



Lie Down With a Lyon (The Lyon's Den)

Author: *Cerise Deland*

Category: Historical

Description: He loved her at first sight...but she was his enemy's daughter.

Dáire O'Neill has a terrible problem: he's fallen in love with his enemy's daughter. He met her by accident, but loved her from the moment he first saw her. She savors their friendship, but he won't go beyond it.

Despite her father's scurrilous reputation, Blanche has built a good name for herself—and a respectable business. When the man she met by accident appears uninterested in marriage, she goes to Mrs. Dove-Lyon to secure a husband for herself—and a new life.

When Dáire O'Neill hears that the man Blanche will wed is not the one Dove-Lyon chose, but one her father has put in his place, what can he do if not save her from her own father—and the life she will hate?

He'll never possess her...but he'll set her free from all she despises. Even him.

Total Pages (Source): 15

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

Monmouth Street

Seven Dials, London

April 17, 1805

Dáire O'Neill peered up at his man, Bart Morris, of Dáire's Shadows—one in a team of three assigned to follow the lady whom Dáire could not burn from his mind. Blanche Delacourt was a fire that raged in his heart. Morris had no idea, nor would he. To him, the lady was his latest assignment.

Proficient at his work, Morris stood like the soldier he was.

Dáire fisted his left hand. His iron knuckle duster, cool on his skin, had him flexing his fingers. That was the only sign he allowed himself to display of any worry. "Repeat that for me, Morris."

The man winced.

"Every detail," Dáire urged his man.

Dáire had three rules for himself: Be nimble. Be thorough. Be honest.

If the first two necessities seemed simple, he required the last to focus on execution. After all, the business he was in required a mind that was cunning, ruthless, and profitable. Not always did he expect financial gain from that last principle. But it smoothed any pain in the execution of the deal. "A right cove" was not a phrase he

avored, though many in Whitehall and Carlton House applied it to him. Still, in his dealings with friend or foe, he'd earned it. For he had rules of engagement for those jobs he took. Ethics for those he employed.

Bart Morris understood his challenge. Delivering bad news to the man who ran a gang of fourteen and who could raise an MP or restore a lady to Society's good graces was not an act destined to bring a smile to the boss's lips.

Hands behind his back, spine straight, eyes front, not a move from the stalwart body, Morris did not even breathe.

His large green eyes blinked. Dáire never needed a rehash of his men's reports. They knew they were responsible from tip to toe for their work. That meant each detail had to be firmly in their minds...or they were demoted to the status of runner and had to begin their climb up O'Neill's ladder once again.

But this time, what Morris had said was no failure on his part. And Dáire—unlike Blanche's father, Jonathan Rivers—did not penalize his men for facts beyond their control. After all, to most it appeared that O'Neill was a rival to Rivers, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Morris, a handsome fellow with copper-bright hair and green eyes, was a big man. Many a lady noticed him. But on the street at his job, Morris took pains to appear poor and downtrodden. He spoke like what he was—a ne'er-do-well up from the fish market in Billingsgate. He wore ragged clothes. Slumping, head forward, he walked off-gait, as if an old injury or malnutrition had deformed him. His disguise was a good one because, so far, Blanche Delacourt had not appeared to notice him on her heels.

But as he stood now, tall and broad shouldered, Morris was a strapping, good-looking fellow. Sharp of mind and with a penchant for humor to show it off, he could be quite

a catch for a girl. Dáire knew him not to be interested...until he had significant money to marry properly.

Morris sucked in air, then braced his feet wider and began. “I took me shift at seven this morning, as you said, guv. I relieved Billy Latham from his night’s work.”

Dáire nodded. He had assigned three men to a twenty-four-hour surveillance over Blanche. Morris for early, seven to three. Pip Starling from three to eleven. Latham from eleven to seven.

Morris went on. “Starling told me this morning nothing happened last night. Our lady remained at home.”

“Our lady” was his team’s term for the woman whom Dáire assigned them to track.

Dáire’s two Irish wolfhounds strode toward the marble fireplace and sank down, a sign they were bored with Morris’s interrogation. Dáire needed more. “Go on.”

“This morn at six ten, Starling said the greengrocer arrived at the Delacourts’ kitchen door with his vegetables. No one else came, unless ye want to know that the night soil collector came to empty the house rubbish at three twenty-three this morning.

“At ten twelve”—Morris took out his pocket watch as if to affirm the time—“the family butler opened the front door and Miss Delacourt came out. She wore a blue coat and one o’ them tipsy little hats that matched, snagged on her gloves—leather, they were—and climbed up into her stepmother’s town coach.”

Dáire slapped one hand to his mahogany desk in a sign to continue.

Morris took a sharp breath. “The coach stopped. ’Ad to. An accident, there was, stalled carriages behind, piled up one after ’nother. That was at Green Park. I saw it. I

had run after 'er carriage, figuring she was to meet 'er friend at that ice cream shop. But Green Park is the wrong way to get ice cream."

"Gunther's. Yes. Go on."

"But that's when the lady began to yell at 'im. I could 'ear her. Everyone could. The groom looked surprised cuz he never pulled it over to the side before she yelled at him she 'ad to get out. And when he handed her to the cobbles, they had words. Loud ones."

"And then?" Dáire's patience, usually unlimited, slowly burned away.

"She walked toward St. James's. Alone. No maid."

Dáire inhaled. Odd. Blanche usually had her maid with her when she shopped.

"In front of Fortnum & Mason, she dropped a coin into the hands of the urchin who swept the cross street, and hailed a hack on the other side. That one she 'ad take her over a few streets to Cleveland Row. The blue door."

Dáire sat still as a dead man. This was second time he'd heard this, but his guts churned worse at the description. What in hell was Blanche doing? She'd never gone to a gaming hell before. And the blue door led to a famous one.

"There she climbed down, paid 'er hack, and knocked on that little blue door. Someone came fast. It's early to call, ain't it, guv?"

"By hours, yes."

"Aye, well, and the butler was not pleased. A right owl 'e is, that one! But she was not put off by him. She jabbered at him, an' I think she told 'im what for, that she had

to go in. He didn't refuse 'er. Taken in, she was, boss. Right into—"

"The Lyon's Den."

"Aye, sir."

"She was still in there when you left?" Dáire rolled his fingers of his left hand. This man of his would see him nervous. Morris knew not how important his quarry was to Dáire, but now, with this, he would sense it.

Dáire had placed his pocket watch on his desk when Morris began his story. Now, he looked at the time again.

"Still inside, she was, guv." The man consulted his own timepiece. "I stayed on the front door of the Den until I spotted one of our runners on the street. I hailed 'im, gave 'im orders to follow if our lady came out. Then I left for 'ere. At that point, she'd been inside for forty-seven minutes."

Dáire had runners all over the city. Some had specific duties, jobs they were on. Others without any assignments patrolled London under various guises. Their purpose was to convey urgent news to Dáire of any importance, especially from any of his Shadows.

"Which runner?" A few were new to Dáire's service. He would not be pleased if a green man happened upon involvement in this case. Dáire had no tolerance for imperfection. Especially not when it came to Blanche Delacourt.

"Tom Dorsey, guv. His duty this morning, 'e said, was running an errand for some clerk of Lord Carlisle."

"So he is." I put Dorsey on that duty for Carlisle last week.

“I told him to stay near the hell, watch for ’er, and I gave me word to return as soon as possible.”

Dáire’s mind swam with questions. In the six weeks since he had assigned his men to guard her, Blanche had never gone into a gaming hell. Never gone anywhere without her own transport. Never went shopping or to her modiste without her maid. Even when she journeyed up to Richmond and took the air along the Thames on one her two favorite horses she hired in those stables, she took her maid.

Never had she gone to the gambling establishment known throughout London. Blanche did not gamble. She was prudent with her money, living off her earned income from her registry business.

But the house in Cleveland Row with the blue door had another role in the social lives of Londoners. Many went to pay the proprietress to find them a spouse.

Dáire narrowed his gaze on the ceiling. His mind jumped to his first problem: he had no informants in Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s gambling house. The lady kept strict rules about servants who gossiped. Any hint of it and they were immediately sacked. True, he had once done a favor for the lady, but that courtesy was not so grand that he could ask one in return. He was, to all the world, not that kind of man who asked for help, nor the kind who demanded remuneration for a service he offered for a goodly fee.

There is only one thing to do.

Dáire got to his feet. “You’ve done well, Morris. I’m pleased. You may return to your post.”

“Nothing else?”

“Report to me again after three. Tell that runner, Dorsey, to come see me as soon as

he confirms the solicitor he's assigned to has returned home. Inform Jack Starling when he comes to relieve you of everything you told me. Tell him he must come to me immediately if he sees anything else of note. I also want to know immediately from any one of you when the lady returns to her home."

"Aye. I'll spread the word, boss."

"Oh, and Morris?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Have you ever heard any nasty business occurring in the Lyon's Den?"

"Only that any bloke who goes in stands the chance of losing not only his coin but his leg."

Shackled. Married. Hell. Who wanted to marry a stranger? Most of the ton married for money or land. The merchant class sold off their daughters for connection and power. The poor rarely married at all. Tugging each other, they had little to give other than their bodies.

Dáire didn't need to ask his next question, but he needed to kill his anxiety if he could. "Have you heard about the women who go into the Den? What of them?"

"Aye, sir!" Morris snorted. "They call upon the lady who owns it. Hear she wears a veil, keeps herself to herself. Women who've got money in their pockets—and one thing on their minds."

Buying a husband.

Red flames danced before Dáire's eyes and obscured his vision. Fisting his left hand

repeatedly, he took a minute to reclaim his sanity.

He understood why Blanche Delacourt might wish for a man in her life. Her father was a tyrant to her, controlling her household and her every day. She lived with her stepmother, whose family name was Delacourt. Blanche liked the lady, but he'd inferred from her words that she did not love the woman who had married Jonathan Rivers for money and for a promise to rear Blanche and build a good life for herself.

Blanche, at twenty-four, was fiercely independent. From that first encounter with her on the bridal path along the Thames in Richmond, Dáire had found her quiet, unassuming, witty—and enchanting. He knew much about her even before they'd met. Her father was the most notorious gang leader in Seven Dials. The man ran a host of illegal activities, from prostitution rings to the sale of opium. Dáire had met Rivers often, especially whenever their business conflicted. Although they had never clashed openly, the day could come, Dáire was certain. Rivers ran anything he wished to turn a coin—women, children, opium, smuggled goods, and more. He would not stop for the likes of Dáire O'Neill, who to him was a pansy do-gooder with no muscle and no balls.

But Rivers had often threatened Dáire with extinction. It was his way. He bullied everyone. Even his only child and daughter. Dáire himself had seen it the day after they met, when one of his Shadows had urged him to Piccadilly to witness what was a barely contained argument between Rivers and Blanche. On the street in front of a book shop, the two of them went after each other mercilessly. Whatever Rivers threatened Blanche with, he had taken his time to impress it on her over and over again. Only after she hailed a public carriage in a huff had Rivers watched her leave him, his mouth moving in what Dáire knew were curses. After that display, Dáire knew he was right to have her protected by his men.

He had not loved her then. But he cared about her. The same way he cared about anyone abused—especially a woman. Protecting women had been the basis of his

business. He would never stop. For Blanche, he couldn't.

“Thank you, Morris. You can go. Good job.”

Dáire watched Morris shut the door behind him. He knew that the women who appealed to Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked the lady to trap a good man. But occasionally, a man who needed reforming was caught in Mrs. Dove-Lyon's web. Most often, the man reformed. But there were those few who never did.

What sort of man did Blanche Rivers want?

A man like me? Dáire's pride stirred. He'd have her, treasure her, keep her. He'd sequester her away from her father and all his evil dealings. Build a life for her, safe and loving—and constant.

Dáire shook himself. That was far from the truth. Far from fact.

He knew the lady would never want a man like her father. And most thought Dáire like her father. A thief, a cutthroat, a pimp. A scourge. Dáire could not control what people thought, but those who knew him, hired him, understood the nature of his work. For him to try to explain it to anyone, especially Blanche, would take hours, days. Besides, why would she want to learn exactly what he did? They were, at best, friends.

He'd enjoyed her conversation so often as they rode their mounts along the Thames that he knew she was high-minded. Not a fainting flower spending her father's money, but a lady who wished to effect some change for women, starting with servants of both genders. For herself, too. For a husband, she would request an honest man, an ethical one. She trusted that Mrs. Dove-Lyon would try to fulfill her wishes, or she never would have gone to the lady.

But a woman had no guarantee that Mrs. Dove-Lyon would do her bidding. Dáire knew firsthand that people could be bought. Persuaded. Corrupted.

How canny was Mrs. Dove-Lyon? Did she truly know everything about those who strolled into her gambling hell and dropped their fortunes in her lap? Did she take enough time to become acquainted with her clientele? Could she give Blanche what she truly wanted?

If she did not, Blanche would be lost to herself. Her ambitions to develop her own little business would be killed. Her desire to effect social change would be gone.

She has to have a man she can admire. Could Mrs. Dove-Lyon ensure that? No!

But I can. I can!

Dáire shot to his feet.

But he wouldn't meddle. Couldn't interfere and give her a man she could admire. Blanche would learn. Somehow. And hate him. Loathe him.

Which meant...he'd have to monitor what Mrs. Dove-Lyon did. Whom she produced.

Dáire would control his impulse to interfere. Instead, he'd continue to guard Blanche. It was the least he could do for the only woman who had ever mattered to him.

After all, what is power worth if you cannot help the one you love?

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

Cleveland Row

London

April 17, 1805

B lanche Rivers sat in the hall waiting for Mrs. Dove-Lyon to appear. She'd not made an appointment, but come on a whim.

She set her jaw. Well, not a whim, really. I've considered this for weeks.

Ever since she'd met a man who invaded her daydreams—and, by the very fantasy they produced, had forced her here to do this extraordinary thing. Her riding companion, Mr. Dillon, was no ordinary man. An Irishman, one could tell by his soft brogue, so tall, so broad, that his very aura blocked the sun above him, and blotted all but his presence from her mind. His daring looks—all ink-black hair and ethereal sky-blue eyes, the breadth of his shoulders, his searing smile—had birthed a desire in her that swamped her mind with nothing but the need to have him.

Ridiculous as that was.

She had never wanted a man before. Oh, yes, as an impulsive young girl at school in Kent, she'd giggled with her friends about the dashing groom who worked in the stables, or the not-so-handsome gardener whose bulging biceps inspired sighs. But no, she had not met any man she wanted for her own. To love her. To sweep her away from...everything. To make her life normal.

But now she had to have one. A husband. Someone stalwart, like Mr. Dillon. Someone no-nonsense, like Mr. Dillon. Someone—dare she hope—delicious. Like him.

Her body stirred. Her breasts budded, her thighs pressed together. She shifted in the chair. Mr. Dillon was a man she could savor, if she could only entice him. Which she would not. Should not. For if and when Mr. Dillon learned her identity, he would take his leave. Forevermore.

And I would not blame him.

A severe-looking skeleton of a man, the butler, no less, reappeared and strode toward her. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon will see you now, Miss Delacourt.”

She frowned at the sound of her stepmother’s name, which she used out in the world. The name her father had arranged, and the stepmother he had arranged to keep her safe—and untouched by his illicit activities.

As if that were ever truly possible.

Yet now I will try in the boldest way.

“Miss Delacourt?” Mrs. Dove-Lyons’s butler urged her to action when she’d been gathering dust motes.

“Yes, yes, of course. Pardon me.” She rose and followed him.

The house was well appointed. Aubusson rugs, Chinoiserie pottery in shades of eye-popping yellow and smoother jade, and silver doorknobs declared that Mrs. Dove-Lyon was far from poor. Blanche’s business partner, Grace Mansfield, had told her so. Of course, then afterward she’d asked why Blanche wished to know, but Blanche

had demurred. She would tell no one of this venture of hers, not even her dear friend with whom she owned the registry. She wished no one to dissuade her.

“Good afternoon, Miss Delacourt, I welcome you.” The lady was courteous and kind despite Blanche’s lack of appointment—and the off-putting black veil the widow wore to build an instant barrier. “Please, do come and sit so we can chat.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Blanche shook hands with the lady and chose one of the two chairs before the desk.

She took a huge breath. She was here, and she would do this and change her life.

“We will have tea,” the widow told her butler. “And despite the early hour, please have Cook add a few of her scones and crumpets.” The woman sounded as if she bore no distaste for Blanche’s appearance at such an unfashionable time of day. “Have you an appetite, Miss Delacourt?”

“I do. I definitely do.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon nodded to her man, and he disappeared, closing the door with a near-soundless snick of the latch.

“Well then, Miss Delacourt, do tell me why you are here.”

“I want a husband.” Blurting out her need made Blanche shake her head. “My apologies, ma’am. I was trained to be more polite.” She took her time and pulled at the fingers of her kid gloves. Once they were off, she raised her face to the lady once more.

“I know you were, Miss Delacourt.”

Blanche fell back. Astonishment rang through her like alarm bells. Few knew her in Society. She was no one to have appeared in any register, nor even in the tittle-tattle newspaper notices of this one or that going here or there. “You know ?”

“I make it my business to know nearly everyone in Town. I recognized your name immediately when my butler told me you were here. I know where you live, that you abide there most days with your stepmother, and that you own a servants’ registry with Miss Grace Mansfield in Richmond.”

Blanche opened her mouth but found no words for the accuracy of Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s recitation.

She went on. “I know that you were a good student of Mrs. Crawford’s School for Young Ladies in Tonbridge in Kent. In fact, you excelled at watercolors of landscapes—and the history of the Roman Empire. That last, my dear, is odd for a woman. What attracted you?”

Blanche lost her shock that Mrs. Dove-Lyon knew so much about her—and smiled at the memory of her schooldays. “Caesar. ‘All Gaul is divided into three parts.’ And Cicero. One should always know how to speak well in public.”

The woman chuckled. “How true. I wonder, have you aspirations to do that?”

“Speak in public? I have thought of it.” But my background prohibits it. Someone, anyone, could discover who I really am and use it against me. “I think writing my opinions would be better received and do more good. Speaking is so...open, don’t you think? Women rarely do, though I believe that wrong and wish I could be one to change it. But no. I prefer to write.”

“Yet I see before me, my dear, a young woman of beauty and charm, one who is well spoken, and beneath the polish acquired at Crawford’s, I find a woman of

determination. What would you do with your life if you had been—shall we say?—born into different circumstances?”

Blanche tried not to take offense. After all, Mrs. Dove-Lyon could mean she might stand a better chance of changing others’ minds if she had money or status to back her. She found the answers to the lady’s inquiry. “I would write against the restrictions on women. I would want them to manage their own money, own land, marry whom they wished, have rights to their children, and if the marriage went poorly, divorce when and why they wished.”

“A tall ambition.”

“It is.” She sighed. “I would begin, however, with articles, exposing some of the hardships suffered by domestic servants. Those I know far too well. But at the moment, I can do none of that.” Not if my father carries out his threats to make me marry, and soon. “I have come to ask you to find me a husband.”

“Given your views on a woman’s equality in marriage, I think you are in a conundrum.”

“Precisely, ma’am.”

“Tell me, then, why are you here to ask me to find you a spouse?”

“The reason is simple. I cannot do it on my own.”

“Whyever not?”

Blanche frowned at the woman. “Many ladies cannot. Their tastes are particular. Or their social circle is too limited. I am one of those fussy women.” She struggled to smile at the older lady.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon nodded. "That's the spirit I looked for in you. Brava. Let us continue with even more truth between us."

Blanche accepted the challenge, offering as much truth as she could. "I have money. I can pay you. I want a husband. He must be..." Tall, with a jaw that shows resolve and power. With lips firm and kissable, and a smile that lights up a woman's heart. "He must be good looking and smart. He need not have a title. I doubt any man with such prestige could wed me with a full heart."

"I see. You want a strong, dashing fellow with some brains."

"Indeed. He cannot be a man of ill repute. Not a womanizer or a drinker. Not an inveterate gambler, either. I cannot live with a man who has such vices."

A scratch came at the door. At once, the butler appeared with a tray filled with the tea and an array of pastries.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon waited behind her desk until the butler arranged the service on the small table beside Blanche. Then she rose and came round to sit in the chair opposite.

As the lady poured, she began her inquiry again. "I find your case intriguing, Miss Delacourt. You are twenty-four years old."

"I am." Blanche accepted the cup and saucer, took a sip, then placed the china to the table.

"By many accounts, you are too old to wed."

"I doubt it. I am still capable, ma'am, of bearing children, if that is a qualification for any man who might fit any of mine."

“What I mean to ask, my dear, is what compels you to seek a husband now?”

She winced, and found the obvious truths. Not the dastardly one her father had presented her with on the street in Piccadilly weeks ago. My father will present me with a man of his choosing. That alone makes my mind blank and my heart stop. “In the early years of my youth, I told myself I would find a man I could like or love. As time wore on and I found none, I realized my social circle, as you call it, was very small. Mostly women.”

“Have you never fallen in love?”

“No.” Not until now. Not until I met my Mr. Dillon, who saved me from tears one day and has brightened my life twice a week since then.

“One who appeals to you?”

“Yes, one gentleman does lately. He is my riding companion. A hale fellow.” His Black Irish hair is a mass of tousled curls I long to touch. His eyes are the blue of sky at dawn. He wears the same sorts of clothing every time we meet—a black frock coat finely tailored to the daring breadth of his shoulders, a frothy cravat round his corded throat, and fawn breeches that fall over his muscular frame like a second skin.

“Is he not interested in marriage?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked. “Clearly you find him more than acceptable.”

“I do like him very much, but it is clear to me he is not inclined to be wed.”

“How is it clear?”

“We have met twice a week on Mondays and Tuesdays for many weeks, ridden the bridal path along the Thames in Richmond, become friends, enjoying each other’s

company...but..."

"But?"

"I see no spark. And I need to see one. I need to feel one to hope that the future would be pleasant and bright."

Mrs. Dove-Lyon softly smiled. "So then, do you expect to love your husband?"

"Expect? No. Hope? Yes."

"Love makes life an enjoyable adventure."

"I think it must be so."

"Can you not say you know love at home, Miss Delacourt?"

"When I was a child I did. My mother was still alive. But after she died, and I grew to adulthood, I saw the real world."

"Your mother loved you, I am sure."

"She did."

"And your father?"

Blanche rolled a shoulder. "My father is proud of my accomplishments at Mrs. Crawford's." He knows nothing of my profitable business in Richmond helping servants find good employment in decent houses.

"Does he know you are here?"

Inside, her stomach churned. Did Mrs. Dove-Lyon know her real name and background? Was the woman playing cat and mouse with her?

“No.”

The echoes of those words hung in the air.

Silence like acid ate Blanche’s courage. She was certain she would be shown the door.

“Which means you have come here in secret,” the widow said.

“Exactly.”

“You want this match concealed?”

“From Society, yes. No reporting to newspapers. No pre-wedding celebrations among the groom’s family.”

“I see. Am I permitted to reveal to your intended these stipulations of yours?”

“Yes, of course.” Blanche wound her fingers together and held on to her resolve. “I want them framed as my desire for modesty. No fanfare. No folderol.”

She sorrowed over the need for her restrictions. Heaven knew, she would delight in being married to a man who rejoiced in what she was and did not care for what her father was...or that his blood ran in her veins. “You must help me, please. I want you to, but I realize the man may not want me because of my restrictions. If he refuses, we can go on. Choose another. Try again.”

“I will be honest with you, my dear, what you want is extraordinary and may cost you

quite a penny.”

“I have sufficient money, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

“The price I referred to was not in pounds, my dear. But in effort and heartache. Sometimes what we want brings us catastrophe as well as triumph. Are you sure you wish to reveal all you are to a husband who can only love you if he knows who in fact you truly are?”

“I am prepared,” Blanche said with conviction. “I want this. I want a loving man with all my heart.”

“Well then.” The lady rose, went to her sideboard, and poured two healthy whiskies. “A toast to your new status. A lady who soon weds a good man.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

Richmond on Thames

April 21, 1805

B lanche Rivers, who had introduced herself to Dáire as Miss Delacourt, sat atop her horse calm and graceful as the river flowing next to her. She waited as she always had, at the bend in the river where they'd first met six weeks ago—and where they had continued to meet every Monday and Tuesday since then. He grinned at her beauty.

To her, he was simply Mr. Dillon. Not O'Neill. God, no. But a talkative, affable, yet mysterious fellow who had shared little about himself. He ran a business, aye. He had men who worked for him, aye. But that was all. He was not the man her father hated. Not a gang leader, not really. But her friend. Her friend who ached to be more. To be her lover. Hers.

Spurring his horse on, he winced at that dream. He did not care to lie, either, but for what precious minutes he had of her, he would do anything.

He tore himself from his self-criticism. As he approached, he smiled at the gorgeous sight before him.

He was late today. Business matters in London had kept him from her.

But he was here now. Eager and sad.

Their visits were brief. But informative. They did not discuss the weather. Why

would they? It was springtime in England and the clouds were required to rain down to nourish all below. Luckily, each time they had met, the sun had blessed them with bright and shining minutes.

“But I like showers,” she’d said to him once when thunder drummed through the clouds and rain cooled them with a few drops. “To have the things you love, you must have showers.”

They did not discuss current news. The regent was far from his mind. So too any of his friends. Only those who came to him for help or advice was he disposed toward. Yet his dealings with his clients were nothing he would share with anyone, least of all Miss Delacourt. She would not be interested. She had no regard for gossip. Nor did she pine for standing among the ton. She was happy with who she was.

If only to the point that her life did not revolve around her father. That man’s criminal activities kept Bow Street busy. She knew it, though she only implied as much. In fact, she was discreet in discussing her family background, declaring that she and her father shared a standoffish view of each other. So from the beginning of Dáire’s relationship with Blanche, he had not probed into the dynamics of her relationship with her father.

He had no need. He knew who she was. In her bones. In her work. In her heart. She was generous to her personal servants, a personal maid at home and an assistant at the servants’ registry she owned with another woman here in Richmond. She demanded good wages and half-days off for all those posted to fine houses. In fact, Dáire had learned that she refused to accept the offer of one lady who was known among those in Richmond Society to beat her staff for any little infraction.

As for her heart—ah, well. Dáire had loved her spontaneity, her willingness to laugh and joke with him. He’d appreciated her quick wit to note that he changed the colors of his clothes at her suggestion.

“Chalk blue like Wedgwood to match your eyes, sir. For your waistcoats.” She’d wagged a finger at him. “A forest green for your riding habit to highlight the ruddiness of your complexion.”

He was certain he had blushed at that. “I’ll be a dandy.”

“Dear Mr. Dillon,” she had intoned in that alluring whisky voice of hers, “you command any space. Never will anyone challenge you to what you desire.”

No. Only circumstances now take from me what I most want on this earth. You.

He gave his horse another nudge toward her. Their time would be short and sorrowful today. He expected it, had girded himself for the disastrous tale she’d impart about her visit to the Lyon’s Den.

But for a few exquisite minutes at the beginning of their meeting today, their relationship would be as pure as it had ever been. Friendly, jovial, honest as far as each could be about who and what they were. He’d keep it that way...until she told him what she’d agreed to.

And she would tell him, wouldn’t she?

Dáire took in the sight of her. The tall figure, regal atop her hired mount. Her hair, a golden-brown crown with red highlights, tucked beneath her prim little hat. Her breasts, generous beneath the cranberry-red wool serge coat. The color, he’d told her before, accentuated her luminous gray eyes and gave a glow to her porcelain complexion. He’d noticed that she wore more of the dark red and shades of jade that alone could make his mouth water and his loins go to iron. She shifted. Her horse pranced, and the skirt to her habit rode up her calf. He had a glimpse of white hose and tempting curves from her trim ankle to her knee.

He bit down hard on his desire. Her contours begged for his hands, his lips. That ankle, her calf, her thigh and waist. The breasts that he had imagined far too often were large enough to overflow his hands. Her nipples. Were they pink or rose?

He looked away and collected his gentleman's persona. But as he approached her, he noted how she met him and reached out her hand. She was followed by the groom, whom she thought she had hired at the nearby Richmond stables. But, in fact, her "groom" was his man. His trusted man that he had placed at the stables where she rented her horse—and where she had left her maid. Dáire had put the man to the task of riding with her each Monday and Tuesday so that she would have an additional guard for her safety. Who knew who could pop out from the forest along the banks of the gently flowing Thames?

Dáire took no chances her father might have a man following her here. Rivers did it elsewhere sporadically. Dáire didn't trust the man to leave his daughter alone. He was a bully, and even that was too mild a term for the man who controlled the rookeries, the docks, and maybe more.

She beamed at him as they came closer, their mounts at a walk. She rejoiced to see him, as she always had. Her lips, plump and pink without a hint of more than the pressure of her pretty teeth—if he ever had the chance, which he would never, he would savor those lips of hers. Show her how a man enraptured would take her, kiss her, thrill her.

But not today. Not any day.

He could not touch her, but he would consume her with his eyes and inhale her with his heart.

She was the one he wanted and could never have.

He was her friend. Only ever that.

She approached him with that tilt of her head that confirmed their comfortable relationship. Yet her lips began to tremble. And in her large gray eyes, darkness lurked and a storm brewed.

Curse him. He knew what it was.

Just tell me, my darling.

Blanche took the bridal path where Mr. Dillon would always appear amid the leafy foliage every Monday and Tuesday at one. A large man, perfect in his sculpted beauty, handsome in a rough way, with a brogue to his bass voice that brushed her senses to irrational want of him—but he was late today. “Only a few more paces, Dancer. Ah, there he is!”

Around the bend of the river at gracious old red-brick Ham House, she spied him trotting his huge black stallion from the far end of the river path. She held her breath. The man never failed to take hers—and make her want for all she wished to have. Especially and impossibly from him.

So he was not so late. Not by more than a minute or so. Today of all days, she had wanted him to appear on time. He always had. But this day was different. She had news she wasn’t keen to impart. Not to him. Her announcement of her coming nuptials would end their relationship—and she mourned its end already.

Brief, colorful, fulfilling, her time with this stranger on this bridal path had inspired her to find a husband, a partner—someone she could respect. Her father’s recent insistence that she marry had initially raised the subject. But her appreciation—oh, to be honest, her infatuation—with this striking Irish bear of a man was the real impetus to marry—and to do it soon, in the most outlandish way.

Yes, she wanted a man to share her life with. She wanted children. Stability. Peace. Laughter at home, if she could get it.

He saw her, dozens of yards away, and tipped his riding hat. Today, he was in his verdant-green riding habit, the froth of his ivory cravat contrasting with his sun-bronzed skin and bold black hair. The silver of his waistcoat challenged the pale blue of his eyes. But once he looked at her, as he did now and held her in his thrall, that savage became the man who wanted her, above all others.

She did not imagine that.

Her insides jumped. She rocked in her saddle. Yes, she wanted a man in her life, in her bed. This man.

Yet she knew little about him, save what he'd told her here on their weekly walks along the Thames. His name was Mr. Dillon. No first name. He lived in London. No address. He lived alone, though he had two younger sisters, both of whom he had in a school in Sussex. He claimed he had many friends and many who worked for him. She doubted he was gentry. That Irish lilt to his gravelly voice added sorrow to his tales of life in Dublin. His speech gave him a lighthearted air that elicited joy. Yet beneath his debonair surface, she could perceive the armored plate.

Yes, her Mr. Dillon was a gentleman to her, always had been, never crossing the boundaries of etiquette between an unmarried woman and a man who were never introduced according to the rules. They met the first time here on this bridal path when he paused one day as she sat watching the river twinkle and ripple away—and she wept.

“Are you in need of help, miss?” he'd asked. He had not come close, only stopped his mount far enough away to be respectful. He'd even motioned to her hired groom, paces behind her, that he was no threat to her person.

“No. Thank you, no.” She dabbed at her wet lashes, aghast at the argument she’d had the day before with her father—in public, no less. “I am merely...sad.”

“Might I help to change that for you?” he persisted with a charming smile.

No one in all her life had ever asked her that. She had sniffed and tipped her head up to get the full, magnificent view of him. “Do you do that often?”

He lifted his jaw and stretched the strong column of his throat as he scanned the blue sky. “I do. For many.”

She dabbed at her cheeks and sat back in her saddle to admire him. “Tell me how.”

“People come to me with their problems. I fix them.”

“My. You make that sound so easy.”

He let his huge stallion walk near. “It’s not.”

“What do you fix? Give me an example.”

His mellow blue gaze swept her features. “A lady’s tears.”

She shivered with the admiration in his gaze. How forward of him. How delicious. “How do you help a lady in distress?” Repenting her audacity, she put a gloved hand to her throat. “Forgive me. I am forward.”

Close beside her as he was then, she could smell him. The fine sandalwood of his cologne. The coffee he’d consumed earlier. Both enveloped her in a cloud of desire that she’d never known. “One lady’s challenge was her father. Another, her intended.”

“Neither easy to resolve, sir.”

That first day was the last day she’d been able to tease any details from him about his work or life.

In return, she’d done the same. Sticking to the Delacourt name, her stepmother’s assumed married name, she had told him her given name was Blanche. But where she lived, how she managed her business, she had not revealed. She had indicated that she and her father were not on friendly terms because she disapproved of his business dealings.

Now, after today, she would give her Mr. Dillon nothing more. She would be gone. Another man’s wife. The charms of this man traded for the hope and chance of happiness with another.

How foolish was she?

Any answer drifted away with the charm of his stride toward her. Always before, they would dismount their horses and lead the animals along behind them as they talked. Today, she tied her horse to a tree limb and, after she threw him a smile, checked that her groom drifted away from them. Out of earshot, as she had told the man to always be when she and Dillon walked. The groom obeyed now.

So near she felt Dillon’s body heat warm hers. If she dared, she could reach out a hand and take one of his own. But she did not. They had not met or talked like this since last Tuesday. But they took up their usual topics. Their horses, how his friend considered a business proposal, how hers had rented a new house here in Richmond, and how Mr. Dillon needed to leave her soon for a meeting with a friend.

She halted along the path, not willing to let him go. Oh, how she was going to miss him. His easy conversation. His lilting, rhythmic speech. His perusal of her

expression and the light in his eyes when he greeted her or spoke to her. The way he frowned, as if torn, when he had to leave her...or she him.

She could not bear the tension within her any longer. "I must tell you something, Mr. Dillon."

He tipped his head in question.

"I... We cannot meet again."

"No?" He stiffened, his back ramrod straight.

She licked her lips and looked away to the dark waters cascading over rocks. Clouds rolled in to gray the green grasses. She faced him. It would be the last time she would view his manly face, his appreciation of her shining in his large, expressive blue eyes.

"No. I did not tell you, but recently, I have pursued means to be married."

He winced, and she had no idea if he was alarmed or attempting to accept her announcement. "A good man, I do hope." His face had gone pale, his words, sharp and clipped.

Was he angry? She was! "By all accounts, he is."

"You do not know him?" he asked in a rush.

She heard rage in his tone. "No."

"Is that wise?"

She had expected that question. Mr. Dillon did not set great store by many of

Society's rules, especially those that restricted the rights and means of women. So she had prepared an answer to that. "Many women in Society have never met their intendeds before they are engaged."

"Many of them regret everyone who forced it on them."

"I am not being forced."

"I see," he said as if it were fact. As if he knew that. But how could he? "Why, then?"

"I have chosen to get married." If she told him how she accomplished that, he would not believe her. He would most likely think her crazed. "When I knew..." Who he was. No, that was not a fact to reveal. "When I was told his name, I secretly had a dossier compiled for me of his family, his background, and his habits. All are pristine. His major character flaw is his tendency to occasionally fail at cards."

"Cards." He sucked in air—and fisted his hands. "When? When do you marry?"

"Friday."

"So soon."

"It's best."

His luminous eyes seared her with his objection. "For whom?"

"Me!" she cried. "Me."

He took a step forward, as if he would gather her up and run away with her. But then he froze. "Is he...is he appealing to you?"

Did he show a spark of jealousy? She smiled at this little victory. She had to tease more out of him. Make it a joke. Turn this conversation to one more pleasant. A sweet farewell. “Why, sir, are you asking me if I like his looks?” She knew not what the man looked like, but she had to use this to prod Mr. Dillon.

“I am.” He refused to be cajoled. Instead, sorrow turned his blue eyes gray.

“You think me shallow?” She hoped she sounded as if she parried with him.

“I think you as deep and mysterious as the ocean.” The rumble of his bass voice drummed through her, making her want and yearn for all of him that she would never claim.

“How can you say such a thing to me?” she shot back, irritated at his allusion to the elements, knowing she sounded as if she wanted him to say more like that in just that voice.

He took both her hands. “Because I will not see you again. Because I must say such things now...before you disappear.”

A sob rose in her throat. How could he undo her in a few moments? She would not cry. Would not! But, stripped of her rational thoughts, her desire for him made her impetuous. “You have never told me if you are married.”

“I am not.”

The wind picked up. A few heavy drops of rain fell on her nose and eyelashes.

She yanked her hands back and strode a few steps away. Near a clearing of trees, the wind whistled through the branches. Her hair flew about, her hat tilting, her pins gone. She whipped her hat off her head and let it fly away.

He followed her. "Look at me."

She shook her head. Angry still, she wanted to prick him with the needle of her frustration. "Do you not wish to marry?"

He stepped around her, his height and breadth a barrier between her and the wind. He lifted her chin. His tormented gaze deepened to a river of regret as the gathering clouds blocked out the sun. Catching her wrists, he pressed the palms of her hands to the flat of his chest. Beneath her flesh, his own pounded. "If I could, I would marry one woman."

She could not bear to ask if that lady was her. Oh, but she could hope. "What deters you?"

"She and I are star-crossed."

"Can that chasm not be bridged?"

He brought her hands up to his lips, and the journey they took began with the press of his lips to one wrist, then the other. "No," he rasped. "She is not mine to have."

"How...how do you know?"

He opened one palm and licked the skin. She trembled at his ardor.

"She wants, she deserves, more than I can give her."

"Sometimes," she ventured, caught between desire and propriety, "love can grant more to a relationship than circumstances provide." She had no knowledge of that, no understanding. She had heard it whispered among her childhood friends in Crawford's school, or read of it in books that were in essence fairytales for adults.

He hooded his eyes as he bent and nipped the pad of one thumb, then the other. His lips stirred fresh, hot hunger in her blood.

She threw back her head, her eyes squeezed shut. “Please stop.”

He circled her waist with both arms and pulled her against him. His lips in her hair, he whispered, “I can’t.”

’Twas then she threw all caution to the windy afternoon, reached up, and caught his cheeks. Sliding up against the bulwark of his fabulous body, she put her lips to his.

No man had she ever kissed. She knew not how, exactly. But in that moment, instinct was her guide and she took his lips, parted from him, and took them again. He groaned and crushed his mouth on hers. Heaven, at once, appeared before her.

He was fierce in his claim. Ravenous. His arms were iron, his lips a brand, his tongue a fierce probe she met with a cry of delight. He’d said he was not married. He was gentle, persuasive—an animal who took and gave. He’d said he could not marry because the one he desired was so different. But in the command of his kiss, the claim of his tongue, the groan from his throat, he declared how he wanted her.

She believed him. His fierce possession of her. His words.

And she let him have her. All of her. Her lips, her teeth, her heart. How could he not want to claim her? She wanted all of him!

He broke their kiss.

She gasped for air and marveled at the look on his face.

He was enchanted—torn and furious. He cupped her shoulders. His voice a rasp, he

said, "I must go."

Dazed, she let him steady her on her feet. Insulted, heartbroken, she fought for sanity. He would leave her? After this? Was he a fool ?

She shook back her hair, pretending was so ridiculous. But what else did she have? "Yes, as must I."

Mr. Dillion took a long look at the sky, his jaw set. She must not fill in the empty space in their relationship with silly platitudes. She must leave, and so she looked around for her groom. As ever, the fellow stood with his back to the two of them—an odd stance, she'd always thought, for one who should be warier of any man she met accosting her.

Mr. Dillon pulled at the points of his frock coat. Yet he let his eyes fall down her form, before he caught her gaze. "It has been a pleasure to know you, Miss Delacourt. I wish you felicitations on your wedding. May you have all you desire in your marriage."

He bowed and strode off, collected his horse, and led it away. Against the black clouds that scudded the blue sky, then twisted and turned, Mr. Dillon and his horse striding away from her painted a silhouette of doom. The man, his shoulders slumped. The horse, his head down as if in mourning.

She gulped back her despair and frustration. Who was he to treat her so badly? To want her and not? To claim her and leave? To make her pulse and yearn, to kiss her as if he were on fire to make her his? And then he bade her farewell and strode away?

What man did that?

Did she know any?

Ba! She knew of her father's thieves and pimps and murderers. His gamblers and crooks, his cutthroats—and him. Her father, the worst of the lot.

A wild thought flared through her, hot as flames. She fisted her hands. Was her Mr. Dillon one of her father's men? Was he one of those criminals who did her father's bidding? Had Mr. Dillon been assigned by her father to track her, entice her? Was he hired to ruin her? So that she had to marry any man her father put before her?

She whirled in a frantic circle. No, no, that could not be true. He was too kind to be a thief or...or worse. He was too observant of her moods, too ready to accommodate her, to be as ruthless as one of her father's men.

But whomever he was, Mr. Dillon was gone, accepting her word that she was soon to marry. Respecting it, even if he had stolen kisses from her like a craven rogue. Never arguing with her.

Only kissing her so voraciously that no man, no husband, no attentive lover, could ever compare.

She dashed away fresh tears from her cheeks.

She would not cry. She would not give Mr. Dillon or her father the satisfaction of reducing her to female fragility.

"I am going to be married. My husband will be kind and good and I will be content."
She set her teeth. "I must be."

She turned to call to her groom. "Hello-o. Let us be on our way."

I am to be fitted for my wedding gown.

Two hours later, as she stood on Madame Frasier's little stool and the lady poked pins into her skin, she realized one fact.

Mr. Dillion had not asked her the name of the man whom she married. A man who cared would have curiosity for that. Wouldn't he?

Not that it was any of his business. But she would have hoped he'd be curious enough to ask and comment if he knew her intended. "Marry me," he'd whisper to her instead, and take her lips in another of his all-consuming kisses.

But no.

None of that was to be.

Dillon was gone. And she was alone.

Betrothed to a merchant's son—Mr. Henry Mercer, age thirty, of sound mind and body, a clerk in his father's business.

A stranger to her.

And why not marry a man unknown to her? From her investigation of him, she learned he was no thug. No thief or cardsharp.

Considering her past...her heritage, her dastardly blood—who was she to want more from life, to want a man who loved her?

A few of her teachers at Miss Crawford's had pushed her to be proud of herself. Only one of her chums had ever known who her father was. Susana Edmunds had kept Blanche's secret for these many years.

She would march onward now.

Sweeping her palms over the iridescent blue-white crepe, Blanche commended the seamstress. Then she gave instructions for the gown to be delivered to Susana's house in Kensington, to No. 14 Argyll Street. Her best friend, just like her partner Grace Mansfield, knew nothing of Blanche's wedding. She hated to be so secretive with the two persons whom she valued above so many, but Susana was known to share everything with her mother. Grace was not as talkative, but still, Blanche could not take the chance that either would let any of her plan slip. Later, she'd make it up to both of them, after she was settled in her new home.

She was committed. Her mind made up.

She would become Mrs. Henry Mercer. And she'd love him.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

An hour later, Blanche calmed herself as her hired coach rounded the corner to Hanover Square and her stepmother's house. Blanche had always thought of it as precisely that. Doris Delacourt had never given Blanche reason to expand her definition to include such platitudes as home, refuge, sanctuary. Nor could Blanche ever bring herself to think of Doris as her mama, dear and revered. No. Doris Delacourt had been hired by Jonathan Rivers when Blanche was five years old. Blanche remembered the day she was taken from a crowded, loud, dirty building filled with quarreling, scrappy children. In that filthy place, Blanche had slept three to a bed, had eaten gruel and spent most of her days curled into a ball, cold and starving.

How Rivers had found her, he had never told her. But he had imparted the story of her birth. Over the years, he'd given her more and more details. But when she was sixteen, he had sat her down and told her details she'd never forgotten.

They had sat in his office, a nicely appointed room with an old desk and two comfy chairs. That day she had not noticed that his home was a tumbledown wooden monstrosity in the midst of the teeming rookeries. Only in later years—twice, to be exact when she'd come to argue with him—had she noticed the filthy slums. Yet inside his domain there was cleanliness and order. Inside, he and she were safe and sound, with his guards, his bully boys, posted all around them.

He began his tale, his gray eyes looking upon the past. He had met her birth mother when her family carriage overturned one afternoon in Piccadilly.

“With one look, she took my heart. I pulled 'er out of that overturned coach—knocked out, she was. But I caught 'er up and had my men bring round my own carriage. I took 'er home. Aye, home here. To Seven Dials. She di'nt know

where she was. What did it matter, eh? She di'nt care. She was safe, she was grateful, and she knew as the time got on that I loved 'er. I cared for 'er.

“Hell, she did not know who she was. Not for weeks. Seven, it were, aye. But I tended 'er, called in good apothecaries and a doctor, fed her, healed her.

“Aye, I was good to 'er. So aye. By the time a li'l idea come to 'er of her name and family, she did not want to leave me.”

Blanche shook her head at that memory. Her father said he had not seduced her mother. Blanche had no reason to believe him. But she did believe the rest of his statement—and she never forgot it.

“Your mother felt obliged to tell her parents she had survived the accident. She decided to write to them to inform them. I could not argue against it. By that time, I'd done me work. I knew she was the only daughter of the Earl of Langley. Aye. A rich man's diamond, she was. I nearly spit out me guts. To tangle with likes o' that ain't me wont. Rich, a big man, 'e sat in Parliament. Oh, aye, he'd tried to clean the rookeries of all their evils. Including me and mine.

“I knew once her family knew where she was and who her companion was, it would not matter that she cared for me. Her family'd keep her. I knew she were lost to me. We were cheese and curd, no good. I got up me gumption and told her to forget me. Go home. Be who you are, I told her.”

Blanche wiped a tear from her cheek at what had happened next. Her mother—Adelaide was her name—had returned home, tearful and afraid of her parents and her future. She had reason to be.

Her father, tyrant as he'd always been to all his children, ordered her banished. Soiled as he proclaimed she was, she was to go to an institution far away from London in

Northumbria. The facility was for “wayward girls.” Addy, as she called herself, refused.

But soon after she climbed into the hired hack her father had hired to take her north, she escaped.

She returned to Blanche’s father. She had no address. Only his name. But so many knew him or knew of him that they quickly told her where to find him and scurried away. Horrified as she was at the state of his lodgings, which she had never been permitted to fully see, Addy faced him. The man she loved. The one who had shown her kindness and care. The one who she now knew was the father of her unborn child.

Shocked and delighted at her reappearance, Rivers was aflame to hear her news. He took her to the nearest church and married her. Soon after, he bought a house for them a few streets north of the old meat market at Smithfield—and there Addy and he lived for the next three years. Blanche’s mother birthed her without any challenges. Addy and her father—so he said—were happy.

But Addy’s father, the earl, had hired people skilled in tracking others. One day as Addy visited a bookshop, Blanche asleep in a small carriage beside her, two men snatched up them both.

Unconscious from some kind of drug they forced on her, Addy gave no fight. When she awakened hours later, she was in her father’s small study in his home in Mayfair. He told her he would send her to Northumbria and send her daughter to an orphanage.

That afternoon, with the help of a Langley servant who had always been loyal to Addy, she escaped the house. But baby Blanche had already been sent away. Addy knew not where.

Outside, a thunderous rainstorm bore down on the city. Without coin to pay for a

carriage, Addy walked from Mayfair to Seven Dials. Once there, soaked and shivering, she collapsed into her husband's arms. Three days later, she was dead.

The Earl of Langley, who had discovered his daughter and her husband's home, sent forth the accusation that the notorious gang leader, Jonathan Rivers, had killed his wife in an act of revenge. What precisely that act was, the earl refused to say. There were other limits to what Langley would tell. Having it known that his daughter was the paramour and wife of the criminal Rivers was damning enough. If he also told the tale publicly that he had taken his own granddaughter to a public orphanage, that would be a greater shame. Rivers told his men to give out the word of Langley's cruelty to his own daughter and his granddaughter. The whole Langley family suffered the taint.

It took Rivers two years to find Blanche.

"I knew with one look who you were, Blanche. Just as I'd loved yer mother in one glance, I knew you were mine the minute my eyes landed on ye."

He'd prepared for Blanche's return to him months after Addy died. He found a lady of strong moral fiber, a former housekeeper to a marquess. He'd found a vicar he could bribe and who would marry them on the stipulation that Doris was to assume the given name of Delacourt. That she was to remain free of any blemish, keep the house he gave her, rear his daughter—once he found her—as her own. That she was to educate Blanche to be a lady, capable of languages, literature, dancing, and fine manners.

Doris Delacourt had kept her promises. The one thing she could not give, nor had it been stated she must, was love.

Blanche had felt the lack. All her life, she'd been grateful for Doris's companionship, dedication, direction, and guidance. But shows of affection or words of endearment

did not come her way.

Only as she grew to adulthood did Blanche look for affection from others. From her school friends she'd learned that some parents and family gave love and guidance, but others did not. If a young lady wanted to marry a man she loved, she might begin by finding one who was kind, educated, and respectful of women.

"So far in my life," she said to herself as she faced the front door of the house that had been her home for nineteen years, "the only man to fit that definition is Mr. Dillion."

Who gives me good wishes for my marriage to another man. And nothing else.

So be it.

She wiped tears from her cheeks.

Life, says my infamous father, is what we make it.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

D áire hurried away from Blanche.

At the memory of her lips on his, anger blossomed like a black flower. A torrent of frustration tumbled through his veins. All of it raged and smoldered in the flames of his jealousy. He silently cursed himself. He should never have reached for her. Never pressed her so near. Never tasted her.

And she? She should never have offered herself. Never responded to him. Never welcomed what he did. How he did it. How he could not stop himself.

Oh, bloody hell. He ran a hand through his wild locks.

He hastened toward the quaint house upstream. Think of business! Think of facts! Not her, you dolt. You have a job to do for Carlisle. Think on that!

Anything but the marriage of Blanche Rivers to Henry Mercer, chosen by lots or chance or whatever whim of the likes of Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Mercer was not a bad man. But rather bland, colorless, a rich man's son with little to his name, save his daddy's wealth. He had often allowed his idleness to become an open door to vice. Did Mrs. Dove-Lyon know that of him? Did she care?

Aye, Dáire knew the lady. Not well. But still. He had even been hired by her once last year on one of her marital arrangements gone wrong. There Dáire substituted the older, titled brother who was a paragon for that man's scurrilous, illegitimate one. That younger fellow was an inveterate gambler and rake, but had managed to hide it well from Society. Even from Mrs. Dove-Lyon.

If I fixed that, could I fix this?

The idea danced through the red rage of his anger and the clashing green of his jealousy. But if he did, if Blanche ever knew he had meddled, she would hate him.

What a riddle!

Work, O'Neill! Work!

He focused on the small London country estate of the Earl of Carlisle that appeared around the newest bend. It was a modest house, Palladian in form, built by the last earl after a fire had swept through the previous seventeenth-century building.

Dáire took the circular path to the front door. No problems with him being admitted by Carlisle's butler. He'd done steady jobs for the earl for more than two years, and both the man and Dáire's own superior, Scarlett Hawthorne, were pleased with the results.

"Good afternoon, sir." Carlisle's man, Winston, stepped back to allow him into the marbled foyer. Dáire's name was not necessary. In fact, after the first introduction of Dáire to Winston here, Carlisle had abolished the requirement.

"We are all friends," the earl had told his man with a toss of his overlong, sun-bleached brown hair. "Always let him in immediately."

"Follow me, sir," Winston said now. "The earl is in his library."

There he spent many hours these days, Dáire knew from Carlisle's statements over the past two weeks.

He took the stairs behind Winston, eager to have this interview over. He had to go

home and plan how to extricate Blanche from a catastrophic union with Henry Mercer.

“Well, hello, O’Neill!” Carlisle strode forward, one big hand out toward him, the other clutching his favorite tool lately—binoculars. Today, he had a marine spyglass that could afford him ten miles coverage. He collapsed the brass and laid it on his desk.

Hale and hearty, this man who worked on problems with the war on France was recovering his good humor after a long bout of grief over the loss of his wife two years ago.

“You are looking wonderful, my lord!” Dáire accepted the earl’s offer of a large Chippendale chair and a glass of Scotch whisky.

Carlisle had that graceful swagger to his walk. He glanced over a few times at Dáire as he poured. But when he strolled forward, he put the crystal glass into Dáire’s hand and broke his silence. “I wish I could say the same for you, O’Neill.”

Dáire raised the glass in salute, as did Carlisle to him. “A problem.”

Carlisle let a smile curve his lips. “Not work, I wager.”

“Do I wear a sign?”

“You have the look of a man bedeviled not by his challenges with men, but with a woman.”

Dáire sighed and drank. “My problem is one I should not solve.”

“Why not? Can she not be yours?”

“No.” Dáire shook his head once and took another swig. “Shall we discuss your latest discoveries, sir?” He tipped his head toward the collapsed spyglass atop the table.

“The lady I’ve been watching for the past seven weeks has gone. Disappeared! Moved out of the old saddler’s house yesterday, so says the man’s widow.”

“Any idea where she’s gone?”

“She said she was off to visit her aunt in Hastings.”

“On the southern coast?”

“Precisely.”

“Odd,” Dáire mused. “When one of ours engaged her at a country dance weeks ago, she said she had an aunt in Eastbourne. Now she has one in Hastings?”

Carlisle frowned. “A lot of aunts. Too many, if you ask me.”

“All living along the Channel.”

Carlisle clucked his tongue. “Do you have a man near Hastings, O’Neill?”

“He’s in Brighton at the moment. At the end of his case, he is. I’ll send word he is to trace her to Eastbourne.”

“Do it quickly.” Carlisle leaned forward, anxious as Dáire had never seen him before.

Was there some other reason that set Carlisle’s gaze aglow? Did he like this woman? Unusual, since no one had ever appealed to the earl since he’d met his future wife when he was four and she was five. Her tragic death in the house fire that destroyed

the kitchen wing of this house had rocked the earl. For more than a year afterward, he submerged himself in work. Going nowhere, seeing no one, he performed his duties at the admiralty and lately the Foreign Office with an intense dedication. But when twelve- and fourteen-hours days had sapped his good health, he'd gone home to recover. 'Twas then that Carlisle had spotted this woman in the cottage not far away...and begun to rally as a spy, and as a man who was very attracted to the stranger in his midst.

Recalling the details of her face and form, Dáire dug a short pencil and small folio from his breast frock coat pocket. "She always takes her pencils and bound notebooks wherever she goes, correct?"

Carlisle was speaking as Dáire was writing. "Her distinguishing mark, yes. Even took her pencil and paper to the country dance. Claimed she must record what she sees. Keeps her calm."

"But her habit only upset you because of that one sketch she produced."

"That's right. Have you ever seen anyone draw a building so to scale that it's as if they flew above the treetops? Who does that, eh?"

Dáire locked gazes with his friend. The word that stood between them was one they had spoken when first Carlisle noticed the beautiful woman who walked the Thames and captured his imagination so completely. If she were a spy, why was she sketching so that others might look over her shoulder and see her work?

"My man will find her," Dáire assured him. "Then we will find a way to pin her down, make her stay until we can figure out what precisely she's about."

"The admiralty and the Foreign Office need to know about anyone interested in the coastline. So do I. I had a problem with a double agent a few months ago. I do not

wish to be wrong again. Not with Bonaparte's Grand Army assembling on the French coast and threatening to invade us." The marquess's cheeks colored in his anger and embarrassment. Then he rose. "Another drink?"

"No. Thank you, sir. I am off to London."

Carlisle poured himself a smaller draught this time and sat. "You know, O'Neill, I worry about you. The work can be a nightmare, taking too much from you. I see it. You are pale and worn. Not your usual self. Why don't you put one of your men in charge and take a few days to yourself? I have a cottage outside Brighton. I will happily send word to my caretakers that a friend comes for a rest."

"Thank you, sir. But I could not impose."

"You won't. I haven't been south since...well, the fire." He took a drink. "The place is a lovely cottage along the sands, well appointed, and my two staff write often and beg for someone to take care of. I say it should be you. They are man and wife and live away, far down the lane, so you would have absolute privacy. Take a friend, if you like!" When Dáire hesitated, actually considering the offer, Carlisle persisted. "From what I understand, you are not married."

"No, sir."

"Nor have a mistress."

Four weeks ago, Dáire had broken an arrangement with one certain woman who had visited him twice weekly for over a year. Mary Adams was a lovely lady, a widow, a vendeuse in a French dressmaker's shop on Half Moon Street. They had comforted each other well, and he had enjoyed her company, smart and witty as she was. But he'd broken it off when he realized he was not being fair to her. He had no desire to make love to anyone. Only Blanche Rivers. Curse my soul.

“No. No one.”

“And this one who makes your brow furrow? Is she married?”

The earl was too perceptive. “Soon to be.”

“Does she care for him?”

Dáire shook his head. “I doubt it. Only for the protection of matrimony.”

“I see.” Carlisle twirled his empty glass. “Another?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Prudent, you are. Always.”

“I was once not prudent at all, sir. I do not tempt myself again, especially when I am...challenged.”

Once more, Carlisle went to his broad stand and poured from the decanter. “Can you personally not give her the protection of matrimony?”

“Circumstances forbid it.”

“Ah. So...she is your cousin?”

Dáire gave a laugh, and so did Carlisle. “No.”

“So then...she marries a man with more money, or land or power, than you can give her.”

“Aside from the fact that none of that appeals to her, no. There are other factors that forbid the union.”

“Hmmm. Truly a mess, then.”

“Exactly, sir.”

“Well, O’Neill, I have known you for four years now. There is no problem you cannot solve. No mountain you will not climb to correct a wrong. But I detect here—dare I name it—grief?”

Hell. Carlisle was right.

“My dear friend,” Carlisle said, “it would be wrong for her to wed another.”

It is. I wish I could change it. But Blanche would know it was me who got another man for her. I told her a few stories of how I work. If I fix this, she will condemn me to hell.

“My friend!” Carlisle slapped his knee. “I pester you unmercifully. Now I stop. However, when you figure this out, and you will, do promise me you will come and tell me all the details.”

Carlisle was one for hearing every tiny fact of all his missions. It was what gave him insight into future problems, and Dáire had always been willing, even as he chuckled in the telling, to reveal each pertinent morsel.

“I must see her wed to another.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am, sir. I am.”

Dáire rushed away from Carlisle to return his horse to the stables one mile away from Blanche's. After paying off his fees to the head groom, he caught a hack and hurried to the center of Richmond and the White Duck to meet Tim Farrell. That man had done an excellent job of accompanying Blanche as her hired groom each time she and Dáire met on the bridal path. Farrell was one of Dáire's men in Richmond, and this job had been a convenient one with Farrell's mother so ill at home. Dáire was right to have hired him, and paid the stable master handsomely to appoint Farrell to be Miss Delacourt's hired man each time she appeared.

“The lady will not be riding again,” Dáire told his young man soon after he sat down. “You've done a fine job o' keeping her safe.” He drained his mug of beer, extracted a paper package filled with pound notes, and slid it across the old, rough wooden table.

Farrell weighed it in his hand. His eyes widened. “This is more than before, sir.”

“Aye, 'tis so, Farrell.” Dáire shot to his feet, unable to sit still. Besides what he really wanted was a tall four fingers of whisky. But Dáire had experience with John Power & Son and, thankfully, after years of too much fine whisky, had learned to temper his desires. All of them. Save one...

But when she marries Friday morning, there'll be no time for you, boy-o.

He strode to the bar and got another ale for Farrell and one short whisky for himself. He had to be positive, look toward his future. He'd learned that every day, every hour, presented an opportunity for him to catch a job...and good money. He could make friends, high and low on the social rungs. Folks liked him, his smile, his openness.

But it was his unrelenting drive to do a job well that made him a unique man with a

unique job. Only one man hated him and threatened death. That man was Jonathan Rivers, and Dáire had never worked a job in the intervening three years in which Rivers was implicated.

A good thing. Dáire did not look for trouble. He'd explained to Rivers what he did, how he worked, but the job that had raised Rivers's hackles was a murder in St. Katherine's Docks. Dáire had solved the crime, found the murderer. But not before Rivers had warned him never to take any of his friends to gaol again. Of course, Dáire had not known the culprit was in any way attached to Rivers. But his statement meant nothing to the man. Rivers would not accept Dáire as foe...or son-in-law.

"Come near me and mine again," Rivers threatened then, "and you'll be feedin' the fish in the Thames."

Dáire was pleased he'd never had another reason to go near the man.

He liked his work. He provided a service no one else rendered.

He used his friendships and his dearly earned knowledge observing others in the streets to buy himself access, information—and power. Now, after ten years in every street and alley, each dock and pub, and every rookery in London, he had fourteen men to steer, problems to solve for many Society leaders or businessmen. His allies were men in government, clerks with years of experience. His Shadows were expert agents who followed quarry and investigated as they could. Those men he had trained as well as any Bow Street runner. His own runners were more recent recruits who learned on the job. Stationed all over town, they provided eyes and ears for the Shadows and for any accidental mischief. All of his men were thorough, resolute, devoted to ethics, uncovering those who cheated or stole or did worse to further their own cause.

Like a merchant jobber of army uniforms who took bribes—and would soon learn

that Dáire O'Neill would end that money-making scheme. An MP, married and amoral, had ruined a young lady and refused to aid her financially. He would soon know that Dáire O'Neill required that he pay the woman a handsome monthly living. That or his father-in-law, averse to scandal as that man was, would cancel the man's monthly draft.

Dáire returned to Farrell with their drinks and took his seat opposite. "I thank you for your service to the lady and to me. I know it was irregular work to ride as groom, but you helped me."

"Glad, I am, sir. But..." Farrell winced. "Well, sir, ye must know, today was different from the last."

Dáire sipped his drink. Farrell's note of apprehension struck him. "How so?"

"We were followed."

"You're certain of that?"

"He was no gent. Not dressed for it, no. Not the best horse rider, either. Rough, if you ask me."

Dáire had not noticed a thing. Not a twig out of place. But then Blanche's news, even though he already knew it, set him on fire. He saw and heard only her. "How rough?"

"Bad shave, to start. Poor shoes. Clothes, dirty."

Dáire got the picture. "Up from London?"

"Who knows, eh, sir?" Farrell took another sip. "I didn't hear him speak."

“He was there the whole time?”

“He was following our lady, sir. Appeared behind her before you did.”

“And when we parted?”

“He went off behind our lady. Not you he wants at all, sir.”

This man was one of Jonathan Rivers’s boys. Dáire knew it. Who else would be interested in what Blanche Delacourt did? Mrs. Dove-Lyon wouldn’t care to follow her. Henry Mercer might. Or his father. Dáire would check on that when he returned to London.

Dáire got to her feet, his hand out. He had to leave and investigate. “Thank you, Farrell.”

“It’s been an honor to help you, sir. Able to pay a doctor for me mother, I was.” Farrell pressed the money to his chest. “I am grateful.”

“Come see me in London when she’s better, eh? I think it’s time we talked about moving you up the ladder.”

“Aye, sir!” Farrell’s freckled face broke into a grin. “I’d like that, I would!”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

April 26, 1805

The sun shone today. A nice day for a wedding.

Blanche would not ask herself once more if she had done the right thing. Not ponder if she should have asked Mr. Dillon to marry her or how long he would have waited to ask her to marry him. Not allowed retreat to overtake her when the only reason that man thought them star-crossed was that he was beholden in some way to her father. For it was God's truth—an alliance by her husband with her father she would never tolerate.

She ran her fingers down the soft, pale-blue crepe of her elegant, Grecian-style gown. Madame Frasier had done well by her. Blanche fingered the three rows of tiny white beads across her décolleté. She had no full-length cheval mirror here. She'd rented this modest room yesterday in a small, respectable carriage inn near the Tower. Telling her stepmother she was to meet a friend in Richmond, she had set off from home yesterday. She'd sent a note to Susana Edmunds asking her to send over the big box that had arrived addressed to her, and now, she was ready to have the porter carry her trunk down to the inn's courtyard.

All she needed was her little reticule—and her courage.

Dáire stared at his watch as it ticked over to nine minutes past nine. Blanche's wedding day. Henry Mercer's, too. Dáire rapped his knuckles on the desk, irritated with himself.

He had confirmed Mercer was still intending to wed. Yes, Dáire had had Mercer

followed ever since he learned it was he whom Mrs. Dove-Lyon had chosen to marry Blanche. But after Farrell spotted someone trailing Blanche, Dáire had added a Shadow to Mercer and put one on Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Dáire had doubled the watch on Rivers's house in the Dials. He'd learned from his men that Rivers had brought in three men, each for an hour or more, all minor members of the ton and louche to boot. If he interviewed each to become his son-in-law, Dáire's men could not verify. But Dáire didn't put anything past Rivers. He had taken caution too, and put double watch on Blanche's home. But when she'd left it yesterday to take up residence in an inn south of the Thames, Dáire was shocked.

To him, it meant she had told no one of her upcoming marriage. Not her stepmother, which was wise. Not her partner in their registry business, Grace Mansfield. And after he heard that Blanche had accepted from the inn's porter a large dress box from a Miss Susana Edmunds, Dáire knew she had kept her wedding secret from everyone.

Except me.

He swallowed his remorse over that. Only a few more minutes and Blanche would be of his past. A delight he'd never expected. Just a few more moments to get past Dáire's last set of Shadows, all three placed at the church in St. Pancras.

One of his men had entered the church yesterday, pretending to be a cousin of the bridegroom. The vicar had readily told him details of the wedding. This so-called cousin would attend the ceremony, sitting discreetly in the back of the church. He'd then report confirmation that Blanche Rivers had taken her vows and slipped away from London with her husband.

To be kissed by him.

Caressed by him.

Honored by him forevermore.

And she would not be thinking of me. Our meetings. Our laughter—and that kiss.

Thirteen past nine now.

“Sir, we are at a pass now. Confused, we are.” One of his Shadows, Liam Curtis, sat on the chair before him chattering away. Dáire set his teeth. Truth was, he had no idea what the man imparted. Curtis had appeared minutes ago, saying he had urgent news. He was reporting his latest on work with Lord Carlisle and Dáire had been...what? Dreaming...

“I hear you, Curtis.” But he hadn’t. He fingered his watch. Funny what a woman could do to a man’s mind. Fill it, and empty it of all else. Blanche had done that to him...and after today, after ten o’clock, when she married another man, he would cut her from his reverie.

He had to try to put order to life—and with his business, he could do that. Carlisle was interested in finding the woman who spied for the French by giving them maps of the coast. “So let me be certain I have all the facts, Curtis. Repeat all them for me.”

He was becoming a dolt. His men must think him feeble. Not listening to your staff was one thing. Forgetting everything and everyone who ever existed was—in Dáire’s business—reason to be put away.

“Sure as can be, sir.” And off Curtis went on a speech worthy of Drury Lane.

“Keep after it.” Dáire was just rising to his feet to thank the man for his work when a knock came at the office door. He strode over to open it.

“Good morning, guv.” Bart Morris stood there, a frown marring his pretty face. “A

word, sir?”

Curtis gave one look to both, nodded, and passed around them.

Morris was on duty, seven to three today, heading the others, to trail Blanche to her wedding. If he and his team could track her and her new husband to their honeymoon, all to the good. Morris was to take with him his cohort who had followed Blanche these past weeks. Starling and Latham, so said Morris, were happy to have the extra work.

“Come in.”

Morris locked his green eyes on Dáire. His coppery hair was a wiry mess from his raking it—and his gaze was dark as a primeval forest, wide and agitated. Not an emotion any of Dáire’s men usually exhibited, unless for some reason suddenly they had no control of a situation.

“What is it?” Dáire waved him to the chair as he pushed shut the door.

Morris remained standing and stared at him. “The wedding, sir.”

Dáire sucked in air. No. No, nothing can go wrong. “What about it?”

“Mercer will not go.”

“What do you mean?”

Morris bit his lower lip. “At eight fifteen this morning, Little Willy Jackson called on Mercer at his father’s home.”

Little Willy Jackson was far from small. Built like the brick walls of a brewery, he

was one of Jonathan Rivers's cutthroats.

Dáire feared the results of that encounter. "Why would Mercer's butler let that man inside?"

"Outnumbered, guv. Our man on Mercer, Reston, saw Willy arrived with two bully boys. Everyone had a pistol. Reston had no way to stop 'im."

"I understand. What did they do?"

"A maid tells us Willy forced his way upstairs to Mercer's bedroom, barged in, and forced him out of bed, down the stairs, and into a carriage waiting at the back."

"Where did it go?"

"We don't yet know. Reston got one of our runners off the street, told him to get over to our lady's inn to tell me. Our runner says Reston took his horse and galloped off to try to follow the carriage."

Dáire cursed roundly, then looked at his watch fob. Forty past nine. "The maid? We have paid her handsomely. Get her to tell you more."

"She's sobbing and crying, she's that upset. I got nothing more from her."

"The carriage, then?" From what stable did Rivers hire carriages?

"We've a man down at the mews Rivers uses now, sir."

"The wedding is at ten," Dáire said to himself more than Morris. Twenty minutes from now. "What's happening at the White Hart Inn in Southwark?"

“All looked normal. Our three men are in place.”

“I’ll send three guards front and back.”

“Sir?”

“Aye, six in all. Armed.” Dáire needed every one of them for this mess. Rivers must have discovered how Mrs. Dove-Lyon had managed Blanche’s wedding. He must have. Why else the attack on Mercer? But then...

Holy God. Mrs. Dove-Lyon was in Rivers’s crosshairs too!

“Go cover Dove-Lyon. Rivers can do anything! Attack even her! And get me flowers, clean and fresh looking from Hanover Square Market. A basket of” —what was Blanche’s favorite flower? —“pink peonies. French.”

His man frowned. “But that’s—”

“They can be had, Morris! Go. Quickly. And send in my butler.” Dáire was crazed, or why was he getting flowers for a wedding that would never occur? Unless...

Unless he had another man in mind to walk down the aisle with her.

But I don’t! Shite!

“Abbott. Lord Kingston Abbott of...of...” Where did the man live? Green Park. And he owed Dáire a favor. Not big enough to marry on minutes’ notice, but Dáire would twist his arm!

To his butler, he requested an unmarked carriage for himself, and a full hamper of food and spirits to provide for Abbott and his new bride. To Abbott, he sent a blunt

note of what was due the man who had saved him thousands of pounds in false debts. Dáire would meet him at St. Pancras church at ten, and afterward he would ensure for the happy couple a comfortable traveling coach and directions for a honeymoon cottage. This he would obtain from Lord Carlisle, who had been so kind as to offer him his seaside cottage. A damn fine offer, it was. And timely.

The note Dáire sent Carlisle told him to respond to the runner who had delivered the request. He needed an answer with directions to the cottage before nine forty-eight, please. The runner would then deliver Carlisle's instructions to Dáire when he stopped briefly with Abbott and Blanche after the wedding at the other large carriage house in Southwark, the George Inn. There, Dáire would leave the newlyweds and return home.

Orders given, Dáire left his abode within five minutes and walked through the tunnel he'd had constructed last year just for this purpose of simple escape. Not underground, but useful. The passageway was funneled through other buildings he owned, ramshackle as they were. At the final door to the street, he emerged into Kendrick Yard near St. Giles Church.

His mind awlirl, he gnashed his teeth over this fiasco and climbed into his waiting carriage. It was lush, and unmarked. He traveled always anonymously, in comfort.

Patting the top of the wicker hamper, he fumed. Rivers may have put one of his own lackeys up to walking down the aisle. A cracksman or a blackleg? Rivers would not do that to his daughter, would he?

Dáire scrubbed a hand over his mouth. A tiny voice from the past whispered that Rivers would do anything to get his way. Years ago, some had gossiped that he'd even had Blanche's mother killed.

To marry one of Rivers's men meant she would never be free.

He'd be damned if he'd let Rivers control her! He had men. Resources. All he needed was Abbott to agree!

But then Dáire froze. If Abbott agreed, was Dáire any different than her father?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

D áire stood on the side street in full view of the porch of the small church in St. Pancras.

To clog the street, he had hired a hack to idle on the opposite side of the entrance to the church. He stood to one side of his own carriage. Both coachmen were experienced getaway men. One had made his reputation at age ten as a marquess's tiger who often took the reins. The other had brought his own horses to this event.

Dáire glanced at his watch fob. No word came from Abbott yet. As for Blanche, she was five minutes late. He pulled at his cap, a signal to all that time flew past. Once more, he surveyed the other carriages that moved along the street. A lorry full of chopped wood headed for the alley behind the church. A lone rider stopped to talk to a lady and her maid beyond the street. Dáire didn't recognize him. But the man didn't appear to be one of Rivers's. Dáire prided himself on knowing by face every man who worked for the gang leader. At last count, Rivers had twenty-two men. More than Dáire employed. But then, Rivers had his fingers in every sordid deal known to man.

A hired coach pulled to the front of the church and stopped.

Across the street, a young man ran to the corner, stopped, and tipped his cap at Dáire. The fellow nodded. So this coach was Blanche's.

Wisely, she had decided to hire a public conveyance. Prettier and cleaner than most, it appeared to be from Dáire's vantage point.

He grimaced, still waiting for Abbott to show up. Getting a man out of his bed before

noon was always a trial. But if Abbott did not show, Dáire had a bigger problem. He had no substitute for whomever Rivers had appointed to marry his daughter.

The driver of her carriage climbed down from the box and opened the door, and Blanche appeared. Her lips were drawn tight against her teeth.

Afraid, my darling? I don't blame you. If you knew what you walked into, you'd run.

She clutched a small bouquet of flowers and idly fixed her skirts. She was a vision in an iridescent pale-blue gown and long white gloves, wearing a tenuous smile. My darling, you do this so alone. Not even a maid.

Whatever her emotions, she put her chin up, lifted her skirts to avoid a puddle, and strode toward the church. From the look on her face, she did not know that her father had kidnapped her bridegroom. Nor that there were so many men guarding her. Dáire snorted. If they all took each other's scent, the fight would be a melee.

Another carriage took the corner at a screaming turn. Everyone paused to notice. If it had not stopped when it did, a huge crush of people, horses, children, and dogs would have filled the street.

Blanche jumped back.

And out of the open door of the racing carriage came a man of tall height and heavily lashed black eyes.

Jack Winthrop. Born on the wrong side of the blanket to an earl of ill repute, Winthrop was a handsome devil. Known to seduce a lady out of her skirts or a man out of his pocket money with a kiss or a smile, he was the worst possible choice of bridegroom. The man was in league with Blanche's father. Had been for years. In fact, Winthrop ran Rivers's racing bets.

Abbott had not shown. But Winthrop would never wed her. Rivers and Winthrop were not getting what they wanted today!

No, by God.

Blanche Rivers is mine!

Dáire pulled his cravat up over the tip of his nose. He lifted his right hand, and his man on the church porch knew he would take off after her.

But Winthrop was there first. Grabbing at her arm.

Damn him!

She yelped.

Winthrop seized her around the waist.

She screamed.

Hell.

Pedestrians gasped.

But Winthrop clamped a hand to her mouth to muzzle her.

Dáire flinched. He'd warned all his men so hastily assigned to this watch this morning that whatever happened, the lady was to remain unscathed. All were to treat her gently.

Blanche, however, knew only feral despair. She writhed and kicked at her attacker.

Winthrop screamed and snatched his hand away. It was bleeding.

She'd bitten him!

Dáire got to Winthrop. Pulled at his shoulders. Yanked at his arms...and pulled him off her.

She whirled for the door of the church, but with a punch to Winthrop's chin, Dáire downed him. One of his men was upon Winthrop, and the man howled at his captors.

Dáire caught a recoiling Blanche. One arm around her breasts, one around her hips, he pressed her to him.

She squirmed and kicked backward. "Get away! Away!"

Dáire did the only thing he could: he ripped his cravat off his neck and stuffed it in her mouth—and threw her over his shoulder.

She fought him like a banshee. Writhing, hitting his back, she gave him such grief he lost his breath—and nearly lost his grip.

But he made it to the coach. His man had the door open. He nodded. A quick glance told him others had abandoned the street—and the chaos. His guards at the ends of all three streets had done their work. The way was clear.

Dáire shoved her inside to the squabs and followed. She squirmed around him to claw at the handle to the door, but he bound her to him.

The coachman lashed the reins, and off they charged down the cobbles. With the sudden movement and the speed, she toppled to the floor.

He caught her, then held both her wrists, her heaving body flush to his. He fought to keep his voice soothing. “Listen to me, Blanche.”

At his use of her name, she paused, groaned behind the cravat, and twisted. Then, for perhaps the first time, she recognized who held her. She froze and frowned at him. She tried to push out the scarf from her mouth but failed and growled in frustration. “Mou? Adibobo!”

He shook his head at her gibberish, to which she elbowed him in the stomach. Well, that hurt. He seized her shoulders. “Blanche, stop.”

She shook her head side to side so forcefully that he had to jerk back before she broke his nose.

“Blanche!”

“Undunme!”

He winced. “I cannot let you go.”

“Mundidisdinel.”

Whatever that meant, he had to ignore it. “You must listen to me.”

“Mo! Aman wanto murry ma.”

“Mr. Mercer was not waiting at the altar.”

She froze. “Wha?”

Dáire would get the truth out quickly. “I know Mr. Mercer was supposed to marry

you, but you see that is not the case.”

“Mo? Mo?”

“No.”

Her whole body went still in his embrace. It was heaven to hold her, hell to have her in the circumstances.

“Misder murder didn wan ma?”

“He did. Oh, he did. But this morning, he was abducted by your father’s men.”

She narrowed her eyes to slits. “Why?”

“I think you know why.”

She froze. “Hou do mou kno ths?”

He winced. “I know because I had men watching Mercer.”

She blinked hard. “An me?”

He nodded.

She pummeled his chest. “Le me go!”

“I can’t let you go, Blanche. We do not know who is out there with the man your father wanted to marry you to.”

She scowled.

“That one who attempted to catch you. He’s a nasty piece.”

She either didn’t believe him or didn’t want to. “Mou throwl-mouth mig!”

Even with the rag jammed in her mouth, he understood her colorful curse. He glanced out—they were far from the little church by now.

“Look, I’m going to take this scarf away.” He tugged on it.

She pushed more with her long pink tongue. “Blahhh.”

“Here, give it to me.”

As soon as it was out—and out the window—she was after him with a torrent of insults. “Of all the scoundrels! Outrageous cad! Who do you think you are to kidnap me from my wedding?”

He took his hands from her, sat back, and gave her as sheepish a look as he could muster in the circumstances. He had to calm her down to listen to the full explanation. But his physical retreat did not assuage her anger. Instead, he crossed his arms and let her have a royal time denouncing him.

“What is the matter with you?” she barked, flailing her arms in her rage. “Why are you here? Why do you say Mr. Mercer is not at the altar? My father doesn’t know I’m to marry. And Mercer is a good man. He is! He promised. He is reliable. Mrs. Dove-Lyon says he is reliable. And I...I had it from my man of investigations that he was good.” She took a breath. “Why are you here ruining this for me?”

“It’s not what I wanted.”

She harrumphed and crossed her arms. In the lovely crepe gown, her breasts rounded.

His desire went straight to his groin. Not what was needed here, certainly. “Let me explain.” Then he reached for her, which was the wrong thing to do.

Blanche squirmed away from him. “Get off me!”

Dáire complied, hands up in the air.

She could smell him. The mellow mix of rosemary soap and sandalwood cologne. No man ever smelled so good.

She flinched. Held in Mr. Dillon’s arms—more like imprisoned —she felt the contours of that huge, muscular body she had so admired and had touched only once before in that blissful kiss.

What was he doing here? Taking her away from her wedding. Yes, but...why?

If he had wanted her, would he not have wooed her or at the very least asked her to marry him? She’d told him everything. Why she wished to marry. How she had decided to go about it. Yes, she’d told him all of that. Well, almost all, except who her father was.

And now, did it seem that he’d always known who her father was? By reputation, if not in person.

She tried to apply more logic to his actions. Stealing her away like a common criminal. Abducting her...from a man whom, supposedly, her father had substituted for Mercer. Had he been paid by her father to abduct her? Was that to make her pay for having the audacity to marry without her father’s approval?

That would mean she must fear Mr. Dillon. In his presence, the emotions she felt from her toes to her lips burned with a desire she could not douse.

I object to his insolence to carry me away. But I don't fear him.

Not before.

Not now.

She slowly turned and met his calm gaze with one of her own. "Have you a flask in that hamper?"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

So he sipped the very good whisky he'd poured into a pewter cup. "Don't you like whisky?"

"I do."

"But you refrain? Why? You wish to be clearheaded if I try to run?"

He gave her a quelling look. "You can jump from a speeding carriage?"

"Ba! You haven't seen all my skills."

"No." He rubbed his left thigh. "But I've felt the power of your kick. And I've seen how you made Winthrop bleed."

She preened. "Good, wasn't I?"

"Helped me take you from him, yes."

She wrinkled her nose. "Glad you brought good spirits. In the hamper, I mean."

"The only kind to have. One drink eases cares, and two always brightens the day."

She took another drink. "And three?"

"Like much in life, too much of one temptation can bring ruin."

She nestled back into the corner shelter of the squabs, ignoring her approval of his

prudence. “Like gin, sugar, and power.”

“Exactly.” He dropped the whisky back in the wicker hamper and let the flap close.

“May I now explain more?”

“Let me think.” She moved the last drop of whisky over her tongue—and noted, damn her soul, that his gaze absorbed her movement with sensual need. She had to ignore it and press her case. “You carried me away because the man I was to marry did not appear. He was abducted by my father’s men this morning. And the fellow who appeared, that swarthy creature who ran after me, was the substitute for Mercer. Somehow you learned that it was my father who did all this. Yet you have no proof of this, only your conjecture.”

“Not entirely correct.” He nodded, his mellow eyes locked on hers. “I know of the men who took away Mr. Mercer this morning. I also know that that fellow who suddenly appeared would have married you. He is an associate of your father.”

She looked out the window, watching scenery fly past. She knew not where she was. Only this man did. He seemed to know so much more than the average human. How could that be?

“You say you learned that Henry Mercer was abducted this morning.”

“I did. At eight fifteen, gunmen forced their way into his house, found him, and pushed him into a carriage at the back of his house, then made off with him.”

“Do you know if he is well?”

“Not yet.”

She took that answer with a shudder, even as she heard a promise within it to save

Mercer. Years ago, she had warned her father to never interfere with her friends or their families. He had agreed, although she often wondered if he had been disruptive whenever she learned of something awful happening to her friends or their families. “When will you know? How?”

“I have men who are skilled at tracking others.”

“Why would you do that? You don’t know Henry Mercer...or do you?”

“No. I have never met him.”

She heard a note of caution in his voice. “How do you know of him? Why?”

“How? Because I have men and women who work for me who know how to investigate others.”

“That costs time and money.” She rolled a shoulder, uneasy at her next thought. “So since you do not know Mr. Mercer personally, you had your staff investigate him because...I was to marry him?”

“Aye,” he said with some remorse.

“You knew about my business deal with Mrs. Dove-Lyon?”

“I did.”

“Which also costs time and money.”

He said nothing.

She sat, astonished...and to her dismay, a bit complimented, too. “I am worth that

much?"

"You are."

"To my father, obviously, but..."

His gaze bored into her. "To me, Blanche. You are worth that much to me."

"Why would you be interested in taking me from any man?"

He set his jaw, gazed out the window, then faced her. "I care for you."

Her heart soared. Her guts rebelled. She scoffed at him. "Really? How wonderful." She leaned forward. "You didn't seem to be so caring when I told you along the river that I was to be married."

"I thought all would go well. Mrs. Dove-Lyon runs a respectable matchmaking business. She makes mistakes sometimes, I know. Mercer was not a terrible mistake for you..."

"But not good either, eh?" Oh, he fried her reason to a crisp!

"You should have the best."

"Do you know what that is?" And do I? "No answer? Well, tell me this. Did Mercer know who he really was to marry?" She had wondered for days about that.

He shook his head. "I have no knowledge of that."

"Yet Blanche Delacourt was to arrive at the church," she said with sarcasm as she admitted to herself for the first time the truth of that matter, "but only Blanche Rivers

could sign the registry.”

“Aye, because that is the way your birth was initially recorded in the St. Pancras church rolls.”

“Charming,” she said with bitterness. “The poor man may have learned of my real name at the altar.”

“If not before.”

She snorted. “Was the vicar really a clergyman?”

“The one who was supposed to appear was.”

“But you are not certain about the one who did?”

“No. If you wish, I can have my men find out.”

“Ah, no. I think not. That is salt to a wound. We don’t need another travesty to add to this mess, do we?” She wagged a finger at the hamper. “Bring out that flask again. I need more.”

He poured.

She drank.

And pondered. The path her thoughts took suddenly took her away from her wedding, Mercer, and her father...to the man who sat beside her in this very plush and well-appointed coach.

“Why would I believe you?”

He pressed two fingers to his mouth and thought on that. "The scene at the church will be reported in the newspapers."

She closed her eyes. "Wonderful. Just what I always wanted. Notoriety."

He studied the passing scenery. "Perhaps not."

She blew out a gust of air. "Do you always look on the bright side of things?"

"I try. So do you. Usually. Maybe this news can be tempered. Maybe no names will be listed in the papers."

Was that possible? How? But then she recalled his men, his work. "You have many men who work for you. You, I assume, pay them well to learn such secrets. You also have connections up and down the social ladder."

He sat silent, absorbing her words as if they were gospel, as if he wished to caress her and kiss her anger away.

She could not allow his alluring blue eyes to beguile her. Riding with him along the river had been an interlude, an escape. A brief set of moments wherein she thought she might be able to find a man whole enough, good enough, ethical enough, to marry. No, he had never flirted with her. Never intimated he was interested in her by word. Only by that kiss.

Yet after that one devastating action, she had yearned for him and what might have been if he had declared anything remotely like "I care for you."

But he had not done any of that.

And she had gone to Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Accepted the man the lady had chosen for her,

only to find herself foiled, lied to, betrayed by her own father, and now—now!—torn away from the only solution that mattered to her. And all by the one man she valued. The one she wished for. What irony!

To be free of her father, his name, his influence, his men, his hellishly criminal life, she found herself facing this man. This chivalrous mystery who “cared” for her and did extraordinary acts to prove it. “I want to know, sir, what do you do among the ton that you know so much about so very many?”

“I am not a leader in Society.”

“Yet you know many of them and much about them.”

“I will say I know of them. Some well. Others, not.”

She recalled their first conversations, in which he talked about “fixing” others’ problems.

He crossed one leg over the other, attempting to appear cool to her hot pursuit. “I make their lives easier.”

She tipped her head. Between confusion and lack of understanding, she shook her head. “How?”

“I learn what is wrong in their lives, what should occur for them, who has hurt them or intends to, and I make their problems go away.”

Her heart stopped. “You kill people?”

“Never.”

“You steal from them?”

“I help them see that they should return items they have stolen from another.”

She could not breathe, a hand to her heart. His careful wording stung her sense of right and wrong. “You arrange things. Abduct women. Bribe men.”

“No! You are the only woman I have abducted.”

“Oh, jolly thought.”

He fumed. “I arrange things. I help ladies escape from those who hurt them. I do use money to persuade certain people to act in the public’s best interest.”

He could coat with sugar what he did, couldn’t he? But the fact remained that... “You run a gang, just like my father.”

“No. I do not run a ring of criminals. I have men who are expert at following others, finding evidence, producing it so that it can be used, shall we say, to persuade people to stop their criminal activities.”

That was some salve for the open wound of her fears. “Tell me that you do not have houses of prostitution.”

“No women or children. No thieves, or smugglers. No blacklegs to break workers’ strikes. No cranksmen who rob people or shops or banks.”

“But you must know these types of people.”

“I do.”

She hooted. She shouldn't be surprised or impressed. Yet what he said sounded benign...or, for some of his clients, beneficial. "You are a repairman."

Her term made him frown. "I like to say I remedy improper situations."

"Such as?"

"A man and woman who conspire to have the lady seduce government officials for information."

"How would you... remedy that?"

"Make it public knowledge that the two are French spies."

"So they run home in disgrace?" She rather liked that idea.

"If they can."

Blanche throbbed with the intrigue his words conjured. She wasn't sure yet if what he did was proper or legal, but she needed more information. "What else?"

"An East India man who bribes an MP to ease restrictions on sale of opium."

"Because...why?"

"Opium is addictive. The member of Parliament already uses too much of it."

"This..." She pointed at him as she searched her memory. "This I have heard of."

Then she shrank from him. The realization of who he was flooded her. He had even told her that first day they spoke by using the word that defined him. But she hadn't

caught the implication. “You are known as the Fixer.”

He regarded her with wide, tormented eyes.

My God. A hand to her throat, she whispered, “You are Dáire O’Neill.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

“I am.” Truth had always served him better than lies. Today’s events proved it.

She sat still, without shock or anger. Indeed, she considered him as if she studied a painting...or a puzzle. “I am sure you wish to explain. But do it later.” She bit off her words, fury turning her cheeks bright pink. “Now...at this moment, I want to know what you intend to do with me.”

His mind picked over the imperfect picture he’d tried to create since he’d saved her. Bits of that had pierced him like shards of glass from ruined cathedral windows.

But the carriage rounded in front of the George Inn in Southwark, and Dáire climbed out when his man opened his door. He looked at his watch. His man should have arrived already. But no one was in the courtyard. Dáire checked inside. No luck there.

He had no choice but to tell the inn’s messenger boy that he would await a reply from his man at the Grey Ghost Inn along the Old Kent Road until noon.

At eleven fifteen, they took the turn into the carriageway at that famous Kentish inn.

“We’ll refresh ourselves a few minutes here as we change conveyances,” he told her as he handed her down into the cobbles. “We’ll also get more supplies for our journey.”

“We change? Why?” She seemed not so much contrary now as inquisitive.

“If anyone in the churchyard recognized me or mine, my regular carriage or groom, I want us suddenly to have disappeared.”

“You do think of everything.”

“I try.” He smiled, liking this attitude of hers better than her peevishness.

“I assume this means you have a plan for us.”

“I do.” He led her across the cobbles into the pub. “We go south toward the coast.”

“You wish to sail?” she quipped.

“No.” His lips curved upward, but it was no true smile.

“You wish to fish?”

“Ha! No.”

“Ah, then. You want to go sea bathing.”

With you? Without so much as a chemise clinging to you? I should be so lucky. “Of course. Good for your health.”

“So I’ve heard,” she said with a certain snideness. “I cannot.”

“No?” He’d draw her out. To keep the conversation pleasant, he’d follow along. He led her to a table in the far corner of the busy tavern and settled her into a chair before he took the opposite one, hoping to show her how calm and rational he’d become. “Why not?”

“I’m not to shock my lungs. A childhood malady that can reoccur.” Her visage tightened with the memory. “Also my mother...”

“What about her?”

“She died from the chill of a rainstorm.”

“Well then,” he said, his sympathy for her loss greater than she would ever know. The loss of a mother was no small despair. “No sea bathing for you.”

The tavern girl appeared, and Dáire asked for a quick luncheon of cold meats and bread, plus apples or pears from their cellars. “I’d like to fill my hamper.”

“Traveling, are ye?” the girl asked with a sashay of her hips. She liked his looks and would probe the possibility he liked hers, regardless of his female companion.

“Aye,” he told her, polite but dismissive. “Going west.” If Rivers tracked them here, he had to leave false word of where they went.

The girl, discouraged, sighed, took their order for cider and ale, then left.

Blanche gathered herself, looking uncertain. “You’ve not planned much of this, have you?”

“I’ve had no plan at all.” He winced. “That is my failure here, as well as—”

Her brows rose. She wished to find a way into his troubled mind, did she? “As well as what?”

He took in her lovely face. Unsmiling. Anger at the edges of her lips. Distrust at the corners of her eyes. How could he tell her how he had failed his own rules? He was ashamed of how he had ignored them. Be nimble. Be thorough. Be honest. He’d not been fair to her. Not nimble but scattered, clumsy in the matter of her protection. And thorough? No, he’d failed to expect the unexpected—her father’s ruthlessness. And

honest? Hell no! He'd not been honest with her from the start. He was no Mr. Dillon. He was no shopkeeper in Richmond. The only thing that had been honest and true was his desire for her and that kiss. "I had no plan. All of what happened was a surprise to you and me. We go south because few will look for us there."

"You are so certain?"

"I am. I never go south. So if anyone wishes to hunt for me, they'll go to Dover or Ipswich."

"Why there?"

"I have friends there. Friends in the same work."

"Dear me," she said, feigning distress. "More fixers! Who knew?"

"I'm trying to make up for the lack of a plan." He folded his arms. "Bear with me."

She looked at him as if she would never turn her eyes away. Whatever she searched for either astonished her or set her back teeth to grinding. "I want to go home, O'Neill."

"Dáire."

She thinned her lips. "My stepmother will lose her mind with fear. My father will want to wring your neck."

He swung his head back and forth. "Both your stepmother and your father will assume I have taken you for revenge or ransom. When no note comes stating that desire..."

She scowled. “Do you have a bone to pick with my father?”

“None...lately.”

“But there is an old rivalry between you?”

“Rivalry, no. Animosity, some. He does not like my presence in what he calls his territory. He fears I will try to fix someone’s problem someday and bring him down. I am a thorn in his side. A man who fixes people’s problems and may one day take on a job that changes the way your father works.”

“Is that not what Bow Street does?” She sat back as the tavern girl brought their mugs of cider and ale.

Dáire lifted his pewter mug to her in toast. “But does Bow Street have the power to fix every problem it finds?”

She took a long drink, then pressed her lips together. “True. So you are not out for revenge, not in it for compensation. What, then, is this...this escapade ?”

She would have him declare it? He would! “To save you from a life of despair at the hands of a rogue.”

She leaned over the table, and for a moment, she was so angry that she curled her lip at him. “Oh, that is so rich. To marry, I would have had some respectability in the small circle of my own in London.”

“If!” He shot up a finger. “If you had married Mercer!”

“Aye. So now? Now, I will be labeled the woman ruined by a scoundrel. Taken against her will with God knows what forced upon her. Enclosed with a man in his

carriage and taken to his hideaway. Ruined! Untouchable!”

“You can return to London. Scandal dies down. Always.”

“So says a man who does not live or die by the ton ’s rules. I have friends. Or rather, I had them before I was carried away like booty of war. Now I have nothing.”

Dáire felt like an idiot, but he had one card left to play. “And how well would they cling to you if Mercer turned out to be less of a man than you or even I thought possible?”

She took offense. “What do you mean?”

“Some rumors say that Mercer beat one of his mistresses.”

Alarm had her gray eyes going wide. “Tell me the details.”

“He’s had, over the years, four.”

“Go on.”

“He was twenty-one. New at sponsoring a woman. She was nineteen, pretty, but frail and sickly. She often showed up at her mother’s or her sister’s house with bruises. When she was four months with child, she went to her mother’s one night, badly beaten. Some say she told her mother she’d suffered a boot to her belly. She lost the babe and her life.”

Blanche sucked in air, folded her arms against the horror she’d just heard, and downed her cider. “How many repeat this tale?”

“Only the lady’s mother. Only right after her daughter’s death.”

“So she could have been bought off.”

He nodded. “Or she made up the tale and wished to make some money off Mercer’s father. We do not know.”

Their quick meal was eaten in silence. When she finished, she asked for the ladies’ convenience and off she went toward the back.

As Dáire waited, he heard a rider came barreling into the carriage yard. The man ran into the inn and searched for Dáire. Within minutes, Dáire had his hands full of two missives.

“One to me with directions,” he explained to her when she returned. “Another to the caretakers in case Carlisle’s other messenger does not arrive before we do.” He grinned, happy and relieved they had some refuge.

They traveled along the Old Kent Road in silence for the next few hours. At another carriage inn, they took a few minutes for ale and cider and a walkabout to stretch their legs. Here, he hired a new carriage for them.

Blanche had to applaud her captor’s taste in carriages, as well as his obvious ability to pay for the best, because this next one was a landau of stunning proportions. A green lacquer that rivaled the deep verdant density of an English forest, the coach had such sumptuous padding and well-hung springs that she floated on air.

A nice compensation, the extreme comfort slayed her anger. Soothing her outrage at him, she decided to see if she might begin to see her way out of this predicament.

She focused on the passing landscape and counted the results of this fiasco he’d created. Her marriage arranged by Mrs. Dove-Lyon was ruined. Any marriage to any man was now out of the realm of possibility. She faced a life alone, with two friends

only, Grace Mansfield and Susana Edmunds. Certainly she would remain a spinster, without children or many friends to celebrate or comfort her. She would have to become a new and different creature.

Fingers to her lips, she suppressed a sob. Would she have to take a new name? A new home? Create new aspirations?

She had money. Not much. A little more than two thousand, all of it from her business profits. If Grace now wished nothing to do with her, given the scandal, she would create a new business. Not in Richmond. But...somewhere. Other towns needed registries that stood up for servants' rights of good wages, days off, and humane treatment.

All of that was for a distant future.

Her objective must begin with plans to escape Mr. O'Neill. Hide away where her father could not find her. And begin to build her new life.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

D áire could see the wheels of her mind grinding against each other.

She was debating how to leave him. He'd expected that. But he predicted she would not wish to remain away from all she knew.

Whatever she chose, he had means to help her set up a new life. Money. Connections. Even properties around the country. None were grand, but he'd gladly give her anything to help her recover from this. If it also assuaged her anger and his guilt, so be it.

He'd offer whatever he had to her to escape the consequences of a foiled marriage...and the notoriety of his abduction. She might refuse all his help. He understood her inclination to do that. But he was an expert at deception. Was renowned for it, actually. And she knew his name, so she must have some knowledge of his good works, if not his reputed bad ones.

What most said of him was wrong. Completely false.

But his name also received accolades from many who benefited from his actions. Still her father had the wrong impression of him...and why not? Rivers had no friends or associates in common with Dáire. Those whom Dáire caught in heinous acts would not praise him. And those were the ones Rivers would revere.

Dáire shifted in his seat and brushed a hand down his fine lawn breeches. Casting his gaze over his captive, he could not ignore his appreciation of her face and form. How Rivers had sired such an elegance mystified Dáire.

She locked her eyes on his, then turned away. She'd nearly done so without reaction, too, but the shiver that shook her lithe body and quivered the tops of her bounteous breasts told him she was affected by his appraisal. If his eyes could touch her, and his hands could inspire her, and his kiss could make her moan, then in a portion of her soul, she liked him. More than liked him. Even if it did him no good.

She's not for you.

Never was.

And that, boy-o, is what this is really about. He could save her from a disastrous marriage; he could help her to create a new existence for herself, and set her free from all she despised. And that included him.

"Do you like the sea?" he ventured long minutes later. They had to become better acquainted, didn't they? He could not sit here and pine for her. She could not sit opposite and silently fume at him.

"I do."

"What of it?"

"The salty air. The sounds of pounding of waves upon the shore." She inhaled. "The views down the beach on clear days—the vista serene, but primal, with all those clouds and birds rushing to and fro on the gusts."

"Would you live on the coast permanently?"

"I never asked myself that. But now...I might."

"Where would you live?"

She smiled, but only briefly. “Curious, aren’t you, now that I cannot go home again, not to anything or anyone I know?”

He swallowed the sting of her accusation. “I plan to prove to you that marriage to Henry Mercer was a questionable thing. But a marriage to the man your father sent to the church would have been a nightmare.”

She lifted her chin in defiance. “I await that evidence with an eagerness that fills my every moment.”

Three hours later, both of them silent as a tomb inside the cab of the luxurious landau, they arrived outside Brighton at the thatched-roof cottage the Earl of Carlisle had so graciously offered Dáire days ago.

Carlisle had given use of it as a place of rest from work and cares. But Dáire took it now as a sanctuary and a hideaway from the heinous man who was his darling Blanche’s ignoble father.

The cottage struck Blanche with its charm. From the coach window, she saw that the wattle and daub that looked in excellent condition. The precise laying of the thatch on the roof. The fronds hanging over the eaves that rustled in the offshore breeze, sounding soft and sweet.

She’d expected a small abode. But this was wide, denoting such breadth she questioned how someone could heat such a vast room. However, three chimneys told her she must not fear. The house was fit for more than one, perhaps for two or more.

The wind, her silent partner in her love of the sea, picked up her hair as she accepted Dáire O’Neill’s hand to alight. Her hat long gone in the melee in the churchyard, her curls flew wild. She smiled at the refreshment of wind and sun driving away some of her anger.

Around them, the coachman and footman carried in the hamper from which they'd chosen refreshments. It occurred to her that neither Dáire nor she had any clothes. Not a hairbrush. No tooth powder. How would they get on?

Beneath her feet, the earth was uneven and she wobbled. O'Neill grabbed her hand, and she allowed it. His touch was firm, gentle, and she resented that he'd caught her. But she welcomed his assistance to the bright emerald-green door.

Lifting a flowerpot to the right, he scratched the earth and produced a large iron key. One quick turn and he pushed the door open and extended a hand to her to cross the threshold.

At once, she was in awe. To the right was a large, open room with a huge rock fireplace and far too many chairs, settees, and chaise longues. Beyond, toward the back, she glimpsed hanging herbs, a huge, standing wooden butcher block, and the edge of yet another fireplace.

"The house is owned by a friend of mine who has offered it to me for as long as I wish."

"It is lovely." She would give him that. Even the accommodations to the left were more than adequate. These were sleeping quarters with two wide beds, and beyond, against the far wall, stood a ladder up through the roof. So sleeping quarters were available in the loft too.

"Let me take your shawl," he offered, walking forward, as politely as any well-trained butler.

Which, of course, had her smiling at him, if only fleetingly. Still, she shrugged out of it herself, unwilling to allow him to touch her and douse the dying embers of her vexation.

“Come, walk about,” he said, his appealing lips curving at the corners.

She strolled into the great room, the flames from the fireplace drawing her into an acceptance of things she could not change. Yet.

“Who set the fire?” She nodded toward the gathering room, where a blaze had taken any chill from the wood and stones.

“The caretaker. The owner, the Earl of Carlisle, said in his note that he sent a messenger quickly down here. He employs a man and his wife to care for the house and keep it always well stocked and clean.”

She glanced about, taking in the china teapot and its matching cups and saucers, the numerous thick-knitted shawls and blankets thrown over the backs of furniture.

“There is a cold cellar beneath the wash bin in the far room.”

She admired his ability to produce shelter for them. “You provide well. One would think you kidnap many women.”

His hungry eyes devoured her. “Only you.”

“I am honored,” she said sarcastically to kill the compliment he paid her with his need. She disliked herself for her peevishness. “Have you come here before?”

“No.” He strode around, walking into the sleeping area to sit and wiggle on the bed, before returning to the kitchen area and digging through the cold cellar. “We have a good selection of vegetables to cook for dinner.”

“Comforting.” She picked up a knit wrap and flung it around her shoulders. She was not as warm as she’d thought. “Do you cook?”

“I do.”

“Odd for a man,” she shot back.

He propped himself on the edge of an armchair, surveying the cottage with a grin. “Man or woman, one must eat. It is best if it is done with skill to honor the poor plants.”

That took her down a peg. She relented. “I look forward to tasting your efforts.”

“Tonight you will do that. Afterward, we can have the caretakers cook for us. Unless”—he grinned—“you care to show us your own skills with a sharp knife and a hot fire?”

“We should allow the caretaker to gratify us first. My talents are never worthy of any praise.”

“I spy a hip bath tucked in that corner over there. I’ll fill it for you tonight and leave you to a good soak.”

She followed his gaze to a fine-looking tub. “Where will you be?”

“On a walk in the yard.”

“You’ll be cold.”

“Would you care?”

“I wish no one ill, not even you.” She narrowed her eyes at him, the luscious creature, so louche in his loosened shirt and green wool waistcoat, his legs spread before her, showing off his manly length and form. Even his brown leather coat, draped as it was

beneath him, added to his piratical air. Try as she might, she could not dislodge the hunger he aroused in her.

“Are you not afraid that I will run away while you sleep?”

“You could,” he said.

“Why not?” She had to taunt him, didn’t she?

“You will not go at night. No one travels then, especially not a woman alone.”

A good point. She nodded.

“You will not go tomorrow or even the next day. I’m sure you wish to know if what I’ve said about Mercer and your father is true. If it is, it presents you with new choices for your future.”

“None of them as a married woman.”

He tipped his head in thought. “How badly did you want that?”

His vehemence took her aback. “I did. I went to Mrs. Dove-Lyon to arrange it.”

“To an honorable man.”

“Yet that did not happen. Should I suspect that you had anything to do with that switch from Mercer to that other man?”

Insult turned him to stone. His lips thinned. “Why would I?”

“Because someone hired you to ruin me?”

He barked in laughter, shot to his feet, and bent toward her. His lips a breath away from hers, he said, “What would be in it for me?”

“Money?”

“Trust me, my dear. No amount of money could tempt me.”

She was crushed. He didn’t want her...but he did? “Why not?” she whispered.

“To take you against your will?”

“No. No, I—”

“Because if I wanted you...” He let the words hang like ornaments on a tree. Temptations that blinded her. But she felt him, his breath of mint and coffee. She yearned to taste him, and he blinked, seeing her desire. Her eyes widened to regard his ardor as he reached for her and paused so close that she knew the phantom brush of his lips.

Still she felt the might of his hands on her shoulders, the strength in his arms inescapable, her need to be taken by him, reassured of his desire for her, fierce as a wild animal.

He breathed, hot and hard. “Because if I wanted you, my dear, there would be only this—and no more.”

She absorbed his anguish, equal to her own. Yet his hands still possessed her and she ached to know one more thing. “You won’t kiss me?”

“Nor will you kiss me.” His arching brows challenged her. “Why? Say it.”

“I liked you. More than that—I trusted you.” The truth was all she had this close to him. “Now I have so little.”

He released her shoulders and strode away, his back to her as he approached the door...and turned back. His gaze was a black river of regret but his jaw was set, his lips firm, when he spoke. “So to smooth our way, until we tear down this wall of distrust, we go as we were when first we met. Two who met along one path and looked not beyond it.”

Dáire moved away from the house and Blanche. But he did not rush. He fled.

Blind with fury at his impetuous behavior to run away with her, he strode down the winding lane toward the sea. The dark mist of the night shrouded him as he cursed the wrong he had done her. The clouds met the rolling horizon, blue-black above an undulating sea. He sat upon a boulder, cold, uncaring.

He thought of no way out, save what he'd shared with her. He'd not predicted how savagely he could take her, abscond with her...and even argue with her that his action was warranted. What a fool he was. He loved her. To distraction. To insanity.

He had a streak of rashness. Always had.

“You'll pay a price for that some day, me boy.” His father's words struck him hard as that man's fist often had.

Since the day that man had been shackled in Waterford City gaol, destined to be put on a convict boat to Australia, Dáire had spent his life proving the man wrong. Since the age of ten, he'd worked and saved his pennies, read everything put in front of him, and jumped at any chance to make a wise choice, do a good turn, gain a friend, cure a problem.

He'd had so many successes. In Waterford. With the Marquess of Linhaven. In Dublin. With that man's two notable friends. His move to London after his mother died, taking his two young sisters and finding clues to muddles and crimes that no one—not lord or lady or Bow Street runner—could untangle. Building a name for the unusual, a notoriety for the righteous outcome, a reputation cloaked in discretion. One valued by those in need of redemption and restoration, but misinterpreted by those who knew him not. Like Jonathan Rivers.

Now for that man's daughter, the woman he loved above all others, Dáire challenged himself to fix this mess he had created and do it soon. He must.

Else, how could he live with himself?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

She took to the bed that night sore at heart for all she had lost.

But, exhausted, she slept like a rock, awakening only once as dawn broke through the little window on the far wall, and she saw Dáire on the smaller bed opposite.

When he had returned from his walk, she did not know. She'd been asleep. That in itself surprised her...and not. She trusted him. Trusted him, heaven help her. She'd considered this man, his chest bare, his toes sticking out from the blankets, so innocently handsome in his sleep. Different from thousands of others, wildly so, in his work. Articulate in his speech, he was accepted by Society—paid, too, for extraordinary work. His very person was kind, funny, proud, with a regard for her so high, so strong, that he had sent his men to follow her and protect her. That he had also ruined her plans for her future was now the matter she had to work out. The first thing she could do would be to stop haranguing him for what he'd done. Then she'd take his offer to help her create a new future somewhere, somehow.

With that as comfort, she'd rolled over and gone back to sleep.

As the sun streamed hot and bright through the window and the trees rustled in the wind, she twitched her nose. The aromas of bread and coffee filled the air.

Wrapping a blanket around her shift, she padded out to the tiny kitchen.

“You do cook!” She confronted him in his chair in the great room.

“I do. Only this today”—he raised his mug toward her—“but the caretakers came early this morning with fresh rolls, oats, and a pitcher of milk.”

“I am very grateful.”

He looked like a horse had run over him. His beautiful, wavy umber hair was disheveled, his eyes red, his body lax in the chair. He gave her a half-smile. “Help yourself.”

She sliced the bread and poured her coffee, then took her plate and cup into the great room.

She chose to sit opposite him in a chair before the very healthy fire. “You’ve been up and active early.”

“I usually am.” He regarded the dancing flames.

Very well. He’d decided to remain cool toward her. Wise of him, considering how she had lambasted him yesterday.

“I promised you a bath last night, but when I returned you were asleep. I will pump the well for water now, and heat it for you to wash. Then I thought we could walk into the village. Mr. and Mrs. Campbell—the caretakers—tell me it’s just a few minutes to the west, and a dressmaker has a shop there. You’ll need clothes.”

“So do you.”

He drained his cup. “So do I.”

After their return to the cottage, Mr. Campbell arrived, leading two horses saddled for a ride. Dáire asked Blanche to come outside to meet the man. She was pleased to find the fellow hale and hearty, with a smile wreathing his pudgy face.

“I asked Mr. Campbell for these two animals. Lovely, aren’t they? I thought you

might like to see the countryside,” Dáire said, his attitude toward the caretaker and the two mares free of his and her argument. She admitted to herself his friendliness was what she preferred, and decided to encourage Dáire to show to her.

“I would very much like to ride.” She’d like the diversion. The two of them had fallen into an uneasy truce, avoiding any discussion of any length at all. Blanche had no more anger to pour out on him. It got her nothing.

To be on horseback again was a welcome release from the tension between them. No one else was in sight. The sun cast a golden-red glow upon the water and the air was calm. The world, it seemed, was hers—or theirs—alone.

She spurred her mare to a trot, and the animal managed to keep her pace upon the sandy rocks well away from where the waves crashed upon the shore. Her wedding gown certainly was no garment for taking the air on a horse, but she had let go of all the aspects of her life that did not fit her new reality.

At first, Dáire was a few lengths behind her. His mare as adept as hers, he was soon beside her. He even had a smile on his face.

“Might we have these horses each day?” she asked as they returned to the cottage.

“If you’d like that, I’ll ask.”

“I would. I’d also like to meet Mrs. Campbell. She was kind to make us dinner. I would like to go with you to their home and give her my regards.” While they had gone to the village, the couple had brought a good stew and hung the pot on the fireplace hook.

When they returned, the sun had set. The cottage appeared somehow lived in. From the aromas of stew and coffee, the little house had the fragrant sense of home.

The next day and the one after that, they strolled to the village. The dressmaker had finished two gowns for Blanche. A shift and petticoat, too. Blanche hated her half corset and asked for another. She'd rather none at all, but needs must if one had more flesh to display than the average girl. Best of all, the seamstress had made a riding jacket and skirt of lime green and navy worsted wool.

Dáire had been supplied with two shirts from the modiste. And Mr. Campbell had gone into the next village and found a men's tailor who had a few pairs of breeches ready made. He'd bought them for Dáire. All three fit.

Blanche noted how well the new breeches clung to the might of the man who had captured her as if he were a pirate on the high seas. He stood in the kitchen one late afternoon, the dying rays of the sun falling over his dark hair and casting shadows over his sculpted face and magnificent muscles. He was a rare specimen of manhood, and her blood heated with her appreciation.

She shouldn't admire him so. But then, from the moment they had met, he had thrilled her with his virility. If any man were destined to carry her off with him, she would have said it should be Dáire O'Neill.

Later, in the village tearoom, they sat and enjoyed fresh bread and roast beef with strong mustard. As they ate, Blanche noticed a man in the square carrying newspapers under his arm.

Dáire followed her line of sight. "I'll buy a copy. Stay here."

Her good spirits flew away with his words. She wanted to know what was said of her and Dáire, and the others.

The Sussex Inquirer had nothing good to say.

““An outrageous act of countless heathens occurred last Friday at St. Pancras Church,”” she read aloud. ““A lady, alighting her coach to attend her wedding, was abducted in the sight of all. The intended bridegroom, a gentleman known to many in Society, attempted to rescue the lady from her captor. Alas, that was not to be. She was carried off, objecting loudly to her kidnapper. Bow Street has been advised, and we understand a very concerned lady who is a benefactor of the kidnapped bride has hired a runner to find her friend.””

Blanche closed the paper in her lap and took another sip of her tea. “The piece glosses over much of what happened.”

“Leaves Winthrop’s name out,” Dáire groused. “As for the other omissions, I think Mrs. Dove-Lyon had a hand in that.”

“She would not appreciate a full revelation of her involvement. Who I am. Whom I was to marry. How that poor man disappeared.” Blanche took Dáire’s hand across the table. He’d had no news from his men of the welfare of Henry Mercer. “Your men must continue to search for him.”

“They will find him. Never fear.”

“Do you think your friend, Lord Carlisle, had any influence on what was printed?”

Dáire took a big breath. “He might, yes. For the world to know that I kidnapped a lady on her way to be married would not reflect well on his choice of me to accomplish his work.”

“Nor on you,” she added, concern growing that Dáire would pay dearly for his abduction of her. “If you had been named, such an incident might reflect poorly on all your future work.”

Dáire squeezed her hand. “Let us not worry. The news, bland as it is, is good. No names were printed. No aspersions cast.”

“Not mine,” she said with gratitude. “Nor yours. Nor my father’s.”

“We will count our blessings that this is all the news they printed.”

As they ate their supper that night at the tiny table near the fire, she noted their new companionship. Without her anger, without his fear for her marrying a less-than-honorable man, they had relaxed into their normal selves. She enjoyed the camaraderie—and wanted more. With the hope that was possible, she ventured to ask him about himself.

“I’d like to know why you and my father are at odds.”

The question made him blink. Those long black lashes swept down and hid his surprise.

“Please tell me.”

He paused.

“Three years ago, I took an assignment from a viscount and his wife to find letters missing from her writing desk. She had employed a new maid recently, and she was my first suspect. The girl did confess immediately upon questioning, but she had given the letters to her beau. That man was employed by your father—and he’d given over the letters to him. When I questioned him and he told me your father had them in his possession, I got up to go. He had a knife, which he brandished, but he was not as fast nor as skilled at its use as I was. In the scuffle, I pierced some organ near his ribs, and he suffered badly for weeks, trying to recover. Your father had one of his men come for me. I was taken to your father’s house in Seven Dials, blindfolded, hands

tied, and legs shackled. He told me then and there that the man I had attacked was one of his best second-story men and he hated the loss of such a good fellow. You see, he'd been poorly ever since we fought. He'd not fight, nor climb a second story, nor walk very far ever again."

She crossed her arms, envisioning how fiendish her father could be. "So my father threatened you."

"He told me I should never come so close to anyone near and dear to him..."

She caught her breath. "Or...what?"

"He would see I suffered the same disabilities as his man. Worse, actually." Dáire shoved back his chair and shot up to pour them draughts of whisky from his flask. "Fortunately, I have never since had an assignment that was in any way connected to your father."

"Until now." She knew what her father was capable of. How easy it was for him to steal or cheat or lie...or kill.

Dáire handed over her glass. "I knew the day would come."

She placed her fingers over his and would not let him go. "But not over me."

He pulled away and strode to the hearth. "When I met you on that bridal path, I thought of nothing but you. How could I?" He whirled to face her. "You were everything I'd ever wanted. No, not that. Everything I'd never known I wanted."

His declaration drew her like a magnet. He wanted her. Had from the beginning. She rose, put her arms around his waist, and absorbed the stalwart man he was. He didn't push her away but crushed her near. His body was her shield, his might her strength.

“You knew who I was?”

“Yes! I knew who you were! I’d seen you before. Last year, it was. One of my men pointed you out to me. But then, after we met, I feared for you because of your father. I had you followed—yes, to keep you safe—and witnessed a terrible argument you had with him in the middle of Piccadilly.”

“That day he threatened to make me marry.”

Dáire raised her chin. “Oh, my darling, he should never have done that.”

“No,” she whispered, emboldened. Her lips brushed his. Her eyes closed. “You are my heaven and no one will ever compare.”

He muttered something in a lyrical language she surmised was Gaelic. He might have cursed, but she heard his words as ones of endearment.

“Sweet woman.” He pulled her even closer and claimed her mouth. This kiss, so much like the first, was filled with a passion that lifted her, buoyed her to a new and wondrous heaven.

She fell into the aura of peace and desire, contentment and need. She clutched him close and kissed him back time and again until he broke off and picked her up. She felt the chaise longue beneath her...and Dáire O’Neill pressing down above her.

His hands were in her hair, his lips on her throat, his legs tangled with hers. She arched into his warmth and drew him forth to settle all his strength upon her. She ran her foot along his calf and tilted up her hips to wrap her legs around his hips.

“Oh, my girl,” he moaned, and dropped his forehead to her chest.

He did not move, but nestled as he was in the hollow of her aching body, she reveled in the hot length of his desire for her.

“We cannot,” he ground out, and tried to push away.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

“D on’t go!” She grabbed his cravat.

“I must.” His mien was of a man tortured. “If I don’t go now, this will not end well.”

She lured him with a smile. “Or better than you predict.”

He hung his head and tried to pry her fingers from his clothing. “I must not stay.”

“You must not go. I want you, Dáire. I do.”

He shook his head. “You don’t mean it. What you feel is fellowship, friendship, desire, lust. It cannot be for us.”

She nestled closer to him. Her thin muslin gown was no armor to save him from the spike of his cock to her belly.

“You want me,” she whispered, her lips against the corner of his mouth. “Admit it.”

“Want you?” He pulled back far enough to sear her with blue eyes alight with love. “You cannot imagine how much, how long, how often I have wanted you.” He spread his fingers and grabbed down the bodice of her gown. Pushing down her hated corset, he kissed and laved her pointed, hungry nipples.

She squirmed in his embrace. More of this, and she would have him. Him and his damned logic was what he needed from her. “I know at last who you are. What you have done for people. For many. Now for me.” She yanked on his cravat. “Look at me, please, Dáire.”

“I did this, this abduction, to save you. But I did not save you for me.”

“What if you are the only man I want?”

“That cannot be.”

“Only you say no.”

“I know it to be true. I am not...respectable.”

“Yet respected.”

“I am not noble.”

“Yet honorable.”

“Oh, Blanche,” he pleaded as if he were a dying man, “let me go.” He lifted her fingers tight around his cravat and brought her knuckles to his lips.

“Never.”

“Blanche.” He weakened.

She heard the break. “I want you here tonight now as we should be, together.”

“My darling, I cannot take you and ruin you for another man.”

“For me, there will never be any other man.”

“I will not dishonor you!”

“Then marry me.” It was what she wanted. Him forever.

He stared at her, horrified. “That’s impossible.”

“You have no wife. No mistress. No lady bird.” She cupped his cheek and tipped her head like a coy girl. “I am who you want. Make me yours. Please, my love, won’t you marry me?”

Shock ran through his veins like lightning. His fingers dug into her arms so badly that he feared he’d bruised her.

He let her go and stepped back.

She followed.

He put up his hands to warn her off. “To marry you would be the blessing of my life. But you know we cannot do it.”

She gave him a lift of her chin in stern defiance. “I only know that we are meant to be together. That you care for me. That I love you.”

He ground his teeth. “You know nothing of who I am. What I come from.”

“Oh?” She had the gumption to arch a brow at him. “Then tell me quickly—and we will have done.”

“The son of a thief sentenced to a convict ship! A poor Irish boy who scrabbled to please the earl whose house he lived in. A lad of fourteen who took his two young sisters and sailed for London and tried”—he groaned and ran his fingers through his hair—“tried to build a life, a reputation no one could destroy!”

She took a step forward, an airy move that charmed his sore heart. “I admire that boy. So too that man. Hardworking, dedicated, and kind, he is. I want him as my own. All others pale beside him. No one else fills my heart. So tell me, Dáire O’Neill, do you love me?”

“Ah, lovely woman. You tear me from my purpose.”

“Is your purpose to live alone? Unloved and unloving?” She put both hands to the flat of his chest and whispered, “I doubt it, sir.”

A blaze of joy blinded him. He wound his arms around her and lifted her. His lips on hers, his life hers, he’d have her to wife. He would, by God, have her for life.

He marched to her bed and sat her on the edge. One knee to the floor, he knelt before her. “I’ll never make you ashamed of me.”

She combed his hair back and gave a slow and ardent smile. “I know.”

“And you will not want for anything.”

She wound her arms around his shoulders and sighed. “Nor you, my sweet man.”

“We will make peace with your father.”

She brushed her mouth on his. “Necessary.”

“And you’ll marry me tomorrow.”

“Because you love me.”

He bore her down to the bedding. “Aye, my lady. Because I love you.”

“Show me.” Her gray eyes twinkled with mischief.

He tickled her ribs and she squirmed, but drew him up over her. “I long for you.”

“Ah, sweetheart, you do me an honor, but now I must rally all my skills to keep you.”

“No skills. Just you.” She rolled away from him and stood on the other side of the bed. Then, with dexterous swipes, she removed her gown, her petticoat, and wiggled, toeing off her slippers. “You’ll have to come help me do away with this new corset.” She tugged at it. “I hate it anyway.”

He went still, hard as stone, at the prospect that all of her would be his. “Perhaps if I’m really good at that,” he crooned as he rose and strolled to the other side of the bed, “you can give up wearing it for long days and longer nights.”

“Oh.” She wiggled up against him, kissing his cheek and his jaw as he struggled to get the damn thing off. “Let’s make that happen.”

In the second her corset fell and her shift disappeared over her head—in fact, quick as he’d had her in the St. Pancras churchyard—he grabbed up her naked body and put her to the sheets.

She drew him close and rubbed her breasts across his waistcoat. “I love the feel of the wool, but you really are too formally dressed for this, sir.”

“You tempt a man, then complain.”

She tsked. “Get to business or I’m leaving.”

He pushed up to his feet, tearing at everything he wore, even his damn boots. But then he was upon her, rubbing his long, sculpted body on her pretty nipples and her

belly, her hips—and her hot, wet core. He groaned, head to her cleavage, his cock alert, ready for action, and he knew he could not take her like a rogue.

But she was undulating, smiling, the minx. Her eyes dreamy, her hands wandering down his torso, she explored and found him.

“Oh, this is lovely,” she whispered as she stroked the iron length of him. “Let me look.”

Of course, she’d never seen a man. Thrilled, eager to plunge into her, he gulped back a laugh. But he’d further her education like the eager boy he was. He led her fingers to circle him, and she moved aside to watch what she did to him. “I’m not beautiful like you.”

“Whoever said that,” she cooed as she rubbed her thumb over his tip, “was wrong. You’re soft as silk, and beneath so hard. I think you could drive nails.”

He burst into laughter and cupped the curve of her mons. With his mind set, his mouth on one luscious, hard nipple, he slowly spread her creamy flesh and drove inside her one finger, then another and another.

She arched, her eyes clamped shut. “That’s wonderful. Don’t stop. Don’t—Oh!”

He grinned that his eager fingers had found that special little part of her that could thrill her. He could bring her to heaven and let her throb and feel and want. But he was too greedy, wanting her first orgasm to be with him inside her, loving her, proving to her she was his forevermore. Checking his drive to claim her, he gave her a small sample of his girth.

“Oh,” was her response.

Another inch or two—and the world tilted for him.

“More,” she said to that.

Undone, he sank inside her until there was no him or her, just them.

“You’re big.”

“You’re sweet.” He slid away once, and she gasped. “Here I am again,” he whispered against her lips. “And again.” And more and more until all of him was spent and she lay, gasping, her walls still gripping him and giving him the surrender he’d never imagined could be his.

Hours later, he kissed her shoulder and padded away to clear and clean their supper dishes. He was dousing the candles when she appeared in the great room. Naked, before the red embers of their fire, she was a gorgeous figure of a woman. Struck, he stood, a candle snuffer dangling in his hand, savoring her heavy breasts and rounded hips, her long thighs and the shadow of what lay between them.

“Leave all that,” she said as she went to him and put the snuffer to the nearby table. “I am cold and lonely and pining for your touch.”

He did as he was told. Why not? She would soon be his wife, and he’d obey her day and night until he died. He led her back to bed and made love to her twice more during the dark hours. Once at dawn. Later, after he lifted her from the warm water he’d poured into the hip bath, he fucked her properly, driven by her naughty words of abandon.

When she awakened once more, she strolled to him. His watch told him it was past three, he showed it to her, and she said, “We won’t marry today. Too late to find a vicar, I’d say. But maybe”—she sat in his lap and played with him to make him

crazed to have her—“tomorrow. We can’t go anywhere until I am thoroughly convinced you love me only.”

So, of course, he did what any red-blooded man would do—he had her once more. This time he treated her to fine foreplay with his tongue upon her silky, swollen flesh. After all, a gentleman had to show his wife all the benefits of marriage, didn’t he, if he wished to be cherished for the rest of his life?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

Three mornings later, they set out for London. But in Maidstone, they stopped for Dáire to introduce his future bride to his two sisters. The girls, fourteen and sixteen, hugged their brother and accepted Blanche at first sight.

“You’ll marry soon?” asked the eldest, Marie. To Dáire’s reply, she wondered if she and her sister Alys could go to London to be witnesses.

But he advised against it. “Blanche and I have matters to settle in London. They are complicated. One among them is that we must find a house. Plus you both must finish out the term. Come in August for the holiday, aye?”

With goodwill, Dáire and his sisters parted easily. As for Blanche, she grinned and took his arm as they sat in a coach that sped toward London. “I will have two sisters. Funny, I never thought I’d have so many to love.”

He kissed her forehead. “My sweetheart, you’ll have dozens to love.”

She sent him a look of pain. “That many children, eh?”

He widened his eyes. “More!”

She cuffed him. “You’ll have to work hard to pay for all of us!”

In London, Dáire took her to his house in Seven Dials. The place was old, in need of great repair, and in the rookeries, it looked fit for a man and business cloaked in secrets. Dáire introduced her to a few of his men. But he and she agreed that the place was not where they should live as a married couple. Blanche went so far as to

intimate Dáire did not belong in that part of town. He was no criminal engaged in nefarious enterprises. It was time to move.

First, however, the next morning, they called upon the vicar at St. Pancras. They explained their desires, and he married them that afternoon.

The day after, Blanche called upon her friends, Grace and Susana. Then Dáire and she rented a tidy, unobtrusive house near St. James. The two-story red brick was small, with six rooms plus quarters beneath for a housekeeper, butler, and cook.

They took possession of the nearly empty house the following day. At breakfast the next morning, Blanche reached for Dáire's hand. "We must go to Mrs. Dove-Lyon."

"I agree. She deserves our regard."

"I go with not a little trepidation," Blanche admitted.

"I say we need not fear her ridicule," Dáire said as he kissed her fingertips. "We know two things Mrs. Dove-Lyon believes in. Love and marriage."

"We have both," Blanche whispered, a smile on her lips.

However, the shadows of Mrs. Dove-Lyon's veil offered her two visitors nothing of her emotion. She was polite, cool.

Blanche shifted in her chair in the lady's salon. She feared that they had alienated a very fine woman whose friendship they sought to win. "We come here, ma'am, to apologize."

The woman tipped her head. "Kind of you, but you owe me none. For my distress at the news of the doings that day, I would say, Mr. O'Neill, 'tis you who owe me a few

kind words.”

“Aye, ma’am. More than a few,” Dáire said.

The woman waved a hand. “For running off with the bride? No, sir, none needed. From what I now know about Mr. Mercer’s secret activities, I should not have offered him to any woman as husband. However, for running off with my client, yes, I am inclined to box your ears, Mr. O’Neill.”

“Oh, ma’am, I wanted only to save Blanche.”

“Sir, you are fortunate I have a fine opinion of you. Yes, from the service you did me once before, I know your true worth.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I am honored at your reprieve.”

“I know well your benefactor, the Marquess of Linhaven. I will say even that we are friends. So I know the story of the young man who lived in his house in Waterford. I know his mother was Linhaven’s cook and that the boy did extraordinary services for his master. Even to the point where Linhaven benefited politically. Linhaven referred his friends to the young lad—and for them, too, he accomplished delicate errands requiring ingenuity and finesse.”

Dáire saw his wife’s brows go up in surprise. He had told her some of his background, but not all. To Mrs. Dove-Lyon he said, “I am pleased you can find in me reasons to trust my judgment, even though I abducted your client on her wedding day.”

“You had reason, did you, Mr. O’Neill?”

“A good one. You see, I had met my wife weeks before she came to you. I wanted to

marry her but thought there existed too many barriers between us and any happiness.”

She nodded, as if she agreed. “I hope you have a plan to surmount them?”

“We do, ma’am,” he told her.

“I am rather stunned at what you accomplished that day, sir. For one, you had Mr. Mercer followed.”

“I did. I knew of him and wished only to assure myself that he would appear at the church.”

“And you, Mrs. O’Neill?”

Blanche straightened at the sound of her new name.

“You went to the church that morning thinking you would marry Mr. Mercer?”

“I did, ma’am.”

The lady sniffed. “I questioned passersby, witnesses to the scene at the church. They told me you were shocked at the chaos before you.”

“I was, indeed.”

“I heard, too, that you were even more surprised at the appearance of Mr. Jack Winthrop.”

Blanche let out a sigh. “That is true.”

“And you bit him.”

Blanche winced. “He deserved it.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon had trouble clearing her throat of her chuckles. “From what I understand, he still cannot pick up a writing instrument.”

“Is that so? I didn’t think I had that much power in my jaw. Sorry, ma’am, terrible to say. I do wish him a speedy recovery.”

“I’d forward that for you, Mrs. O’Neill, but I doubt it would put salve to the wound of his pride.”

Both Blanche and Dáire coughed, attempting to hide their laughter.

The lady went on. “I am happy for you both. Life is best lived with one we love. You both have found that one person and decided to keep to them. I applaud your dedication. You are a fine example of devotion—however, I will tell no one that I approve of your shenanigans. Others will get the bright idea that they can abduct ladies at will, and for that gallantry alone, the woman may fall in love with them.”

Both of them left the lady with hearty handshakes and a lightness of being.

By the end of June, they were a busy married couple making a house a home. They had the floors sanded and polished. They ordered furniture from a cabinet maker. Upholstered chairs and settees, too. Blanche stocked the pantry with utensils and staples. Dáire hung draperies for her and lugged in heavy boxes filled with china, linens, and rugs. A new pianoforte graced the main salon.

Well pleased with how everything looked, Blanche stood in the dining room one morning and said, “You are no longer a resident of the slums, Dáire. People will notice. The people who need you and care about you.”

By September, many incidents indicated that they needed to act on family matters. Her father wrote that he was very ill—bedridden, in fact. He asked her to visit him. She did not reply for two days, but as she was ready to put ink to paper, she received another letter from him saying that he had worsened.

Someday soon, he wrote at the end, you must come.

She did not disagree with him, but she mulled over what she wished from any future meeting with her sire.

In the past few weeks, Dáire had worked with the Marquess of Carlisle and his friend, the Earl of Langley, on detecting espionage activities along the Channel coastline. During their meetings, Dáire took Langley aside and told him that he had married the fellow's niece. The poor man nearly fell to the floor, he was so overtaken.

When Langley had recovered and sank into a chair, he begged to know how Blanche had survived what he had been sure was a death sentence in an orphanage. Dáire outlined how Rivers had found her and saved her.

“Her father has led a life that is, shall we say, not commendable, save for his actions toward Blanche.”

“I would like to meet her, O'Neill. My brothers and I know how our father cast out our dear sister. Our mother approved, God help her. Now, today, I care not who Blanche's father is. I will deal with that, if I must, later. But Blanche I wish to meet. You love her, O'Neill, so she must be an astonishing woman. Do ask her if she would do me the honor of meeting her.”

Dáire had told her not only of the invitation, but of the fact that the Langleys—all five brothers and their families—were known in Society for their earnest values and good deeds.

She had been reluctant. “I will consider it, Dáire. But I give no promises. Tell them that, please.”

Days later, she brought up the subject at breakfast. It was the first morning in a few weeks when she had come down to dine. He noticed she ate little but toast and jam—and he longed to hear any explanation she might offer to explain her actions.

She savored her tea for a few minutes, then said, “I think we both need to reconcile matters with those in our pasts.”

“Is this what has bothered you lately?” Her distraction when they spoke of their future had become a regular thing.

“Yes, you mentioned that the Earl of Langley would like to meet me.”

“He is a man of ethics. Unlike his father.”

“Are you certain we should go?”

“I am.” Dáire reached over to her and pulled her to his lap. After taking her lips in a sweet moment, he pulled away.

“Would he want to meet in private? I am, to him, an embarrassment.”

“I assure you, my darling, you are not. He wants to welcome you to the house where your mother grew up...and to the family which is yours.”

“For my part, I would not want him to meet me, then change his mind about accepting me. I must consider Grace and my business. No scandal must taint her.” Blanche had visited with Grace soon after they returned to London, and her friend had welcomed her with open arms and tears in her eyes. “She has been good to me.”

“I assure you, Lord Langley is a just and honest man.”

She traced her fingers over the line of his jaw. “Then I will see him. Where he chooses will tell me much about his view of me and his own character.”

Dáire grinned and kissed her again with a hearty smack.

She got to her feet, but paused and turned at the threshold of the breakfast room. “That leaves my father.”

Dáire stared at his wife, resolved to let her make the decision about when they should approach her father.

“I say we should call upon him soon. Can you bear it, my love?”

Dáire smiled, relieved that they would make this attempt at rapport with Rivers. “You need it. I welcome it.”

“Good!” Her lovely face broke into a smile that lent sparkles to her eyes. “These things need to be settled before our baby is born.”

His heart did a little jig. With his own grin firmly fixed, he rose slowly to his feet and sauntered toward her.

“I wondered when you’d decide to tell me.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and nestled her against him.

“I had to be certain,” she whispered as she traced the line of his nose with the tip of her own.

“When do you think we should expect her to arrive?” He trailed kisses down her

chest to the tops of her generous breasts.

“ He’ll be here in March.” She flung back her head to allow him greater access. “In time for spring.”

“I think this calls for a celebration,” he murmured, his lips on hers.

“You always have such fine ideas,” she crooned as he picked her up and carried her upstairs to the bedroom.

The morning drifted away on delights of the future. They were lovers, matched, rational about the requirements for their safety and prosperity—and as prospective parents, they rejoiced.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

B lanche let go Dáire's hand as her father's man pulled open the door to his office. They'd left their carriage a few streets away and walked. The air, she said, would clear her head. She'd also declared that she alone would speak here. Dáire had agreed that this was her hour. He would speak only if addressed.

She'd last seen her father months ago. He had bullied her then. Now she would declare her independence again.

She was ready for his arrogance, his bluster. The narrowing of his silver eyes, the evil he showed the world—and her when he was thwarted.

But she was not ready for how much he had aged. The silver streaks that defined his wealth of hair. The set of his wiry jaw. Whatever the malady that had sent him to his bed earlier had robbed him of his ruddy complexion and given him a bit of palsy when he spoke.

He was a tall man. Not as tall as Dáire, but she noticed now that in the intervening months since last they'd met, he'd shrunk a few inches. He hunched. He made no mention of his condition. He was too proud to issue any statement of weakness. His lack of words told her, more than anything ever had, that he was human—and perhaps he had not long for this world.

His light eyes pierced hers, then went about assessing every inch of her.

“Come. Both of you. Sit.” He extended a hand to the two chairs before his gnarly old desk.

“Thank you, no. We will stand,” she told him.

When she expected him to sneer or rail at her, he sniffed. Crossed his arms. Then took a long look at her husband.

“You can go,” he told Dáire.

She felt more than saw Dáire shake his head.

“I will not spirit her away, O’Neill. What’s in it for me? Eh?” Her father gave them both another once-over. “Aye. So if you won’t sit, I will.” And he did sink into his overstuffed leather chair.

“I came to warn you,” she began, “that you must not try to interfere in my life again.”

“Well! Coming right to the point, aren’t ye?” he said with a flourish of his hand, but at once appeared sober. “I failed at the most important event in yer life, so why would I try again?”

She tipped her head, incredulous at his concession.

“Oh, I see. There is now another reason... So you are with child!” He glanced from her to Dáire—and his look was a mix of outrage and pride. “So, no. I won’t interfere. You both do as ye wish. I’ll not engage.”

With his all-too-ready agreement, Blanche winced. She didn’t believe her father would comply, but she would not stay to debate any little bit of his concession. She turned to leave.

“But, my girl, I’ve a price for that.”

She whipped around. “No! You’ve not the power!”

“Don’t I?”

For the first time, Dáire spoke. “Tell us your price, and we shall consider it.”

“Once a year, ye both come to Cheltenham. Four days. I have a house. Ye bring my grandchildren.”

“No,” Blanche happily responded. Once more she stepped away.

“Would you both live under the threat that I could surprise you one night in a rainstorm or one sunny afternoon when you seemed alone in the park? Would ye be at peace each day, knowing I’d destroy ye? That I could deprive ye of yer precious husband, Blanche? Or one child?”

She sucked in air. “You would not dare.” Would he? Would he kill one of his own blood? He had saved her, but was that a fluke or a precedent?

“Are ye sure?” He stared at her, then at Dáire. “Will ye risk it?”

Dáire glared at him. “I would destroy you, Rivers—and everyone who works for you.”

Her father smiled, sardonic and full of wrath. “But I am like some ancient beast. I have”—he wiggled his fingers—“tentacles.”

“You are no longer that powerful, Rivers. I know that the Earl of Langley cripples your dangerous web.”

“So it’s my threat against the chances you take?”

Appalled she had to make this deal to keep Dáire and her baby safe from her own father, she seethed. “Very well. Done! Once a year. Four days. When?” She would not live under his roof while she was enceinte.

“June. Every June. The first four days of the month.”

“Not this June,” she shot back. “I deliver this baby in spring. I will be recuperating. I will not travel with a young baby either.”

“Then, O’Neill, you will send me word of her delivery.”

Dáire nodded.

“Done, all of it. Goodbye.” She turned to go, and Dáire took her arm.

“I loved your mother,” her father said.

Blanche froze mid-step.

“She loved me. Although I knew ye would never bloom living in my house, I loved ye greatly. I am proud of yer ambition, yer courage. I saved ye from a life of despair. That is worth four days in June.”

Dáire and Blanche walked a few streets away from the shambles of filth, begging children, and women who solicited Dáire but drifted off as soon as they recognized him.

The two of them did not speak until they were once more in the cocoon of their home.

Blanche pulled the salon bell for tea. After it arrived and they partook in silent sympathy, she went into her husband’s arms. There she stayed until day turned to

night.

“Tomorrow will be easier, my darling,” Dáire told her as they climbed the stairs to their bedroom to change for dinner.

Today, she had faced the man who had saved her. Tomorrow she would face her uncle, the heir to the man who had torn her away from her mother and, in his cruelty, had killed her mother. Dáire declared the Earl of Langley was a kind and decent man.

But Blanche did not trust sight unseen. She did not forgive without proof. What could he give her for that anyway? Apologies. Useless as they were, such words could never fill the hole of catastrophe into which her mother’s family had plunged them both.

Dáire and her town coach idled in front of the pristine white mansion of her uncle, the sixth Earl of Langley.

“Do you meet him here when you have business to discuss?” she asked of Dáire as she clutched the collar of her new pelisse. That day her mother had last come here, the weather was a torrent of rain. Today, the sun blazed down even though it was very cold for mid-November.

In many ways, she had greater trepidation coming here to Mayfair than to Seven Dials.

But what could this Earl of Langley want of her?

“Let’s not agree to tea or anything else.” Blanche was adamant. “Just talk. A visit.”

“Whatever you want. I’m with you,” Dáire said.

She squeezed his hand in thanks and walked with him to the front door.

“Good afternoon, Mr. O’Neill,” the aged butler greeted them upon opening the door. Tall and bushy haired, he had a twinkle in his eye.

“Good afternoon, Haywood. My dear,” Dáire said, smiling at Blanche, “for years this gentleman has taken care of me whenever I come to this door.”

“Ma’am, allow me to say that I am thrilled to see you here,” Haywood said. “I knew your mother. So did many of us here remaining, and we have missed her smiling face. I see now that you inherited her beauty and her demeanor.”

“You are very kind,” she said as she handed over her gloves and pelisse. From what she knew of her father’s description of the former Earl of Langley’s household, congenial servants had not been as plentiful as silent, obedient ones.

Up the stairs they went past portraits of family long deceased. On the first floor, Haywood opened double doors to the main salon. Like the rest of the house, this was done in shades of cream and blue. The sapphire of the painted walls was a perfect backdrop for the handsomeness of the tall, lean, blond-haired man who strode forward, both hands out to welcome her.

“Dear Blanche,” he said when she stood frozen to the Aubusson at his approach. “You are the very image of your mother. Adelaide was our joyous one, never daunted by the vicissitudes of life.”

“Your memory of her is so good to know.”

The earl’s expression sobered. “Your husband has told me of your travails. Allow me to express my condolences, Blanche—as long overdue as they are. But I assure you they are heartfelt. Every one of my four brothers regretted your mother’s

disappearance and her terrible demise. When we heard no more of her fate that rainy day, we knew our parents did nothing to find her.”

“Your mother approved of your father’s actions to send my mother and me away?” The very thought that one woman would do that to another, one who was her one daughter, set her blood afire.

“I am ashamed to say it, but yes. Our mother was as much a tyrant as our father. She would have no hint of scandal at her door. Association with a man like Jonathan Rivers was anathema.”

“I’ve never been very proud of it myself. Though I will say that he did retrieve me from the hell of an orphanage in Billingsgate and gave me a different name and education.”

“Whereas the great and illustrious house of Langley gave you nothing.” The sarcasm of his words meant much to her.

“Exactly.”

“May I suggest we sit down? I would like to explain to you what you do not know.”

She stood her ground. “Forgive me if I sound unforgiving, but I will take no excuses.”

“I will give you none.”

“Then there is nothing to be gained.”

“I hope there is, Blanche. My brothers and I are dedicated to one thing in our lives. That is the resurrection of the integrity of the family of Langley.”

“Ah, well, sir.” She still had not moved. “I am not capable of helping you do that. After all, I am the illegi—”

“Never say it!” A spark of anger hardened the earl’s countenance. “Please come and allow us to talk to each other. I wish you to know how we brothers loved our only sister. How we thought her the best at archery, the canniest at cards, the ablest trainer of any dog, and the finest horsewoman. Addy was also the most soothing when one of us had been beaten for a misdemeanor by our father.”

With each revelation, Blanche found herself strolling nearer to the settees. At the last, she sat with a sigh and her heart full of anguish. “Did he do that often?”

“He did.”

“That’s despicable.”

“Our mother was no better.” The earl pulled up the cuff of his very fine cambric shirt. There on the inside of his wrist was an old but distinctive outline of a burn from the end of fire poker.

Blanche sucked in air. “How could you live with that? All of you?”

“Like many children, you know not what the rest of the world is like until you have the experience and the wits to compare one to the other.”

Compassion flooded her. “I am so sorry. How... When were you able to...cope?”

“Our mother died soon after our father told us he had seen the last of Addy. That she had run away, escaped, really, from the carriage to take her to obscurity.”

“Nineteen years ago.”

“Four years later, our father died. Unloved, unmourned, he was put to the family vault in Langley in Sussex.”

“You became earl,” she said.

“I did. I threw out every leather strap and fire poker in this house and in Langley. No one has abused anyone since. We brothers took to healing ourselves of any hatred, and I am happy to say, we each live happily. I sit in Parliament and work on special projects with your husband. A good man, he is.”

“Indeed.” She reached over to grasp Dáire’s hand. He’d come to sit beside her at some time in the last few minutes. “And your brothers? Are they married? Do they have children? Do you?” She bit her lip. “I am sorry. I am too forward.”

“Not at all. You are our niece. And in a family where our loving wives give us all males, you will be our pride and joy.”

She chuckled, astonished she had asked such personal questions, but more surprised she was laughing. Here. In the house where her mother had been spurned. Where she had been condemned. Blanche sobered.

“I am pleased to tell you that all of my brothers await us in the grand salon. They have brought their wives with them, and all their sons. I warn you—they are a noisy gaggle.”

“And you?” she asked, hoping to meet his wife and his sons.

“My eight-year-old son waits to meet you with the others. My wife passed away two years ago. I am, as you see, a widower with a large and growing family.”

The reception of her by her boisterous family was a heart-pounding joy. They partook

of tea while her uncles told stories about her mother.

Climbing into their carriage two hours later, Blanche sat replete, happy, full of all the joys of family she had never known and now so dearly savored.

“That...” she said to Dáire, and he curled his arm around her and kissed her temple.
“That was...”

“What was it?” Dáire grinned, ear to ear.

“It’s what my father wants.”

Dáire gazed down at her. “And?”

“It’s what he shall have. For four days each June.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm

August 10, 1805

D áire's sisters arrived with a flourish midafternoon on the tenth of the month.

They had both come for two days' visit soon after Adelaide was born. But this visit would be for three weeks until they returned to school.

On the day of their arrival, they scrambled out of the traveling coach Dáire had hired to fetch them from Maidstone. They ran past the butler, yelled upstairs proclaiming their presence, and skidded to a halt in front of Dáire, who met them on the second landing.

"Wonderful to see you so well and here at last." He hugged and kissed them both.

"Where is our sister-in-law, sir?" prodded Alys with a toss of her long, fiery curls.

"Upstairs. The master. She is nursing the baby," he told them, trying to keep his voice level and urge them to a sense of calm. "Now, I suggest both of you come with me for only a minute. Then you may go wash your hands and your faces, have a cup of tea, and unpack. Later, we will have a leisurely visit during dinner."

"Let's go," said Alys.

Dáire entered the room first, leaving the two girls at the door to giggle and whisper in their excitement.

Addy lay asleep in Blanche's arms.

“Shall I let the girls in, or would you rather wait until she’s awake?”

Blanche got to her feet, her precious bundle secure in a crocheted blanket Susana Edmunds had made for her. “Yes, let them come. Only for a minute, though. I just got her to sleep and I want to put her down. After that, we can visit for a few minutes. Then I want to nap.”

“If you are up to this.” His wife continued to be very tired. She nursed their daughter, refusing the offers of her husband, her aunts and uncles, and her father to find a wet nurse for the baby.

“I am,” she said with a bright smile. “I am always ready for family to visit.”

He waited as Blanche walked to the alcove where they had placed the cradle. Soon, he would have to order a cabinetmaker to fashion a larger bed with sides. Addy grew quickly—her feet now touched the end of the little bed.

“Come in, please,” he called to his sisters at the door.

They rushed inside, quiet as little mice.

Standing around the cradle, the four of them beamed at the baby and each other in turn.

Then Dáire raised a hand to shoo them all toward the bedroom and the hall. Blanche emerged with them to hug and greet both girls with kisses to their cheeks. “Do go settle in your rooms now. I must retire. I’ll see you at dinner, and we will have a jolly time hearing your news.”

“I got top marks for history and etiquette,” reported Marie with pride.

Alys pressed her rosebud lips together. “I did well in dancing and pianoforte.”

“All of that sounds useful.” Blanche liked to praise others for all the positive things they accomplished.

“Run along now,” Dáire urged them. “We’ll see you both at dinner.” Then he offered his arm to Blanche and they returned to their bedroom.

Alone together, they strode in silence to their bed. There, Dáire sat her down. As he did each day at this time, he removed his wife’s shoes and unfastened the pins in the bodice she’d hastily secured after nursing their daughter. Her gown gaped, and the sight of his wife’s added contours from feeding their daughter had him smiling to himself.

“Those pins are such a nuisance.” She sighed as she reclined on the bed.

Dáire stretched out beside her and pulled her into his arms. “Dressmakers should make gowns that allow a woman to nurse her children more easily.”

“More buttons.”

“Or ribbons,” he added. “Anything other than those prickly things.”

She nuzzled him and kissed his throat. “The best would be to do without them all.”

“I know. How long do you think a mother continues to feed her child?”

“Corrine and Delilah tell me eight or nine months.”

He nodded. Both ladies were married to Langley men, and therefore Blanche’s aunts by marriage. Their relationship among her mother’s family was a rich and rewarding one. The ladies often appeared for tea, and did so more frequently now that Blanche was recovered from the drain of the first few weeks after the birth.

Blanche and Dáire's relationship with her father remained strained, stilted. But the man had written a month after Addy's birth to ask if he might view the child. The four of them had met at a bookshop near Lambeth. Blanche had written to stress they would meet for only five minutes and that he must come with only one bully boy to assist him. Dáire had brought two of his runners as their protection.

Tears had dotted Rivers's lashes when he saw the babe.

"She's as lovely as you were. As beautiful as her grandmother, too."

When Blanche told him they had named the baby for her, he'd had a terrible time suppressing a sob of joy. He was weak, frail. In the intervening months, he had lost more weight, more color, more height.

Blanche had cried after he left, fearing he was not long for this world. "I wish we could be closer, but I cannot do it."

She had good reason. Recently, rumors in the newspapers and from Dáire's associates in government said that one of Jonathan Rivers's men had been caught associating with a double agent for France. The man had killed the suspected agent, and though he claimed the fellow was an agent for France and he had done his duty to Britain to do away with him, he had no proof. He was not absolved. He had gone to prison, accused of treason.

Dáire sympathized with his wife's wish to find more in union with her father, but he had no solution to the problem.

Instead, now, he did the only thing he could. Dáire inched closer to his wife and offered comfort. "I understand, my darling. But I do believe your father does, too."

She fought her tears and sniffed. "I want him to know how grateful I am for what he did do for me."

Dáire threaded his fingers through her hair and smiled down at the woman he adored. “He knows that also. It’s why he feels free to ask to visit.”

She snuggled closer. “I love you, Dáire O’Neill.”

He dropped a kiss to her fragrant hair. “It is the honor of my life that you do.”

“And a joy,” she added as she pulled back to unwind his cravat.

He stayed her hand. “That way is a joy, but not wise.”

“Who says?” She cocked a brow at him, whimsy in her twinkling gray eyes.

Desire surged hot through him. “You may still be...tender. Unready.”

“I’d say I am ready.” She pushed up and climbed over him to press her body along the top of his. “I want to show you how dear you are to me.”

His heart overflowed as he gripped her shoulders. “You’ll tell me if I hurt you.”

“You cannot. Ever.”

And so Dáire O’Neill took his darling wife to him for the first time in three months.

That afternoon burned bright in his memory for the next forty-two years he lived. In fact, his wife’s invitations to intimacy were the charming aspect of her recovery from the birth of each of their four children. She loved him, and that was more than he’d ever expected of this life or the next.