



In Service to a Lyon (The Lyon's Den Connected World)

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Category: Historical

Description: A lowly servant who may be French nobility. A scarred English lieutenant who hates all French. Can these two find love in the Lyon's Den?

Marie Cadough is a French servant who's learned to hide who she is. Sent to England as a child to flee the French Revolution, she and her uncle escaped suspicion by working as servants in a London household. But when she is dismissed at the hands of an unreasonable mistress, her uncle finds them new positions in the household of Mrs. Dove-Lyon, the Black Widow of Whitehall.

Lieutenant Samuel Gage is scarred by war. Having lost his closest friend to a duel and seen hearts broken by heartless Frenchwomen, he has developed an irrational dislike of all things French. But when he suffers painful memories from loud music at the Lyon's Den, a kind servant takes pity on him. He never expected her to be French.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:22 am

Gerberoy, France, 1796

Once upon a time, there lived a very rich family in France, and a husband and wife who loved each other very much. They had a little girl with golden curls and a sweet smile who liked to laugh, dance, and play with her doll, but she also loved being in the kitchen with the cooks, tasting their food, and making mud pies.

But when the people of France rose up against the aristocracy, it was no longer safe to be rich, or titled, or to wear such pretty dresses, ride in fancy carriages, or live in a grand estate. The people had spoken, and they pursued the rich families of France with knives, stakes, and a monstrous device that shone in the sun called a guillotine, whose large blade soon stained red with the lives of the bluebloods who'd met their ends upon it.

It became so dangerous to be wealthy that the husband and wife decided it was best to send their little girl away to England to be safe. But they had no family there, and had no one they could trust but their faithful manservant. So they sent him with their little girl on a great ship, with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and some money for their passage. The ship left Calais during a great storm, headed to Dover. The little girl cried at being separated from her parents, but the manservant told her this was not farewell, only *à bientôt*, for now. And as the ship left the harbor, the mother and father clutched each other, the ocean spray stinging their faces, mixing with their salty tears, and prayed that someday, they might see their daughter again.

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London, 1815

The Campbell Residence, Upper Clapton

Marie Cadeaux stirred the stew, a rich peasant dish of chicken, onions, potatoes, carrots, and red wine. The cheaper, the better, and as the chicken breasts turned a delightful dark-red color, the smells drifting from the simmering stew made her mouth water.

She took a wooden spoon and tasted the sauce slightly, relishing the hot, wet liquid. It was as delicious as she'd thought it'd be but needed more salt. She added another dash of salt and pepper and kept stirring.

She stood in a medium-sized airy kitchen with stone floors, dimly lit by aged windows to the outdoors, and no view to speak of, for it was on the ground floor and connected to the tradesmen's entrance below a set of steps. When it rained the earth threatened to flood, and it wasn't always safe. Often, the dim sunlight only filtered a few rays down into the kitchen, so the room would be dark and in shadow. But it was warm and safe enough, and Marie got to do what she loved best: cooking .

She'd pinned back her straight, brown hair, rich with almost a tint of red in the sunlight, and retied her worn linen kerchief to keep the strands out of her face.

"Hello? Mary, are you there?" a voice called.

Marie's mouth quirked in a frown. Her name was Marie, yet her employers found that to be too French, along with her accent, her surname, and even the way she turned her

head. And the French were at war with the English, so they persisted in calling her Mary Cadough, instead of Marie Cadeaux. Mrs. Campbell's idea.

Marie brushed her hands off on her apron and turned around. "Yes?"

The upper stairs creaked under the careful weight of Mr. Campbell, who looked around as if to see who was present and entered the kitchen. A large man with a hanging belly and squat face like a toad, he loved to come by and check on the meals being prepared for dinner, and to taste some if he could.

At that moment, his eye took in the sight of Marie in her simple, homespun dress and apron, and he licked his lips. "And what do we have cooking for tonight's dinner?"

"Well, I know Mrs. Campbell said she wanted chicken, but I thought since it's February and the nights are still cold, you might like a bit of stew." Coq au vin, she thought. She'd consulted her trusty recipe book, an old French tome that had belonged to her parents, now passed down to her. She gently closed the cover and pushed it across the worktable. It might have been battered and old, but she treasured it.

Mr. Campbell came closer, happily sniffing the air until he stood beside her. "May I?"

As if he needed to ask. It was his home, but she was glad he respected her domain. Really, it was Mrs. Herring's province, but Marie had been working in the kitchen since she'd been a child. Mrs. Herring trusted her with the sauces and deboning of chicken, but her salads needed more work.

Mr. Campbell took the wooden spoon and leaned over the stew, tipping the spoon in and tasting the rich sauce. He smacked his lips. "Delicious. I love chicken stew. Can't wait. Will you serve it with crusty bread rolls? With butter?"

Marie's face split into a smile and she nodded.

At that moment, Mrs. Herring walked into the kitchen with Mrs. Campbell. A tall, thin woman with a long, pointed nose; bushy, short, brown hair; and sharp eyes who reminded Marie of a crane or egret, the lady of the house tended to wear shades of grey and opted for a rather severe look, which made her pinched features stand out more. At the sight of her husband standing with Marie, her mouth withered. "What are you doing?"

"Tasting tonight's dinner," Mr. Campbell said. "Try this chicken stew, pet. It's wonderful."

"I doubt you need to be associating with the servants, Michael." Mrs. Campbell sniffed and eyed the bubbling pot. "That doesn't look like the roast chicken I ordered."

"I thought you might like a stew, Mrs. Campbell. Seeing as it's cold out still," Marie said.

Mrs. Herring shot her a warning look. A stout woman with a thickening middle but a clean starched apron, she often communicated through looks and emotive sounds rather than words, if a person was quick enough to take her meaning.

Mrs. Campbell's upper lip twitched. "That is not what I asked for." She walked briskly over to the stew and sniffed, coughing. "Mary, throw it out. It's ruined. You've added far too much salt and I can smell the pepper from here. What a waste." She tsked .

"But, ma'am, I can fix it, I swear," Marie said.

"Mary, I did not ask for your opinion. A good servant does not offer argument, only

an apology. You have ruined this chicken I had Mrs. Herring buy specially for tonight. You knew we were inviting Father Reynolds over and his son to meet Hortense. They will want something delectable and excellent, not a plain chicken stew. What are we, peasants? Throw it out. And Mrs. Herring, go buy another chicken. Prepare it yourself this time, if you please.”

Mrs. Herring’s eyes widened and Marie’s mouth dropped open. “Mrs. Campbell, I’m sorry. I can fix it. We can serve the chicken with the sauce.”

“Did you not hear me?” Her employer’s voice was shrill. “I said to throw it out. Why on Earth would I serve these men some red chicken in an over-salted sauce? The food is a reflection of our household, and I will not have it be salty.”

“But, Mrs. Campbell—” Marie started.

“No. Enough.” She held up a hand. “Mary, I took you in out of the goodness of my heart, you and that uncle of yours. But he at least knows his place. You won’t find him sneaking French dishes into our kitchen.”

Marie’s eyes widened.

“Oh, don’t think I don’t know—you and he are likely spies or traitors to the Crown. You’re nothing but a pair of refugees trying to hide under the goodness of the Prince Regent’s kindness, all the while muttering in French to each other. It’s rude.”

“We aren’t traitors, ma’am,” Marie said. “And surely, we would be traitors to France, not England. We are not English, so how could we betray an English ruler?”

Mrs. Campbell reddened. “I’ve had quite enough of your insolence. If I cannot trust you to fulfill a simple request, that means I cannot trust you to do anything. Get out of my house.”

“What?”

“Prudence, that’s a bit harsh,” Mr. Campbell said.

“I wasn’t asking you, Michael.” She glared at Marie. “What are you still doing here? I told you, girl. Pack your bags. You are dismissed from my service. ”

“But—”

“Mrs. Campbell, let me fix this,” said Mrs. Herring. “I can buy a new chicken and make it good and proper for Father Reynolds and his son. But I’ll need Marie’s help. Please, ma’am.”

Mrs. Campbell’s eyes were steely as she appraised Marie. “You may assist Mrs. Herring. But I want you gone by tonight.” She turned and snapped her fingers. “Michael. Come away from there. I need you.” She stomped up the stairs, her long skirts whisking in her wake.

Mr. Campbell turned pink and he patted Marie’s hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll make her see reason. She always gets like this before we entertain. You just do what you do best.” He looked longingly at the stew and followed his wife upstairs.

Once the door between the kitchen and upper floor had closed, Marie sank into a chair. “What am I going to do?”

Mrs. Herring clucked, making a clicking noise with her tongue as she shook her head. “Ooh, you’ve done it now, girl. I like your stew as much as the next person, but you know what the missus is like. She wants things done her way and if you don’t do it, you’re out.”

“Do you really think she’s given me the sack?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have a word with Mr. Campbell and see what we can do, but you’d best look for another place to stay tonight.”

Marie stiffened. “But... I don’t have anywhere to go.”

“Go get Mr. Allard. He’ll know what to do.” She made a shooing motion with her hands. “Go on, and I’ll see what I can do about this mess.”

Mrs. Herring, as usual, pronounced his last name wrong, Marie noted. It was pronounced Allard, like “renard,” with a soft “d,” not Allard as in “mannered.” But it didn’t matter.

Marie darted outside to the courtyard, where Mr. Allard was chopping wood for the fire. Now in his late fifties, he still had the physical speed and strength of a young man, but there was a certain stiffness in his movements she detected now, as well as traces of grey and silver in his hair.

He was a sort of jack of all trades—at times underbutler, footman, valet, dogsbody, everything. He was infinitely more valuable to the Campbells than herself, she knew. But she had known him since she’d been a child, and he was the closest thing she had to a living male relative. They were not related, she knew that. But... they were connected somehow. He had always told her to call him “uncle,” so she did.

“Uncle Baptiste...” she started.

He looked up from his chopping and rested the axe blade to the ground. He gave her an easy smile, then saw her expression. “What is it?”

“Mrs. Campbell, she’s... She’s dismissed me,” Marie said.

He stared. “What? Why? What’s happened?” he asked in French.

Marie sniffed and replied, “I took the chicken she wanted to use to entertain her guests tonight and thought it’d make a nice stew instead. Coq au vin .”

“And she found out and decided she’d wanted it roasted.” He shook his head. “That woman wouldn’t know good food if it hit her in the face.”

They shared a smile, and Marie looked away. “She’s told me to stay somewhere else tonight. But I have nowhere to go and I don’t know where...”

He set down his axe. “It’s all right. I’ll make inquiries. We’ll leave tomorrow morning before breakfast.”

“‘We’? You’re coming with me?”

“Of course.” He gave her a swift hug. “As it so happens, I’ve been thinking of leaving for some time now. But you seemed happy here, so I stayed. I was just waiting for the right opportunity, so here we are. Don’t worry.”

She watched him go and went inside. There wasn’t a lot to do, as the Campbells had more servants, so she went upstairs to her room that she shared with another maid and began packing a bag. She wrapped her family’s cookbook in one of her work dresses and carefully tucked it away, making sure it wasn’t disturbed.

Marie heard from the other servants that Mrs. Campbell was delighted with the prospect of her leaving, but Mr. Campbell was less so to learn that they would be losing Mr. Allard as well. He offered Marie’s uncle money to stay, but Mr. Allard refused. As he told Marie later, his price was her, and on that, he would not budge. Either they both stayed, or they both left. So Mr. Campbell paid him his wages and wished him luck.

Marie didn’t see Uncle Baptiste at dinner, nor the rest of that evening. As she climbed

into her small bed, the only one she'd known since being a child, she wondered what was to come of her. She was being kicked out of the only home she remembered. When she joined the other servants at dinner that night, there were many knowing looks and poorly hidden smiles.

She had no friends, aside from Mr. Allard, but she felt embarrassed to sit there as everyone knew. They dined on the chicken stew she'd prepared, and whilst Marie couldn't tell if Mrs. Herring was being resourceful or insulting by disregarding Mrs. Campbell's instructions to throw it out, the empty bowls and enthusiastic eating made her feel a little better. She excused herself early and went up the stairs, closing the door. But it hung ajar, and she could hear the others' conversation as she paused halfway up.

"Well, I won't be sorry to never see her again," Hannah, a housemaid, said. "She walks around like she's the Queen of Sheba, always giving herself airs and acting like she's the best cook who ever lived. You should see the recipe book she has in her room. Full of French recipes. It's not right."

"Enough of that," Mrs. Herring said. "She's only gone because Mrs. Campbell doesn't like her, that's all. Her work was fine."

"But dismissed without a reference?" Thomas, an underbutler, said. "No wages? I heard the missus told her to clear out. It's about time."

"I'm sorry to see her go," Luke, a footman, said. "She's a right pretty thing. Nice to look at. And always has a smile for me."

"You always think a girl has a smile for you, Luke," Mrs. Herring said. "Besides, Mr. Campbell's more sorry to lose Mr. Allard. Where he'll find another underbutler and valet like that, I don't know. And so cheap."

“That was part of the deal, though,” said old Mr. Jeffries, the butler well past his prime and on his way to retirement. “I was there. The girl was just a child when she and Mr. Allard came by and begged to be taken on, for cheap. And in return, they’d be overlooked.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked.

“They came here from France, via Dover. Fleeing with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The way he tells it, her mother was a beauty as well. He talks of her like she was a princess.”

“It’s no wonder Marie has such airs if that’s what her mama was like,” Hannah said. “What happened to her?”

“I never met her. Mr. Jeffries explained. “But it’s a hard decision to send a child away and not even write to the girl. But that was years ago. Whoever Mary’s mother is, she’s probably dead.”

Marie’s shoulders slumped as she took the back staircase up to the servants’ quarters at the top of the house. She had never received a letter from her mother, as far as she could remember.

She pulled out the silver locket that hung around her neck, a keepsake from her mother. It was small but bore two miniature portraits of her mother and father, both young and comely, both smiling as if they had smiles ready, just for her. She looked at it whenever she felt low or needed a little sign that she wasn’t alone. She relied on her uncle, and was grateful to have him to depend on, as she was a French outsider in an English household, but deep in her heart, she missed her parents terribly.

The next morning, Marie and Mr. Allard quit the Campbells’ residence for the last time. Mr. Allard did not look back, but Marie did.

“Forget about them,” he told her. “This place was never your home.”

“What do you mean? It’s the only home I ever knew.”

He shook his head and pulled the small trunk of clothes with him down the street. “Home is with the people you love, who love you. It’s not working for a bunch of stuffy people who turn you out on the street.”

Marie sniffed and tried not to cry. She’d had to endure Hannah’s teasing that night after dinner, with the maid telling her she was likely to die of dysentery within the year, or worse. At that moment, anything sounded better than staying at the Campbells’.

“Where are we going? Did you find somewhere for us to stay?” Marie asked. She hoped it would not be somewhere like Covent Garden, as she knew it was a rowdy place at night, with many taverns, pubs, and bawdy houses where women of loose morals roamed the streets.

“I made inquiries and found us a place. It was all I could find at short notice.” He sniffed.

She wondered if she had offended him but remained silent and kept her eyes and ears open as they wandered into London’s West End, to Cleveland Row, and approached a very distinctive blue house at the tradesmen’s entrance. She had little but a small traveling trunk with some clothes, a recipe book, and her locket. Not a lot to speak of for the ripe, old age of twenty-two, she supposed.

The house on Cleveland Row was very grand, tall with high windows and a balcony with blue, painted brick walls. It sat at the end of a fashionable street, and many fine carriages with well-dressed couples drove past.

Marie hugged her purple cloak closer and idly wished she could be as grand as some of the ladies walking by. They looked so distinguished in their shined boots, bonnets, and walking dresses. Comparing that to her grey, homespun dress and faded, purple cloak, she felt positively provincial. She kept her head down as they walked by, and she followed Mr. Allard into the tradesmen's entrance. She vaguely heard them being welcomed inside, and she stepped inside a large kitchen.

Instantly, she looked up. The air was full of smells, delicious ones too, and her stomach rumbled, for they had not yet eaten today. The sounds of chopping, slicing, dicing, soups simmering, cooks stirring, servants covering a worktable with flour and pounding dough with hard slaps—it was music to Marie's ears.

She took a step toward the cooking food, then stopped. Her traveling trunk struck her right foot and pinched it. She bit her lip in pain and straightened.

Mr. Allard looked back at her. "Well? Come on."

The housekeeper, a stern woman, met them and showed them up to their rooms on the top floor, which was divided by sex. Once they were situated, they met back again and were shown through a grand hall and to a private parlor, that they were informed belonged to the proprietor, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.

Marie stood by and fidgeted as they were bid to sit down on a plush, pink sofa that looked far too grand and accepted a cup of tea from the lady. Mrs. Dove-Lyon was a middle-aged woman swathed in black, but expertly so. She wore a gauzy, black veil over her face and was clearly in mourning attire but managed to make it look elegant rather than depressing. But there was no denying the cold intelligence in her eyes. "Good morning. Thank you for coming here so early."

After fretting all night over her situation, Marie was tired and could barely keep her eyes open. After a strong cup of tea and a plate of biscuits, Marie and Mr. Allard

were sent to work in the household. Marie was given a parlor maid's uniform and was put to work setting the fires and tidying the rooms while Mr. Allard worked with the footmen below stairs. It was long and tiring work, but Marie was glad of it, for it kept her busy.

By the time luncheon had come around, she was ravenous and gladly joined the others at the table downstairs. The meal was a thick, potato soup, which, while it proved to be stodgy and filling, left something to be desired in terms of taste. Marie tasted a spoonful and looked at Uncle Baptiste, who wrinkled his nose slightly and tried to withhold a disappointed sigh. It needed salt, pepper, and herbs. Maybe a splash of white wine to make it divine.

But she was hungry and ate her portion, and she tried to overlook the blandness of the food. She looked up into the watchful gaze of a thick man with round cheeks.

"You like that, eh?" He winked. "I made that soup. It's good, isn't it?"

"Mmm," Marie agreed, not wanting to speak out of turn.

"What are you thinking?" a mousy-haired girl who sat at her right asked.

Marie thought to herself: a bit of onion, perhaps some garlic, herbs would liven it up a bit. But no matter. She was there to work, not to cook. Maybe she'd get a chance someday. She licked her lips at the thought and ate more of the stodgy soup.

There was a gasp, and people stared at her.

"Marie," Mr. Allard chided. "Hold your tongue."

Marie blinked and looked up from her soup. Had she spoken aloud? "What?"

The man's friendly smile disappeared. He looked at her with a hard gaze. "You think this could be improved, eh? And what do you know about cooking? Do you know the difference between a sauce and a soup?"

"Of course. I've been making soups since I was six."

"Care to put your skills to the test?" the cook asked, his eyes narrowed.

"All right."

The butler, a Mr. Jones, an older gentleman who stood tall, thin, and with an impressive grey mustache, who sat at the head of the table, clapped his hands. "No. We will have no competitions here. This is a household, not a gambling den."

Eyebrows rose.

Mr. Jones's cheeks reddened. "All right, fair point. No pun intended. But still. We will have decorum downstairs, even if the patrons upstairs do not."

Now it was Marie's eyebrows that rose. "What do you mean?"

Heads turned to her, glancing at her and Mr. Allard.

"She doesn't know?" a footman asked.

"No, she does not," Mr. Allard said.

"You didn't tell her?" another asked.

"What don't I know?" Marie's eyebrows furrowed.

Faces glanced at her, then looked away.

“Will no one tell me?” Marie asked.

One of the men sat at the dining table, built stocky and with a military bearing, looked up from his soup. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon runs an establishment upstairs called the Lyon’s Den. It’s where men go to forget about their troubles, play cards and gamble a bit, and meet women.” He grunted. “She’s a very good matchmaker.”

Marie blinked at Mr. Allard. “Uncle, we’re living here?”

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Marie looked at Uncle Baptiste in confusion and pushed away her soup. “A matchmaker’s home and where men and women go to gamble. That’s our new place of employment?”

“Oi,” one man said, and she received some unfriendly looks.

“Sorry,” Marie said.

“Is that so bad?” the mousy-haired maid at her side asked.

Marie stirred her thick soup.

“We needed a place to stay and Mrs. Dove-Lyon is a good employer,” Mr. Allard said.

His dark eyes sharp, the cook banged the table. “Enough of this. First you insult my soup, then you turn your nose up at Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Who do you think you are, the Prince Regent?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult anyone.”

“Well, it’s too late for that,” the cook said. “You think you can put on airs like some rich lady? Think again. This is your last night here.”

Mr. Jones at the head of the table cleared his throat. “Charles.”

The cook, Charles, reddened. “Sorry, Mr. Jones.”

The butler said, “I think we can forgive Miss Cadough a little surprise. It is not every day a person can work for a woman like Mrs. Dove-Lyon. And Charles, I agree. You prepare delicious meals for the patrons upstairs, but we eat simpler fare.”

“That’s the way it should be.” Mrs. Drummond, the head cook, a middle-aged woman with ruddy cheeks and dashes of flour on her, gave Charles an encouraging nod.

“Perhaps so. But I too find the soup to be a bit ordinary,” Mr. Jones said.

Charles’s face fell in dismay. “What are you saying?”

Spice it up , Marie thought, but she wisely held her tongue, successfully this time. She received a warning look from Baptiste. She instead took a sip of her tea.

“Perhaps we might give the girl a chance to cook, and see if she is any good,” Mr. Jones said.

“No,” Mrs. Drummond said. “This is my kitchen and I say what goes on and who cooks in it. That Marie girl and her uncle just got here and we don’t know them from Adam. She could poison us all, or he could.”

“Mrs. Drummond,” the butler started.

“Madam,” Uncle Baptiste said.

“Nay, I don’t mean no insult—it’s just, you’re new here,” the head cook explained. “We don’t know you. You’re a housemaid and he’s a manservant. Neither of you work in the kitchen and that’s that.”

Charles sniffed loudly as if to say, Hear, hear .

“I’m sorry. I meant no offense,” Marie said.

“Charles accepts your apology. Now, Mrs. Drummond, what have you planned for tonight’s party?” Mr. Jones asked.

Mrs. Drummond relayed an impressive list of hors d’oeuvres, including small short crust pastry pies with minced beef and mustard, and little almond tarts with preserved blackberry jam.

Marie’s mouth watered at the mention of the culinary treats, and she glanced down at the soup. It seemed even plainer now.

The meal ended and Marie shadowed the other housemaids that evening. The mousy-haired maid at her side, introduced to her as Lucy, was kinder to her than the others. Now that the sun had set, Marie helped Lucy and Harriet, another parlor maid, clear the table and put away the servants’ dirty dishes. Lucy offered to help Marie get settled and led her up the back stairs.

The noise of laughter, music, and chatter could be heard. Marie asked, “What is all that? Are people gambling?”

“Want to see?”

“Sure.”

In their maids’ uniforms, they would attract attention, but Lucy kept to the shadows and corridors and led Marie to a spot where a balcony was, overlooking the main hall. The strains of a harp, pipe, and stringed instruments could be heard playing a light and warm tune, and Marie wandered over to the balcony.

“Marie, come back,” Lucy hissed, but Marie didn’t pay attention.

She was struck by the sight of such pretty women, dressed in their finest, in silk and satin dresses of pink, white, and purple, some dancing, some chatting with the men. Clusters and couples of men and women stood by small tables where card games like faro and hazard were played, and dice were rolled.

Marie rested her rough hands on the balcony railing and watched as some couples danced, and others stood by to watch, whilst footmen drifted in and out, bearing wine and the small appetizers mentioned by Mrs. Drummond from before.

It was like looking into another world through a window, and Marie wished with all her heart that she might join their ranks one day. She wished that she might have an occasion to put on a pretty dress and fine shoes and stockings, wear a ribbon in her hair or a fine necklace and silk gloves, and spend an hour or two laughing and dancing with eligible young men. To dance away the hours sounded like fun, much more so than preparing beds or folding linens.

“Marie, come away from there,” Lucy hissed. “Now, before you’re seen.”

“Wait.”

The music was loud and drums were beating loudly. But there, off to the side, a young man in uniform stepped back, clutching his head.

Marie paused. “There’s something wrong.”

“What do you mean? Come away. The men will deal with it.”

“No, the man down there is in trouble.” Marie hurried down the stairwell, her small boots tapping against the steps as she dashed down, entering the main room. So far, no one had seen her, but she didn’t care. She knew the look of a man in pain. She quickly glanced around the room, then spotted him.

It was a young man with light-brown hair tied back in a queue, with a patrician nose and round, sloping chin. He wore the smart, red coat uniform of a man in the English army, and he stepped back and covered his ears.

Marie went to him and pulled him aside. “There, are you all right?”

Lowering his hands from his ears, he barely opened his unscarred eye and shuddered. “The drums. They sound like cannons. I...”

There was no time to think, only move. She didn’t think of the rudeness or impropriety of taking his hand as if he were a lover or beau—she only saw a young man in pain. She gently took his hand and wrapped his big hand in her own, leading him away from the swirling dancers and laughing gamblers, off to the side of the room. The noise was still loud and he trembled, so she whispered a gentle shush and ushered him into the quiet of the corridor, away from the noise. It was still present but muted. He shut his eye tightly to blot out the noise, as if the darkness could claim him.

At each pound of the drums, he trembled and shook as if taking a beating. The sight of it was terrible and pained her to see. She said, “Stay here,” and went to the small orchestra playing in the half-circle enclave of the room, tucked away. She caught the attention of the conductor and stood by as he waved his arms and directed, preferring to ignore her.

She gritted her teeth as the members of the orchestra frowned at her, a mere maidservant. She turned and looked for a familiar face. There nearby at one of the gambling tables stood a footman, a burly-looking fellow with a stiff bearing, with whom she’d sat at dinner below stairs. She went to him and said, “Excuse me.”

He turned, his jaw set in a stiff frown. “You shouldn’t be on the floor.”

“There’s a man here, a soldier, and the music hurts his ears. The drums remind him of cannon fire and he’s in pain. Can you tell the orchestra to stop with the drums?”

“I’m busy. Can’t you?” he asked.

“They won’t pay attention to me. I tried.”

His mouth firmed into a hard line and he walked on, over to the orchestra. As big and imposing a man as he was, there was no chance of ignoring him. At his arrival, the conductor turned and looked at him. “Yes?”

The imposing manservant bent and said something into the conductor’s ear. The man reddened and motioned for the drummer to stop playing. The manservant nodded and returned to Marie. “There. Now get off the floor before you’re seen.”

Marie left, plucked a glass of wine from a footman, who recognized her, his eyes wide, as she went back to the young man in the stairwell.

He shivered and had his unscarred eye squeezed closed. His tanned face bore a nasty scar across his left eye. His brown hair had grown long over his eyes and around his face, likely to hide the scar, and his chin bore a few days’ stubble. He had a dirty, roguish look about him, but he seemed so scared at that moment, like a child.

She spoke gently and touched his arm. “Here,” she said, taking one of his hands and putting the wineglass in it. “Drink. The drums have stopped now. ”

He opened the eye not hidden behind an eyepatch, fixing his gaze on her face. “Who are you?”

“Marie,” she said, taking in the sight of him.

He was handsome, with fair skin tanned by the sun and warm-brown hair with strains of blond in it. His white cravat was tied simply but assuredly, and his red overcoat and white waistcoat made him seem pristine, down to his trousers and smart, black boots.

His light-blue eye was hooded in misery. Her heart went out to him and she tried to ignore the fluttering of her pulse as her skin warmed at being near such an attractive man.

“I—” he started.

“We spoke to the conductor,” she said. “He’s stopped the drummer from playing. You shouldn’t have any trouble now.”

He nodded and considered the wine she’d given him. He took a heady gulp. “Thank you.”

“I should get back.” She ducked her head and turned to leave, darting back up the steps to find Lucy waiting.

“Where were you?” Lucy asked. “You’re not supposed to be on the main floor when the guests are here. Mrs. Dove-Lyon doesn’t like that. The last girl who did that was dismissed.”

“The man looked to be in pain. He didn’t like the drumming.”

“So you had to go tell the musicians to stop?” Lucy asked.

“No, they ignored me. I went to one of the footmen and he told them to stop.”

Lucy frowned. “Come on. We’re both in trouble if they see us.”

“If who sees you?” a feminine voice asked.

The young women turned around. There stood Mrs. Dove-Lyon, dressed in a fine evening gown of black silk, a subtle black veil over her face.

Lucy trembled. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon. We was just—”

“It’s my fault,” Marie said. “I wanted to see the main floor and I asked Lucy to show me. I’m sorry, madam. ”

“Fine. Go to your rooms, girls. It is late and you should both be in bed. I’ll speak with you in the morning.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon spoke quickly and turned her back, moving with a quiet, subtle assurance of her directions being obeyed. She disappeared in a whisper of black silk skirts.

Marie wondered at Mrs. Dove-Lyon. So calm, cool, and efficient in her ways. Mrs. Campbell would not have been so polite, or composed. Lucy pulled her away, and went to bed that night, dreaming of silk dresses, harp strings, and satin shoes.

The next day, Marie rose early and helped the others clean the boots of the guests left outside the rooms on the second and third floors, sweep the hall and front steps, and light the fires in each of the rooms. Whilst the cooks prepared breakfast and the smells of hot coffee and tea filled the air alongside the rich scents of toast and marmalade, Marie set the kitchen table, as a cook set a plate of toast, butter, marmalade, black coffee, and a small flask of flowers on a tray.

“Who’s that for?” Lucy asked.

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

“Oh.” Lucy turned away.

“Marie,” the cook said. “She wants you to take the tray to her.”

“Me?” Marie exchanged a look with Lucy. “Why?”

“I don’t know.”

Lucy bit her lip. “You’re in trouble now. She’s going to punish you fer sure.”

Marie frowned. “You think so?”

Lucy nodded. “She don’t tolerate no nonsense. Not amongst the staff. ”

“Go on now, and hurry. That’s her bell pulled twice now,” the cook said.

Marie swallowed, took directions from the cook on where Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s room was, and collected the tray.

Once at Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s room, she took a little, shaky breath and knocked.

“Enter,” the voice called.

Marie opened the door and took the breakfast tray inside. Mrs. Dove-Lyon sat up in a prim and full-sized bed, with pink, silken bedcovers and plump pillows. She wore a silk night robe over her dress and sat in shadow, so Marie could not make out her face.

“Your tray, ma’am. Good morning,” Marie said, setting the tray on Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s lap.

“Good morning, Marie. Thank you.”

“Will that be all, ma’am?”

“No. It came to my attention that you were on the main floor last night. Why is that?”

Marie glanced down, feeling her cheeks warm.

“Why were you on the floor last night, Marie? It is a simple question. I believe I must have mentioned it during our tea yesterday, or the other servants would have told you. You know that servants are not allowed there, unless they are footmen working, dealers, musicians, or by my own invitation.”

Marie swallowed. “There was a man, ma’am.”

“A man?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s voice rose.

“Yes, ma’am. He was in pain. From the noise. I could see whenever the drummer played, it bothered him.”

“He did not like the drums?”

“No, ma’am. They were loud and he covered his ears. He stumbled back as if in pain. It... I thought he needed help, so I went down to the floor.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon was silent, so Marie continued. “I tried to get the conductor’s attention, but he ignored me, so I went on the floor and asked a footman to help. He talked to the conductor and the drummer stopped.”

“You could have left the floor, then.”

“Yes, I suppose. But the man, I didn’t want to leave him like that. So I brought him to the stairwell for quiet and gave him a glass of wine. He seemed better, so I left and

went back up to Lucy, where you found us.”

“I see. Did you know who that man was?”

“No, ma’am. A soldier, I think. He was in an army uniform. A foot soldier, perhaps.”
She touched the locket around her neck.

“What is that?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

“A necklace, ma’am. A keepsake from my mother.”

“And where is she now?”

Marie paused. What if her new employer was as anti-French as her previous mistress? She could tell what Uncle Baptiste had told her years ago as a child that her parents were dead. After years of silence, without so much as a letter, she had eventually come to accept the grim possibility as the truth and stopped dreaming of ever seeing her parents again.

“Dead, I think, ma’am. It is just me and my Uncle Baptiste.”

“Ah. Thank you, Marie. I assume you know not to go on the floor again?”

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry.”

“On your way, Marie.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon waved a hand and she was dismissed.

Marie spent the day learning the ins and outs of Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s establishment. From raking out the ashes of the fires in the guest rooms and tidying, to washing plates and dishes. It was hard, industrious, tiring work, but Marie didn’t mind. The fellow servants were civil enough and whilst they seemed to love a bit of drama and

gossip, they also got on with their work, a contrast from Mrs. Campbell's staff .

Together with Lucy and Harriet, Marie dusted the rooms, including the front parlor and jewelry shop front, and the upstairs ladies' gambling rooms and dining rooms on the first floor. Dusting and cleaning took up a lot of time, until they were called to come to luncheon.

The meal that day was a platter of cold meats, cheese, and salad. Not quite the heartwarming meal that Marie had hoped for, but it was fresh and perfectly tasty. As she filled her plate with cuts of cheddar, ham, and mixed salad greens, she poured herself a glass of wine and listened to the other servants talk.

Her Uncle Baptiste was becoming a steady hand, and he was soon popular with the men. He had an easy, honest look about him, which was proving helpful in getting them situated and the other servants to trust them.

He exchanged ready talk with the men and listened as the butler informed the others that tonight was to be a concert of the violin and harp, which they may listen to if they stay in the vicinity of the stairwell. "No drums," he said, with a glance at Marie.

Marie turned her attention to the food on her plate and ate, listening and staying quiet. After luncheon, she and Harriet began to clear the dishes from the table, when Uncle Baptiste came to her. "Is it true?" he asked. "That you were on the main floor last night?"

"Yes." She nodded. "There was a man in pain and—"

"Be careful, Marie," he chided in quiet French. "You have a good heart, but do not land yourself in trouble, not when we have just started anew. We were lucky Mrs. Dove-Lyon took us in."

“I understand.” She bent her head to her work. “I think we should talk in English.”

“Why? Mrs. Dove-Lyon is accepting of us, and—”

“What if the others don’t like us?”

“Then so be it. But they do. So you have nothing to worry about.”

“What if they know we are French?” she asked .

“You have an English accent and your French accent is terrible. No one will believe you are truly French, only that you tried to educate yourself. We can always tell them your former employer demanded we learn French, to better ourselves.”

She gathered up the utensils and looked around. “Will they believe that?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. People believe what they want to believe.”

That night, Marie stood in the stairwell off of the main hall. She sat on a step of the circular stairwell and listened to the music with the other servants. The music swelled as the dulcet tones of harp and violin played, a light and playful tune.

The servants’ feet tapped along in time and one of the men stood and took Lucy’s hand, whirling her around in wide circles to the music. Lucy laughed and shrieked as he whirled her around faster when a hushed voice hissed for them to stop.

Lucy’s dance partner stopped and let her go. She laughed and bent to her knees, catching her breath. “What is it, Henry? Why’d you stop?”

The servants all froze like statues as a young man stood in the doorway to the stairwell. He wore a foot soldier’s red uniform, with crisp, white trousers; a smart, red

overcoat with shined brass buttons; a bleached shirt and waistcoat; and a stiffly tied cravat. His dress uniform was all points and angles, but the man was different.

Marie looked at the sight that had stopped them all. The music continued to play, but the servants there could've been statues. It was the man from the previous night, the one who had been in such pain and hurt from the drums. He bore the same rough sideburns and fuzz on his chin, along with the overgrown hair that fell into his eyes. But this time, he looked around, his gaze landing on her.

He sought her out, that much was plain. That he had come there looking for her was clear, but why?

He opened his mouth to speak when one of the footmen stood up. "Yes?"

The man glanced at the footman, the spell broken. "I was looking for a young woman."

"There are many fine ladies out on the main floor, or upstairs."

"No. I mean, a maidservant. Her." He jerked his head toward Marie.

Uncle Baptiste stood and got in the man's face. "What do you want with her? She is not for the likes of you."

Marie's eyes widened. "Uncle, no."

Uncle Baptiste ignored her. "What is it you want?" His French accent came out strong, a sure sign of his anger. His English façade and prim accent had fallen.

The change in the young naval officer was instant. His unscarred eye widened and he took a step back. His upper lip curled in a sneer. "You are French?"

“Yes. What do you want?” Baptiste asked.

In that moment, Marie saw Baptiste as larger than life—a thin, wiry man of quiet strength. Perhaps once, he had been slim and bookish, with a set of round spectacles, but years of work in all household jobs had put hard muscle on his slim body. Now he carried himself like a man ready to fight, his feet shifting in place.

The movement did not go unnoticed by the soldier, who settled into an amateur boxer’s stance. All that was missing were his raised fists and a referee.

“Please. What is the meaning of this?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon appeared behind the soldier, dressed mysteriously in a black evening dress with jet-black buttons and a necklace that caught the light, with a small black headdress and veil that left her face in shadow.

Baptiste stood back, his hands at his side.

The soldier turned around. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

“Lieutenant Gage. What a pleasure to see you again. But are you lost? I see you’ve found the stairwell. That leads to the kitchen downstairs and the upper floors.”

The soldier bowed his head and rested his hands behind his back. “My apologies, madam. I was looking for someone.”

“Not amongst the servants, he’s not,” Uncle Baptiste said.

Lieutenant Gage’s head snapped up, and his eye narrowed. “I—”

The mistress interrupted. “Yes, well. Clearly, you have not found the person here. Do escort me back and I shall be glad to introduce you to some friends of mine.” She

reached for his arm.

Honor dictated the lieutenant offer her his arm. He did so, and she shot the servants a look before leading him away.

Baptiste turned and clapped his hands. “All right, you lot. That’s time. Best be off to bed, double quick.”

Marie stood and began to follow the others when her uncle said, “Marie, wait a moment.”

She paused. “What is it?”

He waited for the other servants to depart before he asked, “Do you know that man?”

She shook her head. “We met yesterday. He was in pain from the music. But I don’t know him.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“Only to bring him a glass of wine.”

His face was stern. “He does not like us. Do not speak to him again.”

“But why?”

“He is a soldier. English. Do you forget we are at war? You are French, Marie. Never forget that. ”

“But—” she started.

“But nothing. Remember who you are.” He strode past her and went down the stairwell to the kitchen.

She watched him go. Alone in the stairwell, she idled to the entrance and stood in the shadow, away from sight. But she watched as the men and women chatted and danced, laughing and gambling. She spotted Mrs. Dove-Lyon chatting politely with the lieutenant and walked away.

She never saw him turn and glance back in the direction of the stairwell.

The next day, Baptiste watched her closely. She went about her chores, cleaning the fireplaces, setting fires, changing bedsheets, and washing fresh linens. He was never far away.

He spoke only in his quiet French when they were alone, and when others were in the vicinity, he spoke in English. Finally, when she bumped into him and almost dropped a heavily laden serving tray she grunted in exasperation and set it down on the dining table. “That’s it.”

“What?”

She frowned at the tray full of dirty dishes. “You’ve been following me around all day like I’ve done something wrong. You speak in French when we’re alone and in English when the other servants are there. What is wrong?”

“Nothing. Nothing is wrong,” he said, rubbing the side of his face. He rested a hand against the back of a chair and eyed her.

“Then why is it that all day today, you’re never far away? What is it you’re afraid of? That’ll I’ll insult the cooks again and get us thrown out?”

“No. Frankly, they could use some criticism. It might improve the food.” He smirked.

“I mean it, Uncle. Why around you following me around like a mother hen?”

“I...” He stopped. “You should stay downstairs from now on. Especially in the evenings. Don’t go to the upper floors.”

“I have chores that take me all over the building.”

“I’ll speak with the others about letting you go from those chores.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Why? They’ll think I want special treatment when I don’t. What is it, Uncle? Why are you so... skittish?”

“I’m not skittish. I just... I don’t want you going in the stairwell again. Not when the main hall is open for guests.”

“Why? Is it because of that soldier? I was only helping him, I promise.”

He arched an eyebrow. “What you might view as a kindness, the wrong man might see as an invitation. And I have to protect your honor.”

“What honor? We are servants. I am a maid. I will never wear a silk dress like one of those fine ladies, or dance a jig with the rich men upstairs. This is our life.” She bowed her head, her cheeks burning.

He looked at her for half a minute. “No matter the uniform, even the lowest scullery maid has pride, Marie.” He left.

She sighed, picked up the tray, and returned to her duties. The rest of the day she went about her chores with a listlessness that filled her bones. Was this all there was

to be of life? A secret identity she hid, a part of herself? She could only speak her own native language in private, and she had to hide her true self?

But what that was, she couldn't say. Marie sat in a small room downstairs, surrounded by dirty linens to wash. As she went outside and filled a small tub with water, she glanced at her wavering reflection in the water. It felt a bit like she was a part of one world but didn't belong there, but it was the only world she knew. Aside from a private language that she dared not speak in front of the others, her Uncle Baptiste, who wasn't really an uncle at all, was the only family she had. She had no friends, and she had no one her own age to confide in, or socialize with. At least once, she'd come into a room to find Lucy and Harriet laughing and giggling over some private joke. She felt alone.

After dinner, the servants were mostly below stairs, tidying up, washing dishes, and closing things up for the night. Marie was drying a dish in the kitchen, her hands damp from the dish rag, when she heard a commotion.

"Mrs. Dove-Lyon," Mrs. Drummond, the head cook, said.

Marie turned and set aside the plate she was drying. New household or not, the rules were mostly the same. When the employer or a member of the family came into the servants' vicinity, everyone stopped to attend and assist if necessary.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon looked smart in a black evening gown and black lace veil over her face, right down to her sleek gloves. She was a dark and forbidding figure standing in the kitchen doorway. Her gaze settled on Marie. "Ah, just the person I was looking for. Mrs. Pratt, may I borrow Marie for a moment?"

The other servants looked at her. The housekeeper, Mrs. Pratt, a large, round woman with red cheeks and a doughy face, said, "Now, Mrs. Dove-Lyon, if the girl's done something wrong, I should be the first to know—"

“No, it’s nothing like that. Just a little favor I’d like to ask. Marie?”

Marie swallowed and wiped her hands on the damp dish towel, not that it helped dry her hands, but she tried. She nodded and followed Mrs. Dove-Lyon out of the kitchen, conscious that the other servants were watching, not making a sound.

Once out in the corridor, Mrs. Dove-Lyon clasped her hands, unclasped them, and clasped them again. She avoided looking at Marie directly, instead assessing her from head to toe .

“Madam?” Marie started.

“Yes? Right. I wonder, do you speak French?”

Marie tensed. “Yes, a little.”

“Oh, good,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said with relief.

“Why?”

“Well, it just so happens that Colonel Martin, a guest of mine, has come with his new wife, who is French. My knowledge of the language is tolerable, but I’m no expert. I thought I heard your uncle Baptiste speak in French before and thought perhaps you knew it too. Has he spoken it to you?”

“Yes. Maybe he can help?”

“Oh, no. He won’t do at all,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said with an enigmatic smile. “It is a woman’s help I need, you see.”

Marie’s eyebrows rose. “Oh?”

“Well, it is simple, really. The good colonel likes to enjoy himself at the games played upstairs, but besides himself and I, there are few amongst the company who speak more than a handful of French words. He has abandoned the poor thing and she is off standing by herself. I fear she is terribly lonely.”

“Oh.” Marie knew how that felt. “But what can I do? I’m a servant.” She looked down at her plain uniform and sensible shoes.

“That’s easily remedied. But you do speak French? More than a phrase or two?”

“Yes,” Marie said. “But I don’t see how I can help. I’m happy to talk to her, but would you want to bring her downstairs? I know you don’t like us going up on the main floor when guests are there.”

“Not to worry about that. I think we might make a little exception for a time. If you wouldn’t mind, I will have one of the girls dress you and fix your hair.”

“What? You mean...”

“If you would do it as a favor to me, dress up as one of the guests and pretend you are one of them. Chat to Mrs. Martin and keep her company. You might even get an offer of employment as her companion if she likes you well enough.”

“I couldn’t leave my uncle.” Her heart rose in her chest, then her stomach quailed at the very thought. Leaving him would be like leaving a part of herself behind. Exciting at first, perhaps, then empty and alone.

“Well, let’s see how it goes.” She assessed Marie. Hmmm...” She tapped a slim, gloved index finger to her mouth. “Pink, I think.”

Marie followed her upstairs to one of the private parlors, which bore a wardrobe with

a series of dresses in colors of blue, pink, purple, grey, and green silk. There were pairs of dancing shoes, used, along with a small, raised, circular platform and a long, polished looking glass.

“What is all this?” Marie asked.

“Just a few dresses I have. Not a night goes by when there’s not a little tear in a lady’s sleeve or a spill of wine. Most can be cleaned or patched up easily, but sometimes, the damage is a bit more serious, and a replacement dress is needed. It doesn’t always happen, but on the rare occasion it does, we are prepared. I would rather go barefaced in public than let a lady guest of mine go on wearing a soiled dress whilst in my establishment.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon looked upon Marie with an appraising air.

“So I am to wear one of these dresses?” Marie asked, looking at the wardrobe.

“If that is not asking too much,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said sharply. “I’ll have you know, Miss Cadough, that whilst you are on the main floor entertaining Mrs. Martin, you are exempt from your usual chores.”

Marie couldn’t resist a smile. At this point in the evening, the servants had already been up before dawn and were preparing to go to bed. Now she was to stay up later. She’d be lucky if she didn’t yawn the entire time. Just thinking about sleep had her stifle a yawn.

This did not go unnoticed by her employer. “There are many servant girls who would love to be in your position right now. Being able to wear a pretty dress? I’ll have no insolence from you, Marie. Not under my roof.”

“I’m sorry if I gave offense, madam. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I should hope not. It is a great gift I am giving you, letting you do this. Now, choose a dress. I would suggest the pink one.”

Marie dutifully took the blush-pink dress from the wardrobe and held it up. Its light, silk folds fluttered to the ground with a low, square bodice embroidered at the high waist with a slim, gold ribbon.

She’d never held a dress like that before. The fabric felt smooth and almost slippery, but it was so sleek, as the dress caught the light. Her former employers had never trusted her with cleaning their fine dresses, but even they had never had such fine dresses as this. And to think Mrs. Dove-Lyon had this and others just like it, hanging in a wardrobe.

“Go on girl, put it on.” The mistress turned her back.

Marie swallowed and quickly stripped down to her shift and stays, then carefully put the dress on, inhaling as the cool, silk material slipped over her head. She put her arms through the small cap sleeves and gently tugged the dress down over her hips and curves.

“Stand up on the platform, Marie, so I can see how it fits you,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

Casting a glance at the small pile of her servant’s dress and apron on the floor, she took two handfuls of her new dress and stepped onto the pedestal.

“Oh, no, those shoes won’t do at all. Take them off.”

Marie bent and undid her boots, setting them on the floor. “There. Much better. Now, stand up straight.”

Marie straightened and glanced down, smoothing minuscule wrinkles out of her

dress. She'd never worn anything so low cut. She put a hand over her chest.

"What are you doing? "

"It feels like I'm on display, ma'am."

Mrs. Dove-Lyon laughed. "You're not wearing anything so daring as some things I've seen. Come now, lower your hand. Chin up, shoulders back."

Marie looked up and dutifully lowered her hand, resting her hands by her sides.

"Hmm. With your hair done, some gloves, you will be very pretty, very pretty indeed, if I do say so myself." She clapped her hands, and two servants who regularly assisted Mrs. Dove-Lyon entered. Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, "This is Robbins and Julia, who is training to be a lady's maid. I can't afford my other maids' help with this, so Robbins will show Julia how it's done."

Julia, a busty blonde, was clearly none too happy at the idea of Marie getting the chance to dress up. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of Marie's fine dress and when instructed to do her hair, she did the bare minimum, her mouth set in a perpetual grimace. She pinned it back into loose, soft ringlets, whilst Miss Robbins conferred with Mrs. Dove-Lyon over makeup.

In no time, Marie was dressed in a pair of dancing shoes, her hair adorned with a gold ribbon and her locket around her neck, as well as a set of white gloves. She'd even allowed the maids to brush her cheeks with rouge and her lips with something slick and rosy. When they stepped back and allowed her to survey herself in the tall looking glass, Marie was stunned.

She didn't recognize the person standing there. She looked sweet, like a demure French mistress, or a young woman on the cusp of coming out into society. The

thought struck her then, and she uttered, “Madam, I am not out.”

“Oh. Right, I see. Well, let this be your debut.”

Marie’s eyes widened. Her debut was to be playing dress-up in a gambling den?

She cast her gaze downward. She had observed from the Campbells’ daughter, Hortense, that a real coming out in society was to attend balls, parties, and soirees, and was reserved for girls of breeding and good family. She was a mere servant, beholden to no one but her uncle and now her employer. It just... wasn’t how she had imagined her life to be.

“We will throw a little party for you later. For now, do this favor for me, and I will speak with your uncle about what we can do for you. How about it?”

Marie hardly felt she could say no , and she rather admired the sight of herself in the looking glass. She realized she didn’t want to refuse Mrs. Dove-Lyon but felt like modesty and decorum dictated that she should. “I...”

“Please, Miss Cadough. It would mean so much to Mrs. Martin to have someone to whom to talk, and you would be doing me a huge favor. Please. I will speak with your uncle to ensure he does not worry about you missing chores.”

At the mention of her uncle, Marie fretted and bit her lip. “Madam, I—”

“You must address me by my title, as do all my guests.”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon, I... do not think my uncle would like this. He does not want the others to know we speak French. It might cause trouble if other people knew.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon frowned. “You are quite right. Some people might find it a bit

unpatriotic for me to hire French-speaking servants when our countries are at war. I'm sorry. I should not have pressured you to do this without asking your uncle's permission first. But do you mind?"

Marie knew that in moments, she could be dressed and in her maid's uniform again and heading toward her bed. But she also knew that to refuse her employer would damage their relationship, she would lose Mrs. Dove-Lyon's trust, and she would never receive an opportunity like this again. And she desperately wanted a night to socialize, dress well, and pretend she was a lady, even if she wasn't.

Marie nodded. "I'll do it."

"Very good! Thank you, Marie. You are helping me out enormously. Come, let's get you out on the floor. I will introduce you."

"Um, Mrs. Dove-Lyon? What will I talk about? I don't know how to talk to a grand lady like a colonel's wife."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Think of her like one of the servant girls but in a better dress. She'll be as nervous as you are, I imagine. Not many people here would care to speak with a Frenchwoman, even if she did marry an Englishman."

"But she is a lady, ma'am. I... don't know what we will talk about."

"I'm sure you will find much to discuss. Now, no more excuses. Let us go," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said."

The mistress ushered her young companion downstairs to the main floor. Marie hesitated in the stairwell. Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, "Remember, Marie, you are here tonight at my invitation with your uncle, who is elsewhere. You belong there with the rest of them. So chin up, shoulders back, and ignore any looks you might receive

from the men. You are to focus your attention on Mrs. Martin and that is it.”

“Right.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon took her arm, which trembled a little, in hers as if they were good companions, and swiftly led her into the room.

The main hall was large, suitable for little assemblies and decent parties. In the small alcove, a set of musicians played, this time a violinist and a harpist, and small tables were scattered around the room, each manned by a dealer. Well-dressed men and women stood here and there, some playing cards, others gambling.

The room was warmly lit by hanging chandeliers and wall sconces that held pairs of candles dotted around. Tall windows and a balcony stood at the far end of the room, but Marie didn’t notice much more as Mrs. Dove-Lyon said in her ear, “There she is. Stay no more than an hour, and I’ll come rescue you. I can see you’re tired.”

“Thank you.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon brought Marie over to a middle-aged woman with long, brown hair pinned with soft ringlets at the back, in a fetching, forest-green dress with a round scoop neck lined with gold trim. She stood off to one side, looking on as others laughed and chatted together.

“Mrs. Martin?” said Mrs. Dove-Lyon.

The woman turned. She has a kind face , Marie thought.

“Forgive me for interrupting you, but I would like to introduce you to a new friend of mine, Miss Marie Cadough. She too is new to my little establishment, and I thought you might enjoy a bit of her conversation.”

“Oh? How kind.” Mrs. Martin sniffed and looked away.

“Well. I shall leave you. I am sure you will become good friends.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon stepped away.

An uncomfortable silence followed. The music playing offered little respite. They stood side by side, saying nothing, until Mrs. Martin uttered a sound of disgust and said under her breath in French, “What a waste of time. I should have stayed at home.”

“Why is that, madame, when there are such friends to be met?”

Mrs. Martin’s head whipped around. “You speak French.”

“I do. A little.”

“Your accent is... strange. What did you say your name was again?”

“Marie Cadeaux. But everyone calls me ‘Cadough.’ It’s easier for some people.”

“How is it you know French, Marie?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“I have spoken it since I was a child. It is my first language. But, my em—I mean, the family we stayed with here did not like it, so they called me ‘Mary.’ ”

“When did you first come to England?”

Marie shrugged. “When I was a child. I hardly remember France, or my parents.” She fingered her locket, her light, delicate fingers twisting in the old ribbon.

“What is that? A keepsake?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“Yes, it has my mother’s and father’s portraits in it.” Marie leaned forward and opened it so Mrs. Martin could see.

Mrs. Martin smiled as she examined the miniature portraits. “How beautiful. So that they are always close to your heart. And where are your family from? Your accent, it is not Parisian.”

“No. My uncle said we come from Gerberoy. I looked at a map once. It is north of Paris, and west of Rouen. That is all I know, aside from that it is a beautiful village, and that my parents and I were happy.” Her smile was wistful.

“I hope you might meet them again,” Mrs. Martin said, taking her friend’s hand and giving it a squeeze.

“Thank you. But I fear that might be in heaven.”

“ Mon dieu , let us not speak of such things and hope they are alive and well. When did you last see them?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“I do not know. It is hard to remember. We came over when I was a child. It would have been before 1799 or so. But I am not sure.”

“Well, never mind. I only mean to learn more about you, as my dear friend. Do you play cards?” Mrs. Martin asked. “Poque? Whist?”

“I have never played.”

“Then I shall teach you. Come.” Mrs. Martin dragged her away to the women’s gambling rooms and began a lesson. Unfortunately, as it turned out, Marie had little head for cards and was not a skilled player.

“Hmm, I think you need a few more lessons before we play again.” Her stomach gurgled audibly, and she covered her mouth. “Oh, excuse me.”

Marie smiled. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes, but this English food. I do not like it. So much bland, plain, ordinary food. I want something rich, something divine. But...” She hesitated and looked around. “We are at war. There are few delicacies to be had, I fear.”

At that moment, servants with small trays of hors d’oeuvres came out, offering the petite, bite-sized pastries and savory foods to the people. One of the footmen gave Marie a second glance but recovered quickly, offering the tray to Mrs. Martin and somehow managing to miss Marie.

Mrs. Martin took one of the bites and ate, chewing. “Mmm. it is good, but not so good as at home, I think.”

“When did you come here?”

“Six months ago. My husband and I met and fell in love, but when we came here, I did not know what to expect. I do not know which is worse: living with my husband in a dusty tent in a military camp, or sitting at home alone. I have no visitors, no friends. And I cannot even talk to the servants because we are not equals.” She frowned. “I’m sorry. I say too much.”

The women chatted and walked around the room, surveying the games, when Mrs. Martin said, “Tell me this. Why is it that the servants ignore you?”

Marie swallowed. “I—”

“Wait, no. Never mind. What I want to know is do you have a beau? A young man?”

“No.” Marie blushed.

“You lie. You do,” Mrs. Martin said with a smile.

“I don’t, honestly. Why?”

Mrs. Martin’s eyes widened. “Then if not, why is that young man staring at you?”

Marie turned to see, meeting the eyes of a handsome young man with light-brown hair tied back in a queue, a sloping, round chin and patrician nose, dressed in a stiff, red army uniform.

It was the young soldier .

“I...” she started. “Uh...”

“Oh, my goodness, he’s coming this way,” Mrs. Martin said, clutching her hand.

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From across the room, Samuel Gage watched the young woman almost greedily, drinking in the sight of her. He was sure it was her, the young woman who had helped him the other night when the drums had disturbed him so.

Samuel had never felt himself to be a man of poetry—he had no love of the arts and had little cause or concern for the finer tastes of the elite. Not that he belonged among their sort, anyway. He'd much rather hunt, ride, go shooting, or play sport than waste away the hours playing cards and exchanging whimsical niceties over games of whist.

But as the third son of a wealthy landowner, and with his eldest brother, Bartholomew, now happily married, and his second-eldest brother Geoffrey in the clergy, his parents and close relatives had turned their matchmaking eyes on him. But as he reflected sourly and took a glass of red from a passing servant, not even the war had been enough to stop their little schemes and intrigues.

He wanted a simple life, especially now. For who in their right mind would want a man with a hideous scar?

No wonder the other servants, especially that older man, had defended her honor when he had come upon the lot of them loitering in the stairwell. Samuel didn't care that the servants had been there listening to the music; he'd only wanted to see the girl again and perhaps ask her to dance.

Samuel smiled at the thought. He'd surprised himself. He'd seen enough fair and plain ladies' faces at the camp, and he'd never given one girl a second glance over any other. He'd been too busy. But this girl was different.

She was pretty, that was unremarkable. There were many pretty women at the Lyon's Den. But she had a certain elegance in her movements, a lightness that suggested she enjoyed life and had a warm spirit, and her eyes sparkled like stars. At her first smile at him, he'd been done, although he'd refused to admit such a thing. For the first time in a long time, he'd felt like dancing. Something about her face and fair skin that looked blessed by the sun. Her eyes had danced and she had smiled in pleasure at the sounds of the music, which had lifted his heart. They had first met in the stairwell, and it was there he had sought her out again, hoping to meet her by chance.

But never mind. He'd come across that bumbling oaf of a Frenchman and had been promptly rebuffed. He drank a mouthful of wine and swallowed, not bothering to savor the slightly fruity taste. He was a soldier. He was used to a soldier's life, and that meant eating and drinking on the hoof, when there was food and drink to be had. It was a nomadic life, but he'd gotten used to it. Anything was better than spending the days at his family's home, devising ways to escape whilst his mother and sister tried to marry him off to friends of theirs. And it was all thanks to that blasted hill.

He'd been stationed in Portugal. He was one of a battalion of men who'd been sent to take over a hill, and they'd done a night raid. But the French were crafty, and the men had been ready for the English soldiers. There'd been the battle and the hill. He remembered the hard land beneath his boots that crumbled and pebbles sliding loose as he and dozens of other men had stridden and climbed uphill in the darkness, when artillery fire had gone off near him. A blast had come out of nowhere. There'd been the blast, the smoke and fire that had stung his eyes and choked his throat, the thunder and explosion of gunfire and the shower of hard earth that had pelted and blinded him. He'd gasped for breath and coughed, tried to get the grit out of his eyes, only to see the rushing form of a French soldier in uniform, wielding a saber and his mouth open wide in a battle cry, slicing at him. Then darkness and pain.

He'd woken up a day later in the sick ward of the military camp's hospital, his left eye heavily bandaged. Once he could walk and had gained some of his sight, he'd

been given an eyepatch and sent on leave back to his family's manor in Hertfordshire. But he'd quickly grown tired of the large house and found it stifling, and told his family he'd had enough of convalescing at home. He'd taken a carriage to London and rented a room in a boarding house, when he'd heard about a little gambling den on Cleveland Row.

He didn't like London. Too many people, and the streets were dirty and smelled. He was used to the mass of humanity, the men, but a military camp was structured and orderly—it had to be. Boys dressed in little more than rags, mere street urchins, walked the streets, weaving in and around the steady stream of carts, carriages, horses' hooves, and foot traffic, picking up piles of horse shit and selling it. The smells were what bothered him the most. Weave too close on the wrong street, the wrong alley and the stink of the butchers' from Smithfield market would assail his nose, or from the tanners nearby. He was sick of blood on the streets, although it didn't bother him as much as it should have.

There were women aplenty. He'd never had any trouble talking to women. But since he'd returned from the battlefield, men stared at him for slightly too long than was proper, and women studiously avoided his eye. They dared not look at him and those who did were usually selling something.

The girl who'd spoken to him in the stairwell had been the first kind soul he'd met, the first who hadn't stared at his eye or avoided his gaze. But she was confusing. He was sure he'd first seen her in a maid's shapeless uniform, right down to her pulled-back hair and stiff, white apron. And she'd been in the stairwell with servants enjoying the music. But his eye was playing tricks on him, for he now saw her as clear as day, chatting to a fine lady on the main floor as if she belonged there. Who was she?

He walked toward her, seeing her in a luscious pink dress that accentuated her curves nicely.

Her hair looked soft and silken, and she stood with a self-conscious naivety that made him know she was an innocent. Here was a sweet young woman who had been untouched by men, and she had not been battered by the world yet. He longed to see her smile again, and perhaps even see her bestow a smile on him. It would keep him warm in a thousand cold nights.

He took a step forward, then stopped. He did not know her, and they were not introduced. He looked around for the master of ceremonies but did not see him. Instead, he approached Mrs. Dove-Lyon, who was walking by.

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” he said.

The woman herself was a striking sight, all in black, with a thin veil over her face. “Ah, Lieutenant Gage. I hope you are enjoying yourself.”

“I... Yes. Tell me, where is the master of ceremonies?”

She peered past his shoulder. “Over there. But if there is a young lady to whom you wish to be introduced, I would be glad to help.”

“Yes. That woman, there.” He nodded toward the girl.

Her face clouded. “That woman is married. That is the wife of Colonel Martin, of His Majesty’s Third Battalion.”

“No, not her. The young woman with her, her companion.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s eyes widened. “Oh. That girl.”

“Yes. ”

Her mouth quirked and her eyebrows furrowed in thought.

“What is it? Is she engaged?” he asked.

“No, she is not. Quite free. But...”

“Tell me. She already has an understanding with another man?”

“So forward, Lieutenant Gage. I did not think you so ready to fall in love.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon tapped her chin.

He ran a hand through his hair, then remembered it was in a queue, so managed to dislodge some strands of hair to fall across his face. “I’m not in love. I just... I should like to make her acquaintance.” He swallowed and tried to ignore the warm feeling in his chest.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon raised an eyebrow.

“My intentions are honorable, I assure you,” he said.

She smiled. “I have no doubt.”

“Who is she?”

She looked at him. “She is here as a guest of mine. I do not believe she is looking for a husband.”

“Please, Mrs. Dove-Lyon, make the introduction. I would know her name.”

His hostess tilted her head, and her mouth quirked again in a smile. “All right. But I warn you, it is not my fault if you do not care for the company.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, but she was gone, walking over to the pair of women directly. She spoke in a low, hushed tone that was drowned out by the subtle strains of a harp and pipe that played.

He spied the three ladies conversing and then Mrs. Martin and the young lady glanced in his direction. Her eyes widened and took in the sight of him, her gaze alighting on his uniform and resting on his face, and the angry red scar over his eye. She spoke in Mrs. Martin’s ear, and the lady gave an imperceptible nod. It was so slight, he might’ve missed it if he hadn’t been paying close attention. Then Mrs. Dove-Lyon approached him once more. “They will allow it. Come with me. ”

She took his left arm in hers and led him over to the pair. He got a closer look. Mrs. Martin looked older, in her early forties perhaps, but she held herself with an air of self-assured confidence. From the flick of her eyes that assessed him from head to toe, she held herself aloof; she’d done this before. She’d clearly navigated her share of assembly rooms, parlors, dances, and fine dinners. She gave him a polite smile and murmured something to her companion.

He barely heard his hostess as she said, “Ladies, allow me to make a little introduction. Lieutenant Gage wishes to make your acquaintance. Mrs. Martin, Miss Cadough, I am pleased to introduce you to Lieutenant Gage, of His Majesty’s regiment. Lieutenant, this is my good friend Mrs. Martin, and Miss Cadough.”

He looked at her, barely aware that Mrs. Dove-Lyon drifted away without a word. He watched the young woman closely, as her eyes were on the ground. “Pleased to meet you,” he said.

“The pleasure is ours, monsieur ,” Mrs. Martin murmured.

“You’re French,” he said.

The young woman's head shot up. Her brown eyes stared at him.

"Yes, I am. Why?" the colonel's wife asked. "You are English. We are together here. Do not tell me you dislike French people on principle? And here I thought you looked more intelligent than that. What a shame." She turned her back on him.

He straightened, sniffed, and tried to keep his mouth from trembling. It had an unfortunate tendency to curl into a sneer when he grew agitated. "I... Excuse me." He turned and walked away, feeling shame, anger, and embarrassment warm his cheeks. The bloody attitude of the woman. And a Frenchwoman, at that. So cold and mocking at the same time.

His hands curled into fists, and he took a fresh glass of wine from a passing servant, drinking fast.

He felt a tap at his shoulder. "What do you—" He whirled around to see the young beauty standing at his elbow. "Oh. Hello. "

"You're being rude," the young woman said.

"What? I..." His face turned red.

"I don't know who you are, but you have no right to behave that way. Mrs. Martin is a lady, and she deserves your respect." Her brown eyes blazed, and he felt an urge to do something scandalous. He wondered what it would be like to kiss her.

She said, "You are a soldier, and I would think a man in the army would know better than to treat women with so little respect."

He uttered, "I'm a lieutenant. What's your name again?" In an instant, he was holding her hand. He paused. He was being rude. She should have offered her hand first and

yet here he was, taking her palm as if it belonged to him.

She blinked and looked down at his hand. She gently tugged hers free and said, “Marie Cadough. But everyone calls me ‘Mary.’”

“I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“You should apologize to Mrs. Martin.”

He glanced at the elder woman, who crossed her arms over her chest. He swallowed. The woman was French. How could he? He took a deep breath and said, “I am sorry.”

It was curt, blunt, uncaring. Almost rude. Perhaps it was. But this girl had asked him, and even though he felt nothing toward Mrs. Martin, he did care about what this young woman thought of him. He didn’t understand it. He felt drawn to her somehow. He’d apologize for the sky being blue if he thought she’d appreciate it. How strange. And yet he knew that he’d do anything just to see her look at him again.

The woman in question, Mrs. Martin, glanced at him with knowing brown eyes. “I accept your apology. You are a soldier?”

“Yes.” He looked down at his red army uniform. It was a dead giveaway. “I am.”

“You are a lieutenant?” she asked.

“With His Majesty’s Second Battalion, 95th Foot, ma’am. ”

“Why are you not overseas?”

“I was stationed in Portugal when I got injured in battle.” He tapped his eyepatch.

“I see. So now you are here,” Mrs. Martin said.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m on leave.”

“And are you local to London?”

“No. Born and bred in Hertfordshire. But I wanted a bit of entertainment and came to London.” He turned to the object of his interest. “What about yourself, Miss Cadough? Are you from London?”

She shrugged. “I’ve lived here all my life.”

Mrs. Martin looked at her askance. “But that is not true. Surely, you remember—”

Miss Cadough and Lieutenant Gage looked at the elder woman. Mrs. Martin fanned herself and said, “I’m sorry. For some reason, I thought you had grown up in France. You speak French so well, my dear.”

Lieutenant Gage sniffed, then brightened. The girl was educated, which was promising. “I speak a little French, as well as a few words of Portuguese. Was your governess French, Miss Cadough?”

She shook her head. “I never had a governess. My uncle taught me everything I know.”

“And where is he? You are not alone?” he asked.

“No, he is around.” She took a drink and looked away.

He was boring her, he realized. No doubt she had come here for cards, dancing, and entertainment, like him. Instead, he was interrogating her about her upbringing.

They'd only been acquainted for five minutes and he was already making a fool of himself. He ran a hand through his light-brown hair.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

Her gaze turned back to him. She blushed and glanced at her shoes. "I did not plan to dance this evening."

"Oh, but you must," Mrs. Martin said. "You are wearing such a pretty dress. I would like to see you dance. Go on." She made a little shooing motion with her hands.

Miss Cadough fidgeted and bit her lip. "All right."

A thrill ran through Lieutenant Gage as he extended his hand and Miss Cadough lightly took it. He led her onto the dance floor nearby and as the strings of the violin and pipe began to play a light, playful tune, he felt an excitement, as this was one he knew well. But to his surprise, she didn't.

He watched her most carefully and realized this was not a dance she knew, which was surprising, considering it was a common tune. She watched him and the other dancers, and he saw her move with an approximation of the right dance steps, but always a beat or two behind.

Her pink dress fluttered like silk against her legs and she moved, and in no time at all, more couples joined them, recognizing the tune. Soon they danced in a line, and the number of dancers grew. Suddenly, a simple dance of two became ten, then twelve. It was fun, it was light, and it was magical. He'd never had so much fun dancing before. But he spotted a mixture of concern and concentration etched on her face, her forehead wrinkled in thought. Perhaps her initial plan not to dance had been due to a lack of confidence, rather than a potential dislike of him as a partner. Hope soared in his chest.

He hadn't danced for a long time. Not since before he'd left England and his mother had been forcing him to attend assemblies with his brothers and his young female cousin. He'd always made sure to escort his cousin and stand up with her whenever she wished to dance, but all too often, her golden, shining hair and sparkling, blue eyes had not been enough to offset the considered unattractiveness of her firm opinions and blunt way of speaking. A family trait, he supposed, and yet he knew she found it hard to find young men with whom to socialize.

He had it easier, for all he needed was to become acquainted with a young woman and ask her to dance. The decision did lay with her as to whether or not she would deign to dance with him, but he knew that he was not considered unattractive by women. And so unless she pleaded a headache or was abominably rude, he had every hope of dancing with whomever he pleased. But maybe his appearance disturbed her. Perhaps this ugly, red gash across his eye would heal soon and leave nothing more than a faint scar.

He got a thrill out of the barest touch of her gloved hand and could feel the slight tremble as she danced. She missed a step and was out of time for the next two beats. He held her hand firmly and gave her a reassuring squeeze. She looked at him with a mixture of embarrassment and gratefulness. Was she nervous? He didn't know. Perhaps she was unsure of the dance steps, or she had a beau watching from elsewhere in the room. Maybe she dancing with him out of pity. All he knew was that he didn't want the dance to end.

But the strings did stop, the pipe player lowered his hands, and the dancing ended. She gave a small sigh of relief, but he spied her smiling, her cheeks flushed bright pink from the exertion. It was a pretty sight, and one he dearly wished to see again. He blinked as if in a dream. He'd never fallen for a girl so hard before. What made her different from any other pretty face?

Marie stood by to catch her breath. After working all day and now wearing a dress

that wasn't hers, and which likely cost more than she would make in a year, she already felt anxious. And now this. The dance had been simple enough, but she didn't know any of the steps—and was afraid it had shown. Some of the other dancers' surprised looks and small grins and smirks at her missteps had made her uncomfortable with each passing beat of the music, until she'd been ready to cry and run away. But then the man, the soldier, who had taken an instant dislike to the kind Mrs. Martin, and had been so rude, had squeezed her hand, and she'd looked into his unscarred eye and had known it would be all right. His gaze had been warm and gentle, and she'd known instantly that he didn't care whether she knew the dance or not—he didn't give a fig as to whether or not she knew the right steps. He'd just enjoyed being with her, there in that moment. Her heart gave a little flutter at the thought, and her worries drifted away.

He did cut a dashing figure in his red uniform. He wore his hair long and a bit messy, hanging over his eye. He clearly wished to hide it and the bright-red scar that puckered the skin, no doubt stitched up by a field surgeon in a hurry. But she rather thought it gave him a roguish air. Were all soldiers that way?

But his touch and handling of her had been polite and courteous, and downright civil. He had made no untoward passes at her or asked anything impolite. To her, he'd been more than civil. Did he like her?

She looked at him pensively. Why had he reacted so when he had learned that Mrs. Martin was French? Yes, they were at war, but what was the cause of such animosity? Mrs. Martin was an ordinary Frenchwoman married to an English military man. Clearly, her husband bore her no ill will for her nationality, so why should this man?

She looked up at him, admiring his tall, confident air. He stood of an average height for a man, not too short or too tall. Just right. She could look up into his exposed eye without craning her neck. But what did he want with her?

He asked her for another dance. She agreed, and they danced, but then her eyes caught the solitary figure of Mrs. Martin standing alone on the sidelines, watching. Her smile was polite, but Marie suspected it was just a mask to hide her true feelings .

She felt his gaze on her as she stumbled through another dance, doing her best to mimic the steps of the other ladies, but she was always a beat behind—and distracted. She was not here to dally with handsome soldiers. She had been asked by Mrs. Dove-Lyon to keep a lady company, and she wasn't doing that. The moment the dance ended, she nodded to the lieutenant and walked past, when he said at her shoulder, "Why do you leave? Do you not wish to dance another?"

She shook her head. "I wish to keep Mrs. Martin company. Excuse me."

"But Miss Cadough..." he started.

She turned back to him, her eyes questioning.

"I..." He seemed tongue-tied. "I would not keep you from your friend."

"She's not my friend. She's—" Marie paused. "Excuse me."

She left him to return to Mrs. Martin, who smiled at her arrival. "And here I thought he might steal you away for the evening."

Marie grinned.

"He's watching you, you know."

Marie gave a little Gallic shrug. Mrs. Martin laughed. "That, more than anything, reminds me of home."

“What do you mean?”

“The women I know back home, they shrug off the attentions of handsome men as you do. There will always be another handsome man wanting to take them to dance or pay them attention like the lieutenant. They may seem careless with their affection, even when they care very much.” She raised a knowing eyebrow.

“You determined all that from a shrug?” Marie asked.

“It was a very good shrug, my dear.” Mrs. Martin’s eyes sparkled with amusement and she took Marie’s arm. “So, you have stolen the heart of the young soldier. Who next?”

Marie gave a little laugh. “I have no wish to steal men’s hearts, Mrs. Martin. ”

“Why not? Is that not what young ladies do to pass the time?”

“French ladies, you mean.”

“Yes. But you are French, so it is the same thing.”

Marie’s smile faltered. She was gazing at her shoes, when she looked back up at Mrs. Martin. “I think here in London it is not so good to be French. I’m sorry that man was so rude. I don’t know what made him act that way.”

Mrs. Martin gave her an easy smile. “It is easily done. These English, they are so quick to take offense. No one can take a little joke. It is all so serious. But I find the men are very honorable and loyal. And oh-so-handsome. I love a soldier in uniform, don’t you?”

Marie blushed. “I don’t know many soldiers.”

“Well, you know one now. And he seems quite taken with you.” She glanced over Marie’s shoulder.

“Is he watching?”

“Yes. Although now he pretends not to. I do not think he has stopped gazing at you since you left his side on the dance floor. The poor man. He’s besotted, I’d say.”

Marie shook her head at Mrs. Martin’s teasing. “Nonsense, he can’t be. We’ve only just met.” Then she realized, of course, she had met him before.

“What? Your face says something different. You know him?”

“Yes, I met him briefly the other night. The noise from the drums troubled him.”

“Ah. That is not uncommon amongst soldiers, especially those who have been in battle. Now tell me... I am new to this country. I have a modiste and a charming husband, but at these little dinner parties, all the Englishwomen stare at my dress and jewels and turn up their noses at me.”

“And the men?”

“The men are worse. They all think I am some English rose when they meet me, then when they hear my accent, they think I am a French whore my husband picked up whilst in camp. They speak of me like a prize thoroughbred, and over cards one night, more than one man lost his head to wine and made improper advances.” She tossed her head, her dark curls whipping around her shoulders. “As if any drunkard would have a chance with me. I love my husband.”

Marie smiled. “I wish I had someone like that.”

“I have no doubt you will. But you interest me, my petite friend. If not toying with men’s hearts and minds, what do you like to do?”

“Cook.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I love to cook. To make dishes and try new flavor combinations. I think there is beauty in a rich, red wine sauce that shines in the light and tastes like velvet.”

“ Mon dieu , you are a chef. Who knew?” Mrs. Martin smiled in delight. “Well, in that case, you must make some French dishes for me. I miss our food from home, but now that I have met you, I will not worry.”

Marie grinned. “I would be happy to cook for you, Mrs. Martin, but I...” She looked down. How to tell her new acquaintance that she was nothing but a maid?

“What is it? Something troubles you, I can tell.”

“I...” She did not want to hurt Mrs. Martin’s feelings, or ruin her evening by revealing her occupation. What would the woman think if she were to learn of Marie’s background? She could see telling her, only for the woman to grow cold and walk away. It would crush Marie, to be rejected so.

She’d never really had a real friend. Growing up, she’d played once or twice with Miss Hortense, the daughter of her employers, but as soon as Mrs. Campbell had found out, she’d separated them and told Marie’s uncle to keep her in the kitchens, or they could find another employer. The mistress had also employed a governess to take care of Miss Hortense’s education, so the two girls had rarely seen each other since.

Now Marie felt the beginning of something when she reflected on her new relationship with Mrs. Martin. It was like the hard kernel of a chestnut before it warmed and was roasted by the fire at night. She did not want to crush something so delicate, so new.

She turned to Mrs. Martin. “Nothing. It is no matter at all. Now, tell me of France. What are your favorite dishes? I’m sure the cook below would let me cook some for you.”

“Below? With those servants? Non. It is simple. You will come to my townhouse or I to yours, and we will cook together. I have not gotten flour on my hands in a while, but I am no stranger to the kitchen.” She held out her gloved hands and laughed, a rich sound.

Marie smiled and instantly felt grateful for her gloves. The moment Mrs. Martin saw her hands, reddened and tough from years of work, she would know Marie was no delicate French ingenue.

They spent the rest of the evening chatting, until Mrs. Martin’s husband came to collect her. Mrs. Martin said, “Ah, Richard. You simply must meet my new friend, Miss Marie Cadeaux.”

The colonel, a stout, round man with an impressive, grey, curled mustache, bowed and raised Marie’s offered hand to his lips. “A pleasure. Enchanted.”

“ Enchantée .” The French word came unbidden to Marie’s lips, and the colonel’s eyes widened as he smiled. “Another Frenchwoman. How wonderful. I have no doubt you and my wife will be great friends.”

Marie bobbed a quick curtsy as he released her hand. She stood by and wished to give a little wave as they left arm in arm, when a firm hand took her arm and a stern

voice said in her ear, “What do you think you are doing?”

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Marie glanced at the familiar hand on her arm. “Uncle. I...”

His grip was hard. “I repeat, what do you think you are doing? Come away from here, Marie. Now.”

“But, you don’t understand—” she started.

“No. It is you who does not comprehend. Come. Or I will tell Mrs. Dove-Lyon we are leaving and we will be out on the street by morning. Is that what you want?”

She shook her head and allowed her uncle to lead her away and off the main floor. She felt the watchful eyes of the card dealers and footmen and felt a warm heat to her cheeks in embarrassment. Here she was dressed like a fine lady, and her uncle, in his servant’s uniform, was treating her like a naughty child. She didn’t deserve such treatment, especially when she was only doing Mrs. Dove-Lyon a favor.

She pulled her arm from his grasp when they were stopped by a familiar sight. It was the soldier who’d danced with her before.

He looked down at her uncle, eyeing the man’s stern expression, and asked, “Miss Cadough, is everything all right?”

“That is no business of yours,” Uncle Baptiste said.

“I was not addressing you, but the lady. Miss Cadough?”

Marie ducked her head in a nod. “Yes, everything is fine. I’m very well, thank you.

My uncle was just escorting me home, for I have a headache.”

The lieutenant’s eyebrows rose. “Your uncle?” His good eye darted quickly to the man, taking in his servant’s uniform and his chin, stiff with disapproval. He nodded politely. “Sir. I would be happy to escort your niece,” he began, when her uncle said, “I will do it. Good night.” He whisked Marie past the soldier when the man touched her arm.

Marie looked back at him.

“You would tell me, wouldn’t you? If something were amiss? I know we have only been introduced, but I—”

“You are right. You do not know each other,” her uncle replied in a chilly, accented English. “You are strangers. Now if you will allow it, sir, I will escort my niece home.”

The soldier’s face turned to stone and he removed his hand. He bowed and wished them goodnight.

Marie looked back as Uncle Baptiste hustled her away from the main floor and into the corridor. Once away from prying eyes, he turned on her. “What were you doing in there, and dressed like that? What are you playing at?”

Marie swallowed. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked me for a favor.”

“What? What kind of favor?” he demanded.

Marie pondered this. Had Mrs. Dove-Lyon not yet had a chance to speak with her uncle? Her mistress would, she was sure of it. “There is a Frenchwoman here tonight. She is alone and has no friends. The mistress feared she was lonely, and so she asked

me to dress up and talk to her.”

“Why you?” He tugged at his high collar, a sure sign of his unease.

“We both speak French.” She paused and looked down at the silk folds of her dress. “I’m sorry, Uncle. I didn’t think—”

He cursed. “That’s right, you didn’t. Have you no sense? What has gotten into you, Marie? It is not safe to be French right now. We were lucky the Campbells tolerated us for so long, but now, you take a risk with our new employer. All it takes is one mistake, one wrong turn, and we could be out on the street. I am careful—now you must be too. Do you understand?”

She bowed her head. “Yes, Uncle. I’m sorry.”

He patted her hand. “Go change out of that dress. I don’t want to see you in it again.”

“But, Uncle, the mistress—”

“I will speak with her. Go.” He stood by, waiting.

She left. But she did not follow her uncle’s orders to change and go directly to her room. Instead, she suspected she knew where he was going and followed him.

That was one thing about her uncle: when he was mad, he lost sight of much else around him, remaining fixed on the task ahead.

She kept a safe distance behind him, and when he knocked and entered Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s private parlor at the mistress’s summons, she hastened to listen at the door. As the wooden door was ajar, she could hear clearly enough.

“Mr. Allard,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. “You are up late. Is something the matter?”

“You could say that. Why on Earth is my niece on the floor of your gambling den, dressed up like a silly French lady?”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon laughed. “I hardly think it is all bad as that, Mr. Allard. I meant to speak with you earlier, but time got away from me. She is simply doing me a favor. Any fault of this is mine. I asked her to do it.”

“Why? What could she possibly do for you?”

“Please, Mr. Allard, do not be angry. She was very hesitant to agree at all. The fact of the matter is that a general and his new bride are among my guests tonight, and his lady wife is French. She speaks little English and looked so alone. I did not want her to find my little institution unwelcoming. Is that so wrong? ”

“You should have asked my permission before allowing Marie to dress up like a lady.”

“Perhaps. But she is not a child. She is a young woman, and she should be allowed to make up her own mind.”

“She is innocent in the ways of the world. She does not know the trouble it could cause.”

“And what harm could a dress do?” she asked.

“Her dress is not my concern. But it is now too, for it is not hers. She will return it to you immediately.”

She paused. “Mr. Allard, I do not care about a dress. What is your quarrel with me?”

“I have no quarrel, madam. I only wish you would have consulted me first before involving my niece in one of your schemes.”

The mistress’s voice grew cold. “My ‘schemes’? Do you understand what it is we do here, Mr. Allard? Without these schemes , as you call them, there would be no roof over your head. The eligible men and women who attend my little parties come intending to meet their matches. Is that so wrong, to add your niece to their number, even just for one night? There is a very distinguished soldier who—”

“Marie is not suitable for a common soldier,” he said angrily.

Marie’s mouth dropped open and she clapped a hand over her lips to keep from uttering a sound. How dare he? Her uncle thought her lower than a soldier? Why? How had she sunk so low in his estimation?

“I fail to see why you are so angry. I understand you are protective of your niece, but she is a grown woman. She is what, twenty?”

“Twenty-two.”

“More than old enough to be entertaining beaux. I know some women are married by that time. And a young woman likes a bit of excitement. She enjoyed herself tonight. Would you deny her the chance to meet some eligible young men?”

He grunted. “It is not for me to say. Her parents— ”

“Ah, yes. A subject which young Marie seems to know little about, and which you seem oddly reticent about. Tell me, why is that?”

“Her parents placed her into my care. They left it to me to look after her education and said nothing about her carrying on with men. Especially English soldiers.” He

gave a little harrumph, one which Marie often found amusing, but at that moment, she found it utterly annoying. It was his little sign that he was done with the discussion.

“Well, as I said, it was a favor. And now she has the welcome ear of a very good French lady. With the right connections and good favor, Marie could make a very suitable match. If you were to allow her to continue as a social companion to the lady Mrs. Martin.”

“Who is she? This Frenchwoman?” Uncle Baptiste asked.

“She is the well-to-do wife of an English colonel, and they now have the means to entertain themselves at the gambling tables. But she is alone and knows no one besides her husband. Whilst the language is no barrier to their relationship, she expressed a wish to know some ladies who could speak her language.”

“Why not introduce her to some of the young ladies present?”

“Ah. There is a difference between the schoolgirl French we are taught by our governesses and speaking like a native. I am afraid that Mrs. Martin prefers the latter in her companions, and the English guests to whom I have introduced her found her wanting in English graces and conversation. It is a mismatch, again and again. So when I saw your niece, I thought perhaps she might do me this one favor.”

He breathed in. “What is in this for her? Won’t it detract from her duties?”

“Yes, it will. But I think no servant would turn it down, especially when they are allowed to wear smart clothing and converse with fine ladies. She has been such a help to me, Mr. Allard, Mrs. Martin has taken to her already, and I can already tell they will be good friends. Please, Mr. Allard, allow Marie to be a social companion to her. Once Mrs. Martin tires of her, she can return to her duties below stairs. ”

“Won’t this give her airs above her station?” he said. “She will develop a taste for rich things and miss that world when she returns, if we are not careful.”

Marie smiled and realized then that Mrs. Dove-Lyon had convinced him to allow her to continue, whether he comprehended it himself or not. She rubbed her hands together.

“I think Marie has a smart head on her shoulders, and she is imminently sensible. Now if we can just keep her out of the kitchen and avoid offending the cooks, we will have peace downstairs. What say you, Mr. Allard? Will you allow her to continue working above stairs?”

He paused. “I wonder how the other servants will treat her, when they hear of this. We are new here. I would not have her face any unkindness, if she is seen to be raised above the others.”

“There will be none of that. I have a good staff, and they are very kind. Those who step outside the bounds of good nature and common decency do not stay here long. What do you say?”

Marie waited. With a word from him, she could be spending her evenings chatting with Mrs. Martin or dancing with that handsome soldier. Or she could be downstairs, clearing away the servants’ dinner service. She gave a tiny sigh and prepared to walk away.

She knew her uncle. He had always been fiercely protective of her, as long as she had known him. She fingered the locket around her neck and straightened from her bent pose by the door, when she heard a voice say, “Miss?”

She ignored it, when came a hand touched her arm. She whirled around with a cry. It was Lucy, one of the parlor maids, and the girl with whom she shared a bedroom.

The maid's eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open. She gripped Marie's arm and held up a finger to her lips for silence. She pulled Marie from the door. "What are you doing?"

"Listening."

"Why? It's not your business. Mrs. Dove-Lyon doesn't like it if we're listening at doors. It's a good way to get dismissed if you're not careful."

Marie lowered her head. "I—"

"And why are you dressed like that? Like a lady?"

Marie looked down at her beautiful dress, her slim, white gloves, and her dancing shoes. She felt like a lady, and yet she felt like an imposter at the same time.

"Lucy, what are you doing out here? Oh, Marie." Mrs. Dove-Lyon and Uncle Baptiste came out of the parlor. The mistress looked amused, but Uncle Baptiste was not. He crossed his arms over his chest and said, "What were you doing? Were you listening at the door?"

"No." Marie bit her lip, a sure sign of her deceit.

"You are a terrible liar, Marie. That is why you should never play cards," Uncle Baptiste told her. "Go change out of that dress. You need to clean it and return it for the morning."

"I will," Marie said.

"But first, a little word," said the mistress. "Miss Cadough, if you would?" At a glance from Marie's uncle, Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, "Just between us women. Not to

fear, Mr. Allard. It will only take a moment.”

Marie glanced at her uncle, then joined Mrs. Dove-Lyon in the parlor and at her instruction, sat as her hostess shut the door.

“Well, I assume you know already what was discussed. How much did you hear?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

“Some. Enough.” Marie paused. “Will I really get to dress up again and talk with Mrs. Martin?”

“Would you like to?”

Marie had thought about this already, whilst overhearing their earlier discussion. “Yes, I would.”

“Good. I thought you might. You are accepting of being Mrs. Martin’s companion again, for however long she wishes?”

“Yes. ”

“But bearing in mind, you may have to return downstairs when she leaves, or if she tires of you?”

Marie nodded.

“Very well. Then I don’t see a reason why not to let you continue. She seemed to like you tonight and enjoyed watching you dance even more.”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon, could you tell me a bit about the man I danced with? The lieutenant.”

“I’m surprised. I thought he would have told you a bit about himself. Lieutenant Samuel Gage is a brave soul, and an honorable man, from what I understand. Why?” A smile warmed Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s face, despite being shrouded in shadow from her black veil.

“No reason.”

This mistress’s smile grew. “It is a funny thing. I had not thought I would ever see him dance, but ever since coming here two nights ago, he has come here every night once we opened and stayed almost till closing. I rather thought he might be looking for someone. Was it you?”

“I don’t know.” She wanted to ask, Is he married? Then she bowed her head.

“Well, never mind. I’m glad you enjoyed yourself tonight. You really did do me a favor. You can go.” She dismissed Marie with a wave of her hand.

As Marie rose to leave, Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, “Marie, just one question.”

“Yes?”

“Did you enjoy the dancing?” The mistress’s smile was back.

Marie couldn’t hide the shy grin on her face as she bobbed a curtsy and said, “Good night, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

She stripped off the dress in the dressing room and once she’d put her own clothes back on and had cleaned the dress and hung it back in the closet, she crept up to the servants’ rooms on the top floor and went to bed, her dreams full of dances and light music.

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Marie did join Mrs. Martin the next evening, and the following, although she rarely accepted the lieutenant's kind offers to dance. Soon, invitations came for her to accompany her out of the Den, and to take a country drive in the park. "What do you say, Miss Cadough," Mrs. Martin said. "A little country air might do us good. Will you join me?"

Marie bit the inside of her cheek and demurred. She would have liked to, but to step outside the Lyon's Den in daylight hours, when she should be cleaning, washing, or sewing...

Not all the servants had been glad to hear of Marie's little favor for Mrs. Dove-Lyon, or the fact that she would be spending her time above stairs with the guests, socializing, dancing and drinking, when she should be below stairs doing her chores.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Pratt, was particularly disapproving, and raised the subject to Mrs. Dove-Lyon herself, as Marie was tidying the anteroom before Mrs. Dove-Lyon's parlor one afternoon. "What is the meaning of this? To be raising a girl above her station and have her talking with the ladies and gentlemen? It's not right, Mrs. Dove-Lyon, and I don't mind saying, very peculiar. "

A large woman with a round body and large bosom, Mrs. Pratt's no-nonsense attitude was clear. There was to be no funny business going on with a girl in her care, not beneath her roof. She'd said her peace, and that was that.

But Mrs. Dove-Lyon had something more to say.

"My dear Mrs. Pratt, I am at my wits' end. You see..." She explained the situation

again, which was relayed back to the kitchen staff, the household staff, the wait staff, and anyone else who cared to listen. Marie's favor and situation became common knowledge before lunch.

And when she sat down at the table to join the fellow servants, she got some very serious and suspicious stares.

Marie swallowed and looked down as she was given a bowl of soup. Today's soup was a dull, dingy, beige color and thick. She took a soup spoon and sniffed the air. If she wasn't mistaken, it was potato. How she wished she could season it with a bare touch of salt and pepper, or some parsley or watercress. Anything. But it would be filling, which was what the cooks aimed for. They saved the finer foods for the paying guests upstairs.

As it had been pointed out to her, the men and women paid an entrance fee to attend the Den, similar to paying a subscription for tickets to Almack's, the Fashionable Institution, or one of the other ballrooms, galas, or clubs in London. They deserved the fine fare that the cooks prepared, and very little was left each night.

One evening, Marie joined the other servants for dinner and felt a slight tension in the room as her wooden chair squeaked when she sat at the dinner table. Her uncle had been sent off on an errand and was not present, which made Marie feel slightly uneasy. Mr. Jones, the butler, made eye contact with the housekeeper and head cook, then cleared his throat and began.

"A sharp knife has gone missing from the dinner service. Has anyone seen where it has gone?"

The maids, cooks, scullery boys, and footmen shook their heads. No one seemed to know.

“Well, it couldn’t have just disappeared,” Mrs. Pratt said.

“And yet that seems to be exactly what has happened.” Mr. Jones gazed around the blank faces. “If someone cares to return it or knows where it has been misplaced, do let me know.”

The sound of soup spoons clinking against china plates and the tearing of a thick bread loaf, pieces being spread with cheap butter, filled the air. The bread had been baked yesterday and was still fresh enough, and it made for wonderful use being used to mop up the leftover soup that remained in the bowl.

Marie accepted the loaf when it was passed to her and tore off a small hunk, handing it to the servant sat next to her, when a voice said, “Thought you wouldn’t want that now, since you’re standing up drinking and eating with the lords and ladies upstairs.”

Marie paused. She was still new and didn’t know everyone yet. She looked around the room but couldn’t peg who had spoken. “Who said that?”

The other servants’ faces were as if carved from wood: expressionless and hard. One young man said, “Me. Why are you down here eating with us when you should be up there with them?”

“Thom,” the butler said. “That’s enough.”

Marie said, “I’m a servant. This is where I eat.”

“Well, I don’t like it. I don’t want to eat with a girl who plays at being a servant, then spends her nights up there with the guests. You’re either one of us, or you ain’t. Which is it?” Thom asked, his voice hard. He had a head full of curled, black hair and a rounded chin, which was right now jutting angrily in her direction. He would almost be handsome if he weren’t so angry.

“I’m sorry. I never meant to offend. I only did what Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked,” Marie said.

“Oh, aye, blame her. She always wants something. You didn’t have to say yes , did you?” Thom asked. “Bet you jumped at the chance. Put on a fine dress and pretend like you’re some fine lady.” He snorted.

Marie stared at him. “She asked me for a favor and I did it. Yes, I enjoyed it. Who wouldn’t?”

He sneered. “You seem to have a pretty high opinion of yourself, don’t you?”

“Thom,” Mr. Jones said, “enough. Either eat here and hold a civil tongue or go elsewhere.”

“Fine.” Thom stood up fast, knocking his chair to the ground.

The other servants froze.

Thom took up his bowl and bread and with a glare at Marie, quit the room.

Marie felt her shoulders slump. What had she done? She’d never meant to offend him so. “I’m sorry,” she uttered.

“Never mind, Miss Cadough,” Mrs. Pratt said. “Thom is always angry about something. He once thought he could better himself and become a valet, but the gentleman wasn’t interested. Now he gets mad whenever one of us has something to do with the guests upstairs.”

“Never you mind him,” one of the cooks said kindly, then she seemed to remember to whom it was she was talking and quieted. She ate her soup with gusto, eyeing Marie.

The others were waiting for her to comment on the quality of the soup, Marie realized. She spooned a mouthful into her mouth and swallowed, burning her tongue. “Delicious,” she uttered. “Hot.” She coughed and reached for a glass of water.

But as much as she thought she might be the subject of attention, she was quickly overlooked in favor of the hot meal. The sounds of clinking spoons and eating filled her ears, and she gave her attention to the bowl in front of her. But it was empty too soon, and she used the bit of bread to wipe the bowl clean of soup, eating it and licking her fingers when she’d finished.

“Good, eh? Up to your standards then, eh, princess?” one of the cooks said. At a stern look from Mr. Jones, he said, “Just asking her opinion.”

“I am not a princess.” Marie looked around the room. Some of the servants were still eating and ignored her entirely. Others gazed back at her, but their expressions were unfriendly.

Marie realized she had no allies here, and it was only down to the butler’s dominance over the group, and his stiff politeness, that kept the rude remarks at bay. She rose, took her plate, and quit the room, then hung back a moment to listen.

One servant said, “She’s got a real nerve, acting all high and mighty after a few nights on the main floor.”

Mr. Jones said, “It’s not her fault. Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked her to help. Would you have said no, if she’d asked you? Would any of you?”

There was silence.

“I thought not,” Mr. Jones said. “So please leave the girl alone. From what I understand, she has no parents, only her uncle. I don’t care if she has a nice night

talking with the lords and ladies upstairs, or if she gets to wear fifty fine dresses. It's none of our business. Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked her to help her, and she did. The girl doesn't deserve your anger, so keep your thoughts to yourself."

"But it's not fair. She skips her chores whilst the rest of us are working, and she plays and pretends to be a lady at night."

Marie hung her head as she stood in the shadowed corridor, then had a thought. She went to the kitchen, washed her bowl and spoon, and put the dishes back. She then went in search of Mrs. Dove-Lyon.

An hour later, the maids found her tidying up the guest rooms on the third floor. "What are you doing?" Lucy asked.

Marie stopped from making the bed. "My chores."

Julia, who was never far from Lucy and who was often found chatting to Thom, crossed her arms over her chest. "Thought you'd be trying on dresses. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Marie gave her a hard look and went back to straightening the duvet on the bed.

Julia stepped forward, her blonde hair pinned back in a severe bun and her eyes blazing. "I bet I know. Bet the mistress put you to work. Maybe you weren't so popular with the guests, and now she wants you downstairs with the rest of us, now that you're no use to her." Her face held a nasty grin.

Marie stopped what she was doing and faced her. "What do you want, Julia?"

"Only to wipe that smirk off your face. You're no better than the rest of us, you hear?" She strode toward Marie, when Lucy grabbed her arm.

“Stop it, Julia. The mistress don’t hold with us fighting.”

“Oh, we’re not fighting. We’re just having a little disagreement.” Julia sneered.

“I’m not going to fight you,” Marie said.

“Why not? Too precious? You don’t want to dirty your hands with me?” Julia asked.

Marie stared at her, her gaze unflinching.

Julia shook off Lucy’s hand and snorted. “Thought so.” She turned. “Come on, Lucy.”

“You’re not worth the trouble,” Marie said, her nose in the air.

“What did you say?” Julia whirled back around.

“You heard me. You’re not worth it. You’re looking to pick a fight with me and I don’t know why. I don’t even know you. But I don’t care. If hitting me will make you feel better, go ahead.”

Julia stepped toward and shoved her shoulder. Marie stumbled back and stood up straight.

Julia shoved her again, and Marie’s expression grew haughty. “You’re just jealous.”

Julia slapped her face, a hard smack. Lucy flinched. Marie stared at her, not bothering to raise a hand to her cheek. She instead raised an eyebrow .

“Let it be, Julia. Someone’ll hear,” Lucy said.

Marie glared at Julia.

Footfalls were heard outside. Julia shot Marie a look. “This isn’t over.” She turned and walked out.

Lucy glanced at Marie. She said not a word and followed Julia outside the room.

Marie crossed the room and closed the door, then sat down on the bed and held her head in her hands. She’d thought that by convincing Mrs. Dove-Lyon to let her continue with her chores, she could both act as companion to Mrs. Martin and work downstairs, so to speak. She wouldn’t need anyone else to cover for her or take on her work, and all would be well. So why did she feel like such a failure?

It had only been a few nights, but already it seemed that no matter what she did or said, the other servants disliked her. She had no friends but her new acquaintance Mrs. Martin, and if she was ever to learn of Marie’s true occupation as a servant in the Lyon’s Den, Marie would likely lose her friendship too.

A lone tear dropped down her cheek, when a knock came at the door. She wiped it away hastily. “Yes?” she asked.

The door opened and in walked Uncle Baptiste. “Are you all right?”

“Oui .” She spoke in French, a sure sign she was stressed.

“I was looking for you and the others said you had gone up here to change the bed linens. I thought that must be a mistake, so I went to see for myself.”

She turned away and sniffed.

He stood by her. “You’ve been crying.”

“Non .” She blinked hard. “Non .”

“Do not hide from me, Marie. We are family.” He caught a look of her face. “What happened to your cheek? It’s bright red.”

“One of the maids slipped.”

He gave a derisive snort. “You are a poor liar. So a girl hit you. Who was it? Why?”

“They do not like me helping out the mistress.”

“That is their problem. It is nothing to you. Ignore them.”

Marie turned her face to him, not bothering to wipe her eyes. His gaze darted to her cheek, her tears, but he did not speak. Instead, she did. “Thank you for agreeing to let me continue meeting Mrs. Martin and pretending to be a lady.”

“There is no pretending. You are a lady.”

She looked down at her maid’s uniform, the staunch, white apron over her knees. She turned her hands over, looking at the rough, red skin. How she’d enjoyed the feel of the silk gloves that hid this, and reached up to her elbows.

“This is my life. I am a servant, Uncle.”

He breathed in noisily and pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing. “This is not the life I would have chosen for you—”

“Why do you get to choose what is right for me? Why can’t I make my own choices? The mistress said—”

“That woman seeks to involve you in her matchmaking schemes. I do not trust her. Yes, she is our employer, but who is to say what she will do? I do not like her using you like this.” He sighed and put his head in his hands.

“ Using me? She asked for a favor and I said yes . I agreed to put on the dress and talk to Mrs. Martin. I walked into this with my eyes open.”

“But into what, is the question, Marie. I think you enjoy this, a break from your usual duties. But what will you do when Mrs. Martin leaves, or if she tires of you? What then?”

Marie wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. “Then I will go back to my life below stairs. And I will get more sleep at night.” She gave a ghost of a smile and hiccupped.

“This is no joke. I fear that you will become restless and unhappy. The others are jealous of you, but when this is all done and over with, they will pity you, for you will have tasted the rich food and drank fine wine and danced and flirted, while they are stuck downstairs.”

She looked at him, her mouth pulled into a frown.

“What will you say then?” he asked.

“Nothing. I will have the memory of it. That will be enough.”

He kicked the bedpost and his face clenched in anger and at the sharp pain he must have felt in his foot.

“What is it, Uncle?” she asked.

He frowned and stuck his hands in his pockets. "I do not like it. Yes, you are an adult. You can make your own decisions. But your parents would not have liked this, you pretending. It is beneath you."

"How can you say that, when I am but a servant?" she asked.

"You may be a servant, but that was not the life your mother and father intended. They wanted more for you than this," he said curtly, his mouth twisted. "Go on. I'll keep a watch over you so the others don't bother you."

"No need, Uncle. I can take care of myself."

"Yes, I can see the proof of that," he muttered darkly before quitting the room.

That evening, Marie sat down at dinner with the other servants and was about to cut into a piece of roast chicken when there was a slight knock on the doorway.

Heads turned to reveal a footman, dressed in a smart, green jacket, a waistcoat, and beige breeches, looking at Marie with a pointed look. "Miss Cadough, the mistress requests your presence on the main floor."

"Oh?" Marie knew what that meant and began to rise from her chair.

"Mrs. Martin is among the guests. The mistress was hoping you would make an appearance."

More than one servant scoffed, while another snorted.

"Of course she does," Thom said. "Our grand hostess desperately needs the favor of Miss Cadough's presence. She can't do without her." He smirked.

“Thom ,” Mr. Jones said.

“Have a care, Thom,” Uncle Baptiste said, a note of warning in his tone.

Thom glanced at him. “What do you care?”

“That’s my niece you’re insulting.”

Thom shrugged. “Calls it as I sees it. She’s the mistress’s favorite, for now. But when she’s done with her, then she’ll be down here with the rest of us, where she belongs.”

“Stop it, Thom,” Marie said.

“ Stop it, Thom ,” Julia mimicked.

Mrs. Pratt shot Julia a warning look, but to Marie’s surprise, a few snickered at Julia’s teasing, which only served to encourage her.

“She probably don’t like the food, either. That’s why she hasn’t touched it. Not good enough for her tastes,” Julia said.

“That’s enough,” Mr. Jones said.

“Oh, yeh, quit it, Thom. Our princess will order the guards to cut your head off.”
Julia sneered.

Thom laughed. “What do you say to that, eh, princess?”

Marie turned red.

Uncle Baptiste rose from his chair. “Shut your mouth, or I’ll shut it for you.”

“Go ahead, old man.”

“Stop this. I don’t want you fighting,” Marie said, gripping the table. The smells of her roast chicken wafted in the air, teasing her. “I’m not worth it.” Her voice was cutting.

The servants looked at her. Thom’s eyebrows rose. Julia, sitting beside him, leaned back in her seat.

“You think to insult me by calling me ‘princess,’ but the truth is that I am a nobody, and you know it. I am no better than anyone here. I’m simply helping out our employer for a time. That is it. Think what you want, say what you want, but leave us alone. I promise, I will be no trouble for you after this.”

“Marie?” her uncle started.

“I’ve made up my mind. Once my favor for the mistress is complete, I’ll find other employment. It’s clear I’m not welcome here.” She sniffed, lifted her chin, and paused. “And the food smells delicious.” She followed the footman from the room and heard Julia cackle as she left.

As they walked together, the footman asked, “What you said in there... Will you really leave the Den after your work for the mistress is done?”

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t want to be where I’m not wanted. And there’s always work to be done. I can find employment in another household. Somewhere where it doesn’t matter if I am French.”

“May I offer some advice?” the footman asked.

“If it pleases you.”

“She does not ask for favors very often. In fact, it is rare. And when she does ask, she usually has another idea in mind entirely, a reason other than what she says. And the people she asks, they aren’t like the rest of us.”

“What are you saying?” she asked.

“Only this. That if the mistress asked a favor of you, she saw something in you that made her take notice. You say you are a nobody, but that’s untrue.”

Marie frowned at the man. “What if you are the only one who thinks so?”

“It’s not just me. I don’t know you. But like Thom, I call it like I see it. If the mistress has enlisted you in one of her plans, she means for more for you than just working below stairs with the rest of them.”

Marie smiled as she followed him up the stairs. “I hope you are right.”

She was attended to and helped into a sea-green dress by Miss Robbins and Julia. As Julia affixed a sea-green ribbon to her hair and Miss Robbins straightened the dress over her shift, she said, “Don’t enjoy this for too long. You can’t keep the clothes.”

Marie looked up and caught a disapproving glance in the large looking glass that faced her as she stood upon the small, raised platform. “Have I offended you somehow?”

“Not me, no. Can’t imagine a princess like you would notice the likes of me. Not when you have the mistress’s favor.”

“What?” She looked down at the woman.

The lady’s maid was middle-aged tall and thin, with baby-fine sandy hair and dark

eyes. “We’ve seen you around. You might act all nice to our faces, but Julia told us everything. How you criticize the food and that you think you’re better than us. Well, you’re not.”

Marie bit her tongue. Would this idle servants’ gossip never cease?

She smoothed down the silk of her sea-green dress and sniffed as one of the maids tightly tied a thick ribbon around her waist. The maidservant gave it a sharp tug, earning a slight gasp came from Marie, when Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s voice cut into the room.

“Have a care, Robbins. You’ll cut off her circulation. Undo that. It’s too tight.”

With a grimace, the maid loosened the sash and tied it again, at a more breathable fastness around Marie’s waist.

“There now. Let me have a look at you.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon came forward and surveyed her. “Very pretty, very pretty, indeed. Now go on downstairs. Mrs. Martin was hoping you would come, and I’ve seen that that soldier is back too. They are conversing together, but I have no doubt they are both looking forward to your company. Please join them.”

Marie stepped down from the pedestal, slipping as one of the maids stuck her foot out and tripped her. She landed hard on the wooden floor, scraping her hands and knees. The small slicing of pain grazed the flat skin of her palms. She shot the servant a dirty look .

“Oh!” Mrs. Dove-Lyon leaned to help her up. “Careful, Miss Cadough. You must be more graceful than that.”

Marie blushed, stood, and brushed down the dress, making sure it was still in good

condition. She joined Mrs. Dove-Lyon and followed her out of the room. Once alone together in the stairwell, Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, “It’s strange. For a moment, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. I almost thought that Robbins tripped you. The servants do not like you, do they?”

“No,” Marie said simply, thinking, Was it so obvious?

“Why is that? I have known these people for months and in some cases, years. I trust them implicitly, and their conduct has always been above reproach. Have you been rude?”

“Not to my knowledge.” Marie paused. “Although... I did critique the soup.”

“The soup? What was wrong with it?”

“It was plain. Ordinary. Your guests dine on such good dishes. I found it odd that the staff should eat so plainly.”

“You expect the servants to eat as well as the guests?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

“No. But I would not have them eat without spice or seasoning altogether, either.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon smiled beneath her black veil. “I see. And what would you have done?”

“I would season the potato soup we had earlier with a bit of salt and pepper, maybe a bit of sage, watercress, or parsley. Something to season it, for sure.”

“And what about the dinner tonight?”

“I... didn’t get a chance to try it. But the roast chicken smelled wonderful, and the

boiled potatoes very nice, indeed.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon snorted. “I’m sorry to have pulled you away from your meal. You must be starving.”

“Not at all. We had a very filling lunch.” Marie’s stomach chose that moment to grumble. She swallowed and hoped Mrs. Dove-Lyon hadn’t heard.

They reached the bottom steps and before they entered the main floor, Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, “I see. Well, do spend as much time as you can with Mrs. Martin. And, Marie, you can enjoy yourself. I mean for this not to be a chore, but enjoyable as well. You don’t mind doing this, do you?”

“Not at all. It’s the highlight of my day,” Marie said brightly. And it really was. After the rude reception and pointed jibes of Thom and Julia, not to mention Miss Robbins tripping her, Marie felt that an evening of dancing and pleasant chat with people who actually liked her would be welcome.

“Very good. Now, stand up straight, shoulders back, and put on your best smile,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, walking with her out of the stairwell.

Marie adjusted the pair of gloves on her hands, noting the slightly loose fit they had on her small hands. She walked toward Mrs. Martin, who waved, evidently delighted to see her.

Marie joined her and made a polite curtsy, as the soldier greeted them. Mrs. Martin fanned herself and grinned. “Well, Miss Cadeaux, you’re a smart thing. Keeping us waiting. My, if another minute had passed, poor Lieutenant Gage would have drunk himself silly.”

The lieutenant in question blushed and looked away, then glanced at Marie. Their

eyes met, and she felt his gaze was strong and held hers, refusing to let go. She felt locked somehow, almost as if they were connected in a transparent embrace, one only they could see.

She wondered if perhaps Mrs. Martin's playful teasing had unknowingly hit the mark.

"But where were you, Miss Cadeaux? What kept you?" Mrs. Martin asked.

"I was detained at dinner. And then I was chatting with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. "

"Well, I cannot be mad at you for that. I am grateful to our hostess for such entertainment."

"Oh?"

"Well, we were saying that there is a lady over there with such outrageous jewels. She looks like a prized elephant from pictures I have seen of such creatures in India. Isn't that so, lieutenant?" Mrs. Martin nodded in the direction of the woman in question, who was indeed draped in finery.

But something about her struck Marie as familiar. Perhaps it was the high topknot of her hair, meant to look like a gigantic, vertical bow, or the way her figure, now thick around the middle, sat squashed in a too-tight dress of red. But when she turned around...

"Oh, no," Marie breathed.

"What is it? Do you know that woman?" Lieutenant Gage asked.

"Yes, I... do." Marie stared as the woman stood not fifteen feet away, surveying the room. The woman's husband turned, his eye landing on Marie. He stared and glanced

away, then stared again. It was Mr. Campbell, her former employer, who looked none too happy to see her.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:22 am

Marie swallowed nervously. Mr. Campbell, her former employer, was coming over, his expression stormy. It was a face Marie knew well. From the heavily furrowed eyebrows and narrowed eyes, dark as jet, to the pinched twist of his mouth, Mr. Campbell was furious.

Marie turned to the lieutenant. "Sir, I should feel very much like dancing right now."

His eye widened. "Are you certain?" He blinked. "I mean, of course. I just thought perhaps you did not wish to dance. The dances I thought must be foreign to what you learnt as a child."

"I don't know the steps, it's true. My uncle did not care much for dancing. But I like it, even if I am a bit behind the others. Please?" Her look was pleading.

He held out his hand. She took it, and he led her swiftly to the dance floor. She exhaled a breath as he led her to the small line of dancers and spoke not a word as they joined in the next set. He quickly whispered instructions to her.

As the small orchestra began a light tune of violins, harp and pipe, he guided her through the dance, and her hands trembled .

He asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"You know that couple." It was not a question.

“Yes,” she said.

“Who is they?” he asked.

“Mr. and Mrs. Campbell.”

“Former acquaintances of yours?” he asked.

“Yes. They are my...” A soft sigh escaped her.

“What? A horrid aunt or relation? Someone whose son you jilted at the altar?”
Lieutenant Gage smiled.

She looked at him. “You are teasing me.”

He gave her a warm look. “I am. Is it working?”

“Your teasing?”

“Yes. It was meant to make you smile. I am glad it has distracted you.”

She smiled at that. “Yes, for a moment.” But then she saw Mr. Campbell standing by, his arms crossed, staring at Marie, and her face fell.

“What is wrong? Who is that man, to make you so unhappy?”

“He is...” Marie started and looked at Lieutenant Gage. He did not know her. He had seen her once before, in a maid’s uniform. And had made no issue about her circumstances. If she revealed the truth, would he abuse her in front of the others? Before Mrs. Martin?

He squeezed her hand. "You can tell me, Miss Cadough. I am no stranger to secrets, and I have no close confidantes I would tell."

She looked at him. "Surely, you have friends."

His face clouded. "I lost many on the battlefield. But even so, I would not betray a lady's secrets."

She snorted bitterly. "Well, that is not an issue, for I am no lady."

"Of that, I believe you are mistaken." The dance was almost ended, and as they finished, he took her hand in his and raised it to his lips. "I believe you are a maidservant in Mrs. Dove-Lyon's employ, are you not?"

She stumbled in the dance, and her face fell. She looked as if she were about to cry. Her eyes darted to the exit, and he gripped her hand. "Please. Do not go. I would not lose my dance partner."

She looked at him. "You don't mind?"

He shook his head. "You may act as a maid, but you are the epitome of feminine beauty."

She gave him a shy smile. "You remember me."

"The kind maid who pulled me away from the harsh music when I was in danger of a fit? Of course I do. I've been coming here night after night, trying to meet you again. You were like an angel that night. Whilst I would not repeat the events of that evening, I am glad to have met you. I still am. Whether or not you wear a fine dress or an apron over your uniform. I do not care. I only want..." He paused. "Forgive me. I speak in haste. You hardly know me."

She tensed, feeling unfriendly eyes upon her. "It's true." She let him escort her off the dance floor. "Do you really mean what you said? That you don't care about..."

"The fact that you are a maid? No. I mean, no, I don't care. It doesn't matter to me a whit. Does Mrs. Martin know? You are acting as her companion in the evenings, are you not?"

"Yes. The mistress asked if I would chat to her, and I have done so. I did not know I would like her so much. But now that we are friends, I do not want to tell her. It would betray her confidence and ruin our relationship. I have so few friends. I..." She looked down. "Will you keep my secret?"

"I will, but I do think she deserves to know. I think you should trust her. If you truly are friends, she will not let your occupation stand in the way."

She smiled up at him, happy for the second time that day. "Thank you."

He said, "Miss Cadough. In battle, we face challenges directly no matter where they come from. Are you going to face that gentleman?"

"Yes."

"Who is he to you? If you are in trouble, I will do all I can to assist."

She shook her head. "He is my former employer. His wife does not like me."

"Why?" He took her hand in his.

She gently removed her hand and lowered her head, staring at her feet. "I could not say. But he does not approve of my presence here, of that I am certain." She raised her chin. "Excuse me."

She marched off in the direction of Mrs. Martin, determined to ignore the others. But she did not get far before a quiet voice said behind her shoulder, “Mary?”

She turned around. Not for the first time, Marie wished she were taller, so that she might meet her former employer eye to eye. “Mr. Campbell.”

“Mary, good God. I thought that was you. What are you doing here? Why are you dressed like a lady? I’d heard you found some other employment. You’re not a... lady of the night, are you? I’m happy to help if you need money.” His bushy eyebrows and dark eyes looked down on her in concern.

Marie could have cried. She’d expected loud angry shouts and declarations, pointed fingers and accusations, not kindness. “Oh, Mr. Campbell, no. I am not. I am fine, truly.”

He surveyed her. “What are you doing?”

She stood aside and spoke quietly. “I am acting as a companion to a Frenchwoman in the evenings. But I work here, as a maid. My employer recommended me to the post.”

“And you are not being mistreated?” Mr. Campbell asked.

“No.” Not by my employer, anyway, she thought.

“Very well. I like this place, but do not let my wife see you or she’s sure to create a scene. If she happens to see you, I’ll tell her she is mistaken. Have a good evening.” He bowed and returned to his wife.

Marie let out a large sigh of relief and was soon joined by Lieutenant Gage. She looked at the soldier and said, “You know me, but I know so little about you. Tell me

about yourself, Lieutenant. What brings you to the Lyon's Den?"

He accompanied her back to the waiting Mrs. Martin. "I'm no one of consequence, just a poor foot soldier. Nothing special."

"Come now, monsieur . I am sure that is not true," Mrs. Martin said. "Everyone is someone, especially here. I find here one can reinvent oneself. You may have little in your pocket, but that could change as fast as a hand in a card game."

He smiled and procured two drinks for the ladies, handing them over. "And if my circumstances do not change?"

"Then at least you will have had fun trying. Excuse me. I must speak with my husband." She accepted her drink and left in the direction of the gambling tables.

"Why do you put yourself down?" Marie asked.

"It is an English trait. Some love to laugh, others frown. We Gage men prefer to remain humble about our accomplishments."

"Aha," said Marie. "Then you must have some accomplishments to boast of. Not that you ever would."

His clear, blue eye lit up. "Maybe. I did lead a charge up a hill. It's what earned me this." He gestured to his left eye, and the bright-red healing gash over it, and the eyepatch.

"Did it hurt very much?"

"Not that I remember. I recall going up the hill with the men, fighting the French, and then... nothing. Next thing I know, I'm waking up in a hospital bed and can only see

out of one eye. I was sent home straight away once the surgeons were finished with me.”

She shuddered. She’d read the London papers and some told accounts of the grim and ghastly injuries the men had gotten in battle. It was bloody, this war .

“I hope the war ends soon,” she said.

“Me too. But a lot of us don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there’re commissioned officers, and prizes to be had. Loot, booty. Payment from King George, not that it’s very much. There are chances to make money from war, and for a lot of men, this is the way how. I guess for navy men, it’s easiest, as they get part of the prize ships they take in. Anyway. Enough about war.” He looked away. “Would you care to dance again?”

“I dare not. We have already danced two dances. Any more would cause idle gossip, I imagine.”

“Ah, right. Of course.” He glanced down in disappointment.

Mrs. Martin returned. “Well, if you two are done flirting, I have learned a bit about that man who kept staring at you, Miss Cadough.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. The man is a gentleman, Mr. Campbell, who lives in Upper Clapton. Apparently, he is here with his wife, Mrs. Prudence Campbell.”

“You said you were acquainted with them, I believe, Miss Cadough?” Lieutenant Gage asked.

Marie nodded. “Yes, I know them. I knew her daughter, Hortense, from when I was a girl. We used to play together as children.”

Until Mrs. Campbell put a stop to it, she thought, her mouth setting into a hard line. For years, she’d thought that Miss Hortense had just stopped liking her. Then when she’d managed to corner the girl alone, Miss Hortense had said the most hateful thing.

“Mama says I’m not to play with the likes of you, as you’re French and just a servant. I’m to be a lady someday and I can’t be playing with servant girls.”

Marie’s heart might have broken at the loss of her only friend, were it not for Miss Hortense sticking up her nose in her best imitation of her mother and trying to look down on her at the same time. It had annoyed her years ago, and she had since stopped seeking out Miss Hortense’s company.

She swallowed. “Forgive me, but we are not close.”

To say Mrs. Campbell disapproved of her was an understatement.

“I quite understand. The woman looks fearsome indeed, and she does rather move about as though she has something up her nose. I wonder if she needs a kerchief,” Mrs. Martin supposed.

Marie laughed and happily kept company with Mrs. Martin and Lieutenant Gage for the rest of the evening.

But as they were preparing to say goodbye, Mrs. Martin said, “Oh, Marie, I meant to

say. Why don't you come over to my townhouse and we'll bake pastries together? I know how much you love cooking, and I'm sure I can convince my cook to leave us the kitchen for an afternoon. You'll come, won't you?"

"Oh. Uh, of course," Marie said.

"I also include you in that invitation, Lieutenant," Mrs. Martin said.

Lieutenant Gage brightened. "Ma'am?"

"We need someone to taste our pastries and tell us if they are any good. If you are smart, you will tell us they are all divine, even if they are barely edible."

"Why would I do that?" he asked.

"Because then we would like you more, and I would invite you both to stay to dinner," she said with a devious smile.

"Mrs. Martin..." he began. "How could I refuse?"

"Good." She clapped her hands together and gave them the address. "I'll expect you both for luncheon tomorrow. Say noon?"

"I'll be there," Marie said.

"Excellent. Now, it is late and you shouldn't be waiting along for a hackney. Come with me and I will take you home, Miss Cadeaux."

"Oh, no, that's all right. I couldn't possibly," Marie said, blushing.

"Why not? You don't have other plans at this hour." Mrs. Martin eyed the lieutenant .

“I rather wondered if Miss Cadough would fancy a stroll in the garden,” he began. Was he helping Marie keep her occupation a secret from her friend?

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Marie said. “But I wished to speak with Mrs. Dove-Lyon and thank her for a lovely evening.”

“Very well. Bonsoir .” Mrs. Martin waved goodnight.

Lieutenant Gage turned to her and once Mrs. Martin had gone, he escorted her to the entrance of the floor, where she might quickly escape to change. “That woman is a self-determined flirt and matchmaker.”

Marie snorted softly. “She means well.”

“Yes, I think she does. Even if she is French.”

Marie cocked her head at him. “Why do you dislike the French so?”

He shook his head. “A long story, for another time. Maybe I’ll tell you someday.” He raised her gloved hand to his lips and bid her goodnight. Over his shoulder, she spied the Campbells playing another game of cards. From Mr. Campbell’s stern expression, it was not going well.

Marie went upstairs to change and set aside the dress to wash later as she yawned all the way to her bedroom that she shared with Lucy. She opened the door, the light from her candle creating shadows in the room, when she cried out.

Lucy sat up in an instant. “What? What is it?” she asked, dazed and half-asleep.

“L-Look.” Marie pointed.

There was a knife in her pillow, and on her bedspread, a note. Marie picked it up with a trembling hand and read it by candlelight. It read: Stop telling lies.

Lucy screamed, loud enough to wake the dead.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:22 am

Marie dropped the note, which sailed to the floor. With shaking hands, she lit the small gaslight in the room, bathing the room in warm light.

Lucy stared at her. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. Why would I put a knife in my pillow?"

"Well, if you didn't do it, then who did?"

"I don't know." Marie stared at the knife dumbly.

There was a knock at the door, and her uncle, Mr. Jones, Julia, Thom, and the housekeeper came in. "What's all that racket?" Mrs. Pratt asked, her hair askew. "You woke me. I need my sleep."

"Marie's found a knife in her pillow. It's a ghost come to murder us all in our beds," Lucy said, clutching the bedsheet up to her chin.

"Oh, my lord," Mrs. Pratt said as Uncle Baptiste came and put an arm around Marie. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I was just going to bed when I opened the door and found it."

"Who would have done this?" Mr. Jones asked.

"I don't know," Marie said.

“Well, someone did.” He looked at Lucy. “Do you know anything about this?”

“No. I was asleep.”

His eyebrows rose. “You mean to tell us you were asleep this whole time, whilst someone came in here, stabbed Marie’s pillow, and left a note, and you didn’t notice anything?”

“I sleep like the dead sometimes,” Lucy admitted. “I didn’t even know she was here until I heard her cry out. That’s enough to wake up anyone.”

Thom smirked. “It’s not Lucy’s fault. I believe her.”

The others looked at him.

“It’s obvious. Marie’s gone and done it herself. She likes all the attention.”

“Excuse me?” Marie asked.

“He’s right,” Julia said, “She probably did it to her own pillow so we’d all come running and pretend she was a victim. First she’s all woe is me, I have to dress up and pretend I’m a grand lady and dance all night , but now that none of us cares, she had to get our attention somehow.”

Marie stared at her. “I didn’t do this.” A yawn escaped her, even though she tried to hide it.

“Marie is too tired to have done anything like this,” Uncle Baptiste said. “And she was never one to court attention. Not like this.”

“Well, we don’t know her that well. What’s to say she didn’t pull jokes like this at

her old employer's?" Julia said.

"I didn't. I never did," Marie said. "Besides, why would I want to damage my own pillow? Now I'll have to pay for a new one with my wages."

"That's right, you will," Thom said.

"Thom," Mr. Jones said.

Thom held up his hands. "Don't go blaming me. I didn't do it. I just calls it like I sees it, that's all."

"I've heard enough. Go on, all of you. Leave us. I would speak with Marie alone," Mr. Jones said .

"What about me?" Lucy squeaked, gazing at all the men in the room with wide eyes.

"Just give us a moment, if you please, Lucy," Mr. Jones said.

Once the others had left, he turned his back as Lucy grabbed a robe and pulled it on, tying it tightly. "I didn't sign up for this. Work, yes. But not scares in the night by princesses. This is too much trouble. It's like out of a Gothic novel!" She shut the door behind her.

Marie sat on her bed, glancing at the flat pillow and the knife. "I didn't do this, Mr. Jones."

"I'm sure you didn't. But your presence here has caused no end of trouble, and gossip." Mr. Jones sighed. "I'm not sure what to do. Your uncle is very welcome here and works hard. From what I've heard from Mrs. Dove-Lyon, you could have chosen to leave off your chores and keep yourself free for acting as a companion, yet you

choose to keep up your work and tire yourself entertaining, when you should be asleep with the other maids.”

Marie nodded glumly. “It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“Given the circumstances, I can understand why you would do such a thing. But you cannot keep this up. You will tire. You need sleep. And I can’t have my staff slacking on their work. It’s also not fair to the others to ask them to take on extra work, while you dance until dawn.”

“I never—”

“I know. But that’s not to say it won’t happen. These men and women who frequent the Lyon’s Den, the parties that take place, it can last all night.” He nodded toward the knife.

She pulled it out and handed it to him. “Like I said, I wouldn’t do this.” She’d never pulled tricks before, and she wouldn’t start now. However much she was tempted.

“Let me speak with the mistress, and your uncle. I understand you are close. I don’t wish to dismiss you, but the servants are unhappy.”

“I understand.” Marie bowed her head .

“Are you happy here?” Mr. Jones asked.

She shrugged. It was hard to say when all she’d met was dislike. “I can do the work. But I’d really love to work in the kitchen. Could I?”

“Maybe that would keep you out of trouble, and then the others would still see you working. I’ll think on it. For now, go to sleep. And at least we have one mystery

solved.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Now we know where the missing knife disappeared to. Goodnight.” He rose and opened the door, letting Lucy back in.

Lucy shut the door, stripped off her robe and climbed into her narrow bed, glaring at her. “I don’t like this, and I don’t like you. I don’t want to share a room with you anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Lucy. I never meant for this to happen.”

“I’ll never get back to sleep now. I’ll be afeared of murderers coming to kill me in my bed. All because of you.” Lucy sniffed, laid her head down and turned away from her, facing the wall.

Marie let out a small sigh, brushed the feathers and ruined pillow to the floor, and blew out the lantern. It was a long time before she fell asleep.

The next day, Marie rose before dawn, dressing in the darkness and silently slipping out of the room. She threw away the note, the ruined pillow, and the feathers, changed the linens in the guest bedrooms and by the time the servants had collected for breakfast, she’d already done hours of work.

As she accepted a plateful of porridge and sat down at the hard and worn dining table, Thom said, “How did you sleep, princess? Any ghosts come to stab you in the night?”

“No.” Marie shot him a look.

“You look terrible.” Julia sat down across from her. “Looks like you had no sleep at all.”

“It’s me who had no sleep,” Lucy grumbled from down the table. “First that shouting and then all of you in the room—I couldn’t get to sleep for ages after that.”

Mr. Jones cleared his throat. “Yes, well. Let us discuss something other than sleeping arrangements, please. I am glad to say the missing knife has been found and returned to its rightful place. Mrs. Drummond, tell us, what dinner have you planned for this evening?”

As the conversation turned to other matters, Marie ate quickly and went to Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s parlor. She knocked and walked inside, where Mrs. Dove-Lyon was sitting at an impressive mahogany writing desk, looking over some papers. “Ah, good morning.”

“Good morning, ma’am. I’m sorry to disturb you, but...” She quickly relayed Mrs. Martin’s invitation to join her for a day of baking and dinner.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s eyebrows rose beneath her black veil. “I see. Well, that is very kind of Mrs. Martin, but I thought we had agreed, you would join her only to be her companion in the evenings when she is here, and that was all.”

The question sat unbidden on Marie’s tongue. She wanted to ask, May I go? , but realized she already had her answer. “Yes, madam.”

“I can see the disappointment on your face, Marie, but I hired you and your uncle to work, not to play. I can’t spare you from your chores, not when we have just agreed you would continue. It wouldn’t be fair to the other servants.”

Marie hung her head. She had so wanted to see Mrs. Martin again, and an afternoon

of baking sweet treats in her kitchen had sounded divine. She wouldn't have minded seeing Lieutenant Gage, too.

"Is that all?" Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

"Yes, ma'am. "

"Thank you. Take this with you." Mrs. Dove-Lyon gestured to an empty breakfast plate and tray.

Marie took the items and left, closing the door behind her. She brought the tray and plate back down to the kitchen and washed them until they were sparkling clean, then set the tray away. She almost didn't notice Lucy stop her. "Oi, watch where you're going."

Marie looked up. "Sorry."

Lucy's face pulled into a frown and she fumbled with the fine black dress wadded up in her arms. "Yeh, well, pay more attention. Just as well. I was looking for you. You're good with a needle and thread, yeh?"

"I suppose so."

"I don't have time for supposes. Are you or aren't you?"

"I am. What is it?"

"The mistress has this dress that wants mending. Miss Robbins and Julia are too busy to mend it, and they gave it to me to fix. There's a tear in the hem. The mistress wants it ready for tomorrow tonight. But I've got my hands full already. Fix it for me?"

This was a chance to do a good job for Mrs. Dove-Lyon and possibly build a bridge in her relationship with Lucy. “All right.” She took the dress from her.

“Don’t you have other chores to do?” Lucy asked, her eyes darting around.

“Yes.”

“Do it later, then. What the old lady don’t know won’t hurt her.” She spoke nervously, a slight tremble to her voice, and walked away, her shoes echoing down the hall.

Marie took the dress up to her room and laid it on her bed for mending, then went about her chores. She penned a quick note to Mrs. Martin of apology and had one of the footmen deliver it personally.

She went about her chores, aware that it was perhaps foolish to think she could have gotten a brief recess from her duties that day to spend time with Mrs. Martin and Lieutenant Gage. A servant’s work was never done, and even if she had woken up early to get a head start on her chores, escape Lucy’s glares, and speak with the mistress, it was also no surprise that she’d been given more work to do at the drop of a hat. It was common, and in a workplace such as this, servants helped one another or they would find themselves alone in times of stress.

Still, she tried not to think of the fun Mrs. Martin and Lieutenant Gage would have baking without her. She’d tried some of Charles’s hard biscuits that morning and had almost broken her teeth, they’d been so hard.

She would have loved to go to the kitchens and bake but felt she had no place there, or anywhere in the household. She changed the linens, cleaned the dishes, and raked out the ashes from the fireplaces along with the other maids. She bumped into one, a scullery maid named Hannah, who said, “Oh. You’ve done the work already.”

“Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. You’ve saved me some work. That’s kind of you.”
Hannah brushed a black stray curl out of her face and tucked it behind her ear.

Marie nodded and made to leave, when Hannah said, “You don’t have to work so hard.”

Marie turned back, curiosity on her face. “What do you mean?”

“We all know the mistress picked you to act as companion to that French lady. Most of us don’t know French, and the others are just jealous. Don’t mind them. It’s why they call you ‘princess’ and try to make trouble.”

“I don’t want any trouble.”

Hannah shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter. Once my job for the mistress is over, I’m leaving. I’m going to find other employment,” Marie told her.

“You shouldn’t. They’re always causing trouble. It’s them who should go, not you.”

Marie smiled. “Thanks.”

But that evening, their dinner was interrupted. Mrs. Dove-Lyon stood at the entrance to the servants’ dining room, her face grave beneath her black veil. Her voice was questioning. “I’m sorry to disturb you all at dinner, but a dress of mine has gone missing. Does anyone know where it might have gone?”

The servants all exchanged looks. “Does anyone know anything about this?” Mr.

Jones asked.

There were a few shrugs and shaking of heads. “I’m afraid not, madam,” he said.

“Are you certain? It’s just that this dress is very dear to me and I’d laid it out this morning and it was gone. I’d like to know where it is.” She glanced at the blank faces sat down to dinner, unmoving as their roast potatoes and cold salad rested on the plates before them, untouched. “No one is in trouble. I just want the dress back. But if someone knows and does not speak up, we will have a problem.”

Marie glanced at Lucy. Was this the same dress she had been given to mend?

Lucy swallowed and looked down at her plate of food.

Julia said, “Ma’am, I wasn’t going to say anything, but it’s not right you don’t know. I saw Marie going in your room this morning.”

People looked at Marie.

“You did?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

“Aye,” Julia said.

“That’s a lie. I didn’t. I’ve only been to your room once, to deliver your breakfast tray, Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” Marie pointed out.

“Now who’s lying? When Lucy bumped into you in the hallway you had the dress. I saw it myself. You had it in your arms. I tell you, ma’am, I thought it was mighty suspicious. Then when I saw Lucy ask you about it, you said you were taking it for mending. But it’s not your job to mend the mistress’s clothes, now is it? I’m the one in training to be a lady’s maid, not you. That dress belongs to her lady’s maids. So

what was you doing with it? That's what I want to know." Her southeast London accent was harsh.

"I—" Marie started.

"That is very kind of you, Miss Cadough, but I had meant to wear it tonight, and I don't recall it needing any alteration. I'll have it back, please. Where is it now?" Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked, her voice sharp.

Marie stood, frustrated. "In my room."

"Fetch it, please. The dress is very dear to me."

Marie rose and walked from the kitchen, aware that a few others were following her. She turned around. "I'm going to get the dress. Why are you following me?"

"Just a precaution, Miss Cadough. That is all. If you are innocent, you will have nothing to hide," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

Marie stared. "Innocent of what?"

"Stealing," Julia said.

"I didn't steal anything," Marie said. "Lucy gave it to me in the hallway. She said the hem had ripped and it needed mending. She asked me to do it."

"Lucy, is that true?" Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

Lucy stared down at her shoes, not saying a word.

"Lucy?" Mr. Jones prompted.

Lucy mumbled something.

“What was that? Speak up, girl,” Mr. Jones said.

“Julia’s right. Marie is wrong. She’s lying,” Lucy said, an ugly, red rash spreading up her neck.

Marie’s mouth dropped open.

“See?” Julia smirked. “Just like I said. I spotted her with the dress and thought it was odd, since she shouldn’t have been in your room, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

“I wasn’t,” Marie said.

“Never mind that,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. “I want my dress back. Now let us get it and then speak no more of the matter.”

Marie led the way up to the servants’ quarters, her uncle, Mr. Jones, and Mrs. Dove-Lyon close behind. She opened the door to the room and stopped.

“Well? Where is my dress?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? You were the last one to have it, so where is it?”

“I don’t know,” Marie uttered.

“Mr. Jones? She’s not making sense.”

“Marie, do you or do you not know where the dress is?” he asked.

“I did, but now I don’t,” Marie said.

“Why is that?” he asked.

“It’s gone.”

“What? How?” Mr. Jones asked.

“I’d laid it out there for mending and meant to come back to it after dinner. But it’s gone. I don’t know what’s happened to it.” Marie sat down on the bed and stared at her empty bed. “I just don’t know,” she said softly.

“Well, where could it have gone? Dresses can’t just get up and walk away.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon stalked about the small bedroom, looking around as if her steely-eyed gaze could capture its location amongst the simple furnishings.

“I swear, ma’am, I don’t know where it could have gone. It could only have been a few minutes. I was working on it here not a quarter hour ago.”

“And yet you had my dress in your possession, without a word of it to me. You could have checked with me personally, Marie. I am disappointed in you.”

“Madam, please,” Uncle Baptiste started.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon held up a hand. “No. I’m sorry, Mr. Allard. I had thought your niece to be an honest, trustworthy young woman, but I know wonder if I was mistaken. Although it is odd that she would steal something like a black dress. As far as I know, she is not mourning anyone. And I pay my staff well, so there would be no need to steal and sell it.” To Marie, she said, “I know you wanted to join Mrs. Martin and the

lieutenant today. Is this... an attempt to spite me?"

"No," Marie said, a note of steel in her voice. "I would never."

Mrs. Dove-Lyon's voice was equally cold. "Then I suggest you find the dress, or you can look for another situation. I won't abide stealing in my household."

Marie's eyes grew wet with tears, and she bowed her head in mute apology. Mrs. Dove-Lyon huffed and walked out, Mr. Jones following after.

Uncle Baptiste went after them, protesting her innocence. But it was to no avail. Marie sat on her bed sadly, wondering how she had ended up in this situation.

At that moment, she looked at her locket, opened up the very old miniature portraits of her mother and father, and wished to God they weren't dead. She had a champion in her uncle, but for some reason, in the back of her mind, she knew he wasn't really her uncle. He was more of a minder, or a servant, who'd been charged with looking after her. But how she knew this, she didn't know.

Marie's shoulders slumped. She thought she'd been doing Lucy a favor. She was used to taking on odd jobs and requests, and being below stairs meant she always helped other servants, whenever they needed it. It was just one of those things she always did, no matter the request. But now, she wondered how trustworthy her new workmates were.

She knew for certain that it had been Lucy who'd given her the dress and instructed her to mend the hem. Yet when she'd examined the dress shortly before dinner, it had seemed fine. She'd planned on returning the dress after the meal and telling Lucy it didn't need any alternation. The question remained, why had Lucy brought her a dress that didn't need any mending? It was odd.

She knew the answer at the back of her mind, but she didn't want to consider it. And yet, what if Lucy really had meant to cause trouble for her and had roped in Julia to assist? Or was Lucy a pawn in Julia's plan to humiliate her? She rose and searched her part of the room. The dress was nowhere to be seen. And now the hour was getting late, well past the servants' dinnertime. The others would have eaten by now. It was time for her to change into a fine dress and socialize with Mrs. Martin and Lieutenant Gage. But what if Mrs. Dove-Lyon had changed her mind after the issue of the dress and didn't want her to attend to Mrs. Martin that evening? Or ever again? She felt a flutter of disappointment and a small sigh escape her. A part of her wished to see the lieutenant again, and even dance with him, despite her not really knowing the steps.

She opened the door and met her uncle, who said, "Marie, I tried talking to the mistress, but she wouldn't listen. She says she has no other course but to believe the others."

"But they're lying. I wouldn't steal a dress. For God's sake, what would I want with a mourning gown?" Marie asked.

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter if it was an apron or a ballgown. You accepted it and now the blame falls on you." His face was glum. "I don't like this, not at all. What did Lucy say when she spoke with you earlier?"

Marie shot her uncle an appreciative look; he'd believed her no matter what. "She had the dress and met me in the hallway downstairs, and said the lady's maids had asked her to do it, but she was too busy, so Miss Robbins asked me to mend the hem, as the mistress wanted it for tomorrow night."

"I have no doubt the dress will reappear, but whether that will happen before or after you are dismissed is the question." He frowned. "Those servants are behind this, I'm sure of it. If she asks you to do anything else like that, consult me first. "

“Uncle, I can make my own decisions,” Marie said.

“And look where that got you. You must find this dress, Marie. You could lose your position here.”

“But that’s not fair. Of course I’m going to look for the dress. But you know as well as I do, there are dozens of little decisions that happen all day. Just today, I helped the maids with the washing, the ironing, the drying. Am I to consult you over when I eat and sleep too? It is preposterous.”

Their eyes met, and her expression was serious. He threw up his hands. “All right,” he said in French. “I understand. But be on your guard. They are not friendly here. These servants were kind until you started speaking French to that woman in the evenings. Now they mean to play tricks on you. One of them wants you gone.”

She looked down at her lap. “I know.”

“You are smart, Marie. Be wise, and wary. Like the owl.”

She smiled and knew they were at peace again. “I will.”

But downstairs, she met with Julia, who had a wide smile on her face. “The mistress doesn’t trust you not to cock things up with the grand lady. She’s had enough of you and your grand ways.”

Marie exhaled through her nose. “Did she leave a message for me?”

“Yeah. Says not to show your face above stairs if you know what’s good for you. That clear enough?”

Marie blinked. “She doesn’t want me going up tonight?”

Julia shook her head, her curled, blonde hair swinging around her face, tendrils escaping from her ruffled cap. “Not if you want to stay employed here. You don’t believe me, go ahead, dance with the men and pretend you’re a grand lady. But they’ll see right through you, just like I do.”

Marie sniffed and walked past her. Julia retorted, “Don’t walk away from me.”

Marie kept walking, her head held high. Maybe it was a mercy she wouldn’t have to face Julia’s and Miss Robbins’s angry glares tonight, as they would have had to help her dress for the evening. She went to the servants’ dining table and the plates were all cleared away, except for hers, which sat there, the food now stone cold.

Mrs. Drummond, the cook, was about to clear that away too, when Marie entered.

“I’ll eat. You don’t have to take it away,” Marie said.

Mrs. Drummond turned and put a hand on her hip. “All right.” She took a seat beside her as Marie sat down and reached for her water glass.

“Don’t be touching that. I saw Julia tip salt into it when she thought no one was looking.”

Marie sighed, instead going to slice up her potatoes, which looked bland and uninviting. As she speared one small potato and sliced into it with her knife, Mrs. Drummond said, “Our Julia doesn’t like you.”

“I know,” Marie said around a mouthful of cold, stodgy potato.

“She hasn’t liked you since the day you walked in. Any idea why that is?”

Marie shook her head.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she’s jealous.” Mrs. Drummond’s eyes sought hers for confirmation. Marie tapped her rough fingers idly on the table, wondering.

“There’s no reason for her to be. I work in the morning and all day, then go up and speak French to a rich woman who doesn’t know I’m a servant. I’m tired most mornings and when the others aren’t causing trouble, I’m trying to just survive. I have nothing for Julia or Lucy to be jealous of.”

“Ah, now, that Lucy, she’s usually quiet as a mouse. Don’t know why she’s turned on you too,” Mrs. Drummond said.

Marie shrugged. “Last night, the dinner knife went missing and was found in my pillow, it gave Lucy a fright. She couldn’t get to sleep and kept fearing ghosts, so she doesn’t want me around, either. ”

Mrs. Drummond chortled. “That Lucy. Of course she thinks that. That girl loves a ghost story. She’s always seeing spirits around every corner. For some reason, she thinks that out of all of us, they’ll attack her in her bed.”

Marie shared a smile with the older woman. Mrs. Drummond looked about fifty, with a hard, round body and stiff, red hands that were rough and coarse from years of manual labor. Her cheeks were ruddy and she had crow’s feet starting at her eyes, but there was a genuine smile on her face for Marie. “Are you all right, child?”

Marie almost burst into tears. Instead, she smiled back and bent her head to her peas and potatoes. “I’m fine.”

“Your uncle tells me you fancy working in the kitchens. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ll see about giving you a trial run in the kitchen. Once this matter of the dress is settled, perhaps. Mr. Jones did mention that you fancied working with my cooks. Maybe under my watch, we can keep you out of trouble. What do you say?”

Marie looked at the older woman. “I should like that very much. Thank you.”

The woman smiled and rose from her chair, pushing it in to line neatly flush against the hard, wooden table. “Don’t thank me yet. I expect hard work and attention to details from all my staff. If you cause any trouble or problems, you’ll be out within the hour. You hear?”

“Yes, Mrs. Drummond,” Marie said meekly. She ate her food.

Once she’d finished her meal of cold peas, carrots, and potatoes, she poured out the salty water, cleaned her plate and utensils, and put away the dishes, then crept up to the stairwell that led to the ground floor, where she might peek at the guests.

There, her heart sank as she saw Mrs. Martin with her husband, together with Lieutenant Gage. They gazed up and around, as if looking for someone. For her, she knew. But without Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s permission, she couldn’t speak to them. Not even to apologize for having to turn down Mrs. Martin’s kind invitation.

Then Lieutenant Gage’s eyes drifted over toward the stairwell, and he caught her eye. He shot her a small smile and made to come over, when she raised a finger for silence. He made his excuses to Mrs. Martin and a minute or so later, slipped inside the stairwell. “Miss Cadough,” he whispered. “What are you doing? Why are you dressed...like that?” He eyed her maid’s uniform and allowed his gaze to drift up from her worn shoes to her hips and then to her bosom before resting on her eyes and darting down to her lips.

She bowed her head. “I didn’t get permission to join you tonight. Could you please

give my apologies to Mrs. Martin? I'm so sorry."

His face clouded. He looked handsome in his red army uniform, and his hair was growing long around his face, but his clear, blue eye sought hers. "She was very unhappy when you declined her invitation. She worries she offended you somehow."

"Oh, no." Marie's hands darted to her mouth. "No, not at all. It is I who have caused offense."

His smile was kind. "So now you both worry about the possibility of having offended the other." He rubbed the side of his face, which needed a shave. "I shall never understand women."

She looked up at him, and they shared a smile. Her heart fluttered, just a little.

He gave her a gallant bow. "I am at your service, Miss Cadough. What would you have me do? Since I assume you are not dancing this evening." He took in the sight of her maid's uniform, apron, and ruffled cap.

"No. Just please reassure Mrs. Martin that I was detained and unable to make it. But I am truly sorry. I did so want to join you."

"I'm sure Mrs. Martin will understand. But can you not tell her yourself? I am certain she would prefer to hear it from your own lips." He glanced at her mouth and looked away.

"I... would rather keep my situation a secret, for now. Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked me to dress up like a lady to fit in to the company. I do not think she would appreciate my ruining the charade now."

He frowned. "I do not like keeping secrets, especially from friends. You should tell

Mrs. Martin. She deserves to know. Otherwise, she will feel betrayed, more so the longer you keep it from her. She will also wonder why she never sees you in public, only here.”

Marie bowed her head. He was right. And she did so dislike keeping it secret from Mrs. Martin. “I know. But what am I to do, when I have been asked by my employer to keep it from her? She might feel she’s been made a fool, when she learns a servant has been her companion.”

“Do you think she is so discerning in her choice of companions?” Lieutenant Gage asked.

Marie gave a stiff nod. “She is a lady. She deserves friends who are of her station. Not I.”

“Perhaps you think too little of yourself,” he said.

“No, Lieutenant. I know my worth.” She glanced at the floor. “I should go. Goodnight.”

“Good night, Miss Cadough.” He bowed.

She turned away and went to her room for an early night. She would have challenged Lucy for lying about the dress, but the girl was already asleep. Marie undressed to her shift, lay down and due to fatigue she fell asleep almost instantly, for which her mind was most grateful. But she lay awake, tossing and turning. For though she had looked for the dress, she had not found it. And as the hours grew long, she fell into a fitful sleep, too tired to care.

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The next morning, Marie joined the others for breakfast. But before she'd had much time to do more than sip a cup of hot tea, Charles, the cook, said, "So I hear you're to join us today. Apparently, Mr. Jones had a word with Mrs. Drummond."

Marie looked up from her porridge. She'd gotten so used to interruptions during mealtimes, she was eating faster just to get some food down. So it had been agreed. She wiped her mouth. "Yes. If that's all right."

"I don't mind. Not that we need another pair of hands, but there's always work to be done. But it's not everyone who can work in the kitchen, mind you, so if I find you're eating cherries meant for the guests on the sly, or cutting corners, or making shoddy dough, you'll be out on your ear. Now hurry up."

Marie tried her best to hide the smile on her face, when Mrs. Drummond said, "Oh, don't look so pleased. If you can't chop onions properly, you'll be back to raking out the fireplaces by lunchtime. Now hurry up and finish." As Marie spooned more porridge in her mouth, Mrs. Drummond said, "About the matter of the dress. Mr. Jones and your uncle spoke with the mistress, and she's agreed this may just be a misunderstanding. So you're to work with us where we can keep an eye on you. But no mistakes, Marie. Or you won't have the good mistress's charity a second time."

Marie heaved a small sigh of relief and lowered her spoon with a subtly trembling hand. She shot Mrs. Drummond a smile, finished her porridge, then took her plate and utensils away to clean. Mrs. Drummond ran her kitchen like a military regiment, with no laziness allowed. She first instructed Marie to chop onions, so she might inspect her knife work. After five seconds, she said, "No. That won't do. Hattie, show her how."

Marie was introduced to Hattie, a tall girl with broad shoulders she had seen before at meals, but who was largely quiet and sat with the other cooks. Hattie patiently showed her how to hold a knife, cut without hurting herself, and soon had her chopping onions. Marie was shocked to learn she'd been cutting vegetables all wrong and began to slice with the blade held away from her fingers, to make smaller incisions, rather than big rough ones.

After a quarter hour, Marie's eyes and nose were streaming and her arms ached, but she didn't care. She was in the kitchen. For the first time, she felt like she belonged. All that day, she listened and paid attention, whether they instructed her to chop up carrots, potatoes, or mushrooms, and let her observe how they made sauces. But part of her idly wished that she might share this moment with Lieutenant Gage. She daydreamed of them stirring a sauce together, with his hand resting over hers on the edge of the wooden spoon, stirring until he leaned down to kiss her.

But as Marie leaned over a saucepan to stir the bubbling, white sauce, Mrs. Drummond said, "Oh, that locket of yours looks old. Take it off, girl. None of us wear any jewelry here. We can't have rings and bracelets popping up in the pastry, now can we?"

Marie slipped away to her room and rested her locket on a small side table next to her bed, then thought better of it and hid it beneath her coverlet before returning back downstairs.

Soon the air was filled with the heavenly scent of a creamy, white sauce, and Marie soaked up the lessons like a sponge. She'd never been so happy—aside from spending time with Lieutenant Gage—and even when she sat down to luncheon with the others, she was keen to get back to work. That afternoon, she watched as they made bread and a thick potato soup for the servants' dinner and was sent to read and study a cookbook as they made dinner. Hattie was surprised she could read, and to Marie's surprise, didn't tease her or call her a princess, but rather quietly asked if

Marie might teach her sometime. Marie felt a warm rush of pleasure come over her and instantly agreed.

That evening at dinner, she sat beside Hattie and the other cooks, and there was no trouble at all. The evening meal was calm and even quiet for once. Marie observed, chopped vegetables, peeled potatoes, stirred sauces the following day, and again the day after that, learning tips, tricks, and how the cooks worked. And yet, she realized that she missed Lieutenant Gage. She missed his smile, and how he had a sort of crooked grin that grew when he saw her, and the rush of excitement she felt when their eyes met. She missed the warm touch of his hand on hers as he led her in dances she did not know and missed the subtle strength he had as he encouraged her or charmed her with witty conversation. She longed to see him, and her feet found their way up to the stairwell, where she might look and see him, but beyond exchanging a glance or two, they could not speak without causing attention.

In the kitchen, she distracted herself by focusing on the work. They made beautiful pies with golden topped pastry, sweet jellies to tantalize the tongue, and miniature savory tarts meant to delight.

She spent hours learning how to make bread, from creating the dough and letting it prove, then beating it and letting it prove again. Her first attempt, she added some seeds to the mix, and the cooks served it at dinner to the servants. The bread, fresh and warm from the oven, had a light, hard crust on top, and it was spongy in the middle, just cooked. Sliced into thick squares and spread with butter, the bread disappeared in minutes, much to Marie's delight.

Mrs. Drummond said, "Take a slice of this to the mistress, Marie. I'd like her to taste it."

Marie took the slice of bread on a plate, along with a knife and some butter, and took a tray up to Mrs. Dove-Lyon's parlor, where she knocked and came in when bidden.

“What’s this?” the mistress asked as Marie entered. She sniffed the air. “A new bread?”

“Yes, ma’am. With seeds. Mrs. Drummond bid me to bring you some.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon let her set the tray down on the coffee table before her and helped herself to some butter on the bread. She took a bite and said, “Delicious. I’ll have some more, please.”

“Oh. I think it’s all gone. We just made some for the servants’ dinner.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s lips pursed with displeasure. “You’ll just have to make some more, then. I’ll take two more slices, quick as you can. Thank you.”

Marie curtsied and took the tray with her, when Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, “Oh, and Marie, you may join Mrs. Martin on the main floor tonight. I think she seemed a trifle lonely these past few nights.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Marie brought the tray back downstairs, smiling. She would see her friend again, and Lieutenant Gage. The day was looking up.

She returned the tray, cleaned up the dishes, and told Mrs. Drummond of the arrangement she had with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. The woman nodded. “Yes, I’d heard about that, but I never listen to servants’ gossip. All right. So long as you don’t turn up late tomorrow. I can’t have it affect your work, understand?”

“Yes, Mrs. Drummond.” Marie curtsied and went up to get dressed. She needed the maids’ help with her hair, and that night dressed in a light-pink dress with small cap sleeves; sleek, white gloves that reached her wrists; and small dancing shoes that seemed dainty and light on her feet. With an ordinary pink ribbon in her hair and around her waist, she was ready, and thanked the lady’s maid for doing her hair. Miss

Robbins's silence was her answer, but she had hopes of winning over her good favor with kindness. In no time at all, she was on the main floor and quickly sought out her friend.

"Mrs. Martin," Marie said, curtsying.

"Miss Cadeaux," Mrs. Martin said, clasping her in a hug. She lapsed into French immediately. "Where on Earth have you been hiding? Did I offend you? I've been so hurt. Did I drive you away?"

"No," Marie replied. "Not at all. It's my fault. I was detained and couldn't make it. I'm so sorry."

"Well, never mind. I'm glad you're here now. We missed you, and if you don't mind my saying so, that poor lieutenant was particularly unhappy." Mrs. Martin spoke with a coy smile.

Marie laughed. "How strange. I don't see him."

"Come to think of it, nor do I. Odd, indeed, for I had grown used to seeing him here most nights. I daresay he comes here looking for you."

Marie gave a small gasp. If she had carried a fan, she would have rapped her friend on the arm with it—playfully, of course. "Mrs. Martin."

"Oh, don't Mrs. Martin me. I've seen the way he looks at you. And I think you are not insensitive to his many attractions. You like him, do you not?"

"I do." Marie blushed.

"Aha! I knew it. Well, he will be sorry to have missed you. I would have been so

happy to act as your chaperone. Never mind. Come, let us watch the card games.” Mrs. Martin took her arm and whisked her away to one of the gambling tables, where they chatted gaily.

Yet a half an hour later, a footman approached and said, “Excuse me, miss, but the mistress wishes to speak with you in her parlor.”

“Me?” Marie squeaked.

“She’s not going anywhere without me,” Mrs. Martin said. “I want to speak with her, too.”

“Begging your pardon, madam, but she did request just Miss Cadough,” the footman said.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Martin,” Marie said. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“You’ll be all right without me? I will come if you need me,” Mrs. Martin said.

Marie patted her hand. “I’ll be fine. I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll be waiting.” Mrs. Martin fanned herself and nodded at the servant.

Marie followed the servant off of the main floor. It was one of the burly footmen who managed entry at the door of the establishment. She did not know his name but recognized his face. She asked, “What’s this all about?”

“Don’t know. Just that a gentleman’s come calling and the mistress wishes to speak with you. Best not keep her waiting.” He escorted her through the main rooms upstairs, through the observation gallery and gambling rooms of the women, and knocked on the parlor door.

“Come in,” a feminine voice said. The footman opened the door and stood by for Marie to pass.

Marie entered and stopped short. There sat Mrs. Dove-Lyon on a pink sofa trimmed with dark wood, almost black, whilst across from her sat Marie’s uncle, Baptiste. Facing them stood Lieutenant Gage.

Marie’s heart fluttered in her chest. He looked incredibly handsome in the warm candlelight, his brown hair tied in a queue, his sideburns long and with his black eyepatch over his left eye, his clear, blue right eye gazing at her with a warmth that made her heart pound. He bowed, straightened, and walked past her before taking a seat in the anteroom.

“Close the door, Marie,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon instructed .

Marie closed it and swallowed. “Ma’am?”

“I trust you are acquainted with Lieutenant Gage?”

Marie nodded.

“He has expressed a wish to get to know you better.”

Uncle Baptiste frowned and his hands clenched into fists.

Marie looked at her hostess askance. “I beg your pardon?”

“He wishes to pay his addresses to you. He wishes to court you publicly, if you will agree to it.”

“Court me?”

“Yes. Are you... open to his suit?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon steeped her hands.

To be properly courted by the lieutenant. A real gentleman. Marie sat on the sofa next to her uncle, opposite Mrs. Dove-Lyon. “I...”

There was a knock at the door, and Lieutenant Gage opened it. “Forgive me, but I would make my case to you all directly.” He stood before them and looked directly at Marie. “I know I am unattractive due to my eye injury, but I swear to you that my intentions are honorable. I come from a good family and have the means to court you. You can look my family up in Debrett’s—I would not propose to court you formally if my intentions and good name were not a sign of good faith.” He looked at her, his good eye almost pleading. His mouth was in a soft line that could be changed into a smile or a frown in an instant.

“But I am a servant.”

He came toward her and took her hands, raising her from the sofa. His hands were warm and he looked down at her. “You were so kind to me that first night. The drums and the music was harsh to my ears and you took pity on me, when an ordinary servant might just ignore me and leave me to my pain. You may be a maidservant, Miss Cadough, but you are not ordinary. Not to me.”

Her heart rose in her chest, and a warm feeling came over her. Could he be telling the truth? Butterflies suddenly fluttered in her chest. “Truly? You wish to court... me?”

His smile made her heart sing. “I have come here each night and stayed until closing, with the hope of meeting you. Did the other servants not give you my message?”

“What message?”

“A footman, Thom, I think his name was, agreed to tell you I was waiting by the

stairwell and hoped to speak with you. But when you never came, I thought perhaps you didn't like me. That you had changed your mind." He squeezed her hands.

Marie's mouth dropped open. "I never received any message. Believe me, if I had known..."

"Never mind that. I would like to court you properly, if you will have me. Will you?" He spoke earnestly then, addressing her heart, she realized. His clear, blue eye sought hers, and she slowly pulled her hands free and lifted his black eyepatch off of his head, setting it aside on the sofa. The harsh redness of the scar and its puckered skin glared at her, but the blue eye that looked at her was clear and healthy. "You don't need to wear this around me."

He exhaled and took her hands in his, raising them to his lips. "Am I to take that as a yes?"

"Yes." She laughed, a light, happy sound.

He laughed and picked her up in his arms. "Really? Truly? You do not find me hideous?"

She shook her head, smiling as her heart felt light and fluttering as he set her down. He leaned in to kiss her when Uncle Baptiste cleared his throat, and Marie was reminded that they were not alone. Seeing his disapproving face, cold reality set in and she dropped the lieutenant's hands.

"But I am as you see. A servant, and sometimes a cook. My birth is obscure, my family is likely dead." She ignored her uncle's noise of protest. "I have nothing to offer."

"Perhaps he does," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. "Lieutenant, perhaps you might give us a

few minutes alone to discuss.”

Lieutenant Gage’s expression was mutinous. “Only if Miss Cadough wishes it. If she wishes for me to stay, I will not leave her.”

Marie felt her heart overturn, almost swoon and smiled at him. “It’s all right. Please, we’ll just be a minute.”

Once the lieutenant had quit the room, Marie looked toward her uncle. “Uncle Baptiste?”

His face was sour. “I do not like him.”

“Because he is English, or a soldier?”

“Both. How do you know he is not just seeking to tumble you and make you his mistress? These soldiers are young; they do not know how to treat a woman. They have rough ways. How can we be sure he is honest, and honorable?”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon looked at him with interest. “You believe I would allow a common soldier to toy with one of my staff?”

“He may make polite addresses now, but what happens when they are alone?”

“They will be chaperoned at all times. I would make sure Miss Cadough is looked after, like any young woman in my care.”

“And when are they to court? Will she be given time off from her duties? She has just started in the kitchens.” Uncle Baptiste turned to Marie. “You have started working in the place you love. Would you throw that away for a man?”

“I...” Marie’s mouth shut like a trap. “Could I not do both?”

“You wish to work in the kitchens, see this young soldier for courting, and be a companion to Mrs. Martin? This is too much for any young woman,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. “You’ll be dead on your feet.”

“I agree. You should not see this young man,” Uncle Baptiste said.

“Uncle. I would like to,” Marie said. “Be courted, I mean.” Her heart fluttered at the prospect. To see him, to hold hands, to maybe even be kissed by him. It was all too much to consider all at once. Was she in a dream ?

Her uncle’s face grew stormy. “Your parents would not have wished to see you escorted around by an ordinary soldier, and an English one at that. They did not—” He stopped. He rose to his feet and said stiffly, “If that is what you wish, then so be it. But you do not have my permission or approval.” He walked out, leaving the door open.

Marie let out a breath and shut it again, quickly.

“Why is he so defensive about your person, and your parents? Who are they?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

“I... don’t really know. I hardly remember them from when I was a child. I remember faces, and a ship, a voyage over the ocean and the storm, then working in service. That’s all I know. We speak French, and Uncle Baptiste tells me we are French, but I do not remember my parents as such. All I have of them is a cookbook, and my locket—” She felt at her neck. “Oh.”

“Where is your locket?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

“I took it off when I started working in the kitchens, so it wouldn’t fall in the food,” Marie said.

“Very wise. And what is your surname? Is it truly Cadough?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

“Yes. Why wouldn’t it be?” Marie tensed.

“I have heard Mrs. Martin address you as ‘Miss Cadeaux,’ so I wondered. I will address you as ‘Miss Cadeaux’ as well, as that is your true surname. You see, I am not so unforgiving of French staff as some employers. When did you come over to England?”

“About fifteen years ago, I think, maybe sooner. Uncle could tell you for certain.”

“Yes, well. I see no reason not to let you receive a gentleman caller once you have finished your work for Mrs. Drummond. She came to see me, you know.”

“She did?”

“Yes. She said you’re a dab hand in the kitchen, and you have a taste for seasoning and sauces. You make a good bread, too. You made that seeded bread earlier, didn’t you?”

“I helped.”

“She said I’d be a fool to let you go back to working as a parlor maid. She said you worked as hard as any cook, and we’d better not let you go, no matter what the others say. You’re worth the trouble, she said.”

“Did she really?” Marie clasped her hands in her lap.

“Yes. So now I need to see proof of that. Mrs. Drummond and I both expect great things from you, Miss Cadeaux. Do not let us down. I will speak with her about letting you have a caller to escort you after your duties are done.” She paused. “Marie, about the dress. I do not think you took it, but I also cannot let the matter slide. I cannot abide carelessness, and I also will not tolerate theft in my household. I will not dismiss you over this, I have decided. But I do want you to find that dress and return it to me. Is that understood?”

“Yes, madam. Thank you.” Marie bowed and quit the room to find Lieutenant Gage waiting.

He bowed politely and straightened, looking her in the eyes. From another person, such a firm stare might have made her feel discomforted, but she met his gaze directly. His eyes were a bright blue, and they reminded her of the morning sky, after daybreak.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello.” He swallowed and glanced away.

“What is it?” She clasped and unclasped her hands. “You don’t wish to court me, after all?”

“No, nothing like that. I...” He rubbed the side of his face, along one of his sideburns. “You make me nervous.”

She smiled. “Oh.”

They faced one another. He looked into her eyes. “You are not opposed to my... courting you?” His voice was low and quiet.

“No. You are not bothered about courting a maid? ”

“Oh. And here I thought I was courting a cook. Never mind.” He made a shy attempt at humor, but she caught it and smiled. He added, “I don’t care what you do, or what you are. If you’ll have me?”

She gave a little nod, and her chest rose as he took her hand and brought it to his lips. But doubt bloomed in her mind. Would he still care for her once he learned of her nationality? Would he still find her as beautiful if he knew she was French? She didn’t know. And she feared what might happen when he found out.

“I promise I won’t disappoint you. I know we hardly know one another, but I hope... I hope. That is to say I... Will you dance with me?” he asked.

Her smile was shy but unmistakable. “Even though I am a terrible dancer and do not know the steps?”

“You are not so bad as that. And besides, you have a very willing teacher.” His blue eyes danced.

“I should like that, very much.”

She walked with him a little, and they rejoined the main assembly, when Marie stopped short.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Um. I recognize that young woman,” Marie said.

“Who?”

There amongst the men and women stood Miss Hortense Campbell, the daughter of her former employers. She took after her mother in that she was tall and thin, with movements like a stork, all long legs and stiff movements. She also had the insufferable habit of looking down her nose at people and sniffed more often than necessary. Marie had once overheard Miss Hortense—No. She was Miss Campbell to Marie now. Marie had heard her once tell her mother she believed it gave her an air of gravity, so as better to stand out amongst her peers.

Tonight, Miss Campbell wore a long-sleeved dress of deep plum, shot with light, vertical stripes. With a round bodice and dark cross about her neck, she looked pretty, if a trifle severe. Perhaps it was her dissatisfied expression.

Marie paused. What to do if Miss Campbell recognized her?

“You are wondering whether to avoid her and hide in your room, if I had to guess,” Lieutenant Gage said.

“How did you know?”

“You must never play poque, for the other players would be able to read your expression instantly. If there is a story to tell, it is written on your face. Along with your rosy cheeks, your lips, and soft, brown hair.” He smiled at her fondly.

“Poque?”

“I believe they call it ‘poker’ in America. A card game of wagers and bluffs,” he said. “But now you have promised me a dance. Shall we?”

She accepted his hand and allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor.

A harpist was playing tonight, and she felt eyes on her as the lieutenant led her in the

dance, taking her hand in a light warm clasp and then releasing her again, stepping in formation. He whispered instructions to her and she tried, but once again, she was slow to learn, however much she tried to mimic the dancing of the others. With each step, they moved and stepped, weaving patterns on the dance floor with other dancers, in quartets and then a line. It was a country dance, but a pretty one, and she found she was enjoying herself.

But there was more to it than trying to remember which step to take. At each moment where they danced or clasped hands, his eyes sought hers, and his mouth, at first serious, began to offer a warm smile. Above his eyes was the angry red line of the scar, but it gave him a roguish air, and she decided she liked it on him. He looked dangerous, and as he pressed her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, her heart fluttered again.

All too soon the dance was over, and she felt the poorer for it. He said, “Another? Or would you like a drink first? ”

“A drink, please.” She felt parched.

He excused himself and went to fetch her a glass of wine. She stood by as Mrs. Martin quickly joined her.

“Well, you two make a delightful couple. What did Mrs. Dove-Lyon want to speak with you about?” she asked.

Marie glanced at her shoes and couldn’t hide the shy smile on her face. “Lieutenant Gage asked permission to court me.”

Mrs. Martin clapped her hands in delight. “Oh, how wonderful! I have no doubt you will be perfect together.” She paused. “But how strange. Why would he ask her permission and not your uncle’s?”

“I um... My uncle valued her perspective on the matter. I... worried the lieutenant might not wish to court me, considering I am...” She paused. “I have no prospects.”

“Pish tosh. Of course you do,” Mrs. Martin said. “Anyone who looks at you can see you are a beauty. You may not have much in the way of a dowry, but you do well enough. And many men would pay handsomely for the chance to have a pretty girl on their arm.”

Marie looked at her friend askance. “Pardon?”

“I only mean that you have attributes enough to attract any man. Do not belittle yourself so.” Mrs. Martin paused. “I should like to meet this uncle of yours myself. Is he here?”

“My Uncle Baptiste, he does not socialize much,” Marie said. “And he is not here at present,” Marie said hurriedly, her face warming. “He left after our meeting with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. He... does not care for gambling. And Mrs. Dove-Lyon looks after me when he is gone.”

“And yet he escorts you here and leaves you under her care. With no chaperone or lady’s maid. What a kind gentleman. Although that is a shame. I would invite you both to tea so we could properly meet,” Mrs. Martin said, “But never mind. So it is official. You two are courting. I love it. I always love courting couples. It is so exciting.”

“How did you and the colonel meet?” Marie asked.

“Oh, he was encamped near my village and met as the men came in to the market to buy food and drink. Eventually, he made my family an offer we could not refuse. Besides, I wanted a bit of adventure and knew he would give me a life that was not boring. But never mind us. I want to hear all about the charming lieutenant. And, oh,

my. Look at that young woman.”

Marie followed her gaze. There stood Miss Campbell, with a berry-colored shawl dangling from her elbows. As she stood alone, near a group of men clustered around a gambling table, Mrs. Martin said, “Mark my words. I wager she’s about to drop that shawl at any moment to get their attention.”

“You think so?”

“But of course. A gentleman will see it drop to the floor and pick it up, on the pretext of assisting her, and then they will become acquainted. It is a little game. But she is nervous, like a bird. She keeps looking around. She must be new at this.”

“At what?”

“Trying to attract men’s attention.” Mrs. Martin glanced at her. “Oh, my young friend, you are new to the art as well, I see. But do not worry. I will not let you make a fool of yourself. You will be much subtler than her. Who is she, I wonder?”

“Miss Hortense Campbell, of Upper Clapton. North of the river.” Marie wondered idly that things must not have worked out well between her and Father Reynolds’s son, despite the roast dinner they had served on her last night at the Campbells’.

“I see. Is that a fashionable neighborhood? I am still new to London and do not know its streets.”

Marie answered in French, “Comme ci, comme ça.”

“So-so? Hah!” Mrs. Martin laughed. “Look.”

Sure enough, Miss Campbell dropped her shawl, letting it fall to the floor.

Unfortunately, this happened behind the gentlemen standing at the card tables, and so it was not long before one or two of the men stepped on it, not noticing .

Miss Campbell frowned and pouted, attempting to tug and pull it out from under the men's boots. She succeeded and it ripped, making her fall backward and crash to the floor. "Oh!" she cried. Muted laughter and whispers rippled through the air.

Marie stepped forward, but Mrs. Martin held her arm. "Wait."

A young man in a red regimental uniform noticed Miss Campbell, smirked, then tapped one of the men on the shoulder, whispering in his ear. The man turned, glanced at Miss Campbell on the floor, shrugged, and returned to his game.

"Oh, how rude," Marie said.

"Yes, indeed."

"I should go help her," Marie said.

"Non , look," Mrs. Martin said. "That soldier will do it. Watch."

The soldier turned from the men and knelt to Miss Campbell, speaking to her quietly. He helped her up and with a steady hand at her back, handed her the torn shawl. She nodded and spoke quietly, her cheeks red.

Then, as if by magic, the event seemed forgotten, and they began to talk. The soldier in question was a handsome, blond-haired man, tall, with broad shoulders and a pleasant expression. His hair was tied back loosely with a light blue ribbon, which added a distinct contrast to his stiff, red regimental uniform. But his smile was free and easy, and he took Miss Campbell's offered hand and bowed over it deeply, kissing it.

Miss Campbell beamed with pleasure and touched her chest as if to say, Oh, my .

A few minutes more and soon he was escorting her to the dance floor.

“I see Miss Campbell has made a conquest too. You are not the only one with a military admirer,” Mrs. Martin said with a smile.

“It seems not. I’m glad,” Marie said. As much as she and Miss Campbell might have been of two different social spheres, and despite her harsh words all those years ago, she bore her no ill will. Not really.

At that point, Lieutenant Gage returned, bearing two glasses of red wine. “Mrs. Martin. Miss Cadough.” He handed the glasses over.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Let me congratulate you on the happy news. I am delighted to see you both courting.” Mrs. Martin grinned at Marie’s blushing cheeks. “Now, what can you tell me of that gentleman over there?” She pointed with her fan.

“The soldier?” He followed her gaze toward Miss Campbell and her dance partner.

“Yes. Are you acquainted with him?”

His face clouded. “Yes.”

“Lieutenant?”

He stood watching, his expression growing darker by the minute. “Excuse me. I have no more appetite for frivolity. Ladies.” He bowed to them both, and glancing at Marie, his gaze rested on her face and dwelled at her lips. “Goodnight, Miss Cadough. I trust we will see each other again soon.”

She nodded and curtsied as he soon left.

“Well. What on Earth was that about? And his eyepatch is gone. Do you think he has had a misunderstanding with that soldier? Are they mortal enemies, do you think?” Mrs. Martin said teasingly.

“I do not know. But it is strange, is it not?” Marie said.

“I shall speak with my husband and see what I can learn. Men gossip just as much as women; he is bound to know something. I wonder what his name is. We’ll see.” Mrs. Martin spoke with a wide smile.

Marie stayed by her friend’s side for the evening but kept a peripheral watch over Miss Campbell. She did not know why, but her senses were alert.

She reached unconsciously for her locket at her neck, then realized she’d left it.

“But where is your pretty locket?” Mrs. Martin asked .

“Oh, I was baking and had to take it off. I did not want to drop it in pastry.” Marie smiled.

“Very wise.” Mrs. Martin yawned. “But now I am tired. I think I shall adjourn early this evening. Bonsoir .”

They said good night, and Marie quickly undressed and once back in her maid’s uniform, she set aside the dress for laundering and returned to her room. She pulled back the bed covers where she was sure she’d had tucked it away, but it wasn’t there. That was odd. A sense of doubt filled her. She looked for her locket, feeling almost naked without it. Marie hunted high and low for it, opening drawers, searching under her bed, tearing the sheets and duvet off of it, peering on the floor, but it was no use.

Her locket was gone.

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Lieutenant Samuel Gage woke up the next morning in a foul mood. He used the piss pot beneath his bed, wiped his hands clean, and then washed his face, deciding he needed a shave. His brown hair was long, as were his sideburns, but Miss Cadough did not seem to mind. He had gone to sleep annoyed but had dreamed of Miss Cadough's smiling face, her rosy cheeks and dancing eyes. He longed to dance with her again and teach her the steps properly, perhaps with little breaks to take her in his arms and kiss her. He longed to trace his fingers along her fair skin and touch those pink lips. It had been a wonderful, charming evening, until he'd laid eyes on Walker.

He scratched his beard irritably. He did not want a beard, and the stubble on his chin was more than rough. He used some of the water from his basin and prepared a bit of shaving cream and sharpened the blade on a strop. In previous years, he would have pulled a bell pull for his valet to do this, but years of being in the military had soon disabused him of that practice, and the notion of being waited on by others.

Samuel was the third son of a baronet and was due to inherit nothing, so when he'd reached his twenties, he'd been determined to make a name for himself. His father, Sir Luke, had put in a good word and arranged for him to have a commission, so he'd been a young ensign in the army and had been shipped off to France. He'd recently earned the rank of lieutenant and had been hopeful of making captain when his accident had left him incapacitated and on the first ship home. He thought he'd seen the end of Charles Walker, until last night.

He faced a small looking glass on a writing table and grimaced at his ugly scar. He felt hideous. Then his expression softened and he blinked hard. He had almost felt like crying when Miss Cadough had removed his eyepatch yesterday in front of her uncle and Mrs. Dove-Lyon. No one had touched him for a long time like that, with

tenderness—not really. Not with kindness like she had. Only the barest civility and politeness, like during dances. With her gentle words and shining smile, he had felt a part of him break down, like a crumbling wall he'd built up inside, and he had wanted to take her in his arms right here and then, polite society be damned. He smiled at the memory and began to wet the shaving brush with the cream, dabbing it on his chin and upper lip, then bordering his sideburns, as he thought about the events of the previous evening.

He had been so happy, until he'd seen Charles Walker there, chatting up a young woman.

Charles was known in the regiment for being a ladies' man, and for not having a care as to whether his quarry were single, engaged, married, or widowed. If the woman had legs, breasts, money, and a pretty smile, she was fair game.

Samuel had not paid much attention to him until they had crossed paths a year ago, not long before his accident. His best friend, Henry Dalton, had fallen in love with a French girl, a peasant, and joy of joys, Henry's love had been returned.

He'd never seen Henry so happy. All he'd done in their quiet moments had been to sing her praises. Samuel had even met Anne once, a pretty blonde with a sunny smile, and eyes only for Henry .

Or so they'd thought.

Henry had managed to offend Charles somehow. Samuel couldn't recall the matter, but he did know that Charles had made it his mission to get revenge on his friend, starting with fixing his attentions on young Anne.

Anne, an ordinary peasant girl, had been struck by her change in fortune. She now had two English soldiers paying court to her, one with sweet flowers and declarations

of love and affection, the other with honeyed smiles and expensive food and wine.

Charles wasn't very wealthy, or else his family would have purchased a commission for him. But he was skilled at cards, and he'd taken more than one soldier's weekly pay over a single game of poque.

Henry had been furious when he'd discovered Charles had been paying attention to Anne as well. He'd tried telling Anne the truth, that Charles was a lover of women, and she'd mattered little to him. She had been nothing but a prize. His honest, heartfelt words had fallen flat on her ears, and she'd refused to see him outright. He'd wounded her pride.

Henry had been so despondent. Samuel had been furious. His friend had been miserable—he'd been curt and barely speaking to anyone, and the stress had begun to show. His marching in formation, which had been seen as a standard to all, was becoming sloppy. His hair had grown long and his facial hair had begun to become bushy. He'd paid little attention to the cleanliness of his uniform.

Samuel blamed it all on Charles, and on Anne herself. Why had the woman been so fickle? She'd been returning his best friend's declarations of love one day, and in the space of an afternoon had thrown him over for Charles Walker. Walker himself had declared he'd been in love with the girl and had planned to marry her as soon as they were able. In private, he'd encouraged the men to place bets on how soon he could bed her.

When Henry had heard about that, he'd slapped Charles and declared him a cheat at cards, and a cad toward women. Charles had demanded satisfaction, and even though dueling was frowned on in the regiment, the men had met at dawn the following morning.

Samuel carefully scraped the sharp blade against his rough stubble, guiding it along

the facial hair that was thick and growing. He remembered that morning, for it was the day he'd lost his friend forever.

In the early hours of the morning, just as the sun had peeked over the horizon and the short, stunted trees had braced against the oncoming heat of the summer, the man in charge had called them forth, had the seconds check the pistols, and begun to count down.

Samuel had stood by, patiently waiting as Henry's second. Henry had been a good shot. Whoever drew first blood would win the duel, and be the winning party in the matter of satisfaction and the right. But Henry, as it had turned out, had not been as good a shot as usual. He had not been in good form. He'd shot first, and his shot had barely grazed Charles's upper arm, ripping the sleeve.

Charles had flinched and clapped a hand to his arm, then took aim and fired. But he had not aimed for the shoulder or arm, as Henry had. He'd aimed for the heart, and had not missed.

His bullet had sliced through Henry's stiff uniform and sailed right into his heart. Henry had died instantly.

Samuel shook and set down the blade, holding on to the desk for support. He looked in the mirror. The reflection was his own, but he could distantly see the events, almost as if he were a ghost watching from afar.

Henry had collapsed, dead on his feet. Samuel had run to him and held him in his arms as he'd died, whilst the man in charge of the duel had berated Charles for ignoring the rules. Charles had held up his hands and said he'd missed, but it no longer mattered. The duel had finished, and Henry was dead. God help him. Samuel had shaken with silent tears and impotent fury as his best friend had stared up at the morning sky, seeing nothing.

His heart had broken that day, as the doctor had taken away Henry's body. Samuel had buried Henry himself, taking his effects and preparing to send them back to his family. He'd used his own pay to post them, with a heartfelt written letter to Henry's family. He'd come to love Henry like a brother, and had promised to visit his family when he next returned to England.

His friend lay in French soil, and he'd wanted to weep that day, but he could not. He instead had gone to Anne, knocked on her cheap, wooden door, and begged to speak with her. She at first had been hesitant, but then she'd seen his face and let him in. He vaguely remembered standing in her kitchen, a spare place but one that bespoke of a home, and stood stiffly, delivering the bad news of his friend's death, like he would give a report to his commanding officers.

Anne had collapsed to her knees and stared up at him, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. "Henri is dead?" she'd said in her French accent.

He'd nodded. He'd taken one last look at her tear-stained face, turned on his heel, and walked out into the French sun. He'd passed Charles walking on the way out. Charles had opened his mouth to say some nasty comment, but seeing the expression on Samuel's face, he'd wisely kept his mouth shut.

Samuel had stared at him, feeling dull and wooden, dead inside. He'd searched Charles's face for a bit of meaning, some horrid reason or explanation why. "Why?" he'd asked.

"He got in my way." Charles had left him then and entered Anne's home, where the sounds of weeping could be heard.

Samuel had gone through the next series of military engagements like a puppet, maneuvered by an unseen hand, but naught but idle machinery waiting to be employed. He'd eaten, drunk, marched, attacked. But he'd missed his friend, and

until they'd marched out of town, he would spend his nights drinking and eating at Henry's gravesite.

He'd later heard that true to his word, Charles had made free and easy with Anne and had bedded her that very night. When Charles had joined their party on the next foraging mission a few days later, one man had asked him about the French girl, and Charles had laughed. "Which girl? One French girl is as good as another. She spread her legs the moment I paid her a compliment."

He'd shot a snide glance at Samuel, who'd wished with all his heart that Charles might die. He'd hoped to never see him again, and after he'd been wounded in battle and sent back home, he'd thought he never would. Until last night at the Lyon's Den.

As he dragged the blade across his bristly facial hair, Samuel thought, What would it take to destroy him? For the honor of Henry? He must devise a way to expose Charles, once and for all.

That morning once he'd finished shaving, his mind had drifted from the fickle Anne to another girl, Miss Cadough. He found himself daydreaming about her soft, brown hair, her lips, the way her eyes sparkled when they danced. He longed to take her hand again, and to press it against his heart, that she might know it beat just for her. But he must think reasonably, logically. One thing at a time. They were courting. Would it be too much of an imposition to visit her during the daytime hours to bring her a bouquet of flowers?

That day, he received a note from Mrs. Martin to join her for tea. He had no idea how she had managed to learn of his family's townhouse in the city, but he accepted her invitation and at the proper time, called at the colonel's townhouse in a respectable part of London. Whilst he suspected his family was wealthier than the colonel's, he really didn't give a whit about material wealth .

He knocked on the front door and was admitted by the butler. Mrs. Martin received him in a well-fashioned parlor of greys and ochre yellows, with fine, painted walls and some furniture, but none of it matched.

Some of it was stately, like the fine writing desk and chair in the corner, and the elegant table that sat between the sofa and visitors' chairs. But the sofa itself looked of a plain white, damask material and the chairs were of different styles. There were no pictures on the walls, so the room seemed rather bare, despite its decent size. He had been here before of course, that fateful day he'd come calling in the hope of spending a day baking with Mrs. Martin and Miss Cadough, only to learn that Miss Cadough had sent word she'd been unable to attend, after all, with apologies. Why Mrs. Martin had asked him to call now was a mystery to him.

Mrs. Martin rang for tea, and they were served quickly, although the biscuits were rock hard and not very digestible. He bit into one and spent too long trying to crunch the hard biscuit into manageable bites, then drank tea that was so steaming hot, he burned his tongue. He coughed, shedding crumbs on his uniform.

"How can I be of service, Mrs. Martin?" he asked. He'd come to like her after a time. He admired her solid friendship with Miss Cadough, and she also seemed to want the best for her.

She sipped her tea delicately and surveyed him. "There is no need to be so formal, Lieutenant. We are friends, are we not?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Then I hope you will join me in a little scheme." She set down her teacup. "I think it is odd that our young friend Miss Cadeaux does not really know where she comes from, or the whereabouts of her family. It sounds like the family who took her and her uncle in are rather unwelcoming toward my countrymen."

I can't blame them , he thought.

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Lieutenant Gage, when we first met, you disliked me instantly because of my nationality. Do you still feel that way?"

"I'm surprised you felt the need to ask. Of course not."

"And what if I told you that I suspect our young friend is a countrywoman of mine?" She seemed to choose her words carefully, assessing him.

He balked. "Marie? French? No. Surely not."

"And if she were? You have just started courting. Would you still feel the same way about her if she were French?"

"Why do you ask me this?" he asked.

"Because I care for Miss Cadeaux, and I think there is more to her than meets the eye. That is what you English say, is it not?"

"I care for her too."

"Do you?"

Then it hit him like a bullet. "Marie is French. That's what you're getting at." He put a hand to his forehead.

"Yes, Lieutenant. Did you just come to that conclusion now?"

He nodded. He felt like a fool. All this time, he'd gone on about how he disliked French people, and then had been charming her on the side. It was no wonder she

might refuse him, or not want to see him at all. “I’ve been a monumental fool. I’m sorry I was so rude at our first meeting.”

She laughed. “Not at all. But I do not blame Miss Cadeaux for wishing to hide her nationality from you. Ah, I see on your face that you share a similar point of view. Tut tut, Lieutenant. We are friends, and I would remind you that we both have one thing we are allied on.”

“And what is that?”

“We both care about Miss Cadeaux.”

He drank more tea. That was certainly true. “What are you planning?”

“I want to find out where her family are and reunite them. ”

He frowned.

“You dislike my plan?”

“Mrs. Martin, may I speak frankly?”

“I would prefer it that you do.”

He swallowed. “Whatever drove Miss... Cadeaux and her uncle from France, they probably had a good reason for leaving.”

“Miss Cadeaux says it was before the year 1799 or so, but she was so young, she hardly remembers.”

“So right around the time of the revolution and Robespierre,” he said.

She nodded. The only intimation he had of her emotion was the clenching of her hands on the sofa cushions. “La Terreur.”

“I can only imagine that whatever drove them from the country, that danger is still present, or else surely, her parents would have sent for her, and they would have returned home. Unless they are truly dead, as she believes.”

“Maybe they did not feel they would be welcomed.”

“Who knows?” He drank more tea. “Mrs. Martin, do you think it is wise for you to be looking into this matter?”

“Are you questioning my intelligence?” she asked.

“No. But I do wonder about how safe a quest like this is.”

“Well, I want to find out. It is not right that she is all alone, with no one but Mrs. Dove-Lyon and her uncle to look after her. Besides... she reminds me of someone.”

“Who?” His interest was piqued. He planned to look after Miss Cadeaux, even if he had to be generous to that uncle of hers.

“That is just it, I cannot recall. A woman, a great beauty, whom I had occasion to meet years ago as a girl. She too wore a locket that reminds me of Miss Cadeaux’s. Something about the face and hair, and her laugh. But I can’t remember her name.”

“Was she a landowner, a noblewoman?” he asked.

“Something. She was not a nobody. But she and her husband were incredibly sad. We all were. It was a dangerous time.” She blinked hard. “In any case, I mean to help out Miss Cadeaux and find out what happened to her parents. She deserves some

happiness in her life, don't you agree?"

He nodded.

"On that note, you're not going to be like one of those English rakes and dally with my young friend, are you? Your intentions are honorable toward her?"

A ghost of a smile flitted across his face. "Yes, Mrs. Martin. I care for Miss Cadeaux."

"I thought so. Now will you help me or not?"

He looked at her. He still did not like this plan, but he would help Miss Cadeaux if he could. "Tell me what you would have me do."

After they had agreed to conduct their own searches, he took a carriage home, where he had a letter from his mother at their country estate in Hertfordshire. She wrote to ask if he was attending many assemblies in town, and whether he might bring home a young lady soon. He smiled as he began to pen a reply. His mother was the fourth daughter of a businessman who had gone bankrupt but who had given no small share of beauty and intelligence to his daughters. Miss Cadeaux coming from a humble background would not be so distasteful to them.

The following night, he met Mrs. Martin at the Lyon's Den. "Have you learned anything?" she asked.

"I haven't known where to start looking. I haven't your connections in French society," he said.

"True. Poor Miss Cadeaux." She paused.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Because if we keep digging into her past, I think we will find something. And if you are not up to the task, I want you to end your courtship, immediately.”

“What?” He stared at her .

“Do not lie to her and lead her on, if you do not plan to care for her like a gentleman should. She deserves a good, true love. I mean a gentleman, not a lover. She does not deserve to be seduced and abandoned, like so many soldiers do to women of my country.” Her mouth twisted.

She had painful memories there, he could tell.

He straightened. “I am sorry if you have experienced such rude behavior from English soldiers.”

She waved a hand. “It is not you, monsieur . Out of a band of fifty men, there will be forty-nine honorable ones, and one rake. It is often the case. I think being at war makes many men act differently than they would at home toward their own country’s women.” She gave her head a little shake. “But never mind that. Promise me that if we do find out something about our dear Miss Cadeaux, you will not betray her trust, or break her heart.”

“I promise,” he said, his pulse beginning to pound at the thought of Miss Cadeaux. He wished to see her again, take her hands in his, and tell her he did not care if she were French, English, or from the other side of the world. He cared only for her. He wanted only her.

“Make sure you keep your promise, Lieutenant. Or I will have my husband call you out at dawn for a little pistol exchange in her honor, and he is a very good shot.”

Samuel stiffened.

“I am sorry, Lieutenant. It was a poor joke.”

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Marie joined the assembly downstairs, this evening wearing a pretty, blue dress the color of sea foam, with shades of blue and white. Her dress was of white muslin with a blue sash about the high empire waist, and she wore a matching blue ribbon in her hair. Her chest felt bare and naked without her locket, and it made her feel heartbroken inside. She had not misplaced it,—someone had taken it, she was sure of that. But why? Jealousy? To cause trouble? She had torn apart her room, looked downstairs, even questioned the other servants, but no one seemed to have seen it or know where it was.

As she walked downstairs from the observation gallery and saw the lieutenant talking with Mrs. Martin, Marie felt a warmth in her chest that she had come to recognize as a pleasant feeling. She was joining friends to spend an evening in delightful company. And as her gaze fell on the handsome Lieutenant Gage, her heart lifted.

She liked seeing him in his red regimental uniform—he was so handsome. He had shaved, which she approved of. His brown hair was still long and tied back in a queue, but he had discarded his black eyepatch and the bright-red scar over his eye had begun to fade slightly .

As their eyes met across the room, he had a smile just for her, and her heart pattered in her chest. He was handsome, right down to the elegant slope of his chin and smart patrician nose. He faced her as she crossed the room and bowed deeply. “Miss Cadeaux,” he said.

“Lieutenant,” she said, smiling. Then paused. He’d pronounced her surname the French way. Did he know?

“You look...” he started, eyeing her dress.

She blushed.

“Our dear lieutenant is at a loss for words, petite . How charming.” Mrs. Martin curtsied. “You look beautiful, and I’m sure Lieutenant Gage would agree. Wouldn’t you, sir?”

“Um, yes,” he uttered, eyeing her feminine form. “Indeed.”

Marie grinned.

“May I offer you some refreshment?” Lieutenant Gage asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

He walked away without another word, or even asking Mrs. Martin if she would like a drink. Mrs. Martin laughed. “Oh, my dear, he is besotted. He hardly noticed me, and I am not without my charms. If I were a more insecure woman, I would feel jealous.”

Marie shook her head. “Mrs. Martin, you are...”

“Ravishing, I know.” Mrs. Martin held up her fan and laughed behind it. “But, never mind our poor besotted lieutenant. Look, there is that woman again. The Campbell woman. You see?”

Marie turned. “Oh. Yes.”

Miss Campbell was walking around, looking for someone.

“I think she is hoping for a glimpse of the soldier again,” Mrs. Martin said.

“I suspect you are right.”

Miss Campbell spotted him talking with a young woman, and she went up to him and not-so-subtly inserted herself into their conversation, fluttering her eyelashes and her fan at him. She managed to elbow the young woman, dressed in pink, causing her to spill her glass of red wine down her dress.

“Oh, did you see that?” Mrs. Martin asked. “What a fearsome young woman.”

Marie nodded, standing by as they watched. Lieutenant Gage rejoined them, handing over two glasses of red wine. “Ladies, what are you looking at?”

“That young woman talking to Lieutenant Walker,” Mrs. Martin said. “She’s already made one poor girl spill her drink. It is most diverting.”

Lieutenant Gage’s face clouded.

“Lieutenant? What is it? You do not like him?” Marie asked.

He spoke quietly, just so she could hear. “No. We met during the war, when we were both stationed in France. He... is a lover of women. But he is not a gentleman, however much he pretends to be.”

Marie’s eyes widened. “I see. Should I say something to Miss Campbell?”

“No. She would not thank you,” he said.

“But... I know her. We are not friends, but if I were about to make a mistake like that, I would want to know,” Marie pointed out.

“She is not your friend, Miss Cadeaux,” Mrs. Martin said, casting a wary glance at Lieutenant Gage. “Leave it be. Let her make her own mistakes. I knew a woman like her once and tried to warn her against what I knew was certain folly. All I succeeded in doing was to lose a friend.”

“But—”

“Please. I warn you, Miss Cadeaux, she will not thank you for your trouble,” Mrs. Martin said.

Marie stopped. She did not want to watch this. She felt like she wanted to do something but didn’t dare. They were right, most likely. Even if Miss Campbell was not offended immediately by Marie talking to her in society, she would not thank her for pointing out her poor choice of suitor. She spotted Mr. Campbell not far away, gambling .

Marie sipped her wine. “Let us talk of something else.”

“Where is your locket?” Lieutenant Gage asked. “You usually wear it.”

Marie’s warm smile disappeared. “I lost it the other night. I was baking and set it aside, and now I cannot find it again. I’ve searched everywhere.” She bit her lip as she spotted his gaze flitting to her mouth. Would that he might kiss it, and all her troubles away.

He coughed and clasped his hands behind his back. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. It’s just that the locket has special meaning for me. It holds the only portraits I have of my parents. Without it, I feel like...” She gazed at the floor. “I feel like I’ve lost a part of them. I worry I will forget what they look like. And I don’t want to forget.” She blinked away tears.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She smiled half-heartedly. “It’s all right. I’m too easily bothered these days.”

“No, no, we cannot have you so unhappy,” said Mrs. Martin. “Lieutenant, dance with her so that I might see you two fly about the room. It will put a smile on Miss Cadeaux’s face, and you two look so charming on the dance floor. Go, please.” She took Marie’s wineglass and set it on a nearby empty games table.

Lieutenant Gage extended a hand to Marie. “Would you care to dance?”

She nodded. “All right.”

He led her to the dance floor, but he could tell she was not of a light mood that evening. A solemnity and gravity weighed upon her thoughts. The dance itself was a slow-moving, stately tune. They danced with good form, for the most part, with her once again trying to watch the others and study their movements, but her heart wasn’t in it.

“Miss Cadeaux, I meant to say. I never meant to offend you with my irrational dislike of French people. I realized recently that you are of that nation, and I... I was a fool. I hope you do not think less of me.”

Her eyes widened, and she gave him a sunny smile. “Not at all, Lieutenant. But why such dislike in the first place?”

“A close friend of mine fell in love with a French girl who abandoned him for another man, a rake. He fought a duel over her honor and died. Since then, I have not trusted the French, especially the women. We are at war, but...” He ran a hand through his hair. “There is no excuse for it. It was an illogical, irrational dislike for which I have no excuse.”

“I bear you no ill will, lieutenant. I am glad you told me.” She danced, and surprisingly enough, got a few steps correct. But then she became distracted.

“A farthing for your thoughts,” he said.

She looked up at him, blinking. “Oh, I’m sorry. My mind was elsewhere.”

“Still thinking about the locket, or your friend?”

“Ha. Miss Campbell was never a friend. But I do so want to warn her.”

He shook his head, slowly taking her hand and raising it in the air, as they twirled in a slow circle. “She needs to find out for herself. The man is a rake. If she does not hear of his poor reputation from someone else, she will not want to hear about it from you.”

Her shoulders dipped unhappily. “I know.”

“You feel loyalty to her?”

“Yes and no. We are of a similar age. Had we been of a similar station and social sphere, we might have been friends, or at least nodding acquaintances. I would not want anything bad to happen to her.” It was true. For all Miss Campbell’s distance and civility, she was not a bad person. She did not deserve to be toyed with by a rake.

As if reading her thoughts, Lieutenant Gage said, “She might enjoy the attention, even if it is from someone less deserving.”

Her smile fell. “Forgive me. I do not much feel like dancing. ”

“Then let us go somewhere else, where you can be at peace with your thoughts.”

He held out his hand. She took it, and he led her from the dance floor, across the room, and outside into the garden. The courtyard was lit with small torches that outlined a stony pebbled path. There was a humble growing tree, bushes, flowers, and a genteel-looking pond, with a stone bench.

Marie sat down on the bench and let out a breath.

“Miss Cadeaux, what is wrong?” he asked. “You are not still concerned about Miss Campbell.”

“No. It is not that.”

“Then what? Tell me,” he said.

She looked at him. “How can you want me? I do not understand. I am naught but a servant. You are a soldier, you are handsome, you should be talking with ladies of your own station, not spending your time with me.”

“You think you are unworthy?” he asked.

She did not answer and instead rested her hands on her knees, looking at the ground. The air was chilly, and he sat next to her. She felt drawn to him, like a moth to a flame.

She breathed in as he took her hands in his. “I stopped caring about that five minutes after meeting you. I was a fool to think a person’s nationality mattered. It is a part of you, but there is so much more. I do not care where you are from. Only that you are here, now. With me.”

“Truly?” she asked.

He slowly faced her, and gently, barely touching, tipped her chin upward. Her eyes drifted up to meet his, and he caught a glimpse of her pale chest, almost ghostly in the moonlight, that excited him.

“You want to know why I wish to court you?” he asked.

She nodded, the movement fractionally small.

“Because you have a good heart. You show kindness to a soldier who cannot bear the loud drums, when most women find the sight of me unbearable.” He leaned in close. “But mostly...”

“Yes?” she asked, her gaze darting to his lips.

“Because you are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. And I have wanted to kiss you since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

Her heart rose in her chest. Her eyes closed of their own accord as he bent his head and pressed his lips to hers.

The touch of his lips were gentle and light, barely tracing hers. She might have been kissed by a butterfly, or flirted with a feather. His touch was soft and warm, and she leaned into the kiss, her heart beating wildly.

She had never been kissed before. She did not know how to do it properly and it was all happening so fast. One second he was gracing her lips with the barest touch, the next, she found herself pressed against him, her hands firmly touching his chest.

Their bodies were molded together, closer than propriety, closer than Marie might embrace a pillow at night. Their lips were locked, pressing firmly against each other, teasing and tasting one another. His hands had magically found their way around her

waist, with his right hand on the small of her back, pulling her closer to him.

“Marie! Get away from him!” Uncle Baptiste’s voice rang out.

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Marie froze and scooted back from the lieutenant, who stood up immediately. “Sir,” he began.

“I am no ‘sir.’ I am a servant, as is she. You should not be kissing her. It is inappropriate.” Uncle Baptiste’s French accent grew thick, a sure sign of his temper. “I did not agree to you seeing her just so you could do this in private.”

“Uncle, we are courting,” Marie started, when he held up a finger at her.

“Marie, go to your room. I would speak with the lieutenant alone.”

Marie rose, smoothed down her skirts, and shot him a glance before leaving. She slipped away and waited until a moment later, then crept back near the garden entrance to listen from the shadows.

“You should not dally with my niece. She is a good girl. She is not some harlot for you soldiers to toy with.” Uncle Baptiste’s voice was sharp.

“Sir. I am courting your niece. This is what courting couples do,” Lieutenant Gage said, his voice even.

“Not in private, they don’t. ”

“You would prefer I kiss her in public?” the lieutenant joked.

“That is not what I meant, and you know it. Do not be impudent with me, boy. If you knew—” He stopped.

“Why is Miss Cadeaux in the dark about her parents?” Lieutenant Gage asked. “Why does she know so little about where she comes from? Was she born out of wedlock, is that it?”

“No. And, it is not my business to tell. Who her parents are is no business of yours, either.”

“Sir, I would know so I may know to whom to speak in the future.”

“You may speak to me,” Uncle Baptiste said.

“That is not what I meant, and you know it,” Lieutenant Gage said quietly.

This only seemed to anger Uncle Baptiste further. “Do not go skulking around corners and taking my niece in the shadows again. If you must court her, escort her around in public, as is decent, and befitting a young woman of her stature.”

Marie cocked her head. What on Earth did he mean? She knew Uncle Baptiste cared for her, but he talked of her as though she were the daughter of an earl or a king. And yet, she had memorized their portraits in her locket—they did not look like peasants as such. Could they have been wealthier than that?

“Mr. Allard. I am courting your niece. I do not plan to dally or toy with her. I care for her. If it is acceptable to you, I will ask her to join me for a walk in the park on Sunday.”

From the shadows, Marie almost clapped her hands in delight. A walk in the park! That sounded delightful.

Uncle Baptiste hesitated. “I will have to speak with the mistress. Her acting as a French-speaking companion to Mrs. Martin has already created enough trouble for

her with the other servants.”

“What do you mean?” Lieutenant Gage asked. His hands flexed, as if wishing to hold a sword .

“Many do not like her. They think the mistress has shown favoritism toward her, which they think unfair, especially as we are both new hires in her household. Do not cause further trouble for her. She has no one but me.”

“That is not true, Mr. Allard. She has the friendship of Mrs. Martin, and myself.”

“Ha! The friendship of a woman who does not even know she is a servant. How long can a friendship last that is based on lies? Once that woman learns of Marie’s occupation, she will end their connection faster than you can blink. It will be over, and Marie will be lost. Do me a favor and leave her alone. She does not need her heart broken by a man who is not serious.”

“What gives you the impression I am not serious about her?” Lieutenant Gage asked.

“I have seen your type before. You British soldiers are all the same. Smiling and wooing a girl one minute and having her on her back the next, only to leave her the next morning ruined, or worse, with child. I will not see that happen to Marie.”

“That is not I, Mr. Allard.”

“No? It is your friends. I saw that soldier tonight, flirting with a young woman. It was only a few minutes before they went upstairs, and everyone knows what happens when a couple goes up there. And now I find you out here with Marie. Can you truly say you are any different?”

“I shall prove it to you.”

Uncle Baptiste uttered a sound of disgust. “Prove you are honest and stop looking into her background. You are not from the same social spheres. The sooner you learn that, the better.” He walked away, right past Marie hiding in the shadows.

Marie waited a few minutes more and spied on the assembly in the main room. She saw Miss Campbell talking with Lieutenant Walker. Miss Campbell looked so happy, the air filled with laughter and good humor. Perhaps she was wrong about the lieutenant. What if he was not so bad as Lieutenant Gage had thought? Or maybe he had changed, or genuinely liked Miss Campbell. Either way, was it right for Marie to disturb their happiness?

She went upstairs to change and went to bed, her mind in turmoil. Her last moments awake, her thoughts were full of a kiss, and the touch of Lieutenant Gage’s soft lips against hers.

The next day was Sunday. Marie went down to breakfast, ready to work in the kitchens, and found the other servants were all smiling, whilst others looked stunned. Their eyes were wide; a few mouths hung open. Marie looked around, but Julia was suspiciously absent. A mercy, she decided. “What is going on?”

Mr. Jones said, “The mistress has kindly given us a few hours off in the afternoon.”

A few of the servants looked at each other and grinned. One or two clapped.

“So the Black Widow of Whitehall does have a heart,” Thom muttered.

“A half day!” one of the maids said.

“No, not quite. Just around three hours. You may all finish after lunch and then be back in time to prepare dinner. Get your work done quickly and do not miss church, those of you who are churchgoers.”

The servants quickly talked about this, chatting about what they would do with their free time. Mrs. Drummond fancied she might buy a flavored ice from Gunther's as a treat.

Marie sat down and ate her porridge quickly, swallowing it down with a watery cup of tea. It tasted bitter, but she didn't mind. What would she do with her free time?

"Oh, and, Miss Cadough, the mistress wishes to speak with you in her parlor, as soon as you've finished breakfast," the butler said.

Marie glanced up from her porridge. She ate quickly, wiped her mouth with a napkin, and cleared her empty dishes away. As Marie left the room, one of the servants asked, "Why is the mistress giving us a half day, Mr. Jones?"

"She is a good employer. That is all."

"Can't remember when she last gave us some time off."

"Well, it's not a gift you should take lightly, so make the most of it," Mr. Jones said.

Marie went upstairs to Mrs. Dove-Lyon's parlor, knocked, and entered at the lady's summons.

Her employer sat at a rich, mahogany desk, with a wall of books behind her. She was writing at the moment, and she put her quill away as Marie entered. "Ah, Marie. Come in."

Marie closed the door behind her. "You asked for me?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Gage has asked permission to take you out this afternoon for a walk in the park."

Marie smiled immediately. She'd woken up from a dream about kissing him that morning and was shyly eager to do it again. A small rush of pleasure passed over her.

"I trust you are open to joining him?"

"Yes."

"Very good. I have matters to see to here, but I have given the servants a few hours' free time this afternoon and have asked your uncle to chaperone you. Do make haste and finish your chores, as he has asked for you to meet him at the entrance of St. James's Park."

Marie nodded. "Thank you, ma'am."

Mrs. Dove-Lyon gave her a curt nod in reply. "That will be all."

Marie left and went about her chores with half a mind. She made bread dough and let it proof, and was wiping down the tables when Mrs. Drummond said, "Girl, you're miles away. You've cleaned that table twice now."

Marie stopped and looked down at the sparkling-clean table. "Oh."

"I'd give you more work to do, but I don't trust you wouldn't put oranges in the pantry instead of in the sauce. Go on and finish up. The others are almost about to leave," Mrs. Drummond said with a smile. Her eyes were kind and she made a shooing motion.

After a small luncheon of cold meats, cheese, and salad, Marie went up to her room. She had few clothes of her own, but nothing so fancy as the dresses she wore in the evenings. Everything she earned went to support her uncle and herself and to save for a little house in the countryside, once she'd earned enough for her passage back to

France. That had been her plan for years. But now, she felt her heart changing.

She had an old, brown dress, and an ordinary walking coat, with a faded, straw bonnet and dull, beige ribbon. None of it was very special, and she felt humble indeed as she changed out of her maid's uniform and into her dull, brown dress. But it was hers, and she hoped that with the weather being so fine, Lieutenant Gage wouldn't notice the poor quality of her clothes.

Her uncle, similarly dressed in non-descript clothing, escorted her to the entrance of St. James's Park. They waited, speaking little, as well-dressed men and women walked inside.

"Maybe he won't come," Uncle Baptiste said.

Marie bit her lip in dismay. Would the lieutenant keep her waiting, or worse, not show up at all? Maybe he was having second thoughts about their courtship. What if she'd had bad breath and he had been repulsed?

She clapped a hand to her mouth, when a male voice said, "There you are."

She whirled around. "Lieutenant Gage." She curtsied and received a bow in return .

He gave her a warm smile. "Miss Cadeaux." He glanced over her shoulder. "Mr. Allard." He bowed.

"Lieutenant." Uncle Baptiste nodded.

"Shall we?" Lieutenant Gage asked.

"Yes."

They began walking, with Uncle Baptiste close behind. They were quiet for a time, with the only sound being the noise their boots made on the sandy, gravel path, and the sounds of the birds calling and trilling nearby.

A great canal stretched out before them, far ahead, and ducks, geese, and even pelicans were scattered along the green borders of grassland as elegant swans glided upon the water. The scene was quite pretty, and Marie was delighted.

She looked on and smiled at the lieutenant, who was gazing at her. “Are you enjoying the park?” he asked.

“Oh, yes.” She stood by, watching the ducks nose about for food, then dive and careen into the water with almighty splashes, making her laugh.

“I’m glad.” He stood by her.

She glanced at him. “But, sir, it strikes me that I know so little about you.”

“What is it you wish to know?”

She thought on this. So many things, and yet where to begin. “What about your family? Are they in London? Is that where you’re from? I know I asked before, but you were so private then. You gave little away.”

He laughed. “So many questions. Let’s play a game. You ask one of me, and I’ll answer, but that means I get to ask one of you too.”

“All right.”

He said, “You asked about my family. They live in a little place out in Hertfordshire. I have a mother, a father, and two older brothers, both of whom are insufferable.”

“Really?” Her eyes were wide.

“No.” He laughed, teasing her. “Maybe sometimes. They’re all right. We have a place in London, but I’m the only one there at the moment.”

“That sounds lonely.”

“It’s why I spend most nights at the Lyon’s Den. At least there, I’m assured of good company.” He gazed down at her. “Now let me ask you a question. Are enjoying yourself?”

“Yes.” Her smile warmed him.

“Good. I was relieved to hear that your locket has only miniatures of your parents and not any beaus.”

She blushed at the thought. “I’ve never had any beaus.”

“So I am the first. That is a singular position to be in, and one I hardly believe. You mean to say you really never had any beaus before?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Shocking. I can hardly believe it.”

“You are teasing me,” she said.

“I am. I like to make you smile.” He faced her. “Miss Cadeaux, did you...” He paused, his cheeks turning pink. “Did you like our kiss last night?”

Her cheeks flamed. She could not meet his eye. She gave a little nod. Then she raised

her head, her gaze challenging. “Lieutenant Gage, I have a question for you.”

“Go on.”

“When might we do that again?”

His eyes widened. He took her hand and whisked her behind a tree, pressing his lips to hers.

She instantly relaxed in his arms. She didn’t care that they stood in a public park, and that she was pressed up against a tree, trapped beneath him. She didn’t care that the hard bark of the tree dug into her lower back, or that the tall grass bit into the skin of her ankles above her boots. She cared that she was here, together with him, and with his hands on her waist, pulling her toward him, it felt like the perfect place to be. As her heart pounded, she wished time could stop, and they could simply be together.

They heard a noise, and both their eyes opened at the same time. Lieutenant Gage broke off the kiss and stepped back. His clear-blue eyes now had dark pupils—they were dilated for some reason. His cheeks were pink and his hair slightly disheveled.

She stood still as he reached out and rearranged her straw bonnet on her head, having pushed it back off her head when he’d kissed her a moment ago. Surveying her up and down, his gaze lingered on her chest, her lips, as he smiled and she smiled back. “You look beautiful,” he murmured.

He swallowed and stepped back a few steps, putting his hands behind his back, ever the gentleman.

He said louder, “As I was saying, I have two older brothers, Bartholomew and Geoffrey. Bartholomew is the heir, and he will inherit the baronetcy when Father is gone. Geoffrey became a county curate, which leaves me to make something of

myself.”

Marie blinked. A baronet’s son? She instantly felt embarrassed for her poor clothes. And yet, he didn’t seem to mind. What on earth was he doing walking out with her? “And will you, Lieutenant?” Marie asked, feeling how hot her cheeks were. Her lips felt rough and perfect from kissing. She wanted to do it again but knew they must wait.

“I am working on it. I have saved some. If I can just avoid getting hit in the head when I charge up hills, I’ll be more of a success.” He grinned and tapped the red scar above his eye.

She laughed, and her smile fell when he grew serious.

“You do not mind my scar?”

“No.”

He looked at her, then away. “You ask of my family. Here is a truth: my parents hoped I would make something of myself, and until I do, they were keen to throw me into the path of wealthy, young women.”

Her kind smile disappeared. “Oh.”

“But then I was shipped off with the army and had my accident. No one wanted to see me then, so I left for London, and they didn’t seem to care what I did with my time. I know my mother wants me to heal and rest, but I’m fine. I just have this scar.”

She thought he looked rather dashing.

“I never thought I would meet anyone who would even see me for who I am.

Everyone just looks at my scar or tries to avoid looking at it, then looks in secret when they think my gaze is elsewhere.” He met her eyes. “I never thought I would meet a young woman as kind as you.”

She smiled and spotted her uncle nearby, watching. Then a couple walked by and Lieutenant Gage stiffened.

“Lieutenant? What is it?” Marie asked.

“Nothing.” He held out his arm for her, and she took it.

“Gage, is that you?”

They were soon joined by Lieutenant Charles Walker and his companion. Marie glanced up at the tall woman’s face and started. It was Miss Campbell. A lady’s maid she recognized from her time at the Campbells was acting as her chaperone. Miss Sanderson, Marie recalled her name was. But if Miss Sanderson recognized her, she showed no inclination of it. The maid walked some distance behind, idly keeping watch.

Miss Campbell glanced at her before her eyes alighted on her face, then widened. “Mary?”

“Miss Campbell.” Marie gave a polite curtsy.

“You two are acquainted?” Lieutenant Walker asked, eyeing Marie’s simple clothes with a growing smirk. “My word, you do have singular taste in fashion. And, Gage, I thought you aimed rather higher in your expectations. I did not think you socialized with peasants, but maybe you take after your friend Henry, eh? But with that gash, I hardly recognized you. Bit of nasty luck, that. But then I suppose you would have trouble finding ladies who could stand the sight of that.”

Lieutenant Gage's mouth firmed into a hard line. His hand clenched into fists, and his chin raised, his eyes narrowed. "Walker."

"Now, now, let us not lose our tempers, Gage. Not whilst there are ladies present." Lieutenant Walker smirked.

Marie looked at Miss Campbell, who glanced at her and dismissed her without a word. She instead looked at Lieutenant Gage, eyeing him in his uniform. Her gaze swept over him from head to toe, resting on his face and scar. "Were you in an accident?"

"Forgive me, madam, but we have not been introduced. Excuse me." He ignored Miss Campbell's gasp of displeasure and turned to Marie. "Shall we go?" And without leaving her a moment to reply, he guided her away from the pair. They strode toward her uncle, who stood leaning against a tree, watching closely, his jaw jutting out stubbornly.

"Lieutenant—" she started.

"Let us away, please," he said. Once they were some distance away, he added, "I'm sorry about that. That man is rude and impertinent. I hope you were not too offended."

Marie gave him a small smile. "It's all right. I'm glad to be away from them."

"That makes two of us. And I did not like that young lady on his arm."

"Miss Campbell?" Marie said.

"Yes, I remember you saying. She stares too much. And her addressing me, particularly with such a personal question, when we have not been formally

introduced. Such poor manners in a girl.” He shook his head.

They were soon joined by Uncle Baptiste. “Come, Marie. We should return. We do not want to stay out too late.”

“Yes, Uncle.” She took his arm and glanced at Lieutenant Gage. “Good day. Thank you for the walk.”

“It was my pleasure.” He bowed. “Will you be attending the Lyon’s Den tonight?”

“I will be there, provided Mrs. Martin is as well.”

“Then I shall hope to see you this evening.”

That evening, Mrs. Martin was present at the Lyon’s Den. Marie dressed in a dress that bore a light shade of pink and found Mrs. Martin standing in the observation gallery, watching the gamblers and assembly present in the main hall.

“Mrs. Martin,” Marie said. “Good evening.”

“Oho, good evening to you too, Miss Cadeaux. I want to hear all about it. Did he actually take you out on a walk this afternoon?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“Yes,” Marie said.

“How she blushes! I knew it. You two lovebirds can hardly stay away from each other. Well. I am happy for you, even if I am a little jealous. I miss the first few days of young love.” She observed her husband at one of the gambling tables. “The colonel is a very good man, but his mind is often on the war. I will be happy when both our nations are at peace again.” She rested her hands on the smooth, polished balcony of the gallery. Tonight, Mrs. Martin wore a russet-colored gown with a

square bodice, and a feather in her hair and headband, along with a gold necklace with semi-precious stones for jewelry.

Marie observed her friend and wished that she might one day dress as well so that she might not feel so embarrassed by her ordinary clothes when out in the street. But never mind. She was there to keep Mrs. Martin company. “How has your day been?” she asked.

“Oh, well enough, I suppose. Nothing as exciting as the day you’ve had. Although... I wonder if you might help me with a little project,” Mrs. Martin said, with an air of mystery .

“What is that?”

“Well. I cannot help thinking that you remind me of someone. When we first met, you were the spitting image of a woman I met years ago at a party, before *La Terreur* began in France. But I could not remember her name. She and her husband were very kind to me, for I was a young girl, but ever since I have spent time with you, I think more and more that you remind me of her.”

Marie began to tense. “Why is that? I have lived in England most of my life.”

“But not all of your life, Miss Cadeaux. You say you and your uncle came from France years ago when you were but a child. What if this woman I knew was your mother?”

Marie’s throat began to choke up. She blinked and turned away.

“Oh, petite , I’m sorry. I don’t mean to upset you. I simply want to help.”

“There is no need, Mrs. Martin. I am content enough with my life here.”

“Are you?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“Yes. Tonight, I made little tartlets with crumbly pastry and tiny slices of roast beef, just little shavings topped with mustard and diced onion. It was delicious. The other—” she stopped.

She peered down at the main floor. There was Miss Campbell again, with Lieutenant Walker. Except he was making little show of hiding his affection for her, as his hand drifted not-so-subtly to her bottom, and squeezed. She jumped, laughed, and batted at his arm with her fan, giggling.

Marie frowned. Such treatment, and in public. What would the other men and women think at the sight?

“Mmm, go on, it sounds wonderful,” Mrs. Martin said. “Where do you come up with such ideas? This sounds magnifique .”

“It’s just a recipe in a recipe book my parents left me. These recipes... They keep me feeling closer to home, even though the book is so old, it is falling apart. That and my locket, although I lost that.” She felt at her neck, her fingers tracing her collarbones that jutted out. She missed the locket more than she cared to admit. It was like losing a piece of her, a piece of her soul.

“Well, I must try this. Say you will make some for me one day soon. Please?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“I would be glad to,” Marie said, glad to be talking of a different subject.

“Now, what shall we do this evening? Come, let us take a turn around the room. You are thinking of your beau, Lieutenant Gage, yes?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“Yes.” Marie smiled at her friend. “Is it so obvious?”

“A little. And why not? You are new and the love is fresh and exciting. I am happy for you.” Mrs. Martin paused. “I hope you do not mind my prying, just a little. I want you to be happy. As my friend, I want to help you anyway I can.”

Mrs. Martin laughed. “I will not keep you or Lieutenant Gage waiting any longer. Let us go. We will chat and gossip and I will watch as your handsome lieutenant twirls you about the dance floor.”

There were many men and ladies present, with some playing drinking games, others balancing cards and fruit on their heads, whilst other couples took to the dance floor as a harpist played. The gentle tunes of the harp notes filled the air with calming music, and Marie sighed with pleasure. The evening was almost complete. Her pulse beat wildly and butterflies swarmed in her stomach as she looked for Lieutenant Gage.

“Do you see him anywhere?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“No,” Marie said, her voice a shade unhappy. They chatted in French and laughed, teasing each other and observing the men and women present. They took a turn about the room, which was very grand, indeed, and Marie gave another little sigh. Where was he? He had said he’d hoped to see her there this evening .

Then Marie glanced around. “Have you seen Miss Campbell anywhere?”

“Who? Oh, that young woman. The tall one who was carrying on with that soldier. They were here before, but I do not see them now. Never mind that her parents never pay that much attention to her, anyway, from what I can see. What of it?”

A worrisome thought occurred to Marie. As much as she and Miss Campbell were

not friends, a niggling thought, a very bad one indeed, began to worry her. She spotted Mrs. Campbell and her husband playing cards at a table some distance away. "I should like to find her."

"Why? She is no friend to you." Mrs. Martin glanced at her. "Unless you know something I do not."

"Um..." Marie looked around. She did not see Miss Campbell at all. "No, I don't know anything. Could she have left?"

"This early in the evening, and unescorted? I doubt it," Mrs. Martin said. "Hmm, on second thought I bet I know where she'll be."

"Where?"

Mrs. Martin jerked her head in the direction of the stairwell. "Upstairs. They might have decided to further their acquaintance in one of the bedrooms."

"But, Mrs. Martin, Miss Campbell is an innocent. She is..."

"She may not be so innocent if she has gone up there."

Marie began to walk toward the exit.

"Miss Cadeaux? Where are you going?"

"I have to find her. Make sure she's all right."

"But... Oh, for heaven's sake. Marie," Mrs. Martin said.

"Yes?" Marie faced her.

“I will check the garden. We have searched down here already.”

Marie froze. “But...”

“Come. We will look together. Do not get separated, it is not wise. We may both be attached to men, but there are some here who will surely not care about that.” Mrs. Martin glanced at Marie. “Let us make haste. Go!”

Together, they took a quick turn about the room again but found no sign of Miss Campbell or Lieutenant Walker. They wandered out into the garden, but the only couple there was one they had never met before, and so they did not take too much trouble in disturbing them, once they ascertained the lady was not Miss Campbell.

They began to go upstairs, at which point, a voice called out. Mrs. Martin said, “Ah, my husband is calling me. Wait here for me, will you? I think the rooms are likely empty, as I did not hear any noise from them when I came up before. It is possible the young woman simply went home.”

“I hope so,” Marie said. But she wasn’t so sure.

Mrs. Martin disappeared and Marie waited, then walked down the corridor past the guest rooms that were for hire. There were no inappropriate sounds coming from them, which made Marie feel relieved. But then she heard a sound and spied a door opening. Quickly, she dashed behind a curtain at the end of the hall and hid, pinching it closed around her. With any luck, whoever it was exiting the room would not notice her. She paused and waited, holding her breath.

One minute passed, then two. Whoever it was must have been male, for his loud, heavy footfalls echoed down the corridor. Marie peeked from behind the curtain and gave a little sigh of relief. Whoever it was hadn’t seen her; her hiding place had worked. She came out from behind the curtain and began to walk down, ready to

rejoin Mrs. Martin, when she heard some muffled noises. It sounded like crying.

She stopped and listened. It was the sound of weeping, and coming from that door the man had exited from. Marie took a breath and opened it.

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Marie's heart sank. She stood inside the room and quickly shut the door behind her. Inside sat Hortense, on the bed in the otherwise sparsely decorated guest room in a state of dishabille.

"Mary?"

"Miss Campbell?" Marie said. "Are you all right? What happened to you?"

The young woman wiped a tear from her face and used part of her bedsheet to wipe at her eyes. "I've been a fool."

Marie leaned against the door. "You mean..."

Miss Campbell looked down at herself on the bed. The bedsheets were rumpled, her hair was in disarray, and her dress lay on the floor. She sat on the edge of the bed, holding up one of the sheets to cover herself. She wrapped it beneath her underarms and held it close, her eyes dull. "What do you want, Mary?"

"To make sure you're all right. I heard someone crying."

"Well, I suppose you're happy now. You're the pure one and now as you can see, I'm lower than dirt." Miss Campbell's chin stiffened and she sniffed.

"What happened? Did he... force you?"

"No. I went willingly. Too willingly. He had me out of my clothes and on the bed in minutes. He almost forgot to close the door. Can you imagine what would have

happened if he'd left it open?" Miss Campbell pinched the bridge of her nose. "I was so dumb. I can't believe it."

Marie looked at her. "I'm glad you're all right."

"Who said I was all right? I'm an idiot. Help me find my clothes," Miss Campbell ordered, and Marie bent to the floor, picking up her stays and her shift. She helped the disheveled woman tie up her stays and get dressed again, then had her sit before a small looking glass as she repaired her hair.

Miss Campbell sat on the small stool before the looking glass but looked away, as if she did not want to meet her own reflection. "I was so dumb. He paid me a little flattery and I thought, this is how it's done. Give the man what he wants and in no time, I'd have my suitor sorted. No need for a London Season for me when I've got a soldier right here."

"What do you mean?" Marie asked, winding a strand of Miss Campbell's hair around her fingers.

"Well, that night before you left, my family had Father Reynolds and his son over to dine. But the meal was not to Mama's liking and she told the pastor how she had dismissed some servant who'd messed up the dinner, and the pastor felt it would be unchristian to dismiss a servant so lightly over something like a meal. The son wasn't much interested in me, anyway, but Mama was furious. And now my family has decided they cannot afford to give me a London Season, and so decided I would be better off meeting eligible bachelors here, at the Lyon's Den." She sniffed, and it was bitter. "But good girls do not come here to meet eligible men. Father only comes here to gamble, not that he has much money to gamble with. Their schemes never work."

"There are nice men here. "

“Ha. Would that I had some of your luck. There are no nice men. No gentlemen, anyway. Do you know what he said? When we were done? I’m such a fool.”

Marie stayed silent, fixing the woman’s hair.

Hortense said, “We finished sleeping together, and I asked him, ‘When shall I tell Mama of our engagement?’ He was out of bed faster than you could blink. He put his jacket on, which stinks of sweat, and said, ‘Make yourself ready. You look a fright. Wouldn’t want anyone mistaking you for a whore.’” Her chin trembled at that last word and she lowered her head into her hands. Her shoulders shook with silent sobs.

Marie rubbed her back. “I’m sorry.”

Miss Campbell wiped her eyes. “What are you doing here? And who was that soldier you were walking with before? The one with the horrid eye. Gage something or other? Lieutenant Walker doesn’t like him.”

“He’s...” Marie took a breath and swallowed, feeling her shoulders tighten and rise closer to her neck, almost like a turtle hunching into its shell. “He’s my beau. We are courting.”

“Oh.” Miss Campbell gazed in the reflection at Marie’s face. “That’s a new development. And why are you here? You were dressed so commonly at the park. Now you look like a lady. Come to think of it, I thought I spotted you a few days ago, but Papa assured me it was someone else entirely.”

“I work here,” Marie admitted. “I cook and clean and I’m speaking French with a Frenchwoman.”

Miss Campbell’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then she gazed back at her own reflection. “So it’s true. I could hardly believe it, when that maid told us.”

“What maid?”

“Some new maidservant Mama took on. Julia, I think is her name. She’s training to become a new lady’s maid for Mama. She overheard us talking about the Lyon’s Den and mentioned she knew a servant who was pretending to be a grand lady. I at first thought it was a joke, to amuse Mama, but she knew all about you.”

Marie tensed. Julia had been hired by Mrs. Campbell? What a small world. But would Mrs. Campbell take the trouble to inform the public of what they were doing? She needed to tell Mrs. Martin post-haste—sooner rather than later.

Hortense patted her hair and rearranged her necklace. “Mama will throw a fit to see you here, especially dressed like that. You don’t look like a servant at all. You didn’t see Mama downstairs, did you?”

Marie stiffened. If Mrs. Campbell spotted her, she was sure to make Marie’s life horrible. “No, I didn’t.”

Miss Campbell began to sulk. “She’s probably in the ladies’ gambling rooms.” Her lower lip began to tremble and she pounded her fist on the table, rubbing it in pain. “She cares so little for me, she didn’t even notice I’m ruined. That I went off with a soldier and lost my virtue.” A tear rolled down her left cheek.

Marie didn’t answer.

“It’s no surprise. She’s too busy seeking her own amusement to take any notice of me. She’s too interested in her own pleasure to give any thought to my own happiness.” Hortense’s mouth twisted in fury. “Finish fixing my hair and then help me downstairs.”

“Miss Campbell…” Marie started.

“What?”

“My name isn’t Mary. It’s Marie. And I work for Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” Marie said.

“Well, you barged in on me. I could go to her right now and say you caused great offense, and have you dismissed,” Miss Campbell snapped. Then her expression faltered. She turned and looked back at the bed and the dressing table. “Can you believe it?”

“Miss Campbell?”

“He left coins on the nightstand, as if I were some whore.” Her mouth firmed into a thin line. “Never again.” She sniffed angrily and wiped another tear away. “But what will people think when they see him, and then me? They know we went up together. They saw him put his hand on my...” She turned pink. “I saw their faces.”

“There’s a lot of that that happens here. I think the men and women who frequent the Den do so with an open mind, and they keep secrets.”

“I can’t trust anyone,” Miss Campbell said bitterly. “But maybe you. You will keep my secret and not tell anyone I am no longer a maid, and I will keep quiet about you working here and masquerading as a lady. Do we have a deal?” She put out a hand.

Marie shook it. “Agreed.”

Miss Campbell rose. She checked her reflection in the small looking glass and patted her hair. “That will do.” She smoothed down her skirts and went toward the door, before she paused, her hand on the door handle. “It won’t work, you know. More people are bound to recognize you and find out what you’re doing.”

“Until then, I have to try,” Marie said.

“But it’s all a fa?ade. You like this woman? The one you’re a companion to?” Miss Campbell asked.

“Mrs. Martin.”

“Is she as good to you as my parents were?”

Marie looked away but gave a tight smile.

“Never mind. I don’t want to know. If you value her and want her respect, you owe it to her to tell her. Otherwise, it will just get worse, and the longer you go on keeping it from her, the more she’ll be hurt. Just some advice.” Miss Campbell sniffed and walked out.

Samuel entered the Lyon’s Den and began looking for Miss Cadeaux. He ran into Mrs. Martin, who curtsied hello . “Lieutenant, good evening. Have you seen our young friend?”

“Just who I was looking for. Do you know where she might be?”

Mrs. Martin glanced away. “We were looking for her acquaintance, Miss Campbell.” She relayed Marie’s concern for the girl.

“And you let her go wandering around the upper rooms, unescorted?”

Her smile fell away. “Miss Cadeaux is a sensible young woman with a good head on her shoulders. She will not fall into danger by peering into odd corners. Besides, we were searching together until my husband called for me. I was only gone a few minutes. There are not many other places Miss Campbell could be, unless she simply went home.”

Samuel didn't like this. "Where did you last see her?"

"Upstairs, when my husband called. Don't look at me like that, Lieutenant, it's not like I sent her off with some man. I came down here looking for her. I'm in your corner on this matter," Mrs. Martin said sharply, but her hands fretted.

"Stay here. Maybe she will return. I'll check the rooms in that corridor. Maybe she got lost." He checked the rooms where guests went to spend time alone but did not hear any sounds. He called her name, but there was no answer. He went down to the main room, but again, there was no sign of Miss Cadeaux. He finally checked the garden, when he heard a familiar voice.

Entering the shadowy courtyard that was lit by candles dotting the walkway, he spied Lieutenant Walker standing over a woman. The man sneered and said, "You clean up well. No one would know you were spreading your legs for me half an hour ago."

Miss Campbell backed up. Her voice shook. "I asked you here to tell you it's over. We're through. You took advantage of me, and I don't want to see you anymore. You can take your stupid coins." She flung them at his feet and he laughed.

"Is that what you wanted? To get the moral high ground? Fine, if it pleases you. I will take back the coins I paid you. But remember this, Miss Campbell, it was a fine bit of sport, and you enjoyed yourself as much as I did. You came to me willingly and begged to be taken to bed. I didn't force you." He leaned in close to her and must have said something even more inappropriate, for she slapped his face.

The loud smack of her palm against his cheek rang out in the quiet courtyard, and Lieutenant Walker grabbed her wrist. "You don't do that to me. You like things rough, eh? Maybe I'll give it to you again, harder this time. Bet you'll like a bit of what I can give you." He moved in to kiss her when Samuel said, "Let her go, Walker."

Lieutenant Walker glanced over his shoulder. “Gage? Thought you were dallying with that other girl. Of course you’re sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. What’s this one worth to you?”

“Let her go, Walker.”

“Why? She’s no sister of yours.”

“She’s not your property, either. Leave the girl be.” His right hand slowly drifted to his side, but of course, he’d left his saber at home. He didn’t need it going about town.

Lieutenant Walker sneered. “Missing your little blade, eh? Come and we’ll settle this like men.” He let go of Miss Campbell and she lunged at him, jumping on his back. He roared and shoved her off, staggering. “Get off, you witch!”

She shoved him and he landed face-first into the nearby small lily pond with a loud splash. He coughed and choked up pond water, dripping wet.

Miss Campbell threw herself into Samuel’s arms, clinging to his side. He restrained himself from shoving her away. She said, “Please don’t leave me.”

Samuel stood before her, ready to defend her honor. Fortunately, no such gallantry was needed, for Lieutenant Walker climbed out of the small pond, dripping. He tried shaking his legs to whip away some of the water, but it was of little use. He glared at Samuel. “This isn’t over.”

Samuel called him something very rude and waited for him to walk out. A footman appeared at the garden entrance, likely having heard the noise.

Samuel and Miss Campbell explained everything. He waited until the footman had

escorted Lieutenant Walker away, then relaxed. He felt the tension leave his shoulders.

“Oh, sir, that is so kind of you, thank you. You saved me,” Miss Campbell said.

He turned. Her smiling face was lit up by the moonlight, but he could see she’d had a fright.

“It’s no matter. He shouldn’t bother you again. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. Thank you. I... I feel a bit faint. Might we sit for a minute? I don’t want to be alone, in case he comes back.”

He felt his forehead wrinkle. He did not want to sit with this woman. He wanted to go find Miss Cadeaux. But here was a lady in distress, and he did not wish to leave her in case she did faint, or something else happened. “All right.”

They sat together on a stone bench, the cold stone seeping through his white trousers. He sat up straight as she said, “I’m so cold. May I lean on you for a moment?”

He grunted. “All right.” He put an arm around her shoulders and she snuggled into his chest. He felt warm, and if this were Marie, he would already have been kissing her. But this young woman, he felt nothing for.

“Miss?” he asked.

“Mmm,” she murmured. “You were so brave.” She lifted her chin up and kissed his neck.

He reeled back from her. “Excuse me, miss.” He stood up from the stone bench .

“What is it? You don’t want me?”

He stared at her. “I don’t even know you.”

She pouted. “You were so kind and brave. You rescued me from that horrid soldier.”

“You were the one who pushed him in the pond. I’m impressed by your resourcefulness.”

“How kind of you. But if you hadn’t found me and stopped him, I don’t know what would have happened. I only meant to thank you,” she said shyly.

For some reason, he didn’t quite believe her. “Consider me well thanked. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must rejoin my party.”

“Why? Aren’t I just as pretty as the other girls in the Den?” Miss Campbell asked.

He restrained himself from running a hand through his hair. “You are very pretty. But we are strangers and have not been introduced, and I am courting someone else. I love someone else.” He froze, his mouth hanging open. He had just admitted aloud that he was in love with Miss Cadeaux. A light-heartedness filled him, like a warmth bubbling inside his chest. He wanted to tell her. But first, he had to find her. And be rid of this other woman. “Now please, excuse me.” He bowed and turned, but not before he spotted a pang of hurt cross her face.

He left and returned to the main room, where Mrs. Martin stood with Marie. Mrs. Martin said, “Ah, there he is. He was looking for you everywhere. Well, Lieutenant, did you see? That other foot soldier you know, Lieutenant Walker, came in looking like a wet fish. A footman said he’d fallen in the pond. I didn’t even know the garden had a pond. Isn’t that funny? And now here you are, not long after him. I say, you didn’t push him in, did you? Do him a good turn?”

“No, I didn’t.” He glanced over his shoulder at the entrance to the garden, where Miss Campbell now stood, watching him. He turned back to Miss Cadeaux. “I am glad to have found you. ”

“I’m glad we found each other.” Miss Cadeaux shot him a sunny smile.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I could use a drink.” Mrs. Martin flagged over a footman with a drinks tray and took three drinks, handing one each to Samuel and Miss Cadeaux and keeping one for herself. “Cheers,” she said, clinking her glass with theirs.

Samuel felt a creeping prickle between his shoulder blades, and a sneaking suspicion down his spine. He glanced back and saw Miss Campbell staring at him, her eyes narrowed. A little while later, Miss Cadeaux excused herself for the evening and went to bed, giving Samuel a chance to talk with Mrs. Martin.

“So, have you learned anything that could help dig up information on our friend?” she asked.

“Have you heard of a Mr. Baptiste Allard? That is Miss Cadeaux’s uncle. Maybe we could look into his background.”

“Good idea. I shall make some enquiries with my contacts back home,” she said. “I have written to my friends and mentioned her name, but I have heard nothing back yet. But then where are her parents now? Why did they stay behind?”

“There must be a reason,” he said, and he excused himself to use the necessary.

“There is, Lieutenant,” Mrs. Martin murmured to herself as he walked away. “But what if they are dead or worse, French traitors? The war might be being fought overseas, but we all too easily find ourselves on opposite sides, even here in English

dining rooms and salons. What if they are involved in this war that hurt you so, Lieutenant? What then? We must protect our young friend, at whatever the cost.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:22 am

The next day Marie was called to Mrs. Dove-Lyon's office. As she entered the anteroom, she passed by Lucy, who was just leaving, but all was not well. Her face was red and cheeks looked flushed, her eyes red-rimmed as if from crying.

"Lucy? Are you all right?" Marie asked.

Lucy looked at her and said, "I'm sorry," and hurried away.

How very strange, Marie thought as she knocked and was bid to enter. She stepped inside Mrs. Dove-Lyon's office, admiring the fine, mahogany desk and bookshelves behind her. "You asked to see me, ma'am."

"Yes, I did. Please sit."

Marie sat, resting her hands lightly on her knees. She sat very straight and felt as if she were about to get a bollocking from her employer. "Am I in trouble, ma'am?"

"You? No." Mrs. Dove-Lyon smoothed down some papers on her desk and set them aside. "Firstly, let me say that I am sorry to have asked you to act as a temporary companion to Mrs. Martin when she visited the Lyon's Den. I think by singling you out for this task, the servants felt I was giving you a pride of place amongst them, raising you up as a person of consequence, when all I wanted was for you to speak French to her in the evenings. I suspected they did not like you, but I had no idea that their tempers had been raised to such a height, or that they might act harshly toward you, instead of speaking to me about it."

Marie sat quietly. Was she about to be dismissed? She gripped her knees ever so

slightly.

“That being said, you have done an admirable job and Mrs. Martin is most pleased. She enjoys your company so that she visits here most nights, which is good for business. Her husband is unlucky at cards, it seems.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s mouth formed a half-smile. “I think that despite the negative reception you have received downstairs, you have conducted yourself admirably and have shown that you are above idle gossip.”

Marie smiled a little.

“But a dress of mine went missing, and I cannot tolerate lies amongst my staff, or thieves.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon gave Marie a hard look, touched the black dress that lay folded on her desk, then glanced away. “Lucy tells me that Julia put her up to it, that she had taken my dress and then prompted Lucy to tell you a lie and say I wanted it mended. Then when we went to search, Lucy had already hidden the dress beneath her bed amongst her things so that we might blame you. She came to me this morning in tears, for now Julia seeks to blame her for everything. I understand Thom also stuck a knife in your pillow?”

“So it was Thom?”

“That is what Lucy tells me. She was so frightened about ghosts, Thom told her to calm her wits. It does not excuse his behavior, of course.”

Marie looked away. “A little prank, I think, ma’am.”

“That is more like something out of a Gothic horror novel, and I do not find it funny for my staff to be ruining others’ pillows. I am taking the money out of his wages to pay for another. Whilst he may stay on, he is being watched closely by Mr. Jones. Julia, as you might imagine, has been dismissed. She is packing up her things this

very moment. Although it almost seems an afterthought, for I learned she was coming to me to give her notice when I sent for her. She has already found another place of employment.”

Marie’s eyes widened. “So it’s true? She is leaving for the Campbells?”

“Yes. I have spoken with Mr. Jones, Mrs. Pratt, and Mrs. Drummond, who all spoke highly of you, but less so of Julia and Thom’s treatment of you. They have supported Lucy’s statement, and I see no other recourse but to dismiss Julia, if she were not already leaving. I am not giving her a reference, which will affect her relationship with her new employer.” Seeing Marie pause, she added, “I think it is the right decision. Unless you wish to speak for her, vouch for her good character?”

Marie thought on this. To speak for the good character of Julia, who had made her life a torment once she’d arrived. Who had pushed her, slapped her, mocked her, and been cruel, even trying to get her dismissed. She was no friend and Marie decided with a hardening of her heart, Julia did not deserve her compassion, or a good reference. “No, ma’am.”

“Then it is settled. I do wish you would have spoken of this rude treatment to me earlier, Miss Cadeaux. Or at least told Mr. Jones or Mrs. Pratt. I would like you to speak to them if something like this happens again. I will not tolerate bullying amongst my staff.”

“Yes, ma’am.” But then she thought, they had done little to stop the bullying that had occurred.

“Good. Now I see no reason for you not to resume your evening conversations with Mrs. Martin. You may resume your duties. That is all.”

Marie left and went to find Lucy. She finally located her crying quietly in their room.

Marie entered and closed the door behind her .

Lucy took one look at her and wiped her eyes. “Come to laugh at me?”

“No. I wanted to thank you,” Marie said. “If you hadn’t come forward, I might’ve been dismissed. I need this job.”

Lucy sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “It wasn’t right. The guilt... It was giving me bad dreams.”

Marie looked at her properly. She had missed the signs, but they were there. Lucy’s eyes, normally so bright, now looked haunted, with dark circles beneath. Her skin was pale and she glanced at Marie. “I only thought she was playing a trick. I thought she’d speak up and admit to it at dinner, but then the mistress came and was so angry and accused you and Julia whispered that if I said anything, then she’d make sure I got the blame for all of it, and I’d be out on the street by morning.”

Marie sat down on the bed beside her. “I’m sorry you went through all that. I wish you’d told me.”

Lucy shrugged and wiped her eyes again. “No one ever notices me. Julia and Thom used to call me ‘Lucy Churchmouse’ and squeak when I came in, until you came. Then when they started to pick on you, they had me help. I... was foolish. I thought maybe they were going to be my friends. I’m sorry,” she muttered, avoiding Marie’s eyes.

Marie wondered if she had somehow made life worse for the others since her arrival. She wanted to ask, “Was I truly so awful?” but she knew that she wasn’t, and to ask for someone to relay negative views about her person would only make her feel worse. “Thank you.”

Lucy sniffed. "It's all right."

From her nonchalant words, Marie knew it really would be. They would become perhaps not friends, but they would not be enemies, not any longer.

Without Julia around and Thom keeping a distance, life below stairs became decidedly more comfortable. In the days that passed, there were fewer jokes about Marie's acting as a French-speaking companion to a lady above stairs, and more of them came to view it as a chore for Marie, rather than a pleasure. Marie wished to tell Mrs. Martin of her true occupation, but each passing day seemed to grow longer and heavier upon her soul, and she had so much fun with her friend, she kept telling herself, one more day. Just one more day, then she would tell her friend the truth. So far, the Campbells hadn't spoken a word of her situation to anyone. She wondered if they were holding the secret close to their chests, or if she was truly of no significance to them at all. Maybe they wouldn't say anything at all.

Thom remained the only one angry at Marie. He refused to talk to Marie and instead gave her many scowls and glowering looks, often avoiding her altogether.

Marie worked in the kitchens, helping the cooks making chicken pot pies with golden pastry in the shape of hens, and that took up most of her day, along with preparing a warm chicken broth and crusty bread for the servants' luncheon. But as she worked, Charles asked, "What will you be wearing to the masquerade tomorrow night, Marie?"

Marie glanced at her colleague. "What do you mean? What masquerade?"

"Didn't you hear? The mistress announced it earlier last night, but you must've been busy with that lady friend of yours. There's to be a masquerade ball here tomorrow and everyone is to dress up. Not us, but you can. Have you thought about what you'll wear?"

“I hardly know.” He asked, “What would you choose?”

“Oh, me? I do love a good chicken, or a goose. Maybe a swan, although they are fatty. But all those feathers are beautiful.” The cook gave a little sigh. “You do us proud up there. I bet if all goes well and you charm that lady, the mistress will give more of us chances too to impress that lot.”

“Would you want to mix with them?” Marie asked .

“Me? No. I’m much happier in the kitchens here. It’s my province, like you. I wouldn’t know what to say. And I don’t know none of those dances they do. But I like to watch, and the ladies all look so pretty.” He rolled out pastry dough. “I think you should dress like a goose. They’re pretty and noble.”

Marie smiled. A goose. “I’ll do my best.”

The cook clapped his hands, sending flour flying in the air. “Great. I have just the feathers for you.”

A day later, when the evening came, she stood once again in the dressing room, having taken some time out with Lucy and a few other servants to dive into a few boxes of old costumes Mrs. Dove-Lyon had stored in the attic. A number were old and had aged badly, with mice having broken into a few boxes. With their employer’s permission, these were disposed of and the non-ruined pieces repurposed for other uses.

But after an hour or so, they’d found a lovely, white dress that wasn’t in too bad condition. Miss Robbins had given it an airing out and washing, repairing the little tears and rips, and hemmed the waist with a lovely white silk sash. She’d taken an old mask meant to tie around the face and trimmed it with white beads, pearls, and feathers, so that if Marie were to be dressed like a goose, she would at least look

fashionable whilst doing so.

Marie went downstairs and was astounded by the change in her surroundings. Whilst she had been fussing with a costume and feathers, the other servants had transformed the grand hall into a thing of beauty. It had been an impressive room before, but golden candles offered a warm light from many candelabras, white wine in delicate glass flutes tinkled and glittered, and her eyes were dazzled from the stunning jewels and diamonds on display. Even some ladies wore a tiara or two.

The men were dashing and handsome, each wearing masks, whilst the ladies had spared no expense, some dressing like buxom milkmaids, and others goddesses, Valkyries, shepherdesses, and creatures from Greek mythology. She spied a few Athena, Demeter, and Heras as well as Artemis, complete with moon headdresses.

She looked but did not recognize a soul. It was not until she saw a woman standing alone, who had the same stance and height as her friend, that she approached and ventured, “Mrs. Martin?”

The woman turned. “Marie? Mon dieu , you look like an angel. Or a swan. Are you a goose? Where did you get all those feathers?”

The women curtsied and Mrs. Martin took her arm. “Which modiste made your costume? I must know. I was lucky to get mine sorted at the last minute. I do wish we would get more advance notice before major events like these. My husband didn’t bring a mask at all, and he was given one at the door. He almost refused.” She laughed. “But where is your handsome lieutenant? I saw him the other day in Bond Street, and he asked me if I knew whether you were attending the masquerade ball tonight.”

“Why?”

Mrs. Martin tapped the nose of her mask, which had been decorated with dozens of flower petals in shades of pink. “He hinted that he had a good reason for wanting to see you. Something particularly important he wished to ask you.”

“Oh? I wonder,” Marie said.

“Can you not guess?” Mrs. Martin squeezed her hand. “I can. But I will not ruin the surprise. I demand you tell me everything once he speaks to you. I can hardly keep from jumping in excitement.”

Marie swallowed. The moment had come. “Mrs. Martin, whilst I have you alone, I must tell you something. I’ve been meaning to speak with you about this. You see, it’s about my background.”

“Yes, yes, I already know. You come from France with Mr. Allard, and you don’t remember who your parents are. It is all right, petite . Lieutenant Gage and I have been making enquiries.”

Marie’s mouth dropped open. “That’s very kind of you, but... I mean, that’s not what I wanted to talk with you about.”

“Well, whatever it is, I’m sure it can wait. I think I see the lieutenant now. Hallo there!” She waved.

Marie looked. Lieutenant Gage looked exceedingly handsome in his red regimental uniform with white breeches and white knee socks, along with a dark black mask. Despite the evil-looking mask he wore, he had a stiff, firm bearing that spoke of nobility and honor, just how a young man ought to have been, Marie thought. How lucky she was that a man like him fancied her.

“Mrs. Martin, please. I must tell you. When I came here with my uncle, we had

nothing, to hear him tell it. We had only the clothes on our backs. We had to work—”

“Everyone works hard, my dear. Hard work is what makes us into the people we are today. Now, enough of this. I want to see you together with Lieutenant Gage.” Mrs. Martin inclined her head and curtsied. “Good evening, Lieutenant. What a pleasure to see you here. Miss Cadeaux is here, you see, although I wager you did not recognize her.”

Marie curtsied. Lieutenant Gage smiled at her, the upper half of his face hidden by a black, round mask. What with the scar above his left eye, he looked every inch the highwayman, or a very noble rogue.

He took her offered hand and kissed it. “Mrs. Martin, Miss Cadeaux.” He did not release Marie’s hand. “Will you dance with me?”

She nodded, feeling as though she were in a dream. He guided her to the dance floor and as a small quartet of violins and horns began to strike a stately tune that she recognized as “Mr. Beveridge’s Maggot,” an English country dance. She smiled, pleased with herself. She had finally stumbled her way through enough dances to actually recognize a tune.

They danced one song, and then another, with her doing a close approximation of the steps. She hardly noticed the time, then realized that they had danced two dances and to dance any more would cause comment. She refused his offer of a third, and said, “It would not be proper.”

He raised her hand to his lips. “Then I shall endeavor to be the perfect gentleman.” He whispered in her ear, “Until that time in which I can be most improper with you.”

She gave a mock gasp. “Lieutenant Gage.”

He laughed. “Forgive my impertinence, Miss Cadeaux. I could not help myself. But will you have time later tonight? There is something I particularly wish to ask you.”

She nodded. “Of course.”

But then they were interrupted. “Lieutenant, is that you?” A tall, young woman stood before them in a white dress wearing a deep-purple mask over her face and a purple sash about her waist.

“Miss?” he said, glancing at her. “Are we acquainted?”

“Why, it’s only me, Miss Campbell. I should think after coming to my rescue, you could call me ‘Hortense.’ I feel like dancing. Will you join me?” She held out a hand.

Marie glanced at the lieutenant. He swallowed and politely accepted Miss Campbell’s hand. “It would be an honor.” The words sounded dull from his mouth.

“Excellent.” Miss Campbell took his hand and dragged him to the dance floor, shooting Marie a triumphant glance.

Mrs. Martin joined Marie. “Whatever is that girl doing? Doesn’t she know you and the lieutenant have an understanding?”

Marie shrugged. “There is nothing preventing him from dancing with other women.”

“You are too generous. That woman seeks to make trouble, I’ll wager. I saw the way she looked at you, and at him. Like she wants to eat him.”

Marie was grateful for her feathered mask. “I’m sure it’s fine. I trust him.” She reflected that Miss Campbell was playing a poor game if she meant to make her jealous. And yet still, she disliked the sight of them dancing together.

“Let us hope so, for I think she means to test that,” Mrs. Martin said.

They watched as the couple danced, but Miss Campbell began acting even more strangely. She held on to the lieutenant’s hands a beat longer than necessary and gave him many sultry looks, sniffing with her nose in the air.

“She sniffs a lot. Does she have a cold?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“Non , she thinks it gives her a more distinguished air.”

Mrs. Martin laughed out loud.

Samuel danced with Miss Campbell, but he was not enjoying himself. She sniffed and squeezed his hand tightly with every touch, sidling up to him much closer than was appropriate, or necessary for the dance.

She said, “I hope you are aware of the company you keep, Captain.”

“My rank is lieutenant,” he told her.

“Never mind. I’m sure you’ll make captain soon. We are at war with the French, so it only goes to reason you’ll be fighting them again in no time. I do hope that scar of yours heals properly. I do so dislike men with ugly blemishes.”

He stiffened and mentally began calculating how long the dance still had to continue for.

“But then you’ve met Mary, you’ll no doubt have seen what a good, kind heart she has. So charitable toward poor cases. She’s always picking up strays. I only hope that the men she attracts don’t mistake her charity for real affection.”

He twirled her in the dance and was silent. Was Marie just being kind to him? Had he mistaken her politeness for true personal regard? Would she have agreed to be courted, have kissed a man so passionately, if she were only being kind to him? His face clouded.

She added, "It is such a shame you didn't know about poor Mary. She's a servant, you know. And French. Quite unfortunate. I have half a mind to tell that darling Frenchwoman whom she's keeping company with. Mary is a servant here. She had to find a job after my mama kicked her out. She always had such airs, acting as if she knew better than her employers. Always with an opinion on what foods we should eat, and trying to cook her insipid French dishes every chance she got. Quite deplorable, really. We couldn't stand her. Her and that manservant of hers."

"Manservant?" he repeated.

"Why, yes. He's no relation of hers at all, even though she calls him 'Uncle.' She probably doesn't know he's not her uncle or is lying to keep up the charade. My mother told me everything, you see." Even behind the purple mask, Hortense's eyes lit up with the chance of relaying gossip. "Apparently, she comes from some poor family in France, from some no-name village in the middle of nowhere. Her parents sent her here with him when she was a child, to escape the fighting that went on over there. They of course were too poor to bring her back, or didn't care. My mother took her in from the goodness of her heart and gave her and her uncle both a place in our household. You can see how horrid it is that Mary repays her in this way."

"Quite," he said, distant. Miss Campbell's words were like poison in his ears, and he looked forward to when he might walk away from this miserable dance.

At one point, she swooned and he had to catch her, or leave her tumbling to the floor. She gazed up at him, clutching his shoulders and said, "Oh, thank you, Lieutenant. You are too kind."

He helped her up, but she refused to let go of him. She moved her head as if to lean in, and he stepped back. "Excuse me, miss."

He strode over to her just as Miss Cadeaux's eyes widened. She stood her ground as he was roughly shoved aside by a tall, older woman, who wore a long, purple dress in a fashion two years out of date. Far too many ruffles adorned her bodice and hem, and her elbow-length purple gloves bore stains.

"You little actress. I thought it was you." With a horrible movement, the stranger ripped the beautiful, white goose-feather mask off of Miss Cadeaux's face and threw it to the floor.

People stopped and stared as Marie's mouth dropped open and she held up a hand to her face as if she'd been slapped. "M-Mrs. Campbell?"

"How dare you attack my friend. Stay away, you horrible woman," Mrs. Martin said, standing before her.

"Ha! Don't denounce me until you know the company you keep," Mrs. Campbell said, her face stern. "Did you know that your little friend is nothing but a servant? She's a serving girl here at this gambling establishment. Did no one tell you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Miss Cadeaux would do no such thing. She is a lady, as I am." Mrs. Martin glanced at Miss Cadeaux. "Go on, Miss Cadeaux. Tell her."

Miss Cadeaux raised her eyes and met Mrs. Martin's troubled face. "It's true."

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:22 am

Marie's heart was breaking. She stood there in a beautiful dress faced with her friend, her former employers, and the man for whom she cared. But was so embarrassed, she wished she might open up a hole in the ground and die. The feathers of her beautiful, white mask littered the ground as Mrs. Campbell stamped on it under her feet.

Marie turned to Mrs. Martin, who stared at her as if she had been offended by a stranger. "Mrs. Martin, you see..."

"Mon dieu . Why do you not tell them they are wrong? Have I been deceived, all this time?"

"Yes. She is nothing but a servant, straight from the gutter," Miss Campbell said, smirking.

Marie stared at her. How could she repay her kindness with such cruelty? Had she no sense of right and wrong?

To Marie, Mrs. Campbell said, "Well? Has a cat got your tongue? Apologize to your betters, right now. I have a mind to speak to your employer myself and demand your dismissal. How could you, Mary, go around posing as a lady? To think, I let you stay in my home. And this is how you repay our generosity. The insufferable insolence of it all."

Marie felt tears come to her eyes. She blinked hard. Her tongue was like stone.

"Marie? You are my friend. Please, tell me she is wrong. Tell me it is not true, that

you are not what she says,” Mrs. Martin said quietly, ignoring the many stares they were receiving. “You are a lady, I know it.”

Lieutenant Gage reached for Marie’s hand, but she kept it from him. He said, “Miss Cadeaux. Mrs. Martin—”

“Non . I will hear the truth of her myself. Let the girl speak, damn you,” Mrs. Martin said, her eyes blazing. “Well?”

Marie swallowed and she blinked away tears as she met Mrs. Martin’s eyes. “It is true. I am a servant. I have been working here for a few weeks now. When Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked me to speak a little French to you in the evenings—”

“My God. So I am a charity case and a project for your employer? I have never felt so humiliated in all my life. I am leaving.” Mrs. Martin strode away, pushing past others.

“Mrs. Martin, wait!” Marie called after her, but her friend was gone. All that was left was a crowd of gossiping onlookers, watching, no doubt hoping to see the first tears fall.

Lieutenant Gage reached for her again, begging with his eyes for her to let him take her away from all this. But she refused with a hard shake of her head.

Marie looked at Miss Campbell, who opened up a fan and hid her snide smile behind it.

“This was your plan all along,” Marie said.

“No, but it worked out nicely. Don’t let me stop you. I’m sure there are scullery boys who would be glad of your company.” Miss Campbell grinned.

Marie stared at her former childhood acquaintance and employer's daughter. With a sentence, she could oust Miss Campbell and reveal her sullied reputation to the world. She could ruin her in the eyes of society. She could stoop to the Campbells' level. She could...

She couldn't do it. A tear coursed down her cheek, and she fled. She ran, ignoring Lieutenant Gage's calls after her. She hurried through the assembly, slipping around dancing couples and darting around others, men and women drinking, laughing, smiling and enjoying themselves. She ran up the stairwell and kept going, even when her dancing shoes slipped off in her hurry. She trailed feathers as she ran and went to where she thought no one would find her.

She slipped inside an empty guest room and shut the door, collapsing on the floor. She cried and cried, tears streaking down her cheeks. Her cries were drowned out by the sounds of the merrymaking downstairs, and she wept at the hurt, pain and embarrassment of it all. Her friend, Mrs. Martin, now no longer trusted her at all. The man she loved—

Marie paused. She loved? She loved Lieutenant Gage? She blinked. She hadn't realized it until just that moment. She wanted him, that much was certain. But did her feelings really lean toward love, when she knew so little about him? She wanted to know his tastes, his desires, his whims and fancies. She wanted to meet his family and hope to God they liked her. She wanted to push the long hair out of his face and kiss away his pain.

Her eyes watered again as she hugged her knees to her chest and whimpered. Now everyone knew she was just a servant, a nobody. Mrs. Campbell would no doubt complain to Mrs. Dove-Lyon and get her dismissed, and she would be out on the street by morning. She sobbed and when there was a knock at the door, she scrambled away. "W-Who is it?" she asked.

“Miss Cadeaux? It’s me.” Lieutenant Gage opened the door a crack. His eyes widened at the sight of her and he quickly walked in and shut the door. He knelt by her. “Are you all right?”

She shook her head. “No. How can I when Miss Campbell has her hands all over you? I saw her grab your arm as I left. She seemed to be enjoying dancing with you.”

“I did not enjoy dancing with her.”

“Because she knows the steps?”

He snorted softly. “No. Because she is not you.”

She looked up at him. His blue eyes were kind and warm.

“I do not care for Miss Campbell,” he said. “Her mother is going around telling everyone who will listen about you, but she’s made a mistake,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone here is intending on enjoying the party. By creating a disturbance, she’s bringing the mood down. No one wants that. They also don’t trust that she isn’t spreading idle gossip, when this is the place for secrets to be safely hidden. The footmen have already alerted Mrs. Dove-Lyon and she’s been asked to leave.”

“She has?”

“Her and her daughter.”

“But I thought... Lieutenant, what am I to do? I wanted to tell Mrs. Martin, but I never had the courage. And now she knows the truth.” A tear ran down her cheek.

He reached forward and rubbed it away with his thumb. “Don’t cry.” He kissed her hand. “You’re beautiful, even when you cry.”

She gave a little laugh-sob. “Now I know you must be teasing. I look a fright, I’m sure.” She gave a little shudder and he pulled her close. She cried into his chest. “Now Mrs. Martin won’t like me and won’t want to see me anymore. She’ll think I’m a fraud, and likely that I was trying to earn her trust to take advantage of her. I’ve lost my only friend.”

He rubbed her back and held her tightly against him, murmuring sweet nothings in her ear. “Shh, it’s all right, Miss Cadeaux.” He waited until her sobs subsided and stroked her back, then he leaned back, facing her. He looked her in the eyes, the black pools of his pupils growing wider.

Their faces were very close. She watched as he leaned his face down and kissed her. Their lips met, parted, and relaxed as he explored her mouth with his tongue. His hands tangled in her hair, and she moaned softly. She felt it was wild, loose behavior and a bit wanton, but she did not care. She only wanted to enjoy him, all of him, in that moment. And yet...

She broke off their kiss. “You do not care that I have no prospects and spend my days working in the kitchen?”

“That depends. Can you bring me a pastry or two?” he teased as he kissed her again. “No, I do not care about any of those things. I care about you and you alone. No one else matters to me but you.”

He kissed her deeply and this time, and she put her arms around him, holding on to him tightly. She got a thrill out of feeling the warmth of his body through the stiff, red regimental uniform he wore and felt a little frisson of excitement as he took it off. She smelled his natural scent, a men’s cologne that reminded her of a warm summer

night, but manly.

She eagerly touched his back, tracing her hands along the curves of his muscular arms and back as she felt the thin, linen shirt that stretched across his broad shoulders. She gently tugged at his snowy-white cravat, letting it unwind from his neck, and her eyes widened at the small expanse of chest hair that caught her eye. Something about seeing his bare skin sent a warmth through her, and she felt her blood run hot, hotter than a flame. She wanted him.

Their kiss ran deep, passionately, and trailed his fingers along her bare arms. He traced kisses down her neck, and her chest rose and fell as he pulled her closer, up onto his lap, and kissed her bare chest.

She uttered a soft moan as he kissed her there and pulled away. Her eyes opened. “Why did you stop?” She felt breathless.

“I do not wish to dishonor you,” he said, breathing hard. “If we were to be found now, your reputation would be ruined. I care about you and want to do right by you. I do not wish to sully you.”

She leaned back on her hands, feeling the soft carpet. Her legs were splayed out wantonly around his hips. She rather liked them there. And he looked so sweet and innocent, yet a gentleman at the same time. How very English.

A wicked idea struck her. “And what if I wish to be dishonored?”

He stared at her. “Miss Cadeaux?”

“All my life, I have tried to do the right thing. The good thing. To do what has been asked of me. But now, I want to be selfish. I want something, someone, just for myself.” She spoke quietly but clearly. “I... want you, Samuel. Only you.”

“Marie,” he murmured, his voice low.

She adored it when he spoke her name. She wanted to touch those lips again.

“Are you certain? We do not have to—”

She crawled toward him on her hands and knees and kissed him, conscious that bending over, she was giving him ample view of her chest that he’d kissed but a moment ago. The thought did not go unnoticed by the lieutenant, whose eyes darkened with arousal.

“Marie, are you sure? I can go—” he started.

“I do not want you to. Please. Stay with me a while,” she said. “I do not wish to be good. I’d like to be bad for a time. Please?”

Her hand slipped and stroked a telltale bulge in his trousers. She did not protest as he groaned and took her by the arms. Excitement filled her as he pinned her to the floor, kissing her madly along her neck, her cheeks, her lips. He trailed kisses up and down her skin, kissing his way down her chest, giving a light kiss to both of her slim, delicate collarbones that stuck out.

She felt she was running out of breath, her heart was beating so fast. She broke off the kiss, panting.

He looked at her, his mouth in an easy smile. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, unable to stop smiling. “Yes. I needed to catch my breath.”

He laughed, a rich, joyful sound. He helped her up and slowly undid the ties of her dress and assisted her out of it, discarding the pretty garment on the floor. Sitting her

on the edge of the bed, he slowly pushed up her skirts and feeling wild, wet a finger of his in his mouth.

She was breathing hard. “What are you doing?”

“Pleasing my lady, if you’ll let me,” he said, and slowly, he spread her legs apart. She watched with curiosity as his fingers danced along the tops of her knees, tickling the soft fabric of her silk, knee-high stockings, his fingers grazing the tight ribbons that held them up to her thighs. He then reached with his hand and felt lower, teasing her most private part.

She gasped, her eyes wide. “What are you—” She was dumbstruck as he teased her center folds, tickling her. She was soon slick and wet, much to her surprise. “You’ve made me all wet.”

His fingers bunched together and rubbed, teasing and playing along her slick walls, slipping in and out, stroking her most sensitive part. He grinned. “I can do better than that.” And he bent down and teased her with his mouth, his tongue angling and slipping inside of her.

It was rough, wet, and warm, feeling her and tickling in all the right places. His tongue slipped in and out of her and it was maddening as she spread her legs wider apart to give him freer access to her. She wanted all of him inside her, and if his tongue was any indication, he was a most attentive lover, indeed.

He kissed the insides of her thighs and kissed her down there again, teasing and prodding her with his tongue. She luxuriated in his touch and almost felt bruised and sore, but oh-so-good. He felt deliciously soft and smooth, and she wanted him to play with her forever.

She arched her back and ached for his touch, and when it came to be too much, she

cried out. Waves of pleasure rode her, making her shiver and shake, down to the very muscles in her legs.

He stopped and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, pulling her skirts back down over her trembling legs. "You are exciting."

She shook and trembled on the floor. "Me?"

"You're shaking like a leaf. I've made you tremble."

"I suppose it is a small kind of accomplishment," she teased.

"Then I shall have to work on becoming very accomplished," he said with a sly grin. He kissed her mouth then and she felt delicious. She wasn't sure if she could walk again, but her lips felt rough and sore from so much kissing, her cheeks were rosy and her eyes bright.

"You are beautiful. Marie. I want..." He paused. "There is something particular I wished to ask you, but not now. This is not how I intended to speak with you."

She looked up at him and slowly sat up. "No?"

"No. I will call tomorrow to speak with your uncle. You will be here?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

"Then I will help you into your clothes and bid you goodnight, and sweet dreams." He helped her sit up on the bed and put her dress back on, tying and arranging it correctly. She repaired her hairstyle whilst he adjusted his own clothing.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

He picked up her feathered mask from the floor. “With this,” he said.

“You picked that up, after Mrs. Campbell had stepped on it?” And tried her best to crush it beneath her heel, much like my spirit , she thought.

“Of course. All I had to do was follow the trail of feathers you left behind, and your shoes.” He glanced at the pair he’d found on the stairwell and had set on the floor. “Your dress does have a lot of feathers. What are you supposed to be?”

“A goose. ”

He laughed. “Well, my little bird, I shall call you my goose and bid you goodnight.” He kissed the top of her nose and her forehead, going in for another kiss on her lips.

“ Bonne nuit ,” she said.

He shut the door behind him and she went to her own bedroom shortly thereafter, dreaming of feathers and soft kisses.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:22 am

Marie woke up the next morning sore, but she didn't mind. She decided at their next meeting, she would tell Samuel exactly how she felt, blame him for her soreness, and then ask him to do it again. She felt wild and wanton, but oh-so-safe in his arms. She loved him. She had to tell him.

And she needed to make things right with Mrs. Martin again. She owed her that. Her friend had not deserved to be deceived like that. But then at breakfast, the butler was reading the morning papers and tsked .

“What is it, Mr. Jones?” the housekeeper asked.

“These men and ladies, they get together so fast. Listen to this. An engagement is announced between Miss Hortense Campbell, of High Clapton, and Lieutenant Samuel Gage, of His Majesty's Second Battalion, 95th Foot.”

“What ?” Marie asked.

“What is it, Marie? Do you know them?” Hattie asked.

The blood drained from Marie's face. “They... They were here last night. They danced together.”

“Ah. So it is likely true, then, if they were seen dancing together in public. I say, we don't normally see engagement announcements in the papers, but these modern couples, who knows what they will do next.” The butler turned the page.

Marie ate her porridge but hardly tasted it. It tasted like ash on her tongue. Samuel

was engaged, to Hortense. But how could that be? After the night they had spent together in one of the upper guest rooms, it hardly seemed possible, or like a cruel joke. Could it be true? Or was this a horrid lie circulated by the Campbells?

Marie excused herself after breakfast, pleading a headache. The cooks teased her and said she'd probably had too much wine. She accepted their teasing with good grace and fled to her room, where she sat on her bed and trembled. Was Samuel really engaged? How could he not say anything? Had it all been a lie? He'd said he didn't care for Hortense.

There was a knock at her door. She quickly sniffed and pasted on a bright smile as her uncle opened the door and stuck his head inside. "Marie, how are you doing?"

"I'm all right, Uncle. Just a slight headache."

"You are not disturbed by the news of the lieutenant marrying the Campbell girl?"

She shrugged. "I do not know what to believe. He has been very attentive to me and declared he did not care for Miss Campbell."

"And if the news is true?"

She blinked hard. "Then I will bear it, with the good grace you have taught me, Uncle."

His stern expression softened. "You are too good for the likes of him anyway." He left.

The door closed behind him as the first tear dripped down her cheek, and then another. She wiped her eyes. If this was how the lieutenant was going to treat her, then he deserved Miss Campbell. She raised her chin indignantly, but then her

shoulders slumped. She loved him. But did he love her back? Could the Campbells be spreading lies?

There was another knock on her door .

“Go away, Uncle, I’m fine,” Marie called.

The door opened.

“Thom? What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Suppose you heard the news. I was dismissed.”

Her eyes widened. She opened her mouth to speak, when he said, “Save it. Don’t pretend you’re sorry to see me go. I know you aren’t. But before I go, I got information you’ll want to hear,” he said.

“I’m listening.”

“A week ago, I was on Bond Street when I sees your locket hanging in the window of a pawnbroker’s.”

“You did?” She shot up from her bed.

“Aye. I sees a man go in, and he and a soldier were haggling over it. It’s that soldier I seen you about before with, the one with the scar over his eye.”

She breathed in. Samuel. Why hadn’t he mentioned the locket to her?

“So I speak with the other man and tell him that locket belongs to a girl I know. So we meet for a drink, and he tells me he works for yer family Cadough, who are trying

to find their daughter. He's been sent here to find her."

"What?"

"Your parents are alive, Marie. In France. They've been looking for you."

She so wanted to believe him. Her heart jumped at the thought. Her parents, looking for her. But why hadn't they come themselves? Why send a man ahead? Without even a letter? But this was Thom she was speaking with, and any kindness from him was to be treated with suspicion. He'd never been good to her before, so why now? It was odd.

Her expression was skeptical.

Thom shook his head. "You don't understand how these things work. You're too young and naïve. That uncle of yours, he's kept you in the dark all these years. But that man, he's got more information. He was in the pawn shop because he recognized the locket instantly. It belongs to the lady who hired him to find her daughter. He's leaving on the first ship back to France in an hour. I'll take you to the dockyard if you want. Show you where the ship is. It's no place for a woman alone. But you'll have to pay me for my trouble." He leaned against the doorway and seemed to lounge, an insolent smirk on his face.

"Now why would I do that?" she asked, her hands on her hips. "You could be lying. Surely, if this man was searching for me, he'd delay taking the first ship and continue looking. He'd get another ship once he had found me, or write a letter to confirm. Wouldn't he?"

"Aye, I could be lying, princess. But I might not be. You ready to take that chance? Miss out on your parents?"

She wasn't, and he knew it. "How much?" she asked.

"Seeing as you're the reason I lost my position, gimme what you got, and we'll call it even."

Her eyes narrowed.

Thom shrugged and straightened. "I didn't have to tell you any of this. I'll just be going. Your loss."

He turned.

"Wait," she said. "I'll pay."

Indecision warred within her. She wanted to talk with Baptiste about it first. But she also wanted to know if there was information to be had about her mother and father.

"Let me just write a note."

"There's not a moment to lose, Marie. Come."

"I'll meet you around the back entrance. I just need to get my coat."

"Don't dally. The ship sails in less than an hour." Thom left.

Marie took her simple cloak and bonnet and penned a quick note to her uncle, leaving it on her pillow. She hoped she wouldn't be too late.

Samuel Gage's household was in an uproar. He'd woken up that morning, happy and free, preparing to bring Marie a bouquet of flowers and to formally ask her uncle's permission to ask for her hand in marriage.

But when he'd read the morning papers over a cup of tea, toast and jam, he'd spat out his tea, staining the newspaper. He stared at the fine, black print, glaring with increasing intensity at the horrifying announcement. It was false, and it required a retraction immediately. What was the meaning of this?

He was furious, and instead of riding to the nearest florist, he went to Fleet Street, where he called upon the newspaper, only to learn that the young Miss Campbell had started the rumor. He wrote a firm note to the editor, demanding they retract the announcement for being false, or print a correction. He didn't care which, as long as it was changed. He was most definitely not marrying Hortense Campbell.

He then rode to the Lyon's Den and called early, but on the doorstep he bumped into... "Mrs. Martin? What are you doing here?"

She wore a pretty beige walking coat and straw bonnet with green ribbon. She glared at him from beneath the shadow of her bonnet, her mouth firmed into a hard line. "I've come to comfort my young friend. No doubt she's heartbroken from today's newspaper announcement. And just what do you think you are doing? Come here to break her heart in person?"

He frowned at her. "No. I already called at the paper to ask for a retraction."

"Much good that will do. All that will accomplish is making Miss Campbell look like a victim and you like a cad. Not that I disagree, considering. "

He faced her. "Mrs. Martin. I do not know what you have heard, but I am not marrying Miss Campbell. I never told her I would. I am here to ask Marie's uncle's permission to ask for her hand."

"You knew she was a servant and still wish to marry her?"

He nodded. "I do."

"Oh, how romantic." She touched her heart. "I will go with you. Make sure you propose to her properly. Let us in! Maintenant !" she said loudly.

They were admitted when he said he wished to speak with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. But upon being escorted up to Mrs. Dove-Lyon's office, Mrs. Martin sat and accepted a cup of tea, whilst they waited for Uncle Baptiste to arrive.

When he did, he glared at Samuel and addressed his employer. "Madam, what is he doing here?"

"I am here to ask your permission to ask for Miss Cadeaux's hand in marriage."

"No. I cannot allow that."

"Why not?"

"You are already engaged, sir. I will not have her be made a fool, or worse, your mistress." Mr. Allard's French accent was especially cutting.

"I am not engaged!" He emphasized this with a curse. "This is a false rumor, started by Miss Campbell or her mother."

"Hmm, interesting. They did create a scene last night at the ball. We had to ask them to leave. Most disturbing," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. "Well, Mr. Allard, the Lieutenant Gage is here and single. Will you not give your blessing?"

Uncle Baptiste looked down. "I...cannot."

"Why not now?" Samuel stood.

“Because I am not her uncle. I never was. I am her family’s manservant, and it is her mother and father you should ask. And her name is not Cadough. It is Marie Cadeaux.”

“We know,” Samuel said, running a hand through his hair. “Do tell me where I can find them.”

“Mr. Allard, I think there has been some confusion as to Miss Cadeaux’s background and parentage. Kindly clear the air for us, if you please,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. It was hardly a request, more of a subtle command.

Baptiste rested his hands on the back of a chair. “Many years ago, I worked for a great family. A chevalier, Sir Matthieu, and his wife, Clemence. They were wealthy landowners in the town of Gerberoy, north of Paris. It is a charming place, and very beautiful. They had a little girl, who they adored. You know her as Marie.”

Mrs. Martin said, “I knew it! I knew she was more than what they claimed her to be. How horrible the Campbells are.”

Baptiste swallowed. “When La Terreur broke out, the very towns and villages we knew so well had changed overnight. It was no longer safe to be wealthy, or to have a title. Rich men and women were being ousted from their homes, imprisoned, or worse: sent to meet Madame la Guillotine.”

Mrs. Martin paled.

Baptiste said, “The fighting and turmoil reached us, even in our little village. So Chevalier Matthieu and Clemence did the best thing they could think of for their daughter—they sent her away. They trusted me, as Mattieu’s valet, to take care of her. They gave me money, enough to get us transport to Calais, and pay for our passage overseas to England. We left with nothing but the clothes on our backs, a bit

of money, and for Marie, they gave her the locket she always wears and a cookbook of French recipes, so she might never forget her heritage. She was always in the kitchen, you see, driving the cooks wild.” He smiled at the thought of Marie as a laughing, blonde-haired child, running amok in the kitchen.

He continued. “We booked passage just in time and made it across the channel. I found places for us in a family’s household in London, and we worked as servants. It was the perfect cover. No one would suspect a man and his niece. I told Marie the same story as everyone else. It seemed easier that way.”

“So she has no idea that she is the daughter of a chevalier?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“No. She thinks her parents are likely dead in France. She believes she is a servant who can speak French. That is all. I have not led her to believe any different. It would do her no good to think of herself as better than her peers, when there is no way to know if we would ever return, or if her family were even still alive.”

“But she is so much more than a servant. You have done her no favors by hiding the truth from her,” Samuel said. “She thinks so little of herself.”

“I have done what I can to keep us safe,” Mr. Allard said. “Working for a rude employer was the least of our worries. Her parents charged me with her safety, and I mean to keep my promise.”

“But what of her family? Have you kept in contact with them, to let them know you arrived safe?”

“I sent a letter or two when I thought it was safe to do so, but I never had a reply. For all I know, they might be dead.” Baptiste’s shoulders slumped and he glanced at Samuel. “That is why I cannot give my blessing to your asking for her hand, Lieutenant. It is not my blessing to give.”

Mrs. Martin let out a sound and cursed in French. “The drama of it all. You should write for the stage, Monsieur Allard. Truly.”

Baptiste glanced at her. “I do not think we have met.”

“I am Mrs. Martin, formerly of Toulouse. I am the wife of Colonel Martin, and from what I comprehend, I am also the poor, lonely Frenchwoman whom Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked Marie to keep company in the Lyon’s Den.” She shot Mrs. Dove-Lyon a glowering look.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon seemed unbothered by this. “Let us tell Miss Cadeaux of her parentage. She deserves to know by now, don’t you think?”

“Yes, let’s. I want to tell her the news,” Mrs. Martin said. “I heard this morning that the girl Miss Campbell is ruined. There is a rumor started that she lost her virtue to a common foot soldier. She is saying that soldier is you, Lieutenant.”

“But I never touched the girl,” Samuel said angrily.

“In response to the gossip that she is no longer pure, she is saying it was you. So now everyone will think you did it, whether it is true or not.”

Samuel pounded the back of a chair, ignoring the slight pain. “Miss Cadeaux was worried about Miss Campbell’s safety, especially when she kept going on with Lieutenant Walker. Do you think...?”

“That he is the one who ruined her?” Mrs. Martin said. “Most likely. She probably asked him to marry her and he laughed in her face.”

Samuel said, “Mrs. Dove-Lyon, may we speak with Miss Cadeaux?”

“Yes.” She tugged on a bell pull in her office and a servant knocked a few minutes later. “Fetch Marie up here, please.”

They waited and drank tea, when there came a sharp knocking on the door and Lucy came in, a note in her hand. “She’s gone.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:22 am

Marie rode in a hackney carriage with Thom, who sat patiently beside her. She felt every bump and jolt of the cheap carriage against the rough and jagged flagstones of the London streets. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“East India Docks. We’ll meet the ship there.” He looked at her. “If you can catch this ship, you can meet your family within a day or two, or even a few hours.”

Marie gasped. To be reunited with her parents in a matter of hours. Was it even possible? She sat and once the carriage had stopped at the docks and Thom stood by her, looking for the Frenchman, she asked, “Thom. Why are you helping me?”

He shrugged. “You’re paying me.” Seeing her raised eyebrows, he added, “Julia was just jealous, you know. She was the one talking about you behind your back and calling you ‘princess.’ She was furious that you got to dress up like a lady and drink wine and dance with the guests when she didn’t. She was downstairs stuck with us. It was all her doing.”

She glanced at him. She remembered very well him calling her “princess,” his teasing and glowering looks. He’d played a part in making her life unbearable below stairs as well. She knew he couldn’t be trusted—and was only as good as the money she paid him. But she couldn’t miss out on the chance of seeing her family.

“Come on.” Thom took her arm and waved to a sailor. “Oi!”

“Thom?” Marie said, disliking his grip on her arm. “What are you doing? Will this man help?”

Thom's grip grew hard, like iron. "You think you're so smart. But Julia told me everything. She heard it from that new employer o' hers. You're nothing but the snot-nosed brat of some no-name family in France. And they didn't even want you, so they sent you here. Yer uncle isn't even your uncle, he's a servant. But you're so full of your airs. Not even a knife in your pillow scared you off." He grunted, ignored her, and held her fast before the burly sailor.

"This the girl?" the sailor asked.

"Sure is. She'll give you a good time, mate. You can count on it," Thom said.

"Thom? What are you doing?" Marie said.

The men exchanged money and Thom shoved her at the sailor. "Farewell, princess. You'll make a few new friends on the journey home."

"What?" Marie stared and tried to run, but the man held her, his rough hands gripping her arms like steel. "Let me go!"

"You're bought and paid for, girlie," the sailor said.

She screamed in the man's face, hit his nose with her skull, and he dropped her, falling back. He cursed, blood spurting out of her nose.

Marie scrambled away and ran, running for dear life. She heard shouts and footfalls after her, and she tripped and fell off of a stone outcropping on the dock, plunging into the water below.

Back at the Lyon's Den, Samuel rounded on the girl. "Where is she? Tell me?"

Lucy shoved the letter at him. "She says she went to meet a man at the docks and

catch a ship to France, to meet her parents.”

“What man?” Baptiste asked. “Tell us what you know, Lucy.”

Lucy fretted. “I don’t know anything. I only saw her walking away with Thom a quarter hour ago and thought they were on an errand for Mrs. Dove-Lyon. That’s all I know.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s expression was stormy and even beneath her black veil, her eyes blazed. “He was dismissed from my service last night. He should not have been on the premises past dawn.”

“What docks?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“There’re loads of docklands around London. She could be at any one of them,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon pointed out.

“Then how do we find her?”

“We split up,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon ordered. “And we look for Thom. Lucy, stay here and if Thom returns, alert me immediately. I think he may have some malicious plan for Marie.”

“I’m going to the docks,” Samuel said.

“Me, too,” Baptiste said.

“Take a few of my men. They’ll help with the search,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

“I’m going too,” Mrs. Martin said.

“Out of the question,” Baptiste told her.

“Absolutely not,” Samuel said. “This could be dangerous.”

She glared at the both of them, her hands on her hips. “Miss Cadeaux is my friend. I am going with you. Now.”

They left.

At the docklands, they split up. Baptiste went with two of the footmen, whilst Samuel and Mrs. Martin stayed together. They walked fast along the docks, hurrying from one to another. Samuel said, “There’re too many ships. What if he drugged her? ”

“We have to find her. We can’t give up.” Mrs. Martin looked at a crowd of people staring at the water. She approached them and asked, “What happened?”

A boy, most likely a pickpocket, looked up at her and said, “Girl fell in the water. She got into a fight with one of the men on the ship. She hit him in the head and ran, then she slipped over the edge and fell in the water.”

Samuel stared. “Did no one try to help her?”

“No.” The boy went off to play.

Samuel and Mrs. Martin ran to the water’s edge and began calling Marie’s name, but the wind had picked up and their calls were drowned out by the sound of seagulls, men calling and whistles.

Samuel peered over the side, when Mrs. Martin grabbed his shoulder and said, “Look!”

Marie was splashing and clawing for breath, kicking at the water. “Help!”

Before he could think, he’d stripped off his red regimental coat and dived in. The water was fiercely cold, and the chilling waves and sea foam chopped at his bare skin and stabbed at his limbs like ice. He clawed through the water, moving his hands like knives, and began to rise to the surface, kicking his feet.

He spotted her a short distance away. He swam quickly, powerfully, grateful his father had taught all his boys to swim. He reached her in a short time, just as a fishing boat pulled up alongside her.

“Marie,” he cried, as she was tossed a rope. She grabbed at it and was tugged along. He followed thereafter and was helped onto the boat, which rocked as they both were pulled up onto it.

“All right, sir, we’ve got you.”

“I can swim,” Samuel said. “I was going after her.”

Marie looked at him. “Lieutenant?”

He took her in his arms, both of them shivering with cold. “I found you.”

“You came for me?”

He nodded, his teeth chattering.

One of the fishermen handed them a blanket and Samuel wrapped it around her shoulders, rubbing her arms with his hands, which felt numb with cold. Her hair was wet and plastered across her face, and she shivered uncontrollably.

“I-I’m so... glad you came...” she chattered.

“Shh.” He rubbed her arms. He loved her, even though she looked like half-drowned. Maybe especially so. She was alive. She was safe. And he was never going to let her out of his sight again.

The boat slowly made its way back to shore. Mrs. Martin, Baptiste, and the two footmen ran to meet it, running and climbing down a set of iron ladder rungs and walking on the rocky sandy shore, thanks to the low tide.

Marie was helped out of the boat and instantly embraced by Baptiste and then Mrs. Martin.

“M-Mrs. Martin? What are you doing h-here?” she asked, her teeth chattering with cold.

“I came to rescue you, petite . Can’t let you have all the adventure yourself. What are you doing here?”

“Thom told me that a man had information from my parents back in France, and they wanted to see me. I could board the ship and see them as soon as the ship crossed the channel.” She looked away. “I should never have trusted him. I knew he was hiding something. And I know it sounds silly, but I couldn’t let the chance pass by without trying to see them. For what if he was actually telling the truth?” She let out a bitter sound. “He wanted to sell me as a whore for the men’s sea voyage.”

The men shared grim expressions. One of the footmen said, “We will deal with Thom.”

The other footman cracked his knuckles but said nothing. That somehow made it seem more chilling .

Samuel stood by Marie, not letting her leave his sight. “Let us return to the Lyon’s Den,” he said.

They ended up taking two carriages back to Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s establishment, with Baptiste, Marie, Samuel, and Mrs. Martin in one, and the two footmen in the other. No one wanted to leave Marie’s side, and she was well looked after by Mrs. Martin, who took off her fine coat and put over Marie’s shivering shoulders.

“Why did you come?” Marie asked, still shivering.

“We would not leave you, especially not now, since...” Mrs. Martin glanced at Samuel.

“I thought you didn’t want to see me again. After last night... I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner I was working for Mrs. Dove-Lyon. I enjoyed our conversations and then we became friends and... I didn’t want to ruin things between us. It seemed easier to keep pretending I was a real lady.”

“I had an idea something was off,” Mrs. Martin said.

“You did?”

She ticked off the reasons on her gloved fingers. “When you declined my invitation to lunch, a footman from the Den presented it. You are a terrible dancer, when any young lady of quality would know the English dances back to front, and you said your uncle was present at the Den when Lieutenant Gage asked permission to court you, yet he disappeared before we could meet, but most of all, what sort of gentleman allows his niece to walk around a gambling den unescorted? Highly irregular.”

“Well, when I suppose you put it that way...” Marie began. “I’m sorry.”

“Non, petite. I should have seen the signs. I’m sorry I made you feel you could not trust me.”

“I didn’t think you would want to be associated with a servant.”

Mrs. Martin shrugged. “Perhaps not. I was angry, and hurt. But I have come to view you as a friend. As we all know, you are not any ordinary servant.” She glanced at the men sat across from them. “Otherwise, Lieutenant Gage would not be here.”

Marie lifted her eyes to Samuel. “Why are you here? I saw the morning papers. Is it true? About you and Miss Campbell?” Her face was pale.

“It’s a lie. Just a scandalous rumor Miss Campbell or her mother circulated about herself. I’ve already asked the newspaper for a retraction,” Samuel said.

“Then you’re—” Marie paused. “You’re not engaged.”

The carriage pulled to a stop outside the Den. Mrs. Martin opened the door and said, “Baptiste, help me out, would you?”

Baptiste helped her out and she closed the door. “Let’s give them a minute.”

“But she could be shivering to death in there. We have to get her inside—”

Mrs. Martin stood in front of the carriage door before him with her arms crossed, daring him to come any closer. “He will keep her warm, I’m sure. Give them a minute, monsieur.”

She’s as skilled as any fierce footman, Samuel thought, and he looked at Marie, shivering quietly on the seat across from him. “I came here earlier today looking for you.”

“Why?”

“I came to ask your uncle permission. To ask for his blessing, so that I might ask your hand in marriage.”

Her eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open a little. “You did?”

“Yes. But he did not give it.” He looked down.

“Why?” Marie demanded.

He glanced up. “Because he is not your uncle. And your name is not Cadough, but Cadeaux. He informed us today that since the start of the French Revolution years ago, your parents entrusted him, their loyal manservant, to have a care for your safety and look after you, until it was safe to return. He posed as your uncle and found you both work as servants, and that is how you hid.”

“He’s not my uncle,” Marie said. “I knew it.”

“No. So I could not ask his permission. I’m sorry.” He rested his hands on his knees.

“Yes,” she said simply.

“What?” He looked up.

“Yes. I accept your proposal. I say yes ,” Marie said, her eyes shining.

“You mean...”

She reached for him, shedding the fisherman’s blanket and Mrs. Martin’s coat and kissed him, wet and bedraggled and all. It was to be the first of many more kisses, he

discovered.

A few minutes later, there came a knock on the carriage door. Mrs. Martin said, “All right in there? Are you two formally engaged yet?”

Samuel opened the carriage door, not wanting to let Marie go.

Baptiste shouldered Mrs. Martin aside. “Well?”

Samuel looked at Marie with a wide smile. “She said yes .”

Mrs. Martin jumped for joy. “I knew it! Oh, I love a wedding. Come, we have plans to make. Now, the way I see it...”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:22 am

Thom disappeared before he could be apprehended. He was later spotted working at an inn in the notorious area of Covent Garden, where many women of loose morals could be found.

The newspaper that had printed the false engagement announcement printed a correction the next day, apologizing for the error.

Miss Campbell did spread rumors of her courtship with a young English officer of the army, but after she was seen in public with no such man, the rumors died, much like her chances of romance. She remained single, sour, and bitter. Due to her parents' poor luck at the gambling tables, they could not afford for her to have a London Season.

Marie and Samuel became engaged. His parents were keen to meet her, and at first were less inclined to do so upon learning she had been working as a maid, but when they learned of her background, their sympathies were aroused. Marie charmed them, but she was still keen to find news of her parents. Baptiste relayed the history of them and her father's nobility as a chevalier in Gerberoy.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon wrote to her contacts in France, who, in a few weeks' time, relayed the happy news. Marie's parents were alive and well. After their separation years ago, Marie's parents had been imprisoned and it had not been safe to correspond with or trust many of the people they'd once known. But there were some channels sympathetic, and thanks to Mrs. Dove-Lyon's help, Marie, Baptiste, and Samuel at last received an invitation to visit.

Marie stood on the smooth deck of a ship, this time supported by Baptiste and Samuel

at her side. She gripped the wooden railing and watched the waves go by. The ship was making good time and they would cross the English channel in a few hours. Marie's heart lifted with every minute closer they got to France.

“What do I say? What if they don't recognize me? If they don't like me?” She fingered the silver locket that hung at her neck.

Samuel had found her missing locket amongst pieces of the dinner service belonging to the Lyon's Den in a pawnbroker's shop, which Thom had been selling off, a piece at a time. Surprisingly, Thom hadn't been lying about her locket being at the pawnbroker's. Samuel returned it to Marie, along with a gift of a simple gold ring, which now winked on her finger.

“They will love you,” Samuel said. “Whether you are a servant or not, a cook, a lady, a Frenchwoman. They will love every inch of you. Just like I do.”

Marie looked at him, her eyes sparkling. “Promise?”

He kissed her then, and Baptiste pretended to look away. But after a minute, he coughed and cleared his throat. There were standards to be upheld, after all. Especially for the daughter of a chevalier.

The End