



# Don't Wake a Sleeping Lion (The Lyon's Den Connected)

**Author:** *Sara Adrien*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** The Widow of Whitehall will get them in the game, but what are they willing to put on the line for a match?

Ada must marry soon or else she'll lose access to the trust money her father left her. Can she gamble as Mrs. Dove-Lyon's puffer and support herself? When she's swept up in the arms of a charming young doctor, will she find a way to make her luck last?

Alfred dreams of having his own practice on Harley Street but he doesn't have the money to get started. Before he finds a way to make a down payment, he loses his heart to a spirited lady gambler. Will he also lose his head, or can he reconcile love and his career?

In "Don't Wake a Sleeping Lion," author Sara Adrien brings her signature Jewish twist to the well-loved world of the Lyon's Den. Watch Mrs. Dove-Lyon make ingenious matches, and characters fall in love against the backdrop of Regency London.

From scrumptious pastries to delectable gowns, this nostalgic story will bring you everything you enjoy in steamy romance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 32

# Page 1

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London, 1817

“Y ou owe my father!” Ada crossed her arms. She knew no one usually spoke in such a manner to Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon, but Ada had nothing left to lose. “He put you on the map, Aunt Bessie. Without his imports, you wouldn’t—”

“I’m not your Aunt Bessie. Don’t call me that,” she snapped. “It’s a name for a poodle. And I put myself on the map.”

Aunt Bessie—known as The Black Widow of Whitehall to the rest of the world—sat down and poured herself a cup of hot chocolate. Without Ada’s father Aunt Bessie’s preferred drink wouldn’t have been of such fine quality. He didn’t only import liquor, but also cocoa, coffee, and medicines.

As Ada took in the widow’s private room, filled with elegant upholstery, intricate wood carvings, and crystal chandeliers, she wondered what else her father had imported to see to Aunt Bessie’s comfort. And when would the cocoa run out as Ada’s luck already had?

Ada picked at her worn gown and admired Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s fine sarsenet attire embroidered with real gold thread. Dressed in her typical black with gold brocade on the sleeves and at the hem, Mrs. Dove-Lyon occupied her chair with the poise that suited her reputation as London’s underground queen. Despite Ada’s lack of enthusiasm for the opulence at The Lyon’s Den, the city’s most exclusive gambling establishment where peculiar games and bets fueled the gossip columns of high society, she couldn’t ignore the fact that she—in contrast—had nothing to her name.

She could not shake off the overwhelming despair that clawed at her heartstrings. She had always known that life as an orphan would be difficult, but she never imagined it would be so cruel. All she yearned for was stability and security, a place to call home. And then she thought of her gift—her talent for gambling. The idea of bluffing her way to riches was tempting, but did she dare to bluff her way through life? Perhaps this was her chance to turn her fortunes around, to escape the miseries of her mundane existence, and to enter the world of the rich and famous. She took a deep breath and resolved that she wouldn't leave this elegant room without trying her luck.

“Let me be your puffer!” Ada pleaded; the position would allow her to gamble with money that wasn't hers and decoy other players. She needed the money and knew the games were rigged, so there was no point in feigning outrage. Plus, she wasn't going anywhere without permission to play the tables at The Lyon's Den.

The gray-haired woman sighed. “I'm sorry that you are down on your luck, but you are getting entangled with people who have no scruples, they're—”

“No different from most of the people I have encountered in my life,” Ada said. Aunt Bessie knew very well that Ada had played with smugglers on her father's ships. She'd grown up gambling with cheaters and criminals. There wasn't a trick Ada didn't recognize and know how to foil. “Please, Aunt Bessie.”

“I'm not your aunt, and you know it.”

“But Papa called you Aunt Bessie.”

“Your papa, Ada, was a fine businessman. I knew him when he was a boy, and I knew him when he had you.” The elderly lady let out a hearty breath and her veil flew in a wave around her head. “Life didn't give him a choice but to work in the shadows; still he was honest and had a good heart, like you.” She lifted her hand as if she wanted to reach for Ada's, but then decided otherwise. “He was one of the few

people I could trust.”

“Then trust me, too!”

“Ada, please be reasonable. You are a girl, not a puffer. You can’t be that good a gambler—”

“I am! Please let me play! I can look after myself.”

Aunt Bessie took a sip of her hot chocolate and swallowed it with gusto, forcing Ada to wait. Then she rubbed her eyes.

“All right, I’m too tired to fight you, and I know you won’t stop asking me. This might destroy you, but if it is your wish, you can play rouge et noir . Nothing else.”

Yes! Ada suppressed a triumphant grin. “It is my wish.”

“And pay me twenty percent interest in your wins for the night. You are gambling with my money, after all.”

“Ten!”

“Fifteen!”

“All right.” Ada clapped her hands excitedly as her heart swelled with renewed hope and purpose. Despite the social constraints she faced as a Jewish girl without a father or a husband, Ada was determined to take charge of her own destiny. She refused to let the limitations life had thrown her way hold her back any longer. Instead, she was going to quadruple what Aunt Bessie would give her and keep eighty-five percent of it. With a little luck and a few wealthy players, she’d have enough to get away from the people who were using her as little more than a free servant. Because the terms of

her father's will stated that she couldn't access her inheritance until she'd reached the age of twenty-five—or she'd gotten married. So until then—if she wanted her freedom—she had to pay her way in life.

## Page 2

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“M r. Stein?” A tall man who looked like a statue of Goliath tapped Alfred on the shoulder.

“Dr . Stein,” he corrected him.

“Very well, Dr. Stein. Follow me.” The man, who was called Titan and looked the part, led the way. Alfred swallowed hard. He’d been summoned to the master suite of The Lyon’s Den, and he had no choice but to enter the Black Widow’s cave feeling a bit like prey. When men lost their fortunes, she’d find wives with dowries for them. Legend said—and she was a legend among the Ton—that Mrs. Dove-Lyon was notorious for making love matches. The aristocratic mothers of his little patients had told him enough about her to instill a healthy dose of fear.

Titan, the leader of Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s wolf pack opened the door to what looked like a richly endowed lady’s parlor.

“Wait here,” said the ex-military man, chief bouncer, and manager of the gambling hall. When he spoke, one obeyed. He was Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s right hand and feared by all who had debts to pay. Titan shut the door and left Alfred alone to wonder why he’d been summoned to Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s private room. He’d been on a winning streak and had never lost more than two shillings.

He didn’t even owe her any debts, so what did she want?

Dr. Alfred Stein had graduated with honors in medicine from Edinburgh University and returned to London knowing that his parents expected him to marry. So far, he’d artfully avoided their efforts of introducing him to chaste and proper Jewish girls,

especially since he and his younger brother Seth had rented their own bachelor lodgings near Regent's Park. Most of the "good Jewish girls" his parents paraded were pretty enough, but altogether too docile for his taste. He wanted a woman who'd inspire him, in life and in bed.

During his studies, he'd enjoyed various exploits with the more experienced ladies in Edinburgh, but nobody had ever truly captured his interest beyond the pleasures of the flesh. Jews couldn't study in England, and it was known that graduates usually returned from Scotland with an altogether rounded education, in the classroom, and in the bedroom.

Of course, he knew his way around the female anatomy. Not only because he'd studied under some of the most renowned surgeons at the best school of medicine in all the English-speaking world, but also because he'd explored what brought women pleasure. He could make them quiver and scream his name in a matter of minutes—less, if he wanted to. But none had ever given him the reason to break out in goosebumps at a mere touch. How could anyone be so lucky? Alfred wanted it, too. A girl to call his own, to give his heart to. He wanted it all: love, sex, and a career. To his general annoyance, he'd experienced none of the tingles that genuine affection allegedly entailed.

And because Alfred wanted it all, he gambled at The Lyon's Den. He risked being found out, for Jews were usually not welcome at such establishments. But he hadn't been turned away at the doors. And if he was to have an office like Felix, Alfie, and Nick, the doctors at 87 Harley Street, it was a risk he needed to take. The high-stakes games could bring him the fortune he sought. Careful not to have any debts that could hinder his plans for a pediatric practice on Harley Street, he only gambled for profit. Enough of feeling like a peddler, or making house calls for patients with various ailments. He dreamed of an office with a waiting room. A nurse who'd say, "Yes, doctor. No, doctor." And announce the waiting patients upon his arrival in the morning, "The doctor is in. He'll see you next." Possibly, someday, an addition to the

building to make a hospital of sorts, and maybe even a practice where other doctors worked with and for him.

The door clicked open and Alfred saw her. The Black Widow.

“Thank you, Titan. You may leave us,” a strong female voice said from under the infamous black veil.

“Dr. Stein, take a seat,” she commanded. Alfred complied. Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s tone did not invite back talk. Her reputation as the black widow because she was so much like the deadly spider that paralyzed its prey before killing it, sent a shiver down his spine. She was a queen among men, feared by many but respected by all. Her story was one of power, mystery, and a web of carefully-plotted matches that threatened to entangle any man who dared to cross her path—and fail to pay. Alfred, however, expected her threats to make matches between men who owed money and wealthy young ladies who could pay their debts didn’t extend to Jews.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” He bowed as he unbuttoned his evening coat and sat. It was already hot in the room and a fire roared in the grate. Either side of the mantel had carved legs, a man on one side, a woman on the other. Was that a cupid? The hearth was raised and detailed depictions of two young lovers connected them. They were nude and looked longingly at each other. Was this to intimidate or entice? Two statutes carved of wood, trying to unite but separated by fire. They’d burn if they ever tried to reach the other, not that they would, of course. But art told stories and this one, Alfred thought, was a tragedy.

“Let’s cut to the chase, shall we?” An enterprising ring to the Black Widow’s voice unsettled Alfred. “Tell me what you are doing in my house.”

“I beg your pardon?”



“Dr. Stein. Alfred, if I may. I knew you were Jewish the day I laid eyes on you. You gave us no reason to refuse your entry, but you’ve been coming back, and I’ve begun to wonder why. Your kind is not usually found at gambling houses.”

“I wasn’t aware that Jews were not welcome to gamble,” he said with a quirked brow. This was easy. He’d played this game of Jews-are-not-truly-equal-citizens a million times. Gentiles never quite acknowledged them as full-fledged humans, even though the law was different these days. And when the ladies of the Ton needed his services, they could be quite sweet-tongued. Alfred was not one to buy into flattery. His parents had taught him the ways of the world and he wasn’t so naïve as to consider Jews on the same footing as Gentiles, legally or socially, particularly with the aristocrats at The Lyon’s Den.

“I’m gambling for the money,” he admitted. Lying to Mrs. Dove-Lyon was no use. He was good at many things, but not at masking falsehoods. Besides, in her business, she’d probably detect even an innocent half-truth before he could finish speaking it.

“Why do you need money? My contacts state you are rather well-respected among your peers.” Who were her contacts? And which peers did he mean? The doctors at 87 Harley Street were surely not speaking to Mrs. Dove-Lyon. And they had a practice. They weren’t exactly his peers; just his friends.

“A practice, Madam. I am saving for the down payment of a building on Harley Street.”

“Ah!” She leaned back and folded her hands. “Which one?” He couldn’t make out her face exactly behind the veil, but he read her posture. He knew the human body. She was stiff, and moved carefully and slowly, probably because her joints ached. That, too, explained the heat in the room. It allowed the blood vessels to dilate, and her muscles to relax.

“Ninety-one Harley,” he told her.

“The entire building is for sale, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but if I’m quick, I can get the lower level at a fair price.”

“Why not the high level?” She made a good point. It was a better set of rooms, but it would make the building unattainable because it cost more, and yet he wanted it all.

“Because my patients may be injured or may not feel well enough to climb stairs to my office... once I have one there, of course... if ever.”

“Greed, Dr. Stein, I can work with. But you seem to have ambition.” She sat back and steepled her gnarled, wrinkled fingers. She must be so uncomfortable, he thought. But before he could muse more on her condition, her words made him pay attention. “Yours is a fresh problem altogether.”

“How are my professional ambitions a problem?” He pulled at his cravat. Though she might require the heat, it was stifling. He could barely breathe.

“You won’t give up until you have the money you need, am I right?” She tilted her head under the veil.

“That is my intention.” He nodded.

“And if someone snatched number 91 away before you have enough money?”

He shrugged. “There will be others for sale. Maybe I can rent a room and start smaller. But for now—well. I guess I’m a gambling man, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. I am willing to take risks because I won’t settle for less than my heart’s desire.”

“You have grit.” She crossed her legs at the ankle, carefully. “Men don’t come here to make money, Dr. Stein. I don’t like the precedent you are setting.”

“What do men come here for?”

“Wealthy matches. To pay off their debts. To make debts, too, of course—not that they ever plan on that.” She blew on the skin that had formed on the surface of her hot chocolate, then took another sip. How could she drink a hot beverage in such a blazing room? “I’ll give you two weeks.”

His heart jumped in his chest. “For what?”

“To make the money you need. If you don’t manage it until the masquerade ball in honor of my birthday—I will match you. You’d be a blemish on my reputation if you walk out of here with pockets full of money, but not a wife. I won’t tolerate it. You have two weeks.”

Alfred choked on the stuffy air. “Match me?”

She nodded, the folds of her veil bending softly. Alfred gave a nervous laugh. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon, Madam, with all due respect. I cannot be matched.”

“And why is that?” Skepticism pierced her voice. She sounded as if she enjoyed the challenge but mocked his resilience.

“I’m Jewish. We’re not matched like the Ton.”

“And how are you matched?” She raised the pitch of her tone and set the cup aside on its matching saucer. “My understanding is that Jews are humans, aren’t they? I have known enough in my lifetime to know that they can be quite passionate lovers and devoted to their families. That should make you easy enough to match.”

Consternation pierced her words. “Plus, you are a doctor. And , rather easy on the eye.”

He quirked a brow. “We are matched by shadchan , Jewish matchmakers, among—” He cleared his throat—“like-minded—”

“Nonsense, Alfred. I know what your meaning is. You can only marry a Jew, of course. I would not match you with a lady of the Ton. That would never work. Society would be ablaze!” She hissed an unnerving laugh.

“And what makes you think I will agree to be matched with a woman at your hand?”

“Easy. Either you make enough money in two weeks to buy your practice yourself, or you’ll marry a woman of my choice—a Jewish woman—who can supply the funds you need.”

“And what do you get out of this?”

“A promise that you won’t come back here and continue to win against the house.”

Alfred nodded. But the arrangement didn’t sit quite right with him.

“Do you have any other criteria besides the religious requirements and money?” She assumed a businesslike air, a seasoned matchmaker indeed.

“Yes. She can’t bore me. I want a partner who is my equal intellectually and an inspiration in life.”

“Men usually ask for a fertile womb, virgins, or pretty hair. Your requirements are more specific. That makes it harder, but I’m taking the challenge and raising you one. She’ll have to match your good looks.”

“You make it sound like a game.”

“It is rather, the most interesting game of all, and I think you’ve taught me a new variation.”

“What is that?”

“Matching Jews. It’s a higher art with centuries of tradition. I seem to have the unique opportunity to test my skill at it—”

“And put your reputation as a matchmaker at stake, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.” He wanted to flee but to maintain etiquette wouldn’t rise from his chair before she did. “May I propose we forget the whole thing? I’m sure I can find a wife myself in the future. I promise not to come back after the next two weeks.”

“You may not. I’m afraid, Dr. Stein, that you forced my hand by winning against the house. The terms are thus: Two weeks to get out with enough money for your down payment, or you marry the woman I present to you. Your cards have been dealt.”

She reached for a cane on the side of her chair and banged it on the floor. Titan came in.

“Two weeks,” she said, and Titan nodded. “And don’t tell anyone your Jewish name, Dr. Stein. You’ll be The Cavalier .” She waved grandly. “I like your manners and backbone, boy. It suits you.”

When Alfred followed the leader of the wolf pack to the gaming floor, he had an uncomfortable pit in his stomach. The corridor seemed narrower, the light brighter, and the air stuffier. In two weeks, he’d have enough for the down payment, but would he still have his freedom? Somehow, he feared he’d gambled his life away without even touching a deck of cards. True, Mrs. Dove-Lyon had given him a chance to get

the money he needed for the future he wanted. A practice on Harley Street had been his and his brother's dream for so long. But with the persona he'd assume as The Cavalier, would his destiny change?

"You woke the sleeping lion, Doctor," Titan said as he handed Alfred an envelope. "This is your ticket to the masquerade ball." He tapped his shoulder. "You'll need all the luck in the world."

"What do you mean?"

"Once she sets her sights on someone, she won't relinquish—"

"She set her sights on me, didn't she?"

"Not just on you, Doctor. You're only the first of many Jews she'll want to match. I heard everything. You accused her of not working with Jews. She won't stand for bias and bigots, you know."

"I cannot say that I do." Alfred's head hurt. Had he gotten all the Jews in Town into the matchmaker's line of fire?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

As exciting as the nights at The Lyon's Den were when Ada gambled at high stakes, her usual days were fraught with cleaning up after Charlotte Silvers. Ada hated every moment of her mundane life under the Silvers' roof.

"Should I wear the fawn-colored gloves or the white?" Charlotte Silvers threw a pair of white gloves on the floor with a haughty air as if Ada should be grateful for the opportunity to gather them. "I think the brown." Good choice . The white clashed with Charlotte's dirty teeth, while the brown would blend in seamlessly. Ada chuckled to herself.

One by one, Ada hung the scarf, ribbons, and fur stole over her left arm as she picked up the trail of garments Charlotte had dropped when she had finished with them.

"I will wear the half-boots today." Another pair of boots flew across the carpet, nearly hitting Ada in the head.

"Spoiled brat," Ada mumbled to herself as she bent down to collect Charlotte's scattered boots from the floor in the foyer before anyone stumbled over them.

"Did you say something?" Charlotte called, sending her frilly collar flying as if she were on stage. She peeked over her shoulder before her brother, Daniel, rushed past them, plopping his hat on to escort her for the day. "I'll be back in a few hours," she declared on her way out to Regent Street for another day of shopping.

"Oh drat," Ada feigned a smile. "I hope it won't rain. We wouldn't want your new boots to get water stains." Then she went about her work to tidy up after her.

Wham.

Daniel slammed the door behind them. He always made sure that his exit from a room was heard and felt. He was such an arrogant prig; he probably couldn't imagine how the world could function without his presence. He never even acknowledged Ada's presence in the room.

Charlotte and Daniel Silvers, the children of wealthy parents, were considered the darlings in their circle of social climbers. Their father, a former classmate of Ada's father, owned two butcher shops in London. He had amassed his fortune by killing innocent animals, utilizing every part of their carcasses—not only the meat.

He dried cows' ears for dog treats, macerated the eyes and brains into sausages, and even boiled the hooves for hours to sell the broth. The scent of death seemed to emanate from everything he touched, but the stench lingering at the Silvers' apartment didn't bother them. Stepping over carcasses in their slaughterhouse and spilling blood was fine, as far as they were concerned.

Life only had value if it satisfied their immediate and personal needs, whims, and desires. Simply put, crushing out the lives of animals was no different than crushing dried leaves in the fall. As long as the Silvers always had meat and money, turning death into business didn't seem the least bit immoral to them.

"On the contrary," Mr. Silvers said when Ada once asked if he minded killing fluffy lambs. "At least the animals can be useful this way!"

She'd cringed in disgust. The family only found useful what served the purpose of making them happy. Otherwise, nothing and no one warranted consideration. Instant gratification was their goal at any price.

Ada's father's smuggling enterprise seemed far less immoral than the Silvers'



business, and yet he'd paid with his life.

Dylan, the second footman, came into the hallway and slipped her a playing card; a folded queen of spades. "Coming to the back for a round?" he said as if he hadn't passed anything to her. But he didn't need to—the card itself said enough. It meant that the cook was cheating.

If Dylan had passed her the king, then it would have meant the valet was cutting the deck. And there were other signals they could exchange. A young man of twenty, the footman was one of Ada's only close friends. When he wasn't sneaking around with Maria, the pretty kitchen maid, he gambled. He and Ada had worked out this system of communication so they could speak without saying a word.

She tucked Charlotte's boots under her arm and walked to the back door to the courtyard behind the kitchen. Her own cold feet were dressed in felted slippers with holes. She'd brought the shoes with her. The rest of her clothes and shoes had been expected to arrive with her father's shipment a year ago but never had. Instead, her father's killers had taken everything, even the blank pages from her diaries.

Ada snuck a hot bun from the cooling rack in the kitchen on the way out to the courtyard to join the rest of the staff in a game of Commerce. They too were her friends; they didn't look down on her and didn't treat her poorly.

And they didn't care that she'd grown up on trade ships and played with anyone willing—smugglers, travelers, and the crew. It was her way to feel connected to her father. Over time, he'd taught her to maintain a perfectly placid face, no matter what cards she held in her hand. Bluffing was a way of lying about her luck, but only when asked about her hand.

"One day, your skills from card games will come in handy, Maidale, sweet girl," her father had said in Yiddish when he tucked her in every evening, always with a gentle

kiss on her forehead. Ada touched her face as if she could feel her father's gentle love one more time.

“Remember, this is a game. But the skills you develop translate to real life,” he'd warned her. Ada didn't understand then but pretended to acquiesce. Now it came together. Much in real life was merely a bluff, and quite necessary for her survival in London. Dealing good cards, for instance, was how she'd made friends among the house staff. Bit by bit Ada had come to realize that every trick in card games worked exactly as her father had predicted. Memorization skills, shuffle tracking, shortcuts... all were useful, and yet—none of these skills had protected her from being trapped at the Silvers.

“I had a flush!” Dylan called when Ada walked to the group of men sitting on wooden boxes, cards in their hands. The cook, the valet, and Dylan threw their cards on the plank that served as a makeshift table.

“Play'n?” The cook raised a brow and cast Ada a friendly smile.

“Certainly, but no garroting.” She gestured at his head. He huffed and produced two kings that he'd saved. “Were you gonna make me cut?” She smiled, swiftly dismissing the cook's attempt to cheat her.

“'Tis too smart for her own good, this girl,” the valet said. Dylan shuffled the cards and handed them to her. Ada shook her head. It had been a skeleton deck, and she could feel that it was too thin and too light. She wriggled her fingers, inviting the cheater to produce the missing cards.

“There's no fooling' you, is there?” Dylan muttered as he retrieved the four queens from his pocket.

“I'm dealing,” Ada said with renewed vigor. She'd already slipped the tens in her

sleeve and was ready to earn herself some pocket money. Careful not to take too much from her fellow servants, Ada reserved the tougher gambling tricks for the wealthy players at The Lyon's Den.

Later that night, after Charlotte had returned with her latest purchases and Ada had pressed and folded the new chemises and even the new silk stockings, was she able to unhook the bell in her room and open her diary. Not one like other young women her age kept. She didn't confide in the pages and dream of a husband. Her notes were more pragmatic than that. It was only because—like her father—Ada kept careful records, especially of her wins.

Page after page listed the dates, initials of her gambling partners, the game, and her wins. Only wins, for she hadn't lost a game since she was fourteen. That time, the captain's son coerced her first kiss. She'd given it willingly, for they were friends, and she would have kissed him eventually even if he hadn't had the trump card.

Ada smiled when she remembered the freedom she'd had growing up on her father's ships. The captains' children were her playmates and classmates. Her father always found tutors to give them lessons during the long and dreary passages. By day, they studied. At night, they gambled. It had been the most delightfully exciting childhood and Ada had gained more life experience than most of the people she'd met in London.

But the stakes were high in the great city. Especially when she gambled at The Lyon's Den. Ada flipped her diary shut and hid the book in the tin box under a loose floorboard where she also kept her savings. Her wins.

A few minutes later, she donned her dark blue dress and crept out of the house. She supposed it was a good thing that she had to wear a bonnet inside because she'd kept her long flaxen hair wrapped around ribbons and it fell in thick curls for a half updo. Considering the simplicity of her only evening gown, she regarded her hair as the

best adornment—and the only one she could presently afford.

As Ada walked along Cleveland Row and toward the light blue building that was the notorious gambling hall, she thought of her father. He wouldn't approve. But he wasn't there to help either, so Ada had no choice. At the ladies' entry, she saw Hermia in a heated discussion with another woman. When Ada was within earshot, the other woman pivoted and left. Hermia was tough, but another friendly face, one of Aunt Bessie's entrusted wolves.

"Couldn't pay her buy-in, hmm?" Ada unbuttoned her pelisse.

"You're the only one who gets to play the men with house money," Hermia said through pinched lips.

Ada took heart. Being the only female puffer was a somewhat delicate position. Not from a gambling side. That was easy enough. But as the nights grew long, men often wanted more from her than mere games—and that she'd never been willing to give. She'd always hoped to fall in love and be swept away by a man who'd make her bones melt with a kiss, like in the books she'd read. If a love of that sort wasn't real, there wouldn't be so many novels written on the topic. Thus, she hoped to find it someday. To find the man who'd melt her bones and catch her fall.

"Ada!" Hermia called before Titan could escort her to the gambling floor. "The governess wants me to recite a poem in French by Wednesday. Can you help?"

"Of course! I know quite a few by Jean de La Fontaine." Ada blinked at the wolves. Most guests who frequented The Lyon's Den were terrified of them, but they were her pack.

"We can plug every hole with you, hmm?" Titan offered his arm for Ada to hold as he walked. "Is there anything you can't do?"

“I can’t do much at all, I’m afraid.”

He stopped and stared at her. “Let me get that right, Ada. You are probably the only woman I know who speaks four languages without ever slipping into an accent. You play every game like the masters, and your breadth of knowledge has yet to be scouted out by any of us.”

Ada gave a wistful smile. The bouncers and the servants were always nice to her. But they weren’t really her people, and their compliments didn’t quite reach every corner of her heart. She was Jewish but had no contact with the community.

“And you are by far the most beautiful woman here,” Titan gave her a knowing once-over. “I think that’s why she lets you play with the men. The ladies in the back room wouldn’t like you.”

Ada’s cheeks heated at the compliment.

Since the days on her father’s ship crossing the Channel from Dover to Calais, she’d been playing cards with men. They’d considered her an entertaining challenge, a girl to best at cards. They never did, of course. But women evaluated challenges beyond the gambling tables. Everything from her hair to her toes could threaten another woman’s pride in her persona. Men wouldn’t give Ada a second thought beyond the games because she was a girl. Girls couldn’t compete with men, even if they always won. It didn’t count. And yet, she had padded her savings with her exploits at The Lyon’s Den. Her only hope was to escape the prison at the Silvers. She couldn’t stand Charlotte’s nagging, self-indulgence, and stench anymore.

They’d arrived at the rouge et noir table and Titan nodded at Robin, who was dealing tonight.

“Good evening,” came a resonant and youthful voice from one of the chairs. Ada

glanced in the direction of the speaker. She rarely cared about who she was playing, if they kept their hands off her and the money flowing. But this voice came from an enormous shadow in the corner of her eye that made her look.

And what she saw left her mouth dry.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

He had short blond hair, topped with sun-kissed strands that were long enough to fall seductively onto his forehead. Despite the dim light in the high-stakes games room, his eyes shone bright blue, with a green tint like the trees reflected in the Pregel River back home in Prussia on sunny days.

Robin shuffled the cards and Ada felt his stare burn into her skin. She knew their roles by now. He was the clerk assigned to watch her tonight so that she wouldn't sink any of the money she was allotted as Dove-Lyon's puffer. Didn't they know better by now? She didn't lose, except on purpose.

"Black," the striking blond man said as he placed his stakes on the top square. There were two other punters, house players Ada knew by sight, but not by name. No threats to her control of the game from their end.

"Noir ." Ada set the pound notes on black. She briefly met the blond stranger's gaze. He gave a curt smile and her stomach flipped uncomfortably.

"Votre jeu est-il fait? Is your game made?" Robin said and uncovered the card. "Vingt-cinq, trente et un, sept..." Twenty-five, thirty-one, seven, he counted in French, as was customary at this game.

And so, the rounds went on and on. At least four times. It was most unusual because Ada didn't beat the stranger. Instead, the oddest thing happened. They had doublets every time, so Robin moved their stakes to the next level, then the next, and back but Ada didn't get back any of the money she put in.

"La premiere prison, encore une fois." The first prison rank, again. Robin gave her a

look that meant it was her last round.

“Je m’en vais, merci .” I’m leaving. Ada rose and left the money on the table. Titan should have come to her side to escort her to the next. But she couldn’t see him, and the evening’s games were not going well, even though she’d hoped for some straightforward wins.

Ada slipped into the powder room. Her chest was constricting again in that uncomfortable and familiar way. She told herself to stay calm, not to let the fear overwhelm her, not to have one of her strange episodes that would take her breath away.

With a blink from the corner of her eye, Ada saw that Hermia followed.

“You’re losing house money, Ada. What is going on?” Hermia asked in a hushed voice when they were finally alone. Aunt Bessie would be furious.

“I don’t know. He wins every time, and I cannot trick him into conversation or distract him...” Ada’s breath caught and she exhaled and inhaled, hard. It felt like her throat was closing. Her lungs weren’t working. She gasped and tried to push herself to breathe regularly but the air didn’t come.

“Of course, you cannot. He’s The Cavalier!” Hermia seemed exasperated, but Ada could only blink at her as the wolverine explained, “You know, the strongest player we’ve had in a while. The house loses against him all the time.”

Deflated, Ada leaned against the wall.

“Didn’t you know?” Hermia’s mouth twisted in pity.

She shook her head, but Ada finally understood. How could she have missed it?



Losing house money would upset Aunt Bessie. She might cut her off and then Ada could never save enough to escape from the Silvers. The Cavalier was a professional player. Dangerous. And yet, Ada was stuck playing against him. She was a puffer after all. How could she win against the man who never lost?

Once Ada steadied her breath and swallowed the panic in her throat, she ventured out of the ladies' lounge.

There he was, lurking in the corridor. Except that he didn't seem predatory at all. He had kind eyes and a warm smile, and appealing, chiseled features like a prince in a fairy tale.

"Madam," the stranger called and gave a polite bow. "My name is Cavalier. I thought I should at least introduce myself."

"Because I ended your winning streak?" she said cheekily, bluffing. She faked confidence and hoped it would come for real.

"That remains to be seen. Have I ended yours?" A stalemate was not a win.

She shrugged. There wasn't much else to say with her heart pounding so strongly, she felt it in her head. He was a most unusual gambler and didn't fit the mold at all. Yet, Ada knew better than to judge her opponents by their smoldering looks. He'd thrown her off her winning streak and was infuriating. She always won and had diaries filled with her wins. If she didn't value the completeness of her notes, he wouldn't make it into her ledgers of wins—and now, her stalemates.

"I'm Ada," she said with aplomb. Better to face off than to hide.

"Just Ada?"

“Yes.”

“All right. Would you care to join me for a drink?”

“No.”

“Fair enough. Do you play any other games?”

Her cheeks twitched in a smile. “Yes.”

“But you are not making this easy on me?” He grinned like a little boy hiding a frog in his pocket, but this was no boy. He was tall and well-built, and his green-blue eyes pierced Ada’s charade.

“All right, what’s your game?” Flirting was not part of her privileges as a puffer. Ada cringed when the words slipped out, but she couldn’t resist the temptation. He was everything that she didn’t need—a gambler, a stranger, and sinfully handsome. Nonetheless, she needed to break out of the prison at the Silvers. The thought of being stuck there cut her breath off. When she left The Lyon’s Den tonight, she’d be trapped again between the promise of her faith and the horror of Charlotte. Even the short reprieve created by flirting and gaming with The Cavalier offered some relief.

“Whist, casino, poker, chess—”

“What would your mother say if she knew you were playing me here?” Her question came out cheekier than expected.

“Hmm...” He rubbed his chin and then grinned. There was a level of intelligent mischief about him that made her stomach drop to her knees. She needed to sit. “My mother would say that calculated wins could pay for the education if the child was clever enough.”

“Your mother would think that counting cards was clever?”

He gave a half-cocked smile and Ada backed away. The sheer force of his brilliant eyes nearly knocked her off her feet. She had to get a hold of herself if she was going to win against him tonight. “Do you cheat then?”

“I don’t need to,” he said, inclining his head and reaching for her hand.

“Very well.” Nobody admitted it, but almost everyone bluffed. It was like lying, an accepted practice until you were caught. She instinctively lifted her hand and as he received and he placed a kiss on her knuckles. A rush flooded her as if he’d set her ablaze with the simple contact of his mouth on her skin. Most unsettling, Ada thought. And yet welcome. She wanted to extend their encounter by all means. “So, your mother wouldn’t frown upon cheating in a game of cards?”

“She’d want me upon a level with the rest, which is usually not realistic if one doesn’t take all advantages.”

“But?”

His smile widened now, and his cheeks showed the most adorable dimples. “It is my habit, Miss Ada, to leave games that my personal code of honor dismisses as improper.”

“And what exactly makes you such an excellent judge of players?”

“My profession, of course. I cannot afford to play, drink, or do anything else in such excess that it would compromise my ability to be perfectly alert on short notice.” As if this were the most natural thing in the world, he casually shrugged, displaying a level of self-control that Ada had never witnessed before. “And caring for people means reading them, for they don’t always tell the truth.”

Ada wondered what he'd meant by care but didn't dare ask the chivalrous Adonis before her. His intense gaze bore into her soul as if he knew her every bluff, her face flushed with a mix of fear and excitement, and her heart thudded uncontrollably. "H-how admirable," Ada said, as she looked down at her hands. "I'm afraid that my habits of gambling would mean that I am ruined for someone with your code of honor."

"On the contrary." He leaned against a side table next to her and crossed his legs. Towering over her, his warm breath grazed her face and electrified every inch of her skin. Everything about him was clear and crisp, like his spring sky eyes. Despite all this clarity, he'd muddled up her chances to make some money this evening. Though she knew better, she couldn't resist keeping her gaze fixed on him, mesmerized by his sculpted features and rugged charm.

Ada shook herself. She didn't have time for handsome men. Not if she wanted to escape from the Silvers and plan for the future.

"I have to go," she said then and turned away. She'd never been so unnerved by a man. Ada knew her bluffing skills were completely shattered; he'd be able to read her with no trouble. Even as she walked away—showing only confidence—she could feel his gaze following her, and she knew he could tell he'd affected her. She couldn't get away fast enough, and she hoped she wouldn't have to play against him again.

She'd gamble at cards, but never with her heart.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

“The house has recently been converted,” the estate agent said as he pulled his left cheek up and let his mustache follow like a hairy caterpillar. “The ground floor has been split in two.”

Alfred followed him and inspected the premises carefully. Ninety-one Harley Street was ideal as an office.

“What used to be the morning room could now be an office. The kitchen has been modernized and would be shared.” The agent opened a door to the left of the small entry hall.

Alfred tuned out the words. Most people lied almost as soon as they spoke. He’d trained himself to pay attention to the details and focus on the unspoken. When the estate agent had turned the key in the lock, Alfred listened for the telltale screech of rust. None came.

He’d trailed his hand along the walls and felt that they were warm, which meant that the building was heated and not in foreclosure, thus making a long rental period possible.

“Has anyone let the other half yet?” Alfred asked.

“We have received offers, and the owner is only entertaining the highest bids.”

So that was a no.

“Are those rooms bigger?”

“They are more expensive,” the agent said with gravitas as if he wanted to warn Alfred.

“Can I see them?” He was undeterred. The location was perfect. With the staircase tucked away in the back, the former morning room could be his office. He’d put some chairs in the hall as a waiting room, and he’d have a bed for overnight stays in the former dining room. That left the drawing room as the principal place for consultations.

Each had a functional fireplace and windows facing south, which made for bright rooms. The wood panels and chair rails were shiny as if they’d been recently sanded down and lacquered. Bright green and white striped wallpaper and brass lamps complemented the interiors well. Everything suited Alfred, even the mismatched chairs in the dining room would make satisfactory seats for the waiting room. All he needed was the down payment.

The agent left Alfred alone for a moment and stepped outside. Meanwhile, Alfred walked around the three rooms on the ground floor. He knew instantly where he’d put an exam table, cabinets with linens, and a washbasin. His desk could stand by the window, with two chairs backing against the street view to maintain his patients’ privacy. But as he walked through the building, allowing himself to peek upstairs and dream of the perfect space to build a career, his mind returned to last night.

He’d be at least a few pounds closer to the down payment if he hadn’t encountered stalemate after stalemate with the gorgeous blonde at The Lyon’s Den. Her face had been an enigma. Even after several rounds at the rouge et noir table, he had not figured out her tell. Most players fidgeted if they hid some cards in their coats. Others looked for the longs or shorts on prepared decks. Most women had an expectant glance once they told lies as if they hoped for instant confirmation they’d gotten away with the untruth. But not the girl from last night. Her breathing had remained calm and regular. She spoke with no noticeable hitches, and she’d held herself ramrod

straight during the game. If he didn't think her too young and too pretty, he'd consider her a professional card player. One of the best he'd ever seen.

Alfred smiled at the memory of their brief encounter in the hall. There, she wasn't as composed. Was her rapid breath possibly a sign of arousal? Could he have been the reason for her nervousness? She'd exchanged glances with the Black Widow's wolves around the game room as if they were her friends.

She was one of them.

The epiphany struck him like a blow to the head, leaving him reeling with the weight of its impact. She played for the house. It must be true. For what reason could a woman as striking as she have to spend her evening surrounded by men in the gambling hall?

"She must be that good!" he'd mumbled to himself, more in awe of her skill than disappointed in his losses. For Dr. Alfred Stein, stalemates were losses. He was used to winning and felt surprised that losing to a girl didn't bother him more.

The serviceable, well-worn blue dress had contained her petite frame. She wasn't rich, that much was obvious. Yet her posture was straight and her manner of speaking elegant. With an air of unfulfilled potential, she seemed destined for more than the gambling tables' demands could offer. Despite her position, she exuded a quiet grace and unquenchable spirit that made it clear she was meant for more.

No matter what Alfred tried to focus on, his mind circled back to the beautiful Ada who'd nearly ruined the perfect winning streak he'd maintained since university. He should be focused on getting the money for the down payment. That was all he must think about. But how her hair had shone in the dim light and the way her smooth skin prickled with goosebumps when he stopped her in the hall sent a shiver down his back. The pout she'd made when she bit down a sly remark and refused to tell him

her last name had been engraved in Alfred's mind as a constant distraction. She was so beautiful, his thoughts circled back to her over and over again.

Bollocks.

He had to control himself and win enough money for the down payment. With three fireplaces, 91 Harley Street would take at least fifty pounds worth of firewood per year, especially in the room designated for overnight patients. He'd also need money for rent as soon as the lease started. Plus, dark lining for the curtains, to dim the light for patients' recoveries.

After leaving the Marylebone location of what he hoped would be his future office, Alfred took a walk in Regent's Park, which was open to the public a few times a week. It was lovely in the spring. He needed some fresh air to clear his mind. "Stop thinking about her," he chastised himself, again. So close to making his dream a reality, he couldn't be distracted like a green boy.

And then his heart made a flip and his palms grew sweaty. The gorgeous blond hair and the delicate silhouette from the night before drew his eyes like a mirage. Ada! He didn't believe in coincidences and walked straight toward her. Despite the thick woolen pelisse, he could make out her alluring figure. He shouldn't, but he would talk to her. While it was certainly irregular for him, he had no office to occupy or patients to tend to, leaving him with an unaccustomed air of leisure and a gnawing restlessness. He longed to speak to her but didn't dare. So why did it feel as though approaching the beautiful Ada from The Lyon's Den was a terminal affair? No matter for he couldn't possibly pull himself away from her.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

Ada stood yawning at the Park Square gate to Regent Park with hours to kill. She'd much rather sleep and relax after suffering the tension in her neck from the gambling rounds she'd lost. Charlotte was on another of her shopping sprees and had dismissed Ada. Even though she'd been sent as a servant, she was glad to get away from Charlotte and her rotten ways. One day, she'd trap an unaware man into marriage and Ada didn't want to see it happen. He'd walk into Charlotte's net of lies. It was one thing to trick men out of some coin, but another altogether to betray them and steal their freedom.

The tulips were in bloom, and even hyacinths showed their buds. A colorful display of spring flowers lifted Ada's mood as soon as she stopped to take in the crisp air. It was warmer now but still cool, perfect. As usual, the instant Ada was at a safe distance from the Silvers, she felt freer, better, and more herself—not the servant girl without a say about her own life.

Ada walked on the rocky path, ignoring the pebbles that got stuck in her soles. Among the trees, London's usual noise dissipated, and the morning felt much more in order than the Town's bustling. Ada bent down to a bed of crocuses, marveling at the beautiful dark purple hues and bright oranges. With their little white bases, each petal flowed into a splash of color, as if an artist had touched a watercolor-laden brush onto a crescent water droplet, allowing the pigment to bleed onto the paper.

Ada remembered her art tutor in Königsberg. "Wet-on-wet effects for the backgrounds, wet-on-dry for precision," he used to say. "Precise strokes for the foreground, wider ones for the background." Growing up, everything had a set of rules, not just watercolors. Discipline, punctuality, and politeness ruled all levels of human interaction. Each day came filled with the same monotony, a life devoid of

excitement or challenge. She had searched for a way to break free from the endless cycle of routine, yet it was a path that remained elusive. Instead, she'd found herself entrenched in a rut.

Step-by-step her father had built a little fortune by smuggling the finest liquors from France and Italy to Prussia and, eventually, to England. Aunt Bessie had been one of his most demanding clients, placing large orders and ultimately monopolizing him and his connections. He had uprooted their lives and enlisted tutors for Ada to come along with him as they traveled the world, to ensure that she received the education he'd never had.

Often, during his days-long absences, Ada would be left in the sole care of her Parisian governess while her father pursued his trade business. Over time, his bank account reflected his success and Mrs. Dove-Lyon had built a reputation for an establishment offering the highest-stakes games and the finest drinks in Town.

As The Lyon's Den grew, so did her father's greed. When The Lyon's Den celebrated its tenth anniversary, Ada was twenty. She'd traveled on his father's ship for nearly two years, perfecting her French, English, and Italian with passengers and other smugglers. She also learned every trick that the men had been willing to teach her about cards. "A pretty girl with wits and tricks," they used to joke.

At that time, the French physician Dr. Pierre-éloi Fouquier had been treating patients with strychnine, a plant-based substance that could help various ailments—or be lethal in high concentrations. Dr. Fouquier's research assistant was a gambler and indebted. One day, instead of paying Ada's father, he brought four vials of strychnine. He sent it to England with the latest shipment for Mrs. Dove-Lyon, whose female clients paid quite a lot for it and wanted more "nux-vomica," as they called it.

And so, Ada was sent to London with several enormous trunks of the medicine, and her father's promise to follow soon. He'd trusted Mr. Silvers, expecting his former

schoolmate and friend would take Ada in as if she were his own, an equal to the Silvers' children, Charlotte and Daniel.

"I'll establish a steady trade line and join you as soon as I can," Father had promised. "Leaving liquor behind, I can try to help bring medicine to England." It was a laudable endeavor now that Napoleon had yielded to hegemony in Europe. Ada had thought her father was a pioneer. His business would become important beyond generating money. She'd hoped there would be a virtue in ensuring a steady influx of strychnine and the other cures he'd import.

Sadly, as she had seen repeatedly in her life, the corruptibility of the human soul was bottomless. Instead of using the vials for medicinal purposes, they were pawned off as poison—most efficient and without an antidote. One thing led to another and eventually, Ada's father was caught by the most corrupt of all souls, the beer brewers from Prussia.

Beer, unlike harder liquors, was less prone to being diluted with the blinding effects of ethanol and generally considered a safer drink—except that it also masked strychnine well and was the drink of choice for disgruntled wives resorting to murder. Thus, instead of establishing a business to bring medicine, Ada's father had been tricked into smuggling poison. Since he had no legal protection as a Prussian Jew, he had no chance to fight those who'd corrupted his imports.

"He's dead, Ada." Mr. Silvers told her without aplomb one night. "Beaten to death by the brewers."

Ada's arms grew cold in shock. "It's all here in this letter, girl. His accounts are frozen until you turn twenty-five or get married."

As she read the words on the paper in front of her, Ada's heart pounded loud enough to echo through the room. Her father, the man she loved more than anything and her

only family, was dead. Her eyes scanned the words again and again, hoping that the meaning would change, but the pain in her chest only grew worse with each passing moment. She took a deep breath, but it felt like her lungs were collapsing on themselves. Panic set in as she realized that she was all alone now. Ada slumped to the floor, dizzy and hyperventilating. She buried her face in her hands, shaking with uncontrollable sobs, as grief and shock consumed her. The world felt like it had been turned upside down in an instant, and Ada was left with nothing but the hollow emptiness where her heart used to be.

And the Silvers had given her no time to mourn. Instead, Mr. Silvers' tone and demeanor had changed. From a cherished guest, Ada fell to the status of a household nuisance. She couldn't quite explain it and she missed her father so deeply, she hadn't cared to find out.

About two weeks after her father's death, she stepped into Mr. Silvers' office, which was only a desk in the small library on the ground floor.

"What do you want?" he grumbled.

"I was wondering when you expect the shipments of my belongings."

"Like what?" He didn't even look at her.

"Books, dresses, shoes, scarves, and my diaries."

At that, Mr. Silvers made eye-contact. His stare locked into his features like a man who enjoyed killing. She'd seen it in the slaughterhouse when he slit the animals' throats. The kosher way was to make a swift, clean cut so that the animals wouldn't suffer. Mr. Silvers prolonged the agony, relishing the squeals and screams, enjoying the power he held over his victims. The sight made Ada shiver in horror then, and the memory of it made her shiver again.

“Don’t know. Don’t ask again.” His retort came with a dose of venom and a cold deliberation that made Ada suspicious of his nature. Every time she saw Mr. Silvers, a sudden surge of fear coursed through her body, cutting her breaths to come in short, quick gasps as though she was suffocating. As if remembering the moment Mr. Silvers upended her life with the terrible news, her body went into flight mode even though she had nowhere to go. Every time was worse than the previous, making it difficult for her to calm down and regulate her breathing.

Her father’s death had been a shock and had cost Ada her life as she’d known it. She didn’t even get time to mourn, nor investigate his death. The Silvers stripped her of everything she’d brought to England and made her to sleep in the drafty attics. Worse, they forced Ada to serve as Charlotte’s maid. As Ada continued to toil under the brat’s oppressive and abusive character, her spirit gradually withered away. She yearned for a way out.

Three years her junior, Charlotte read like an eight-year-old but gave commands as if she were a patroness of Almack’s. The spoiled girl made virtually no progress with her tutors and indulged in so many sweets her figure was swelling and her teeth rotting. The stench when Charlotte spoke led her mother to give her a fan to cover her mouth. The girl used it to wave the air away from herself. Dylan once gagged in her presence and was sentenced to cleaning the stables alone during the cold winter night.

“Even the dung smells better!” he’d joked with Ada when she secretly brought him hot tea.

At first, Ada tried to make herself useful to help Charlotte with her correspondence.

“I don’t need to write letters, only invitations,” Charlotte had told Ada one day when Ada offered to help in composing formal missives.

“And how will you thank your hosts after they invited you?”

“With a gift?”

“And who will send that gift with a note?”

“My husband, of course!” Charlotte had everything figured out in her mind. In her narrow perspective, people were nothing but tools, existing solely to cater to her every desire and fancy. Any thought that contradicted this notion was swiftly dismissed, leaving little room for empathy or understanding. Ada shook her head. Some unsuspecting husband, Charlotte surely thought, would one day cater to her whims and consider himself lucky. Preposterous illusions, Ada feared, for which Mr. Silvers might pay. And so, Ada watched the entire household dote on Charlotte. Her parents remained ignorant of the servants rolling their eyes and of Daniel’s lies to avoid Charlotte tagging along when he mingled in society.

Unlike the Silvers, there was no place in London society for a Jewish girl. Jews were only beginning to mingle among the Ton and, ultimately, Ada didn’t belong there. But she also didn’t know anyone in the Jewish community. They were just as tightly knit as the Ton, probably even more. No Jewish man would have her if he knew she gambled at The Lyon’s Den. It was a vicious cycle: She needed her inheritance to leave the Silvers and gambled for money in order to leave, yet being found out as a gambler could jeopardize her chances to marry, which she needed to do to claim her inheritance. Or wait five more years. Ada groaned.

Despite her present lack of prospects, she enjoyed watching the elegant couples when they walked along the crushed stone paths in Regent Park. Ada was content to spend a few hours alone amidst the trees and strangers there. The park was peaceful and smelled like new leaves and fresh buds.

It was a balmy April day and the air was ripe with the scent of life. Soft pink magnolia blossoms danced in the cool breeze and whispered promises of vibrant delights but the season’s efflorescence didn’t soothe Ada’s despair. When Ada went

closer to the tall tree, a bed of fallen petals cushioned her steps. These beautiful messengers of spring couldn't experience the season. Instead, they fell to the ground to be raked up and taken away in sacks before the temperature grew warmer. Ada crossed her arms and rubbed herself. Not even spring's beauty could dispel the gloomy shadow of her future at the Silvers.

She also couldn't help the poor magnolia blossoms. She couldn't even help herself. So, she continued her walk, pondering where her path would take her. The moments of quiet solitude turned into loneliness. Ever since her father died, a pesky urgency sometimes squeezed Ada's ribs shut. Fear, she thought, was suffocating her. Thus, she tried to trick herself and force a smile, hoping her breathing would follow her expression. The ruse often worked.

Distraction was another trick she borrowed from playing cards. She regarded a tuft of crocuses that had opened their petals wide in the bright sun and knelt to look at the lovely shades of their petals. It was still chilly in the early spring, but these harbingers of warmer days were encouraging. Sometimes crocuses peeked out from under a blanket of snow. If they could bloom despite the cold, couldn't she, too? But Ada didn't finish her thought.

A large muscular hand appeared in her field of vision and picked a yellow tulip from the flower bed.

"For you." That resonant voice from the night before swept through her, as The Cavalier offered the flower to her. "You look like you need some cheering up."

He caught her off guard—without her guard entirely—especially judging by the immense throbbing in her chest. She inhaled deeply, grateful that the air returned to her lungs.

But a different nervousness washed over Ada and her entire body reacted to the

familiar sound of his voice. How would she react to his touch? Though they had only exchanged perfunctory words during their card game the night before, their eyes had met more than once, conveying a silent connection.

“Thank you.” Still kneeling on the side of the flower bed, Ada extended her hand to reach for the tulip. “I’m not sure it is allowed to pick the blooms at Regent Park, milord.”

“I’m no lord, only a physician,” he said kindly, and their fingers touched ever so slightly. “My real name is Alfred. The Cavalier is a nickname.” A jolt of heat, as if fired from the tiny spot where his fingers had brushed hers, shot through Ada. She lost her balance and almost toppled over, landing with one hand in the dirt. He caught her upper arm. “Are you all right?”

She couldn’t help turning crimson as the heat from his firm grip spread through her, thundering in her middle below her already fast-beating heart.

But before she could thank him, a woman screamed. “Help! Somebody!”

Ada turned toward the tree-lined paths to her left.

“Over there,” Alfred called and pulled Ada with him. She had no choice but to run along. He was holding her hand.

“My son, my boy!” a woman in a dark-brown walking dress and feathered hat screamed. “He’s been bit!”

“Let me see, I’m a doctor.” With a firm yet cautious stride, he approached the woman and the small boy, no more than three or four years old, dressed in a miniature Marine outfit. Despite his sobs and the tears rolling down his chubby cheeks, the boy tried to speak but Ada couldn’t understand his lament.



His words were lost, however, as he licked tears off his chin and gave a heaving breath. More tears rolled down his chubby cheeks. Ada's stomach turned when she saw blood oozing from his small hand. But Alfred remained admirably calm. He surveyed the grounds while he set down a leather bag that Ada hadn't even noticed before. As he retrieved a white rolled cloth and wrapped the boy's hand, he spoke with composure as if nothing were the matter. The boy's sobs quieted to whimpers.

"What bit you?"

"The big monster squirrel," the boy said, opening his eyes wide as if the perpetrator had been five feet tall.

"A monster squirrel? Oh no! Those are very dangerous indeed," Alfred said, a little amusement showing through his voice. "They have very sharp teeth!"

The boy nodded vigorously.

"I'll tell you what we shall do. Come with me to my friend's office so we can clean the wound. And then you must draw me a picture of the monster. All right?"

Alfred picked the boy up. His eyes met hers, and she understood that he wanted her to follow him, though how she did, she wasn't sure. There was plenty about this man that confused her; she decided it wouldn't hurt to get to know him better. After all, he was The Cavalier and she'd need to be able to read him in order to beat him at cards. What better way to do that than to watch him when he was focused on the child? With that in mind, she decided she'd tag along and when Alfred started walking, she followed.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

Ada watched the Cavalier transform before her eyes. The cocky gambler from the previous night was now a doctor in full command. He'd scooped up the boy—Max was his name—tightly in his arms as he led the small entourage out of Regent's Park, through Marylebone. He knew the way and didn't stop except to cross the street. Ada followed eagerly. Alfred made a sharp turn into the entrance of an inconspicuous white building.

87 Harley Street

They'd arrived. Alfred didn't bother knocking and simply walked in, little Max in his arms. Ada followed after the boy's mother.

"Alfred, what happened?" A young man in a white apothecary's apron corked a tiny dark brown vial in his hand and came around to the child.

"This is my dear friend, Mr. Collins. The pharmacist." Alfred gingerly placed the boy on the shiny wooden counter. His mother mumbled a greeting. Ada curtsied. Behind the pharmacist was a wall of small drawers with metal latches, rows of shelves with tin boxes and glass bottles, and various wooden cases. A well-stocked apothecary, Ada thought.

"Little Max here caught a monster squirrel at the park and got bitten," Alfred said.

"A monster squirrel. In London," Mr. Collins said with grave understanding. He exchanged glances with Alfred. Ada stifled a laugh. They seemed to be old friends. "Well then, let's make sure there are no pieces of the fangs still stuck—"

“Fangs?” the little boy screamed, but Mr. Collins had already poured a pungent liquid from a brown glass bottle onto the wound. The concoction smelled almost minty but reminded Ada more of a salad than candy. Alfred collected the surplus in a kidney-shaped metal bowl.

“Oh yes, I heard that monsters sometimes drop their fangs if they bite into something very hard.” Alfred handed Ada his bag to hold. Then he opened it and reached in to produce a small, clear glass jar filled with a white powder. He turned to the little boy’s mother, who hovered behind him, and he gave her a reassuring smile that Ada realized was for Max’s benefit more than anyone else’s. He said, “This is a detection powder. If it goes away in a few days, we know there are no fangs left.” Alfred gave the boy’s mother a wink and a nod.

She looked from Alfred to the boy, and then back again. The mother didn’t seem to understand at first, but then her eyes widened as she caught on to his meaning. “Oh,” she said, “Yes! I see. For... fangs .”

Alfred nodded and gave her a look that spoke of his concern. “This will let us know if we’ve eliminated all the effects of ‘monster fangs.’ But if you see any discoloration, white blisters, or redness, come back, all right?”

The mother nodded gratefully and brushed Max’s hair from his face.

As if they’d done it together a million times, Alfred and the pharmacist bandaged the boy’s hand. With a last tug of the strip of fabric that secured the bandage, Alfred helped the boy off the counter and gestured to a small table and chairs tucked into a corner under the staircase.

“Now take some paper from the table over there and pick some watercolors. You mustn’t go without drawing an exact likeness of the monster squirrel.”

“I’ll hang it right here as a warning for other monsters,” Mr. Collins added.

“Will you catch it?” The boy asked, ready to dart off to what Ada realized was a children’s waiting area. Besides watercolors and brushes, there were alphabet blocks and a doll with ribbons and woolly braids.

“I’ll catch it today!” Alfred took his bag from Ada and snapped the latch shut. “Let’s bring the monster to justice,” he said, taking her hand again. He nodded his goodbye and dragged her out of the office and onto the bright street.

Ada was flabbergasted. This stranger—The Cavalier—had such a charming way with the little boy and yet he looked like a Greek marble sculpture, his golden hair glistening in the sun. His rugged beauty and athletic build clashed with the nimble fingers and dexterity he’d shown when bandaging the child. He didn’t fit in The Lyon’s Den last night, but he’d gambled as if he did. But then again, so did she. Should she give him the benefit of the doubt despite where she’d met him?

Would he give her the benefit of the doubt even though he’d met her there?

She struggled to come up with something to say and then latched onto the first thought that came to mind. “That ointment. From the bottle. Didn’t that sting him?”

“The sage oil, oh yes, very much,” he blinked, still gripping her hand and pulling her down the street, then around a corner heading toward Ulster Terrace. She looked at her small hand in his large one. A doctor. She twitched with glee and followed willingly past the white buildings and a flower shop with wooden buckets stuffed with tulips at either side of the door.

“But he didn’t cry.”

“They never do. I distracted him.” He gave a mischievous smile and exuded a

perfectly boyish charm. Alfred combined elegance in his manner of speaking with a fierceness in his gaze that made her shiver.

She felt the need to cut the silence, but her heart pounded so hard that she couldn't think of anything intelligent to say. "I didn't think squirrels had fangs." She shrank away as soon as she realized how stupid that sounded. "I mean, they have rather long front teeth to crack nuts and flick acorn hats off, don't they?"

"I'm a doctor, not a dentist." He cast her a half-smile, but his eyes observed her more closely trailing slowly over her features.

"Do you work at the practice with Mr. Collins?" Chastising herself for spitting out question after question, Ada tried to keep up with his long steps. They walked down another typical Marylebone street. In this part of London, most of the white stone houses were attached, donning heavily ornamented front doors topped with fanlights and flanked with symmetrical twelve or sixteen-pane windows on either side. A few stairs led up to the entrances, and small flower beds or grass interrupted the stony urban rows.

"I hope to purchase a practice nearby. So, no. Not yet." He pulled her hand onto his muscular arm and placed his other hand over hers. "We're here." He beamed at her, and she looked up. They were standing on the side of the road alongside a black wrought-iron fence like those in front of every building.

He stood in the light so that the sunshine illuminated him from behind. It was a splendid view and Ada was agog over the lovely sights of London. Him in particular.

Alfred gestured toward a door.

"Where are we?" She forced her eyes off the gorgeous young doctor who held her hand and read the signs over the striped awning.

## Pâtisserie de la Loire

A little bell rang over Ada's head as Alfred opened the door for her. She could have sworn he stayed behind and ogled her from the back, but she was immediately drawn by the pastries on the glass display. Her eyes trailed over the sweet treats decorated with piped cream, cherries, and even slices of green fruit with a circle of small seeds at the core. The scent of burned sugar and grated lemon rind enveloped her fully. How different the sweetness was and what a contrast to the Silvers' death stench of the butchery. Here, among the beautifully garnished pastries, life took on a magically happy rhythm.

By the time the patron welcomed them and exchanged niceties with Alfred, Ada was in a trance of sweet delight. Until now, she hadn't realized how deprived she'd been of the continental European delicacies. The Silvers never allowed her treats. Their bread pudding, albeit sweet, had grown boring and rather too filling.

"Ada?" came the resonant voice of the tall doctor on her side. "Ada?"

"Oh yes, pardon me." She brushed some imaginary flyaways behind her ears and tried to avoid his gaze. "This all looks rather lovely."

"Made fresh every morning, milady," the chef said proudly from behind the counter. He had a heavy French accent. Ada immediately felt at home.

"Les pâtisseries me rappellent mon enfance ." The pastries remind me of my childhood. The man beamed when Ada spoke French.

"Qu'est-ce que vous préférez alors, mademoiselle? La crème anglaise, les fraises, ou peut-être quelque chose avec du chocolat? " What do you prefer, Miss? Custard, strawberries, or maybe chocolate?

Alfred flashed a wide toothy smile. “I did not know you’d be this excited over lunch.”

She clasped both hands under her chin in excitement. She felt like a little girl in a toy shop, she couldn’t pick her favorite. “I—I honestly can’t decide. They all look and smell so delicious!”.

“You are astonishing, Ada. And I... ahem... never say that.” She blinked away from the pastries again to meet his gaze. His eyes were molten.

“I didn’t expect such a delightful place in London.” She bit her tongue; she didn’t want to jinx this promising encounter. She broke into a cold sweat, but it was not the terrifying kind that cut her breath off. Instead, her chest filled with vigor and happiness. She liked being near Alfred even though he’d been the first to break her streak of winning at cards. There was more to him than she’d initially seen at the rouge et noir table, and she wanted to know more. It appeared like he saw Ada, not merely the servant or the gambler in her.

“You are my guest.” Alfred’s voice was smooth and even more inviting than the treats on display. Ada was entranced by the irresistible display before her. The eclairs gleamed under the soft light, filled to perfection with a luscious, velvety crème patissière , and topped with a sliver of toasted almonds. Beside them sat ornate croquembouche towers, each a testament to the unparalleled craftsmanship of the skilled patissier . The heady scent of sweet vanilla and rich chocolate permeated the air, blending seamlessly with the warmth of freshly baked treats.

“I cannot choose.” She opened her palms and touched her cheeks in delicious distress, unable to pick her favorite.

“One of each, please,” Alfred said, and the French chef’s eyes gleamed.

“ Oui, monsieur. Right away, Dr. Stein.”

Alfred invited Ada to hook her hand back onto his arm and left the shop. “But the sweets!” Ada protested.

“He knows where to bring them. Come with me.”



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

Alfred led her down the street and into an alleyway. She halted and tugged him back, her hand still on his arm. Her back was against the rusticated lower level of a Palladian Marylebone house.

“Trust me?” He looked down at her and his soft words sounded earnest. “It’s a shortcut.”

She swallowed hard. He was a stranger, regardless of his stunning smile and soft blue eyes. If they got caught... or worse if he... and they didn’t... But what was back home that couldn’t wait? Charlotte and new silks to press, muslins to fold, and shoes to wedge into the already overstuffed cabinet. And didn’t her father always say that shortcuts in card games were like routes for a ship? Her life was lacking direction. Even a shortcut might lead her out of the rut into which she’d become trapped.

Ada bit the inside of her cheek and took heart.

And in about a minute, they stepped into a vast open space. Green grass and colorful beds of crocuses, tulips, and hyacinths stretched as far as she could see.

“How did we get back to Regent’s Park?” she asked.

“I grew up in London. I know my way around.” He nodded in the direction of the boating pond opposite Ulster Terrace.

“Have you always lived in Marylebone?” she asked.

“Yes. My parents used to own a lovely house on Wimpole Street, not far from here.”

“You speak as if you miss it.”

“I do. We had a beautiful home. It had an exquisite stucco-covered facade and balconies with decorative ironwork. Mother had two potted roses on either side of the door. My room was on the third floor, my little brother’s and my parents’ bedroom on the fourth.”

“It sounds like you had a wonderful childhood home.”

“That we did, my brother and I.” He hung his head. “And I will get that house back one day.”

“What happened to it?”

“My parents sold it to pay for my brother and me to attend university in Edinburgh.”

“I’ve heard of the medical faculty there—”

“Yes, the school is well-known as the best. And the most expensive.” He pressed his lips and gestured ahead, cutting the moment short as if he didn’t want to say more about his past.

“Oh, my!” Ada saw a large tartan blanket spread out with an array of pastries not far from the main path, under a tree so they were shaded from the strong rays of the sun. “A picnic?”

Alfred gestured for her to take a seat.

She looked around; Alfred had walked her around the block so the patissier had had enough time to make his delivery and spread the blanket for them. “How did the patissier know to bring everything here?”

“He’s done it many times for me, even though I’m not sure I ever bought quite this much for only two people.”

As they settled onto the soft blanket, a tantalizing aroma of baked goods wafted through the air like a warm embrace with the promise of sweet indulgence.

“Do you bring all the women here you wish to seduce?” The question slipped from her lips before the thought had matured. She cringed as the words emerged and barely dared to look at Alfred.

“I’ve only ever been here with Wendy and Nick.”

“Who’s Wendy?”

“The nurse. Nick Folsham’s sister, the oculist.” He reached for a madeleine sprinkled with powdered sugar. “One of the doctors at 87 Harley Street. He and I—” he chewed with gusto—“we took our exams together. Not all of them. But you know, studying makes a body hungry. You met the apothecary, but I’ll introduce you to the others someday.”

“You picnicked here with the other doctors?”

“Well, we weren’t licensed. Not yet. But yes, we quizzed each other to prepare for oral exams.”

Ada liked that answer much better than what her mind had concocted. Why was she jealous? She had no claim to the young doctor. None. Her heart sank.

“Help yourself. We need to eat this before the sun melts the butter.” He reached for a mille-feuille .

At the same moment, Ada's hand was on the pastry and her fingers slipped into the gooey vanilla cream between the thin layers of dough.

"What a shame," Alfred said, but his tone wasn't sad at all. He lifted her hand and brought it to his mouth. With a flick of his tongue, he licked some of the cream off her fingers and then smacked his lips. He cast her a boyish look that made her stomach flip flop. She should have been shocked but wasn't. "I just wanted to taste some. It's yours if you want it." Flushed with emotion, Ada stared at the pastry, agog, unable to maintain eye contact with the handsome man who had sent a sensual rush through her entire body.

She was adorable beyond words, and he couldn't explain what had come over him. Never in his wildest dreams would he have predicted that he'd lick vanilla cream off Mrs. Dove-Lyon's puffer's fingers, but this girl was a phenomenon. She blushed and lowered her lashes, pulling her hand away slowly and shyly.

But not too shyly. He liked that.

"How is it possible that you speak French like a native yet sound entirely British?" Conversation. Good idea. He had to use the same technique he'd perfected with children: distracting himself as if he were the patient.

"My father hired several tutors for me. He traveled a lot and left me at home with a governess." She wiped her mouth and licked a mille-feuille flake off the corner of her mouth.

Alfred's cock twitched in his breeches.

"I suppose the governess didn't know what to do with me except schedule my lessons."

“What else did you learn besides French then?”

“English.”

“English is a foreign language to you?”

She nodded.

“Where are you from, Ada?”

“Prussia. Konigsberg.” She said the German umlaut without an accent.

“Do you speak any other languages besides English, French, and German?”

She nodded again but didn’t answer. Her mouth was filled with the last bite of the mille-feuille .

Slightly embarrassed by his powerful physical response to an innocent pastry mishap, Alfred looked away and tried to count the swans on the pond. One, two, three, four... it was no use. His entire body hardened, and he shifted uncomfortably on the woolen blanket. This girl was different, smarter, more refined, and with a stronger personality than anyone he’d ever met. Besides Wendy maybe, but she didn’t count. She was Nick’s little sister.

Could he possibly get away with one last flirtation before Mrs. Dove-Lyon matched him with another woman?

Ada had polished off the mille-feuille and took a big bite from a Paris-Brest , a ring-shaped choux pastry filled with praline cream and topped with caramelized almond slices. She chewed and a sticky crumb of praline stuck on her lower lip.

Alfred was in outright pain now. It made no sense, but his body wanted that little crumb more than the rest of the pastries on display.

“You...” He cleared his throat and gestured to his own mouth, pretending to pick the crumb off his lips. She batted her long lashes at him and leaned in, swallowing the bite. Then, she searched the picnic spread, probably for a napkin.

Ada was so close now that Alfred’s body tingled. Almost within reach, a puff of her breath, an enchanting combination of vanilla and almond, swept into his nose. His hands were heavy but deliberate; he brought his thumb and index finger to her chin and lifted her gaze.

“Right here.” He brushed her lower lip with his thumb and leaned in. Fully expecting her to withdraw but she stilled, became rather serious, and licked her lips with the tip of her tongue. It was agony. His cock grew harder still, impossibly so. Her gaze fell to his mouth.

“Where?” she whispered and held eye contact. Boldly, he thought. Interesting. She was not new to this. Good, because Alfred wasn’t sure he could hold back much longer.

He leaned closer and when she moved into him, he touched the corner of her mouth with his lips. She sighed lightly and tilted her head. He was mesmerized as she eagerly responded with an enthusiasm he hadn’t expected.

In a moment she’d opened up her mouth and Alfred tasted her sweetness. Not the praline or vanilla, no. But something else, something unique. There was an indescribable quality about this girl that felt whole and right.

Her lips were soft and lush, her tongue delicate but forcefully dancing with his. Both tender and passionate, their kiss filled the air with its sweet longing. Her lush lips

stirred feral desire deep within him. She scooted closer to him, and he wrapped his arms around her, wanting to take as much as she'd give willingly. He couldn't help but marvel at how wonderfully she fit against him. Everything around them seemed insignificant, and all that mattered was her.

When he came up for air, her eyes fluttered open, she gave a cautious look. No matter, for his gaze fell to her swollen lips, pink from the rush of their kiss. She didn't need to speak a word because he saw the sadness in her gaze. She blinked and then inhaled sharply. As if she'd made a decision, she grabbed the back of his head and pulled him back. She took a chance, and he allowed her to lead. Alfred gave himself over to the kiss and pulled her onto his lap. It was scandalous. Onlookers be damned. This was the best kiss of his entire life.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

Later that night, after Ada tended to Charlotte's most recent shopping, she unwrapped the parcel of pastries that Alfred had given her.

"You look rather dreamy this evening." Dylan surprised her in the servant's kitchen. "Oh, can I have one?"

Without waiting for her permission, he helped himself to a slightly squished eclair. "This is..." he made excited chewing noises, "the best chocolate I've ever had! Where did you get it?"

"From the doctor." She and Alfred had split the leftovers and wrapped them in a clean towel that he carried in his doctor's bag, probably as bandage material.

"That's some doctor giving you chocolate pastries." He took another bite. "Are you ill?"

"No." Ada couldn't focus her eyes, and tears welled up. "Can't I just see a doctor?"

"You seem pained. What's wrong, Ada?"

"He's wonderful. Brimming perfection." Her fingers trailed over her mouth as if she could conjure him up again. "Unattainable for someone like me." Defeat drained her energy.

"The doctor?" Dylan stuffed the last third of the eclair in his mouth and watched her curiously.



“Look at me!” Ada pulled at her worn dress. “I’m shabby.”

“Ada!” Dylan leaned toward her. “Never say such a thing, please!”

“I wasn’t always like this, Dylan. Can you believe it?” There had been times when she had the prettiest dresses and read the finest books.

“Yes, I can. I do. Only because they make us feel shabby doesn’t mean that we are.” He plucked the fuzz from his worn breeches. “They may believe that they are better and we are not worthy, but I’m telling you, when it counts, we have more to offer than the Silvers.”

“Maria is very lucky.” Ada knew Dylan was in love with the kitchen maid. “You have many things to offer!”

“I’ve been saving, Ada. If I had another twenty-two pounds, I could buy us passage to America and get her out of here.”

“You’re leaving?”

“One day, yes.” She should be happy for him, but she felt a pang of loneliness. If Dylan left, her only confidant at the Silvers’, she’d be even more lonely. Ada stifled a sob and laid both hands on her mouth. Dylan’s eyes lingered on her.

“Did you kiss him?”

She nodded. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Dylan sank into the chair next to hers. “And why is that so bad?” He inclined his head to meet her eyes, but she didn’t want to look at him. Not anyone.

It was so bad because Alfred's kiss had given her courage, however short-lived. But a love match was impossible for her. Impossible because she feared he wouldn't want her once Charlotte had soiled her reputation. Impossible because she was only supposed to marry a Jew and Alfred's golden locks and clear blue eyes, along with his clean-shaven face, were not what she'd expected, especially not in Marylebone. He was the most unlikely match for her and fuel for wild dreams, not a basis for reality.

Hours after the kiss, their connection had become the highlight of her life. His touch lingered on her skin, painting sinful shades of splendor on her soul. Falling for Alfred meant giving up the last part of her freedom—her heart.

“Maybe he likes you, too?” Dylan's innocent question unraveled Ada's nerves.

His words opened the floodgate. Ada stood quickly, knocking the chair over with a loud clatter, and she ran to her room. Up two flights of stairs past the carpeted floors where the Silvers lived, she dashed through the plain door and threw herself on the cot.

A gorgeous young doctor with prospects of an office on Harley Street and a mouth more delicious than all the French pastries she'd ever tasted was...forbidden. That's why she'd made the kiss count. For a little while, she was Ada, cherished in his arms. Not Ada-go-fetch-this or Ada-mend-that.

So much time had passed since she was her father's darling with a bright future overflowing with potential that she'd lost herself. These days, her life happened while catering to Charlotte's whims and hiding her gambling. Ada rubbed her face in agony. She couldn't have Alfred. He was like a romantic fairytale prince. Unattainable. And a match with a Gentile was taboo. Plus, as a regular at The Lyon's Den, he had dark secrets in which Ada should have no part.

And yet, he'd felt so good. Especially the kiss! The memory made her gasp for air. He'd held her hand on his arm, too. Strong muscular arms that oozed health, youth, and the promise of a better life than hers.

Over the last few weeks, she'd made about twenty pounds per day gambling at The Lyon's Den. Ada reached under the cot and lifted the lid of the tin box where she kept her money. It totaled more than Dylan made in a year. But it wouldn't buy back her freedom. For that, she either needed to wait four years or find a Jewish husband. And both prospects were bleak. At this rate, her trust wouldn't vest in her name. Ever.

Four years was an awfully long time, and she couldn't bear the thought of serving Charlotte after she made her debut. It would be a nightmare to cater to her whims. Ada imagined drowning in frilly dresses and ribbons. Impossible to endure already, Charlotte would grow devilish if she didn't have any offers the day after her debut. And what man in his right mind would offer for a wretch like her?

What man, indeed, would even want Ada? With no respite in her daily routine, Ada found no opportunity to visit the Jewish community, and lacking connections in London, life felt stagnant. Her fate seemed sealed within the walls of the Silvers' estate; there was nothing worth returning to in Konigsberg either. She felt stuck.

Offering herself up for a shadchan was not a solution either. If she could marry a Jewish man and access her funds, she'd go from her present trap to the trap of marriage. She would essentially use her fortune to pay such a man to take her. And that pricked her pride even more than ironing Charlotte's undergarments. Ada buried her head in the folded rags that served as her pillow. Four years of Charlotte...

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

A paper bag of hot madeleines in hand, Alfred pushed the door open to his friends' practice at 87 Harley Street. Wendy always put on some tea at this time and he could truly use the company of his friends. As he'd hoped, he found Wendy pouring two cups of tea. The madeleines were laid out on a plain white plate and had absorbed the powdered sugar with which they'd been sprinkled when he bought them.

"Thank you for the biscuits, Alfred. I didn't have time to eat." She helped herself to one and pushed a cup of steaming amber liquid toward him.

"They're madeleines. French. Not biscuits." She wasn't like Ada. A good friend, but Ada had been on his mind in a way that Wendy would never be.

"Stein!"

Alfie Collins, the pharmacist, walked in, picked a madeleine from the plate, and retrieved another cup from the cupboard. It was like in old times when they sat together and enjoyed a few pastries over tea. They discussed ailments, treatment options, and patients... except that Alfred had a lingering feeling that he was the one in need of a cure this afternoon.

"Who was the beauty who carried your bag the other day?" Collins said nonchalantly.

"A beauty?" Wendy clapped. "Oh, Alfred! Tell me all about her!"

"There's nothing to tell. We just kissed." He dismissed the subject.

Collins plopped in the chair and waved his hands palms up. "You're jesting!"

Wendy raised her brows. “Kissed?”

Alfred groaned and downed his tea. It burned in his throat, but he welcomed the distraction.

“Alfred Stein. I don’t think you’ve ever merely kissed a woman. That means you really like her!” Collins said, blinking at Wendy.

“There’s a lady present.” Alfred hoped he’d stop the line of questioning.

“This lady has worked as a midwife far longer than we care to admit. She may be virginal but not naïve.” Wendy cast him a pointed look, holding his gaze when she asked, “Do you like her?”

Alfred didn’t know how to answer the question. He quite liked Ada, but he was going to meet his bride in less than two weeks.

“Of course, he likes her. He kissed her. I saw the girl. She’s gorgeous!” Collins said.

“Well, if she captured your heart, she must be truly special,” Wendy said, then got up and left the kitchen.

“What’s the problem?” Collins asked once Wendy was gone. “She’s not Jewish, is she?”

Alfred shook his head. “Even if she were, it wouldn’t matter. I went to The Lyon’s Den for the down payment of number 91 at the corner.”

Collins threw both hands over his head. “Are you mad?”

“No, I’m not mad. I’m tired of living like a peddler. I don’t have wares to sell. I’m a

doctor.”

“So, you sell your freedom to the Black Widow of Whitehall instead?”

“I’m finally getting the down payment. What does it matter if I am vershadchet , matched, by her or a rabbi? My mother has been trying to find me a bride for months already.” He sighed in defeat. “What have I to lose?”

“A choice in the matter, my friend,” Collins said. “You may think you found a shortcut to your practice, but believe me, there is no such thing as a shortcut. You’ll pay the price, if not with time, then with your heart.” He rose from his chair. “You’re throwing your life away because you are too proud to wait until you’ve saved enough. I’m disappointed.” He too left the room, but unlike his sister, he slammed the door.

Alfred sat alone in his friends’ kitchen. The sun hung low and it was soon time to gamble for his down payment.

His friend was right. He was looking for a shortcut.

For the next few hours, Alfred sat alone and second-guessed the deal he’d struck with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. His parents generally didn’t mind a few friendly card games, but gambling with his future was not something he could explain to them. He wanted to show his gratitude for his education. In a way, they were still paying even though he’d graduated. It was time to turn his profession into a lucrative business. Had he been greedy and impatient to consider accepting a wife with money after only two weeks?

Alfred cleared his teacup and ate the last madeleine. It had gone stale, like his idea of a practice. Suddenly, the cost of 91 Harley Street seemed steeper than it had when he entered into the agreement with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. He hadn’t known Ada then and

convinced himself that he could manage to live with any wife, as long as he could finally achieve his goal of the practice and repay his parents' debt. Not that they'd ever asked for it, but he wanted them back in London in their old house, enjoying the home they had so willingly relinquished to pay for his education.

Except that he'd experienced an excitement with Ada that changed his heart. The best kiss of his life. Although she seemed to have been kissed before, her innocence was palpable. The way her breath had hitched sent a shot of heat through Alfred's body. She was willing and had expected the kiss, but her enthusiasm and softness had surprised him. Her tenderness had captivated him unlike any before. Ada had stirred desire within him as she yielded sweetly to his embrace that had caught him off guard.

The deal with Mrs. Dove-Lyon trapped him in a position that would keep him from exploring his feelings for the fiery blond beauty who spoke French as well as she spoke English, who loved pastries, and played cards better than any man he'd ever met.

Was he exchanging the life of a door-to-door medicine man for a slave to a wife he didn't love just to have a practice now rather than wait? Was he no better than some of his patients, pitying himself for slight injuries turned into tragedies by their overdramatic mothers?

None of it mattered as long as he had a goal in life and a debt to his parents, he told himself. Without their sacrifices, he wouldn't have had a stellar medical education in Edinburgh. He wouldn't have adapted to London society and looked the part of a doctor for the Ton. All he needed now was a first point of call for his patients. Doctors were not meant to be peddlers, and he couldn't possibly fit enough supplies in his leather bag. An office across from Alfie Collin's apothecary would be ideal. He needed a nurse like Wendy or a secretary to help keep his appointments. A bookkeeper he had in his brother, a trustworthy partner. But even Seth would need a

desk and cabinets to file documents. He needed patient charts with their addresses to mail bills for Alfred's service. Accounts to receive payments. Being a doctor was not only about medicine as they'd made it seem in university. He needed a place to run a business.

He remembered his mother's gloom when she rolled up the rugs and unhitched the curtains to sell everything piece by piece to purchase his instruments. When he came home to London after his second year of study, his father had rented out the top floors of their house. By the time he'd graduated, his parents had sold his childhood home.

"It's an investment in your future," his father had said. And despite her reluctance to pawn off his grandmother's fine china, her wedding band, and even the feather pillows, his mother always had a smile for Alfred. No matter how somber her expression grew, when she looked at him and Seth, her eyes sparkled with pride and love.

"To me, you shine brighter than the sun!" she used to say.

"But my education is making you live in poverty," Alfred had protested when his parents moved to the country. A position as a country estate manager had promised his father free housing.

"Some parents cannot make anything of their children, no matter how much they invest," his father said. "But you and Seth are full of potential. We couldn't find a better way to spend the money."

"And grandmother's china? Her brooch?" Alfred couldn't help the bitterness of letting the family heirlooms pass out of their hands to pay for books on anatomy and diseases.

"My mother was always very practical and rarely used the fine china. She'd never



forgive me if you missed out on the materials for your studies for me to fill the display cabinet with old porcelain.”

So, the time passed, and his parents left Town. He’d returned to London after he graduated from Edinburgh. Within two years, Seth followed with a degree in finance and accounting. They shared the rental facing Green Park on the corner of Berkeley Street and Piccadilly. It was an old three-story building, but there was enough room for both of them. Seth mostly worked at home, and Alfred wandered the neighborhoods in search of work. He was building a client base, Seth said, and he had to do it where his future practice would be.

Until he’d met Ada, Mrs. Dove-Lyons’s solution seemed worthwhile. With a little luck, Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s choice would at least trump his mother’s because the chaste girls from the local Jewish community bored him. They’d never been anywhere, or done anything, and were taught to devote their lives to the house. If he hadn’t been conditioned for the same, he’d look for a pirate’s daughter who could tell him wild stories of faraway lands. But Collins was right, a shadchan merely meant meeting a potential bride. Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s deal forced him to marry the candidate.

Nonsense, he chastised himself. With his success, his brother would be successful, too. And by the time he might have children, his parents could retire and finally enjoy the dawn of their lives in their old house that he’d buy back. He certainly wanted to ensure their medical needs were looked after, so he needed them close.

Then how was it possible that his stomach turned at the thought that he might not find Ada again? Would he ever have the chance to kiss her just once more?

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*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

A da woke up on her cot when it had grown dark outside. Her neck was stiff and her eyes barely focused. She'd sobbed so deeply that her throat still hurt. Church bells in the distance rang ten times.

Oh no, she was late.

As quickly as she could, Ada pulled on her blue gown, wrapped her hair into a simple bun, and walked down the narrow servants' stairs. As her hand turned the knob to escape through the rear exit, a spine-chilling voice intercepted her.

"Ada!" Charlotte would have made nails on a blackboard cringe. Ada clutched the doorknob but didn't pull it. She gave a slight twist of her head and caught a glimpse of Charlotte.

"Yes?" she said as calmly as she could muster.

"You didn't answer my call this afternoon," Charlotte said haughtily, her voice full of reproach.

"I'm sorry, I fell asleep." She wasn't actually sorry at all.

"Asleep?" Charlotte put her hands on his hips, the ones she stressed with dark sashes as if they were delicate but reminded Ada of a sack of flour with a waistband. "I...I...I..." Charlotte searched the ceiling for a suitable punishment or whatever would put Ada in her place.

"You what, Charlotte?" Ada took a wide stance in front of the brat. "You'll dock my

meals? Make me sleep on a cot in the attic? Treat me like a servant?” Ada gestured grandly in the air. “Oh wait, you already do all that. What could you possibly do to make it worse, hmm? I’m locked here until I’m twenty-five or until I marry.”

Charlotte opened her mouth, but no words came out. Ada’s pulse raced, yet it had to be said. She was glad to finally stand up to her tormentor. Ada pivoted and opened the door only to stop when Charlotte growled.

“I’ll ensure you’re compromised to such an extent that no man in London will consider you suitable for marriage.” With a cat-like snarl, she added, “Nobody will have you.”

“I don’t care what you do or say, Charlotte, I will never fall as low as you,” Ada said, without glancing at her. She was smarter, prettier, and would be much richer if only she could access her trust. Comparing herself to the self-indulgent terror could only make Ada feel better. “I’ll be rid of you in four years. But you have to live with yourself forever.”

Ada was already in the doorway when Charlotte laughed. “You think you get your fortune at age twenty-five?”

Now Ada shot her a look that should have made Charlotte combust instantly, but the evil brat smiled self-gratifyingly. “You get your money if your reputation is intact, or else it’ll vest in me.”

“Why you?”

“Yes, me. I’ll have two seasons, and then your fortune as my dowry. I’m invincible. And you—” Charlotte eyed her from top to bottom—“Are nothing!”

“The trust is my inheritance. Papa’s life savings. A drastic change in the trust was not

something he would ever agree to. These terms are unconscionable!”

“Maybe,” Charlotte spoke over her shoulder. “But who can prove now that your dear Papa signed them under duress? Paper is silent on such matters. Ta-dah!” She waved and left Ada standing in the cold draft of the door.

It all made sense now. Her crates of clothing and books... the medicines... had it all been stolen by the Silvers and sold? But why had they killed her father?

That’s why Mr. Silvers had met with her father’s solicitor all those months ago. And when he returned, he had changed completely. Soon thereafter, Father died on his way to Ada, and she became a servant to the Silvers. All words of kindness had gone. Charlotte turned Ada’s room into a dressing room, moved her to an attic bedroom, and gave her daily lists of chores.

Ada’s shoulders dragged, and her arms lost all strength. Each time she witnessed the depth of moral depravity, it felt like a physical blow to her soul—a reminder that even in the darkest moments, hope remained a mere flicker in the dark.

As if in a daze, she walked through the London streets without regard for the darkness and dangers lurking for a girl alone at night. Once she arrived at The Lyon’s Den, Hermia glanced at her with pity. Had she been expecting her?

“She’s waiting for you in her room.”

Ada gulped. Although she had lost to Alfred the previous night, the evening had still managed to turn a profit. And she wasn’t even half an hour late. Surely Aunt Bessie couldn’t hold that against her?

Why did the thought of being summoned fill her with such dread?

Ada trailed her hand along the dark green and white striped wallpaper in the short hallway to Aunt Bessie's office. With every step, her heart betrayed her more but Ada wasn't ready to admit to herself that she'd rather be with Alfred than at The Lyon's Den.

Titan stood guard. It must be a slow evening. As soon as he saw Ada, he gave her the same wistful look that Hermia had shown at the ladies' entrance. At the door, Ada knocked on the casing. Her heart slowed as she entered the room, but she was determined to follow through despite her paralyzing fear. Whatever Aunt Bessie threw her way could hardly be worse than what Charlotte had said half an hour ago.

The sight before her was nothing she hadn't seen before. On the wall with the Japanese paravan room divider, hung a large oil painting of a foggy sky over London. Dark upholstered settees grouped tastefully around an intricately carved coffee table centered on an imported rug. Soothing light was cast from a table lamp next to Aunt Bessie's armchair. Yet, Ada was not impressed by the tasteful décor and instead was caught up in the finality of Charlotte's threat. Lodged in her stomach like a stone she couldn't digest, the girl's meaning had been clear; Ada could not go back to the Silvers. With Charlotte's strike against her and the threat of an impending match by Aunt Bessie, Ada felt trapped.

"Sit!" came the widow's command. She was in charge like the pirate captain on a ship full of treasures. For a moment Ada saw herself shrunk down, overwhelmed by the surrounding opulence. Unattainable if she'd lost her trust. Above all, she suddenly longed to be anywhere else.

"I made inquiries, Ada," Aunt Bessie said.

Although she had an inkling about the subject of the inquiries, Ada's mind jumped to the worst scenario, losing her position as puffer, the roof over her head—even the uncomfortable one at the Silvers—or being matched with a stranger. She'd lost house

money to Alfred. Now, if she lost her position as puffer because she'd been caught cheating, and if Charlotte made her threats come true, then Ada was consigned to her role of the impoverished orphan. Not even that, really. She was too old to be an orphan and still too young to take control of her own money.

But how could anyone have caught her tricks? She'd never been caught.

“My solicitor read a copy of the trust that your father—”

The words flew from Ada's mouth before she could stop them. “How did you get a copy?”

Aunt Bessie frowned at the interruption but still, she answered Ada. Her voice was grave. “My solicitor took care of it. I read the original. I don't read copies. They are often forged.”

“It's in Mr. Silvers' vault, and he's never let me see it.”

“I have my ways, child. But that's not important now. We have more pressing matters to discuss.”

Ada rubbed her hands on her thighs as if the friction could derail the fear in her throat. “Will all the money really go to Charlotte if I don't wed before I'm twenty-five?”

“You knew?”

Ada collapsed into herself, slumping on the chair devoid of energy. Charlotte had spoken the truth. “Charlotte Silvers told me tonight. That's why I arrived late. I think she—”

“She’s probably been rattled when my solicitor paid her father a visit today. She’s of no importance to me. As soon as she debuts, she’ll fall from grace. Don’t worry.”

Was that a prediction or a promise? Ada took heart in the mysterious workings of Aunt Bessie’s methods and gave the woman her full attention.

“You, however, mustn’t wait until you are twenty-five to wed.”

“I know and—”

The widow’s hand flew in the air. “Let me finish!”

She fumbled with the ring on her left hand, unable to keep it steady. The wedding band with its thin engraving and the well-worn sheen of an antique bothered her swollen fingers. “You are out of time and must wed. I shall present you with three candidates and the one you choose will be your husband.”

“Marry a stranger?” Ada’s head swayed in alarm as if the church tower bells rang within her skull.

“One will be old, so you may have a brief marriage and enjoy your freedom afterward. One shall be an imbecile, so you can keep him in check.”

“And the third?”

“I don’t know yet. I still have hope for you.”

Hope for what? A love match was surely out of the question given her circumstances.

Ada leaned against the chair. Her back and knees felt fluid. She had no strength left in her bones to walk away. She lifted her chin as she evaluated her options. Each was a

stab in her gut.

She had to make a match now and access her fortune because Charlotte wanted her trust. If the candidate was old, would he force himself upon her? Ada was not naïve and knew what happened between a man and a woman in the bedroom. But if her fortune passed to a feeble man, could he protect the money in her name? A dim-wit might be tricked out of the fortune altogether.

Could Ada possibly hold sway over a man who had become so entangled in the debts of The Lyon's Den that he was reduced to nothing but a mere pawn in the games played by others? And what would the third choice be?

Suddenly, the air vanished from Ada's lungs. Her chest was rigid, and she heaved. It was too much to bear. How had her life derailed so rapidly and irrevocably? Who did this to her? She needed some air.



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

As soon as Alfred stepped into the gambling hall, he searched for Ada. The puffers should be in place by now but he didn't see her anywhere. He was wasting precious gambling time and he knew it. He had only a few days to arrange the down payment. Failure to do so would result in the matchmaking he dreaded. He wondered if he had acted too hastily and should have exercised more patience. Had he made a terrible mistake and imperiled his future happiness where all he wanted to achieve was to secure it?

He hadn't come to The Lyon's Den to gamble; instead, he had come with the sole desire of seeing Ada once more. Memories of their last kiss left him yearning for more. He had never felt such intensity. Such an unforgettable kiss. Despite all he had known about women who gambled, Ada didn't seem addicted to the thrill of the games. She was brilliant and asked pointed questions. Her figure was impeccable despite the modest dress she wore. Yet the cool blue velvet made her dark brown eyes sparkle with warmth. It was this warmth that Alfred needed or else he knew he'd never feel the same again.

One of the waiters tapped his shoulder. Alfred's attention was drawn to the side of the hall.

Puck, one of Mrs. Dove-Lyon's wolves, stood on his spot at the double doors to the gardens and signaled. As Alfred approached him, he opened the doors and Alfred stepped into the cool of the night. Puck shut the doors abruptly with a metallic clang, positioning himself with his back against the glass, as if to obstruct the view.

Perplexed by the maneuver, Alfred found himself on the marble steps to the garden. Tall trees blocked the lights of the Town and an owl hooted in the distance.

He heard gasping, and then a cough.

“Who’s there?”

Along with the view, Puck blocked the dim light that escaped through the glass doors and illuminated the garden. The wolves wanted Alfred here and he had to find out why.

“Hello? Is anybody there?”

“Alfred?”

Ada. Her voice came out hoarse and forced, but it was her beyond a doubt.

She sounded strained as if she was suffocating.

“Where are you?”

Alfred’s mind raced. He had to find her and help. His own heart skipped a beat at the thought of her hyperventilating. What if he couldn’t help the person he...

Impossible. He barely knew her!

Alfred heard her make another gulping gasp.

Then nothing. She was stranded, robbed of air. He had about twenty seconds to get her to breathe. If only he could find her!

One, two, three, four...

He counted the seconds in his mind.

“Ada?” Alfred walked deeper into the garden, following the labored sounds in the dark.

Five, six, seven, eight...

He left the stone path and felt soft grass under his boots.

Nine, ten, eleven, twelve...

He still hadn't found her. Icy fear overcame him. “Answer me!”

Thirteen, fourteen...

The choking sound came from behind him this time.

Fifteen, sixteen.

Rustling leaves. A branch snapped. Then another. She must have snapped them to signal.

Finally, somehow, he'd found her. She had grasped a handful of twigs and was bent over clasping her chest with one hand, the branches with the other. She stared at him, with horror, eyes wide. At any moment, she'd faint from lack of air.

Alfred's medical training took over. He felt at her wrist for a pulse. Too fast. She was in shock.

He wrapped himself around her from behind and put pressure on her diaphragm. She melted into his arms, and he felt the tension drain from her limbs. His heart ached, but he had to be a doctor first. “Purse your lips. Try to inhale.”

He breathed in and out, demonstrating the directive and reminding her how to allow life back into her body—the delicate, small, oh-so-perfect body in his arms—too young to die.

She was slender and he could maintain the pressure on her chest with one arm. He brushed the hair out of her face and rested his free hand on her forehead. She leaned against his chest and inhaled deeply.

“What happened here?” He didn’t expect an answer. She had to catch her breath. Alfred felt for her wrist, her pulse was still too fast.

“I—nothing happened. It’s just...I got nervous, I guess, and then it felt like everything was closing in on me.”

Alfred held her tight, still attuned to her breathing. She’d been panicking. It hadn’t been a topic any of his professors explored, but he remembered that one of them mentioned in passing how this type of thing could happen to a person if they had a shock or something bad happened to them, or maybe if they were just sensitive. It had seemed important to know, and he’d taken note of it. Now, he was glad he did.

“There you go!”

He shouldn’t have, but Alfred cherished the weight of her body. He wanted to support her and make her whole again, no matter what or who put her in such a state. She coughed and turned around; her face so close that her lashes brushed against his cheek as she blinked.

“You had a shock,” Alfred whispered. “Did someone hurt you? Where is he?”

She shook her head but rested her face on his chest. Alfred held her tight, still attuned to her breathing. What had caused her to have this reaction? He pondered it, but as

her inhalations became more regular, the lover within him overcame the doctor. It didn't matter how, or why it had happened. He just wanted to make her better, by making her feel safe and calmed.

At that moment, all he desired was to be hers. He yearned to offer much more than support. He knew that all the love he wanted to give her wouldn't be a match to her worth, yet nothing stirred his heart more. She was so precious in his arms.

Alfred realized that this was the closest he'd ever held her. Even when they kissed, he hadn't truly wrapped his body around hers. Although he'd only known her for two days, he couldn't envision being without her. He allowed the soft embrace to linger. Ada seemingly welcomed the support and rested against his chest. His heart cracked again, but it didn't break. A whole new feeling hatched within him, one that he, as a man of science, dared not name. Surely it was too soon to think like a romantic.

Another minute passed. Alfred dropped his face onto Ada's head and inhaled her tantalizing scent of almond and burned sugar.

It was neither right nor proper, but she was the woman he'd love to hold forever.

But he wouldn't. Couldn't. Unless he could get enough money to renege on the deal with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. He should go back inside and gamble, but he couldn't move even an inch. He shouldn't, mustn't... but he wanted to kiss her again. At least for now. Even if his bride were a stranger, he'd honor their vows. Except that he was no longer willing to uphold his end of the bargain with the matchmaker. His heart had found a direction that his life had yet to follow.

Alfred had made a mess of things. He knew that now. He'd entered an oral contract that he was going to breach. He'd pay the price and lose the money. There would be no line of credit. He wanted to treat patients. He was good at that, so good, he'd do it for free.

How could he have asked for money to bandage a little boy's hand? Didn't his mother have enough to worry about?

He'd studied, practiced, and passed every exam. For what? It was circular reasoning, a vicious cycle of what-ifs that led nowhere.

Alfred pushed reason aside and squeezed Ada tighter. He tingled with euphoria, as if every bit of contact with her was a victory for his worried soul.

Worry indeed. He only had days and was falling fast for the girl he held, whom he mustn't have. And yet, his body was again at odds with his mind.

A light in the corner of his eye irritated him. Alfred looked up at the windows of The Lyon's Den. Busy people were illuminated from within. Then he noticed a silhouette at a second-floor window. A veiled female held the curtains aside and then dropped them when he saw her.

"How did you find me?"

Ada's voice was muffled by his coat. He unbuttoned it and wrapped the material around her. The dress she donned was identical to the one she had worn the previous night.

"Puck."

"Good old Puck," Ada spoke as if he were an old friend.

"Puck serves the fairy king Oberon. But he was angry with the fairy queen, or was that someone else?"

"In the Shakespeare play? I think that was it. Titania couldn't have what she wanted."

Her mind was sharp as ever, and the extent of her knowledge astonished Alfred anew. “Puck got the king what he wanted, didn’t he?”

“Maybe,” Alfred shrugged, wondering whether Mrs. Dove-Lyon was Oberon in this story. “I forgot the details.”

For a moment, he thought Puck, the wolf, watched them through the glass doors. Had he seen them holding each other? Alfred was certainly being watched. If he didn’t make enough in the twelve remaining nights, he’d have to marry a stranger. The closer he held Ada, the further his chances with her slipped from his future.

Ada lifted her head and said, “Take me away from here, Alfred.”

He’d lose a night of gambling but gain a night with a girl he... no, it was impossible. He wasn’t some feckless boy who’d lost his heart in a day. But neither was he so naïve as to let the opportunity pass to be with a woman as exquisite as Ada.

“Let’s go.”

He took her hand and pulled her to the nearby garden gate. With a loud squeak that disrupted the quiet of the night, Alfred led Ada away from The Lyon’s Den. Away from prying eyes. Away from the world. The looming thought of facing Mrs. Dove-Lyon made Alfred shudder. But tonight was about love, and he was determined to live in the moment without contemplating the uncertainties of tomorrow.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

Ada felt safe, wrapped in Alfred's arms, something she hadn't experienced in far too long. As if he were the only person in the world who could give her room to breathe. She came into her own when she was near him. She hadn't been truly secure since her father died. That's when her episodes of breathlessness started.

Ada lifted her gaze. It was too dark to see beyond the building facades and more than a few feet ahead.

Alfred walked fast and pulled her along, their fingers entwined. It was more urgent than their stroll from Regent Park to Marylebone. This was a sprint. After her breathless terror, the brisk night air was invigorating.

"Where are you taking me?" She gurgled a laugh as the wind brushed some hairs across her face. It was exciting to let him lead her through the night. She was in his hands and quite liked it. She'd been alone since her father died, and since then she hadn't felt safe—until this night when Alfred held her and her breathing regained a normal rhythm. Could he have the same effect on her life?

"Home." He sounded determined to commit mischief. It was exhilarating.

Step by step, as they rushed past buildings, Ada relinquished her forced independence, trusting him with everything she had—the way she used to trust her father. Alfred made her feel safe as nothing had in so long. She was desperate to forget the risks and to give herself over to wandering the night with a man she barely knew who had her insides to a boil.

Alfred was young, kind, well-bred, probably an aristocratic third son who had to



study medicine since he couldn't inherit. Anyone with such elegance and poise was surely of noble blood. Plus, he was well-respected at The Lion's Den as The Cavalier. But the connotation made no sense. Alfred wasn't arrogant, and he cared deeply about others. Why did he bear such a nickname?

Ada ran the word through all the languages she spoke. In French, a cavalier was a rider. Cavaliere in Italian was a knight. That came closer to the Alfred she knew. He was chivalrous, even guiding her through an uneven path in the London darkness. The German word *debonair* summed it all up: helpful, gallant, and an absolute gentleman!

"Do you speak any German, Alfred?" Ada asked as they turned a corner and came upon Regent's Park.

"Why do you ask?" He stopped and they stood looking into one another's eyes under a flickering street light. "I understand it, yes. But I don't speak German."

Ada's instincts from Königsberg returned. Every time someone said "German" with such disgust, they were Jewish. But she knew better than to hope for this gorgeous aristocrat to understand the context.

In Prussia, there were two kinds of people: Christian German-speakers, and Jews who spoke Yiddish, a language so close to German it sounded like a dialect. The Gentiles hated the Jews and disallowed the study of German, forcing them to maintain their telltale Yiddish dialect. If her teachers hadn't trained her to speak like a German, Ada would have slipped into the familiar Yiddish every time.

She mustn't ask more questions lest she give away her heritage and lose any chance at allowing the handsome Englishman to seduce her. For that's what she hoped he'd do tonight. She braced herself for a night of carnal pleasure, like in her romance novels.

Oh, how she used to cherish the sweeping gestures of the Englishmen in those books, the scenes fueling her dreamy imagination isolated on ships going back and forth across the channel. If Alfred gave her even one night like that, she'd exist on the memory for the rest of her life. If only he'd show her once what it was like to be a cherished woman, she could feed her heart on the memory as she went into a loveless marriage with the candidate Aunt Bessie chose.

One night. A few hours of passion. A harmless realization of her desire.

The knots in her stomach unraveled one by one. She exhaled a breath she'd held unknowingly and with it, her fear. However far Alfred would take her this night, she'd go along.

He let go of her hand and touched her elbow gently, so she turned to a few steps leading up to an entrance.

Shrouded in darkness, Ada had followed him along St. James and Piccadilly. When they stopped, she recognized Berkeley Street.

"My brother and I are renting a townhouse," he said. "We can't afford more right now but it's serviceable."

Yes, a third son without an inheritance. A nobleman. Her insides churned. She wanted him even if it was forbidden on every level.

"It's perfect," Ada said, admiring the carved oak door with a fanlight above. She didn't want to think of her hole of a room in the attic and the cot without a pillow. And she didn't want to go back there either.

The house was dark as they entered, and Alfred pushed the door shut behind her. He turned the gas lights on and Ada took in the surroundings of the hall. A worn but

clean runner softened the tiled floor. Elegant ochre wallpaper lined the foyer. There was polished walnut paneling along the lower third of the walls. It was cozy and welcoming.

“Please.” Alfred invited her into a small drawing room. An area rug covered nearly the entire parquet flooring. A chair rail marked the walls that gave way to apricot wallpaper, complementing the deep blue curtains. The ceiling was plastered flat and the only lamp in the center was modern gas. Albeit not fancy, the room was bright and friendly.

“I love it, Alfred!”

He blushed adorably as if intimidated by the compliment. Was he used to more? Embarrassed by the size or quality of his home? He had the good looks of a fairy tale prince but surely she didn’t expect him to bring her to a castle.

“Would you like me to make tea?”

He’d make her tea? Make it himself?

She shook her head.

“Then, I need to speak with you.”

He took her hands and pressed them to his heart. This was not going as she’d imagined. In her books, the girl would be pressed against a wall by now, being ravaged and disrobed. She looked at the settee that looked rather inviting, with tasseled pillows in both corners but remained standing. The scene was rather more civilized than she’d hoped.

But when Alfred spoke his words came out urgent and heavy. “Ada, something has

happened that... Ada, between us..."

He lifted her hands to his mouth. With reverence—there was no other way to describe the motion—he kissed her knuckles.

This was even better than in the books. For a moment, Ada watched, but then the warmth she felt became a need to possess. She wanted to lay claim to him if the world would think her deserving. Nothing mattered except him. She opened her hand and put her open palm on his beautiful cheek, along the length of his chiseled jaw. He was so handsome her heart ached. His Adam's apple bobbed as he met her gaze with a heaviness that unsettled her.

She stood on her toes and arched toward him, her lips close to his. But he didn't close the distance. She expected a kiss, but it never came. Instead, Alfred swallowed hard and furrowed his golden brows.

"I'm Jewish," he said.

Silence.

Her mind went blank. Then thoughts—nonsensical ones—slowly began to bubble in her mind. No. He couldn't be. Could he? Ada blinked as if the sight of him could allow her to process what he'd said. He couldn't... was he? Really? Jewish? She didn't know what to say and she realized it was because she had too many things to say all at once. His blond hair, clean-shaven face, and fashionable waistcoat were not what most Jews wore in London. Plus, he was blond... but so was she. It was impossible after all, and yet too good to be true. Ada had lost so much since her father died, she barely dared to hope that... she must have misheard and shook her head as if she could send the thought away.

He lowered his gaze to avoid hers. "I-I didn't want you to be disappointed when you

see me...” His shoulders slumped and he lowered his head. He seemed defeated and deflated. She could hear the hesitation in his voice, the sadness, and—it pained her to realize—self-disgust. “I mean, if we go upstairs, I thought you should know.”

Ada’s chest tightened again. Not with panic but with anticipation mingled with alarm. It was true. He was real. She couldn’t speak. Couldn’t think. She was overwhelmed with feelings, not the least of which was that something momentous was happening, something that could change her life forever.

She was a gambler. She was always in control of her emotions, her thoughts. Except now. She fought to get herself under control but was still too overwhelmed by the incongruity of the moment. But Alfred was perfection, and no longer beyond reach. In this moment and with him, all the bad things, the evil Silvers, and her shabby cot didn’t matter anymore because she could be the old Ada again, the one who held the trump card, spoke several languages, and was cultured, unlike most girls her age.

She raised her head and straightened her back as the pride and energy returned. Finally, after everything that had happened, she could open her heart.

But why did he seem so perturbed?

“Ada, have you ever been with a man?”

She shook her head, confused that he didn’t feel the euphoria that took her in a wave at this very moment.

“That’s what I hoped. But I didn’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

“D-Disappointed?” Ada grimaced, she didn’t understand.

“When you see me. I’m circumcised. We all are. My brother—”

“Stop talking.” Her words came out before she even realized she was about to speak. But she didn’t want him to ruin this moment or say something deprecating about his Jewishness because he thought she was a Gentile and would expect it. He thought himself less-than in her eyes—but he’d become as regal as a king. She just needed to let him know how she felt at this moment...if she could gather her thoughts and words.

His eyebrows shot up as she reached to clutch his face in both hands. Thoughts whirled in her mind. Too much had happened for her to process. He wasn’t at all what she’d imagined. He was neither forbidden nor unattainable.

Ada’s arms grew cold, but the passion she tried to stifle heated her heart. She tried to keep herself focused, to gather her thoughts and her emotions, and try to gain a semblance of control. But his words, “I’m Jewish” kept sounding, joyously, like bells in her ears. She hadn’t imagined it after all. It all made sense now, her mysterious and overwhelming attraction to him. It wasn’t just that he was the most handsome man she’d ever seen. Or the fact that he was attracted to her despite her lowly status. There was more to their attraction than simple chemistry. They were alike.

He was perfect.

“Please say something.”

He swallowed hard, a frown on his beautiful forehead with a few unruly, golden locks hanging nearly to his eyes. Ada brushed the curls on top of his head with her fingers. It all made sense now. She was fated to meet him, wasn’t she?

The realization made the pain perfectly agonizing. Aunt Bessie was probably looking for her husband at this very moment and yet Ada’s heart had already found him. For that was what she wanted with Alfred, everything. If he was Jewish, she could let her heart spring into love with all the vigor that she’d been forcing herself to contain.

She blinked into his gorgeous blue eyes, a rare color for Jews, but not impossible. He was so handsome in his evening coat and tight cravat, but his golden hair betrayed the mischievous traits that even the elegant clothing couldn't mask. He watched her expectantly as if he were awaiting a death sentence.

"I have nothing to say."

He slumped, letting go of her hand.

"No, wait. I mean, it's too good to be true but I have nothing to say."

He froze. "What do you mean?"

"I'm Jewish, too. I just live with a Christian family here in London. My father died. I have nowhere else to go."

Alfred stumbled backward as if she'd hit him. He bumped into the upholstered armchair behind him and grabbed the backrest. His chest rose and fell quickly.

"I grew up in Prussia. Ikh bin vi ir. " I am like you, she whispered in Yiddish, hoping he'd trust her.

His expression, like that of a deer caught unaware, blinked in surprise yet overcome by a sense of doom.

"Alfred?"

He combed both hands through his hair and looked at her with those big, clear eyes. Was he scared?

"I-I gambled... I struck a deal with the widow." He tightened his fists. "If I don't win

enough money for the down payment of the practice, I have to—”

“I know.”

Ada understood immediately.

“How long?”

“Two weeks, minus today and yesterday.”

“Twelve days then,” she concluded, crossing her arms to steady herself. It would have been too good to be true, of course.

“I have the same deal with her... not even two weeks, though. In fact, I don’t know how much time. That’s why I panicked in the garden today... when you found me.” I know she’s going to find a man for me to marry and I’m scared because...”

She trailed off. She’d been about to tell him. Because I knew that man wasn’t going to be you .

Now that she knew he was Jewish—allowed to love him—everything was suddenly worse, not better. She’d have to marry a man she didn’t love, forever separated from this man, whom she knew she’d love forever.

Her dream had turned into a nightmare.



*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

Alfred thought she'd rejected him when her mien became stony at his confession. His Jewish heritage had never been of too much importance during brief encounters that weren't meant to last. The women he'd met never came to his home, nor seen his family. Most of his conquests were fleeting. In a way, it had felt like a sport.

During his studies, he'd been able to clear his mind with willing Scots, lush redheads of whom his mother would never approve. But he'd always been careful and his encounters were without consequence. In fact, he'd studied the female body with a nearly scientific interest in their desires and how to give women satisfaction. He'd made them come again and again because he learned exactly what women needed.

Yet, he'd never quite gotten the satisfaction he expected. He'd been physically satisfied but it had been emotionally meaningless and empty. None of the other women had mattered. And now that the beauty gawking at him mattered, now that perfection was within reach, he couldn't hold on. When had his life turned into a farce? There had never been the tingling desire to possess he felt with Ada as if his heart had discovered its true purpose. Alfred couldn't find the path to the girl standing right before him. She was closer than ever, in his home, and yet farther than he could imagine.

"I thought I'd bed you tonight. I thought it would be easy," he confessed.

"Me too."

Ada sank onto the armchair that he was resting against, his legs crossed in a defensive stance. He looked down into those gorgeous dark-rimmed eyes and she batted her long lashes. "I hoped you would."

“Why?” He couldn’t hide his surprise. “It’s not proper.”

She puffed indignantly. “Do you think I’d want to give myself to someone Aunt Bessie chooses? She said whoever she chooses would be either old or stupid.”

“I was a better choice because I’m neither?”

He twisted her words hoping a fight would soothe his breaking heart. That was what he felt, wasn’t it? A new and dreadful emotion. He’d found the most unlikely love, and he was going to lose her before he ever laid claim. He needed to gouge that love out of his heart before it broke him.

“No, you are the better choice because I wanted to make love. At least one time, with a man of my choosing, a man that I...” She trailed off.” Sorrow shook her voice.

“W-what did you say?” He bent and put his hands on either armrest, pinning her to the armchair. She leaned back a little but didn’t seem to withdraw, maybe in an attempt to hide the truth, probably to protect herself.

“It makes little sense. I know it doesn’t. But somehow my heart slipped today, and I think I gave it to you unbeknownst.” She gathered her hair that came undone and assumed her placid poker face. He’d fallen for her as well, only yesterday.

“It doesn’t make any sense... that is. I... I...”

He didn’t need to say more. She understood and pressed her mouth to his.

His body tightened. Their mouths opened to one another, and Alfred felt his soul surrender. If he went any farther, he’d completely lose himself. The connection he had with Ada overwhelmed him. He needed her like he needed life. After diving into the dark arrangement that Mrs. Dove-Lyon was planning for him, he’d have his office

on Harley Street, but it meant losing Ada.

Except, right now, he had her.

Alfred broke their kiss. “Ada, I can only give you a few days.”

She answered with a nearly imperceptible nod of assent. With both hands, she pulled his head down. When he almost tumbled onto her lap, Alfred laughed. The women usually fell into his lap. Ada was different. Stronger, smarter, and more beautiful than anyone he’d ever be lucky enough to know.

Wasn’t this night like gambling? A lucky win today followed by a loss tomorrow? Or in twelve days? No matter.

Alfred slid both hands under Ada’s bottom. She shrieked as he lifted her and carried her into the hallway.

“I’m taking you upstairs.”

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A da's body thrummed as Alfred held her as a bride he'd carry over the threshold and walked up the staircase toward his bedroom. He pushed the door open with his shoulder, not letting her down. He twisted the knob on a small lamp and the room brightened with an orange glow. They stepped further inside and he kicked away some books laying open on his bed.

"What were you reading?" Ada asked, her arms wrapped around his neck.

"Children's diseases. Cures, ailments, and behavior." He was perfect, the handsome Jewish doctor who specialized in the littlest of patients. Oh, how bitter life would be once she had to say goodbye to him. The prospect pained her, but she forced the fear aside to focus on the magic of the moment.

"The usual then," Ada jested to lighten the tension between them.

"The usual—but not tonight."

He placed her gingerly on the bed. Ada relaxed. A soft cover cushioned the hard mattress. Ada adjusted her posture on the covers. It was a cozy bed, like the one she'd had as a child. The wooden posts creaked, but the frame was solid. An oasis of comfort and dreamy bliss in a room shielding her from the tragedies and lurking dangers of the morning hours.

Alfred's hands trailed to the back of her legs down to her feet. His light touches still required timid validation that Ada gave willingly. She watched him take off her slippers and then he reached under her skirts. Scandalous. Ada was nervous but curious. She bit her cheek.

“Is this your tell?” Alfred asked when he reached the top of her stockings and rolled them down slowly. He held her gaze as he moved on to the other ankle. Then he stroked her legs slowly and deliberately. His touch enchanted Ada. “I couldn’t figure you out at The Lyon’s Den.”

“You are doing a splendid job now.” Ada propped herself on her elbows to see him hovering over her. He kissed one leg from her ankle to her knee. Then the other. His hands found a spot just beneath her shins where he was stroking her gently as his lips trailed a path up, up, up over her thigh.

Ada inhaled sharply when his hand touched her secret place. He rested his palm against her with gentle, reassuring pressure. “Nobody has touched you here before?”

“Never,” Ada forced the words as a deep, inner eagerness met his hand. Her reaction seemed to please him because he surveyed her body the way he’d looked at the display of pastries in Marylebone.

Without moving his hand, Alfred climbed over her. He was large and strong. Everything about him made her feel whole. In every respect, he was right. Then his hand gave way to his knee, and he grabbed her waist. “You are the perfect woman. Do you know that, Ada?”

“I fear you know what you are speaking of.”

There was that jealousy again. Not because he saw his patients undressed, but because of his other experiences. She wished he could be all hers but then remembered that he would never be. Twelve days... probably less...

Ada forced the thoughts aside and focused on Alfred. He kissed her décolletage, her neck, the edge of her face, her temples. Then he dropped his forehead on hers and closed his eyes.

“I know, Ada. It’s true. But none of that matters now.” He placed a chaste kiss on her forehead. “You eclipse all my memories. I am hungry for new ones with you. I want you so badly, Ada.”

“I want to be all yours.” The double meaning hurt, but Alfred understood. Ada didn’t only want to be his tonight, but forever.

He pushed himself off the bed and unbuttoned his breeches. Ada sat up and untied his cravat. Ada’s fingers trembled as she worked on unbuttoning his coat. Their eyes met just as she finished it, and for a single, intense moment, they shared an unspoken understanding. Ada pressed her lips together and focused on the task at hand, peeling off his waistcoat with single-minded determination. Soon, she was eagerly grabbing his shirt and feeling his taut chest. His skin was hot and smooth, oozing strength that made her insides leap. She made quick work of his shirt then and hooked her hands into his waistband. To her surprise, he helped her, and together, they pushed down his garments until they were nothing more than a mess on the floor. Her heart pounding in her chest, Ada desperately wanted to lose herself in the moment but knew better than to give in to temptation. Not yet, at least.

“That’s all of me,” he said with finality as if he were handing his heart and soul over.

In the nude, he was even more magnificent than Ada could have imagined. His upper body was muscular, chiseled, and evenly toned. He flexed his chest muscles for her, arms crossed, and she burst into giggles when he quirked a brow and his dimples appeared just before that boyish white smile followed. He was irresistibly handsome.

But when she straightened and walked around him, letting her hands trail over his chest and back, his breathing changed. With a hooded gaze, he seemed to contemplate just how to disrobe her. When Ada completed another circle, Alfred reached into her cleavage. His other hand tugged at the buttons on the back. He let out a frustrated breath and tore Ada’s blue dress open.

“That’s my only one!”

He stood slack-jawed as she had fallen out of her garments rather completely. “I prefer you without.”

Alfred had no regard for the layers of undergarments and finished undressing Ada with reverence, cupping her breasts and bending to kiss them. He suckled one of her nipples and did something scandalous to the other with his fingers. Her knees nearly gave way as sensation flooded her. Then he brought his mouth back to hers, gently stroking her upper lip, and she granted him access.

This time, his kiss was hotter. Vigorous. Possessive.

Ada’s body quivered low, and he knew, for he stepped with one leg between hers. Tall as he was, her fiery center rubbed against his thigh. His hands trailed over her back, and he wrapped himself completely around her. She felt for him, eager to explore his manhood. When her hand reached his shaft, it twitched in her hand. Alfred pressed himself against her with all the affection the night promised.

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Alfred's lovemaking was what Ada had always imagined the words slow and sultry meant in the books she so loved. His every movement was deliberate and precise. He nudged her body toward turbulent spasms that made her gasp in shock. But then he was already there with a kiss to catch her. With every flick of his tongue on her nipples, with every thrust of his fingers inside her, she spiraled higher and higher. If she didn't know better, she'd say she was in a delirium, but everything felt real. Acute urgency bubbled up within her and her pulse raced.

"I can't take it anymore, it's too much!" She almost screamed as Alfred pushed his hand deeper in and moved faster. "It's too good!"

"Nothing is too good for you," he said hoarsely and buried his face between her breasts. Then he came up to her face and slid one hand behind her head. "Are you ready?"

She looked confused.

He did something with his fingers, and suddenly, she craved his touch like never before.

"Alfred, what—" she inhaled sharply and arched her back, instinctively meeting his touch.

"La petite mort, they call it in French. But I promise it won't kill you." His voice was not that of a doctor now but of a lover. He hung on to her every movement, taking his cues from her body.



And then her insides quaked and sent flames throughout her entire body. She felt her hair prick up and her toes curl as a scream escaped her lips. Alfred controlled her head and lifted her mouth to his with a raw desire that matched what his hands had given her.

Unaware of how much time had passed, Ada collapsed under him, only to open her eyes and find Alfred smiling at her. His eyes trailed over her face as if he were taking in a museum masterpiece. Though she still panted, when Alfred licked his lips, her private parts twitched with longing.

“You are most enchanting and delicious.”

A golden curl had fallen onto his forehead. Even the Renaissance sculptors wouldn't have been able to capture his perfection in marble. Her craving for him grew unbearable. While their connection seemed new and exciting, she trusted him. She followed her heart's lead, guided by instinct.

“I want you deep inside me.”

He gulped, but a glimmer of excitement sparkled in his eyes. He shifted their bodies to tuck her legs around his waist. His smile melted away, and a vein popped out on his forehead. As if he were lifting a thousand pounds, he controlled every muscle as he placed his member between her legs.

“Enchanting, delicious, and wet for me,” he said with reverence. Then she felt the pressure of his middle. With one hand, he parted her, with the other, he guided her hips. She was overwhelmed with a carnal appetite to swallow him completely.

“Don't hurt me,” she whimpered, still luxuriously relaxed from the petite mort only moments ago.

He tensed in response but continued.

“When I removed the crumb from your mouth at the park, I was dying to do this!”

“Already then? But you barely knew me.”

“I know little about you, but I feel I know everything.”

She felt him push into her and the pressure stung. He was too big for her body to accommodate. Surely, she’d disappoint him now. Just when he was... what was he doing? Opening his heart to her even though she’d told him their fates would never intersect?

“Someday, I’ll bring some mille-feuille home, break it into pieces, and eat them off your perfect body.”

As he spoke, he slid into her, ripping through the resistance at the exact moment she gasped at his scandalous suggestion.

“You’d eat vanilla crème off me?” Her eyes were wide. She couldn’t concentrate and wriggled underneath. “You distracted me!” Alarm made her heart beat faster as she realized the irrevocable deed had been done.

“It didn’t hurt, did it?”

Ada bit her lip. “No.”

His features softened. “It is your tell!”

She pushed her hips against his and he met her thrust. “What’s next?”

“This.”

He gave her a chaste kiss before sliding almost completely out and then back in. Again and again. Slowly. Until she was dripping with desire and the urgent need to feel him deep within her. Each time he reentered, waves of delight rocked through her. A tender yet forceful sensation radiated from her hips as they moved together in perfect harmony.

His gaze fixed on hers was enough to erase all inhibition. Those dreamy blue eyes made her swoon into a state of breathless wonder as pleasure flooded her veins leaving her heart longing to discover all he could show her.

“I need to touch you,” Ada whispered, almost unable to speak.

“Anywhere.”

She grabbed his taut muscular bottom and dug her nails into his back. He ducked down to her breasts again, intensifying the sensation with his erotic onslaught. Alfred was so strong that he didn’t need to prop himself up. Instead, while his hips guided their rhythm, his hands trailed along her waist, her back, and her breasts. He kissed her neck and shoulders, even her earlobe.

She lifted her head and brought both hands to his abdomen. They were merged in the middle and the sight was both surprising and pleasing. She reached for his balls and fumbled for his cock, but his entire shaft was immersed within her.

“Ada, what are you doing?”

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He had never laid with a virgin nor anyone who knew how to take their own pleasure. Yet, Ada was unmatched in every perceptible way. She was perfect, beautiful, soft, and lush, yet perky and taut. Everything she did, said, and how she looked at him was perfection. Alfred couldn't muster any more control.

With one hand on his balls and the other on his shaft, she guided him to rub against her little bean. He knew what she was doing, even if she only followed her instincts. Then she clenched inside, sending a shiver down his back. His stomach muscles tightened, and he slid out slightly. One more thrust and he might get her pregnant. It was a risk. A huge one. But could he stop now? He certainly should.

Then she opened her mouth, tilted her head back, and he saw deep into her throat—into the heart of a silent scream. Her swollen red lips, pink tongue, and elegantly curved feminine neck and shoulders. The picture of health and beauty. For a moment, time stood still and only two souls remained in connected harmony.

She grimaced, and he knew this was the moment. If he didn't stop now, his deal with the widow would be off, but none of that mattered. A life without Ada was unthinkable. He craved her with every fiber of his being and could no longer conceal it.

With a feral roar, he came out quickly and then shoved into her again. She bucked under him and moaned. Her dainty arms clutched him, and she held on as he pumped. He gave as much support as he could, but as he spilled into her, darkness descended.

When his memory returned, Alfred realized he'd collapsed onto her, squishing her breasts under his chest. He groaned as he straightened and pushed off her and onto his

side.

“Is this how it always feels?” she asked, rubbing her stomach with one hand and driving the other through her rich mane of messy waves.

“No.” Alfred gathered his thoughts, lost like a leaf in the wind touching the ground for only a second of reality. “Not to me.” He faced her. “I don’t think I’ve ever truly made love before tonight.”

“You didn’t do this?” She faced him, lying on her side. In the nude, he could see her luscious curves. Tenderly, he touched her side, trailing his hands up and down.

“The act, yes. But I never experienced the essence.”

“What does that mean?” He looked at his hand on her bright and toned skin. She was flushed, her cheeks pink, lips swollen from his kisses.

“That I’ve never been in love. In heat, but not in love.” He climbed back over her, a hand on either side of her face.

“You just met me. What could you possibly love?”

He sniffed as a laugh escaped him. She really was adorable, even if she begged for his compliments.

“Let’s see...” He propped himself up to examine her. “Open wide.”

She wrinkled her brows but did as she was told. He gave a cursory glance, before pressing his mouth to hers. “Impeccable teeth. Small tonsils.” He explored with his tongue. She met his thrusts. “Good reflexes, I think.”

“You think?”

He nodded and moved down to her collarbone, kissing a path to her breasts. Under his touch, her nipples hardened immediately. “Definitely.”

He kissed a trail toward her navel. Her waist was narrow, her hips invitingly round, and her legs long. “Turn over,” he rasped.

Vertebrae by vertebrae, he ran his fingers down her spine. “Beautiful straight back,” he said, as she gathered her hair and pulled it forward. When she glanced at him over her shoulder, he nestled his member between her legs again. As if there was an innate urgency to throw himself into her, he tensed, and his lids grew heavy. Bedding Ada was beyond anything he’d known, vulnerable and sensual at the same time. He wanted more.

“Ada, are you able to go again?”

She looked at him seductively over side-swept golden hair, her behind cushioning his cock. Then she tilted to receive him.

He held her hips and, before long, enjoyed the strongest and most earth-shattering sex of his life.

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As the first light filtered through the window and the chilly morning enveloped her, Ada awakened next to Alfred. Birds chirped in the distance, but her heart and mind were drawn to the gorgeous man sleeping peacefully beside her. She'd never shared a pillow before, much less a bed. The night had been filled with wondrous sensations, feelings she didn't know existed, and physical experiences she longed to experience again.

Satiated—but only for now—she couldn't shake the feeling that Alfred was the key to her happiness. Her discoveries of the night had brought her more insight into her own desires than she'd ever thought possible. She wanted to marry for love and to be free. Like a butterfly that hatched from its chrysalis, it was no longer enough to chew on a leaf. She needed colorful blossoms in her life and the sweetness of real satisfaction. Enough of the subservient Ada grooming Charlotte's whims. Time to take back her life.

Alfred nestled into the ticklish spot under Ada's ear so that she tensed. She always awakened with a chill, but he was warm. Would it be possible that he'd warm her every morning, or was she setting herself up for disappointment?

"I ripped your gown," Alfred said in a sleepy voice, wrapping his arms around her. "I should buy you a new one."

"You don't need to; I can mend it."

Ada had already thought about how she'd patch up the tears and wondered if she could get away with wearing a mended gown at The Lyon's Den. Except returning there no longer felt like the solution to her financial problems. The promise of escape

into a world of gambling vanished.

This night—no, Alfred—had changed her perspective. She wanted to test her luck in real life. Love and freedom were worth fighting for more than any sum of money.

“Let’s go out. I’m hungry,” Alfred mumbled into the small of her neck with a boyish innocence that reminded her of Dylan. Did all men wake up hungry? Dylan was always the first at the servant’s breakfast and content with meager porridge and hot water as long as he could eat his fill.

“I can make you something. Do you like omelets?”

“We don’t have any pans. Nor eggs.”

“You never cook?”

“We didn’t furnish the kitchen. It’s cheaper, faster, and easier to buy meals and bring them home.”

“You know, that might change when you have a wife. I mean...” She felt flush and tasted the words. She wasn’t telling him he should marry her, especially not when he’d made an agreement with Aunt Bessie so she could find him a wife. But just the thought of him with another woman made hurt flow through her, squeezing her heart and freezing the air in her lungs.

He raised his head and looked at her. It wasn’t her place to be jealous, but the emotion overcame her nonetheless. She was ready to spend a lifetime learning more about this man. Could that ever be possible?

An hour later, Alfred took Ada’s hand and reached for the door to a beautifully decorated store on Oxford Street. She read the gilded signs:



Debenlope, Freeworth there was no point in going inside. Ada shook her head and asked him, “How can you possibly afford this? I thought you had to marry to get money for your practice?”

“Yes, that is true. It’s because I have a problem.”

“A financial problem, I know.”

“An attitude problem. That’s what my brother calls it. I cannot request money for my services.”

“You mean, you don’t charge your patients?” Ada couldn’t believe it.

Medical services were expensive. How could a doctor not charge?

“I don’t like to ask parents for their money.” Alfred stuck a finger under his collar and tugged. “When I help children, I prefer to see them walk away happily. If I stopped their parents, what would I say? Fifty shillings for bandaging your son’s hand?”

“You mean little Max’s mother didn’t pay you?”

“Of course, not. Where would she pay me? That’s why I need an office, so people can come back to me in the future.”

“What about the supplies at the apothecary?”

“He’ll add them to my tab.”

“Alfred,” Ada said sternly, “you need to bill for your services.”

He rubbed his eyes. “That doesn’t feel very medical in spirit. It would be different if I had an office, a bookkeeper—someone to file my charts and send invoices out in the mail.”

“You don’t charge, so you don’t have money for the office you want. And you need the office to be comfortable charging?” Ada shook her head. “It makes no sense.”

“That’s what my brother says.”

“He’s right. Let’s go.” Ada turned to leave. “Don’t spend money on my behalf.”

“I don’t need money to shop here.” Alfred pulled her back. “Mr. Debenlope’s baby was born with a dislocated hip. I helped her heal. She’s two now and even walks! He said I could come any time and spend at will.”

Ada eyed him incredulously.

He flashed her that seductive smile. “So, I do get paid. In theory. Come on! Let’s do it!”

She let him escort her into the store. Ada gawked at the opulent fabrics hanging from the high ceilings. Glass tables lined the sides of the large room, where shopkeepers and customers busily discussed patterns and colors. She followed Alfred up two sets of wooden stairs with elegantly carved balusters. A large cone-shaped chandelier hung from the center of the hall and the staircase spiraled upward promising patrons the way to a better self ahead.

Ada had seen Charlotte commit material gluttony in shops like this countless times, purchasing frivolous objects, hoping that they would somehow transform her nasty personality and wash away its stench with perfume. But did these things hold no power to change Charlotte’s nasty core, they merely masked her flaws. It was like

causing a distraction in a card game. Ada couldn't help but find the frills and ribbons Charlotte brought home every day a little bit comical. They were merely props in her theatrics involved in trying to create an aura of unearned innocence. And now she was in the same store, surrounded by marvelously colorful silks, risking the pretty ribbons to tighten the noose that Aunt Bessie and Charlotte were putting on her neck. Each came from a different direction but both would fell her like a tree. Rather than dress in finery she didn't feel she deserved, Ada wanted to grab Alfred by the arm and run away with him in tow. The farther, the better.

"Dr. Stein, what a pleasant surprise!" A man in black evening wear with a stiff cravat called out as they stepped into a carpeted room that resembled a boudoir more than a shop. "I'm so happy to see you are finally taking me up on my offer." The man bowed. "This time, it is my privilege to be at your service."

Alfred seemed uncomfortable with the attention. "How is she, Mr. Debenlope?"

"Full of mischief." He smiled as only a proud father besotted with his daughter could. Exactly as Ada's father used to smile with pride at her. Suddenly, Ada's gloom lifted at the paternal love in Mr. Debenlope's eyes.

"May I introduce you to Ada..."

Alfred looked at her, his cheeks heating when he realized he didn't know her surname.

"Saltzman," she said with a curtsy. "Ada Saltzman."

"Miss Saltzman had a mishap with her gown and finds herself in need of a new one."

Alfred's words were innocent, but his eyes trailed along her body with the wicked knowledge of what lay beneath the shawl that covered her torn garment.

“But, of course,” Mr. Debenlope said, obviously trying to figure out their relationship.

Alfred took Ada’s hand. “I’d be most obliged if she could choose.”

“Anything she wants, Dr. Stein. Anything at all. A pelisse, a shawl, and all the accessories.” He signaled to a lady from the corner of the room. “A full set of day and night wear for Miss Saltzman, please.”

Moments later in a private seating area on the third floor, Alfred sat cross-legged on an upholstered settee polishing off a plate of triangular sandwiches and drinking tea.

A woman with her hair pulled into a bun and spectacles perched on her nose spoke to Ada while two younger women carried garments in and out. “A pale yellow Spencer jacket would suit your coloring well, with an ochre dress and white accent bows. Or do you prefer darker hues? Crimson maybe? Or emerald green?”

One by one, Ada tried on the dresses. Though measured for alterations, the pieces fit well. She emerged from the drawing room in an empire gown with a tight belt. The square neckline had a deep décolletage and a narrow-backed bodice attached to a separate skirt that was two shades darker blue.

“Do you like it?” She asked Alfred when he rose, brushed crumbs off his coat, and tugged at his cravat.

“Ada!” He gasped at first but then the boyish smirk returned.

“I can change into the purple one if you prefer.”

He closed the distance between them and held out his hand. The modiste smiled over her spectacles when Ada’s face heated.

“The neckline is quite low,” Ada said still unsure whether the dress had a purely beneficial effect on Alfred.

“Oh, I can bring you a chemisette, my dear,” the woman said. “You can cover it.”

“Don’t cover it when we are alone,” Alfred whispered, with that playful twinkle in his eyes. “You are absolutely beautiful.”

Ada sighed in relief. Somehow, she longed for his compliment.

The modiste shuffled away with her assistants, promising to fetch the other pieces.”

Ada turned an even darker shade of red. Alfred put his finger under her chin and lifted her gaze just as he’d done at their picnic the day before. Only one day, but it felt like a lifetime for Ada. And she had to make the most of it.

Alfred glanced over his shoulder. They were alone. He leaned in to kiss her.

“You took my breath away—and my heart—when you came out in this dress.”

When he wrapped his muscular arms around her, Ada knew she’d never get enough of his embrace. When she kissed Alfred, she felt heated and liquid. Already she could recognize the feeling lower in her body that meant she wanted him—all of him. She’d never tire of his touch. His body. His sultry lovemaking. If only this could last forever.

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“We need something for the ball,” Alfred said a few minutes later when the modiste presented a pair of lace gloves to Ada.

Ada’s heart flopped. Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s annual masquerade ball. She’d forgotten about it; she’d been too busy trying to win her freedom, and then—of course—there was Alfred to distract her. But she knew all about it. The ball was a risqué night of gambling in celebration of the old woman’s birthday. Ada would work as a puffer; Alfred would be a guest.

“A ball gown?” the spectacled lady asked. “Or an evening dress? Will there be dancing?”

Behind her, a voice Ada recognized shrieked, “Dancing? She can’t dance for the life of her!”

Charlotte. Ada rolled her eyes and turned to face her tormentor who stood nearby, stepping out of Alfred’s embrace.

“What brings you here?” Ada said biting her lip. She had to clench them so she didn’t shriek. Stay calm, Ada, she told herself.

Charlotte gave her a dismissive shrug. “More money that you’ll ever have, especially now that I don’t even need to lie about your—” she eyed Alfred with sly curiosity—“downfall.”

Alfred’s eyes grew icy.

Ada's heart sank.

"He's buying you clothing? Is he paying you for your services as well?" Charlotte asked with a nasty simper.

"Who is this?" Alfred snarled.

"Nobody of importance," Ada said.

"Perhaps not yet, but when her fortune is mine, I'll be the match of the season. Charlotte Silvers," she said, extending her hand to Alfred with a vicious smile. "I'm so pleased Ada has settled herself as your mistress."

Alfred didn't budge. His expression was analytical and dry. Through pinched lips, he said, "We are busy. You may go."

"Dismissing me would be a grave mistake, Mister..."

"Doctor. Dr. Stein. Dr. Alfred Stein."

"A doctor no less," Charlotte said in a voice filled with enough poison to make a viper cringe.

The modiste returned. "Here is the chemise, and a stole." Her expression changed to one of barely disguised resignation. "Oh, dear. Miss Silvers."

Ada quirked a brow and Alfred turned his back to Charlotte pretending to inspect some weighty fabrics.

"Well, Ada, what have you to say for your absence last night?" Charlotte prodded.

“Nothing.”

Alfred turned back to the wretched young woman. “She was with me,” he said.

“So I gathered.” Charlotte gave Ada a look from head to toe as if it were her last. “Don’t bother to come back then, I cannot soil my reputation with yours.”

At that, Ada snapped and grabbed Charlotte’s arm, digging her fingers into that flesh in a way sure to leave bruises. She’d had enough of her threats and abuse, and now—probably—her thievery. “You say you’ll destroy my reputation? That’s doubtful, Charlotte. It’s even more unlikely that my actions could soil yours. Your hateful personality takes care of that all by itself.”

Even Charlotte’s gasp was haughty. “As long as that money is in my name, you’re not even on the guest lists for the balls this season. I’m your golden ticket, never forget that!”

“Golden ticket indeed, Ada. Father has one for the ball at The Lyon’s Den. Will he see you there then? Gambling and whoring?”

Ada’s eyes grew wide. “You didn’t!” Alfred stepped closer with a wide stance. His air was equal parts dangerous and feral, ready to pounce and defend her honor.

“Oh, but I did! Father is furious and eager to see you in action. His solicitor will be there, ready to transfer your money into my name once he sees it with his own eyes.”

And with that, Charlotte pivoted and disappeared.

Ada couldn’t face Alfred. In mere seconds, Charlotte had managed to wash away all the delicious bliss of the night and the generous treats of the morning. Ada felt meager and hopeless.



Worse, she feared Alfred would want nothing to do with her now. But what did she expect? She really was no better than the men who wagered their lives away at the Lyon's Den. She'd been fooling herself, enjoying the fantasy that she, the orphaned daughter of a smuggler, a servant, a puffer in a gambling den, could be the beloved of a doctor. Gone was the Ada of her past, the girl tutors from all over the world taught her to be more cultured and well-spoken than any of the debutantes, especially Charlotte. Ada felt like just a girl nobody wanted anymore, discarded like the boots she'd have to pick up for Charlotte.

Alfred deserved a woman who could be his wife, a woman from a good family, and a woman of good reputation, one who would be his true mate, the mother of his children. She made to leave the room and run away as fast as she could before his reputation was tarnished by association with her, a fallen girl. But Alfred grabbed her arm before she could leave; he made her face him. Even though he knew what she did at Aunt Bessie's, and what she'd done with him in bed the night before, she was sure that Charlotte's accusations could make him see her in a different, dirty, light. She expected to hear him snarl at her, to tell her to get away from him and never speak his name again. Tears pricked her eyes but she squeezed her eyes shut. Nobody would want to see her cry. The world certainly did not pity an orphan, why would anyone pity a fallen girl?

But instead of reacting as Ada had expected, Alfred reached out and stroked her cheek with loving tenderness, the same he'd done only hours ago in his house. She realized then that tears were running down her face; Albert was brushing them away with gentle fingers.

"Ada...who was that horrible woman and why did she say you can't go home?" he asked gently.

He deserved the plain truth but Ada was loath to relinquish his protective chivalry. Still, he was a good man—the perfect man! He deserved better than her. She needed

to be honest with him; if she did that, then she would be giving him the best of herself, and that he really did deserve. Screwing up her courage, she said, “My father trusted Mr. Silvers. They’d been school friends.”

“In Prussia?”

“Yes. Mr. Silvers is German. His wife is British. Because her family served the King of Hanover, she thinks they are practically related to Prinny.”

She wanted nothing more than to reach for Alfred’s hands with her own, to feel his closeness and support, but her life story shamed her. She didn’t want to bring her misfortunes into his life. So she wrung her hands and didn’t allow herself to move any closer to him. “My father supplied liquor to Aunt Bessie.”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon?” His beautiful, clear blue eyes widened. “Wait. Did you just call...Is The Black Widow of Whitehall your aunt ?”

Ada batted her teary lashes. If only she really did have a family to care for her. She wouldn’t need to work to win her freedom or find a husband. She would be a good girl, the kind that Alfred deserved. Right now, she was little more than a wolf at the Lyon’s Den—Or she would be once Charlotte was done ruining her reputation with her father and his solicitor. “Not really. I call her Aunt Bessie because my father did. He’d known her since he was a boy. She hates it that I call her that.”

Alfred’s cheek twitched, and she realized he was trying not to smile. But he wasn’t laughing at her. She supposed she could understand—almost everyone was afraid of Aunt Bessie. Except for her. Maybe it was a bit funny. She gave him a small smile and continued, “Since my father died,” Ada continued, “the trust he’d put in my name was placed in Mr. Silver’s custody. Because my father had faith in him to take care of me as his own daughter. But he didn’t. I asked Aunt Bessie if I could borrow money from her and gamble, grow it, and escape from the Silvers since I couldn’t access my

trust until age twenty-five or I marry, but I was trapped and couldn't find anyone to marry without Aunt Bessie's help." Ada gasped for air. "Aunt Bessie had her solicitor review the documents. The Silvers... they..."

"They're taking advantage of you. And now, Charlotte is waiting to seize your trust?"

Ada nodded. "It vests in my name if my reputation is intact at age twenty-five or upon marriage. The terms were changed and my father is..." Ada's face distorted as the tears rolled after all.

"Charlotte wants to prevent you from attaining your inheritance at any cost, so she can get the money?" he prompted.

Ada sighed. So that was it. Alfred knew and he could turn away from her now. "It doesn't make any sense, Ada." He didn't turn away. Alfred merely rubbed his forehead and squinted. "This Charlotte Silvers seems so sure of her rights, there must be something else."

"Aunt Bessie read the terms."

"In person?" Alfred narrowed his brows to a tense frown.

"Yes, with her solicitor. Mr. Silvers never let it out of his possession, I believe. I was never allowed to see it since my father died." And as soon as Ada had spoken the words, acid rose to her throat. How could she have been so blind? She'd been the only person who had seen the old will and could identify what was altered in the version that Aunt Bessie read. But if Charlotte was so sure of her inheritance, why couldn't Ada see the will? Why was Mr. Silvers so protective of the document? His stakes were high enough to trap Ada in their house.

Of course! Because she'd be able to invalidate it. And if she invalidated the revised

will, she'd inherit but Charlotte never would. A wicked girl without a dowry, the butcher's daughter would have no prospects in society.

Ada's mind raced faster than a phaeton in the wind. She'd been held prisoner by the Silvers because they had much at stake. She needed to find out how much exactly.

Her gaze met Alfred's. "Why is he getting away with murder?"

Ada gasped. "Who?"

"It's obvious Mr. Silvers forced your father to sign the trust over under duress and that he killed him, isn't it? Did he threaten your life? How much money is in the trust if I may ask?"

"When I left for London, it was nearly seven thousand pounds." Ada's hands flew to her mouth.

"Ada, that's... you are an heiress in your own right. You don't need to gamble for your upkeep."

"I don't have access to the money. I'm a girl."

"And I quite like that about you. But you mustn't let them steal your inheritance." He sobered. "Ada, duress invalidates contracts. Wouldn't it invalidate the revised trust?"

"There's nobody to attest to the duress. Mrs. Dove-Lyon's solicitor looked into the terms for me. I must marry immediately or else the fortune becomes Charlotte's dowry."

"If the solicitor examined the trust, it's in English?"

“I never saw the papers, but it seems so.”

“That’s odd based on what you told me. Did your father change the Prussian terms when he arrived in England then?”

Ada had never considered. Had her father nearly reached her when Mr. Silvers intercepted him? And why didn’t Mr. Silvers protect her father from the brewers?

“I-I... when he said that Papa had been beaten to death, I didn’t ask.”

“Maybe you should ask now.” He pulled her into his arms and she nestled against him.

She knew he was right. Enough self-pity. Enough gambling to circumvent the inheritance. It was time for Ada to fight for her future and her love.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

Back on the street, Alfred waved for a hack. He loaded the parcels with a dizzying number of new dresses and more accessories than Ada had ever owned into the cabin.

“Are we not getting on?” Ada asked when Alfred gave the coachman his address and sent him away to deliver the parcels.

“My brother can let him in. He should be home by now. We have another stop to make.” Alfred reached his arm out and Ada hooked her hand into the lovely spot she’d come to admire as a symbol of strength and support.

They walked down Oxford Street toward Piccadilly, but Ada was afraid to speak. In limbo between love and luck, she didn’t want to spill any of the good fortune that Alfred’s attentions bestowed upon her.

When they reached a spot with fewer people, Alfred said, “I’ve been thinking. This is blackmail, entrapment, theft, fraud...These people—Sivers and his daughter—deserve to be...”

“It’s why I work as a puffer. And why Aunt Bessie is looking for a match for me. I want to break away.”

That gave Alfred pause. “You’re not going back there.” He grabbed her hand with a tight grip and interlaced their fingers, trying to find the least scandalous way to press a part of her to his heart while nodding at the passers-by.

Ada cherished the leisurely walk along Oxford Street. They turned left soon and strolled along Regent Street. What Alfred had said lingered in her mind. She should

have asked. She rarely shied away from questions, even difficult ones. Yet, she'd simply accepted her fate. She'd been naive to think that the Silvers would look after her when her father died. She let emotion destroy her good sense and allowed the Silvers to take advantage of her state. There hadn't even been a proper funeral.

In her sadness, she'd been initially grateful to focus on housework, plus, she wanted to help earn her keep. But when Charlotte had pushed the routine toward more menial chores, Ada bristled and fumed, but never questioned Charlotte's motives. By then, Dylan and the other servants had befriended and helped her. Out of appreciation for their support, Ada formed new friendships. They'd gambled for fun and kept her company. As time had passed, though, mourning turned into frustration.

"You should play poker professionally!" Dylan had once joked. "You're more skilled than all the men."

That was when Ada first sought Aunt Bessie out. Ada always tried to look to the future. It was in her nature to defy complacency. She saw that now. She'd allowed Charlotte's bitter moroseness to distract her. Walking alongside Alfred, Ada mulled over her shortcomings and found a new resolve. She had to do something about her situation. Defeat was not an option.

But before she could ponder a path forward, they arrived at a lovely series of jewelry shops, the facades framing sparkling window displays. They stopped at a tall corner store on Regent Street. "I have to go in for a moment, do you want to come? Or do you want to be surprised?"

"No surprises, please. I've had enough for today, I think." She looked up at him and tried to smile.

He shrugged. "You think? All right then. Let's go." He led her into the shop. Ada's jaw dropped. So many sparkling pieces! She moved to stand beside Alfred at a glass-

enclosed counter.

At 35 Regent Street, as soon as she and Alfred walked in, Ada forgot everything in her past and let hope for the future fill her heart.

“Is Arnold here?” Alfred asked the clerk behind the glass counter.

“Alfred, good day! Who have you brought?” A good-looking man appeared from a side door; he was, dark-haired and handsome. He bowed to Ada, took her hand, and placed a kiss on her knuckles. She gave him a slight smile and he gently let her hand go. Then he led them to an area in the back of the store bustling with activity.

“What is this place?” Ada asked.

“Our workshop,” the man said. “Would you like some rugelach?” His eyes darted to Alfred’s as if he’d misspoken.

“It’s all right, Arnold. Zi iz eyne fun aundz.” She’s one of us.

They were all Jews?

“In fact, that’s why I am here.”

“I thought so as soon as I saw you,” Arnold said.

Alfred put his hand on Ada’s waist in a manner that was both protective and proud.

“Mazal tov!” Arnold congratulated them and waved to a younger man. “Ben, bring us some diamond settings, please. The ones from the vault.”

Ada let out a small yelp and clasped both hands over her chest.



“You said you didn’t want to be surprised.” Alfred brought his other hand to her waist and blinked in a boyish mischievous way that made her heart leap. “Help me choose an engagement ring for you? Please?”

“But Alfred, are you quite certain?” Was she dreaming? “What about your down payment?”

He took both of her hands in his and peered down at her. “I’ve decided. I don’t want a practice without you in my life, Ada.”

Her heart soared. How could yesterday have been such a nightmare and today...

Before she could even finish the thought, a young man with an understated dark kippah on the back of his head appeared. If she didn’t know what the small, round covering meant, she wouldn’t have noticed it. What really caught her attention, however, was the dark-green velvet tray he held up and then carried to a small workbench at a window.

“Try them and take your time,” he said warmly. “My heartfelt congratulations.” Then he crossed his arms behind his back. “Alfred, let me know if you require any alterations in size or settings.”

“You made these?” Ada’s eyes were glued to the diamond rings.

“Some, but not all. The trays get mixed sometimes.” He bent over the table. “These two rows are about a carat each, two in this one, and the baguettes make up no more than three in these.” He glanced up at Alfred, “I believe you may need something spectacular. Would you like to see a 3.2 carat with a higher six-prong setting that I set with pavé to the side rather than at the top of the shank?”

Alfred blushed but before he could answer, Arnold returned. “It would be our

pleasure to consider the difference in the cost as a wedding gift if you allow us the honor.”

Did everyone in town owe Alfred?

Even though he flushed with embarrassment, Alfred nodded. And before Ada knew what was happening, the jewelers had measured her left ring finger and fitted her with a dazzling round solitaire that rose nearly a centimeter above the band. The side stones formed a halo around the central diamond with another row of smaller stones adorning the prongs.

“Will you need a box for that?” Arnold asked with a knowing smile. He was a little older than Alfred but spoke with the experience of a jeweler who’d seen many happy couples exchange vows and bands.

Alfred took Ada’s hand and placed a kiss on the knuckle of her ring finger. “I hope she won’t ever take it off again.”

Unable to speak, she burst into a wide smile.

“Ada,” Alfred started. “Will you...”

The bustling people around them stilled. Whatever he said after that, Ada couldn’t hear for the spinning in her head. There was only one answer to the question. When she nodded, Alfred pulled her into his arms and kissed her quickly but strongly on the mouth.

The room erupted in cheering and Ada couldn’t help but cry with joy. She was still busy wiping the tears from her face when someone—Ada didn’t catch the name in the flurry of congratulations—sent them off in their private carriage. If she didn’t have the proof of the magical morning resting on her finger, Ada would have thought she’d

been hallucinating.

How Alfred had changed her life since that night at the rouge et noir table. How marvelously aflutter her heart had become since he'd promised to spend a lifetime by her side.

She couldn't have refused a man so handsome and kind. Every time he looked at her, his eyes softened with love. But could she live up to the bride a man like him deserved? Even the finest shops and jewelers held Alfred in the highest esteem.

"Please come home with me," he said in the carriage. "Don't go back there. We'll marry as soon as possible and live with Seth until I can afford a house."

Ada swallowed and looked through the window. She wanted to stay. Alfred was all she'd ever dreamed of in a man, but so many unexpected variables tugged at her bliss.

"I need to make another stop."

"Is that a yes?"

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Alfred planned to send word to his parents. When they arrived in London, he and Ada would marry. His mother wouldn't mind if Ada already lived with him because Seth was there. Considering how badly his parents had pressed him to find a Jewish wife, they would be thrilled with the news.

But Ada didn't look so happy, staring vacantly through the carriage window. His heart sank as he watched her. There was a special desolation in her now. He wanted desperately to connect with her, to undo the pain engraved in her mind.

"Where are we going?"

"The Silvers," she said, her opaque eyes lost in thought. "There's someone I need to speak with."

It was a short ride to the butcher shop. The smell reminded Alfred of the university morgue minus the embalming agents. Like Charlotte, the three-story building sported a frilly facade to hide the rot within. To his surprise, Ada didn't use the front door. Instead, she led him through the alley between the buildings, around a corner, and past an open door from which rivulets of blood flowed. An eerie silence cut through London in this back corner of the Silvers' home.

"What is this?" he asked, bracing himself for the answer.

"The butcher shop is over there. At this time of the day, the staff pour hot water on the tiles and wash—"

Alfred gulped and she came back a few steps to touch his arm. "Are you all right?"

“I cannot believe that you had to live here.”

She gave him a wistful smile and held out her hand. They walked past another brick wall into a small courtyard. An apple tree full of buds hid the ugly back of the building. A few worn wooden crates formed a crude seating arrangement. Ada picked up a terra-cotta flowerpot and retrieved a deck of cards. Then she sat and shuffled the cards.

“What are we doing here?”

“I need to pick something up. It won’t be long, I promise.”

Alfred couldn’t bring himself to sit. The courtyard, peaceful as it appeared, felt like a cemetery. A basement of death that lacked the scientific justification of the university’s studies in anatomy. There the complexity of the human body mesmerized the students who held the mysteries of the joints, vessels, and tendons in awe. Here, greed and evil turned death into a business.

An abominable squeal pierced the silence.

“Piglets,” Ada said.

Before Alfred could recover, a young man emerged from a door with chipped green paint.

He came toward them with a spring in his step. “Ada!”

The newcomer needed a haircut but looked clean and the freckles across his nose gave him a clever look.

“Dylan, this is Dr. Stein.”

“The doctor?” The man eyed Alfred like a protective older brother. Then he broke into a smile and offered his hand.

“I’m Dylan Flaherty, the footman. I’ve heard all about you.”

As he spoke, Ada lifted her hand and his attention was captured by the engagement ring. “What’s this?”

“He is perfect after all,” Ada said.

Alfred wasn’t privy to the secret their exchange contained, but he felt himself to be the topic of conversation nonetheless.

“Congratulations then,” Dylan said, giving her a friendly hug.

Alfred knew he should mind the casual familiarity, but he didn’t. This Dylan must have been Ada’s only friend in this forsaken place.

“Can you go to my room and bring me something?” Ada asked, hooking her hand in the crook of Alfred’s arm. “There’s a loose floorboard under the right foot of my cot.”

“All the floorboards in the attic are loose, what am I looking for?”

“A tin box, about this big,” Ada said, showing the size of a tobacco box by shaping her fingers and hands into a rectangle.

Dylan nodded and left.

“Why did you let them put you in the attic on a cot?” Alfred demanded. “Why did you stay here? You must have been terrified.”

“At first, I was a guest. My room was next to Charlotte’s. But after my father died, everything changed. And then I didn’t know where to go. It took me a while to seek Aunt Bessie out.”

“And that’s how you met me.”

Maybe his work as a peddler-doctor wasn’t so bad after all. Anything was better than living in this place. His heart broke for Ada. Neither she nor Dylan deserved such circumstances.

Moments later Dylan returned. “Here you go, and I saw these on his desk.” Dylan handed her a dented, white-lacquered box and three books.

“Where did you say you found these?”

“I went down the main staircase. The Silvers are out. The door to the office was open and I saw these books on the desk. I slipped some paper into the pages to mark the ones he’d studied. Aren’t those your diaries?”

Ada swallowed hard and clutched the volumes to her chest. When she looked back at Dylan, her eyes were red, and she blinked away tears.

“I want you to have this, Dylan.” She opened the box and took out a stack of money.

“Ada! No! You worked hard for that!”

“It won’t matter now. You need it to take Maria to America. Go. Live your life!”

Though reluctant at first, Dylan slipped the bills into the pocket of his waistcoat. Then he wrapped Ada in a farewell hug.

“Thank you!” he said, sniffing slightly. “I hope you have a long and happy life!”

“I will.” She looked up at Alfred and slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. “I’m ready now. Take me out of here.”

As the carriage rattled toward his home, Alfred observed Ada closely. Her face was etched with pain, as tears coursed down her cheeks. Helplessness grew inside him as he watched her cry silently. He longed to comfort her, to wipe away her tears, but he knew better than to intrude upon her sorrow. Her fingers were tightly clasped around the books in her lap, as though they were the only things anchoring her.

Alfred understood that Ada was not ready to speak, and so they rode in companionable silence, the only sounds filling the carriage being her quiet sniffles. The ride felt like an eternity, brimming with unspoken words and boundless emotions. As they pulled up to his townhouse, Alfred offered his handkerchief, which Ada gratefully accepted. Alfred watched her silently and she avoided his gaze, still clutching the books. What secret lay in those diaries?



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Alfred broke the silence before they stepped off the carriage. “That was a very nice thing you did.”

“It was my knippale , my savings. Everything I gambled for at The Lyon’s Den.”

“So now Dylan can buy passage for himself and his love to America?”

Ada nodded. “Are you upset that I gave the money away? It was quite a lot.”

“I’m glad you gave it to him.”

“I don’t have a dowry or my trust. That money should have been yours.”

“I’m afraid twenty pounds wouldn’t have helped me much toward my goals. They’re quite a bit loftier than Dylan’s. He deserves a chance at love.”

“It was two hundred pounds, but I think I have something more valuable here,” she said, laying the diaries on her lap and breaking into tears. Alfred didn’t understand what she meant. All he could do was hold her and comfort her, promising himself that when Ada was his wife, he’d make her smile and laugh every day.

“If Dylan was a friend to you, he must be a good man. I see now that love trumps all other needs in life.”

Alfred might be risking his career for love, but he had no doubts that he was doing the right thing. All that worried him was how Mrs. Dove-Lyon would react.

Ada wanted to speak with him, speak her mind but she didn't voice her suspicions. How could he want her if she came from a shattered past, filled with smugglers, crime, and gambling? Alfred had treated her like a princess, but Ada had the sinking feeling that she'd poison his future with her dark past. And she couldn't help but wonder what his parents would think of his impetuous choice for a bride. She knew how important their children's marriages were to Jewish parents. It wasn't just about the couple, but about the entire family and the union to continue their lineage.

When they reached Alfred's townhouse, the lights were on inside. The carriage came to a full stop.

"Now you can meet my brother," Alfred said as he helped Ada down.

At the front door, she held him back. "Wait. I shouldn't be here."

"Why not? If I am moving too fast, Ada, it's just that I never thought anyone like you existed."

Her thoughts and her heart raced. She couldn't do this. She'd ruin his life! "Alfred, I'm not good for you."

"Don't say that; you don't know what's good for me."

"If you renege on your agreement with Aunt Bessie you won't be able to afford to start your practice. She's generous and fair, but not lenient. She won't let you out of the deal."

"I don't care."

"Of course, you care! I've seen you." Ada swallowed against the lump in her throat. "You jumped to the rescue of the boy at the park. Everyone respects you from

Regent's Park to Oxford Street. You are Dr. Stein. The Dr. Stein, on whom everyone relies."

"And why can you not be Mrs. Stein? My Mrs. Stein?" He asked with a vulnerable crack in his voice that broke Ada's heart.

"Because you need a practice. The office on Harley Street will mean that patients can find you. They need you!"

"I need you ."

"Alfred, I've only been in your life two days. You're a pillar of the community. You have a stellar career ahead and I cannot rip it away because I've selfishly fallen in love with you. There's noth—"

"What did you say?"

"I said that I cannot be selfish and gamble away your practice. I've already lost my dowry to Charlotte and—"

"No, before that. Say it again."

Her heart pounded and she was almost nauseous. She wanted to say it again but the pain of losing him would be worse if he knew how much she adored him. Ada pursed her lips.

He burst into a smile and took her mouth with a vigorous and delicious kiss. "I love you, too, Ada," he whispered against her lips barely stopping the tender contact.

Despite her better judgment, she softened to his kiss. He pulled her close and pressed his body against her. At that moment, her heart sank because she knew they were

being foolish, letting their emotions—their desire for one another—overwhelm their good sense.

A man opened the front door and grabbed Alfred. “Get in this house. You’re making a scene.”

Alfred laughed and whisked Ada into his arms. “Who cares? Let them watch!”

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

“I ’m Seth,” a man who looked somewhat like Alfred and yet very different, said. He was almost—but not quite—as handsome. She blinked at him when Alfred set her down in the foyer. “And you are?”

“She’s my fiancée,” Alfred said, holding up her left hand. Her enormous diamond sparkled in the light.

He gasped. “You’re engaged? Alfred, are you mad?”

“Madly in love, yes. I don’t need my little brother’s permission to marry.” He laughed, even as Ada wanted to blend into the wallpaper.

Seth took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Is she even...”

“Yes, she’s Jewish. Ada Saltzman, please meet my little brother, Seth Stein.”

Ada curtsied but remained silent.

“She’s from Prussia and we met at The Lyon’s Den.”

“Oh shit, Alfred!” Seth pivoted and paced the foyer. “What’s going on here?”

And so, Alfred told him everything—standing in the foyer surrounded by the parcels from their shopping trip.

“The masquerade will be my last night to gamble at The Lyon’s Den,” Alfred concluded. “If I go anywhere near the place, the Black Widow will hold me to my

deal. You have to take my place.”

“I can’t do that!” Seth protested. “Have you lost your mind? I don’t even know the rules to those games, and I’m not you!”

“You’ll be wearing a mask. Don’t you remember the way Nanny Fineblum couldn’t tell us apart when we did the same thing to her?”

“This isn’t child’s play, Alfred. I thought your future meant something to you. You were only gambling to win the money for your practice. Now you’ve endangered much more than that.”

“He’s right,” Ada interjected. “If Aunt Bessie realizes you fooled her, she’ll show no mercy.”

“Maybe not,” Alfred shrugged, “but at least she won’t force me to hold up my end of the deal.”

“Let me speak with her,” Ada suggested.

“And tip her off? I will marry you. The deal is off. When my parents arrive, the marriage will take place.”

Seth shook his head. “It’ll take them two weeks to get back by carriage not counting the time for your letter to reach them and for them to pack. What are you going to do until then?”

For the first time, Alfred looked uncertain. “I’ll tell them it’s urgent.”

“That won’t matter. It’s time you don’t have. You have to come up with another solution.”

Alfred considered the matter. “If we don’t have the time, we’ll make it. You will impersonate me at the masquerade. I’ll keep a low profile and continue playing at The Lyon’s Den. I’ll try to make enough for the down payment before the ball, but that night, you must go in my place.”

“I cannot pretend to be you,” Seth said, crossing his arms. “It’s too dangerous. Her wolves will catch me.”

“Not if Ada helps you. She’s a puffer. She knows them all. Even if she discovers the ruse, the Black Widow won’t introduce you to any wealthy brides in my place. As long as I’m not married to Ada, I can’t go to the masquerade.”

Seth visibly deflated. He knew his brother was right, but he still had valid points to argue.

“How will you pay rent? How will you support your wife? Random acts of kindness won’t get you firewood, food, and lodging.”

“Medicine, not kindness.”

“It doesn’t matter. Neither is lucrative.”

“Maybe not,” Ada said, “but gambling can be.”

And so, the three hatched a plan.

Alfred would continue to gamble at The Lyon’s Den. Ada would work with Seth to teach him the game so that he could put in a more convincing performance, but on the actual night, she would signal him where to set his money. A blink of both eyes would mean red. Brushing hair out of her face, black. Leaning on her elbow, skip the round.

“In the end, I still think she will make you pay your end of the bargain,” Ada warned. “And I am afraid to think how she might go about avenging the loss of the prestige to be had in matching Jews. You awakened a sleeping lion and...”

“You’re afraid I’ll get bitten,” Alfred said, “but remember that I’m a doctor, I know how to treat bites.”

But although he feigned lightheartedness, Alfred was worried. What price would he pay for breaking his agreement with London’s most notorious matchmaker? He might as well be ripping prey straight from the lion’s mouth and that could only end in one way—more bloodshed.



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Ten days passed. Ada had never experienced such a combination of bliss and apprehension. She lived in sin with Alfred and didn't care. Their days were filled with exciting house calls. Wherever Alfred went, the parents of sickly or injured children were grateful beyond measure. He had a way with the children—charming with the girls and roguish with the boys. From stitches to fevers, Alfred cared for every ailment as if it were the single most important problem at the moment.

After days filled with innocent laughter and sweet attention to Alfred's young patients, they spend hot and sultry nights. Ada collapsed into his strong arms at night and woke beside him on the soft feather pillow in the morning.

Alfred returned to The Lyon's Den every night but was still short of the amount he needed. The afternoon of the masquerade, Ada sat at Seth's desk and used his paper and a fountain pen to add the sums in the ledger.

"What are you working on?" Alfred asked, coming into the small room and placing his hands on her back to look over her shoulders.

"I added everything up. The Nortons owe you fifteen pounds. The McAllisters five. If you subtract the supplies for the pharmacist, you'll be at a profit of about nine seventy."

Alfred picked her diary up. "You kept a record over the past ten days?"

She nodded, biting her cheek.

He smiled. "And your tell means you worry that I'll be upset?"

She nodded again. “I kept a record of their names and addresses. You could send them invoices and gentle reminders.”

“It’s no use. If the children need further appointments, where will they go?” He riffled through the pages but wasn’t looking at anything.

“Maybe it would be a start. They could come here for follow-up appointments.

Alfred didn’t hear what she said. “Ada, this is not a normal diary, it’s a gambling ledger.”

“Of course, it is.”

He’d known that she wasn’t keeping a self-important diary like some ordinary girl, but he hadn’t expected the ledger recording years and years of victories. She stood and Alfred put his hand on her waist.

“I had already drawn tables, so I sectioned these pages off for your practice.”

She trailed her finger down a page of fresh writing. “If we keep a careful record, you’ll soon know exactly how much—”

“Ada, have I told you recently that you are brilliant?”

She smiled timidly and made eye contact for a split second. Then she turned to the back of the diary. “I wrote the addresses down here, so you can cross-reference the initials of the children with the parents’ addresses.”

She batted her gorgeous long lashes and Alfred felt an erection twitching in his breeches.

“There’s plenty of room here and…” She turned the page. “Here.”

Alfred snapped the book shut. Her eyes darted to his. “How long till you have to go to The Lyon’s Den?” He put his arms around her, and she turned to face him.

Ada shrugged and her eyes fell to his mouth. She was a quick learner indeed. He pulled her closer and grabbed her taut bottom. She gasped with a scandalous grin and cupped his face.

“I was going to help with your bookkeeping,” she whispered into his mouth.

“My brother is the financier in the family. You have your hands full today.”

He led her hands to his middle. Their lips touched and the familiar fire broke out inside him.

“Your invoices are like your homework. It has to be done,” she said as her fingers slid past his waistband.

“Hmmm,” he nuzzled her neck, and she tilted her head back. “My homework’s already much more fun with you.”

She sighed. His lips moved down to the edge of her gown. A delicious mewling escaped her throat. Alfred lifted her onto the desk. She spread her legs and he nestled between her thighs. With his hands behind her back, he supported her as she arched toward him to give him access to her perky breasts. In the afternoon light, her eyes encouraged him with silent permission as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He buried his face in the soft hair cascading over her feminine curves. She held on to his back and pressed her hips toward him, an aching plea for more. Their eyes locked and he plunged his tongue into her willing mouth, interlocking every part of his body with hers.

“Not again!” The front door swung shut and Seth walked in.

Alfred pinched his eyes shut as Ada hopped off the desk, pulling her dress into a more presentable position. She wrapped her arms around Alfred and dropped her head on his chest, giggling silently.

“Hello there!” Alfred croaked, irritated at the interruption.

“Go to your bedroom, please !” Seth said. He’d turned his back and leaned against the door frame.

“All right, all right.” Ada pulled away from Alfred. “It’s time to get ready for the ball anyway.”

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

Ada had donned one of her new dresses and a feather mask decorated with glass beads. Her gown of dark purple brocade silk with a black waist sash would ensure she blended seamlessly with the guests. The scene at The Lyon's Den was particularly elegant. Artful buffet tables with lavish rose arrangements and drapes of shimmering tulle swagging filled the room.

The occasion was special indeed because Ada would help Seth bet all of Alfred's money to double the amount not once, but twice. Alfred had only a quarter of the needed down payment. With a few high-stakes bets and some luck, Ada and Seth could quadruple the wagers.

But there were problems. Winning from the house would be theft if Ada used her tricks. That, Aunt Bessie would not tolerate. And if the old woman knew that Alfred was reneging on their agreement, she'd be furious and shut his games down. The wins had to come from guests, preferably those who could afford to lose a bit. Or a lot.

When Ada arrived, play was in progress at multiple tables with regular gamblers in their usual places. Ada should have drawn comfort from the routine. She'd bet on the losing color a few times, engage the cockiest gamblers at the table, and then win their money. Even though Aunt Bessie took fifteen percent of her wins, Ada usually left The Lyon's Den with a significant gain. The exception had been the night she met Alfred.

She couldn't have accomplished anything, however, without Aunt Bessie's capital. Until now, that money was her lifeline outside her prison-like life with the Silvers. Winning was the contrast to her gloomy days in Charlotte's service. Plus, Ada loved

tricking insolent men. They never expected to lose against a girl. Here, at The Lyon's Den, Ada wielded power over them. Their self-assured arrogance was their greatest weakness, and she took them by surprise at the tables. Would all that come to an end if she failed tonight and she'd never be able to return to The Lyon's Den if she managed to marry Alfred? Certainly not if she had to marry another man of Aunt Bessie' choosing. She didn't want to think about that possibility, but her mind wouldn't obey.

Until now her diaries had been dear trophies, but if she failed to get the amount Alfred needed and lost what he already had, the books would be reminders of her failure to extricate herself from the miserable situation in which her father's death had left her. He said he'd always be there for her, but he wasn't. He promised her that studying languages, art, and literature would open doors in life. Wishful thinking. Here she was, gambling for her fortune, forcing her luck.

Players came and went at the tables. Ada lost track of time. Every once in a while, she glanced at the door, waiting for Seth to arrive, and thought how badly she needed Alfred to stay hidden. What an odd twist of fate and facts. She was typically the hidden one while he was a beacon of light for the community. He insisted that she wouldn't bring darkness to his promising career as a doctor, but she couldn't help worrying about it. She was not a shining paragon of virtue by any means and association with her would no doubt cast a shadow on his character and integrity in the community.

Once—not if—Aunt Bessie found out that he reneged on their deal, he'd lose the chance to secure the office lease. Who knew what vengeance their whole scheme would trigger? Perhaps Aunt Bessie would ensure he was shut out of Harley Street altogether, or even all of London! Her connections cast a wide web across the Town and retribution was one of her many talents.

Without an office, how could patients find Alfred? He had a lot to lose. The

masquerade was their last chance. This night could cost Alfred his career. If that happened, Ada would have to step back and let Aunt Bessie match him with a woman she'd select. Her heart rose at the thought of losing him and panic rose in her chest again. She fought it back. She couldn't afford to be gasping in the garden again.

Ada glanced toward Puck, guarding the double doors to that garden as usual.

What was that about?

A burly figure with an obviously homemade mask bet on black two tables over. She recognized him instantly. Nobody else had such long, ragged fingers and his stink of carcasses and dried blood came to her long before he did. It clung to him like a curse. He looked in her direction but didn't seem to recognize her thanks to the large feathery mask Hermia had helped pin in place to the hair around her face. She took solace in the semi-privacy of the costume that made her seem to be a much more courageous woman than she was in reality.

Ada's blood froze as Silvers took the only free chair at the rouge et noir table. Her palms sweat as she gripped the cards tightly, her mind racing as she prepared herself for the game ahead. Sitting across the table was the man whose money she planned to take. He was arrogant and condescending, a man who believed that he was invincible and untouchable. But Ada knew his weaknesses. She had studied his mannerisms, learned to predict his behavior, and was confident that she could win if he didn't recognize her.

As he placed his bets on the table, she swallowed hard, her stomach churning with bile. For a fleeting moment, she hesitated, wondering if what she was doing was right or even moral. But, she reminded herself, she'd done it before—won at cards by capitalizing on others' mistakes.

And in Silvers' case—out of anyone, he deserved to lose it. Her father had died at his

hand—or at his will, anyway—and then he'd tried to steal her inheritance. Beating him—even if she cheated to do it—was justice. She would not allow herself to feel an ounce of guilt when he finally lost everything. So Ada took a deep breath, gathered her courage, and focused on the game ahead. She was determined to walk away from that table victorious, and nothing, not even fear, would stop her. She watched for a moment and then made her first bet.



*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

The wolves carried trays of fine liquor among the tables. When they personally catered to certain guests, rather than sending the waiters to do the job, Ada knew they had their eyes on those players. Nobody ever paid attention to the servants, and they often caught cheaters this way. Mr. Silvers helped himself to the finest liquors, the kind that Ada's father had supplied until his death. Alfred was right. She'd been too naive to connect her father's untimely demise with Silvers' bottomless greed.

"Another round goes to me!" Mr. Silvers roared with enthusiasm. Robin was dealing tonight. Good. Ada let Silvers collect her money and she bet again. He'd indulged in too many drinks and wasn't paying attention. But even though his speech was slurred, the man could hold his liquor, and his eyes were still sharp.

Then a shiver traveled down her spine and Ada rubbed her arms to hide the goosebumps. This was her chance to play Mr. Silvers. His turn to pay.

At first, she merely observed. Then she slowly started to bet against him, making sure he'd win the confidence needed to place exorbitant sums on the table. While Mr. Silvers indulged in glass after glass of the finest French port wine, Ada focused on his tell. Whenever he started to twitch in his chair, he lost a round. When he was still, he won. Round after round, she slid her money over to him and he bellowed with excitement.

Laughter filled the large room, but Ada couldn't muster a smile.

Then her eyes moved toward the door and her heart leapt. She thought she'd seen Alfred but, of course, it was Seth. Time to siphon money from the only place where she'd had a bit of safety. But she had to get Mr. Silvers to pay, too. Could she manage

to take his money and avoid stealing from Aunt Bessie? Acid rose to her throat. If Silvers' pockets were deep enough, she could accomplish her goals without stooping to thievery.

She had to both turn Silvers' luck and ensure that Seth won his money. If she could redirect Silvers' losses, she wasn't stealing even if the house made no profit on her gameplay. It was the lesser of two necessary evils.

"Good evening," Titan said as Seth arrived at the table.

"The Cavalier's usual?" Robin used Alfred's nickname. Another sign that their ruse was working—so far.

Seth cast a look at Ada begging for help. He barely looked like Alfred. They had the same golden hair, but Seth's was slightly shorter, and behind the black velvet mask, his eyes were a clearer blue. She had to admit that his physique was similar to Alfred's in the black evening coat—it was the same ensemble Alfred had worn when they met less than a fortnight ago. It felt as though they'd shared lifetimes since then.

Ada was afraid to speak because Silvers would recognize her voice. Until this moment, she'd only mumbled a few phrases in French to place her bets. A word in English and her chance to draw money from her father's murderer would vanish.

Even behind a mask, Ada could not bring herself to compromise her morals. Caught between her role as puffer for the house and the responsibility to maintain Seth's cover as the Cavalier, she felt the heavy weight of her predicament. But it was time to step up and gamble for her life in every sense of the expression.

Seth did well and bet on red when Ada batted her eyelashes as they'd planned. He bet on black when she brushed her hair out of her face. The wall clock showed one o'clock. It had been nearly an hour and Mr. Silvers owed the house a dizzying

amount of money.

“ Votre jeu est fait? ” Is your bet made? Robin asked. But Ada knew that Silvers owed more than he could afford already, so she gave Titan, the manager, the signal to collect. She leaned on her elbow and Seth understood. With a curt nod, he walked away.

Ada's chest constricted as she realized that Seth didn't have enough money yet. Panic bubbled in her throat, and she swallowed hard.

“Titan,” she called.

The tall manager furrowed his brows.

“Is the private gaming room open?”

If she had one more chance, even at the risk of exposing herself, she'd take it to collect the down payment. She wanted the man of her dreams but not at the cost of his dream.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

In the early morning hours, Alfred stood by the window of his bedroom and stared into the night. A thin layer of frost sparkled on the roofs. Lights went on in a few houses, probably servants readying the households for the day ahead. A woman across the street opened the door and let a cat out. He heard the animal's meow, birds chirping, and wooden carriage wheels on the pebbled street.

They'd hatched a dangerous plan and Ada was gambling with their futures. All he could do was to stay out of the way, which wasn't in his nature. Alfred liked to jump to the rescue.

He glanced at the empty bed behind him, and his stomach turned. Seth should have brought her back by now. Whatever held them up could only be trouble.

On a typical day, he'd walk over to the patisserie and bring freshly baked rolls back for them all. He'd collect a few crocuses or tulips and watch the buds open just in time to hand them to his gorgeous girl when he brought her breakfast.

And then he'd bed her again, wrap himself around her deliciously slim body, hold her hips firmly, and spill himself into her while she peaked and grabbed him tightly. Alfred could virtually taste her sweet lips and hear her crying his name, moaning with pleasure as he'd catch her screams with kisses.

But she wasn't with him, and he felt her loss acutely. This was not a typical day. He hated not waking up with her in his bed. His parents couldn't arrive soon enough. He needed to marry Ada and ensure nobody could ever separate them. There was nothing he wanted more.

Restless, he went downstairs to the office. The ledgers that Ada called her “diaries” lay open on the desk. Alfred turned the pages and glanced at the writing. Her neat, upright letters had a feminine flourish. He flipped the pages back a year and found a different hand, one that transcribed a squiggly correction annotated with the initials ERS.

Curious, Alfred compared the entries—one that began a year ago in Ada’s handwriting with dates that matched her account of her arrival in England and earlier writing in a masculine hand, probably that of her father judging from the German “s.” But there were several instances of crossed-out numbers and overwritten notes. Each time, the player’s initials were ERS. Someone had altered her ledgers. Alfred riffled back through the pages and then it all made sense. Silvers had changed the entries to hide his debts to Ada’s father. It was right here, ink on paper, a motive for murdering Ada’s father. Instead of paying what he owed, he took Ada’s father’s life and forced him to write Charlotte into the will.

Did Ada know?

The clock struck seven.

Where was she?

Over the past twelve nights, he’d grown used to sleeping with her in his arms. Her slim body roused his senses. She’d become nestled into his heart, not merely his embrace. And even though he’d taken her virtue and her body, he wanted more. He wanted everything from this witty, spirited woman.

He’d had enough of uncertainty in his life. An engagement was a good start, but he couldn’t marry Ada without his parents present. He owed them his life, his heart, his education. But there was a nagging feeling that waiting too long would cost him his bride.

A bang at the door startled him. Alfred stepped to the window and looked down. One of Mrs. Dove-Lyon's men stood on the steps. His heart rose to his throat. Had something happened? Was Ada all right? Seth? Had their plans gone awry? He hurried down the stairs and flung the door open to greet Puck.

Puck looked at him with a calm expression and said, "Time to meet your bride."

No! He didn't want a bride. Not if it wasn't Ada. But he didn't even have time to grab his hat before Puck ushered him into the carriage, intent on driving straight to Cleveland Row.

"Wait! I need to get something in the house!" Alfred resisted. "Is Ada still there?"

Puck nodded.

Wrestling himself free, Alfred rushed back inside and retrieved the ledger before he returned to the carriage. It was time to confront Mrs. Dove-Lyon with the truth.

The Lyon's Den looked harmless by day, painted light blue and sitting on a street filled with people and horses—far different than its nighttime appearance. The foreboding cleanliness struck Alfred as soon as the carriage came to a stop. Without roaring gamblers around, the Lyon's Den was even more terrifying than usual. Puck escorted him to the front door, sticking close enough to grab him if Alfred tried to flee. He had no idea that the woman of his heart—his soul!—was inside the building and leaving her there was the last thing Alfred would do.

"Mrs. Dove-Lyon's room," Puck said to the wolf at the door and let Alfred walk in first. Inside, servants were clearing dishes and glasses, tossing piles of cards in buckets, and cleaning up from the ball. The wolves still stood guard.

Alfred knew the stench of alcohol and sin all too well. The combination often

comingled pain and blood when things got out of control. But this time, he had the sinking feeling he was about to become the casualty of the day.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

H ours earlier, in the same room ...

Ada played this game, these cards, for her life. And she'd succeeded. She'd not only won, but she'd also crushed her nemesis.

Funny how she hadn't exactly thought past that to consider how he'd react, or the repercussions of her actions.

"That woman?" Mr. Silvers yelled when Titan and Puck shoved him into the dimly-lit private room off the main hall. "She already cleared me out! She's a cheat!"

Puck grabbed him by his lapel. "You begged for another chance because you couldn't pay. This is it."

"'Tis not fair!"

His protest infuriated Ada. No matter that he'd recognize her. After all he'd done to destroy her life, a part of her wanted him to bleed out.

"Isn't it? Fair?" Ada asked.

He inhaled sharply when she spoke and his eyes met hers. She didn't drop her gaze as she slowly removed the hairpins that held her mask in place. Even though her heart pounded, she couldn't help but revel in the terror that gleamed in Silvers' eyes. But then the terror drained away when he realized who she was, and he growled like a vicious dog.



“You cheated! Just like your father!”

She lay the pins on the table in a straight, exacting row. “I didn’t need to cheat. You and your luck are that bad.”

“Prove it!” He would have lunged at her had it not been for the wolves on either side of him, holding his arms so he couldn’t move.

Surprised at the strength she drew from facing his hatred, Ada placed her mask to the side and folded her hands in front of her on the card table. The scene was set perfectly; she in the light and he in the shadow between Puck and Titan.

“I won’t play you, girl!”

“You already did and you lost,” she answered and the calmness in her voice surprised her. And it pleased her. She was done allowing this man to ruin her life and steal her inheritance. And she definitely wasn’t going to allow him to think he’d gotten away with the murder of her father.

The arrogant man broke into a sweat but shook his head.

“Will you cut his throat then, or shall I?” Titan asked Puck.

Ada wasn’t exactly sure what happened to the men who didn’t—or couldn’t—pay and she’d never asked. She couldn’t imagine the wolves killing them. They were too smart, and truly, death would be an easy way out for Silvers—which he didn’t deserve.

Puck shoved Silvers to the chair across from Ada and the man cowered like a boy caught stealing. The wolves were, if nothing else, effective.

“The highest card wins,” Ada said. “If you win, I will pay your debt to The Lyon’s Den.”

“And what happens if you win?” His voice dripped with malice.

“Then you admit to killing my father and transfer the trust back in my name.”

“I will do no such thing!” He began to rise from the chair.

Puck pushed his shoulders and held him down. Silvers smacked his lips and licked the sweat off his stubbly chin. “It’s not your trust anymore, it’s my daughter’s dowry.”

“Except that Charlotte lied!”

“Did she?” he spat. “Where’ve you been the last fortnight then?”

Ada blushed when Titan and Puck’s eyes darted to her. What a world they lived in, full of double standards. She couldn’t go back to the Silvers yet failing to return sullied her reputation. And losing her virtue to the man she loved was not even something she could openly defend. She had to fight for him the only way she knew how—gambling.

“Where I’ve been is none of your concern,” she bluffed. “The higher card wins. If you lose you will explain to the authorities—in front of witnesses who I trust—that you forced my father to sign the trust over to Charlotte under duress. You made the conditions up, didn’t you?”

“You don’t know that. You weren’t there!”

“Then why did you cross your debts out in my father’s ledgers?”

“How do you know...”

He inhaled sharply. “You stole the books!”

“And you erased your debts to my father in his ledgers, didn’t you? That’s why you hid them from me! And you altered the will, too! You promised to look after me, to introduce me to London society just so you could get my father alone.”

“You have no proof for any of it!”

“I know that you killed my father to get my trust. You stole from him and me!”

“No court in England will take the word of a Jewish girl! Much less the mistress of a peddler!”

That was the moment Ada lost her cool. Beads of cold sweat built on her back, and she clenched her jaw. “Every court of law will accept written accounts of your debts. That you tried to falsify the evidence but didn’t finish just proves how guilty you are! And the debts are motive.”

“That may barely suffice to prove mens rea , malice, but without a body, there’s no actus reus , no evil deed. You cannot even prove both parts of a simple crime, girl!”

Ada’s blood boiled. She needed to avenge her father’s murder. The stack of cards before her had become her weapon of revenge.

“At least he was useful this way!” Silvers snarled.

Ada shook with rage. Had he just alluded to her father being slaughtered like an animal at the butchery?

“Where did you kill him? Where was he?”

Silvers shrugged and pursed his scruffy lips. He was disgusting. The vicious old man winced in pain when Puck’s fingers dug into his shoulders.

“You will admit all it. All of it, do you hear me? And transfer the funds,” Puck ordered.

“What’s left of it.” Silvers laughed then, clearly thinking he’d outsmarted her.

Ada’s heart dropped. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he started in a gooey singsong, “A debut costs money. A ticket to Almack’s, the new gowns, furnishings for a lady’s parlor. If there are callers, where will they go?”

The blood drained from her limbs. “You didn’t!”

“Oh, but I did,” he spoke with fiery pride. Charlotte had already spent her trust. That’s why she went shopping every day, but Ada had never been in the stores with her.

“How much is left?”

He shrugged. “If you win, you find out. If I win, you’ll never know.”

Silvers reached for cards and checked them for cut corners or other alterations. He counted them carefully. “Cut?”

Ada swallowed hard. Now, rather than playing cards, she wanted to strangle him. But then she’d be just like him. This was going to be the hardest bluff she’d ever had to

manage but also the moment to show her true capabilities. Losing to her would hurt him more than physical pain.

The room was so dimly lit that she couldn't see Titan's face. Usually, Robin signaled her opponent's cards, but he stood behind Silvers in the shadow. This was a clean deck. The old tricks didn't work. Ada leaned forward and steadied her nerves.

Then she noticed the candelabras. Polished brass made excellent mirrors and she saw all of Silver's cards when he shuffled. So that was why Titan and Puck had set the candelabras rather than lighting the gas lamps. Ada forced her face into a placid expression but sent Titan and Puck a grateful look.

Silvers dealt himself a ten of hearts. He laid it face down on the table. She had four turns to trump his card or else he'd win.

"Your first?"

He picked the next card, an eight of spades. Ada shook her head. Silvers had no clue that she'd seen it.

"Go on," Ada said.

He dealt another. She couldn't make out whether it was the king or queen, but she shook her head regardless. If there was a higher card, she'd want it. She didn't want to win against Silvers, she wanted to crush him.

"Are you sure? Only two left."

"Next card. I'll let you know which is mine."

Silvers shuffled again and pulled another card. His face fell and Ada saw the card in

the polished brass.

“That’s the one,” she said.

Silvers put the card on the table.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

It was almost morning. Seth had disappeared relatively early when another guest slipped and hurt her foot. Hermia had told Ada that Aunt Bessie was most displeased at her rogue private game, but Ada was too sleepy to care. After Puck and Titan had carried Silvers off, they had promised to inform Aunt Bessie's solicitor. The money was hers, Ada thought with relief. But how much was there?

She let herself into Aunt Bessie's room and pulled a throw pillow to the dressing chair behind the paravan room divider in the far corner. Only a few minutes, Ada thought. She'd rest her eyes for only a few minutes and then slip away before anyone knew she was there. Alfred was surely worried about her but she couldn't venture back alone in the dark. Not after a masquerade ball, it was too dangerous for a girl alone. And where had Seth gone?

A few hours later, Ada awoke with the familiar click of the opening door.

"Dr. Alfred Stein," Titan said.

Alfred? Other voices mumbled something, but Ada couldn't make out the words. She pulled her legs up so that she couldn't be seen behind the room divider.

"Alfred, this is the girl you will marry." Aunt Bessie sounded furious. Ada held her breath. Her pulse throbbed in her throat.

The voices spoke but Ada's cracking heart overpowered them. She'd known their love was too good to be true. She couldn't be so lucky as to find love and a groom in not even two weeks.

“As lovely as she is—and I’m sorry, Miss—I refuse.” Alfred’s voice woke Ada from her stupor.

Ada heard the clinking of porcelain. Aunt Bessie had set down her cup. From her position cowering on the settee, shaking with fear that she’d be discovered, Ada couldn’t see much. No, that wasn’t it. She was trembling with sorrow. Alfred was going to marry the other, faceless voice she’d heard speaking, and Ada would be just this, a hidden memory. Everything had been in vain.

“Dr. Stein, you jest.” Aunt Bessie’s voice trembled with wrath. How could Alfred have thought to defy her? And why had Ada allowed him to do so? Was she truly so naive as to think Aunt Bessie would let him out of the deal if he said he’d already given his heart away?

“First, you allege that my matches are biased toward the Ton, then you storm out of here with enormous wins against the house, and now you refuse to accept the match I deem fit for you per our agreement? Have you any inkling what you are doing to your life? Have you gone mad, boy?”

Ada’s mind went blank. She heard nothing, felt nothing. And just when she thought she was falling apart, Aunt Bessie ruled, “Kiss!”

“No!” The girl protested. “I don’t want to!”

“Kiss him now. You weren’t this squeamish last night.”

Was it possible? Alfred and this other woman? Last night? Ada leaned to see between the panels of the room divider but the morning sun was too bright to see clearly; everyone was in silhouette with the light blazing through the windows behind them.

“Alfred! Stop!” The door slammed open and hit the wall with a bang.



“Seth?” Ada heard the confusion in Alfred’s voice. Her head began to buzz and swim as she grew dizzy and her throat grew tight.

Not now. Not another episode of breathless terror. But her lungs refused to take in the air she needed. Again.

“Get your hands off her!”

“Mr. Cavalier.” The other woman’s voice collided with Aunt Bessie’s outburst and then Ada heard a dull “Wham!”

“What was that for?” Alfred’s voice sounded forced. He’d been hit. Ada gasped, slipped off the settee, and knocked the room divider over. She wasn’t breathing.

“Ada?” Alfred straightened, still clutching his stomach. Seth held the young woman in his arms. Aunt Bessie was fuming.

She gasped, but no air moved into her lungs. Alfred rushed to her and took her face in both hands.

“Slow and deep!” His eyes locked with hers and shakily, she inhaled. Air filled her chest and relief spread through her limbs.

“You... you...” Aunt Bessie growled and wagged her index finger. “And you!” Her voice was a low growl.

“Aunt Bessie—I didn’t mean—to eavesdrop,” Ada spoke through coughs. “I fell asleep and then I heard Alfred.”

“Alfred?” Aunt Bessie’s eyes darted from one to the other. “You and the Cavalier?” She propped her hands on her hips as if she’d known all along. “I gave him two

weeks to gamble here. But not with a Jewish name, I'm no fool."

Seth and the young woman stood together facing Aunt Bessie. Alfred reached his hand out and Ada took it.

"Neither are we," Alfred said. "Let's settle this once and for all."

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

Alfred took the widest stance he could muster, angry and confused. He shouldn't have left Ada alone here last night.

"You played with my money and signaled him, didn't you?" Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

"Aunt Bessie—" Ada stuttered, her breathing still unsteady. Alfred held her wrist, feeling her pulse.

"Don't Aunt-Bessie me, child! I may run a gambling hall, but we have a certain code of honor here. I saw you. And when Titan and Hermia refused to meet my eyes, I knew you were betraying me. What I didn't expect was the double betrayal from you both."

She turned and walked slowly to the small table in front of the fireplace. Alfred knew she walked without a cane, but her posture clearly showed that she had a deep lingering pain in her bones that only warmth and rest could appease.

"I risked my reputation for you, child. But no good deed goes unpunished, hmm?" She sat down slowly, supporting herself with a hand on either armrest. The chair was lavishly upholstered, and the padding deflated to receive her like a queen on her throne.

The elderly woman sank into the high-backed chair and visibly relaxed. Ah, lumbar pain, Alfred concluded. As soon as she took the pressure off her spine, the Black Widow regained her usual force.

"Alfred, you accused me of bias and agreed to a match in return for the down

payment. Ada, you asked for my charity, and I complied out of respect for your father.” She folded her hands in her lap. “Lucy here is a good Jewish girl, and I was sure you’d be a love match with time. I am not sure how your brother figured into the mix, Dr. Stein, but you made a mess of things.” She sagged deeper into her throne, but her voice sounded as if she were seated above them all.

“I can repay you for the money Seth won last night,” Ada ventured. “And more!”

“How?”

“Mr. Silvers owed my father money. That’s why he killed him—so he wouldn’t have to pay. He stole the medicine and sold it as poison, turned the brewers on my father. They killed Father instead of him. And that’s why he seized my trust, or else his daughter wouldn’t have a dowry. He needs her to marry rich to pay his debts.”

“Can you prove it?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked patiently.

“She can!” Alfred produced the diaries. “Mr. Silvers tried to forge the gambling ledgers. Over three years’ worth in this one, more in the others. His losses stopped when Ada came to England.”

“You saw the forgeries?” Ada asked.

“I waited for you, and the diaries were sitting open on the desk.” Alfred dropped the books on the coffee table.

“If this is true, there is enough incriminating evidence to seize all of his assets,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

“Except if it comes from a Jew. You’d have to be the one to present the evidence to the authorities. I already got him to testify,” Ada said. “Titan accompanied him to the

magistrate.”

“All of his assets can be yours. And I promise not to return.” Alfred added. He glanced over his shoulder where Seth was wrapping his arms around the young woman.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon raised her chin and glanced at them with the strict expression of a grandmother.

“I might have a solution,” Alfred said.

“Boy, there is no solution to this, and I won’t let any of you out of here if my reputation takes harm. I’m the…”

“Most notorious matchmaker in town, I know. Hear me out!”

Alfred let go of Ada’s hand and took the seat by the fire at a right angle from the elderly woman. She wouldn’t want to strain her neck by looking up at them and he wanted to make this as painless as possible for her if his idea was to stand a chance.

“All right, what have you to say?”

“Not only did I challenge you to make Jewish matches, but I will spread the word with my connections—and I have many, as you know. My patients may not pay me in cash—yet—but they pay attention to me.”

Alfred felt Ada nodding behind him when her hair brushed against his cheek, and then her hand came to rest on his shoulder. Seth and his girl—Lucy—had also stepped closer, hanging on to his every word.

“Who’s to say that you didn’t plan for us to meet here? That you didn’t hire Ada as a

puffer and planted her at the table where I would play every night?”

“Continue.”

“Well, I assume Miss...”

“Lucy,” Seth said.

“I assume Lucy was masked, as was Seth. Nobody knows that it wasn’t me with her.”

“I have no idea what you are getting after, so make your point fast.”

“The facts of how the matches were made are ambiguous at best and lend themselves to interpretation. I propose that you make of them what you wish, and we have a double wedding.”

“The sooner the better,” Seth smiled and the girl in his arms beamed. Ada’s other hand came to his shoulder, the sparkling diamond eclipsing the morning sun.

“Your first Jewish match would start with such a spectacular event that everyone will want to be there!” Ada said.

“A double wedding?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said cautiously. “A Jewish double-wedding.”

Alfred waited. He heard the blood rushing through his veins. If she was agreeable, his luck might turn after all.

“One condition!” the Black Widow said in her usual stern and unyielding tone. “It’s outdoors and I invite the guests.”

“Fine,” Alfred said.

“Agreed,” Seth joined in. “Our parents will be here any day.”

Ada clasped her hands.

“Not so fast, Ada.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon picked up the cane from the side of her chair and used it to bang on the floor. The door opened and Puck appeared. She cocked her head at Alfred and the others. “You are dismissed. Ada, you stay. I need a word.”

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

“Yes, Aunt Bessie?” Ada stepped toward her. Alfred and the others had filed out with solemn looks.

“Are you sure he’s the right man for you?”

Ada sank onto the chair that Alfred had just occupied. It was still warm, but she was on edge and couldn’t lean back. Her feet crossed, she wrung her hands and blinked into the fire. It was a genuine question. Simple really. Except that her feelings were so complicated that she didn’t know how to answer.

“If it takes so long, girl, I’m afraid I know the truth of your heart.”

“No, it’s not that, Aunt Bessie.”

“You must speak frankly now or lose the chance. You came to me seeking freedom. Can he give that to you?”

“I don’t know that he can.”

“You got your trust back just now. The money is yours. No husband shall stifle your control over your own life.”

“There’s not much left in my trust and I’m afraid I didn’t manage to get enough money for Alfred’s down payment after all.” Tears filled her eyes and Ada thought the light was altogether too bright. “It’s not enough.”

“Mr. Silvers was here last night,” Aunt Bessie said. “He gambled, shall we say,



beyond his means. I know what you've done. It was courageous, I must say." She gave a flick with her hand, the wrinkled fingers stretching and collapsing again. "You won us a good deal. You're the best puffer I've ever had, Ada." She leaned forward. "Silvers had a choice between pawning off his daughter or relinquishing the papers of your trust to me after your victory."

"Charlotte?" Ada couldn't hide her astonishment.

"I can tell you that I'd much rather manage the details of your trust than try to find a husband for that brat." She shuddered. "And it seems that her father knew. He handed the trust over to my solicitor before Titan escorted him to the magistrate. Mr. Silvers' cards are dealt."

Ada's heart soared. "The trust isn't depleted?"

"No. It's all yours as soon as my solicitor files the papers. Twenty thousand pounds with interest."

"How much interest?"

"Two hundred percent." Ada would have fainted if she hadn't already been seated.

"You are free!" Aunt Bessie took her hand. "You can buy a house—an estate—and live out your life as you like."

The Black Widow seemed to expect a euphoric reaction. Instead, Ada burst into tears.

"Child, I must say, I expected a different response, but I understand your tears."

"I don't," Ada sobbed. "I've been hoping for my money back. I wanted to escape the Silvers, but now... I don't understand what I'm feeling."

“You are in love, child.” Aunt Bessie spoke softly. “Do you want to marry Dr. Stein?”

Ada nodded and accepted an embroidered handkerchief from the elderly lady who had gone from a stern queen to the tone of a grandmother. “I can’t imagine life without him.”

“What’s the problem then?” Aunt Bessie put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I’m letting him out of the deal in return for the double wedding, Ada. But he’s going to have to find another sponsor.”

“I destroyed his dreams. I never meant for him to choose between his career and me. I wanted to step away but...”

“Darling child, one does not step away from true love. Even if it has a sudden onset as I suspect was the case with you. Love must be cherished and nurtured. He’s no idiot and I knew he wouldn’t step aside as soon as you peeked out from behind my room divider.”

“But his practice, his career.”

“Let me tell you something about money, now that you are an heiress, Ada. If invested properly, it grows. What you may consider a fortune today, darling child, is but a seed. With a little help, however, from a seed, a forest may grow!”

And with those words, Aunt Bessie advised Ada on how to secure the down payment with her trust as collateral.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am*

One month later a long white carpet had been rolled out toward a large chuppah—a wedding canopy—in the garden of The Lyon's Den. Uncountable yellow tulips shimmered in the sunlight. Rows upon rows of yellow petals stretched out as far as the eye could see. Alfred stood ramrod straight next to Seth, both awaiting their brides.

Their parents stood on Seth's side, and the doctors from 87 Harley Street on Alfred's. As a symbol of the home that two people found upon their wedding, their closest relatives stood with them. It was an ancient tradition that honored those who accompanied the groom to this pivotal moment in life.

Then the music started. An elegant string quartet was situated in the corner of the garden under the willow. Angelic tunes soared through the air as if the weddings were not being held in the Town's most risqué gambling hall. Rows of familiar faces, Alfred's numerous patients, and a select group of the most influential members of the Ton sat primly in the chairs. The scene was like a painting, serene and peaceful. It was hard to imagine anything more beautiful, more perfect than this garden in its full glory, a breathtaking masterpiece in every sense of the word. But then Alfred's eyes locked with his bride and the surroundings vanished.

Escorted by Mrs. Dove-Lyon, Ada walked slowly along the white carpet, flashing her brilliant smile at him. His heart dropped to his knees and he nearly buckled, but his brother's shoulder touched his. He wasn't alone here; it was their double wedding.

Led by Wendy, Lucy emerged just after Ada. When both brides stood before their grooms, Seth cast Alfred a proud nod. They each covered their brides with the veils that hung over their shoulders in the bedecken ceremony. It wasn't exactly the

traditional order of events, but Mrs. Dove-Lyon had insisted that the Jewish wedding be welcoming for the guests of the Ton and not obscure the view of the brides.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon surprised Alfred when she gave Ada a warm hug and whispered something in her ear that sounded like, “Your father would be so proud of you.” Ada blinked away tears and then found Alfred’s gaze again.

Alone, holding only a bouquet of golden tulips, she circled him seven times while the Rabbi recited the Sheva Brachot , the seven blessings.

He had married the girl of his dreams, a woman who was bold, confident, and full of life. It was as if he had waited his entire life to find her. Alfred couldn’t believe his luck that they had met—or had Mrs. Dove-Lyon planned that they’d meet all along?

No matter. Alfred could see the way his bride’s eyes shone as they gazed upon each other. He’d known somehow the moment their eyes met that she was the one he had been searching for. Their life together would be a grand adventure, filled with surprises and thrills. Alfred was excited to share every moment of his future with his beloved Ada.

The rest of the ceremony washed over him in a daze. After the well-wishers filed past, his mother finally found him.

“Alfred, Yingale , sweet boy.” She rubbed his cheeks as she’d done since he was a boy. “ Mazal tov and may your love blossom and shine as bright as your smiles.”

“I’m so happy. Mother, will you ever forgive me?” He glanced over to the corner where Ada was encircled by a group of young women who admired her gown.

“Whatever for?”

“I failed to secure the down payment for an office. I just don’t know how long it will

take me to save enough to bring you and Father back to London.”

“Oh dear, don’t you realize? We are glad to be out of the busy city. And so proud of you already! We never expected you to have a practice so soon after your studies. In time, son, in time, you will have it all.” She gave him a warm hug and a kiss on his forehead. “Now go and see your bride.”

Curious debutantes cornered Ada. They asked so many questions that she wanted to press her hands against her ears.

“Pardon me.” Alfred’s strong voice penetrated the din and reverberated in her stomach. “I need my bride, ladies.”

His smile left the young women fanning themselves.

“Come with me,” he said, pulling on Ada’s hand as he’d done that night when she despaired in this same garden.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Home!”

“No wait!” She stopped and looked around. Puck stood guard by the gate. His eyes met hers and within seconds, Aunt Bessie’s carriage, decorated with white carnations and yellow tulips, pulled around the corner.

Alfred lifted Ada into the coach and climbed in after her. He looked dashing in his light grey breeches and dark coat. A lock of golden hair fell onto his forehead just the way Ada liked it best.

“To 91 Harley Street,” Ada called to the coachman. She turned her head slowly to Alfred who had jerked back in surprise. “I bought the building.”

“What?”

“Aunt Bessie gave me some advice on investing my inheritance. What better way to use the money than to secure our future?” She spoke with as much nonchalance as she could muster but she was giddy with excitement and ready to burst into tears.

“The whole building?”

“Why yes, it’s going to be a hospital. The practice for ambulatory patients will be on the ground floor. Supply and laundry in the basement. On the first floor, Seth can have his office next to the patient rooms and the nurse. You’ll have to help me with the layout, but I reserved the apartment on the top floor for us and the baby.”

Alfred’s mouth dropped open. “Baby?”

Ada took his hand and placed it on her stomach. “Well, you tell me, Dr. Stein. I haven’t had my courses since we met. It’s been two months.”

“Oh Ada,” Alfred claimed her mouth with a searing kiss. When he’d kissed her breathless, he told her, “I’m so happy you stalemated me at rouge at noir that night. I love you so much!”

“So, I didn’t break your winning streak?” She pressed her forehead to his.

“No, my beautiful wife. You started it. I am the luckiest man alive.”