



Earl for the Summer (Princes of London #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: A tangled deception, an undeniable desire—how long before the truth breaks them apart?

Scarred by war, in both body and mind, Cassian Rourke lives in seclusion in the Scottish countryside. Only a desperate letter from his twin brother, Julian, Earl of Windham, can lure him back to England. But the favor Julian asks is the last thing Cassian wants: Julian, injured after a reckless horse race, begs Cassian to impersonate him in London and continue courting the diamond of the Season—the woman Julian intends to marry.

Daphne Bridewell once foolishly gave her heart to a rogue who broke it. Now, as the sister-in-law of a duke, she's been granted a lavish first Season of her own. Yet, with her heart still tender, she resists the charms of London's gentlemen, content to fade into the background and support her friend Lady Selena Montgomery, who is the Season's reigning diamond. When one of Selena's suitors—a charming earl she finds suspicious—asks Daphne to help him win Selena's heart, she hesitates. But as she gets to know him, her wariness softens. He sees past her false smiles and polite conversation to the wound she hides, and she glimpses the man beneath his charm—a man of depth and unexpected sincerity.

Cassian has no interest in the beauty he's meant to woo on his brother's behalf. Instead, it's her best friend—with sad eyes and an indomitable spirit—who captivates him like no woman ever has. But what will she think when she discovers his deception?

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London, Belgravia

The Welbournes' Ball

He smelled of bergamot, and when he looked at her, Daphne felt lucky.

Those warm amber eyes of his, so full of appreciation and interest, always made her pulse thrum in her veins. And whenever he was near—even if they stood apart in the same ballroom or sat with half a dozen guests separating them at the same dinner—she sensed his regard.

The other debutantes agreed he was the most charming of gentlemen.

Handsome, always fashionably garbed, and agreeable in every way.

Indeed, half a dozen ladies seemed slightly smitten with him.

But he smiled at Daphne with a particular glint in his eye.

Surely, he didn't smile at all the ladies that way.

Of course, she had not been named the diamond of the Season—that distinction had fallen to her friend—but she was not without her own quiet virtues.

She was kind, loved books and gardens, and she was loyal to a fault.

Her father always told her she was sweet-natured.

Her mother always encouraged her curiosity.

Perhaps Sebastian saw some of that in her. Maybe that's why he'd singled her out.

Though it was true that he danced almost every dance at the balls they both attended, rather than every other as was strictly polite, she'd put that down to his good nature and obvious sense of joviality.

And while he'd never danced more than two dances with her, she'd been increasingly certain for weeks that there was something between—that he meant to court her in earnest.

Now she had proof of his intentions.

Tonight, as he'd taken her hand and offered the most proper, chaste kiss atop her knuckles, she'd felt him pass a slip of paper to her. Taking it, her heart had thrashed as if she'd done something terribly brazen.

And no one ever expected her—sweet, biddable Daphne Bridewell—to do anything but what was expected of her.

Now, as she was doing exactly the opposite, she kept swallowing against a lump in her throat that would not dislodge.

I am following my heart.

Daphne had told herself as much the moment she'd decided, which was approximately ten seconds after reading his note. And she repeated the sentiment now as she rushed as quickly as she dared down the hallway of Lord and Lady Welbourne's elegant townhouse.

Their ball was so crowded that many guests had drifted off into other rooms to take refreshment, play card games, or retire for conversation. She hoped the various diversions meant she wouldn't be missed.

I am following my heart.

Her goal for the Season hadn't been to make the best match, but to make the right one.

To meet a man she didn't just like or who she could admire—as some debutantes spoke of their suitors—but one to whom she could give her whole heart.

Her deepest wish was to have a companionable marriage and a large family like her parents had.

She wanted a husband who looked at her with steadfast love in his eyes, and to raise children with him, who would flourish in a home as nurturing as her family's had been.

Her parents' marriage had been a love match. Her eldest sister Lily's marriage to the Duke of Edgerton certainly was. The two could barely spend a moment in each other's company without kissing. That was what she wanted too.

So, why should she not rush headlong toward her own happiness?

One thing was certain. No man in England could make her happier than Sebastian Moreland.

It wasn't just his Adonis-like chiseled features or golden curls or the sparkle in his honey-brown eyes. Mr. Moreland was more than the sum of his obvious male appeal. He was scrupulously polite, faultlessly charming, and never failed to make her smile.

She adored his thoughtfulness too. After her first ball of the Season, he'd sent her the most striking bouquet, which stood out among the many blooms sent to Edgerton House.

Enormous purple delphiniums had risen in all their wild beauty above an assembly of too-perfect hothouse roses.

Mr. Moreland had recalled her mention of how much she loved delphiniums and even the color she favored.

Footsteps sounded at the far end of the hallway, and Daphne skittered back into an alcove near a statue of a lithe Greek goddess.

She pressed a hand to her chest.

The couple proceeded swiftly, leaning close, whispering to each other. She heard a light giggle and wondered what debutante would take such a risk.

You , an inner voice of warning whispered. Yes, Daphne had found the courage—or perhaps the recklessness—to risk a great deal this evening.

Still, she had no desire to be caught sneaking about when she should be back in the ballroom.

Once the couple slipped into one of the rooms that had not been set aside for public entertainment, she drew in long, lung-filling breaths. Her heartbeat rattled in her chest now, and for the first time since deciding on this course, she debated returning to the ball.

Perhaps the couple had been an omen. If they were found—whoever they were—the young lady would be disgraced.

And if Daphne's rendezvous with Mr. Moreland were to be discovered, she'd be caught in a scandal.

And that would touch more than just her reputation.

She had two younger sisters who were yet to have their Season, and even with a duke for a brother-in-law, such a scandal could not be easily overcome.

Clasping her fingers tightly around the note Sebastian had passed to her, she closed her eyes, recalling the two simple lines it contained.

Just a few moments alone with you is all I crave. Come to the Welbournes' library.

He was going to propose to her. Daphne felt the certainty deep in her heart. He wouldn't bid her to risk so much if the reward he intended to offer were not so great.

Mrs. Daphne Moreland. Pride at taking his name filled her chest with warmth. And one day, when he inherited, she would be proud to become Lady Hurst.

Goodness, they would be happy together. So gloriously happy. The prospect of waking with him. The notion of sleeping beside him. She could see it all in her mind's eye.

Pushing away her doubts, Daphne rushed toward the Welbournes' library. The door was set back beyond the townhouse's grand stairwell, blessedly hidden from the view of anyone else who might be striding down the hallway.

Cracked open an inch as it was, a tantalizing sliver of light spilled onto the marble floor beneath her feet. She paused, not debating, just savoring the moment. Once she crossed the threshold, her life would change forever.

Daphne licked her lips. Tonight, she'd have her first kiss from the first man she'd ever given her heart to. The only man she would ever give her heart to.

The sound of voices stopped her.

Good grief, had another couple already secured the library for a tryst?

Daphne lifted her hand from the door latch and began to retreat, but then she heard the smooth, deep voice she heard in her dreams. Anticipation coiled in her belly. Oh thank goodness, Sebastian was already here.

But then another gentleman's laughter sounded in the room, then another's. The three seemed to be engaged in jovial conversation.

Daphne leaned in, trying to catch their words.

"We should be off," one man said.

"Don't want to interrupt your tête à tête," a second affirmed.

"Off with you both," Sebastian told the men.

"On the lips," the first man insisted.

"To hell with that," Sebastian barked. "I'm having more than a bloody kiss."

All three quieted and then joined in low, lascivious laughter, thick with suggestion.

Daphne's belly pitched down toward her slippers, and as much as she wanted to escape and hear no more, curiosity kept her frozen in place.

“The bet is for a kiss, Moreland,” the first man said firmly. “We’ll be listening from the hallway to confirm it.”

“You’ll do more than listen,” Sebastian insisted. “You must see that we’re not caught.”

“She has a dowry from her duke brother-in-law, an angel’s face, and a delicious figure, would it be such hell to be leg-shackled to her?” one of the men asked.

“Perhaps not,” Sebastian admitted, “but I aim to dodge the parson’s noose for a bit longer. Still, I do intend to win this wager and have a proper taste of her damnably pert breasts.” His arrogant tone was one Daphne had never heard from him.

The men let out another round of laughter.

Daphne clutched her stomach. Bile burned her throat. Laying her palm on the door, she stepped forward, determined to see his face. Determined to look into those amber eyes and see the truth—that she had never been more to him than a wager.

A silly, trusting debutante. Easily seduced. A gullible fool.

Her other hand balled into a fist, nails digging into the skin of her palm. Then tears came, spilling down her cheeks.

That’s what stopped her. She wouldn’t give him that. She wouldn’t let him see how deep he’d cut her. He wouldn’t care anyway. He never had.

She swiped at her cheeks, turned on her heel, and made her way back to the ballroom on wobbly legs. Nothing had been true. Weeks of dreaming, hoping, carving out such an enormous piece of her heart to stamp his name upon it. And it had all been a facade. A handsome, charming facade.

God help her, she was the greatest of fools. And she hadn't even made it hard for him.

Papa had always called her the sweetest of his girls.

But she was too sweet. Too gullible. Too eager to give away her heart.

As she reached the ballroom's threshold, her tears had begun to dry and her resolve had begun to harden.

She would never be a gullible fool for any man again.

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Berkshire

Cassian Rourke pushed the coach's door open and descended, though the driver had barely drawn to a stop in front of Hillcrest Manor, once his family's home—now his brother's estate.

The journey had been damnably long, the air inside the carriage stale, and his muscles screamed for movement.

Yet as he looked upon the all-too-familiar Palladian facade with its elegant symmetry, impressive columns, and imposing pediment, a ripple of unease had him clenching his jaw and balling his fists.

The tormentors he'd once feared no longer lived inside its honey-colored walls of Bath stone, yet ghosts seemed to linger. The memories came sharper than he'd expected.

Keeping away from the bloody place for nearly a decade had been no mistake. In fact, it had been the best decision of his life. And isolating himself in the north after a lifetime of naval service—and private indulgences that brought more regret than pleasure—had been precisely what he'd needed.

Yet he'd never refused to help his brother when Julian needed him, and Julian's letter spoke of a dire need. A favor that he could not ask of another soul.

Still, as eager as he was to see his twin, he stood fighting the urge to climb back into the coach he'd just spent days in. Or better yet, to free one of the horses from its

traces and make his escape as fast as the beast could carry him.

But the poor horses needed food and water and rest. He did too, though he couldn't imagine managing a wink of rest in his old bedchamber.

The moment he'd resigned himself to facing Hillcrest's ghosts, the front door yawned open, and he spotted Bartlett just beyond the threshold.

The aged butler had served the family from the days when his father was the earl's heir.

Lean and stoic, with a posture as straight as the manor's columns, Bartlett preferred order in all things, yet he'd been kinder to Cassian and his brother than either their father or grandfather had ever been.

Cassian strode forward and reached out to shake Bartlett's hand. The white-haired servant took Cassian's hand in a firm hold, his gaze softening with warmth beyond the spotless lenses of his spectacles.

"It's been a long while, Master Cassian."

"Captain Rourke, if you please."

Bartlett smiled, then released him and nodded. "Old habits, Captain. Seems yesterday when you and your brother ran riot through these halls. Do pardon the error."

"No pardon necessary." Cassian smiled, ignoring the reference to his childhood.

With a glance behind him, Bartlett silently commanded a young footman, who strode forward, then passed by to retrieve Cassian's traveling trunk.

“Will the blue guest room suit?” Bartlett remained standing in his usual stiff, shoulders-squared posture, though his eyes held an understanding that gave Cassian his first moment of ease since stepping through the front door.

“Yes, it will suit very well. Thank you.”

Bartlett had known not to give him his prior bedchamber. Bless the man.

“Is he awake?” he asked as he passed over his hat and gloves to another footman.

“He is indeed, Captain, and his lordship is most eager for your arrival.”

Cassian took the steps of the wide staircase two at a time and then strode down the long hall to the suite that had once been his father’s and now housed the current Earl of Windham as he recovered from a nasty fall from his stallion.

His twin, Julian, as was his way, had put a favorable spin on the whole matter in the letter that had requested Cassian break his self-imposed exile in Scotland.

But though Julian had downplayed the seriousness of his injury, he’d emphasized the urgency of his need for Cassian’s presence, and that had convinced him to come.

He’d all but sensed his brother’s worry as he’d held the letter in his hand. That inexplicable sense of knowing and connection with his brother was one he’d accepted as an aspect of having come into the world within moments of each other.

Worry was rare in Julian, which had made Cassian even more curious.

Yet, even as he approached his brother’s room, he heard him laughing, though a bit ruefully.

“Never give me a bit of hope, do you, Coates?” Julian said.

“I give you honesty, my lord,” their longtime family doctor said in his usual bumptious way. “Is that not superior to hope?”

Without waiting for his brother’s reply, Cassian strode into the room.

Julian’s eyes creased as soon as he spotted his twin. With a beaming smile, Julian pointed at him from his massive four-poster bed, where his broken leg had been elevated upon pillows.

“There!” he shouted. “There’s the hope I’ve been seeking.”

Dr. Coates collected his bag and assessed Cassian as he strode toward the door.

“You look hardy, Captain Rourke, and as thoroughly wild as I recall.” The doctor glanced back at Julian.

“’Twasn’t so many moons ago when I was setting your brother’s broken bones.

Never expected to be called to do the same for you, my lord. ”

“With Cassian gone, someone had to take up his wildness,” Julian put in merrily.

“I bid you both good day.” Dr. Coates shot Cassian a stern look. “He must allow time for healing and not return to his duties too soon. See that he does not.”

When the doctor departed, Julian stared at Cassian a moment, taking him in after years apart and only letters between them.

“You do look wild,” he said with a smile. “That beard. Those well-worn boots. And

when was the last time you cut your hair? You truly are Rourke the Rogue.”

“Not anymore.” Good God, to think he’d actually reveled in the silly moniker once upon a time.

If anything, it indicated how much he’d altered.

Hearing it now made him wince. “That’s the beauty of living in a hunting lodge in the Highlands.

I need not fuss over my appearance to please any society but my own.”

Julian had given him the lodge after he’d left the navy, though Cassian never had a bit of interest in hunting. He’d experienced too much destruction and felt too much sympathy for foxes and beasts of the forest to take any pleasure in chasing and killing them.

But he had needed quiet and seclusion to heal the wounds he’d sustained and to quiet the sound of cannon fire in his head.

He’d built a makeshift greenhouse at the lodge and found solace in the botanical specimens he’d collected during his naval service.

Cultivating and growing his collection calmed his mind, and watching new life sprout from a cutting gave him a unique satisfaction.

He suspected most of the men he’d known during his naval service and his years of wild carousing would find the quiet life he’d carved out for himself to be a shocking contrast.

“It’s been far too long,” Julian said quietly.

“Almost three years.” Cassian assessed his twin as he approached his bedside.

They’d once looked quite alike. Enough to fool servants and even their parents.

Yet they’d always been unlike in personality and inclinations.

Julian thrived in society and enjoyed nothing more than a party and garbing himself in the most elegant fashions of the day.

Cassian had never given a damn about balls and soirees or gatherings of more than a few close friends.

Though he’d adhered to neatness and taken care with his uniform while in Her Majesty’s Navy, the years in Scotland had allowed him to have done with suits and thrive by engaging in the quiet, simple pleasures he truly craved.

A well-stocked library. Thriving specimens in his conservatory. Walks in the forest.

“You’re pale,” Cassian told his elder brother, then pointed to his injured leg. “And that must hurt like hell.”

Though the usual merriment danced in Julian’s green eyes, his skin held a shocking pallor, and the stiffening in his jaw revealed his pain.

Cassian had broken bones as a boy, been injured as a man, and still occasionally ached from injuries he’d sustained in service.

He knew how pain wore on one’s body and mind, and he knew bones took their time to knit and heal.

A collection of medicine bottles sat on Julian’s bedside table.

“I won’t take laudanum,” Julian insisted. “It saps my spirit, as I’ve told Coates a hundred times. Morphine just makes me sleep.” He notched up his chin. “I can endure the pain.”

Cassian let that claim pass without comment. “But you wished for companionship in your convalescence? Is that why I’m here?”

“Not exactly.” Julian gestured toward a chair, then toward a cut-crystal decanter. “Have a drink and sit with me a while. I must ask something of you. Something of great importance.”

Cassian hesitated. He’d avoided liquor in the last few years, having leaned on it too heavily in the months after his departure from naval service. He’d seen what it could do to men’s inhibitions, knew what it could do to his own hold on control.

Still, he poured a finger of brandy into a snifter and pulled the chair up to his brother’s bedside. “What is it that you wish to ask?”

Julian frowned. “Will you not tell me how you’ve been first?”

“I’ve been...peaceful.” In the last three years, there’d been no violence in his life, no brawling, no recklessness.

“But lonely,” Julian said softly. “You must be.”

Cassian shrugged, turning the snifter in his hand. “It is necessary.”

He was lonely because he was beastly company nowadays.

He’d been volatile company in the past. His roguish reputation had been earned by carousing, behaving like a reckless fool, and bedding women he barely knew.

He'd even broken a lady's heart once because he'd given her reason to hope, even though he'd known he wasn't the sort of man to ever settle into domestic bliss.

He was too haunted. Too unsociable. Too lost in his own regrets. Too bent by his father's cruelty. Loneliness seemed a small price to pay for peace and the certainty that his surliness would harm no one else.

“My request may quell some of your loneliness.”

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Cassian shot his brother a questioning look. If this was some scheme of Julian's to draw him back into society, it was doomed to failure.

“Don't attempt to save me from myself, Julian. I do not require it, and I do not want it.”

Julian had always been determined to buck others up, to bring cheer to whomever he was able.

He gave liberally to charities, hosted village feasts twice a year, and he extended an open invitation to anyone among his acquaintances seeking respite from London's bustle to join him in Berkshire before and after the Season.

It was as if a light burned bright in him, and he wished to share it, especially when he perceived darkness in others.

Cassian had never been able to make his brother understand that it was not always a simple matter of choosing whether to be bleak or cheerful.

For some, dark moods and melancholy were part of their nature.

For others, loss and grief weighed on the spirit and had to be endured like a passing storm, rather than shed quickly like a heavy cloak.

“This isn't about saving you , dear brother,” he said, his tone suddenly serious. “It's about saving me.”

“What do you need?” Cassian leaned closer.

“I knew you’d help me. As you always have.” Julian reached out and clasped Cassian’s hand. “Though I should be the one aiding you now that I’m earl. Repayment for all you endured on my behalf.”

He’d been his brother’s protector. Though older by a few minutes, which made him heir, Julian’s gentle nature had enraged their father. He’d sought to toughen his eldest son, to harden and shape him, and his methods had been harsh.

Cassian had always possessed the tougher nature, and he’d never been able to bear seeing Julian’s tears or the welts on his skin. So, he’d stepped in, pretending to be Julian when the time for punishments came.

“There is no debt. You’ve given me the lodge, and it’s been my haven.”

“I’ll give you more than the lodge. There’s a manor in Kent near the sea.”

Cassian swallowed against a sudden tightness in his throat.

God, how he missed the sea. He did not miss being in naval service, most of the time. But he often ached for sea spray in the air, the crash of waves, the song of gulls. Salt water coating his skin.

“I remember Heveston Hall.” How could he forget the rare visits to the comfortable country house, the majestic white cliffs at England’s edge, and the lure of the Channel’s waters?

They’d spent a few summers there while their mother lived.

“If you’re offering me Heveston, this request of yours must be weighty indeed. Tell

me.”

“I found her, Cass.”

“Found who?”

“My countess, of course!”

Cassian paused with the snifter halfway to his lips. “That’s wonderful, Jules.” He clapped his brother on the shoulder and regretted it when Julian grimaced in pain.

“Hold your congratulations until I tell you the rest.” Julian attempted to sit up a bit straighter.

Cassian assisted him until he was resting more comfortably against a few pillows braced on the bed’s headboard.

“She’s in London,” Julian finally told him. “And I’ve yet to offer for her.” He lifted worried green eyes that matched the hue of Cassian’s own. “So you see my dilemma.”

“I think I do. Especially if she’s a debutante.”

Julian’s mouth notched up at the edge. “Not just any debutante. She is the debutante. The diamond of the Season. Lady Selina Lytton. She’s a veritable goddess, Cass.” His voice had lowered to a reverent tone. “I love her, and I believe she could love me.”

“Could?”

Julian gestured at his injured leg. “I was felled before I could properly woo her, you

see. Bloody damned leg.”

Cassian had rarely ever heard his brother curse, rarely seen him anything but jolly. Hopeful. He wished to aid him however he was able, but he still couldn’t fathom what his role might be.

“Perhaps you should write to her. Tell her what you feel.” It was nothing Cassian could imagine doing, but he’d never wooed a lady properly. “I’m hardly one to advise you in these matters.”

“A letter won’t do. Don’t you see? In but a few hours, she’ll be at the Carstons’ ball. Tomorrow there is the Hollingsworths’ musicale in Mayfair. The Season does not stop for a man with a broken leg.”

“I see that it puts you at a disadvantage, and I’m sorry for it. When does Coates say you can be up and around?”

Julian’s face fell, and he scraped a hand over his clean-shaven cheeks. “A month. Perhaps more. The Season will be over, Cassian, and I will have lost her. No doubt, she’s already had offers.”

Cassian stood, his brother’s misery causing a stew of unease inside him.

Julian was often fanciful, but in this, he seemed to have adopted a sense of practicality.

If the young lady was lovely and appealing, as most were who’d been dubbed the Season’s diamond, then she would, in all likelihood, be snapped up.

“I need to be there.”

“No chance.” Cassian shook his head firmly. “A broken bone needs time to heal. Months.”

“She’ll forget me.”

Cassian stroked his beard. “Even if I helped transport you to London, you’d need to convalesce there. Not go to balls or?—”

“No, I do not wish her to see me like this. How would I compare to the bucks who surround her?” Julian twisted his hands on his lap, ducked his head, and then shot Cassian a long, beseeching look. “There is a solution.”

“Which is?”

“You must go in my stead,” Julian said in a firm, unwavering tone. “As me.”

Cassian stood, and the floor seemed to sway under him like when he was on the deck of a ship at sea. The thought of the crush, the noise, the heat of a hundred perfumed bodies preening and pontificating made him queasy in a way seasickness never had.

“No.” The reply came out without thought, immediate and unwavering.

Yet he saw the seriousness in Julian’s gaze. The resolve. As if he were nearly as hard as their father had long wished his heir would be.

Then the ridiculousness of it struck him, and he choked out a laugh.

“You cannot imagine I could fool anyone.” He needn’t stand side by side next to his twin to know how much they’d diverged in the last two decades—in appearance, in habits.

Even their accents set them apart. Cassian's had been softened the slightest bit by his time in Scotland.

Julian's was as plummy and refined as any aristocrat's.

Julian cocked his head. "A good shave. Kit you up with suits from the best Bond Street tailor. And I'll fill you in on Lady Selina and what I've learned of her interests. In truth, we've only danced thrice and made conversation at a few other soirees."

"Julian..."

"I know I'm asking a great deal, but you are the one person upon whom I can ever truly rely. And I've never needed your help more than I do now."

Despite the impossibility of his request, Cassian settled heavily onto the chair beside his brother's bed. He'd never failed to help Julian. Indeed, the idea of failing him felt as impossible as whirling through London's ballrooms.

"If she ever learned of your deception, you'd lose her entirely. Ladies do not like to be lied to."

"There's no chance of her being mine if I can't be there to compete with her other suitors."

Cassian pressed at the arch above his left eye, pressing at the hammering pain that had begun the moment he thought of entering London society. "You truly want me to woo your lady?"

"Not thoroughly, of course," Julian said dryly. "But dance with her?—"

"You must have forgotten that I'm dreadful at dancing." He'd happily left all the

social graces to his twin.

“Charm her a bit.”

“The last lady I charmed was an injured, surly wolfhound who I found in the woods.”

“There are only a few weeks left of the Season. You won’t be stuck in my place for long, and once those weeks have passed, I will take up my place and offer for her.”

“Your leg won’t be fully healed.”

“No, I am aware.” Julian’s vehemence twisted his features, and for a moment, Cassian saw himself reflected in his brother’s face.

“Even though it won’t be fully tip-top, I will hobble to her doorstep if I must and offer for my countess myself.

” Julian reached for Cassian’s hand, squeezing until his knuckles blanched.

“She’s the one for me, Cass. I know it. I cannot lose the chance to win her. ”

Cassian closed his eyes and pinched the skin between his brows. His head pulsed like a drumbeat. He sensed the folly of this falsehood before he’d even agreed to it.

Yet when he opened his eyes and saw the hope in his brother’s—so much like his own—he could no longer refuse him.

Though his gut twisted in protest, he heard himself say, “Go on then. Tell me what I need to know about this Lady Selina Lytton.”

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Belgravia

One week later

G aslight chandeliers conspired with candlelit sconces to make the Ellburtons' ballroom as bright as the cloudless July day had been.

Blessedly, the evening had turned cool and their hostess had the long windows in the elegant London townhouse opened to admit the breeze, though it barely stemmed the heat in the overcrowded room.

But Lady Ellburton must have emptied Covent Garden of every rose available, for their sweet scent filled the air.

"Please don't worry. He's not in attendance this evening," Ivy whispered to Daphne as they stood side by side in a strategically selected spot on the far side of the ballroom.

It allowed Daphne and her younger sister a clear view of the gathering and each guest who entered the ballroom. Every social event since the night she'd learned of Moreland's intentions had become a nerve-jangling misery for Daphne. More than anything, she feared another run-in with the blackguard.

"I hope I never see him again."

"I'll deal with him if he ever dares approach you." Ivy clenched her fists at that pronouncement.

Daphne's mouth turned up in a half-smile.

Ivy had made a collection of colorful friends in the London ladies' club she'd joined. One, a lady pugilist, had taught her some basic fighting skills, and it seemed Ivy was eager to put them to use on Moreland.

Daphne had last seen him the night he'd slipped her the note—the evening her heart had shattered into jagged pieces.

Moreland hadn't even sought an explanation when she failed to appear for their tryst. Perhaps word had got to him about the state she'd been in later in the evening.

Her tears had been hard to hide, though she'd swiped at them furiously.

Then Selina, her closest friend among the Season's debutantes, had insisted they walk in the gardens until Daphne felt better.

Yet she hadn't felt better since that night.

Not truly. All her hopes for what the Season might bring had been smashed.

She no longer cared about being courted or receiving a marriage proposal.

Selina was the reason Daphne continued to accept invitations, show her face, and risk encountering the skunk who'd hurt her more than anyone ever had.

Though Selina insisted Daphne shouldn't let anything mar her Season, Daphne's only goal now was to protect her impressionable friend from blighters like Moreland and his ilk.

So, she stood along the far edge of the Ellburtons' ballroom, just a few feet from

Selina, watching as handsome young bachelors attempted to catch her eye. And she didn't miss how other debutantes whispered about Selina in jealous tones behind their fans either.

At eighteen, Lady Selina was two years younger than Daphne, the same age as Ivy, and they'd quickly established a warm rapport at various balls and soirees in the early weeks of the Season.

Selina was quiet, as Daphne tended to be, and much more comfortable observing from the edges of a soiree than being the focus of attention.

But she'd been declared the Season's diamond, so she had to endure more attention than she'd ever sought.

Indeed, the day after a gossip sheet referred to her as the diamond, Selina had called in at Edgerton House to visit Daphne and cried on and off for hours.

They'd discussed how she might weather the storm of scrutiny and suitors.

Daphne had promised they'd conquer the Season together. And now, after the... incident with Sebastian Moreland, Daphne was even more determined to remain close and watchful.

She'd confessed all to Selina, of course, wanting to ensure that Moreland and his friends, who her sister Ivy had eventually helped her identify, kept their distance from her sweet, trusting friend.

Daphne no longer cared about being wooed or courted. She'd happily become a wallflower and soon realized there was much to be learned when one observed from the sidelines and blended into the wallpaper. And she wasn't alone. Ivy was content to stand in wallflower row beside her.

“I don’t know why Lord Montclair still buzzes around Selina,” Ivy murmured, her gaze fixed on a tall, auburn-haired noblewoman who’d caught the eye of many debutantes. “He offered for Miss Cartwright just last night.”

Daphne sipped at tepid lemonade and side-eyed her sister. “Was it in the gossip sheets already?”

“Not that I saw.” Ivy consumed scandal sheets and gossip rags avidly.

“Then how do you know?”

“The Cartwright’s maid is friends with Jilly.”

Jilly was one of their brother-in-law’s chambermaids at Edgerton House.

“You’re becoming a terrible purveyor of gossip, Ivy.”

“I don’t think of it as gossip, since I don’t spread details except to those who might benefit from the information. I consider it the collecting facts.”

Daphne couldn’t deny the usefulness of having a sister with detective-like tendencies, especially when her chief concern was helping her friend determine which suitors were worthy of her attention and which were vile deceivers.

“Well, look who’s reappeared after a mysterious absence,” Ivy whispered.

Daphne followed the direction of her sister’s gaze and spotted one of the noblemen who’d managed to earn a bit of Selina’s interest before he’d quite strangely disappeared from society and ceased accepting invitations to the Season’s round of balls and soirees.

“Did you ever hear why he vanished?”

“I didn’t.” Ivy sounded chagrined. “He’s a true conundrum.”

Daphne narrowed her gaze as the earl made his way through the crush.

His absence had wrought some changes, it seemed.

His hair was a bit longer and tousled, his shoulders broader, and he walked with a confident, commanding air about him that she didn’t recall from her previous encounters with Julian Rourke, Earl of Windham.

Indeed, nothing about the handsome young nobleman had particularly caught her eye. After all, the Season was flush with eligible bachelors.

Yet now, for some reason, she couldn’t take her eyes off him.

A fierce determination tightened his jaw.

And for the first time, she noticed a faint scar that ran along his left cheek.

The whitened line stood out against his sun-kissed skin.

It made him appear slightly dangerous when, previously, he’d only ever been so amiable and jolly as to cause her to think him frivolous.

“Well, I mean to find out why,” Daphne said before setting her lemonade on a passing servant’s tray and striding off toward Lord Windham.

He was beelining toward Selina, but he kept getting caught as fellow noblemen greeted him.

Daphne glanced back, relieved to see that Selina hadn't yet noted his arrival. Two fellow debutantes were chatting with her, and Lord Godfrey approached to capture all her attention.

Slipping quickly past a few gathered couples, Daphne planted herself in Lord Windham's path.

It was worse than Cassian expected.

He'd prepared himself to encounter a stifling crush of bodies. Even anticipated the necessity of making inane conversation about the weather and horse racing and the next social event on the Season's calendar.

What he'd not anticipated was the number of noblemen who counted Julian as an acquaintance worth greeting. A few had already inquired about his fortnight absence from various balls and musicales.

Cassian made the excuse of illness but assured both men—Nelson and Knowles, according to the friendly banter between the two—that he was hale and well now.

Then, when he'd disentangled himself from a few other gentlemen who assumed such intimacy they didn't even offer their names, he fixed his gaze on the whole purpose of this hapless venture.

Julian had described Lady Selina Lytton with such detail that it was no difficulty to identify her among the eager debutantes dotted around Lord and Lady Ellburton's ballroom.

Oddly, the Season's diamond seemed a touch less at ease than the rest. She looked as if she felt out of place, which was precisely how Cassian had felt the moment he'd shaved off his beard, donned new Bond Street clothes, and crossed the Ellburtons'

threshold.

According to Julian, the lady was a bit shy, but Cassian had expected her to at least sparkle in company.

A small group of ladies burst into laughter on the right edge of the ballroom.

Cassian turned at the sound and promptly collided with a figure in his path. His hands shot out on instinct, steadying the petite blonde before him. Her skin, bare where his fingers grazed her upper arms, was soft and warm, and the contact shot an unfamiliar thrill up his spine.

He clenched his jaw at the feeling.

She glanced down at where he touched her, and he withdrew his hands at once, though her warmth seemed to linger on his fingertips.

“Forgive me,” he murmured, already cursing the misstep. Five minutes in, and he’d already committed a grave faux pas.

“You were gone, Lord Windham,” the young lady put to him with one tawny brow arched in challenge. “Lady Selina remarked on your absence.”

“Yes,” Cassian replied, smoothing his accent to match Julian’s clipped tones and attempting his easy charm. “I was ill. But never fear. I’ve fully recovered, and I’m flattered she noticed.”

She tilted her head, studying him with a kind of deliberate scrutiny that made the air between them feel charged. At the intense perusal, his skin heated beneath the fine cloth of his evening suit.

The lady had eyes of rich blue, the color shifting with flecks of gold.

It reminded him of watching sunlight glitter on a churning sea.

Her hair shimmered like a polished gold sovereign under the chandeliers, and her lips—he couldn't help but notice—were a perfect bow, the lower fuller and faintly flushed.

Julian had mentioned a close friend of Lady Selina's that it would behoove him to win over. A Miss Bridewell. Could this be her?

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“I’m sorry to hear it, my lord,” she said, though her tone hinted at more suspicion than sympathy. “Two weeks to recover. Mercy, it must have been quite a dire illness.”

“A fiendish cold indeed,” he said, matching her tone with a bit of playfulness.

“I see.”

The ballroom’s many lights caught shades of honey in her golden hair, and after looking longer than was polite, Cassian watched as matching flecks in her eyes took on a flash of fire.

“Poor you.” Her voice dipped into a softer tone. “But, of course, I do understand. After all, you’ll recall our discussion about my father.”

“Your father,” Cassian repeated like the fool he was for ever agreeing to this scheme.

“William Bridewell.”

So she was Daphne Bridewell.

“You said your uncle knew him,” she continued. “He was a physician. So I do understand how ailments can keep one down far longer than expected.” She took him in from his brow to the tips of his boots. He stole the moment to note the faintest blush at the edges of her cheeks.

When she caught him studying the shape of her lips again, her gaze narrowed, but not

unkindly.

“You seem different somehow,” she murmured, almost as if to herself.

“Do I?”

“Yes.” Miss Bridewell’s voice had gone quiet, slightly breathy. “You’ve changed.”

“For better or for worse?” The question was out before he could temper it, and he was suddenly both wary of and eager for the answer he might receive.

Though he could quickly catalog some of the ways he fell short of Julian’s amiability and charm, it fascinated him that this young lady should note a difference immediately.

Her breath caught. Her pink lips parted slightly, and something flickered across her face. “I wouldn’t presume...” she began, then faltered.

For the first time in years, his desire to taste a woman’s lips nearly overwhelmed him, and his own breath tangled in his lungs.

Miss Bridewell blinked and the color deepened in her cheeks as if she could read this thoughts.

“Perhaps the question was rude.” Good grief, he genuinely didn’t know how to make polite conversation anymore. “Do forgive me.”

“You’re forgiven, my lord.” She said the words a little too quickly. Then she cast a look over her shoulder at the woman he’d been bent on approaching before their collision. “I imagine you’re here to seek her out.”

“That was the plan,” he admitted, though his attention remained stubbornly fixed on the lady in front of him. Her jasmine scent wrapped around him like a tether, and he was intrigued by how she looked at him with all the suspicion of a Scotland Yard detective.

“You should hurry, Lord Windham. Her dance card will soon be filled.” The petite beauty stepped back, clearing his path toward Lady Selina, and he felt the loss of her nearness like a snapped thread.

But the diamond was no longer in the spot where she’d been. Lady Selina had taken to the dance floor with Lord Knowles, one of the lordlings who’d greeted him.

Without thinking, Cassian turned back to his blonde inquisitor.

“Will you add me to your dance card, Miss Bridewell?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, I don’t...” She looked as undone as he’d felt beneath her gaze. “I do not dance.”

“Not ever?”

She gave no reply but dipped her head, as if all the pertness she’d displayed had suddenly been doused.

“That’s a shame,” Cassian said softly, truly meaning it.

He regretted anything he’d done to unsettle her, yet it couldn’t be a blunder to ask a lady to dance at a ball. And oddly, against every impulse he’d brought into this crowded ballroom—to express interest in Lady Selina and then depart as soon as possible—he wanted to dance with Miss Bridewell.

The thought of her hand in his, of her peering up at him with those sea-storm eyes, took hold like a spark in kindling.

“Windham.”

Cassian turned at the sound of his brother’s title.

“Daphne, you’ve found him.” Lady Selina approached, her silk skirts whispering across the floor, eyes bright. “Goodness, I didn’t expect to see you this evening, Lord Windham. Where have you been hiding?”

For the briefest moment, Cassian hesitated, flicking a glance toward Miss Bridewell—Daphne—who stood just to his right. He was intensely aware of her, even as he told himself to show regard to the woman he’d been sent here to falsely woo.

“I was unwell,” he told Lady Selina. “But I’ve recovered, and I find myself ready to dance.”

He offered Lady Selina the smile he imagined Julian might wear, polished and gallant. “If you have a place for me on your card, that is.”

She seemed delighted. “As it so happens, I do. The next dance.”

He offered his arm and Lady Selina took it. But as they moved toward the dance floor, he chanced one last glance back.

Miss Daphne Bridewell hadn’t looked away.

She watched them—composed, unreadable—and something in her gaze stirred a flicker of apprehension in his chest. There was a...knowing in her eyes. As if she saw

past the polished smile he wore, as if she sensed that whatever part he was playing tonight wasn't quite the truth.

He turned to face the lady in his arms.

"You look lovely," he said, because Julian surely would've said so.

"Flatterer," Selina murmured, her gloved hand resting lightly against his shoulder. "Though you do sound a touch different tonight. Your voice is rougher. Maybe it was the illness."

Cassian gave a nervous laugh. "Illness will do that to a man."

"I suppose it might," she said with a tilt of her head. "Though I admit I rather like it. It's good that you're back."

He didn't know how to respond to that. Because he was not the man she thought she'd pinned her hopes on. Julian would have been thrilled to have Lady Selina in his arms. Yet he was not. It felt odd, awkward. Wrong.

Especially since his gaze kept wandering to the only lady who'd sparked a reaction in Cassian in years. She stood at the edge of the ballroom, wrapped in candlelight and watching silently.

The music began. Cassian tried to focus on the steps. Lady Selina was forgiving when he took a misstep and then corrected on the next turn.

"A bit rusty, it seems," he murmured with a wry smile.

Lady Selina studied him as if confused by his manner. "Then you must practice more, my lord."

Despite Julian's claims of her shyness, she moved with quiet confidence, then she gifted him with a flirtatious smile, and his stomach churned with unease.

Perhaps she had been taken with his brother, but this fakery was treacherous.

"Will you not ask for another dance?" she asked.

"You do me an honor, but I fear I will only tread on your toes again in my present state."

Amusement sparked in her eyes. "Before your illness, nothing would have stopped you from dancing."

"Perhaps the illness changed me." As one far too perceptive lady had pointed out.

When Lady Selina nodded and was swept away by her next dance partner, Cassian immediately scanned the ballroom for Daphne Bridewell.

Their gazes clashed. She was watching him too.

The oddest feelings overtook him—desire shifting something inside him, like the insistent roll of low tide.

It had been so long since any woman had tempted him.

Yet this one, who seemed content in her spot on wallflower row, made his breath hitch almost painfully in his chest.

He hated dancing, yet he still wanted to dance with her.

Lord help him, what was he doing?

He shouldn't be thinking of her. The last thing he needed was to entangle himself with any lady.

He'd come here for Julian, and he tried to remind himself of that fact.

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Daphne knew something was amiss.

Lord Windham had never intrigued her, never made her pulse race with a single glance.

The man at last night's ball was so different that it almost felt as if he was someone else entirely.

With slightly longer, more tousled hair.

With more curiosity in the deep moss green of his eyes.

With a rakish scar that somehow made him more appealing rather than less.

How had she never seen that scar before?

"Did you notice anything strange about Lord Windham last evening?" Daphne asked as she stood with her sister Ivy near the unlit fireplace in Lord and Lady Harrington's drawing room.

Guests had gathered to make conversation as they awaited the sound of the dinner gong. Lady Harrington's dinner parties were grand and well-attended. Though a dozen had already arrived, Daphne suspected more were expected.

"You mean aside from his reappearance after two weeks' absence?"

"Yes, aside from that."

Ivy turned one of her inquisitive gazes Daphne's way. "I saw you speaking to him a while. Did you not ask where he'd been?"

"Recuperating from a cold, or so he said."

"Goodness." Ivy arched a brow. "I do believe I'm rubbing off on you." She beamed proudly at that. "You sound as dubious of gentlemen as I usually do."

"Not all gentlemen," Daphne clarified. "Only some gentlemen. And at the moment, just one."

"What makes you doubt his claim?" Ivy asked.

Daphne licked her lips and considered her reply. She had no logical reason to be musing about the man. Selina had seemed pleased by his return. Whatever misgivings Daphne harbored, her friend clearly had none.

Selina and Windham had danced and smiled with one another as if no time had passed at all. They'd seemed so amiable with each other that Daphne had half expected a note to arrive this morning. If he'd asked for her hand, Selina would be breathless to send news of their engagement.

And Daphne would be happy for them.

Of course she would.

And yet here she was still thinking of the earl. Something in her refused to stop pondering the changes in him—and the way he'd looked at her.

"You've gone quiet," Ivy said, ever attuned to Daphne's mood.

“I was simply considering whether it’s possible for a man to return from a head cold more handsome than before.”

Ivy gave her a look. “Oh, dear.”

Daphne swallowed hard and inwardly chided herself for letting that truth slip out. “He seemed different,” she said at last.

“Two weeks abed with a fever would change anyone,” Ivy said. “But you mean that you noticed him as you hadn’t before.” Her tone held an edge of mischief.

Daphne shot her a look. “I mean nothing.”

“And yet you say it in a way that means quite a lot.” Ivy smirked. “You noticed him.” She shrugged. “It is not unheard of that a young lady should take note of a gentleman.”

“Ivy, please. This isn’t a case for one of your sleuth-like deductions.”

“Yet you’ve already said something incriminating.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “It doesn’t have to mean anything, Daphne. Not every spark becomes a fire.”

“I said he looked different, not appealing,” Daphne said a little too indignantly.

“You said both.”

Daphne gave her a warning glance, but Ivy only laughed softly, enjoying herself far too much. Then, with a pat to Daphne’s arm, she sobered a little.

“You’ve done nothing wrong. It’s not a crime to notice a man. Even one with...complicated attachments.”

“It feels as if it should be.”

“It’s not,” Ivy said gently. “Just don’t go falling in love with him.”

Daphne stiffened. “Of course I won’t. Do you not think I’ve learned my lesson after Moreland?”

But even as she said it, her pulse quickened.

A murmur swept through the drawing room, as if someone had let in a breeze. Daphne didn’t have to turn to know who had just walked in. She felt it in the way the room altered—the shift of attention and tilt of voices. Someone spoke his name in greeting.

Windham .

She turned despite herself.

There he was—tall and composed in his evening clothes, the line of his shoulders so much broader than she remembered. He greeted Lady Harrington, his manner polished but not as smiling as he used to be, almost too practiced. Then his gaze swept the room, as if searching for someone.

Until it landed on her.

Daphne felt it again as she had last night—an inexplicable jolt. As if some thread inside her had snapped taut.

He didn’t look away.

Neither did she.

“There it is,” Ivy murmured at her elbow. “That very not-a-crime sort of noticing.”

Daphne inhaled sharply, determined not to rise to the bait. “He looked over. That’s hardly?—”

“And he’s still doing so.”

Daphne exhaled and turned her back to the room, pretending sudden interest in the arrangement of flowers on nearby table. “He’s not quite as I thought he was.”

“Not the affable suitor of your friend, you mean?”

“I mean,” she said quietly, “he looked at me strangely last night, almost as if he didn’t know me. And then?—”

“Then?” Ivy’s voice was inquisitive now, as if seeking clues.

Daphne shook her head. “Never mind.”

Before Ivy could press her, a familiar voice cut through the nearby conversation.

“Miss Bridewell.”

She turned. He stood a polite distance away, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Lord Windham,” she replied, voice calm, even while her insides were rioting.

He bowed, and there was something very precise in it, something almost careful.

“Might I trouble you for a moment’s conversation?”

Daphne blinked. Beside her, Ivy had suddenly become fascinated with a nearby portrait.

“Of course,” Daphne said.

He offered his arm, and she hesitated half a beat before taking it. His sleeve was warm, his muscles hard beneath her fingers.

They moved toward the far edge of the room, near a tall window draped in green damask. The sound of the other guests blurred behind them.

“I was hoping to see you again this evening,” he said quietly.

She glanced at him, but his expression remained unreadable.

“Did you? We didn’t exactly get on well last night,” she replied.

His mouth curved. “Yes, and that was entirely my fault. I was...not quite myself. Allow me to apologize if I was awkward or abrupt.”

“Apologies aren’t necessary,” she said. “You’ve never been unkind to me.”

He studied her a moment. “And yet I fear I left you unsettled.”

Daphne felt her throat tighten. That jolt came again, but more subtle this time. “You looked at me...strangely. As though you’d never seen me before,” she said under her breath.

“Perhaps I hadn’t.”

Her eyes flicked to his. Before either of them could say more, the dinner gong

sounded from the corridor.

He offered his arm again. “Shall we?”

Daphne hesitated. Then she laid her hand over his arm once more and allowed him to lead her to the dining room.

Cassian had not meant to look at her so often.

But his gaze kept returning to where Miss Daphne Bridewell sat across the table, laughing lightly at something a too-friendly lordling had said.

It was maddening.

She wasn't even speaking to Cassian, let alone paying him any mind, and yet her presence bent his attention toward her like the magnet of a compass needle draws towards north.

He sipped his wine and forced himself to glance away, to offer a cordial remark to the dowager countess on his right. She complained of card games and her dreadful luck. Nodding at the appropriate moment, he murmured something about fortune always favoring the undeserving.

Then Daphne laughed again.

Cassian stole another glance.

A lock of her hair had slipped free of its pins, and the soft curl brushed her cheek. The strand caught the light like it meant to blind him. Like the shimmer of sunlight on still water. He told himself it was just the gaslights that made her seem so bright.

But he couldn't stop looking.

She was...vivid. So lovely and alive in a room full of people posturing and gossiping. And utterly unaware of the way her smile made him forget what he was here for.

Cassian felt a sting of guilt and gulped down more wine. The lie he was perpetrating on her, on everyone, bit at his conscience.

Another man leaned too close to Miss Bridewell during the fish course. Cassian's jaw tightened. She tilted her head, cool and polite, not charmed. Not the way she'd looked at him earlier.

That shouldn't matter so much, but it did.

Her gaze flicked up then, as if she'd felt his attention. Their eyes met, but only for a second.

Cassian forced his mouth into a mild expression and looked away, then reached for his glass again. He was not here to be distracted. He had a part to play. A duty to his brother to uphold. And then, somewhere between the fourth course and dessert, a thought began to take shape in his mind.

What if he asked her for help?

Daphne Bridewell was Lady Selina's dearest friend. If anyone could assist him to navigate a courtship with the lady, it would be her.

And then he'd have a reason to speak to her. He'd have reason to listen to her laugh. To hear her thoughts. To watch the way her fingers curled around a napkin as she listened to dull men with remarkable patience.

Yes, he could ask her to advise him on how best to woo Selina.

He glanced at her again. This time, she arched a brow as she met his gaze. Anticipation coiled low in his gut, but he willed himself to look away.

As the final plates were cleared and Lord Harrington rose from his seat, guests began to disperse. Gentlemen were invited to the billiards room or a nearby salon for cards. Others made murmured plans to stroll the garden paths in the balmy air.

Cassian didn't head to billiards or cards. He went in search of one petite blonde.

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He found her not far from where she'd been earlier, standing near the drawing room's wide windows beside a dark-haired young lady who shared her features and seemed to have her affection.

He guessed she must be one of the other Bridewell sisters.

Julian had mentioned that there were several and also that one of her sisters was the Duchess of Edgerton.

"Miss Bridewell," he said to the woman he'd done a miserable job of not watching all through dinner.

The dark-haired sister tilted her head. "Let me guess, Lord Windham. You mean to steal my sister away again."

"I'd be greatly obliged," he replied smoothly. "I've a question I'd like to put to her."

The two exchanged a quick, inscrutable look.

Then Cassian met Daphne's gaze squarely and added, "Perhaps we might all step into the garden? The air will do us good."

He said it lightly, but the request was sincere. And if he wasn't mistaken, the wariness in her gaze softened. Just slightly.

The Harringtons had strung lanterns throughout the garden paths and Miss Daphne Bridewell's sister took off wandering through the waist-high beds of flowers, then

broke away into the grass to smell some white roses twining around a trellis.

“She intends to seek her own path, it seems.” Cassian snuck a look at the beauty beside him.

“You’ve just summed Ivy up perfectly.” She smiled as she watched her sister. “Always determined and very certain of her own opinions.”

“A formidable combination,” he said, amused.

They walked in companionable quiet. A night breeze stirred the lanterns above them and carried the scent of roses and damp grass. The silence between them wasn’t uncomfortable, but at least for him, it felt charged.

“Are you and your sister much alike?” he asked at last.

“In some ways, but very different in other ways.”

The other Miss Bridewell had plunked herself down on the grass, seemingly unbothered about mussing her gown.

“Perhaps she doesn’t have your restraint,” he said. “Though I can’t begrudge anyone for relishing a garden.”

Daphne’s steps slowed. She looked over at him. “You think me restrained?”

He didn’t answer right away.

“I think,” he said slowly, “that you see more than you let on. And I suspect you feel more than you let yourself admit.”

Something flickered across her face. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t you?” His voice dropped a little. He stopped walking and turned toward her. “Forgive me if I’m being a presumptuous boor, Miss Bridewell. I only meant that last night, and again this evening, your expression said more than your words.”

Her eyes searched his, and he had the sudden, powerful sense that if he reached out—if he so much as brushed her hand—she wouldn’t pull away.

But he didn’t, of course. He couldn’t. Because she was Lady Selina’s friend, and he was pretending to be Julian.

He swallowed and looked away. “But that wasn’t what I meant to speak to you about.”

“Ah, yes, your question. Might as well ask me now.”

“I have a request,” he said, offering a crooked smile. “You may find it amusing.”

She looked at him, tension sharpening the edge of her jaw. “You’ve always been amusing, my lord.”

Yes, that is precisely how one would see Julian.

“Normally I’m rather direct,” he confessed, though he shouldn’t have. He should have been encouraging any likeness she found in him to Julian, not dissuading her.

“But this...situation,” he continued, “requires tact and a woman’s perspective.”

She looked intrigued. “Go on.”

“I’d like to know how best to win Lady Selina Lytton’s favor.”

There was a long pause. He thought he saw something like shock behind her eyes, but it was quickly shuttered.

“I thought you and she were already...well acquainted,” she said lightly.

“We are friendly,” he said, “but I think you know how often appearances can be deceiving.”

Her mouth twisted. “Yes,” she said. “I’m learning that lesson rather thoroughly this Season.”

Cassian felt it again—the urge to reach for her. To explain himself. To confess the whole damned ruse.

Instead, he retreated into the safety of his idea. “Will you help me? Advise me, I mean.”

She hesitated.

“I don’t wish to deceive my friend,” she finally said.

The guilt he’d felt at dinner rushed over him like a wave. She made him ashamed without meaning to.

“I would never ask you to. I only wish to know her favorite flower, her interests.”

“You should seek those details through conversation, my lord. Charm has never been something you lacked.” There was no compliment in her words. Indeed, she seemed more guarded than ever.

“You’re right.” He nodded and pressed his lips together. “I should have never asked such a thing of you. Yet again, I must apologize, Miss Bridewell.”

She didn’t offer quick forgiveness this time; she merely watched him.

“I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening.” He bowed and turned to leave her, jaw tight. Good grief, he was a fool.

He should’ve known better than to put her in such a position. He’d just wanted an excuse to be near her, to know her better, to keep her in his orbit a little longer.

“Lord Windham.”

He stopped mid-step. Her voice cut through the garden’s quiet.

He turned. “Yes, Miss Bridewell?”

She stood just as he’d left her, her pale green gown’s beads and her honey-gold hair shimmering in the lantern light. Her expression was guarded, but her gaze held him fixed in place.

“I will help you,” she said. “But with one condition.”

His brows lifted as hope stirred in his chest. “Name it.”

“If I determine you’re not the best match for my friend,” she said, her tone cool, “I will end our arrangement. Entirely.”

He held her gaze. “You mean to assess my character then.”

“You’re asking me to help you court a dear friend. I think that entitles me to form an

opinion.”

There was something noble in the way she stood—like a ship riding steady in high seas. Proud. Unwavering. So lovely that it almost hurt.

“I accept your terms,” he said quietly. “Though I suspect I’ve already failed the initial assessment.”

She offered no denial or agreement. “That still remains to be seen.”

He almost smiled, but he didn’t trust himself to do so without revealing far too much. He’d been trained to keep his bearings in all manner of weather at sea, but he sensed that Miss Daphne Bridewell was the sort of tempest who could upend all his intentions.

“You have changed,” she said firmly.

The words struck at his guilt, as if she knew of his duplicity, and he squared his shoulders. “Have I?”

“You used to seem...lighter. More carefree.”

He studied her face, desperate to know what she truly saw when she looked at him. “And now?”

She hesitated. “Now I don’t know.”

Neither did he because he’d certainly never expected to arrive in London and be bewitched within the space of two days.

“If anyone can suss me out, I suspect you can.” He gave her a short bow, forcing

himself not to say more, not to reach for her hand.

Because he wouldn't offer some chaste kiss on her knuckles.

He'd press his mouth to her wrist to feel the beat of her pulse, he'd savor the taste her skin, and then she'd know precisely what sort of man he was.

She didn't smile or soften her stance, but she nodded. And her willingness, even with all her obvious wariness, felt like a victory.

She hadn't sent him away, and, for now, that was enough.

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Why did I ever agree to this?

Daphne had asked herself the question dozens of times since impulsively calling Lord Windham back to her in the Harringtons' garden. It had been a moment of weakness. Or foolishness. Possibly both.

But for some reason she couldn't bear to watch him walk away and never have reason to speak to her again.

Yet even now, as she stood along the edge of the Bancrofts' grand ballroom, watching Selina beside him while the musicians tuned their instruments, her doubts multiplied. It was painfully obvious that the earl needed no assistance wooing anyone. Selina seemed convivial in his company.

Daphne forced herself to stop gaping at them and made her way toward a small group of wallflowers—young ladies she'd met on the edges of many dance floors this Season.

She greeted them with warmth. Ivy had begged off tonight, pleading a headache, and without her sister's easy wit and sharp tongue, Daphne felt a bit lost. Still, she smiled.

She conversed. She pretended not to feel out of place.

But as soon as she'd taken up her spot against the wall, her eyes betrayed her again. They sought him out. Across the ballroom, their gazes clashed the moment he stepped closer to the floor with Selina.

They were going to dance the waltz.

A flare of something hot and bright shot through Daphne's chest. Not quite jealousy, but something undeniable. And unwanted.

Daphne looked away, looking across at the far wall, as if staring at the gilded molding might somehow help her stem feelings she had no right to.

But then the waltz began, and when she glanced over again, he still stood at the dance floor's edge, while Selina spun around the parquet in the Marquess of Strathmere's arms.

Suddenly, beside her, one of the wallflowers, Miss Truscott, burst into tears. Daphne and the girl opposite her bent closer.

"What is it?" the debutante's friend asked.

"I thought Lord Strathmere might ask me to dance. Foolish of me, I know." Miss Truscott offered each of them a somber look, her chin wobbling. "All these balls and no one has asked me to dance."

As couples continued waltzing, Daphne looked up to see Lord Windham making his way toward her.

"Lord Windham," she said, far too breathlessly.

"Miss Bridewell. I wondered if perhaps you'd changed your mind about dancing."

Daphne turned to him, keeping her back to Miss Truscott. "I haven't changed my mind, my lord," she whispered, "but the brunette over my shoulder has not been invited to dance this whole Season."

She didn't know why she was asking him. He'd never shown any particular benevolence toward wallflowers in the past, but he was different now in so many ways. Perceptive, taking everything in, as if he no longer felt the need to be the most jovial or amuse those around him.

With a stealth she admired, he lifted his gaze over her shoulder very briefly. "Tell me her name."

"Miss Emily Truscott."

He nodded, gave Daphne a look that made warmth curl low in her middle, then strode past her.

"Miss Truscott." At the sound of his deep voice, all the wallflowers nearby snapped their gazes his way. "Would you do me the honor of adding me to your dance card?"

"Oh, I... Yes, of course."

Soon, the waltz ended. The next dance would begin imminently. Lord Windham led Miss Truscott onto the floor, and the girl turned a beaming smile Daphne's way.

Windham caught her eye on the next turn, and Daphne drew in a sharp breath. When he looked at her like that—as if he couldn't tear his gaze away—everything else faded. She felt drawn to him, but she told herself she had to stop this.

She would not betray her friend.

Yet the feelings he stoked in her were maddeningly potent.

Far more so than her ridiculous infatuation with Moreland.

That had been like candy fluff. As insubstantial as air.

This was something else. Something that seemed to slip past her defenses, pressing against places inside her that she'd vowed to protect against fancies and fairy tale notions of love.

She'd only begun putting the pieces of her heart together, and this ridiculous yearning threatened to scatter them again.

And it was not right. Selina favored him, so it was improper to harbor a moment's longing for the man.

Daphne couldn't keep still. She walked past the other wallflowers, seeking the ballroom's threshold, seeking escape.

She didn't know the Bancrofts' home at all, but there had to be a door that led to the garden or perhaps a quiet room, where she could catch her breath and find the inner calm she'd never in her life had to struggle so hard to find.

Moreland hadn't unsettled her like this. That had come on gradually, smile by smile, his easy charm pulling her in. Windham consumed her thoughts without effort, and despite Ivy's reassurances, it was wrong to feel the heat that lit inside her when he looked her way.

Other guests mingled in the hall, and the retiring room and games salon were buzzing with activity, but Daphne kept striding past them all.

She found the library and let out a little scoffing sound at the irony of finding respite in the place she'd so eagerly rushed to over a month ago—like a lamb bounding toward its demise.

Pushing the door open, she examined the interior to ensure she wasn't disturbing some rendezvousing couple or another forlorn debutante in search of solitude. But the room was empty, so she slipped inside.

The soothing scent of old books settled her nerves, and she trailed her finger along the spines on the nearest shelf. It made her long for the library back at Rosemere, her brother-in-law's ducal estate, where she and all her sisters had spent many happy hours.

She took down a copy of Mr. Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, which she'd begun reading and abandoned in the whirl of preparing for her first Season.

Now, she thought perhaps she should have abandoned the Season altogether after the incident with Moreland.

It all felt false now, and she didn't want to pretend for another month.

She'd told herself she stayed for Selina, but now, with her own fascination with Windham, she felt as if she was failing her friend.

"Miss Bridewell."

Daphne dropped the book and spun to face Sebastian Moreland.

He stood in the doorway, arms folded, leaning against the frame as if he'd stood watching her for a while.

"I have nothing to say to you," she managed to bite out, though every muscle in her body had gone tight, and her heart thrashed wildly in her chest.

All she could think about was getting through the doorway he blocked with his body.

“But I have much to say to you, Daphne. No.” He shook his head. “What I must say won’t take long at all, though I’d like to talk with you at length, if you’ll let me.”

“I won’t let you. Step aside.”

He shifted so that he stood squarely in the doorframe and lifted his hands, palms out. “Please, Miss Bridewell. Indulge me while I apologize.”

Daphne glanced to the bank of windows at her right, considering whether to open one and climb out.

“You’d throw yourself from a window to escape me?”

“Yes.” Daphne faced him, then took a step toward him. “If there is a shred of gentlemanly honor left in you, step aside, Mr. Moreland. I wish to leave and do not care to hear anything you have to say.”

As Cassian led Miss Truscott, he had to concentrate to remember each step.

The young woman offered him a smile a few times but seemed to be concentrating as fiercely as he was, looking down at her feet a few times as if doubtful they’d follow the right pattern.

“I appreciate this, my lord,” she whispered as the dance wound down.

“I thank you for dancing with me, Miss Truscott.”

She blushed at that. “I’d almost forgotten how to dance.”

“You can surely tell I feel the same.”

They both chuckled, then the music drew to a close. He bowed to her, then escorted her off the floor.

Scanning ahead for the lady who'd inspired this mission to assist a wallflower, Cassian found she wasn't there. A moment ago, she'd been standing beside the line of other debutantes, and now she'd disappeared.

"Thank you again, Miss Truscott," he told his dance partner, then immediately slipped from the ballroom.

Perhaps it was folly to seek her out, but he was beyond propriety where Miss Bridewell was concerned. For the first time in a long while, impulse drove him, though it felt suspiciously like need.

He searched the rooms set aside for guests and interrupted a tryst in progress, though Miss Bridewell was not one of the participants. The relief of that was more than he had any right to.

Then he heard the muffled sound of raised voices—a man and a woman—and picked up his pace.

"Get away from me." Daphne .

At the thread of fear in tone, Cassian balled his hands into fists and rushed toward the door at the same moment a man roared with pain.

Cassian slammed the door open, colliding with Daphne as she rushed across the threshold.

Like the time they'd stumbled into each other the night he'd met her, he held her a moment too long. This time, she didn't look wary or offended. She let out a sigh as if

relieved.

“Windham, I...kicked him.” Her hand remained clutched against his sleeve as the man behind her straightened and approached.

“Daphne—”

“Get out. Now.” Cassian stepped away from the threshold to allow the man space. Miss Bridewell did the same, retreating farther inside the library. He only regretted that it forced them to let go of each other.

Cassian gave the man only seconds to comply before lunging, grabbing the bastard by the shoulder, and wrenching him through the library door.

He kept hold of his lapel, then slid his hand up to grasp the man’s throat.

Old instincts welled up. Everything in him wanted to strike hard, draw blood, damage the man who’d dared to impose himself on her.

Instead, he shoved hard, nearly knocking the bastard off his feet.

“What the bloody hell, Windham?”

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Cassian kept his hands balled at his sides, forcing himself not to plant a fist in the man's shocked face.

"A gentleman departs when a lady tells him to." Cassian stepped closer, backing the knave farther into the hallway. "Go. Now."

The coward seemed to see something in Cassian's expression that convinced him, and he began to storm off. Then he stopped, turned, and cast Cassian a glare.

From his position a few steps away, he shouted, "Daphne, I didn't mean?—"

Cassian stepped into the library and slammed the door shut.

He heard her let out another shaky sigh before he turned to face her.

"Are you all right?" He reached for her instinctively, a hand on her arm.

They were close enough that when she reached up and pressed her palm against his waistcoat, he wasn't certain whether she was pushing him away. But then her fingers curled around the edge of his coat's lapel, holding him in place.

Some of his fury at the wastrel he'd found her wish eased at that. He'd stay with her as long as she wanted him to because he was exactly where he wished to be.

"Good heavens," she whispered, "I've never kicked a man before."

"He deserved that and more."

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and nodded. Unshed tears glittered in her lashes. And it twisted something inside Cassian to watch one slip down the pink-flushed slope of her cheek.

He forced himself not to touch his fingertip to her skin.

Swiping at her cheek, she let out a shaky breath. Then she released him and took a step back. “I am well, Lord Windham. Or I soon will be.” With a hand pressed to her middle, she worked to steady her breathing. Then she focused her attention on the closed door.

Cassian immediately realized the impropriety of shutting himself inside with her. “Perhaps we should head back?—”

“No, I...need a moment.”

“Would you prefer that I go?”

“Propriety dictates that you should.” She stepped forward, as close as she’d been a moment ago. “But I haven’t thanked you yet.”

“You needn’t thank me.” Cassian couldn’t resist matching her movement and inching a bit closer.

“And I haven’t explained that I did not arrange to meet Mr. Moreland.”

“You needn’t explain yourself to me either.” But he did file the man’s name away in his mind.

“I came seeking a moment alone, and he found me. Or perhaps he followed me. I confess I didn’t know he was in attendance this evening. We are acquainted.” Her

emphasis on the word held a bitter note.

“If you fear he’ll trouble you further, I’ll have a word with him.”

“I want nothing more to do with him.”

Cassian nodded. “Then he won’t come near you again.”

She studied him a moment, assessing, just as she’d done the night they’d met. As if she wished to know how he meant to put a stop to Moreland’s attentions.

Though she didn’t ask the unspoken question, he vowed to do whatever was necessary to ensure the knave never troubled her again.

“I feel like a fool.”

A shiver seemed to rush through her, and Cassian slipped off his evening coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. She blinked up at him as if shocked by the gesture.

“Why would you, Miss Bridewell?”

She hesitated.

“If you don’t wish to divulge more, I understand.” The lady had no reason to confide in him. And, of course, he didn’t deserve her trust.

“For some reason, I find that I want to.” Her eyes fixed on his. “Though I’d beg you to never speak of it to anyone.”

“Of course. You have my word.”

She licked her lips and drew her brows together. “I did encourage him once. Not tonight, but not so long ago either.” Dipping her head, she studied the carpet under their feet. “He was charming.”

Head tipped up, she gave him a look that said like you . But, of course, she would be thinking of the man she believed him to be.

“I was ridiculously smitten.” The admission caused her to swallow hard.

A rogue flare of jealousy welled up in Cassian—a nonsensical feeling. She was not his and never could be.

“I was reckless,” she said more softly.

Cassian took a step closer. “He did not deserve your affection, Miss Bridewell, but you cannot berate yourself for your feelings.”

“Can I not?” Her eyes glittered with emotion. “I should have been discerning. Less trusting. Less naive. I came into the Season so hopeful for romance that I fell for the first man to show me a scrap of attention. Now that my wits once failed me so entirely, I don’t trust myself at all.”

“Hopefulness and innocence aren’t failings,” Cassian insisted. “Treachery is.”

Good God, had he ever been more of a hypocrite in his life? Part of him wanted to warn her that she should not trust him . A greater part of him wanted to confess everything because he ached to be a man she could trust.

She seemed to mull his words. “Well, at least I’ve learned my lesson. I’ll never again be such a fool. And I mean to warn every lady I know about men like Moreland.”

“Men were deceivers ever.” Cassian winced. The Bard’s wisdom rarely failed.

Her eyes, still glossy, lit with bit of amusement. “Mr. Shakespeare’s wisdom does seem instructive here.” After letting out a sigh, she added, “Which is why I shouldn’t have agreed to assist you.” She shook her head as if to emphasize how much she regretted it.

“I shouldn’t have asked you. I only wanted to...” Cassian caught himself, but the truth was all but clawing its way up this throat.

“To what?”

“To get a lady’s perspective on the whole matter. Your perspective.”

Their gazes held a moment too long.

“You may not be who I thought you were, but you do seem sincere.”

He gritted his teeth. All this talk of treachery and sincerity had his gut in knots. He wanted to tell her...

What? That it was her company he craved? That she was the only one he wanted in his arms for each dance he stumbled through?

He hadn’t ever properly courted a woman. Hadn’t ever had cause to consider it. The navy had been his life and succeeding in his profession had consumed all his time, but for a handful of dalliances.

Julian was the one for whom marriage was a necessity, so Cassian had never given much thought to it himself.

Now, he had nothing to offer a lady like Miss Daphne Bridewell.

Hell, she didn't even know his name. She was lovely, kind, protective, loyal.

She deserved to be courted properly. To be loved deeply. To be adored.

There was only a fortnight left in the Season, but he needed the ruse to end. Lying to everyone and tormenting himself with this impossible attraction to a young woman who'd already been ill-treated by a deceptive man? No.

He'd go back to Scotland. He would leave things cordial with Lady Selina, leaving no doubt of his—Julian's—interest, and then his brother could write to her of his intentions once Cassian left London.

He'd send a telegram to Julian and tell him as much first thing in the morning.

"We should return to the ballroom," she said quietly. She'd been watching him while he'd been lost in thought. "But we should go separately."

"Of course." Cassian understood propriety even if he'd rarely had cause to adhere to its rules. "Why don't you precede me? I'll wait a while and then return too."

"Thank you for what you did, Lord Windham."

"I believe it was your kick that did it."

She gifted him with a lovely smile, then it faded as her brows furrowed. "Why did you happen upon this room?"

"I was looking for you." It felt liberating to admit that simple truth.

“Oh.” She searched his eyes.

Cassian wondered if she saw it all there—how often he thought of her; that he’d dreamed of her last night; how he was drawn to her despite every reason he shouldn’t be.

“Of course,” she finally said. “You came for advice regarding Selina.”

“Actually, I?—”

“As a thanks, I’ll tell you this. Tomorrow a group is going to Kew Gardens, including Selina. Lord Knowles organized the outing, and I’m sure he’d be willing to add you.”

Cassian tapped his fingers against his leg. He’d just decided to be done with this whole thing, but now she’d offered something Julian would have jumped at.

“Are you going?” he asked.

“Yes, Selina invited me.”

That sealed it. Before he stopped this farce and returned to Scotland, he’d have one more chance to spend time with her and in a place he’d long wanted to see.

“Then I shall see you tomorrow.”

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Daphne climbed into the Lytton's carriage the next morning to find Selina brimming with emotion, but she couldn't tell whether it was with excitement or dismay.

"What is it?" She reached out a hand, and Selina took it eagerly.

"I have reason to believe," she said, her voice pitching high with eagerness, "that I'll receive a proposal today."

So it was excitement then. Selina's eyes glowed with emotion. She'd already had one proposal from an elderly nobleman who she'd refused. Her family had abided by that decision because the man was a baron, and they dearly wanted to catch a duke for their daughter.

Whoever Selina believed would offer for her seemed to be much more appealing.

"Is it Lord Windham?" Daphne hated the way her heartbeat sped. It was ridiculous to be afraid to hear Selina's answer. She had no claim on him.

"No." For a moment Selina's exuberance seemed to ebb. "I used to enjoy his attention, but he's been odd since he returned. Distracted. Less jovial. I don't think he ever would have offered for me."

Daphne frowned. "I thought you favored him, and he seemed to feel the same."

"Does he?" Selina shrugged. "He left for so long, and there are gentlemen who've been more consistently kind and attentive."

Daphne could think of at least three, though Selina had drawn the notice of many gentlemen since the start of the Season.

“It’s Strathmere.” Selina squeezed Daphne’s hand as she said the nobleman’s name. “He’s handsome, most attentive, and well-connected.”

And he was a marquess set to inherit a dukedom. Her parents would be thrilled.

“Do you love him?” Daphne may no longer trust herself to give her own heart wisely, but she still believed in a love match, and she knew Selina did too. Her friend deserved that.

“I think so.” Selina smiled. “I can easily imagine myself spending all the rest of my days with him.”

Daphne grinned. “That sounds like a promising start.”

“Oh, Daphne. I hope the rumor is true. It would be the end of all the false compliments, the fawning, and the fear that I might fail my parents.”

“Who told you he plans to propose?”

“Lady Beatrice Beckham, and she would know, wouldn’t she?”

“I would think so.” Daphne had met Lady Beatrice a few times and knew she was the cousin of Lord Strathmere. “When is it to happen?”

Selina drew in a deep breath. “I think, if Lady Beatrice is correct, it will happen today. At Kew Gardens.”

“Did Lord Knowles invite him too?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps Matthew plans to be there since I told Lady Beatrice that’s where I would be.”

The way she’d said his name, all breathy and reverent, told Daphne all she needed to know about Selina’s feelings. Though her friend was a bit shy, she possessed a warm, expressive nature, yet she’d never called any gentleman she’d met during the Season by their given name.

Daphne hadn’t heard even a whisper of scandal or gossip about Strathmere. Indeed, he was known for his charitable endeavors and championing progressive legislation in the House of Lords.

“Oh heavens, I can’t believe it’s going to happen.” Selina fiddled with the lace at the edge of her sleeve. “What if Lady Beatrice was wrong?”

“Just wait and see what unfolds. She doesn’t at all seem the sort to make such a thing up out of whole cloth. There must be truth in it.”

Selina’s eyes widened. “Wouldn’t Mama or Papa have said something if Lord Strathmere had approached them to ask for my hand?”

Daphne nibbled her lower lip. “I don’t know. I think some gentlemen prefer to gauge a lady’s interest before speaking to her parents.”

Her brother-in-law, the Duke of Edgerton, had sought no one’s permission prior to offering for her sister.

“I wish this would happen for you too,” Selina said softly.

Daphne scoffed. “I have no interest in a proposal from any man.”

Selina reached over and laid her hand on Daphne's arm. "Perhaps in time, you will."

Daphne smiled. "It will be a very long time. And by then, I'll be a spinster, fully set in my ways." Over the last few weeks, she'd imagined such a future, telling herself that it would at least save her from ever being heartbroken again.

"Well," Selina said as she settled back against the squabs, "I shall continue hoping some ideal gentleman will come along and surprise you."

Maybe there would be some honorable, trustworthy gentleman who came along and slipped past her defenses, but Daphne wouldn't count on it. That blithely hopeful part of herself was too bruised.

"Goodness, is that our party?" Selina had pulled back the curtain over the carriage window and stared out at a gathering of a dozen well-dressed gentleman and fashionable ladies. "I had no idea Lord Knowles had invited so many."

Daphne bent to survey the group too and spotted a tall, broad-shouldered figure with tousled dark hair.

Her stomach plummeted to her kid boots. She had caused the large group to increase by one man last evening. After leaving Lord Windham in the library, she'd spoken to Lord Knowles, who promised he'd invite Windham.

Now his presence would be for naught, except to allow him a firsthand view of disappointment, especially if Strathmere intended some grand, romantic proposal.

Perhaps she should warn him.

"Goodness, is that Windham?" Selina leaned a bit farther toward the window. "Perhaps he does intend to pursue me in earnest?"

“Would that persuade you to decline Strathmere’s offer?”

Selina pressed her gloved hands to her elegant silk skirt and nibbled her lower lip.

“I don’t think so.” She lifted her gaze to Daphne.

“The thought of never kissing Matthew again...” She lowered her lashes at that admission.

“I can’t bear to think of never spending time with him again, whereas Windham disappeared for two weeks and I hardly missed him. ”

“Yet now he’s back.” Daphne looked out at him again, then she surveyed the group as their carriage finally moved up among the queuing vehicles. “I don’t see Strathmere.”

“Not yet, but I have a feeling Lady Beatrice was right.” Suddenly, Selina didn’t sound worried. She sounded hopeful.

Lord Knowles stepped forward to hand them each down from the Lytton carriage. Then he offered his arm for Selina to take, and the group proceeded toward the ornate ironwork entrance gate of the gardens.

Daphne stepped aside and let her gaze wander to the dark-haired nobleman near the back of the assembled group. He returned her look as if he’d been waiting for her to notice him and immediately strode over to offer her his arm.

“How are you?” he asked.

The warmth in his voice wrapped around her, as comforting as it was enticing. For a moment, she could almost imagine he’d come here for her. For a moment, Daphne

forgot that a gentleman pursuing her wasn't what she wanted at all.

"I'm well, my lord." Daphne glanced up at him. His attention was still on her. Intently. "And I thank you again."

"He won't trouble you again."

"What did you do?" A wave of apprehension slowed her steps.

Windham slowed too, and they stepped off the gravel path together while the rest of the group proceeded toward the Palm House, a vast glass-domed structure with plants visibly arching against the inside of the glass.

"I merely spoke to him before he left the ball last evening and made it clear what would befall him if he attempted to bother you ever again."

Daphne swallowed hard. "Then I thank you once more."

"Trust me, Miss Bridewell. It was my pleasure to assist you." His green eyes glowed in the morning sun, and he looked at her as if she was far more interesting than any of the natural beauty around them.

Then he smiled, and Daphne's pulse sped despite her insistence that she needed to cease feeling...anything for him.

"And I must thank you," he said in a lighter tone, "for getting Knowles to invite me today." He glanced toward the group as they drew closer to the Palm House. "Lady Selina seems in high spirits."

Daphne pressed a hand to her middle. She had to get ahold of herself—her reactions, her thoughts where this man was concerned.

And she had to figure out how to break it to Lord Windham that the lady he wanted so much that he'd asked for her help to win Selina would soon accept another man's proposal.

As he and Miss Bridewell caught up with the others, Cassian told himself that he should be showing Lady Selina a bit of attention, as this was the last time he'd ever encounter her on Julian's behalf.

Yet, as happened every time he was near her, he couldn't seem to take his eyes off of Daphne Bridewell.

Today, the bright day seemed to gild the golden strands in her hair and lightened her eyes to a shade akin to the summer sky over their heads.

He noticed a beauty mark near her upper lip and another at the edge of her cheek, and he barely resisted the urge to reach out and draw a line between them across her skin.

Though, as also tended to happen when they were in the company of others, she seemed to be attempting to avoid paying him excessive notice.

Then again, she also seemed genuinely interested in the plant life around them.

At each new species of palm, she stopped to study it, making little appreciate sounds as she took in the fronds and then bent to read the metal plaques that listed the species' Latin names and region of origin. Sometimes the donor was noted too.

Cassian studied them as well, out of curiosity, but the chance to keep close to Miss Bridewell was appealing too.

As he read one plaque, he recognized the name of the donor. "Good grief, I had no idea Carruthers had donated to Kew."

Miss Bridewell scanned the plaque and then shot him a quizzical look. “You’re acquainted with Lieutenant Commander Carruthers of HMS Endeavor ?”

Damn and blast .

“I am.” Surely Julian had met all sorts during his time in London.

Miss Bridewell straightened and turned to him. “Your brother a navy man, isn’t he? I just recalled that you mentioned it once.”

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Cassian froze, and his tongue refused to obey and utter some vague comment, then move on from the moment. Because what he truly wanted was to tell her the truth right then and there. To let her see him as himself, not some poor imitation of his brother.

Her brows drew together as the silence between them stretched.

“There’s something I must tell you, Miss Bridewell.” The moment the words were out, he could breathe easier, as if a weight had begun lifting from his chest.

“Yes?”

“The brother you asked about?—”

On the point of confessing all to her right there in the sultry air of the Palm House, a noise rippled through the others in their group. A collective gasp.

“Oh heavens, it’s happening,” Miss Bridewell said cryptically.

“What’s happening?” Cassian took a few steps to see past those who’d gathered on one of the paths of the glass structure. They were quite far ahead. He’d been happily strolling slowly with Miss Bridewell.

At the far edge of the Palm House, he saw a tall, bronze-haired nobleman, who was impeccably dressed and seemed fixed on the lady before him. When she turned, he caught a glimpse of the lady’s profile—Lady Selina.

Then Miss Bridewell touched Cassian, and his thoughts scattered. She'd reached out a hand and clasped his—their bare fingers brushing against each other for a tantalizing moment.

“I’m so sorry, Lord Windham.”

Cassian, he wanted to shout. Just once, he wanted to hear her speak his true name.

When she made to pull away, he instinctively wrapped his hand around hers.

“What are you apologizing for?”

Before she could answer, a shout of “hurrah” rose up among the guests Knowles had invited. Then they all broke into applause.

Miss Bridewell winced and squeezed his hand. “For your disappointment,” she said softly. “I know it will be great, and I would not have invited you if I’d known...” She seemed so forlorn that he had the urge to soothe her, to wrap her in his arms.

“Oh, Daphne!” Lady Selina emerged from the crush.

Miss Bridewell immediately dropped his hand, and Lady Selina seemed to notice him for the first time all morning.

The debutante’s joy dimmed only for a moment. “I do hope you’ll understand, Lord Windham,” she said, barely able to contain her beaming smile.

“Understand?” Cassian murmured.

But Lady Selina had already turned away from him to huddle close to Miss Bridewell. She thrust out her left hand, and Daphne took it to examine the sparkling

ruby and diamond band on Lady Selina's finger.

Bloody rotting hell . Her beaming smile, the eye-catching ring, the other gentlemen slapping the bronze-haired man on the back. He'd failed Julian.

"Is it not perfection?" Lady Selina whispered.

"It's absolutely beautiful," Miss Bridewell agreed, her lovely blue eyes lifting to Cassian and brimming with regret.

All he wanted was a moment alone with her.

His gut twisted with guilt at the thought of failing his twin, yet his chest was full of another feeling entirely.

The whole point of this ruse had come unraveled.

The engagement was sealed, and Lady Selina looked incandescently pleased.

Perhaps she had once fancied Julian, but now another man had won her hand, and apparently her heart.

Cassian had always believed in fate, unlike his brother. Julian was born to inherit; Cassian had been meant for the sea. And now it seemed that Julian was destined to marry someone other than Lady Selina Lytton.

He dreaded telling his brother that he'd lost him the chance to marry his heart's desire. Yet Julian had always known the lady's favor would be a contested prize. That had been the root of this whole charade.

And perhaps it made him a selfish bastard, but Cassian breathed a sigh of relief at the

sense of being freed. No more lies. No more pretending.

He was damned well going to tell Daphne Bridewell the truth.

And before he said goodbye to her forever, he was going to hear her speak his name.

She'd drifted off with Lady Selina, and all the other ladies in their party had circled around too.

Cassian bided his time, continuing on the Palm House's path and examining the specimens until the cluster of ladies dispersed and it was decided that the group would move on to take a stroll around the pond toward the arboretum.

Cassian stepped forward just as Miss Bridewell started in his direction.

"Shall we walk together toward the Temperate House?" he suggested.

She glanced back once as the group that now included Lady Selina's intended made their way out of the Palm House. Once they were out of view, she turned back and nodded.

"I'd like that. I hear there are extraordinary camellias there."

"They're a favorite of mine." Camellias were some of his most prized specimens back in his Scottish greenhouse.

"You studied the plaques in the Palm House closely," he said as they took to the broad gravel path in the opposite direction of the rest of Lord Knowles's party. "Are you interested in botany?"

"Not so much botany, but horticulture. I love to grow plants. I grew up tending my

family's garden in Derbyshire, and it always felt a bit like magic to plant a seed the size of a pinhead and watch it flourish into something grand." A little smile curved her lips.

"I feel the same."

"Do you garden?" The notion seemed to surprise her.

"I do. Does that seem odd?"

"A little." She studied his face a moment before looking ahead toward the Temperate House. "Yet again, you surprise me, my lord."

"I have a greenhouse back home where I grow specimens I've collected from all parts of the world."

"That sounds marvelous." She arched brow as she looked over at him. "You've traveled a great deal?"

"I have. Over many years." He wanted to confess why.

"Do you tend to the plants yourself?" she asked skeptically.

"Of course. There's something terribly satisfying about sinking your hands into the earth, pruning a plant so it can flourish, or even tending it day after day, watching a bud form and then bloom."

"It takes patience."

"And a bit of hope."

She laughed. "I have plenty of hope. It's patience I struggle with."

"Do you?" The confession surprised him.

He recalled her at the Harringtons' dinner party, making conversation with even the most boring of lordlings and never revealing a bit of impatience at inane chatter about hounds and horses.

"It's not something I admit to many people, and my family certainly doesn't see me that way. I can be long-suffering when it's required," she admitted with a rueful grin.

He didn't like the thought of her suffering. Ever. And he certainly never wanted to be the cause.

"There's something I must say to you, Miss Bridewell." Cassian looked around at those queuing to enter the Temperate House, longing for a private moment with her.

"I know today must have been a shock," she said, her voice full of sympathy. "I should have warned you. I didn't know how to say it."

Of course. She would think he was bothered by Lady Selina's engagement.

"She seems pleased with her choice." Even with the guilt he felt over failing Julian, he couldn't muster any genuine regret in his tone. "I can only wish them the best."

She tipped her head and studied him. "I thought you harbored hopes of offering for her yourself."

"No, I did not." Bloody hell, this was a tangled mess. "Is there a place where we could speak privately?"

Her eyes widened as if it was the last thing she'd expected him to say.

Then their chance came to enter the Temperate House, and he escorted her into the balmy air inside the glass structure. The verdant smell of various flourishing greenery was almost as enticing as her floral scent.

For a while they merely proceeded along like the other visitors, appreciating the beautiful specimens from all over the globe.

When they reached the camellias, she turned to him with a beaming smile that made his pulse kick up. "They don't disappoint. How lovely they are."

"Yes," he agreed, but he didn't mean the flowers.

As if she sensed it, warmth rushed into her cheeks. The same shade as the nearby *camellia japonica*.

"I cannot meet you alone, Lord Windham." Her voice dropped to a near whisper. "But my sister and brother-in-law are hosting a small dinner party this evening, if you'd like to come."

He'd not yet purchased a ticket to depart London, nor arranged for a telegram to be sent to Julian. Heaven help him, he wanted more time with Daphne Bridewell and the chance to give her the honesty she deserved.

"I'll be there."

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“Good grief, I missed one ball, and yet there’s a novel’s worth of events to sort out.” Ivy had listened with rapt attention as Daphne recounted all that happened at the Bancroft ball and then at Kew Gardens.

“Not quite a whole novel’s worth.” Daphne had told her sister almost everything. She’d left out the fact that she’d touched Windham—that they’d held onto each other—and that he’d lent her his tailcoat.

They seemed too intimate, and yet she couldn’t stop thinking about those moments. His coat had smelled of his scent, nothing perfumed, just the clean hints of citrus and clove shaving soap. After she’d returned the garment to him, his scent had lingered on her skin.

“What novel are we discussing?” Lily, their eldest sister and Duchess of Edgerton, asked as she joined them in the drawing room.

She wore a Worth gown of cobalt blue that none of them could have dreamed of affording a year ago, when they’d lost their home in Derbyshire. Now, Lily had fully embraced her role as duchess and had become one of the most popular hostesses in London.

“Not a novel. Events related to Lord Windham,” Ivy told her before Daphne could stop her.

“Ah,” Lily said with the flash of a smile. “The earl we’ve added to tonight’s guest list.” She took a spot on the settee next to Daphne and cast her a quizzical look. “He’s a friend of yours?”

Daphne swallowed and flicked her gaze from one sister to the other, both of whom watched her expectantly.

“Yes,” she said, “he’s a friend.” Her cheeks warmed to betray her, of course. She was dreadful at fibbing. As dreadful as she was at knowing which gentlemen to trust.

“He was a suitor of Lady Selina Lytton’s,” Ivy added. “But no longer, since she’s caught herself a marquess.”

Daphne would have glared at Ivy if she thought it would do any good. But it wouldn’t, so she sighed with resignation instead.

Lily arched both brows. “Oh, yes, I did hear about the Lytton-Strathmere engagement. The marquess’s mother attended my tea yesterday. I take it both families are quite pleased with the match.”

“Selina seems happy too,” Daphne added, recalling her friend’s enthusiasm when discussing Strathmere.

“And now Lord Windham is coming to dinner,” Ivy put in, her tone arch and pointed. “Perhaps his interest has turned elsewhere.”

“Would that be welcome?” Lily asked softly.

“No,” Daphne responded with forced coolness. “He did me a kindness, so I invited him to dinner. And he likes gardening and camellias.”

Lily’s face softened with a slow smile, while Ivy wore her signature knowing smirk.

“You’re both going to be disappointed,” Daphne insisted. “We share an interest and have spoken a few times. Nothing more.”

But it was more. From the moment they'd collided at the Ellburtons' ball, something had shifted. He'd been different, and her reaction to him had been...what it had never been before.

Every encounter with him caused her guard to slip a bit more.

She couldn't deny the way his gaze always seemed to find her, nor how it stirred a hope she told herself she could no longer trust where handsome men were concerned.

The incident with Moreland had smothered it for a while, but now some fragile flicker seemed to ignite every time she looked Lord Windham's way.

Opening her heart to another man felt unthinkable, and yet all she could think about was Lord Windham—the moment he'd burst into the library, the fact that he'd come and sought her out at all.

Did he feel something for her? And, more importantly, did she wish him to?

It would mean trusting again, opening herself up to being hurt again.

A knock sounded at Edgerton Houses's front door. Daphne shot up from the settee, her nerves jangling.

Lily rose more gracefully. "It seems the guests have begun arriving. If it's Lord Windham, do show him the garden," she said to Daphne. "We've had lanterns lit, and you can point out the new additions to our tea rose collection that you selected."

Rose breeding was one of Daphne's pet interests, and Lily and her brother-in-law, Griffin, had encouraged her to make suggestions about improving Edgerton House's garden.

“I might do that,” Daphne agreed, if only to stop Lily from looking at her with such a mischievous glint in her eye.

Luckily, the arriving guests soon claimed all of her sister’s attention.

Simons, the Edgerton’s London butler, announced Lady and Lord Cranmore, who Daphne and Ivy had met at previous dinner parties. The viscount and his wife fell into conversation with Lily, and soon Griffin entered the drawing room to help welcome guests.

Ivy approached to stand next to Daphne, just as they’d gotten used to doing at the edges of London ballrooms.

“Not all men are like Moreland,” Ivy said quietly, keeping her gaze fixed on the drawing room threshold.

Daphne side-eyed her sister. “This from the lady who thinks every man should be investigated thoroughly.”

Ivy shrugged. “Seeking knowledge is never a mistake. And it’s better to be forewarned.”

“And have you learned anything about Lord Windham?”

Ivy flashed a smile. “I’m pleased to say I can uncover no devilry where the Earl of Windham is concerned. He seems amiable and well-liked. The family is without scandal too, as far as I’ve been able to determine. One brother was in naval service. No sisters.”

“You’ve been busy.”

Ivy finally turned to look at Daphne. “I had a feeling it might become relevant.”

Daphne couldn't help smiling.

“The Earl of Windham,” Simons intoned a moment later.

A shiver of anticipation chased down Daphne's back as she watched the drawing room doorway, and as soon as he stepped into the room, his dark green gaze fixed on her.

She strode forward to greet him, fully aware that Lily and Ivy would watch the whole exchange.

“You came.” Daphne didn't quite know what to do with her hands or her thoughts, and it seemed she didn't even recall how to make polite conversation with a gentleman anymore.

“Were you hoping I wouldn't?” he asked teasingly.

“Of course not.” Daphne closed her eyes and willed her heart to stop beating so fiercely. “Have you met my brother-in-law?”

“I haven't.” He looked suddenly ill at ease and lifted his gaze to take in the dinner guests gathered in the drawing room.

Daphne turned to seek out Griffin, but he and Lily were already approaching.

“Windham, good of you to come.” Griffin reached out a hand as if he knew the earl well, despite what Windham had just told her. “Your support on the railway bill was much appreciated.”

“Of course,” Windham said a bit woodenly.

It struck Daphne as peculiar—Windham claiming unfamiliarity with Griffin, when it seemed they’d interacted in the House of Lords. The inconsistency pricked at her, quiet but insistent. Had he forgotten?

“Daphne tells me you’re as fond of gardens as she is,” Lily said with a bright smile. “You must see the roses she discovered for the townhouse’s garden.”

“I didn’t discover them,” Daphne felt compelled to add. “French rose breeders are coming up with some exciting new varieties.”

Windham turned a smile Daphne’s way. “I’d love to see them.”

“We’re still awaiting a few guests,” Lily said, “so there’s time now.” She cast a look at Ivy, who immediately stepped forward.

“May I join you too?” Ivy asked.

Windham inclined his head. “Of course.”

Daphne knew Ivy was a terribly lackadaisical chaperone, but if it made Lily feel better to have her accompanied, so be it.

They headed out onto the back garden’s paving stones and paused. Daphne pointed to the line of roses. “We could start there.”

“Lead the way,” he said in a low voice that put an odd lump in her throat.

Ivy headed off to one of the cast-iron benches in the center of the garden, settled near a lantern on a post, and pulled a slim book from her skirt pocket. Ivy always kept

reading material at hand.

“This one is called Madame Caroline Testout,” Daphne said, pointing to the first rose along the garden’s border.

“A striking color,” he said.

“It is very pretty, isn’t it?” Daphne felt his gaze on her, not on the perfect pink rose specimen.

“Very,” he agreed. “The same shade as your blushes.”

“Is it?” Daphne chuckled and then realized, with a bit of mortification, that she was, in fact, blushing. Of late, it seemed to happen whenever she was alone with Lord Windham.

He didn’t chuckle in response. Indeed, there was a quiet intensity to him tonight.

“There’s something I must confess to you,” he said as they approached the next rose variety.

“Yes, you said as much at Kew. I’m listening.”

He glanced over to where Ivy sat.

“You want more privacy,” she concluded.

Though she knew she shouldn’t, she reached for his hand and led him farther into the garden, toward some hedges, where they could be hidden from view.

Once they stood in the shadows, she considered releasing his hand but didn’t.

“Daphne,” he breathed, his voice so low it made her shiver. “I’m leaving London tomorrow, but before I go?—”

Daphne tugged her hand from his. “You’re leaving.” The two words made her throat burn. Tears welled, and she was furious at herself for being such a fool. Again. “Selina is spoken for, and so now you have no reason to stay. Is that it?”

“No. Selina isn’t my concern.” He lifted his hand as if he might touch her face, and heaven help her, she wanted him to. “I wish I could stay. I wish I could—” He dipped his head and bent closer. “I wish I could offer you all that you deserve.”

Daphne rested a hand against his chest to brace herself because she was suddenly unsteady and touching him felt essential.

“Then stay,” she whispered.

She felt an urgency well up inside her, as if the moment was consequential but might slip through her fingers.

When he dipped his head, a curl fell across his forehead, and she reached up impulsively to stroke it back. The gesture seemed to embolden him. He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her closer.

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It felt so good to be snuggled against him that she let her eyes slide shut for a moment. It felt achingly right. As if she was secure in his arms—safe in a way she hadn't felt in weeks—surrounded by his heat, his scent, the wisp of his breath against her skin.

“What is this?” he whispered.

She didn't wonder for a moment what he meant. He spoke of the pull between them. Despite her fears, despite how fragile her heart still felt, this...magnetism between them was powerful. Undeniable.

“It's dangerous,” she whispered, and yet she didn't let him go. Didn't want him to let her go. “It's come on so sudden, and I feel like the worst of friends.”

“No,” he insisted, “you've done nothing wrong. I'm at fault. I've taken advantage of your kindness, your willingness to help others.”

Daphne scoffed. “I hardly helped you. I regretted agreeing to do so almost immediately and then all your hopes were dashed the next day.”

He tipped his head, looking up into the sapphire stretch of clear night sky above them. When he looked at her again, he seemed overcome with some emotion.

“They weren't my hopes, Daphne.” A flicker of a grimace tightened his lips. “I haven't been honest. I wanted to fulfill my brother's wishes in regard to Lady Selina.”

Daphne tried to make sense of what he was saying. “Your brother wanted you to

court Selina?”

“He did, and my desire to do what he asked of me was so great that I failed to foresee the consequences. Though I’m not sure I could have predicted you.” He smiled, but it was quick and fleeting, like the grimace had been.

“Kiss me.” The words whispered out before she could stop them, shocking her. The urge was impulsive, and impulse had gotten her nothing but heartache. She’d learned that lesson, hadn’t she? And yet she had no desire to take them back.

He reached up and traced her cheek with the backs of his fingers, stroked along her chin and then held his finger there, studying her face as if he was determined to memorize every feature.

“You won’t want me to.”

“I do want you to.” A month or so ago, she’d almost given away her first kiss to a man unworthy of even a moment of her attention.

Now, she was in the arms of a man she was drawn to beyond all reason, and even if he was going to leave London, she wanted him to be the first man she ever kissed. “Please.”

The word had barely slipped out before he dipped his head and brushed his lips against hers, softly, gently, as if he was waiting for her to come to her senses and push him away.

She didn’t. Wrapping her fingers around his lapel, Daphne tugged him closer, pulling herself up and kissing him back with all the yearning he’d stoked in her—despite her plan to never hope again.

He groaned as he deepened the kiss, letting her feel his hunger. He took her mouth again and again, his hand stroking up her back to pull her as close as he could get her.

The past didn't matter. Whatever came next didn't matter. Only this moment.

Distantly, she heard a sound echoing through the garden. Then footsteps.

Lord Windham immediately lifted his head, though he still held her close. Daphne was grateful for it. She was breathless and her knees felt as firm as warm jelly.

"Dinner," Ivy whispered from the other side of the hedges.

Daphne stroked up his chest, resting her hand on the center of his chest. She was not alone in these wild, undeniable feelings. His heart thrashed strong and fierce beneath her palm.

"Dinner," she whispered.

"We should go in." His voice emerged deliciously rough.

She forced herself to step out from behind the hedges.

Ivy had already gone ahead of them and stood waiting on the paving stones that led back into Edgerton House.

He held her hand as they made their way inside, only releasing her once they stepped over the threshold. As they entered the dining room, Daphne was not at all surprised to note that Lily had seated her next to Julian.

She strode over to take her seat, then realized he was no longer behind her.

Looking back, she found he'd stalled at the dining room threshold, his eyes wide and fixed on a spot across the room.

She followed the direction of his gaze and realized he'd noted the arrival of his twin ten-year-old sisters, Marigold and Hyacinth.

It shocked many guests that the two were invited to dine with adults during dinner parties, but it was a practice Lily and Griffin had begun shortly after their marriage.

"You have twin sisters." He sounded dumbstruck.

"I do. It may seem strange that they join these gatherings."

"No, not at all. Your family is a loving one."

She led him down the table. The other guests were still gathering, chatting as they took their seats.

"Hyacinth, Marigold."

The girls were dark-haired and green-eyed, like Daphne's other younger sister, Ivy. Like Cassian and Julian.

He could tell from his first glimpse of them that they were very distinct personalities, like he and Julian had always been.

Some expected twins to be alike in most respects; they rarely were.

Unlike in many families, it seemed the Bridewells encouraged the sisters' differences.

Many twins of their age would be expected to dress alike.

Not the Bridewell twins. One wore a vivid magenta-colored dress.

The other wore a muted gray-blue one, and he couldn't help but notice the shell on a ribbon around her neck.

He immediately felt an affinity for that nod to the sea.

"How do you do?" he said to the one in the bright-hued gown. She held a notebook clutched under her arm.

"Pleased to meet you, my lord," Marigold Bridewell said, dropping into a practiced curtsy.

"And Miss Hyacinth Bridewell," he said to the other, then gestured toward her necklace. "A keepsake from the seaside?"

"Oh," she said, reaching up to touch her fingers to the queen scallop shell with lines of pink—like the roses Daphne had showed him—running through it. "It's from a family trip to Margate."

Hyacinth Bridewell beamed to have the keepsake noticed. "Are you fond of the seaside, my lord?"

"I am. Very much so." Cassian glanced at Daphne.

In truth, he'd never felt more at sea than he did now. After that kiss.

He'd wanted it. Good God, he couldn't have said no to save himself. When she'd asked him, he'd wondered for a moment if he was lost in some dream.

But now, with the taste of her still on his lips, guilt crept in.

That kiss had signified more than mere desire. She'd given him her trust. She'd given him a gift.

And he was the very devil to have taken what she offered when she didn't even know his name.

Dinner with the Bridewells and their small handful of friends was both a blessing he did not deserve and a reminder of what he'd given up when he'd vowed to remain alone for the rest of his days.

The family engaged in lively and open discussion. When mention of the remaining social events of the Season came up, Daphne glanced his way.

Perhaps she hoped he'd change his mind and stay, but if anything, the kiss reminded him why he needed to go. He was not the man she thought he was, and she deserved a man who would never disappoint her as he was about to do.

As soon as dinner service ended, guests made their way to the drawing room to continue their discussions. A few made their way out to the lantern-lit gardens.

"I should go," he forced himself to say when she joined him at the edge of the drawing room. "I depart on the early train."

She stared at him. "You're still leaving?"

"I must. Will you walk with me to the door?"

"If you like." Keeping her distance, never looking his way, she led him to the foyer of the Edgerton townhouse, where a servant returned his hat and gloves.

"Did you know," he asked, "that I am a twin, Miss Bridewell?" His heart thrashed as

if it might break free of his chest. This had to be done, he told himself. And he had to face the consequences of his deceit.

“No.” She tipped her head. “I did not know that.”

“We are very different, my brother and I, except for the physical resemblance. Many cannot tell us apart. You did. You are the only who noticed the difference.”

Her breath hitched, and she recoiled as though the weight of the revelation had physically struck her.

“What are you saying?” The lovely flush of pink drained from her cheeks, fading as she paled. “That you’re not Julian Rourke, Viscount Windham?”

Cassian had thought the rifle bullet that tore through his arm and side during his naval service was the most pain he’d ever experience.

But now, watching the hope in her eyes dim and twist into horror, was just as searing and sudden.

Except now, all the pain gathered in the center of his chest. Right where she’d touched him but an hour ago.

“Forgive me, Daphne. I am not Lord Windham. I’m Cassian, his brother.”

“He never came back to London,” she breathed. “You lied...to everyone.”

Cassian bowed his head, then forced it up again. Forced himself to see the pain he’d caused.

“I should have told you the truth the moment I met you.”

She retreated a step back, then another, as if revolted by his nearness. “Please go,” she whispered.

“Daphne—”

“Please go,” she said more fiercely, her voice breaking as tears welled in her eyes.

So he did. He left Edgerton House, walking away from the only woman who’d ever made him wish for the sort of future he’d long told himself he did not deserve.

And tonight, he’d proved himself undeserving by causing her pain. He’d never forgive himself for that. And now, all that was left was to tell his brother of his failure on his behalf too.

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Daphne turned on her side and closed her eyes. A minute later, she shifted onto her back and stared at the four-post bed's canopy above her. It had been hours since that moment at the front door.

Liar . Blackguard . Deceiver . In her mind, she couldn't stop railing at Cassian Rourke.

How dare he be so kind, so attentive, so impossible not to want? How dare he kiss her like he could never get enough of her, and then—on the cusp of walking out of her life forever—confess that it had all been a lie?

She lifted her hand and touched her lips, remembering his mouth on hers, the hunger and urgency in his kiss. The heat of his hands on her body. She'd felt the same urgency, and heaven help her, she'd loved the hard strength of his body against hers. Wrapped in his arms, she'd felt cared for. Safe.

Yet she hadn't been safe. She'd been on the verge of giving her heart to another deceiver. It frightened her now to think of what she might have allowed if Ivy had not come upon them when she did.

None of it made sense. Why pretend to be his brother? And where was the real Lord Windham?

Apparently, she was never going to learn her lesson because all she could think of was being reckless. Going to him. Demanding answers.

Sitting up, she lit the lamp on her bedside table and settled against the headboard.

As she debated with herself, she heard a soft scratch against her door.

“Are you awake?” Ivy whispered from the other side.

Daphne climbed out of bed and opened the door. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“I saw your light.”

“Why are you wandering the halls when everyone else has gone to bed?”

“I wasn’t wandering. I came to check on you,” Ivy said, holding her candle a bit higher to get a clear look at Daphne from the darkened hallway. “I was worried when you left the dinner party so abruptly after Lord Windham’s departure.”

Daphne fought a sudden urge to cry. “Come in.”

Ivy stepped into Daphne’s room and closed the door behind her. When Daphne climbed up on the bed, Ivy settled on the edge, facing her.

“What is it? Something to do with Windham?”

“Yes. But he’s not Windham.”

Ivy’s dark brows dipped. “Beg pardon?”

“The man who sat at table with us tonight was Lord Windham’s twin.”

“Good heavens.” Ivy laid a hand across her mouth, then dropped it to grip the edge of her skirt. “Oh Daphne, what a twist. Why didn’t I see it?” Ivy sounded more perturbed by her own failure of observation than the fact that she and Daphne and everyone else had been duped for days.

“In retrospect, it makes a lot more sense.” Ivy lifted a finger and tapped it against her cheek. “The scar. More likely that a naval captain might have such a thing than a pampered earl.”

Daphne stared at her sister, jaw slack. “What does any of that matter? He deceived us, Ivy. Don’t you want to punch him like you’re always yearning to do to Moreland?”

“Of course, but I’m mostly curious why he engaged in such subterfuge. Did he explain?”

“Something about his brother’s wishes. Frankly, I didn’t let him explain. I told him to leave.”

Ivy pressed her lips together and stared at the waning embers in the fireplace grate. “I can understand your anger. Especially after being deceived so recently by another gentleman, even if they had very different reasons for their duplicity.”

Daphne narrowed her eyes at her sister. “You think I should have given him a chance to explain?”

Ivy shook her head. “I don’t think you owed him anything. I’m just the curious sort.” She offered a soft smile, then reached out a hand to clasp Daphne’s. “Forgive me for not listening to you when you were so convinced he’d changed.”

“I knew something was off.”

“You did.”

“I’m not hopelessly gullible then?” Daphne waved her free hand. “Never mind. You need not reassure me.”

“You’re not gullible. You were sharp-eyed in this case. You know that Hyacinth and Marigold can fool people when they wish to. Yet you noticed the differences with Captain Rourke immediately.”

“Captain Rourke.” Daphne loathed the little flutter in her throat and the rush of warmth in her belly when she spoke his name. “What did you learn about him in your inquiries?”

“That he served for years in Her Majesty’s naval service, and admirably so, by all accounts. That he left service after an injury and?—”

“The scar on his face?”

“No, the information I gathered was that he was struck in the arm and chest by a rifle bullet. In Egypt.”

Those details put a lump in Daphne’s throat. As angry as she was with the man, the notion of him hurt and bleeding made tears threaten to fall again. She blinked them away.

Stroking her fingers against the pleating at the wrist of her nightdress, she looked at Ivy.

“What are you thinking of doing?” Ivy asked, leaning closer as if eager to join in with whatever she might have planned.

“Something reckless.”

Ivy tipped her head, a smile teasing at the corners of her mouth. “Tell me what it is and I’ll either help or try to talk you out of it.”

“He’s leaving London on a morning train.”

Ivy glanced at the mantel clock. “It’s nearly eleven in the evening.”

“So we’ll be very quiet when we sneak out.”

Ivy crossed her arms, stared at Daphne, seeming to ponder the prospect. “If we get caught, Lily will never forgive me for assisting you.”

“But?” Daphne could hear the excitement in her sister’s tone.

“But I believe you deserve an explanation, and there’s only one way to get it. Assuming he’s now done with fibbing and will tell you the truth.”

Daphne got out of bed and went to her wardrobe, pulling out a simple gown and her black hooded cloak. She pulled out another dark cloak and brought it over to Ivy.

“We’re going now?” Ivy asked, her voice lifting with eagerness.

“Yes,” Daphne told her as she slipped on a petticoat and then reached for her corset. “Before I can talk myself out of it.”

Ivy, who still wore her gown from dinner, held out Daphne’s dress and helped her into it. Then they both donned cloaks. Daphne doused her bedside lamp, and Ivy collected the candle she’d brought with her.

Out in the hallway, all was quiet.

They quickly made their way down the stairs, then Ivy blew out her candle and left it on a side table in the front hall. Daphne unlatched the door and they slipped out into the night.

The door clicked shut behind them, the sound softened by the thick evening fog that drifted between the tall Georgian townhouses. Pausing at the top of the steps, Daphne held her skirts just above her ankles. Ivy glanced back toward the darkened windows of the house.

“This is reckless,” Ivy whispered, pulling her cloak tighter.

“I know,” said Daphne quietly, “but I refuse to let him vanish without telling me why.”

They’d already planned to seek a hansom in the next street over, which would be busier at this hour. Daphne gave her younger sister a nod, they clasped hands, and then they rushed along the pavement until they were fully out of view of Edgerton House.

The fire had burned down, but Cassian continued to stare at the ashes, twisting a long-ago drained brandy snifter in his hand. Though he wasn’t truly seeing anything in Julian’s elegant bedchamber at Windham House.

Images of Daphne filled his mind’s eye. Her fierce stare the night he met her.

Her soft smile as she lovingly examined every single specimen she passed at Kew Garden.

The way she’d closed her eyes for a moment when he’d held her in his arms, as if she savored it as much as he had.

Then the heat in her gaze after their kiss, followed by hurt and fury when she told him to leave.

He could still detect the light scent of her jasmine perfume on his skin. He’d never

forget that scent, or the kiss they'd shared, or the fleeting moment when they'd touched each other as if they could belong to one another.

What a fool he'd been. No, worse than a fool. He'd been a scoundrel to abuse her trust. No better than that blighter, Moreland.

Somewhere in the house, he heard the clip of a servant's footsteps, though he'd thought all of them had gone to bed at this hour.

A few moments later, footsteps sounded outside his bedchamber door.

Cassian stood and strode over to a footman on the other side.

"Callers to see you, Captain. Miss Camellia and her sister." The young man looked a bit beleaguered and had no doubt been roused from sleep.

"Thank you, Jacobs."

Cassian brushed past the young man and started toward the stairs, then stopped at the top and shoved a hand through his hair. His clothes were rumpled, he'd consumed too much brandy, and he likely looked like hell.

But for some mad reason, she was here.

He took the stairs quickly and heard the sisters conversing quietly in the front drawing room. When he pushed the door open, they both turned to face him.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, even though the sight of her made him feel as if some part of him had come alive again.

"I need answers from you," Daphne said, her tone firm.

“And she deserves them,” her sister added, hands perched on her hips.

“I agree.” Though he didn’t feel entirely worthy of being given such a chance.

“Then explain yourself to her, Captain Rourke.” Ivy Bridewell turned one weighted glance toward her sister. “I’ll wait in the hall.”

As she glided past him, Cassian turned his head. “The library’s across the hall, one door down, in case you find that preferable to the hall.”

“Obliged, Captain.” She arched one dark brow at him, and her eyes held an unmistakable warning. “See that you do not upset my sister.”

“Understood.”

After Ivy departed, he and Daphne stared at each other. She broke the moment first, tipping her head and gesturing at the two settees facing each other across a low table.

“Shall we sit?”

The distance was probably wise, though of course it wasn’t what he wanted. Even after hours of self-recrimination and self-loathing, he wanted nothing more than to reach for her.

Once they were both seated, she squared her gaze on him.

“Why did you lie to everyone?”

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He searched her eyes and detected none of the pain she'd let him see hours ago. She was in control now, pushing feelings away. Just like he tried to do.

"First..." His tongue felt thick, whether from the brandy he'd consumed or shame, he wasn't sure. "I am sorry for lying to you. I?—"

"To everyone."

Cassian bowed his head. "Yes, but the way I wronged you matters to me most."

"Why did you do it?" she repeated.

"The simplest explanation is that I did it for my brother." That conversation at Julian's bedside played in Cassian's mind, and it now seemed such a flimsy justification for what he'd done.

"Why would your brother want you to lie?"

"Because he thought he'd lose his chance at winning Lady Selina. He's back in Berkshire, letting a broken leg mend. He knew she'd be vied for."

"And now he's lost her anyway."

"Yes." Some part of him wanted to ask if he'd lost any chance with her. But it was nonsense. He was a broken man and had exiled himself for good reasons.

"What's the complicated answer?" she asked quietly, so softly that it almost slipped

past his defenses. Her gentleness made him want to tell her all his secrets.

But no. He could not subject her to the ugliness of his past. Not when he would never see her again after he returned to Scotland.

“I have never let my brother down.” He could admit that much, though it made him sound far more admirable than he was. “I’ve always considered him mine to protect.”

Her forehead pinched in a frown. “But he’s older, is he not? If only by minutes.”

“Does birth order always determine nature, Daphne?” He dared to address her familiarly because it was the last time he’d ever have the chance. “Is your oldest sister the strongest and your youngest the gentlest?”

“Fair point.” Her smile made his pulse kick up. “Marigold is the youngest and she’s almost as fierce as Ivy. My parents always thought I was the sweet, gentle one. Mild-mannered and soft-hearted, my aunt used to call me.”

Cassian couldn’t hold back a chuckle at that description.

“Do you disagree, Cassian ?”

Hearing her speak his name made his mouth dry and shot a flare of desire through him. He’d thought too many times of bringing her to pleasure and hearing her cry his name.

What if he confessed that to the sweetest, gentlest Bridewell sister?

“You do seem gentle,” he told her in a low voice.

He leaned forward on the settee, forearms resting on his knees, needing to get just a

couple of inches closer.

“But do I think you’re soft? Yes, if one is referring to your skin, your hair, your lips”—he studied each as he spoke of them—“but there’s nothing mild about you, Daphne Bridewell. ”

“No?” Her breath had quickened, bringing a flush to her cheeks, making her chest rise and fall against the hold of her corset.

“You’re the most vivid woman I’ve ever met.”

“I don’t require compliments, and they won’t make me forgive you.”

Cassian felt a smile tugging at his lips. Only she made him smile like a fool. “You’re worthy of all the compliments. You’re curious, loyal, and perhaps a little impulsive. I’d call it boldness.” His smile widened when she narrowed an eye at that. “I promise you only the truth now.”

She scoffed. “And how can I believe you?”

“You can’t. I don’t deserve your trust, but I’ve wanted it from the moment we met.”

“As you lied to me.”

“Yes.”

She turned away from him, examining the wallpaper behind his head, as if she could no longer bear looking at him. As if she loathed him that much.

“You could have told me the truth.” She edged forward on the settee too, her poise discarded as anger caused her eyes to flash. “Nothing could break my loyalty to my

sisters, and I would have understood the willingness to do anything for those you love.”

“I see that now.” Cassian nodded. “I was wrong. I should have told you.” He reached out a hand and then pulled it back. He had no right to touch her. “But you are loyal to Selina too.”

“So you feared I would have exposed you?”

“And I would have deserved it, but she would have hated Julian as a result.”

Daphne stunned him by rising from the settee and coming around to perch on his. She sat enticingly close and angled toward him as he turned to face her.

“I admire your loyalty to your brother. So I think I can forgive you.”

“Daphne—”

“But I want to know what was real and what was false. Between us.” With a sharp inhale, she slid closer. “Was the kiss real?”

“Every moment of it.”

She studied him as if looking for the truth in his eyes, beneath his skin, as if she could see as deep as his very soul. Then she closed the space between them.

Cassian didn’t move. Didn’t dare breathe.

Daphne leaned in, so near that he was surrounded by her sweet floral scent. She pressed her lips to his. Tentatively at first, then with a bit of the same boldness that had brought her to his door tonight.

Yet it wasn't the desperate, fiery kiss they'd shared before.

This one was slower, deliberate. She seemed to ask a question and offer him the answer at the same time.

Lifting a hand to his cheek, she let her warm palm linger against his skin.

Then she traced her fingers in a featherlight caress down the line of his scar.

Cassian reached for her waist—unable to stop himself—as if anchoring her would anchor him too.

He deepened the kiss, determined to convince her that, yes, their first kiss had been real. All of it had been real. Every look. Every moment he'd spent with her. And if he were a better man, it might still be.

But he wasn't.

He forced himself to stop, to break the kiss. As both of them breathed raggedly, he pressed his forehead to hers.

"I still have to go to Berkshire," he told her, his voice rough.

She pulled back, blinking as if confused. "What?"

"I won't allow Julian to read of Selina's engagement in some gossip rag."

Hurt rushed into her eyes again like a tide, turning the vibrant blue darker. "Loyalty."

"Yes." He leaned back, pulling away from her, though it felt as if something inside him was ripping apart. "But I need the distance too. And you..." His voice caught,

then he forced himself to say, “You deserve more, Daphne.”

“Why do you get to decide what I deserve?”

“Because I know what I am.” He stood and crossed to the fireplace, bracing a hand against the mantel. “You saw me as some polished nobleman, but I’m not that man. I’ve lied, manipulated, taken advantage of your kindness.”

“Cassian...”

He turned. “You should hate me, Daphne.”

“I don’t,” she said softly, standing up from the settee. “I suppose that’s the problem.”

He raked a hand through his hair. “Allow me to do the right thing and go. If I stay, I’ll want more. And I can’t seek more when I have nothing to give.”

They stood in silence. She seemed to be waiting for something—no doubt for him to be the man she thought he could be.

Finally, he stepped closer. “You make me wish I were a better man, and you must know that I’ll never forget these few days, or you.”

He reached for her hand and lifted it, pressing a kiss to her knuckles, then he let her go.

“Allow me to find a hansom for you and Ivy. I need to know you’ll get back safely.”

“No.” She clasped her hands together, notched her chin up. “We found our way here. We’ll find our way back.”

With that, she turned and headed for the drawing room door, stopping just as she reached the threshold. She didn't look back, only murmured, "Goodbye, Cassian."

And then she was gone.

It was right that she walked away. He reminded himself it was what he wanted.

So why did he feel so bloody shipwrecked? As if nothing inside him would ever feel whole again.

Three days later

“You must help me design my bouquet,” Selina insisted as she sat with Daphne in the Edgerton House conservatory. “I know no one else as fond of and knowledgeable about flowers.”

“I’d be happy to.” Daphne forced a smile, reminding herself for the umpteenth time that it had been three days since Cassian Rourke’s departure from London, and she must put the man out of her mind.

“Hurrah.” Selina beamed and clapped her hands before scooping up her teacup and taking a sip. “Mama would choose flowers because of their colors without a thought to their true meaning.” She winked at Daphne. “You taught me that. That flowers have a language of their own.”

Daphne stood from the settee they were both seated on and went to a shelf where she and Ivy had placed books they’d brought along with them to London, or new ones they’d acquired since arriving. Bookshop visits were a weekly jaunt for the Bridewell sisters.

“Which flowers are all about love?” Selina asked as Daphne settled next to her again.

“Many of them have some meaning related to love.” Daphne opened the book so they both could leaf through the pages. “We should have baby’s breath for certain.”

Selina bent to look at where Daphne pointed on the page. “Everlasting love. Oh, goodness, yes. I want that.”

Daphne flipped a few more pages as Selina looked on.

“Oh, the camellias look promising,” she said as she ran her finger along the list of meanings of the various colors of camellia blooms.

Daphne tensed, more affected than she wanted to be. “Yes, camellias are wonderful flowers.”

“Pink for longing, red for the flame of your heart.” Selina smiled as she read. “I like both of those.”

Daphne felt tears well and tried to will them away. She reached up to swipe at one before it could fall.

“Will you tell me what’s troubling you?” Selina asked softly, still sifting through the illustrations of flowers and their meanings. “I know you’re trying to hide it, so I said nothing.” She finally lifted her eyes to Daphne’s. “But I want to help if I can.”

“You can’t help, but I appreciate how much you want to.” Daphne smiled, and this time it wasn’t an effort. She truly appreciated Selina’s friendship, and she wanted to be happy for her good fortune, rather than fixating on her own heartache over a man she barely knew.

Selina sipped her tea, watching Daphne over the rim of her cup.

“I’ll be fine. I promise,” Daphne told her.

“If it’s Moreland, I want you to allow me to enlist Matthew’s aid. He’s connected to powerful men and even has contacts in the Home Office.”

“Can we get Moreland exiled from England?” Daphne teased.

Selina grinned. "I'd be willing to ask Matthew to try."

"It's not Moreland who has me acting like a fool."

"You're not a fool," Selina said firmly. "I won't allow you to speak of yourself that way for what that deceiver did."

Of course, Selina did not know she'd almost immediately set her heart on yet another deceiver. Maybe she wasn't a fool, but it seemed her heart was.

Though she did agree with Ivy's assessment. Moreland was vile, while Cassian had simply been blinded by loyalty, and she couldn't hate him for that.

"Is it Windham?" Selina asked softly.

"Why would you think so?"

"After his return to London..." Selina hesitated. "He seemed to notice you in a way he hadn't before. Indeed, I caught him watching you on several occasions."

Guilt flooded her cheeks with heat. "I'm sorry."

"You've nothing to apologize for. I had no claim on Windham." Whatever fondness she'd shown for him in the past, Selina seemed to feel no regret at all about choosing Strathmere.

"But you two did have something, did you not?"

Selina looked pensive, then selected a macaron from a plate of treats that had been delivered with the tea tray. She took a bite, dabbing at the corner of her mouth with her pinky before replying.

“We had a sort of flirtation. I liked how buoyant he was, how jovial. But you know how it is during the Season. The day after a ball, a gentleman sends bouquets to half a dozen ladies. Until the question is asked, no one has a claim on anyone else.” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug.

“It’s all a game.” A smile made her eyes sparkle. “Thanks to Matthew, I’m free of it.”

Daphne no longer cared about playing the game either, but she still felt ill at ease.

“I’d never betray you,” she told her friend.

Selina reached out and squeezed Daphne’s hand. “I never had my heart set on Windham. And when he disappeared, I knew he didn’t have his set on me either.”

Daphne winced. “He wasn’t being thoughtless, Selina. He’d broken his leg.”

“Goodness, did he?” Selina set her teacup aside and leaned in. “But how did he return so quickly? I once sprained my ankle and couldn’t dance for a week.”

Daphne licked her lips. Might as well have it all out in the open, even the parts that didn’t reflect well on her. “He didn’t return.”

Selina stilled, furrowing her brow. “But I saw him. I danced with him.”

“That was his twin. Captain Cassian Rourke.”

“Oh my.” Selina inched closer on the settee. “You mean to tell me that Captain Rourke pretended to be his brother? To what purpose?”

“So that he did not lose the chance to court you.”

“Good heavens.” Selina lifted a hand and twisted the pendant at her throat. “I truly had no notion he was that keen.” She tipped her head. “When did you know it wasn’t Windham?”

“I suspected there was something odd almost at once, but he only confessed it three nights ago. Before he left London.”

Selina reached for Daphne’s hand again, but this time, she kept a gentle hold on it. “So, Captain Cassian Rourke fancies you .”

“Not enough to keep him in London.” Daphne shook her head. “I wouldn’t have wanted him to stay. He lied and lied. For days.”

“On behalf of his brother.” Selina laughed softly.

“Windham did seem to see life as a performance. Why not let someone else take his part?” One brow arched high.

“The more curious bit is that a naval captain would be willing to do it.” Lifting one finger, she tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Perhaps it’s common among twins.”

“Marigold and Hyacinth have swapped places at times to see if anyone can tell,” Daphne admitted. “But they’re ten. He has no such defense.”

“You’re angry with him.”

“Of course, I am. He lied to me.” Somehow, she didn’t sound nearly as indignant about that fact as she should be.

“He did, but do you care for him?”

“That doesn’t matter now.” Daphne scoffed. “He’s gone.”

And yet she hadn’t stopped thinking about the man for more than hour since she’d last seen his face. She told herself it was anger that made her call him to mind again and again. But over the past days, her thoughts had felt less like anger and more like longing.

Selina observed her silently. “Do you know where he went?”

“Yes, to Berkshire. To tell Windham about your engagement.”

“You could write to him.”

“Why would I?” Daphne had felt the finality of their parting. He wouldn’t wish to hear from her. She couldn’t even imagine how a letter might begin. “I have nothing to say.”

Selina clasped her hand, then released it. “Whatever you decide, I shall support you. And Matthew will too.”

Daphne laughed at how easily Selina volunteered her future husband for any endeavor she might undertake. That was how marriage should be. A true partnership. But the foundation of such a union would need to be built on trust.

Selina settled back against the cushions and took up her teacup again. Daphne felt her assessing gaze. “Tell me one thing, my dear.”

“Yes?”

“How many times in the last three days have you thought of him?”

Daphne crossed her arms as if she could keep her secret rumination to herself. “A few,” she said lightly.

Selina’s smile turned mischievous. “Why don’t I believe you?”

“Because I’m terrible liar, unlike all the men who show the slightest interest in me.”

They both laughed.

“I do hope he comes back to London. I should like to meet Captain Cassian Rourke when he’s not pretending to be someone else.”

He wouldn’t. Daphne had felt it in that final goodbye. He never intended to see her again. Now it was only a matter of accepting that truth.

The soil gave way easily beneath Cassian’s fingertips. The irony was that in leaving the garden beds their mother had planted untouched and overgrown, the plants had turned to compost, making the soil rich.

Julian took after their father in that he didn’t give a damn about maintaining the gardens or the conservatory their mother had adored.

It had been built by his grandmother when she was dowager countess, constructed in a spot about a hundred yards away from the main manor house.

Cassian suspected his mother had relished that distance from their father as much as the flowers she tended so lovingly.

Often more lovingly, in fact, than she’d tended to her sons.

Their father hadn’t allowed her to dote.

All of her attempts were met with the earl's rage and, when that did not intimidate sufficiently, his violence.

Julian, in particular, was kept from their mother. Their father claimed too much time with Mama would make him soft and girlish. The miracle was that Julian had grown into a jovial, kind man despite the damage their father had inflicted.

He'd taken the news of Selina's engagement hard for all of two days. Then it was as if his optimistic nature could no longer linger in grief and regret. He'd begun to laugh and recommitted himself to learning to amble around efficiently on his crutches.

He'd also asked Cassian to stay in Berkshire a while before returning to Scotland.

And, of course, Cassian had agreed—not only did he not wish Julian to convalesce alone, but he carried a new weight of guilt, a sense of debt to his brother. If remaining in the English countryside would alleviate that, he'd remain.

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But he couldn't bear to be idle, so every day, he'd made his way out to his mother's overgrown, abandoned conservatory. He'd begun by clearing away debris, repairing what he could, and now he'd started to prepare the flower beds for seedlings.

"I'd thought to have the damned thing torn down." Julian's voice came from a distance as he used his crutches to maneuver toward the conservatory. "So why on earth are you determined to revive it?"

"I need something to do while I'm here." Cassian looked over his shoulder at his brother. "Why do you want to destroy it?"

The conservatory had been a lovely thing. The ceiling soared, all high arches and vaulted iron. Once, it had been painted cream and light had poured through every pane in the mornings. As a child, it seemed the light caught every leaf's shimmer, every petal's color.

Julian was breathing hard by the time he made it to the conservatory's threshold. "She isn't here to appreciate it anymore," he said simply. "Seemed presumptuous to try to keep it up the way she did."

Cassian stilled, then grabbed a rag and wiped his hands. "Then you think I should leave it?"

Julian tipped his head up and studied the high ceiling. "No, I think you're the only person who could bring it back in a way that would please her." He offered Cassian a smile, a little chagrined, a little sad. "You two spent time here together. I was more than a little envious."

While their father had insisted Julian spend his time with tutors, or learning to ride, or fence, or shoot, Cassian had stolen away to the conservatory.

Their mother hadn't always welcomed his presence, fearing their father might punish him for it.

But she'd soon seen it as something she could teach him—how to plant, weed, water, and trim.

How to train a vine, to deadhead flowers so that more would bloom.

She'd never seen the conservatory as a place for idleness.

She applied herself to it as passionately as their father had to his much more unsavory pastimes.

“Mother came here to distract herself,” Julian declared.

Cassian couldn't disagree.

“So what are you distracting yourself from?”

Cassian narrowed an eye at his brother. “Let us not revisit this topic.”

Julian worked his jaw pensively. “Could a certain pretty blonde with blue eyes and a penchant for Kew Gardens be what requires so much distracting toil?”

Cassian groaned. He'd told his brother too much. Not at first. When he'd returned to Hillcrest, he'd focused only on his own failure to secure Selina's favor on Julian's behalf. He'd dropped the news of her engagement and given his brother time to digest the disappointment.

But then they'd drowned their sorrows in too much brandy—more than Cassian had consumed in years—and by the next morning, Julian had details about Daphne, the Bridewells, and a certain kiss in a moonlit garden that he did not recall divulging.

“Do you know why I won't let this go?” he asked with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“Because you're trying to drive me mad?”

“Not quite.” Julian used his crutches—he'd become quite adept with them—to enter the conservatory.

“Have a care.” Some of the tiles were cracked, though Cassian had cleared a path to the center of the structure.

Julian was aiming for a wrought-iron chair, but he waved Cassian off when he tried to help him into it. Finally, he settled hard on the seat and let out a sigh.

“I won't let it go, brother dear, because of what you told me when you were in your cups.”

“Whatever I said was no doubt nonsense, and you must disregard it.” He winced at the memory of how his head and body had felt the next day. “Good God, I'm never drinking that much again.”

Julian chuckled. “Cass...you told me you loved her.”

Cassian's heart knocked so hard against his ribs, he thought Julian surely must have heard it. His brother didn't react as if he could, but Cassian heard the blood rushing in his ears.

“I knew Daphne Bridewell for all of four days, Jules. I doubt I would have proclaimed that I love her, no matter how soused I was.”

“You didn’t use the word itself,” Julian admitted, “but you spoke about her as if she was the most fascinating, lovely, desirable woman you’d ever met.”

Cassian dipped his head. All of that was undeniably true, but it didn’t matter. Because she was indeed all of those things, he wanted to see her far happier than he could ever make her.

“Yes?” Julian nudged, tipping his head to study Cassian’s face. “Suddenly tongue-tied, brother?”

“I hardly know her.”

His brother frowned and scratched his head. “What exactly does one need to know about another before falling in love? Is there a set of requirements that I’m unaware of?”

“You’re not going to bait me.”

“I fell in love with Selina the night I met her.”

Cassian said nothing. It wouldn’t do to point out his brother’s quick recovery after learning of Selina’s engagement. Perhaps Julian dealt with heartbreak as he did everything else in life—with a lightness that allowed him to return quickly to high spirits.

On the other hand, when Cassian imagined receiving word of Daphne’s engagement, his gut twisted into a painful knot and he yearned to be on a ship, sailing to the opposite side of the globe.

Then he reminded himself that caring for Daphne meant wanting what was best for her more than his own heart's selfish desire for her.

“Pretend you can go back to living like a brooding, solitary hermit if you like.”

That was exactly what he damn well intended.

“But I know you better than you think I do, brother,” Julian added cryptically. “Now, come back to the house with me. Cook has made your favorite warm blackberry charlotte with custard. She'll be vexed if we don't partake soon.”

Cassian dusted off his hands and laid his gardening tools aside. “I suppose when it comes to my stomach, I can be baited.”

“Don't worry,” Julian said as he got to his feet and shot him a mischievous grin. “I'll let you get back to distracting yourself and definitely not thinking of a pretty blonde soon enough.”

Cassian clapped him on the shoulder and then strode side by side with him back to the house.

His twin was right about one thing—the conservatory had proved to be a blessed distraction. But it didn't stop Daphne Bridewell from invading his thoughts. He'd begun to suspect nothing, for the rest of his life, would ever distract him enough to dim his memories of her.

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Daphne tugged at a weed, then another, working with practiced hands to clear space for the seedlings she'd cultivated over the past weeks.

She'd decided to sow some biennials. They were a reminder to have patience, for they'd give no glorious flowers this year, but tending them well promised blooms in the coming year.

At Selina's urging, she was trying to have patience with herself too. With her downtrodden mood. With her longing for a man she couldn't have. With the tears that came unbidden, just when she thought she'd put Cassian Rourke out of her mind.

Unfortunately, he wasn't a man who simply invaded her thoughts. He'd somehow wedged his way into her heart.

"Lily's coming, in case you want to slip your gloves on," Ivy said as she strolled toward Daphne on the garden path behind Edgerton House.

"Has she become such a high and mighty duchess that she'd object?" Daphne smiled and held up her dirt-smeared hands.

Proper young ladies were not supposed to relish such things. Yet she'd pay the price of scrubbing at her nails to clear away the dirt below them for the singular joy of sinking her bare hands into the soil. It simply didn't feel the same with gardening gloves on, ladylike or not.

A few moments later, Lily emerged from the French doors that led to the garden with an odd smile on her face.

“What is it? You look as if you’re plotting something.” Daphne wiped off her hands as best she could and got to her feet.

“Not plotting,” Lily glanced at Daphne’s mud-streaked smock and dirty hands but said nothing. “Just pondering.”

It was only then that Daphne realized Lily had something clutched in her hand.

Her sister grinned and lifted a letter. “We’ve had an unexpected invitation.”

“Oh?” Daphne attempted to sound intrigued. Invitations weren’t exactly a rarity during the Season, but, of course, they were now in the final days of London events—thank goodness. Soon, most noble families would hie off to their county estates.

Daphne hoped they would too. She longed for the familiar Derbyshire countryside where she’d been raised, even if it meant abandoning her gardening projects in London.

“Are you going to tell us, or give us clues and makes us guess?” Ivy asked, her tone making it clear that she preferred the latter.

Lily fixed her gaze on Daphne, and the longer she looked, the more Daphne’s wariness grew.

“We’ve been invited to visit Hillcrest Manor. All of us—myself, Griffin, the twins, and both of you.”

“That’s the Earl of Windham’s estate,” Ivy whispered as if Lily, who was standing right in front of them, wouldn’t hear her.

Daphne swallowed and tried to ignore how her traitorous heart fluttered. “Why would he invite us to visit?”

“He did dine at our home and seemed quite fond of you,” Lily said with a lilt in her voice. “Perhaps that’s why.” Her smile was soft, hopeful.

Daphne felt suddenly queasy. She hadn’t confessed to Lily about Cassian Rourke’s deception, but if they all journeyed to Berkshire, the whole matter would be torn open again. And the pain of it was still too fresh.

“I’d prefer to return to Derbyshire,” Daphne told her sister.

“Arguably,” Ivy interjected, “Berkshire is on the way to Derbyshire. We could make a short visit to Hillcrest as a stopover on the longer journey home.”

Daphne narrowed her eyes at Ivy, who’d apparently forgotten the meaning of sisterly loyalty.

Lily looked at each of them, as if searching for some answer. “We could forego the last few balls and soirees of the Season and depart in the next few days.”

That sounded appealing. Daphne had already been devising excuses to avoid a ball later in the evening. Selina had stopped accepting invitations too, preferring to have Matthew visit with her family or going to small family gatherings with the marquess and his sister.

The Season had nothing to offer either of them anymore.

And for Daphne, going out meant being a fool. Because though logic told her Cassian Rourke was gone—never to return—some foolish, irrational part of her kept looking for him, hoping to catch his gaze across a ball room or a dinner table.

“If a stop in Berkshire means we can decamp from London early, then let us do that.”
Daphne nodded, her mind made up. “The sooner the better.”

Two days later

Cassian strolled the library at Hillcrest, noting that Julian still maintained all the finely bound volumes of poetry, Shakespeare, and history that he’d favored, but he’d added new books too, particularly novels published in the last few years.

He’d loved escaping into books a child, but now, as he traced his gaze across row after row of volumes, his only thought was to wonder what Daphne would favor.

There’d been a volume on the floor of the Harringtons’ library the night he’d interrupted Moreland’s attempt to corner her. A Dickens novel. Did she like Dickens, or was it just something she’d taken down to distract her?

He traced a finger over the shelf of books and found a few of Dickens’s novels.

Despite every intention to put her from his mind, she was there whether he liked it or not.

Daydreams bloomed in his head—reading with her, reading to her, listening to her read to him.

Venturing to bookshops together and buying whatever caught her eye.

Then a hazier thought, the most tantalizing of all—returning with her to a home they shared, filling their bookshelves with volumes they intended to read together.

He wanted it. For the first time in his life, he could admit that wanted a place to call home that wasn’t simply the familiar confines of his quarters on a ship or the solitude

of a Scottish hunting lodge.

In truth, it wasn't the place itself that mattered.

What he truly wanted were endless days spent with her.

"You should shave," Julian opined from the library threshold.

Cassian scrubbed a hand across stubbled jaw. "Why?" The only company he kept was with Julian's.

"We're dressing for dinner tonight. If you've no white tie ensemble, borrow one of mine."

At Cassian's frown, Julian smiled.

"Guests for dinner," his twin said with a wink.

Cassian groaned. "What guests?"

Julian lifted a hand from his crutch and waved it at him. "Ready yourself, and you'll soon find out."

An hour later, Cassian had washed, shaved, and donned Julian's clothes. All that remained was his bow tie, and Julian's valet stood before him, no doubt doing a perfect job of tying one.

"Have the guests arrived?" he asked the fastidious man in his brother's employ.

"Indeed, sir."

“Do you know their names?”

Norris flicked his gaze up to Cassian’s. “The Duke and Duchess of Edgerton and their family, sir.”

The valet finished with Cassian’s tie and stepped back. “May I assist you with anything else, Captain Rourke?”

“Where are they now?” Cassian managed, though all the air had drained from his lungs.

Norris glanced at the mantel clock. “At this hour, I suspect the guests have begun gathering in the drawing room to await dinner service, sir.” With that, the servant bowed, then left Cassian’s room.

Cassian stayed rooted to the spot where he stood, remonstrating with himself to snuff out the ember of hope that he could feel burning in his chest. But it was there—fierce and unquenchable and urging him to move.

He rushed downstairs, reminding himself to breathe.

Voices carried from the drawing room. His heart—that wild, willful organ—had lodged itself in his throat. He swallowed hard and started toward the drawing room.

“Wait.”

Back stiffening, he turned at the sound of Daphne’s voice. She stood in the shadows beyond the staircase, waving him toward her.

He smiled. He couldn’t stop himself. The sight of her was like seeing the sun again after days of storm clouds.

“Why aren’t you coming?” she whispered. “Please. Hurry. I must speak to you.”

Cassian approached and knew the ridiculous smile was still on his face. A smile that seemed to go bone deep. All of him felt lighter, almost buoyant, now that she was near.

As soon as he was close enough, she reached out and clasped his arm, pulling him along.

“This way,” she said quietly, then turned, still gripping his sleeve as she led him into Hillcrest’s library.

Once they’d entered the room, she released his arm and spun to face him.

His mouth went dry. Good grief, she was lovely.

The low gaslight in the room cast a warm glow that lit the blue of her eyes and the burnished gold of her hair. She wore a peacock blue gown with enormous sleeves that accentuated the curve of her waist, and he wanted to wrap an arm around those curves and pull her closer.

For a moment, she stood gazing at him, letting him drink in the sight of her.

As his smile faded, something more potent made his breath quicken. “You’re here,” he said dumbly because it seemed to be all his brain could manage.

“And you wish I wasn’t, I presume. I need you to know that I’ve told Lily and Griffin nothing,” she said, her tone low but intense. “As far as they know, I’ve never met you, so that’s how you must behave when we’re introduced.”

Cassian nodded. “I understand.”

“I detest lying to them. I wish we could be done with lies.”

“I do too, Daphne.”

Something flickered in her eyes. A warmth that made that ember in his chest flare.

“I should go back to the drawing room,” she said and then began to move past him.

He reached for her, brushing his fingers along the warm, soft skin of her arm. He held her gently.

She didn’t pull away.

This close, he could tell her breath was racing too. And when she dropped her gaze to his lips, it shot a warm flash of pleasure through him.

“Daphne.” He’d meant to say more, but it felt so damned good to simply say her name.

“Cassian,” she whispered in return.

The sound of his name on her lips made him want to drop to his knees and beg her forgiveness for being such an ass back in London.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he rasped, the rawest truth.

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She lifted a palm to his chest. She wore no gloves, and he had the mad thought that he wanted to be bare, out of Julian's too-tailored evening suit, so he could feel her skin against his.

"Your heart is racing, Captain Rourke," she said quietly. "So I believe you, though I didn't think you'd be pleased to see me."

And just like that, he was smiling again. "There has not been a moment since the day I met you that I wasn't pleased to see you, Miss Bridewell."

"Nevertheless, you must pretend tonight is the first time we've ever met." She bit her bottom lip, and a need like he'd never felt in his life speared through him.

Good grief, how had he thought he could walk away from this woman and go on living his life as if she'd never left her mark on him?

"Can you do that?" she asked, pressing lightly on his chest.

Cassian laid a hand over hers where she touched him. "I can if you wish it."

With a nod, she pulled her hand away gently. "I should go back."

"I'll follow soon after, and I hope..." He bit down on the next words, unsure, not trusting himself.

"You hope?" she asked, one tawny brow arched.

“That tonight is the last time there’s any pretending between us.” Apparently, it only took the crook of her brow. With her here, close to him again, he had no wish to prevaricate or hide his feelings.

“I’d like that.” She strode away as soon as the words were out.

Cassian pressed a fist to his chest where his heart beat hard and fast. It hadn’t fully steadied by the time he walked down the hall and into the drawing room.

He approached to stand a respectable distance from Daphne and her sister Ivy. They were clustered together near a potted palm in the corner.

The Duke of Edgerton looked a bit taken aback when he got a glimpse of Cassian. Beside him, his duchess lifted a brow, not unlike her sister had done minutes before.

Julian waved a hand toward him from where he stood near the unlit fireplace, briefly releasing his hold on his crutch. His other hand rested on the mantel as if taking a bit of its support. Having been on his one good foot for hours, his twin must have been fatigued and in pain.

“Dear guests, may I present my brother, Captain Cassian Rourke.”

“Twins,” Hyacinth Bridewell murmured with the beginning of a grin. “Why didn’t you tell us, my lord?”

Julian didn’t immediately answer, and the silence stretched so long that everyone turned their gazes his way. “In truth, Miss Hyacinth, we did not meet until this day.” His tone was gentle toward Daphne’s young sister.

Cassian heard Daphne gasp, a soft, hushed inhale that made him want to reach for her.

“Julian,” he tried in a warning tone. Yet he recognized the resolute look on his brother’s face.

“But...” Hyacinth frowned, then looked to her twin. “We did, my lord.” The girl lifted a hand to the pretty shell on a ribbon at her throat. “You remarked on my necklace.”

Julian gifted her a beaming smile. “It is indeed a lovely shell pendant, but the man who previously remarked on it was my brother.”

Edgerton glowered, and the duchess simply looked confused.

Cassian stepped closer to Daphne. He wanted to offer whatever comfort he could in this moment his brother had decided to engineer without giving him a single damn word of warning.

Julian laid a hand on his chest. “I owe an apology to all of you. And to my brother. I asked him for something that went against his conscience, against his good judgement, and I was too selfish to consider how it would impact others.”

Everyone in the room seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for the explanation Cassian dreaded.

“I asked my brother to go to London with the pretense of being Lord Windham.” Julian patted his chest. “The whole scheme was my doing. Indeed, I all but begged my brother to agree.” He gestured to his splinted leg.

“Down one leg, I could not return to the Season and woo a certain young lady. Not wishing to lose her favor, I asked my brother to take my place.”

Daphne turned her head, and Cassian stepped closer. He shook his head, dismayed,

unsure how to make this moment less mortifying for her. For all of them.

“We’ve swapped places before,” Marigold said quietly.

“Though not since we were little,” Hyacinth added.

“You’re very wise young ladies.” Julian locked eyes with Cassian.

“And I am a very great fool.” He looked across the room at the Duke and Duchess of Edgerton.

“But what I must make clear is that my brother is no liar. The only time he’s ever pretended, it was on my behalf.

If he’s guilty of anything, it’s unflinching loyalty. ”

A wave of memories crashed over Cassian, unexpected and raw.

Julian wasn’t just referring to what happened in London. He was referring to the painful history neither of them talked about now.

For a moment, they locked gazes, and Julian’s jovial facade fell away. Cassian had long thought he’d protected his brother from so much, but, of course, their father’s cruelty took its toll on both of them.

“I’m sorry,” Julian said, still staring at Cassian, then he traced his gaze around all the guests in the drawing room. “For being the cause of such a foolish subterfuge.”

Edgerton gave his brother a nod and then looked Cassian’s way.

“And I’m sorry for feigning my identity,” Cassian said, his throat tight.

“You do look a bit different though,” Marigold Bridewell opined as she looked at Julian and then Cassian. “It’s a wonder no one noticed.”

“Someone did,” Cassian said, then turned a glance toward the lady at his elbow, whose jasmine scent booth soothed him and drove him slightly mad.

She shot him a self-satisfied look. “Yes,” she whispered, “someone did.”

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Daphne was too anxious to sleep or even try. So she slipped from her guest bedchamber and headed out into the night air, needing to breathe, needing to escape the awkwardness of being under the same roof as Cassian Rourke after a strained dinner with the Rourke twins and her family.

Cassian had watched her, and she couldn't resist sneaking glimpses of him too.

But his brother had been the one to truly hold court.

He was as amiable as she recalled from those early days of the Season.

And though Griffin had initially seemed quite irked by the brothers' deception, by dessert, it seemed as if Lord Windham had won him over again.

She'd hoped she and Cassian might have found a moment to speak after dinner, but he'd been drawn away to the billiards room with his brother and Griffin, while her sisters all gathered in the drawing room.

Once back in her chamber, she'd even entertained the foolish hope that he might come to her room. That moment in the library had been as charged as every other encounter between them, and it made her imagine he might have regretted how things ended in London.

He felt what she did. She knew it. And despite the farce he'd participated in for his brother, she'd always known—even when she was furious with him—that he was nothing like that other man who'd deceived her.

When Cassian told her all that had passed between them had been real, she hadn't just believed him, she'd known it in her heart. She'd felt it in those moments, even when it caused her to be racked with guilt over what she thought was a betrayal of Selina.

Yet her feelings persisted, real and rooted, even if inconvenient.

None of this felt like the simple infatuation with Moreland.

Cassian Rourke stirred something much deeper.

More than mere attraction. She didn't even truly understand it, but she didn't want to walk away from it either.

Most of all, she didn't want him to walk away before they'd barely begun to express their feelings.

And certainly not over a misguided notion that she was some perfect creature deserving of a paragon.

She wasn't perfect, and she certainly couldn't love a man who was. Good grief, it sounded terrifyingly boring.

Now, striding out into the gardens, all she wanted was to speak to Cassian—to touch him, to kiss him, to get him to tell her why he was so determined that he was not good enough for her.

What she found instead was a sad state of affairs.

For a Palladian-style county house like Hillcrest Manor, its gardens failed to match its grandeur.

Though there were signs that it once had.

An ornate conservatory that appeared to have been abandoned stood a short distance from the manor house, and the beds of the main garden were arranged in a geometric regularity that indicated some designer had taken care with their layout.

Yet many of the rows now stood fallow. Only a simple, neatly clipped hedge maze and smaller boxwood hedges that gave the garden its shape seemed to be maintained by Hillcrest's gardener.

Though there were no lanterns lit in the garden, the moon was high and bright in a cloudless sky and she easily made her way along the garden's rows.

A fountain with Aphrodite atop a shell at its center stood at the far edge of the garden path. It looked as if it might have once spouted water, but now it was simply a still pool with water collected in its large basin beneath the statute.

Daphne perched at the edge and looked up at the sky, wishing she'd taken time to study astronomy so she might know which constellations she gazed upon. Hyacinth would know. She was fascinated with the phases of the moon and how they affected the sea and its tides.

"I had a feeling I'd find you out here."

At Cassian's voice, warmth rushed into Daphne's chest.

"Am I that predictable?" She looked over at him, and her breath tangled in her throat.

He'd shed his coat, waistcoat, and neckcloth and wore only his black evening trousers and the suit's white shirt, now unbuttoned at the throat.

She couldn't seem to take her eyes off that shadowed spot at the base of his throat.

"You must be disappointed," he said as he approached, then tipped a glance over his shoulder at the all-but-barren garden.

"It is rather sad. Does your brother not favor a flourishing garden?"

He joined her on the fountain's edge, settling within arm's reach. "He doesn't. I think it reminds him too much of our mother. She's the one who made it a thing of beauty."

"Did she choose this fountain?"

He looked up at the voluptuous marble goddess above them. "My grandmother did. She arranged for the design of all of this."

"So you've been influenced by the ladies in your family." Men so often looked to their father's example. Daphne couldn't help but be charmed by the fact that he'd taken up his mother's and grandmother's interest.

She smiled at him, but he'd grown suddenly serious.

"Perhaps I'm wrong," he said as he looked out on the flowerless garden. "I suspect it's not the pain of remembering my mother that's caused Julian to let the garden go, but the influence of our father."

Daphne laughed lightly. "He opposed flowers?"

"He was a joyless, cruel man and was determined that those around him should be the same."

Daphne couldn't help but reach for his hand. "That's dreadful."

For a moment, he simply looked down at her fingers over his, then he turned his hand so that their palms met.

“I didn’t tell you that as a bid for sympathy.” He flashed a smile. “Only as an explanation for this bleak landscape you see before you.”

“Sympathy isn’t the only reason I reached for your hand.” Somehow, here alone with him in the moonlight, she felt bold.

“No?”

“I’ve wanted...”

He leaned closer. “What did you want?”

“To s-speak to you.”

He lifted their joined hands and placed a kiss against her skin. “I’ve wanted that too,” he murmured. “And to touch you.” He swept his thumb across her skin as he spoke.

That simple caress made her gasp because it caused a shiver to race down her spine. She’d never wanted anything as much as she wanted to kiss him again, to be in his arms again.

“Shall we walk?” she whispered.

He mistook her question as discomfort at his admission and immediately released her.

“Oh, I...” she began.

But he was already standing, gesturing toward the hedge maze. “It’s a simple design,

and I think the moonlight will sufficiently light the paths.”

“Yes, let’s walk,” she told him.

They started off, walking side by side. He didn’t take her arm, and she was hesitant to take his.

“Why are you happy I’m here?” she asked softly.

He chuckled, then shot her a look that made her swallow hard. “You know exactly why.”

“Do I?” she said, determined to spark some reaction in him. “In London, you seemed so determined to send me off to find some more deserving man.”

As they stepped into the maze, he strode a bit faster until was several steps ahead of her.

“Cassian.” He stopped the moment she spoke his name, but he didn’t turn to face her.

Daphne approached, her boots crunching on gravel, closing the distance between them.

“Why are you not a deserving man?” she whispered.

She laid a hand on his back, feeling the muscles shift and ripple, relishing how the heat of his body warmed her palm. “Or perhaps you don’t feel for me?—”

He turned before she could finish, wrapped an arm around her waist, and pulled her close. Daphne braced her hands on his chest. His breath came fast and his stubbled cheek brushed hers as he dipped his head.

“What I feel for you,” he whispered, his breath hot against the shell of her ear, “is dangerous. You said so yourself.”

His hand slid down her back, tucking her closer, until she could feel the proof of his desire for her through her dress.

“Daphne.” He spoke her name as if it were a plea. Then he pressed his forehead to hers.

“Yes,” she told him in reply, then slid a hand up to lightly trail her fingertips into the open V of his shirt.

He let out a sharp exhale, then bent to take her lips. His kisses were hungry, desperate, as if after just a couple of days apart, he was starving for a taste of her.

When he pulled back, she almost cried out in protest, but then he bent to kiss her neck, to lick and nip at her skin. He found that same spot at the base of her throat that she’d just touched on his, and he laid a tender, reverent kiss there.

Daphne sought the top button of his shirt and slipped it free, then the next. He lifted his head to look at her, to stroke his finger along the edge of her jaw, then over her lower lip.

“I should take you back inside,” he said roughly.

“To your room?”

A laugh burst from him. “You are the greatest temptation of my life, Daphne Bridewell.”

“And you of mine, Captain Rourke.”

He kissed her again, tenderly this time. Daphne wanted more and wrapped a hand around his neck to draw him closer. Yet she felt the tension in his body, his shoulders, even his arms as he held her, and she pulled back.

“Answer my question,” she said, her voice husky and a bit breathless.

“Which one?”

“Why aren’t you a deserving man?”

He straightened his back, squared his shoulders, but didn’t release her. She wasn’t about to let him.

Reaching up, he swept a lock of hair behind her ear, then cupped her nape. “I don’t know how to...” Stopping, he drew in a breath, then let it out slowly. “I am not a good man, Daphne. You deserve tenderness, kindness.”

“You’ve never been anything but kind to me. You’ve kissed me tenderly.” She reached up to glide her finger across the fullness of his lower lip, as he’d done to her. “You’ve shown me your goodness.”

“When I was pretending to be my brother?”

“Not just then.” Daphne’s voice had turned sharp, like the little ache that had begun to pinch in her chest. Even in this moment, with their bodies seamed together, he was holding back. “You told me it was real. All of it. And that means the kindness was real. The tenderness too.”

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She made him feel as if he could be the man she thought he was—kind, good, worthy of her.

But he knew what she did not. That he'd been forged in cruelty, under the fists and lashing words of a brutal father, who thought kindness was a weakness. Whose rages came with no warning, much as Cassian's anger sometimes bubbled up.

Then he'd lived for a decade and a half in the navy, which instilled its own notions of enforcing discipline in the harshest ways.

He'd never believed himself capable of giving his heart, of having a family of his own, because he felt aspects of his father inside him. Julian had inherited all their mother's joyfulness and light, and he'd turned out more like their father, and he loathed those parts of himself.

But now there was Daphne. Temptation indeed. And not just because he was fighting the urge to take her right here against a hedge in the moonlit garden, but because of what she wanted him to be.

A better man. A good man.

When he said nothing, she began to pull away. Even as he told himself he should let her go, he couldn't.

"If I am any of those things, it's because you bring them out in me," he confessed.

"But that means they are in you already." She smiled, then reached up, curling her

hand around the placket of his shirt, stroking a finger against his chest.

“There’s a great deal more too, I’m afraid.”

“What if I want all of it?” The desire, the yearning, in her soft voice nearly undid him.

A shudder rippled through him, and she mistook it for disquiet.

She lifted a hand to cup his cheek. “What do you want, Cassian?”

Such a seemingly simple question. Even simpler was the answer.

“You,” he confessed the truth, artless and unvarnished.

The loveliest smile curved her lips. “Well then,” she whispered, “you’d better kiss me again.”

He cradled her slim waist in his hands, bent, and took her lips. Then he was lost, pulling her closer, deepening the kiss until she opened and let him sweep his tongue inside to taste her deeply.

She tugged at his shirt as if she wanted him out of it. Her eagerness made him smile against her lips. Then he was tasting the delicious slope of her neck, his hands shaping the soft swell of her breast.

When he tugged the edge of her bodice down, she gasped. Cassian stilled.

“Don’t stop,” she breathed.

He tugged until the tip of her nipple tantalized him in the darkness. He bent slowly,

kissing and licking, until he felt her tauten further under his tongue.

Her body quivered in his arms, and he lifted his head. “Only say the word and we stop.”

She bit her lip. “You’ll think me brazen, but I don’t want to stop.”

“You say brazen as if it’s a bad thing.” He kissed her, tasting her, stroking her with his tongue until she melted against him. Then she shifted her hips, arching into him, her stomach rubbing maddeningly against his hardness.

No matter how much he wanted to, he would not take her in a hedge maze.

“Daphne,” he murmured between kisses.

“Please,” she breathed in reply.

He understood her need and wanted nothing so much as to give her pleasure.

Where he gripped her hip, he began pulling up the fabric of her skirt. She watched him, licked her lips, then helped him lift the fabric.

He looked down at her shapely legs in white stockings and hardened until he ached. His hand shook as he reached under her skirt, found the slit in her drawers, and drew his fingers through her warm, sodden curls.

God’s teeth, he was lost. He’d only meant to touch her, stroke her until she found her release, but he found himself dropping to his knees, tugging at the ribbon of her drawers, inching the soft cotton fabric down her lush hips.

All the while, he could hear her breathing grow ragged, feel her nails dig into his

shoulder where she'd braced her hand.

When he looked up at her, she looked down with such longing, it felt as if something inside him ripped free and began to unravel.

"I trust you," she whispered into the night air.

And at those three softly spoken words, that empty, unraveling spot inside of him began to fill with warmth. With light. With love for the woman he held and didn't ever wish to let go.

He drew his fingers along her folds, then bent to replace them with his tongue. Licking gently and then more hungrily, he feasted on her sweetness. As she bucked against him, he slipped a finger inside her tight, hot channel and continued to taste her.

Daphne drew her fingers through his hair and let out little mewling gasps of pleasure.

He felt her body begin to draw tight, but he didn't stop until he'd stroked his tongue across the bud that made her shudder through her release, quivering against his mouth. She cried out as she let go, then clasped a hand across her lips.

It reminded him that he needed to protect her. He pulled up her drawers and retied the ribbon. Then he settled her skirts around her, stood, and pulled her into his arms.

"Good heavens," she whispered against his chest.

"Heaven indeed." He smiled against her silky hair and placed a kiss there, stroking her back gently as she caught her breath.

"We should go back," she said quietly, but with her arms wrapped around his middle,

she didn't make a single move to pull away. "I need you to know..."

"Know what?" Cassian felt a moment of trepidation, a flicker of guilt.

"That I won't regret any of this in the morning." She tipped her head up, her chin on his chest. "Will you?"

Cassian stroked his fingers along the warm, soft curve of her flushed cheek. "How could I?"

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:14 am

Cassian dreamed of his father for the first time in years.

He woke near dawn in a cold sweat of confusion and terror.

He was at Hillcrest, and that realization alone made bile rise in his throat. But as the nightmare receded and reason took its place, he breathed deeply, reminding himself that he was no longer a child. And their unpredictable tormentor was buried miles away in the family plot.

As he scrubbed a hand over his face, the previous night came back to him. The misery of his dream was nothing to the pleasure of those moments with Daphne.

I won't regret any of this in the morning.

Her words rang in his head, and he clenched the blanket in his hands.

Of course, he didn't regret a single moment spent with her since the day they'd met, and certainly not last night. Even now, he wanted nothing as much as he wanted to find her and kiss her senseless.

But now, in the dawning light of morning, after just seeing his father's rage-filled face in his dreams, he could not deny who he was.

Once, in his quarters in the belly of the Resolute, he'd startled so violently from a nightmare that he'd struck the wall with his hand, and ship's surgeon had been called on to ensure he hadn't broken it.

Could he risk sleeping next to Daphne when his night terrors might disturb her too? What if he struck out and harmed her?

As he washed and dressed, he wrestled with himself—his desire for her against his need to see her happy, well, safe.

Someone rapped on his door, and he opened it to find one of the footmen, Griggs, on the other side.

“Lord Windham requests you join him in his chamber, Captain.”

“Now?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Cassian made his way down the hall to the earl’s suite and strode inside to find Julian in a wingback, his leg elevated on a chair.

“Close the door,” he told him.

Cassian did, noting the unusually serious set of his brother’s features.

“What’s wrong?” Cassian crossed the room to sit on the wingback across from Julian’s.

Despite the weighty look in his brother’s eyes, Julian’s mouth edged up in a grin. “Tell me about your evening.”

Cassian narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I wake every couple of hours from the pain. I heard you striding down the hall long

after everyone else was abed.” Julian’s smile widened. “Or at least after I thought everyone else was abed. Though I heard another set of footsteps with yours.”

Cassian stared at the fireplace, watching the flames flickering there and considering what to admit. Above all else, he wanted to protect Daphne, but he also wanted to be done with lies.

“I know you never planned to marry...” Julian’s voice was tentative, quiet. “But you’d not yet met Miss Bridewell either.”

“You know the reasons I never wished to marry.”

“Because you preferred brief, meaningless liaisons with ladies who expected nothing more of you?”

Cassian winced and gripped the back of his neck. “In the past, yes, that’s what I preferred.”

“And now this young lady has altered you.”

Cassian ground his teeth and said nothing.

“Has she not?” his brother pressed.

After a curt nod, Cassian pressed his hands together, trying to put the storm inside him into words. “When I am with her, I’m different. All I want in those moments is to continue being that man every day of my life. For her. With her.”

Julian grinned and leaned closer. “Then marry her posthaste,” he whispered.

Cassian laughed, but it turned into a groan. “If only it was that bloody simple.”

“Why is it not?”

“You know why.”

Julian settled back into his chair again and crossed his arms. “Because you’re stubborn as hell?”

“That is only one of his qualities I inherited.” Cassian shot up from his chair.

“You’re not like him, Cass. I never understood why you thought you were.”

“We were apart for many years, Julian. You don’t know.” During his decade and a half in the navy, he and his brother had exchanged letters, but he’d rarely visited Hillcrest. Even during the many months when he lived ashore on half-pay, he preferred to keep away from the manor and its memories.

“And during that time you became a brutal, manipulative, destructive monster?” Julian asked in a wry tone, perfectly summing up their sire.

Of course, he hadn’t been that. But he’d been churlish, quick to anger, and he kept his finer feelings stifled under a tight control. That had eased during his years in Scotland, when he was on his own, without provocations or temptations. Loneliness had seemed a small price to pay for peace.

Now, he only seemed to know peace when he was with Daphne.

Though she provoked far more than that in him.

Feelings that terrified him, if he was honest. A wild desire that threatened to blaze beyond his control, a possessiveness that she’d find stifling if he gave it full reign, and a protectiveness that made him want to bludgeon men like Moreland, who dared

to cause her a moment of unhappiness.

He had learned control because his emotions were too much otherwise. Though he was Julian's twin, he'd never had his brother's ability to treat things lightly.

"I will take your silence as agreement that you are not, in fact, our vile pater," Julian said, sounding far too pleased with himself.

"Not him exactly, no, but he shaped me just the same."

"As did our mother."

Cassian arched a brow. His brother had once held as much bitterness toward their mother as their father. He felt she'd abandoned them to the earl's abuse, but over the years he'd come to acknowledge that she herself had suffered too.

"I know you two had a special bond." Julian gestured toward the window. "Beyond just a love for fussing over garden matters." He squared his green gaze on Cassian. "You have her gentleness to temper his hardness. You have her patience. Her sense of loyalty."

"You have those things too," Cassian told him.

"If I was truly loyal, I never would have asked you to lie for me."

Cassian shook his head. "You were smitten. I now know what it makes a man do." He shot his brother a rueful grin.

"Do you now?" Julian's eyes glittered with mischief. "Then, pray tell, what do you plan to do about it? You are, after all, a man of action, are you not, Captain?"

Cassian ran a hand through his hair, pacing a line from the door to the fireplace. “It’s not as straightforward as you imply.”

Julian watched him for a moment and then heaved a long sigh. “Tell her of your worries and see what she says.”

“Expose her to that ugliness?”

“She’s not as fragile as you make her out to be.”

Cassian didn’t see her as fragile. He saw her as hopeful, bold, generous. Yet she’d also come from a large, loving family. How could she understand the twisted upbringing they’d had?

“I know you think I’m being fanciful,” Julian said, “but if there’s one thing I know, it’s you. And I can say with certainty that if you don’t try to overcome whatever is keeping you from embracing this lady, you’ll regret it forever.”

Cassian stopped his pacing and drew in a deep breath.

“With her, you could undo what he had and make a happy home, a loving family.”

Julian’s words sounded like an idyllic dream, not anything he could ever dare to reach for. Though for the first time in his life, part of him wanted to.

“You’re a brave man, Cass. Now prove it.”

“This isn’t a naval battle, Jules. It’s much more precious and comes with far greater risk.” He stood with his hands on his hips, staring at the rug beneath his boots. “What if I fail her? What if I hurt her?”

“You wouldn’t,” Julian insisted. “But more importantly, what if you gave up on this chance at love?”

Hillcrest’s butler, Mr. Bartlett, struck Daphne as a genuinely kind man.

He made certain she and her sisters felt at ease in the manor house and seemed to take special delight in the twins. Now, as Daphne and her sisters explored the manor’s library, he remarked on how much they reminded him of the Rourke twins when they were Marigold and Hyacinth’s age.

“Did they also like to read?” Daphne asked him.

“They did, Miss Bridewell. Reading was a bit of an escape for each of them, I believe.” He scanned the rows of books.

“As I recall, his lordship preferred stories of adventure like those of Sir Walter Scott, while Captain Rourke favored Shakespeare and history books and the occasional bit of poetry.”

“That seems odd,” Marigold opined. “Since Captain Rourke went off to have adventures in Her Majesty’s Navy, no doubt.”

“And Lord Windham was stuck being earl,” Hyacinth said, a bit of sympathy softening her tone.

Daphne smiled at Bartlett, whose silver brows had quirked up at Hyacinth’s comment. Their late brother had never looked forward to inheriting their father’s title, but Lord Windham might very well have seen it as a great honor to carry on his father’s earldom.

Bartlett approached the bookshelves and pointed out a few volumes clustered

together. “These histories particularly intrigued the captain, and now I see one is a tome of Scottish history, which seems apropos.”

“Why?” Ivy asked.

“The captain now resides in Scotland,” Bartlett told her with a smile.

Marigold and Hyacinth exchanged a confused look.

“But he’s here in Berkshire, Mr. Bartlett,” Marigold said as if the man could have forgotten.

“Visiting, Miss Marigold, but I suspect he’ll head north again soon.”

Daphne nearly dropped the book she held. “How soon?”

Bartlett turned back to her, his brow furrowing as if with concern. As if he immediately recognized her distress. “When his lordship recovers, Miss Bridewell, which could be months from now.”

A shaky nod was all Daphne could manage in reply. Would he really retreat again? After last night?

“Where is Captain Rourke now?” Daphne couldn’t help but ask.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:15 am

She'd dared to rap on Cassian's bedchamber door after he failed to come down to breakfast. Then she'd explored the main rooms of the house, hoping to find him, but she never had.

She'd tried to tell herself it was not purposeful.

Surely, he was not avoiding her. Something important must have occupied him.

"He visited with his lordship this morning, and I believe he's in Lord Windham's study now."

"Is Lord Windham unwell?" Lily asked.

It had been clear to all of them that the earl was suffering pain from his broken leg. By the end of dinner the previous night, he'd gone frightfully pale.

"I don't believe so, Your Grace."

"Do you think Captain Rourke would mind being interrupted in the study?" Daphne whispered.

Bartlett turned his bespectacled gaze her way. "No, not by you," he said too softly for the others to hear.

"Thank you." She beamed at him and then, when her sisters were consumed by the books they'd selected, she slipped from the library.

A passing housemaid directed her to the earl's study, and a few minutes later, she was standing on the threshold, hoping Cassian wished to see her as much as she wanted to see him.

When she reached out, she realized the door stood slightly ajar.

After knocking, she pushed it open and stepped inside.

At the far side of the room, Cassian sat behind an enormous desk. He immediately laid a nib pen on a tray in front of him and slid a piece of paper into the desk's top drawer, standing as he did so.

"Daphne."

She couldn't quite interpret the look in his eyes, but the stiffness with which he held his shoulders and flexed jaw told her he was filled with tension.

"If I'm interrupting?—"

"No, I've wanted to see you since the moment I woke up, but I..."

"Bartlett said you spent time with your brother."

He nodded. "I did indeed, but I still wanted to see you."

"And here I am." Daphne heard the giddiness in her own voice and couldn't seem to temper it. His nearness did odd things to her.

"You are." He chuckled, and the tension in him seemed to ease.

Daphne glanced behind her. "Do you mind if I shut the door?"

At that, he stepped out from behind the desk and crossed to her, reaching out to shut the door himself.

“Why would I mind?” he asked, his voice a low rumble that made her heart race. Then he touched her, his hand on her arm.

She immediately stepped closer and lifted her hands to his chest. “You did seem worried about us being alone in a room together at the Bancrofts’ ball.”

“Only for your sake,” he said with a sudden earnestness in his tone. “I would have happily remained in that library with you for the rest of the evening.”

Her breath caught at the look in his eyes, the green seemed brighter, heated. Lifting a hand, he traced the edge of her jaw with his fingertips. “Actually, I was writing you a letter.”

Daphne stilled. “Why?”

For some reason, the idea that he was writing to her rather than just seeking her out for a conversation felt ominous.

“An attempt to explain.”

That sounded even worse. Her throat tightened. Her chest ached.

“Explain what?”

He dipped his head, then looked up at her again. “Matters that are hard to discuss.”

“That you’re leaving Berkshire?”

“What? No.”

Relief rushed through her so fiercely, she gripped the edge of his waistcoat. “Then what do you wish to tell me? Shall I read the letter?” She glanced toward the desk, even began to pull away so that she could move toward it.

“No, it’s not finished, and it’s a mess. A nonsense jumble of thoughts.”

Daphne did step away from him, then headed over to a burgundy settee before the fireplace. She sat and patted the spot beside her.

“I’m here. You’re here. Will you not try to tell me?”

He wore a little half-smile as he settled next to her. Daphne immediately reached for his hand, then turned so that she was facing him. He laced their fingers, then he turned toward her too.

“You mentioned that moment in the Bancrofts’ library when I found you and—” He grimaced as if he loathed even saying the man’s name.

“Yes, I remember that moment,” she said to save him from having to.

“That night, you told me that you no longer trusted yourself.”

Daphne began rallying her arguments. Yes, she’d said as much, but it didn’t mean she was wrong about what she felt for him. That other man, who neither of them wanted to name, had flattered her, charmed her.

But she’d been drawn to Cassian as if it had somehow been fated.

“I don’t trust myself either,” he said.

Daphne tipped her head. “Was your heart broken by someone?”

“No.” He cupped her cheek with his free hand. “I sometimes doubted I even had a heart until I met you.”

His crooked smile made her heart thud.

“I refer to my father. My nature. My blood. And the ways I am like him.”

Daphne heard the rasp in his voice, saw the sheen in his eyes. She forced herself not to offer easy reassurances because she sensed there was a great deal yet unsaid.

“I think I understand your fears.” Her parents influenced her and all her siblings, yet they’d been loving parents. If they had been cruel, uncaring, how might that have impacted each of them?

He flinched. “Daphne, I’m not certain you do...”

“Then tell me more.”

“Some of it is so dark that I don’t even wish to speak of it to you.”

Daphne bristled at the implication that she would not want to know him, all of him. Or that she was not equipped to hear such things.

“Because I’m an innocent? I’m not the delicate, prim creature you think I am, Cassian. Didn’t I prove that last night?”

Leaning closer, she tugged him toward her by the edge of his waistcoat, then kissed him. A single, too-quick taste.

Cassian seemed to want more. He wrapped his large hand around her nape and pulled her in for another kiss, then another, until he was stroking her with his tongue as his hand traced down her back, pulling her nearer.

When they were both breathless, she pressed her forehead to his.

“No matter how thoroughly you kiss me,” she whispered, “I’ll still want to know what’s in that letter. And about your father.”

“Are you certain you want to know?”

Daphne bent to kiss him, a gentle, lingering meeting of her lips and his. “I want to know, if you are willing to speak of it, but if it troubles you too much?—”

“You should know what I am.” He fell quiet, but for his harsh breaths. Then licked his lips and said, “He was a monster. His rages were frequent and for minor infractions, or for none at all. Some days, he might just look at one of us and find reason to strike out.”

Daphne bit her lip and swallowed against the sting of tears. She caressed his hand, waiting, knowing there was more.

“My mother wasn’t excluded.” He lifted his head, his gaze haunted.

“To know that your mother is being harmed and to be too young, too frightened, to protect her. That hurt more than his fists.” He swallowed hard.

“Words seem much less cutting than lashes, but they’re not.

He told me I was nothing. God knows what he said to Julian. It gave him pleasure to see us broken.”

“I’m so sorry, Cassian.” Daphne wrapped her arms around him, tucking her head against his neck, kissing the spot where his pulse beat hard. “None of you should have suffered such cruelty.”

“He told me once that his father was the same. That terrified me. It was as if he was condemning me to be the same too.”

“But you’re not and never will be.”

Turning his head, he kissed her, then cupped her face between his palms.

“I am torn.” His voice emerged husky and low. “Between wanting protect you from my shadows and...”

“And?” Daphne prompted when he fell silent again.

Cassian caressed her face. “Believing that I could make a life without them.”

“We could make that life.” Daphne clasped one of his hands and then drew it down to hold between her own. “You need not do it alone.” Suddenly nervous, she added, “But you have a decision to make, Cassian.”

He smiled and lifted their joined hands to kiss the top of hers. “You make me more hopeful than I have any right to be.”

“You have a right to be hopeful, to love and be loved,” she whispered. Swallowing hard to steel her courage, she admitted, “You have a piece of my heart, Cassian, and I’d gladly give you all of it, but I have to know you’re as certain as I am. Because if you walk away again?—”

“Daphne—”

“No, we must be honest now. No pretense. I want us to share our hopes and our fears. And my fear is that I could so easily give myself to you in every way, and yet you would still hold something back. Or worse, give into your fears and walk away. That would break me.” She looked into his eyes and saw the storm of emotions he was battling.

“I know I can’t decide for both of us. I want you so very much. Now you must decide what you want.”

For a long stretch, they sat silently together. She could feel him battling, and she prayed he’d choose hope rather than fear. But she sensed he needed time.

So she kissed his cheek, released his hand, stood, and made her way toward the study door. All the way, it felt as if a thread connecting them was drawing taut, pinching at the center of her chest. But she knew that they must be of a like mind in this.

She could wait for him to decide, but she could never again give her heart to a man who she could not trust to love as thoroughly in return.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:15 am

Cassian woke before dawn the next morning after a sleepless night.

In his mind, he replayed the moment when Daphne walked away and the ache of it was as sharp every time.

Yet he admired her for it. She did not plead or persuade.

The most lovely, loyal, spirited woman he'd ever met had offered him her heart, and all he had to do was give her his own, and she'd be his. She'd said as much.

And yet here he was rushing across the field beyond Hillcrest like a man trying to outrun his demons.

He'd once doubted he had a heart or was capable of tender emotions. Daphne had proved to him that he did, for the damned blood-pumping organ had never troubled him as it had since the day he'd collided with her.

Under his father's fists, he'd taught himself to be hard. Yet even then, he'd loved his mother. He'd adored his brother. He'd treasured Bartlett, who'd shown him that men could be strict, yet also cool-headed and kind.

Perhaps there had been some tenderness in him, despite their father. But did that mean he could deserve the love of a lady like Daphne? God, he wanted to try.

Somewhere in the grassy acreage abutting the manor, he slowed his strides. Then he heard the quick, steady beat of horse hooves and turned to look behind him. In the distance, a man approached, galloping straight toward him.

As the rider grew closer, he recognized the Duke of Edgerton and one of the horses from Hillcrest's stable.

Edgerton slowed the horse as he grew nearer, then dismounted quickly, his brow bent, expression fierce. "A word, Captain?" he said as he approached, the horse's reins clutched in one gloved hand.

"Of course." Unless Cassian wanted to make a run for it, there was no avoiding the man as they were alone and miles from Hillcrest, but for a few grazing sheep.

"I think you must have some notion as to why I've run you to ground."

Cassian nodded. "I do, Your Grace."

"I didn't quite understand why your brother invited us to Berkshire.

In fact, I had no wish to accept the invitation, but my wife, clever as she is, knew immediately what your brother had in mind.

"Edgerton took his measure, scraping a look across the unshaven, wind-tossed, rumpled state of him.

"Windham seems keen on playing matchmaker."

"That I did not ask for," Cassian told him. "Indeed, I didn't know you were coming until you'd arrived."

Edgerton narrowed his eyes as if dubious about that claim. "And yet you benefit from our visit all the same."

Cassian couldn't deny it. Seeing Daphne again was a gift he'd neither expected nor

felt worthy of.

“Daphne is kind-hearted. My wife would say she’s the sweetest of all her sisters, so we are keen to protect her from ne’er-do-wells.”

Cassian bowed his head, then nodded. “And you fear I may be such a man?”

“Are you?” Edgerton tipped up his chin the slightest bit, and it felt like a dare.

“If you’d known me years ago, you might think so,” Cassian admitted.

“I might think so now.” Edgerton’s expression hardened.

“Because, you see, Daphne has also always hoped for a love match. I think all the Bridewell sisters do because their parents’ marriage was such a loving one.

They have a shining example to aspire to.

I did not. I suspect you may not have either. ”

“No. Quite true. Not at all.”

Edgerton’s eyes seemed to lighten a bit, and he merely observed Cassian a moment and said nothing.

“My duchess and I want to see her happy,” he finally said, a bit less sharpness in his tone.

“As do I.”

Edgerton glanced over his shoulder, toward Hillcrest. “She seems quite...taken with

you, Captain Rourke.”

Cassian’s throat worked against the lump rising there. He looked away, unable to summon a response that wouldn’t betray too much of what had passed between him and Daphne.

Edgerton’s gaze was unrelenting. “And you? What are your intentions toward my sister-in-law?”

Cassian opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

The duke didn’t wait for a reply. “One would imagine a man who’d won such a lady’s favor might have already made his offer.”

Cassian snapped his head up. Edgerton’s words echoed Julian’s.

The duke arched a brow. “Yet you have not, Captain. So I’ll ask once more. What do you intend?” The duke drew in a sharp breath and added, “My wife and I are of a mind to continue on to Derbyshire with her sisters.”

“When?” Cassian’s pulse pounded.

“Tomorrow,” Edgerton said, his voice like flint. “So I suggest you either act...” He paused to make sure Cassian looked him square in the eyes. “Or you must let her go.”

With those words, Edgerton mounted his horse, turned the stallion, and headed back toward Hillcrest.

Cassian stood as if thunderstruck, the duke’s words rattling through his mind.

Let her go .

Letting her go would be like giving up on breathing. Some part of him—the shadow that reminded him he was nothing—warned that he was not deserving of her. But then Daphne’s own voice rang in his head.

You have a right to be hopeful, to love and be loved .

If he was going to listen to any voice, it should be hers because she had reminded him who he was—a man with a heart. A heart that belonged to her. And, somehow, in some immense blessing that he’d never expected, she’d offered him hers, if he but had the courage to claim it.

Courage to push away doubts, to have hope greater than his fears.

With her, for her. Could he do that?

He had to, or he’d lose her.

That he could not do.

All it demanded of him was grasping what was right in front of him. She said he had a decision to make, and yet part of him knew it had been made the minute he’d crashed into her in that damned ballroom. He’d never been the same since the moment.

Now, he couldn’t imagine a future without her.

He started back across the field as clouds swept in. Eagerness built in him, love drove him, and he lengthened his stride until he was all but running through the tall grass. As the land tipped downward and Hillcrest came into view, cool drops of rain began to fall.

By the time he was close enough to see through the glass of the conservatory, his clothes were drenched and his hair dripping, but none of it mattered as much as finding Daphne and telling her what was in his rusty, racing heart.

Then he saw a flash of pink through the glass of conservatory walls.

He rushed around the structure and strode through the entrance, and his lungs drained of air.

She stood at the far edge of the conservatory, eyes wide, clasping her right hand. Blood seeped through her fingers.

Cassian rushed to her, pulling at the arm of his shirt until the seams tore. He pulled a strip of rain-soaked cloth free. "Let me see."

"It's nothing. A small cut."

He worked quickly, dabbing at the cut with his damp shirt, then wrapping the clean strip around her hand.

"What happened?" he asked quietly as he gathered two ragged edges of the cloth and tied a knot.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I wanted to explore, and I broke a pot. When I tried to pick up the pieces..." She glanced over to where one of the clay pots he'd collected for seedlings had tumbled off a low tiled ledge along the conservatory wall.

"I don't care about the pot. I care about you."

"I...found something," she said, then looked up to him. "I wasn't being a busybody. A tile broke, and I spotted it in a hollow below the tiles."

She pulled out of his hold to retrieve the item she'd found.

"I opened it. Read a bit. I was curious. I hope you'll forgive me." She lifted a slim leather-bound book up to him.

"What is it?" But the moment he took it in his hand, he knew. A memory came of his mother bent over the book, scribbling notes. He'd thought she was making notations about the plants she grew.

"You mother's, I believe," Daphne said quietly. She still wore a look of guilt.

Cassian stroked her arm. "You did nothing wrong. Please don't apologize or feel ill at ease."

"She loved you very much," she said with a soft smile.

Cassian tightened his hold on the journal, then lifted the cover to look inside. He flipped slowly through the pages, catching snippets of his mother's neat handwriting.

And his heart, which had felt near to bursting as he rushed back to find Daphne, now ached for his mother.

Because the pages held no notes about her garden.

They were all about her sons. On each page, she'd detailed their thoughts, their activities, their burgeoning personalities, cataloging all she saw and treasured in each of them.

Today, Julian said the most amusing thing. I adore his smile.

The boys are growing so fast.

They raced each other across the field, so far I could barely see them on the horizon. And when they came back, they were red-faced, breathless, sweaty, and grass-stained. But happy. Their laughter is a balm.

This morning, Cassian snuck out to help me prune the rose bushes.

They are so different. Julian's heart is open. He is all laughter, loving everything, but lightly. Cassian's heart is guarded and he tends to brood, but when he loves something, he does so fiercely.

Cassian smiled, his chest full of warmth, and he sent up a silent thanks to his mother. Then he closed the book, set it on the ledge, and turned back to the woman he loved fiercely.

"Does it hurt?" he asked about her cut as he reached for her.

"Not at all." She slipped a finger between two buttons of his wet shirt to stroke his skin. "You got caught in the rain."

"I did, but it's good for clearing the mind."

Both of her brows winged up. "Oh?"

"I love you, Daphne Bridewell."

Tears welled in her eyes and she smiled. "And I love you, Captain Rourke. So...you've decided?"

Cassian grinned. "I have." Gently, he swept the pad of thumb against her cheek to catch a tear, then reached down to clasp her hand. "But now you have a decision to make too, my love?"

“What decision?”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:15 am

Cassian dropped down on one knee, never letting go of Daphne's hand. "You must decide whether you wish to be my wife. What do you think? Will you, love?"

"Yes—"

Cassian got to his feet and took her lips in a kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck, letting him take her weight as she arched into him.

The rightness of it, of holding her, of loving her, of devoting himself to her for the rest of his days filled him with such happiness that he trembled.

"Are you cold?" she whispered against his mouth.

He wasn't. If anything, he was overheated, burning from the inside out with how much he loved and wanted her.

"We should go inside," she said.

Cassian nodded, kissed her again, and it was all he could do not to sweep her up into his arms and carry her straight to his bedchamber. Because now that she'd promised to be his wife, and he had the prospect of a life with her ahead of him, he didn't want to wait a single minute.

Daphne tried for patience as Mrs. Hanson, Hillcrest's housekeeper, gently cleansed and then applied a sticking plaster to her injured hand.

The cut truly was slight, and she didn't wish for anyone to make a fuss.

But Mr. Bartlett had insisted as soon as he saw her enter the manor with Cassian and noted her bandage.

“There you go, miss. Right as rain.” The silver-haired housekeeper glanced at Daphne’s bedchamber window where the summer rain had slowed to a slight drizzle. The sun had even begun to peek out from behind the clouds. “And hopefully the rain is off for good if you wish to venture out again.”

“I might,” Daphne told her with a smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Hanson.”

“You are most welcome, Miss Bridewell.” She collected her kit of mending materials, stood, and left the bedchamber.

Daphne sat in the chair before the unlit fireplace and wondered how long she should wait before making her way to Cassian’s bedchamber. It was scandalous, of course. It was midday. Lily and her sisters would no doubt be wondering where she’d gone, and yet all she could think about was going to him.

She pressed a hand to her heart because it felt so full, as if it could barely contain the love and excitement she felt.

He was going to be her husband. Part of her wanted to suggest they start for Scotland today, with a very purposeful stop in Gretna Green. She’d always dreamed of a proper wedding, with her family celebrating the day with her, but it didn’t seem as important now.

Standing, she nibbled her lip, listening for any sound out in the hallway. Then she made her way to the chamber’s door.

She jumped when someone rapped from the other side.

Then she beamed when Cassian pushed the door open and stepped inside.

He'd shaved and donned dry clothes, though his hair was still tousled and damp slightly damp. She couldn't resist reaching up and running her fingers through it when he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

"Why does even half an hour away from you feel so long now?" he asked as he bent to nuzzle her cheek.

"I don't know." She turned to whisper in his ear. "But I feel it too."

Daphne couldn't resist reaching up and unbuttoning the top button of his shirt, just to dip her fingers inside and feel his warm skin. Then she freed the next and the next.

"Temptress," he said with a mischievous smile.

"You did call me bold."

"You are, my love." He bent to kiss her. The kiss began gently, almost hesitantly, as if he was holding back. But the way he gripped her hip and pulled her an inch closer told her he was as eager as she was.

She deepened the kiss, wrapping a hand around his nape. Cassian responded with equal need. Kissing her as if he couldn't get enough, then reaching down to pull her skirt up and run his fingers along her bare thigh, just above her stocking.

"I don't want to wait," she told him between kisses. Then she pulled back and turned in his arms, looking back at him over her shoulder. "Help me with these?"

Cassian licked his lips, studied the line of buttons down the back of her bodice, then looked into her eyes again, as if to make sure she had no doubts.

“I want this,” she told him. “I want you.”

He made quick work of the buttons and helped her slip from the fabric. Then he kissed her nape, nipping and then soothing the spot with his tongue as he unhooked the fastening of her skirt. He let out a pleased, throaty sound as it slid over her hips and down to the carpet.

Daphne reached back to the fastening of her petticoat and worked it down her legs. Then she turned to him again.

He watched her as if awestruck as Daphne worked the hooks of her corset free, then let it fall from her waist.

“Just two ribbons left,” she told him, her voice wobbly.

Cassian reached for the first at the neck of her chemise, then Daphne pulled the ruched fabric wide until the soft cotton slid down her shoulders.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured.

Reverently, he traced his fingers across the curve of her shoulders, down her chest, across the top of her breasts, and then he caressed one nipple with his thumb. When it was pebbled and aching, he bent to take it into the heat of his mouth.

Daphne’s knees felt boneless and she held onto him as he licked and sucked and grazed his teeth against her tender flesh.

When he bent to treat her other nipple to the same maddening devotion, she felt a pulsing need build in her core.

She squeezed her thighs together to stem the ache he stoked in her.

Then he tugged at the ribbon of her drawers and slid his hands inside to push them down over her hips, his fingers brushing across her curls.

Daphne gripped his shirt for balance as she stepped out of the last of her garments.

Standing in nothing more than her stockings and boots, she felt intensely bare, yet thoroughly bold because Cassian's adoring gaze made her feel beautiful.

"Now you, Captain." Even as she said the words, she worked the rest of his shirt buttons.

When she could finally slip it from his shoulders, she hummed with pleasure at the sight of him.

The bulge of muscles, the dusting of hair that tapered down to his waist. Then she saw his scar and gently traced her fingers over the whitened ridge.

Bending, she kissed his skin and heard his half gasp, half groan.

She couldn't resist kissing and tasting his skin in that tempting hollow below his throat as she worked the fly of his trousers.

Cassian toed off his boots, then pushed his trousers to the floor. Then he wrapped one arm around her and bent to scoop her up with the other.

The heat of him felt so good, Daphne let out a little wanton moan. She never felt as safe as she did in that moment in his arms, bare skin to bare skin.

Cassian grinned wolfishly and settled her on top of the bed.

Then he worked the laces of one of her boots, and the other, helping her remove

them. As he did, his gaze kept straying to her body—to her taut nipples aching for his mouth, to the apex of her thighs where he'd worked such wicked magic with his tongue.

When he climbed on the bed, Daphne reached for him, needing to feel his body against hers, but he held back, kneeling before her as he reached for one stocking.

He kissed the top of her thigh before tracing the path of the stocking down her leg with his fingertips.

When he had both stockings off, he moved closer, one bent knee between her legs, opening her to his gaze as he stroked his fingers across her inner thighs, then up to her center.

“So gorgeous, my love.” He bent his head as he spread her with his fingers and lapped at her, licking with long languorous strokes, then slipping his fingers inside to caress that spot where all of her aching need for him seemed to have gathered.

For one moment, he lifted his head, his gaze intense and adoring. Then he lapped at her again, hands curled around her thighs, holding her as if she was a treasure to savor.

“Cassian.” Daphne stroked her fingers through his hair, bucking against his mouth as pleasure rippled through her. Then she clutched at his shoulders, pulling him up, needing to feel more of him.

And he seemed to understand because he positioned himself above her and the perfection of it made her shiver. This is what she wanted—their bodies together, as close to him as she could get. Nothing between them but this all-consuming passion—no fears, no doubts.

Then she felt the hard stroke of him against her, slipping through her wet heat, testing, tempting. His gaze locked on hers, and she saw such love there, it made her breath catch in her throat.

“I want forever with you, Daphne,” he rasped.

“Yes,” she said, then arched up to kiss him.

As he slipped his tongue between her lips, he slid inside her. She was so aroused, so wet from his mouth and her release that he filled her easily. At first, the fullness felt strange, but only for a moment because as soon as he pulled back, she wanted more.

When she made a little mewling sound of need, Cassian stilled.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered with a smile, reaching up to stroke the hair from his forehead. “I trust you.”

“I’ll never stop loving you.” He smiled too, no doubt remembering the first time she’d said the words to him in Hillcrest’s hedge maze.

Then he filled her again, deeper, and she gasped at how right it felt. As he built a rhythm, she bent her knees, then reached down to grip his hip, as if she could pull him closer. Needing him closer. He captured her lips and kissed her fiercely, one hand tangled in her hair.

With every stroke, every kiss, he made her his. Whenever he looked at her, even as he seemed to struggle for control, she saw love in his eyes. Felt it in the way he touched her, kissed her, filled her.

The pull began anew, her body reaching for a pinnacle that made heart race and drew her muscles taut. Cassian lifted his head and watched her as he reached between their

bodies, his fingers going unerringly to that sensitive flesh that pushed her higher and then tipped her over the edge.

She cried out his name, scraped her fingernails across his back, and then his mouth was on hers again as he found his own release.

He nuzzled her neck, kissed her heated skin, whispered, “My love” like a promise. Like a vow.

Then as he shifted to move away from her, Daphne immediately wanted the weight and warmth of him back, but he made no move to get out of bed or dress.

He settled next to her, then pulled her into his arms. They lay entangled, sated, wrapped in each other’s arms as their breathing slowed. Cassian reached down for a blanket to pull it up over her, but she didn’t need it. His body warmed her like a furnace, and she’d never felt more content.

“My sister will come looking for me eventually,” she said as she lay with her cheek against his chest, savoring the strong, steady beat of his heart.

“They went into the village with Edgerton to the local summer fair.”

Daphne grinned. “Did they indeed?” She stroked her fingers through the curly dark hair on his chest. “Then we have time for...” Lifting her head, she arched one brow at him. “More?”

He chuckled so low, it sounded smoky and utterly enticing. “My insatiable wife-to-be.”

Daphne inched up until they were face to face, then reached out to trace his lips with her fingertip. “Perhaps now is a good time to mention that I want a houseful of

children.”

For a moment, his eyes grew serious.

“We’ll make sure they’re loved,” she whispered, fearing he was recalling his own childhood. She understood a bit of the horror of what his father had done to him and his brother, and she knew it had left him wounded inside, doubting himself.

But she knew how powerful a loving family could be, and she trusted they could build one together.

He reached down, stroking a hand down her back, then rolled their bodies until he arched over her again. “A whole houseful?”

“Can you bear it?”

He smiled. “I think I could, love.”

Three Years Later

Heveston Hall

Kent

Seagulls wheeled overhead, and Cassian held tight to his daughter's hand as they walked along the seaside cliffs near Heveston. Little Portia had a passion for rocks, and by the time they took the path back home, she'd no doubt have one in hand and more in her pockets.

Daphne had begun collecting them and was determined to use them to create a little mosaic to put in the garden.

"We should wait for Mama," he told his rambunctious child with hair the same gold shade as her mother's.

Portia stopped and turned back immediately. "Leo!" she shouted into the wind.

Their infant son, cradled in his mother's arms, knew his name well enough to giggle at his sister's call.

When Daphne reached them, Cassian stroked a hand down her back and kissed her. He couldn't seem to look at her without needing to touch her, kiss her, whisper in her ear of his love for her. That love had saved him, and now it deepened between them day by day, year by year.

He no longer questioned whether he deserved her or whether she deserved a better man. He was a better man because of her, and because of her, he'd become a man who deserved her, a family, and love.

Heveston was no longer just a rambling country house for summer visits, it was their home, and they'd filled it with books, children's laughter, and plants.

So many plants. The first they'd bought together to bring some greenery inside was a palm, and somehow Daphne had teased him about that day at Kew Gardens, their first trip to the Palm House, and his eagerness to tell her the truth—though he'd never found the moment or the words.

They'd visited Kew since, when Portia was a babe, and had been able to appreciate it anew and explore it more thoroughly.

She didn't bring up his past deception, and her capacity for forgiveness still astounded him.

"Shall we head back?" Daphne asked.

"Yes, because I have a surprise for you."

She pushed at his chest playfully. "My birthday is two weeks away. You must wait."

"Surprises are allowed any day of the year. Besides, why can I not give my wife a bit of pleasure whenever I like?"

Daphne's eyes sparkled. "Indeed, Husband."

"Can I have a surprise too?" Portia asked. Their daughter rarely missed a thing.

"See what you've done," Daphne whispered and then chuckled. "Yes, love, you'll

have so many presents very soon because your birthday is just three days after Mama's."

Portia bounced on her toes and beamed at the prospect, then clasped her mother's hand. Cassian reached out and Daphne settled their son in his arms, and then they wound along the path back to their home.

As they neared Heveston, Isla trotted toward them. The old Scottish deerhound he'd found near the hunting lodge had adapted well to the change from Highland forests to Kentish fields, and she was particularly smitten with Portia.

Their daughter rushed forward to greet her with a hug.

Narrowing one eye at him, Daphne asked, "So where's this gift?"

"It's a special sort of gift because you've seen it many times, but this time it will surprise you."

A lovely pink blush washed over her cheeks. "Are you trying to seduce me?" she whispered.

Cassian laughed. "That comes later tonight. Now come and see the surprise."

"Give me a hint."

"My impatient wife," he teased.

Once they reached the house, Cassian tipped his head toward the back gardens. "This way."

They had a small staff, but he'd needed the help of all of them to keep this secret for the past few months.

On his part, it had required patience, diligence, and hope for years longer—somehow, he seemed to have all of those qualities in abundance now, at least where a surprise that would please Daphne was concerned.

Digory, their footman, stood outside the entryway of the conservatory they'd commissioned a local builder to create in the months after their marriage and their move to Kent.

Once it was complete, Cassian had taken Daphne to Scotland, and they'd returned a few weeks later via coach rather than train, in order to transport his botanical specimens and Isla too.

On that trip back to England, in that carriage, she'd told him she was carrying his child.

And for one terrifying moment, the memories of his own father had nearly overwhelmed all the joy.

Daphne had been patient—despite her claim she wasn't and how much he loved teasing her—and he'd reminded himself that he was not his father.

He remembered that he'd had paternal affection from Bartlett and his mother's love and care.

Those were the examples he'd let guide him as a father.

"All's ready, Captain," the footman said as they reached the conservatory.

"Thank you, Digory."

Elise, the children's nanny, took Leo in her arms and led Portia to one of the white-painted, wrought-iron benches inside the soaring glass structure.

When Cassian nodded at their housekeeper, Mrs. Moore, she bustled off to a corner of the conservatory, where they'd constructed an inner wall to create a hothouse for the specimens that needed sultry conditions.

Cassian took Daphne's hands in his and turned her so that her back was to the corner.

"Is it the new rose variety I told you about?"

He grinned. "Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't."

"Well, it must be a plant of some sort." She was all but vibrating with frustration.

This was something he'd learned quickly about his wife—she both loved and hated surprises.

She'd confided that too many of the surprises in her life had been terrible ones, like the loss of her brother, and the business with that skunk she'd kicked in the bollocks.

So whenever Cassian planned a surprise for her, he did so with care and made certain it was a good one.

A moment later, Mrs. Moore emerged, pushing a gilded cart with Daphne's fragile surprise situated atop it.

Daphne tried to turn her head, and Cassian caught her chin, then leaned in for a kiss. Always an excellent means of distracting his wife.

When the cart was in place behind Daphne, he smiled at his wife, the woman who he loved fiercely and who'd given him so much.

"Now you can look, my love."

Daphne turned and let out a gasp. “Oh, Cassian.”

She stepped closer and bent to examine the blooms, turning her head this way and that, then reached out to touch the plant’s glossy petals with the gentlest of strokes.

The camellia japonica had bloomed a rich red, its petals pointed, plentiful, and arranged in perfect symmetry.

Among botanical collectors, it was an almost mythical variety and extremely rare.

His cutting had come from a naturalist navy man who’d served on the HMS Lizard in New Zealand, and when he and Daphne brought it back from Scotland, it had been little more than a few leaves.

He hadn’t known for certain it would thrive.

It’d taken five years for these blooms to burst forth.

Two of those years he’d spent in isolation, telling himself it was enough.

The last three years had proved him wrong and had been the happiest of his life.

“Such a wonderful surprise,” she said, turning a look over her shoulder.

Cassian wrapped her in his arms, and she leaned back against his chest.

“It’s so beautiful,” she murmured.

“So are you, my love.”

“Do you know what it means?” she asked him. “In the language of flowers?”

“No, tell me.”

Daphne leaned slightly to look back at him. “Ardent love. The flame of your heart.”

“You are, Daphne. You brought my heart back to life.”

She smiled and turned to twine her arms around his neck.

“Thank you for my gift, Husband.”

“Thank you for mine.” There were so many—her love, her trust, her hope.

She wasn’t just the woman who’d changed him. She was his heart’s home.