more than cold air and an empty chest.

She passed beneath a tree and flicked a leaf. Green and gold and breathing—the world possessed such beauty, such joy. The sunrise passed perfectly through the

arched doorway in the tall hedge at the back of the garden, a riot of pinks and purples. It was the sort of sky lovers kissed under, making promises.

She had no need for such skies or kisses or promises.

Then why did her chest ache a bit, and why was her cheek wet?

“Don’t cry, angel.”

She screamed, jumped, whirled and raised a fist, as her brother had taught her to face her attacker.

Who also screamed and whirled around with fisted hands held high to face... no one.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

He whipped back around, fists loosening as his arms dropped to his sides. “You terrified me. Whew.” He bent double and braced his hands on bent knees, his dark hair falling over his brow. “What a fright you gave me. At least you’re not crying anymore. Would rather cough up my heart than see that again.”

“Who are you?”

He froze, then slowly raised to his full height many, many inches above her own. Not that she had many inches. “I’m, erm, the new stable hand.” He straightened his waistcoat. “You picked me up in London, remember?” He wore simple, dusty, ill-fitting clothing in overlapping shades of brown. Yet, somehow, he did not look like a stable hand at all. How he held himself... the precision of his haircut, the width of his broad shoulders, the haughtiness and confidence of his expression, the cultured tones of his voice...

“They must make stable hands differently in London,” she said. “You sound like a toff.”

“Indeed they do craft us from a different mold. I worked for a fine family, and they hired only those capable of using accents that didn’t offend their sensitive ears. And they only accepted the best-looking lads. As you can see, perfect specimen that I am, they hired me immediately.” He grinned, a flash of even, white teeth behind firm, well-shaped lips. His thick dark brows arched playfully above eyes the blue of the delphinium lining the walkway behind her. A brown hat perched atop a mop of thick black hair.

Her heart thumped. “Pardon... What were we speaking of?”

He laughed. “I have that effect on women.”

Ah, there—the cursed conceit all men exuded. “You should return to your new work, Mr....”

“Keats.”

“Mr. Keats, you’d best return to the stables or you’ll find yourself reliant on your good looks to find another position.”

“After you tell me you won’t cry anymore.”

“I wasn’t crying.” She pulled her cloak hood up and over her face.

“Oh yes. Water just leaks from my eyes, too. Quite natural.”

“It’s true. Not that water leaks from—oh. I wasn’t crying. And I’m returning home. Good day.” She dropped a curtsy and headed for the garden arch that opened up into

a field beyond. The sun had risen entirely above it now.

He followed, hands stuffed in pockets. “I’ll escort you home. My uncle won’t mind if I’m a bit late for shoveling the horse dung if my reason is so noble.”

“You find irritating women noble?”

“I find saving women noble.” A hard edge to his voice, sudden and shocking like the first winter wind on a warm August day.

She stumbled to a halt, and he slammed into her from behind. He grabbed her out of the air as her body lurched forward. He steadied her, straightened her against his own body. Hard and warm. When she didn’t remove herself immediately from his embrace he flattened his palm against her back, pulling her closer.

“Careful, Miss...?” He arched one brow.

“No need for you to know my name.”

“Every need.” He stroked his hand up her spine then back down. Entirely unnecessary, scandalous, riveting... Then he set her firmly away from him.

Why had she not moved away first? She shook out her skirts, releasing some of her irritation into the movement and set off once more to the village.

He kept pace. “The girl you brought with you from London, the?—”

“The first rule of Hawthorne House, Mr. Keats, is that we do not speak of Hawthorne House. Do you understand?”

He mimicked putting a lock between his lips, turning it, and pocketing it.

“Excellent. Give no one the key. You should not speak of what happens at the house. Not to anyone. Ever. I assume your uncle has told you what we do here.”

He hesitated then nodded.

“That is for your information only. The village thinks we are an educational facility, training young women to be governesses, maids, seamstresses, cooks, and the like.”

“You live there? In the village?”

“Sometimes. With my brother. He is a doctor.”

“Where do you live at other times?”

“That is not for you to know.” She glanced at him. “What happened to that key, Mr. Keats?”

“Dropped right out of my pocket. There’s a hole. What else should I know to work here?”

“Mr. Sacks or Mr. Geddings will know your duties in the stables better than I. But... I can tell you... if you see any strange men lurking about, you must inform Mr. Beckett right away. The footmen we employ are former boxers and army men. They either know how to throw a punch or hit a target.”

He tugged at his neckcloth. “And what happens to strange men found lurking about?”

“They find out which sort of footman has caught them lurking.”

“The boxing sort or the shooting sort.”

She nodded. Far off in the trees, a bird burst into song, and it seemed to be the final thing to break the fog's hold on the morning. The sun's gold scattered over everything with the bird's music, and with this stable hand cutting his long strides short to remain by her side as they crossed the field, her loneliness went the way of the fog. Mr. Keats knew the knack of annoying a body, but he was a treat to look at, and... perhaps... his conversation at times tended more toward the amusing than the annoying. Her soul expanded into airy thinness, and she smiled. If she was going to marry for a practical reason, she could enjoy a few stolen moments with a handsome man before she sealed her future. Surely.

“God, you're beautiful.”

She stumbled again, then stopped to face him, her hood falling down her back.

He seemed to waver, as if his legs might give way. “I want to drop to my knees before you. I shouldn't. I don't know you, but... maybe the body knows what to do better than the mind sometimes.”

“I... well... do not kneel, Mr. Keats.” But... wouldn't he just look delicious on his knees before her? Her stomach twisted into knots, and a place a bit lower seemed to shiver, ache.

“And why not? You deserve it.”

She ripped her gaze away from his and walked faster than before. “You do not know that.”

He caught up quickly. “Are you one of these women? The Hawthorne House women I shouldn't talk about?”

“No. I'm something different. The doctor's sister. A spinster.”

He snorted. “A goddess like you?”

“You must not flirt.”

“Another rule?”

“The most important one. If Mr. Beckett discovers any sort of flirtations, he’ll let you go right quick. These women don’t need the inconvenience of a vapid man who thinks more of himself than he should.”

“Ouch.” He rubbed his heart. “You’re more dangerous than the footmen. Your words both sword points and fists.”

“Remember that.” She didn’t smile. A victory, that.

They walked in silence until the village appeared beyond a thin line of trees.

She stepped onto the nearby road, intending to leave him behind, but he grasped her wrist, stopped her, forced her to turn around.

As his thumb rubbed havoc into the pulse at her wrist, his blue, blue eyes made her forget her name. She didn’t even pull away. He did not move, but nonetheless, she felt as if he bound her, weaving with her undeniable attraction to him a connection she had no use for.

“I apologize.” His brow pulled low, and his hat tipped over his eyes, yet he could not hide his expression, serious for the first time since he’d scared her in the garden. “For flirting. The whisky’s wearing off and the emptiness is setting in. Flirting is the next best distraction.”

Birds chattered around them, the sun made sapphires of his eyes, and oh how she

wanted to agree. “Thank you for apologizing. Do not flirt again. And no whisky.” Where had he even come by it? No matter. Men always had their ways.

He squeezed her wrist then released her. “As you wish.” He turned and made his way down the road back toward Hawthorne House, and she watched him until he disappeared.

The thread of yearning he’d tied about her stretched out with his wandering form. It seemed to have wiggled its way around her heart. It tugged loose some drop cloth that had settled there years ago like a shroud. She rubbed at her chest, trying to dislodge the thread, keep the shroud in place.

She did not yearn for him . But... but for the idea of him. He was the kind of man she might have married had she not settled upon this new scheme. A simple, working man with a jovial spirit who sparked desire in her body. She yearned for what she’d never have. But she snipped the thread and headed to her brother’s house. What mattered her own desires when so many others suffered?

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Three

K eats hid behind a rose bush of some sort that made him sneeze and watched his sister. Miss Jones, the doctor, and his wife had left her just moments ago. The doctor had asked Alex questions with a cool calm that inspired trust, looking at a bruise Alex showed him on her forearm and then inspecting her ear and hearing on one side. Where the devil had she come by such wounds? Why had he not known about them? Was he really so drunk so often that he'd not noticed her wearing long sleeves in the middle of the summer?

Apparently so. Alex sat with a book in her hands, but she did not read. She stared off into the garden but stared at nothing, too, a horrid blankness in her gaze. He needed to talk to her. He needed to tell her that she must return home. He needed to tell her he was there to take care of her.

He rustled around the side of the bush but stopped before making himself known. He still smelled a little—well, perhaps a lot—like he'd taken a bath in whisky. And he hardly looked like himself, having borrowed a real stable hand's clothes. None of that of any consequence. He still did not trust these strangers who absconded with women in the dead of the night. Alex must return home. He must confront his sister.

But then she closed her eyes, and a single tear dropped down her cheek, and he threw himself behind the rose bush again, his heart beating madly in his ears, his soul wailing like it never had before. He'd not even known it could do that. Had never really thought about having a soul, actually. How did he turn it off?

Talking to Alex, banishing her tears—that would do it.

He hated weeping women. That's why he'd given himself away early this morning. After Sacks had been bribed and threatened into handing over a grubby suit of clothes, sharing his cottage accommodations, and keeping his bloody mouth closed, he'd spied Miss Jones trudging toward the gardens. He'd followed only to discover her secrets and those of this house, not to escort her, protect her, pledge allegiance to her. But then she'd closed her eyes and dropped a tear, and hell if he could keep away.

The crunch of gravel on the path signaled a new arrival, as did a sunny voice saying, "Alex, would you like some company?" Miss Jones. Lucy, the doctor had called her.

He'd almost kissed her, had wanted to with every fiber of his being. But for all he knew, she was the enemy.

But she'd not put that bruise on Alex's flesh, not put those shadows in his sister's eyes.

Alex wiped away a tear. "I should like company very much. Apologies. I do not mean to be a watering pot. I never am." It was true. Good old stalwart Alex never cried, never made a fuss, always did everything she should. Until now.

Who had bruised her arm? What or who had left her concerned about her ear? Palmerson? Her betrothed? Surely a man that old could not muster much force. Alex was safe with a near-corpse like him. Wasn't she?

"Please join me," Alex said.

Keats peeked through the branches of the rose bush, pricking his thumb on a thorn. He hissed and sucked at the blood between his teeth.

Beyond the bush, Miss Jones said, "I hope you are not too exhausted after my

brother's examination."

"No. He's quite reassuring," Alex said.

"Do you have the energy for a few more questions?"

Alex nodded, ran her thumb along the edge of her abandoned book. "I believe so."

"You must not answer anything that discomfits you, but... it is rather necessary for me—for us—to know... will anyone search for you?" Miss Jones seemed to hold her breath.

"I do not think so. I left no evidence of our correspondence. I fed every letter to the fire as soon as I'd done reading it. My fiancé will simply find another young lady to wed. My father and brother... they will eventually realize I'm gone but not, perhaps, for a few days. My father might look for me. For a few days, a fortnight at most. But then he'll put my dowry to other uses. And my brother... he'll think it a curiosity, but he'll forget my absence at the bottom of the next whisky bottle he turns up."

"I'm sorry," Miss Jones murmured.

I'm sorry , Keats's soul whispered.

"That no one cares for me? Don't be. It allowed me the opportunity to escape. If they truly cared, I would be better watched. They would search for me mercilessly. But they do not, so they will not. And it is for the best."

Miss Jones nodded.

And Keats clapped a hand over his mouth, glued his feet to the dirt because every bit of him demanded to run out of his hiding spot and tell Alex she was wrong. And he

was sorry. And... bloody hell. This place was not full of villains.

“I’m the villain,” he whispered, words like ash on his tongue.

“Last night Mrs. Beckett said that I must begin thinking.” Alex’s voice rang not with the fragile discards of a fire, but with the new flames of life itself. “Now that I am no longer to be a lady, I must do something useful with my life.”

Miss Jones nodded again, offered more silence.

“I do not know yet what that will be,” Alex said so softly Keats almost did not hear her. “I do not know if I’m good at anything.”

“Oh, but you are!” Miss Jones leaned into the space between them, her arm stretching out to grasp Alex’s arm. “You will soon find out exactly what. There’s a bright intelligence in your eyes. They...” She tilted her head to the side. “They look quite familiar, a most unique shade of blue. I swear I’ve seen them before.” She shook her head.

Keats did not know whether to be relieved or offended. He rather wanted the lovely Lucy to remember the face where she’d seen blue eyes like that before—his.

“Everyone on my father’s side possesses eyes the same shade. They are unique, but I think they have been a curse too. My betrothed is rather... obsessed with my eyes, watches them always, accuses me of looking with them where I shouldn’t. I suppose it’s not an idle accusation. The first kind, handsome man to pay me attention, I rather... collapsed into his arms. Grateful. He praised my eyes as well. I hate them.” Alex dropped her gaze to her lap. “I wish I could change their color. Or pluck them out entirely.”

And Keats wished the bullet from last night’s abandoned duel had found his heart. A

more humane death, that, than the silent desperation in his sister's voice.

Miss Jones bolted to her feet, hauling Alex up with her and wrapping her in a tight hug. "Oh, no, no, no! Your eyes will see sights much kinder from this day forward. I promise!"

Keats could take no more. Let the angel care for Alex. His sister had found much better hands than his own to keep her safe in spirit as well as body. He walked back to the stables on numb legs.

None of this could be true. It couldn't. He wasn't cruel. Neither was his father. Women were meant to marry whomever they were told to marry, and surely Keats's father would not have chosen someone who...

The bruises on Alex's arms told truth. And he'd heard truth from her own lips. Anger pulsed his steps forward more quickly. Men who hurt women deserved to meet bullets in Green Park at dawn.

Alex's betrothed had hurt her, and she'd sought protection in the arms of strangers.

Alex did not need Keats's help. He hadn't even known she'd needed saving in London. Too stuck in his own whisky bottle, in his own fornications, to care about anyone but himself and his cock. Let her eyes remain and see kinder sights.

Let his be plucked out instead.

"New boy!" the stable master called as Keats neared the stables. "If you're going to remain here, you have to actually work. You may be Mr. Sacks's nephew, but you'll abide by the same rules as all the rest."

Why not? He'd done so little for Alex, he had to make up for it. He'd stay, watch

over her. He'd wasted his life thus far; he could do a little good with it now.

The stable master threw a shovel at him, and Keats caught it. Barely. Apparently doing good meant shoveling shit. He deserved it.

He worked for hours, until the smell of dung and dirt and hay had soaked into his skin as much as the smell of whisky, almost chasing that other sour scent away. Not an improvement. But somehow, also, yes an improvement. Because by the time the sun began to sink in the sky, his muscles ached, and he'd sweated out an entire river of alcohol. He'd imagined each sweat droplet taking away his negligence, his thoughtlessness.

"Mr. Geddings?" he called out, wiping sweat from his brow. "I need to procure..." Perhaps less formal. "I need somethin' from the village."

"I suppose you can shove off, then. You've worked hard today. Wouldn't think a young, pampered lad from London would have it in him. You've surprised me. Got more of Mr. Sacks in ya than I thought you did." He took a huge sniff in Keats's direction, then wrinkled his nose. "There's a lake down the hill. Use it before you visit the village. No one wants to smell you."

No one had ever told Keats he smelled, but he'd also never shoveled shit before. The two were bound to happen at the same time. He propped the shovel against a wall and took off toward the lake. Easy enough to find, and he stripped down to his smalls after a quick look around. Alone entirely, he slipped into the cool water with a groan, diving into deeper depths after a few slogging steps forward.

He'd sell his left ball for a bar of soap. He'd acquire one in the village and... oh. No, he would not. He had no money to acquire soap or otherwise. Hell. He must consider his current poverty the penance he had to pay for being so blind to Alex's plight.

When he surfaced, he scrubbed his hair hard, then his cheeks and jaw. In a few days, he'd have the beginnings of a beard. No money for a razor, either. All he had to his name—which everyone here got wrong—was a set of dueling pistols and a fine suit of clothes he could not wear. Keaton Godwin, Earl of Ennis wore silk and fine wool. Mr. Keats, stable boy did not.

He ducked under the water once more and screamed. Muffled pain and frantic bubbles, murky darkness, and Keats sinking down, down, down until his lungs burned and he began to kick. He popped up above the water with a gasp of air. When had he last cried? He couldn't remember ever once doing it. He felt like he should now, like he must.

Or drown himself.

No time for that. He had to get to the village and send word to his father— Alex is with me; do not worry, and do not search. I will take care of it. By which he meant he'd let Alex do whatever the hell she wished to do. He owed her that much.

He set off for the shore, and when he stood, the water up to his waist, a cry and a splash from the other side of the lake swung him around. A head popped up above the water—blond hair darkened by the water, a round, soft face, with wide, parted, lush lips.

Miss Jones, rolling onto her back to float belly up, eyes closed not far from where she'd jumped off a bank and into the water.

The water lapped at Keats's hips, barely hiding the most pertinent bits of him. He should dress, walk to town, and send word to his father. The right thing to do.

Damn, but he'd never been good at being good. He swam back out into the lake. Really, it was her fault she'd not seen him. Or... perhaps she had.

He grinned as he swam. How to approach her? Didn't want to scare her, after all. Some feet away, he came upright and treaded water.

She floated, softly, making tiny waves with the languid movements of her arms and legs, the corners of her luscious lips tilted up ever so slightly. Her shift had molded to her body, and hell, his own body pulsed to life. Big breasts, soft belly, wide, full hips—she was a feast, and he was ravenous. He wanted to set his lips to the nipples that peaked against the shift, rosy shadows he needed to taste.

“A divine treat to a man who deserves one.”

He didn't realize he'd spoken out loud until she screamed, her entire body dunking beneath the water then resurfacing with a sputter, her hair tangled over her face.

“Hell.” He swam forward. “Let me help.”

“No!” She flung out an arm to keep him away and sank beneath the water once more, popped up more quickly this time. “No, no, no.” Each word tripping into the next. “Do not come any closer.”

Her legs pumped beneath the water, and one arm waved wildly to keep her treading upright, she pushed her hair off her face with her only free hand in jerky movements, blinking water out of her eyes. When she seemed to catch her breath, she stared at him with... well, there was no other word for it but horror .

“Perhaps we should move to a shallower bit of the lake,” Keats suggested.

Her gaze darted from one of his naked shoulders to the other. “No!” Then her eyes narrowed. “How far down does that bare skin go?”

“All the way down.”

Her eyes widened.

“To my smalls.”

She released a breath and closed her eyes. “Thank God.”

“I thank him, too, for bringing us here at the same time.” She’d told him not to flirt. He’d determined not to flirt. Unfortunately, flirting ran thick through his veins. Like breathing, he couldn’t not do it. “I was about to leave.”

“Do not let me stop you.”

“Oh, you already have. No stopping me from being stopped. But you may certainly leave if you wish.” There. Better. He wasn’t here for a flirtation. He was here for Alex. And this woman, this goddamn heroine, certainly deserved better than a drunken coward like him.

“I will.” She swam toward the bank, slowed, and turned around, muttering a curse.

And he watched it all, unable to look away as long as she was within view. “What is wrong, Miss Jones?”

“How do you know my name?”

“Asked around. Miss Lucy Jones. I must say, my tongue rather likes saying it.”

She scowled. “Don’t say it. And you must turn around and close your eyes.”

“Must I?” Hadn’t he, after all, just determined he couldn’t close his eyes? Not against the sight of Miss Lucy Jones.

“I am going to tell Mr. Beckett he’s brought a wolf into our midst.” She took off for the bank.

Panic shot through him, propelled him through the water and after her. He couldn’t let her tell Mr. Beckett anything of the sort. He’d be sacked.

“I apologize!” he called after her. “Don’t go.” She did not stop, and damn but the woman could swim quickly. Those thick limbs harbored strong muscle. He had to kick harder to keep up. “Where did you learn to swim?” Said more to himself than to her, but she slowed and then stopped, then looked at him over her shoulder. She seemed to have found some footing on the lake bottom, and she no longer had to work to tread the water.

She ducked low beneath it, though, the waves lapping just above her breasts. “My father taught me how. I grew up in the country. How do you know how to swim?”

“I may be a London lad, but my father has—” A country seat with a lake twice this size on the property. Couldn’t say that, though, could he? “A brother, my uncle, with a farm. We used to visit as children in the summer. No one taught me. I seem to have a knack for it, though.” That much true at least. He swam a few inches closer and reached for the lake bottom with his foot. Yes, just there, silty and cool.

She turned toward shore, and he needed more than air, more than soap, to keep her just where she was, not quite within arm’s reach inside that lake.

“Do you have brothers and sisters?” he cried out. Then swallowed a groan. Of course she had a brother. He knew that. She knew he knew that.

When she turned back to him, merriment made her eyes glow. “One brother.”

“Yes, of course. Perhaps he should inspect my mental capacities. My wits seem to

have sunk to the bottom of the lake.”

“Do you? Have brothers and sisters?”

“One sister.”

“Oh. Is she well? Your face fell when I asked, and...” Miss Jones chewed her bottom lip.

“No, I do not think she is well. But I have high hopes she will be. She is smart and strong, and I find I greatly admire her.”

“You seem surprised about that.”

“I am a bit. And that’s a shame.” He ran a hand through his dripping hair, slicking it back against his skull. “I know we’re not supposed to speak of the ladies who come here, but... I can’t help but wonder, where do they go... after?”

She looked up to the sky and shivered. “All over the place and wherever they wish. Wherever they feel safest. Some seek out family. Others cross the ocean to pursue new lives in different lands. They go where they are wanted and where they will be loved. Hopefully.” That last word an afterthought, a crack in her armor.

“Hopefully?”

“We can never know for sure what the future holds for us. Love or... something else.”

“No. I suppose we can’t.” He’d certainly never expected to be talking to a mostly naked woman in a lake while mostly naked himself. And not even flirting but discussing the cruel inconsistency of life. Good God, he never thought about life .

But... maybe he... should? "What will you do when you leave here?"

"Marry. And you?"

"I will... I will..." Return to drinking and whoring and infidelity and duels at dawn and dying. Slowly. Surely. Tedious day by tedious day. Why did he do it? Why did he run thoughtlessly through life like a drunk man swinging about a sabre? Did he mean that metaphorically or literally? He had been drunk once at Griff's place. His friend, the Earl of Finley, had been trying to pry another bottle from his hands. And once Keats's hands had been freed of drink, he'd busied them with something else, jerking an antique sabre off the wall. He'd swung it about wildly, stumbled... Griff wore a scar on his jaw to this day where Keats had slashed him well and good.

Some damage could not be undone.

"Well?" Her eyes were brown. He'd not seen her in enough light until now to notice it. A light brown, burning gold at the edges. He'd never seen their like, so clear and confident. That more mesmerizing than the color. The way she watched him over the water's edge as if she studied him from across a ballroom. She would rule there, throwing every rake and rogue into a tizzy because she'd see right through them.

Did she see right through him? Hell. He should keep his distance.

"Well?" she said once more.

Well what? Oh, yes. "I'll find another lark, I suppose. When I leave my... position here." But he didn't feel like larking. Not anymore.

Every goddamn thing changed in less than twenty-four hours. Anger, irrational and boiling, rippled through him like the water circling rings around him in tiny, lapping waves.

He knew who he was—a rogue. And he knew what he wanted—her.

And rogues took what they wanted. Always. He surged through the water, meeting her widening eyes, and grasped an arm around her waist. He yanked her tight against him and, before she could so much as gasp, devoured her mouth in a hungry kiss.

That taught him more than he'd learned in all his eight and twenty years. Not about kissing. Of that she seemed to know very little, certainly not enough to teach. But about passion and about himself, who he was and what mattered to him.

Because she kissed him back, her arms wedged between their bodies. Her kiss seemed a punishment. She offered it like she might a parting laugh, one that would leave him shattered.

And then she ended it, softening each movement, showing him she could lead him where she wished, then peeled her lips away from him with a hot breath. He strained his neck for more, to catch her up again, but she pushed him away, sent him sailing into the water, stunned. Then she swam after him.

And slapped him. The hard sting of her hand etched into his cheek.

“It seems I left a rule out, Mr. Keats. You do not touch the women here. And that includes me.” She swam off, and when she reached the bank, she did not hesitate to rise out of the water, her shift molding to every perfect curve of her body. She stepped into an abandoned gown and shoved her arms into the sleeves. One lift of a fine, golden eyebrow was all she offered him by way of a farewell before she disappeared into the woods.

Keats sank under the water. Did this lake, perchance, possess any monsters? Multi-tentacled beasts who might rise out of the depths and swallow him whole. He'd throw himself into its maw. Because shame weighed his limbs down, suffocated his heart.

He was an earl, would be a marquess one day. She was a farmer's daughter, a radical.
But she was better than him, and he would never deserve that kiss he'd tried to steal.

And he would feel her slap's sting across his cheek till the day he died.

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Four

Lucy guided the baker's daughter into Hawthorne House and up the stairs. Mrs. Beckett waited in an empty room for them both. A baby's crib sat low by the narrow bed, and the fresh bouquet of flowers in a white vase brightened a chamber lit only with the early morning gloom.

Miss Thea Caplan clutched her large belly like it was a lifeboat in a tossing sea, her gaze darting from one corner of the room to the other. Her bright-red hair poked out from beneath her worn bonnet, and she took the hesitant, stumbling steps of a woman terribly unsure. When her gaze fell on the small crib, her hesitance evaporated. She flew across the room and knelt with a grunt beside it, running her fingers along the edges. She glanced up at Mrs. Beckett standing beside Lucy in the doorway. "Thank you, ma'am. Thank you."

Lucy's time to leave. Mrs. Beckett handled things from here. Lucy must head to her brother's home, curl up in bed with a pair of stockings she'd been embroidering, sleep if she could, and attempt—if she could—to forget how the blue-eyed stable boy had looked at her when she'd helped Miss Caplan out of the coach, how his lips had felt crashing into hers a month ago, wet and warm and firm and perfect.

Heavens. A month, and she still could not purge her memory of his kiss. Perhaps this was what turned men into rakes—unhealthy obsessions with pleasure and those things that most quickly provoked it.

Perhaps it was merely her—impulsive and passionate Lucy drawn to yet another mistake like a moth to a flame.

She'd avoided him, mostly. And he'd avoided her. They met only at midnight and dawn, as she left and returned from London. And during those brief moments, she could not look away. He wasn't as lanky and smooth as he'd been when he'd arrived here. A month of country living had put muscle on his frame and whiskers on his chin. His dark hair inched toward his collar, always untamed and falling across his eyes. But when their gazes caught, he would brush it back, sending the muscle of his arm and shoulder tightening against the linen of his threadbare shirt. Without fail, she'd drop her gaze to his lips and feel, even through the distance separating them, their firm warmth.

She had to hide in the coach to break the connection, to avoid her own desires. Tonight, she'd been alone. No Peggy to keep her company. There had been, however, a blanket, a basket filled with bread and cheese, and, curiously, wine. Unusual. Yet, all but the wine had proven useful once she'd had Miss Caplan in her care. She must tell Mrs. Beckett to make the basket and blanket a regular occurrence.

A cry careened down the hallway behind her. She whirled and ran back into the bedchamber she'd just abandoned. Miss Caplan leaned against the bed, her arms wrapped round her belly. Mrs. Beckett stood above her, a hand on the young woman's back, a growing puddle at her feet, dribbling from beneath Miss Caplan's skirts.

"Lucy," Mrs. Beckett said, sparing her a fleeting glance, "Miss Caplan needs the doctor. Quick. The babe's coming."

Lucy fled, her legs flashing against the deep slit in her skirts, her men's boots, fitted to her own feet, pounding hard into the marble and then into gravel as she left the house and sped toward the stables. A light mist had begun to fall from gray skies, wetting tendrils of her hair to her forehead.

"I need a horse!" she cried, skidding around the edge of the doorway. Morning sun

had not yet broken through the gray shadows. The air was still with the smell of hay and horse and electric with the startled snorts of its occupants. And with the sounds of running boots.

Keats appeared, wearing only breeches and untucked shirtsleeves. “Miss Jones. What do you need?”

“A horse.” Laughter almost broke through the urgency.

He winced but set to work, entering a stall with the mare she usually rode. “You did say that. What’s happened?”

“The lady I just brought—her babe is coming.”

He froze, his arms dropping to the side as if the bit and harness he held were suddenly too heavy. “God.” The single word choked out before his body broke into a frenzy.

“Mr. Keats.” She stepped closer. “Are you well? We should make haste, but babes take their time coming. Usually. She’s going into labor, not dying.”

“Could be dying.” Mr. Keats’s face had gone pale as a newly laundered shift. He led the horse out of the stall and wrapped his hands around Lucy’s middle.

“Wait!” She clasped his wrist before he could release her. “Not a side saddle.” She parted her skirts to show the slit, her pantalets and embroidered stockings peeking through.

Lightning stuck inside his eyes. “Bloody hell. You’re trying to kill me.”

“I’m trying to be practical. A man’s saddle, please.”

“Very well.” He switched out the saddles and wrapped his hands around her middle once more.

She slapped them away. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you mount.”

“There’s a mounting block.” The blockhead.

“I’ll do it.” His hands tightened, fingertips gripping onto muslin and flesh.

“You can’t.”

“You’re not using a damned mounting block when I’m here to help.” His hands tightened further, his arms flexing, muscle screaming against worn linen, and then her feet left the ground, and she gripped the pommel, pulling herself as he lifted. She reached the saddle with ease and with every inch of her body alive to his touch.

Then he released her and bolted, and she brushed her hands over her sides, trying to rub away the tingling, ghost sensations where his touch still, somehow, lingered.

He returned, leading another horse before she could set her mount toward the stable doors.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he saddled the second horse.

“Coming with you.”

“There’s no reason to?—”

“I’m coming with you.” His jaw flexed, and though clearly his stance on the subject

would not flex, hers did. No use wasting her breath to convince him to stay.

In moments, they were gone, galloping through the fields and toward the village. The morning mist had turned into a full-fledged rain, and she had to wipe her eyes to see the road ahead. When they reached her brother's home, Mr. Keats swung her to the ground without question, without hesitation, his hands strong and steady around her. They didn't even linger .

She'd wanted them to.

Before she could catch her breath, Keats was pounding on the door, her brother was opening it, and Keats was giving him all the information he needed. And his horse. To save time saddling another, Keats said.

Lucy watched her brother disappear down the road, feeling a bit... deflated. Beside her, Mr. Keats seemed deflated, too. His hands trembled, and he'd not lost the pallor of his skin. Yet he'd quite taken control of the situation. And of her.

"You are a reliable soul in a crisis, Mr. Keats."

"Pardon? Oh, thank you." He was still watching the road where Hades had disappeared.

"I barely did a thing."

"You led me to your brother's house."

"I suppose. Mr. Keats, are you unwell?"

"Quite. I mean no. I mean... do not worry over me, Miss Jones." He lifted her back up onto her horse and took the reins, guiding them through the rain and back toward

Hawthorne House. He wore no cloak, and the rain molded his shirt to the curves of his shoulders, the planes of his back, lovingly over the muscled mound of his backside.

She pressed her center against the saddle to tame the aching there. “We need shelter. Over that way.” She pointed toward a stream and a thick copse of trees on one side of it. “That canopy will suffice.”

Without a word, he led her there, looped the reins around a tree branch, and held up his arms to her. Once more, his hands on her waist, her body ignited by his touch, her imagination ignited, too, by the strain of his muscle against the wrinkled linen of his shirt.

Under the trees, a large rock jutted out toward the stream, and he sat on it, shoulders slumped, head hanging forward as he scratched his fingers through his hair.

“Hell,” he breathed, scrubbing a palm down his face.

She sat next to him. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“I’m not one of your troubled ladies.”

“Very well.” She threaded her fingers together in her lap. Sometimes, threading a needle required meticulous patience. The clouds moved overhead, gray surging against dim white. The nearby stream rushed forward, crashing out of control with its new, rain-soaked inches. And still she waited.

He took a breath first, seemingly careful not to let his body show too much the rise and fall of an inhalation. And then he said, “My mother died in childbirth.”

Oh, what an unexpected blow.

He dropped his hands to his sides and spoke to the sky beyond the tree branches. “My first stepmother, too. My current stepmother is younger than me and will have her second babe in mere months. Hell, she’s tiny. And so quiet all the damn time.” He squeezed his eyes closed tight. “She has red hair like the lady you brought today. Do you think she’s well?” He turned only his head to look at her, and worried fear made his eyes swim a watery blue.

No wonder he’d come here to work. He was not as careless with women as that kiss had suggested. The kiss had been something else. Something outside of the world, just between them two.

Lucy chose her words carefully. “She’s likely in a bit of pain. But as far as I know, her pregnancy has progressed normally. And my brother is with her. She will be fine.”

“I wish you could tell me if my stepmother will be fine. I know you cannot. I don’t like to think about it. How she might die. Truthfully, I barely know her, but that does not matter. I don’t want her to—” The words seemed to lodge in his throat.

“She might not. Women have babes every day.”

“And they die. Every day. From the same. My sister... she was betrothed. To an old man, and I didn’t much mind. I think... I think I thought it safer. If he died soon, as he was sure to do, she wouldn’t have to bear many children.” He shook his head. “You’re not interested in this.” He forced a bright smile. “Tell me... this new lady. The one who arrived when I did... she’s well? Acclimating... nicely?”

She should not speak of Alex, but he needed distraction, and she wanted to give it to him. “Yes. But she did not have much at home to make her leaving bittersweet.”

“Nothing or... no one she loved, that she’ll miss?”

“No. A hard father, a cruel betrothed, and a thoughtless brother.”

“Perhaps he’s doing what all young gentlemen do—sowing his wild oats, living before he must settle down and produce an heir. Perhaps if she’d gone to him, trusted him, he might have helped her.”

“What would he have done? Reassured her their father knew best? Looked once at the bruises on her arms and told her she imagined them? No. This is better. This is why Hawthorne House exists.”

“You are right. It is a haven, and I am glad to be part of it. In even the smallest way.”

She made the leap, then, reached for him, let her fingers test the stubble on his cheek, found that the roughness on her fingertips stole, somehow, her ability to breathe. But she spoke anyway, fingers sitting on stubble. “I am glad you are here, too.” She pulled her hand back to her lap and curled her fingers into her palm, trapping the sensation of stubble there for as long as she could.

They didn’t touch, despite sitting so close together, and the sliver of space between them sizzled into something living, something impossible to pass through.

He cleared his throat and spoke with a laugh. “I fear my ego is overly inflated, thinking I can be of any help to you at all. You, after all, are quite perfect.”

She inhaled, the air hissing through her teeth. “Hardly.”

He gaped, mouth hanging open. “Miss Lucy Jones, my angel, my countess, say it isn’t so.” Clearly, he was feeling better. Or hiding the raw truth of his heart behind careless teases.

“I did something quite stupid once. I interrupted a mission for Hawthorne House.

Tried to complete it myself. I had no training, no idea. We were almost caught. Things turned out well enough, I suppose.” She wiped a stray raindrop off her cheekbone. Not a tear. Not at all. “After that night, my mother looked at me differently. She’s always wanted me to be better than her. I proved I was not.” You’re a passionate girl, she’d said, as if that were not a compliment, and you must not give in to your impulses. Lucy had always wondered what she’d left unsaid. Two little words maybe?

Like me. Do not give into your impulses like I did.

Lucy would never do that. She’d abandon passion for duty.

“Was anyone hurt?” Mr. Keats asked.

“Pardon?”

He elbowed her arm. “Was anyone hurt? On your first mission?”

“No.”

“Was anyone helped?”

“Yes.”

“If you have only done one foolish thing in your life and it turned out well, then I admire you. Greatly. You are a more perfect being than I shall ever be. I’ve done a thousand foolish things. Not a one of them helpful.”

“You helped today. In retrieving my brother.”

His mouth curled into a grimace. “Apologies for hauling you about. I was not

thinking. At all. Apologies, as well, for... what happened at the lake. I should not have kissed you.” He clasped his hands between his knees. “It was a rather unique circumstance, and I am not known to behave in the most proper of those. I was bucking against the truth, denying it.” He picked at a fraying hole in his trousers.

“And what truth is that?”

“That I can never go back to who I was before.”

“And who was that?”

He tilted his head, and through a soft curtain of dark hair, he studied her, parted his lips, then shook his head. “Trouble. That’s who I was.”

She hopped off the rock and stood at the edge of the stream, the lightening rain melting into her already soaked cloak. Clear water tumbled over polished stones, and she picked up a small one that had washed onto dry land. She tossed it, and it landed with a plop and a splash.

He joined her, towering above like a strong oak, hands stuffed into pockets. “Did you use the basket? The blanket?”

“Pardon?” She looked at him over her shoulder. “The one in the coach? Yes, I did.”

“I thought you might find those things useful.”

“ You thought? But Mrs. Beckett put those...”

He grinned, pink slashing over his high cheekbones.

“You?”

He shrugged.

“They were quite useful.”

“Good.” He stepped around her to stand between her and the stream. “Do you forgive me? For the kiss?”

There was nothing to forgive. The kiss did not hound her—lies she told herself. She cherished it. Relived it over and over because it sang through her blood like a perfect melody. It may be the only memory of passion she’d have to look back on after she let a husband she did not love into her bed.

The only memory? How sad, how pitiful. “How can I grant forgiveness when I want nothing more than another kiss?”

Every sound around them fizzled into silence—the rush of the stream, the patter of the rain, the hush of their separate breaths. Then he stepped closer, his thighs brushing against her skirts, and his hand nestled beneath her chin, lifting it, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“Do not say it if you do not mean it.”

She was soaked and sad, lonely, and the adrenaline of her nighttime mission still buzzed through her. “I will likely marry soon and?—”

“It is already arranged?”

“Not yet. Soon. But it is not likely I’ll know passion.”

“A true tragedy.”

“Not if I explore passion now.” Give into impulse one more time. “Before I marry a man who will never know me.” Not truly. What man could she ever share all of herself with? What man would love her knowing why she’d married him?

“What are you saying?” he asked.

He was flippant and charming. He took liberties and he teased. But he cared, too. He was no thoughtless aristocrat using her as a plaything. He was a working man with calluses on his palms. This the kind of man she wanted, but not the kind of man she’d have in the end. At least she’d have the memory of his touch, of the desire hot in his eyes, when she married herself to cold duty.

“I’m asking you to show me what passion is like. I wish to learn of pleasure before it is too late.”

His jaw shifted side to side for a moment as he looked through the trees to the road in the distance. Then it softened, and so did his lips, and his hand beneath her chin smoothed around to the back of her neck, pulling her tight against his hard body. “If I go to hell for kissing you, so be it. The taste of your tongue is worth eternal damnation.”

When he crashed his mouth against hers, the flames leapt to life, consuming, raging, ruining. Sinning was a sweet thing, and instead of falling into hell as she fell into this man’s lips, she found heaven quite reachable on earth.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am

Five

K eats would never prove himself a gentleman, not when Lucy's lips offered themselves up for the ravishing. Not strong enough to resist. Surely, no man was, but thankfully she'd chosen him for her seduction. Happy to oblige. Honored, even. Couldn't turn her away, not when she tasted of the honey he'd secured in the wicker basket he'd stowed in the coach. She'd eaten what he'd provided her, and now he wanted to eat her. Need ravaged him, moved him, took her mouth and made it his own.

She let him. And he'd keep taking as long as she said yes.

She was saying yes with every slant of her lips across his, with every hot breath, with every fingertip on his arm branding him hers.

Hers .

Somehow that gentled him, slowed him. They exhaled as one, and the kiss softened. He smoothed his hands down her rounded shoulders, up again, all the way up her neck and into her hair. He groaned, pulled away slightly so the tips of their noses bumped.

With eyes shut, he asked, "Can I keep kissing you, countess?"

"Yes," she breathed, flattening her palms against his chest. Did she like his newly hardened body? Did she appreciate the unfashionable muscles he'd honed in the month he'd worked harder than he ever had in his life? He did. If she or Alex ever

needed his protection, he could give it.

He returned to kissing, exploring the soft curve of her jaw, her cheek, the feathery gold of her eyebrows. When he returned to her lips, she was hungry for him. She fisted her hands in the cotton of his shirt, tugging until she could slip her hands under and slide up his abdomen to his chest. Her eyes glazed over. She did like his body.

His lust careened out of control. Hers did, too, and their teeth clashed. He laughed. Her kiss, though passionate, was unpracticed. The little innocent. She asked for more, but if he gave her the passion that made him heavy and hard, he might scare her.

He must move slowly. “Can I kiss you more?”

“Yes. You need not ask permission.”

“You may rescind that offer soon.” He lifted her off the ground.

With a gasp, she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist as he carried her up the bank, turned, and sat on the rock, cradling her in his lap.

Such an intimate, wanton position—their chests pressed together, her legs spread wide to straddle his thighs and the hard bulge growing there. He ran his fingers up and down her neck, her back, ran them around the outside of her hips, then trailed them up and down her thighs. The skin of one thigh in particular. The slit in her gown gaped open, revealing the hem of the pantalets above her knee and her stocking below it. And that strip of visible skin between the two.

He fisted his hand in the crisp white cotton of her drawers. “Bloody hell, you siren. I’ve never seen any sight so entirely seductive. I’m trying to reform, countess, and here you are dragging me sin-ward.”

“’Tis no sin for you. Only for me. But I do not care.”

“I adore sinning, always have.” But it didn’t feel like sinning with her. It felt like heaven had lowered its guard, felt like he’d snuck in somehow when they’d not been looking. “You make me feel less empty, less lost, less alone.” Hell, what an insipid thing to say.

Better to delve into her body, a rogue’s delight. Her thigh a heaven on earth. He rubbed his hand up and down it until she moaned his name.

“Are you aching, angel? Tell me where.”

“Here.” Her hand slid from his abdomen and crept between her legs.

“Do you want me there?”

“I want... yes, I want you. There and everywhere.”

“You’ll have it.” He dragged his lips along her jaw and kissed her neck, pushing her cloak away from her shoulders and running his fingertips along her collarbone. Beneath that, a bounty, a feast, the most magnificent pair of breasts he’d ever seen. Ever touched.

He dipped his thumb into her cleavage. So warm, so perfect.

She gasped, and he kissed the edge of her bodice. Soft muslin and softer skin, a heady combination. He hooked a finger beneath her bodice, tugged. Her breasts spilled out—berries and cream—and he gathered them up, pressed them together, her skin hot and rosy. He tasted it, the cream first, full and lovely with a hint of the salt of her sweat. He traced a path to her nipple with his tongue, circled, laving first before taking one fully into his mouth, sucking.

Her head fell back on her neck with a moan, her fingernails scraping against his skin beneath the warmth of his shirt.

“You like that.”

“Yes.” The word ragged and sharp. She clung to him, squeezed her legs more tightly around him and rocked her middle against his pulsing cock. “Yes. More.” She rocked again.

He slid his hand across the satin of her thick thigh to the crisp curls hiding her cunny. She inhaled, exhaled—shaky, broken, needing. Oh yes, her body told him everything. Not a single word needed. He found the slit in her pantalets and slipped through, grazing the part of her sex first, giving her a chance to push him away.

She did not. So he cupped her mound and rubbed, his thumb probing through her curls and finding?—

“Ah!” A sound half gasp, half cry broke from her lips.

“Do you know what that is?”

“Yes. I... I’m well educated in female anatomy.” She gripped his shoulders beneath his shirt, squeezed until her fingernails scored his skin. “And its possibilities.”

He rubbed circles around her glorious little pearl, watching her face flush, her eyelids flutter closed. “Tell me what you feel when I touch you like this.” She wouldn’t, this innocent. She’d?—

“Like I’m drowning in a sea of sensation. As if... as if a wave of pleasure is about to... to decimate me.”

His cock leapt. She'd given him an answer so easily, spoken of her pleasure so freely.

Her fingernails clawed again. "Drown me," she demanded, opening her eyes. Fire lit them, jumped into his body.

"As you wish." He stroked, parted, delved deep, and she cried out again, clutching him, pressing her bare breasts against his shirt-sodden chest. A cold lingered in the air, but their bodies banished it. His hand at her core a miracle, his lips at her breast heaven. Her breaths came shorter, faster as her chest heaved in a delicious rhythm that rocked her against his cock.

He dipped a finger into her, then a second and a third, and she took him, biting her bottom lip. His thumb still circled hard and fast and?—

Her eyes flew open—the earthy brown of life, beautiful and shocked, heated and piercing into his damned-to-hell soul. She cried out as her body shook, his name rough in her throat, silky on her lips.

Control gone in that cry, in those coffee-dark eyes, drowned in the power of her climax. He wrapped an arm low around her hips and ground into her, taking over her rocking motion as his own climax ripped through him. Every muscle hard, every atom of his being melting. He came in his pants like a bloody green lad. But that like nothing he'd ever felt before. Not an embarrassment. What man, after all, could resist Lucy shattering in his arms? Not Keaton Godwin, that was for damn sure.

No, not an embarrassment, a remaking. As if in her embrace he could return to his own innocence, experience everything for the first time. With her.

And that made it better than he'd ever known it could be.

He held her as their breathing settled into a softer rhythm, smoothing her wet hair,

drawing lines up and down her spine with his fingertips, resituating her skirt to cover her leg, and murmuring silly, rambling little things near her ear because he couldn't seem to shut up.

“You should not have asked it of me. Not that I'm complaining. You'll have to call me Keats now. And let me call you Lucy. No arguing. You'd best let me do that again. Or something like it. Don't know if I can be in the same room, er, stables, as you and not do that. Or something like it. I'm going to hell, no doubt, ruining an angel. But I didn't. Ruin you. Not really. I won't ruin you, that I promise. No matter how many times I do this. Or something like it. You know?—”

She cupped his cheeks with both hands and kissed him. A most successful strategy for stopping the myriad musings of his idiotic mouth.

They kissed, slow and soft as if they had every hour of every day to do so, and the rain lightened to a mist, then stopped altogether. The stream grew to a roar as it passed, splashing against their rock. Birds sang and the sun glowed, and a coach groaned over muddy, rutted roads behind them.

“Hell.” Lucy jumped off his lap, righting her bodice. “This was... this was?—”

“Don't say it was a mistake.” Keats pushed to his feet, tucking his shirt in. Hell. He'd been soaked through, but now he was sticky as well. At least the rain hid the evidence of his climax.

“No. Not a mistake. Thank you. It was a most useful interlude.”

“Useful?” He snorted, unraveling the horse's reins from the tree branch. “Insulting.”

She rolled her eyes. “Useful is good. I wished to experience pleasure, and you were most successful at helping me to it.”

“The fact you can put more than two words together in a coherent sentence suggests I was not useful enough.” He offered his hands, interlocked, and she stepped into them, lifting herself up onto her horse.

“Please do not reprimand yourself. It was exactly what I wished it would be. I will not marry for passion, but to know it once...” She grinned. “Thank you.”

“Not once.” Foolish words. He could control those as well as he could control his cock. “Let me show you again.” And again and again. “For your sake. There are ways to seek pleasure without risking a babe.”

“I’m aware. But I do not know if it is wise. My family would?—”

“What does Lucy Jones want?”

She exhaled loudly. “Everything we just did and more.”

His hands tightened on the reins as he led her toward the road. He could do that. He shouldn’t. But he would.

“And who will you marry?” he asked.

“I’m not sure yet. I’ll know in a month or so. Soon I plan to travel to London. For the Season.”

“The Season? The social Season? Balls and soirées and plays and Hyde Park, and?—”

“Yes, all that. Do take the shock out of your voice. I am a farmer’s daughter, but I am also a viscount’s granddaughter.”

“How?” Couldn’t help sputtering out that question. His entire world tilted.

She cleared her throat. “My mother caused something of a scandal the year she debuted. A man promised her everything, and she gave him everything. Then, when she came to be with child, she demanded he marry her, and he laughed in her face. In front of the entire ton. When she returned to the country, my father was waiting for her. He’d loved her for years.”

Hell, what a scandal. He’d done worse in his life and not paid any price at all. Her mother, though. “I’m sorry, Lu.”

“It does not matter. She found happiness, and so will I. My grandfather has given me a sizable dowry. I will put it to good use. If I can find a man to marry me among the peerage, I’ll have a window into that world. I’ll be able to better help the ladies there who need it, I hope, without endangering those at Hawthorne.” She smoothed her hands down her rounded belly and luscious hips. “I’m not blind to the male attention I’ve received in the past. Despite my mother’s scandalous history, I think I’ll find one or two men willing to wed me.”

“Utter perfection is what you are, Lucy. What men have been paying attention to you? I cannot blame them, but I also cannot let them keep their eyes.”

“Keats.” She blushed prettily.

“I’ve changed my mind. They may keep their eyes because I want them to see how perfectly beautiful you are and to know I’m the man who gets to touch you.”

“Keats...” He didn’t like the hesitation in the way she said his name. Not at all. “This”—she moved her hand between them—“is temporary. I will use my appearance, my grandfather’s connections, to catch a husband. And my husband will be the one with permission to...” She swallowed hard, dissolving her next words. He

knew what they would have been anyway. Touch me. “Not you.”

Hell. True. He hated it with every bit of his body, mind, and currently tortured soul. He stared down the road. It seemed very long and lonely, dusty and desolate with no end in sight. A viscount's granddaughter. Hell.

“I’ve upset you? Is it because I’ve kissed you while planning to marry another? Is it because of my grandfather? Perhaps you think I’ve taken advantage of you. If I were free to wed as I choose, I would prefer a simple man, a stable hand who understood life better than some fop from London who’d never really lived it.”

His teeth almost cracked under the pressure of his jaw. A stable hand. He’d forgotten. Hell. He almost laughed. But he didn’t, and the bitter mirth soured in his hollow chest.

They did not speak as he guided her back toward Hawthorne, and when they reached the stables, he lifted her down in silence, too, watched her slip toward the stable doors.

She turned at the last moment and looked at him, her form a dark silhouette against the bright avenue of space between the doors. “Perhaps, I will let you show me. If you do not mind.”

No. No . The only word a responsible gentleman should say.

Unfortunately, the only thing Keats knew how to say when faced with one of Lucy’s requests was, “Yes.”

When she left, he changed into the only other suit of clothes he currently possessed and headed back to the village. He’d been about to set out there when Lucy had arrived in a rush to the stables what seemed a lifetime ago. His friend Griff kept

sending letter after letter asking when Keats planned to return. He knew Keats had run off somewhere near Dorking to find his sister and nothing more. Keats had often trusted the Earl of Finley as his disapproving second, and he trusted him now to keep his father calm. And clueless.

This morning, Keats had meant to send a letter saying he'd return soon. Alex was fine; there wasn't much more for Keats to do here. No amount of haunting the stables and grounds would help her step into a new life.

He'd have to write out a new response. Because he couldn't leave now. What if Lucy went looking for passion, and Keats wasn't there to help her find it?

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Six

Lucy threw herself in front of danger like an erotic angel of justice, but she didn't throw herself at Keats. Annoying, that. He wasn't supposed to kiss a woman more than once. Against his rules. He was happy to break those rules for Lucy. Who knew idealism was so arousing.

And when had he found arousal so frustrating? He had to take himself in hand every night because she wasn't putting her hands on him. He'd offered himself up. He'd remained here for her disposal.

Yet, she did not make use of him.

She was headed to London tonight. The stable hands and coachmen bustled about the stables making preparations. Keats's basket and blanket lay in the floor of the coach, ready for her, should she need it.

If the woman could sacrifice her life for duty, he could put a damn basket together. Too little, but no idea how to do more.

He'd parted her legs and made her shatter, and he dreamt about it every damn night. He'd done so knowing it was wrong. No whisky to fog the brain this time, no jeering fellows slapping him on the back and cheering him on to mischief. He didn't want to be like that anymore, like the men who sent women here. But it seemed he couldn't help it. Not with Lucy, whose Miss just would not stay put on his tongue. How in hell could he be formal with a woman whose cunny he dreamt of tasting?

The doors parted, and a shadow walked through. Her shadow. He didn't need details to recognize it. He busied himself with checking the buckles of the harnesses, the wheels, every spring and board of the coach. He'd never cared about buckles and knots and bolts before. Wouldn't have known what to look for had someone shoved his face into it. Now he did, and now he cared because he needed to know damn well she'd ride safely to London and back.

The lemon scent of her soap wafted to him over the aroma of hay and horse. And then her warmth was right there, right at his side, and she was lifting her chin to look at him, parting her lovely lips.

"Are we ready, Mr. Keats?" she whispered.

"Just about." He checked the box beneath the driver's seat. Pistol there. Ready. Good. Any rogue or bounder could jump up on the bench and find his way here. Better Mr. Sacks is ready when it happens. The next time it happens.

Shame. Knife. Twist.

What the hell had he been doing with his life, and why had his father let him do it? He'd not encouraged it, but he'd certainly not cared about the duels and the drinking and the gambling and the women. So neither had Keats.

But now... He glanced at Lucy. She paced between the stalls, her hands clasped behind her back, waiting for him to finish.

"Is something amiss?" he asked.

"No. Yes. I'm merely... anxious. A new girl will be helping me tonight, and it's a bit of a risk to take her. But it's what she wants. And we no longer have Peggy, so there are more reasons than one to accept her help. I have never trained anyone before. I

am afraid I will not give her what she needs to remain safe. And if we are—if she is—discovered by anyone she knows, my plans are ruined.”

He looked left and right. They were alone, so he clasped her hand and led her into an empty stall at the back of the stables. “You will do anything for your cause, Lucy. No one is better prepared than you. From the first moment I saw you, you’ve been teaching me. More than you know. Your kindness. Your courage. They make me want to be a better man.”

Her face brightened, and she looked at him as if he were good .

If only she knew.

“Do you have a knife?” he asked.

“Why?”

“I’d like you to be armed.”

She took his hand and slipped it past her cloak, past the slit in her skirts and straight to her thigh. No, not the creamy softness of that limb, but to a cold blade strapped to it. Damn but he was hard. Hard as that blade.

He swallowed. “Clever woman. You are well prepared. When you get to London, you will bustle the new lady into the coach, and you will take off with haste, no stopping. You will come back to me. Do you promise?”

“You’ll be asleep.”

He shook his head. “I will be waiting.” He had no other choice. His body and mind and damned racing heart would not quiet until he knew her safe. He kissed her. Long

and deep, saying everything he could not with words because he'd never had occasion to use those words before, never truly knew the meaning of them.

The tension vibrating through her body drained away beneath his touch. Ah. He could help her, in the only way a man like him knew how.

He deepened the kiss, walking her backward slowly, gently, so she didn't notice until her back hit the wall. He stroked his tongue into her warm mouth and cupped her breast, rubbed his thumb back and forth over the nipple until it peaked, hard and lovely even through all those proper layers.

Not entirely proper. That slit in her skirts. Damn. Yes. He sought it out, raked his fingernails up and down her thigh, over the ribbon that held her garter up, over the steel of her knife.

He was harder than it, harder than he'd ever been.

But now was not for him.

He trailed kisses down her jaw, her neck, in the small space of skin visible above her bodice, and under her dark cloak. He licked the hollow between her breasts.

"Keats, what are you doing?" Her voice breathy as her hands tangled in his hair.

"Relaxing you. Making sure you leave Hawthorne calm and confident."

She gave a small, gusty laugh. "We can't."

He hit his knees before her.

He swept her skirts over one shoulder. What a blessing that slit was proving to be.

And he raised a brow as his thumb found her center and teased it. “Won’t take long, angel. I know what I’m about.” He had to be quick, didn’t he? They were not well hidden. A clock ticked down the seconds someone would come looking for her.

He adored a challenge.

Her hands in his hair tightened, as if she might pull him to his feet.

She didn’t, and he wasted no time discovering the taste of her, licking the seam of her between the fine cotton of her pantalets. She shivered, a squeak of passion lodged in her throat.

“Shh.” He placed two fingers against his lips as he looked up at her then popped them inside his mouth, wetting them, sliding them out slowly. “You must make no sound, or we’ll be caught.” Holding her brown eyes prisoner, he slipped his fingers into her. She shuddered, tightened. He winked, grinned, then dipped beneath her skirts once more. Inhale, exhale, the scent of her everywhere. So damn good. A kiss, a lick, the taste of her even better. He kept one hand as busy as his tongue at her center and the other hand worshiped her thigh, her belly, her breasts. Every damn place on her delectable body he could reach, he did, those parts hidden and those parts revealed. All parts his in this moment.

Mine .

When he licked and sucked, she rocked her hips against his face. When he thrust his tongue inside her, then thrust his fingers deeper, she collapsed against the wall, her knees bending as if she could no longer support the weight of the pleasure he kissed into her.

She delighted in his touch, his attentions, and nothing had ever in his pitiful life given him more joy than taking fear from her, replacing it with this—heady passion, rising

need.

Her hands clenched on his shoulders, and she made muffled little moans. If ever given the freedom of privacy, she'd be loud and demanding, and he'd give his own life to witness it, to cause it. He might have bruises on his shoulders where she gripped him. God, yes. To be marked by her strength... he'd beg for it if she wasn't giving it willingly, unconsciously. He worked harder, faster, time ticking in this small, heated, scandalous space, sheltered from the footsteps and voices so near but unknowing.

Entirely unaware that the prim yet intrepid Miss Lucy Jones was one shiver away from climax. He teased her lovely little clit with his tongue and thrust his fingers inside her once more, curling them, breaking her apart.

Her body rolled and undulated above him, around him, her creamy flesh shivering as he stood, gathered her against him so she could collapse into his embrace, so he could hold her up, keep her standing. She was a drenched gown draped over his shoulder, a woman loose-limbed and trusting even heavier in his soul.

"Better?" he murmured close to her ear. "Still nervous?"

"Nervous?" she mumbled. "What is that?"

He set her from him, holding her shoulders as she blinked into awareness and found the strength to hold herself up without his support. "I'll accept your thanks later. When you return. Perhaps you can show your gratitude by helping me relieve my tension as I've relieved yours."

Her gaze clouded then dropped down his body to his bulging cock. She looked away immediately, red blooming across her cheeks.

He guided her toward the stall door. “But now, you have somewhere to be.”

She nodded, blinked, still too spellbound to do much else. He chuckled and ducked down for another swift and final kiss.

“Lucy,” a voice rang out in the stables, familiar and jerking him out of the kiss. He looked over the edge of the stall then ducked down with a curse.

Lucy ducked down with him. “What’s wrong?”

“Lucy,” the voice called again.

Alex’s voice. That’s what was wrong. Alex was walking into the stables as she hadn’t since their arrival. Bloody hell . He had to hide.

“Just a moment,” Lucy called out, finally fully awake. She smoothed her skirts and mastered her blush. “That’s the woman I’ll be teaching tonight. She arrived here with you from London. And she has decided she does not want to leave Hawthorne House but would like to work with me. Rescuing the girls. It’s a good thing, too. Because I will not be able to work in this capacity anymore once I wed.”

Did he feel like crying? Good God, why ? He’d never cried a day in his life. Likely, he hadn’t even cried as a babe. Surely not. He’d grunted and pointed at the wet nurse’s breast. Quite like he did now. Hell, he may not have evolved much since infancy.

“I must go. Geddings needs me.” Keats nudged her towards the stall door. “Be careful.”

“Lucy,” Alex called again.

“Go,” he hissed.

And she did. He stayed in the stall until the coach rumbled out of the courtyard. Then he beat his forehead against the stall three, no, four times. Because maybe that would help... something.

It didn't.

“Keats!” Geddings could scream like a ton mama on a rampage when he needed to.

Keats slunk out of the stall. “Right here. Quit shrieking.”

Geddings, standing half in shadow, stabbed his thumb toward the large doors leading outside. “Someone here ta see ya.”

“Who?”

“Hell if I know. Take care of it and get back to work.”

Keats heard the pounding of his heart in his ears as he forced one foot in front of the other. He didn't see anyone at first. Only the evening sky, the house and gardens. But then he heard the crunch of a boot on gravel and felt a presence to his right.

“Well, damn. It is you.” Griff stepped into the dim light cast by the rising moon. He had the sort of sandy-blond hair that looked brown in the shadows and gold in the light. Beneath the moon and shadows, it shifted between both shades, swept back in a close-clipped fashionable cut. As always, he was impeccably shaved, impeccably dressed, and regarded Keats with a tight-lipped expression that seemed to defy humor itself. The only stain on his perfect appearance the thin white scar striking down the length of his jaw—the scar Keats had left there. He'd left a mark on a man who'd only ever treated him well.

He'd not leave a mark on Alex. And his friend's presence put her in danger.

"What are you doing here?" Keats demanded.

Griff hung his head, cuffed the back of his neck. "I had to find you. Didn't seem right to tell you by post. Your letters came from Dorking, so that wasn't difficult to find, but the fact that you're not using your actual name certainly confused me. You're not too clever, though, going by Mr. Keats."

Hell and damnation. If Griff could find him... could others?

"Does anyone know you're here?"

"Maybe. I told your stepmother I was off to find you."

Anger, fear—they curled Keats's hand about Griff's cravat and fisted tight. Keats slammed his friend against the wall. "Does anyone know?"

Griff clawed at his throat, clawed to throw off Keats's hold, spoke with a strangled, halting rhythm. "Get. Off. No one knows. Get. Off!" He pushed Keats hard, sending him stumbling backward on legs made numb with staggering relief.

"What has gotten into you?" Griff paced toward him, tugging at his cravat. "First you run off, then you refuse to say where precisely. Then you attempt to kill me?"

"Wouldn't have killed you."

"That's not what my neck is saying."

"What did you come to tell me? Get it out, then go."

“I should have just sent a letter. If I’d know you were going to attack me, I?—”

“What is it?”

“I was going to tell you with a bit of sympathy, but I see you refuse that. Your father is dead, Keats. Your father is dead, and your stepmother is alone and with child. And Palmerson is infuriated that Alex has disappeared.”

Your father is dead .

Your father is dead .

Your father is dead .

Surely Griff jested. But Griff rarely jested. He was the frown to Keats’s grin, the Latin textbook to Keats’s naughty erotic novel.

Keats’s father was dead.

And still Griff lectured, as if he’d not just sliced Keats’s life into two distinct parts. “And you... you’re out here playing games!” He gestured up and down Keats’s body. “Pretending to be a stable hand? What in hell for? Another lark, another jest? Another moment in which you give in to your own whims over the needs of others.”

Keats lunged, slamming Griff against the stables and crushing his neck with his forearm. “You don’t know anything. This isn’t about me.”

“You’ve never cared about anyone but yourself,” Griff pushed back.

Keats released him, his arms and legs and entire body buzzing, buzzing, buzzing with the truth. “I haven’t. But I do now.” He stared up at the house.

Griff stood tense beside him. “What is this place?”

“A refuge. Hawthorne House. And the first rule of Hawthorne House is that you do not talk about Hawthorne House. Do you understand?”

“I assume you’ll kill me if I do?”

“You assume correctly.”

“Consider me silenced. Keats... you have to come home. You are now the Marquess of Rainsly.”

“Yes, I’ll come.” What other choice did he have? At least he knew Alex was safe. Lucy would watch over her, guide her. Or... the idea swept through him gradually like a candle growing brighter. Alex could come home. The new Marquess of Rainsly would not force her to wed a man she did not want.

He could do good with this. It was a chance to truly change. He searched for some shred of grief, of soul-dark mourning. Found none. Found, mostly, regret that he and his father had never even attempted to know one another. Strangers with the same nose.

“I must write to Alex. Tell her everything has changed. She can return home now.”

“Where the hell is she?”

Still, Keats looked at the house.

“In there ?”

“Leave it alone. Leave her alone.” Keats headed toward the cottage he shared with

Sacks, Griff rushing after him.

“You’ve been here?” Griff asked, recoiling as they entered.

“It’s not that bad.” It was currently empty. Sacks always took the ladies to London. Keats had nothing to pack, nothing here he’d need back in London, where he’d be a marquess, not a stable hand.

He needed to write to Alex. He’d sneak into the big house, find some paper.

And Lucy?

God, Lucy. He felt like she’d shown him every bit of her soul. He’d pulled back his thick skin to show her his, as well. Yet she still did not know who he was. What would happen if she did? What if he told her? What then?

Marriage?

Why not? She was a walking scandal, certainly, a farmer’s daughter, but also a viscount’s granddaughter. And hell—did he even care about any of that?

He wanted to stay with her, to keep her at his side. He didn’t want ladies from the demimonde and willing widows, larks and whisky, or duels at dawn anymore. He wanted her . She was like a good bottle of whisky one never wanted to end. The whisky always ended, but Lucy wouldn’t. She’d go on being brave and clever and damned arousing from now until eternity, and he’d go on being utterly enthralled.

And undeserving. Naturally. But she made him want to deserve her.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am

Seven

The coach lurched to a stop, and after a pause, the door swung open. Lucy stepped down, and behind her, Alex helped Mrs. Clepton to the ground. A short and easy trip; the moon still shone high above Hawthorne House, a gold button in a navy wool sky.

And need for Keats still pulsed between her legs. Such a clever man. He had entirely banished her fears with a sinful stroke of his tongue.

“Alex?” She sounded steady, not at all ruled by lascivious thoughts. Excellent.

“Yes?” Alex stood several steps closer to the door than Lucy, her arm around Mrs. Clepton’s waist.

“Take our new guest to Mrs. Beckett. You know what happens next.”

Alex nodded. She’d not an ounce of nervousness during the journey, and she’d been able to put Mrs. Clepton at ease despite Alex’s Mayfair lilt and Mrs. Clepton’s East End Cockney. Alex would be a perfect replacement for Lucy, able to connect with and comfort women from every walk of life.

Mrs. Beckett appeared in the doorway, and Lucy raised a hand in acknowledgment before turning toward the stables. She slipped in while the other hands were busy with the coach and horses. Keats was not among them. Perhaps he was at Mr. Sacks’s cottage. Her feet turned in that direction before her mind had fully decided to do so. His faith in her earlier that evening... it had sung in her soul, kept her calm, made her want to reciprocate.

The cottage sat on the edge of the woods, its thatch roof blending with the spindly branches rising over the rooftops. She knocked on the door, her hood pulled low, hiding her face in shadows. It did not take long for the door to open.

Keats blinked at her in the dark, holding a candle between them to light up a sliver of the night. “Lucy?”

She pushed her hood back. “How did you know?”

“I’ll always know.” He stepped out of the cottage and so close to her she could smell the hay on his skin, feel the heat of his hard body.

“It was an easy trip. Everyone returned home quickly and safely. And I... I wanted to thank you.” Her boots were dark shadows peeking out from the hem of her skirt. “For helping calm me earlier.”

His hand against her jaw, a touch as light as air, brought her head up. He curved over her, around her, his fingertips tracing the arch of her ear now, smoothing a lock of hair behind it. “You didn’t need me.” He looked over her head and down the path at her back, toward the house and drive and stables where Mr. Sacks would be busy, but not for long. “I’m glad you came. There’s something I need to tell you.” He retreated into the shadows cast by the cottage. “Lucy, I’m leaving tomorrow.”

She covered her heart with her hand, as if attempting to stop the bleeding from some mortal wound. But it could not be stopped, and life pumped out of her faster and faster with the horrid quick beating of her heart.

“Leaving?” she managed to say. “Why? Where?”

“Back to London. My father—” Something dark and painful twisted across his face. “He’s dead.”

And then she was hugging him, resting her head against his chest and clutching her arms around him, and he was curling into her, his hands fists in her cloak at her back and his face finding a home in the crook of her neck.

“I’m so sorry,” she mumbled against his waistcoat. “I am so sorry.”

He shook, a moment of tortured convulsions, and then he pushed away. “Thank you. But do not waste your sorrow on me. My father and I were not close. And I’ve come to realize the old man may have done more ill in the world than good. Me as well. I would have kept doing ill, too. But for you.”

The moon above made the white of his shirt glow, made the unshed tears in his eyes glisten, made the world into something new, a space out of time, out of duty, out of propriety.

“I should feel... empty, I suppose,” he said. “But I know what empty feels like. This is not it. Emptiness is having no purpose, is thinking yourself happy but not being able to put down a bottle because when you do... the nightmares seep in. Loneliness and dissatisfaction, fear and self-doubt.”

“Keats—”

“I don’t feel that now. I feel brimming over with purpose, determination. Damn the bottle, damn the man I used to be.” Each word rose higher in the darkness, and his profile in the pale moonlight seemed sharp and noble and too beautiful for a mere mortal. When he turned his gaze to her, any shadow that she might have seen there once had disappeared. His eyes were clear and bright and eager. “I return to London a different man entirely.”

When I return to London.

“Will I ever see you again?”

“That is another thing I wished to speak with you about.” He wove their fingers together—his, hers, his, hers, palm to palm and pulse to pulse. “I know you have plans, but I would like to be part of them. Lucy.” He pulled her closer and whispered the words against her hair. “I want to marry you.”

A surge of bright, pure light, nothing dusty or dim about it.

A wave of crashing cold water, creeping with seaweed and choked with salt.

Joy and sorrow tangled together, breaking her apart.

She wanted him. She wanted to give her heart to him, her life.

Impossible. Duty demanded otherwise.

So, perhaps instead, she could give her body. For a single night only.

She cupped his cheeks, and his hands found the softest parts of her.

She went up on toe and brushed her lips against his. He kissed her back as if he meant to push his very soul into hers through breath and lips, through teeth and the clutching, seeking, demanding hold of his strong hands.

They kissed until her breath grew raw. They kissed until her legs gave out. They kissed until her breasts ached for more. He whirled her around and pressed her against the wall of the cottage next to a climbing vine of summer roses. Pink in the daylight but night red now. He released her only to press his palms firm against the wall on either side of her head as he parted her legs with his knee and pushed his muscled thigh against her very center.

How did he make her melt there? Every time. And every time she wanted his touch more than she had the time before. An impossible accumulation of desire.

She flattened her palms against his chest and shoved gently. When he blinked down at her, brow furrowed, chest heaving with his heavy breaths, she said, “Take me inside. To your bed.”

His mouth fell open. “I... It’s... Hell.” He wiped his hand down his face, then gave a soft bark of laughter. “It’s not a bed, Lucy. A pile of rough blankets, hard and cold. I would give you silk and feather for our first time. I would give you wine and candlelight.”

“I don’t care. Take me to it. Take me .”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know there are ways to prevent a child. You must simply pull out of me before?—”

“Yes,” he snapped, “I’m aware.” The space between their bodies, previously humming with heat, had begun to thaw.

She could not have that. Grabbing his shirt, she dragged him closer, kissed him hard and quick. “Please. It is what I want. Once before you leave.”

“Damn me to hell.” He melted against her, catching her up in another kiss, this one slower, hungrier. Clutching her to him, he spun them toward the door, a moon-mad waltz that ended with the soft groan of the door closing behind them.

He offered her no opportunity to view the inside of the coachman’s cottage but dragged her toward a small room to the side, their kiss never once faltering, skin on

skin, lips on lips, fingernails dragging, and bodies hard. The moon peeked in through a small window. It had followed them, a midnight voyeur, and it showed her a narrow pallet in the corner of what appeared to be a closet or storage room.

“I told you,” he growled against her lips. “This is not good enough for you. I am not good enough for you.”

“I do not care where you lay me down, only that you do.” Now that they were secreted away from all eyes but for the celestial, every inch of her burned for his touch. Her stays were too tight and her shift too clinging, her cloak entirely in the way.

He kissed her neck and backed her toward the blankets, eased them to their knees. He could not seem to decide where to touch her first—the slope of her hip, the mound of her breast, the line of her back, the round of her belly, the heated place between her legs. No matter where he touched, though, he stoked her pulsing need higher.

She could no longer remain upright, and she lay back, holding her arms up, offering an invitation she’d give no one else in this way ever again.

He came to her, eyes on fire and greedy as he bent her legs on either side of him and stroked her skirts up over her knees until they pooled across her belly and only her pantalets covered her from his sight.

Until he clawed his fingers beneath their waist and ripped them away. A lock of hair fell across his eyes, but it didn’t hide his expression—wolfish, wanting. “Such a beauty. Not a damn thing in the world more beautiful than Lucy.” He licked his lips and traced his knuckles up and down the sensitive skin on the inside of her thighs. She thought, for a moment, he planned to follow those knuckles with his lips, but he settled his body between her legs and kissed her mouth.

“Hell,” he breathed against her lips, “I’d make you a marchioness right now. I would raise you up this very instant.” He gave a bitter laugh. “You are already so high above me, I cannot touch you. So high up there. With the stars, outshining them. I do not deserve you, but I’m a selfish man, and I’ll take what you give me.” He kissed her again, then stopped just as quickly. “I shouldn’t kiss you like this. There is more I should say first. Things I have done. Jeopardizing... but I won’t let any harm come to you. Ever. I swear it.”

“No more words. God, Keats, no more words. It feels like lightning is striking in my limbs. Or is about to. A storm is gathering inside me. Please, Keats. More.”

He plunged his tongue between her lips, exploring her further, crushing her body to his and kneading the flesh of her hips with hungry, delighted hands.

Her want was a living thing inside her. In her blood and in her bones, in the electricity skating across her skin and in the rapid beating of her ecstatic heart. Ecstatic because she’d never felt like this before, never given in to pure impulse and joy before. Lucy the daughter of a disgraced viscount’s daughter must be ever careful. But Lucy the moonlit maiden could live in utter abandon for once. Just once. With this man who said the most perfect things.

“I could love you,” he breathed into the kiss. “I never once considered love, but with you, I cannot stop thinking of it, feeling it.”

On such short acquaintance? Impossible. It was lust and admiration waltzing heady between them.

But also not impossible. Because she felt it, too; felt what could never be.

He ran his fingers up her spine, over the plump curve of her shoulder, and up her neck to tangle his hand in the hair at her nape, to deepen the kiss. She gave a little

startled cry when his lips moved roughly over hers, but she did not fall apart. No. She kissed him harder and with greedy abandon.

He clasped her hand with his free one and moved it down his chest, past the waist of his trousers, and over the hard ridge of his shaft outlined by the loose and dirty wool. And he kept kissing her, halting only when she squeezed.

He growled. No idea what that primal sound meant. But he did not stop kissing her, and his hands sought out the edge of her bodice, pulled it down, freeing her breasts. He kissed them, too, kneading and nipping with gentle teeth. Gentle hands, too, while his hips rhythmically rocked against her.

She raked her fingernails down his back, wishing it were skin. “Now. I need you now.”

His exhale a blast of fire across the skin between her breasts then over her belly and navel, his hands bracketed her hips as he dragged his lips lower. “You are... art.” That last word a heady breath. “These dimples.” He kissed her rounded hips, dragging his tongue over the softly textured skin there. “These elegant lines.” His hot breath running the length of the marks left on her inner thighs as her body had stretched and grown during girlhood. “Strength and beauty across every blessed inch of you.”

She arched her back, his words igniting her more than his touch. Until he set his lips against the apex of her body and kissed her. Pleasure, pure and spiraling. She tangled her hands in his hair, arching harder, higher as he parted her with his tongue, tasted her, rolled her body into a ball of nerve endings, sparking and crying for more. She moaned his name and clenched her hands in his hair as the world became sensation gathering force until it crashed over her, overwhelmed her, shattered a climax through her. She floated like a feather to the rough blankets on the hard floor, realized his soft, firm lips were roaming up her belly, tasting the valley between her breasts and

finding her lips once more.

A heavenly kiss, gentle. Good. Because she could barely move. Hadn't the energy or strength. But somehow, she found it as she grasped for the buttons at his fall, because no matter how glorious that had been, she needed more. Knew there was more. Had determined to take it. He helped her unloop the buttons, and she felt his shaft, hard and hot between their bodies as her hesitant hand crept toward it, wrapped around it.

His gaze caught her, flared to life. "I'm going to marry you." He kissed her. "I'm going to marry you and give you everything you desire. Marry me, Lucy. Will you?"

She opened her mouth to deny him. Such a foolish dream. But she could not shape the words. What if she let herself marry for love and found some other way to give herself to Hawthorne? Yes, her heart cried out. Marry a simple man with nothing to give but himself. Marry this man who makes you feel alive and loved. She smiled, and instead of setting one hard, cold syllable between them, she nodded.

Victory shot like lightning across his face, and he kissed her hard, settling himself between her legs as she clenched his shoulders. He teased her opening with the head of his shaft, dragging it up and down before thrusting into her. She greeted the thrust with a cry.

"Have I hurt you?" He tensed above her.

Tight and full. She'd never felt so full before. It felt different, new, perhaps the smallest bit uncomfortable, but heat tempered the pain, soothed it with a yearning ache both bright and beautiful. "More."

Lowering to his elbows, he moved with a slow, determined rhythm. She wrapped her arms around his neck and met each of his thrusts with a roll of her hips, letting her body tell her what to do and when. Each of his thrusts brushed against her curls and

the pulsing point hidden there, and she moaned his name when she could not quite catch the promise of falling stars. He rolled his weight to one arm and slipped the other between their bodies, finding exactly what she wanted, thrumming his thumb over it once, twice?—

She screamed, a cry of pleasure that rocked him into a quicker rhythm. Faster and faster, their bodies like their pulses—hot and impossible to calm—and then he rolled her nipple between his finger and thumb, and she shattered. His name on her lips, loud and long until he swallowed it in a hard, giving kiss. This time, her body shivered longer than before, tighter and higher.

He gave a final thrust before pulling out of her, his body taut, every muscle hard as he spent on the blankets beside them. For several heavy seconds, he panted above her, then he wrapped his hand around her nape and rolled them both to the side, gathering her up in his arms and kissing her forehead.

Perfect peace.

She stirred first, resting her palm against his hard chest to count the rapid beats of his heart. “I want to make you something.”

“Oh? What shall you make me?”

“A greatcoat perhaps. Something to keep you warm in London. But I do not know where to send it.” She didn’t need to know. The temptation to seek him out would ruin her, break her plans into a million tiny pieces.

“You are a tailor too? My, is there anything my Lucy can’t do?” His fingertips trailed down her shoulder.

Resist him, shut up her passions and impulses. She should.

But perhaps this weakness would be a gem she could always hold close to her heart and not a coal to burn her. “I enjoy modifying clothing more than making it. I would find you a blue greatcoat, as deep navy as the sky before sunrise. I’d put in a blue silk lining the color of your eyes. And opals for buttons.”

“You’ll make a dandy of me?” He threaded her hands with his and squeezed.

“You’re already a dandy of the soul, I can tell.”

He chuckled and pulled her so close the line between him and her blurred a bit, just enough for hearts to beat together and souls to leap in greeting. He whispered in her ear. “My beautiful Lucy, strong and brave. I’ll wear whatever you give me. I’ll be your stable hand and your footman, and better than all those your?—”

The cottage door crashed open.

Wide eyes, fumbling hands. Bodices righted, skirts lowered. Fall buttons closed and manly shafts shoved back to where they’d come from.

Fear coursed through her, embarrassment too.

“Keats, where the hell are you?” Mr. Sacks rummaged unseen in the main room, and then a light flared on. “There’s trouble at the house.”

“Trouble,” Lucy whispered, the word like ice on her tongue.

Keats slammed to his feet, helping her up as well and tucking his shirt in. He found a waistcoat slung across a chair in the corner and slipped it on. As he stepped through the door, he hissed, “Stay here.”

“This is all your fault,” Mr. Sacks said from the other room.

“Shh,” Keats hissed. Then the cottage door opened and crashed closed once more, and she was alone.

She waited only long enough to straighten her cloak and hear the heavy stomp of boots lead away from the cottage. Then she left, following them toward the house and whatever trouble had come to call.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:12 am

Eight

If any man possessed a blade for a tongue, it was Mr. Sacks. As soon as Keats set foot out the door until they reached the threshold of Hawthorne House, he cursed not only Keats but himself for allowing Keats to stay on.

He whirled in the doorway, slinging out his arms to block the entrance. “You swore you’d keep the secret. Swore you only wanted to see your sister safe.” He seemed to have ground his teeth down in the short distance between the cottage and the house. If he knew what Keats had been doing before he’d slammed through that door, he’d likely snap Keats’s neck. Not a single question asked.

Keats held his hands up. “I am entirely ignorant of your meaning. Are you mad? I would never —” The words clogged his throat, emotion, too, because he had . Griff. “Damn me. I told him to stay away.”

Sacks dropped his arms and shook his head. “I knew it! You feather-brained nodcock!”

A wail from inside. They ran—up the stairs, down a hall, up more stairs to a long, narrow hallway lined with even narrower doors. Few sconces lit the space, and the shadows held dominion, hiding a tableau at the very end. A woman, her arms rigid at her sides, and two bloody giants toying with a mouse.

Not a mouse. Griff.

Hands pushed Keats roughly aside, and Mr. and Mrs. Beckett stormed down the hall.

Doors eased open, revealing curious faces. The women. Curious? Scared?

“Back to bed!” Mrs. Beckett roared.

The doors snapped shut.

Mr. Beckett pushed up the sleeves of his banyan, revealing muscle-corded forearms.

“What in hell is happening out here?”

The figure in skirts stepped out of the shadows, and Keats’s heart clenched.

“Alex,” he whispered, wanting to go to her, to apologize, to promise to make everything right.

“He is an intruder here!” Alex pointed a brazen finger at Griff, caught arm for arm by the hulking footmen. One had a gap between his teeth and shockingly red hair. The other was missing a front tooth and possessed a swollen ear. Lucy had not been joking. The Hawthorne House help had been procured from a boxing ring.

Griff jerked his arms, kicked out his legs, but every hit seemed but a fly’s annoying buzz to the footmen. They merely held him tighter. One twisted an arm, and Griff caught a howl behind clenched teeth. The footmen shoved him to his knees.

“I may be an intruder,” he said, “but I’m not going to hurt you. God, Alex, it’s me.”

“Precisely.” A world of sorrow in that single word as Alex turned her back on Keats’s friend. What in hell had happened between them? They used to be friends of a sort, too.

“Do you know him?” Sacks hissed in Keats’s ear.

Keats couldn't find the words to respond.

Mrs. Beckett was looking at him, her keen eyes like a predator's in the dark. "What are you doing here? Get back to the stables."

What was he doing here? Hell. Alex would see him.

Alex had seen him. She walked toward him slow as a dream. "Keats? Is that..."

He made for the stairs.

And ran right into Lucy. She wobbled, and he steadied her, met her gaze briefly, so full of worried curiosity, before a hand wrapped tight about his wrist and tugged. And really, Keats was nothing more than a leaf on the wind; he went where he was blown, apparently.

Once face-to-face, Alex's eyes became blue moons, then she threw his wrist away as if touching him had burned her. " You ! What are you doing here, too?"

Ah, hell.

Lucy stepped to his side. "You know Mr. Keats, Alex?"

"Mr. Keats?" Alex threw her head back and laughed like a banshee, clutching her belly. A laugh that didn't last long enough for Keats to escape down the stairs. Oh, no, she cut the laugh off as neatly as you would a pat of butter and settled a deathly calm gaze on him. "He is not Mr. Keats. He is Keaton Godwin, Earl of Ennis. My brother."

Beside him, Lucy turned stone bit by bit, her arm closest him then everywhere else until even her breathing stopped. Stone had no lungs to take in air, had no heart to

beat for love. He had to revive her, to transform stone to soft curves once more.

He put one hand on her shoulder, his other hand on his heart. “Lucy, I?—”

She knocked his hand away.

“What is going on here,” Mr. Beckett bellowed.

“Should we break ’is bones?” the redheaded footman asked, almost lifting Griff off the floor.

“No bone breaking yet.” Mrs. Beckett stalked toward Keats, crossing her dressing gown more tightly over her front. “You. Is it true? You are an earl? Lady Alexandra’s brother?”

“Actually, I’m a marquess now.” Keats cringed. It was not the time for technicalities. “My... Our”—he met Alex’s gaze—“father has just died.”

Alex blinked, reaching out and grasping for something, someone, finding Lucy, and letting herself give up strength for just a moment. “Dead? Oh, God.”

“That’s what I came to tell you,” Griff shouted. “Now you—ow, ow, ow!”

The giant with the swollen ear twisted Griff’s arm at an unnatural angle. “Now the bone breaking, Mrs. Beckett?”

“Not yet.” She covered her mouth with a hand and looked at her husband. “This is a disaster. What do we do?”

A disaster? Keats was not a disaster. A liar, clearly. A hedonist, formerly. A marquess... it appeared so. But a disaster?

He stepped between the husband and wife. “I do not wish to cause you disaster or to alarm you. I followed my sister here the night Miss Jones took her from London. I stayed using a different name in order to watch over her. I wrote to my friend”—he strode down the hall, holding out an arm to Griff—“the Earl of Finley, requesting he keep my father calm, so that my father would not attempt to find Alex. I have tried for the last month, longer, to do what is best for Alex and for this place. Finley should not have snuck in here.” He reached for his friend, to pull him to his feet.

The red-haired footman boxed him in the ear.

Keats leaped out of the way, muffling a curse. “Maybe I deserved that, but Finley means no harm, I swear. Alex...” He searched out her gaze along the dark length of the hallway. “I mean you no harm. I plan to dissolve the marriage contract with Palmerson. You may marry whom you please.” He took two tentative steps toward her. “I have been a horrid brother, inattentive and selfish. But I promise to do better.”

Her eyes gentled, but her hands were still fists at her belly. Then they went limp, and her shoulders slumped as she leaned farther into Lucy’s embrace. “My brother is a fool. Mischievous to the point of calamity. Clueless, selfish, barbaric?—”

Griff laughed. Then yelped when a footman kicked his arse.

Good. The man deserved it. And Keats deserved Alex’s ire. He hung his head and took every damn word.

And there were waves of them, still coming, never once disrupted for the farce between earl and footman. “Addlepated, foxed most hours of most days, idle, shiftless.” She could stop any time now. Lucy’s eyes grew colder with each new description. “Careless, easily distracted, bit of a fop.” Now that he did take exception to. “But he’s never been cold. Or heartless. Or cruel.” Alex stepped out of Lucy’s hold and took precise, confident steps toward him. “I believe him.”

“That’s all well and good”—Mr. Beckett barreled down the hall—“but what about that one?” He stabbed a finger toward Griff.

“That one, you can throw to the wolves.”

“Alex!” Griff cried. The footmen yanked him to his feet, dragged him toward a window. Oh hell, an involuntary defenestration. He dug in his heels. “Keats! Do something!”

“Frankly, I don’t think I will. Clearly, you’ve done something to enrage my sister.” He sighed. “I suppose I’ll want to know what, though.” And since no one seemed willing to stop the footmen from throwing Griff out the window, Keats would have to save him. “Stop.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Mr. Beckett, Mrs. Beckett, what if, instead of having to clean up a mangled body from your lawn, you shove us both in a locked room until you’ve decided how to handle the situation. We will be at your mercy, and hopefully, by submitting to your power, we will prove to you our loyalty.”

Griff nodded like the action alone could save him.

Mr. and Mrs. Beckett shared a look that likely held an entire conversation.

“Take him upstairs to the attic,” Mr. Beckett said. “Both of them. And stand guard.”

An arm with more muscle than Keats had ever seen hitched under his shoulder, almost hauling him off his feet, and dragging him toward a narrow set of stairs in the shadows that he’d missed.

“Up you go,” the footman said.

“And your name is?” Keats asked.

“Fred.”

“Well, Mr. Fred, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Shut up, Keats,” Griff groaned.

“I’m Pat,” the other footman said.

“Pleasure to meet you, too.” Keats wielded cheer and charm like weapons. They gilded his every word. A necessary self-preservation strategy. Because his heart strained to cut itself out of his chest and remain at Lucy’s side. Stone-faced Lucy. Silent Lucy. Who’d said not a single word since learning of Keats’s lies.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:12 am

Nine

The world had shrunk, and time had spun backward as everything Lucy had known to be true over the past few months unraveled and restitched itself.

Lies and manipulations.

The man she'd started to fall in love with was the very sort of man she hated most. Titled. Clueless. Dangerous. Titled. The Marquess of Rainsly.

Outside, night had begun to bow before dawn, the velvet-blue sky softening as the stars winked out. Purples and pinks bled like ink on paper across the horizon. Like blood over linen.

Yet night still pressed in on Lucy, dark and heavy. Its sharp teeth ripped at her suddenly sensitive skin. She wanted to cry.

A soft touch on her shoulder. "Are you well?" Alex asked.

Lucy rubbed her cheek. "You should not be worrying over me. Are you well?"

Alex bit her lip, a paltry attempt to stop its trembling. "I don't know."

"Time for tea," Mrs. Beckett said, sweeping past them.

"Or something stronger," Mr. Beckett mumbled, following his wife down the stairs.

Lucy and Alex followed, too, arm in arm with weary limbs and sore hearts, all the way to the drawing room. Mr. Beckett pulled out a bottle of brandy from a cabinet, and Mrs. Beckett called for tea before gesturing for Lucy and Alex to sit with her. No one spoke until the tea had arrived and all had been fortified by a heavy swallow of something or other.

“My, my, my,” Mr. Beckett said. “What a night. Never yet experienced the like.”

“Nor me.” Mrs. Beckett rested her cup on her leg. “Did either of you know? That these... men were about?”

“No.” Said together.

Lucy, like her mother before her, had been tricked, seduced by a charming grin and a mouth that said the right things, made promises the heart had no intention of keeping. The disappointment in her mother’s eyes when she found out...

Damn that lying scoundrel.

Damn herself .

Mrs. Beckett tapped a finger on her shoulder. “And you truly believe your brother, Lady Alexandra?”

Alex had stopped trembling, and she stared out the window at the lightening sky. “I do. And I do not think Lord Finley meant any harm, either. He simply wanted to know where I was. He was... worried. I perhaps overreacted. The last time I saw him... It is not a good memory.” She picked at one fingernail, the skin around it raw and angry. “We will send him away, and he will be silent.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” Mr. Beckett asked.

Alex nodded.

“Well, then.” Mrs. Beckett pulled herself up tall. “We’ll throw them out.”

“I must dress and speak with Mr. Sacks,” Mr. Beckett said. “He allowed this to happen.”

After he left, Mrs. Beckett refilled their cups and considered them in silence. She need give no reprimand. Lucy’s bones wailed. She’d been cocky and careless. A bit like how Alex had described Keats.

Lord Rainsly.

Lucy stood. “You need say nothing, Mrs. Beckett. I know this is my fault. You told me what would happen. I put every woman in this house in danger, every child, you and Mr. Beckett. Mr. Sacks will lose his position because of me. I—” She’d hurt herself as well, letting the stable hand with a cocky grin much too close and trusting him with her heart. That organ had gone silent, hardly seemed to even beat.

The natural consequence of loving. Then losing.

She made for the door, every limb screaming the pain she could not voice.

“Where are you going, dear?” Mrs. Beckett asked.

“Home.” More lies. She took all the stairs to the attic and stared down Pat and Fred.

“Can’t let you beyond this point, miss,” Pat said.

“For yer own good,” Fred added.

“I appreciate your concern, but I will enter. He has lied to me, and I will have my say.”

They shared a look, then shuffled away from the door.

She swept inside, and Keats’s gaze hit her like a wall of flames, his shocked gasp of her name an arrow to her heart. Lucy faced the door and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. She hated this. Hated him. Hated herself.

“Don’t cry, angel.”

Her eyes flew open, and she swung around to face him. Keats—no, Rainsly—stood across the room, hands slouched into pockets, his face pale in the early morning light. He rocked toward her.

“Stop right there.” She held out a flat palm, a shield.

He froze. “You’re angry.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “I want to rip your lying throat out.”

“That should not arouse me, but here we are.”

“You dare to?—”

He dared to step closer. Just one step. She could smell him now—hay and horse and man, and he prowled toward her with ease, stopping close enough to touch. But not touching. “Your scent is still on my tongue. Your scent sunk deep into every inch of me. Yes, arousal . Because I will not soon forget the sight of you spread before me in the moonlight.”

“Do not speak of that ever again.” She clenched her fist to keep from slapping him. “I trusted you. We all did. Yet you led the type of man most dangerous to us right to our doorstep.” She laughed, a lost sort of sound, distant and empty. “ You are the sort of man most dangerous to us. And I led you to our doorstep. Mr. and Mrs. Beckett were right.”

“It’s not your fault. Griff will tell no one. I won’t breathe a word.”

“I cannot believe you.” All her fault if Hawthorne House crumbled. She’d been warned, but she’d thought herself clever enough to succeed anyway. She’d been wrong. “I came only to demand your silence.”

“Yet you refuse to believe me.”

“And to say what doesn’t need saying.”

He tilted his head to the side. “And that is?”

“I will not be marrying you. It was barely an agreement. You can’t hold me to a nod. I agreed to marry a stable hand, not a marquess.”

“Yet you originally intended to marry a peer. For duty’s sake. Do your intentions remain the same?”

Her plan. In shambles now. Could it be saved? Now more than ever she deserved the punishment of a cold marriage bed. “Not every woman is as lucky as I. As my mother was in having loving parents.”

“You’re punishing yourself.”

She scoffed. “How absurd.”

“It’s true. You punish yourself for being loved. For being safe. Because you feel guilty.”

“That’s not... that’s not—” Was it? Hadn’t she just thought that very word— the punishment of a cold marriage bed .

“You think that marrying for guilt and duty instead of love will even out the unfair hands fate has played to you and others.”

“No.” But her hands had become fists, and her jaw ticked with more than irritation.

He reached for her, and she flinched back, but he would not be stopped, and the door at her back offered few options for escape. When his fingertips finally brushed against her skin, she closed her eyes, hating how much his touch soothed her, how much she wanted to melt into it. He smoothed his thumbs up and down the mountains of her knuckles. Still she clutched anger in her palms.

“I know I am right,” he said, “because I’ve felt much the same since discovering Hawthorne House.” He gave a huff of laughter. “What a blow. To realize a woman you were supposedly protecting intended to run from you. To realize you don’t know a damn thing about kindness and love. I was not merely ignorant. I had never even tried to learn. After my mother’s death, women began to feel so very... temporary. Here to blaze with brief life and color, populate the earth, and die. My father didn’t care. No one cared. But me. The unfairness of it crawled in my skin like ants across a picnic blanket. So I ignored it. Until I couldn’t any longer. Then I lied to make amends. I think you’re lying to make amends, too.”

“I’m not lying.”

“The lie is that you must be unhappy to make life fairer for those born without your privileges. But you can have both happiness and duty, countess. If you marry me?—”

She ripped away. The hubris of this man! Proposing marriage. Again . After she'd just refused his proposal given in lies. "Marry you? Why would I?"

"Because you'd have a husband who knew what you were up to. And wouldn't care. You wouldn't have to live a lie. And you'd have a husband dedicated to making your every waking hour a pleasure."

She snorted.

"It's true. I'd make you come right now, if you let me. I'd throw Griff off that bed and toss you atop it, then I'd drop to my knees before you and?—"

"Well now, that's quite enough, thank you!" The rustle of cloth and squeak of a bed accompanied the masculine objection.

Lucy yelped. There on a bed in the corner, indignant and flustered and half hidden by a curtain—the Earl of Finley. She'd quite forgotten about him. Heat flaming across her cheeks, she strode to the window and threw it open, gulped in fresh air.

"Ignore him," Keats said, much too closer and whispering in her ear. "As I was saying, I'd drop to my knees before you. Because you deserve adoration. You deserve?—"

"You lied." The words bigger than her rib cage, choking her.

"Only about my name, countess, about why I was here."

She mouthed the word countess , trying to say it around a throat quickly closing up.

"You kept calling me that because you are... were... an earl ." She groaned. "I should have known. Your voice, your bearing. But I chose to believe that Banbury tale about your London employer's absurd requirements. I'm such a fool."

“You’re not. Marry me.” Still he hovered oh-so close.

Still her body enjoyed the hovering.

“No!” She swung away from him.

“Likely the wisest decision, Miss Jones.” From the bed, Griff flipped through an old, dusty book, not even looking up as he spoke. “He’s a bounder.”

“I may be a bounder, but I’ll make you happy.” No matter where she fled, Keats pursued, his eyes cold yet wild at the same time. “But you insist on sacrificing yourself to duty! What about you , Lucy?”

“What about me? The only good I can do in life is to make the world safe for other women. I’ve been given so much. A family who loves me and protects me. Wealth and, if the ton will have me, status. Why should I not give all of it away? Use it all to atone.”

He lifted his hands as if to touch her. No, to grasp her, clasp her, hug their bodies together. His arms hung heavy, charged with electricity in the air between them. And then he dropped them once more to his sides. “Because you are human. A good one, at that. And you deserve some happiness, too.”

Oh, how an hour could change everything. “Exactly something a man like you would say.”

“A man like me?” The knife edge back in his voice.

“Yes.”

His jaw clenched and unclenched. “You will not marry some stranger and sacrifice

your happiness.”

“I do not follow your orders, no matter your name or title.”

He jerked downward, as if he might kiss her, claim her. She would let him. God help her, she would let him, earl in the room or not. No matter the lies that lay between them.

When he stepped back instead, running a hand through his hair and biting out a muffled curse, she should have felt relief. She felt, only, a little cold. And alone. Nothing left to say now. She eased the door open and slipped through.

Tried to.

His hand banded around her upper arm, pulling her back inside and pressing her against the door to close it.

“Miss Jones?” Fred asked from the other side of the door, his deep voice muffled and concerned. “Do you need help?”

“N-no. I need no help,” Lucy called, her gaze never leaving her lying lover’s face.

Keats leaned closer, one forearm braced on the wall above her head, and his lips, his warm breath, whispered against her ear. “Please, Lucy. Please marry me.”

She tugged, but he held her tight. Yet gentle. He would leave no bruise. A contradiction. He was what she hated and what she wanted at the same time. Infuriating.

“If you must marry for duty,” he whispered, “marry me .”

Ice flushed through her veins. No man told Lucy Jones what to do.

Not even this one.

When she jerked her arm away this time, he released her, and when she stepped into the hall, she didn't even look back. She barely felt the stairs beneath her feet as she descended and left Hawthorne House. The warmth of the rising sun did not heat her skin as she crossed the wide, morning-fogged field.

Only when a dark shape appeared on the horizon did she blink back into the world.

“Ophelia?” She ran to meet up with the woman clutching her bonnet to her head. She quickened her pace as her sister-in-law's face came into view—pale, worried. “What has happened?”

Ophelia stopped and doubled over, breathing hard. “Hades... Hades is... Pudding, let me catch my breath.” She straightened and looked to the sky. “Hades is at the inn in Dorking. There is an older man there, a viscount. And his son. They are looking for Lady Alexandra.”

Ten

Keats leaned against the window, looking down the drive that eventually met a road, which eventually led to London. To his old life. To the Marquess of Rainsly's new life. It looked like his father's life—cold and empty, a series of young wives whose bodies gave way, meetings where you sold off your daughter to the highest bidder, raucous laughter and winking when your son acted like a cocksure arse.

Made Keats sick. He stabbed his elbows into the windowsill and dropped his head into his hands. "I want to do something of substance with my hours. I want to protect those in my charge, not neglect them. I want... God, Griff, I want her."

"The vengeful Venus?" Griff said from the bed where he lay stretched out, counting the cracks in the ceiling. "Who exactly is she, other than the woman most likely to put a bullet through your heart?"

"Miss Lucy Jones. Farmer's daughter, viscount's granddaughter, daughter of a lady who caused quite a scandal in her own time, heroine in her own right, and, I hate to say it because it sounds maudlin as hell, but she's the woman I love."

"You can't marry her. She sounds entirely improper as a possible marchioness. Besides, she said quite forcefully she will not marry you."

"I lied to her." But at the same time, he'd been utterly truthful with her, never more himself than these last weeks. Imagine growing up an earl and finding, after a small amount of time in the country, that you prefer being a stable hand. Because Miss Lucy Jones respects you. Because you respect yourself.

Could he convince her to respect him once more?

“You know,” Griff said, “you could always court her properly. If you’re set on her, and I don’t think you should?”

The door swung open, and Keats and Griff bolted to their feet.

Lucy stood wide-eyed in the doorway. She’d looked lovely and tumbled this morning when he’d left her at the cottage, and she’d looked regal and distant when she’d found him out. Now, she looked as if the ground was opening up before her, and she had no choice but to stagger forward into the abyss. The hem of her skirt was dark and wet, and grass clung to her boots like desperation clung to her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” He made it to her in two long steps.

She lurched away from him. “Everything, my lord. Two?”

“No my lording me.” Grated on the ears like the wail of a cat in heat when you’re trying to sleep off too much drink. “‘My dear.’ ‘My darling.’ ‘My God, Keats, it’s so big.’ All of those are acceptable.” My lord? Anything but that.

“We’ve no time for your absurdities.”

“He’d lost all of them a minute ago,” Griff said, plopping back down to the bed. “You brought them all back with you, Miss Jones.”

“Some help you are wooing a lady.” But Keats did feel better. Lucy needed help, and she’d come to him. He risked a step closer to her, and she did not shy away this time. “You will hear truth. I saw my sister being swept away to devil knew where, and I followed her. I held a pistol to Mr. Sacks’s ribs and threatened to put a hole in his heart if he gave me away. I didn’t pull the trigger. I gave the man—and you—time to

prove you worked for my sister and not against her. I stayed here, leaving behind all the comforts of my London life to sleep on a pile of blankets in a hard corner of a cottage and shovel shit every day to ensure my sister's safety and happiness. I lied to you. What choice did I have? You would have set your violent footmen on me. I would have run back to London and returned with reinforcements, the exact kind of men you do not want gaining knowledge about Hawthorne. I have kept your little enterprise safe. And I was... am ... glad to do so. I am not your enemy. I wish only to be your protector.”

“You have endangered us all. Not only did you bring that man”—she pointed at Griff without looking—“here, you’ve brought another two. They are in the village looking for Alex. You must get rid of them. And you as well.” She nodded at Griff. “You brought them here. Make them go away. If they find us out, if they spread word...”

Where would those who needed Hawthorne House go? How would they disappear?

Bloody hell.

“It’s Palmerson, isn’t it?” Alex stood in the doorway, Fred and Pat hovering behind her, shifting side to side, clearly unsure whether to let the lady do as she pleased or haul her away from the imprisoned rogues and out of danger.

They should take her away from him. Keats had no power, no ability to keep her safe. Shame was a heavy cloak, rough and suffocating, and it enveloped him thicker than the morning fog. “I did not mean this to happen, Alex.”

Her feet came into view, practical little half boots that had been quite fine once, but that now were dusty and cracked and well-worn. Her skirts rustled. “Do you mean what you said, about dissolving the marriage contract with Palmerson?”

“Yes.” If only he’d done something sooner.

“Then go now and do it.” Her hand found his, her grip strong and pleading.

And he finally found the courage to look into her eyes, so like his own. But better because the gaze there was stronger, braver, than he could ever be. “Yes.”

“My brother,” Lucy said, “says Palmerson’s queries regarding Alex have already resulted in talk. About Hawthorne.”

“But the villagers think it a school, yes?” Keats said. “Training for working women?”

“And that will make him curious, won’t it?” Lucy stepped to the side of the door, clearing the entry, making way for him to act. “Why would your sister be training for something? He’ll come here. He can’t come here.”

Griff pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s not as if you’ve done anything wrong. A few months’ sojourn to the country is hardly a scandalous crime.”

“That’s it.” Lucy snapped her fingers. “Alex, you’ve been visiting a friend—me. To... prepare for married life. Your brother escorted you here and decided to stay.” Her brow wrinkled, and she tapped her lip. “But why would you stay?”

“Stick to the truth,” Keats said. “I stayed because I worried for Alex. And then because I met you.”

Humming silence. Had he stolen their conversation because he’d admitted so plainly the pitiful state of his heart? Or because they realized the solution was a simple one? Tell the truth and send the uninvited guests away.

“Very well then,” Alex finally said. “Let’s go.”

“Not you.” Griff blocked the door. “You stay here.”

Alex ducked beneath his arm. “I think not.”

Griff chased after her, leaving Keats and Lucy alone.

The door was empty, the hallway, too, their guards having chased after Alex and Griff. Keats could easily slip through it without another word to Lucy. She’d prefer it that way, no doubt.

“I should go,” he said, curling his toes in his boots. “I’ll need to change.”

She gave one sharp nod and made for the door.

“You’re coming with, I assume.”

“Do not try to stop me.”

“I would never. I’m a fool, but even a brain so small as mine knows Lucy Jones is an excellent woman to have about in a crisis.”

“You’re not a fool,” she mumbled. “Not entirely.”

Sounded like hope, that did. “Are you saying I have a chance? To woo and win you?”

“I’m saying nothing of the sort.” They took the stairs side by side. “Tell me something terrible about yourself.”

She was curious about him. Hope, indeed. “Why do you want to know?”

“So I may build up my walls against you.”

Ah, and there went his hope—drowning like a shoe thrown into a lake, sinking fast.

“I don’t think so.”

“Come now, a small detail only. How many women have you ruined?”

“None! I’ve never touched a virgin.”

She arched a brow.

“Except for you,” he hissed. “All the other women were widows. Or paid well for their time. Actresses. You know.”

“Yes. I do.”

“I did it, didn’t I? Gave you brick and mortar for your damn wall?”

She mimicked plopping a brick on a wall and smoothing mortar across it.

“What can I do to demolish it?”

“Why?”

“Don’t you feel this?” At the bottom of the steps, the front door within view, an arch of bright, dusty sunlight spilled across the flooring from the upper window. As Lucy stepped into it, he grasped her wrist and pressed her hand against his chest, right above his heart. “Don’t you feel what has grown between us? I am happier around you than anywhere else. You comfort me and challenge me. You drive me”—he inched closer, the toes of his boots tapping against hers—“wild. And while I want nothing more than to sink into you, somehow, at the same time, I want more than that to hold you close and safe and fight at your side, to pledge myself to you.” Each word bent him lower over her until he swore the last was whispered right into her ear. Her neck warm, her hair silky, her pulse a dancing flutter beneath her jaw, beneath his

fingertips at her wrist.

Her voice as erratic as that pulse. “We’ve known each other so little—”

“Perhaps that is enough.” He could kiss her neck, take the lobe of her ear between his teeth.

“The time we spent together... you were not yourself.” He wanted to curl up in her low, husky voice and live there. He wanted to drop to his knees and beg.

He placed his hand beneath her chin and lifted it with the softest feather of a touch. “Allow me to court you. We can come to know one another as Keaton and Lucy, the marquess and the viscount’s granddaughter. But you’ll find nothing different about me. I have always been myself with you. Perhaps more so than anywhere else.”

Her entire body shuddered. She swayed into his embrace. He’d won!

She stepped away, pulling her wrist from his hold and circling it round with her own fingers. “I’ll take it into consideration.” Nothing at all in her voice now, not even anger. She turned her back to him and left Hawthorne House.

And he found himself making a vow into the empty sunlight of the cold hall. “I won’t disappoint you, Lucy.” Never again.

Eleven

The girl in the mirror seemed brave. She seemed poised, her head held high, her pink skirts smooth. Her bodice and neat little spencer both practical and modest, no hidden slit hemmed up the side. The girl in the mirror was as much of a lie as Mr. Keats was.

Lucy turned her back on the reflection. “Are you ready, Alex?”

The marquess’s sister looked a little pale, but she, unlike Lucy, looked perfectly proper in a green gown she’d brought from London. It was of a finer quality than Lucy’s, and the lovely muslin seemed to mock her.

She’d thought Keats—no, Rainsly—a mere stable hand. Had thought herself higher in the world than him. How he would have laughed at her.

Wouldn’t he have?

“Your brother...” Lucy wandered toward her bed, where Alex sat, and leaned against the bedpost. “You claim he is not a cruel sort of man.”

“He is not, at least that I have seen.”

“What of all those duels you said he fought?”

“He possesses an overblown sense of justice. I’ve seen him tolerate a fellow until that man took idle chatter too far, making some sort of statement well beyond the pale. And then he puts a bullet in the fellow’s shoulder.” Alex shrugged. “That, too, shows

he's not particularly cruel. Always aims for the shoulder, never to kill. And then he walks off whistling as if he missed entirely. Did he... do anything to you, Lucy, while he was here?"

Oh, he had done everything to her. And Alex, a woman who had also been seduced, would understand. She sat carefully on the edge of the bed. "The gentleman who made you feel he loved you... How did you know he did not? You do not have to answer if you do not wish to. I hate to bring up something painful."

"I do not mind speaking of it. He made me feel... beautiful and special, unique. But he was not willing to defy the world for me." She chuckled. "It's too much to ask, isn't it? Ask a man to defy the world for you. And he did not even really have to defy the world... just his father, Lord Palmerson."

"No."

"Oh, yes. There'd been plenty of opportunity for us to become acquainted with one another while his father was courting me."

"It makes more sense for you and his son to marry. The son being the heir and needing an heir of his own."

"Yes, well, Palmerson is quite competitive. I believe that his son, Hutchens, seduced me in order to... defeat his father."

"How awful." Lucy squeezed Alex's hand.

"It is done. And I will move on."

"Of course you will."

There was a short knock on the door, and then it opened, and Lucy's sister-in-law, Ophelia, slipped in. "Are you ready?"

Lucy and Alex stood, smoothed their skirts, and followed Ophelia into the small drawing room on the ground floor.

Lord Finley stood at the window in a fresh suit of clothes, and Keats—Lord Rainsly—stood beside him, stiff and stern, his jaw newly shaven and dressed more finely than she'd ever seen him. He turned and caught her staring, offered a weak half smile as he crept toward her.

"The clothes belong to your brother. We're of a size." That blush stealing across his cheeks, how he could not quite meet her eye... was he feeling shy?

And could she not find it adorable? She flattened a grin. Apparently not.

Her brother, Hades, strode in, Scandal, his dog, jumping at his heels. "Palmerson's still at the inn. If you go now, you can keep him from searching out Hawthorne." He stopped in front of Keats, stepping between him and Lucy, and puffed his chest out. "You're the liar?"

"Bloody hell," Keats breathed, peeking around Hades to look at Lucy. "Your brother is terrifying."

She pulled Hades back and shocked herself by saying, "He's the liar, but he had good reason."

"Hm." The noise vibrated in Hades's throat.

Ophelia hooked her arm through her husband's and drew him away. "Slash him to pieces later. After they've dealt with the threat at the inn, yes?"

“I suppose so. Make haste, though. He’s almost done with his ale.”

They headed toward the door, Lucy gravitating to Keats’s side. Whether her brain thought it a wise move or not, her body wished to be close. He looked so different, more polished than before, but still not quite right. He looked as if he were playing dress-up more now than when he had been wearing a stable hand’s clothes.

“Wait.” Lucy stopped him as Ophelia opened the door. “The clothes are not quite right. Earls do not dress for practicality and comfort as country doctors do. Palmerson might wonder about it.”

“She’s right.” Alex circled him. “Not a hint of the dandy there. He’ll notice.”

“Dandy?” Hades brightened. “I’ve got just the thing.” He disappeared down the hall and returned just as quickly, handing a large greatcoat to Keats. “Here you are.”

Ophelia laughed. “Perfect! It will hide his clothes and add that foppish touch.”

Keats slouched into it, fingering the large brass buttons and inspecting the green silk lining. “You do hate me, don’t you?”

“Are you disparaging the coat?” Lucy asked. “I bought that for Hades. I switched out the original boring buttons myself. He loves it.”

Keats’s eyes widened. “It’s a lovely coat. Quite stylish.” He scowled at the sleeve, traced an embroidered heart there. “Yes, quite stylish.”

“I saw that wince.”

“We must go. Now .” Finley had already left the house and called to them from the street, one leg bouncing up and down.

They filed out, but Hades caught Lucy's arm. "I wish you would stay here."

"I make the story convincing."

"It might be dangerous."

"I've been in danger before."

"And I've hated every moment of it."

Ophelia said nothing, but she set a palm on Hades back, and he closed his eyes and released Lucy.

"Take care of her, Rainsly," Hades called out, "or you'll discover how skilled I am with a blade."

Keats nodded. "If anything happens to her, I'll let you show me."

They walked two by two the short distance to the pub, which sat right next to the inn.

The pub was mostly empty when they entered, and Keats turned his face away from the bartender as they sailed inside, clearly afraid of being recognized.

"There he is," Griff said. Near the window. "But where's Hutchens?"

"Who knows," Keats hissed, "but Palmerson has spotted us. It's time." He raised an arm and grinned, letting loose a loud, raucous chuckle. "Palmerson? That you, my good man?" How different this Keats was from the one she knew. He strolled toward the table with a lethargic grin and a loping gait, and no one would notice the ill-fitting clothes now. He was all dandified peer now. Her stomach roiled, but then Keats slammed a hand a bit too hard against Palmerson's back in a too-energetic hello, and

the old viscount sputtered, choked, coughed. Purposeful, that, a knife glint in Keats's eyes. "What brings you here? Middle of nowhere, innit?"

Palmerson wiped his mouth with a nearby serviette. "I should ask you the same question." He rose, his eyes narrowing as they swept not only over Keats but over all of them. He bowed low, attention riveted on Alex. "Lady Alexandra. I have found you at last. I hope you realize I'll not tolerate jaunts about the countryside once we wed."

"About that." Keats stepped between them.

"Yes, about that." Palmerson sat once more, rapping his fingernails against the tabletop. "What brings you here for so long you leave a betrothed man abandoned and your father to die in London?"

"Visiting friends, my lord." Alex stepped out from behind Keats, dragging Lucy with her. "Miss Lucy Jones, Viscount Springwell's granddaughter."

"Springwell, eh?" Palmerson dragged his gaze over Lucy from head to toe. "He's flush with grandchildren, I hear. But wasn't there a scandal? It would be best if you retire the friendship until I can tell you if it is a fit one for Viscountess Palmerson. And why are you here, Rainsly? You're needed in London."

Keats leaned over the table, digging his fingernails into the stained wood, those claws his only show of emotion. "Came to watch over my sister. Then"—he straightened and walked to Lucy's side, looked down at her with such deep, unfathomably blue eyes, her breath caught—"I stayed because I found someone I wanted to know better."

Palmerson snorted. "Thinking of marriage? Don't lower yourself for a chit like her. Like I said, might be a scandal. Can't quite remember. Memory's a bit hazy these

days.”

“If he could just forget everything, ” Griff whispered to Alex, who gave him a look sharper than an elbow to the ribs.

In the corners of Keats’s grin, something feral lurked. “You know, I recently told Lady Alexandra the very same thing. She shouldn’t lower herself with marrying the likes of you.”

Heavens. This was not the plan. The plan had been to make Palmerson think they were all enjoying a harmless holiday in the country. Keats should not be riling him.

And the viscount had been riled. Palmerson stood once more, his gaze settling like a boulder on Keats. “Pardon me?”

Keats inspected his fingernails. “You know, I’ve been considering matrimony myself these days, and it’s given me a new perspective. On life. On love.”

“What are you getting at with your idle prattle?”

“I suppose I’ll say it plainly. Alex is free to marry whomever she wishes to, and I do not think that will be you.”

“Your father was drawing up a contract.”

“I’ll have it destroyed.”

“I have your father’s word.”

“He’s dead. I’m the Marquess of Rainsly.” The greatcoat collar, flipped high, brushed a jaw set hard and hair like midnight. No fop. No stable hand. Keats incarnate, the

very center of him undressed and naked for everyone to see. And dangerous. This not a man to be trifled with. This a man who rushed for doctors and threatened his way onto coaches to ensure the safety of sisters.

This the man she loved.

“What in hell’s going on here?” A man strode across the inn to stand next to Palmerson. His face passed through a variety of emotions as he studied the rest of them, but his gaze stuck on Alex, an amused brow flying skyward. “We found you, then.”

The man’s voice was slippery like oil, and Lucy stepped in front of her friend. Griff did, too, and they stood shoulder to shoulder, blocking Alex.

“You remember my son,” Palmerson said.

Keats nodded. “Mr. Hutchens. I see you’ve accompanied your father.”

“Yes, and he looks rather troubled.”

“I’ve just informed him he’s in search of a new bride.”

Mr. Hutchens froze for a half breath then peered down at his father. A deep chuckle rumbled his chest. “That so? Fascinating. Did he offer a reason?” His gaze floated to Lucy and Griff. No, to where Alex hid behind them.

“It is simply not a good fit,” Keats said.

“Absurd!” Palmerson smacked a fist into the table.

Mr. Hutchens rounded the table to prop a hip against its edge and face Keats—mirror

images. But Keats was dark and Hutchens light. Keats wore a bored half grin and Hutchens's eyes possessed a victorious gleam.

"What about me?" Hutchens drawled. "Am I a good fit for Lady Alexandra?"

"No!" One word, three voices, Alex's the loudest as she pushed out from behind Lucy and Griff, to grab her brother's arm. "Please, no. Not him either."

The polished rogue slipped away, leaving only Keats raw and ragged and torn. "You get to choose, Alex. I swear it."

"Utter nonsense!" Palmerson reached for Alex. "She's mine."

Alex lurched back. "I belong to no one!"

Lucy slipped her hand into her pocket and through the hole she'd ripped in the bottom of it. She rested her fingers against the dagger strapped around her thigh and pushed Alex back, muscles ready to do what she must.

"That one," Palmerson said, stabbing a finger toward Alex, "is a not worth the trouble. And that one"—he turned his finger to Lucy—"is a bit too brazen, isn't she? Clearly she's been a bad influence. I'm done with you all. We leave now, Timothy." He made for the door.

But his son did not follow. "You give up that easy, old man? Ha. Well then, the better man will clearly be the victor." He shoved Lucy out of the way, grabbing Alex's arm. "The lady's mine now."

"Like hell she is." Keats lunged.

Hutchens threw Alex's arm away and danced out of Keats's reach, laughing. "Don't

waste your breath avenging your sister. She's not worth it. I know. Quite intimately."

Keats surged forward, and Griff grabbed his arm, holding him back.

"What are you implying?" Keats demanded.

Hutchens strolled toward the door on a rolling wave of his own laughter.

Keats looked lost, his gaze swinging wildly from Alex—standing defiant behind him—to Palmerson, then back to Hutchens. "No man insults my sister, casts doubt on her character. I demand satisfaction."

Hutchens stopped mid-step.

"Name your weapons!" Keats cried.

Hutchens shrugged. "Why not? I like winning. Pistols."

A wide, victorious grin flashed across Keats's face before it snapped out of existence. "There's a field south of Dorking. We meet there in a quarter hour."

"No!" Palmerson exploded across the room, blocking his son's exit. "You will not duel that man."

"I'm not a coward, Father. Now, will you be my second, or are you a coward?" He pushed his father aside and left the pub, Palmerson rushing after him.

Keats walked to the fireplace across the room, took a box off the mantel, and returned to them. "Your brother stashed this here while you were dressing." He glanced at Lucy. "Thought it might be useful. In case things went poorly. As they seem to have done." He spoke without any inflection, and the hands that opened the box, revealing

two gleaming dueling pistols, were steady, capable. He snapped the box closed and left the inn.

They tumbled out of the pub and onto the street, trailing after Keats.

Griff's long legs caught up with him more quickly. "Don't do this."

"You'll be my second, yes?" Keats's strides ate up the road out of the village.

Alex ran to his side. "You're trying to do better, Keats. That means no more duels. You promised me you were trying to change."

Keats stopped, placed his hands on Alex's shoulders, then kissed her forehead before continuing his march to the southern edge of the village. "I have failed you, Alex, but I will make it right."

"Dying does not make it right."

"I don't intend to die. I've survived duels before." He shrugged. "Does anyone know how good Hutchens's aim is?"

Alex groaned.

Lucy ran, skidding to a stop in front of Keats, holding her palms out.

He looked out across the horizon behind her, eyes blank.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Keats, look at me."

He looked at the sky.

“Look at me.”

He looked at his boots.

She ventured a step closer and then another until they were toe to toe, and she rested her palm against his chest and peered up at him, pleading. “Look at me, Keats.”

Finally, his chin tipped down and his eyes met hers, and they were swimming. “I won’t die.” And then he leaned low and whispered in her ear, “Not if you promise me an armful of you if I survive.”

She clutched at his collar and pulled him even closer and said hot against his ear, “All the armfuls.” Fear shuddered through her, and she melted against his chest. His arms came around her. “Don’t do this.”

He released her. “I have to.” The boundary of trees surrounding the village thinned, gave way to tall, wind-ruffled grass dotted with small yellow blooms.

A coach rumbled by. It bore the Palmerson crest. As it passed them, raised voices emanated from inside. The viscount apparently was not happy that his only son and heir had decided to risk his life.

Lucy, Alex, and Griff followed Keats in single file, a funeral march. Such horrid thoughts, but Lucy could not shoo them away. They gathered like flies on a dead carcass.

Everything seemed to happen much too quickly and yet agonizingly slow at the same time. The coach waited like a spider, and as they approached, Hutchens and his father climbed out. The morning sun was hot on the grass, but a breeze rippled through, creating an ocean wave of green, the yellow flowers fallen stars. The men checked their weapons, then met one another, their bodies bisected by the horizon. Lucy

clutched her hands at her heart, and Alex melted into Griff's side.

He put an arm around her waist to hold her up. "Don't look, Alex," he said against her hair. "Don't look."

But Alex kept her gaze steady on her brother.

The men began their march of death one pace at a time away from one another, pistols lifted, and then they whirled, and then they aimed, and then bullets cracked across the sky.

Hutchens crumpled with a grunt that funneled into a long, low wail. He curled up on his side, the high grass outlining his body. Palmerson ran, hitting his knees next to his son.

Keats stood with his arm raised, a dark figure of retribution against the bright blue sky. "Come near my family again, either of you, and I'll put the next bullet someplace much more vital." He shrugged. "Whether that's the heart or between the legs, I've not yet decided. Both if I hear one whispered word against them."

Lucy's heart thumped. Her body gave way. Only force of will kept her standing as Alex broke free of Griff's hold and barreled toward her brother. Griff loped after her.

To her other side, Palmerson and his coachman lifted Hutchens and secured him in the coach. They rumbled off without a word.

And Keats sank to his knees.

No more strength. No more composure. Lucy made it to his side between one breath and the next. Griff was lowering Keats to the ground, and Alex shrieking, her hands fluttering about his abdomen, pulling back the greatcoat. A dark spot bloomed like

spilt tea across his side.

“Well,” Keats mumbled. His blue eyes grew hazy, seemed capable of focusing on one thing only—Lucy. “Hope I haven’t ruined your brother’s coat. He might want to put a second bullet through me.”

“Stop,” Lucy said, “stop. It’s not funny.”

“I agree.” Keats’s mouth a thin line, his face draining of color.

Griff stripped off his jacket and pressed it hard to Keats wound.

Lucy jumped to her feet. “Hades. I must get Hades.” She stood over Keats for just one moment, pressing a fist to her heart. “Do not die. Do you understand?”

Keats nodded, whispered, “Yes, countess.”

Then, her cheeks wet and her heart thumping wild with pain, she ran. Ran to find her brother. And ran to save the life of the man she loved.

Twelve

K eats woke up to soft sheets and cloudy pillows instead of green grass stained red. He felt like he'd been ripped in two. Oh yes, that's right. He had been. By Hutchens's bloody bullet. Bloody now. Ha ha. Oh damn, hurt to laugh.

Better to go back to sleep. Brain was foggy, listed toward sleep anyway. The bandage itchy around his chest revealed he'd been treated. By the Devil Doctor, likely. Fog caused by laudanum, then. Yes, sleep better than this. But the pain sank its teeth in and wouldn't let him go. No matter how long he kept his eyes closed, no matter how still he lay, his brain whirled in wakefulness to the tune of too many questions. Had Palmerson and his son left Dorking? Once in London would they leave Alex alone? Would it be better for Alex to stay out of sight? Would Hutchens try to put another bullet in him?

Soft warm fingers fluttering about his forehead offered another question—who was that? The fingers brushed hair away from his brow and placed a cool cloth there. And then the faint scent of heather swept through him on a shaky inhale.

Lucy.

When he opened his eyes, she was leaning over him, and the world narrowed entirely to big brown eyes, pale cheeks, yellow curls come undone, and kissable lips that didn't even tremble.

“You're awake,” she whispered. “How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve been shot. How bad is it? Where am I?”

“My brother’s house. If there’s no infection, you’ll live. The bullet ripped through the fleshy bit of your side. No major organs were damaged. You’re quite lucky.”

“Not lucky. Good . I hit Hutchens’s shoulder purposely and angled my body to give him a smaller target.”

“That means Hutchens is good, too, because he still hit that smaller target.”

“Yes. Well,” Keats grumbled. He attempted to raise his hand to brush his knuckles against her cheek, but pain exploded up and down his side. “Damn.”

“Don’t move.”

“Then could you please lay your cheek near my hand so I can feel it without lifting my arm?”

Her lips bounced into a brief smile she squashed. She rolled her eyes.

When she stood, he risked the very pain of Hell to reach for her and catch her wrist.

“Where are you going?”

“My brother said to tell him when you wake.”

“Where’s Alex?”

“At Hawthorne House.”

“And Palmerson and Hutchens?”

“They seem to have left, gone back to London, I presume. Your friend the earl has returned to London as well.”

“I must leave, too.” He rubbed his thumb over her pulse. Her skin was soft everywhere, but at her wrist it was maddeningly so. Her pulse hopped. At his touch? Or because of the possible danger of an unvanquished enemy? “I’m sorry.”

“You should be. For fighting a duel and getting shot. It was quite thoughtless of you.”

“Not for that. I’m not sorry for that at all.”

She returned to her seat on the mattress just beside him. “You should be.” She dropped her head, hiding her expression. “You scared me.”

“I never wished to do that.”

“You scared Alex.”

“Not my wish, either. But I will put a bullet in the heart of any man who tries to hurt either of you.” She pulled her wrist away, and his fingers were lonely without the warmth of her skin, the beat of her pulse. “I regret being a careless fool up till now. I regret not showing you greater respect. By revealing the truth sooner.”

Her nose wrinkled. “You have always been terribly forward. There was that kiss in the lake. But... you have respected me by listening to me. By not taking offense when I propositioned you.”

“I would not mind if you propositioned me again.”

“Do you... truly want me, then?”

Bloody hell, her doubt hurt worse than the hole in his side. “If you have to ask, I’ve not been obvious enough, which means I need to be more obvious, and I fear you might find that obnoxious. How do you feel about me using rose petals to write out in large letters on some field in Hyde Park exactly how I feel about you? I might write, ‘Lucy Jones is the most cock-stirringly adorable woman to?—’”

“Stop.” She laughed.

“See. Adorable.” He dug his fingernails into his palm. “I should have told you who I was when I knew you were helping my sister, when I knew I... wanted you.”

She picked at a wrinkle in her skirt. “Perhaps we should have trusted each other with more than our bodies.”

“I have trusted you.” He wanted to touch her, to reassure her, and while the indescribable curve of her hip brushed against his knee, he could not reach her with his naked hands, with the needy tips of his fingers. He tried to reach her with words, instead, as he’d never done with any other woman. “I’ve never told anyone about how women... giving birth scares me. I’ve never told anyone how empty I feel at times, not even Griff. Only you.”

She nodded, her gaze still heavy on her lap. “Do you know, I’ve never asked anyone for anything. Except to help the women of the ton. I asked for that, but that wasn’t for me. It was for them. I don’t like being a bother. But you made me want something for myself. You made me feel comfortable asking for it. As if asking for something was not selfish.”

“It’s not. You’re not.” The words raw in his throat. Please God that she believed him.

The tiniest shake of her head and the slightest rush of pink crossed her cheeks. “Perhaps you did not tell me your name because you had already told me in other

ways who Keats is. I was listening. I know.”

“You don’t know exactly how much of a rogue I’ve been. But I’ll spend every hour of the rest of my life being better. I know you do not believe me, but?—”

“I do believe you.”

He risked it all—pain and his torso ripping in two—to push upright and lean forward, to take her hands and press them into his chest.

She tried to force him back down to the mattress. “You’ll open your wound. Hades will have to stitch you up again, and he’ll be quite displeased.”

He resisted her, his muscles screaming. “I cannot lie down as I tell a woman I love her.”

Her hands remained on his chest, but they went still, as still as the rest of her body. Only the light in her eyes beamed brighter.

He kissed her palm. “I love you, Lucy. And I want you to be my wife. You do not have to answer now or return the words. I simply beg you to give me a chance.”

“A chance. Hm.” Hope like dawn rose bright and fierce across his soul, warming faster when she met his gaze with an adorable almost smile that popped a dimple into her cheek. “I think I might like to become better acquainted with you.”

“You’re asking for a courtship. Very well. I accept.”

She laughed. “I’m the one who must accept.”

He shrugged, then groaned, then managed to say, “Perhaps you should propose to me.

I've proposed enough."

"What's the fun in that? I know you'll say yes. But if you propose to me, I can keep you on your toes."

"Minx." And then he sighed and said, "Angel." And then he got a little bold, and he picked up her hand and kissed her knuckles and said, "Mine?"

She inhaled as she leaned forward so close their breath mingled, and then with a happy hitch of her lips she kissed him. "Mine."

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One month later, London

London felt like a trap. The street beyond the window of her grandfather's townhouse hardly seemed a prison, though. She could see the garden at the center of the square and the street was neat and clean. The sun bright. Not a cloud in the sky. Yet she felt the bars gathering about her.

Perhaps it was because Lucy had grown up in the country and preferred open skies and fields to narrow lanes and tall buildings. Perhaps it was because those her grandmother, Viscountess Springwell, introduced her to did not often approve of a young lady with a farmer for a father and a scandal-maker for a mother. Or perhaps it was because of the failure of her plan, and her flight from Hawthorne House. She'd left because she'd needed change, to discover who Lucy was without her cause ruling her waking thoughts and nighttime hours. To try something new.

Like being courted by a marquess.

Ah—there lay another bar in her London cage. Not the courtship itself. That felt like being lifted on a strong breeze up into the clouds on a sunny day. What felt like manacles around her ankles was an increasingly rapacious need she must soon speak of.

“Miss Jones?” Her grandfather's butler, Mr. James, bowed from the doorway. He had a short nose that tipped up at the end, showing more nostril than Lucy ever knew what to do with. “Lord Rainsly is here. Are you at home?”

“Yes. I'm always home for Lord Rainsly.”

“I told you she’d say that, James.” Keats patted the butler on the shoulder as he strode into the small parlor at the back of the house. He stopped right before Lucy, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes glittering. “Good afternoon, Miss Jones.”

Lucy dismissed the butler, then sat near the window. “This is an unexpected visit. I’m glad of it, though. My grandparents are gone for the morning. You will have no chance to discuss parliamentary matters with my grandpapa.” She was glad for that, too. Keats all to herself. A rarity.

“Not here for a chat with Springwell. I’m here for you. Naturally.” Keats dragged a matching chair closer and sat, pulling to the edge of the seat so their knees almost touched. When he rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, he tapped her thigh three times. “I’ve heard chatter about Palmerson.”

Unexpected, that. And it banished the tingles that had been making a slow path from thigh to parts of her body higher. “I thought we were done with him.”

Keats and Palmerson had met once since returning to London. The viscount had wanted Keats’s word he would not discuss the duel. He had been awfully contrite, considered the puckered, healing wound in his son’s shoulder fitting punishment for taking a lady’s innocence before marriage.

Keats flattened his palm on her knee, and the tingles erupted all at once, hotter than before. “Palmerson is hunting for a wife. For his son. And he seems to have found one. Lady Annabelle. Who happens to be in love with a young baron, who happens to be in love with her.”

“That is certainly a sticky web.”

“Isn’t it grand.” He squeezed her thigh, and she felt it higher, between her legs, clenching her gut.

“But why does it necessitate a visit?” Not that she wanted him to leave. Or remove his hand. In fact, the words A little higher, please, Keats sat on her tongue. She locked them up.

Ah—there, the prison bars of her own design.

“Because I think we can save her.”

Her brain, which had been wholly involved with the growing ache between her legs, shifted. “Pardon? Save Lady Annabelle?”

“Yes. I know you’re unwilling to risk the secrets of Hawthorne House anymore, but what if we can prevent Lady Annabelle’s marriage to Hutchens without involving Hawthorne at all? Just you and me. We can save her.”

“How?”

“The baron I told you about. He’s entirely smitten. And a good man. I did a little snooping about him, spied on him at the club. He’s a giant, but he’s a gentle one. And according to my sources?—”

“You have sources?”

He nodded. “The best gossip comes from credible sources. And according to mine, Lady Annabelle kissed him last week at some ball or other. Then she ran off crying. Star-crossed lovers if I’ve ever seen them.”

“Have you? Ever seen star-crossed lovers?”

“You and I were star-crossed once.” He squeezed her thigh, this time higher as he leaned closer, his other hand cupping her cheek, his gaze narrowing on her lips. So close now, almost kissing distance. “I think with a very little nudging, Lady

Annabelle and her baron could be happy.”

“And you think”—her voice breathless—“we should nudge them?”

“Yes. They need the help, and you are bored. Do not bother denying it. You miss the purpose of Hawthorne House. You miss being useful.”

She did rather. She’d not been entirely idle since moving to London. Only making friends and learning how the ton moved was slow, tedious work. Important work, though, if she intended to be Hawthorne’s eyes and ears in the city. And she did.

“See,” Keats said, “you’ve stars in your eyes simply contemplating it. We should start planning now. We’ve much to do.”

“Such as?”

“Well, later helping the baron and his lady organize a trip to Gretna Green. And now ...” He inched even closer, his lips brushing against her.

She sank into his kiss, so hot, so soft, so very perfect.

And then she broke it with words she should have said weeks ago. “I want more than kisses, Keats. And I want it now.”

His eyes flashed. He knew what she wanted, and he would give it to her. But then why was he pushing away? Why did cold air rush between them?

And why was he hitting his knees before her?

“I have promised to be a better man. And a better man would not take a woman who was not his wife.”

Oh. Finally .

“Will you marry me?” Keats wrapped his large hands around hers, holding them safe and steady.

“Yes.” Her laugh was bounced about by tears—both came freely. “What other man would offer a woman radical machinations instead of flowers as an engagement gift?”

“I do know what you desire, Lucy Jones.”

“So do I. Keats... I love you. I have been more than a little terrified to say it, but I cannot keep the words locked up any longer. You are my passion and my comfort, my joy and my love, and I... and I am more myself with you than with anyone else.” The words he’d given her. Finally, she could give them back to him.

For a moment shock rippled through his face, but then he clutched her to him and hid his face in her neck, his body shaking. When she nudged his head upward, his eyes swam, and his wide mouth grinned, and she kissed him soft and slow but only for a moment. Then she pulled him to his feet, pulled him up the stairs, shut him in her bedchamber.

And he was rogue enough to let her.

He was also rogue enough to untie her tapes when she turned her back to him, and rogue enough to strip her bare, his fingertips making hot trails across her skin just before he set his lips there to set her aflame.

Lucy bold enough, too, to unwrap his cravat and unbutton his waistcoat, to strip him as he had her until every hard inch of him, bullet wound and all, was open to her hungry gaze.

Once unclothed of everything that hid who they truly were, they moved at the same

time, surging together in a hot kiss. Slow, too. Because they had time. Time to love and time to learn and time to help others find the love between them that leapt higher with each meeting of their lips, each stroke of palm over belly, each tangle of fingers in hair. Each offering that showed they were more than their names, their pasts, and that better than anyone else, they understood each other.

Each grasp and caress proved it. He knew how to touch to make her purr, and she knew how to squeeze to make him moan. And when he picked her up and laid her gently on the bed, it was only seconds after she'd thought, I cannot stand a moment longer .

He climbed onto the mattress, and she grasped his hips and tugged him tight against her, rolling her own hips against his thick shaft. He kissed her earlobe, her chin, the peaked point of her nipple. "Glorious," he moaned. "You're bloody glorious."

He was glorious, too. She wrapped her hand around his thick length—she'd done this to him. Fair enough. He'd done so very much to her—burned away lies and masks, revealed truth. She wanted to belong somewhere, to someone, and she wanted to help others find where they belonged. All clear in an instant. And in that clarity—Keats. With his crooked smile and sweet, grinning mouth, with his wicked tongue and steel desire to protect.

She loved him.

He slipped a hand between her legs, inside her. "You're ready."

"For weeks now, Keats." She moaned into his neck as his thumb began the lazy circling around her most sensitive spot. One hand on his chest, resting just above his heart—its beat the rhythm she rolled her hips to—she grasped his shaft with the other, squeezed, and explored its length. Satin, warm, hard. The world reduced to sensation, his name a breath between her lips, lingering in the air around them.

He entered her—tight, hot, sweet. Not even the ghost of the pain she'd felt before. Nothing but pleasure as he stroked in and out of her, his mouth at her breasts, his hands exploring every curve of her body, including that hot space where their bodies rolled together. Fingers searching, finding, circling, pressing.

"I'm yours, angel," he moaned. "I love you." A kiss to her neck. "I love you." A kiss to her shoulder. "I love you." A kiss settling on her lips as he pulled her bottom lip between his teeth.

And she fell off the cliff of pleasure into the warm sea of his arms. She drifted, able still to move enough to clutch at the muscles of his shoulders and the silk of his hair as he rocked harder against her then shuttered with the power of his own climax.

As he always did when she asked for what she wanted, he gave her everything he could.

He rolled to the mattress and gathered her limp body in his arms. He petted and stroked her everywhere, and these touches vibrated not urgent need but lazy pleasure throughout her.

"I could hold you all day long," he said. "I will one day."

"Mm. Hold me all day now. That is what I want."

"I would." He kissed her neck beneath her ear, and she shivered, snuggled deeper into his embrace. "But I do believe I hear your grandfather's voice downstairs."

She froze; she listened. She leapt from the bed, dragging Keats along with her. They dressed more quickly than they'd undressed, and she shoved him toward the door.

"Not there, countess." He ducked toward the window. "Take it from a former rogue, windows are best for escapes of this kind."

She kissed him as he slung a leg over the ledge. “As long as mine is the only window you make use of.”

“Darling”—he fisted a hand in the hair at her nape and rested their foreheads together—“yours is the only window in existence.” He grinned, the flippant, careless little one she loved so well, and disappeared down a narrow, bending tree and across the street. Whistling all the while.

Her heart whistled, too, as she pulled a deep navy greatcoat from her wardrobe and ran her fingers down the row of opal buttons at its front, down the soft delphinium blue of its silk lining. The perfect wedding gift for the man she loved.