



Duke Before Christmas (Marquess Under the Mistletoe)

Author: *Jillian Eaton*

Category: Historical

Description: 'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house...the stone-hearted Duke of Dorchester was falling in love.

The Duke of Dorchester needs a wife for himself and a mother for his wild twin daughters. Someone obedient, well-behaved, and perfectly mannered. Sultry, sarcastic actresses need not apply. Why, then, can he not keep his eyes—or his mouth—off Lillian Snow after a chance encounter at the Yuletide Ball? She isn't at all what he wants. But maybe...just maybe...she is precisely what he needs.

Lillian swore off men years ago to pursue a career in the theater. She isn't attending the Yuletide Ball to find a husband; her newest stage production requires funding before Christmas Eve or they'll be closed down. A grumpy, annoyingly sexy duke isn't at all what she's looking for. But maybe...just maybe...it's who she is meant to find.

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Lisbon Theater

London, England

December 1854

“Touch me and risk your death!” Lillian snarled, raising a carved blade above her head. “I loathe the day I attempted to heal your heart, for it is clear that you’ve none to heal. Only a black, cold lump of charcoal resides in your chest and I shall not—bloody hell. Line! ”

“I shall not risk smearing my own with soot,” a voice whispered urgently from behind the burgundy curtain at the edge of a long, oval shaped wooden stage.

Lillian cast her gaze toward the massive chandelier that hung directly over her head. Half of the candles were out, their wicks worn down to useless nubs. The other half were doing a pitiful job at illuminating the theater. Even as she watched, another sputtered and died with nary a whimper.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to refocus on the task at hand. There was no use worrying about adequate lighting if she couldn’t remember her lines. Then again, people weren’t going to pay for her to recite them in the dark. Her voice was good—a velvet, husky timbre that she could deepen on command—but it wasn’t that good. It was her face they really came to see. And if they couldn’t do that...

“I shall not risk sullyng my own with soot,” she snapped.

“Smearing,” said the voice from the wings.

Lillian took a deep breath as her arm holding the blade—its edge dulled for safety—began to tremble. Memorization was not something she ordinarily struggled with. While the other actors in their small company spent hours poring over their scripts, her mind had a way of imprinting her lines so that they flowed from her tongue without her even having to think about them. But today was different. Today her tongue felt heavy and cumbersome.

“Smearing . I shall not risk smearing my own with soot and...oh, bollocks.” Letting her arm drop on a sigh of defeat, she gave her fellow actress, a slim brunette with her hair chopped short to resemble the man she was pretending to be, an apologetic grimace. “I’m sorry, Emma. Can you rehearse your act three scene with Marjorie and we’ll pick this up later? There’s something I have to do in my office.”

Emma shrugged. “Not a problem. Oi, Marjorie! You’re up.”

A middle-aged woman, short and stout and perfectly suited to play a variety of wise matronly characters, hustled up the stage steps while Lillian leapt nimbly off the edge and strode through the audience seats, trying not to notice how threadbare they’d become. Or how too many of them had begun to collect dust from sitting empty.

The sad truth of it was, she reflected as she entered her office, a cramped closet tucked away beside the larger room they used for costumes and handmade props, the Lisbon Theater hadn’t turned a profit in nearly two years. Not since the larger, flashier, and far more popular Canterbury Music Hall had opened up just four blocks away.

Shiny and new, it offered a brand new experience for its devoted audience of hundreds. One where they could enjoy food, drink, and dancing along with the show. It also had the benefit of two wealthy, influential benefactors: the Earl of Yardley and

his unmarried son, Lord Markham. When they were in attendance, the line stretched out the doors and all the way down the street to the front of the Lisbon Theater...rubbing Lillian's nose in the fact while she was struggling to fill half her seats, the music hall was struggling to fit all of its patrons inside.

Slumping into her chair, she tipped forward and let her head hit her desk with a dull thud, the sound of her skull striking wood muffled by the stack of bills and unpaid notes that had been piling up since spring.

In less than a month, it would be Christmas. And when the New Year came to pass, she would either remain the owner of a miserably failing business, responsible for all of those who relied on it for their livelihood...or she'd be forced to sell the only thing of consequence that her father had left her when he'd died.

Sir Harold Snow had been a good man and a wonderful father that had made the great mistake of falling in love with the wrong woman. In his own words, always spoken with a certain gruffness, Lillian's mother had dazzled him from the first moment he saw her on stage. An opera singer of some note, Esmerelda had sung her way straight into his heart. When their affair had resulted in a baby, she'd briefly auditioned for the part of a doting mother and wife. But her heart had belonged to the stage, and before Lillian was a year old she returned to it, never to be seen or heard from again.

Lillian did not miss her mother. You couldn't miss what you had never known beside a portrait of a blue-eyed, blonde-haired woman with a coy smile that had hung in her father's study until the day he died. During those rare moments when she thought of Esmeralda, it was always with a vague, distant sort of annoyance that she had been born from a woman who had been the careless cause of so much hurt.

"Come in," she said when a light knock sounded at the door. Lifting her head, she managed a half-hearted smile for Marjorie when the older actress squeezed into the study. "Is rehearsal over already?"

“We’re getting dinner at Blue Pig,” said Marjorie, referring to the acting troupe’s favorite pub right around the corner. As ramshackle and run-down as the theater, it was the only establishment they could afford and was a regular haunt for any manner of local performers. “Then returning to run a few more lines. Ye should come with us, dear. Have ye eaten anything today?”

“I’m not hungry,” Lillian replied automatically, although her stomach would have begged to differ. The truth was she didn’t have time to eat. This morning she’d met with her father’s solicitor, a weasel-faced man that had made her head spin with fancy tallies of figures and numbers that had revealed what she already knew: she hadn’t any money. Then it was off to the dressmaker where she’d begged and bartered her way into three more gowns for their upcoming production, the wigmaker, and finally meetings with not one, not two, but three potential benefactors for the theater that had all immediately declined except for the last.

“I would love to show my support for your cause,” Lady Wimple had proclaimed, stroking the glowering head of the enormous white cat perched on the middle of her lap.

“You—you would?” Lillian had been so caught off guard she’d nearly dropped her teacup.

“But of course. I have long been an advocate of the arts. And a woman-owned company? What a delight. Things aren’t like they used to be, are they? No, no they’re not. Just tell me what you need, and I shall endeavor to provide it.”

“I’d say our most pressing need is better lighting,” she’d said eagerly. “This production in particular—”

“When would I have the opportunity to introduce my granddaughter to Lord Markham?” Lady Wimple had interrupted. “We’re free tomorrow at noon.”

And with that, Lillian's empty stomach had dropped like a stone. "I am here on behalf of the Lisbon Theater. Not the Canterbury Music Hall. I believe you may have the two confused."

"Lisbon Theater?" Lady Wimple had replied, looking mystified as her cat had released a disdainful hiss. "Never heard of it. Is Lord Markham involved?"

"No," Lillian had sighed. "No, he's not."

"Oh, well, in that case..."

Disappointment.

It was an emotion she'd become quite acquainted with over the past year and a half. Eighteen months of Lady Wimples. Eighteen months of watching what she loved slowly die, as she'd had to watch her father die. And not being able to do anything to stop it.

"I'm sorry," she said, although she wasn't entirely sure whether she was talking to Marjorie... or herself. "There's too much to do before opening night, and everyone saw that I should work on my lines."

"What ye should do," said Marjorie, the painted corners of her eyes wrinkling with matronly concern, "is get some food and some rest, Lillian. When was the last time ye did either?"

"There'll be plenty of time to eat and sleep after the play." A pile of unpaid notes slid off the side of her desk and fluttered to the floor as Lillian pushed her chair back and stood. She didn't bother to pick them up. "We have one more chance tomorrow night. I managed to secure myself an invitation to the Yuletide Ball at Foxhaven House."

Marjorie's jaw dropped. "That fancy manor up on the hill? Blimey. I've never even been close enough to see what color the shutters are."

Neither had Lillian. Renowned for its elaborate themed parties and the elite crowd such gatherings attracted, Foxhaven House stood alone atop a rolling knoll overlooking the River Thames. As the daughter of a baron, she'd attended a handful of balls during her debut Season before her attention had been captured by the stage and she'd veered off in the complete opposite direction of her peers.

While other young women her age had been curling their hair and gossiping about London's list of most eligible bachelors, she'd been wearing wigs and reciting Shakespeare. Rubbing elbows with the ton's elite had never held much appeal and finding a wealthy husband—finding any husband, for that matter—wasn't high on her list of priorities. But if the Lisbon Theater was to survive beyond Christmas, then she did require a wealthy benefactor. Someone whose name would fill seats and whose deep pockets would fill the chandeliers with candles that weren't worn down to little nubs of wax.

Having exhausted all of her father's acquaintances, she had one last chance to land a stag. And if there was any place to do it, it was the infamous Yuletide Ball.

Held once every three years, it was considered the *crème de la crème* of social affairs. The gold embossed invitations were as valuable as the Crown Jewels and possessing one was a reflection of your power and influence...unless you happened to win it in a lucky roll of hazard.

"The shutters are blue, I think." Lillian shrugged. "I'll let you know. The ball is tomorrow night."

Marjorie clasped her hands together under her chin. "What are ye going to wear?"

“Do you remember the dark red gown I wore for last year’s production of ‘Ye Merry Gentlemen’?” When Marjorie nodded, she continued, “I had the sleeves shortened and an overlay of lace added with a jeweled sash. Unless someone looks closely, no one should notice that the gemstones are made of glass or that the satin is secondhand.”

“I’m sure you’ll be the prettiest lady there,” Marjorie said loyally.

“The poorest, at least.” But the most determined, she added silently.

It was said that if a duke feared anything, it was a debutante’s mother desperate to make a match. Lillian may not have been a mother, and she hadn’t been a debutante for more than decade, but she was desperate. And desperate women were dangerous women. If Shakespeare had taught her anything, it was that.

Failure was not an option. She was either going to find a rich benefactor...or her dream of owning the Lisbon Theater would end in a nightmare.

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“Will you be home in time to tuck us into bed, Papa?”

As he gazed into the earnest green eyes of his youngest daughter (by a grand total of five minutes), Abel, the Duke of Dorchester, felt an all-too familiar twinge of guilt.

There was guilt over the loss of his beloved Catherine, of course. She'd given him two beautiful, healthy children...and then she had left him to raise their daughters by himself. As if he knew the first thing about childrearing. As if he was prepared to shoulder the burden of parenthood alone. As if he was ready to live a life without her in it.

He was still angry with her for that. Angry that she'd granted him this unbelievable gift and then left before they could enjoy it together as they were supposed to. Which only invoked more feelings of guilt, for how could you be angry with someone that was dead? Catherine had not wanted to leave this earth. She'd not gone willingly. But after the girls were born and she kept bleeding, there was nothing that could be done. Nothing that could save her. Nothing that could bring her back...and he'd tried everything.

Except moving on.

Too soon, the twins would be seven. Seven, when just last week they'd learned to crawl! Time was a damned thief that had already taken too much from him. He wouldn't let it take any more. Anne and Amelia needed a mother. He needed a wife. The dukedom needed a duchess. So tonight, at the Yuletide Ball, he was going to find one. A woman that was principled and organized. A woman that was kind and gentle. A woman that understood he was not seeking a love match, but rather a marriage

born of reason and practicality.

“Not this evening, my dear. Nanny will tuck you in.” He brushed Amelia’s pale blonde curls to the side before he placed a soft kiss upon her smooth, warm forehead. Then he did the same to her sister, who laid right beside her, blankets tucked up to her round little chin. The girls had their own beds in the large nursery, but they preferred to sleep next to each other. Especially when their father was going out for the night.

“Will Nanny read us a story?” Anne asked.

Abel nodded. “Of course.”

“Will she bring us a glass of milk before we fall asleep?” Amelia wanted to know.

“If you ask nicely.” Here, his voice turned firm as he tapped their noses with the tip of his finger. “Behave yourselves. I don’t want to return only to hear that you’ve set frogs loose in the hallway again.”

Anne’s lower lip jutted. “It was only four frogs,” she said.

“Four too many, as far as I am concerned.” He straightened. “I love you, girls.”

“We love you, Papa,” they chorused in unison.

Abel’s heart constricted. Did they know, he wondered? How precious they were to him. Perhaps he ought to remain at home. To stay close, in case they found a monster lurking under their bed. There would be other holiday balls. None as grand or prestigious as this one, but it was the height of the Christmas Season. The desk in his study was littered with invitations. He had plenty of opportunities to find a wife. He didn’t have to go tonight. In fact, the more that he thought about it—

“No.” Arms crossed, lips pursed, Miss Ester Hathaway—otherwise known as Nanny—stood firmly in the middle of his path when he quietly closed the nursery door behind him and prepared to return to his own bedchamber. “You’re going, and that’s that. The carriage is already here.”

Abel’s dark brows drew together above the hawkish bridge of his nose. “I haven’t said I wasn’t,” he said defensively.

“It’s written on your face, isn’t it?” A brown curl, heavily threaded with gray, slipped out from Ester’s mobcap as she shook her head from side to side.

Further into her sixth decade than she cared to admit, she was one of a surprisingly few number of women that could say she’d seen the Duke of Dorchester naked. Granted, he’d been a babe at the time. The cutest she’d ever cared for, save his daughters. But it seemed reasonable to her that once you had seen the buttocks of a man, even if that man did grow up to become a powerful duke, you were allowed to speak your mind. “That’s the same expression you wore when you suddenly fell ill right before the Glenmoore Ball.”

“Something in the food—”

“And what about the play you were supposed to attend with Lady Farthing?”

“Last minute business—”

“And the dinner party at Lord Hatfield’s manor?”

“Ah...” He racked his brain, searching for one of the dozens of excuses he’d used to bow out of social engagements over the last five years. “I believe the snow—”

“It’s time, Your Grace.” Once, very long ago, Ester would have gathered him into her

arms and squeezed her love into him. Now that he towered over her, the best she could manage was to squeeze his hands. “Our Catherine, may God rest her soul, would want you to be happy. I want you to be happy. The girls want you to be happy. They’re growing up, and it will be easier for them if they have a mother by their side. Not someone to replace the one they lost. No one could replace Catherine. But to stand next to where she stood.”

To stand next to where she stood.

But that’s where he wanted to stand, Abel thought irrationally. Beside the woman he’d fallen in love with when they were little more than children themselves growing up on neighboring estates. For him, there had never been anyone but Catherine. When she was sixteen and he was eighteen, it seemed only natural that he ask for her hand. They’d married in the spring, and had enjoyed three years of each other’s quiet, comfortable company before the unimaginable happened. He had mourned her ever since. Every minute at first, then every hour. Every day. Every month. The passage of time had dulled the grief to an ache instead of a sharp, stabbing pain, but even now he missed her. Or maybe...if he were being completely honest...he missed the idea of her. Of having a wife. A companion. An ear to confide in. A pillow beside his own.

Was there a replacement out there?

An identical replica he could find if only he went looking?

No.

As loathe as he was to admit it, there wasn’t another woman like Catherine. There wasn’t another love like Catherine. Their bond had been forged in adolescence and innocence. Now he was a man full grown. A man with two little girls depending on him and a heart hardened by loss. If he were to meet Catherine in this moment...if he were to meet Catherine in this moment, he doubted that she’d want anything to do

with him. Or at least this version of him. This cold, aloof, withdrawn shell of the happy, carefree duke that he'd once been.

"The carriage is ready?" he asked with a last, regretful look down the hall at his bedchamber. He'd have much preferred a book and a brandy than a ballroom, but Ester was right. His excuses had run thin. Whether he was ready or not, it was finally time to find another duchess.

Ester nodded. "Yes, Your Grace."

"Then I suppose I'd better go."

* * * *

The shutters, Lillian noted as she let herself be carried along in the sea of perfumed bodies fighting to get through the massive front doors of Foxhaven House, were blue.

And the domed ceilings were gold.

A harpist garbed in winter white greeted the guests in the front hall, her fingertips moving elegantly across taut strings of sinew. Tables heavy with food and drink lined the walls while servants circulated through the crowd carrying flutes of champagne. Wreaths adorned with scarlet ribbon decorated the windows and garland hung from the mantles above crackling fireplaces, filling the air with the crisp scent of evergreen. Woodland animals carved from ice and wearing regal crowns of red berries were scattered throughout the front hall and adjoining parlor, inviting guests to walk around and explore as everyone waited for the ballroom to open and the dancing to commence.

Accepting a flute of champagne and withdrawing to the nearest corner, Lillian wrapped her fingers tightly around the crystal stem as she drew on every acting skill

in her possession not to openly gape at the almost otherworldly display of wealth and grandeur surrounding her.

She'd known the Yuletide Ball was for the elite. The powerful. The rich. But this...this went beyond her wildest imaginings and she could only hope no one looked too closely at her dress, as the garment paled in comparison to the gorgeous gowns adorning the ton's most renowned duchesses, marchionesses, and countesses. While she, the daughter of a lowly baron without so much as a 'lady' to precede her first name, held an ill-gained invitation in the folds of a theater costume .

The pit in her belly told her this was a terrible mistake. If she hadn't been able to pull a benefactor from amidst her father's—admittedly small—pool of acquaintances, what had made her believe, even for a second, that she could find a financial savior in this ocean of opulence? These aristocrats in their pristine cravats and glittering diamonds wouldn't give a damn about the Lisbon Theater. Why, they'd probably cheer its demise if a gentleman's club or a modiste shop took its place.

She wasn't going to find rescue tonight. This was a den of dragons guarding their treasure, not a field of knights prepared to dash into battle to save the weary princess. But since she was already here...

“To hell with it.”

Throwing her head back, Lillian drained her champagne in one swallow and blindly plucked a second flute off a passing tray before plunging recklessly into the crowd. She was an actress, after all. A chameleon adept at playing different parts. Which was why, for this evening, she wasn't a business owner teetering on the brink of ruin. No. Under the glow of a thousand candles, she was...she was a woman of mystery. The heiress of a grand fortune. The unknown daughter of a duke whose mother had run away with her when she was young. Now the duke was dead, and she'd returned to claim what was rightfully hers...but only if she married before Christmas Eve, or all

would go to her terrible cousin!

Oh, yes.

She quite liked that.

And the best part?

She could make up her lines as she went.

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As his gleaming town coach crept up the long, winding, tree-lined drive of Foxhaven House, Abel gave serious consideration to opening the door and jumping out of it. Surely in all the chaos, no one would notice one mad duke dashing off into the woods. But then he'd have Ester to contend with. While he wasn't afraid of the nanny—he was nearly twice her size and a duke, for God's sake—he had grown tired of her nagging. And, all right, maybe she was a little intimidating.

No, Abel sighed, best he get this night over and done with. The quicker he found a suitable wife, the better. Then he could return to his beloved daughters and his quiet life away from the mayhem of the ton .

Adjusting his cravat and affixing a grim smile upon his face, he waited for the coach to come to a proper halt and the door to be opened by a footman before he departed. Ignoring the immediate rush of whispers and stares that his unexpected arrival had provoked, he strode straight into the front hall, took a cursory glance around—was that a bear made of ice?—and walked right out the back through a glass set of French doors.

Heart thumping, Abel ducked out of view and pressed his skull against the manor's cool, rough stone exterior.

He was wrong.

This was a bloody terrible idea.

All of those people looking at him...old schoolmates from Eton, friends he hadn't spoken with since Catherine's funeral, strangers salivating at the thought of gaining a

public audience with the reclusive Duke of Dorchester...it was too much. Five years wasn't enough time to prepare. Hell, fifty years wouldn't be enough time. He needed to leave, Ester's inevitable cluck of disapproval when he returned within the hour be damned. He'd just wait until the dancing began and everyone was distracted. Surely no one would bother him out here. But no sooner had the thought entered his mind than he heard the distinct click of the doors opening and a spill of golden light unraveled across the terrace, followed by the unmistakable rustle of satin as a woman in a gown the color of perfectly aged claret walked out.

She went to the edge of the curved balcony and stopped, her small hands, enclosed in white gloves, anchoring themselves to the railing. Abel watched from the shadows as she tilted her head back, affording him a crystal clear view of her silhouette and the pile of tawny brown curls atop her crown.

She had a smooth forehead and a nose that tilted at the end, followed by a lush mouth with a lower lip that was slightly heavier than the top. A pointed, some might say stubborn, chin. A long, elegant neck and prominent collarbones exposed by the low décolletage of her dress that also revealed the ample swell of her—

“I can feel you staring,” she called out, her velvety voice caught somewhere between amusement and annoyance. “If you'd like to caress me with your eyes, at least come over here and keep me warm while you're doing it.”

Abel startled, caught off guard as much by her bold invitation as his body's immediate response to it. Fire licked through his veins; tendrils of flame racing across an icy field that had laid fallow for far too long. When was the last time he'd experienced a flood of desire? Even when Catherine was alive, their intimacy had been...soft. Quiet. Comfortable. By her request, they'd kept separate rooms, and whenever he'd knocked on her door she had opened her arms but kept her eyes closed. They were each other's first. They were each other's only. And afterward, if he'd wanted more in the solitude of his own room, he'd used his hand to sate any

lingering urges while Catherine slept on the other side of the wall.

But as he gazed at the woman in the red, he couldn't help but think that if he were to ever visit her bed, he'd been too exhausted afterward to even lift his arm. And that sense of arousal, that lust, felt good. Like the first raw punch of heat after coming in from the cold.

"Well?" she asked, tapping her foot impatiently. "I haven't all night."

Of its own accord, Abel's gaze dropped to her bottom. Cloaked in a silk bustle that only served to accentuate her already voluptuous frame, it was plump, round, and practically begging to be squeezed. When the fit of his trousers suddenly became far snugger, he swallowed. Hard. Then he pushed off the wall and stepped out of the shadows, unbuttoning his jacket as he went.

"Who are you?" he rasped, putting his jacket over her shoulders.

"Who do you want me to be?" she said coyly, still gazing out over the terrace at the frozen rose garden beyond. His jacket was enormous on her. The sleeves fell almost to her knees and the collar was three sizes too big for her slender neck. But there was something about seeing his clothing on her body that stirred a sense of protectiveness inside of him. Even as her rebuttal to his perfectly reasonable question had him grinding his teeth.

"Why aren't you inside?" he asked.

"Why aren't you inside?" she countered.

"I came out here to be alone. This is the first public event I've attended in quite some time and I find the crowd to be...overwhelming." The truthful admission came as a surprise. His eyes narrowed. What sort of power did this bewitching female have over

him that she could tease his secrets from his tongue while divulging none of her own?

“Your name, my lady. I shall take that or my jacket. You cannot keep both.”

“Lillian.” The three syllables floated off her lips like warm honey drizzled into tea.

“Lillian Snow. I came outside for a breath of fresh air before the ballroom doors open and I spend the rest of the night dancing. Do you like to dance, Lord...?”

“Abel Taylor Roberts, Duke of Dorchester. And no, I do not like to dance.”

“Your Grace ,” Lillian murmured. “How...interesting.”

“What is?” he said guardedly.

“Just that you’ve chosen to attend a ball, yet you dislike large quantities of people and dancing. The two things that make a ball...well, a ball. Did you request your driver bring you somewhere else and he came here instead?”

“No. My attendance tonight is a duty to be fulfilled.”

“And here I thought dukes could do whatever they wanted.”

“How many dukes have you met?”

“You’re the first.” She finally turned away from the balcony, affording him a clear view of her countenance. Abel’s breath lodged in his throat. If her features had been remarkable in profile, the front facade was nothing short of exquisite.

Dominated by catlike garnet eyes flecked with dashes of gold, her face was a work of art. And while it was said beauty was in the eye of the beholder, it took all of his self-control not to hold her . Not to yank her against his chest, drag his fingers through her hair, and plunder her mouth until her legs gave out.

The shock of his reaction to her appearance—the sheer strength of it—made his jaw clench and his abdominal muscles tighten. Obviously, he’d gone too long without a woman. It was the only explanation that made sense. His response was exaggerated due to five years of self-imposed celibacy. It had nothing to do with Lillian in particular. Never mind that he had received female callers over the past few months and none of them, not a single one, had made his cock harden or his blood burn.

It was this night.

This ball.

He shouldn’t have come...and now he didn’t want to leave.

Not without knowing what she tasted like first.

Raking a hand through his hair, he forced himself to look past her at the empty terrace as snowflakes began to fall intermittently from the dark, cloudy sky. “You should go back inside. I’m sure the ballroom will be opening soon. You don’t want to miss it.”

“I wasn’t even supposed to be here tonight, you know.”

Abel couldn’t help himself. His gaze flashed to hers. A half smile flirted with the corner of her mouth, but her eyes—large, gorgeous gemstones framed with thick black lashes—remained solemn.

“Did you have other plans?” he asked.

“I didn’t have any plans. I wasn’t given an invitation.” Lifting the long sleeve of his coat, she spun it in a lazy circle. “I won one in a game of hazard.”

“Are you gambler, then?” he said, mostly in jest.

“Almost as bad.” She gave the sleeve another spin, then let it drop. “I’m an actress.”

Abel barked out a laugh. Lillian Snow, an actress? A bored debutante more like, seeking a bit of drama. Except she didn’t appear as if she were teasing. She looked...serious. Maybe even a little sad. Brows gathering above the bridge of his nose, he braced an arm on the edge of the railing as the snow began to fall in earnest. “I cannot recall the last play I saw.”

Lillian frowned. “You don’t enjoy the theater?”

“No, that’s not what I—”

“Do you also have an aversion to rainbows, puppies, and rays of sunshine?”

“I never said—”

“Crowds, dancing, and now the arts.” A loose curl tumbled from her coiffure when she tilted her head to the side. “Is there anything you do enjoy, Your Grace?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. Reaching out, he brushed a snowflake off the high arch of her cheekbone. Turning his hand inward, he cupped her cheek, the pad of his thumb cradling the small, stubborn point of her chin. “Quiet,” he growled. “I like it when people are quiet .”

So he kissed her. It wasn’t planned, yet how else was he supposed to keep her from interrupting him? Her lips were cold under his, but they quickly warmed when his tongue swept along the delicate seam before sliding inside to sample the sweet nectar of her hot, wet mouth. He’d wondered what she would taste like and now he had his answer.

Peppermint.

She tasted of fresh peppermint and secrets cloaked in velvet.

On a groan, he pulled Lillian in closer while her hands anchored to his chest, fingers digging into the silk fabric of his waistcoat as she returned his kiss with wild abandon and pinpricks of light danced behind his closed eyelids when she took his lower lip between her teeth and tugged. He snarled in response, more animal than man when he backed up against the balcony and captured her wrists, pinning her arms to the side of the railing so that he could ravish her properly. So that he could indulge in all of the dark, wicked fantasies that his mind conjured during those nights when his hand was wrapped around his cock.

Wrenching free of her delectable lips, he kissed her jawline before skimming up toward her ear to take the small, sensitive lobe in his teeth. She gave a soft, almost imperceptible mewl when he licked, but he caught the sound nonetheless and his body thrilled at having summoned it, loins pressing ardently against her skirts where layers of silk and chiffon hid what he truly coveted.

Releasing her left arm, he palmed her breast, holding the full, plump weight of it while his thumb stroked across the hard point of her nipple. She arched her spine, leaning backward over the balcony as their mouths crashed together yet again. Canting his head, Abel deepened the kiss, shamelessly taking what he wanted without reservation. Dimly, he registered that Catherine would have already been a withering pile of nerves. His gentle lady wife had consistently shied away from passion in all of its varied forms. But Lillian met his tongue thrust for thrust, and he nearly pushed them both off the terrace when she used her free hand to cup his groin, her teasing fingers tracing the outline of his rigid manhood through his trousers from base to tip.

It was too much.

She was too much.

In every possible way.

In every wonderfully sinful way.

When had he ever been this close to losing control?

Bloody hell, when had he ever kissed a perfect stranger at a ball?

Never.

The answer was a firm, resolute never .

But damned if he didn't want to do it again even as he made himself relinquish his hold on her and take a step back.

"I'm...I'm terribly sorry," he rasped. "I don't know what that was."

In the snow-flecked darkness, Lillian's garnet eyes gleamed. "That, my dear duke...was theater."

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:06 am

Lillian was not a virgin.

She had been, until the age of eighteen, when she fell deliriously in love with Arman, a trick-rider from a traveling circus. They'd spent two lust-filled weeks together and then she'd woken to a rose on her pillow and a letter filled with token remarks of remorse.

He'd spelled her name wrong.

After that, Lillian had guarded her heart—and her body—more carefully. She'd indulged in flirtations (she was a stage performer, after all) but had made a rule that she would not fall for a performer ever again. Being one herself, she knew how fickle they could be. How quick they were to fall in—and out—of love.

Which was why, when she turned twenty, she had an affair with a doctor. The handsome, albeit pompous Dr. Theodore Cartwright came calling after he saw her performance as Grace Harkaway in *London Assurance*. They'd enjoyed strolls through Hyde Park, dinners at the Albion in Covent Garden, and a memorable seven-day excursion to Bath. But Dr. Cartwright had wanted marriage, and while she found him pleasant enough (more so out of bed than in it, where he'd been rather stiff), there weren't any of the sparks she'd had with the trick-rider.

Since he'd stormed off in a fit of bruised ego—and subsequently married a debutante six months later—Lillian had made it a point to focus solely on the theater. She didn't need a man, and aside from a few casual kisses here and there that hadn't led to anything else, she'd gotten along just fine without one.

Until she walked out onto a terrace...and was kissed senseless by the Duke of Dorchester.

On the stage, first impressions were everything. You had seconds to capture the audience's attention and then an hour to hold it. What they saw they had to believe, even though they knew they were watching a fictional production. Voice, tone, body language...it all had to come together to tell a story.

The duke's story had started as a stodgy gentleman that had vaguely reminded her of Dr. Cartwright. But when he'd yanked her into his arms and then shoved her against the balcony...that had been Arman and then some. With his passionate embrace, Abel Taylor Roberts, Duke of Dorchester, had succeeded in capturing her attention. She wanted the show to continue. But she also needed to remember why she was here in the first place.

A glance over her shoulder at the French doors revealed that the front hall had largely emptied of guests, indicating that the dancing had commenced. If she was going to find a benefactor, it would be in there, amidst the sheen and the shine of old wealth and new. Unless...

"You wouldn't happen to be seeking to fund a failing theater house, thus ensuring the survival of its acting troupe and stage crew, would you?" she asked pleasantly.

Abel blinked slowly at her from beneath a heavy lock of ebony hair dotted with ivory snowflakes. "Are you...asking for money?"

"Buckets of it. Trunks, really."

His eyes—a truly mesmerizing shade of green, he would have dazzled the ladies on stage—narrowed slightly. "Is that why you came out here and kissed me?"

“ You kissed me ,” she reminded him.

A moment of silence, and then...

“You should really return inside now, Miss Snow. The weather has taken a turn and I wouldn’t want you to catch cold.”

Her laughter tinkled like sleigh bells. “I can assure you that I’ve never felt warmer. But if you’re cold, here is your jacket.” She shook it off before she returned it to him, and when their fingers brushed she heard his hiss of breath as if he’d touched a kettle in the fire. “See?” she said softly, watching his countenance for any revealing flicker of expression that would tell her what he was thinking behind his stern facade. “Warm.”

“Here,” he said stiffly, turning his head away. “I’ll get the door.”

Lillian pressed her lips together as she preceded him into the front hall. She heard the door click closed behind her and then he was gone, striding past with such speed that a train would have likely had trouble keeping pace.

“How do you like that?” she asked her reflection when she stopped in front of a gilt-framed mirror to check her appearance before continuing on into the ballroom. Her hair was damp and the curls slightly flattened from the snow, but it wasn’t anything a quick tease with a comb procured from a pocket sewn into her skirts—an old theater trick for storing hidden property—couldn’t fix. A bit of light pinching to bring a rosy glow to her cheeks and she was ready for her Yuletide Ball debut.

“Name and invitation, if you please.” A dour-faced butler held out his hand expectantly at the base of the grand staircase leading up to the ballroom on the second story. The mahogany bannister was wrapped in garland and strings of festive red holly berries. From the top of the stairs came the sound of music and the tramp,

tromp of feet in a synchronized dance.

“Miss Lillian Snow. And here you are.”

“Your invitation is...wet,” said the butler, his bulbous nose wrinkling as he accepted the wet, crumpled parchment she’d shoved carelessly into her bodice and subsequently forgotten about before going out onto the terrace. Some of the black ink had run, staining the inside of her dress. Thankfully, the red hid it well.

“I was outside,” she explained, nibbling the inside of her cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ll have to return in the summer, when our gardens are more suitable for viewing.”

“That sounds lovely, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to, Mr...”

The butler squared his shoulders. “Mr. Clause, miss.”

“Mr. Clause. You see, I’ve a confession.” She lowered her voice. “I’m not really supposed to be here. I won this invitation in a game. I haven’t a chaperone or a title or any money. This gown is a costume.” She touched her throat. “These jewels are glass. I’m an actress pretending to be an heiress who was just kissed by a duke. And it’s all so fantastical that I have to tell someone . I’m sorry, Mr. Clause, that you happen to be that someone.”

The butler cleared his throat. “Miss Snow.”

“Yes?” she sighed, certain that she was about to find herself escorted out. And maybe that would be for the best. She’d already managed to chase off one duke before the ball had even started. What were her chances of winning another to her cause? Forget champagne in fancy crystal flutes. She would probably be better off going to find

Marjorie at the Blue Pig and drowning her troubles in a tin mug of ale.

“The heiresses I have met would never apologize with such frequency.” The faintest twinkle shone in Mr. Clause’s gaze. “Straight up the stairs and through the doors to the right. Enjoy your evening, Miss Snow. Should you like to come back to Foxhaven House in the future, I shall make sure that you have a real invitation. No need to rely on a fortunate roll in hazard.”

It wasn’t until Lillian had entered the ballroom that she realized she hadn’t told the butler how she’d won her invitation. A lucky guess, she reasoned as she picked her way through dozens of dancing couples to stand beside a life sized ice sculpture of a...

“Are you a unicorn or an elephant?” she asked aloud.

“I believe it’s supposed to be a stag.” This from a sandy-haired gentleman wearing a brocade waistcoat and a charming grin. “That’s an antler, not a horn.”

Lillian’s head canted. “I rather thought it was a trunk.”

The man gave a hearty chuckle. “Now that I look at it again, you may very well be right. Have you ever seen one in person?”

“A unicorn?” she said, the corners of her lips twitching.

“No, an elephant.”

“I have not. You?”

He nodded. “During my Grand Tour, we followed a herd of them in Sierra Leon. It’s an experience I will not soon forget.”

“Nor should you. Where else did you travel during your tour?”

“The usual places. Rome, Naples, and Florence for my first. West Africa by way of Egypt for my second.”

“Two tours,” she said, suitably impressed.

His charming grin widened, revealing a dimple high on his left cheek. “What can I say? I’ve always had a penchant for exploration and adventure.”

Yes, traveling for months at a time through dangerous and foreign lands would certainly require a deep sense of adventure.

It would also require deep pockets.

“Do you have other interests?” she asked, borrowing the sweet smile she’d worn for most of King Lear when she’d played his youngest daughter, Cordelia, to not one, not two, but three standing ovations. “Such as, oh, I don’t know...the theater?”

“I hold great appreciation for the arts.”

“That is refreshing to hear.” Inexplicably, Abel’s glowering countenance flashed in front of her mind. She swatted it aside with an inward huff of annoyance. “My name is Lillian. Lillian Snow. And I’ve a theater—the Lisbon Theater—that is in great need of a benefactor such as yourself to help fund repairs and help us market ourselves to a broader audience.”

The man’s grin slipped ever-so-slightly, then quickly righted itself as he bent forward into an exaggerated bow. “Miss Snow. What a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Lord Byron White, Earl of Clearfield. And I should very much love to hear more about your theater...after a dance.”

“A dance,” she said blankly.

Lord Clearfield straightened and held out his arm. “A dance,” he said with a wink that she found to be a tad over the top, but who was she to complain when he was the first potential benefactor not to immediately slam the proverbial door in her face?

“Of course,” she said, allowing him to escort her toward the middle of the floor where white chalk had been used to draw large, elaborate snowflakes across the polished oak hardwood and assumed the following position with her weight on her left foot and her right turned slightly to the side. Truthfully, she was far more accustomed to moving across a stage than a ballroom, but she managed the fast, complicated steps of the popular Viennese Waltz with only a few small mistakes. When it ended to a loud eruption of applause, Lord Clearfield bowed again, this time taking her hand and bringing it to his mouth.

“Miss Snow,” he murmured, his breath fanning across her knuckles. “Should you like to discuss your theater further, might I recommend a...quieter venue? There is a tea house that keeps late hours not far from here.”

“I don’t have a carriage. I took a hackney here. I’m not sure how long it would take to get another.” She stared at the hand that Lord Clearfield still held, willing a tingle to move up her arm, if only to show it wasn’t the Duke of Dour Glances that had made her pulse race and heart pound. That she would have a similar reaction to any handsome, virile man. Especially one that was showing an interest in the Lisbon.

Tingle, she ordered her limb.

Tingle, tingle.

Tingle , damn you!

But it wouldn't.

Her traitorous hand refused.

Somehow, it must have known that the Earl of Clearfield was not the Duke of Dorchester.

"That is of no consequence." He kissed her hand again—still no tingle—before releasing her. "I have a carriage."

Lillian's brow creased. As an actress and business owner, she was already stretching the lines of what was considered socially acceptable behavior for a female. Truly improper acts, such as leaving a ball in the solitary company of a gentleman, would be...discussed. And the last thing she needed was malicious gossip following her around. Not when the theater was already on such tenuous footing.

"I'm not sure—"

"Not to worry." The charming grin reappeared. "We'll be very discreet."

She looked around the ballroom. The majority of the guests had already moved on to another waltz. No one was paying her any attention. No one even knew—or cared—that she was there. The giant splash she'd imagined she would make had dried up into a puddle. She didn't even see Abel's dark head amidst the crowd. Her gaze returned to the Earl of Clearfield who was watching her expectantly.

"A tea house?" she said.

"You'll love it," he promised. "I conduct all of my meetings there. They have the best Battenberg cakes that you've ever tasted."

“I do like a good Battenberg cake,” she admitted. “Lead the way, Lord Clearfield.”

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As it turned out—and Lillian really should not have been surprised, given her appreciation of a good dramatic twist—the tea house was actually an innuendo for Lord Clearfield’s bedroom; a discovery she made within five minutes of his carriage departing Foxhaven House.

“We seem to be traveling away from Grosvenor Square,” she noted, drawing back the window curtain to peer outside at the passing scenery. The snow had intensified, hindering visibility, but she was aware of her surroundings enough to know they weren’t going in the right direction. “I thought you said the tea house was around the corner?”

Slouched in the cushioned seat across from her with his thighs spread, the earl gave her a heavy-lidded look that she assumed was meant to be sensuous. “We both know you didn’t really want to go to the tea house, Miss Snow.”

“We don’t know anything of the sort.” She linked her fingers together on top of her lap. “My wish was to discuss the theater—”

“The theater,” he cut in, rolling his eyes. “You can abandon your ruse, Miss Snow.”

“My—my ruse ?” she sputtered indignantly.

“Yes.” Leaning forward, Lord Clearfield put his hand on her knee and squeezed. “You wanted to get me alone, and you succeeded. Congratulations, sweet. Now what would you like to do with me?”

Her stomach contracting in disgust, Lillian shoved his hand off her leg. “I don’t want

to do anything with you. Nor was my theater a ruse to get you alone. You've overstepped your bounds, Lord Clearfield. I demand you return me to Foxhaven House at once."

"Feisty," the earl murmured. "I like that."

Lillian shrieked when he suddenly launched himself forward and made a clumsy attempt to grope her breast. She brought her knees up to fend him off while simultaneously striking out with her elbow and catching him in the side of the head. With a grunt, he toppled sideways and struck his skull against the window with a hard clunk that she found quite satisfying.

"I'm—I'm bleeding! You made me bleed ." he cried, touching his hair and then holding his hand out to reveal his white glove covered in a slick sheen of red. For a so-called adventurer with two grand tours under his waistcoat, Lord Clearfield's face turned an interesting shade of green at the sight of a little blood.

"So you are," Lillian said dispassionately. "And if you do not order this carriage to stop this second, I'll do it again."

"You're...you're a Goddamned madwoman!" Lord Clearfield declared even as he thumped his fist on the roof and his driver immediately pulled off to the side of the street and reined the horses in to a stop.

"No," she said, stepping over him to reach the door. " I am an actress. And you are sad, pitiful, bit part of a man."

The fallen snow went past her ankles when she jumped to the ground. She barely had time to gather up her skirts and stumble out of the way before the carriage took off, Lord Clearfield's parting remarks lost to the wind.

Her eyes wide and her heart tight in her chest, Lillian turned in a circle under the weakly flickering glow of a gas lamp. She was on a well-to-do street lined with a mixture of manors and townhouses, all of which were closed up tight. The street was empty, partly due to the storm and partly due to the fact that everyone who lived in this opulent section of London was still at the Yuletide Ball. If there were any hackneys for hire, they wouldn't be coming around here anytime soon. She was, in essence, stranded a mile or more from her cozy flat above the theater. With only a rudimentary grasp on what way to go and nothing more than her own two feet to get her there. In an unprecedented winter storm—

“And the pitch dark,” Lillian groaned when the gas lamp sputtered, reignited, and then went out. Tucking her chin down, she began to walk.

* * * *

Abel wanted to leave.

Every fiber of his being was telling him to leave

Why, then, was he climbing the steps to the ballroom? Why was he standing in the arched doorway? And why the bloody hell was he scanning the crowd for a bewitching pair of bronzed garnet eyes and lush pink lips curved in a smirk?

“Can I be of assistance, Your Grace?” A butler, distinguished from the other staff by the superior cut of his clothing, joined Abel at the ballroom entrance.

“No, I...” Frowning slightly, he tore his gaze from the dancing couples. “Actually, yes. Yes, maybe you can. I’m looking for someone. Perhaps you’ve seen them.”

A long pause, and then....

“A name or description would be helpful, Your Grace.”

“Of course.” Feeling foolish—not an emotion he was familiar with—Abel clarified his request. “Her name is Miss Snow. She is about this tall”—he held his hand up to his shoulder—“and she is wearing a dark red gown.”

“I am afraid nearly half of ladies here are wearing gowns of that color, Your Grace.”

“But do half of them have the countenance of a goddess and the tongue of a witch?” he snapped, running his hand through his hair in a fit of exasperation. In addition to foolish, he also felt...warm. Feverish, almost. Maybe he was coming down with an ailment. Maybe his kiss on the terrace had been nothing more than a hallucination. Maybe he wasn’t even at the Yuletide Ball. Maybe—

“Ah.” The butler nodded solemnly. “You mean that Miss Snow. She left in the company of one Lord Clearfield approximately half an hour ago.”

“She...left?” With another man. In an instant, Abel’s temple cooled as ice water poured into his veins. “She left,” he said flatly. “Very well. That’s that, then. Thank you for your help.”

“You’re quite welcome, Your Grace. May I ask if you are enjoying the festivities? I noticed you have not yet entered the ballroom.”

Abel’s frown deepened. “Are you watching me?”

“I am the head butler, Your Grace.” Clasp ing his hands together behind his back, he lowered his torso in a short bow. “It is my duty to watch over all of the guests at Foxhaven House and ensure they are getting what they need.”

“And how is it you know what they need?” he asked suspiciously.

“I have been doing this job a long time, Your Grace. There are always signs. For example”—he pointed out into the crowd at a middle-aged woman in green staring adoringly into the eyes of a gentleman in black as they waltzed in a circle—“Lady Haywood wanted nothing more than her husband to notice her again and Lord Haywood needed an evening to appreciate what he had right in front of him. In can grow weary, you know.”

“What can?”

“Love. Similar to a rose, it grows quickly in the beginning. Easily. But in order to sustain the long winter and the even longer years ahead, it must be tended. Fertilized. Pruned. Without care and attention, the leaves can start to wither and the stems to rot. Yet for all of the world’s wonders, there is truly nothing more magical than that very first bloom. That delicate unfolding of petals is nature’s own miracle.” The butler’s studious brown eyes met Abel’s with quiet intensity. As if he wasn’t looking at him, but into him. “The only thing more rare and wonderful is to experience the first bloom a second time. Wouldn’t you agree, Your Grace?”

‘Are you a gambler, then?’

‘Almost as bad. I’m an actress.’

“I’m sure I have no idea of what you’re speaking,” Abel said stiffly.

The lined edges of the butler’s eyes crinkled. “Of course not. Forgive me. If there is nothing else I can assist you with...”

“Wait,” he said with the butler started to turn away. “Can you really tell what people need?”

“So I have been told.”

“What is it that Miss Snow needs, then?”

“That’s easy, Your Grace. Her theater.” The butler shook his head. “Although I fear she went looking for it in the wrong place.”

“What do you mean?” Abel asked, his brow furrowing.

“After several poor investments, Lord Clearfield is teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.”

“How does that have anything to do with Miss Snow? Unless...” At his sides, his hands curled into fists. “He told her that he would invest in her theater.”

“He did imply as much, yes.”

“But the bastard hasn’t any money.”

“No, your Grace, he does not.”

Abel’s thumbs dug painfully into his palms, forming crescent-shaped indents. He hardly noticed the pain as a flash of red hot rage ran through him, like a rod of steel thrust into a blacksmith’s forge. “How long ago did you say they departed?”

“Thirty minutes. The tea house Lord Clearfield said he was taking her closed last year, but his house is on Aldine Street. Should you wish to pursue Miss Snow, I suspect you will find her there.”

Did he, Abel wondered?

Wish to pursue her, that is.

His jaw clenched.

Damned right he did. If only to rescue her from that lying grasp of a lecher, Lord Clearfield. Not because their kiss had branded his soul. And definitely not because he considered her to be his second blooming rose.

Lillian Snow, a wife? She was an actress . An actress that had no qualms being kissed by a stranger in the snowy moonlight. Hardly the model of exemplary behavior that he wanted his daughters to emulate. He'd come to Yuletide Ball to find a woman that was mild-tempered, courteous, and sophisticated. Not a gorgeous, garnet-eyed hellion with the body of an angel and the tongue of the devil's own bride.

"Is there anything else you require, Your Grace?" the butler asked.

"Only my carriage brought round."

"Of course. Consider it done."

"Thank you for all of your assistance, Mr..."

"Clause, Your Grace. Mr. Nicolas Clause. And it's no trouble." In what was undoubtedly a trick of the light, the butler's gaze appeared to...twinkle. "It's no trouble at all."

* * * *

All of the feeling had seeped from Lillian's toes and fingers. She only knew her legs were there because they continued to propel her through the snow, albeit at a slower and slower pace. Her face was frozen. Her teeth were chattering. She was as cold as she'd ever been, and it was becoming a struggle not to find somewhere to curl up and take a long, restful nap.

How far had she gone? It was nearly impossible to tell. The snow made every street look the same. For all she knew, she could be traveling in circles. One thing was absolutely certain: the dice she'd rolled to win an invitation to the Yuletide Ball hadn't been lucky at all. Unbeknownst to her, the bloody things had been cursed. She never should have picked them up. And she never should have gone to Foxhaven House.

"B-b-blue," she stuttered as she forced one foot in front of the other. "I have to tell M-M-Marjorie that the s-s-shutters are b-b-blue."

A gust of wind barreled down the lane, kicking up a blinding sheet of white. Wincing, she threw her hands up in front of her face. When the wind subsided, she peeked through her fingers...and found herself squinting at an odd, bobbing sort of light heading straight towards her.

Heaven, she thought almost hysterically. I'm being summoned to heaven and now I can ask Shakespeare how he brought such large audiences to the Globe Theater. Not that the answer will do me any good considering I'll be dead.

The light came closer. Dimly, she heard the sound of...bells? Yes! Bells. Bells jingling on the harnesses of four horses pulling a massive town coach. The light was a lantern affixed to a pole above the driver's head.

"S-stop!" she cried, waving her arms madly. "P-please stop!"

The coach veered to the right as the horses slowed, the wheels losing traction on the slippery cobblestones. Before the heavy black vehicle had shuddered to a complete halt, the side door opened and a man jumped out, his face obscured by falling snow.

"LILLIAN!" he shouted, his deep voice slicing through the wind.

“A- Abel ?” Not trusting her own eyes, she blinked, then blinked again. When her eyes opened the third time, the Duke of Dorchester was standing over her, already taking off his coat and wrapping it around her trembling body.

“I have you,” he said, and Lillian was too weak to protest when he scooped her into his arms and carried her to his coach as if she weighed no more than a pillow of feather down. He placed her on the seat closest to a small, triangular iron stove stuffed with coals but when she continued to shiver, he pulled her onto his lap, his arms closing around her in a protective embrace. “I have you,” he repeated huskily. “You’re safe now.”

Lashes fanning across the top of her cheeks, Lillian’s head lolled onto his shoulder and within minutes, she was fast asleep.

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A fit of high-pitched giggling stirred Lillian from her slumber. Cracking an eyelid, she found herself face to face with a two little girls, their identical blonde heads pressed together as they stared at her with big, curious green eyes.

“Who are you?” she asked, sitting up on her elbow as she took in her surroundings. She was under a white canopy in a large, four-poster bed. Early morning sunlight, pale and silvery yellow, streamed in through a window framed with pale blue drapes. There was a writing desk, dressing table, and armoire, all in matching mahogany. None of it was familiar. “Where am I?”

“You’re in our house ,” said the girl on the right, bouncing up and down.

“Papa brought you home last night. Are you a puppy?” The girl on the left gave Lillian’s forehead an experimental poke. “He promised he’d get us a puppy for Christmas.”

“He didn’t promise, Anne.”

“Yes he did , Amelia!”

“No he—”

“That’s enough,” Lillian interrupted. Sitting up, she pointed at Anne. “You, keep your grubby little hands to yourself. And you”—her finger moved to Amelia—“go find your father and tell him I am awake. While you’re at it, bring me a pot of tea and something to eat. Well? What are you waiting for? Off you trot.”

She waited until the girls had left the room to glance down... and her cheeks bloomed with color when she saw her gown had been replaced with a white cotton nightdress. Someone—and she had fairly good idea who—had changed her out of her frozen wet clothes before putting her in this bed and tucking her under the covers. Bringing her hands to her cheeks, she found them warm and rosy. She could also feel her toes again, and gave them an extra wiggle for good measure right before the door opened and the Duke of Dorchester entered the chamber.

“Miss Snow,” he said, and she didn’t know why he should look so stunned at the sight of her when she was the one who had woken in a strange room. “I didn’t expect you up this soon. How are you feeling?”

“Like a proper human being instead of an icicle.” She bit her bottom lip, worrying it between her teeth as more heat wound its way through her body. Summoned not by the pile of blankets on top of her, but by the mountain of a man in front of her. Somehow, even though he was wearing plain tweed trousers and a linen shirt sans necktie or waistcoat, the duke was even more physically striking than he had been last night. In the shadows and the snow, she hadn’t been able to fully appreciate his raw, rugged masculinity. His broad shoulders. Large hands. The dark shadow of whiskers across a strong, defined jawline. He was... well, he was scrumptious. And she was suddenly very, very hungry. “I suppose I have you to thank for that, Your Grace.”

“Abel.” He removed the chair from under the writing desk and put it beside the bed, but instead of sitting down he stood behind it, his hands wrapped around the top rail. “After last night, I believe it is fitting that you call me Abel.”

She pursed her lips. “Are you referring to our kiss or my timely rescue?”

His face reddened. “Miss Snow—”

“Lillian.” Rather enjoying herself, she drew her knees up under the coverlet. “After last night, I believe it is fitting that you call me Lillian.”

Gripping the chair so tightly that his knuckles gleamed white, he cleared his throat. “I’m just glad that it appears you’ve made a full and swift recovery. Might I ask... what were you doing outside in such dangerous conditions?”

“An earl said that he wished to discuss becoming a benefactor of my theater over tea and Battenberg cake. He failed to mention the tea and cake would be served in his bedchamber.” She made a face, as annoyed with herself and her poor judgment as she was with Lord Clearfield and his ill intentions. “When it became clear what he was really after, I escorted myself out of his carriage.”

“And he left you?” Abel growled, his gaze darkening.

“Be careful,” she warned, noting the bulging tendons in his wrists as he grabbed onto the chair even harder. “You’re going to—”

Crack.

The top rail splintered in half.

Lillian’s eyebrows rose. “You know, we could use that strength for stage production. The sets are unbearably heavy and cumbersome. It takes forever to change out a scene. Particularly between act three and four. But if we had you waiting in the wings—”

“We brought your tea!” one of the twins—Anne?—announced as she skipped into the room.

“And some cinnamon scones,” chirped Amelia, carefully balancing a silver platter.

“Girls.” Abel turned, hiding the chair and its broken rail behind him. “What are you doing in here?”

“That lady asked us to get her something to eat,” said Anne.

Now it was the duke’s eyebrows that shot up. “And you listened?”

“You sound surprised,” Lillian commented. “Over there on the dressing table, girls. Thank you very much. Have you been out to play in the snow yet?”

“It’s cold out there.”

“We’ll get wet.”

“Oh?” She drummed her fingers on her knee as she levelled a stare first at Anne, then at Amelia. They stared back, their green eyes wide. “Will you melt?”

“Melt?” Anne giggled. “Why would we melt?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you test it out and see? Dress warm!” she called after them as they scurried out of the room, chattering on like a pair magpies. Her gaze returned to Abel. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“They did what you asked,” he said slowly. “They never do what anyone asks.”

She smiled, somewhat smugly. “Compared to a dozen temperamental actors, two darling little girls are hardly any trouble.”

Abel snorted. “Those darling little girls have chased off three governesses, five nursery maids, and, strangely enough, a footman. He left in tears. The only person they marginally obey beside myself is their nanny, and that’s only because they’ve

known her since they were born.”

Casting aside the coverlet, Lillian climbed slowly out of bed and padded barefoot to the dressing table. Courtesy of the cheery fire in the hearth on the opposite side of the room, the floorboards were toasty warm under her feet. Courtesy of the handsome duke standing in the middle of the room, the air was downright steamy.

Pouring herself a cup of tea, she added in a single lump of sugar and gave it a half stir. She could feel Abel watching her, his hot, heavy gaze as intimate as a caress as it slid from her nape to her back to her bottom. Purposefully taking her time, she slathered sweet smelling strawberry jam onto two scones, plated them, and then returned to the bed.

“Here, sit and have breakfast with me,” she said, patting the space beside her.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I have a meeting—”

“And I have an entire production to prepare for, lines to rehearse, and a theater to save. But if there’s one thing in life I have learned, it’s that you should always make time for a good cinnamon scone. So sit,” she said, adopting the same stern tone she’d used on his daughters, “and tell me more about yourself.”

“Are you always this authoritative?” he grumbled as he sat.

“Are you always this reluctant to enjoy simple pleasures?” she countered.

Abel bit into his scone and glared at her. “What do you want to know?”

“How old are Anne and Amelia?”

The stern line between his brows noticeably softened. “Six, almost seven. Their

birthday is in February. They've been begging for a puppy for months."

"And are you going to get them one?"

He sighed. "I haven't decided. Puppies are loud, disruptive, and chew everything they can get their sharp little teeth on."

"So do children, or so I've been told." She sipped her tea, and then asked gently, "Where is their mother?"

Abel's gaze shuttered. "Catherine...died. In childbirth. They don't know her beyond memories and portraits. I've been too lenient with them as they've grown. It's why they can be... unruly. It's been difficult. Raising them alone. Trying to know how stern to be. Whether I should give them a lecture or a hug."

Lillian's heart gave a small, poignant tug inside. Setting her scone and tea aside, she placed her hand on the duke's thigh and softly squeezed. A small token of comfort in an ocean of grief. "I lost my mother when I was a baby as well. She didn't die. As terrible as it seems, it might have been better if she had. Then at least I would have grown up knowing that she loved me. Instead, she left before I could memorize what her face looked like. And I've had to grow up knowing that she didn't love me enough to stay." She took a long breath. "My father raised me, as you're raising your girls. And although I'm sure it was hard for him as well, he did a wonderful job. The best job. Because he did it with love. As you are."

Abel put his hand on top of hers. Their fingers interlocked; pieces of a puzzle coming together that never should have fit but somehow clicked perfectly.

"I really do have a meeting," he said gruffly.

"And I should return to the theater."

But neither of them moved.

“Or perhaps... perhaps you could go to your theater and then come back here, for dinner.” His thumb curled around her wrist, hovering over the light flutter of her pulse as its tempo increased. “I can send a carriage for you.”

Lillian gazed up at him. Unable to stop herself, she brushed a lock of ebony hair behind his ear. And when he lowered his head almost imperceptibly, she kissed him. A long, slow, lingering kiss that filled her with a contented, glowing warmth from the tips of her toes to the ends of her eyelashes.

Cradling her cheek, he shifted her onto his lap as the kiss went on, and on, and on. Both of them loathe to be the one to end it as time itself seemed to stop. The light in the room intensified, heating her neck as she slipped her fingers into Abel’s thick, luxurious mane and they sank into each other.

He traced her spine, following the delicate bumps of each vertebrae until he reached her bottom and she gasped when he brought her closer to his loins, clasping her buttocks with one hand and tugging her nightdress over her knees with the other so that she could straddle him, the smooth inside of her thighs clinging to the coarse fabric of his trousers.

She tipped forward as he leaned back and they fell together onto the mattress, sprawling on top of one another in a tangle of limbs and lips. A flicked glance at the door to make sure it was firmly closed before she reared up, first to pluck the pins from her hair so that it released over her shoulders in a tumbling waterfall of tawny tendrils and then to pull off her nightdress (with a touch of dramatic flair, of course).

“ Lillian .” The knot in Abel’s throat bobbed when she stretched like a lioness, allowing him to look at her. Wanting him to look at her. At the slender slope of her shoulders. The slanted line of her collarbones. The dusky pink of her nipples. The

small hollow in the middle of her navel. The thicket of curls between her thighs. His jaw worked convulsively, and when it appeared as if he wasn't sure where to start, she started for him, first with his shirt and then his trousers, dropping her chin and giving a tiny, teasing lick on the point of his hip bone to get him to arch off the bed so that she could remove the last stitch of clothing from his magnificent frame.

"Your Grace ," she said, her gaze moving across his manhood with appreciation. Dappled sunlight spilled into the rigid lines of his abdomen, illuminating the veritable wall of muscle. The man, bless him, was a work of art. A marble statue come to life.

And he was hers to do with what she wanted.

"Put your hands above your head," she ordered, and while his gaze flickered, he obeyed.

"Authoritative," he rasped, his stomach quivering under the light pressure of her lips as she began to kiss her way further downward.

"You'll thank me later," she promised before she took him into her mouth, circling her tongue around the damp tip with little licks and sucks before starting to work her way down to the thick, pulsing. Despite her outward show of confidence, it was an act she'd never performed before, although Marjorie and the others had certainly regaled her with stories, most of them bad. But stretching her lips around Abel, tasting Abel, hearing Abel's groan as she took him deep into her throat... it was a satisfying, thrilling pleasure unlike any she had ever experienced before.

Without warning, she suddenly found herself flipped breathlessly onto her back while Abel loomed above her, his arms taut on either side of her.

"Put your hands above your head," he demanded hoarsely.

For once, Lillian listened without hesitation, nearly hitting the headboard in her haste to submit to his request. Her previous lovers had never attended to her down there , and she'd always secretly wondered if she would enjoy it.

When Abel's mouth settled at the apex of her curls and his tongue outlined the small nub of her desire before slipping inside her wet, velvety quim, she had her answer.

Yes.

Yes, she enjoyed it.

She enjoyed it very much indeed.

When he had reduced her to a quivering, writhing pile of nerve endings and curled toes, he made his way back up her body, pausing only to languish over her breasts until with a half laugh, half mewling whimper, she dug her nails into his scalp and urged him upward.

Their gazes met when he entered her and she saw his pupils dilate before he captured her mouth in a searing kiss, his tongue moving in tandem with the thrust of his hips. Already teetering on the brink, she raced toward release with Abel right behind whilst stars danced behind her closed eyes and their hearts pounded in tandem.

A cry tore itself from her lips when she came, her ankles hooking around his hips while her slick walls tightened around his cock as wave after wave of sweet, heavenly pleasure coursed through her veins. Withdrawing at the last possible second, Abel spilled his seed into the sheets as she threw her arms above her head. After he had collapsed beside her, his countenance utterly dazed, she twisted to face him and propped up her chin with her elbow.

“Have the carriage sent at six o’ clock.” Blowing him a kiss, Lillian sprang out of the

bed and began to get dressed.

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For the next three weeks, Lillian worked feverishly at the Lisbon Theater. Her hours were consumed by rehearsals, costume fittings, and putting the finishing touches on the set. It was hard, albeit rewarding work. Work that left blisters on her heels and splinters in her palms as the play began to take its final shape. But as soon as the sun began its downward descent, all temporary discomforts were forgotten as she bid her fellow actors farewell and rushed out the front door where Abel's carriage waited to whisk her away to his manor in Grosvenor Square.

There, she had dinner with him and his daughters. Having never given serious consideration to having children before, she wasn't sure how well she would get along with Amelia and Anne... but to her pleasant surprise, she genuinely enjoyed their company. The girls were intelligent, witty, and quite creative. By their second dinner together, she had them reciting lines from Shakespeare. By the sixth, she'd taught them how to play hazard (which Abel, stodgy duke that he was, had put a stop to the next day after he found the twins gambling away their doll collection in the nursery).

After eating, they'd go into the drawing room and thread cranberries for the tree, or read A Christmas Carol written by a relatively new, unknown author by the name of Mr. Charles Dickens. The girls always listened with rapt attention when Lillian told them how the play was progressing, and they shrieked with delight when she gave them tickets for opening night.

"Can we go, Papa?" they'd asked in unison, leaping up and down. "Can we, can we?"

"We'll see," Abel had replied, watching Lillian as indecipherable emotion had flickered in his gaze. "We'll see."

When candles glowed in every window and the girls were fast asleep, their quiet snores echoing down the hall, Abel took Lillian up to his bedchamber... or a sofa in the library... or a blanket in the front of the parlor hearth... and they made love. Quickly. Slowly. In all manner of positions. Afterward, they'd stay up and talk for hours, or fall immediately to sleep. But no matter how late or early she stayed tucked against Abel's chest with his arm heavy over her hip, Lillian made sure to be gone before sunrise, as the one thing they did not discuss was their future together.

She knew now that Abel had gone to the Yuletide Ball in search of a wife and a mother for his children. Just as he knew that she'd gone looking for a benefactor for the theater. How could two such separate needs possibly reconcile into one? She wasn't oblivious. She realized that actresses rarely became duchesses. She also realized that if he gave money to the theater now that they were lovers, it would complicate something that she desperately wanted to remain uncomplicated.

The sad truth was that when the play finally opened on Christmas Eve, it would likely be the last and final production ever held in the Lisbon Theater. There was no more money to be had. Ticket sales were absolutely dismal. Unless a miracle occurred, they would shut their doors before the New Year and that would be that. Her dream would be over. But at least she'd still have Abel... maybe.

For the past two days, he'd been oddly distant. In the middle of dinner the night before, he'd abruptly stood up and gone to his study citing business but he had never divulged what the business was. As for her part, Lillian had begun to stay later and later at the theater as opening night loomed. And then, without too much fanfare, it arrived.

* * * *

"Girls! Girls, hurry!" Abel shouted up the stairs. "We're going to be late."

"We're coming," Anne whined as she skidded down the steps in her stockings.

“We’re right here ,” said Amelia, following right behind.

“Where are your shoes?” Flustered, he raked a hand through hair as he turned in a senseless circle. “And your cloaks? And your—”

“I’ll take care of all that, Your Grace.” With perfect timing—per usual—Nanny popped in from the adjoining parlor, two pairs of boots and two matching red cloaks in hand. “Sit on that bench there, my dears. Your Grace, I believe you’ve forgotten something in your study.”

“Forgotten something?” he said blankly, patting the pockets of greatcoat. “What have I forgotten?”

“It’s small. Round. With a diamond—”

Bloody hell.

The ring.

Abel’s heart threatened to pound through the wall of his chest as he raced into his study, opened the top drawer on his desk, and removed a small, square-shaped box. He opened the lid to reveal a delicate gold band crowned with an emerald cut diamond. When his heart shot up out of his chest and lodged somewhere in his throat, he snapped the lid closed and shoved the box deep in his pocket.

“Girls,” he called hoarsely, his back to the door. “Girls, come in here for a moment. There is a matter I would like to discuss with you.”

“Yes, Papa?” Anne said, skipping into the study.

“What is it?” Amelia asked.

“Sit, please.”

“Did you get a puppy?”

“Oh, please say you got our puppy! We’ve been waiting forever.

“For ever .”

“It’s not your birthday yet,” he said automatically as they crammed together in a leather armchair. “Besides, this will be better than a puppy.”

“Nothing is better than a puppy,” Amelia said solemnly.

“That may be true, but hopefully this will come close.” Taking a bracing breath, he knelt down in front of them and placed a hand on each of their adorably knobby knees. “I understand we just met her a little while ago, but you enjoy Miss Snow’s company, don’t you?”

“She tells amusing stories,” Anne said.

“And she sneaks us chocolate when you’re not looking,” Amelia giggled.

“Does she?” he said with mock sternness. “I’ll have to have a word with Miss Snow about that. What would you think of she came to live with the three of us? If she was here all of the time, not just for dinner.”

Anne frowned. “Would Nanny have to leave?”

“No. No, Nanny will remain here for as long as she likes.”

The sisters exchanged a glance, then gave identical shrugs.

“There would be all right,” said Amelia.

“Yes, that would be all right,” Anne echoed.

“To be clear, Miss Snow wouldn’t be another nanny. She would be...well, she would be like a mother.”

“Oh.” Amelia’s brow pinched. “But our mother died. You said.”

“Yes, yes your mother, Catherine, did die. Miss Snow–Lillian–would be another mother. She would...” Blast it, why was this so damned hard?

“Miss Snow would not be replacing your first mother, my dears.” This from Nanny, who walked across the study and put a hand on Abel’s shoulder. “Catherine will always be your mother. But sometimes in life, if you are very fortunate and you have a father that is as wise as yours, you have the rare opportunity to have a second mother. If Miss Snow agrees, that is. Your father will have to ask her. It is called a marriage proposal.”

Anne scooted to the edge of the chair. “Can we help?” she said excitedly. “With the pro...prop...”

“Proposal,” he said hoarsely. “And yes, you can. Absolutely.”

“If you put on your shoes,” Nanny said, thrusting the boots at them.

“Race you to the carriage!” Amelia cried.

“Not if I get there first,” Anne shrieked.

In the deafening silence following their departure, Abel scrubbed his hands down his face. “Tell me this is lunacy, Miss Hathaway. I met Lillian less than a month ago.”

“Giving your heart to someone to keep is the very definition of lunacy, Your Grace.” Ester smiled gently. “But that doesn’t mean it’s wrong.”

“She isn’t what I was looking for.”

“One does not look for love, Your Grace. It is not a series of boxes to be checked or a list to be crossed off. If one is very fortunate, they recognize love when they see it. No matter what form it comes in. And once they have it, they do everything in their power to keep hold of it.”

“I do love her.” He closed his eyes as he let the importance of his own words wash over him. “I’ve loved her since the Yuletide Ball and every night since.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Go get her,” said Ester, giving him a small nudge. “At the very least, go get in your carriage before the girls take off without you in it.”

Abel’s eyes widened. “By God, you’re right.”

He sprinted from the room.

* * * *

Opening night turnout was...dismal.

“Perhaps we put the wrong date on the fliers?” Marjorie ventured after she snuck a peek out at the audience. Only a third of the theater was filled, but it was the three chairs in the front row—the chairs marked with little reserved signs she’d crafted herself—that filled Lillian with the most disappointment.

‘We’ll see’ Abel had said when his daughters had asked if they could attend the play. With less than five minutes to go until the curtains opened, she supposed that the three empty chairs meant ‘we’ll see’ had turned into a no.

It's fine , she told herself as she gave her wig a final adjustment. You're used to being left. This time is no different.

Except it was.

Of course it was.

Because this time... she'd fallen in love.

"Two minutes!" a stage hand hissed from the wings.

Lillian took a breath and squared her shoulders. If this was going to be the last production ever held at the Lisbon Theater, then there was nothing else left to do but to make it the best yet. No matter who—or who wasn't—in attendance.

"Ready?" Marjorie asked.

She nodded. "Ready."

She heard the creak of the chandeliers as they were hoisted up, the swoosh of the curtains as they were pulled back, and then she marched onto the stage not as herself, but her character. A woman scorned by her husband the day before Christmas.

How achingly familiar.

But as she opened her mouth to deliver her opening line— the opening line of the entire play—she was stopped short by the sight of those three chairs. Empty no longer, but filled with a duke whose mere face made her go weak in the knees... and whose two little girls had stolen her heart.

"She's forgotten her line!" the stage hand said desperately. "Quick, someone call it out!"

“Wait,” said Marjorie, following the direction of Lillian’s gaze. “Give her a minute.”

“But—”

“If you don’t give her a minute, I’ll take this fake dagger and stab you in the eye with it.”

With a squeak, the stage hand disappeared into the shadows. And with a loud, clear voice from the theater’s leading actress, the play began.

* * * *

Two hours later, when the final curtain closed, Lillian sagged, exhausted, against a brick wall. “We did it,” she said, beaming at her actors. “ You did it. You were wonderful. Each and every one of you. I couldn’t be prouder.”

“I think you should go back out there,” said Marjorie, pointing at the stage.

“We already did our final bows.” She gave a weary smile. “I’m afraid there isn’t enough of an audience for a second curtain call.”

“Oh, I believe there is. Go on, then. Go ,” said Marjorie, delivering a hard push that sent Lillian stumbling out through the curtain.

“Ridiculous,” she said, rolling her eyes. “There’s hardly any... Abel . What... what are you doing?”

During intermission, she’d told him to take the girls home right after the play ended. That it would be late, and she’d join him at the house when he could. He’d agreed. Why, then, was he still here? And why was he down on one knee?

“We’re proposing! ” Anne squealed.

“Not yet!” Amelia whispered loudly.

“You’re... you’re what?” Lillian said, stunned. “What are you doing?”

“The girls are right,” said Abel. “I—we—are asking you to marry us.”

“Right—right now ?”

The faintest hint of a smile lifted the corner of his mouth as he opened a small box to reveal a beautiful diamond ring. “Is there a better time?”

“No. No ,” she said emphatically, shaking her head. “This...this is the perfect time.”

“Then what do you say ?” Anne and Amelia cried.

“Yes.” Laughing, crying, Lillian took a running leap of the stage and landed right where she belonged... in Abel’s arms. “I say yes .”