



How to Romance a Rogue (A Gentleman's Guide to Courtship #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: A single kiss ruined him.

How's a rake supposed to please the ladies if he's incapable of kissing anyone but her—Lady Charlotte Merriweather, the thorn in Quinton Chance, Viscount Noble's backside. He should never have kissed her. But what else is a man to do when a beautiful woman cries? Now the one woman who makes him feel weak is the only woman he wants. And he promised his father on his deathbed to never show weakness. A proper society marriage will help him focus on his duties as a peer and banish Lottie's kiss forever.

A single kiss awakened her heart.

Lottie has been in love with Quinton since he kissed her the day of her parents' funeral. But he apologized and ran, and now all he gives her is smirks and snide remarks. That's why she's determined to forget him, to choose a husband from the many men courting her. But none of them kiss like Quinton, and when she discovers his barbs hide softer feelings for her, she knows she can't give up. She'll do her best to romance a rogue and prove loving is no weakness.

The Duke of Clearford's Guide to Courtship will help Quinton woo a tepid bride, but Lottie will use it to romance her rogue. If these warring lovers can quit arguing long enough, perhaps they'll see that happily ever after begins with a kiss.

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February 1809

Quinton Chance, Viscount Noble was crying, and he didn't know how to stop. It had started with a single tear leaking from the corner of his eye, rolling down his cheek. He'd swiped at it, thought it an anomaly. It hadn't been. He'd been leaking all day long, during the funeral, during the interment. He'd remained behind in the chapel, too embarrassed to follow the others as they'd filed outside into the drizzling rain.

What the hell was wrong with him? Men died every day. Just because this one happened to be his father, and just because he happened to quite like his father, didn't mean he had to wail about it. He took a shaky breath and rubbed the heel of his gloved hand over his raw eyes. His chest constricted, and it took more effort than it should have to pull a breath into his lungs, to push it out again. Was he dying? Rather felt like it.

"Quinton?" The soft voice, so hesitant and so familiar, seemed to brush him on the shoulder, a gentle touch, a query.

He turned around. She stood in the chapel doorway, sunlight flooding around her, making a halo of her golden curls. Lady Charlotte Merriweather, his neighbor and friend—if a viscount could have a girl for a friend—since... forever, stepped toward him, her gait as hesitant as her voice had been, her hands clasped behind her back.

"Can I help?" she asked.

Not are you well. An important distinction, that. Are you well is what everyone had asked him since his father's death. Of course he wasn't bloody well. His father was

dead, and he'd become the viscount responsible for everything and everyone around him, at barely twenty years of age. Some men had children already. Quinton knew that. Quinton knew there were men who had held their titles since childhood. But Quinton had never thought to be one of them. His father had been hale and hearty and very much alive, and Quinton should have had time. Time to simply be himself before he had to exist for others.

But Lottie knew he wasn't well as she crept ever closer. Of course he was horrible. He much preferred the question she'd asked. More astute than the customary.

He shook his head. "No, you cannot help me." What good could a sixteen-year-old girl do? Too innocent, too ignorant of the hardships of men's lives.

"It's absolute rubbish," she said, stopping next to him. "Losing your parent. I can't even imagine... I love Mama and Papa so dearly..." She snorted. "Rubbish."

He rubbed another tear away.

She glanced up at him, a quick dart of her blue eyes. "You look horrid. Should I bring everyone back for a second funeral?"

"And a third. You appear to be on death's door, Merriweather. Black does not suit you."

She sighed, deep and heavy. "I suppose I'll take pity on you."

He raised a brow, curiosity punching bright holes in his grief. "You? Pity me?"

"Oh yes. Because you see..." She unclasped her arms from behind her back and shoved a tiny, sleeping puppy into his face. "I've brought you this. To make you feel better for just a little while. My papa's dog had pups, and he said I could give you

one. But you've been so impolite, my sympathy has entirely dissipated." Another deep, dramatic sigh. "I suppose I'll relent. From pity. Here." She shoved the puppy at his chest, and its limp, brown body composed almost entirely of large, floppy ears and loose, silken fur burrowed into his cravat. It yipped.

And Lottie smiled. "Feel better?"

He didn't want to, but he did—he grinned and dusty sunlight poured through those holes that curiosity had left in his sadness. "A little."

"And you said I couldn't help." Such satisfaction in her tone, such pride.

Holding a soft pup and with such a confident creature next to him, he should have found a path forward. The tears should have dried up.

They poured, and he dropped to his knees with gut-wrenching sobs.

"Oh." Lottie dropped to her knees, too, her hands fluttering around his shaking shoulders. "Oh, Quinton. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I only meant to tease you a little bit. Not to hurt you, but to distract you. I'm so sorry." Grief choked her voice now.

And that made the tears pour more quickly. He curled in on himself, pressing his forehead to the floor and trapping the puppy in the cavity of his chest with rigid arms. Everything changed. Every damn thing in his life was different and no father to show him the way.

A soft hand settled on his back, on the ridge of his spine. A mere touch. Nothing more. No soft shushing like a mother to a babe, and no false reassurances that everything would be fine. She just sat next to him, a corner of her skirts spilling into his cavern of grief, and let him cry.

Coughing finally roused him. But not hers. Male and from across the room. It echoed around them. Quinton rose and sat back on his heels, wiping his nose with one sleeve and his eyes with the other.

His father's best friend, Mr. Barnaby Percival, stood in the chapel doorway with a stern and craggy face. Gray lightly streaked his dark hair, and the lines on his face spoke more of displeasure than of laughter enjoyed well and often. His gray eyes were sunless skies, capable of striking lightning.

"My lord," he said, "I have need of you."

Lottie popped to her feet, eyes blazing. "What could you possibly need right now? Can't you see he needs a moment alone?"

Seemed impossible, but Barnaby's face grew craggier. "I'm sure your mother is wondering where you are, Lady Charlotte."

Lottie's hands found her hips, and she threw her chin up. She would not be sent away. Always ready for battle, little Lottie. Exhaustion hugged him tight. Nothing left in him for fighting.

"It's fine," he said. "Go find your mother. Thank you."

She studied his face for several seconds, and then with a hard jaw, she nodded and flounced out of the chapel. Quinton laughed without quite realizing it, but when he heard the sound—so astounding—it made him want to laugh again. Lottie... always entertaining. He'd needed her distraction as much as he had needed her understanding.

He pushed to his feet, clutching the pup to his chest. It seemed to have fallen asleep, and its light, limp weight somehow tethered him to the earth. "What is it, Barnaby?"

“A man from London is here to meet with the viscount.”

“It can wait. We just put my father in the ground.”

“It can’t.” Barnaby marched forward. “You’re the viscount now. You don’t have the luxury of grief. The world does not stop because you’re wounded.” The word said with a sneer. “People do not stop depending on you because you’re crying,” he said with a hard laugh.

Quinton’s hands fisted, and he strode toward the door. Better that than putting his fist in Barnaby’s face. How humiliating—to be caught crying by a man so hard a blade against his skin would spark instead of slice. If Quinton hit him, he’d likely break all the bones in his hand.

Barnaby followed, his footsteps heavy on the stone floor. “Don’t think you can ignore this lesson, boy. Don’t be weak like your father.”

Quinton swung around, and his fist found the man’s cravat, tangled, tugged, choked. “Don’t say a word about my father.”

“He almost ruined everything for his first wife. Did you know that? She fell ill, and he spent almost every penny on doctors, trips, all useless. Thank God, he married a sensible woman the second time around. Your mother didn’t want love, and your father didn’t want to give it anymore. And do you know what happened?”

Quinton released Barnaby, gave him his back, and stepped into the rain.

Barnaby followed. “He suddenly had a son and heir. And he made good investments to refill the coffers, and he had time to give to his tenants.”

“Why are you rambling about this, Barnaby? I know all about my father’s first wife.

The story grows tedious.”

“Because you were bawling like a babe in that girl’s lap. I’ve seen it before. She’s dangerous. She’ll ruin you.”

Quinton rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t in her lap. And Lottie’s a child, a friend.”

“Don’t let her close or she’ll become more.” Barnaby flicked his wrist to the gray sky and tugged the hem of his glove down. An insignificant gesture. To most. To Quinton, it brought the past into screaming life. His father used to do the exact same thing. Then Barnaby folded his arms behind his back and walked forward with a slight lean. His torso would arrive at his destination before his feet. Same as Quinton’s father.

Drowning in his own damn tears, Quinton grasped the only bit of wood floating toward him. His father could offer him no guidance, but Barnaby, perhaps, could. He grasped hold, steadied himself with Barnaby’s certainty.

“You can’t be weak, boy. Ever. A lesson your father learned in the most difficult of ways. Do you think he wants you to make the same mistakes?”

Quinton paused, everything in him freezing in time around that one question.

“Your father’s gone, Lord Noble.” Barnaby’s eyes were hard as buttons. “But I’m here if you need me. Your father asked me to lead you if you require it, to stop you from making the same mistakes he made. You can’t be weak. And nothing makes a man weaker than love, than a woman he can cry with.”

Had his father truly desired that? He’d not been there in his final days. But Barnaby had. His father had always done what was best for Quinton, and he’d put his future in Barnaby’s hands.

“Go ahead and put your heart to sleep,” Barnaby said. “You won’t be needing it.”

Quinton took a final glimpse over his shoulder at the chapel, then left his heart sleeping in the cold sepulcher beside his father.

* * *

June 1813

Lottie ran from the chapel and into the brightest sunshine she’d ever seen in all her one and twenty years. Tears streamed down her face, and the wind stole curls from her coiffure until her hair trailed long and wild behind her in the breeze.

She stumbled into the forest, bouncing from tree to tree, losing a slipper somewhere along the way...

She’d lost so much more than a slipper. She’d lost both parents. Crushed in a carriage accident. Gone. Forever. Too heavy. Much too heavy. Her legs wobbled under the weight, collapsed. She sank as far into the warm earth as it would let her and sobbed, careless of mud or grass or bugs or anything but for the crushing pain squeezing her chest, her ribs like claws around her heart. She’d gained a reputation during her first London Season for always being perfectly attired, perfectly behaved. The perfect duke’s daughter. They would not recognize her now. She was no longer a duke’s daughter now. Her brother was duke, and she was... she was...

“Merriweather?”

She bolted upright and squeezed her eyes tightly closed. She’d imagined the voice. She had to because Quinton had not spoken a word to her for four years.

The grass crunched behind her, as if beneath the weight of a man’s footstep. She must

be imagining that as well. Then a warmth beside her.

“Lottie?” Quinton’s voice said again, softer this time. And that she could not imagine because she had no experience from which to conjure softness from him.

She opened her eyes and turned her head. He sat next to her, his face pale, and his whisky-colored eyes full of the same sorrow she’d seen in them the day they’d buried his father. His sandy-brown hair had been falling over his face then, but he wore it perfectly styled now, waving back from his forehead as if he’d not run through a forest like she just had. Because he hadn’t. He’d followed, presumably, at a more sedate pace, and he clutched her missing slipper between both hands.

“What are you doing here?” She spoke without emotion, studying only the blank future stretching out before her.

“I saw you run off. I was worried.” He leaned over her leg and lifted her foot gently, brushed dirt and grass from her stocking, and slipped the shoe on. The touch, so careful, so meticulous, made her want to cry.

Then he sat back down, bent a knee, and rested a forearm against it, and she tried not to notice how the movement pulled the wool of his jacket taut over strong muscle. Unfortunately, she noticed such things about him, even in her grief. She’d tried not to during her Season, had tried to notice such things about other men who noticed her.

Futile. Unfortunately.

“You think me incapable of handling my own grief?”

“I’m sure you can do that fine. I think you incapable of running without tripping over a root.”

She gasped. “I would never trip. I’m quite fleet of foot, as you well know. I could beat you in a race, you—”

He grinned.

Her world stopped. Not just because he’d been teasing her. Not just because that grin of his with strong lips and white, even teeth, shone brighter than the happy sun above. But because he never grinned these days. Not that she’d seen. Not since his father’s death.

She picked up a leaf near her foot. “Hmph. I’ll not succumb to teasing.”

“I’m not teasing. You’ve worn nothing but ball gowns and slippers the last several months, and your only exercise has been sedate strolls in Hyde Park. I doubt you could beat me. I doubt you can even walk without the assistance of a footman. Or a beau.”

“When we were children, I—”

“We’re not children anymore.”

Why did that make her feel... hot? Must be the sun. She inched away from him and leaned against the large trunk of a mossy tree.

“How do you survive?” she asked him.

He sighed and joined her against the tree, their shoulders kissing. “Barely at first, but then a day at a time until it’s a bit better.” He’d not needed an explanation to know what she meant. The loss of a parent. Or both parents. “Find something else to eat the time up with.” He nudged her shoulder with his, sending her almost to the ground. “You can do that, Merriweather.”

Could she? She righted herself with a glare his way and leaned her head against the tree. She turned to face him, knowing she gave him her every weakness in the two tears rolling down her cheeks. “I don’t know if I can.”

His eyelashes, golden somehow despite his darker hair, fluttered, then something shifted in his eyes. He lifted a hand to her cheek and wiped the tear away. A speck of dirt, too, he held up between them before stripping his glove off and letting it fall to the ground. “There are many ways, many distractions.”

More tears replaced the one he’d demolished. “Such as?”

“Hell, Lottie.” He licked his lips. “Distractions such as this.”

He kissed her, a soft meeting of lips, as bright and hot as the sun above, while his ungloved hand cupped her face. He breathed into the kiss, a sound, a rush of sensation that said something she didn’t understand and promised something she wanted as much as she wanted her parents back.

When he pulled away, his hand remained, and a groove appeared between his brows.

“Why?” she asked, incapable of language outside of that one word.

He blinked, seemingly unsure. “You comforted me once, so...”

“Comfort me again?”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Please, Quin—”

His comfort came like fire, sudden and all-consuming as his unoccupied arm curved

around her waist, pulling their bodies closer together, and his lips met hers again with greater pressure.

And more passion.

A door unlocked inside Lottie. A light blazed on. And a need that had been sleeping dreamlessly inside her woke up. Not a need for Quinton. She'd long known she harbored an unwise affection for her neighbor and childhood friend.

A new need growled awake within her—for touches, caresses, kisses.

She clutched his shoulders—strong and solid and comforting. Then she tangled her hands in his cravat, pulling him closer, groping her way to the back of his neck where his silky hair curled, and the sensation made her want more.

More. Her mother had told her about it before her Season, wanting her armed with the knowledge of womanhood. Knowledge. She had it. Practice... she wanted it.

She may have squeaked as she leaned into Quinton fully, needing his arms tighter around her, needing so much she couldn't name. He toppled to the ground, and she fell atop him, and he growled and bit her bottom lip, then scattered kisses along her jaw, and she sighed his name.

“Quinton.”

He froze.

That couldn't be good. She froze too, looked down at him. “Quinton?”

He unwrapped his arms from around her waist and scurried backward on his forearms. Like she was a hound and he the hunted fox. Once free of her, he jumped to

his feet, brushed off his trousers.

“Enough distraction, Merriweather.” His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Are you well now?”

Not even a little bit. “Perfectly fine. Thank you.”

“Yes. Perfect. You can distract yourself now?” He waited for no answer, merely nodded, and disappeared around the side of the tree, the crunch of his boots growing fainter until they disappeared entirely.

Lottie sank back against the tree, her hand hovering above her mouth, afraid to touch it lest it banished the sensation of his lips against hers. Her first kiss. A distraction. It had worked, too. And not one likely to be repeated. He clearly thought it a mistake. A moment gone too far with the neighbor girl he’d known all his life. Most kisses were a prelude. This one a nail in the coffin of a brief but brilliant living thing. The kiss had simply added more weight to that she already bore. Another loss to carve her hollow.

What would she do without her parents?

And what would she do without the man who’d awakened her desire?

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April 1819

The actress's lips were... fine. Perfectly acceptable. Perfectly kissable. The right shape and size and—if Quinton dared to find out—texture for pleasure. She leaned against the door in the theater alley, beckoning him as she'd beckoned the actor she'd shared the stage with half an hour earlier. Her kohl-lined eyes said without words exactly what she wanted. His lips. On hers.

Quinton sauntered toward her, into the shadows. “Afternoon, luv. Excellent performance.”

“Hm.” She purred. “Thank you, my lord. But I’ve heard you give quite an impressive performance as well.”

He stopped just before her. Pretty enough—rouged cheeks and eyes made dark and tempting by the kohl.

“Good evening, Viscount Noble.” The words tumbled from her wicked grin. “Do the gossips speak the truth?”

“About...?”

“Certain of your appendages being as noble as your name?” Her gaze flicked downward, lingered on his fall. An invitation if he’d ever seen one.

And he had. More than he could count. He should accept it, enjoy a quick fuck after a sleepless night, and return home ready to face the demands the day would lay about

his shoulders like mud-heavy bricks. He'd earned it, eschewing pleasure in the dark hours that had just passed in order to pore over plans for new cottages at Bluevale, his country seat. A rough rutting in the alley with a willing actress was all he had time to indulge in.

He'd come here for that express purpose, having received the actress's note early yesterday evening. Mable Marcus—the most sought-after actress of the age, a celebrated beauty. And she'd invited him backstage. For a private performance after her matinee. Alluring. Talented. And she wanted him.

But when Quinton looked at her lips, his heart remained sleeping. Not a single bit of him stirred for her, most especially not his noble appendage. But he did not wish to offer her offense with his rejection. He leaned forward, trailed a finger down her round, pretty face. “Unfortunately, not this afternoon, Mrs. Marcus. I came merely to express my admiration of your talent.” He stepped away from her.

She pouted. “I have other talents, you know.” A glint of pain lingered in the drooping corners of her mouth.

He winked, stepped back again. “Of that I've no doubt. Seeing you up close, though, it's clear you're as beautiful as they say. Much too refined for a man like me.”

She blushed, her smile returning, and he left.

Left the actress unkissed and left himself cursed. Early evening wrapped navy shadows round him as he pulled the brim of his beaver hat low. He kicked through puddles as he stomped toward Mayfair.

He was cursed. Because it had been over three years since he'd kissed a woman. He'd been celibate for a year. Fucking proved no fun without kissing, apparently. A woman's lips on his, his lips everywhere on her body—a miracle of sensation, a

moment of transport.

Ruined. Because of her.

Lady Charlotte Merriweather. Sister to a duke, prim as a prude, and the last woman he'd kissed with enjoyment, with urgency and need. He'd tried his best since the kiss six years ago to forget, tried to use every other willing woman's lips to muffle the memory. Unsuccessfully.

Hell, Barnaby had been right. A vein of softness ran through Quinton's blood when a viscount should be, needed to be strong, hard as steel with a sleeping heart. The only way to do his duty to his title, to his ancestors, to his people, to his father, and to his future heir.

For years, he'd thought Barnaby's views on women baseless. He'd never met a woman he'd destroy the world for. Then he'd kissed Lottie and his heart had come to wakefulness moaning her name, his lips on hers, their hearts beating together beneath that summer sky as the sun cast gold and shadows over her face. Then he'd known exactly what Barnaby meant, and he'd done everything he could to keep Lottie away, to keep himself away, his heart sleeping. He did not destroy worlds for love.

But he did find himself in need of an heir. One of those mud-heavy bricks. And since he couldn't enjoy bed sport anymore, he might as well do it for practical purposes.

He entered his London townhome half an hour later. He needed a bath. And food. Then to speak with his estate manager about the cottages. He'd not yet made a decision on which plans to follow. Perhaps the man would have some insight.

"Quin! Is that you, darling?" His mother's voice from down the hall.

"Coming, Mother." He handed his greatcoat to the butler, Mr. Carter, and found his

mother in her private parlor, smiling and sunny in yellow, her slightly silvered blonde hair hidden by a matching turban.

She patted the seat next to her on a too small and spindly couch. “Sit, darling. You look horrid.”

He felt horrid. He’d had too much scotch, one too many cheroots. He stank, and his mouth tasted like mud. Or worse.

“Out carousing again?” She chuckled.

If only.

“With one of your actresses?” More prodding.

“No. I told you. I’m ready to marry. No more actresses. Speaking of which, have you made a decision yet?” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I need tea. No, coffee.”

She called a maid and requested a fresh pot, then sat by him once more. With a satisfied sigh, she reached down and scratched Princess’s ear as the hound rose on unsteady hips and came to sniff Quinton, tail wagging. “I’ve not made a decision yet. I find it rather uncomfortable to choose your wife for you.”

“I trust you.” He angled away from her to speak so she did not have to smell him and rubbed Princess’s belly with the toe of his boot. He pressed his eyes closed and massaged his temples. His mother was everything light and lovely, everything kindness and truth. “You know better than I which lady will make a good Viscountess Noble.” He scrubbed his clammy palms over his face and kept them there. Hiding in the darkness, he heard the coffee arrive, heard the tinkle of china and silver as she fixed him a cup and set it before him. He opened his eyes and reached for it.

She beamed. “I want you to be happy, Quin. And if you take no interest in the process of choosing a wife, I’m afraid you will not be. I want to know when I leave you that you’ll be well cared for—heart, soul, and body.”

He sat bolt upright. “Leave? What do you mean by that?”

With an annoyed grumble, Princess flopped to her belly and closed her eyes.

His mother cleared her throat, a tiny, almost proper sound. “Death, my dear, that is what I mean.”

He snorted. “You’re not dying any time soon.” Was she? He studied her more closely. Laugh lines around her eyes. Grooves of worry between them. Thin frame and sturdy spine. Same as always. He couldn’t lose her, too. If she was sick, he could help. In whatever way possible. “You’re not sick, are you?”

“No, I’m not. But Quinton... there are other reasons I might leave you.”

“What?” He could not think of any.

“Marriage.”

“When I marry, you will stay right here and—”

“Not you. Me.”

Well, that floored him.

She laughed. “You look like I’ve just dumped a chamber pot over your head.” She placed two fingers under his chin and snapped his mouth shut. “It’s been almost a decade since your father died. I’m tired of being alone.”

He took her hand, folded it between his, his skin be damned. He needed the solidity of her bone and skin to reassure him. Not sick. Merely starting up her life again. Considering it. He squeezed and released her, then took up his coffee. “You’ve no need to marry, Mother. I’ll always support you.” He sipped. “Hell! It’s hot.”

“Language, Quinton.” A soft warning.

Those did the most damage, soared straight to the heart. Thunk. Dead.

“I’ve no need to marry.” She picked up her own cup but did not drink. It hovered right over her mouth, her eyes clouded by steam. “This time I’ll do it for love.”

He knew well his parents had not shared much outside of duty. They’d respected one another, trusted one another, but there had been no love. His father had tried that with his first wife, found it devilish, and made corrections in his second marriage. A strong man didn’t marry for love, didn’t cloud his judgment with a soft heart. His father had learned that lesson the hard way, so Quinton would not have to suffer similarly.

“I do not think you’re missing out on much, Mother,” he said.

His mother sipped with no accident. Scalding heat suited her, it seemed. “I’m disappointed you think so. I suppose that is why you think I should be the one to choose your wife.”

“Yes. It is purely a practical matter.”

Through the steam rising from her cup, her gaze sliced into his. “I cannot do it. I will not. You are to be involved in choosing your wife. I insist. In fact, I’ve sent out invitations for a series of events I will host, and you will attend. During these events, you are to court and choose a bride.”

“No. There’s no reason for it. It’s a waste of time. Just draw a name from a jar and be done with it.”

She placed her cup delicately on the table and straightened her shoulders. “I will choose for you. But you will attend the events. I must see you with the ladies to know if you suit. Even when choosing practically, compatibility is of great importance.”

Hell. She had a point. He groaned. “Very well. I’ll attend.”

His mother clapped her hands. “Excellent. I should have known your good sense would win out. I do not enjoy hosting parties, of course. I’ve never been good at it, but I’ll not let that stop me. This is important. You are important.” She took another sip of her tea. “With Lottie’s guidance, it will be easy.”

Lottie.

A name like a death knell.

“You don’t mean Lady Charlotte M—”

“Merriweather, yes, that’s exactly who I mean. What other Lottie is there?”

None other.

“No.” Knowing she might help him find a wife sat like a rotten fish in his gut.

His mother blinked, set her cup softly on the table, and tilted her head. “No?”

“No, Lady Charlotte cannot help you.”

“I assure you, she can. You attended the ball last Season she hosted for her brother. A

triumph. It quite transported me. You should have offered her a dance, being her brother's oldest friend."

Quinton's father and the Duke of Clearford, Samuel's father, had owned neighboring estates. Samuel and Quinton and every one of Samuel's sisters had grown up tumbling about the countryside with one another. Naturally, assumptions about marriage had taken place throughout the years.

"I'm not marrying any of Samuel's sisters," he insisted, peering at the coffee. Had the steam receded enough yet? He picked up the cup, sipped, sighed that he could finally drink it without burning his gullet.

"I'm not suggesting you do. They're too nice for you. At one time, I thought you and Lottie... When you were children, you were so close. Then something shifted."

"I grew up. We were playmates when I was a boy, but a man cannot have a girl for a friend."

"Nonsense. Doesn't matter now, though. She likely wouldn't have you if you begged. If you caroused less, perhaps..."

He dropped his head into his hands and propped sharp elbows into his thighs. "Again with the carousing? As my sainted mother, you're not supposed to know about that."

"Perhaps your mother is not quite as saintly as you think."

He looked up, a bit horrified.

She chuckled, raised a brow. "You exist, darling. Ponder that for a moment."

"I don't think I will."

Another chuckle that bled into a sigh. “No, Lottie is not meant for you. Not anymore. Nor are the others. But... you might seek out Samuel’s help as I have sought out Lottie’s. The Daily Current reports that”—she pulled a wrinkled bit of newspaper from beneath her skirts—“every single man in need of a wife finds himself, eventually, before the townhouse of the Duke of Clearford.” She pulled a pair of spectacles from a pocket and perched them on her nose to read. “Having married off one of his famously unmarriageable sisters, a woman many considered beyond the reach of the entire population of London beau—”

“Rubbish.”

“Shh. It continues. The duke is considered every bachelor’s surest route to matrimonial success. If he can teach a man how to catch one of his superior and not unreasonably discerning sisters, he can teach a man to catch any woman he chooses to chase.”

“You believe that rubbish?”

The newspaper fluttered to her lap, and his mother repocketed her spectacles. “He helped his sister wed that newspaperman last Season. They’re quite happy.”

Happy. He snorted. “Men aren’t supposed to care about happiness. Only results matter.” Like improving the cottages. “Barnaby always says—”

“Oh, Barnaby. I’ve always disliked him. Now, Quin, all you must do is appear at these events and become acquainted with the ladies. You must behave yourself, though. Unwed innocents are a different sort of creature from what you’re used to. No lewd topics of discussion, no leering, no smirking.”

“I don’t leer.”

“You do. I’ve seen it.” Her usually serene face scrunched up. “At women’s lips. It’s quite unmannerly.”

Hell. He did stare at women’s lips. Almost constantly. Trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with him. How to break the curse. “Never innocent ladies’ lips,” he insisted. Especially not that one innocent lady’s lips.

“That is the problem, you know. It’s the wrong set of lips. Entirely wrong. You look at lips you can’t marry. During these events, you may peruse the lips of ladies who are perfectly suited for marriage. Don’t sample them, of course. Not until you’ve proposed. But you might browse a bit.”

The wrong lips. Yes, perhaps therein lay the problem. He’d spent the last several years courting every pair of unacceptable lips that came his way. Those only belonging to women he could never wed. And he’d failed to banish the ghost of Lottie’s kiss. He’d never tried a proper woman before. Not since Lottie.

He chuckled. Damn, such a simple answer to the problem. He’d been attending a knife fight with his bare fists. But he had the correct weapons now. If he kissed, wed a proper lady, he’d finally be rid of Lottie and obligated to kiss his wife and his wife only. He should have thought of it sooner.

“When is the first event?” he asked.

“A week from today. Lottie assured me we could be prepared by then. Just a simple afternoon tea. Don’t you want to hear who the guests are?”

“No.” Didn’t matter as long as the woman knocked Lottie out of his head like a fist knocked a tooth from a skull—quickly and efficiently. Brutally. Speaking of Lottie. “Lady Charlotte is helping you, but will she be attending the tea? The other events?”

“Oh, yes. She’s promised, and she must. I need her. She just left, you know. If you’d slept at home, you would have, no doubt, ran into her.”

He sank slowly back down to the couch. Would he be able to focus on any lips but hers with her about? He shook his head, standing once more. “No. She can’t help you.”

His mother sighed. “Quinton.” She snapped his name into two heavy bricks. “I need her, and I’ll have her, no matter what little spat you two are embroiled in at the moment. I’ve never understood it. Always fighting, you two.”

A warm heavy weight rolled onto his foot. Princess. She looked up with sleepy, loving eyes. The same eyes she’d stared at him with ten years ago when Lottie had first handed the small ball of too-big fur over to him.

Usually, he’d allow his mother whatever she wished, no argument whatsoever, but this... he couldn’t.

“I don’t want her involved with finding me a wife.” He couldn’t have her around.

His mother stood. “Too late for that, darling. She’s already set off to Fleet Street with my invitations. She promised that brother-in-law of hers, the newspaperman, could print our invitations today. So very convenient to have such a man for a connection.” She sauntered toward the door, clearly done with their conversation. “I suggest you bathe. And visit Clearford about his Guide. I do dislike suggesting you may need help to attract a proper young lady, but...” She considered him over her shoulder, the corner of her mouth lifted in a grimace. “You may very well need help.” She disappeared into the hallway.

Help from Samuel’s Guide. It wouldn’t hurt, and he needed every weapon in his arsenal to combat the curse that had settled over him for the last six years. Six damn

years. He'd not known anything to be particularly wrong at first. He'd kissed Lottie, a moment of softness in the face of her soul-shadowing grief. She'd just watched both her parents' bodies interred at the family chapel, and she'd run into the woods. He'd followed, caught her, held her, kissed her. A nodcock idea born of desperation. She'd given him a puppy when he'd been low. He smiled fondly down at Princess. He'd had nothing to give her. But himself. Her pain had torn him in two, and he'd given into the urge to fix it, cure it. And somehow ruined himself in the process.

Because Lady Charlotte Merriweather's kiss had cursed him. If he even dared attempt to kiss another woman, as soon as he closed his eyes, he saw Lottie, crying in the woods, shoeless and loving, in pain. He hated her a bit for that. He should be strong, impenetrable, but she uncovered his hidden weaknesses, peered beneath his skin, and found the real him—helpless.

Celibate.

Hell. He shot to his feet. He must marry. And soon.

But first, he had to get rid of her. Because just like every other goal he'd accomplished in his life, he'd make a victory of courtship. Having Lottie about while he tried to do it just might steer him off course.

He left the house without a bath, though he did collect his tin of mint leaves from his study first. His phaeton was readied in moments, and he was on his way. Toward the Duke of Clearford's home. Where Quinton would acquire one of Samuel's courtship guides. And where he would let Lady Charlotte Merriweather know he did not need her help.

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Lottie must enjoy torture. Of the self-inflicted variety. Why else would she have agreed to help Lady Noble find a wife for her son? A man Lottie had long thought herself in love with. Unrequited love—another of her self-inflicted pains. She might as well put her hand in the printing press within arm's reach and slam the heavy frame down on top of it.

Her one solace? That Quinton Chance, Viscount Noble would surely experience a bit of torture during the series of planned courting events himself. And at her hands. Delicious, that.

“Lottie?” Andromeda, Lottie's sister, looked away from the man loading the press with paper and shaping the letters into place and nudged her with a shoulder. “Your expression went from gloom to murderously delighted in a breath. I'm distinctly worried. Should we vacate the premises to ensure the safety of, well, everyone? You're not about to flick knives into every man's chest, are you? Or set the building aflame? Lots of paper here. I'd suggest against it.”

Lottie wiped the apparently murderously delighted expression from her face and replaced it with her well-practiced angelic smile. “Not at all. I'd never be the agent of destruction for my dear brother-in-law's place of business. It's proved so very useful of late. No, I would like to destroy someone else entirely.”

“Ah!” Andromeda poked Lottie in the shoulder. “There it is again. You want to murder Noble. Admit it.”

“When do I not want to marry Noble?”

Andromeda lifted a dark-blondé brow, rolled her lips between her teeth. Her cheeks grew red as if she were about to explode.

“Are you well? About to cast up your accounts?” Lottie scowled.

“You just said—”

“Blast!” She heard it now. “Murder. I meant murder, not marry. I always wish to murder Noble.”

Another bump, one sister’s shoulder to another. “And marry him.”

“Not anymore. I’ve plans.”

The man pushing the press frame down, muscles bulging against fine but rumpled linen, released the handle with a grunt. “Here you are, Lottie. And glad to hear you’ve no plans to burn my empire to ash.” Mr. Tristan Kingston, owner of several printshops, ships, and a variety of other ventures—and married quite happily to Andromeda—grinned, raked a hand through his messy dark hair, and stretched his back. “Forget Noble, I say. He’s a prick.”

She should admonish him. Such language. And herself and Andromeda ladies, a duke’s sisters. But truly, what did it matter? She already knew the word, its meaning, its implications. She likely knew more words for a man’s member than he did. She was, after all, quite well-read and with all the right books. Books no proper lady should know existed. But Lottie and her oldest sisters did know. They’d found such books among their mother’s possessions after their parents’ deaths, and then the women had found them. All ladies who moved among the ton, and all of whom had borrowed their mother’s books, who wanted to borrow the books still, from the sisters. Lottie and her sisters had spent four years loaning them to the married and widowed ladies of the ton before giving up the endeavor to another intrepid soul last

Season.

Erotic novels.

She'd given up purveying them. But not reading them. Just as she'd given up loving Noble. But not given up on love itself.

"I have forgotten Noble already," she assured her brother-in-law. "It is why I've agreed to help Lady Noble. Is it done, then? The invitation?" She glanced at the press.

Tristan grunted and lifted the frame. "How's this, then?"

Andromeda slipped the paper out of the press, and they examined it together.

"Perfect." Andromeda patted her husband's arm.

Lottie agreed. "Now we need twenty more."

"Twenty!" Tristan's eyes took on the wide, wild-eyed shock of a cornered man. "Does Noble truly need that many options?"

Lottie nodded. "There will be fewer invitations issued with each event. We must cast the net wide at first, then narrow it down."

Tristan shook his head and set to work. "Taking up your brother's work, then? Matchmaking? Will you be choosing Noble's bride?"

"Certainly not. I'll be helping Lady Noble plan the events, ensuring they go well. Wooing a wife is entirely up to Lord Noble. I'm not sure he's capable of it."

"He's wooed his fair share of women," Tristan mumbled.

Andromeda sliced him a glare like a knife.

“It’s true,” he protested.

“It is.” Lottie stood taller. “No need to speak carefully around me. I am, after all, a lady he’s successfully wooed.” Not that he wanted success with her. Not that he’d tried. He’d chased her, he’d kissed her, and she’d been his. “All in the past, though. I’ve already begun my search for a husband. And I’ve already narrowed down the contenders to three.”

“Are you attending the Woodward ball tonight?” Andromeda asked.

“I am. All three gentlemen will be there as well. Who knows, I may find myself seriously considering a proposal by the time the sun rises on a new day.”

Andromeda sighed.

“What is it?” Lottie demanded.

“You’re moving a bit quickly, aren’t you?”

It would seem that way. Only last Season she’d been fending off suitors, determined to marry no man but for the one her heart wanted. The one who didn’t want her. Quinton. She’d been waiting in some odd space between patient and impatient. But she had been willing during the one Season she’d had before their parents’ deaths. After the accident... none of them had been willing. They’d locked themselves away, buried themselves in books. And, in Lottie’s case, girlhood crushes.

Last year, though, Samuel had insisted his sisters finally join the marriage mart, finally find husbands. And that push had jolted Andromeda out of her years’ long battle with grief. She’d shucked off the chains that had held her to a past with no

future and stepped forward into love with Kingston at her side. She'd been stuck, and then she'd not been anymore. And happiness had made her glow from the inside out.

Lottie wanted that. She'd been stuck, too, waiting still, hoping, unsure how to win back the gentle lad she'd been friends with as a child, confused about why his face had abandoned its soft smile for a sharp smirk. Confused about why he'd kissed her, then fled, never mentioning it again. She'd been waiting for him to snap out of it. Or waiting for herself to figure out how to fix it, how to approach him, and demand answers. But waiting had begun to feel like death.

No more. Like Andromeda, she would step into the light and into her future. No more waiting on Quinton. If he had her heart, she'd simply find a new one.

"I need to move more quickly," she said. "I've much to do before the ball tonight."

Tristan stood from his work. "Go, then. I'll have these delivered to the viscountess as soon as they're complete. And if you go, I'll be delivered of all this talk of courtship and Noble."

Andromeda kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

He kissed her back, his arm slinging around her waist and lips descending to hers. Lottie looked away, flushed and embarrassed by the affection between them, given so easily, accepted with such fervor. Did embarrassment make her avoid the sight? Or jealousy?

"Anything for you, Captain," she heard Tristan mumble.

Then Andromeda, her own cheeks flushed, was beside Lottie as they headed for the alley behind the printshop and climbed the small hill to Fleet Street beyond. The Street of Ink proved a bustling, living thing as always, and Lottie breathed in its

energy.

Their brother's footman, Johnny, waited for them, stepping in line dutifully behind them as they trod the street toward the waiting carriage.

"How can you say I'm moving quickly?" Lottie finally said. A sour storm had begun to rumble in her belly. "You and Tristan hardly had a slow courtship. And Samuel wants us all wed. Soon. And Mother would have liked to see me wed ages ago. I'm firmly on the shelf at six and twenty. It is time. It is past time."

Andromeda hummed. "Yes to everything you said. But what about love?"

Lottie snorted. "I tried that. It's awful. Time for a change." If she wed a man she didn't love, he held no sway over her. Love gave a man power, and with no guarantee he'd use it wisely, carefully. Andromeda had been lucky. "Besides, I'm tired of waiting to explore"—she lowered her voice—"pleasure, bedroom sport." Returning her voice to normal, she added, "Many women my age have children already." Yet Lottie had only kisses. A good number of them, admittedly, all conducted as rather unsuccessful experiments. She'd hoped, perhaps, that kisses wakened hearts. This had proved false. The man, not the kisses, breathed life into love.

"Oh. Yes, well, I understand that particular curiosity. And, I suppose, a marriage is the safest place for a woman to explore such desires." Annie sighed. "As it pleases you, Lottie. I hope you fall in love with one of your suitors, though."

She would not. She'd chosen them carefully.

"Who are they?" Annie asked.

"Lord Erstwhile. Mr. Pepperidge. And Lord Phillipspots."

Andromeda tilted her head to the side and pressed her lips together. “Not a horrid bunch. All familiar with Samuel. All approved by him, I assume.”

Lottie nodded. “They are solid men who will leave me be except for the bedroom. And the bedroom is the only place I shall need a husband, anyway.”

Andromeda flinched. “Rather... practical of you.”

“It is a practical matter. Part of my dowry is my own, as Mother insisted.” Their mother had insisted on many things before their parents’ deaths—that the sisters have money of their own, that they be allowed to choose their own husbands. “I do not need a man to provide me with a home. But I do need a man for children.” And experimentation.

“Yes. Very well, then. I’ll support you, whatever you do. Will you let me take you home?” Andromeda glanced at the waiting carriage.

“No. I’ll walk. I have Johnny.”

“Lottie.”

“I’ll walk.” There were few dangers to be faced during a carriage ride from Fleet Street to Mayfair. But Lottie had catalogued them all. Discounting those catastrophes that could occur within the body, there remained foul weather, robbery, fires, falling objects, and...

Carriage crashes.

Walking was better. Infinitely.

Andromeda sighed and hugged Lottie, and Lottie hugged her sister back.

When they separated, Lottie grasped Andromeda's hands. "I am so pleased to see you so happy. Tristan adores you, and you adore life now. More than you used to."

Andromeda bent her neck to hide her glowing smile. "I am filled to brimming with joy most days." She straightened and squeezed Lottie's hands. "I want the same for you."

Lottie returned the smile and the squeeze. What else could she do? And Andromeda slipped into her coach and rumbled away.

One sister married. Four marriageable sisters left to marry off. Then their brother might have a brief respite before their three remaining sisters came of age. Lottie would offer no obstacles. She had last Season, entirely ignoring every suitor set before her. No more. She'd be married by Season's end. And she'd be done with Quinton. That odious man. He frustrated and stimulated her like no other.

No more.

"My lady." Johnny caught up with her. "You should have taken the carriage with your sister. It's safer."

"Safer? You think me unsafe in Mr. Kingston's purview? Who would dare threaten the Ink King's sister-in-law?"

"Plenty," he grumbled. "Plenty would dare, my lady."

"Oh, you disappoint me, Johnny. Had I taken the carriage, we would not have been able to chat."

He swallowed. An audible gulp likely heard on the other end of Fleet Street. "Chat?"

“Indeed.” She picked up her pace. “Or perhaps I should say gossip.”

“No, my lady. I—”

“Have an ear in every household.”

“No.”

“Yes. You have footmen friends in other households, do you not?”

“I do, but—”

“Then tell me what you know of... hm.” Who to start with? “Mr. Pepperidge.” A wealthy banker and landowner. No title, but Andromeda had done well with a mister. No reason to discount them but for convention, and she’d rather been done with that long ago.

“Mr. Pepperidge.” Johnny’s nose scrunched up. “You can do better, my lady.”

“Don’t be a snob, Johnny.”

“I’m not. But it’s true. I heard he writes poetry.”

“I, too, am a lover of the arts.”

“Bad poetry. That he thinks is good.”

Her turn to scrunch her nose. But perhaps the person who’d made such an estimation did not understand poetry. She’d not give up on him just yet.

“What about Lord Phillipspots,” she asked.

“Don’t know much about him.”

“Hm. Yes. He spends most of his time in the country.” A good sign. It meant he took care of his estate. But it also meant he neglected his parliamentary duties. Not good, that. Still, she’d not cross out his name yet.

“And there’s his name, my lady.”

“What about it?”

“It’s difficult to say. Phillips. Pots. It’s like two names shoved together. S’not right.”

“Hardly a fault, Johnny. My name rubs two words up against each other. Merry. Weather.”

“S’not the same. Merriweather is a fine name. Can barely say Phillipspots without spitting.

She bit her lips to keep from testing that accusation. “Let us be practical. Now, tell me of Lord Erstwhile. You cannot complain of his name, at least.”

“No.” Johnny clasped his hands behind his back. “But he goes through footmen awfully quickly.”

She stopped and peered up at Johnny. “And what does that indicate?”

“That they don’t like working for him.”

She tapped her bottom lip. “I see. But we don’t know why they don’t like working for him. Do you?”

Johnny shook his head.

“Very well, then. I’ll not cross him out yet.”

“As you say, my lady.”

They walked on in silence, past the reach of Fleet Street. She could not quite figure out how to ask the question she really wished to ask. And she could not be sure the footman would have an answer to such an indelicate question.

What is each man’s kiss like?

Quinton had kissed like a dream. He’d wrapped an arm around her and spun her grief into hope, and she—fool that she’d been—had let herself believe for the span of a brief, soft as sin kiss that he loved her.

Fool, yes. And him the devil who stole her heart.

She planned to take it back.

She cleared her throat. Entirely inappropriate or not, she’d ask. In the only way one could ask such a question.

“Johnny, I must ask. Do not be embarrassed, now.”

“My lady, don’t. I don’t know what it is, but with that introduction, I’m trembling.”

She glanced at him. A fine man with striking blue eyes and thick dark brows. His hair must be a similar shade, though she could say with no certainty. She’d never seen him without the powdered wig. His clean-shaven jaw had gone granite, and his face had lost its color.

“I’m not asking your opinion. I just want to know if you know. If you’d like, you can merely shake your head yes or no. It will help me make a good decision about whom to marry.”

Johnny squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head, tight, fast little bobs that sent his wig wobbling. “Very well, my lady.”

“Open your eyes. You’ll trip.”

His eyes snapped open.

“Now, Johnny, is Mr. Pepperidge a”—she licked her lips and rushed the remaining words together—“good kisser?”

He tripped, righted himself, swallowed. “Shouldn’t you find that out for yourself? Not that I’m suggesting—” He coughed. “I’d never suggest you—”

“Oh, but I have. Not Pepperidge, but others. And what a waste of time it’s been.”

Johnny groaned. “You shouldn’t tell me these things.”

“I tell them to Maria.”

“She’s your lady’s maid. And a woman herself. You shouldn’t be talking or doing, Lady Charlotte.”

“I have three remaining suitors. I shall marry one of them by Season’s end. I’ll not waste time kissing all three if I can cross one off my list based on credible knowledge of his skills.”

“And by skills you mean—”

“Kissing.”

He flinched. He sighed. He said, “I’ve heard he takes many ladies to his bed. Of all ranks and stations and appearances. Not a picky man.”

“But were those women pleased?”

Johnny flushed beet red, stopped dead with two stubborn feet. “My lady. I draw the line”—he mimicked drawing a line between them—“right there.”

She sighed. “Very well. You’re clearly uncomfortable discussing such things. I will not push you. I’ll ask Maria.”

“She won’t know! She only knows about kissing one man and—”

“That man is you?”

Fascinating. He’d not been as red as he could be before. What was redder than a beet? A holly berry? Yes, the man had two large holly berries in his cheeks. And pinkish spots everywhere else skin showed.

She should not have hounded him so. “I do apologize for pushing you. I should not have. I’m merely anxious to choose the right fellow.”

The spots dissipated as did the berries, and he matched his steps to hers once more. “You will, my lady. You’re the smartest of the lot. And that’s saying something. Bunch of bluestockings your sisters are. No offense meant.”

“No offense taken, I assure you.” But no number of books in the world could tell her which man to marry. Only her heart could tell her that. And how could she trust that awful organ when it had fixated so fully on the wrong man for so long?

“My lady.” Johnny had dropped his voice and moved closer. “There’s a phaeton slowed down. Just behind us. Can’t tell who’s inside, but it’s been following us for a bit.”

Her spine stiffened, and her stride froze midstep. Chin to shoulder, she peeked at the conveyance following them.

“Blast.” She stomped forward once more. “Keep going, Johnny.”

The carriage cruised alongside them.

“Merriweather!” The voice that slung down from the phaeton crashed through the noise of the street loud and clear and commanding. And oh-so-frustratingly familiar.

“Do you know him, my lady?” Johnny asked, slowing.

“Yes. So do you. Keep walking.”

The carriage stopped some ways in front of them, and a man jumped down. “Merriweather.” Quinton, Lord Noble, trotted to meet them. The April air had not yet heated up and brushed lovely against her skin, yet sweat streaked her palms under the thin cotton of her gloves.

“The gates of Hell are open today?” She confronted him with as much calm composure as she could muster with her skin suddenly pouring like a rain cloud.

The sight of him hit her like a runaway horse. As it always did. Completely flattened her. Tall and broad and impeccably handsome. Beautiful but with a rough wildness about his whisky-brown eyes. He wore no hat, and his sandy hair glinted in the sun. Scruff brushed along his jaw and cheeks, and his lips had curved up into a smirk. The Noble Smirk, Samuel called it. The newspapers and gossip columns called it that, too.

A man known for a smirk, and today—and always—he smirked at her.

He nodded. “The gates of Hell. Hm. You should know right where those are.”

She smoothed her skirts, resumed her walk down the street. “Come along, Johnny.”

“Running?” Quinton called after her.

“Who wouldn’t run from a devil? Or a headache.”

“And I’m both, I assume.”

He understood. No need to elaborate.

He caught up with her quickly, his long strides eating the small distance she’d put between them. “I’m the one with the headache. Get into the phaeton, Merriweather.”

She stopped midstep, blinking. “You want to take me for a drive?” That was the sort of thing a man intent on courtship did.

“I want to speak with you. Now. And this is as good a way as any.” That voice. Hard and annoyed and accompanied by a grin both sharp and feral, likely capable of tearing skin with the ease of an ax shredding a single slip of a paper.

“No, thank you.” She brushed past him.

“Merriweather,” he growled.

“I’ve no desire to put my fate in your hands.” The bench of his phaeton proved much too narrow, and the man’s body much too big, and her own body something of a traitor, willing to lean into him when the rest of her would rather not.

“You insult me.” He snorted. “Typical. Are you scared?” Forget the Noble Smirk. He’d crafted a Noble Sneer. Especially for her. How lovely.

She would not stop. She would not. He’d riled her like this before, daring her, suggesting he’d always win in whatever battles they played at. They’d challenged and teased each other as children, but never with this new, venomous edge. Their kiss had been sweet, but it had spoiled something between them.

Now his challenge was not a gentle tease, but snapping teeth. And she’d be damned if she’d back down, run away, give in.

She stopped abruptly, whirling around. “Johnny, please return home. Lord Noble will escort me the rest of the way.” In his phaeton. His high-perched, terribly tippy phaeton.

Johnny eyed her, then eyed Quinton, then eyed the contraption Quinton prepared to hand her up into. “He is the duke’s friend... Are you sure, my lady?”

“She’s sure.” Quinton wrapped strong fingers around her elbow and guided her toward the phaeton. He practically threw her up into it, and she clutched the seat with one hand as the contraption wobbled and clutched her bonnet with the other. She sank into the seat as quickly as she could, wrapping her fingers around the edge and closing her eyes. The phaeton shook, then a warm, heavy body settled close to her, making the phaeton dip, taking up all the space. Then, with a whip of the reins through the air, the conveyance flew forward.

She should not have come with him. There was too much of him, too close and too confident, and she’d made a vow to forget him. But he’d suggested she was scared. She couldn’t have that.

Besides... what did he want? Curiosity purred within her so loud it nearly drowned

out the hum of fear fizzing along her veins. She had to know. And then, when she descended this cursed conveyance and left him on the street before her home, she'd leave him out of her heart as well so she could dance into the night with the man who would become her future.

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Why must everything begin and end with lips? Lottie's this time. (Lottie's always.) Pressed into a thin line. Her face pale, her hands clutched in her lap. Their exact texture and taste weighed on him still, an ever-present ghost that chased all other kisses away.

He hated it.

He rustled the reins to push his team through a hole between a hack and a cart.

And Lottie squeaked.

"Scared?"

"Never." Her voice was tight, though.

He didn't dare glance her way. "You should be scared of me."

"Not of you. What have you abducted me for?"

"You came willingly enough."

"You're stalling."

"I'm not." He might be. Her presence always sent him reeling, tied his tongue up in a perfect speechless knot. Not always. Not before the kiss. Before the kiss, he'd talked to her as easily as he did to himself when alone in a room.

Now? Now she owned his lips, his mouth, his tongue. Tied them up as she pleased.

Damn her. No. She. Didn't. Best to let her know his purpose, then he could dump her back out onto the street.

"You met with my mother today," he said.

"Ah. That's what fires your ire." She slid a glance his way. "I'm allowed to spend a pleasant hour with a pleasant woman I've known my entire life."

"Not if that hour includes machinations against me."

"I would not call marriage a machination, my lord."

"What else would it be?"

"A joy. A privilege. A future filled with delight."

"Ha." A hard laugh for a man who planned to marry, to take upon himself that joy, that privilege as she called it. "For women, perhaps. For men... unlikely."

"You are a toad."

"So you keep telling me."

"Impossible not to when you croak every time you open your mouth."

Mouths. Hers was no longer flat and thin but pouty. A perfect bow. He'd kissed many women before and after kissing her, but he had found no lips like Lottie's. None that particular shade of pink. None with such a perfect bow for an upper lip. None so soft. Or warm. Or sweet.

He focused on the horses' hindquarters, their flicking tails, their trotting legs. Anything but that one thing he could never quite forget. "No more, Merriweather."

She tilted her head, her expression a particularly dangerous shade of blank. "No more what, Noble?"

"You will not help my mother plan these courtship events."

Those lips parted, oh so slightly, releasing an exhale of disbelief. "Your mother asked for my help planning her events. And I am good at planning events. I will not deny a woman who has always been like family to me."

"You will. I'll help her. I'll choose a lady to marry quickly enough so she won't need all the events. One or two should suffice, and she should be able to handle that many on her own. No need for you, Merriweather."

"You are not going to fight it?"

"Fight what?"

"Marriage."

"No. It's time. I need an heir."

"And you think you can find a woman to marry in an event or two?"

He shrugged. "Can't be that difficult."

"I've been working since last Season to locate the perfect candidate for marriage. It's not a decision to take lightly. It takes time and planning and coming to know the other person."

“I don’t see how. If my mother invites the woman to one of these infernal events, then she’s acceptable enough to marry. All I need do is discover if being in the same room as her for prolonged periods of time is tolerable.”

“Tolerable!” A high-pitched rage of a word.

“Precisely. And that’s an easy enough task. I merely need to measure her against you.”

Her mouth dropped open, hung for the space of a breath, untaken, then snapped shut once more. “I see.”

Something about her slumped shoulders sent him straight to hell. He’d hurt her. That was the point, though, wasn’t it? Yes, it was. Because when she looked at him with trust in her eyes, he wanted to—

The reins cut across his palms as his loose grip hardened into fists, and the horses shot forward with a lurch.

She gasped, clung to the edge of the seat. He slowed the phaeton, and she relaxed. Did the speed bother her? That bothered him.

He brushed the bother away and cleared his throat. “I expect you to keep your distance from these events.”

She raised her head slowly, gazed out onto the road before them. “You can expect nothing of the sort.”

He might snap the reins in two, squeezing them so hard. The horses danced. “It sounds, Merriweather, as if your time would be better spent securing a husband.” Perhaps then he’d be free. Perhaps that’s what he’d needed—for another man to own

those lips so she could stop owning his. “You seem to be failing.”

“I’m not. It’s none of your business, but I have narrowed it down to three suitors.”

“Who?” he asked before he could stop it.

“It hardly matters.”

It did.

He scowled. “You’re right. It does not matter.”

“Three will be one by the week’s end, so it’s hardly worth mentioning them all. You’ll know soon enough. I’ve already secured their dances for this evening’s ball.”

“The Woodward affair?”

She nodded.

Hm. His hands loosened on the reins. Perhaps he should start his hunt at the ball this evening. If he started now, that would be fewer events his mother would feel obligated to host. He’d be engaged even sooner than he thought. And his mother, who truly did need and deserve Lottie’s help, could have what she wished. Only she would not need that help as long as she’d anticipated.

“I’ll be there, too.”

She groaned and let her head fall back on her neck, showing off a smooth column of skin above her high-collared spencer. Creamy skin, delicate above curves he should absolutely never notice. Generous curves. More than a handful of curves, round and plump and perfect and—

No. She was Merriweather, a devil of a woman with the tartest tongue known to man.

Tart? A memory whispered. Not at all. Instead... so very sweet. She'd tasted of strawberries and cream, a summer flavor to live on.

He stopped the phaeton, and without waiting for him, she stood, intending obviously, to swing herself down on her own.

"Hell," he growled, jumping out of the phaeton and running to the other side just as she swung herself down, skirts hiked, her hem catching on a corner, holding her above as her body jerked toward the ground, falling.

He caught her. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Merriweather?" He clutched her to his chest where her heart beat hard against his ribs before releasing her. "It's too high. You're going to hurt yourself. Then your brother will want to put his fist into my nose. Or one of his blades between my ribs."

"I can do it myself." She stormed toward the door, her bonnet tumbling backward off her head. He caught it, plopped it back on from behind. She froze right before the door, and he nearly slammed into her. She turned to face him, putting his body a hairsbreadth from hers, her chest rising and falling with angry breaths. She lifted her chin, and the bonnet tumbled once more. He reached around her to catch it, and she snatched it from his hands, held it at her side by dangling red ribbons.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Going inside."

"Why?"

"Not that I must tell you, but I'm going to see your brother." He smirked. "I've need

of his Guide.”

“Ha. Yes, you do.” A smile so smug it hit him like a fist.

He’d walked right into that one. He stepped around her and opened the door. “You know, you should seek out your brother’s help as well. You’ve been at this how many years now and have yet to receive a proposal?”

“I’ll have one by the end of the Season.”

“And I’ll have one by the end of a fortnight. Think you can do better?” He should not goad her. But damn it felt good to do so, a small return to how they used to be before his father’s death.

“I know I can. I’ve a head start, after all.”

“We’ll see.”

They faced one another in the door frame of the townhouse, her chin tilted up, him bent ever-so-slightly at the waist, leaning toward her. A tableau that, if drawn, might be titled Before the Kiss.

He snapped upright and held out an arm toward the interior, ushering her into her own home. She marched right through and toward the staircase. He set his steps down the hall toward the duke’s study.

“And my mother does not need your help, Merriweather,” he called out. “Stay away.”

“No!” Her footsteps stomped quickly up the stairs.

He chuckled. He’d not obtained what he’d set out to gain—her agreement to stay

away from his mother and these cursed courting events. But what he had gained seemed to make up for it—a contest. Him versus her as it ever had been. Winner married first. God, it had been too long since he'd felt such a thrill, such a challenge. He'd win, find a wife, and kill the curse of Lottie's lips. Then Lottie would marry soon after, and her lips would be entirely out of bounds within another man's bedroom. A second bullet in the beating heart of this curse. Excellent.

His steps slowed as he approached Samuel's study.

Lottie's lips in another man's bedroom. He'd never had to think about that before. Why should he? She'd never allowed men to seriously court her before. Except for her first Season, before her mother's death. She'd accepted suitors then, and... hm.

You didn't like it, memory whispered.

The men that Season must have been scoundrels. As Clearford's closest friend, it had been Quinton's duty to scare off scoundrels.

Who had she said her remaining three suitors were? She'd not said. They could be scoundrels, too. He stopped before the study door, hand half raised to knock.

The door flew open.

"Noble. I heard the footsteps, but didn't think..." The Duke of Clearford stood in the doorway, the hilt of a small knife in his hand and a sharp question in his blue eyes. He did not much resemble Lottie, had acquired all the shadows Lottie seemed to lack, his black hair a striking contrast to her golden locks. But like Lottie, Clearford was always brightly polished, hair perfectly in place, fashionably cut, cravat pristine with a single simple cravat pin in place. A diamond today. "What are you doing here, Noble? Look as if you've seen a ghost." He waved his empty hand in Quinton's face. "All pale."

Quinton pushed his friend's hand away and stepped into the room. "It's nothing. I've come for your help."

Clearford strode for his desk and tossed the knife across the room in one fluid movement, where it hit a block of wood hung on the wall there with a solid thunk. Quinton flinched. He should be used to the duke's penchant for throwing knives, but he never could quite accept flying blades with ease. Especially not when thrown with such accuracy.

Clearford sat behind his desk and kicked his boots up onto it, weaving his hands behind his head as he leaned back into his chair. "With what?"

"You know what." Quinton mirrored the duke on the other side of the desk—leaned back, hands woven, boots kicked up. "Courtship."

"It's about time."

"You're one to judge. Your Grace has no duchess, not the last time I checked."

"I'm working on it. Soon."

"Who?"

"There is no who yet. I'm working on the how. Once it's perfected, I'll choose the who. The who is the most important bit. Can't rush it. Do you know who?"

"Not at all. Leaving that up to my mother."

Clearford scowled. His boots hit the floor with a thud as he snapped his body forward and upright. "I'll not help you if you refuse to take this seriously. Courtship is the most serious endeavor a man can make. The outcome of the process informs the rest

of his life, colors it in sun or shadow.”

“Just give me the damn book, Clearford.”

“No. I only help those gentlemen who are ready and willing to marry. You seem to be doing this under duress.” Clearford scratched his jaw, glanced to the side of the room where a giant portrait hung over an equally massive fireplace. His parents and their children, all nine of them. Painted before his parents’ death. Clearford’s face changed as he considered the portrait from impassive determination to something a bit more thoughtful, a bit more bothered. He propped his elbows on the desk and tapped the oak top with all fingers as he thought.

What did he see in the portrait? Quinton saw an awful lot of skirts. Nine females—the mother and eight daughters. Lottie the oldest. He’d known all of them since birth, a natural consequence of their estates bordering one another.

Quinton cleared his throat. “Duress hardly matters. No, it matters more. I don’t have the luxury of time. I need what help I can get to make the best choice as quickly as possible.”

Clearford sighed. “Perhaps you’re right. Who does not marry without duress?” Not really a question. They both knew the answer. Everyone had reasons, and very few reasons ran to romance. “My sisters... as you know, I’ve commanded them to marry. They get to choose, but”—he winced—“I’m denying them the luxury of time.”

He likely expected to be asked about that. Quinton did not care. “You understand, then. You’ll give me a copy of the book?”

Clearford pushed away from the desk and opened a drawer. He pulled a beaten notebook into the light and tossed it onto the desk between them. “Take it. You’re my friend, and Lottie’s suitors have all borrowed it.”

Ah. The three chosen ones. “And they are...?” Quinton kicked his feet to the floor and leaned forward, ready to gather the names.

“Lord Erstwhile, Mr. Pepperidge, Lord Phillipspots.”

Quinton crossed his arms over his chest. “Erstwhile.” The best of the bunch. “Are any of them close to proposing?”

“All of them. They’re waiting on the right time.”

“Waiting? Why don’t they propose and get it done with?”

Clearford tapped the notebook. “Read, my friend. It’s clear you need to.”

“I don’t want to wait.”

“Waiting for the right time is necessary, Noble. You must be assured of the lady’s feelings. She must be perfectly receptive in all ways. Need, longing. Otherwise, she will say no. It’s not about the proposal. It’s about the successful acceptance of the proposal.”

Hell. That made sense. Complicated matters, though. Quinton snatched the notebook and flipped through it, pushing the chair back and standing. “Thank you, Clearford. I’m sure this will prove invaluable. And in less than a fortnight, you may congratulate me.”

“Don’t be too cocky, Noble. Such hubris always seems to come before the fall.”

Quinton waved as he left the room. “I’ll invite you to the wedding.”

Clearford’s laughter followed him down the hall.

And he found Lottie waiting in front of the door. No bonnet. No gloves. No spencer. Only a perfectly starched green gown and perfectly polished golden curls. A pink bow of a mouth. A fierce scowl.

He sauntered toward her, waving the notebook. “Look what I’ve got.”

“Hm.” She tapped her cheek. “It must be titled Being a Successful Suitor for Simpletons.”

Why did she make his jaw clench and his blood rush every damn time she opened her mouth? Her pink bow of a cursed mouth.

“Success is right, Merriweather.” Because wooing a wife would also win him freedom from the horrid mistake he’d made long ago—kissing her.

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The flowers were perfection. The purple blooms blended nicely with the swaths of green silk hanging on the walls. The swirling white gowns of debutantes, and the black and white columns of dancing gentlemen suited the ball's color scheme to perfection. Lady Woodward had done well to ask for Lottie's help. The viscountess had wanted all white. White tapers, white flowers, white everything. And that would have been dull. Terribly so. Thank goodness she'd been wise enough to listen. The gasps of enchantment and sighs of pleasure of everyone entering the ballroom had soothed Lottie a bit.

And she certainly needed soothing. Lord Noble had riled her past all endurance. That. Man. Stalking her down. Insisting she drive with him. Demanding she stop helping his mother. She hated him.

Only a partial truth.

"What puts that crease between your brows, Sister?" Prudence, one of her younger sisters, elbowed Lottie in the ribs. Her hair glinted more blonde than brown in the candlelight, and her blue-green eyes danced beneath a single arched brow. "Let me venture a guess. Lord Noble."

Lottie straightened the hem of one long glove and then the other. "Is Cora reading tonight?"

Miss Cora Eastwood, a poet and the new organizer of the little naughty library the sisters used to run themselves, had become something of a friend to them all, particularly to Prudence. They'd met her during one of the risky readings she performed at balls during the Season. A select group of ladies would abandon the

ballroom, find a pre-appointed and empty corner of the house, and in the darkness listen to Cora read her latest poem. Her words always spoke of longing, spoke of desire, spoke of love. And they always ended tragically.

“Yes,” Prudence said, “naturally. Will you go?”

“No. I must focus tonight. I’m hoping to reduce my options down to one. I’m thinking...” Lottie tapped her finger against her chin.

“Yes?”

“Kisses.”

“Oooh.”

“Precisely.” Lottie surveyed the ballroom. Two of her three suitors had arrived, but they had not yet sought her out. They would soon. She meant to kiss three men tonight. She wanted a new life, children, the opportunity to explore those things she’d read about in books but never been able to practice. Marriage remained the safest way for a woman to explore the erotic. If she found the right man. And Lottie would find the right man.

“What about you, Pru?” Lottie asked. “Has any man caught your eye?”

“Oh, all of them. London is simply teeming with gentle fellows who respect a lady’s independence. In fact, it’s a bit tiring. I wish some beast of a man would toss me over his shoulder and carry me off to his moldering castle.”

“You’re... not... serious?”

“Of course not. The gentlemen of London are singularly uninspiring, neither disposed

to toss me over a shoulder or to ask my opinion on parliamentary matters. Not that I have many. Or that the ones I do have are revolutionary. But it would be nice to be asked now and again. All they do”—she cast a long glare over her shoulder—“is stand there.” Behind her stood a group of men dressed impeccably, staring. Some possessed moons for eyes while others seemed confused, as if they’d found themselves in the wrong place and didn’t know how to extract themselves.

“My fondest hope,” Prudence said, “is that your marriage and the twins’ marriages appease Samuel enough that I will not have to marry. Every family with an abundance of daughters needs one permanent spinster to hold the world up. Watch the children, take care of the elderly. You understand.”

“You’re not even considering marriage?”

Prudence tugged on a curl near her ear, her eyes distant. “No.”

“Have you told your suitors that?”

“Every day. But they don’t seem to believe me.” She swiveled her head to the side and glared at a gentleman sidling up to them. “Not tonight, Liston. Be gone.”

He bowed low as he scurried backward. “Yes, my lady. But tomorrow? A ride in the park?”

Prudence glared.

“Apologies, my lady. I should never have presumed.” He disappeared into the crowd.

Lottie chuckled. “That man is terrified of you.”

“And, unfortunately, in love with me. Or so he thinks.”

“Unrequited. Poor fellow.”

“You’re not in love with... him anymore, are you? I thought you’d put that behind you.”

Him. Quinton. “I have put it behind me.” She would, at least. Soon. Probably. “It’s difficult. But tonight, I’ll take very strong steps in the out-of-love direction.”

“Kissing?”

“Kissing. Oh, see, there’s Lord Erstwhile.” Lottie checked her dance card. “He’s scheduled for this one.”

“Do you like him?” Prudence asked.

“I don’t dislike him. And he does not annoy me. And he brought me some very pretty flowers a few weeks ago. Mother’s favorites. He seems to have rather progressive views concerning women. A necessity. And I’ll test his kiss tonight. It should be enough.”

Prudence grabbed a glass of wine from a passing tray. “Do you intend to kiss all three men in one night?”

“I’ve not decided yet. I’ll take opportunity where it arises.”

“It’s most likely to arise in a dark garden.” Prudence sipped her champagne.

“Indeed.”

Lord Erstwhile made his way toward her, pushing through the crowd to reach her side. He had the dark-haired good looks of a man who should not be trusted. Yet he’d

never been anything but chivalrous and his blue eyes never a bit lascivious. Perhaps he just needed prompting.

He bowed to her and Prudence. “The next dance is mine, I believe.”

She curtsied. “It is indeed.”

“And a waltz. Lucky me.” He held out his winged arm.

She took it, enjoying the strength of his arm beneath her palm, his hand at her waist. Surely, he would be an excellent kisser. Among other things. He whirled her into the dancing throng. One night. Three kisses. As long as she approached the plan, and the men, with caution, she’d know before the night ended who to encourage to propose. Some might think her callous. Most would certainly think her loose. But why did men get to taste when women were supposed to be the... the cheese they were sampling? Unfair. Unjust. She’d had enough. There was no more important decision to make than whom to marry, whom to produce babies with, and she would consider every angle. Especially kiss—

She stumbled, righted herself, ignored the tall-framed man taking up every inch of her vision. Quinton. Waltzing with... Miss Cora Eastwood?

Don’t care. Don’t care. Please do not care, Lottie.

But she did. Because she’d wanted him for so long and now, so very soon, he’d give himself to just... whomever? Yes, whomever. Because he did not care at all.

Erstwhile grunted.

She blinked up at him. “Pardon?”

“I mean no insult, my lady, but you... stepped on my toes.”

“Oh! I do apologize. Woolgathering.”

“I see. You’re particularly pensive this night.”

She glanced at Quinton, who was staring at his dance partner. Her stomach churned. How would she help his mother find him a match if she tossed her tea every time he glanced at another woman?

She must focus on her own purposes. Kissing.

“I’m afraid I feel unwell,” she said. “Would you mind escorting me outside?”

He glanced at the French doors on the other side of the room. “Into the garden?” A crease burrowed between his brows.

“Yes. I fear I need fresh air.”

Without a word, he twirled them toward the back of the ballroom, and in silence, he slipped through the open doors, tugging her along. A waltzed escape. Quite sneaky. She approved. She chuckled as she leaned against the balustrade. Now. She’d reached the moment of action. Alone outside. No one in the ballroom minding them a bit. Clever men and women knew what to do with such moments.

She propped a hip against the marble and threw her shoulder’s back, revealing the full amount of skin available above her bodice. “Many thanks, my lord. I’m feeling better already.”

He leaned beside her, putting several appropriate inches between their hips, not even noticing her shoulders, her neck, her bosom.

She inhaled deeply, helping that bosom rise and fall in a slow rhythm. “The night air is delicious, is it not?”

“I suppose.” He peered into the darkness of the garden.

She sighed, a last attempt to drag his regard to bosom. And eventually, after her toes began to want to tap, he did.

She licked her lips. And finally, his gaze dropped, found what she wanted him to find, ventured lower. Neck bosom, bodice, rising and falling. Would she have to make the suggestion, or would he—

“Lady Charlotte.” He swallowed, his focus still riveted below her chin.

“Yes?” She made the word a breath.

“I have enjoyed coming to know you in the past weeks.”

“As have I enjoyed coming to know you.”

“You are radiant.”

“And you are quite the handsome beau.”

He tugged at his cravat. “I, ah, would like to ask you if...”

“Yes?”

“You would like... I mean... if you would allow me to...”

“Yes?” She fluttered her lashes.

“Would you like me to escort you back to the ballroom?”

Ah. She straightened the sensuality out of her posture. “Yes, I suppose so.” Curses. Kissing did not come as easily as it did in books. But she’d not run out of tricks yet.

He stepped away from her and extended a hand toward the glowing room beyond the doors, inviting her back into the musical crush. She sailed past him. And tripped.

Pretended to. But it was all the same, wasn’t it, whether one was accidentally or purposefully thrown off-balance? A fall came no matter which.

Strong arms caught her, tight and secure. He lifted her to her feet. Her heart raced, and she melted into his warm embrace.

“Oh,” she said, a tiny flutter of a word as she lifted her hand to her chest. His large, strong hands still held her upper arms, firm on the naked skin between her capped sleeve and long gloves. “Thank you for catching me.” She would lift her face slowly, find Erstwhile’s face hovering close, lift her lips to his, then he would demolish the remaining distance and—

“You’re welcome, Merriweather.”

She gasped and lifted her face quite quickly indeed. “You!”

Quinton grinned. “Me.”

She ripped from his hold, searching for—ah, there, behind Quinton. Lord Erstwhile.

He blinked quickly, as if he had dust in his eyes, but he stood straight and proper. “Are you hurt, Lady Charlotte?”

“Not at all.” She beamed, then dropped the smile like a slammed door as she faced Quinton. “What are you doing here?”

“Aren’t you glad I am? Otherwise, you might have broken your nose on the marble. Then all that perfect beauty of yours—poof, gone with a crooked beak.”

“You were dancing.” She searched about for Cora, saw her nowhere.

“And you were falling. Thought you’d be more grateful for my quick rescue.”

She skirted him to stand before Lord Erstwhile. “Shall we return inside?”

He nodded, offered his arm, and they left Quinton outside to do what men did in dark gardens.

Not the man on her arm, though, apparently. Disappointing, that. No matter, there were two more men. Surely one of them would kiss her before dawn arrived.

When she and Erstwhile had rejoined the crowd once more, she said, “I would like something to drink.”

He bowed and left, and she found a pillar to lean against. Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply. For the briefest amount of time, she’d thought the arms that had caught her, saved her from a fall, had belonged to Erstwhile. They’d felt perfect, stronger than expected. Just right. Then Quinton had spoken and ruined the illusion. Of course the perfect arms had belonged to him. Her head throbbed, and she pressed her fingers into her temples.

“Here you are, my lady,” Erstwhile said in the darkness.

She opened her eyes. He stood beside her, pleasant and holding a glass of champagne

out to her. She frowned at it. She should have been more specific. When a headache came on, already pounding at her skull, champagne transformed from harmless delight to haunting devil. She'd needed something else. Anything else. But she accepted it, the glass cool between her fingers.

"I apologize," he said, "but I must abandon you. I'm engaged for the next minuet with Miss Glour."

"Yes of course." She nodded, curtsied.

"May I call on you tomorrow?"

"Please do." But she did not mean those confident words. He had hesitated to kiss her. And she wanted kisses and more from her marriage. Did his hesitation bode ill for her desires?

He bowed and disappeared, and she did not even bother to follow his trajectory across the ballroom or to see him escort Miss Glour onto the dance floor. She sighed at the long-stemmed glass warming between her fingers. Why not? At least she'd have the delightful fizz before the headache pounded into place. She tipped it toward her lips.

But it was plucked away before she could take a single sip.

She gasped and glared at the man who had appeared like a ghost before her. "Noble!"

He downed the champagne, every drop down his gullet.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Saving you from a headache, Merriweather. You know you can't drink that stuff."

“I would have been fine.”

“No, you wouldn’t have.” His gloved hand appeared between her eyes, smoothed down the bridge of her nose to the very tip, then froze there. “You’ve already got a megrim. I can tell by the crease between your brows. And you’ve scrunched your nose. I don’t want to see you with a glass of champagne in hand again. Not tonight.”

The audacity of that man. “I shall do what I like.” Thankfully, a footman passed, holding high a tray of the bubbly wine. She snapped one off the tray, downed half of it in one gulp.

He ripped it from her fingers, finished it off. “I’m not in the mood for games.”

“Neither am I. Leave me alone.”

“Why? So you can lure more unsuspecting men into the garden to kiss them?”

“That is not what I was doing.” How had he known?

“Of course it was. You were rolling your hips and poking your breasts out at him like a trollop.”

She bunched her hands into fists. “Go away.”

“Gladly.” Yet he stepped toward her, the tip of his finger hovering just above her décolletage. “No more champagne.”

He left, and just because she could, she hunted down another footman and took another glass of champagne. But she didn’t drink it. She knew her body well enough, and she’d already been fool enough to swallow half a glass during their skirmish. No more. But not because he demanded it. Because she knew better.

She held the glass tight and searched the crowd for her second suitor, unable to banish Noble's words. He'd called her a trollop. Horrid man. Horrid everything. Because a woman interested in a kiss, and more was considered a trollop. And because women who were actual trollops were forced to do something dangerous that often ended in illness and death in order to feed themselves.

The acts she had read about in her mother's books should not be done under duress as a means of survival. They should be moments of beauty and joy in which two individuals shared themselves with one another entirely.

That's what she hoped it would be like when, one day, finally...

Ah, there was Mr. Pepperidge. A wealthy banker turned landowner. Quite intelligent. He seemed a playful sort, and that boded well for one of her main reasons for marrying. Perhaps he'd prove playful in the bedchamber as well. Tonight, she would test him.

She still held the glass of champagne, and it warmed in her hand as she caught Mr. Pepperidge's eye from across the room. He made his way through the crowd, shouldering others out of the way, holding her gaze the entire time.

He bowed low and popped back up with a wide grin beneath brown eyes and a mop of brown hair. He had two dimples, one in each cheek, and they seemed so deep his valet must get lost inside them when shaving each morning. "Lady Charlotte, a delight to see you. Is it time yet for our dance?" He arched and glanced at the fan around her wrist, which held the order of the dances as well as the names of the gentlemen who'd secured her hand for each.

"Not quite yet," she said. "I thought it might be nice to talk for a bit before. To enjoy some fresh air. I have a bit of a headache." Not a lie, and at the moment a bit of a convenience.

“Oh.” His usually affable face folded into a frown. “Should we seek the quiet climes of the garden?”

She nodded, and he escorted her outside without the suave secrecy Lord Erstwhile had employed. Together, they jolted down the stairs and onto the gravel path that threaded through the garden. Their hostess had placed candles, as Lottie had suggested, at intervals along the path, lighting it and casting golden circles into the air around their heads.

This time, she would not roll her hips and push out her breasts. Quinton had made it seem like a distasteful performance. This time, she’d be more direct.

“Gardens are quite romantic, don’t you think?” she asked as they strolled past an early blooming rose bush.

“A common opinion, my lady.”

“It makes one think of—”

“Would you like to kiss me?”

How easy that had been. She’d barely done anything at all, and he’d known just the direction she desired. What a clever fellow. From least likely prospect to most in a moment. “Yes, Mr. Pepperidge, a kiss would be nice.”

He grinned, revealing teeth that were wide and white and big. Then those teeth disappeared behind a set of puckered lips as he leaned forward. He smelled of tobacco and ale, and though the combination made her scrunch her nose and hold her breath, she puckered up and leaned forward as well. Their lips brushed, the merest whisper of a touch, and then he popped away from her.

His teeth appeared again. “Quite delightful.”

Had it been? Had it happened at all?

“Yes,” she said, “quite.”

“I must confess, I have been thinking of doing that for some time now.”

“Have you? I’m glad it is done then.” But was it done? The kiss that Quinton had given her had been so much... more. It had lasted for eternity and had left her an entirely different person when it had finally ended. She’d never forget the feel, the touch, the taste, the smell of him, and now she could not even remember at all what Mr. Pepperidge felt or tasted or smelled like. Except tobacco and ale.

“Shall we return now?” Mr. Pepperidge asked with a chuckle. “I suspect you had the same reason for coming out here as I did.”

She laughed, a weak little thing but hopefully convincing. “You’ve caught me.”

“Do not worry, my lady.” He took her arm and hooked it with his own, then patted her hand. “I still think highly of you.”

“Thank you?” Hopefully, he did not hear the hesitant insult in her voice.

He patted her hand again and escorted her back toward the ballroom. At the bottom of the stairs, she pulled out of his grasp.

“There’s a pebble in my shoe. Will you go up without me?” She needed time to think, time to consider her options, her new information. Her hopeful group of three now seemed entirely less hopeful.

“Let me help.” He bent his knees as if to kneel.

“No, no! It would not be proper for you to see my stockinged feet.”

He bounced back to upright. “Quite right. It is good to know your curiosity does not lead you too far astray.”

If only he knew how far astray she’d really gone.

He bowed and ran up the steps as if he’d forgotten her between one breath and the next, and she sat on the bottom step, cold glass hitting her knee. Oh. She still held the glass of champagne. With the kiss and everything else, she’d entirely forgotten. Surely one more sip would not hurt her head too much, and she rather needed the fizziness to dull the disappointment. She lifted the glass, and as soon as it hit her lips, a warmth settled beside her, and the glass was ripped from her hand. Again.

In the candle-haloed darkness, the glass rose, and the liquid disappeared down Quintin’s gullet.

She growled. “You barbaric beast! Do that one more time, and I’ll—”

“What, Merriweather?” He sighed. “Punch me?”

“Yes. Or kick you in a much more sensitive location.”

“Ladies aren’t supposed to know about sensitive locations. Did he kiss you?”

“That is none of your business.”

“You’re right.” He pulled a flask from his pocket and chased the champagne down his throat with some likely much more potent liquid. “My guess? A rock could kiss

better than Pepperidge.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve as he hid the flask away once more.

She would not hit him. She would not hit him. She would be that proper lady he claimed she was not. “Aren’t you supposed to be dancing with ladies, choosing a wife? Here I am doing all the work to find a husband, and what are you doing?”

“Saving you from yourself, apparently.”

She stood, smoothed her skirts.

He clenched the wine glass in his hand and also stood, making her feel small once he’d gathered himself to his full height. He made it up three steps before he swiveled around, brandishing the wine glass at her as if it were a rapier. “No more of this.” He wagged the glass up and down. “And no more kisses and dark corners. It’s not safe.”

What did he care for safety? He left her alone. Would she always be alone? God, she hoped not. She grew tired of it, so deadly tired of it.

But not all hope lay like a dropped kiss in a dark garden—lost. One suitor remained, and while he may possess an unfortunate name, she could survive such things if he proved himself valuable in other ways, particularly the ways of the bedroom, the ways of lips and tongues, the ways of bodies during the secret hours of the night.

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Quinton braced himself against a pillar and took several deep breaths. One more glass of champagne might fell him like a tree in a forest. He'd lose his balance, then bam! Hit the floor, toes, knees, chest, and nose all at the same. But trees didn't lose balance, did they? Someone cut them down.

And he knew who held the ax.

Lottie.

Infuriating chit. She knew what the bubbly stuff would do to her. And she knew not to go into dark gardens with men. Yet she'd done both things. And entirely distracting him from his purpose. Should he be meeting eligible young ladies? Yes. Was he wandering after Lottie instead? Unfortunately, yes. And drinking every glass of champagne she picked up to save her from herself.

"Mother," he groaned, "who else is on your list?"

She pointed through the crowd. "Do you see the lovely young lady with blonde hair?"

He nodded. Though he didn't really see the woman that his mother spoke of. There were many young ladies with blonde hair. And all the same shade of lovely. And then the room began to spin, and he couldn't tell one white gowned lady from another.

"Are you ill, Quinton?"

"No. One drink too many." He should not have brought the flask. He'd thought it only a means of breaking the usual monotony of such events. Instead, he'd been using

it to keep his anger in check. When he felt the urge to punch a wall, he took a sip.

“You should not have.”

“I’m aware.”

The flask would not run him into the ground so quickly had he not also tossed down all that champagne. The wicked combination had more than muddled his mind. It might have entirely melted. Could be running out of his ears. He reached up to check, found his ears dry, but found the room spinning more than before as well. He clutched at a nearby column, and through the spinning candlelight of the ballroom, he found a focal point. Gold curls and a pink bow of a mouth. Lottie. And she seemed to be following a man.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Another man.”

“What about another man?” his mother asked.

“They’re everywhere tonight. Ants. Crawling into every crevice. Carrying things away that don’t belong to them.” What was he saying? And why was he saying it? Was his face numb? He reached up, patted it. Yes, certainly numb. Why would Clearford allow his sister to be courted by men who were willing to escape with her into dark corners? The duke should keep a better eye on her. Besides, the book had said no kissing. A very clear dictate. Seemed an entirely sensible rule, as well. No kissing. Not that Quinton wanted to anyway. An easy rule to follow. And then he’d marry a pair of lips that he’d be obliged to kiss and that would be that. Everything solved, everything better.

But why was Lottie slipping into a hallway on the arm of a man?

“Who’s that man?” he asked his mother, but it didn’t come out quite right. All the

words felt as fuzzy as his face. “With Lottie? The man with Lottie. Tall, red hair, freckles. Probably has freckles. Do you think he has freckles?” Did Lottie like freckles? Quinton had a few scattered over his shoulders.

His mother craned her neck to peer across the crowd. “That’s Lord Phillipspots.”

One of the three, then. And she probably planned to kiss him, too. But the book, Clearford’s Guide, said, quite clearly, no kissing. So surely Lord Pisspot would... not kiss. The first fellow caught with Lottie out on the balcony had followed the edict virtuously. But what if Pisspot didn’t?

The suitor in the garden had kissed her, throwing the guide’s advice to the wind. Of course, it had been quite a weak attempt at a kiss. Laughable, really.

Quinton laughable, too. He’d followed them out there, squatted behind a bush, and watched, half his attention on the glass of liquid held between their bodies that would prick needles through Lottie’s skull, and the other half on that meeting place between lips. Barely a meeting at all. More of a how do you do while waving as they passed one another on the street.

Quinton pushed off the pillar and swayed in a circle. Upright seemed a difficult posture to manage.

His mother’s hand on his arm steadied him. “You should sit down. Better yet, go home. You can meet the ladies when you’re sober at next week’s tea. No more ladies for you tonight.”

“You’re right.” He nodded. Twice. Three... four times? “No more ladies.” And then he stalked after Lottie. He crept through the door she’d gone through earlier and found a hallway. At its end, shadows gathered, candles had been extinguished.

No one wandered the deserted hall. Had they gone into a room? There were two... three... no, two doors on each side. Hard to tell with everything fuzzy, shifting, the world gone sand, sifting through his fingertips.

And then the shadows moved just a bit at the end, near an alcove. Leaning a shoulder against a wall, he made his way down the hallway, letting the wall guide his slow, lumbering steps. God, he wished he could be bootless so his stocking feet could whisper instead of clack.

But the voices ahead did not seem to notice his thunder-loud arrival.

“I should not kiss you, Lady Charlotte,” a man said. Pisspot. Must be.

“And why is that?” Lottie’s voice.

“There’s nothing settled between us.”

“Perhaps nothing should be settled until we know. I think a kiss should be a mandatory part of courtship.”

Quinton could almost hear the frown gathering around the man’s silence. “Unconventional thought indeed, my lady.”

“Unconventional. Hm. You’ll find that is a word that describes me perfectly.”

“Does it?”

Course it did. Was the man a blind fool?

“I never would have thought so,” Pisspot continued. “You always appear so... perfect.”

“I am not,” she assured. “Will you kiss me?”

Damn, what a brazen woman. She’d always been brazen—even as a child—climbing, running, swimming, hiding frogs in her pockets. Never afraid, his Lottie.

His Lottie.

His Lottie was his weakness. And he could not be weak.

The silence had gone on too long. Her question unanswered for the exact amount of time it took to kiss a lady. Quinton crept closer to the shadows that hid the couple. Sounds—sighs and smacks and Quinton’s hands became fists. His shoulder popped off the wall, and his feet marched him forward until the world of shadows at the end of the hallway swallowed his boot, and he blinked two figures out of the darkness, pressed together, a tangle of arms and skirts and legs. They were kissing.

And something inside Quinton roared to vengeful life because if he could not kiss, then neither should she. His hand grabbed the man’s shoulder. Not a conscious move. His hand moving itself entirely, doing as it pleased, and it pleased to throw Pisspot back and away from Lottie. Pleased to press the man with a hard, unforgiving palm against his chest straight into the wall.

“What would Clearford think of this little display?” Quinton asked, his voice crisp though the words felt heavy on his tongue.

“Release him right now,” Lottie demanded.

Quinton fisted his hand in the man’s cravat. “Shall I tell the duke what you were doing here or should you?”

“No one has to know.” Pisspot wrapped his hands around Quinton’s forearm. “It was

barely a kiss. I didn't even want to."

Some corner of Quinton's fogged brain interpreted that as an insult to Lottie. Another corner suggested that Quinton himself insulted her quite often and therefore claimed no ground from which to condemn others. Had a point, that bit of him did.

Still, the other corner yelled quite loudly, No one insults Merriweather!

But you, the inconveniently rational corner insisted.

He flicked it away and squeezed Pisspot's neck with greedy fingers.

"Release him now!" Lottie's hands found him, her fingers wrapping around his wrist not currently attached to the hand strangling Pisspot. She tugged at him, and somehow her hand found the sliver of skin between his gloves and his jacket sleeve, found the pulse beating madly there, squeezed tighter. Her fingers hot irons on his already inflamed skin. "Let him go now, Quinton."

He shoved the man into the light outside of the shadows.

"I'll not say a word," Pisspot said, clutching at his throat.

Quinton growled. "If you do..." A warning. Because any woman who had solicited kisses from three men in one night needed someone to encourage those fellows to keep quiet.

Pisspot ran.

Quinton collapsed against the wall, his forehead hitting it with a thud, and his forearms bracing his weight.

“What have you done?” Lottie’s voice was shrill and soft at the same time.

He rolled until his back and shoulders held his weight and pressed his eyes closed.

She poked him in the chest. “Are you addled?”

He nodded. “Foxed.”

She poked him again, and he caught her hand, held her wrist tight. So delicate. And then he opened his eyes and stood to his full height. Her blue eyes glittered with anger, not tears, and she leaned away from him so that he almost held her up entirely with his hold on her wrist. He ran his free hand through his hair and marched toward her. She stumbled backward until her back hit the wall, and he kept going until almost no space existed between their bodies.

Her free hand flattened against his chest, pushing. He ignored the insignificant pressure and lifted his free hand to her face. He traced the bottom line of her bottom lip, explored the indentations at the corners of her mouth, and pulled down that bottom lip gently, just a bit, for a glimpse of white even teeth.

“What is it about this mouth?”

“It-it’s merely a mouth.” Her tone rang calm, controlled, but the brief stutter gave away her panic. “And if you do not remove your hand, I will bite it.”

He chuckled and did as she’d asked, raising his hand to his mouth and tugging his glove off with his teeth. When he’d freed his hand, he dropped the glove to the floor and cradled her jaw, his thumb still sweeping the smooth, plump bottom lip. He only felt. Blocked out and batted away every screaming thought. Only felt—the smoothness of her lip against the pad of his thumb, the soft curve of her jaw, the silken curls behind and above her ears, so close to his fingertips.

“What is it about this mouth?” he repeated. His entire body had become sensation and every sensation her. The small contact of palm and jaw and thumb and lip sent sparks up his arm and throughout his body, pulled the lust heavy in his gut.

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Not nearly enough.” Because he could still feel her. He could still feel the press of her lips against his six years ago. It never went away.

“You should be dancing with other women.” Her voice was breathy now, and she no longer struggled.

“Did you enjoy Pisspot’s kiss, Merriweather?”

“Don’t call him that.”

“Did you?”

“I... yes.” But she’d hesitated too much before that affirmation for him to believe it.

“What was it like?”

“I—” Her tongue darted out to wet her bottom lip, and the tip of it almost touched his thumb.

His cock tightened, not a physical reaction he should be having with her. But the champagne and whisky drowned all care. Almost all care.

“No more kisses tonight, Merriweather,” he said.

“I do as I please.”

He leaned closer, his nose almost brushing hers. “No more kisses.” He’d not been able to rip his gaze from her lips. Not been able to stop the pour of questions he didn’t want answers to into the air. “Did you like it?” Had he already asked that? If he had, he’d not been satisfied with the answer. He didn’t want to know. He had to know.

“Yes.” She lifted her chin, defiant.

“Liar. Did you hear him? What he said? Or did I imagine it?”

She swallowed, her throat working and her lips slightly parting. “I don’t kn—”

“The fool said he did not want to kiss you.”

She made a sound, half growl, in her throat. “Yes, that seems to be the theme of the evening.” Said more to herself than to him.

“A man should want to kiss you.” Not sure what he was saying or why he was saying it. He released her wrist and speared both of his hands into the hair at the nape of her neck, resting his forehead against hers.

Lottie gasped, a soft, slow, ragged inhale. How many times had he heard that sound tonight? What would it be like to hear it in a different context? Not fear or dismay, but desire. He shook his head, trying to fling off those rogue thoughts.

Failing.

“I don’t want to kiss you,” he said, “but it’s all I can think about. Ever since that day in the woods. Damn you. I’ve tried to kiss other women. Nothing works. I feel nothing. You ruined me, cursed me. I don’t want to kiss you... but kissing you is all I can think about.” He flexed, using his grip at the back of her neck to pull her closer

still. He could take those lips he had so long obsessed over. He could take them, and he could take her, strip her bodice down low, hike her skirts up high, shove a leg between hers, and grind against his soft, sweet Lottie. His weakness. Not her softness but his.

When a kiss almost sat between their lips, he pushed away from her with a growl and left. He stumbled down the hallway. How long was it? How dark? Like some endless cavern he would never find daylight beyond. But then somehow a wall before him gave way, and there it was—the swirling ballroom. Too much. The glow from the candles above blinding. The music too loud. The dancers too dizzying, churning the devil liquid in his gut over and over and over.

He threw himself to the side and staggered toward an entrance. Exit? Somehow his coach found him. His coach? Strong arms pulling him into it, settling him inside on the seat.

As the darkness took him, he couldn't quite remember... Had he kissed Lottie? Again?

No, surely not. He'd remember that. And he'd never allow it.

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Lottie stared up at Quinton's townhouse, a pause in her steps. She hated hesitating. But how could she not? The last time she'd seen him, he'd scared away her suitor, pressed her against a wall, almost kissed her, not kissed her, and let loose words into the shadows between them that had nearly laid her flat.

Quinton wanted to kiss her. He never stopped thinking about kissing her. He couldn't kiss any other woman with any sort of desire. Couldn't be true. Because then why had she spent the last six years thinking he despised her? Perhaps one did not need to like someone to want to kiss them. She clutched her hands to her belly. She had to go in. She had to help his mother host an event meant to find him a wife. It had, when she'd agreed to it, seemed the perfect plan. A wonderful way to rid herself of her agonizing unrequited affection. Watching him find a wife would convince her heart to move on. And she would be further along on her journey to finding a spouse of her own.

But the Woodward ball had ruined all that. Phillipspots had removed himself from contention. He had called to visit with Samuel, and she had been in the anxious sweats the entire time, her head pounding. She'd expected a proposal.

But Samuel had come to tell her that Phillipspots had decided to wait another year to find a wife, and that he wished Lottie luck in finding a husband.

A blow, that.

Thankfully, Erstwhile and Pepperidge were still contenders. Of course, Erstwhile hadn't kissed her at all, and Pepperidge had barely kissed her. Phillipspots's kiss had been the best of the evening. She'd enjoyed it. She could marry a kiss like that.

And yet, it paled in comparison to not being kissed by Quinton, to his big body pressing her against the wall, making her feel desired, wanted, consumed, making her feel like she unraveled his control. She liked that. She wanted to make him wild. In his not-kiss she'd felt more promise for the bedroom than in any of the three attempts made by the other men.

She shivered, a pulse of lust low in her belly. She must go in. She must do this because nothing had changed. What he had said... A lie, a fancy born of alcohol? Or a raw truth revealed by it?

It didn't matter.

The door opened. "Lady Charlotte, are you unwell?" The butler, Mr. Carter, watched her with a blank expression.

Caught. Caught in a horrid moment of hesitation and indecision. How humiliating. "Yes, I am well. Thank you. I was merely enjoying the sun."

He blinked up at the clouds, close-knit and blocking even the dimmest of the day's rays. "Of course." He held the door open and stepped to the side, inviting her in.

She entered as if everything in the world were perfectly fine.

Mr. Carter closed the door. "Lord Noble has requested to speak with you when you arrive."

Everything was not perfectly fine. But she could not run. Show weakness? To Quinton? Never. "Yes, of course, Mr. Carter. Please show me the way."

He led her to a small study on the first floor and opened the door to reveal a caged lion, pacing. Quinton held a beaten notebook, his neck bent as he read while he

paced. Princess lay in a pile of graying fur nearby, watching her master in his back-and-forth journey across the room.

The butler cleared his throat, and Quinton snapped to a stop, hid the notebook behind his back, and faced them.

“Ah, you’ve arrived.” His attention bounced about the room, unsettled and unsettling. First, it landed above her head, and then it wandered behind her before finally settling on the butler. “Thank you, Mr. Carter.” A dismissal, and the butler knew it. When he left, an awkward silence stretched out like treacle between them.

“He said you wish to speak with me,” Lottie finally said.

Quinton nodded and shuffled toward a nearby table, tossed the book down onto its surface. She knew what it was, of course. She’d seen it in Samuel’s study. His Guide. She’d never read it, never been tempted to. But Quinton had been studying it. It meant he was taking this mission to find a wife seriously. It meant finding a wife mattered to him. It meant he desired success. And it meant he felt as if he might not obtain it on his own.

His large hand settled at the back of his neck, stretching the wool of his jacket against his lean, muscular arms as he lowered his gaze to the floor and then slowly lifted it to finally catch on hers. “I want to apologize. For last week at the Woodward ball. I don’t remember much. What I do remember... it’s not good. I wish to apologize.”

What should she do with that? He’d never apologized to her before. She deserved an apology. She wanted one... as long as he apologized for the right thing. But if he could not remember what he’d done to require an apology, how would she know if his motivations passed muster?

“Did you receive the tea?” He risked a step closer to her.

“You sent that?” The day after the ball, a package had arrived from this residence. She’d thought Lady Noble had sent it over. Apparently not.

His arm dropped to his side. “I remember that it helps you. Your megrims. You probably already have some but—”

“No, I finished the last some time ago. It was quite thoughtful of you.” She risked a step forward, too. “Thank you.” And another step.

Something like panic roused in his expression, and he marched to Princess, knelt, and scratched behind her ears. “Very good, Merriweather. You’re of no help to my mother if you’re an invalid.” From thoughtful to thoughtless in less than a breath.

“I do not see that she needs my help.” She set her steps toward the notebook. “Not when you have this to guide you. If I had such help courting my beaus—”

He stood. “You are not courting them. They are courting you. Women do not court. They are courted. And your suitors have access to your brother’s notes as well. Frankly, they must be nodcocks if they’ve not already won you over.”

“Phillipspots has abandoned pursuit.”

His jaw worked. “Whatever happened at the ball”—he placed his hand over his eyes—“he was part of it, was he not?”

“Yes,” she ground out.

“God, I’m sorry, Lottie.”

“Stop saying that. I accept your apology, now let’s leave it in the past.”

“Very good.”

“Is that all you wanted of me?” Irritation pulled her apart at the seams.

He nodded. “Now I must meet Mother. And so must you.” Without another word, he stormed from the room.

She remained hypnotized by the empty doorway for quite some time, her fingers doing the mechanical work of unclasping her spencer, draping it over a chair, untying her bonnet, and dropping it there as well. She found a mirror across the room and ensured everything about her seemed smooth and calm and perfect. The exact opposite of her insides. Good. Best no one knew what screams echoed inside her.

She dropped to the ground beside the dog she’d given Quinton so long ago, and Princess picked up her head, laid her muzzle on Lottie’s skirts.

“Your master is inscrutable.”

The dog huffed, wiggled her head harder into Lottie’s fingers.

“I should leave. But Lady Noble needs me. It’s been ages since she’s hosted a thing. But... why did he apologize? Can you answer me that, Princess dear?” And why was he so nervous about wooing a bride? Any woman would say yes. “He is nervous, though.” The Guide gave that away.

She stood and picked it up, flipped to a random page, read it aloud. “Often a lady may appear reluctant, or she is unaware of the desire coursing through her, perhaps interpreting it as inappropriate. It is the suitor’s purpose to gently guide her to a better understanding.” She snorted. As if women didn’t know their own minds. “Samuel is a right arse sometimes, Princess dear.”

Yet... many women didn't know because they weren't allowed to. Even before Lottie had discovered her mother's hidden books, her mother had shared necessary and forthright information about the marriage bed and bodies with her. An unconventional woman, her mother, but knowing made life better for Lottie, allowed her to make decisions with all the information at hand.

In the deepest bit of himself stripped bare by drink, Quinton wanted to kiss her. Also, Quinton could suffer the aftereffects of his actions with shame, embarrassment, regret.

That Quinton, unsure and heartfelt, was the one she remembered from her childhood. The one who, the day they'd put his father in the ground, had collapsed into himself, puppy held tight, misery choking him. He'd allowed her to comfort him, and she'd fallen in love with him that day. A girl of sixteen knowing little except that the boy newly become a man beside her was somehow the most important person in her existence. He'd always been there, a cheeky friend with a ready wink in his eye. A ready scowl as well when she did something he disapproved of. They'd ambled over hills and through woods together. But that day... she'd felt a tug in her heart she'd never felt before, as if a golden tendril from his own had reached out and tied itself between her ribs, locking them together always, each heavy beat of sorrow or heady beat of excitement sending a ping down it from one chest to the other.

And then he'd disappeared. Into London, into the role of viscount, adulthood severing that fragile, fledgling bond. When she'd sought him out at his home, he'd been absent. Or unwilling to see her. And years later in London at the first ball of her first Season, he'd taken one look at her and left. She'd never felt such anger, deep and sharp. Then the impossible man had kissed her. Kissed her in the woods, sweeping away her grief in a moment of wild ecstasy. And walked away. Ran away. Fled as if she'd shown clear intent to impale him or some other such gory machinations. After that, she'd hated him. Tried to. Failed to.

And now he'd come in at the worst possible moment, dropped a revelation like hot glass into her hands, and confused her further. The devil.

Forget confusion. Forget him.

She nuzzled Princess's fuzzy neck with the toe of her boot, one final parting pet, then found the drawing room where the guests would be seated and found Lady Noble, too.

"Good afternoon, my lady," Lottie said with her brightest smile.

Lady Noble stretched out her arms as she approached, offering a tight, short hug. "Lottie. You look lovely. As always. I'm nervous. How is the room? Too hot? Too cold? Too... ugly?"

Quinton slumped in a chair in the corner, one leg outstretched, hands folded across his tight abdomen. She should attend Lady Noble's questions, reassure her. She could think only of him, so big and so close. And such a mystery. She must wipe him from the scene, erase his scowling elegance, his masculine grandeur. She put her back to him.

"Do not fret, Lady Noble. Everything seems perfectly placed. A delightful temperature, too. Hm. Let's regroup these chairs. The ladies will feel more comfortable with smaller groups. And Lord Noble will simply have to flutter from one group to the other."

He snorted.

"He makes an excellent butterfly, don't you think?" Lottie said.

Another snort. He stood. She couldn't see the movement, but she heard it, felt it along

every inch of her skin, and a drawer opened, closed. She heard the shush and slam of it. Then he sat again.

“What tea service are you using?” she asked Lady Noble.

“The porcelain one. Green and gold.”

“Hm.” She finally glanced at Quinton. He wore a bottle green waistcoat and focused on a square of paper in his hands. He folded it, fingers strong and confident as they moved. For a moment, the room melted away, became another room, another day years ago when two small children had bent their heads together over a mountain of wrinkled paper, trying to get the flower just right. She had no time for memories. No need for those particular ones, either. “Dark green or light?”

“Is that important?” Lady Noble asked. “I wish I remembered more about entertaining, but I’m afraid I let that particular skill pass into obscurity. Gladly, too. These days I much prefer solitude to society.” She tilted her head. “Dark green, I think.”

“The shade of a given color may not be terribly important to some, but I find it necessary for establishing the right mood. But even small visual connections can help create a feeling. The colors you’ve chosen are good. Fresh yet elegant. Is there a design on the tea set?”

“Yes, a floral one. Should we have met yesterday? Sooner, to make preparations?”

“No. We do not wish an event such as this to seem too formal or prepared. It should feel natural, organic. It should encourage comfort.”

Another snort from across the room.

She ignored it. “May I see the cups and pot?”

Lady Noble showed her, and after, they strayed out into the garden to find blooms similar to the ones depicted on the tea service. When they returned to the drawing room, flowers in hand, Quinton sat reading a book in the same corner, and the room seemed slightly... different. She couldn’t quite determine what had changed.

She helped Lady Noble place the flowers about the room and said, “How many do you expect to attend?”

“No more than ten, and soon.” Lady Noble glanced at the clock.

“But you sent out twenty invitations.”

“Yes, well”—Lady Noble leaned close and whispered—“many were put off by Quin’s behavior at the Woodward ball last week.”

“Ah.” She snuck a glance at Quinton. Had he apologized because his mother had demanded it? “Well, I dare say he intends to behave better today.”

“He must. I’ve thrown all the liquor out.”

Lottie laughed and glanced his way. He stared at her, that long leg outstretched, his elbow propped on the chair arm, and his head propped up between thumb and forefinger. Nothing about him spoke of good behavior. Chiseled lips and straight nose, high cheekbones and whisky-colored eyes. The Noble Smirk and something hotter in his expression, something that sizzled. She looked away to avoid being singed. And found the strong outline of a jaw peppered with bristly hairs. A sliver of corded neck above a snowy white cravat. Shoulders that spilled outward under dark wool. From one end of London to another, they spanned, broad and strong and—

She shook her head. None of that. She grasped a small glass vase filled with pink and white flowers and searched the room for the perfect spot. Ah, there—a low table at the center of a group of chairs. She bent, placed it, and paused.

“What are these?” She picked up the small, shaped paper, one of several scattered around the table. “A butterfly?” The rest of them too. Her gut tightened. Quinton stood at the window, staring at who knew what, hands clasped behind his back. “Quinton—”

The door opened, and the butler appeared. “My lady, the first guests have arrived.”

Lady Noble wrung her hands before her. “Oh my. Oh, yes. Very well. Send them in. Are we prepared?” She stared at Lottie.

Lottie held the paper butterfly lightly between her fingers. “Yes, yes, we are. But quickly, place the rest of the flowers. One on each table and one on the mantel.”

A quick flurry of activity gave way to stillness as Lady Noble stood front and center, awaiting her guests, and Lottie receded into the background. She’d haunt the opposite corner of the room currently occupied by Quinton. She’d sit, pull a book from the nearby bookcase, and read until Lady Noble needed her.

Voices soon filled the taut silence, Lady Noble’s welcoming warble, her son’s deeper, clipped tone. Not much welcome there. But the ladies, jubilant and excited, seemed not to notice. Lottie peeked out of the corner of her eye. Everyone seated themselves, a maid rolled a tea cart in, Lady Noble presided, and Quinton... fluttered about. Like a butterfly. She still held the paper in her hand, folded and shaped and pristine. She pressed the heel of her palm against her eyes. They burned. Air came halting into her lungs.

“Oh, look at these!” one of the ladies said. “Butterflies.”

A chorus of oohs and aahs.

“Lady Charlotte made them,” Quinton said.

Lottie gripped the paper as tightly as she could without damaging it.

“She’s a close family friend,” Lady Noble rushed to say. “I’m quite hopeless when it comes to planning events, and she’s been such a help. I have no daughter, you see, to guide me in the latest fashions.”

The other mothers in the room rushed to sigh their condolences, likely eager to offer up their own daughters for Lady Noble’s purposes.

Lottie smiled at the party, nodded. Only Quinton failed to smile back. In fact, he appeared to have found something fascinating at the bottom of his teacup.

“The butterflies are a delightful touch,” one mother said.

Lottie nodded. “I am glad.” The butterfly winked from her lap. It burned. Why had he lied? He’d clearly been the one to fold the papers, to place them on the tables. She ripped a book from the nearby bookcase but could not read it. The same sentence knocked at her brainbox several times, but no matter how many times she saw it on the page, she never came closer to understanding it.

The low rumble of Quinton’s voice, then feminine laughter ringing like bells through the air. He’d amused them. He never amused her anymore. Only annoyed. She peeked their way. He’d taken a seat in a small group of ladies. Two mothers, two daughters, and he conversed without even a hint of a smirk. The ladies seemed pleased with him. More than that. They seemed enamored. When he stood, their gazes followed him like shooting stars across a night sky. And when he settled with another group, they sighed, a congregation in complete agreeance with one

another—their god was a worthy one.

She returned her attention to the book, but beneath it, her hands smoothed over the folded paper, traced its winged edges.

“Do you need tea, Merriweather?”

Her heart skipped a beat. He stood above her, steaming cup and saucer in hand. She took his offering and settled the saucer over the book. She was parched and, more than that, in need of the comfort of a cup of warm tea, steam warming her face, the warm cup against her palms.

“Thank you.”

He bowed and left.

“Wait.”

Slowly, he returned to her, his brown eyes warm at the edges, cold in the center.

“Yes?”

“The butterflies... you remember?” She had meant to ask him why he’d lied, claiming they were her idea, but in the end, her tongue had cared more about the memory—two children, a pile of paper, and a mission. They’d folded a garden of blooms that day, enough to scatter across every surface of Lottie’s family drawing room.

He shrugged. “My fingers remember. Nothing more than a mechanical memory of the muscles.”

“Excellently done. Do you still... do you practice?”

“Of course not.”

She swallowed. “Ah. You’re doing well.” She nodded at the guests.

“I must admit, the Guide offers excellent advice. Perhaps you should give it a read. Shedding suitors left and right, Merriweather.” A tsk in his voice as his mouth stretched into the Noble Smirk. “You might need it.” Then he turned on his toe and returned to charm the ladies once more.

He clearly did not remember what he’d told her at the ball. Perhaps he did not remember the feeling—wanting to kiss her—any more, either. Perhaps he needed drink to call it into existence. The tea grew cold in her lap as everyone chatted around her. Within an hour, the group had dwindled. A single lady and her mother remained, the rest having scurried off to Hyde Park for that afternoon’s parade. The mother and daughter sat on a couch, and Quinton and his mother occupied chairs across the table from them. Tea had been forgotten. Biscuits had been forgotten. The small group spoke and laughed with ease, and Quinton picked up a paper butterfly, held it out to the young lady whose name Lottie could not remember. She took it, blushing, and their fingers brushed. Briefly.

But long enough for jealousy to roar to life, tearing at Lottie’s chest, gnashing with wail-worn teeth. No one noticed. Why would they? Because along with the tea and the biscuits, Lottie too, had been forgotten.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Frederick's Coffeehouse always echoed with busy sounds, and as Quinton stepped over the threshold and into the dimly lit interior, he welcomed the boisterous noise. His brain ached from the number of cottage plans he'd viewed over the last hour. Some excellent options that would work for Bluevale's tenants, but difficult to make a decision. He wanted to talk to the tenants first, to understand their needs better. He'd have to send the plans to his estate manager for greater insight, and it could take a week or more to hear back. Didn't like that. Wanted the cottages renovated now.

Should have been done a few years ago, but Barnaby had convinced him they would keep so he could invest the necessary funds. He'd hesitated but eventually taken Barnaby's advice. The scheme had proved lucrative, and now he had more to invest in his tenants. But last winter had been rough, cold and windy. How much damage had been done to them in those several snowfalls. Surely not much if Mr. Rilston remained unworried over them.

Quinton would follow his estate manager's lead and let his worry wash away in the bustle of the coffeehouse. Clearford, Kingston, and Benjamin Bailey waited at their usual table in the back corner, and he joined them, sitting beside Bailey. Usually, he'd tease the wild-looking, bearded man about the name, or his too-long hair, or his flat American accent, but he felt too sour for teasing. Across from them sat the duke and his brother-in-law, Tristan Kingston.

"Clearford, I have a question." Quinton flicked a glance at the bar and nodded at the familiar barkeep, a sign he wanted his usual Turkish coffee.

"Spit it out, friend," Clearford said. "But if you want an answer, you must pay."

“With?”

“Details. About your courtship. Lottie said the first three events have gone quite well. You’ve already narrowed the field down.”

Had Lottie said anything else? About Quinton’s behavior at the ball? He barely remembered a damn thing from that night. Not what he’d done or what he’d said after his conversation with her in the garden. He’d found her. Hadn’t he? With a man? In a hallway. He remembered only shadows and candlelight. And anger. Need, frustration, longing. The night had been a cauldron brewing them all together until he’d overflowed, exploded. But how exactly had that explosion manifested? Had he punched Phillipspots? The man had abandoned his suit. Because of Quinton?

Shame crawled up Quinton’s spine. He was a rake and a scoundrel, yes, but not an abusive drunk. Had he hurt Lottie? He scratched an L into the old, weathered tabletop.

“Why no kissing, Clearford?” he asked, flattening his palm on the table.

Kingston burst into laughter. “A flawed rule. I suggested he change it. I found kissing to be quite necessary. Should be introduced into the courtship process as quickly as possible.”

Clearford rolled his eyes. “Less of that kind of talk from you, newspaperman. I’ve no desire to know when you’ve kissed my sister.”

Kingston slapped Clearford’s back, then wrapped his arm around the duke’s shoulders. “The better question at this point is when have I not?”

Clearford pushed Kingston away.

“I think it’s an excellent question,” Bailey said. He leaned forward to brace both forearms on the table, his long hair swinging around his face. “Seems rather an important bit of the whole process. Are you daft, Clearford? Is your Guide a case of the blind leading the blind?”

“Absolutely it is.” Kingston ducked as Clearford’s fist swung his way.

Quinton leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest. “Will you two horses’ arses let the man answer my question?”

Bailey and Kingston leaned back, quivering lips barely containing laughter.

Clearford straightened his jacket and his cravat, then focused on Quinton. “The lady should trust you before you kiss her. It’s not that you should never kiss her, but that you should wait for the right time. An ill-timed kiss could be the end of a perfectly respectable and successful courtship. You must be assured she’ll return the feelings and the desire for such an intimate embrace.”

All sounded perfectly reasonable. Perhaps that’s why kissing Lottie six years ago had proven so catastrophic. Wrong time. Wrong person. Wrong feelings.

“I understand,” Quinton murmured, welcoming the mug of coffee a server set before him. He inhaled the rich aroma. “Tell me then, when do you kiss the girl?”

Clearford opened his mouth.

Kingston snapped it closed with two fingers. “Let me answer this one.” He leaned over the table, closer to Quinton. “According to our most esteemed author of the Gentleman’s Guide to Courtship, the correct time to kiss a woman is”—he paused, looking at each face leaning forward with bated breath around the beaten table—“never. Look at the man.” He shook Clearford’s shoulders. “That mouth has

clearly never—”

“One more word, Kingston, and my blade will make my sister a widow.” The knife Clearford always kept about his person glinted into existence, point first in the tabletop.

Kingston held both hands up and scooted backward, his chair screeching across the wood floor. “Sensitive about the subject, are we?”

Clearford’s hand wrapped tightly around the knife hilt, squeezing until the blood drained away, leaving his knuckles bone white.

“Put that bloody thing away, Clearford,” Quinton said. “You’re scaring no one.”

“I’m a little scared,” Bailey said into his coffee cup.

“And I remain unsatisfied,” Quinton persisted. “When is the best time to kiss a lady? When can you know you’re sure of her?”

Clearford lifted the knife with a swift thunk as it left the wood, and it disappeared again. “After you’ve proposed, and she’s said yes.”

“No!” three male voices cried together.

“Absurd.” Kingston rapped his knuckles on the table.

“Why in hell would you wait so long?” Bailey wanted to know.

Clearford shook his head, raised an arm for more coffee. “The lot of you simply do not understand the fine—”

“If I’d waited so long to kiss Andromeda,” Kingston said, “we might still be courting.” He shivered. “I prefer the married state.”

Quinton tapped his foot aggressively beneath the table. “How’s a fellow to know if a woman will suit his... needs or not if he doesn’t kiss her? And shouldn’t he wait to propose until he’s certain she’ll warm his bed in the best of ways? We can’t... sample the delights of the marital bed beforehand, after all. Kisses must do.”

Kingston pulled at his cravat as if it was too tight. “Precisely. Kisses only to test the waters.”

“So,” Quinton continued, “how are we to know unless we kiss?”

Clearford’s cheek sank as if he gnawed on it, and his gaze drifted to the ceiling. “Andromeda did suggest I change that bit. Truthfully, I thought to ignore most of the suggestions she made for the Guide—”

“Now who’s asking for a knife in the gullet,” Kingston grumbled. “My Andromeda is brilliant and should be treated accordingly.”

“Including her notes about kissing.” Clearford spoke as if he’d never been interrupted. “But... perhaps she has a point.”

Kingston grinned. “I remember her point about kissing.”

“What was it?” Bailey asked.

Kingston’s grin took on a wolfish tilt. “Always kiss her.”

Bailey hit his fist on the table. “That sounds more like it! Clearford, you clearly need to listen to your sister.”

“Said sister is married. She can kiss”—he shivered—“whenever she wishes. The others should abide by stricter rules. No kissing. Until the proposal.” He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Noble.” Everyone turned toward Quinton. “You’ve clearly got kissing on the mind. Which of your remaining ladies are you considering kissing?”

“Neither.”

“What?” three male voices cried in unison.

Quinton settled back in his chair, his cup warm between both hands. “I’ve not really considered it at all. I’ll have to kiss one of them one day. Doesn’t really matter which it is.”

“Are you reading the book at all?” Samuel demanded.

“Yes.”

“And rule number one is?”

“Choose the right woman,” Quinton dutifully replied. “But the right woman is whichever woman I successfully woo. Both ladies are impeccable. My mother approves of their birth, their behavior, their looks.”

“And do you approve?” Kingston asked.

Quinton sipped his coffee, rubbed his thumb along the uneven side of the earthenware mug. “Yes.”

“Which do you approve of more?” Bailey studied Quinton, an eyebrow raised.

“Either will do. The brunette one or the blonde one.”

Silence as heavy as a boulder dropped around them. During it, Quinton studied his friends, each wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

“Did I say something wrong?” he queried.

“The brunette one?” Kingston said slowly.

“Or the blonde one?” Clearford spoke in equally stilted syllables.

Bailey leaned closer to Quinton. “What are their names?”

He couldn’t remember.

“He can’t remember!” Samuel burst to his feet.

“Sit down and don’t reach for your blasted knife.” Quinton waved for his friend to sit.

“You can’t cut my throat for being bad with names.”

“You’re not bad with names.” Kingston snorted. “You’re bad with women.”

“Popular gossip says otherwise.” Quinton smirked. “And I can assure you, in this particular instance, gossip is right, and you are wrong.”

Clearford fell back to his seat. “You’re not even trying to court them. Really court them. If you were, you’d know them better by now.”

Quinton pushed his coffee away. It began to feel like a muddy brick in his belly. He didn’t need to know them, did he? They would exist to carry his heir and host his gatherings and... replace Lottie in his imagination. Something neither of the ladies

could currently do. Perhaps the fellows were right. “I’ll become better acquainted with them later this week. My mother is hosting a dinner party.”

“Yes,” Kingston said, “Annie and I have been invited. I’ll wager I can learn their names before you can.”

“I’ll learn their names,” Quinton growled. And he’d figure out which he’d like to kiss. Perhaps he’d even kiss one or both of them. Because Samuel’s rule about kissing required revision. Lady Andromeda and Kingston were right. How could a fellow propose if he wasn’t sure of desire? And how could he erase one kiss without first exploring another?

Lottie snapped her book shut when the butler pushed open the sitting-room door. “Yes, Mr. Jacobs?” She folded the book beneath her hands, ensuring the title on the spine and its cover were well hidden.

“Lady Charlotte, Lord Erstwhile is here to see you.”

An unexpected visit. How unusual. The man usually scheduled his day down to the last second. He never did anything that hadn’t been planned days, weeks in advance.

“Are you at home?” Mr. Jacobs asked.

She patted her hair, twisted her lips between her teeth. “Yes. Yes, I think I am.”

“Very good.” Mr. Jacobs bowed his way out.

Lottie found the mirror across the room. Every hair in place but... her cheeks were too red. The scene she’d been reading when Mr. Jacobs had interrupted had made her bosom rise and fall, and her heart beat with a rapid, frantic rhythm. A man and a woman surely about to be caught in one another’s arms. They’d been kissing and

touching, and the woman had set her hands to his fall and found something quite large there. The woman had thought it mysterious. What is that? She'd thought with all the innocence of a too-young debutante at her first ball.

After running a secret book club for married ladies, Lottie knew exactly what it was—a man's cock the size of his forearm. They couldn't really be that size. They couldn't. But the woman with her hand to the man's fall didn't know that. The author apparently didn't know that, either. Or cared little about realism. And whatever powers that held Lottie's arousal in their grasp also seemed unaware of the fact, also unbothered by reality.

As she'd read, she'd done what she often did—imagined the man with a particular viscount's face and imagined the woman with the visage of the Lottie in the mirror, wearing the same blue dress Lottie wore at the moment. Her imagination sometimes proved limited, and she made do with what inspiration surrounded her.

Despite the redness of her cheeks in the looking glass, she appeared perfectly coiffed and calm. Excellent.

“Lady Charlotte,” Lord Erstwhile said from the doorway. “You're a vision today.”

She gave a little jump of surprise, her hand fluttering to her breast. He'd come so quickly. She'd not expected... but of course the journey from the door to here... so very short.

“Thank you, Lord Erstwhile.” She dropped a curtsy. “This is a rather unexpected call.”

“Yes, well, I was walking by.” A slight tilt of one corner of his mouth. “I've missed you.”

She blinked. He'd missed her? She'd been so busy with Lady Noble's gatherings that she'd rather forgot about him entirely. Would she have missed him had she not been so preoccupied? She winced, knowing the truth of it. She would not have.

"It has been over a week since we've seen one another," she said. A good enough answer that revealed nothing. "Shall we go for a walk in the park?"

"No. I've come to ask you a particular question."

Her heart thumped fast again. Only one thing that could mean. He made his way across the room, sure, long strides eating the distance between the doorway and the chair. The chair where her abandoned book lay. Dread shot through her like lightning, and she hurried across the room, each rapid footstep a prayer—no, no, no, no. Please, no. She swept in front of him just before he sat down and sat down herself, right on top of the book.

He lurched away, startled.

"Sit there." She waved at the couch. "It's much more comfortable. This chair is rather wobbly. And the stuffing is bad. I could not live with myself as a hostess if you were forced to suffer." She bit her lip. Would it work?

He sank slowly to the couch, and she released a breath of relief. The hard edges of the book bit into her backside. Better that than he discovered *The Mysterious Shaft of Pleasure*. She smiled at him, her most innocent affair—blank eyes and all teeth.

But his gaze flicked to the chair at the precise spot where her rear covered it. "I think you're sitting on a book, Lady Charlotte."

Oh no. "I'm sure I'm not—"

“Yes, you are. I saw it before you sat.”

Caught. No hiding it now. Evasion was her next best step. She laughed and pulled it out, folding it into her lap and hiding it in her skirts as best she could. “I see you’re right. How silly of me.” Another fake laugh.

Still staring quizzically at the book, he did not appear to notice. “Is it about mining?”

She frowned. “Mining? Whatever could you mean?”

“I thought I saw the word shaft on the cover.”

Blast. What now? She blinked at the book cover, her mouth hanging open, hoping, apparently, to catch a response. Panic made action difficult. A tiny Lottie inside her brain ran in circles, screaming. She must respond, so she swallowed and grabbed the first explanation that popped into her head.

“Oh... yes... you’re correct. I was not reading it, so I did not know its title. My brother must have left it there. He’s considering investing in a mining endeavor.” She sat up straighter, preened. What a quick mind she had. What a quick cover that explanation proved to be. Inner Lottie had even stopped wailing.

“Fascinating. I’ve been searching for a proper investment. I’ll ask him about it.”

“No!”

He jerked, arms flinging wide for a startled second.

“Apologies,” she said in a more moderate tone. “The endeavor is a secret for the moment. When he’s ready to make it known, I’ll certainly let you know.”

“Excellent.” He grinned at her now, an expression of delight unfettered by inconvenient preoccupations with mysterious mineshafts and secret mining investments.

She wanted to sink through the floor right into the wine cellar and pour an entire bottle down her throat. Should she remind him why he’d come here? Or should she let the question he’d come to ask fade away? Quinton’s soft, drunken words from the shadowed end of the hallway begged with her to let him forget his purpose.

“Would you like some refreshment?” she asked.

“No, thank you.”

She stood and rang the bell anyway, taking the opportunity to settle her book on the bookshelf across the room, behind all the other books.

As she approached her chair, he reached for her, half rising from the couch, arm extended in a graceful slant. “Sit next to me, Lady Charlotte?”

She hesitated, then took his hand, and let him guide her to sit next to him. He did not release her hand once she sat but placed his other atop hers.

“We have become close friends in the last several months.”

“Yes, we have.” She did think of him as a friend. He’d proved a kind and charming man, handsome and thoughtful. She should be eager to marry him.

“More than friends.” He scooted closer so that their knees touched. Perhaps he would kiss her now, a prelude to the intimate question he would soon ask. He squeezed her hand. “Lady Charlotte, would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

No kiss then, just the question. And that poked at her rage, roiled disappointment through her when she should be bursting with victory. She pulled her hand out of his embrace. “My lord, why have you not tried to kiss me yet?” Oh. She’d not known that question had been sitting so lightly on her tongue until it had dropped into the air.

He startled backward. Cheeks blushing, one hand ruffling with the hair at the nape of his neck. “A kiss...” He said it as if he were trying to distance himself from the word, say it without saying it. “In truth, your brother suggests against it. Not until one is sure of the lady’s affections. I had not planned a kiss until after you had accepted my hand. That is the only way to be sure, after all.”

Damn Erstwhile. Damn Samuel! Lottie wanted to know before she committed herself to a man if she liked his touch, his caress, his kiss. The familiar anger boiled beneath her skin. She was not supposed to want to know about kisses and caresses. She understood the rules that bound her well enough. She should not seek out any evidence of desire, of pleasure. Never mind that she wanted to, needed to.

She plastered her palm flat against the outside of her thigh to keep from fisting it in her skirts, to save the soft, pristine folds from angry wrinkles.

“Will you kiss me now?” she asked.

Erstwhile’s eyes darted left. Then they darted right. Then he looked straight at her. “Does that mean you accept my proposal?”

“It does not. Will you kiss me now?”

He stood. “No, I will not.”

She stood, too, feeling as if the light skirts of her gown were weighing her down, had suddenly become sodden with murky brown lake water. “Then I cannot accept your

proposal, my lord.”

His jaw ticked and paced two steps away from her, two steps back toward her. “This makes no sense.”

“Perhaps not from your perspective, but from mine it is the only thing that makes sense. Thank you for your kindness and your courtship. Thank you for your interest, but I’m afraid I cannot marry you.”

Anger flashed in his eyes, then he turned with a snap in his step, and made his way to the door. He took one last look at her with a short, electric pause, then nodded and left.

She sank back down to the sofa, bracing her elbows against her knees and hiding her face in her hands. “What else does that blasted book say?” she whispered into her palms.

Where was her sorrow? Where was her broken heart? She’d not been after love to begin with. No wonder they were missing, leaving her with nothing but cold anger. One suitor left, and if everything failed with him, she’d have to start all over. Could she start all over? At six and twenty?

She wanted only a future, a marriage with a man she didn’t abhor, a marriage bed in which to explore pleasure, children. She wanted to be unstuck. But every man around her wanted her stuck just the way she was—unkissed, untouched, lovely, and virginal and—

She wanted to scream. Instead, she jumped to her feet and stormed down the hall, found Samuel’s study and flung open the door. Empty. She knew it would be. He visited Frederick’s coffee house at this time every week. She stood behind his desk and threw open every drawer, searching... searching... ah! There. A notebook like

the one that Quinton had been reading before the first courtship event. She yanked it out, flipped it open. Finally, satisfaction and victory sailed through her. She'd found his notes. It seemed as if her brother had been drafting another copy of his Guide. Seemed to be in high demand these days. The fools. Samuel probably had several such copies.

She sat at his desk, set a stack of paper at her elbow, and began to copy everything onto the blank, creamy squares in curt, black slashes.

She'd received a proposal this afternoon, yet she would not stand on Quinton's doorway and brag about her victory. No. She'd do something much worse. She would court the poor fool of a man. Because only he dared to kiss her before marriage. Because he had admitted that somewhere deep inside, he wanted her, and because after receiving a marriage proposal, she knew she could not marry anyone with that damn man in her heart.

He'd tangled himself up inside her more thoroughly than she'd anticipated. She might never be able to extricate her heart from his thorns. But if the boy of her youth existed still, somewhere behind that Noble Smirk... perhaps she could find him. Perhaps she could court him out of hiding. Since the rogue would not vacate her heart, she might as well try her hand at romancing him.

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The dinner party had been an excellent idea. A room full of happy couples created the illusion that this was not an event invented solely to find Quinton a wife. It was, of course. His two remaining ladies were in attendance with their mothers and fathers. Andromeda and Tristan had been invited. As had Lady Noble's friends and their husbands. Out of the guests, Quinton, his two remaining options—Miss Bradford and Lady Susan—Lottie, Mr. Pepperidge, and Lady Noble herself remained unwed. Lady Noble, it could be assumed, intended to remain unwed. Perhaps not. One never knew.

Lottie had not intended to invite Mr. Pepperidge, but something written in Samuel's Guide had shoved the idea into her head. Comparison is useful, it had said, and competition good.

She'd not known exactly how to interpret that. Was she supposed to put Quinton in competition with another man? Or was she supposed to compare herself to other women? The idea of forcing Quinton to compare her to others and find others lacking did not sit well with Lottie. She didn't want to put other women to shame, to point out their flaws, and present herself as superior. She too had flaws. Many. She'd much rather hold them up, help them shine. Ladies were a little like the events Lottie loved planning. They could appear unremarkable unless you knew how to make them shine.

Better to have an abundance of wonderful and memorable events to attend. And better to have an abundance of wonderful and memorable ladies at those events. No need for comparison. Competition.

Let the men compete if they wished to. So, she'd invited Pepperidge. Lady Noble had welcomed the last-minute addition to the dinner table, happy to help Lottie in her pursuit of a husband. Only she could have no clue which man Lottie truly wanted.

She did feel a bit... guilty, bringing Pepperidge here under false pretenses. Perhaps she should give him one last chance, one last moment to pry her from Quinton's thorny clutches. Yes, she'd be open to that. A final test. Quinton? Or any other man on God's green earth.

The assembled guests sat perfectly organized around the long table in the Noble townhouse dining room. Lottie had spent hours thinking of how she would arrange the guests around this table, and so far, her plans had proved perfection. She'd given Lady Noble pride of place at the head of the table so that her son could sit along its extensive edge, a lady on either side of him. And Lottie right in front of him. To Lottie's right sat Pepperidge, and on her left sat Tristan, beside him Andromeda. Lottie could not claim anything but a superficial acquaintance with the other guests, and while she had purposely placed them around that table according to interest and personality, she let them all now fade into the general din and merriment of the conversation.

A hand brushed her thigh.

She clenched her muscles so she wouldn't jump and turned to Mr. Pepperidge, the only possible perpetrator of the offending touch. "Are you enjoying the evening?"

He rolled his wine glass between his fingers. "I am. I assume I owe the invitation to you." He lowered his head. "Many thanks, my lady."

"'Tis nothing." She sipped her wine. "I am good friends of the family. Lady Noble is like a mother to me."

"You lost your own?"

Everyone knew that. Why must he bring it up? She snapped her glass onto the table and took up her fork, stabbing the perfectly cooked asparagus. "Yes."

“A tragedy for such a young, vulnerable girl.”

She gritted her teeth. “Yes.”

“Mr. Pepperidge.” Quinton’s voice sounded cold from across the table. “Do you fence?”

Mr. Pepperidge tilted his head to one side. “No, I do not. Why do you ask?”

“You’d make an excellent sparring partner. Your abdomen’s the perfect height to meet the end of my rapier.” His face was both cold and calm.

“Lord Noble,” Lottie chided. “Please reserve conversations of masculine violence for purely masculine venues.” Miss Bradford nearly quivered beside Quinton. She’d not taken but a few bites of any plate set before her, and she seemed particularly compelled by the liquid ruby glitter of her wine glass.

Quinton leaned back in his chair, his gaze heavy on Lottie. “Perhaps Mr. Pepperidge should reserve unwanted conversations for more appropriate times as well.”

“What’s he mean?” Pepperidge glowered.

Lottie tried to breathe through a heart swelling too big for her chest. Had Quinton been protecting her from conversation that might pain her?

Surely not.

Mr. Pepperidge’s hand brushed Lottie’s thigh again. Her gaze flew to that touching point, then back to Quinton, whose previously impassive face had become a scowling knot. His gaze whipped lower. If he could burn a hole through the table, his stare would land right on the spot where Pepperidge’s hand had brushed her thigh. She

swallowed. He couldn't know. Other than the brief roll of her eyes in that direction, she'd given no clue as to what unexpected naughtiness happened beneath the table.

Unwanted naughtiness. Hadn't she desired this sort of physical flirtation? Yes. She'd specifically tried to find the boldest suitor, the one who would kiss her, touch her, tease her. And now that she had, the man's touch shivered dread down her spine.

Because that naughty hand did not belong to the man she wanted. A lesson learned: Pleasure, enjoyment, relied rather heavily on the man giving it. Not just any man would do.

She cleared her throat. "Mr. Pepperidge. What do you do to pass the hours of the day?"

"Walk. Constantly. From one end of London to the other."

"Walk?" Quinton huffed. "All day long? You've nothing else to occupy your time?"

"After my father bought land, I stopped working at the bank. I've not much to occupy my time these days." He grinned. A silly smile that would have been contagious had his palm not landed flat against her thigh. And squeezed.

She yelped, hid the sound with a serviette pressed tight against her lips. Pepperidge squeezed again, and she hid her flinch as best she could.

Quinton's fist hit the top of the table, sending a ripple of clinking china, silver, and glass down its length. The chatter stopped, all heads turned, and Miss Bradford trembled, shrank into herself. Poor girl.

"Miss Bradford?" Lottie said in her gentlest tone, "do you like to walk?"

Slowly, the chatter around the room returned, and even more slowly, the young lady across from Lottie lifted her head.

“I... I do indeed.” She cast a glance at her mother sitting farther down the table on the same side as Lottie. “It is a refreshing change from sitting indoors. And every day provides a new scene to observe.”

“Has Lord Noble accompanied you through Hyde Park yet?”

The girl’s lashes fluttered, and she peeked quickly at Quinton before settling into an intense study of her plate. “No.” So soft, that single word, almost silent.

“Speak up, Mary!” the girl’s mother called out. “No one can hear you.”

Miss Bradford’s trembling doubled. She might shake holes in the floor beneath her chair legs. Lottie grew tired of it. Tired, rather, of all the arrows soaring toward the girl that put terror in her expression.

“I think you have a lovely voice,” Lottie said. “I heard you perfectly.”

The girl’s head swung up sharply, and in her eyes—gratitude.

“Don’t you think so, my lord?” Lottie asked Quinton. She had not planned to help him court this wallflower, but helping the wallflower... well, yes. Lottie rather needed to do that.

“Yes, quite lovely,” Quinton said.

“And you, Mr. Pepperidge.” Lottie sipped from her glass. “Don’t you think our Miss Bradford has the voice of a songbird?”

“I cannot argue with you, Lady Charlotte.” He laughed, a sound rather like a donkey’s bray. “But I’m afraid I must add that no woman’s voice compares to your own.” His hand, still on her thigh, snaked to her knee, cupped it. Did Pepperidge have no understanding of proper location? Did she wish to sip a taste of the benefits of marriage? Yes! But did she wish to do so at a dinner table with a score of other guests? No!

She needed to swat that cursed hand away, but how could she without bringing notice to it? She glanced at Quinton, whose gaze had returned to the table, or rather the spot beneath it he could not see. How did he know? Surely, he did not.

Very slowly, moving only the muscles below her elbow, she pried Mr. Pepperidge’s hand off her leg and flung it away.

He teetered, his eyes widening. His chair teetered, too, popping up onto its two side legs. The angle of the tilting chair threw him shoulder first into Miss Bradford’s mother’s lap on his other side. Mrs. Bradford cried out, shoved him away, and his chair tipped up in the opposite direction, throwing his other shoulder first with a cry into Lottie’s lap.

Lottie shrieked and shoved him away. Or she would have. But the man had become a tangle of vines, chin and arms clinging to her like thorns. She pulled and pried, but still he clung as the chaos rose around him. Chairs screeching, men yelling, women gasping.

“Get off me, you dolt.” Lottie smacked the top of his head with her soup spoon.

And then he released her. Because he could not grasp her while flying through the air, yanked out of her lap and away from the table. She gasped, thankful for the freedom to breathe fully without her breasts brushing against the man’s face. But then she turned, quick as a leaf on the wind to discover her savior.

Behind her, his face a red mask of rage, Quinton held Pepperidge upright. Through gritted teeth, he said, “You’ve clearly had too much to drink, Pepperidge. Walk it off.” He whipped him around and shoved him toward the doorway. “Since you enjoy that activity so much.”

Pepperidge dug his heels into the floor. “Wait, no. I’ve only had a glass or—”

“Two or three,” Quinton provided for him. “I think I’ve counted four.”

A lie, that. Pepperidge had not even finished the one glass before him. But Lottie was glad to see him go, so she folded her hands in her lap and folded her knowledge on her tongue, swallowed it, and watched with everyone else as Quinton manhandled Pepperidge out of the room.

In silence, they all returned to their dinners. Almost. Every gaze seemed to have become riveted on Lady Noble. Who sat like a frightened deer at the head of the table, eyes wide and unblinking, hands hovering just above the dishes.

Oh dear.

Lottie laughed, and the curious gazes of the dinner party guests bounced her way. Excellent. A quick peek at Lady Noble revealed she’d relaxed a bit.

“My!” Lottie cried. “What an amusing bit of dramatics. There’s your entertainment for the evening!”

Everyone laughed, the awkwardness draining away, the clink of cutlery and chuckles replacing it.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Bradford,” Lottie said as she sat. “Lord Noble, as you see, is handling the situation. I’m sure Lady Noble is—”

“Mortified,” Quinton’s mother said from down the table. But she managed a chuckle, then sipped her wine. “Do accept my apologies.”

“Younger sons.” Lottie lifted a shoulder, dropped it. “They are amusing, but one can never quite decide if they are good company or not. Will you have another glass of wine, Mrs. Bradford?” She offered her most polished smile, the one with a bit of warmth beneath it.

And though Mrs. Bradford sniffed, she relaxed. Her shoulders said goodbye to her ears, and the grooves above her brows disappeared. “Yes, thank you. I found the entire scene rather amusing.”

Lottie mirrored the lady’s small smile, then peeked down the table at Lady Noble.

“Thank you,” that lady mouthed, lifting her glass to Lottie before placing it at her lips.

Lottie nodded and tried to relax. Impossible. She’d almost ruined Lady Noble’s evening by inviting Pepperidge. And where had Quinton gone to? And why was Miss Bradford attempting to sink beneath the table?

“Miss Bradford?” Lottie wished she could reach a hand across the table, squeeze her shoulder as she did for her sisters when they felt lost or alone. Lady Susan on the other side of the empty chair across from Lottie seemed hardly to have noticed the ruckus. Miss Bradford shivered, her face pale. “Miss Bradford, would you like another glass of wine?”

“No, she wouldn’t,” the girl’s mother said.

Lottie nodded, pretended she’d comply. And then, with the most minute gesture, more of an eyebrow raise than anything else, she motioned for the footman to fill

Quinton's glass. He did, and once his body blocked the view of the older woman down the table, Lottie whispered, "Her too," and nodded at Miss Bradford.

Miss Bradford looked up as the footman filled her glass. "Thank you." A whisper. Then she looked up at Lottie. "Thank you." After she'd taken a rather indelicate gulp of the wine, she seemed to relax a bit, her shoulders lowering away from her neck and her jaw loosening.

"Are you well?" Lottie asked. "Would you like to escape into the garden for a bit?"

Miss Bradford shook her head. "My mother would not like that. I'm to stay near Lord Noble as much as I can."

"Ah. I see."

"Only"—she flicked a glance at her mother, then at the door through which Quinton and Pepperidge had disappeared—"he's rather intimidating."

Lottie laughed. "I can see how some would think that. But did you know..." She leaned over the table. "He likes kittens."

"Does he?" Miss Bradford perked up.

Lottie nodded. "And flowers. And"—she allowed herself a small smile—"butterflies. He's a big protective bear is what he is."

"He's a... well... he has a reputation." She glanced at her mother, lowered her voice. "With women."

"Yes, he's a scoundrel."

“And that does not terrify you?”

“Not in the least. It does you?”

Miss Bradford nodded. “I’d rather have a fellow like Pepperidge. I like walking, too.”

“Pepperidge might be a scoundrel, too. Under the table. So to speak.”

“I suppose all men are... are beasts.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They are slaves to their baser impulses. And we must become the means through which they give into those impulses.” The poor dear lost every bit of blood in her face at once.

Lottie poured more wine down her throat than she should have. It burned, and she welcomed it. The very next ball where Cora performed a reading of one of her naughty poems, Lottie would find Miss Bradford and lead her into the light. This girl needed more guidance than her mother seemed capable of offering. She needed to know the desires of the body weren’t bad and that pleasure was not the exclusive domain of men.

“Careful, Merriweather. You’ll snap the glass in two.” Quinton sat in the chair across from her, a thick eyebrow raised.

“How is Mr. Pepperidge?” she asked.

“Do you care?”

“Naturally.”

“He’s outside, and he’s not coming back in.”

Lottie tipped her glass to Miss Bradford. “See there, Lord Noble has eradicated the threat. You are safe now.”

Quinton’s brows pulled into a scowl. “Were you scared, Miss... Miss Bradford?” Her name on his lips possessed the tenor of a question, and not for her emotional state. A slight hesitation hovered over Miss Bradford, as if his tongue had not known what syllables to shape.

“A little,” Miss Bradford admitted. “I am fine now.” She took another long pull of her wine.

Quinton looked to Lottie with an expression that begged for explanation, and she offered him a silent one with an arched brow and pursed lips. An expression she hoped he interpreted as she’s scared of you, you dolt.

He must have understood because he slumped into his chair, his expression softer than usual. “Miss Bradford, is there anything I can do to set you at ease?”

She shook her head, sending her curls into a chaotic bounce.

And Quinton... Quinton smiled. Not a smirk, not a sneer, not a reluctant grin. He gave the girl a true smile, and when she caught sight of it, her shaking stopped and something in her expression shifted.

Lottie knew that feeling, that lovely moment well, when you looked at a smiling man and knew you’d never forget the sight.

She’d set out to make him jealous this evening. And she’d visited that green squirming illness on herself instead. The rest of the meal held no flavor as far as her

tongue was concerned.

Comparison is necessary and competition good.

Ridiculous. She'd merely proven what she'd already known—Pepperidge could not hold a candle to Quinton, and Quinton did not give a fig for her. Humiliating. And the dinner guests she'd particularly invited had made a scene, been forcibly removed. But—she glanced at Quinton—how had he known what crimes the man's hand committed beneath the table? How had he guessed? She pushed the asparagus around her plate, then clenched her hands in her lap. Better that than accidentally fall into any more embarrassing predicaments.

She couldn't give up, though. Competition had not proven the way past Quinton's defenses, but Samuel's Guide offered more advice. What else had he advised? Be direct. Seek out unusual locations for a meeting but make them appear entirely unplanned? Act possessive? She almost snorted but covered the impulse with a healthy swallow of wine. How could she act possessive when she did not possess the man one bit?

Not anymore, at least. There had been a time, during childhood and those dusk-colored days just after, before adult concerns had dawned blinding on their worlds, when she'd felt as if they'd belonged to one another. Spirits wandering the woods, friendly antagonists and fierce protectors.

Perhaps she'd owned him then.

A clearing of a voice down the table preceded the scratch of chair legs across the floor. Lady Noble stood. "I had hoped men and women might retire to the drawing room together this evening. Continue conversation there with a bit of brandy. Or madeira."

Those around the table agreed, and following Lady Noble's lead, they filed out of the dining room.

In the hallway, Andromeda sidled up to her. "What in heaven's name happened in there?"

"Pepperidge proved a bit too improper." Lottie spoke just below a whisper, leaning toward her sister.

"The man cannot handle his drink."

"He was not drunk."

"And still, he..."

Lottie nodded. "His handprint might be branded on my leg."

Andromeda inhaled sharply.

"Shall I mangle him a bit for you?" Tristan cracked his knuckles. He walked directly behind Andromeda and seemed to see with narrowed eyes exactly what he'd do to Pepperidge if Lottie gave permission. "No one would even blink if I did, my being a bastard and all. Bad behavior is practically expected of me."

"You're a gem of a gentleman, Tristan, but no. Kind of you to offer, though." They passed the hallway that led to the front door, and Lottie stopped. "Do you think he's gone? Or is he sitting outside moping?"

"He'd better be gone, or I'll mangle him."

Lottie jumped, and her spine sent sparks of awareness everywhere from fingers and

toes to locations not mentionable in polite company. Locations she shouldn't be feeling in polite company. But then Quinton had never been polite, so perhaps he did not count.

She stared up at him as the rest of the party streamed into the drawing room behind Lady Noble. But for Annie and Tristan, they were alone. She looked to her sister for help. Do not leave me, her gaze pleaded. But her sister dragged her husband into the room dancing with candlelight and conversation, as if to say with not-sorry eyes that Lottie must fight her own battles.

Yes. Lottie could do that. Would do that.

She poked her finger into Quinton's chest. And almost broke the bone. Rock hard muscle met her gloved fingertip, bending the digit back on itself. She squeaked and shook her hand.

Then wagged it in his face. "Why did you do that to poor Mr. Pepperidge?"

"Poor Mr. Pepperidge? The man taking advantage of you beneath the table?" He crossed his arms over his chest, straining wool and linen as well as Lottie's ability to concentrate on anything other than muscle. Flexing. What would that bulging bicep feel like beneath her fingertips?

"How'd you know?" she asked, her voice a bit listless, breathless, her attention still riveted on a single muscular point.

"Because I saw his bloody arm moving toward you. And I saw you flinching and scooting farther away from him. I'm no genius, but I recognize an unwanted touch when I see one, especially when so poorly concealed."

"I'm sure you've seen them often enough."

“I don’t touch women when they don’t want it.” His voice a low growl, the candlelight dancing in his eyes a glow of feral danger.

She swallowed. “I... know. I should not have insinuated otherwise.”

“Why’d you invite that man?”

“Pepperidge? He’s courting me. Was courting me.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “Two down. One to go.”

He didn’t know about Erstwhile. She had no suitors now. If she could not win over Quinton, she’d have no one. Nothing. She’d have to start all over again, and her blood ran so sluggish through her tired veins... How could she?

“Are you sure of your suitor?”

“Are you sure of the ladies you’re courting?”

He snorted. “Of course.”

“You’ve terrified the one and bored the other.”

“Terrified? Which one?”

“Miss Bradford.”

His cheeks bloomed red. “The one sitting on my right?”

Her jaw dropped, and she had to pop it back into place with her own fingers.

“Quinton Chance, do you not know their names?”

He said nothing, stared into the darkness at the end of the hall with a hand cuffed around the back of his neck between the curls of hair at his nape and the starched white glow of his cravat.

“You don’t. You cad. Miss Bradford, the sweet young woman seated to your right, is scared of you, poor dear. And Lady Susan, who sat on your left, looked more at the mutton than at you. I don’t blame her. It possesses considerably more appeal. The mutton likely knew her name. Is that why you call me Merriweather? Because you cannot remember what else to call me?”

“Don’t worry, Merriweather, I know exactly who you are.”

Who he thought she was—likely no one Lottie cared to be. Shrewish and demanding and foolish.

“Why is Miss Bradford scared of me?” His deep voice sounded small with his face tilted down and away from her.

She ducked her head to peer into it. Tight jaw, whisky eyes darkened, skin drained of blood. She’d upset him, pained him. She sighed and took pity.

“It’s likely, Chance, because you’re so horribly handsome. Some ladies are intimidated by all that”—she wagged her fingers at his face—“masculine beauty.”

The hard line of his lips softened. “But not you, Merriweather.”

She straightened. “Certainly not.”

He straightened, too. “Very well. How do I make her unafraid?”

She wanted to run her fingers down the buttons of his waistcoat, pick at his cravat

folds until they were perfect, and brush a rogue curl behind his ear.

She clasped her hands together behind her back. “Make her laugh. Make a funny face like we used to do in the mirrors because your nanny said our faces would stick that way. Show her you are but a silly man.”

He made a face, pulling the tip of his nose all the way up with a finger and puffing his cheeks out.

She laughed, a true sound that felt like champagne bubbles on her lips. Then she pulled a face right back at him, pulling her lips apart by hooking a finger inside each corner and sticking her tongue out.

He hid a rich, rough laugh with his palms, pretending to scrub his face as he swallowed the sound, and sent a quick glance through the open door of the drawing room. “Thank you. Why are you helping me?” When his gaze swung back around to her, it felt like a hammer to the chest.

She could not look away. She did not want to. She’d told him how to put a lady he was courting at ease, and she’d put him at ease. But she felt riled, wild. Because she did not want to send him into that room to court the pretty Miss Bradford. He was hers. That silly little exchange proved it, did it not? How he looked at her with something like desperate hunger... that proved it too.

Perhaps he didn’t have to be foxed to want her.

And perhaps she did not have to be pitiful. She’d not been able to make him jealous, but she could do two things the Guide had advised—be direct, be possessive.

He shook his head and stepped to the side, his intent clear, his wish to escape to the safety of the drawing room settled into his steps. One long stride around her, toward

his destination.

She caught his arm, stopped him, popped up on toe, and whispered in his ear, “You do not intimidate me. I do not help you for your sake, but for theirs. No woman deserves to be forgotten so easily.”

He gave a curt nod, tugged his arm, but she did not release him. He could have broken her hold. A mere snap of superior muscle would do it. But he didn’t, letting her hand linger in that slight embrace.

“I may as well let you know,” she said, feeling the foolish words boil up inside her, knowing she shouldn’t, knowing she would. “I don’t want you to marry either of those women. But you mustn’t hurt them, either.”

“Why shouldn’t I marry them?” His voice sounded ragged and raw.

“Because...” The Guide said to be direct. She must follow its guidance, so she swallowed her fear. “I want you to belong to me.”

His body tightened beneath her touch, every muscle, it seemed, shocked full of electricity. One breath could bring her chest against his, her arms around his neck. Still, she held on only to his arm, his bicep bulging.

“You do not intimidate me,” she whispered again, “because I know you. Better than they do. And because I know you better, you are mine. Just a warning.” She knew him well enough to understand the slight parting of his lips as confusion and the tightening of his jaw... fear. She released his arm, but he did not step away. For several breaths, their chests rose and fell at the same time and to the same rhythm, in sync as they’d not been for almost a decade.

And then—a feather touch on the back of her hand, the whisper of his knuckles

brushing across hers. The slightest touch. Almost not one. Yet that feather touch burned her, and his gaze dropped to her lips. Her heart waited for the kiss, beating faster at its imminent arrival. He descended a bit lower, and the backs of his knuckles trailed up her forearm, flirted with the skin right above her long, silk glove, flirted with skin where all her nerve endings had become Vauxhall fireworks. She held her breath, ready. After six years, nigh well desperate for—

He straightened, stepped away from her, and left her alone in the hallway.

Damn him. He was hers, and she wanted more than a knuckle graze and an almost kiss. And she tired of being neglected. If the man she angled for could not be felled with stratagems, she'd have to plot a much more direct plan of battle.

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The night could not be over soon enough. As soon as the last guest left, Quinton could pack himself up into a coach with a crate of whisky, tell the driver to dump him and the crate over the edge of the known universe, and drink himself into a stupor on the way there.

I want you to belong to me.

A sentence sent from Lucifer himself to torment Quinton. Where had she stumbled across it? Why had she picked it up? Why had she flung it at him as if he could make heads or tails of it, as if it weren't a powder keg exploding in his chest?

Damn her.

She conversed with a large group across the drawing room from the dark window where Quinton stood. Those around her laughed, an easy sound that floated to him on golden candlelight only to turn noxious, suffocating when it wafted round his head. She stood between Lady Susan and Miss Bradford, setting them at ease, no doubt. As he could not.

Damn her.

She'd cut him to ribbons this evening. He found himself flayed and bleeding and losing life. First because she'd been at the mercy of Pepperidge's assaults and Quinton had wanted to grab him by the cravat, drag him across the dishes, and toss him out the window. Then because she'd pointed out his callous indifference to the women he should be courting. Not a superficial wound, that one. He'd hurt the young Miss Bradford, terrified her according to Lottie. No good.

The killing blow, though?

I want you to belong to me.

What had she meant? She couldn't really want him. Not with how he'd treated her the last several years. Brutal barbs and cold callousness. She'd never hinted... not since that day in the woods. He'd only considered himself. His inability to forget their kiss. His fascination with her lips to desertion of all others. Had... had she been cursed that day, too?

No, she must be playing with him as a cat toys with a mouse. Not a great metaphor, him being the mouse and all, but humiliatingly accurate.

More laughter from her and the group around her. What did they discuss? He should be doing as she did—charming the ladies and their parents. He straightened his cuffs, checked his hair in the warped, evening reflection of the window, and joined the others, slipping between Lottie and Lady Susan.

“Oh, my lord,” the latter said with a quirk of the lips, “Lady Charlotte has been telling us a story about you.”

Hell. “Which one?” He eyed the top of Lottie's golden head. If she looked up at him, he'd be able to see his fate in her eyes. What humiliations was she heaping upon him?

Lady Susan tapped a black lace fan on his arm. “The one about the kitten.”

He frowned. “What kitten?”

Finally, slowly and somewhat menacingly, Lottie tilted her head back, her gaze seeking his. “Your kitten. Snow.”

“I didn’t have a kitten. You did.” A midnight black cat, scrawny and scrappy, that she’d inexplicably named Snow.

“Snow only became mine after you gave him to me.”

“I...” The memory clicked into place. He’d been chasing her with the cat. She’d been six or so and he eleven, and he should have known better than to chase a girl with a cat, claiming it would eat her soul up.

She fell—stockings torn, knees and palms red and bloodied.

He hit his knees beside her, bruising them, shaking his head. “No, Lottie. It’s not going to hurt you. It’s a regular old cat. See?” He shoved it into her lap. “Just pet him. You can have him.”

She hesitated, then hid her face in the cat’s fur, wetting it with her tears.

“I’m sorry, Lottie. I’m sorry. Do you want him? He likes you. He’s yours now.”

I want you to belong to me, she’d said not more than a quarter hour ago. Like his cat had once belonged to her. He was no tame puss, though.

He cleared his throat. “Oh, yes, I remember now.”

“‘Twas quite sweet of you, my lord.” Miss Bradford spoke without lifting her gaze from the floor.

“Lord Noble has ever been sweet as a biscuit.” Lottie fluttered her lashes. “He was always following after me in childhood.”

The she-devil.

“Someone had to keep you from falling from trees and drowning in lakes and crawling into fireplaces.” He crossed his arms, his voice a low, annoyed grumble. He couldn’t look away from Lottie’s shining eyes, and everyone stared at them. Not him. Them. Lottie spun a particularly enchanting picture, didn’t she? The childhood friends standing side by side in adulthood, dedicated to one another now just as they’d always been.

What a peddler of lies she’d become. And what for?

I want you to belong to me. She certainly weaved a picture of a man and woman belonging. Lies.

Her fingers brushed his elbow. “I owe you my life, then, it seems.”

Why did it feel as if every set of eyeballs in the room flew to that point of meeting? Her fingertips. His elbow. All the proper layers between them of jacket and gloves and shirt. Yet... it seemed the improper axis around which the entire drawing room rotated.

Then she dropped her hand to her side and turned to the others, face bright. “He has not always been heroic, though. Would you like to hear about the time he sent me off in a rowboat to the middle of the lake without a single paddle to bring me back to shore?”

Quinton groaned. A chorus of enthusiastic approval rose around them, and he tried to keep his hands from curling into fists.

“Oh!” A startled exclamation from the side of the room, punctuating the musical shatter of china on wood.

His elbow bumped into Lottie’s arm as they both turned to look. His mother stood,

staring bewildered at the broken cup at her feet.

Quinton pushed toward her. “Are you hurt?” he asked when he reached her side.

Lottie followed swiftly, reaching toward his mother. “How may I help?”

His mother put a hand to her forehead and forced a laugh. “Slippery fingers. But we’re short a cup now, and oh Lottie, I’ve ruined the tablecloth. You deliberated so long over which one to use, and you found the perfect one, and I—”

“Oh, not perfect,” Lottie insisted. “In fact. There’s one much better. Will you excuse me to find it? I’ll go speak with Mrs. Poppins.” She rested a hand on his mother’s shoulder. “I’ll return shortly.”

She stopped briefly to reassure the guests that Lady Noble was fine, everything was fine, and the conversation quickly returned to previous levels as Lottie left the room.

“Are you sure you’re not cut anywhere?” Quinton asked.

His mother shook her head. “I’m not. Merely embarrassed. Thank goodness Lottie is here. This is twice she’s saved me tonight.” Her hands shook as she wiped them down her skirts. “I admire her confidence. She’ll make some lucky man a lovely wife. Just not Pepperidge.” Her nose scrunched, then smoothed as she gave him a smile. “Go. Entertain your guests and charm the ladies. Soon Lottie and I will have an engagement ball to plan.”

He nodded and returned her smile, but it felt like a twisted wound across his face. And his steps heavy as bricks as he returned to stand between Lady Susan and Miss Bradford. And his gaze even heavier on the door through which Lottie had disappeared.

“Excuse me.” He sketched a bow to the group without explanation and left. Where’d she gone? She’d done this to him, soured him. She needed to know that. He looked left, then right down the hallway. A door at the end stood slightly ajar, pale light spilling a shaft onto the wood flooring. She’d been in there with his mother today, planning all the details, her voice drifting through every crack in the house to find him out, ruin him, drive him mad.

He strode through the door before he’d entirely made up his mind to do so, and she popped up right from where she knelt scratching Princess’s ear. The butler’s room was abandoned but for her, the dog, and a nearby table piled high with fabric. The tablecloths, presumably, almost with a life of their own, spilling over the edge and draping to the floor. He slammed the door behind him and stalked toward her.

She jumped as the door shook, whipped around to face him, and leaned her hips against the table, wrapping her fingers round its edge until her knuckles blazed white. Her blue eyes were wide with a hint of panic and a deluge of determination. No matter her level of determination, she could not escape.

Princess lifted her head and whined as he stepped over her, trapped Lottie against the table.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

“Helping your mother, naturally.”

“The stories of our childhood.”

“Those old things?” She turned to face the pile of tablecloths once more. As if their memories were no more than a gown that didn’t fit, rags to be discarded. Of no significance. “No harm in them.”

“They put Miss Bradford at ease.”

“But not you, I venture to guess.” She eyed him over her shoulder, her expression—no doubt sly—hidden by the curls at her temple.

“Not me.”

“You’re angry.” She swiveled her head away from him once more, giving him the smooth, graceful column of the back of the neck. “With me.”

“Of course I am. You’re playing a game.”

“Am I winning?”

He leaned a hip against the table edge right next to her, so close he’d barely have to move to touch her. A breath could do it—collision of arms and legs, chest and belly, through exhalation.

He didn’t touch her. He barely breathed. “What do you think to win is what I want to know.”

“I told you.”

You belong to me.

He knocked the words away. “A tease to get under my skin. A stratagem to confound me.”

She shook her head, sending candlelight bouncing in the thick pile of her curls. “You’re terribly obtuse.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Am I?”

“The stories are only to remind you, to let everyone know who knows you best.”

“You think that’s you? Ha. You know me not at all.”

She raised a brow. Her hands, held lightly at her belly, reached out, found the buttons of his waistcoat, and trailed sparks of life up his abdomen. He didn’t want this, didn’t want her touch. Didn’t want to have to lie to himself about not wanting it.

Her fingers made their lazy way up his chest, slanting sideways, dipping into the small waistcoat pocket there. Her fingers grazed along his body, and then she tucked them safe into that pocket near his frantic heart. “It’s purple, isn’t it?”

“What’s purple?” His voice was raw.

“The handkerchief hiding here. It’s lavender, is it not?”

“No.”

She pulled it out, waved it in all its lavender glory before his nose. “You’re right. I don’t know you at all.”

“A lucky guess.”

“How so? A guess made by a strange acquaintance would be made on the same facts everyone has at their disposal concerning Viscount Noble—a stoic sort of man who runs wild only in his carnal pursuits. Wears only dark colors, no frivolous knots in his cravat. That information would not lead such an acquaintance to guess lavender. Do you know how I knew, Quinton? Not guessed, knew?”

He didn't want to know. He bounced off the table's edge, stepped toward the door.

"I gave you a lavender handkerchief for your sixteenth birthday because it's the color of your favorite flower. And you've used one of a similar color ever since. Cleverly hidden. But I look for it. See it peeking out sometimes from that pocket. I know you."

Striding away from her, he waved a dismissive hand in the air. "Go marry one of your suitors, Merriweather."

"There are no more suitors."

The words cut his stride in two. He stopped one shoe not quite on the ground. Gently, he placed it down and turned.

She took a halting step toward him. "Erstwhile proposed. And you've booted my final remaining suitor out the door. He'll not likely continue his interest. Not that I'm interested in him."

His mouth went dry, but he managed to say, "Erstwhile proposed, and you said..."

"No."

"Why in hell would you do that?"

She inhaled a shaky breath and straightened one glove just below her elbow, a gesture she often used to seek calm, to bide her time as her mind whirled away behind a placid expression. When she finally spoke, it would be without any hesitation, stutter, or prevarication. He knew her, too.

"He wouldn't kiss me." She abandoned the hem of her glove and gave her attention to him instead.

“Because you wouldn’t accept his proposal.”

“No. I refused him because he refused to kiss me.”

Following Clearford’s Guide had not worked in Erstwhile’s favor, it seemed.

“And”—she took another shaky breath—“because I’ve decided to court you.”

Her words were more violent than a punch, so he swung back. “No.”

“Yes.” A step forward, the brave, foolish woman.

“You can’t court someone who doesn’t want to be courted.” But damn if he did want it, a little bit, to be pursued by the woman he wasn’t supposed to want. And did. Desperately. “You’re doomed to fail.”

“I may very well fail, but at least I’ll have tried.”

“You adore failure, then?”

“I adore a challenge.”

Why did that spark lust like a raging river through him, tightening every muscle, burning his own determination to ash, shaking his sleeping heart until it yawned? No good. He found his anger and wrapped it tightly about him. “Why in hell’s name would you?”

“Because you were mine once upon a time, and then you shut your heart up behind a thorny wall, and I’ve not been able to get in since. And because you woke me, Quinton. You took my first kiss and taught me desire, and I cannot put that needing ache back to sleep.”

Then satiate it with another man. What he should say. But he couldn't.

"I want you." Not a hint of doubt in her voice.

"I'm not the same man."

"Because you've slept with every willing woman in London?"

"Yes." More than that. The distance he'd grown between them was purposeful, made of so much more than a decade of careless raking.

"Then sleep with me. I do not want to be perfect, virginal Lottie any longer. Ruin me. Why do you think I've been after kisses? I want to know what it's like, physical pleasure. And for a woman like me the only safe place to acquire that knowledge is in the marriage bed."

"I'm not marrying you."

A pink flush stained her cheeks in bright spots. "Why not me?"

"Because I can't!" He hissed the words. Had they been alone, truly, without guests down the hall, it would have been a yell that echoed off the walls and through their flesh. He couldn't because she remained his weakness, and he had to put all soft things aside, put her aside. He paced away, raking fingers through his hair, trying to pull forth the words he knew he must say. He hated them. Yet he let them slip through his teeth. "Find another man to fuck you."

"No."

The single word brought him to a standstill yet sent the room spinning.

“You are the only man. Your words challenge and infuriate me, but you never let up. And that... the acknowledgement of my strength... I need it. You save me from headaches and unwanted advances. You see my grief when no one else does. You’re the only man whose kiss has ruined me, made me.”

He heard the soft footfalls of her approach. Then he felt the brush of her arm as she rounded him. Then she stood before him, her lovely, heart-shaped face tilted up.

“And you want to kiss me again,” she said, certainty in the set line of her jaw, in the clip of each of her words.

“No.” He nearly choked on the denial and closed his eyes to block out her soft, sure gaze.

“If you insist.” Said with a sigh. “But at the Woodward ball...”

He opened his eyes. “What happened?” Damn his brainbox, he still couldn’t remember. Sometimes in dreams the feeling of a soft pink lip beneath his thumb lingered... “Did I kiss you?”

Another sigh. “Not a thing happened, Chance. A grave misfortune if you ask me.”

Thank God. But the pure relief coasting through him... swelling by gratitude that he’d not kissed her or by the fear that he had kissed her. And forgotten it. To kiss and forget Lottie Merriweather. That was the grave misfortune. But he’d not. Thank God.

No! Hell. He had to get away from her. She sent double blades of longing and dread through him, and he could not predict which would prove the deadliest.

He backed away from her. “I’m not the man you seem to think I am. A protector. Your knight.” He made sure to sneer the words. An act. For survival.

“If you say so.” She wandered back to the table with the clothes as if she were strolling through a garden, unbothered. “Your mother will wonder what’s taking me so long.

Her complaisance boiled him to a breaking point. “You’re not listening to me.”

She rummaged through the cloths. Still not listening. Humming. Her generous hips swayed slightly, making him hard. He wanted to show her. Needed her to know how hard he was. Not just of body but of soul. He could be no other way.

“Listen to me,” he demanded, storming across the room until his front pressed against her back.

Still, she ignored him, ignored the feel of their bodies bleeding into one another—curves and muscle and heat.

“The pink, I think,” she said, not even a hitch in her voice. “It’s an entirely different color scheme from before, but—”

He reached around her and swept all the bloody tablecloths to the ground. She squeaked, but he wasn’t done. His hands fit around her waist, and he lifted her, plopped her hard onto the table. Keeping his hold on her, he leaned close, whispered in her ear, “You think you know me? You think I’m secretly enamored of you, concerned to a frenzy for your well-being?”

Her chest froze on a deep inhalation that pushed her sumptuous breasts high, straining against the low bodice.

“I’m concerned with one thing,” he told her.

“What’s that?” Her voice shook.

“My own pleasure.”

She shivered, as if he'd run a finger down her spine. Or his tongue across her nipple.

“I'm not going to kiss you, Merriweather. Don't ask for it.” He raked her skirts up and stepped between her legs. “Scared?”

“No.” Her shiver entirely gone. She spoke only with clear certainty like a sun falling bright and sparkling on new-fallen snow.

He'd shake her, though. Himself, too, in the process. But it must be done. To show her, prove to her. She did not know him. Tracing his fingertips up her thighs, he told himself that's all this was—a warning. And when he flattened his palms and rounded her full hips, squeezed, shooting a bolt of lust right to his core, he almost believed it. “Now are you scared, Merriweather?” He was.

“No.”

He dropped to his knees. “At least”—he pressed his nose to the inside of her knee, just above the pink silk stocking and the pretty little garter tied in a perfect bow, and inhaled, tried not to cry at the utter perfection of her soap and sugar scent—“I won't kiss you on the lips. Scared now?”

“Never.”

Of course not. He licked her creamy inner thigh, then nipped it, hoping to leave a mark, a bit of himself on a part of hers he could never truly claim. “You say you want to be kissed, made love to. Fairy tales. You have no idea how—”

“Less talking, Chance.” Her hands fisted in his hair, urged his face closer to her center. “I want to know. Everything. Now.”

Very well. Now. Just this once. To prove to her.

He lifted his gaze and caught hers. She leaned slightly backward, bracing herself on her hands behind her, and as she tilted her head forward to watch him, her perfectly coiled curls bobbed around her face, catching the light. He wanted to muss them, tease them into a wild nest, stoke them to softness once more, watch the golden strands run like liquid through his fingers.

He wouldn't. Couldn't.

“Well, Chance?” she asked, breathless.

A challenge. He could never back down, not when Lottie challenged him.

“Are you ready, Merriweather?” he growled.

“More than you can know.”

She laughed, a breathy sound that tightened his hands around her waist. He pulled her hips to the edge of the table, then kissed her, the skin just above her stocking, his mind wandering higher, to that warm center of hers. But he kissed the side of her knee first, then her inner thigh. He must only be patient to get where he wanted to be. How many years had he been patient? He could last a few moments more. He'd place a kiss where he'd always wanted to. Soon.

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Quinton was touching her, tasting her skin, bringing to life every illustration she'd seen and stored in her imagination, every scene she'd imagined with their faces and bodies in the books she'd read. His hair was soft between her fingers as his broad shoulders pushed her legs wide. Each caress of his gloved knuckles against her inner thighs, her hips, her waist, turned her to silk heated by tangled bodies. She wanted to pool herself like liquid flame against him.

She wanted his gloves gone.

So, she reached down and dragged a hand away from her arse where it had been creeping. Then finger by finger, she tugged the glove from his hand. Inspiring him, apparently, because he tore his other hand from her body and ripped the other glove off with his teeth.

She chuckled, a purr of sound strung to the vibrations of desire he curled through her body. "You did that at the Woodford ball."

His brows drew together as he spit the glove to the floor. "Did I? Bloody h—"

"Don't think on it." She finished removing his glove and dropped it to join its brethren. Then she squeezed his shoulders with her legs. "As you were, please."

"Hell." Flames leapt in his eyes. "Hell. That was—" He broke off his own speech with a growl and returned to kissing her thighs, working his way higher as his bare hands—big and strong and smooth—rubbed up to her hips, biting indentations into her waist beneath her shift. His thumbs began to swipe low on her belly, back and forth, creeping closer to her center as he licked a path up her thigh that made her

tremble and grip his hair with one hand. She rolled her hips, bracing her weight on her other hand and biting her bottom lip.

The air on her skin, his touch, her own teeth sinking into her lip—a leaping of awareness, a shiver of sensitivity everywhere all at once.

And then without warning, his breath at her center, his hand cupping her mound and pressing with gentle pressure. She wanted this. She wanted exactly this. What no man would give her unless she first took his name. She should have known. Only a rake would do. Only that sort of man would kiss her between the legs without a blink of an eye.

But Quinton had blinked. And backed away. Because this wasn't just any rake. This was Quinton Chance, her childhood friend, her lovely tormentor. And she'd wanted love from him for so long that after the rolling pleasure of this encounter receded, pain would remain.

But for now, she'd hold her breath and happily drown beneath the waves.

Reading about this act could not compare to experiencing it. The pages of her books never spoke of the self-doubt that came with tossing one's skirt above one's knees, rucking it higher, showing a man everything. Never spoke of the self-consciousness. She and her sisters were of varying shapes and sizes, and she knew herself to be more generously shaped than some of them. As society deemed her plumpness pleasing, she'd never questioned it.

But currently, she cared not for what society thought. She cared only for his impression, his reaction, the only man who'd ever seen her so. The light was dim, the candles flickering, and when he set his mouth more fully to her sex and parted it with his tongue, she gasped and threw her head back, threw every single doubt into the wind. His touch told all—he liked the look of her, the feel.

The descriptions in her books had not been thorough enough, and she wasted several precious seconds of pure sensation fashioning a few sentences that she would add to her favorite pages to make them more accurate. Tongues and teeth and sucking and—oh! He dragged his hands down to her thighs and squeezed, then tilted his head, his hair brushing against her sex, and nipped her inner thigh with his teeth, sharp, ultimately and entirely pleasurable.

And when he returned his mouth to its purpose, the pleasure did not stop. An intense feeling of neediness coiled inside her. And when he scattered kisses higher, tracing a path onto her belly and placing a kiss just below her navel, his hand replaced his mouth between her legs, his fingers searching through her curls and finding exactly the right place where the smallest, buzzing, aching bit of her needed him most. She arched into his hand. And then his thumb found what it had been searching for and flicked over it, a lightning sharp bolt of pleasure struck.

She cried out, her hands flying to his shoulders, squeezing tight, fingernails making indentations into the wool of his jacket, digging deeper, seeking flesh.

“Quiet, Merriweather.” He spoke against her belly, his breath skating across her skin. His hand stilled for but a moment before it began a circular movement, not quite touching that buzzing lightning bolt he’d flicked to blazing life before. Circling, circling, ever closer but never quite touching until he gently made his way to it, circling still, and the slightest, softest nudge of it unknit her body and soul.

She cried out again, trying to stifle the scream by biting her lip, the sound becoming a groan, a moan of the pleasure that tortured her body.

He pressed his face to her belly, and his arms wrapped around her waist. Between her legs, their bodies met, a hug more intimate than she’d ever experienced before. He held her as she shook, as she calmed, as her breathing returned to normal. When her muscles relaxed and she slumped within his embrace, he lifted his head, and she tried

to lift hers with heavy neck muscles to look down at him. For a moment, their gazes caught. Something there, something glowing, something sharp and real, something that had always been there.

Shattered by a boot step in the hall.

Panic drained the blood from his face, and he jumped to his feet as she jumped down to hers.

The doorknob rattled.

“Quick,” he hissed, pulling her to the floor and flinging an arm around her shoulders as he rolled them under the table, then grabbed one of the scattered tablecloths and threw it over the surface, hiding them. The fabric settled around the table’s legs, pooling on the floor as the creak of hinges announced an opening door. More footsteps.

Lottie’s heart raced for a whole new reason, and their gazes locked once more. The heat of their pleasure still wrapped around them somehow, made more scorching by how their bodies were tangled together—his legs bent up to his shoulders, his arms braced atop them, and her in his lap, hugging her knees. His body curved around her, and his breath stirred the hairs at the back of her neck.

The footsteps shuffled closer, and she leaned away from them, leaned into him—strong and hard, particularly in one place.

She knew what that was. She’d never seen or felt one before, but she knew. And knowing gave her power.

Not the time, Lottie.

If not now, though, when?

She twisted and settled her body into the bend of his hip, the crook of his shoulder, and draped her arms around his neck. She smiled.

“No,” he mouthed. But his arms tightened around her, holding her close, squeezing her tight. But not too tight. A gentle prison.

She tightened her arms, too, pulled him closer, whispered in his ear, “Don’t worry, Chance.” Words so soft they almost did not exist, but the tightening of his muscles told her he heard. “I’m not going to kiss you.” She let her lips settle against his earlobe. “At least not on the lips.” She dragged her mouth along his jaw and stopped at the very tip of his chin, nipped it with her teeth, kissed it, so close to the lips she remembered so well. Had their feel and taste changed with time? She wanted to know.

Not yet. As she kissed what little skin was open to her touch above his cravat—a sliver of neck, his earlobe, his chin, she slipped an arm between their bodies and found where his hard length strained against his fall. Cupped it, gently squeezed, then rubbed her hand up and down. She knew men liked this. Fictional ones at least.

He hissed, and his hand caught hers, a vise from which she could not escape. She would not force an escape. She’d finesse one. She twisted her wrist in his hold and grasped his, so they were both palm to pulse, and then she lifted his hand away from his body, brought it up between them and inspected it—hard knuckles and long fingers. His grip loosened, and he eyed her, a question there. Free from his grasp, she lifted his hand, kissed his palm.

Then the door slammed shut beyond their cocoon, and he changed. From a man curved large and warm around her to a darting snake seeking escape. The moment after their kiss in the woods all over again as he disappeared behind the tablecloth

curtain.

Until a grayed muzzle appeared beneath it, nudged her feet, whined. Lottie lifted the cloth and patted Princess's head above the dog's sad, brown eyes. Bereft of Quinton's body, Lottie felt a bit sad, too.

"Come here, girl," Quinton said from beyond the cloth.

"Does he mean you or me?" Lottie asked Princess before scooting out from under the table. The dog, entire backside wagging, caught up with her master before Lottie did, and they were both too near the door when she caught his wrist.

"Quinton, wait—"

Slowly, he turned. "That"—his gaze darted to the table behind her—"will not happen again."

"Why not? I want a lover for my own pleasure and a husband is how I must gain that. And you want a wife."

"Not you."

She flinched, released his arm, and pressed her fingers into her chest, massaging the ache he'd lodged in the vicinity of her heart.

He wiped his hand down his face. "I'm not supposed to be soft. I cannot be weak." Did he speak those words to her or to himself?

"And what does that mean? That you're not supposed to have a heart?"

"Perhaps. Putting that organ to sleep seems to be the only way I can remain strong.

Hell, if you want to know the truth, it's why I had to put you away."

"Put me away? As if I'm a trinket? A cuff link, a button you can store in a box?"

"More like something you drop to the bottom of the Thames, hoping to be done with it forever."

What a blow, what a killing blow. It didn't kill her, though. He'd been delivering such blows for six years, and still she stood, alive and breathing. She'd become hardened to it, each blow showing her how to mend to become stronger. But what happened when all bits of her had been sewed up with leather and steel?

She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. "I am your softness." Dropping her arms to her sides, she prowled toward him.

"You are my weakness," he said, backing away.

"Use what word you like, Chance. I'm going to woo you, court you, teach you to tear down your walls, to embrace softness as strength. I am going to awaken your heart as you did my desire."

A flicker of panic like pain flickering across his face, then a tightening of his jaw. "It's no good, Merriweather. Don't even try." And then he pushed through the door and left her in the half-lit dark.

On numb legs, she gathered a tablecloth and took it to Lady Noble, not even looking about the room for Quinton. "I'm afraid I've a megrim. I am terribly sorry, but I'll have to leave early."

"Of course, dear," Lady Noble said. "I understand." She patted Lottie's shoulder.

Quinton leaned against a wall across the room, murder in his face. She'd not meant to find his form, but she could not seem to help but know exactly what space he occupied in any setting.

Lottie brushed up against Andromeda where she and Tristan had isolated themselves near a window. "I'm ready to leave. Would you mind, terribly, leaving with me?"

Andromeda studied Lottie's face, nodded once. "Let's go." She hooked their arms together, and they said goodbye as they made their way for the door, Tristan trailing after them like a guard or a puppy.

The balmy night air brushed against her skin. A fresh breeze gave her lungs a reprieve from the clinging scent of Quinton's cologne. Why did she feel so faint, so weak, when she was so determined?

"Perhaps," she said as she stepped up into the carriage and settled into the squabs of Andromeda's coach across from her sister, "because I let him kiss me beneath my skirts."

"Pardon?" Andromeda said.

Tristan, climbing into the coach to sit next to his wife, fell back to the street with a curse. "I'll walk. Seems you two have much to talk about. A man knows when he's not needed." He shook his head as if to dislodge Lottie's words from his ears, then winked at Andromeda. "Meet you at home, Captain."

"I did not mean to speak aloud." Lottie fidgeted with a fold of her skirt.

When the coach rolled forward, Andromeda crossed the space between them to sit next to Lottie. "Perhaps you did not mean to speak, but you clearly need to. Well, then, let's hear everything."

“I’ve decided to woo Quinton.”

“Oh. I did not expect that.”

“You think it a mistake.”

“I think it... an interesting choice. Why?”

“I’ve never told you, but... we kissed once.”

Andromeda jumped up and back, her arms flailing wide, her shock rocking the coach.

“Come now, Annie. It’s not that surprising.”

“It is!” She held out her hand just beneath Lottie’s nose. “See. I’m shaking.”

Lottie rolled her eyes. “You’ve become more dramatic since your marriage.”

“When did you kiss?”

“After Mother and Father’s funeral. He followed me. Comforted me.”

“Oh, Lottie. I... and it was good enough to keep you pining through six years and countless mistresses?”

Lottie nodded. It had been perfect. “And three of my own suitors.”

“What of them! They’ve courted you and—”

“Either Quinton has scared them off, or I have sent them packing.”

“Scared them... well, Pepperidge. He made quite the scene this evening. Good riddance.”

“Erstwhile proposed, and I told him no when he refused to kiss me first.”

Annie’s nose wrinkled. “He wouldn’t kiss you? Good riddance to him, too.”

“And Phillipspots... At the Woodward ball, Quinton drove him away and then revealed to me that he’d not been able to stop thinking of our kiss. He was foxed, Annie, so much so he doesn’t remember what happened, but... even foxed he remembers our kiss.” Lottie tangled her hands in her lap. “That means something, yes? Gives me reason to hope.”

Annie hesitated, then reached for Lottie’s hands, folded them in her own. “It’s unexpected.”

“And I know it wasn’t the alcohol because tonight we did quite a bit more than kiss.” She licked her lips, desire sparking across her skin from just the memory of him touching, kissing her thigh, tasting her. “Something in him wants me as I do him, and I need to know. If it’s possible.” She hung her head. “It might not be. But I would rather try and fail than never try at all.”

Andromeda leaned into her, wrapped an arm around her, and rested her head on Lottie’s shoulder. “Then let’s woo a viscount for you, Sister dear. You seem to be doing well so far, but he appeared rather angry upon returning to the drawing room this evening.”

“I told him I was courting him. I’ve been using Samuel’s Guide. But Quinton does not approve of being courted.”

“Perhaps you should abandon our esteemed brother’s courtship Guide for a different

sort of book altogether. Since it seems the man can be seduced, even if he cannot be courted.”

“Astute observation.” And she’d told him, more or less, she needed a husband only to bed her. But if that husband were him, she’d likely prove incapable of keeping her heart out of the bedroom. Would it be worth it? Outside of his heart, which he’d bricked away from her so well not a seam remained in the walls to pick apart, he had what she wanted—a knowledge of bedroom pursuits, a willingness to use that knowledge with her. Perhaps she could wall off her heart, too, to take what pleasure he could give.

“Annie?”

“Hm?”

“He said I was his weakness. What can he mean?”

Annie chuckled.

“Don’t laugh,” Lottie said, slapping her sister’s shoulder.

“Apologies, it’s only that you should have started with those words. You’re his weakness? That’s the most telling thing of all, isn’t it?”

“It sounds a horrid thing to be.”

“Not at all. It means you’re his soft spot, his vulnerability. If any man wanted to hurt him, they’d go through you to do the most damage.”

Oh. How horrible. “I don’t want to be anyone’s weakness. I want whatever man I marry to feel stronger because I am with him.”

Annie stroked Lottie's hair.

"I'm not weak."

"I know."

"I'm excellent at planning things."

"Quite right."

Lottie pulled out of her sister's embrace, sat tall and proud. "And I'm wonderfully well-read."

"Just so!" Annie sat tall, too.

"And if I'm going to convince him I'm no weakness, I'd better show the man my strengths."

"Huzzah!" Annie clapped. "If anyone can do it, you can, Lottie."

"I must plan a few courtship teas for Samuel to prance a few new men before Prudence and the twins, but I see no reason why I cannot also plan a little courtship of my own."

Annie snorted. "Courtship? I was sure you were going to say seduction."

Lottie grinned in the shadows. "You understand me well, Sister."

She'd thought Quinton understood her well, too. But if he thought she'd give up when he sliced her heart to shreds, he didn't know her at all.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

“Don’t look like you’ve lost your spine.”

Quinton counted to three, but when he turned around, his father’s best friend remained in the doorway of the private room at Brooks’s, a newspaper curled in one hand, the planes of his face unyielding.

“Damn,” he said, turning back to the large table where he’d laid various architectural plans flat. “Thought you a hallucination. What will it take to exorcize you, Barnaby?” Usually he welcomed the man’s advice, his strengthening presence, but today he felt unhappy with everything and everyone.

Barnaby’s footsteps continued forward, then the man himself appeared at Quinton’s elbow.

“What is this?” He shook the paper at Quinton’s nose.

“A newspaper, now please do go walk in front of a speeding coach.”

Barnaby growled. “Still a mean pup, I see.”

“Just as I should be.”

Barnaby chuckled. “I taught you well. But the paper says you plan to wed.”

Quinton snatched it from Barnaby’s grasp and opened it. One of Kingston’s publications, The Daily Current. And there, the blazing headline—Viscount N’s Noble Intentions. He skimmed the article, clearly written by Clearford, who’d begun

to make the writing of a courtship column for the Current as much of a habit as flinging knives. Nothing of interest in the paragraphs, just what Quinton already knew.

He flung the paper to a nearby chair. “You disapprove, I take it.”

“Hardly. A viscount must take a wife. You should have years ago.”

Quinton returned his attention to the cottage plans spread before him. He liked John Catcher’s designs best. He promoted more whimsical elements, but the ornamental touches seemed to hide strong foundations and good materials. Yes, he wanted John Catcher as his architect. This other fellow, Simon Parker, meant to save a pound or two with his designs. Nothing aesthetically or foundationally pleasing about them. Cheap now, but they would cost in the long run. In repairs and lives.

Catcher it was. The decision made. Finally. It had taken long enough. Too long. This whole wife thing had proved more distraction than he’d anticipated.

Quinton rolled up the plans. “I’m marrying now.”

“Not considering the duke’s sister, I see.”

“The duke’s sister?”

“That brazen chit the day of your father’s funeral.”

“Why would you think—”

“You were sweet on her.”

“I wasn’t.” Not then. Not that day. But he was... something on her now. An

unavoidable truth. He'd made her come two evenings ago, felt her lips on his skin, her hand on his cock, had wanted to take everything from her and give none of it back. Thank God, he'd found the will to walk out the door. What would Barnaby say if he knew? He'd never know.

And Lottie would never have her way. Courting him? Absurd. Just because she'd lost all three of her suitors didn't mean she could have him.

"I know she's about all the time, Quin. She's helping your mother."

Quinton placed the cottage plans in his satchel, slung the strap over his shoulder, and strode out the door. "She is. Mother needs it. Do you disapprove of that?"

The man disapproved of just about everything. He'd become less palatable in more recent years. But he'd been there for Quinton when it had felt like he'd had no one else. He'd acted as a father in Quinton's own father's stead. He couldn't toss Barnaby away like an old newspaper. He owed the man striding at his side, mouth twisted into a dour frown. He'd warned him, helped him erect stone walls before he'd even needed them, helped him come to terms with his duties and obligations.

"She saw you cry."

Quinton's steps faltered just before he put a toe outside.

Lottie had seen him cry. She'd seen him enraged. She'd seen him scared. She'd seen him so brimming with passion he'd almost lost control of himself. Had lost control for several perfect moments. She scared him. Because she'd seen so much of him, parts of him no one else even knew existed.

He slipped easily back into a swinging stride and into the afternoon sunshine. "You don't have to worry. I've no interest in Lottie." Not quite true. He'd taken quite a lot

of interest in the parts of Lottie hidden by her skirts. And if he had the opportunity to do it again, his interest would—

Hell. It would have to remain unsatisfied because he could not lie to himself. His interest in her—dangerous. That sharp, quick tongue of hers, for instance. As perfect for kissing as for teasing.

“You still have that dog she gave you the day your father died.”

“She owed me a beast. She took my cat,” he grumbled, jogging down the street to where his phaeton waited. “Barnaby, you become tiresome. Do you trust me?”

Barnaby made a humming sound in his throat. Spoke of doubt without a single cursed word.

“You insult me. Is there a damn thing soft about me?”

Barnaby chuckled. “That I can answer truthfully. You’re stone.” Said with pride.

“Excellent. Then trust I’m not about to melt for some duke’s sister with a bounteous bosom.”

A gasp.

Quinton stopped walking. Perched atop his phaeton now near enough to touch—a blue-eyed duke’s sister with a bounteous bosom.

He whipped around to face Barnaby, pushed him away from the phaeton, away from Lottie. Just away. Couldn’t get him far enough away. Panic choked him. Who the hell knew why? “Go. We’ll talk later.”

When he turned back around, Lottie stood poised to swing down from the conveyance on her own, her skirts inching above her calves, her bonnet at an awkward tilt, a heavy-looking, too-large reticule dangling from her wrist and banging against her hip.

“Not you!” He grabbed her forearm to halt her progress and pressed her back up and onto the seat. He found her oddly malleable, allowing him to put her exactly where he wanted her before jumping up into the phaeton himself.

“Let me down,” she said meekly, but trying not to sound meek as he joined her, the conveyance rocking around them.

“No.”

“You hate me, so let me down.”

He took up the reins and urged the horses into a trot. “No. And I don’t hate you.”

“Oh yes, you possibly appreciate my bounteous bosom, but—”

“What are you doing in my phaeton?”

“Why have you abducted me?” Her fingers wrapped tightly around the seat edge. Her cheeks had gone from a jolly red to pale as snow, and her eyes were hard as ice.

He couldn’t think. Couldn’t concentrate with her apple scent teasing him, the warmth of her body rocking against him, her clear fear like a blade hanging above them. Scared of him? Or something else? She’d give him nothing in this state, insulted and terrified. He’d have to fix it to find out anything.

He took several calming breaths while she did her best to put space between them on

the small bench. So different from the sultry, demanding Lottie of a few nights ago who'd wanted only to be nearer, of the Lottie from the woods six years ago, too. Then, she'd brooked no distance between them, wanted only more touching, more kissing.

Lottie always wanted more from him.

And he could never give it.

"I should not have said what I did," he finally said. No use trying to deny he'd meant her. She knew, and he wasn't about to deny it. She deserved more respect than that. "It was wrong of me. I do not expect forgiveness, but I give you my sincerest regret. I will not mention your person to another man ever again."

She peeked at him from the side of one eye. "I'm not put out about the bosom remark. They are bounteous."

His mouth went parchment dry in an instant. Don't look, don't look, don't look. Not like he needed to look to know just how plentiful they were. He even knew how they felt pressed against his chest. Like heaven. Hell. Don't look.

He looked. The direct result of which was that his trousers became too tight. So, he flicked his gaze upward. Only to find her grinning.

"What I take offense to, Chance," she said, "is your insistence that I'll never make you melt."

"You won't. You can't." A lie. They both knew it. Physically, at least, she'd melt him like flame obliterated ice.

"Shall we test that theory?"

“No.” How had he lost control of the conversation?

And when had she released the seat’s edge? Her pinky flirted with the outside of his thigh, and her other hand traveled to her shoulders, where he saw for the first time that she wore a dark pink shawl. Unseasonable choice for the summer heat. Surely, she was hot, and—ah, yes, a droplet of sweat trailed down her neck and caught in the small, delicate shelf made by her collarbone.

He swallowed, tightened his grip on the reins because he’d never known an impulse so demanding as the one that told him to find out what the drop of sweat tasted like on her skin.

Her pinky drew trails of teasing sensation down the outside of his thigh, and the shawl fell off her shoulder, somehow falling, too, across her hand, his thigh, obscuring his lap.

And her hand knew what to do with such obscurity. It moved, palm flattening against his leg and smoothing up and around to lie in the crook of his hip. Her fingers turned outward, brushed against the wool covering his cock.

This touch in this place at this moment before these people. But hidden. A scandal. What Pepperidge had done to her beneath the table but... wanted. Wanted so very much.

“Shall I stop?” she asked, her expression calmer than the surface of a windless summer lake. “Shall I remove my hand? I will if you request it.”

Yes, she absolutely should.

“Do you dare keep it there?” he heard himself ask instead. A challenge. Because he always challenged Lottie. As she did him. “Or are you scared, Merriweather?” When

had he decided to play her game?

Had they ever stopped playing a game? Since the day in the wood—circling, plotting, advancing, retreating—a dangerous dance.

One he should abandon.

But after the other night... if they'd been preparing for battle before, now they were locked tight into it.

She squeezed his thigh, looking into the distance. He bit his lips to hold back a groan of pleasure because when she squeezed, the minute up and down of her fingertips brushed his hard length.

“Again,” he growled. If she wanted to play the seductress, he could play the rake. He'd mastered that role early in his adult life.

She squeezed again, then rubbed her hand toward the center of his body, covering his aching cock. She moved only her hand so that to any onlooker she appeared to sit primly with her hands in her lap, shawl covering them. She appeared that way to him, and he knew better, knew that under that shawl the prim duke's daughter rubbed him, squeezed him, brought him to the edge of madness.

A prim duke's daughter. His childhood friend. Impossible.

“How in hell do you know what you're doing?” Another impossibility—keeping his own expression calm, keeping his body stiff, giving nothing away. But he locked down every muscle that wanted to slide into the warm waters of desire, and he clamped his jaw tight to silence sounds of delight.

She hummed. “I shouldn't tell you. But... I think I will.” Her head tilted as her hand

continued winding his body like a clock. If she didn't stop, he'd drop the reins, press her into the seat, throw her skirts up, and take her. Let all bloody London see, too. If she could take him as she pleased, he would do the same to her. And relish it.

Some tiny gentlemanly restraint must remain in him, though, because he ground his teeth to dust and focused on her words instead of on her hand.

"I'm an avid reader," she said, her words breathless as if stroking him was exquisite torture for her too. "If you take my meaning."

He did not.

"Books of a salacious nature. With... arousing illustrations and titillating descriptions and, oh, they're quite educational."

"Erotic books." She'd been reading erotic books. He almost came. The image of proper Lottie reading a scandalous book in bed. Touching herself?

"In fact." She could barely speak now; her breathing came with such rapidity. "I used to run a library for them. I"—a sigh that lifted her breasts high as she bit her bottom lip—"shared them with others."

If every bit of his existence hadn't been fixated on her hand stroking his cock, he might have felt shocked. But the only emotion outside of raging desire that even existed anymore was relief. Gratitude. Thank God for those books. Without them, he'd not be—

Hell, he'd not be about to make a bloody mess of himself.

"Stop, Lottie."

“Stop what, Chance?” Said with wide-eyed innocence.

“Stop what you’re doing because I cannot stop you, and I do not relish the thought of walking into my house with my seed dripping down my leg. Do they describe that in your books?”

“Oh!” Her hand shot away from him.

He hated it. He wanted it back. “Tell me more about the library.”

“Why?”

“Distraction.” He was hard as a rock and needy and he couldn’t be. Not for her. Not now. “How’d it come about?”

A beat of silence. “After my parents died.”

Hell, that did it—arousal gone. Thank God. Or curse the heavens? Hard to tell which.

“And?” he growled.

“They were my mother’s books. She used to lend them to her friends. When we discovered the scheme, we took over.”

“We?”

“My sisters and I. Not all of them. Annie, Prudence, the twins only. The others are too young, naturally. We don’t do it anymore. Handed off the responsibility to others. I have a book in my reticule, the very one that inspired me today. Well, Samuel’s Guide also played a role. He suggests seeking out the woman you’re courting in unexpected locations. Would you like to see the book? Lord Bottom’s Baguette.”

He almost dropped the reins. “What in hell...” He shook his head. “No, thank you.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“You’re rather quiet for someone who’s just found out my darkest secret.”

“I’m still recovering from your... attentions.” And from that book title.

“Ah.”

“Courtship, you realize, does not usually include such salacious actions.”

“So Samuel’s Guide says, but that particular text has proven imperfect for my purposes. Therefore, I’m writing a new book. Or rather, using others.” Her voice sang with confidence, but there, just in the last syllable of the last word—doubt. And in the thin press of her lush lips, too. And in how she clutched her hands atop that pink shawl.

He hated that doubt, wanted to eviscerate it. He’d told her the truth two nights ago—she was his weakness, the woman who’d seen him cry, the woman who made like softness.

“Why tell me your secrets?” he asked.

“Who else would I tell? You may insult me, but you would never betray me. Except in one way.”

“And what way is that?” The only question he could ask to wrestle control back from the simple truth she’d put upon her lips and into the air between them—she trusted

him. She trusted him, and damn but he adored that. Needed it.

“Never kissing me again.”

He wanted to kiss her. More than he wanted air he wanted his lips against hers. He forced his hands on the reins to loosen, and said, “You’re dangerous, Merriweather.”

“Oh? How so?”

Truth spilled out before he could stop it, a gift for the truth she’d given him. “You’re a goddess. Men could lay themselves at your feet and pledge their lives to you, and it would only be what your beauty demands. But—hell—beyond that, you’re bloody conniving. And I mean that in the best way possible. An entire erotic library right under the ton’s nose, and you were never caught?” He knew his voice held nothing but awe, but he couldn’t hide it, didn’t want to. A woman like her... she needed to know. And even if he couldn’t do a damn thing about it, he would be the one to tell her. The one who should do it. Ripping off the head of any man who tried to beat him to it seemed, suddenly, quite the most logical reaction.

“You’ll find a man to worship you,” he said, the words weak and heavy on his tongue.

“But it won’t be you?”

No, it wouldn’t be him.

He spit out a curse. “Let’s go to Gunter’s. Would you like an ice?”

“I’m not a child to be placated, I’m—”

“You’ve got that little line between your brows that says a megrim’s coming, and

since you've none of that tea on hand, an ice will do. Cold things seem to help."

Her mouth dropped open, snapped closed. "How do you know?"

"I pay attention." He'd always paid attention to her.

Some commotion on the street startled his team, and his horses reared up and back, just a little. Lottie launched herself at him, wrapping her hands around his upper arm, burrowing her face into his shoulder with a barely suppressed scream.

"Lottie," he cried, bringing the horses back under control.

She remained stiff beside him, clinging.

"What the hell, Lottie, look at me."

She shook her head, her body trembling. She seemed to have stopped breathing, and her body pressed against his revealed the rapid beating of her heart.

He pulled the phaeton to the side of the street and stopped it, knocked her bonnet onto her back and ran his knuckles over her temples, smoothed her hair, a calming—he hoped—rhythmic pattern of reassurance. When her trembling slowed into shuddering breaths, he placed his knuckles beneath her chin and lifted it. Her eyes were squeezed shut.

"Look at me, Lottie." Slowly, so slowly, her hand still clawed into his upper arm, she opened her eyes. "You're safe." He cupped her cheek. "You're safe."

She shook her head, her lips pursed into a thin line.

"Say it with me. We're safe." She did not say it the first or the second time he

repeated the words, but by the third repetition, she chanted with him. “We’re safe. We’re safe.”

Color returned to her cheeks but in a mottled pattern, and her muscles were still rigid as a board.

“Now breathe,” he commanded.

Dutifully, she did, a large exhale, a large inhale, over and over again until her body loosened and her pulse slowed. She released his arm and distanced herself from him on the seat, folding her hands in her lap.

“I do apologize. Sometimes it happens that way. The horses startled me.”

“Why? Is it like this in every carriage and coach, or is it just my phaeton?”

“All of them,” she admitted with a little laugh bereft of joy.

“I don’t understand. As children, you often traveled with your parents between London and the country. We traveled in dog carts to the village. You never seem affected then.”

“I wasn’t. It is a rather new development. Though some years old.”

“New. But old. And the thing to have changed between childhood and now... your parents’ accident. They died in a crash. Carriage rides remind you of it.”

“You guessed it in one. Lady Charlotte Merriweather is scared of carriage rides. Though it’s not so much the reminder of their deaths as it is... I cannot shake the notion it will happen again, and then my sisters will be gone. Samuel. Others I love. One minute they’ll be there, then the next they won’t. Yet the cursed coach remains.

Seems unfair. Ridiculous, I know, but—”

“Not ridiculous. Quite understandable, actually. I’ve heard Kingston’s young brother is excellent at burning coaches. Should I get him to light one on fire for you?”

She laughed, her normal coloring returning. “No, that will not be necessary.”

“Does anything help it? The fear?”

“Not really. When in London, I walk as much as possible. And when long trips are necessary, I will often have a drink or two of brandy before leaving. That will put me right to sleep, and then I can sleep the whole way there. That is the only thing that helps, but...” She flashed him a look from the corner of her eye.

“But what?”

“But I must admit I felt no fear with my hand busy beneath the shawl. It seems our stimulating activities quite distracted me from my fear. Perhaps I have found the perfect way to travel.” The corner of her lip hitched up. “Will you help me survive the ordeal of carriage travel in the future?”

“Enough, Lottie.” He snapped the reins and guided his horses back out onto the street. “The mephitic’s getting closer. I know it.” He knew no such thing, but if she continued seducing him, he’d soon give in. “What flavor ice would you like?” And why shouldn’t he give in? Just for an afternoon, a brief liaison to break his curse. Then he could remember the other ladies he courted, their names and faces. Now Lottie’s light obscured them entirely. But she wanted him to touch her, to tease her, to take her.

Perhaps he should. Give her what she wanted, what he wanted to. Then they could both move on. He could choose a wife, and she could cultivate another group of eager

suitors.

“Are you growling?” she asked.

“No.” He encouraged the horses to go faster. The sooner he’d cooled her rising megrim and saw her safely with her family, he’d seek out his mother, choose a wife, and put thoughts of seduction, of letting himself be seduced, far behind him. Because oh how she tempted him to relent.

The temptation lay in the unexpected. Not in her brazen touch or scandalous intentions. But in the parts of her he’d not known existed. The girl he’d thought he knew so well still had hidden corners to be discovered, and more than seduction, he’d wanted to dig into her secrets, share them with her, prove she did not misplace her trust in him. He’d always known her to be a formidable creature. Even as a child, she’d been more leader of her wild band of sisters than her brother had been. Was he surprised she organized an erotic lending library and hid a fear of carriages? No, because of course Lottie would. But yes, too, because he’d not known. He should know. Everything about her. Always.

What else did she hide from him? That question was the secret temptation.

But what would happen if he knew? Would the bit of him that would cry on her shoulder any time as long as she promised to cry on his, too, run like spilled ink all over his soul, weaken him? What would happen if her fears were realized, and a crash took her life? Would he melt away into nothing as his father had done, his duty and obligations be damned?

Berkeley Square rose before them. He’d get her an ice, then fashion his heart of that substance as well. No more Lottie secrets for him. While knowing her touch made him hard, knowing her heart softened him to his very core. And soft was the worst thing a man like him could be.

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Lottie stared at her ice and tried not to frown. The cold of the ice cut through the small glass and her thin lace gloves to chill her fingertips. A delicious sensation. Equally delicious, the chill that shivered through her as the ice slid down her throat. Tingled in a pleasant way, and the sun shining on her as they walked from Berkeley Square to Hyde Park soothed her, too. Physically.

Emotionally, she felt as if she stood on the edge of a cliff. She'd told the man striding beside her too much, given away her secrets and her fears. Terrifying.

More terrifying, however—he'd not reacted as she'd expected him to, taunting her, tormenting, and teasing until she wanted to jump from the phaeton and run, screaming, home. No, Quinton had accepted, praised, encouraged.

That bit of her that had urged her to reveal all, to trust the boy she'd grown up with... that bit of her crowed, vindicated. She could trust him.

Yet... what did that mean? Nothing? Silence gathered like a heavy pile of autumn leaves around them, crushing. How to break it? He seemed unconcerned, worked at a small lemon-flavored ice as they walked as if all were right with the world. Tall and handsome and confident and more masculine than any man of her acquaintance. Big, strong, everywhere. She'd felt it herself.

And now her cheeks were flaming because she'd touched him. She knew she was brazen, bold, but she'd surprised herself. Delighted herself. Wanted more.

Needed, though, to quell her rising desire, so she groped about for conversational topics to serve her purpose. Samuel's Guide? New corset fashions? Headaches? Or...

ah. Yes. That did it.

“That man you were talking to,” she said. “Mr. Barnaby.” A fellow with a visage to make any celebration a funeral. “Why are you so close with him?”

“My father wanted me to lean on him. He’s an earl’s fourth son. He knows what it is like, to some extent, to inherit, knows the duties, the work required, the dedication, but he will inherit nothing himself. I suppose my father knew he would be capable of guiding me. The man had guided my father before, so why not? They met in school, were good friends. Barnaby saw my father through a heartbreaking first marriage. He’s been a great support for me. Particularly after my father’s death.”

“I didn’t know your father was married before your mother.”

Quinton stared at the ice in his hands, a crease forming between his brows. “A woman he loved quite dearly, and she died quite painfully. Painful for her and for him, I understand.”

“I’m glad to hear that Barnaby is a capable and dependable fellow because I’m afraid he’s not very likable.”

“Neither am I a likable fellow.”

“I like you quite well... at times.”

“The times when I’m under your skirt,” he grumbled before taking another bite of his ice.

She chuckled and hid the sound behind a hand.

He stopped, stopped her as well with a hand to her elbow. “I shouldn’t be saying

things like that to you.”

“Why do you, then?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I suppose it feels... quite natural. As if every time I’ve insulted you or teased you in the last six years, I’ve been one breath away from demanding you hit your knees before me and wrap that beautiful mouth around my cock.”

She gasped. “Would you... would you like that?”

“Absurd woman.” He kicked back into motion. “Stop taking notes.”

“Stop giving them.” She spoke around her smile. The way he spoke... as if what they were doing right now was a natural extension of what they’d been doing. Did he mean it? Surely not. But then—she scurried to catch up. His hard jaw, harder eyes. Anger bit him. Angry with her? Or with himself for wanting her in the way he’d described?

Perhaps a change of topic. The notion of kneeling before him, and treating him to the same kisses he’d treated her two nights ago, made breathing difficult, made her skin hotter than the scorching summer air could ever wish to make it.

What had they been discussing before? Oh yes.

“He doesn’t like me, you know,” she managed to say in a surprisingly normal tone. No lust to speak of there.

“Who?”

“Barnaby.”

Quinton shrugged. “He doesn’t like many people.”

“He came to visit me once. My first Season. Before my parents died.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked me if I had a husband in mind, if I had fallen in love. But he said it with such derision. He was mocking me.”

Another growl, deep in his throat, his chest. He’d been doing that a lot today. “I’ll talk to him. Tell him to mind his own damn business and leave you the hell alone.”

Lottie laughed. “Why would you do that? It was so long ago. I’ve not seen him again until this afternoon.”

“Because he doesn’t trust me.” He sped up.

She did too, running to maintain a pace with his long strides as Hyde Park rose before them. “Trust you to do what?”

“Stay away from you.”

“And why would you do that?”

He stopped, Rotten Row within view, and on it, a gaggle of six girls and women clustered around a tall, starkly dressed man. Her sisters. Her brother. He paced back toward her, leaning low, his brows pulled low, too, over brown eyes that had caught the heat of the summer day and burned into her. “Because he knows what you do to me.”

“And what is that?”

His gaze dropped to her lips, hungry.

And she dropped her ice, wanting only to feast on him.

He watched it fall, landing with a splat between them. “Hell. Now what? Your megrim will return. Don’t worry, I’ll fix it.” And off he hurried into Hyde Park.

“How will you fix it?” she wondered to no one in particular. “Confounding man.”

When she found her sisters, Prudence asked without greeting, “Was that Noble I just saw stomping about?”

“Yes. He’s apparently going to fix my head.”

“Do you feel pained?”

“Not particularly, but he’s convinced.”

“You do have that line right there.” Prudence poked the space between Lottie’s eyebrows.

Lottie swatted her sister’s hand away. “I’m well.” For now.

“Excellent. Because I’m in pain. Quite intolerable pain.”

Panic thumped through Lottie, hollowed her belly out. Prudence seemed fine, whole and healthy, but... “What happened?”

“They happened.” Prudence glanced over her shoulder where a group of gentlemen had gathered. They watched her as if she were a Drury Lane actress. “They won’t leave me alone, and I can’t tell them to leave because Samuel’s right there.” She

hissed the last three words in a low whisper. “I desperately want to help Cora. See?” She nodded across the park where Cora spoke with one of their oldest friends, Lady Templeton. The two women were of similar, average height and possessed similar, slender figures. Yet Cora seemed to stand a head taller than the older lady, as if she dared mere measurements to defy her true height. The height of her soul, she’d likely say. Much too poetic a turn of mind for Lottie. But with her black hair and steel spirit, poetry suited Cora.

Lady Templeton seemed to approve of that steel spirit. With a slight nod, she slipped a small piece of paper into Cora’s palm. The two women barely interacted but for the exchange, and Cora glided across the park to another of their acquaintances, Mrs. Garrison, and another exchange of paper.

Lottie recognized the process. The paper, once unfolded, would reveal the name of a scandalous book, the book each lady wished to borrow next.

“Oh,” Lottie said, “I wasn’t aware today was the day to make requests. Tomorrow is the meeting?” The women passing the paper were members of their—no, Cora’s—lending library, and tomorrow they would meet for their monthly discussion of books.

“Yes, and I’ll have no idea what book goes to whom, and—”

“And you shouldn’t. We decided to give up the library so that we could find husbands. It’s too much of a risk.”

“How is finding a husband going, Sister?” Prudence crossed her arms over her chest.

“Well—”

“Merriweather.” Quinton appeared at her elbow, making her jump.

“Lord, Noble, you scared a year off my life,” Prudence said, hand fluttering at her neck.

He ignored Prudence and shoved his half-eaten, mostly melted ice at Lottie. “You take mine. It’s the only solution.”

“Are you”—she studied his pinched face—“panicking?”

“Your headaches are nothing to take lightly.”

Lottie took the ice.

Prudence blinked at him, her mouth partly open. “Are those from Gunter’s? Did you steal the bowls? Are you going to return them? This is all highly irregular.”

“Just eat the damn thing,” Quinton mumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets and stomping away.

“No! Quinton, you can help us.”

He stopped, turned back around slowly. “Help? With what?” The pinched worry had been replaced with reluctant curiosity.

“What I told you about earlier,” Lottie said. “The books.”

His brows shot up to his hairline and rushed forward. “Shh. You can’t talk about that here.”

Prudence shoved a thumb his way. “He’s acting odd.”

“My fault. I’m courting him. It’s put him out of sorts.”

“Lottie!” The same name said very differently in two different voices echoing at the same time.

“What happened to Merriweather?” she asked Quinton.

“You’ve shocked it out of me.”

“I’m not sure I like it.”

“Can we focus on my problem?” Prudence tugged on Lottie’s arm. “Whatever is happening between you two, I hesitantly approve. I think. But please do help with the unwanted suitors.”

“What do you want us to do?” Quinton regarded the gaggle of gentlemen standing at a distance. “But if I help, I do it for the poor suitors who need to be saved from you. Is that Bailey?”

“Yes,” Prudence said, “The American. Surprised me, too. But Samuel approves of his suit. He approves of them all, and is just waiting for me to choose between the American, a marquess’s youngest son, a vicar, a—”

“A vicar?” Lottie asked.

“Former vicar. Unexpected deaths in the family, unexpected inheritance of a title. You know how it goes.”

“Yes,” Lottie said, “and you could exhibit a bit more sympathy. They’re all quite good-looking. Though Bailey appears a bit coarse and—”

“Boring, Merriweather,” Quinton drawled. “Trust me. He’s quite boring. Not at all a lively fellow. Bury your interest. Deep. Or waste your time.”

“Oh, you found my name, I see. And as you well know, I’ll plant my interests wherever I like.” She grinned.

Quinton grunted, ignored her. “I didn’t know Bailey wished to marry.” He scratched the back of his neck. “I can distract him at least.”

“That’s something.” Prudence shivered. “He’s the most eagle-eyed. Makes me feel uneasy, as if he sees everything.” She whipped toward Quinton. “Why would you help me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You’ve not shown an interest in any of us but Samuel since your father’s death. I was still a child, but I remember what it was like before.”

“You were always a tiny chit, like a bug. Cute. But smooshable.” He winked at Prudence, then ambled toward the gaggle of gentlemen.

“You’re a bug!” Prudence yelled after him.

“Leave him alone, Pru.” Lottie pushed her sister gently toward Cora. “We’ll handle this, but”—she leaned close and whispered—“please consider marrying. Mother would want you to... to consider love.”

Prudence’s gaze flashed to Quinton. “Like you are? I thought love had no room in your plans of marriage but...” Her voice dropped impossibly lower. “What about him?”

Oh, she had thought that, hadn’t she? Only a fortnight or so ago. How odd that life shifted so quickly, its bends occurring without forewarning. “Don’t worry about me. It’s mine to worry about you. I’ll speak with the gentlemen, see if I approve of any of

them for you. Then I'll send the rest away, and you'll only have one absolutely wonderful man to get to know."

Prudence snorted.

"Just become acquainted with that one man. Just try. The books, the library... they are wonderful, but they are not forever. They will not watch out for megrims and protect you from unwanted attentions. They will not keep your secrets safe or comfort you." She dared not look at Quinton. He'd done all that for her this Season in his own brutal way, watched out, protected, kept, comforted. If she continued pursuing him, she would cause herself pain. He'd been nothing but truthful with her. He would not marry her, no matter how much of their bodies they shared with one another.

Was it worth it?

Prudence sighed. "I'll get to know one man. One, Lottie. And if he does not suit, then—"

"You may waltz into spinsterhood at your leisure."

"Precisely." She hugged Lottie, whispered in her ear, "Good luck. With courting him." Prudence ran to join her friend and, as they approached, Lady Macintosh, to accept another slip of paper.

Then Lottie joined Quinton where he stood beneath some trees conversing with Bailey, her steps heavy, the ice entirely melted in the bowl in her hand.

"I'm telling you," Quinton was saying, "I need your help, Bailey. Will you deny me?"

Bailey seemed all lion-like ease, raw power hidden by a veneer of boredom. His long,

dirty-blond hair had been pulled back into a queue, and his beard was thick and untrimmed, wild and untamed. No wonder Prudence felt uneasy in his presence. No ton dandy, Mr. Bailey.

Even his voice was rough, stripped of all elegance until it became a growl. “Take your woman and leave me be, Noble.” He nodded at Lottie. “Afternoon, Lady Charlotte.”

“Am I the woman you’re referring to, my lord?”

He nodded. “I mean no offense.”

She chuckled. “Surprisingly, none taken.”

Quinton removed his hat and slapped it on his thigh. “Bailey was just about to leave with me. I need a sparring partner at Jacksons.”

“I’m not leaving.” Bailey studied the park until he found Prudence.

“But why would you stay?” Quinton demanded, his boot now tapping out a rhythm to accompany the rapping of his hat against his leg.

The other men looked back and forth between Bailey and Quinton as if the two bandied a ball about instead of words.

Lottie scooted to the side and smiled at the assembled suitors. “Good afternoon, gentlemen. Prudence has told me so much about you.”

The gentlemen scooted to the side, too, doffing their hats and making elegant bows. But for one tall, hulking fellow hovering near the back who seemed not to know how to do it.

To the side, Bailey and Quinton bickered.

Lottie tamed an eyeroll. “Are all of you courting my sister?”

Head nods like ducks bobbing on the choppy waters of a lake.

“I begin to think we should not.” The hesitant, big man from the back.

“Oh?”

He nodded, and his hat fell off. He picked it up, his cheeks flaming. “She doesn’t seem to want us, and I won’t force her.”

The others chuckled, and one fellow stepped forward. His clothes were slightly too big for his frame, and he appeared a child playing at dress up. “The Guide says a proper lady is hesitant. We must simply be patient.”

“The Guide should tell you beef-brains that a lady knows her own mind.” The awkward giant crossed his arms over his chest.

“I know it is not the done thing,” Lottie said, “but could I ask you name, sir? Since we are without a proper introduction.”

He clamped a hand to his hat and bowed awkwardly again. Someone should tell him he didn’t have to bow so often. He would surely break at the waist. “I’m Mr.—ah, no. I’m Viscount Norton.” Said with the hesitation of a man who wasn’t who he used to be. That meant he was likely the fellow who’d been a vicar before inheriting.

“Would you mind helping me?” Lottie asked. “I’ve twisted my ankle and need a strong arm to wobble my way over to that bench.”

He frowned, but he rushed to her side. Gallant, that.

“The rest of you,” she said, waving to the gentlemen, “may disperse now.” No lightness in her tone. They could do anything they wished but defy her.

And they knew it, wandering off in various directions with identical grumbles.

“I suspect,” she said, peering up at the former vicar, “they believe I hold some power over Prudence’s decisions. As her older sister.”

“And you do not?” He escorted her to the bench and helped her sit.

“Not as much as they think I do. Neither does Samuel, but I see you’ve guessed that.”

Lord Norton stood above her, hands clasped behind his back, looking across the park where Prudence and Cora conversed with another patron of the library. “Dukes’ daughters, I assume, are used to getting their own way.”

“Yes. And no. There are quite a few things I’d like to have but do not.” Her gaze strayed to Quinton, still speaking with Bailey.

And, as if he felt her scrutiny, he whipped around, saw her missing, spun in a wild circle before finding her and leaving Bailey speaking to himself. He stalked toward them.

“Oh dear, he’s wearing his angry eyes.” Lottie stood to face her not-suitor. “You’d best brace yourself. Or run. Now.”

“What?” Norton followed the trail of her gaze. “What have I done?”

“It’s likely something I’ve done. Don’t worry. Quick, before you leave, answer me

this. Do you believe married women should answer only to their husbands?”

His brows sank low. “In what way?”

“You must answer, not counter with your own question.”

“But—”

“Here’s another: Do you think men know better than women?”

“In some things, but—”

She growled.

“You’re asking philosophical questions with a clear threat stalking toward us. I’ve no time to think of a proper response!”

“You said you trusted women to know their own minds. Do you truly believe that?”

“Yes!” He threw his arms out to his sides.

“Excellent. You may go now.” She shoved him, and after a few stumbling steps, he took off.

And Quinton arrived, hands in fists, gaze targeting the fleeing former vicar. “What are you doing?”

“Having a delightful conversation.”

“I heard you say your ankle was hurt.” He squatted before her, his hands hovering near but hesitant to touch the hem of her gown. He frowned. Naturally.

“A lie to get Lord Norton away from the others. He has the most potential, I think.”

“For Prudence.”

“Of course.” She looked at him.

He looked at her. Could that be called a look, all blazing with heat and danger?

“Who else?” she asked.

“No one else,” he grumbled. “Are you positive you’re not injured?”

“I’m—Oh, good afternoon, Samuel.”

Quinton popped to his feet. “Clearford.”

“Noble.” Samuel studied Quinton for a second, then he studied Lottie, then he seemed to discard whatever thoughts had popped into his mind. “Where’s Prudence?”

Oh, no good. But Lottie had years of distracting Samuel from their subversive Hyde Park enterprise. “She became overwhelmed with emotions for one of her suitors, Lord Norton I believe, and she had to excuse herself to catch her breath.”

Samuel pulled the brim of his hat low. “Norton, you say? Hm. Would not have expected that. Where’s Bailey?”

“Here,” Bailey grumbled, trotting up to the bench round which they gathered.

“Not very attentive,” Samuel chided.

“Noble distracted me.”

Quinton gripped the brim of his hat so tightly it would surely crush to dust. “Your sister ran off, and I did not know where she was.”

“And I’ve still not found Prudence,” Samuel said, irritation clear in his voice, “so—ah. There she is.”

Lottie stood, pushed the men away from one another. “Gentlemen, please do not bicker. It’s exhausting and accomplishes nothing. Lord Noble, as you see, I am fine. Mr. Bailey, you are no longer distracted by anyone but yourself. You may court as you please. And Brother, why are you scowling at Prudence?”

“I’ve got another suitor to introduce to her. You won’t like it.”

“Who is it?” she demanded.

“Lord Phillipspots.”

Oh. Lottie’s suitor. Former suitor. And apparently, he’d decided to court Prudence. It should... hurt? But she merely found it... “How annoying.”

“Insulting,” Quinton corrected.

“And how’s that?” Samuel’s hand crept beneath the edge of his jacket, one of the places he liked to stash a throwing knife or two.

Lottie stepped between the men. “All is well. I do not care a bit. But I guarantee you Prudence will not like it, and—” She jumped as she spied a man approaching from behind her brother. “Oh dear, is that him? He’s coming this way.”

He soon pounced, bowing and casting Lottie curious glances.

“Have you told them, Your Grace?” Phillipspots asked.

“I have, but Lottie is—”

“Clearly upset. I had hoped I could have a word with her alone, to soothe her hurt spirits.”

Lottie’s hands found her hips. Hurt spirits? That was insulting. As if she were pining for him. She was, admittedly, excellent at pining, but not for this man.

“I think it would be wise,” Samuel said. “If you do successfully court Lady Prudence, you’ll be sisters with Lady Charlotte, and we do not wish family dinners to be awkward.” He nodded curtly at Bailey and Quinton. “Come along. Let’s leave them to talk.”

Quinton hesitated, every line of his body rigid.

That thrilled her. She wanted to dance around his hard hesitation, erect a monument to it. Protective or domineering impulse though it might be, she didn’t quite care. She cared only that it meant he felt something for her, something other than desire. She should not hope, but that hesitation built such hope and encouraged it to soar.

But she must focus. No happy dancing. No hope soaring. Prudence protecting—that being her sole purpose. And even if she did not wish Prudence to marry this man, she needed all men to think kindly of her sisters, to believe them true paragons of virtue. So that if they chose to take it, they would have every opportunity to marry well.

“I think it wise, too,” she said, offering her brother her most confident smile.

Quinton straightened, and though his scowl remained, he stepped out of his hesitation and allowed Samuel to lead him away.

Then she was alone with Phillipspots.

“I understand you are cut by this turn of events, Lady Charlotte.”

Ah, he would waste no time. Neither would she.

“I’m not. It’s natural you look elsewhere when one avenue does not work out.”

“I hope you will do nothing to decrease my chances of wooing your sister.”

“Of course not. You will rise or fall based on your own merits.”

“Will I?” He raised a brow. “Does your sister happen to have a volatile admirer hiding in the shadows?”

Ah, that. Standing before him, one hand holding a bowl half full of melted ice, the other holding her too-big reticule, and the specter of the Woodward ball rising between them, she felt... awkward. Not a feeling Lottie knew well. She needed fewer objects in her arms to smooth her skirts and reassure herself everything remained nicely in place. She set the bowl on the bench first, then lowered her reticule. It hit the edge of the bench, fell, caught on a bit of jagged wood, and hovered there upside down.

And her book slipped out. Lord Bottom’s Baguette landed face up on the grass for all Hyde Park to see. She froze. Then she dove.

But Phillipspots got there before her.

Her heart hammered in her chest as his thick fingers turned the book over, as he frowned at the spine and the cover, as he opened it up and found the frontispiece. An ink drawing of Lord Bottom using his baguette on his governess.

Phillipspots snapped it shut, tossed it toward the bench as if it were on fire, had burned the gloves from his hands. Then he lifted a slow, dazed look toward Lottie.

“It’s not what you think,” she said, even though the words formed the most dazzlingly ridiculous lie she’d ever told. What exactly did she think she could convince him it was?

“What is it, then, Lady Charlotte?”

Excellent question. No idea how to go on. One inconceivable truth rang like madness between her ears—for five years she’d kept this secret, and now she’d ruined it. And if she was going to be ruined, she refused to take anyone else with her. She flashed a glance at Prudence across the park, her younger sisters running after one another down rotten row, the twins walking arm in arm. Tears stung. They would come. And she would let them.

“I found it in a shop and—”

“No wonder you wanted a kiss. You’re a wanton.” He sneered at the book. “Worse, likely.”

He glanced over his shoulder at Prudence. “I do wonder what that says about your sisters. You can tell your brother I’ve decided against pursuing Lady Prudence.” He snorted. “Prudence. I doubt she has a bit of it.”

“No.” She tried to cry out the word, but it lodged in her throat, came out weak and sickly.

Phillipspots sneered, and she tried to lunge for him. He must let her explain. But her muscles would not work, and he walked away without a single brush of her fingertips across his fine coat.

She dropped onto the bench, her hands covering her mouth. She wanted to weep until her entire being dissolved. She'd ruined her sisters with a careless mistake. The thing she'd dreaded, the reason she'd stopped running the library to begin with—all her effort undone in an instant. She could not cry enough to undo this. Every bit of her heart—her head, her arms and legs, her gut, her heart.

And her backside was... wet? She looked down. The cup of melted ice had spilt, staining her skirts red.

Ruined. Like her.

No. No, she was only ruined if Phillipspots spread word of what he'd seen. Surely, he wouldn't. Hope surging her steps, she ran.

Why was Lottie running? And why had Pisspot stormed off with a sneer? Quinton took two steps after her, but Clearford grasped his wrist, held him tight.

Quinton wrenched his arm away. Tried to. "Release me." Lottie grew smaller and smaller in the distance.

"Answer a question for me first."

"What?" he snapped. He could barely see Lottie now.

"When Phillipspots told me that he would no longer be courting Lottie, he did not tell me why. He just said they would not suit. But when he asked my permission to court Prudence, he said something odd."

"Are you going to ask your question?" Time ran out with each of Lottie's running steps. She'd reached her sisters now. "What did the man say?"

“He asked me if you were as protective over all my sisters. Or if you threatened men only over Lottie.”

Hell. What happened that night? He was never drinking again.

“Did you threaten Phillipspots, Noble? Over Lottie?”

“Apparently, I did.”

“Apparently?”

“Don’t remember. Now will you release me?”

Clearford threw Quinton’s wrist away. “You don’t remember that you cornered the man in a dark hallway and threatened him for kissing Lottie?”

Had the man kissed Lottie? Quinton boxed up a murderous impulse, but not soon enough for it to rage back to life as an image, a shadowy memory, popped into his mind. Lottie in a hallway with a man. Kissing.

Oh yes. He’d threatened Pisspot. He remembered that now. Wished he didn’t.

“The man wasn’t following your Guide correctly,” Quinton said. “You said no kissing.”

Clearford scratched his chin. “Do you think I should deny Phillipspots’s courtship of Prudence?”

“Yes.”

Clearford snapped his jacket tight. “Very well, then. Thank you. And thank you for

protecting Lottie. You might not realize this about her, but she can be stubborn. And rebellious.”

The sisters were running off now, their arms around Lottie.

“Why wouldn’t I know that about her?” Quinton asked. “Of course I know that about her.”

Clearford blinked. “I forget. You grew up with them, too. It’s been a long time since you’ve shown any interest in them at all. I suppose I thought you’d put Lottie and the others right out of your mind.”

He’d damn well tried to.

With a sigh and a slap to Quinton’s back, Clearford said, “Thank you, again, for protecting Lottie. It takes a weight off my shoulders to know I don’t have to do it alone.”

Lottie and three of her sisters climbed into a coach, and Quinton studied his friend. He often forgot that the duke before him had also lost his parents, had been forced into a heavy role at an early age. Heavier than Quinton’s because Quinton didn’t have charge of eight sisters.

He slapped Clearford’s back. “I’ll always protect her. You never have to worry about that.”

But who would protect Quinton from her?

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Lottie studied her reflection in the mirror one last time. Everything was as it should be. She looked no different. No more chaotic, no less confident. Yet she must be both those things because beneath the pink gown and smooth curls, the stays and shift, she'd become a howling banshee—all her worry and fear and guilt screaming into the numb void of her body.

Phillipspots had seen a book yesterday afternoon, and he'd sneered, and he'd stormed off. But had he talked? She'd find out soon enough when she arrived at Cora's for the monthly library meeting. She would not hide. Whatever her fate, she'd face it and do whatever she must to protect her sisters, their futures.

She swallowed the tears and her anger until her reflection smiled, sweet and serene. Perfect. She made her way downstairs, tying her bonnet beneath her chin and—

Found Lady Templeton in the entry hall. Her mother's friend. Lady Templeton had informed them, after Lottie's mother's death, about the secret erotic books, about their mother's naughty lending library that had become the Merriweather sisters' inheritance. A round hat trimmed with a rather large yellow ribbon hid well the lady's brown and silver hair, framing her round face and blue eyes. Displeasure in those pools. Pity, too. Blast.

Lottie pulled the bonnet off, let it dangle from loose fingers. "Good morning, my lady. What brings you here at this hour?"

"Mrs. Garrison is just outside, and the others are coming as well." Lady Templeton wagged her finger at Lottie. "Don't you worry, my dear. We've come to help." She took off down the hall without waiting for the butler to take her spencer or her bonnet

and settled herself nice and cozy in the drawing room they used to gather in for the monthly meetings.

Lottie followed. "I'm afraid we don't have any refreshments prepared."

Lady Templeton waved away her objection as Prudence and two more of Lottie's mother's old friends—Lady Macintosh and Mrs. Garrison—stormed into the room in a flurry of ruffled skirts and steel spines. Lady Macintosh's steely hair and eyes sharpened her soft, plump figure, and Mrs. Garrison who stood tall and bold with white-streaked red hair, her shoulders stiffer, likely, than those belonging to her admiral husband. If all three of Lottie's mother's old friends were here, there would be trouble.

Lottie's pulse panicked at her wrist, but she dropped into a chair, holding her hands loose and her composure tight, showing not a single crack opening beneath her pristine pink gown.

The three ladies did not sit; they descended on Lottie like the Greek fates. Lady Templeton, Mrs. Garrison, and Lady Macintosh stood before her, stout as pillars. But something in their faces crumbled.

Lottie peeked at Prudence, but she'd retreated to a corner, biting a fingernail, clearly pleased to keep her distance. Lottie resisted the impulse to retreat between the cushions of her chair. Little could intimidate her, but these women united could. Last Season, they'd worked together to squash a threat to Andromeda's happiness. Cunning and powerful, these women could ruin Lottie if they so wished. Or save her.

"We will try our best," Mrs. Garrison said with the confidence of an admiral's wife, "to stem the gossip."

"But," Lady Templeton continued, "you understand it has already gotten about.

There's not much we can do against the entire ton. Andromeda's difficulty last Season was simpler. Only a single mouth to silence. Now, with so many having heard the rumors..."

"We risk our own reputations," Lady Macintosh added, "speaking too loudly in your favor. We risk opening up questions about ourselves. About why we would champion you. Our reputations are the castle walls we hide behind, how we manage to do what we please in private."

"I understand." Lottie wrapped her hands tightly around the ends of the chair arms. These women brought hard truths with them, but they did not shy away from them. Neither would Lottie. "I never expected any sort of protection from you. It was my duty to protect your secrets for all these years."

"Every one of us has a duty to look after one another," Lady Macintosh said.

"What were you doing?" Mrs. Garrison made a disgruntled tsking sound. "Carrying such a book around in your reticule?"

"We all carry them about in our reticules," Lottie said. They'd all had bags specially made big enough for a book.

All three ladies before her cast slow glances toward the reticles dangling from their arms, all slightly bigger than fashionable, and then slid their glances back up to Lottie.

"Yes, but"—Lady Templeton sniffed—"we keep ours perfectly secure. At all times."

Lottie groaned into her palms. "I know, I know." Only she'd not been particularly careful in Quinton's phaeton. She'd been reading her book to pass the time, to come by some ideas for seducing him. And then he'd suddenly shown up talking about her

breasts, and she'd shoved the book into her reticule as quickly as she could, not bothering to close it tightly. And then everything else had gotten a bit out of control. And by the time they'd reached Hyde Park, she'd had other thoughts on her mind. Prudence, her sisters, possible marriages, a melting ice, a growing megrim.

"I've ruined everything." And she felt hollow about it.

"Not for us," mumbled Lady Macintosh, dropping into a chair.

"Not for you, and that is my only joy." Lottie would never reveal the secrets of the women sitting around the room.

Lady Templeton grunted. "Stop being such a wonderful girl. My son is still not married, and I'll begin to wish I'd let him marry you."

"Never say so." Lottie found she could grin. Just a bit. "I'm quite sure I'm not worthy of marriage to your Thurston."

Lady Templeton preened.

"Who's Merriweather marrying?" Quinton's voice sailed into the room before his boots marched through the doorframe. He seemed lean and relaxed and not a bit bothered but for the small crease between his brows.

"What are you doing here?" Lottie shot to her feet. "Go away."

"No," he said, leaning a shoulder against the wall next to the door and crossing one booted leg over the other.

"Go away," the other women in the room said.

“No.” Quinton smirked. The Noble Smirk, cocky and confident and aimed right at Lottie.

Mrs. Garrison marched up to him and poked him in the shoulder. She didn’t even flinch, though she did nurse her hand, likely wounded from the rock of his muscle, against her belly.

“You cannot be here,” she insisted. “This is our private literary salon.”

“It’s only private because it’s naughty,” he said, leaning down so that they were almost nose to nose.

Lady Macintosh gasped and lurched backward, her gaze flying to Lottie, then back to Quinton. Then returned once more to Lottie. “You told him?”

“You’re not supposed to tell them I told you!” Lottie cried.

“Well, I know, so I don’t see why I should keep that secret. Everyone in this room knows.”

Lady Templeton marched up to Lottie and pulled her ear.

“Oh!” Lottie grasped at the woman’s hand, trying to detach it from the vulnerable lobe.

“You’re not supposed to tell men about us,” Lady Templeton said. “Or anyone else. Perhaps you deserve your ruination, girl. To think! I momentarily considered you Thurston’s equal.”

Lottie batted Lady Templeton’s hand away, and Quinton strode across the room, picked the lady up beneath her arms and set her away from Lottie, set himself

between the bodies of the two women and scowled at the older one.

“No pinching ears.” He crossed his arms over his chest and stood sentry.

Hardly the time. Or the place. But her body tingled with appreciation, tightening and melting at the same time. It did not help that his backside existed almost at eye level. And his pantaloons fit impeccably, tucked into perfectly buffed hessians. She could see her reflection in them. If she looked south of his backside, which, admittedly, proved quite the difficult task.

Lady Templeton stepped closer, blocking the tempting sight. She pulled herself up tall before Quinton and raised her brows. A challenge. “Leave, young man.”

“I’m not leaving. And I’m not going to tell anyone.”

Lottie peeped around him at Lady Templeton. “I only told him about the books because I’m attempting to convince him to marry me.”

Silence.

Perhaps she should not have said that. Everything in ruins around her, not merely her reputation. How had she become so desperate to have this infuriating man before her that she’d let everything get so out of control? Not just her future at stake but her sisters as well. She wanted to cry. She would not cry. Lady Charlotte never cried.

“Well,” Lady Macintosh said quietly, a voice finally breaking the electric silence, “did it work?”

“Did what work?” Quinton snapped.

“Did she convince you to marry her by telling you that—”

“No.” He bit the word off, one shiny hessian tapping an agitated tempo on the floor.

“Pity,” Lady Macintosh said. “I thought for a moment we were on to something. A revolution in the methods of courtship. They’re a bit bland as they are now.”

“Enough of this nonsense.” Quinton turned on his toe and frowned down at Lottie. “What is all this I’m hearing about you? Gossip all over the city.”

She pressed her body into the cushions. “What are they saying?”

“Don’t tell him,” a symphony of female voices insisted.

“They won’t tell me.” The tapping of Quinton’s toe sped up. “I hear her name, I ask what is being said, and they simply raise their eyebrows and walk away. It’s infuriating.”

“Are you looking at them like that when you ask?” Mrs. Garrison wiggled her fingers at his scowling face.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re going to rip their heads off, boy,” Lady Templeton said.

Quinton’s scowl deepened for a moment, and then it smoothed out. Or attempted to. He didn’t quite succeed. He merely looked less like an angry vengeful bear and more like a bear that had eaten something which did not agree with his stomach.

Lottie sighed. Time to confess. “I dropped a book.”

“A book?” His head tilted to the side.

“The one I told you about yesterday, in your phaeton.”

“With the baguette?” Red crept up from his cravat to spread like honey across his cheeks.

She nodded.

“Oh, I like that one,” Lady Macintosh said. “There’s a particularly interesting scene in a folly.”

“On top of the folly, isn’t it?” Prudence asked.

“Yes, I believe so.” Lady Macintosh nodded enthusiastically. “And... was the roof sloped?”

“Cursed confusing logistics on that one,” Mrs. Garrison said. “How did they get up there? And once they were up there, how—”

Quinton stepped closer to Lottie, towering over her, his imposing frame blocking the conversation behind him, the rest of the world, out. “You dropped the book and then what?”

“Phillipspots saw it. In Hyde Park yesterday.”

He cursed. “What are you going to do?”

“I can’t say.” She flashed a glance at her sister. “I’m not particularly worried about me, but Prudence, the others...” She felt as if every bit of life and light drained from her body, filling up with something red, something violent.

“Is anyone home?” The words echoed down the hall in a deep male voice.

Everyone sitting shot to their feet.

“Who is that?” Lottie hissed.

“It sounds like Mr. Bailey.” Prudence danced in place, wringing her hands.

Lottie’s heart fluttered wildly. “But where’s Mr. Jacobs?” The butler should have answered the door, sent any unwanted company away. They’d hidden this little gathering of women for so long, and it seemed to all be crumbling in a few days, a few hours.

“I’m sorry, Lottie. I sent Mr. Jacobs away,” Prudence said. “We always send him away when the ladies are coming. After that one incident in the hallway last year, we have not wanted to risk it again.”

Just as Prudence finished speaking, two men entered the room. Mr. Bailey and Lord Norton.

Everyone stared at them as a complete and heavy silence spilled over the room like an unpleasant odor.

Then, slowly, the proper way of things popped bit by bit into Lottie’s blank mind. She stood, brushed past Quinton, and dropped a curtsy to the two men standing in the doorway. “My lords. How delightful to see you. Unfortunately, we are engaged in a private literary salon at the moment. No men allowed. Perhaps you could come back later.”

Both men’s gazes shot to a point over her shoulder, and she turned to see what captivated them so. Quinton stood there, scowling.

She turned back to the American and the no-longer-a-vicar. “We make an exception

for Lord Noble. But we are not accepting new members.”

Lord Norton stepped forward, twisting his hat in his hands. “We came to check on Lady Prudence.”

“Not together,” Bailey added. “Just happened to end up here at the same time.” A slight growl rumbled through the man’s voice, as if he did not like that he shared an idea with someone else, and they had attempted to execute their plans at the exact same time. He continued forward, stopping before Prudence. “My lady, how are you weathering the scandal? I’ve heard nothing but this morning, and I had to ensure you were well.” One could barely see his lips for the bushiness of his beard. His baggy clothes were wrinkled, and his gloveless hands stained with ink. One side of his hair escaped from his cue.

Prudence took several steps away from him, her face twisted into barely concealed disgust. Did the man stink? Lottie tried a very small sniff. The air smelled no different from usual.

“I will not be scared off, though many tried to scare me off today,” Bailey continued. Was he attempting to appear ardent? He wasn’t quite succeeding if so. Must be the beard.

“I will not be scared away, either, Lady Prudence.” Lord Norton stood next to his courtship competition, staring softly at Prudence. He dressed much more fashionably though plainly. At least his clothes fit well.

These two suitors took away a bit of Lottie’s pain, though they could not know it. What intrepid, loyal souls to refuse to judge one sister by another’s actions. She placed a palm over her mouth, blinking back gratitude.

But then gratitude slipped into dark doubt. Why were they not to be scared off?

Suspicious ruffled through her like the feathers of an upset bird. Did Bailey and Norton have other motives for courting Prudence? Motives the threat of scandal could not shake? Would her sisters only now ever attract fortune hunters and nefarious ne'er-do-wells?

Her uneasiness burst into flames, anger at herself, anger at everything, and because she could not contain the tears anymore, because she could not keep a scream clenched behind her teeth one second longer, she ran from the room. And ran to the one place she found comfort these days—her mother's parlor. Just down the hall. Books scattered on every surface. Locked in the wardrobe where the naughty ones they'd kept, the ones they'd not given to Cora that belonged to the library. Lined for everyone to see on the shelves in an alcove were the books their mother had delighted in sharing with them when they'd been girls. The rug in the center of the room was worn from where they had at all lain on their bellies or their backs in the soft pile, books in hands, expanding their imaginations outward beyond walls, beyond boundaries of city and country.

She collapsed into a puddle of skirts in the middle of that rug. And while the books had helped her world expand outward, she felt now them constricting, everything shrinking smaller and smaller and smaller till she was nothing more than skirts and a heart caged behind ribs, beating with a wild fury.

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First, Quinton would disembowel Pisspot. Then he'd wrap his entrails around the man's neck like a cravat and—

“Do stop pacing, Lord Noble. It's not conducive to coherent thought.” Lady Templeton couldn't even see him, her focus trained entirely out the window.

Quinton did not stop pacing, and no matter which side of the room his legs led him to, his gaze remained trained on the door Lottie had disappeared through.

“Perhaps,” Lady Prudence said in the calm sort of tone one reserved for recalcitrant children, “you should leave, Mr. Bailey, Lord Norton. I do appreciate your worry. And your support. But it would be best if you were, ahem, not here.”

Lord Norton bowed and backed toward the door. “Yes. As you wish. I do not wish to intrude. I merely did not wish you to feel alone.”

Collective sighs rose from the assembled ladies as Lord Norton made his escape, leaving only Bailey, who rooted himself to the floor.

He snorted. “I won't leave. There must be some way for me to help, Lady Prudence.”

Lady Prudence's eye twitched. “I assure you, my lord, we are quite capable of managing the affair and wish only to be alone.”

Bailey crossed his arms.

Bloody hell. “I'll fix this.” With a sigh, Quinton clapped his hand on his friend's

shoulder and dragged him from the room. He slammed the door and heard a screech of wood against wood. The crafty ladies lodging a chair against the door? He hoped so. “Look, Bailey.” He shoved him toward the entryway. “Know when you’re not needed. Don’t make a fool of yourself. You can’t possibly want to wed the chit. Didn’t know you were even interested.”

Bailey dug in his heels. “You’ve no idea what I’m interested in.”

“Am I going to have to bodily remove you from the residence?”

“You can’t.”

“I can, and what would Lady Prudence think of it?”

Bailey ripped out of Quinton’s grip. “I’ll leave.”

“Good.” Quinton clapped his hands as Bailey threw open the front door.

“I’ll be back.”

“I don’t bloody care. Just not today.” Now... where had Lottie gone?

Crash. The sound of something fragile hitting the wall. Smash. Another.

Quinton ran, threw open the door muffling the sounds of chaos.

Her back was too him, rigid and quivering, her hands hard fists at her sides. If her curls were perfectly coiled and smooth, if her gown was pristine and pastel, the woman, the soul beneath that thin veneer of propriety and perfection trembled.

He took a step toward her, no clue what he’d say. No idea what he’d do.

“Leave me.” Her voice echoed as she’d been possessed by a goddess with a voice vaster than the starry sky.

“I’d rather not.”

She whirled to face him, her complexion mottled red and white, her lovely lips lost to a thin line of sorrow leashed tightly beneath anger. “What good can you do me? What good can you do my sisters?”

Excellent questions. He couldn’t truly disembowel Pisspot. He couldn’t erase what had happened. He could not stop the whispers. The cuts. The ruination.

“Nothing. You can do nothing.” She whirled back around, her shoulders slumped. For only a moment. Then she threw them back and lifted an arm lightly to the side. “If I were a man, they’d clap me on the back, laugh. I’d receive a lecture, perhaps. Keep your reading proclivities secret, lad. But I’m not a man, so I am judged. Censured. Ruined.” A laugh, hard and bitter and brittle. “I do not worry for myself. But my sisters”—a sob as she clutched her hands to her chest, fell to her knees, hung her head low—“my sisters.” A howl rose from her, a scream of indignation, hurt, and rage, and two steps was all it took to bring him to her, to see him hit his knees beside her, one leg near her feet the other near her knees, his arm snaking round her shoulders.

She yanked away from him, almost growling, her golden curls falling, falling, in a torrent down her back. “I do not need your pity. It is my fault alone, and I alone should suffer.”

He held her tighter, let her push and fight against him until she was empty, drained, immobile, slumped against him, using his strength to remain upright. When her breathing slowed, he put his knuckle beneath her chin and nudged her face out of hiding where it had retreated against his chest. No tears there in her blue eyes.

“Have you cried all this time?” He lifted a brow.

“No, and I won’t. Not for myself.” A hitch at the end of her sentence. Not for herself she’d cry, but for others... yes.

He smoothed his thumb over her lips. “Settle down, Merriweather.”

Her anger returned, making stiff angles of her usually soft curves. Good.

“Stop the hysterics,” he commanded, “and look at me.”

She did, her eyes sparking pools of blue.

“We’ll show them, Merriweather. Every bloody gossip who thinks they can muddy your name or cut your sister.” Energy and purpose pounded through his veins. “We’ll show them you’re not to be ignored or discarded.” One palm on her cheek and the other wound around her shoulders, they leaned toward one another. God, she was strong, raving when she had every right to melt, ready to burn the world down when she could pour herself into grief, and no one would judge her for it.

Not Lottie, strong and defiant. Magnificent.

He tightened his arms, seeing only one way forward as the anger in her gaze flashed into curiosity.

“We’ll marry, Merriweather.”

If he’d held a soft female body with lightning striking across every inch of her skin before, now he held a statue, cold and confused, her curiosity blinking out, giving way to something darker—doubt.

She tried to rip from his hold.

He held her tighter, crushed her body to his.

“Do not tease me. It’s hateful.”

“I do not tease.”

“How could you not?” She wriggled, flattened her palms against his chest, and pushed. “You! Of course, you tease, you—”

He kissed her, not soft and seeking as he’d kissed her in the woods. But hard, bending her neck back, moving his palm to cup the back of her head, and devouring her, taking what he’d wanted, the only thing he’d wanted, for six damn years. Her—filling every one of his senses. The smell of her, the taste, the velvet of her skin. The perfection of her little gasp. He kissed her until she clutched him to her, doubting, pushing palms transformed into desperate, clinging fists. Then her lips moved against his, sweet and needy, and he parted them, tasting the cavern of her mouth, swallowing her little gasp. He trailed his lips down her jaw.

“Don’t answer me yet, Merriweather. Try my kiss out first. See if you like it, then give your response. I’d not deny you a sampling.”

Her hands made chains on the back of his neck as she let her head drop back on her neck so he could scatter kisses along the perfect length of it. When his lips reached the delicate swell of her bosom, he tasted the salt of her skin, drawing his tongue along the skin rubbed pink by the edge of her low-cut bodice.

“If you’ll still not have me after this,” he said, “I’ve not done my job.”

Her breaths became heavy, heady pants, and she lifted her head. Her blue eyes

meeting his gaze were fogged with lust, and she yanked him down so that the sides of their noses rested side by side, and her lips brushed his as she spoke.

“I’ll have you, Chance. I’ll have you.”

He kissed her again, pulled her belly to his, and dragged her to her feet, needing the entire lush length of her flush against his hardening body. Lip to lip, sipping and drowning, he walked her backward until the back of her legs hit a small couch. She fell onto it, never falling away from his body as he floated down with her, hitting his knees before her like a knight pledging his protection.

That’s what he was doing.

He tore away from the kiss, holding her face in both hands. “I will protect you.”

Between breaths, she said, “I believe you.”

A feeling unlike any he’d ever encountered before tore through him, sliced him clean in two, and he held to her tighter, pressing their foreheads together, a feeble attempt to keep himself from falling apart. He wanted to pledge not just his protection...

He wanted to pledge his soul.

He should heed the warning bells ringing against his skull and run.

She nudged him with her nose and took his lips once more, her fingers stroking the back of his neck, her skin heating beneath his touch. She asked for much without words, and he wanted to give it all to her.

Doubt pricked needles along his spine and put distance between their bodies, tore their lips apart with a breath of hesitancy.

She licked her lips. “You do not have to... sacrifice yourself to save me. I can save myself. Somehow. I’ll figure it out.”

He should abandon this fool plan, solidify his hesitancy into a wall of distance. Unclimbable, safe. But all he could manage to say was, “Use those lovely lips for something other than talking, Merriweather, and kiss me.”

And when she did this time, a laugh in her throat as she tugged him upward to join her on the couch, his heart, long sleeping, blinked awake and found itself exactly where it had been when it had closed its eyes and given way to slumber—in Lady Charlotte Merriweather’s hands.

Damn. He pulled away and found her smiling. No wonder. The kiss had tasted different. Of sunshine instead of salt. He traced his knuckles down the side of her face.

“Well, Merriweather, what’s it to be? Do I pass your examination? Will we wed?”

“You would do this for me?”

“Let me protect you.” The only thing he could say, and it wasn’t exactly the right thing, the thing she wanted to hear, because her hands pulled away, folded in her lap.

She took a shaky breath, nodded slowly. “Yes. Yes, I think I’ll allow that.”

“Shall we marry quickly and douse the flames of your scandal with another? Or shall we act the perfectly proper pair and wait until the banns are read?”

“Wait.” She bit her lip, squeezed her eyes tightly closed. “No.” They popped open and found him, blazing with decision. “We marry soon. And big. It must be a bit of an exhibition. Our story must be loud enough to drown out the other voices.”

“As you wish, Merriweather.” He shouldn’t, but he kissed the tip of her nose, the high bump of her cheek bone, the tip of her chin. These kisses somehow sweeter and more troubling than the others for how perfect they felt. “As it pleases you.” He needed distance, needed fire, needed steel. “But later, when we are alone and man and wife, it will be as I wish. Do you understand?”

She swallowed, nodded, and he kissed her once more, hard and fast and demanding and damning. Damning him. Not her. Never her.

Dream or nightmare? Lottie could not decide. As Quinton left her to find Samuel, and she rejoined the other women with numb legs, the rest of her body vibrating, she vacillated. She would marry Quinton. Dream, that, one she’d had often and despaired of just as regularly. But he’d offered out of duress, and she’d accepted because it remained the only light in a bleak situation with no clear solution.

Marrying Quinton, a solution? She almost laughed. Instead, she pressed her fingers to her lips where his had so recently rested, tasted. It had felt like desire, like adoration, like a promise. A promise of protection, yes. That alone. She held on to that because it at least offered some stability and pushed through into the drawing room.

“Lottie.” Prudence rushed toward her, grabbed her elbows, squeezed them tight. “Are you well?”

Lottie nodded. “Where has everyone gone?” The room was empty but for Prudence.

“Home, I assume. Off, at least. There’s... there’s not much we can do. Not much they can do but distance themselves.”

“Lottie! Pru!” Her twin sisters, Isabela and Imogen, tumbled into the room, arms linked, blonde curls bobbing, voices raised as one. “I just returned. The gossip is all over the place.”

Isabela scrunched up her nose. “You don’t want to hear what they’re saying. Horrid. As if being in possession of a book means you’re no better than a—”

“Please do not finish that sentence,” Lottie said. “None of that matters. I’ve a solution.”

Her sisters came to stand before her in a straight line, heads tilted at various angles, waiting.

“Well?” Prudence prodded.

“What is it?” Isabella bounced on her toes.

Imogen waited patiently, head tilted to one side.

“I’m marrying Lord Noble.” Lottie said it with as much confidence as she could muster.

Her sisters melted in different directions, reaching for chairs and couches and sinking low, mouths hanging open.

“You jest,” Prudence said.

Lottie shook her head.

“How?” Isabella demanded.

No need to get into those details. “It’s a perfect solution. An unexpected wedding to set tongues wagging. It will give gossips something to talk about other than that cursed book.” She looked to Isabella, who lived on gossip as well as she lived on air. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s daft.” Imogen drummed her fingers against the couch cushions, scowled. “This is not a fairy story where the prince can ride in and save the day.”

“I think it might work,” her twin said. “Lord Noble marrying Lady Charlotte. An unlikely match. And if he puts it about that he does not care about the book or—better—that it is his, there’s a chance of escaping only a little singed. Your parties might not be quite the crushes you desire. Or”—she shrugged—“the scandal will make them even more crowded.”

“Oh, yes,” Prudence said, “deny the book’s very existence.” She sat up straight, popping a palm over her mouth. “Oh no! What is that? I’ve never seen anything like it! A... book you say? About what?” She screeched the last word, then fell backward into her chair, the back of one hand against her forehead as if in a swoon.

“See,” said Imogen, “you do not even need Lord Noble. Simply deny everything.”

Would he consider that? Once the panic of the moment calmed?

Lottie waved her hands. “No, no. I must marry Quinton.”

“You must explain what’s going on!” Samuel’s voice boomed into the room before he did, carried on long legs taking dangerously snappy strides.

Quinton followed quickly on Samuel’s heels, irritation ticking in his jaw. “I’ve already explained everything, Clearford. Leave your sister alone.”

Samuel whirled to face his friend. “I don’t trust you. You have been courting other women. You have never showed a bit of interest in Lottie, and you—”

“Have you been outside this damn house since yesterday’s excursion to the park?” Quinton demanded.

“I hardly see how that signifies.”

“There’s gossip about your sister, and I’m offering to silence it. Muffle it a little at least.”

Their voices rose high and bounced about the walls. The twins stood, inching slowly toward the door.

“Stay,” Samuel barked. They sat, arm in arm, and Samuel pinned Lottie with a gaze sharper than his knives. “What’s he talking about?”

Their brother was never supposed to know. But they could no longer keep the books, the library, a secret from him. She took a breath, her last deep one before everything she’d hidden for five years spilled from between her lips.

“I put a book in Lottie’s reticule,” Quinton said. “A joke. I meant for her to find it later, at home, but it fell out in the park yesterday, and Pissp... Phillipspots saw.”

“A book?” Samuel’s eyes narrowed, and his hands twitched. “What kind of book, Noble?”

“Don’t skewer me, Clearford. Hands away from the knives.”

Ridiculous. She’d been asked a question, but she’d not said a single word yet. She pushed between her brother and her betrothed. Betrothed? So odd to think, yet... so thrilling. No matter the circumstances. They shifted to continue glaring at one another over her shoulder.

“Samuel, Quinton is trying to help, but he’s not telling the—”

Quinton’s hands rested on her shoulders, and he spun her to face him. “Quinton is

trying to help.” He lifted a brow. “So let him.”

Let him take the credit? Because he could and survive. But she could not. She nodded and swallowed her pride. No other choice.

Quinton spoke to Samuel over her head. “We’ve had a... flirtation. I took it too far.”

Slowly she faced her brother once more.

His furrowed brow spoke of confusion, worry. “Is this true, Lottie?”

“Yes. I’ve been courting him.” Quinton produced a gurgling sound, but she didn’t spare him a glance. “And using your Guide, Samuel. I must say I find it flawed. In the end, it’s a tease gone wrong that finds me betrothed and not any advice from your book.”

“Are you marrying him, Lottie?” Samuel asked. “Truly?”

“Do you dislike it? Truly?”

Quinton stood beside her, and it felt like they were a team, facing this first smaller challenge before they walked into the world together to face a much greater one. His fingers brushed against the back of her arm, reassuring.

Samuel sighed. “It’s unexpected. I had no idea.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes.” Harder to say than she’d thought it would be. Because it was not for the reasons she wanted.

Quinton’s hand found hers, squeezed, lifted it, and kissed her knuckles. A shiver, a

bolt of energy streaking through her.

“Yes.” The single word much stronger now. “This is what I want.”

Quinton smirked. The Noble Smirk—and pinned on Samuel. “Well, Clearford. Do we have your approval?”

Samuel growled and stormed toward the door. “Yes. I see no other option. But.” In the doorway, he faced his three other, silent sisters. “You three marry next. And no scandals this time. Neither Lottie nor Annie married who they were supposed to.” He scratched his head. “It’s as if none of you are actually doing as you should. I cannot do all the work to get you wed. In fact.” He snapped his fingers. “I’ve heard lately of a matchmaker. From Edinburgh. I think I’ll write to request her help.” He left, and the quality of the silence rippling in his wake was rather... stunned.

“Does he mean it?” Isabella asked.

“A matchmaker?” Imogen stared up at the ceiling as if the said individual could be found up there.

“Surely not.” Prudence snorted.

The three turned toward Lottie and Quinton, stood, and ambled closer. They gathered round Quinton tightly, a tiny pride of lionesses with sharp teeth and claws. Quinton tugged at this cravat, looking to Lottie for help. She stepped to the side. Let the lions have him.

“You’re going to marry Lottie, then?” Prudence asked.

“Ah, yes. I am,” Quinton answered.

“And you’re going to take care of this scandal?” Isabella asked.

“I’ll do my best.”

“See that you do.” Imogen showed her teeth, and then the twins followed Prudence out of the room, and Lottie and Quinton were alone.

“I don’t remember them being quite as terrifying as they are,” Quinton said.

“You never paid them much attention. The twins are only six years younger than me, but they are a full decade younger than you.”

“You never seemed much younger than me.”

“I have always been precocious.”

He snorted.

She laughed.

And as naturally as a vine twining round a trellis, his arm snaked around her waist, pulled her close enough to steal her breath. Or for her to give it willingly in a kiss that surprised her, unbalanced her, so she had to wrap her arms around his neck to remain standing. Leaning. Against him, allowing herself to accept his help, thrilling at the notion that they would soon be partners instead of adversaries. They would silence the gossip and reclaim her sisters’ futures. Together.

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Annoying people proved quite diverting. Quinton had to keep a firm watch on his lips because more than once they'd stretched up and out and into a wide grin without his permission, without his knowledge. Everywhere he took Lottie, people stared, and when they stared, he stared back until a flustered red crept into their cheeks. Then he grinned like a schoolboy about to touch his first breast, and then, belatedly, he remembered he was supposed to be imposing.

He also remembered he'd soon have the right to touch Lottie's breast, and—damn—that made smiling even easier, and—

"Quinton." Lottie tugged at his sleeve as they walked through Hyde Park. "Are you ill? Your face seems to be convulsing. Should we return home?"

"No." He patted her arm. "I'm well."

"Do you think it's working?"

"Do I think the members of the ton are rethinking your scandalous love for naughty books? No, I don't. But they're certainly not whispering about that right now."

"They're whispering about us. What nonsense. There's nothing odd about us."

He snorted. "You are the perfect specimen of a duke's daughter."

"I used to be, but now—"

"And I've been in the beds of half the women in this park."

“Half?” she stared up at him.

He felt the heat of her gaze but dared not look down. “An exaggeration. And none lately. Does it bother you?” It shouldn’t. They were not marrying because they cared. They were marrying because she needed saving, and he could save her. They were marrying because he’d kissed her (and more), and he’d discovered it was something like his life’s purpose. No wonder his body had fixated on her after that kiss six years ago. It had known. There would never be anything better. He’d discovered his peak usefulness—making Lottie blush across every inch of her skin. And providing her the protection of his name. And his fist if matters called for it.

“Lottie?”

“Yes?”

“When can we kiss again?”

She slapped his arm where hers hooked through his, a gentle little swat accompanied by a chuckle. “None lately? Why not?” Skipped right over his question to ask one of her own.

Why the hell not tell her? In a fortnight, they’d be wed. “After we kissed in the woods, I found myself unable to kiss anyone else with any sort of... vigor. Entirely lost the ability to care about other women’s lips.”

She hugged his arm tighter to her side. “That’s what you told me at the Woodward ball.”

He groaned. “Was it now? You’ve known my deep, dark, lurid secret all this time?”

“Yes, and I’ve been using it against you.”

“Vixen. What else happened that night? I might as well know.”

She sighed. “Nothing. You interrupted me kissing Phillipspots. Then you scared him off. Then you pinned me to the wall and proceeded to not kiss me. You talked quite a bit. About wanting to kiss me.”

“I still want to kiss you.” A truth. No doubt the bedroom would be the best part of this bargain.

“Wait until later. Now, we must face Lady Woodward herself. No more reminiscing about the ball, an event during which, I must inform you now since you do not remember, you were quite an aggravating fly about my head.”

“Me?” he grumbled. “A fly?”

“Stealing my champagne.”

“Ensuring your health, Merriweather.”

“Chasing away my suitors.”

Mine. The single word that shot through him, a simple, powerful way of saying there could be no other suitors. Not then. And especially not now.

He pulled her closer to his side. “I’m growing possessive. You should know that.”

She glowed. Skipped. “Me, too.”

They stopped before the cabriolet containing Lady Woodward and her husband. Who snored.

Quinton tipped his hat. "Good afternoon, my lady," he drawled. "I hope you are well."

The lady sniffed, looked down her nose at them, turned her back to them.

The cut direct. Could he fix it? He felt Lottie's outrage rumbling through her. If he didn't, she'd explode.

He patted her hand and hoped she held on to that temper until he'd done his work. "Do you remember that first night we danced, Lottie love? Wasn't it at Lady Woodward's ball?"

"Ah." A choked single syllable as she searched his face for the way forward. "Ye-es. It was that evening."

"It was not well done of me, my lady," he continued. "But I saw Lottie dancing with another man and knew. That very instant. I could not let any other man have her."

Lady Woodward peeked over her shoulder at him.

He swallowed a smile. The impulsive expression came too soon, after all. He'd caught the woman's attention, but he'd not caught her. Yet. "I must thank you for my happiness. We're to be wed in a fortnight."

Lady Woodward turned, opened her mouth so slowly it felt like a year had passed before she said, "You're marrying?"

"Oh, yes. We were going to hide it, you see. Everything started at your ball, but we wanted to come to know one another's feelings without the pressure of family opinion."

Lady Woodward's gaze flicked to Lottie. "Is that right?"

"Oh yes, my lady," Lottie said, and likely only Quinton heard the edge in her voice. She did not like playing the innocent.

Quinton sighed. Better to push forward before Lottie lost her composure. "Alas—"

Lottie snorted.

"Alas, we were forced to reveal our growing affection for one another." He let his face fall into complete sobriety and placed his free hand against his heart. "You may have heard what happened. I'm afraid that I am fully to blame. But I cannot be terribly apologetic for my little mischief." He softened his expression as he fluttered his lashes at Lottie. "It has brought our love into the sun."

Lottie almost scrunched up her face, only barely smoothed out the wrinkles before giving the game away.

Lady Woodward glanced between them, then leaned over the edge of her cab, and whispered with a fleeting, dark look toward Lottie, "You're speaking of... the book?"

"A little joke," Quinton said with a weak laugh.

"One," Lottie said with a sniff, finally joining the conversation, "that I do not find diverting in the least." She ducked her head for a moment, then lifted it again, raising the most innocent, wide-eyed expression to Lady Woodward that Quinton had ever witnessed. "I cannot even enjoy the joke, my lady. I do not know what any of it means. Why has a book upset so many people?"

Quinton rolled his eyes. He only barely kept them in place, managing to peer down at his betrothed with an understanding nod.

Lottie held her hands palm up, shaking her head. “Books are ever good, are they not, Lady Woodward? Vessels of virtue. What can everyone mean suggesting I... I...” She burrowed her face in her palms and shook her shoulders softly as if she’d burst becomingly into little tears.

He patted her shoulder. “There, there, Lottie love. ‘Tis all my fault. I should never have put that book in your reticule.”

She lifted her face to him. A single tear rolled down her cheek. How in hell had she done it? “But why is the book bad, my lord? I just cannot understand.”

Lady Woodward tsked, but the smile she slid Quinton hinted at playful. “You naughty boy, you. To play such a joke on an innocent. Do not fret, Lady Charlotte. Your betrothed does not deserve you, but you do not deserve the nasty gossip I’ve heard lately. And next time I hear it, I’ll let those who slander you know how wrong they are.”

Lottie clasped her hands together. “Oh, thank you, Lady Woodward. It’s all been so perplexing. You must know I shall always think of you with gratitude when my heart is bursting with love for Lord Noble. For it was your ball where we were first forced to face our feelings.”

Lady Woodward sighed. “Perfection. I always knew my events were special. Perhaps next year... a cupid theme.” She shook her husband napping beside her. “What do you think, Franklin?”

He snorted awake. “What? Where?”

“A cupid theme!” Lady Woodward yelled.

Quinton tugged Lottie down the path and away from the newly converted Lady

Woodward. Every conversation they'd had this afternoon had ended just the same—denouncing the slander and sighs over a couple in love.

“How'd you do it?” he asked as they strolled. “That single tear. Brava.”

“Entirely real, I'll have you know. Because I spoke the truth. Why are those books bad? I simply don't understand. I am not a rampaging murderess for having read them. And when you take fault for having put the book in my reticule, everyone merely chuckles and pats you on the back. Be less naughty next time, Lord Noble.” She growled. “Unfair.”

“Don't cry. I do not judge you for your reading tastes. In fact, I admire you.” The truth that. “I also admire your acting skills.” He took on a high voice and fluttered his lashes. “Books are very good, are they not? I just cannot understand.”

“I am not the only one with a talent for the dramatic.” She lowered her voice to a baritone. “I cannot be apologetic. It has brought our love into the sun.” She laughed. “Laying it on thick, Chance.”

“Trying to save your hide, Merriweather.”

“And doing a fine job of it. I—oh!” She stopped midstep, almost smacking into another body. When she rocked back into the protective crook of Quinton's arm and saw the face of the person—the man—she'd almost slammed into, her surprised “oh” took on the sharp quality of a gasp. “Lord Phillipspots.”

The man stumbled back several steps as if trying to put distance between his body and hers. He had the frantic-eyed look of a debutante who realizes she's in the wrong place and with the wrong people. Quinton knew that look well. Had caused it on multiple occasions, sent debutantes scurrying for the light and their inattentive chaperones. Lottie caused it now, and if Quinton did not act quickly, their stroll in the

park might be all for naught.

Pisspot swung around to retreat.

“My lord,” Lottie called, “you are just the man I hoped to run into today.”

Pisspot stopped, turned back toward them slowly. “I have no business with you. Good day.”

Quinton caught his shoulder before he could cut them again, squeezed it, caught the grimace on the young lord’s face as he tried to twist out of Quinton’s grip. And failed.

“My lady desires to speak to you, Lord Phillipspots. You’ll hear what she has to say.”

“Your lady?”

“You may congratulate us,” Quinton drawled. “We’re engaged to be wed.”

“Since when?”

“It’s a new development.”

“But,” Lottie added, “one that has been in development for quite some time.”

“Why should I be concerned with who you marry, Noble?” Pisspot said without a single glance at Lottie. Not even when she’d talked. The chamber-pot-named absolute arse.

“Because it’s my fault.” Quinton managed to speak the words despite grinding his teeth to dust. “The book. It is mine.”

Pisspot's eyebrows pulled toward one another. "Yours?"

"Yes. She did not know I put it in there."

Lottie stood off to the side in icy calm. A dangerous calm. A calm that likely meant she screamed inside. She would not relish being swept to the side and being made an object of conversation.

"Did you, Lottie?" A tepid attempt to bring her in.

"Not a clue." Her voice turned all sweetness and confusion.

"I find it difficult to believe, Noble." Still, Phillipspots looked to Quinton, sparing not a single glance for the woman whose name he'd gifted so quickly to the gossips.

"You find thought difficult in general, Pisspot," Quinton growled.

The other man's hands fisted, and he lunged forward, his upper lip curling.

Lottie jumped between them, placed a hand on Quinton's chest. "Temper, my lord. Do restrain yours."

"He's tarnished your name."

"She's tarnished her own name." Pisspot sniffed. "Even if the book is yours, Noble, you didn't lure me into the shadows and beg me for a kiss."

A gasp. "I did not beg!"

"Lottie," Quinton growled, "remember what we discussed."

“I did not beg.” She lifted her chin, her eyes narrowed to the thinness of a knife’s edge, one she’d fling at Pisspot, no doubt.

That gentleman shrugged, clearly unaware of his danger. “Doesn’t matter. You wanted it. The book might as well be yours.”

“Where in hell does your brother get these suitors, Merriweather?” Quinton tried his best to sound bored, studied the hem of his glove, pulled it tight. He sighed. “Listen, Phillipspots. She only asked you for a kiss to make me jealous. She had no idea what she was asking for. I’d been teasing her about having never been kissed earlier in the evening. That, too, was my fault.” He lifted his eyes to Pisspot, challenging him to continue his tirade.

The man’s gaze flicked to Lottie, doubt creeping in. Finally. “You’d never been kissed before?”

She folded her hands innocently before her and looked at Pisspot through her lashes. Serene, gentle, innocent. But for that foot in a pale-yellow slipper tap, tap, tapping on the path. “Oh, yes. I’m afraid it was. Surely you knew. Surely you could ascertain my... inexperience.”

Pisspot’s brows slanted, and his eyes took on a glassy sheen. Did he travel back to that night? Was he evaluating their kiss?

Quinton held his hands stiff at his sides, muscles straining. What was better in this instance? Let the man evaluate and find Lottie lacking? Or play the jealous beau and flatten Pisspot onto the path?

“It was rather... crude,” he finally said.

Lottie hid her face in her palms again, a gesture that had swiftly become her signature

move during this stroll through the park. “I’m mortified. Oh, Lord Noble, how could you have done this to me?” She wailed the words, likely working up more fake tears.

He patted her on the shoulder. “There, there, Lady Charlotte, we will wed in a fortnight, and all will be well. I behaved insupportably, but I could not help myself. Jealousy had me in its grip, and I behaved like a beast.” Perhaps, maybe, a little bit true, that.

Pisspot’s face scrunched up as he studied them. “It could be that I was... wrong. Jumped to conclusions.” Took the beefwit long enough. He inched toward Lottie and dipped his head in a curt acknowledgement of his guilt. “I do apologize for not letting you explain the other day. You must have been terribly shocked. Confused.” He straightened and stepped back. “I do hope you will treat your betrothed with more respect, Noble. She’s a delicate creature and should not, even after marriage, be made to suffer your impulses and appetites.” He nodded stiffly and continued around them and down the path.

Lottie fumed, red rising in her countenance like a sea at high tide. Like a hot kettle, she seemed in peril of exploding.

“Hit me,” Quinton said.

Her jaw loosened as her head tilted to the side. “Pardon?”

“Go on, then. Hit me. One good punch right here to get it out.” He thumped his chest lightly with a fist.

And she reared back and smacked him right where he’d told her to.

“Ow!” he yelped, rocking back on his heels and rubbing at the spot. “Hell, Merriweather, there was force in that.”

“I’m angry.”

“I know.”

She inched closer to him, rubbed the spot she’d hit with gentle fingers. “I’m sorry. If it makes you feel better, your chest might have smashed my bones to dust.”

“Doesn’t make me feel better at all,” he grumbled, capturing her hand in his, rubbing the knuckles.

“I hate it.” She spit the words out. They were no longer talking about the sort of pain a fist could give. “Pretending to be someone I’m not. I do not relish playing the fool, the clueless innocent. But”—a sharp sigh—“I will if I must because it is better than them thinking ill of my sisters.”

“Shall we put on another matinee? Who shall our audience be this time?”

“No. I’d like to go home.”

“I suppose Pisspot is our most important target. Hopefully, the man who started the talk can stop it.” He offered his arm, and she took it. “It might be the shortest-lived scandal London has ever seen.”

After several steps in silence, she said, “If the scandal dies down, dies completely, you should not have to marry me.”

He stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“You’re marrying me to save my reputation, but if we have saved it with these lies, I see no reason why—”

“You’re smarter than that, Merriweather. Of course we must wed. We’ve just told all of Hyde Park we plan to do so.” And with her held tightly to his side, the thought of letting her wander farther afield, away from him, left him sour, grumbly.

“Yes, but”—she stopped and pulled him to a stop as well, clung to his arm, and lifted a countenance brimming with doubts to him—“as much as I do not relish playing an innocent fool, I do not relish trapping you.”

He raised a brow. “You were fine with seducing me.”

“That’s different. You would have enjoyed it.”

“I’m enjoying this.” And, oddly enough, that was a plain truth. He flicked a curl at her temple. “Buck up, Merriweather. They’ll think you’re not happy to marry me.” He drew her back down the path.

“What will our marriage be like?”

“What an odd question. It will be a marriage like all others.”

“But not all marriages are the same. My parents loved one another deeply. Yours did not. But your father was once married to a woman he loved. His experiences alone prove that—”

“It will be a fine marriage.” He walked more quickly now, and she rested her free hand on her bonnet as she rushed to keep up. Impolite to tug her along? Yes. But the mention of his father’s first marriage, the reminder of the danger hidden in soft things, soft feelings... Better to outrun it than confront it.

“Slow down,” she huffed, clinging to his arm, losing hold. “Slow down!”

He forced himself to do as she asked. “Apologies. I’ve only just remembered I have an appointment with an architect.”

“Oh. Why didn’t you say so? You must make it. What is it for? Are you to make improvements to Bluevale?”

“The tenant cottages. It is past time they were improved. In some instances replaced entirely.”

“And you need an entirely new architect?”

“I’d like a new design. The current buildings are not ideal in either practical or aesthetic matters.”

She hummed, nodded. “Will you show me? The plans for the cottages? I should like to see them to better understand.”

His gig rose before them, and he waited until he had her seated beside him on the bench before answering. “There’s no need. You’ll take care of matters at Bluevale. Dinner preparations, redecorating if you choose, parties. The children when they come. And I’ll do the rest. You’ll not have to worry yourself with anything like cottages.” He whipped the horses into slow movement, conscious she sat stiff beside him, scared. “Relax. I’m driving at my most cautious. A gig is much safer than a phaeton.” He offered her a comforting smile.

She did not return it.

“I’ve sold it. The phaeton. To a new fellow about Town. He’ll make better use of it than I. I refuse to have you stiff and terrified every time we go anywhere. I know you dislike all carriages, but hopefully a gig is less fearsome than a phaeton, and—”

“Thank you. You did not have to sell the phaeton for me. I can walk. I usually do.”

“It’s nothing. You should be comfortable.” He mumbled the last, pulling at his cravat. The decision to sell had been an impulsive thing done this morning at his club. He’d been thinking of picking up Lottie for this afternoon’s stroll, and he’d remembered what he’d so newly learned of her. And he’d tossed out the offer to everyone in the room.

“Quinton?”

“Hm?”

“Twice you’ve mentioned children. There will... be children, then?” Her words were low and warm.

And they almost made him drop the reins. “Of course. Why shouldn’t there be?”

Her shoulder slipped up, then down in a graceful shrug. “It seems a marriage of convenience between us.”

“Do you know what would be damn inconvenient? Having a wife I couldn’t fuck.”

She gasped, raised a brow.

“Did I shock you, Merriweather?”

“Not at all. A more apt description for my current state is... aroused.”

Hell. Him too. And all it had taken was a single word, a single look. She undid him at every turn.

“There will be several children,” he said, his voice lower than he recognized.

She rolled her lips between her teeth, focusing on the street ahead of them. “That is what our marriage is to be like, then? Passion at night and... friendly separation during the day?”

“Friendly? When have we ever managed that?” He chuckled.

She did not. “We have managed it. Quite well for years and years.”

“I’m upsetting you.”

“A bit. Quinton. We worked well in the park today. Do you think we might work similarly well in our marriage?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“But you also do not try to see much past your nose.” She huffed.

“What do you want, Merriweather? Tell me truly, and I’ll do my best.”

She sighed. “I want you to... I want you and I to...” She shook her head. “I want my sisters to walk freely through society without censure, so that they have choices.”

“We’re giving them that.” He patted her thigh, realized he liked the plump, warmth of it under his palm, and kept it there.

“Yes, we are. Thank you.” She looked down for several breaths, studying her hands folded primly on yellow muslin skirts and watching his large hand sprawled across her thigh. “Two weeks, and then we’ll be man and wife.” She said the last three words through a hard swallow.

“We must survive a gauntlet of events before then—parties, balls, every kind of thing designed to drive a man mad.”

“And it might not even matter. It could be no one shows, invitations are discarded instead of replied to.”

“Not after today, Merriweather,” he said, squeezing her thigh, then moving his hand back to the reins. “Because we make an excellent team.”

Yet she seemed unconvinced, her face drawn and pale, her hands lifeless in her lap. The phaeton ride or... him? Their betrothal? He'd just have to convince her. This was the right thing to do. A good thing, too. Their walk today proved it. They worked well together. And with her organizing the house at Bluevale and him taking care of all else, they'd make a life of teamwork.

Barnaby was wrong. Lottie wouldn't be his weakness. And his marriage would not be like his father's first. Because they were not in love. Lottie had called it a marriage of convenience, and that sounded like the most perfect description of marriage he'd ever heard.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Lottie would rather jump into an icy lake than enter into a marriage of convenience with Quinton Chance. Nothing about the man had ever proved convenient. He was too tall, so she must go up on tiptoe to kiss him. And he was too handsome, so she found herself inconveniently aroused whenever he was near. And his tongue was too sharp, too quick, and she found herself laughing despite her best interest when he turned something she'd said on its head. Even when it was an insult to her, she appreciated the wit of it.

Inconvenient, that.

Inconvenient, too, were his attempts to haul her off and kiss her at every unpredictable moment. Now, for instance. They stood on the outskirts of a room stuffed with preening gentlemen, all vying for Prudence, Imogen, or Isabella's attentions, and he snuck his hand behind her back, trailing fingertips down her spine, cupping her rear. Reminded her of Pepperidge except his advances had not been welcome. Nor had they been entirely covert. Quinton wore the Noble Smirk as he drove her to the edge of sanity, looking all the while as if he moved not an inch from his proper posture. Their grazing arms, her skirts, hid it all.

He bent so his lips whispered against her ear. "Can we leave yet? There's a bower in your garden out back, and I'd like to test its capacity for kissing. I have high hopes it will prove suitable."

She swatted his shoulder. "We cannot. For several reasons. First and foremost, I must act as chaperone."

"But your Great-Aunt Millicent is just there, a perfect chaperone."

The woman sat slumped in a chair in the opposite corner of the drawing room. A feather from her coiffure drooped out of her white hair and over one closed eye; wrinkles rumpled her gown, and her arms hung loose on either side of the chair.

“She’s sleeping. She stayed up late playing cards at Lady Fairworthy’s last night. Came here from there with the sun, actually. Still wearing last night’s ball gown.”

Quinton squinted at Aunt Millicent, then raised his brows. “Does she win?”

“Sometimes. She had to sell off a bit of jewelry last Season to pay her debts, but she wandered in this morning with a bounce in her step, so I can only assume she had a good night.”

“I must congratulate her, then.” He wound his arm around her waist, pulled her closer. “Your other reason for refusing me the bower? I thought you were on a course of seduction, Merriweather. Have you abandoned it now that you’ve won your prize?”

“Quite brazen of you to call yourself a prize, my lord.”

“I speak from your perspective, naturally.”

She elbowed his ribs. “I deny you the bower, Chance, because I wish to bask in my victory. Our victory.”

The suitors decorating the room were a miracle made possible by the irresistible and incorrigible man pinching her rear. She did her best not to jerk and laugh and shiver with inappropriate longing. Focused on the miracle instead, on the necessity of ignoring his advances and remaining, as far as the collected eyes could see, entirely proper.

“I was scared to invite the suitors back,” she admitted. “Afraid they would not come. But there are seven here today. I am pleased.” Mr. Bailey and Viscount Norton hovered closest to Prudence, who gritted her teeth and managed a smile that seemed more of a feral warning. She had not Lottie’s patience for social niceties, could not hide her frustration so well as Lottie could. She said she did not wish to wed. But should she change her mind, she now had the option. Thanks to Quinton.

“Mr. Bailey does not appear to be happy to court my sister,” she remarked, leaning into the arm wrapped around her back.

“He looks...”

“A bloody mess.”

“Yes, that.” Quinton snorted a laugh.

“Lord Norton is much more presentable. Perfectly handsome, I think. Perhaps a bit of a peacock, but one does not mind a man with style.”

“He’s a nice fit for Prudence.”

“Why did that sound like a warning?” She blinked up at him.

“Because it was one, and you are not daft. I told you when this began, I’m feeling decidedly possessive of you.”

A welcome change from his usual avoidance, one she’d reveled in for a week and a half. He slipped his warm, sure palm up her spine and caressed the back of her neck with his knuckles, tugged a curl at her nape, and she rolled her head to lean into his palm, sighed with more contentment than she’d ever thought possible.

“Thank you.” She stepped from his embrace and held his hand between hers, the posture of a vow. “You have saved us when my foolhardy actions would have ruined us.” Bother. Tears? She squeezed them away and gave him her truest smile instead, the one that bloomed from her heart. “These past ten days have been terrifying. I’ve counted each one with suffocating worry, but each day has been better than the last, and each event you appear at my side has become easier. And if my sisters still have choices for their futures, it is because of you, and I... and I...”

“Say it, Merriweather. You’re no coward.”

She felt brave when he called her Merriweather. As if that particular creature had no fears, knew only victory, had only respect from the man at her side.

“Well, Chance, you see, I’ll never be able to thank you enough, and I will spend every day trying to do so.”

With his free hand, he stroked his thumb down her cheek, his lips smiling, but his eyes holding something much more serious, though they crinkled at the edges, starburst lines of merriment. He leaned low and whispered near her ear, “Then come investigate the bower with me.”

She laughed, impossible joy ricocheting through her. But it became a yawn.

“Tired?” he asked. “I can wake you up.”

He’d awakened her years ago, pulling newborn desire blinking into the sun of his charm, stretching wakeful in the dawn of their first kiss. She wanted nothing more than to be caught up in his arms and kissed beneath a fragrant bower. But this was no longer about her, them, seduction, and courtship. Hers at least. Everything now for her sisters.

“I am tired.” Another yawn. “Exhausted. Ten days of worry, no sleep, smiling, acting, acting, acting. You understand. You’ve been acting as well. The doting future husband who adores me.”

His hands, still tangled with hers, tightened, less of a reassuring squeeze and more of an involuntary tic of shock. His laugh lines had disappeared, replaced by lowered brows separated by a Thames-deep crease and thinly pressed lips.

She pulled her hand away, held it by the wrist behind her back. “You do not have to pretend so well, my lord. I know it has been some time since you felt anything but animosity for me.” One of the things that had kept her up at night in the last ten days. She’d had such brave hope before the incident in Hyde Park. She could seduce him into liking her once more. But how could he like her when she’d cornered him, taken advantage of his nobility, as she had, to save herself. Her sisters.

“Lottie.” His hand caught her wrist and dragged her toward the exit. “We’re going to the bower. Now.” He raised his voice higher. “Aunt Millicent! Wake up!”

That lady startled awake, shedding feathers as she jerked upright. “Hmph? Wha?”

“Mind your nieces and their beaux,” Quinton ordered. “I’m taking this one for a walk in the garden.” He pulled her toward the French doors that opened into a small square of blooming trees and climbing roses.

Not that she had a choice, with him dragging her along, but she followed him out into the scented summer air and to the very back of the garden where a bower nestled like a dream in a cloud of white blooms, ivy climbing and twining with its trellis to the very top.

When they stepped beneath its cool shadows, he spun her toward a bench and nudged her gently to sit there. Then he stood before her, hands on hips, looking like a general

readying to lecture the troops. He turned from her for a moment, giving her an opportunity to admire the strength and width of his back beneath the smartly cut linen of his coat, muscles bunching as he pushed both hands through his hair before facing her once more.

His face was pale and serious and unlined with any emotion, but the words he planned clearly agitated him.

“Are you going to kiss me now?” she asked.

He dropped to sit beside her, holding his palms up flat and empty over the spot where his knee kissed hers. “I do not hate you, Charlotte Merriweather. Not even a little bit. I’ve tried to. Damn have I tried to, every argument and quip and cutting insult meant to convince myself, as well as you, of the depths of my dislike, but... how can a man dislike a woman who gives him a puppy to soothe his grief? How can he dislike a woman who offers up her first kiss with such passion and trust? Forget other men. How could I dislike a woman who is as clever and fierce as you are? For years, I’ve scowled at you because I... I’ve disliked myself a little and visited that upon you. Hell.” Pink rushed across his cheeks, and he reached into his pocket, pulled something out small and white and handed it to her. “For you.”

She held a rose, its white paper petals sharp and flat against the blue lace of her gloves.

“Did you fold this yourself?” she asked, inspecting its every angle and line, folded with careful precision.

“Of course.” He snapped his jacket straight, checked the length of his sleeves against his gloves. “Give it here, let me show you.”

“Show me what?” But she handed it over.

Beneath his long fingers, unfolding and smoothing, the paper took on a new shape, its white edges blending into the snowy white of his gloves. When he handed it back to her, she laughed.

“It’s a mouth now. And with just a few flips of the paper. How clever.”

He shrugged. “Simple enough. Roses and kisses seem to go together, do they not?”

Roses climbed up spindly wood around them, dotting a green blanket of vines and thorns that spread out over their heads, blocking the hot golden sun.

“Did you bring me here specifically to give me this?”

“Perhaps. You made it damn difficult to get you out here, though. I want you to know, Lottie... all will be well. Not just the scandal and your sisters, but us. Yes?” He took her hands, searched her face, the pressure of his fingers on her demanding. “Yes?”

She wanted to agree. But... “Why did you dislike yourself for so long? Why visit that dislike upon me if you... if you—”

“Because you are my weakness, Lottie.” He dropped her hands and pushed his fingers through his already wild hair.

She turned from him, something fragile inside of her trembling. “You keep saying that. I do not think it is the compliment you seem to think it is.”

“I do not know what it is other than the truth. The world falls away when I’m with you. I’ve thought little of anything else these last ten days but when I next get to see you again, when I can touch the back of your arm and know by the soft spot and my fingers there that you are mine.”

When he explained it that way, it did not sound like weakness. It sounded like infatuation, like what she'd felt for him these many years. And if he admitted to infatuation now, then perhaps something deeper would come in time. Perhaps what he called convenience was merely the beginning of that which she desired more than anything—love. With him.

She'd thought she only wanted a practical place to learn the art of love making. She'd wanted so much more all along. Turning back to him, she stripped her lace gloves from her hands, folded them neatly, and tucked them into his coat pocket. Then she brushed her fingers up his jaw and slid them into the hair at his temples, soft and thick. She kissed him then, putting into it all her hopes for them, showing him with each nip and slant that she was not a weakness but a strength.

“Do not fear me,” she whispered against his lips. “I will not hurt you. And you will not hurt me. I am made of stern stuff, Chance. You should know that well.”

He crushed her to him with a dark chuckle. “You terrify me, but I gladly embrace my fears.” He took over then, devouring her, claiming her, as if she hadn't been his since the first moment their lips had met. But now, perhaps, he was hers as well, and that drove her heartbeat higher. She crushed his cravat with grasping hands and raked her skirts up, revealing first her stocking, then her naked thigh to the hot air. Smoothing up and down from knee to hip and back again, over and over. Sometimes his palm flat and learning, then other times his fingertips dragging grooves across her skin.

Those fingertips found the curls where her legs met, where she felt hot and wet and eager. She flashed a gaze toward the house as he scattered kisses along her jaw, her neck.

“Shall I stop?” he asked, not stopping.

“No.” A breathy word as she resituated her skirt over his hand. They were well

hidden behind branches and bushes and trees. And unless one of the suitors decided to take one of her sisters for a walk—in which case they'd hear the door opening before anyone saw them—they would remain hidden. "Don't you dare stop, Chance."

He pushed through her curls, raking his fingers gently through her sex, then slipping a finger inside her. She bit her lip on a whimper, and his hand on her upper back pulled her closer, pressed her breasts against his chest. There was not much for her to touch besides the hard edge of his smoothly shaven jaw and the soft tangle of his hair. Everything else covered when she wanted to reveal it as he'd revealed her. Her breasts felt full, her nipples tight, and the merest brush of his body against them rippled pleasure through her every nerve, collecting in a tight knot of growing need at the center of her body where his hand worked, his thumb circling magic around her tight nub, teasing. And his fingers slipping in and out of her in a rhythm they would mirror on their wedding night.

Four nights. So far away. Too far away.

His teeth tore at her earlobe, and she gasped back into the present.

"Come for me," he demanded, his thumb flicking over her nub.

She gasped, almost a scream, and he swallowed the sound with a kiss, long and deep and slow. Quite thorough as he stroked her, made her pant and cling and—

And shatter. Every muscle tightened as she burrowed her face into his neck, inhaling the sharp citrus scent of him, the hint of smoky cheroot clinging to his clothes. She rolled her hips against his hand, unable to control her body's need to seek out further satiation in his touch, his kiss, his power.

He held so much power over her. She collapsed limp against him, trembling from the waves of her orgasm. And also from fear. Not of this perfect thing between them, not

of his touch. But of that very power he exerted over her. Because he'd helped her sisters. Because he'd saved her. Because he held her heart, her love, in his palm and did not even know it.

How easy to be careless with something you did not know you possessed.

He stroked his hands up and down her back as her body settled into a normal rhythm, and despite her fears, she found herself falling to sleep in his arms.

He nudged her cheek with his nose. "Wake up, Merriweather. Time for us to return."

She straightened with a sigh, smoothing his cravat, his waistcoat and jacket. "True. Aunt Millicent has likely fallen back to sleep." She stood on unsteady legs, the paper mouth falling to the ground.

Quinton knelt to retrieve it, refolded it into a rose, and handed it back to her. "You look terrible."

"Oh, thank you, my lord. You're quite handsome yourself."

"I mean no insult. I'm stating facts. You must sleep this evening. Go to bed early and—"

"Will you join me? Sneak into my room after the house is sleeping and—"

"That would produce the opposite results I'm interested in. No sleep at all if I did that."

"Those are exactly the results that most interest me." She leaned into him, and they stepped out from under the bower arm in arm. As he walked her back toward the house, she yawned once more. His arm around her waist held her up, held her steady.

“We are married in four days, Merriweather, and then you shall sleep as long as you like. In fact, I’ll not let you out of the bed.”

Another yawn. “You mean something less restful, I assume.”

“Can’t sneak a euphemism past Lady Charlotte.”

“Certainly not. But you should decide on a consistent goal, my lord. Keep me awake or let me sleep? Which is it to be?” She slipped the folded rose into her pocket.

“Both. Why can’t I have everything I want after all?”

She chuckled and pushed out of his embrace as they entered the drawing room. Aunt Millicent had, indeed, resumed sleeping, and Prudence, sandwiched between the American and the former vicar, slumped in her seat. She’d declared they were the only two she could take seriously since they were the only two who had not cared about the gossip. But she did not seem friendly toward them now. She leaned as far from Bailey as she could and stared blankly at Lord Norton whom, it appeared, had nothing at all to say.

Isabella, however, had plenty to say and appeared to be in deep conversation with one of the other gentlemen, her fingers tapping on the arm of her chair, likely revealing the agitated state of her mind better than her composed expression did.

Imogen had... disappeared? Oh, no, there she was, alone in the corner of the room, reading. Naturally. Hopefully, a suitable book for such company. They could not afford to mess up again as Lottie had.

“Shall I send them all home?” Quinton asked. “Things appear to have devolved since we left.”

“No, that’s not nec—”

“The ladies are done now.” Quinton’s voice barely rose above the volume he used in regular speech, but the implacable command behind it turned every head, stopped every conversation. “I’m sure the ladies appreciate your company. When is the next tea, Lady Charlotte?” He patted her hand as if what existed between them was a normal, placid thing.

“Next week, same time.” Next week, same time, and she’d be married. To Quinton Chance. Impossible to believe.

The men filed out, and Quinton pushed her toward the door as well.

She dug her heels into the carpet. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

“Not me. You. You’re going upstairs to rest. Now. Lady Prudence?”

“Yes?” Lottie’s sister asked sweetly. “Deliver my bride to her bedroom and do not let her escape. Do you understand?”

Prudence wrapped her arm around Lottie’s waist and saluted Quinton. “Yes, my lord!”

Three of Lottie’s favorite pairs of arms pulled her up the stairs, and she looked over her shoulder for a final glimpse of Quinton. He stood below, watching, a faint smile about his lips. He winked, and her heart fluttered, and in that moment of weakness, she let her sisters carry her up and topple her into the bed. They pulled the curtains tight and left her alone with whispers to sleep and dream of handsome viscounts.

She would. Ones who winked. And kissed and more beneath bowers. Lottie pulled the folded paper from her pocket and yawned, flipping it over and over in her heavy

hands. She would be glad to rest, finally, when her sisters were safe from ruin, and she could collapse into the strong arms of the man she loved.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

A year ago, Quinton would have been waiting outside of a hotel for an actress or widow, contemplating a night of carnal delight during which everything but kissing might be explored. A year ago, had it been raining as he waited, he would not have waited, leaving word he'd called off the assignation with the hotel's concierge; the lady could have the room for the night, just not Quinton.

Tonight, he might as well be an entirely different man because he stood outside a hotel, in the rain, waiting for his future wife, and kissing was the only item on the agenda. He'd kiss her once. Perhaps twice. Keep it chaste. Then put her directly to bed. He wanted her well rested for tomorrow. Their wedding. And tomorrow night.

A hack rumbled to a stop in front of the hotel, and Lottie emerged, pulling her cloak low over her face, shielding it from the steadily falling droplets. She looked one way down the street, then the other way, chewing her bottom lip. Worried? Curious? He enjoyed watching her, admiring how she moved through the world with chin held high, defiant, lovely.

His. He peeled himself off the wall and swept toward her, pushing his hat back on his head, revealing his face.

"Quinton," she said, catching sight of him. "Why have you brought me here? Hotel Hestia?"

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and ushered her into the building. "It's my wedding gift to you, Lottie." He lifted her hand, kissed her knuckles.

"You've bought me a hotel for a wedding present?" She stopped and surveyed the

interior—fashionably decorated in navy blues and gold, everything light and airy.

Quinton pulled her up the stairs. “Just a room. For one night. The hotel belongs to your brother-in-law. Not that Kingston takes an interest in it. Prefers his newspapers and printshops. He did secure me two rooms tonight, though.” He took a key from his pocket and opened a door at the end of a long hall.

“Two?”

“One for you.” He swung the door open and tugged her inside. “And one for me.”

She entered the room, scowling. How long would it take to kiss the frown from her face? He would not try to find out. He’d kiss her only briefly and hope that did the trick.

Then she laughed and ran across the room, sinking to her knees. “Princess dear! You have let this man cart you across London? It is a delight to see you, though.” She regarded Quinton over her shoulder, rubbing her hands up and down the dog’s neck. “You have disrupted her. For shame.”

“She comforts me. I thought she might comfort you, too. Offer you some lovely company.”

She patted Princess’s head, then stood. “And that brings us back to the matter of the two rooms. Why shouldn’t we share a room? Why exactly have you brought me here if you do not intend for us to—”

He sat her on the bed, cupping her sloped shoulders with his hands. “I intend for you to rest, Merriweather. A good night’s sleep. So, you’re ready for tomorrow night.”

“I’m ready, Chance, I assure you.”

When she said things like that, he wanted to pull her tight against him, demand she prove it. When she said things like that, his hardening body cried out for her. When she said things like that he wanted to drop to his knees before her, pledge himself forever.

Hell. When she said things like that, he knew he was lost, that this convenient marriage he'd imagined would prove more complicated than he'd bargained for.

He patted her shoulders and backed away. "Now, there's a bath before the fire, and a maid will arrive shortly with a meal. I'll return just before dawn to return you home so no one is the wiser." He scratched the back of his neck, anything to keep from touching her. "It will be easier to ensure you rest once we're wed. I won't have to secret you away and return you in the morning."

She stood and took his hands, kissed his knuckles. "I do not need to rest, Quinton."

"You're bruised." He raised a thumb and traced it along the skin just under her eyes. Surely this gentle touch would not hold him captive. "And you yawn constantly. And in the last fortnight since everything happened, you've put every ounce of yourself into caring for your sisters, worrying over them. How many megrims have you had?"

Her gaze skittered away.

He cupped her cheek. "How many?"

"Three," she mumbled.

"More like five. I've counted. Let me care for you now. Let me worry over you. Yes?" He grinned. "Yes. You're already here. It would make no sense to reject my offer."

“Your offer of a chaste evening in a hotel room while you sleep just down the hall a night before our wedding?”

“Precisely.”

She wrinkled her nose. He backed away from her once more, clasping his hands behind his back to keep from smoothing out that wrinkle with his thumb.

The last week had been too easy. Easy to convince the ton the book had been his, easy to convince them of Lottie’s wide-eyed innocence, easy to win suitors back into the duke’s house.

Easy to be with her. In her moment of need, he’d let down all his walls, burnt the gardens of thorns surrounding them, and woke up his heart to work for her. Terrifying. But also a bit like breathing—the easiest of all to do.

“I’ll be going now.” He took a few steps toward the open door. “The staff here is excellent. Everything is taken care of. You need only ask. I’m down the hall, as I said. I did not have to stay, but I didn’t want you to be entirely alone here. You’ll be my responsibility starting tomorrow. It’s safe of course. I wouldn’t bring you otherwise, but...” He was rambling. He snapped his mouth closed. “I’m here if you need me.”

She caught his arm at the door. “Stay for dinner? I’d like the company.”

“You’ve Princess for company.”

“And she is the best there is, but”—Lottie cupped her hand around her mouth as if to hide her words from the snoring dog—“she does not excel at conversation. It’s rather a weak point with her, and I’d rather have a little chat while I eat. I find it stressful otherwise.”

He crossed his arms in the hallway, the threshold of her door separating them. “You are attempting to manipulate me.”

She shrugged. “What you call manipulation I call cajoling. Or seduction. It’s all one and the same.”

“No matter what you call it, did it work last time?” When she’d let him kiss her cunny at the dinner party. When she’d stroked his shaft in the phaeton.

“A little. Is it working now?”

Yes, damn it all. Just as it had those times, softening him, promising him everything.

He slunk back into the room and closed the door gently behind him. “I’ll join you for dinner. Dinner only. You must rest.”

“Excellent. What shall we do while we wait?” She raised her eyebrows and opened her black cloak.

His mouth went dry. “What in hell are you wearing?”

“A gown, my lord. Can you not tell?”

“It’s missing bits.” Particularly those bits around the bosom. What little existed of the superbly cut, low-bodice gown shimmered with gold. The silk flared out over her hips, and the tiny cap sleeves gave way to long, gloveless arms he wanted tangled around his neck. Her hair was only partly up, and long, golden curls cascaded over one shoulder, flirting with her waist.

He swallowed. “You responded quickly to my missive, I see. Barely had time to dress. Or do your hair.”

Her smile as she sat at the small table between the fireplace and the bed was sly, knowing. “I had plenty of time. The gown is new. I had it made for my trousseau, and I thought to wear it after we wed. But when I received your note, I decided... why not tonight? I thought”—said with a sigh—“that we would be doing more than sleeping this evening.”

“You’ve a naughty mind, Merriweather.”

“You like it.”

He joined her at the table. “More than you know.”

“Do you like the gown, though?”

“The gown...” He drummed his fingers on the table, raking his gaze over every visible inch of her body, growing tight and hard. “It’s sublime. But not as beautiful as you.” That hair. Threads of gold. They’d twine about him, ruin him. And he’d enjoy it.

A knock on the door, and then it swung open and a maid with a large tray walked through, followed by another with a bottle of wine.

“Shall we ask for another plate of food?” Lottie asked.

The maid whipped the dome off the platter, revealing more bread than two people could eat.

“I think not,” Quinton said.

“It is too much. You should not have.”

“You need it. Eat all you like.”

“And you eat the rest.”

They beamed at one another over the mountain of food as the maids took their leave.

She ate with a gusto that gave him pleasure, flicking small bits at Princess, who gobbled them up better than she snagged them from the air. And when Lottie leaned back in her chair with a sated sigh, he rejoiced that he’d stayed to keep her company, glad to spend this last night of the first half of their lives together.

“Quinton?”

“Hm?” He sipped his wine, watched her with a growing sense that he was the one being relaxed, not her.

“The cottages, how are they coming along?”

He set the wine down, frowned into the low fire in the grate. “Truthfully, I’ve not had time in the last fortnight to tend to the problem.” Guilt snapped at him with rabid teeth. “The plans have been sent to Bluevale with instructions for my estate manager to begin work. But I’ve not had time to send a letter requesting news on the project.”

“It’s my fault.” She twirled her wine glass between her fingers, staring into the deep purple liquid. “You’ve been tending to me. You must let me do something to help. The cottages are important.”

They were important, but he’d nearly forgotten them entirely after he sent the last communication to his estate manager. Not like him at all. No woman had ever so entirely consumed his waking hours that everything else melted away. But then no woman’s entire existence had been threatened by gossip, and he, the best person to

save her. Entirely novel situation. No precedent.

He reached across the table and rested his hand over hers on the wine glass. “It is not your worry. In a few days, after I’ve left you to recover from a days-long bout of love making that will, Merriweather, be recorded in history tomes as one of the most energetic and creative ever experienced, I’ll write to Mr. Rilston, my estate manager. Then when the Season ends, we’ll go to Bluevale for the winter, and I’ll oversee the building and improvements.”

“Surely there is something I can do.”

“It is my duty.”

“And I’ve impeded it. Quinton”—she leaned forward, flipping their hands and trapping his against the table—“I am no stranger to duty. As a duke’s daughter I was raised to be a peer’s wife. And after my mother’s death, it was my duty to watch over my sisters, to find ways to alleviate their grief, and to encourage those little hobbies that gave them purpose and joy. I enjoy my duties to others. They are not obligations, they are privileges, and I would venture to guess you feel the same.”

Beneath her grasp, he turned his hand so that they were palm to palm, his fingertips pressing lightly against the pulse at her wrist. “That, Lady Charlotte, is why you deserve a night like tonight—all your own, no worries or cares, no duties, no matter how much you enjoy them. No cottages. I will manage matters more closely later.” Before the Book Drop Heard Across London, he would have already done so, requesting daily news from Rilston, taking short trips between parliamentary obligations. Many of his peers were less involved, but Barnaby had taught him better, taught him never to let distractions ruin what he was building.

And Quinton had been distracted the past fortnight, more than ever since his father’s death. But soon this scandal would be put to rest, Lottie would be resting in his bed,

and he'd have the matter of the cottages, as well as everything else, well in hand.

Lottie pulled her arm off the table, away from his touch, and stared into the glowing fire. "A night recorded by history, Chance?"

"You doubt me?"

"Not at all. You have so much experience. Me... I've only book learning."

He stood and found the book he'd tossed on a small chair across the room when he'd arrived before her earlier and checked the room to assure its quality and cleanliness. Kneeling beside her, he placed it in her lap. Leather bound, a deep brown that glowed against her gold skirts.

She picked it up and opened to the front page. "Empty." She flipped through the pages. "Why have you given me a blank notebook?"

"Another wedding present. It's for you to write your adventures in as you experience them. If you like."

She held it out, ran her fingers along its spine, then along the creamy, blank pages within. "By adventures, I assume you mean—"

"Every naughty thing we do together," he whispered in her ear.

She shivered, licked her lips.

He kissed the length of her neck between words. "You have long read of others' exploits. It's only fair you have a book of your own. Since you are more passionate than all the ladies in those books combined."

Her breast rose and fell more quickly than before, and he swept her hair off her shoulder so he could kiss that dip where it met her neck, pull the sleeve of her gown lower to continue his journey across her skin. Not part of the plan, but creamy shoulders fair blasted plans apart.

She ripped her body away from his lips. Better that way because he would not continue what he was beginning. Not until tomorrow night. Cupping his face, she laughed, her eyes shining.

“You dear man. I would never have thought to ask for or even want such a gift, but it is perfect.” She kissed his lips. “Absolutely perfect.” She swooped in for another kiss, winding her arms around her neck, and using the embrace to pull to her feet, to mold her body to his, and sweep her tongue through his parted lips.

He groaned and pulled away, escaping arms he wanted to cling to. “I’m leaving now.” He strode for the door. “Sleep well, Merriweather. I’ll—”

“Quinton.”

His hand on the doorframe, he turned, knowing he shouldn’t. She stood tall and regal, wearing confidence and determination like a crown.

“Stay,” she said, and what should have sounded like a question absolutely did not.

He swallowed hard, squeezed the frame so tightly the bones of his fingertips screamed. “I cannot.”

“Will I have a maid to undress me for a bath? Or must I somehow wiggle out of this gown on my own?” Her gaze settled on the large tub pulled before the flames “The water is likely cold. I’ll have to build the fire as well. Or call a maid. Or—”

“I’ll do it.” She’d known he would. “Minx,” he grumbled as he knelt by the fire, poked and prodded it into a roar. When he finished, he found her fondly smiling.

She turned her back to him, peered at him over her shoulder. “Undo my tapes? My stays?”

“Then I must go.” His hands hesitated at the skin above her gown, but he steeled his resolve and found the ties, pulled, undid them all and undid himself in the process. When the gown slumped on her figure, she let it fall in a puddle around her feet. He loosened her stays, let those drop to the ground as well until only her shift remained. “Now I leave, Lottie.” His voice had turned gruff and raw.

She sauntered toward the tub, the golden flames of the fire beyond it illuminating her body beneath the thin muslin. “If you must. Or...”

“Hell.” He ground the curse between his teeth. He was trying to be good, to do right by her and by himself.

“Or,” she continued, ignoring his curse, “you can stay. And watch.” She lifted the shift above her head, let it flutter to the ground, then lifted one thick, shapely leg into the tub followed by another. Curves and curls and firelight. And he could not leave.

He sat on the bed, every muscle tight.

“An excellent decision if you ask me, Quinton. How else will you know if I truly relax as you desire? Unless you stay. And watch.”

He closed his eyes, his body tight with desire, his last sight of Princess curling up for a nap in a warm corner near the fire.

“Shall I show you how I like best to relax?” Lottie asked.

“If it pleases you.” Said into the darkness because, while he could not leave (his legs simply would not let him), he could shut himself off from the decadent sight of her.

“I promise you, it does.”

The sound of water sluicing across skin. A tiny splash. A husky chuckle. Water lapping up the copper sides of the tub. He tried not to imagine the color of it all, the curves of her, the wicked glint in her eye. Tried and failed.

A moan. Hers. And so deep and beautiful, he had to see. His eyes opened in a flash, and he found her in a moment, as if she were the only sight on earth to see—sank low in the tub, head resting against its rim, knees poking up above the edge. So much better than he’d imagined. She bit her bottom lip, her own eyes closed, and her hand beneath the water, lower than her navel, moved in a rhythmic motion.

His hands gripped tight as talons on the bed’s edge. “What are you doing?” Foolish question. He knew. And it drove something in him tight and wild.

“I’m imagining you touching me.”

He had a choice in this moment. Stand and walk out the door and commit to his plan—a celibate evening before his wedding day. Or he could stay and bear witness to the most erotic sight he’d ever encountered, a sight he’d likely never recover from. Even in his dreams, where Lottie moved supreme, a teasing phantom of his every delight, he’d never imagined this—Lottie laid out and wet, pleasuring herself as he watched.

A choice...

Not really.

“Your imagination must be faulty, Merriweather, because you’re doing it wrong.” No going back now. His plan abandoned with a new, better one in place. He would not leave her this night.

Her head shot up and her eyes popped open, and that water-hidden hand froze. As she surveyed him from his perch on the edge of her bed—their bed tonight—she raised a single golden brow.

“I assure you,” she said, “my imagination is quite adequate.”

“Not if you’re imagining what I would do should my hands have free range of your body.”

“Enlighten me, then.”

He stood slowly and prowled a careful circle around the tub where she lay splayed out and open to him. Hell. How would he do it? Let her stay there instead of throwing her over his shoulder, bouncing her onto the bed and taking her in a heady rush. Like a green boy with no patience.

That’s how he’d manage to deny himself. Because she deserved every ounce of control and precision he could manage. Every kiss he’d envisioned over the past six years and failed to take because he could not forget her, he’d lay across her skin tonight. It would take time to give her six seasons of life, but he would manage.

With pleasure.

She looked up at him, her hair around her face damp and curled, her lips slightly parted, one hand slipped and hidden between her legs, the other resting over her navel at that sweet curve of her belly. The water sluiced at her breasts. And there he would begin.

“If it were I, Merriweather,” he said, still prowling a slow circle around her, “your breasts would not be so neglected.”

Her inhale was sharp, and her nipples puckered. When he stopped between her and the bed at his back, he crossed his arms and raised his own brow. A challenge. Their gazes meeting strong and soft at once, she lifted her hand from her belly, cupped her breast, squeezed, then flicked her thumb across her nipple and swallowed a strangled cry as her head fell back once more, and her hand beneath the water continued its work.

Need tingling in every extremity of his body, he began to untie and unravel his cravat, his movements born of mechanical memory not intent. His body would combust if he did not disrobe, every bit of him screamed with the leaping flames of desire. And he could not look away from his soon-to-be-wife writhing in the tub—that, not the fire, what consumed him.

Her hands moving over her body on a languid wave, he unwound the last circle of his cravat, revealing a strong neck that made her fingers itch and her breath catch. Moving with more purpose, he dropped the cravat to the floor and flicked open the buttons of his waistcoat, her gaze trailing after his fingers. When he shrugged the garment to the floor and untied his shirt, she licked her lips. She liked watching him, as he adored watching her, then.

And like him, she found no contentment in mere watching.

She pulled the hem of his shirt free from his pantaloons. Graceful and long, capable, clever. He’d remember what they did and how she liked it when he touched her later. They worked at a more frantic pace as he slipped his shirt up over his torso, tossed it to the floor. His cock pressed hard against his fall, demanding release. Should he? He released a button, and that button, undone beneath his fingers, seemed to undo her. She cried out, her hands flying frantic over her cunny, her breasts, her belly, trying to

touch everywhere at once. Then that cry became a whimper, and that whimper into heavy breathing as she lay, her muscles loose and sated in the tub.

She'd had her turn. Now it was his.

He gathered her out of the tub, dripping and heavy in his arms. He set her on unsteady legs before the fire and snatched the linen draped over the back of a nearby chair. Every inch of her he dried, he kissed after, searing warmth into her skin. Hair, neck, shoulders, the valley between her breasts, her ribs, her navel, and lower, linen and kisses and the shadows of flames everywhere.

When he hit his knees before her, positioned as he had been so many times in the past few months, he grasped her hips and looked up. Her head lolled to the side, her eyes closed, a pleased, unconscious smile curving her lips.

"Lottie."

With the barest of movements, she met his gaze, that lazy smile growing. "Mm?"

"You're mine tonight, and every night after."

Her hand tangled in his hair, fingers stroking it away from his forehead, his temples. "I've been yours every night for a very long time, Quinton Chance. It's about time you caught up with me."

He surged to his feet and picked her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he crashed a kiss against her lips and stole her away to the bed. He pinned her to the mattress and tangled his hand in her damp hair, held her in place with those golden strands.

"I tried to wait till our wedding night, Merriweather, but you have teased me past my

breaking point.”

“Good.” She bent her knee, her thigh behind him, bumping him forward, lips falling into lips, a laughing kiss.

He tried not to think about what she’d said as she flicked open each button of his fall and pushed his pantaloons down his hips. But as he scrambled to yank off his boots, and she watched him with laughter on her lips, the words would ring like church bells across London.

I’ve been yours every night for a very long time.

He’d known that. Somehow. Though he’d ignored it best he could. How had he known it?

Likely because, for a very long time, he’d been hers as well.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Quinton kissed like a man possessed, but Lottie hadn't gotten a good enough glimpse of him, naked and large, before he'd toppled over her. She wanted—no, needed—to see what Lord Noble looked like without his finely fitted attire. Yes, after tomorrow, she'd have every opportunity to view him as he was now. Flame-lit skin and bunched muscles, and lips hungry on her everywhere they could reach. But this was the first time, and she wanted to memorize every bit of him so that tomorrow, standing before their families and God in St. George's, the both of them starched and prim and proper, she would think of this, of him, stripped before her, giving her all of him.

She flattened her palm against his chest, muscled and heavy, and pushed until he gave way, wild whisky eyes glowing with desire and the slightest bit of irritation.

“Merriweather?” More growl than question.

“Stand, if you please.”

A true growl then.

“I want to see you as you've seen me.”

The corner of his lip quirked up, and he pulled away from her, cold air rushing between their bodies making her regret her decision, his compliance. But then he stood tall before her—lock of hair falling over his forehead, Noble Smirk firmly in place, shoulders strong, chest magnificent, muscled planes, his abdomen a ripple of hard slabs honed by whatever manly pursuits he did. All of them, it seemed—riding, fencing, boxing, lifting her up and settling her on tabletops before... a moan rose up in her. She followed that line of muscle to where it narrowed between his strong,

thick legs. And she found another sort of strong, thick appendage between them. She gave her moan, impossible to control now, to the air.

This was what she'd been wondering about, searching for—two bodies exploring each other with delight and abandon. No shame, no fear. Just discovery and pleasure.

“Have you looked your fill?” he asked.

She nodded, incapable of words.

“Do you have further instructions for me?”

How could she speak, her throat tight with lust? But she managed “Here.”

He obliged once more, sliding his body across her, until every bit of his skin seemed to press against every bit of hers. His hand cupping her breast, his lips nibbling the curve of her neck, her jaw, his other hand tangling in her hair, sending tendrils of pleasure coursing through her as he tugged it gently. His hands never stayed in one place too long. Just as his tongue could shift from one insult to another when they sparred, so too could his hands move nimbly, quickly, from one moment of joy to another, smoothing over her waist, slipping into the hollow between her lower back and the mattress, cupping her backside, squeezing so that she wrapped her arms and legs around him tight with a sound half moan, half mirth.

He chuckled low near her ear, and she felt it rumble in his chest. To be so near him that she could feel his feelings... she'd never imagined, never hoped.

Incandescently happy. Could she make such a feeling last forever?

When he slipped his hand between her leg, circling her nub, then slipping a finger, two, inside her body, he murmured, “You're wet again, Lottie love. So easily

aroused.”

With him, she always felt aroused, a never-ending state of being. Inconvenient, like him, but in this moment—perfection.

“God, you’re perfect, Lottie.” He slipped down her body, set his mouth to her breast, licked and sucked and teased until she arched beneath him. “Every bit of you, curved and beautiful. I’ll never be done exploring you.” He dragged his teeth, his lips, between her breasts and down her belly to her navel, lower.

She knew where they journeyed together. He had been there before. But he had spoken of exploration, and she had not even begun that yet. Palm to chest once more, she pushed him, sat up, grasped his shoulders, and nudged him sideways. Becoming clay for her to mold as she pleased, he eased to the side, turning them both until he lay on his back, and she straddled him. The spark of curiosity deepened to satisfaction, and his hands found her hips, settled there, warm and firm.

“What will you do now?” he asked, the smirk quirking into place. The Noble Smirk had always been a look of infuriating superiority in the past. She’d seen in it his disapproval, his disdain. Now she understood its true meaning, what it had meant all along—a challenge. For her alone.

“Touch you. Explore you. Now, be still, Chance.”

“Or?”

She tapped her lip. “I’ll have to think on that. Just know. The consequences will be—”

He squeezed her hips. “Delightful?”

She shook her head.

“Delicious?” he suggested.

She lifted a brow.

“Erotic.”

She tapped his nose, dragged her index finger over his chiseled lips. “Unimaginable.”

“Oh, Lottie love, you underestimate my imagination.” He rose up to kiss her deeply on the lips, the meeting of their mouths a soft sigh, his arms so sweetly gentle around her that she almost could not bear to break the embrace.

Almost.

She pressed him back down to the mattress and sat up once more, drawing her knuckles down the length of his neck. How could it be so strong? No wonder men kept their necks hidden. The mere sight of it made her mouth dry. As she caressed it, his Adam’s apple bobbed, a swallow. Could such a small gesture unman him? She glanced at his face, found his gaze blazing. Apparently, it could.

The muscles of his shoulders were hard, the skin covering them soft, a celebration of contraries that continued down his body: hard muscle, velvet skin, crisp hair, all of it trailing toward his shaft, jutting up between them. So many things she wished to do with this body, with the mind, and hear inside it, teasing and taunting her. More contradictions. The mind of the man teased Merriweather, but the body of the man worshiped Lottie love.

She smiled.

“That expression does not bode well for me.” His voice sounded raw, like grated stone.

“It’s only, I’ve never seen a male body in real life before.”

His hands on her hips squeezed, stayed tight for a blissfully painful moment when fingertips dug into skin, muscle, bone.

“It’s much warmer and bigger,” she continued, “better.”

“Glad to please you.”

She curved over him—her hair falling like a golden curtain and closing out the world—and placed a kiss to the tip of his shaft, closed her hand around it as she placed one hand on his chest. He hissed, his hips bucking up. She stroked her hand up, down.

“Thank God for your books,” he hissed.

“Because they’ve made me brazen in bed?”

“Because you dropped one, and now you’re mine.” His hands slipped lower, cupped her arse, stayed there, possessive and perfect. “I don’t know if...” He looked away, his profile stark against the white of the sheets. “I would have had the courage... to take you without that accident.”

Still she stroked, up and down, learning that he felt different from she’d imagined a man would feel. So hot, so powerful, and yet his tight jaw, his averted gaze—so vulnerable too. All his power poured into her hands. She squeezed as she moved her hand lightly and brushed her thumb over the head of his shaft, enjoying his groan, his arch, his hands on her backside.

Then she leaned low and whispered in his ear, “Do you have the courage to take me now?”

His head snapped forward, the fireplace flames leaping into his eyes as his hands spanned her waist, and in one quick jerk, he lifted her, placed her entrance over his shaft. Yes. She wanted this, needed it. Together they guided him inside her, slowly, taking time, gazes locked in certainty.

“Is it too much?” he asked.

She shook her head. Sank lower onto him, spreading her legs wider. He surged upward, wrapped one large hand around the back of her head and kissed her so hard, so demanding, she forgot the coming together of their bodies, sank into the perfect heat of his hips, grasping at his hair. God, she loved his hair. And then he was in her up to the hilt and moving, rocking against her, his free hand teasing her nipple as he released her from the kiss and fell back to the bed with an exultant grin.

“You can’t... resist... my kiss,” he said between heavy breaths, rolling his hips up into her. “Makes you forget... everything.”

“True.” Why deny it. “What now?”

“You do not know?”

“I know this but... not the details of how to go about it.”

“You’re missing details?” His fingertips trailed up her ribs, across the sensitive undersides of her breasts. “I’ve got those.” A wicked flash in his eyes. “Up and down, Lottie love.”

She rose up a bit, then lowered. “Like this?”

“Yes.” His hand hot at her waist, the other squeezing her breast. “Again.”

She obliged. But she could give orders too.

“I want,” she breathed, “both your hands on my breasts.”

No hesitation. She asked, and he obeyed, and that sent ripples of pleasure up her spine.

Her spine. She wanted him there, too. “Draw your fingers up my back, down my spine.”

He did, palms flat smoothing upward, fingertips dancing downward.

“My hair,” she demanded.

He tangled his hands in the hair at her nape and tugged her down for a searing kiss.

She popped back up, breathless like a drowning woman, throwing her head back. “Touch me there.”

He knew her meaning, finding the spot of burning need between her legs and brushing, circling, teasing. Heat rushed up her body, across every inch of her skin.

He chuckled, his hand still working cleverly between her legs. “Bloody adorable.”

She didn’t want to be adorable; she wanted to be wanton, for him to see her as the seductress she’d been trying to be. She moved faster on top of him, throwing her head back, arching on a moan. The sound seemed to make him harder, all parts of him, inside and outside of her body, became stone.

And suddenly she felt too open on top of him, too vulnerable. She leaned over him, kissed him hard, and begged, “I want under you.”

He gathered her up in strong arms, and she clung to him as he flipped her, pinned her to the mattress with a single, hard thrust.

His kiss pinned her too, and he spoke into her mouth, their breaths mingling. “A woman who knows what she wants.” Another hard kiss. “Is the only woman for me.” He thrust into her again, one hand cradling her head and the other working between their bodies to pitch the sensations spinning through her body higher.

They did not have much higher to go before a scream shot from her lips, and she arched her hips up hard to meet his. She trembled everywhere, breaking, breaking, biting her bottom lip to swallow more cries as he pumped faster and faster, kissing, caressing, soothing and mending everywhere he’d shattered her with pleasure. And then his body broke, too, thrusting into her one last time as he cried her name with a voice raw and riotous.

He dropped his forehead to hers, his body poised hard and heavy atop her as the gentle waves rocking through her found him, too, pulling them both down. How long did they stay that way? Tangled together in every way a man and woman could be, eyes open, chests pressed together so closely their heartbeats had become one? She dared not move, unwilling to break the bond, but he did not share the same fear, it seemed.

He rolled off her, glanced around, took in what she did—they were sideways on the bed, entirely naked, feet hanging off. He crawled to the top of the bed, pulled the blankets down, nodded for her to join him. They slipped between the blankets together, and he pulled her against him, her back to his front, his lips against her temple, grazing kisses there.

“Do you find it distasteful?” she asked, a sudden question developing in her mind as each word rolled off her tongue.

“Find... what distasteful? Nothing we just did, certainly.”

“That I know what I want.” She tried not to pick at the hem of the blanket gathered up under her arms.

He snorted. “Hardly. Did you not hear me?” A smack of a kiss to the back of her shoulder. “I find it almost disturbingly perfect. Everything about you is perfect.” The words, mumbled against the top of her head, held a note of worry, nonetheless.

“Tomorrow, we wed,” she said, feeling slightly better than she had been feeling moments before. “Are you sure I have not bullied you into it?”

“You would be upset if you had?”

“Yes, actually. I do not wish to force you.” Now she did pick at the hem of the blanket. Curses. She wrapped it up in tight fists.

“You were quite forceful mere moments ago. And I hope for many such moments in the future.”

She turned and kissed his lips, then trailed little kisses down his chin, down his throat and across his chest, pressing a final kiss to that spot where she felt his heart beat. She laid her cheek against it, set her breathing to it.

“And you liked it,” she said with a sigh.

“Exactly. I cannot be bullied into anything, Lottie. When I say I want you, that I am glad we ended up here, where we’ll be tomorrow, it is the truth. And if you doubt me,

I'll have to lock you up until you no longer do."

"Oh, well then. Since you say that, I'm afraid my doubt is quite wide and deep. I will take much convincing. That room where you plan to lock me up... is it quite comfortable? Big bed? Big tub?"

"Minx." He rolled her beneath him.

"You love it." She grinned.

"I do."

And she worried that might be the closest to I love you, she'd ever get from him.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Quinton needed to leave the woman-scented bed as quickly as he could. He must abandon the sweet tangle of arms and legs. Never happened before—that urge to stay. But he’d never been married before, either, and a few hours after the sun rose, he would be. He poked his chest, rifled around in his brain. Discovered he felt no urgency to leave Lottie. The urgency lay in the need to marry her.

Thankfully, the sun had yet to spill golden across London’s gray, murky dawn. He had time to return his bride to her family, return to his own home, and bathe and dress.

Prepare to be married.

He should be terrified. With any other woman, he’d be a fit of nerves and sweat, a sour stomach personified, his body knowing what it had for six years now—only one woman felt right. And she slept naked and warm beside him, her golden head nuzzled against his chest, her mouth slightly open, her lips pink even in the pre-dawn shadows, her breasts plump and brushing his ribs. Hard as a rock, he was, had been since waking. But they had no time for dalliance. They’d slept too long.

A long strand of a gold curl wrapped neatly around his finger, and he tugged. She wrinkled her nose. He tugged again. She swatted his chest. He trailed his fingertip down the bridge of her nose, over her chin, down her neck, stopping only at her breasts. There, he flicked his thumb across her nipple. She gasped, arched, and her eyes flew open, finding him. She stretched for a lazy, sleepy second.

Then she shot upright. “What time is it?”

“Time to make our escape, Merriweather.” He kissed her soundly, and when she melted into his arms, he almost said to hell with it. But that wouldn’t get him what he really wanted—her in his bed every night. So, he released her with a sigh (hers) and a grin (his) and swung his feet to the floor. They dressed quickly, him helping with her stays, her tapes, and her not helping at all with the buttons of his fall where her sneaky fingers often found their way, flicking, unfastening.

“Desist, temptress,” he said with a laugh, manacling her hands together with his own. “We must be married today, and the sun demands we make haste.”

“I see no sun.” She wandered to the window, peeked out between the curtains. “And the rain seems to have stopped.”

“Precisely. We can’t see the sun, or we’re done for.” He settled himself behind her, cravat dangling from his neck untied. He placed his hand on the luscious curve of her hip and stroked the length of her neck with the other. Now he was distracted. And when she turned in his arms to beam up at him, his heart did an entirely odd thing. It skipped. It flipped over like a fish on a riverbank. Then it pounded like drums in his ears. All for this woman.

“I think I’m ill,” he whispered.

“It’s because you’re getting married today. All rakes feel their death coming as they walk up the aisle.”

That wasn’t it at all. No death. But life. The beginning of it. His heart settling into a new rhythm. He cleared his throat and flicked a curl lying over her forehead. “You put that cloak on. Pull it low. And I’ll gather Princess.”

The dog lay belly up near the foot of the bed, having found a pool of blankets to make a nest of. Her ears twitched. Lottie laughed and did as he asked, and he finished

tying his cravat, donned his jacket, smoothed his hair, and located Princess's lead.

When the hack they'd hailed stopped in the alley between the Merriweather residence and the mews, Quinton pushed Lottie's cloak back and kissed her cheek. She kissed his lips, and his arms moved to hold her tight. He almost called out for the driver to take them to the edges of London and back again. But instead, he pushed her away, placed a peck of a kiss on the tip of her nose.

"Later, Lottie," he said softly.

And she groaned, but she left, and the hack rolled forward without her, leaving Quinton in a cloud of loneliness. And... bliss? Odd combination that. But perfectly understandable considering Lottie. Princess rolled over and leaned against his feet with a huff, and he reached down to scratch behind her ear.

"Me as well, pup." He wanted to roll over and lie at Lottie's feet. Dangerous. The stuff Barnaby had warned him of. He rubbed at an aching spot in his chest, massaging away an uncomfortable tug of... what? Fear? Surely not. Doubt? For what?

The hack stopped. He was home, and he slipped through the back door as fast as Princess would allow, summoning his valet and having a bath heated. He sank into the water with a groan. It lapped over his skin as he rested his head against the rim, washing visions of Lottie sinking into her bath last night into his mind. His hand floated down his body, wrapped tight around his cock and—

The slam of boots thundering up the stairs shot his eyes open and his head upright.

"What the hell?" He gripped the edges of the tub, ready to fly from it.

His door flew open, slamming against the wall. Barnaby stormed into the room, a thundercloud deep on his thick, furrowed brows.

“Barnaby? Hell, give a man some privacy.” Quinton sank back into the water.

“Do you know where I’ve just come from?”

“No.” A clipped word as Quinton grabbed a square of linen from nearby and stood, wrapping it around the pertinent bits and exiting the tub. “But you can go back there. Or anywhere. Except for my chamber.”

“Bluevale.”

“Blue... why?”

“I wanted to see the work you’ve been doing with the cottages. I wanted to see that you’d come to your senses and chosen Parker’s designs instead of that useless Catcher’s.” Barnaby’s voice had reached the volume of a roar.

“Quiet down. You’ll wake the house. I’ve been busy with Lady Charlotte. I plan to visit Bluevale soon, view the improvements, and talk with Catcher, not Parker, about any problems the builders might be having.”

“Next week is too late, boy. Yesterday was too late. While you were frolicking with that harpy, there was a storm. Half the cottages are blown to bits.”

Quinton’s body shivered into ice. “When?”

“Just yesterday. I rode back to London without stopping as soon as I could. You should be riding to Bluevale just the same. Now.”

“Yes.” Quinton reached for his clothes, but he froze with his hand outstretched. “No. I’m to be married today. I... I’ll have to go after the wedding.” Irritation sliced through him, and he cut a hand through his hair with a small growl. Irritation with

whom? Himself? Lottie? The situation?

“You can be married any day, lad. Your people need you. You’ve wasted enough time messing about with that woman, and—”

“That woman is to be my wife.” Quinton stuffed his arms through his shirt sleeves and glared at Barnaby. “And the mother of my future heir. You will speak of her with respect.”

Barnaby’s lips twitched. “The fact remains your people are suffering, and you’re here catering to that wo—Lady Charlotte’s whims.”

His people were suffering. With tingling fingers and numb legs, he stepped into his pantaloons. Hell, he was a mess. Barely bathed, barely able to breathe, let alone think, and he had to stand up with Lottie in a few hours.

“You must leave quickly, boy.”

Boy. The word had always grated and felt now like pebbles ground into his skin, between his teeth. “I’ll leave. After the wedding.”

“But—”

“I’ve no other choice, Barnaby.”

“A damn fine position you’ve put yourself in. Reminds me of—”

“Do not say my father.”

“It’s the truth. Had you chosen another lady, one you didn’t care for, you’d have a nice rational conversation with her, tell her you couldn’t attend the wedding. Hell,

just send her a note. You'd be halfway to Bluevale by now. If you'd made a rational choice, you'd already be there, overseeing improvements."

"Abandon the wedding? Are you mad? You truly think that the best course of action? You would do that?"

Barnaby shrugged. "Extreme, perhaps. But it's an urgent matter, boy. Your peoples' lives are at risk."

Quinton scrubbed his palms over his face. He needed to be at Bluevale, a truth that sang through his blood. But he would not abandon Lottie, a truth bound with his bones.

He glanced out the window where the first rays of dawn flooded over London rooftops. "How many cottages damaged?"

"Five. Flimsy things. Should have been taken care of ages ago."

Quinton winced. A tiny, involuntary gesture, the surface tell of a deep and painful cut. He'd done this. He'd known the cottages needed care. He'd had the plans, made the decision which architect to hire. But not quickly enough. While he'd been kissing, his people had been shivering. While he'd been flirting and folding bloody paper flowers, his people had watched roofs crash in on them.

He might be sick.

The rising sun glowed pink at the edges, promising purple.

But Quinton's soul had gone gray, and his heart, no longer sleeping, wailed like a storm-angry wind.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Something ailed Quinton. She met him at the front of St. George's, and he stood still as stone, his shoulders a brick wall, his face hard. No smile for her. No teasing. No Noble Smirk wrapped around a suave, "Merriweather." He never even acknowledged her. Unless commanded to do so.

She wanted to pinch him. Look at me, she needed to hiss. But they were a spectacle with too many eyes on them. No pinching or hissing. They were not Merriweather and Chance here but Viscount Noble and Lady Charlotte, and this marriage, at its heart, a means to fix her reputation, to ensure her sisters' futures. So, she accepted the wall he'd erected between them, kept her distance from the thorns climbing, twining there, and waited. With perfect patience.

Because once they were alone, she'd force the answer from him one way or another.

What had happened in between the brilliant, soft hours they'd spent together last night and now?

She tried to focus on the clergyman, his words, Prudence dressed neatly beside her, slumped in boredom, Samuel standing beside Quinton, their families at their backs, but her heart would not stop sinking. Why? What had happened?

When they faced one another at the clergyman's behest, she tried to catch his gaze, but his caught on their hands reaching for one another. He had a ring in one hand, a silver sliver of a thing, a shining circlet of ivy. She'd not seen it until now, had no clue what it would look like. It fit her perfectly, in every way. She wanted to know why he'd chosen this one, what, if anything, it meant to him.

“With this ring,” he said, “I thee wed. With my body, I thee worship.”

Funny. She did not feel worshipped. He squeezed her hands in his, almost painfully, his head hung long, his neck a snowy curve as if he bared it for his own execution. Had she done something wrong last night?

He finished the vows and turned away from her, and she caught a whiff of whisky. Her heart, which had been sinking steadily, plummeted through the floor. He’d arrived foxed. Had everything, every single thing between them the last few weeks, been lies? And now he’d tied them together body, soul, and future, he felt free to reveal his true feelings?

The buzzing started in her fingertips and spread up her arms, taking over her entire body like a swarm of bees.

Then, apparently, they were married, and he was escorting her down the aisle as if flames licked up the sides of the pulpit, stretching long, fiery arms after them.

She ran to keep up, her legs tangling in her skirts. “Quinton,” she breathed, “slow down!”

He finally did, outside the waiting carriage, open and decorated with garlands of white blooms she’d chosen herself. She let him deposit her there, too stunned to fight back.

“I must be gone for a few days, perhaps weeks.”

“What... what do you mean?”

He started backing down the street away from the carriage, away from her. “My horse is waiting on the side of the church. I’ll write to you when I’m able.”

“You’re leaving now!” She shot to her feet, rocking the carriage, flipping her belly, and startling the horses. Even she heard the shrill note in her voice.

“I’ve no choice. Disaster at Bluevale.”

She gasped. “What has happ—”

He disappeared around the side of St. George’s.

Impulse one: Run after him, jump up on the horse behind him, and demand more coherent and detailed information.

Impulse two: Smile at the people currently flooding out of the church and pretend nothing was wrong. Several of them already peered up at her quizzically.

Slowly, she sat, folding her hands neatly on her lap. “It appears,” she said loudly enough for everyone to hear, “that my new husband has an urgent and unavoidable emergency. He will not be joining us for the breakfast as he attends to his duties. I am sure it will prove nothing in his capable hands. Please do not worry yourselves and join me at my brother’s home to break my fast as a newly wedded wife.”

Whose husband had just fled around the corner.

She smiled, though, giving it as much glow as possible, and it seemed to appease the crowd.

Except for her sisters, who stood in the church entrance, all arms crossed, legs spread in stances that said they took this desertion seriously.

And except for her brother, whose brow could rival any thundercloud for dangerous electrical promise. His hand crept beneath his jacket, likely grabbing a knife hilt

hidden somewhere there. Why did the man always inch toward poking implements? She wished she had one to hand currently, and that she could throw it with the same accuracy.

The carriage lurched into movement, and she made the short journey from St. George's to home beneath the merry sun alone. By the time she stepped into the cool shadows of her home—her brother's home now—she was panicking. Just a bit. Hated to admit it, but her shift, beneath her arms, had begun to feel wet. She poked her elbows out and fanned herself. What disaster had occurred to cause Quinton to run off like that? She felt livid. And confused. And worried. And beneath all those emotions some she could not quite discern. Too many. All at once. And none of them the one she should feel on her wedding day—joy. She kept a smile, but through it ran a brittle crack, innumerable hairline fractures impossible to repair.

In the entryway, she welcomed family and friends inside, searching for—ah, there.

“Lady Noble!” she cried out, pushing through the crowd. When close enough, she looped their arms together and pulled the older woman into a nearby antechamber, leaving the guests to Samuel and her sisters.

“What has happened at Bluevale?” she asked, smoothing her hands over and over again down her skirts.

“I can't be certain. I had no idea he planned to rush off like that. He's done little but grunt this morning.” Lady Noble wrapped her arm around Lottie's shoulders, thank goodness, because Lottie's legs gave out a little. “Sit, sit. What did he tell you?”

“Very little. He told me there was an emergency and... and then he left.” Stay strong, Charlotte. She would not cry. It was her wedding day, and she'd been abandoned immediately afterward, but she would not cry. Charlotte Merriweather did not cry over such trifles. “Did he not tell you?”

“Quinton left for the church before I did. We did not have an opportunity to talk. But Barnaby stomped into the house this morning, waking everyone, making a fuss. And then by the time Quinton left, he’d made preparations to go to Bluevale. I thought he’d be taking you after the breakfast, but...”

“As you see, I am here. And uninvited.”

“Lottie, my dear. I am deeply sorry. I’m not sure what to say. I’ve no clue what Quin is thinking. How can I help?”

Lottie swallowed a lump rising in her throat. They’d invited Mr. Barnaby, hadn’t they? Yes, of course Quinton had. But had he come?

“Lottie?”

She met Lady Noble’s gaze. “Bring me Barnaby.”

“Yes. Right away. I’ll have tea sent in as well.”

The tea arrived, and Lady Noble reappeared not more than ten minutes after that, pushing Barnaby through the door, though he dug his heels so well the carpet folded up beneath his feet.

Lottie abandoned her tea and stood, though how, she could not ascertain. Best not to question it. “Do you know what has happened at Bluevale?”

Barnaby flipped her a sneer like he’d toss a coin in the air. “You don’t know? He’s not told you? Hmph. He’s not in your pocket, then, madame, and I’ll not put him there.”

Lottie’s hands became fists. “Lord Noble is not, nor has he ever been, pocket sized.

Now tell me, what has happened at Bluevale?”

“I can’t see as it’s your business. His choice to tell you or not. A man goes where a man goes and takes care of what is his responsibility to care for.”

Last night, Quinton had cared for her. Now...?

She marched toward Barnaby, forcing him to scuttle back until he hit a wall. “And you have chosen to come here. Into my brother, the Duke of Clearford’s home, and break your fast with my family.” Every word an icicle. “I may choose to toss you out.”

“You’re a cold one.”

“Barnaby!” Lady Noble cried. “What has gotten into you?”

“What I want to know, Lady Noble,” Lottie said, “is what possessed your husband to request your son rely on that man.”

“Hey now, girly,” Barnaby growled. “You best not—”

“Tell me what happened!” She may have yelled it. Silence certainly rang after the words dissolved.

Barnaby blinked several times, then stammered, “There was a storm, many of the cottages collapsed. He needed to be there.”

Lady Noble gasped. “How horrid. But where’s Mr. Rilston, our estate manager? He should tend to that, especially on Quinton’s wedding day.”

Barnaby snorted. “A woman would think that. Your son has a duty, my lady, and he’s

been ignoring it to trail after that bit of skirt like a lost puppy dog. He remembered his purpose today and did what a man in his position must do. You women would not understand.”

“Enough.” Lottie would hear no more. “Thank you, Mr. Barnaby, for the information. No thank you for the insults. And thank you very much for leaving my home now.”

His mouth dropped open. “I’ve not eaten yet.”

“Nor will you.” She raised a brow.

He scooted sideways for the door, grumbling. “Women.” He slammed the door closed behind him.

Lady Noble approached Lottie with careful, measured steps, as if to keep from scaring her. “He’s horrid, but my husband trusted him, and he did well with Quinton all those years ago, kept him focused on his duty instead of his loss.”

“Mr. Barnaby does not matter. Thank you for locating him for me. Now I know what has taken Quinton off so suddenly.” And she could not hate him for it. His people were suffering, and he’d known the cottages needed mending. No wonder he’d put up stone walls this morning. He likely blamed himself. She did not begrudge him running off to help his people as soon as he could.

But he’d gone about it the entirely wrong way, the nodcock. He should have told her, asked her to come with him, trusted her to help.

“What will you do, dear?” Lady Noble, the first mother Lottie had belonged to in six years, squeezed her hand, watched her with caring eyes so like in color to her son’s. Whisky eyes. Whisky on Quinton’s breath this morning. Come to think of it, Barnaby had smelled of whisky, too. She likely had him to thank for Quinton’s wedding-day

cologne.

“I have no choice but to join the guests, break my fast, and make merry without my husband.”

“Oh, my dear.” Lady Noble folded Lottie into a hug. “I am so very sorry.”

So, too, was Lottie. For Quinton. Because after she smiled and acted as if nothing plagued her, she would find him.

She pushed out of her mother-in-law’s embrace, dry-eyed and ready. “All will be well.” She sailed out the door. She’d lied with that last bit. No way to know if all would be well.

If she’d said those words last night, lying in Quinton’s arms, she would have believed them in her bones. But that time seemed so long ago now, another continent separated from where she currently stood, with a sea of Quinton’s coldness between them. He clearly did not trust her enough to tell her about his woes, to share them with her. Or... he did not think her strong enough to share them. Hadn’t she asked time and again for details, to help, and hadn’t he denied her time and again, saying it was not her worry to fret over?

What then were her worries to be?

A cold husband. A marriage lacking trust. A husband who thought her his weakness.

Her feet brought her to the large drawing room where everyone waited, and she curved her best smile upon her lips before stepping over the threshold. But she put her heart to sleep. It was the only way to survive.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Destruction, thy name is Quinton. He deserved every bit of ruined roof that fell atop his head, every mother's cry winging on the wind. He hoped they haunted him. Four cottages ruined. eighteen people, his people, without homes.

"Where is everyone sleeping?" he asked his estate manager.

"Can't say." Mr. Rilston, his estate manager, was bald of head and strong of arm, and he'd never failed Quinton. Now he frowned beneath bushy gray brows. "I've not been concerned about—"

"Find out. And if anyone does not have a place to sleep, put them up at the inn. And if the inn runs out of rooms, we'll find space at Bluevale House. Do you understand?"

He pressed his lips like he understood well and disapproved, but he said only, "Yes, my lord."

Quinton faced the next disaster. The final cottage destroyed by the storm seemed to be the worst. Roof snapped right off, entirely gone, bits of it scattered about the house like sheep in a field. A wall gone, too. Clothing lay sodden on the floor, smashed into mud. Earthenware dishes, shattered and jagged, littered the ground. A crib overturned, spindles broken.

"A child lived here."

"At all the cottages, my lord."

"Bloody hell. I've sent an epistle to Mr. Catcher. The architect I've chosen. I'm

hoping he'll visit and make suggestions for proofing the cottages against such disasters."

"Are you sure you want Catcher, my lord? When Mr. Barnaby was here, he suggested Mr. Simon Parker should be—"

"I'd hire Simon Parker to wash my arse before I hired him to build a cottage. His designs are flimsy. I'll hear no more on the subject." He'd not subject these people to more inferior housing. He'd build them palaces before he did that. "Is everyone well? Was anyone hurt?"

"A few minor injuries, but they've already seen the village doctor."

Quinton scrubbed his palms down his face, the scruff on his cheeks and jaw scraping soft skin. He'd not even shaved for his wedding, not felt he had time, busy as he'd been preparing to leave. He'd not even changed his clothes after. He stood there a ragged, married man in rumpled finery with a two-day beard, disgraced.

He climbed atop his horse, a running list of things to do in his head, blocking out the questions that pinched at his heart. How did Lottie fare? Did she regret marrying him? Would she give him a tongue lashing when he next saw her? Would she do other more delightful things with her tongue? Likely not that last one, not after his abrupt departure. He'd barely registered the ceremony. Guilt had crashed through him the entire time. He remembered only taking her hand, slipping the ring on her finger, saying the vows. He'd never had the words to say how he felt for her, had silenced his heart too long for that. But wedding vows sang his feelings for him. He worshiped her. Everything he had belonged to her.

And yet...

And yet he'd let that obsession distract him from his purpose.

She was his weakness.

The village rose into view, and despite the muddy streets from two days straight of rains, everyone seemed to be spilled into them, bustling about, purposeful and... jolly?

He jumped off his horse and pushed into what appeared to be the most crowded part of the gathering, the center of the activity, jostling shoulders and dodging hats. The people of Dewmore, the village nearest Bluevale and the duke's country seat Clearford Castle, chuckled and chatted as if Quinton had not shoved their worlds over a very high cliff. They all craned their necks to see something in the center of the bustle, someone calling out orders above the heads of all the others. The woman's voice seemed to move the crowd; they obeyed her every word, repeating it, bringing her what she asked for.

He understood the impulse. For that familiar voice, he'd do the same, had done the same to the detriment of these people.

The crowd parted, and there she was—Lottie, his wife, her shoulders back, her hem muddy, her hair tousled and wild, her figure perfection in a perfectly tailored, amethyst riding habit. A baby bouncing on her knees.

He rubbed his fists into his eyes. Surely, he hallucinated. But when he opened them once more, she remained. Lottie, golden and lovely where she shouldn't be. Where he'd never expected her to be.

"What's she doing here?" he mumbled.

"Organizing us as only Lady Charlotte can," a man shoulder to shoulder with him said through a chuckle. The families of both houses near Dewmore were friendly patrons of the village inhabitants, and that familiarity laced the man's voice. "And

didn't we need it."

"Organizing... how?"

"She's got everyone rummaging through their things to see what they can donate to the families that lost their homes. She's made a list, she has all our skills, and gained promises from all of us that we would use them to help the families in whatever way we could. Set up a sort of trade between all of us. And she needed help handing out the things she brought with her." The man nodded at a carriage, one of Quinton's he'd left stored in the mews behind his London townhome, at the back of the square near the inn.

She'd rode in a coach, alone, likely biting back her fear.

"What did she bring?" he asked, setting each word carefully into the air. No particular tone in his voice because his body hadn't quite settled on a particular emotion to feel. So many cried out for acknowledgement.

"All sorts of stuff from London. Food, linens, clothes. Dolls and toys for the children. She's already found beds for everyone whose home fell. Most at the inn. Some, even at Bluevale House. Those with the youngest children." The man chuckled. "Won't the viscount be surprised by that? Babes crying at all hours. But what with knowing the lady her whole life, maybe he won't be. He knows what she's about. Likely why he married her. We've been celebratin' since we heard the news. The two great houses united. Ya ask me, he married the best he could with her."

"I have married the best I could. None better than her." And God, wasn't that the truth.

The man finally looked at him, jumped a little. "My lord! Didn't recognize you with all that mud. Don't look a bit like yerself. Congratulations on your wife. Everyone

here's always liked her."

As had Quinton. Except for several misguided years when he'd been attempting to deny his own damn heart. And there she sat like a queen among her subjects, his people, and her taking care of them better than he could, making them smile, giving them hope. His heart squirmed with shame. And pride.

She was magnificent.

He pressed through the crowd, determined to reach her, touch her... explain.

About why he'd left her this morning with barely a word of explanation.

"Lord Noble." Lottie's voice calling him.

He found her gaze above the heads of the crowd, and he found it cold.

She stood, and the crowd parted for her where they hadn't for him. She handed the baby off to another woman before marching right up to him, her expression impassive, unreadable.

His fingers twitched, ready to reach for her. He didn't. "When did you arrive?"

"According to Mrs. Welk, a half hour after her rolls left the oven and an hour after you left to inspect the damaged cottages."

"How... was the journey?" She'd been alone in a conveyance, terrified but determined. He glanced nervously at his coach open and empty at the back of the square.

"As I expected it to be." A catch in her voice. "But I had many other concerns to

occupy my mind. My irrational fears are of no import.”

“Like Hell. Lottie, you mustn’t—”

“I must. I did. And while I entertained our wedding guests, I had a footman and my maid fill the coach with provisions and necessities. I hope you do not mind, but I’ve offered Bluevale as a temporary residence until other accommodations can be arranged.”

He shook his head. “I know. Of course. It’s what I planned to do. Lottie, I—”

“Let us return to Bluevale. These ladies have everything well in hand now, and I can return tomorrow to Dewmore to see if anything else needs doing. Will you remain here longer, or will you leave with me?”

“Leave with you.” Where in God’s cursed earth had his backbone gone? Perhaps she’d stripped it from his body and added it to her own.

Or he’d given it to her when he’d fled this morning.

“Excellent.” She tilted her head just slightly. “Do you see how that’s done? I have intentions to make myself scarce, and I give you details so you do not have to fret.” She raised a brow and strode away from him, head held high, neck long and partially hidden by a few undone bouncing golden curls.

He remained immobile, not breathing, for likely longer than healthy. Some revelation seemed at hand, but his brain moved too slowly to see it clearly yet. He launched into movement, scurrying after her to be the one to help her mount her horse. Then he mounted his own, and they made their way toward Bluevale in silence, his brain wading through memory and slowly forming thoughts to arrive... where? At what truth?

The destination, whatever it was, did not feel like a comfortable place to be. He approached a cliff. No bridge in sight. Just rocks, sharp and killing, down below. And the growing silence between them as their mounts clopped toward home? A dangerous absence of words. Likely every bit of distance covered in which he did not apologize brought him closer to that ever-escalating cliff edge. He tried several times to speak, licking his lips, opening his mouth. Then the words died on his tongue. All of them incomplete, feeble.

When they dismounted, handed the horses off to a stable hand, and entered Bluevale, she marched right down the hall and into a drawing room, reminding him she was no stranger in his home.

The last time he'd seen her here was a few days before his father's funeral. The entire Merriweather family had arrived to offer their condolences. Lottie had sat pale and silent on the edges of the room, and he'd suffered through an hour of soft conversation. Then as the duke and his family were filing out of the room, their visit over, and Quinton standing by the door, head hung, studying his dusty boots, he'd felt a tap—no, a poke—on his shoulder. He'd looked up to find Lottie sliding into the hallway, poking her tongue out at him. And despite his grief, despite the black hole that it had opened up in his chest, he'd laughed. And that laugh had sparked a bit of joy to remind him that life would not always be so dark and empty. The joy had not lasted long. The day they'd buried his father, he'd almost been swallowed whole again.

But Lottie had always been able to do that, stick her tongue out, poke him, prod him out of his feelings. Some might be insulted at the disrespect to their hollow grief. Quinton had needed the silliness to remind him life lay beyond the darkness.

She stood at the window, staring out, her back to him, her velvet riding habit caressing every curve he now had a right to touch. He'd always thought he would grow bored once a woman's body was his to admire whenever he wished. He

wouldn't though. The one night they'd spent together had started an unquenchable fire for his wife that would never be extinguished.

Princess lay at her feet.

"You brought the dog," he said, the words unplanned.

"Yes. She comforts me." Her words sounded lifeless. "And she is mine now, too." She turned and walked toward him, each step chosen carefully, seeming heavy as sin. When she stood just before him, he realized what weighed her down so. Tears. Falling silently from her eyes.

With trembling hands, he cupped her cheeks and wiped them from her face. "How long have you cried?" And why hadn't he noticed?

She jerked out of his embrace. "Do not touch me." The tears came again, sliding quickly, and she dashed them away. God, his Lottie crying. He had not seen her grief since the day her parents died. Her rage, yes, her wicked humor. But not her tears. And he'd caused them.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded. "The cottages have fallen. I'm needed at Bluevale. That's all it would have taken. But you shoved me into a carriage with nothing but a grunt about an emergency after looking like you were attending your own execution the entire length of our wedding. After smelling of whisky as if you had needed it to stand up beside me. You are treating me as if I cannot help. As if I have no place in the difficulties of your life. As if you do not want me in any way." She tore away from him, and when she whirled at the end of the room and stomped back his way, her cheeks flaming and her eyes a cold, sharp blue. "Do you think I will narrow my existence for you? Pretty and perfect in a ballroom and rumped for your pleasure in bed? Those are my only two roles? Do you think I will sit quietly, disinterested in the rest of your life? I will not. I am strong, though you do not see it,

and I can be more to you than... than whatever it is you want me to be. An empty-headed hostess. A body to plow into.”

He winced. “You’re more than that Lottie.” He bit his tongue, swallowed, tried again. “It was badly done of me. I was not thinking clearly this morning. I—”

“That’s all you have to say?” She flung her arms out wide, let them drop to her sides.

“Rage at me, Lottie. I deserve it. Just don’t cry.”

“Do you blame me for this?” she demanded.

He winced. He had. She’d distracted him. Wasn’t that what Barnaby had said? Not quite Quinton’s thoughts, though, not quite his verdict.

Her lips thinned. “I asked you to tell me about the cottages. More than once. If I’d known—”

“I blame myself!” he cried, his voice like knives on his throat.

Something in her shifted, softened perhaps, and she took a single step toward him. “You hired an architect, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And builders?”

“Yes.”

“Could you have completed the project sooner? Before the storm?” She took another step closer.

“No, but—”

“Did you know a single storm would pull them to the ground?”

“My father had them rebuilt before his death. I knew there were problems, was determined to fix them, but I didn’t... I didn’t know.” And he should have. “Maybe I would have had I not allowed my heart to wake up, to want you, had I not given into my fascination with you.”

“You would have still been in London when the cottages fell. You won’t wield the hammer to fix their homes. You’re no carpenter, no god, either. Most peers would not have returned, even to console their people.”

“I am not most people.”

“I know. It’s why I love you.” She hung her head, pushed the heel of her hand across her cheek bone, and his gut twisted. She loved him. But said with such sorrow. “You do blame me after all, I see. If not for your fascination with me, none of this would have happened, hm? Do you not hear how foolish that sounds, my lord?”

Anger flared, a means of protecting himself when his skin already glowed purple with self-inflicted bruises. “I should be strong enough to evade the distractions of a pretty woman. But I am not strong enough to resist you. You are my—”

“I am no man’s weakness!” she cried, pounding a fist against her chest.

Her words echoed around them, and when he reached for her, a natural impulse to soothe her that happened without conscious thought, she shrank away from him, her body making a rigid line of her usually soft curves. Then she began to shake and dropped into a puddle of velvet on the ground. She lifted her face defiantly, though, the spark in her eyes beginning to dim.

“I’m stronger than you, Quinton Chance.” Her eyes watered as she spoke, glassing over with sorrow or frustration or whatever other pain he’d given her today.

He wanted to kneel beside her, pull her into his arms as he had the day of her parents’ funerals, as he had the day he’d proposed to her. But something kept him on his feet, a distanced observer. The sight of a softly weeping Lottie could be counted among the many injustices of the world. Entirely wrong. The only reason he could contrive for Lottie, broken on the floor—play acting. She must be.

Because the Lady Charlotte Merriweather he knew never melted, met every challenge with the sword of her wit and the shield of her courage.

Loving her would never weaken him. It could only build him up, make him stronger.

And he’d broken her.

Slowly, he dropped to his knees and sat back on his heels, close, her skirts beneath his trousers, but careful not to touch her. He did not know if he could make it better, but he could try.

“My entire life, my father lived for his duty. My mother and I—that’s all we were to him. Duty. He was kind and he cared for us, but in the same way he cared for everyone and everything else, as if he were scared to get any closer. I suppose I learned to love timidly and from afar from him.”

Lottie remained unmoving, slumped, her shoulders shuddering up and down in jerky motions with each difficult breath.

He licked his lips and started again. “My mother’s love is messier, more visceral. Hugs and scoldings and tears. I have both in me, I fear, Mother and Father—cold, walled-up emotion and passionate feeling. But the day they buried my father... I’d

never cried like that before. I'd never felt so wounded. I'd been his duty, but he'd been proud of me. He'd loved as best he could with a broken heart. And I felt alone, weak, unable to live up to the example he'd set for me without him by my side to teach me how. I told you he loved his first wife. And in that love, he lost sight of duty."

She snorted. She was listening. And being irreverent about it. A fledgling hope leapt in his chest.

He spoke faster now. "That day Barnaby caught me crying and you comforting me—he reminded me of that, of my father's heartbreak, his mistakes. He seemed so strong. Not a single tear or even a watery eye from him. And he and my father had been dear to one another. He'd been made of stone that day, and I wanted to be like him. So, when he told me to put my heart to sleep or risk losing sight of what matters, risk being weak, I listened. A means of survival, I suppose. I couldn't privilege my heart when so many others needed me without distraction."

She sniffed, barely tilted her chin, and peered at him only from the corner of her eyes. "Distraction. Hmph. Love makes you stronger."

There she was, his Lottie, challenging him. He wanted to weep. But was she right?

Instead, he said, "So I put my heart to sleep, tried to forget how I loved you." He swallowed. "How I love you."

She lifted her head then, her eyes wary, still wet from crying. "You love me?"

"Too much. It consumes me, and I lose sight of everything else. Duty and passion—different types of loving. I cannot afford to love with passion. Men cannot. We must love through duty or put too many others at risk."

Her brows furrowed, and she studied him, then sighed, and climbed to her feet, pinching her nose between her thumb and forefinger. “And you think women risk nothing by loving with passion? If that were true, no one would have cared about that book I dropped in Hyde Park. We risk everything when we love, when we feel. And all we ask is that the men we love take that risk with us.”

“Lottie,” he said, rising, “I’m sorry.”

She made her steady way toward the door. “So am I. That you do not think yourself capable of holding duty and passion in your heart at the same time, that you do not think yourself strong enough for it. Barnaby’s a disaster.” She winced and rubbed her temples.

“Your head is hurting. Let’s take you upstairs.” He reached for her arm. “I’ll—”

“No.” She brushed his touch away. “A maid will show me to the viscountess’s chamber.”

“Let me help you.”

In the doorway, she faced him, the pain of a coming megrim lining her face. But a pain more soul-centered rounding her shoulders. “I do not wish to allow my weaknesses to distract you, my lord. I’ll help myself.” She left, burning a Lottie shape of amethyst velvet into his memory.

Bloody hell. He found a bottle of whisky and took two slugs of it without a cup, pouring the fire down his throat, letting it unsettle his belly and dull his senses.

I do not wish my weaknesses to distract you.

When she said it that way, it sounded bloody absurd. As if he couldn’t tuck her into

bed in a dark room with a warm tea and do whatever else needed to be done. Or hand off his responsibilities temporarily to Mr. Rilston...

As if he could not have married Lottie with a bloody smile on his face, told her where he needed to be, and let her help him get there instead of shutting her out.

Princess lifted her head from near the windows and whined.

“You’re right, girl. I’m a bloody fool.”

He abandoned the bottle where he’d found it and stomped toward the kitchen. “Cook! Lady Noble needs a special tea. Now! I’ll show you how to make it.” When he brought Lottie a cup, steaming between his bare hands, he used his boot to knock. No response. He kicked again.

“Lottie!” Hell. He should be quieter. “Lottie.” That time a whisper.

The door slightly down the hall to his left swung open, and Lottie stuck her head out, a line as deep at the Thames between her brows.

He could frown, too, and he did. First at her, then at the door he’d been kicking at, then at her once more. “You’re not in our room.”

“I’m not in your room, my lord. I am, however, in the viscountess’s room, my room.”

Wrong, everything wrong.

He held out the tea. “Drink this.”

“I won’t if I don’t wish to.” But she took the cup.

“Lottie, I thought we’d share a room. Of course we will.”

“I need rest. And quiet. And darkness.” She winced, slammed her eyes shut, and leaned against the doorframe, the liquid sloshing in her cup.

“That bad?”

“I get dizzy.” Spoken with closed eyes. “A bit nauseous. Particularly when...”

“When what?”

“Nothing.” The word almost silent. “Thank you for the tea. Now please let me rest. Alone.” She slunk back into her room and closed the door.

Alone in the hall, Quinton thought back to every decision that had brought him here.

“I’m a bloody idiot,” he mumbled.

But how could he prove to her that he could change?

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Curse whatever circumstances visited a megrim on her the very moment she'd needed to show her strength. Hardly a surprise, however. Stressful situations often brought her low, her head pounding, odd wiggles across her vision. She never told anyone about the wiggles. Afraid of what they might think of her. They didn't seem to hurt her, and they disappeared after a bit, leaving only the pain, the pounding.

And over the last two days, she'd been isolated in her new bedchamber, Quinton scratching at her door, whispering, wanting to know if she'd had the tea, if she needed a bath drawn, if it was dark enough inside her room, warm enough, comfortable enough. If he should send for the doctor.

If she'd let him in.

No to those last two queries.

How could she convince him of her strength while laid so low, so helpless? She hated it. Hated herself. Hated him for saying he loved her but...

But. Horrid word, that.

At least the headache had left her sometime in the night. The day spread cloudy and thus tolerable before her, and she'd even thrown her curtains open. She ached to go out, but her mood kept her confined. As did, it must be admitted, the possibility of coming face-to-face with her husband, whose voice had taken on many tones over the last two days from the softness of concern to the sharpness of irritation. Her refusal to let him in frustrated him. Well, he frustrated her, too. He'd made her cry. She hated crying. Always brought on the headache.

She rolled out of her bed and shuffled for the window, leaned her temple against the warm glass. Was that figure riding into the distance Quinton? If so, she could leave her room for a few hours, enjoy the gloomy day, and return before he did. She wanted to see the cottages, help in some way. But that's likely where he'd gone.

She called for her maid and donned a walking gown, spencer, and bonnet. Her family's land was not too far, and the chapel where her parents had been buried. She'd needed her mother the last few lonely days, and her feet easily took her down the path that led to home. But when they reached a crossroads—one leading to Clearford Castle and the other to the village—they stopped, as if they could not decide which direction to go in. The wind whipped up around her, and she searched the skies. Gloomier than before. Would it storm again so soon? Were the remaining cottages in danger? Should she go to Quinton and offer help?

Finally, a question with a clear answer: He would not welcome her help.

He'd asked her twice now, both times before she'd drifted off into a fitful sleep, speaking low through the locked door that connected their rooms: What can I do? "Tell me Lottie," he'd said, "please tell me what I can do?" The first night, she'd thought he meant her headache. But the second night, she'd heard a deeper timbre to the question, and she'd recognized a different meaning to it. How could a man prove to a woman that she was not a distraction? How did he show her that her presence in his life was a boon not a regret, that she made him stronger instead of weaker?

Because that's what Lottie needed Quinton to do, prove to her he saw her strength.

Perhaps she asked too much. Perhaps she'd damned herself to a life in which she felt like a burden to her husband.

No. She was not damned to hell. While she'd ruminated, her feet had chosen a path—toward the village. And she had chosen a path as well—to fight with her

husband until he saw her worth, to prove to him through action and time that he would not regret binding their lives together.

As she approached the cottages, voices rose into the air, sharp and tight. She picked up her pace and found several men, Quinton among them, gathered before an undamaged cottage.

The wind picked up, howling their words toward her.

“There are weaknesses, especially in the roof, but we can use the canvas tarpaulins, can’t we?” Quinton’s voice, looking for reassurance.

“Yes,” a familiar voice Lottie couldn’t quite place said. “But we’d better hurry.”

“The storm doesn’t seem like it will be as bad as the last one.” That voice belonged to Quinton’s estate manager. “But we should inspect all the standing cottages. Not much time.”

Lottie could help. Letting her bonnet fall from her head and dangle down her back, she ran around the side of the cottage.

“Lord Noble!”

Quinton’s head jerked around. “Lottie.” He strode toward her, then he ran, grabbing her hands and pulling her beneath a slight overhang on the side of the cottage. “What are you doing here? Your head—”

“Is significantly better. You need help. I can offer it.”

His jaw set hard, twitched. He would send her away.

Two men sauntered into view, Mr. Rilston and Mr. Barnaby.

Barnaby scowled as only a disgruntled man could. “Leave the men to worry over it, Lady Noble. You’ll only be in the way.”

Mr. Rilston’s eyes popped wide, but he screwed his mouth shut, glancing at his employer.

Keeping his body turned to Lottie, Quinton slanted his head at a sharp angle to face his father’s friend. “Talk like that to my wife again, Barnaby, and you’ll not be welcome here.”

“What’s she going to do but distract you, Quinton.” Barnaby sniffed. “Send her away. Or she’s just another bad decision.”

Finally, Quinton snapped long steps toward Barnaby. “I am the one making the decisions on my own estate if you haven’t noticed. It has been some years since you’ve had any control here, though I’ve always taken your input into account. If you’d like that to continue, take my wife’s name off your lips.”

Lottie watched them bounce their antagonism like a ball between them. She should step forward and stop it. But... she rather enjoyed listening to Quinton put Barnaby in his place.

A rumble nearby shot Lottie’s gaze skyward. Clouds but no lightning, but there it came again—a rumble. She looked down the road.

“A coach.” She walked toward it. “It... it’s my brother’s coach.”

Quinton cursed and joined her, watching the coach wind its way toward them. It stopped on the road near the cottages, and after a moment, the door flew open.

And four women jumped down.

Lottie cried out and flew toward her sisters, hugging them all at once in a flurry of bonnets and velvet and lace that felt like home and comfort and everything good.

“What are you doing here?”

Prudence frowned and found a spot behind Lottie to focus on. “We were worried.”

Andromeda patted Lottie’s shoulder. “Your new husband did not behave well at the wedding. And you left so quickly.”

“We thought to save you,” Isabella said.

“If you need saving,” Imogen added.

“Do you need saving?” Andromeda, too, looked behind Lottie.

So, Lottie turned as well, found Quinton looking pale and rigid against the gray sky.

A rumble like a low roar, and then Quinton’s form illuminated by the yellow green of electric light.

Thunder. Lightning. They did not have much time.

The lightning must have jumped Quinton into motion. He ran toward her once more, barely acknowledging her sisters and cuffing her arms with his hands. “You must leave now.”

“I can—”

“Get in the damn coach now and go, Lottie. I don’t care how scared you are of its

confines.”

She felt the rush of heat, her sisters’ confused glances, heard Imogen whisper to Isabella, “Scared of the inside of a coach?”

Lottie shook her head. In response to her sister’s query or her husband’s command, she could not say.

His hands on her upper arms became manacles, tight, demanding. “Go, Lottie. Now. Because as scared as you are I am doubly so. Of that sky throwing death your way.” Something like madness in his eyes, his hair damp against his forehead.

She understood that madness, that fear. She felt it even now; her sisters had traveled here without her knowing. Anything could have happened. And they would travel back, too. The future was so entirely unknowable, that blank darkness terrifying. Is that what Quinton saw with her and the lightning and the whipping wind? Unknowable terror?

Shaking his hold loose, she cupped his face and kissed him, hard and with every ounce of pent-up emotion coursing through her. She kissed him with more fury than the building storm and more joy than the sun that would shine after the storm raged itself into nothing.

“Don’t get hurt, Chance,” she said, resting her nose alongside his, each word brushing her lips against his.

His arms clenched tight around her, his face dove deep into the crook of her shoulder, and he inhaled, ragged and deep, and the sky above them boomed, glowed. He pushed her away. “Go. Now.”

No hesitation in her steps as she hitched her skirts and ran. She felt the first drop of

rain on her cheek as she climbed into the coach, and her sisters appeared around her, hair damp and spencers dotted with the deep hues of rain drops.

Andromeda and Prudence sat on either side of her, hugging her tight, comforting. Across from them, the twins fussed, pulling books and blankets out of corners as well as a wicker basket Imogen popped open.

“Take a biscuit,” Imogen said, pulling one from the basket’s bowels. “Your favorite.”

“No thank you.” The coach lurched forward, and Lottie gripped the edge of her seat, waiting for the familiar fear to roll through her.

Prudence patted Lottie’s hand. “Don’t worry. We’ll have you home soon enough, and then you can send for your clothes later.”

“Send for my... Do you think I’m going to return to London with you?”

Andromeda hummed, pushing a lock of hair behind Lottie’s ear. “I have been trying to tell them that is not likely to be the case, but—”

“But you looked so miserable on your wedding day,” Isabella said.

“And that scoundrel, your husband, looked so very guilty. A true villain.” Imogen’s knuckles whitened as her grip tightened on her book.

“We’ve not heard from you,” Andromeda said softly. “Not a single letter. I thought a quick visit might reassure us all that you are well.”

“I haven’t been well,” Lottie admitted. “My head.” She rubbed her temples. The discomfort returned. Those lightning flashes in the sky had set off waves of lightning in her head. “I could not write. I’ve been abed in the dark.”

Commiserating murmurs joined the grumble of the wheels of the path and the deep rumble of the sky's disapproval. A storm. A coach. Her sisters within. She should be near paralyzed with fear. Her heart skipped not for her, for them, but for the man standing beneath a raging sky who'd sent her away. He would be well. He must be.

She faced Andromeda first. "Thank you for worrying over me."

Andromeda's soft smile could heal almost any wound.

Lottie faced Prudence. "Thank you for coming to save me."

Prudence pulled up tall, beamed with pride.

Lottie faced the twins. "And thank you for facing Quinton, even when you think him a villain."

"Always," the twins said together.

Lottie smiled then, a curve of lips she felt in her soul, impossible to put into words. "I love you all. But I am not going back to London. Not without my husband."

The coach exploded into objections, but Andromeda's arm slipped around Lottie's waist, squeezed. She rested her head on Lottie's shoulder.

Lottie rested her head against her sister's and waited for the others to quiet down before she said, "I love him, and he loves me, and we are at loggerheads, but we will fight until we work it out."

Prudence leaned her head on Lottie's other shoulder and huffed. "You mean you'll insult him until—"

“No. I will not insult him. Because I love him. I will fight for him. And for us. We will fight our fears together and help each other overcome them. That is what I mean by fight. Not insults and barbs. But standing together and fighting everything that seeks to pull us apart.”

“And if he will not fight alongside you?” Imogen asked, clutching her book.

“If that proves true...” Lottie was determined it would not. “Then, and only then, will I come home.” Because staying would be beyond painful. “Let us go to Dewmore and enjoy a meal at the pub while it storms. It is closer than Bluevale.” And though her fear for Quinton seemed to outweigh her fear of coaches for the moment, she did not wish to test it with a longer trip.

The sky roared and the coach shook, and Lottie gripped the seat, hugged her sisters, and prepared to fight.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Quinton didn't always wear smalls, but he was damn glad he'd done so this morning. Without them, his riding breeches would be indecently molded to his nether regions. They were still molded, but slightly less indecently.

Better to focus on the discomfort of his arse and cock than to make room for Lottie in his mind. She was safe and tucked away at Bluevale. The rain was already stopping. It had come fierce and fast, drowning the land in minutes, but letting up just as quickly, becoming merely a soft, consistent patter.

He'd had to divest himself of jacket and cravat ages ago to keep his range of movement and his breath. Wet linen became a noose, and the rain soaked him through. The cottages, on the other hand... Quinton stepped back to admire his work—they were dry. The architect had arrived yesterday, and while the cottages could not be replaced all at once and quickly enough to greet the next storm, things were moving forward. The local carpenter had been hired to shore up the old buildings until the new ones were done, and Quinton had identified, through the test of rain and wind, exactly where else they needed attention.

Not a complete disaster.

Except with Lottie. He'd thrown her at the coach, and he may as well have thrown her into a hell.

“We're all done here,” he called out.

The other men slapped water off their shirt sleeves and peeled jackets from their arms.

“I’ll check on them tomorrow,” Mr. Rilston said. “The inhabitants—”

“Are taken care of. I’ll not have them in houses where the roofs might fall in.” He looked to Barnaby, who set his steps to Bluevale, where he likely expected to stay. Quinton wouldn’t keep him from his usual room, but they needed to have words first. “Barnaby,” he called, “walk with me.” They’d visit the pub, have a drink, then if Barnaby did not wish to stay at Bluevale, he would be near enough to the inn to take a room.

His old mentor, his father’s friend, trudged up, slapped him on the back. “Good work today, Quin. Mighty proud of you. Proved you know what it takes to carry such responsibility.”

Quinton let the words sit in the air a bit. He’d always wanted to make Barnaby proud and, in so doing, know he had the approval of his father as well. But Barnaby’s pride felt sour.

“Do you praise me because I sent my wife away?” Quinton asked.

“That’s part of it. Made the right choice.”

The mud squelched beneath Quinton’s boots, caking them. “I did not send her away because she would have been useless. She could have helped and well. She’s sharp. Strong.”

“Bah.”

“I sent her away because I was scared. The weakness is mine, Barnaby.”

“Bah, I say again. You’re not weak. You sent her away.”

“And may she have mercy on me.” But he had hope. She’d kissed him. He rubbed his lips with his thumb, warming up the memory of her lips on his.

“What’s happened there?”

Quinton stopped in the road, looked in the direction Barnaby pointed. “Hell. That’s Clearford’s coach.”

It had toppled half off the road, tilted, a wheel cracked and lying flat in the mud.

Quinton’s legs pumped without thought, bringing him to the coach. He flung the door open. Empty. His heart beating in his ears, he clutched his chest, sank against the frame. Empty. He ran around the coach, looking for bodies. None.

“They must have gone to the village,” Barnaby said, voice entirely calm, as if he were commenting on the nice plumpness of a pig.

Quinton ran, kicking mud up behind him, the misting rain coating his face. The town square, when he arrived, was empty. But for one whistling man.

“You!” Quinton cried, running up to him. “Have you seen them? The viscountess and her sisters?”

The man lurched away from Quinton. “Her sisters are about? Ain’t seen ‘em. Nor yer wife since the day she arrived.”

No good. He ran. With no real destination. Where to? The doctor. Yes. He knocked on the door, and it flew open before he’d finished pounding.

“My lord,” the bespectacled doctor said, blinking, “are you unwell?”

Quinton shook his head. “My wife. And her sisters. Are they here? Are they injured?”

“N-nooooo.” The doctor looked over his shoulder at his wife sitting wide-eyed by the fire. She shook her head. “They’re not here, my lord.”

Quinton ran once more, once more at a loss for where to go. The pub. Everyone knew everything there. He threw the door open so hard it crashed against the wall. Light spilled over him from candlelight and fireside, and the hum of happy conversation died as he stepped inside. Barnaby at the bar with Rilston. Maids eyeing him warily. The pub owner, Mr. Lockheart, walking his way. Where were they? Where was she? Had highwaymen carried them off? He shook his hands out, trying to fling off the tension as easily as he flung off water droplets.

“My lord,” Mr. Lockheart said, closing the door behind Quinton, “are you—”

“There they are.” His heart stopped, twisted. Four sisters by the fire, damp but drying and wearing smiles. “Where’s Lottie? Where is she?” He forced heavy steps toward the fire, calling out, “Where’s Lottie?”

One of the twins—the one without a book peeking out of her pocket, so it must be Isabella—darted up the stairs at the back of the room. What did he care where she went, unless... she went to Lottie. He caught up with her.

But Lady Prudence darted before him, placing a hand on his arm, pushing him back. “Lord Noble, Lottie is not feeling well. The coach—”

“I saw it. Where is she?” He was pleading, he knew it, could hear the despair in his voice. “Is she alive? Please. Let me go to her.”

“Alive?” Prudence squeezed his arm. “She’s only suffering a—”

“Quinton?”

The voice rippled life up his spine. He closed his eyes, licked his lips, turned to it as if she were the goddamn sun, and he’d not seen the sky for years.

“Quinton, I could hear you from upstairs.”

He opened his eyes. Lottie descended the stairs, her sister following. She was pale, and only curiosity relieved the pinched look of her expression. He moved. Who knew how. She drew him to her, likely, and when she reached the bottom step he waited there for her, trembling arms gathering her into an embrace she returned, arms wrapping around his neck as he curved around her.

He breathed her in. She smelled of rain and mint tea and... He raised his head just enough to study her face, to find that deep groove between her brows. “Has your megrim returned, Merriweather?”

She nodded, brushed her thumb over his cheekbone. “Are you crying, Chance?”

“What else is a man supposed to do when he thinks his beloved wife is dead?” He knew he scowled. He didn’t care.

She reached up, trying to smooth the scowl away. Standing on the first step of the stairs, him below her, she did not have to pop up on tiptoe to kiss him, so she placed her lips on his brow, smiling as she did so.

“Did you really think me—”

“Yes.” And what would he have done if it had been true? Lay down in the rain and prayed for well-placed lightning? He gathered her close, shivered as he inhaled, knew the wetness on his cheeks was not from the rain.

“Quit making a scene, Noble,” Barnaby hissed from behind him.

“Quit being a prick.” Quinton mumbled the insult into Lottie’s shoulder because he refused to release her.

Barnaby’s hand on his shoulder swung him around. “Men don’t cry. Especially not”—he looked around, shifting from foot to foot—“where people can see.”

“I cry, Barnaby, and I can assure you, I’m a man. Now, whether you remain a close acquaintance of mine is yet to be seen. What do you think, Lottie?”

“So far, I have found him tedious. He is terribly good at giving me headaches.”

“Can’t have that.” Quinton tsked.

Barnaby’s face fell, and the lines of age appeared, lines of worry, of weight and responsibility. “I’m only trying to do good by your father.”

Quinton sighed. “I know. But I am not my father. And I am not you. And Lottie is not my father’s first wife, and we will make mistakes but not the same ones as they.”

Lottie’s soft hand wrapped strongly around his shoulder, squeezed. He placed his hand atop it, pinning it, sheltering it, keeping it always.

“My father knew himself well, loved me enough to worry for me. But loving Lottie isn’t a weakness. She makes me stronger than I am.” He held her hands in his own. “You are my greatest strength. I should never have ordered you away, but I was scared. I—”

“I know. I have fears too. I understand. I don’t think our fears make us weak. Perhaps they make us stronger when we face them. When we help each other face them.” The

corner of her mouth kicked into a grin.

So did his. “God, I’m glad you’re alive, Merriweather.” He sniffed, laughed, brushed another tear from his eye.

“Me as well.” She leaned into him, rubbing her temples.

“This won’t do. You’re in pain.”

“I’ve been resting. In a room.” She’d pressed her eyes closed. “Then you came bursting in, demanding my presence.”

“I thought you dead, Merriweather.”

“I am not, Chance.”

He kissed the top of her head and pulled her up the stairs under the wing of his arm. When they passed Isabella, she pointed to her eyes and then to him, as if to say she was watching him. Good. He liked that Lottie had champions. Just in case she needed one other than him. Then Isabella winked and bounced down the stairs to join her sisters.

“Which room?” he asked at the top of the stairs.

“Just there.” Lottie stumbled toward a door on their left, and he wrapped his arm around her, pulled her into the chamber’s dark interior.

He closed the door while she crawled gingerly onto the bed, and when the door was locked, he kicked off his boots and lay out beside her, pulling her back against his front.

“What does it feel like?” he asked as quietly as he could.

“More disorienting than painful. There’s...”

“Yes?”

She turned in his arms, placed her hands on his chest. “I’ve never told anyone this.”

“Whatever it is, tell me. I want to know.” So he could clobber it if possible.

She swallowed, nestled her head on his chest, spoke into the hot space between their bodies. “Before the pain, I have these... wiggles of light across my vision. I’m not mad, I promise. They aren’t... real. They are a... a harbinger. Sometimes that’s all there is to it—the dancing lines, dizziness, light hurts, but there’s no real pain. That’s when I’m lucky. Other times... it hurts.”

He stroked his fingers up and down her spine. “I wish I could take it away.”

She laughed, winced. “You try to, don’t you? Thieving my wine and bringing me tea.” She tilted her head back and kissed the tip of his chin. “Thank you. I have been hiding away for reasons other than megrims.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “I have been trying so hard for you to see me as strong, your equal, worthy of your passion and your trust, but my body wants to bring me low, show you only weakness. My fears, my headaches... you say that I am strong, but I am not always. My sisters do not know about the visual oddities of my headaches. I’ve been terrified to tell them. They may think me mad, flawed. And they do not know that I am scared of coaches. I will not worry them with my ridiculous fears.” She’d grown still as stone in his arms.

He kissed her, soft as the darkness cradling them. “Sometimes you are vulnerable, Lady Noble. So, too, sometimes am I. Did you see those tears cutting down my cheeks?”

She laughed, hid her face in his chest once more. He could not hold her tight enough. Never would he be able to hold her tight enough. But he would try.

“Your sisters will love you if they know. Just as I love you.” He brushed hair away from her forehead, found a lovely spot to kiss. Really, any spot was lovely. “Let us make a pact, Merriweather.”

Carefully, she lifted her head until he could see her eyes. “What sort?”

He stroked his fingertips over her ribs, up and down. His, his, his, each and every one. “You allow me to care for you when you are sick or scared, and I’ll allow you to care for me when I’m too passionate for sense or too emotional to seem properly lordly.”

“I could never hope to do so good a job as Barnaby.”

A joke. Excellent progress. “Of course not. His distaste for emotion in general makes him a true expert, but I trust you.”

“Does that mean that when I ask about things like cottages, you will not toss my inquiries aside as so much refuse, but respond?”

He nodded. “As long as you allow me in the room when you’re hurting instead of locking me out.”

“I would like that,” she said softly with her warm breath against his still damp shirt.

Still damp. Hell. He hopped off the bed. “I’m soaked.”

She came to her knees. “I noticed. I can help you with that particular problem.”

“You’re in pain! Absolutely not.”

“No pain. And the lines have disappeared. I’m not feeling perfect, but—”

“You are perfect.” His hands on her waist, drawing her closer to the edge of the bed, unable to not touch her.

“But I think I’m well enough to—” She bit her bottom lip, gathered his sodden shirt where it was tucked into his breeches, and tugged it, freed it. “Don’t tell me no.” She did not say please, but the sound of it shaped her words, nonetheless.

He could deny her nothing, and soon his shirt became a puddle, damp and bright, on the chamber floor. He pulled her off the bed to stand before him and spun her, untied the first tab of her gown, and placed a kiss on the revealed skin. Then another tie loosed and dangling and another kiss. Her gown slipped down her shoulders, then plunged to the floor, and her stays fell beneath his fingertips. He made quick work, and when only her shift remained, she faced him, her attention falling to his riding breeches. His body was heavy and tight with need, and her hands on him wound that need into an impossible ache. Then they were free of wet clothing and weak muslin barriers. Her skin everywhere rosy and smooth, making each curve a temptation. He needed to touch her everywhere but could not all at once, and in his consuming attempt to do so, they toppled to the bed.

She kissed his neck and traced the lines of his face, and he nestled her on the pillows, tending to her comfort in every way he could imagine. That golden hair unbound and easy. Her arms resting over her belly, her knees bent and lilting to the side as she studied him with lust-heavy eyes.

He eased down beside her, drawing a line between her breast, circling her navel, flattening his palm on her inner thigh. She arched against his hand, wanting him someplace else, close to her thigh, so close.

Her wish was his only desire, and he cupped her. Hell, she was the best, the only sensation in the world, so full of life and determination and heart. She smoothed her hands up his chest and over his shoulders, hooking them behind his neck and tugging until he rolled on top of her.

Slowly, they kissed, lips meeting lips as heart met heart and slipped into a forever rhythm together. Gently, they touched, everywhere, as if they were making up time, as if they had all of time to make it up. Insatiably, they tasted, licks to necks, nipples, and bellies, teeth dragging across sensitive spots as they learned each other's sounds, what made the other moan and laugh and swear. When he thrust inside her finally, his hand cupping her breast, his mouth worshiping her nipple, she arched up to meet him, their years of wary circling melting into a dance where they both led, both followed.

She shattered first, crying out, clutching him to her so strongly, her fingernails pierced the skin of his back. He hissed with more pleasure than pain. The inn would hear. Who cared? Who cared if the entire world knew he adored his viscountess, knew he counted pleasing her as one of his sacred duties. She opened her eyes, and what he saw there drove him over the edge—trust, joy, challenge, love. He buried his face in her neck, her hair, as he came.

And as he gathered her into his buzzing, exhausted arms, he buried his fears.

CHAPTER ONE

Lottie adored snow. Some thought it cold and wet, unwelcoming. But she saw in its iciness a beauty. Some sharp things were merely misunderstood. She pressed a palm against the cold glass of the drawing room and read the note her husband had left her that morning.

Meet me in the chapel, Merriweather. At ten. –Chance.

Should she go, or should she challenge him by remaining here? Force him to come to her. Was there any question? She already wore her cloak. Velvet and in his favorite shade of blue, the one he liked to strip off her. Oh, she'd go all right, and if she challenged him, it would be in other ways.

As she stepped into the gray, early morning light, the snow fell lightly on her shoulders and onto her upturned palm. She set her steps toward the chapel and pulled her cloak more tightly about her. It proved a short walk and delightful, though cold. The sky hung low and gray, but where the snow already piled up, the day glistened. The cold possessed its own particular sort of brightness.

She quickened her steps, her heart and eyes and hands anxious to find her husband. But when she saw the chapel, she stopped. There were coaches. Her brother's coach and others. She ran. And when she stepped into the chapel, she quite forgot how to breathe. Paper snowflakes hung from the ceiling. She reached up her fingertips, grazing the pointed bottom of one. How beautiful. But there—oh! Not just snowflakes. Birds, too. And beyond these fluttering paper beauties, the arms and edges of the pews twisted with paper flowers. And the pews themselves occupied.

She walked—almost floating—down the aisle. Her sisters, her brother, Quinton’s mother, their friends Cora and Bailey, and many from the village, and her husband waiting for her at the end of the aisle.

“You’re late, Merriweather,” he called out.

“Had I received your note sooner, I could have arrived sooner,” she said, returning his affectionate smile.

“Well get down here already.” He snapped his lapels and faced the altar.

As she walked toward him, she caught the grins and winks of her family and friends. The twins hugged each other and giggled, and Prudence, sitting next to Cora, bounced a bit.

Andromeda sat next to her husband, his ward at the very end of a pew. Andromeda’s face glowed, and Tristan’s lips quirked up, amused. His ward, the fourteen-year-old Earl of Avelford, gaped at the twins, smoothing his hair back, clearly less interested in the reason he’d been summoned here than in what Lottie’s sisters thought of him.

Lottie stopped and leaned close to Andromeda. “What is happening?”

Andromeda shook her head. “I’ve not a clue. He called us all here. You’d best go ask him.”

Lottie continued her journey up the aisle, stopping at the first pew where her mother-in-law sat, Princess on a lead. Tiny paper flowers decorated the dog’s collar, and she crushed them between her neck and paws as she slept on the stone floor at Lady Noble’s feet. Lottie knelt and scratched Princess behind the ear. In this very chapel, she’d given the dog to Quinton, an innocent girl’s means of healing a wounded boy’s heart. Princess was more loose fur and creaky knees than nimble, nipping, jumping

pup now. More white than brown spotted her muzzle. So much else had changed, too. Quinton waited for her now instead of walking away from her.

So, she finished her journey at his side. He wore a particular type of the Noble Smirk he'd adopted of late. Less challenge there and more satisfaction. But like the other, he wore it only when he looked at her.

“Well?” she asked. “Explain.”

He swallowed, inhaled deeply. “I owe you.” He took her hand, kissed her knuckles. “I ruined our first wedding day. I thought we might have a do-over.”

She felt her eyebrows pop up onto her forehead. “A do-over? And the snowflakes, the birds, the paper flowers... you?”

“Everything for you, Merriweather.” He lifted her chin and kissed her as soft as snow falling on a velvet cloak.

Cheers rose around them, whistles and shouts.

Samuel stood on the other side of Quinton, clearing his throat. “Get on with it, then. Why can't my sisters ever do things the proper way?”

Lottie hoped none of them did things the proper way.

“What would be the fun of that?” Quinton asked.

And wasn't that the perfect thing for him to say? He knew. He understood. When it came to souls, theirs were something of the same shape, and when it came to seeing the world, their eyes saw similar colors and patterns. And when it came to seeing each other, Lottie had learned in the past several months of marriage, they both

looked and felt through love.

When the clergyman asked them to recite the vows this time, Quinton did so with ease and a smile only for her. And when he promised to adore her, this time she believed him. And when he walked her down the aisle, arm and arm, leaning heavily one on the other, he plucked a paper flower, folded by his own hand, and tucked it behind her ear. And then he plucked a paper bird and tucked it into his pocket right above his beating breast. She plucked a snowflake, all angles and sharp beauty, and she put it in the pocket of her cloak.

Their audience followed them outside, snowflakes gathering on everyone's hats and shoulders.

Quinton called out, "Everyone back to Bluevale. There's to be a bit of a celebration. I'm not as expert at organizing these sorts of things as Lottie is, so it is sure to be amusing if only for what it is lacking."

"It is lacking nothing, I am sure," she whispered near his ear.

"Compliments, Merriweather? You've given me so many of late that I shall grow used to it."

"Good."

"Should I give you some in turn?" He took her hand and guided her down the path that led back to their home.

"You have already fed me compliments this morning. Over the breakfast table, you lauded the manner in which I eat toast. Such an odd thing to compliment, Quinton."

"Can't help it. You're adorable when you nibble it. Like a little mouse."

“Hm.” She tapped her bottom lip. “I’m not sure that’s a compliment.”

“It is.” He dropped a kiss to the top of her head.

“Then you’ve called me beautiful at least five times today.”

“You are beautiful.”

“Six.” And she stashed each one away like berries in her pocket, put into safekeeping to savor later. “And you said you cannot live without my kisses.”

“That’s less a compliment and more a fact of life.”

She knew exactly what he meant. The snow fell a bit faster, but she enjoyed it, hearing her family chat behind her as they walked.

“I’m worried about Prudence,” she said. “After the scandal at the end of last Season.”

He squeezed his arm around her waist, bringing her closer to his side. “Yes, it was all quite shocking. But she seems to be doing well.”

They peered over their shoulders to view Prudence walking beside Miss Cora Eastwood, face angled down as if she watched her feet.

“I worry—”

Quinton kissed the inside of her palm. “Damn glove. It’s in the way.” He threaded their fingers together. “I know you worry, love, but Prudence is strong. How can she not be with you as her sister?”

“You do say the loveliest things.”

“Perhaps it’s only because I want lovely things from you later,” he whispered, his breath hot near her ear. He brought their hands up, kissed the back of hers, and just as their first kiss in the woods on the one of the saddest days of her life had awakened her, just as his morning kisses awakened her every day now, this one poked every bit of her into yawning, stretching, languid wakefulness.

When they returned home, they’d have to leave their guests to themselves for a half hour or more.

For now, she nestled her face against the hard muscle of his arm, inhaled his crisp scent. “You’ve become a bit of a romantic, haven’t you?”

“Not much of a choice, have I? It’s what happens when a lady successfully romances a rogue.”

The End

Thank you for reading *How to Romance a Rogue*, book 2 in Charlie Lane’s new series: *A Gentleman’s Guide to Courtship*.

Dive right into book 3, *Between Courting and Kissing*.

Lady Prudence is plagued by a swarm of suitors she does not want, and one in particular--a bearded American with no manners--seems to want something more than marriage--her secrets.

Read on for a sneak-peek!

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Trapped. The candlelit ballroom, a gilded champagne bubble of a prison. No hope of escape. But Lady Prudence Merriweather desperately needed one. Three exits out of the cursed ballroom, and all of them guarded as if by dragons.

Before door number one, her brother, the Duke of Clearford. He held one of her suitors, the heir to the Earl of Heinsford, by the upper arm and scowled about the ballroom, no doubt looking for her. The Heir, as he must be called since he introduced himself in no other way, seemed resigned to his fate. He wore the placid expression of a small puppy dragged about by a determined young girl. He'd quite surrendered all hope.

Before exit number two—the double doors which led out to the garden—stood another suitor, Viscount Norton. A handsome enough fellow with lovely white gold hair and a soft smile. His clear green gaze traveled about the ballroom, looking for her, too. But not at all seeing her. They stood rather close. His gaze seemed locked on her face. She waved. Still, he failed to register her existence, his eyes remaining foggy as if she were a bit of glass he looked through to something more interesting beyond. A tiny pang between two ribs. She rubbed at it, reminded herself to embrace her habitual invisibility. She must consider it a boon. Particularly tonight.

Because she had much to do in a short time, and because her greatest adversary, sharper eyed than the others, stood before exit number three. Another suitor. The American, Mr. Benjamin Bailey. He stood wide-legged at the entrance to a parlor off the side of the room, as if he knew she might seek out less crowded climes. If he caught her, he would say something he'd learned from her brother's Guide to Courtship. Guide. Ha. The blind leading the blind. Her brother had never courted a woman. Prudence had never read the blasted book, but it likely included only dubious

advice. No kissing until betrothed. No flowers. Encourage competition. Silly maxims, and they'd moved Mr. Bailey no closer to success in his courtship of Prudence.

Neither did his costume. Climbing boy? To begin with, he stood a head above the other men in the ballroom, his shoulders wide enough to sit comfortably upon. Boy? Ha. A burly, bearded beast of a man entirely out of place here, better suited to somewhere men wrenched survival from a pitiless land with their bare hands and sharp teeth. And with the soot all about him, his long honey-colored hair held back loosely with a black ribbon, tangled as if he'd just dropped out of a tight, unpleasant place. Was that a rip in his sleeve? She'd give him a mark for accuracy. But a sweep? Bad taste. Particularly when she found the practice of using children for such dangerous tasks so unsavory. Put him in the negative, that did. Not that the other suitors had accumulated marks enough to tread water. They were all drowning.

Not their faults, really. She did not wish to be courted. They swam toward a goal which didn't even exist—marriage to her.

The American's sharp, blue eyes caught her looking, and his beard rearranged itself into what might be a smile if he knew a good barber. He'd caught her. Those eyes glittered with purpose, and he took one powerful stride toward her, his body rippling into predatory life.

She darted behind a woman wearing a wig and dress from the previous century. Thank heavens for the lazy during masquerade balls. The woman's reluctance to find a costume anywhere outside of her own attics proved useful. But Prudence couldn't stay safe behind wide panniers and sky-high powdered sausage curls for long. She pulled her pocket watch from her skirts. A quarter hour till midnight and she'd still not managed to leave the ballroom. If she did not do so soon, tonight's poetry reading would never happen.

Poetry readings, particularly of the sort Prudence helped organize for Miss Cora Eastwood, required a careful touch, an eye to detail. No one could know they even

existed. Except for the right people. Women of the ton who liked their poems a little naughty.

They needed a common place of congregation for their audience—balls. And they needed an abandoned room inside the residences where those entertainments occurred. Prudence relied on gossip to discover the locations they would commandeer for their next readings. Made them difficult to find in the middle of the night.

Would be easier to do the sensible thing and hold a select and private salon in broad daylight, but Cora's muse demanded certain details be met before delivering. Namely, anonymity. High noon and the bright light of the waking world would not suffice.

And now Prudence was crunched for time.

Her feet tapped. She'd be late. If she didn't find the room and Cora, who would ensure the candles were perfectly lit? They hit against her legs in her skirt pockets. Cora had the pocket tinderbox secured beneath her stays. Useless without Prudence's candles. And if Prudence never escaped, who would place the discreet markers along the path to the room so the brave women of the ton, out for a little entertainment, could more easily find it? Most importantly, who would take up guard in the hall to ensure no one discovered their little meeting?

No one but Prudence. Cora may be Prudence's closest friend, but not even friendship hid the poet's faults. A mind like holey cheese. Unable to hold on to the small details which mattered. Cora could metaphor with the best poets London had to offer. But her little enterprise, the secret midnight poetry readings at balls, had lacked finesse until Prudence had decided to help her. Now they ran like a well-turned clock.

Not tonight, though. Because Prudence couldn't escape the blasted ballroom. She inhaled, exhaled, hard little breaths to pound down the frustration rising up her neck, making it difficult to breathe.

Then behind her, the comically wide skirts rustled, and the woman's neck twisted. "Prudence, dear? Is that you bumping my backside?"

Prudence jumped as the wigged woman turned, her panniers knocking over a potted palm. Aunt Millicent. She blinked at Prudence and held up a quizzing glass to her eye, magnifying that orb as well as the beauty patch shaped like a heart stuck just at its corner.

"Aunt! What a surprise."

"How so? I'm your chaperone."

"Ah. Yes. I mean... I didn't see you when you arrived. What a magnificent costume!"

"Your grandmother's old gown and wig."

"Don't you think it a tad..." Prudence did not drop her gaze to her aunt's bosom. "Risqué?"

Millicent adjusted her stays, pushing even more of her pale flesh into view above the gown's bodice. "Not nearly enough, dear. Where are your suitors?"

Prudence peered around the edges of Aunt Millicent's wig. "Everywhere."

Oh, but Lord Norton no longer stood before the garden doors. Retreating outside was not the best option. If she went out, she'd have to come back in. Created an entirely new problem. But... needs must. Because if Samuel and The Heir did not find her, the American would.

A fan smacked the side of Prudence's head.

“Ow!” She scowled at her aunt.

“You should be dancing, dear,” the woman said, snapping open her weapon.

“I’m feeling a bit fatigued.” Prudence stepped sideways toward the open doors. “I’ll just pop out for a moment...” Another step sideways.

Aunt Millicent fluttered her fan. “His Grace wishes to see you. I told him I’d send you his way before retiring to the card room.”

Her brother. “I’ll find Samuel. I promise. You have fun, Aunt Millicent. Good luck!”

Her aunt narrowed her eyes, seemed to realize Prudence’s easy agreement to speak with her brother was too neat a victory. But then she shrugged, the motion nearly popping one breast out of her gown. She caught it, though, before disaster, and chuckled as she turned to push her way through the crowd. She folded her fan and waved it above her head. “You have fun, too, dear!”

Prudence made slow but steady progress toward the outer doors where the ballroom spilled into the night-shadowed garden. She kept her head down and made herself small. Not hard to hide when no one looked. Those she passed thought her nothing more than an evening draft from the garden. As usual. Prudence quite blended into the background. A pane of glass to be looked through, not at.

The doors, already open to combat the warmth of the crush inside, welcomed her, and she stepped beyond them and into—

“Prudence, there you are.”

She groaned, rocking back into the light of the ballroom. So close. She sewed a smile onto her face and turned.

Samuel stood behind her, back stiff, shoulders wide, dark hair perfectly and fashionably coiffed over a handsome face and serious, gray eyes. The only concession he made to the masquerade was a narrow domino covering his eyes. If he knew what she planned to do this evening, he'd pack her off to the country and never let her leave.

"Suitors," he said in an even tone, "are not out in the gardens."

"Perhaps they are."

"Suitors are in the ballroom, Prudence, dancing. As you should be. With them."

"I will. It's merely too hot in here. I'm melting, Samuel." She gazed longingly toward the garden.

He flicked the black veil framing her face. "I'm in all black, just as you are, and I'm perfectly fine. Not melting at all."

"Then you have a talent for wearing black. I, apparently, do not." That much was true. She'd pushed the front of the veil back over her coiffure, hiding her dark-blonde hair and giving herself space to breathe.

"But you do have a talent for dancing, Sister." He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her back toward the ballroom. "I've seen you. You have the ability to captivate any suitor with your light step and grace."

"But I do not want to captivate anyone. How many times must I explain? I wish to be—"

"A spinster. Liar. You're scared."

She gasped, tugged from his embrace. "Am not!"

“Then dance.” He waved an arm toward the dancers, toward—blast it all. The Heir stood waiting nearby, blinking at Samuel. Awaiting, no doubt, His Grace’s instructions. “You wish to dance, Tallsby, do you not?”

Without looking at Prudence, The Heir nodded.

Samuel guided her toward him, stopped her just before the man who did not quite fit his name. Perhaps he did stand tall. When he did not stoop.

She bobbed a curtsy. “Good evening.”

Finally, he looked at her. His eyes widened as if she’d appeared out of nowhere. “There you are, Lady Prudence. Would you dance with me?”

She glanced at Samuel, wide-legged and grim-faced, and she leaned close and whispered, “Where is your knife? Come. I know you have one on your person.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why do you wish to know?”

“I would like to stab you with it.” The words ground between her teeth.

Samuel nudged her toward Tallsby. “I merely desire you to be happy.”

“Look to your own happiness, Brother,” she grumbled, but she took The Heir’s outstretched hand.

“You have only just arrived, Lady Prudence?” He swept her out onto the dancefloor to await the first notes of the music with the other couples.

“I’ve been here an hour at least.”

He took her hand in one of his and put his other hand on her back. “Are you well this

evening?”

“Yes.” She placed her remaining hand on his shoulder.

“And what are you dressed as?”

“Midnight.” She spoke without looking at him, her entire attention on Samuel, who watched from the edges of the ballroom.

Tallsby watched Samuel, too, as the first chord of a violin wavered into the air. “Ah. How... creative. Have you seen your sister tonight? Lady Noble? All in gold.” He sighed. “A picture of beauty and elegance.” As he swung her into the first turn of the waltz, he finally looked at her. “Perhaps if I may be so bold as to make a suggestion, you should have worn gold. Or blue. Something more delicate. Black, I’m afraid, does not suit you.”

“I shall take that under advisement.”

“Do you know, I courted your other sister one Season—Lady Andromeda. Mrs. Kingston now. Such a sweet soul. I would have liked to court Lady Noble, but her beauty rather intimidated me. Mrs. Kingston possesses a less fearful beauty, but she seemed too serene and peaceful to be disturbed with masculine interest.”

“I’m not sure I take your meaning, Lord Tallsby.”

“You, however, my lady, are perfect for me. Not so terribly beautiful as your sisters, nor so angelic. And unlike your younger sisters, there is only one of you. I’m not quite exotic enough to enjoy the idea that there’s a copy of my wife running about England.”

“Thank you?” If only he hadn’t approached her. But then, he hadn’t really. He’d approached Samuel. Or Samuel had approached him, dragged him toward her, as if

Prudence couldn't attract her own suitors.

But then... she couldn't, could she?

"I'm afraid I'm feeling indisposed." Did she look pale enough? Black washed her out. The truth—her stomach a bit sour, and her jaw so tight it shot pain straight up to her temples.

"Heavens, Lady Prudence. You must sit." Tallsby guided her off the floor and toward a row of chairs near, thankfully, the garden doors.

"Lemonade?" she asked, popping open a black lace fan.

He jumped. "Yes!" And he disappeared toward the refreshments.

She wasted no time slipping into the night air with a deep breath, her shoulders relaxing. Escape the ballroom—done. Excellent. Her spirits lifted a bit, that sour sting in her belly dissipating a bit. Now onto the next task. Nothing better for low spirits than arranging everything just so.

First, she must re-enter the house. She put her hands on her hips and frowned up at the edifice. Bellingham House was rather old, and London crept closer to it year by year. The Marquess of Bellingham resided here, an old friend of her father's before he passed away. And now of her brother. Perhaps Bellingham was more of an old friend to the Duke of Clearford, whomever that duke may be. No matter. He possessed excellent trust in mankind; almost every window and door thrown open and lovely little balconies on the first floor. Trees, too. Good for climbing onto those balconies.

Cora's maid had said they could meet in a first-floor parlor in the midst of redecoration. But which room was that? Impossible to say from the outside.

Choosing the location for the poetry recitation always proved the most difficult bit of their enterprise. They couldn't stride into the planned venue and demand to know what room would prove most isolated and abandoned. They relied heavily on details gathered through the strongest information network known to the world—the servants. Information cleverly gathered as gossip from Cora's maid. Or through Prudence's younger sister, Isabella. She knew, somehow, everything that happened in London.

But which window would prove easiest to climb into? Prudence walked back several steps and bumped into something.

A giggle.

Not something. Someone.

"Apologies," Prudence mumbled, flipping her veil down over her face. The woman and her beau, shepherd and shepherdess, ran off into the bushes, and Prudence tilted her head back to study the house's facade.

"Lady Prudence?"

She cursed. She knew that voice floating out from the ballroom. Lord Norton. She spun on a gasp and fled into the garden. Dressed as midnight, the dark would conceal her. As long as the gold thread sewn into her skirts and bodice and veil did not catch the moonlight or the light spilling out of the house, she'd remain well hidden.

But no closer to her goal. Oh, for the chance to wail her frustration skyward. She'd have to schedule a good scream in the garden for tomorrow afternoon.

She dashed away from a Greek god chasing a goddess down the lane and ducked behind a row of prickly hedges. Had the entire ballroom decided to hold court outside? The masks likely gave them all greater courage to cavort how they pleased.

And with whom they pleased.

“Lady Prudence?” Norton followed still, looking for her even though he never looked at her.

Bent over to remain hidden behind the short hedges, she darted between Queen Elizabeth in a stiff ruff and a swan with a little orange beak attached to a domino.

“Lady Prudence?” Lord Norton’s ever-patient voice.

She could not hate him. Such a sweet temperament. Always accommodating. A man who followed the rules of gentlemanly conduct with absolute perfection. And whose continued interest began to make her thighs and back ache. She could not much longer hold this posture, knees half-bent, stooped over behind a bush. She floated to a crouching position, her skirts billowing out around her knees. A bit of relief for her thighs. Though this position also would not last long.

How had it come to this?

If her thighs ached any more, they’d burn holes right through her skirts. She had to move soon or lose all feeling below her waist. She found her pocket watch, the silver warmed by her body, and pulled it out. In the light of the moon, she could see its white face clearly. She should be in the room already. Her schedule in ruins.

“Lady Prudence?” Norton’s voice so close now, right over the other side of the hedge.

She clapped her hands over her mouth, stopped breathing, lost her balance, and toppled backward. Her arms flew wide, and she gasped, a startled gurgling sort of sound. The house rocked out of view, giving way to the night sky, and she slammed her eyes closed as her head slammed into the ground. She waited for the running footsteps, the worried query as to her health.

But they never came. Lord Norton must not have heard her fall.

Now her chance to run. Surely, he'd ambled off deeper into the garden. She could throw her veil down over her face and make for the house, dart back into the ballroom—easiest route—and just elbow whatever suitor stepped into her path out of the way. She needed to be on schedule, to make sure everything was just right for Cora. Because without just right and on time, there existed only chaos. Lists and schedules kept the world from falling apart, and Prudence would stick to hers, no matter what plagues terrorized London.

Despite the tender lump pulsing at the back of her head, she opened her eyes, ready for battle.

And looked right up into the scruffy face of the American.

Mr. Benjamin Bailey. Dash it all. She'd been discovered.