



Lyon's Lover (The Lyon's Den Connected World)

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Category: Historical

Description: A wastrel lord and an ex-courtesan forced together must pay the price of their past sins.

She's planning for the future...

Having enjoyed a successful career as mistress to various members of the Ton, Isabella Rossi longs to walk away from her past. She wants a normal life with all it entails—a husband, a home, and children. Isabella seeks out the Black Widow, owner of the Lyon's Den gaming hell who also runs a specialized matchmaking service.

He's living for the moment...

Heir to an earldom, Luke Lynwood is addicted to drinking, gambling, and avoiding his responsibilities. But when he gambles more than he can afford, the Black Widow offers him an alternative way to repay his massive debt.

Under Isabella's reluctant tutelage, Luke must come to terms with his lack of self-control and face his father, which might just take a Christmas miracle.

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I sabella Rossi, Belle to her closest friends, was a master at controlling her expressions. Her solicitor, Frank Green, would never guess she was uncomfortable with their discussion.

“You are well situated, Miss Rossi. I assure you, you can purchase a house, a husband, and three lovers, and have plenty left over.”

She arched a manicured ebony brow. “Now, Frank. You know that I’d never need to purchase lovers. ’Tis the other way round in my world.”

His cheeks grew pink.

She loved earning his blushes. It had been the highlight of her visits these past few years, when she no longer had to worry whether she’d have enough to live on when she aged out of her profession.

She’d been open with him from the beginning, not wanting to work with anyone squeamish about the fact that her funds were derived from her role as a courtesan.

“I beg your pardon. Of course. You get my meaning, though.”

“I do. Thank you.”

“I’ve been telling you for years that you have enough to retire. Why not do that and find a husband in your own time?”

“If I wanted to continue to woo men, I’d keep working and get paid for it. I prefer to

be up-front with them about what they are getting and to have some choice, rather than settling. In return, I'm happy to give them something they need."

"If I may be so bold as to ask, why?"

"Why do you choose to work with more women than men?" She flipped a hand. "Men are tiresome, needing constant pandering. Even when they want me to be in charge"—she grinned as Frank's face flamed again—"I still must toe a line between too much and too little. They are so fragile."

"Then why marry?"

She frowned at the invasive question, but it was fair given their conversation. And she'd entrusted him with enough details of her personal life and her money. There was no point in drawing an arbitrary line at this. "I am two-and-thirty, and I want children. More, I wish my children to have some chance at respectability, which means marriage. Besides, I am at the end of my patience with contracted partnerships that include end dates. The idea is to choose someone who will not require quite so much fawning. Indeed, I'd appreciate obsequiousness toward me, for a change."

Frank returned her smile. "Where do you plan to purchase such a creature? I have not heard of a market for those."

"Ah, you needn't worry about that. My role has always necessitated having quiet sources of information, and my patrons are generous with the offer of favors."

He blinked, his mouth dropping open.

She couldn't resist. "A satisfied customer is a friend for life."

Her peals of laughter at his beet-red face did much to alleviate her discomfort with

the topic of buying a husband.

Belle paced the ladies' waiting room. With no eyes on her, she'd been unable to draw her mantle of faked calm around herself. She kept shaking her arms out to dry her sweaty palms and to loosen the nerves quivering through her.

She had chosen not to share her source with Frank, but he would recognize the name of the woman she was waiting to see. Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon, the Black Widow of Whitehall, was never discussed in drawing rooms, but most of London whispered about her behind closed doors.

Belle had no doubt that Mrs. Dove-Lyon knew exactly who she was and why she was there, despite never having told a soul about this plan. The woman likely had a list of Belle's past benefactors as well. After all, in addition to the gaming hell in full swing a floor below, the widow ran a very elite matchmaking service catering to a specific niche of British men and women. There were those like Belle, who had extensive funds but a threadbare—or worse—reputation. And there were the many men on the lower level, whose gambling losses or other debts far exceeded their purses.

The proprietress was extremely selective in who she was willing to match. Belle only hoped that rumors of the woman's past as a courtesan were true, or close enough that she'd be willing to work with Belle.

She wondered how, if the rumors were true, Bessie had managed to secure marriage to Colonel Lyon, as the Lyon family was well respected in London circles. After all, who would want to marry a courtesan? It did not seem to matter that men came to marriage with numerous liaisons behind them, some including courtesans. Some even had current mistresses. However, most still expected their brides to be innocent in all the ways of the world.

Sighing, she threw herself into a chair. What if even the Black Widow of Whitehall

could not help her?

A door across from her opened. She'd been met at the side door of the blue building by a scantily clad woman who'd shown her to this room via a deserted stairway and quiet hall.

A middle-aged woman in a rather severe black dress beckoned her. "Mrs. Dove-Lyon will see you now."

Belle stood, smoothing her skirt in order to give her sweaty palms one last furtive swipe. Following the woman into the next room, she entered an office, darker than the waiting room, holding a massive desk. The dim chamber held other furniture in a similar style—large dark pieces with ornate curves that looked several decades old.

Behind the desk stood a woman wearing a bonnet with a veil that covered all of her face except her mouth and chin. With more candelabras behind her than in front of her, even her uncovered features were obscured. Like her assistant, she was in all black. She gestured to a guest chair, and Belle meekly followed the unspoken order. It was perhaps the first time in her adult life she'd acted this meek. By sixteen, she'd had to fend for herself to have a roof over her head and food to eat. Navigating her chosen path took a fierce concentration on self-preservation that did not allow for timidity.

"Miss Rossi. What brings you to my establishment?" The Black Widow asked in an even tone before sitting behind the desk.

Unable to discern emotion without seeing the widow's expression, Belle fought the urge to bite her lip.

"I understand you offer help to women like me."

“What help are you looking for, dear? I offer a myriad of services. For instance, you might desire a list of potential next clients, as I understand you are between callers at the moment. I do not think that is why you’re here, but I’d prefer not to guess.”

Pulling her cloak of calm about her, Belle vowed to not let this woman see her nerves or her surprise at the knowledge of her single status. One side of her mouth curled in a lazy smile. “You are correct, I do not need help in finding clients. Indeed, if that were what I wanted, my reputation is enough to have someone on my doorstep with the scribbling of a single note.”

Bessie nodded once, waiting her out.

“What my reputation does not allow for is a list of suitors from which to choose a husband, as I suspect you guessed.” She had a strong suspicion that flattery would help her cause. A woman who ran an empire such as the widow’s would likely appreciate recognition of her power. “Thus, if I could not control the selection process, I wanted the best. Hence, I requested this audience. Can you find someone willing to marry me?”

The widow’s mouth twitched at her question, but quickly returned to neutrality. “I have no doubt I can. Before we negotiate terms, can you tell me what you’re looking for?”

Belle stared at her, at a loss. She’d been so preoccupied with worry that a man would have to be rewarded for choosing her that she had given no thought to what she’d like beyond her facetious comment to Frank. She wasn’t certain she wanted to put words to preferences for fear of getting her hopes up. Surely her profession— past profession—was a big enough hurdle?

Bessie waited, silent and still.

Right, then. Belle waved off her fear of rejection, of never having a family, to be revisited when there were no witnesses. “It likely goes without saying, but someone gentle and kind. Someone trustworthy with my heart as well as my blunt. No one who would harm me or run about with a mistress. And yes,” she smiled again. “That is perhaps ironic, but I want children, a family. Not an absentee husband simply for appearances.”

The widow nodded. Apparently, she did not need to take notes. “What else? Can you be more specific about day-to-day interactions or attributes?”

Belle was at a loss. “Hmm, cleanliness—”

The widow slashed a hand, and Belle clamped her lips shut. “Let’s try this. Who among your past clients was your favorite? What about him did you like?”

“Oh.” North popped into her head. The Earl of Northumberland—she barely recalled his actual name, Giles, because everyone referred to him as North. He was enough of a favorite that she’d spent the past few years choosing benefactors who she thought might have the same traits. Her choice to retire now stemmed from her age and concern that she was almost past her child-bearing years, but also included a thread of frustration at never having found a match as good as North.

Bessie watched her, making her want to squirm and wish again that she could see the woman’s expressions.

The widow’s voice remained as calm as a lake on a windless day when she pushed for more information. “’Tis apparent you have a favorite, at least. Would you care to share your thoughts on his characteristics?”

“We had a true companionship. It wasn’t all about bedroom activities. We discussed our favorite books, the news, many things. He took care of me when I was sick. We

both understood loneliness and not fitting comfortably into society.”

“What of family?”

“For me, my wish to have one. He talked about what he’d do differently with his son if he could and what he missed about his wife.”

“Why did the affair end?”

“He hated London, and I was young enough to still crave the balls and late nights and social life. When he went nor—” she coughed to cover her slip “—home, he invited me.”

“Do you regret not going?”

“I cannot say. He never offered me a lifetime. So I’d have had no way of earning the same money or investing it as effectively as I had by staying. I suppose neither of us was quite in love, although we cared for one another a great deal.” But she’d always wondered if she’d done the right thing in refusing.

Bessie nodded. “That information is helpful. I will consider the matter and send word for you to return.”

Belle knew when she was being dismissed. Rising, she thanked her hostess and allowed the woman waiting in the hall to walk her back to the ladies’ entrance where her carriage waited. Her nerves had settled, whether from handing the matter over to an expert or due to fond memories of North. Either way, she had no choice but to wait.

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Luke Lynwood groaned even before prying his eyelids open. Taking stock, he felt confident that he was in a bed, although he did not recall getting there. There was a pillow under his face, linens rather than upholstery under his hand, and his boots were off.

Squinting one eye open, he verified he was in his own bed. During his father's unexpected summer visit, his friend William had taken him to the home of the woman William had been wooing. The next morning, hungover, Luke had been rude to his hostess and her guest, who had berated him the entire time she'd ridden him home in her carriage.

Now it was autumn again. Luke had not visited his childhood home in North England in over a year, and William was in love and determined to marry the widow who had once opened her home to Luke.

Luke's newer friends from the gaming halls were never the ones to help him home. They usually ended nights in similar situations as he, with grooms dragging them to their carriages and to bed. For that reason, Luke kept the London house sparsely staffed so his father wouldn't get wind of his antics.

The Earl, as he liked to think of his father, would not approve. Nor did Luke, but he hadn't convinced himself that sobriety would be an improvement.

The Earl had set high standards very early in Luke's life. When he lost his mother to a fever at age twelve, he lost the only buffer between his failings and those high standards. The gruff patriarch had withdrawn even further from emotions, sending him to boarding school to prepare him for Oxford, where The Earl had also attended.

Not once had Luke been asked what he wanted, and his pleas to stay home where everything and everyone were familiar after such a loss were ignored. Still reeling from his mother's death, he struggled at school, but managed to make two close friends. One was William Stanton, another earl-in-training who had already befriended the housemaster's son, Nathaniel Follett. After hearing Luke's story, they dubbed him "South" in honor of the distance he felt from his home and his father. The three of them all needed relief from the rigid boarding school rules and designed night and weekend escapades whenever they could, forming a lifelong bond.

Until Luke had dropped out of Oxford last October, William had spent as much time helping him with his studies as the better student did on his own. Why, Luke could not say. He was quite sure he did not deserve the support, but he was nonetheless grateful for it. More recently, William followed him around on his quest for oblivion or came to find him and get him to his family's home in Mayfair most nights.

Luke wondered if Nate would take over looking after him once William married. Nate was a blacksmith, an incredibly skilled one. He'd opened his own forge after only a year of apprenticeship due to intricate side work with a member of the Ton who made leather accessories for bedroom intimacies. Smiling against the bed, Luke remembered discovering Nate's personal projects and unique interest. He was glad Nate had found others who shared it, enabling the partners to profit nicely from a niche business.

Luke wished to avoid interfering with Nate's success, and forcing his friend to come find his drunken carcass would not allow the smith the sleep he needed to work with red-hot metal and fire all day.

Sitting up, he groaned. His father had made it very clear he would be forcibly brought home for Christmas if needed, as he was not to miss a second family holiday. As much as he disliked being others' mess to clean up, the mere thought of facing his father made him crave a drink.

Twisting his lips, he refrained from a sarcastic laugh only for the sake of his pounding head. Family holiday, his arse. He doubted his father would recognize a family at fifty paces.

By mid-afternoon, Luke was bathed and dressed with toast and tea sloshing uneasily in his belly. He wandered the house, fighting the pull of the decanter in the rear parlor and counting the minutes until he could go to his club.

On his third pass, the knocker banged. He cringed at the abrupt sound then lingered in the hall to see who it was. When a footman opened the door, William stepped inside.

Luke breathed a sigh of relief at the friendly face. “Will, ’tis good to see you. How fares the ‘shadow earldom’?”

William’s father was in his cups more than he was sober, and William and his mother had managed the earldom around him since before William had attained his majority. Now at two-and-twenty, they were almost complete opposites but still the closest of friends. The irony that his friend had to deal with his shortcomings in addition to his father’s was not lost on Luke. It just wasn’t enough to stop him from pouring whisky down his throat.

“Well enough that I had time for a stroll and thought to come see you for a few minutes.” They passed the pile of unopened letters from The Earl, and William stilled, gesturing. “What gives?”

The Earl had visited last summer to celebrate Luke’s nonexistent degree. Luke had sidestepped confessing his lack thereof. During their last dinner together, his father had issued a command: return home for Christmas or his funds and lodgings would cease to be available. After the visit and decree, he’d stopped reading or responding to his father’s letters. Why, then, did his father continue to write? What else was there to say? He did not think The Earl had discovered his lack of a degree. Of course, he’d

know that if he read any of those missives.

Leading William into the back parlor, he poured them each a whisky. Passing William his, Luke threw his own back and poured himself a second before sitting.

The Earl would be proud of William. Despite helping his mother work around his drunken father for a year, his friend had finished his studies. They really should have each other's paters. The Earl could enjoy William's maturity, while Luke deserved William's drunken father who had no expectations. If only life were that fair. Instead, at least three of them had to suffer—he couldn't speak for William's father.

“What is there to say to him? I have to find my way north for Christmas. I'll deal with him then.”

“Does he know about Oxford yet?” William asked.

Already frustrated by his father's criticism of his hard-won marks at university, Luke had given up on studying or trying to please The Earl and found solace in drink the summer before his final year. He'd lasted a mere month of the Michaelmas term before packing it in and returning to London. When he left, William had asked him to find Nate and inform him of his presence in Town; Luke was sure it was to keep sober eyes on him. “I doubt it. If he were going to get wind of it, I should think it would have been before his last visit.”

“South, I'm concerned about you.”

Luke rolled his eyes. This was not the first time William had raised this, and Luke was tired of the subject. “There is nothing to worry about. I am fine. Simply enjoying my freedom whilst I have it. Yours was cut too short, Will.”

However, like it or not, he was The Earl's only heir. One of these days, he ought to

learn the responsibilities he'd inherit. A chill ran through him at the image of himself working alongside his father, trying to learn how to manage the earldom. He gulped the remaining whisky in his glass and debated pouring another.

William tried again. "Don't you grow bored with doing the same thing every night?"

"Ha!" His laugh was bitter. "I could say the same to you or to any of our friends. Do we not all repeat the same activities day after day? To what end?"

"That is up to each of us to define, I'd think. Nate follows his passion in his work. I find purpose in ensuring the people who rely on the earldom are hale and hearty. And I have Charlotte for passion. What is your passion, South?" William was wooing the Dowager Countess of Peterborough despite her being a widow almost a decade his senior. Although he'd only met her that one hungover morning months ago, Luke had found her lovely, unlike her sharp-tongued friend.

"Finding the warmest dice in the city."

"No, that is simply a bad habit. I know you. You don't love that. You are doing it out of boredom. Perhaps 'tis time to try a different activity."

Luke gusted out a sigh. "Will, I appreciate your effort. I value your friendship. But please. I have no purpose until The Earl is gone. Even then, I'll likely muck it up."

His father's ire was to be avoided. He recalled leaving the gate to the garden open at age ten. Wild hares had feasted on a month of the household's vegetables. The Earl had paced round and round, lecturing him on the importance of responsibility for staff's meals and family funds. A quarter hour later, his mother had found them thus and had tugged him out of the room with an admonishment to his father that boys made mistakes. After she was gone, there was no one to remind his father of that.

William brought him out of the memory. “That is your father talking. And he’s wrong. I wish you could see that. I wish you’d told Nate you were back and spent more time with him.”

“I know.” Instead, he’d tried every gaming hell in the city, linking up with a new crowd of aristocrats with generous allowances like his. Young men with too much time and too little maturity on their hands who filled the hours with drinking, gaming, and wenching. Unlike William and Nate, they did not make him feel guilty about his lack of purpose. “I didn’t want to drag him into my mess. He works too hard for me to burden him. As do you. I am not your responsibility.”

“Nor do I see you as such. You are my friend.” The clock struck six in the evening, and William rose. “I must go. I came to tell you we’ve unearthed yet another tangle of papers and I may not be able to get away for a few days. I’ll ask Nate if he can check on you, but—”

“Don’t. The poor chap starts work around the time I usually get home. Leave him to his passion, his ‘folly.’ I shall be fine.”

“I’ll send a note round when I free up, and we’ll go to Nate’s neighborhood pub to meet him, shall we?”

Luke waved a desultory hand. “Sure.”

William let himself out.

For once, Luke did not pour another drink. Instead, he sat rolling his glass between his palms. Perhaps his friend was right and he needed a passion. Or to be someone’s passion. The friend of William’s widow... Mrs. Ross? Rosso? had been annoyingly bossy, and he’d been painfully hungover, but her sensual allure had kept him riveted. Months later, he still remembered her rose scent, midnight wavy hair, and luscious

lips. His cock stirred half-heartedly, sluggish from whisky. He didn't recall the last time he'd been interested enough in a wench to act on it. Spirits and dice were his lovers now.

Luke glanced at the clock again and heaved a sigh of relief. It was time to head to his club and forage for dinner and mates to drink with until they had gathered enough steam to sow their oats at the tables again.

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Belle had been so hopeful when Bessie Dove-Lyon's note had arrived only days after their meeting. She spent as much time on her toilette as she did for a first meeting with a new client. After all, this next visit might include an introduction to her future husband. She was almost past safe child-bearing years as it was, and she was more than ready to move on from the shadow world of the demimonde.

Following the black-garbed assistant into the Black Widow's office, she cast surreptitious glances to the corners for a gentleman. Even in the dim light, it was apparent there was no one else in the room.

Bessie gestured her to a visitor's chair and sat behind her massive desk. "I have reviewed your file and have some prospects in mind. However, in the meantime I have need of your expertise. Your fee will be reduced to reflect this service."

"I beg your pardon—what service?"

"I seem to recall that you helped a young actress over a laudanum dependency a few years back. She ended up leaving both the stage and London to avoid temptation and is quite happily married to a vicar, of all things."

Belle blinked. The fact that Mrs. Dove-Lyon kept abreast of most of the Ton's goings-on was well known. She'd had no idea that the woman's knowledge extended to the working class.

Hester's face swam in her thoughts. Belle had kept ties to the theatre where she'd once found refuge with some vague idea of paying forward the help she'd received from an actress. When Hester struggled with the demands of her work—and the men

who sniffed around backstage—and fell down a dark well of laudanum, Belle had stepped in.

She'd taken the young woman, barely older than Belle had been when she'd first found the theatre, to her home. She'd made mistakes, not realizing the woman would look to spirits and wine in the absence of laudanum. They'd fought—arguments that nearly became fisticuffs. And finally, they'd found calm acceptance for the girl. She was sober enough to understand what she loved and hated about the theatre, London, and even her life.

Belle had called in a favor from a client and sent her to Devonshire with a promise of work and a safe bed. There, Hester had reestablished her relationship with her Almighty and in the process met the man she married. But that month of overseeing Hester's retreat from dependency had been overwhelming. She'd had to sever ties with her patron as she could not be as available to him as she should. The experience was not something she wished to repeat.

“You are correct.”

“A young man has been coming here most nights the past two months, drinking too much and betting beyond his means. As you know, I have an image to maintain and cannot let this continue without him finding some means of payment. Thus, he must be removed or I shall need to contact his family regarding collection.” She turned a hand. “I have plenty of business from people who can pay their debts without adding to the negligence of young lords. I do so hate those establishments that continue to allow men to get further and further into debt with no way to pay.”

Belle held her breath, worried she knew what was coming.

The widow continued. “You are just the person to help him. Not many have the patience and experience to help someone reevaluate their choices. Even fewer could

do so without harming their reputation.”

Belle’s lips twisted. No one need worry about protecting her good name. Ironical that the widow wanted to capitalize on the very reason she was here bargaining for her future. But not only did she hate the idea, she did not want to delay her quest for a month. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I am not a nanny.”

“No, but you have been a teacher in the past, if I’m not mistaken.”

Belle looked at her sharply. There was no way the widow could know of her training Charlotte in certain bedroom skills her former husband had desired... was there?

Bessie added, “Given the child’s age, consider this more of a temporary governess post. It shouldn’t take more than a month.”

The Black Widow never asked. Her word was law.

Belle reminded herself of the goal. Someone interested in more than a contract, more than her playing whatever role they chose. She wanted permanence and reciprocity, and most of all, children. So... “I suspect I don’t have a choice in this.”

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After supper and several drinks at his club, Luke stumbled into the main gambling room at the Lyon's Den with two friends who still remained upright. They always saved this establishment for last so they could shore up their courage with whisky. Games here were high stakes, and those stakes were not always blunt.

Along with the traditional games, there was an area separated by velvet ropes where customers were invited to make more unique and dangerous bets. The winners' purses for these were significantly heavier, but so were the risks. At the very back was the infamous hazard table. If one was willing to offer marriage as stakes, that was the table to play at. A man had a certain amount of time, Luke did not know how long, to either win his gaming debts back, or to sign a marriage contract. It also was not the usual marriage contract. Rather than naming a bride, it allowed the establishment's owner, Mrs. Dove-Lyon, to choose a woman she found suitable.

For those bored with the usual card and dice games, that roped-off area was a lure after a few drinks. Luke had been attempting to convince his friends to venture past the velvet barricade for a fortnight.

Tonight, he went straight toward it. "Look, they have the tightrope. Come, lads, 'tis a simple matter of balance. And it isn't high enough to do any serious harm, even with the bed of nails underneath it."

His friends groaned in unison. He'd discovered this place a few months ago and had been pushing them to try some of the wilder games. He'd been insistent enough that he'd earned a new nickname. These friends had made a play on his name and the Den and dubbed him, "Lyon." He preferred it over South, which needled him with reminders of his father.

“Not again, Lyon. Let’s play some whist.” The most sober—or least drunk—friend attempted to divert his attention.

“We’ve already played that.” And lost . He’d have to face a reckoning of his losses one of these days, at multiple gaming houses. “’Tis only a yard or so high. At worst, you’ll end up with a few pinpricks.”

“Let’s get a drink first,” his other friend slurred.

“I won’t say no to that, especially here.” The Den had the finest spirits and a better chef than even the finest men’s clubs in Town, no doubt to keep men in the place longer.

One drink turned to two, then three. Finally, Luke convinced them to try the tightrope.

The employee overseeing the tightrope game watched them approach, stifling a grin behind a slender hand.

Luke frowned. The fop was clearly amused as Luke fumbled to release the velvet cords.

After watching for a long moment, the young man stepped forward. “To your left, my lord.”

“Oh.” There was a convenient opening between two of the posts for visitors to walk through.

Stumbling through, he turned to his friends. “Who’s first?”

“You.”

“Right, then. How does it work?”

“You can play against yourself, and ’tis a straight bet. I make the odds. Or you can bet among yourselves and the house takes a cut.”

“Oh, I bet I could get farther than either of you,” he garbled, turning to the other two.

“Let’s hear the odds for betting against ourselves, what?”

“Certainly. For you”—the game host nodded at Luke—“odds are ten to one against you making it halfway, twenty to one for the full length. For you two, seven to one and fourteen to one, respectively.”

“Twenty to one!” Luke could put a sizable dent in paying off his vowels at the Lyon’s Den and other establishments with that kind of blunt. The hope those odds gave him stifled his curiosity as to how the young man had come up with them.

“What’s the ante?” his friend asked.

The employee had been gazing upward to his left, to what seemed like the third floor. A beat after the question, he nodded and looked back at them. Tilting his head toward Li-Na, the bookkeeper behind a barred window, he said, “Your bet is your gaming debt owed the house. Do you need me to get you the exact amount?”

Luke was not drunk enough to want to hear that figure.

His friend whistled. “Double or nothing. No, ’tis more like double or-or-eh, I can’t do the math. Lyon, what shall it be?”

“I’m in.”

He shed his jacket and shoes, sure that his stocking feet could balance better on the thick rope strung taut between two columns. He scrambled up the ladder and clung to the column as he placed a foot onto the tightrope. One step out, his arms windmilled and his foot clenched, curling around the line. It suddenly felt as thin as twine and as sharp as a wire. The second step put both feet on the cord as it flexed under his weight. His stomach lurched with it, and he swallowed hard. His whisky-blurred vision tilted, and before he could right himself, he crashed. Hundreds of nails dug into his side. He rolled to his back, and they stabbed new holes into his flesh. “Help me off, help me off!”

His friends doubled over in laughter, yelling that they weren’t braving the nails to get to him.

Other spectators called out, “Roll off,” “Scoot over on your bum,” and other ideas.

The pricks of pain along his shoulders where his waistcoat ended and only his linen shirt protected his skin, as well as in his bum and legs, made the whisky in his belly swirl and threaten to reappear. The ceiling above whirled. He closed his eyes, but the blackness spun just as fast.

Pale and sweaty, he sidled along the torture device and requested his jacket. Someone tossed to him, and he used it to pad his forearms to lever himself like a crab onto the carpet where he lay face down, panting.

The young man went to a knee next to him. “As much as I appreciate the view from this angle, my lord, your presence is requested upstairs.”

Luke groaned. Pushing to his knees, he attempted to stand. Swaying, he waited for the nausea to subside.

His friends stood along the rope, having declined to try their luck.

“Be back in a few.” He waved them off and turned to the woman in black lingering behind the game host. Nodding, he followed her to a curtained alcove that held stairs.

Climbing them nearly did him in, but he clung to the banister on the last step and waited again for the world and his stomach to stop turning. When she led him into an antechamber, he collapsed into the closest chair. “Please... may I have water?”

After a few careful sips, voices intruded upon his consciousness. He listened for a moment. ’Twas two ladies, one presumably the Black Widow, but he could not make out their words.

The same woman who had led him upstairs reappeared from a different door than he’d entered through and gestured to him.

He grabbed his water and stepped through the doorway. Another woman—also all in black, with a veiled hat that covered most of her face—stood behind the desk. He clutched the door handle for balance and tracked his eyes around the room searching for the other—

A familiar figure turned to look at him. Grimacing, she scanned his disheveled hair, clothing and stance. It was William’s widow’s friend, Mrs. Ross, or Rosso. Whatever her name was.

Shaking her head, she said, “Clodpate.”

He bowed. “Wench.”

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Belle clenched her jaw so hard her teeth ached. She should have asked for a name before she agreed to this charade.

At his sloppy bow and rude greeting, she folded her arms. Apparently, the drunk imbecile wasn't so drunk he'd forgotten referring to her as a wench on their first meeting several months ago.

Charlotte's young lover had been present—she seemed to recall that the men were friends. William had attempted to smooth things over by referring to this young fool as a clodpate. The moniker stuck in her memory, as it was so appropriate. Then the hungover idiot had sketched a lame attempt at a bow and trotted out a trite apology. Deciding to teach him a lesson, she'd offered a ride home and gave him pointers on how to “beg one's pardon” or simply beg, ensuring he suffered being awake and lectured for the entire ride. The lesson had clearly not stuck, so how was she to put him on a new path in life?

This was the last thing she needed. Chaperoning an idiotic youth was one thing. A grown man with a bad attitude and friends in common was quite another. For all he was attractive, with that thick head of auburn hair, pale skin that denoted his late-night hours, and long, lanky frame, he was incorrigible. She had husband hunting to do; she was done with catering to privileged lords who thought she was beneath them.

Turning to Bessie, she said, “No.”

The widow tilted her head. “As you said, you do not have a choice. This is part of the price of my services. You are welcome to find another matchmaker to help you hunt

for a husband.”

She’d already admitted that. But seeing this young entitled lordling had prompted a last-ditch effort.

Clodpate sputtered, “Husband? You want me to marry her? But she’s a—she’s a—”

Both women turned to glare at him, waiting for the end of that sentence.

“Need I remind you that your debt to my establishment, already substantial, has just doubled?” The widow’s tone was ice. Belle was surprised frost didn’t appear on the lordling’s eyelashes.

He gulped and swayed.

“You can do what I say here, or I can write to your father requesting payment. Your choice.”

Belle glanced around for a rubbish bin when his face paled at that statement.

“No, I—”

When he straightened, she stopped worrying and cut him off. “What makes you think I’d marry you? I can do better. I’m to be your nanny whilst you grow up. Which”—she turned to glare at the widow—“could take much longer than a month.”

“He only needs be sober and have the ability to stay so.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

The privileged lord thought he had a say. “Wait, I haven’t—”

“Haven’t you? Or was your father a viable option?” Belle mocked him, not waiting for the widow to reinforce his situation.

“Right.”

“Look at it this way, Clodpate, you’ll get lots of practice begging for the next few weeks.”

Belle sat across from a snoring Clodpate in her carriage, hoping he would not wake up spewing and ruin her upholstery.

Glaring at him, she forced her anger aside to devise a strategy for handling the coming days. His drinking seemed compulsory, and based on the widow’s reference to his vowels, his gaming might be as well. She only hoped snuff and laudanum were not included in his vices. She’d seen too many courtesans end up as streetwalkers because they’d turned to those from unhappiness. Most of them had not survived. The ones who did had help, so she understood why Bessie had requested her guidance.

But why her? And why did the widow want to save this dissolute lordling out of the dozens in her establishment every night?

Deciding to have this out, she kicked him and was grateful she’d worn boots when she encountered his Hessians.

He started and snorted, sliding to a semblance of upright. “I beg your pardon. Must have dozed off.”

She rolled her eyes. The same trite phrase offered out of sheer habit rather than a genuine desire for forgiveness. “Do you recall the elements of a proper apology?”

He blinked at her, his gaze foggy with sleep and drink.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Sincerity,” he ventured.

“No.”

“You used another word, but yes, that was one.”

“Fine. Penitence. Being truly sorry.”

“Sincerity,” he repeated with a smirk.

She raised her brows, and her voice was as haughty as she could make it when she replied, “Do you feel you’re in a position to argue with me?”

“Penitence it is.” He sighed, his eyes sliding closed.

“What else?” she snapped, kicking him again.

He dragged his eyelids up. “Er... a willingness to correct it or do something to atone.”

“And?” She hid her surprise that he’d remembered those two, given his current state.

He lowered his gaze and muttered under his breath, repeating the two components he’d already listed. Grimacing, he raised his head and shrugged, the picture of helplessness.

Gritting her teeth, she growled, “Identifying the reason so you recognize it earlier the next time and ensure it does not happen again.”

“Ah. Right. Thank you.” He leaned his head back against the carriage wall, his eyes

drifting shut.

“We are here.”

The carriage rolled to a halt.

Clodpate did not seem inclined to move, so Belle waited for the footman to set the step and hand her out. She swept inside her house. He could follow or not.

Damnation. She needed the Black Widow to fulfill her part of their bargain, so she had to ensure he got sober. Which meant getting him inside rather than leaving him on the street or allowing him to wander off to the nearest tavern.

Waiting in the hall, she watched him stumble down from the carriage and squint at the house. He took his time meandering inside.

Tapping her foot, she fumed silently. She'd hoped to be done pandering to titled men, being at their beck and call. Her requirements for Bessie Dove-Lyon should have included no titled lords, or at least no need for obsequy. Although, what did she know of marriage? Perhaps occasional obsequy was required to keep the peace. She'd have to really like her husband to manage that. Although, she wouldn't mind some directed her way.

Opening her mouth to summon Clodpate, she hesitated. She did not recall his name. Did he know hers? Bessie had not introduced them, as their reactions had made it obvious they'd met before.

“Shall I continue to call you Clodpate, or would you prefer your name?”

His gaze sharpened a fraction, even through the last of his drunken state. “Shall I continue to call you Wench, or would you prefer your name?”

She managed not to smile. He had forgotten hers as well. 'Twas less embarrassing at least. "I hate Mrs. Rossi. It makes me feel ancient and far too much like a governess. Isabella will do for now. You'll have to earn the right to call me Belle as my friends do."

"Fair." He bowed. "Luke Lynwood at your service. Known as South or Lyon to friends, heir to—"

"I don't care. Lord Lynwood, please follow me, and I will show you to your room." She gestured and turned to start up the stairs along one side of the entry hall.

As they climbed, she debated whether she should put him in the front room, farthest from her, or the middle room that backed on hers. After having men come and go any time they pleased, she valued her privacy. But if he'd been drinking like this for months, he had a long painful road ahead of him. Also, given her promise to Bessie Dove-Lyon, she should keep him close.

Opening the door to the bedroom next to hers, she stepped aside to let him pass.

His red-rimmed eyes, a shade browner than his hair, rose from where they'd followed the sway of her hips to meet hers. Pacing forward, he stopped before her, his gaze roaming her face and lingering on her lips.

Clenching her jaw to avoid flicking her tongue over the part of her he scrutinized, she waited. Any courtesan worth her salt knew how to handle an overzealous lord who hadn't earned her time, and particularly a drunk lover. But lud, the boy was handsome, even with his eyes and nose puffed from excess.

He made his play, thinking her passive, leaning in.

Stomping her boot on his, she placed both hands on his chest and shoved him back to

land against the doorframe.

“Wha—?”

“Go to bed. There will be no touching or kissing without permission.” She’d borrowed that from Charlotte’s introduction to her young man, but her friend wouldn’t mind. Heck, she’d probably giggle over it, as the men were friends. Come to think of it, she needed to work out how to tell Charlotte about this whole mess. She hadn’t yet confided her plan to marry, much less how she was going about it.

That was a problem for another day. Right now, she needed to get this drunken buffoon into bed. Alone.

He drifted past her, as though she had all night to wait on him.

When he neared the bed, she commanded, “Sit.”

He obeyed without thinking, then looked surprised.

“Remove your boots.”

He smirked. “I’m happy to remove whatever you’d like, Isabella.”

After he struggled for a moment, she stomped forward to help. By the time she was done, he had lain back on the bed and was half-asleep. Leaving him there, she placed the boots in the corner by the wardrobe.

Halfway to the door, she changed her mind. While he was in no shape to run off at the moment, she didn’t know what he might think was a good idea when he awoke. Taking his boots with her, she left to purge the house of the few spirits she kept on hand, mourning the loss of sherry, her favorite after-dinner pastime when alone.

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L uke woke face down and as usual, took stock. Pillows, linens, bed. Check. But the linens smelled different than his, and the light hammering against his eyelids was from a different direction than his bedroom window.

Blinking his eyes open, he slammed them shut again. What cretin hadn't closed the curtains? Or had someone opened them before he was awake?

He frowned. The more important question was where he was. He tried to bring his last memory of the night to mind. He shifted, and a spot near his knee twinged in pain. The fall from the tightrope crystallized. Then the meeting. Then... Isabella.

Had he managed to kiss her? He remembered trying, but his head had been pounding, and all he'd wanted to do was sleep—well, after a kiss.

He needed tea, toast, and a stiff drink to talk through why he was there. He hoped she'd have a clearer idea than he did.

Rising, he looked down at himself. He had apparently struggled out of his boots and jacket during the night, but everything else was twisted around him.

Straightening his vestments as best he could, he availed himself of the pitcher of frigid water on the dresser to wash his face and hands, wet down his hair, and wake himself up. He took in the small but well-appointed guest room, done in tones of silver and gold. It felt welcoming, a neutral backdrop to whoever stayed there. The only thing missing was his boots, which he could not find anywhere. He'd even checked under the bed.

Having been vertical for longer than his belly liked, he called it good and exited the room on stocking feet, spying the stairs.

He descended gingerly, his grip on the handrail so tight he expected the wood to groan under his hand. His stomach never enjoyed being up this early, so he rarely was, and the anxiety around why he was here and what the Black Widow expected did not help.

He caught sight of the longcase clock in the hall. Good God, it wasn't even noon. A passing footman pointed him to a door. Hoping it was the dining room, he stepped into the entry.

It was a back parlor with a very decorative hostess. Isabella reclined on a tufted navy settee with tea, resplendent in a sunny yellow dress that accentuated her dark hair and golden skin. He sucked in a breath. He'd have preferred tea first and her second, but he'd take them together gladly to enjoy her beauty.

"Good morning, Lord Lynwood." Her tone was unreadable, flat. She almost sounded resigned, but his head hurt too much to think about why.

"Good morning, Isabella. Please, call me Luke. I'm unable to locate my boots."

"Hmm. I still think Clodpate suits you best."

There was no polite answer to that, so he remained silent, hoping for a cup of tea.

She saw his gaze and waved a hand toward a matching chair and the tea tray. "Help yourself. I did not agree to serve you, only to supervise you for a short time. I took your boots for safekeeping until you get yourself together."

He gestured to her cup with the pot first, but she declined, so he poured and doctored

his tea, sitting back to take a long draw. After a minute, he felt brave enough to venture, “About that... I am not certain I understand what the agreement was. Could you perhaps elaborate?”

“Apparently, the Black Widow is either finished allowing your debt to accumulate, or she thinks you’re worth saving. I am to help you get out from under your ‘bad habits.’”

Her lips twisted as she said the last words and distracted him for a moment. Their lushness and berry color were sublime. But... “Why do you say it like that?”

“I think ’tis more than a habit at this point, which also means ’tis going to be more difficult to stop. And no matter what I do, if you don’t actually want to stop, it won’t stick. I’ve seen it before.”

“You have?”

“You don’t get to my age in my line of work without having seen people become dependent on a variety of substances.” She shrugged.

“I can stop any time. I am not dependent on drink.” He ignored the twitch of his shoulders and elevated pulse at the thought of no whisky. A headache stabbed at his temples. Draining his teacup, he poured another.

“Really? We shall see about that.” She arched a dubious brow. “Shall we take a stroll to the park then and enjoy the sunshine?”

He gave an involuntary shudder. “Ah, perhaps later.” Or never. “I’d need my boots. Speaking of which, what about my home, my clothes, my responsibilities?”

“Oh, have you been so riveted on your duties then? Is that why when I sent a man and

a note to your house to collect clothing, he found a pile of unopened letters and invitations?”

He groaned. “Tell me he didn’t bring those here.”

“I can’t.” She smirked. “I wouldn’t want you to shirk your responsibilities.”

Blast. ’Twould be a long few weeks if she was going to throw his words back at him all the time. He might not be dependent, but he needed a drink to deal with her. He cast a hopeful look around the room. Alarm shot through him when he noted the decanter on the drink trolley was empty.

Isabella raised a brow and stared at him.

“Why not have a daily check in or something, and I’ll stay at my own house?” he asked, the pitch of his voice rising with hope.

“Let me ask you this. How has that worked for you these past months? Do you even wish to get this under control? Have you any aspirations for your future?”

“Eh. Yes. No.”

She flattened her lips, staring at him.

“Look, I realize I’ve overindulged a bit. But I can pay off my gaming vouchers over time from my allowance. And until my pater is gone, I don’t need to have aspirations.”

“And that is good enough for you? Living off an allowance like a schoolboy”—he flinched at that phrase, but she continued undaunted—“and wallowing in luxury and gads of time with no purpose?”

He bit his lip, craving a whisky for this conversation. It hit too close to William's words from the prior day. "What would you have me do?"

"Look at your friend William. Or Charlotte. They both find productive uses for their time."

Speak of the devil and his lovely widow. He had never given a thought to what she did with her days while William waded through his father's mess. His friend likely would have told him, but he'd spent less time with him since leaving Oxford, even after William matriculated and returned to London. He could say that was because William was wooing Charlotte, but much of it was because William reminded him of his failings, both at university and at life. "What does Charlotte do?"

"She teaches working class women to pool their funds and invest any savings they can scrape together, so they can retire someday."

"Oh," he said. To deflect, he turned her words back on her. "What do you do, then?"

"I, too, invest and thus have money I need to manage with my solicitor. More than that, when my time allows, I help younger courtesans find their way on this path."

His head hurt too much to even try to untangle that or ask her for more details. He just needed a nip to clear the cobwebs from his brain and settle his nerves. His gaze slid to the empty decanter. His hands were starting to shake, and he clenched them in his lap. Whether it was from lack of food or the evidence of all spirits having been removed, he neither knew nor cared to dwell on. His thoughts were fuzzy, and a whisky would go a long way to clearing them, even if it wasn't quite noon. His stomach somersaulted.

Isabella continued assessing him, distaste evident in the sneer she wore. "Perhaps you'll think of something today. Or perhaps you'll remain satisfied being a slag. I,

however, need to continue being productive, including canceling my appointments for the rest of this week, thanks to you. I shall be in my private sitting room upstairs. The servants are available should you require sustenance, but they've been instructed not to allow you to leave or send notes. You'll have to earn privileges with good behavior. Also, the house has been cleared of all wine and spirits, so don't bother searching. I'll check in on you later." She stood and swept out of the room.

Luke looked around. He guessed based on what he'd seen of the house and the neighborhood that the building was small enough to have this back parlor serve as the library. Further evidence of that guess was the wall of filled bookcases.

Wandering over, he ran a listless hand along a few spines before selecting a book at random. As he had no shoes on, he lay back on the settee with his stocking feet hanging off the edge and opened the book. His goal was to sleep as much of the day as possible, given how his head and stomach felt, and five pages later he achieved that.

Late in the afternoon, Luke woke groaning. His clothes were drenched in sweat, his hair sticking to him, and yet he shivered uncontrollably.

He sat up, then groaned as his stomach tried to revolt. Curling over his lap, he sat very still, taking shallow breaths.

After a while, he straightened an inch at a time and moved to stand up. Slowly. He crept over to the decanter. Desperate, he squinted into it, searching for even a few drops. It was bone dry. He wanted to scream, to cry, to throw himself on the floor in a tantrum. Well, perhaps not that last, or his stomach might rebel. His mind raced.

The kitchen might have sherry or wine they cooked with. Perhaps he could find it without the staff seeing him and reporting to Isabella. He clenched his teeth against the shudders rattling his body, unsure if he could wait until the household was abed.

The jacket he'd worn had a flask in it. If he could make it up to his room. Keeping his movements slow and smooth to pacify his stomach, he reached the stairs. Peering up, he firmed his lips and raised a foot. Then another, pausing every few steps until he'd gained the upper floor. A few steps into his room, and he looked for his jacket. Checking the wardrobe, he found it hanging and freshly pressed.

The maid had certainly taken the flask to her employer, but he nonetheless checked the pockets, panting at the imagined taste of even the dregs of whisky from it.

Blast. There was nothing.

She said she'd be in her private sitting room, which was somewhere on this floor. He dragged himself back into the hall and noted the three other doors. The front room's portal was open, showing him another guest room, this one in pale greens and blues that might make him seasick. Turning, he knocked at the door next to his.

A maid answered his knock. "My lord?"

Taking a breath, he held the doorframe with one hand as the shivering became quaking. Peering in, his gaze circled the room, finding an empty pedestal leather top desk, two wingback chairs patterned in caramel-colored paisleys by the fireplace, and a table—a bottle of sherry!

Closing his eyes, he strategized as best he could beyond the pounding headache and nausea. "Isabella, your mistress, was looking for you. She is downstairs in the back parlor."

"Oh. I thought she..." The girl trailed off, frowning, and looked toward a door in the side wall, which Luke guessed led to Isabella's bedroom. "Right, then. If you'll pardon me."

He retreated, and she stepped past him, closed the door, and started down the steps. He ambled toward his bedroom, checking on her progress until she was out of sight. Spinning around, he groaned and leaned against the wall, fighting his belly's wish to purge.

He snicked open the sitting room door. Still empty. Closing it behind him, he beelined for the sherry. He poured a glass with hands that shook hard enough to warrant not filling the cup to the top. Raising it to his mouth required his free hand on his wrist to help steady it. He took a huge gulp. Breathing, he checked on how it was received. He still shook, and his belly still wasn't happy, but there wasn't an outright revolt. He raised the glass again, sucking in a mouthful—

“What do you think you are doing?” Isabella's voice was a whip.

Choking, he lost most of his mouthful to his shirt and waistcoat. Brushing at it with one hand, he said, “I just needed a nip to stop shaking. Christ, woman, you're a menace. Look what you made me do.”

She stalked across the room, having changed to a Tyrian purple gown for the evening meal.

Luke abandoned any worries about his clothes and raised the glass, chugging as much of the sherry as he could get down before she reached him and grabbed it away.

“Damnation. Apparently, 'tis too much to ask that I am able to enjoy my one vice of a sherry before bed with you in my house for more than a fortnight!”

Luke's trembling had begun anew with the knowledge that he'd get no more spirits that night, or likely for that fortnight. He hung his head, his fists clenched at his sides to hide the tremors, awaiting her wrath.

“Where did Melinda go?”

“I sent her downstairs under the pretense you were looking for her.”

She rolled her eyes and crossed to open the door of the room, calling, “Meli!”

The girl ran up the stairs, and Isabella handed her the sherry and the glass. “Please remove these from the house. Perhaps the staff will enjoy it as they did the other spirits. There is no sense in wasting them.”

Returning to him, Isabella seemed less angry than he’d expected. There were no pressed lips, foot tapping, or crossed arms. Instead, she tilted her head and gazed at him with... pity?

Blast. He didn’t need anyone’s pity. He straightened his spine and glowered. “What now?”

“What do you want now?”

That was not fair. He didn’t know what he wanted. How could he when every decision had been made for him either by right of birth or The Earl’s decree? He swallowed, ignoring the fact that at two-and-twenty, he should have an idea of what he wanted for himself.

“Do you wish to return to your life of gaming and drinking and debts and allowances? Or are you ready to try a new path?”

“I just needed a—”

“Beyond today. What. Do. You. Want?” she repeated, her tone brooking no nonsense.

He swallowed. Glanced at the sherry. She asked challenging questions like his father, and that made him want to dive into the nearest bottle headfirst. Finally, he came up with, “I do not want to accrue any more gaming debts.”

She nodded. “Right, then. That is a good first goal. If you keep drinking, do you think you’ll be able to refrain from heading to the gaming houses?”

“No.” His tone was sullen. He almost rolled his eyes at himself. Was he ten? He repeated it more firmly. “No.”

“So . . . ?”

“So I apparently do not wish to continue drinking so much. But one drink would go a long way to getting me past tonight,” he begged.

“As you recall, I’ve done this before. Trust me to know what you need. Today and the next few days will be the worst of it, then you’ll start to feel better.”

“Few days ?”

“Yes, now come eat.”

His stomach rolled audibly.

“Trust me,” she repeated.

He’d asked for direction. Like it or not, this was direction.

The clothes brought from his house had been hung in the wardrobe and laid in the chest of drawers. He quickly changed for supper. He suspected the ones he’d sweated through sleeping the day away were a lost cause, but he couldn’t find the energy to

care. Navigating the staircase was its own form of hell. Perhaps she'd let him remain upstairs the following day. She'd likely tell him servants had better things to do than fetch and carry for him, and while the thought of food made his throat constrict, he'd not make it through the day without tea.

The dining room, like the rest of the house, had the finest quality furnishings and decorations, without being ostentatious. The table held six comfortably, eight in a pinch.

He slid into the chair with a table setting at a right angle to hers at the head, only to have his stomach turn when a vegetable soup was placed before him. He leaned back and lowered the spoon. It clattered once from the shaking in his arm.

"'Tis soup. Surely you can manage that," she said, her exasperation evident in her pressed lips.

"It, uh, smells delicious."

"Is that why you're green?"

He swayed.

"Here. Eat a few bites of bread. Small bites at first. See if that helps." Isabella passed him a small loaf of fresh bread with a hunk already missing.

Tearing off a small piece, he attempted a bite. His stomach stayed still, so he nibbled on another. A fresh pot of tea was brought in and poured for them both. He added milk and sugar and sipped. Feeling a mite stronger, he picked up his spoon.

Apparently, she'd been watching him as he took stock. She said in a softer voice, "No one here will care if you dip the bread in the soup to start. You need sustenance to get

you past the effects of drinking so much for so long.”

Flashing her a grateful look, he did as she suggested. Ah, that was delicious, and without the threat of liquid sloshing in his belly, he was able to enjoy the scent and taste.

Still, after two pieces of bread and half the soup—all the tea, of course—he was less certain of his stomach.

“I must be ill. I haven’t felt this puny in months.”

She laughed at him.

He watched her, his eyes narrowed.

She wasn’t just laughing. She was practically pointing and giggling. Every time she looked at him, her mirth ratcheted in volume.

“’Tis impolite to laugh at a guest,” he grumbled. “Particularly a sick one.”

She only laughed harder.

Finally, she calmed. “Do you think a splash of whisky might help, then?”

He brightened. “It absolutely would.”

“And that”—her tone was smug—“is why I said you were dependent. Your body is struggling with the removal of that from your diet. You’ll feel like this for the better part of a week, to my guess.”

His frown at her first sentence changed to a grimace at that prediction. “Wait.

Upstairs, you said a few days.”

She shrugged. “It will depend on your body and your resolve.”

What resolve? He’d never been less certain of anything, and he rarely had to decide anything, even what to eat or wear. And shouldn’t he wean himself off slowly, having small amounts of whisky to maintain his equilibrium? No, he was supposed to trust her. Using the bread for the soup had helped disguise his trembling hands, but he could not eat any more. He needed a distraction.

“Perhaps you could suggest a way to take my mind off this? A game—no betting? Or a task you’d like me to take on?”

She leaned forward to stare at him, holding the table’s edge in both hands. “Luke, I could do either of those things. And continue to do so. However, that will not solve your problem. You need to take control of your own life. Otherwise, you’ll end up even deeper in debt and drunker than ever within a week of leaving here. Did you think about a new purpose today?”

“My father never loosened the reins enough to allow me to do any of the things you mentioned earlier. Or much of anything, really. Anyhow, it all sounds a bit of a bore.” He waved a hand, pretending boredom and hoping she didn’t notice his fear. He had no idea what might interest him; he’d been too busy defending himself against his father’s expectations to ever spend much time considering his own interests.

“What would you rather do then?”

“Perhaps a game of whist?”

“I am not here to entertain you. What would you do at home?”

“Besides the obvious?”

She sighed. “We are talking about replacing old habits with new ones. Now, I have things to do. I will see you in the morning.”

She stood and left. It was probably for the best. He did not think he could concentrate on cards or even remain upright much longer. Perhaps the next day would be better.

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B elle woke to a muted crash. Leaping out of bed, she threw on her wrapper and slid her feet into slippers. On her way out of her bedroom, she swiped the iron poker from the hearth.

The sound had seemed to come from directly below her. She ran downstairs, thankful for the runner keeping her footfalls quiet, then slowed as she approached the kitchen door. Going on tiptoe to avoid the heels of her slippers announcing her presence, she crept closer to the foot-wide opening where the door stood ajar.

“Blast,” Luke’s voice muttered in between quiet clanks.

She peered around the portal.

He attempted to restack pots and pans he’d upset. His shirt was open, his breeches only half-fastened.

She should have known he would try this. Self-control was not something mastered in a day when one had been dependent on spirits for that long. Fear turned to annoyance, but then quickly to titillation as he turned and his shirt swung open. She swallowed the saliva that pooled in her mouth, the poker hanging forgotten by her side. It had been months since her last client, and she’d always enjoyed sex. Not to mention, Luke was sinfully handsome when not drunk, taller than her by several inches with lean muscles peeking between his hanging shirttails.

She sighed. Of all the men to tempt her, it had to be this drunken boy in a man’s body.

“There must be sherry or port or something around here somewhere for cooking.” Still talking to himself under his breath, he abandoned the cookware and moved toward the larder.

“Did you really think I’d sleep through that crash?” She stifled a grin when he jumped a foot and spun, almost falling over. Part of her still seethed, but goodness, the view distracted her enough to delay her glower. A pale freckled chest with a smattering T of hair a few shades darker than his head led to a mouthwatering bulge just hidden by breeches.

He groaned, clutching his stomach and rounding over it, hiding his delicious skin.

She frowned finally. “In case you did not learn this as a boy, this is inappropriate behavior for a guest.”

He flinched, surprising her, but she was too angry to stop and question it.

“I need my sleep. ’Twas difficult enough dealing with you when I was well rested. I won’t be accountable for my actions if I have to do it when exhausted.”

“I am sorry to have woken you.” His head rose from his half-crouch, his gaze roving over her silk-clad form.

She became aware of her scarlet night rail edged in ecru lace covered by a matching wrapper and her dainty heeled slippers with faux fur over the bridge. Clothes bought for seduction.

A spark of interest lit his eyes.

She needed to quash that. Pretty or not, a whiny, privileged, directionless young man was the last person she needed to dally with. Besides, she should be able to wear what

she liked in her own home. Lifting her chin, she said, “Not as sorry as you will be. Come along. If you are going to act like a poorly trained pet, you shall be treated as one. Now, heel.”

“If I could just—”

She spun to face him. “No. We’ve been over this. Need I remind you of your choice? ’Tis this or your father. For whatever reason, you think this is the better choice. I am done asking or arguing with you. I am going to bed, and you’re coming with me.”

“Oh?” His voice rose in interest and he straightened, raking her head to toe with hot eyes.

Ignoring him, she trudged up the stairs. Her leather restraints from two benefactors ago would do. In her room, she crossed to the trunk where she kept such gifts and dug down in the corners to grope for leather straps.

He hovered in the doorway, one arm braced on the top of the door frame. His open shirt gaped away from his side, giving her a delicious glimpse of pale skin and muscle. She’d prefer him to look less enticing.

“Go get the bedding from your room and bring it here.”

“But yours has bedding.”

“Do not question me, Clodpate. I told you I am finished arguing with you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The doorway cleared of temptation.

She pulled the two pairs of cuffs, each on a long strap, from her trunk. The cuffs were removable, so she removed one pair and strung the two straps together. One cuff she

placed around the foot of one bedpost, tightening it and turning it so the fastenings faced beneath the bed.

She took the bedding he returned with and made a pallet on the floor, then gestured for him to lie down.

“You’re not serious?” he asked, gaping like a fish.

“Perhaps I’ll write a letter to your father myself, to have ready for the next time you question me.”

He swallowed and stepped forward to lay down. Before he could draw the coverlet over himself, she leaned down and snapped the other cuff around his wrist closest to the bed.

He sat up, staring at it, then her. “You’re—”

She arched a brow, and he stopped. Stomping around to the other side of the bed, she shed her wrapper and climbed in.

After a few minutes of sheets rustling and mumbles about the tether, he quieted. His breathing evened out as he succumbed to sleep.

She lay with jaw clenched, blinking in the dark. A fortnight more, at least, to earn her freedom. One last entitled man-boy to pander to. She hoped her future husband was worth this. Ever since the Black Widow had asked her to describe what she was looking for, she’d conjured images of her desired spousal attributes. Tonight, though, only a hard chest and stomach, a few ribs showing around the auburn trail of hair, and an ample breeches-covered protuberance came to mind. Stifling a sigh, she turned to face away from him, as though that would help remove him from her thoughts.

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By eight o'clock, Luke was awake, albeit miserable. Once again, he was a sweaty mess. This morning brought the addition of occasional head-to-toe shivers, and he could still feel every heartbeat stabbing a knife into his head. His thoughts were consumed with whisky. Well, and Isabella in that red silk ensemble.

Despite his mental appreciation for her appeal, his body was not interested. When was the last time he'd enjoyed a rousing round of sex? Or even a mediocre one? Blast, he was a young man, he should be engaging a wench a night or more. That thought should be motivation enough for him to straighten out his life, but the lure of whisky was more powerful.

And cor, he needed forty winks. Never mind that he'd just risen or that he'd slept more in the last day and a half than he normally did in half a week. Fatigue dragged at him. Worse, he faced another day with no purpose and no idea what to do about it.

Sitting up, he peered over the edge of the bed. Isabella was not there. Of course she wasn't. She had a purpose. Scowling, he checked his wrist. His tether had been removed, so he made his way back to the room he'd used the first night.

A bath waited for him, buckets of water keeping warm on the hearth. Ringing for a servant, he stripped and sank into it, shivering despite the fire's heat. He bathed and dressed with help, feeling ever more idiotic for needing the assistance due to shaking hands.

Whoever had fetched his clothes from his house had not brought shoes. Although, at the moment, it wouldn't have mattered. Luke was incapable of venturing outside, much less finding his way home.

He padded downstairs in stocking feet in search of tea.

“Oh good, you’re awake.” Isabella’s voice drummed in his head. He swore she was being deliberately loud. “Come have tea. How do you feel?”

“Like a four-horse carriage ran me over. Twice.”

“Well, you at least look a teeny bit better than yesterday. Come in here.” She turned into the dining room.

Luke tensed, craving tea almost as much as whisky, but fearing the smells, given his stomach’s continued missishness. He took one step into the doorway, followed by one more inside the room. There was no cooked breakfast laid out, only toast and a loaf cake on the table with the tea set. Sighing in relief, he crossed to sit.

“Here. Try a small piece. You needn’t eat it if you don’t like it, but I do think it will settle your stomach. Charlotte introduced me to a bakery that makes the best ginger cake I’ve ever had.”

He poured tea first and took a fortifying gulp. Reaching for his fork, he broke off a piece of cake and brought it to his mouth. His stomach did not protest. Ginger and flour and sugar and... cinnamon? So many flavors burst on his tongue, but all somehow still soothed. He moaned.

She closed her eyes on a long blink at his overt enjoyment.

He gave her a wan smile and ate another small bite. So far, so good. Wanting to take his mind off his ailments, he asked, “I seem to recall you were discussing a prospective husband with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. So... ehm... are you still in the same line of work?”

She'd informed him of her vocation in that fateful carriage ride from Charlotte's house.

"You mean catering to wealthy lords' wishes?"

"Ah, yes." She had a diplomatic way of wording it, but she probably needed to.

"I was hoping to retire, but it seems I have one more to indulge," she replied with a raised brow.

His shoulders drooped. He hadn't thought of it that way.

"I was teasing you," she said. "I am retired, though. Unlike some in my trade, I do not wish to marry for power or connections. I want companionship and a family."

Although surprised she was sharing these details with him, he dared not voice that sentiment. Indeed, the entire conversation and all of his questions were beyond the pale for a polite conversation. However, as it kept his mind off his physical misery, he pursued the subject. "What if you do not find someone to suit?"

"Then I suppose I'll continue on. I have no need of the funds, but I enjoy having a partner, both at home and at social events."

Luke knew that most benefactors rented houses for their mistresses. But as she seemed to be wealthy enough to retire even without marriage, he wondered. "Whose house is this, then? Yours?"

She nodded with a proud smile.

"'Tis lovely." He looked around, unable to imagine how he'd earn enough to afford a house such as this. He had no real skills.

Morose again, he hung his head.

“Is the cake not sitting well?” she asked, her hand hovering over the toast rack.

“No, ’tis fine.” He waved it off. “I am frustrated and feel like a clump of muddy straw. You say I need a purpose, but I cannot even piece enough thoughts together to fathom what one might be. Then I look around and you—without all the privileges I had—accomplished all this. What is wrong with me? I fail at everything. Even life. You should have just left me. I don’t know what Mrs. Dove-Lyon was thinking.”

She frowned. “I dislike entitled young men wallowing in self-pity. However, I’m trying to suspend my disgust to understand where this came from. How did you end up like this? What happened to you?”

“Yes, yes, the poor little earl’s son. I simply cannot seem to do anything right.” For the first time, he wished for one success, one right to brag. To impress this self-made woman who he found so attractive. It wasn’t the best reason to want to improve, but perhaps it could be a start, especially if she helped him.

“Says who?”

“My father.”

“What of your mother?”

“My mother died when I was twelve,” he said, his lips twisting at the memory. Her absence had changed everything.

“When was the last time you succeeded at something?”

His brows raised at the barrage of questions becoming ever more probing.

Apparently, they were both abandoning society rules on conversation topics this morning. And perhaps the lovely and skilled Isabella had some small desire to help him, beyond her commitment to the Black Widow.

“I don’t know,” he replied after a moment of thought. “All I know is that my father decided it was best for me to attend boarding school after my mother’s death. I begged and pleaded to stay with him, as it meant I’d lose everything and everyone familiar to me. But off I went. Then my marks were never high enough, I’d not learned enough of sports or music, I didn’t measure up to ‘The Earl’s’”—he made quotes with his fingers—“expectations. Thankfully, I met William and Folly there. They are my biggest fans, and more recently, my biggest supporters... saviors...” He trailed off.

“Were you happy before your mother died?” Isabella pursued her line of inquiry.

Mama’s picnics came to mind on the rare days that were both warm and sunny. She managed to coax his father out with them more often than not. They’d spend hours identifying plants and flowers, remaining still to watch for wildlife in the woods, or any number of adventures she thought up. His father had always been a disciplinarian, but when he was with Mama he softened—or rather, she softened him. “Oh, yes. Mama spent a lot of time with me and was very encouraging. The Earl was too, back then.”

“Perhaps,” Isabella mulled, “your father was struggling with your mother’s absence as much as you were.”

“Then why would he send his one remaining family member away?”

“I don’t know. Have you asked him that?”

“The Earl does not discuss emotions,” he scoffed.

“You won’t know unless you try. Even if he does not lead with them, he might be willing to talk about it if his only son asks.”

“It is too late now. He doesn’t yet know I dropped out of Oxford. He’ll be in the boughs when he discovers that. I believe I’ve surpassed the line of forgivable offense. Not to mention my gaming debts.” He shook his head, his belly churning as it did every time he thought of his pater, exacerbating his craving for spirits. “Please, enough about my deficiencies for now. My head and stomach cannot take it.”

“Fine. I expect you to walk the garden for at least a quarter hour this morning. I shall check in with you later,” Isabella said as she rose, presumably to get on with her purposeful day, leaving him to flounder.

After another pot of tea and the abandonment of the topic of his father, his head cleared, and his stomach seemed to like the ginger cake. As upright felt acceptable, he decided to walk while he could.

A servant had put shoes out for him in his room and he slipped them on, glad he’d worn trousers despite not knowing he’d be outside that day. The autumn weather was not fit for breeches, and he had embraced the new trend of full-length trousers for all occasions he could.

Stepping into the small well-manicured back garden, he strolled the rectangular path. He started slow but after a few laps quickened his pace. The fresh air cleared more of the cobwebs from his head, allowing him to ponder his future.

If he could maintain sobriety, come Christmas he supposed he’d have to face a difficult conversation with his father. He scowled. There was no way he was going to ask his father why he sent his son away. Doing so would show weakness, a quality The Earl abhorred. But he supposed he should start learning the earldom.

His thoughts snagged on Isabella. He owed her an apology. She had her own reasons for helping him, of course, but that didn't give him the right to ransack her house for sherry. He didn't even like sherry!

Refreshing his memory on the proper way to beg forgiveness, he recited the elements under his breath as he went to find his hostess.

“Penitence, identifying cause, act of contrition. Penitence . . .”

Luke was forced to wait until the evening meal to attempt his apology, as Isabella had a visitor in her back parlor.

He trudged upstairs and hid in his room to take a nap. A simple walk shouldn't have left him this feeble, but he needed the rest.

Sitting at the same spot next to her place at the head of the table, he jumped right in, all thoughts of exchanging pleasantries forgotten. “Isabella—”

She braced herself, hands holding utensils lowered to the edge of the table.

He gave a short chuckle and cringed at how rusty it sounded. He couldn't remember the last time he'd really laughed. How sad for the poor little earl's son. Ignoring that thought, he continued. “I suppose you should prepare. I must again”—he took a breath and wiggled his brows—“beg your pardon.”

Her silverware clattered on the plate.

He held up a hand. “Before you say anything, I remember. Hear me out, please. To elaborate, I am apologizing for sneaking into your sitting room and then making a mess of your kitchen and waking you.”

She watched him, staying silent.

“The reason I did those things was because I was suffering the ill-effects of over-imbibing for too long.” He raised a finger. “I hope to avoid that happening in the future.”

She opened her mouth to retort.

He hurried to correct himself. “I will make every effort to avoid that happening again.”

She nodded, seeming to accept that he had met the requirement of recognizing the issue to minimize the risk of recurrence.

“I do not want to take advantage of your help. You have my utmost gratitude and regret. 'Tis not an excuse, but I was overwhelmed by your competence and my cravings. We've already established that I am weak. I will work on that.”

She narrowed her gaze at him.

Ignoring her, he raised a second finger, counting that as sufficient penitence, then continued to his third point. “I will make up for it through service. As you indicated you prefer not to direct me, I offer a foot rub.”

“A what?” Her eyes widened, her brows near her hairline.

“'Tis a skill I honed at Oxford. I, um... wooed?... a number of tavern wenches there, and their feet always hurt after so many hours on them. They taught me what helped alleviate the pain. Heck, one preferred that over...” His cheeks heated. That made him sound like his sexual prowess was not up to snuff. Although, now that he thought about it, it might not have been. At least it was before he started drinking quite so

much. Not that any of this should matter, as he'd leave here in a fortnight.

She snickered, watching his expressions.

“What say you? Did the apology meet your expectations? Do you accept my terms?”
he blustered.

“I’ll decide that after the foot rub, Clodpate.”

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Her thoughts whirled between anticipation of his hands on her and his declaration.

He was overwhelmed by her competence? Belle had had odes written and songs sung to her beauty. She knew 'twas a key ingredient at her success as a courtesan. Intelligence and malleability were equally important. She'd played every role imaginable for men, from kneeling at their feet to having them prostrate themselves before her. Every costume, every undergarment, every hairstyle she could imagine had been put to use.

No one knew better than she that competency and confidence were essential to survival as a courtesan. Knowing one was smart enough to make any man feel like a king by anticipating his needs and fulfilling his dirtiest desires.

Of all those attributes, only this annoying mess of a lordling chose her capableness to value. She should not be flattered. After all, his ineptitude at life was a low bar from which to measure. But she could not help the vain spurt of pleasure flickering in her chest.

He'd succeeded at remembering and implementing the necessary components of an apology. The offer of a foot rub as contrition was unexpected, and irresistible. She slid her feet out of her slippers under the dining table. Heat bloomed between her legs at the thought of his hands on her. With any other man, she'd offer sex—nay, take it. But pleasure came too easily to Luke and responsibility too slowly. That was a horrible combination in a lover, and she had to keep watch over him for another fortnight.

She forced herself to linger over supper while she attempted to talk herself out of a

bad decision and tried not to stare at his hands. Every inch of her garments rubbed against suddenly sensitive skin. At long last, she nodded to the servants and led the way to the back parlor with him trailing behind.

“Let’s see... I usually perform these on a bed,” he mused, looking around the room from the doorway.

She arched a brow. “You have not been, nor will you be, invited onto my bed. We shall have to make do.”

One side of his mouth tilted up in a half smile. “Fair enough. If you sit in the armchair, I can sit on the footstool. Does that suit?”

“Having you sit at my feet and look up to me? Certainly.” She settled into the armchair. “The only thing that might make this better is sherry, but alas, your lack of control means I cannot have that.”

“Exactly why I am here to serve you.” He held a hand out.

If he continued saying things like that, she’d never talk her inner devil out of that terrible decision it had been contemplating. After a momentary internal debate on whether to remove her slipper, she declined. He could do all the work.

And he did, grasping her ankle in one hand, and the back of her slipper in the other to slide it carefully off her foot. His hands were pale against her warmer tones, his fingers long and elegant, his touch firm but gentle.

“May I remove your stocking? These work best on bare skin.”

She swallowed, knowing she should not encourage that intimacy but quite certain she wanted this massage. She nodded once.

His fingers skimmed up under her skirt. She breathed a sigh of relief that out of sheer habit from her days of entertaining, she'd continued using silk stockings with lace, and beribboned garters.

With an expert flick, her garter was unfastened.

He watched her face as he rolled down her silk stocking to tuck it into her empty slipper.

She was careful to avoid any sign of the rioting in her stomach from his gentle touches. His warm hand encircled her naked ankle, and she stifled a gasp. She hated to think what he'd do if he knew how he affected her. His gaze seemed... eager, as though he was looking for approval. She forced her spine to relax against the chair as though unaffected.

"Do you have any bath oils?" he asked.

She blinked. "Not here."

"Where? If I may, I'd like to fetch one to reduce friction."

Ignoring the thump of her heart at the provocative word, she arched a brow. "Try not to make a mess like you did in the kitchen, Clodpate. They are on the shelf to the left of the fireplace in my bedroom."

He placed her foot on the footstool as he stood, grabbing a throw to drape over it for warmth, and rushed off.

Belle was left with "reduce friction" whirling around in her head, the heat of his fingers still tangible on her skin making his thoughtful covering unnecessary.

She gave herself a mental shake. No matter how long since her last lover, she was not so gauche that a simple foot massage from someone she had no interest in should arouse her.

She did not want him or the complexities he came with. Of course, he was pleasant to look at, even the prior night when he was out of sorts. But he was an earl's heir from what he and the widow had said. She was a posting inn on his life route. And he was immature at best, lazy at worst.

That doesn't mean he might not be an excellent short-term lover.

No, she told herself. She always got in trouble when she listened to her inner devil. Admittedly, a man who took the time to give serving wenches foot rubs and covered her with a throw for warmth was also likely to ensure a woman's pleasure, but no. He'd already looked to her for direction. He needed to find his own path, and complicating their brief sojourn would only delay that.

Luke returned, a bottle in hand. Setting it down on a low table next to the footstool, he lifted her foot and slid himself under it, the throw sliding up her leg to bare her to his gaze.

She recognized it as the scent she wore most days. The image of him sniffing the bottles and recognizing it made her body heat.

"You have beautiful feet, Isabella." His fingers wandered over her toes, her arch, her ankle.

She nodded her thanks, unable to speak for the tingles gliding up from every caress. So much for her internal monologue. Her body was ignoring her and very much interested in him and where else those digits might forage.

He poured a dollop of oil into his palm and raised it to his nose, inhaling her signature rose fragrance. Isabella could have sworn he sighed. Luke rubbed his hands to warm the oil, creating a slicking sound. It roused her to images of his fingers on her most sensitive flesh creating a similar sound. Him. Over her. His cock sliding in and out her with her natural lubricant replacing the oil. She bit her lip and shifted in the chair, trying to dispel those images.

His hands went around the back of her foot, fingers up along her ankle, palms cupping her heel, and thumbs at her arch. His thumbs dug in hard and pushed up along her sole.

“Mmm...” Belle dropped her head back and moaned, louder and longer than she had in more time than she could remember. Goodness, that might indeed be better than sex, just as he had said at supper. She giggled.

He stopped and her gaze flew to his. “Are you ticklish?”

She shook her head, giggling more at his confusion.

“Women have never found these quite so funny,” he grumbled.

She snickered once more before getting herself under control. “I beg your—well, never mind that, but I now understand why some of your lady friends liked this as much as sex.”

He grinned. “Ah. I am glad it pleases you, with only one stroke.”

Belle swallowed. His word choice led her straight back into arousal. Wanting nothing more than to be stroked in whatever way he chose, she forced her expression to serenity, not wanting him to see her physical reaction. How ironic that her acting was needed to disguise excitement, when she’d only needed to pretend pleasure in the

past.

He ran his thumbs over her arch at all angles for several blissful minutes, then tilted her toes out to press along the side of her foot, curling up around her ankle bone. Next, he did something pinchy to where her heel narrowed to her ankle that made her eyes roll up in her head.

Another involuntary moan leaked out, and she sighed. Her whole body prickled with awareness and sensation. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her fingers itched to touch skin—hers or his. They weren't particular. Thankfully, her stays hid the pointed tips of her swollen breasts. She had to resist the desire to squirm in her seat again to seek friction for her swollen nub against the chair.

He switched feet, placing her foot down without her slipper and murmuring something about the oil ruining it. Gently lifting her other leg, he removed her slipper and slid his fingers up to unfasten and unroll her other stocking.

This time the tingling went right to her core, and she did squirm once. When he glanced up, she stilled and willed herself to relax against the chairback again.

He placed her foot in his lap.

When he poured more oil and paused to admire her other foot, she chewed on the inside of her cheek to avoid lifting her skirts and telling him exactly where and how to rub her to better effect.

Pressing her lips together, she closed her eyes. A twitch against the sole of her foot had them flying open. His thumb was against her, but she swore she'd felt fabric.

If that was his cock, she might lose all control, something that had never happened. Lud, he was vexing. And enticing. Sighing, she relaxed into the unusual delight of

being the center of someone's attention, rather than the other way around. The movements of his hands sent heat and desire rolling over her like waves, advancing and receding on the shore of her quim.

As Luke lowered her second foot to the floor, Belle blinked. Unable to hold his gaze, she glanced away, hoping her cheeks did not look as warm as they felt.

When he did not rise immediately, she pushed the chair back a few inches and swept a hand down to grab her slippers with her stockings tucked in them. Standing, she controlled her panting enough to say, "The women were right. You are quite the expert in that. An unexpected pleas- skill . You have exonerated yourself; your apology is accepted. Now I find myself quite fatigued. Please go change into whatever you desire to sleep in and meet me in my room."

"I am still to sleep on the floor, then?"

"Yes. I have absolved you, but I think the lure of the spirits remains strong enough that a few more nights of oversight are warranted."

He bowed his head and turned for the stairs.

She remained in the room, unable to decide if she should go change for bed or stay here and relieve her tension by taking herself over the edge of ecstasy. It would only take a few minutes, given how over-stimulated she was from that glorious foot rub.

Deciding it was best to change without him present, even with a screen to step behind, she raced up and shucked her clothing. Reaching for the slinky crimson nightrail, she sighed at its glide over her sensitized flesh. She could hardly wait to chain him in his pallet and slip beneath the covers. Once he was asleep, she'd finish this.

Damn Bessie for putting her in this hostess role, making it impossible to use him for her recreation then never see him again. This was the first time she'd considered any liaison, even a night of intimacy, with a man outside of a negotiated contract in... ever. She wasn't certain of the rules, but she couldn't simply kick him out on the morrow if he was terrible in bed. Bessie would terminate their arrangement, in which case she might never have a family.

A knock came.

"You may enter."

He stepped in and she gripped the bedpost for support. He'd removed his shirt.

"Don't you have a nightshirt of some kind?"

"I sleep in my smallclothes when I'm sober enough to remove my shirt and trousers." His tone was wry.

"Ah. Right, then. 'Tis not like I haven't seen a bare chest or four," she told herself as much as him. But damnation, she did not need to see this one when she was already in a state.

He stepped to the pallet and laid on it, extending his wrist.

"Did you want to remove your trousers then?"

He raised his brows. "If you do not mind. I have a limited amount of clothing here."

She tossed the blanket over him, declining to acknowledge the long rigid lump under his trousers that would make sleep difficult, with or without multiple layers of clothing. The foot rub had affected him as well, yet here he was, respecting her rules.

After his trousers appeared from under the bedding and were tossed aside, she buckled the cuff around his wrist, reminding him, “I am a light sleeper, so whilst I know you can unfasten the binding with your other hand, I expect you not to wake me with roaming tonight.”

Finally, she slid into bed and listened for his breathing to change into sleep.

A half hour passed. She heard thumps against the floor and the swish of covers as he tried various positions. Every time she closed her eyes, she heard the slick of his oil-covered hands, saw the club outlined by his trousers, recalled the line of fur down his stomach. Gulping, she waited, wishing she could act on the evidence of both of their desires. But he'd been so respectful, from the blanket to keeping his trousers on, she refused to reward that by pushing intimacy on a captive audience who had had little say in being here. Gah, morals were frustrating.

She lay rigid, not daring to touch her damp swollen folds even once for fear of being unable to stop when he was not yet asleep.

Clenching her fists against the bed, she heard the slicking again. Slowly at first, then faster. When a stifled grunt came from the floor, she realized she wasn't imagining it. So much for respecting her rules. The arsehole was polishing his damned knob right there on her bedroom floor!

Ready to leap out of bed, she rethought. Slipping out as quietly as possible, she took a candle and flint and rounded the bed. Placing the candle on the chest of drawers, she lit it and pounced, flinging the bedclothes off Luke.

Sure enough, he lay there gaping at her, head off the pillow, cock in one hand, the other still by his shoulder in the cuff, undergarments around his thighs. His abdominal muscles were in sharp relief from his efforts, bisected by a T of chestnut hair running between his nipples then down. She took a moment to admire him,

making sure she gave nothing away in her expression.

“What did I say about waking me?”

His eyes were hot as they perused her top to bottom. Relaxing back against the pillow, he gave a languid tug on his cock with a smirk. “Technically, you said not to wake you with roaming. I could not sleep with this—” He gestured downward with his head as though daring her to look again. “That left me to resolve the situation.”

“This is not acceptable.” She cocked a hip, placing a hand on it to glare at him. In fact, nothing about this night was acceptable. He was not going to attain his peak when she could not enjoy hers. It was her room and her house, damn it. Perhaps she could indulge with him, though...

“Come now, Belle,” he purred, using the name she’d warned him he’d have to earn the right to. “You cannot tell me a gentleman has never engaged in self-pleasure in this room. Or do you do all the work all the time?”

That doused her arousal as nothing else could. Of course, the young lord thought it was acceptable to do what he liked in a courtesan’s bedroom, without asking her leave. She glared, her lips tight when she replied, “Never— never has a gentleman engaged in such an act without ensuring my pleasure first, or without my consent. Now button it up.”

“Please, Belle? Put me out of my misery?”

She gasped.

“Er, I meant allow me to put myself out of my misery? If you had any idea how long it’s been since I’ve been this hard, this interested...” He trailed off and looked away, embarrassed.

She glanced down. When his cock pulsed in his grip and his hand slid up and down again, she glared at him again, a muscle clenching along her jaw.

He shrugged. "Sorry. You were looking; it was automatic."

"Put it away. You have not earned privacy. Until you do, you live with the restrictions I choose. And pleasuring yourself on my floor is one of them."

He tucked himself into his smallclothes with a sigh. "I hope you can sleep. I doubt I will. But damn, that felt good. Thank you, Isabella."

The cad had the audacity to smile.

Her sexual frustration-tinged anger led her to snap open a drawer, grab another cuff and slap it around his second wrist. The straps from the first that kept him tethered to the bed had space for her to attach the second cuff. Now both his hands were forced to remain well above his waist, but he could still sleep on his back or one side. He'd have to make do.

Stomping back around the bed, she snuffed the candle and slid beneath the covers. As soon as she closed her eyes, her body betrayed her, conjuring his rod of iron against his belly. Knowing what it looked like without covering only fanned the flames flickering up and down her spine. The same oiled hand that had worked magic on her feet fisted his cock, sliding up and down. She rolled to her side and punched her pillow.

He sighed and shifted.

She circled her legs against the sheets, feeling her damp folds rub against each other. The silk of her nightrail teased her tightly furled nipples.

An insidious thought wormed its way into her head. Her house, her rules. Just because he couldn't take himself over didn't mean she couldn't. And she could do it much quieter.

Rolling onto her stomach, she cupped a breast in one hand, squeezing the hard point. The other slid between her legs, dragging silk up one handful at a time. Finally, she could touch her core. She fluttered her fingers against her swollen lips first, trying to wait a few more minutes in hopes Luke fell asleep.

After a long minute of torturing herself with feathery touches, he'd been silent long enough she deemed it safe to proceed. Threading three fingers between her lips, she slid them along her hot hard flesh, dipping the middle one into the pool of wetness at her opening.

She pressed her lips together to muffle a moan and retracted the dampened finger to rub circles around her raised nub. Thrusting two fingers into her wet channel, she used her thumb to squeeze and roll that now-damp hard kernel. She daredn't piston her fingers, not wanting a slicking sound to give her away, but she could not stop the tiny jerking surges of her hips.

A vision of his stomach muscles and that narrow trail of hair leading to his cock flashed in her mind. A flush of heat ran over her from head to toe. Her stomach muscles tightened and her hips lost their rhythm. Her imagination recalled his cock pulsing and his hand sliding along it.

Panting quietly, she pinched her nipple and her thumb squashed her sensitive flesh. Her inner walls convulsed around her fingers, a rush of hot liquid drenching her hand. She bit her pillow to stop from keening as her nipple and clitoris throbbed against her hold on them.

Wishing it were him bathing her in hot liquid, she arched her back to press into the

sheets, wiggling her thumb to extend the storm of ecstasy raging through her. Sparks of pleasure zipped through her limbs, fading slowly to embers as her hips relaxed against the bed. She flinched with sensitivity as she extracted her hand from underneath her.

Sighing in relief, she drifted to sleep.

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L uke swirled in a maelstrom of ecstasy and agony all night.

While feet were not his favorite part of a woman's body, they might be in his top five, as he'd found they had a surprising number of erogenous zones. Perhaps, as Belle—he no longer thought of her as Isabella—had said to him, it was having a man serve them in such a manner. Oral pleasure had a different edge for him when a woman was on her knees before him rather than in bed. Not that he had a preference, it was simply nice to have variety. Hellfire, right now, he'd savor a woman's mouth on him in any position.

Caressing Belle's feet earlier in the evening had been sublime. Despite how hard she had worked throughout her life, that work had required less time on her feet than the tavern girls he'd tugged in the past. Her tempting, delicate feet reflected that. He'd wanted to follow his hands with his nose, then his tongue.

By the second foot, he'd had to adjust his cock in his breeches or faint from the pain of constriction. She had not seemed to notice his bulge brushing against her foot, or he was sure she would have commented. No one could accuse her of shyness.

Instead, she'd relaxed against the chair, he hoped from enjoyment of his ministrations. He'd concentrated on her pleasure as he basked in achieving a full cockstand for the first time in months.

He was grateful she hadn't commented on his manners when he did not stand after. If he had, his engorged member would have been at eye-height for her and might have offended.

Of course, as a courtesan, she'd have seen her number of hard cocks. But as she'd said when he'd goaded her later, there was a difference between facing it without warning and having invited it or being paid to deal with it. He had to remember she was doing him a huge favor in saving him from more of his father's wrath, no matter what the arrangement was between her and the Black Widow.

He'd waited for what seemed like hours for her to stop moving and fall asleep, excited beyond words that he was still fully erect the whole time.

It had helped that when she'd bent to put him in the cuff, her nightrail had dropped open and he could see her luscious breasts almost all the way to the nipples. He'd nearly surged up and tried to kiss her, but he had gotten himself into enough trouble for one night. He also was not ready to make another apology, given how the first had affected him.

He'd really believed he could sneak in a tug and get some relief with no one the wiser. Instead, she'd caught him, tied his other hand, and gone to bed.

After which, he was positive she did the same thing she'd stopped him from doing—and finished. Damn, he'd wanted to call out to her. He wasn't sure if he'd have offered to help, asked permission to join her, or yelled at her for her unfairness.

Reminding himself of his tenuous status as an unwanted guest, he'd bit his lip hard, told his cock to stand down for all the good that little chat had done, and lain there. Somewhere just before dawn, he'd drifted off, his body unable to fight the withdrawal and excitement of the previous day.

When he woke, he was uncuffed. Desperate for release, he stumbled back to his room. She'd said no pleasuring himself on her floor. Thankfully, there was a lovely bed in here to which he still had unfettered access. Dropping his clothes to the floor, he threw himself on the bed, then recalled massaging her feet. He leaned over and

drew the vial of rose oil out of his trousers pocket. It took less than a minute for her scent mingled with his arousal to wrap around him. Another minute basking in at the image of her in that slinky red shift and he was spilling into his hand with a grunt.

By the time he cleaned himself up and dressed for the day, his cock was twitching again at the thought of seeing his fascinating hostess.

He sighed. It was going to be a long stay if he couldn't manage even thinking of her without his trousers growing tight. On the other hand, his cockstand and steady hands meant he must be past the worst of his recovery.

Luke had just settled onto the back parlor settee when Belle entered.

Standing over him with hands on hips, she offered a choice—really an ultimatum. “Either read the letters from your father, outline a plan for your future, or go help the gardener prepare the rose bushes for winter.”

He cast a side glance to the window. Tree branches scraped the glass rhythmically against a gray backdrop. Still, the other two choices did not sound appetizing.

“The gardener's name?”

She sighed. “Alistair.”

He frowned. Her tone indicated disappointment, but she'd given him a choice. He was going to be productive with his day, which was more than he might have done if left to his own devices. On the other hand, a grown man should be able to find a good use of his time without needing prodding.

He sighed, feeling just as he had when his father berated him for decent-but-not-good-enough marks in school. He'd revert to drinking again if he thought about it

anymore. The Earl was bad enough, but displeasing Belle felt worse. He wanted her admiration—or at least respect. She had made a success out of the thinnest of opportunities, whereas he had failed despite everything being handed to him. Watching William pull his family out of poverty and Nate create a niche market for his special wares was hard, but he'd never begrudged his friends' success. But they'd also not inspired him to improve. Belle did.

By dusk, his wrists were marked with bloody scratches from the gap between the gloves Alistair had loaned him and his cuffs. His shirt had caught twice on thorns and torn, leaving a long gash on his back and his chest. Despite that, he took a moment before going inside to survey his work, relishing the visible progress from his toils. He'd only managed a quarter of the bushes Alistair had winterized, but he'd helped.

In clean clothes, hoping all the bleeding had stopped so he didn't run out of shirts, he dropped into his chair at the dining table with zero finesse. He was exhausted.

Belle raised a brow at him as she gestured to the servants to begin serving. "How was your day?"

"My back and knees ache from kneeling, I'm scraped all to hell, and it took me an hour to thaw from that wind. All in all, surprisingly good."

She hooted a surprised laugh. When she calmed, she asked, "What makes it good?"

He flushed, knowing what she was asking. "The feeling of accomplishment. Of having won, in a way. 'Tis certainly cheaper than gaming wins."

She didn't press him about determining a path for himself, applying herself to her food.

Happy to avoid another lecture, he watched her for a long moment. Her dark tresses

were pinned back from her face, but a thick wavy hunk had fallen forward to rest on her collarbone. Her bold sapphire dress was neither demure nor provocative but outlined her luscious curves so well it provoked him, anyway. Dark brows and lashes against creamy skin were offset by rose lips. He desperately wanted to find out if her nipples and her quim were similar hues. If he wasn't so deep in debt, he'd have bet double or nothing, as it was a sure winner.

Shifting in his chair to relieve the sudden constriction of his trousers, he sighed. Conversation. That's what he needed. He was such a fool, he didn't even know where to start. It had been too long since he'd had a polite dinner with a lady—and never with a courtesan.

“How was your day?” he blurted.

She patted her mouth with her serviette and stared at him.

He could see her mental headshake at how long it took him to produce that weak of a conversation sally.

Nevertheless, she answered. “Also productive, thank you. I wrote several letters to friends of mine who have left London. You recall how letters work, do you not?”

He rolled his eyes. “Weak, Bel—Isabella.”

“I enjoyed it.” She shrugged with a grin.

A sudden thought occurred that was the perfect topic of conversation. Perhaps he might learn from her success. “Tell me about how you became a courtesan? Please?”

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Belle took a moment to consider whether she wanted to answer Luke's question.

He hadn't earned the right to know her story. Hell, he'd been a nuisance since she'd brought him home.

But he'd worked in her garden all day and was rather charming when sober.

Her story might also help him clarify his future. "The Earl" needed a stern talking-to, as far as she was concerned. What father shipped his son away from all he held dear when the boy was reeling from the death of his mother? For all she'd defended him to Luke, she was angry on the younger Luke's behalf.

He was still watching her, head tilted as he waited for her to respond.

"My childhood had some similarities to yours, believe it or not."

His brows climbed his forehead.

"My parents worked long hours every day of the week to ensure we could pay our rent and eat. Sometimes we only had one meal a day, and sometimes that was broth and bread. My older sister and I managed the household chores as best we could. That was different, I'm sure, but it was like yours in that there was no time for affection. If I skinned an elbow or cut a finger, she helped patch me up, and vice versa, but no one dried tears or dispensed hugs. One learned quickly that crying did not get you anywhere, so why bother."

"What did your parents do?"

“My father worked in a factory, and my mother worked as a seamstress for a dressmaker. She brought work home in the summer and worked long into the night, but in the winter, the cost of candles was prohibitive.”

“Where are they now?”

“Gone.” Her voice was flat. She had long since come to terms with their loss. After all, those focused on survival were fatalistic about it all. “I call it death by poverty, but the physicians likely have some fancy name like premature aging.”

“And your sister?”

Her sister was another story, and a second one she debated about sharing. “My sister married a man from the neighborhood, another working man. Likely to get out of the house. He seemed nice enough but occasionally drank too much. When he drank, he got nasty.”

Luke winced, guessing where this was going.

“Working like that wears you down. He started drinking more often. Sometimes, he’d pick a fight and hit her.”

“How much older is she?”

“Three years.” She shook her head, remembering how young and naïve she’d been. “After the first few times, I begged her to run away with me. We’d find work together; we’d protect each other. But he was always so sweet afterwards, begging her forgiveness.”

“Ah,” Luke said in response to the sharp glance she shot him. “I begin to see.”

“Eventually, when he’d knocked her unconscious and done something to her arm that made it hard for her to use it, I couldn’t stand it. I walked until I could not walk any farther. And I found myself outside a theatre. I slipped in the side door and met some of the cast and crew. One actress let me stay in her dressing room during the performance. In retrospect, I am amazed. I could have robbed her blind.”

“Did you spend time on the stage then?”

“No. After the show, a few gentlemen came backstage for their favorite cast members, either to woo a new showgirl or take a current paramour out on the town. Two of them approached me. The actress took me aside and told me to sleep there that night, but not to roam or she’d lose her job. The next day, she explained to me what they wanted and how much they’d pay for it.”

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen. Old enough, in the world I came from.”

“Holy—” he bit off the rest. “Apologies. ’Tis hard to fathom for me. Please, continue.”

She pressed her lips together. Her whole life was impossible for this lordling to imagine. However, he continued to show interest, so perhaps he could learn what hard work accomplished. Besides, it was rather nice to have someone interested; of her previous lovers, only North had been. “I had an idea of what our rent was, and I’d watched both parents work to barely cover that and feed us. The amounts she talked about seemed like a fortune for me. She assured me she’d help me find an apartment and clothes, and I could pay her back after my first benefactor settled an amount on me. I was lucky.”

He choked but gestured for her to go on.

“I was,” she argued, her tone mild despite irritation at his naiveté, and elaborated. “Another woman in her place might have cut a deal with the men and pimped me out. Instead, she explained how to protect myself from becoming with child and from the men themselves. A week later when they returned, I was dressed differently, had learned how to enhance my looks, and had my pick.”

“What did she teach you?”

“Never to let a client know where I lived. Those first few patrons used an inn until they rented an apartment for me. To ask for what I wanted, not just what I needed. ’Tis amazing how often men allow their cocks to make decisions for them. That sort of thing.”

He sat back, a stunned look on his face.

“I hoarded my funds and learned what I needed. I never wanted to be hungry or scared again. And I rarely was. Once my reputation was established, I could make my own rules. Sure, some men wanted more creativity.” Her grin was sly. “That cost them a pretty penny.”

“But you’ve lived here several years, and your patrons have come to your home.”

“True. I can pick and choose my clients now. There is more interest than I can accommodate, given the nature of my work. I only ever have one patron at a time, as they expect that for what they pay. But I am also well-known enough in the demi-monde circles that if I even whispered about someone hurting me, there would be hell to pay. I have left almost all my clients on good terms.”

“Good, good.” He nodded.

She almost believed he worried for her safety. But why should he? She suddenly felt

embarrassed to have shared all that. It was one thing for him to know she was a courtesan; it was another for him to picture what she meant by stupid words like “creativity.” Only a few months, and she was out of the habit of managing an attractive man’s perception of her, dammit.

He opened his mouth to ask more questions, but she had no desire to rehash any more of the past.

“That is enough reminiscing for one night. I am going to read a book in the parlor before bed. Would you care to join me?”

He stood and followed her.

Belle had not read a single word. Oh, she’d turned pages and ensured she appeared engrossed.

However, when his head bent over his book, her gaze strayed to peruse his form. Long and lean, he tended to lollop rather than sit. He seemed to have developed a tendre for her settee and went from a slouch with an elbow propped on the armrest to hold his head, to diagonal across it with one knee bent across it and the other foot on the floor, to full out, head on a pillow against one arm with stocking feet hanging over the opposite end.

His shoulders had just enough muscle to keep things interesting in the bedroom, but his waist and hips were narrow, and his long legs made her wish to see them without clothes.

His thick hair begged for her fingers.

What was she thinking? This was a passing fancy. Goodness, he was a passing fancy; he’d be gone in a matter of days.

After an hour, she'd given up and announced she was going to bed.

At his complacent nod, she became irritated. "Get up. You have not yet earned the right to your own bed and room. Therefore, you are also retiring, so I can ensure you stay where you're supposed to before I sleep."

"Oh, right." He scrambled off the sofa.

He followed her up the stairs, and she considered that he was almost as eager to please as Charlotte's William. No, Belle. He's leaving. Do not compare him to a loving long-term union. Or at least one she hoped would be long-term if her dear friend Charlotte would get her head out of her arse.

They each changed in their own bedroom, after which he entered hers with a soft knock and she locked him into place, looser than the first night due to his scratched wrists. The night passed without incident, although she suspected neither of them slept all that much.

She offered him the same choice the next morning, and he responded with the same selection, this time polishing the main entranceway. The downstairs maid, Bridget, may have noticed her predilection for giving him jobs on his knees. Both women had spent the previous day near windows facing the back garden. On the second day, Belle had shoved a chair over two feet, completely out of alignment with the rest of the seating area, so she had a view of the front hall. Bridget's frequent trips between first floor rooms interrupted her fascination with his arse. Her staff knew looking was acceptable, including watching her if a client liked to show off his prowess.

Thus, her day had been less than productive, and by supper she was out of sorts with no outlet for her awakened senses. His body might appeal, but she preferred men in her bed, rather than boys. Charlotte's William might be the same age as Luke, but he had already taken control of his life. Luke needed to command his own respect before

he could expect hers, and she had long ago stopped sleeping with men whom she did not respect. She only hoped her brain continued to keep her body from soliciting him.

As soup was served, he skipped trivialities and leaped in where they'd left off the prior evening. "How did you come to be in the Black Widow's office that night? She said she is a... matchmaker?"

"You were gambling in her establishment without understanding what the stakes were?"

He frowned. "Those were only for the one table."

"The callowness of youth." She threw up a hand. "If you'd been sober enough to pay attention, you'd have learned that the one table is for those seeking marriage, most often for debts accrued outside of gaming hells. But anyone whose vowels exceed their ability to pay is subject to her whims of matchmaking."

He blinked.

Recalling his reaction in the widow's office, her tone was bitter when she added, "Be thankful she did not pair you with me."

"What? Was that even a possibility?" He tilted his head in interest.

"One never knows with Bessie Dove-Lyon." She shrugged, confused by his tone, as the servants replaced their soup bowls with plates and set platters of roasted beef and vegetables on the table. She'd asked Cook to under-season them so that they would not offend Luke's stomach, which was likely still sensitive.

As they served Belle and then him, Luke tilted his head, considering. "You've been the perfect hostess these past days—a balance of taking charge and kindness, forcing

me to think about things and giving me space to do so. I've seen worse marriages. I suspect I should say that to you—be thankful she did not pair me with you.”

Belle blinked. He sounded almost open to the idea of marriage with her. Did he not recall that he was an earl's son and needed to produce heirs? Sullyng his bloodline with that of a whore would not be well received, no matter that she knew she had better morals and a bigger brain than half the Ton. Nor could he have considered their age gap. They had about a decade apart... and a lifetime of experience.

Taking a bite of roast beef, she reminded herself that he'd been looking to her for direction. In all probability, this was an extension of that search.

Giving him direction in bed might be fun.

She needed her inner devil to shut up. When she went too long without orgasms at others' hands, she became reckless. And Clodpate was recklessness personified.

To reinforce that thought, she answered him in a stronger tone than she'd intended, “Oh, I am.”

He flinched before smoothing his expression. “Why do you wish to marry?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. If he laughed at her when she told him she wanted children, she might have to kill him and hide the body. Bad enough she'd have to fear her past marring her offsprings' future; illegitimacy would seal their fate in the eyes of polite society in even a remote village.

His expression remained as smooth as porcelain. Unreadable.

“I want a family. Not a rotating door of partners who go on to have families with other women. A husband and children who can never be called bastards.” Rigid, she

placed her utensils on her plate, every muscle taut waiting for his response.

He leaned back in his chair. “Huh. I haven’t thought about that. I suppose I will need to do the same one day. The earldom and all”—he waved a hand—“but I need to sort myself first.”

She snorted, partly in relief but mostly at him finally seeing the light. For a lordling, he was surprisingly open-minded. He’d treated her as an equal in all their conversations.

“I know, I know.” He shook his head. “So what made you decide this now?”

He hadn’t laughed, but his continued interest in her motivations was unexpected. She gave a mental shrug. She’d already shared the worst of it with him, it couldn’t hurt to explain this as well. “I’ve had two long-term benefactors whom I might have loved in other circumstances. And the London scene has grown boring and repetitious. I’d always liked the idea of a family, but my parents’ and sister’s experiences made me wary.”

He nodded. Then, apparently remembering her sister’s marriage, he asked, “Did you convince your sister to leave her husband, once you’d established yourself?”

She swallowed, hating the memories even now, years later. “No. I went back to try, and she refused again. On my second visit, the neighbors told me she’d died, and her husband had moved.”

“Blast,” he muttered under his breath, staring at his plate. Louder, he said, “I am very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” She had seen enough family and friends die too young before she escaped the rookeries for the news to shock her. Anger was what drove her to avoid

ever being in a similarly dependent situation.

“May I ask... do you know how it happened?”

“What difference would it have made? She’d still be gone, and he’d still be walking around free.” She shrugged, attempting nonchalance, when really it had been what shaped her path to this point. She’d determined not to marry until she had enough money and experience to be able to choose carefully. It was also what had led her to the Black Widow for help. Not only did she not take clients who abused their roles, but no one dared cross her.

“If it is boredom, what happens if you become bored with marriage?” Luke’s question brought her back to the present and his earlier question regarding the timing of her quest.

“’Tis not dissatisfaction with a partnership, only London and society’s inequitable rules—one set for titled men, another for titled women, and then others for the working class. I suppose Charlotte finding happiness a second time, if she’d only let herself have it with William, has also influenced me.”

“I hold out hope for them. He’s tenacious and wise beyond his years. She’ll come around.”

Belle barely heard him, lost in thought. She was not averse to commitment—the relationship she’d discussed with the Black Widow was proof of that. Memories surfaced of the one man she’d let get away. The Earl of Northumberland hadn’t ever said it, but she was positive he’d have married her if she’d agreed to leave London with him, despite his title. He was older than her and already had his heir, which helped. But she’d been young and stupid. Now she was older and tired.

Having lost her appetite, she checked his plate. He’d stopped eating, also, his knife

and fork aligned on his almost-empty plate. She gestured to the footmen to clear the table.

He asked, “Why not reach out to one of those benefactors? Or would your profession put them off marriage?”

“Weren’t you?”

His cheeks went pink. “I apologize for my comment in Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s office. That was poorly done of me. It was a combination of shock at the topic of conversation and too much drink. The one good thing my father taught me that was worthwhile was to judge a person by what you learn of their character. Not what others tell you or by a title.”

His liberal nonchalance at the chasm between their stations continued to amaze her. Moreover, given what he’d told her of his father’s high expectations of him, his last comment was unexpected. “A rule I live by, as well. I’m glad your father is not all bad.”

His lips twisted, but he did not comment.

A footman carried in two individual lemon tartlets, one of her favorite desserts. She dug her spoon in and savored a bite before continuing. “As for why I did not return to them, one of them is married now. For the other, I suppose ’tis pride in part, but I also don’t know that we want the same things now. I loved my time with him, but I wanted to stay in London. Now that has changed. But what if other things have changed on his side?”

He nodded and tried the miniature tart. Licking his lips, he ate a second spoonful then asked, “Why go to the widow to find a husband?”

“She caters to a very select clientele. Women who have pasts that might interfere with pursuing marriage but have funds enough to buy a husband. She vets the men to the client’s specifications, removing much of the risk.”

“And you have those funds?”

“Are you asking me about money, young man?” She arched a brow, waving her spoon at his look of consternation. “I am teasing. Yes, I have those funds. You’ll recall I told you last night I hoarded my funds. I asked for more whenever I dared and often got it. Then I found Charlotte, and she helped me invest it. And here I am. Retired now for several months.”

And lusting after the first attractive man to linger in my sight as a result. No, it was more than that. She enjoyed talking to him. If games were not so riddled with strings to betting, she’d have been more willing to play those. While he said he’d struggled at Oxford, the man also seemed to enjoy reading as much as she did.

The memory of her words to Bessie Dove-Lyon flitted through her head. Like she and North had, Luke also seemed to understand loneliness.

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Luke lay on his pallet staring at the ceiling, his hands cupping his head on the pillow. His leash trailed along the pillow and floor to the bed.

Belle had fallen asleep within minutes, but his thoughts kept circling. Her question the day before about his day had plucked an unexpected response. He got that same sense of reward, of winning, through accomplishing a task, as he had from winning at dice or cards. Of course, it depended on the task and his mindset, but it had happened. In fact, he'd experienced that elation two days in a row.

Her past showed him he had a long way to go, however. Menial tasks would not hold his interest for long, nor were they the type of thing a future earl should spend time on. The differences between her achievements and his lack thereof continued to bother him. Which he supposed was a small step forward.

The obstacles in her past compared against a lack of such in his orbited the dark ceiling. There was something there to build on, he was sure of it. He lay for a long time considering the impediments in his world—other than his father, they were self-made. Hours later, he had a tentative idea of a productive use of his time. It would take time and capital and business sense, so he hoped Belle would add her insights, but even without that, he was eager to investigate it more.

He relaxed and turned his contemplation to the woman sleeping above him. What he wouldn't give to have her truly above him, laying on him. But her story provoked respect and admiration even more than lust. He wanted to be like her, to impress her—not in lieu of making changes for himself but because she dazzled him and made him want to interact as an equal, rather than the burden he had been thus far.

Shaking his head, he admonished himself. Never mind him preening like a peacock for her. She deserved to get what she wanted. Such a magnificent, accomplished woman deserved the absolute best husband in the land. He fell asleep running through his university mates to see if any were worthy of her.

He descended the stairs the next morning at a trot, eager to see what Belle had in store for him that day.

But she came to the dining room door, face grim and paper in hand, as he reached the lower hall.

“What is amiss? Are you all right?” he asked, reaching for her forearm that held the paper.

She turned her wrist and thrust the paper into his hand, nodding at it.

A small notice a third of the way down the page she had it folded to read, “The Earl of Harrington, Frederick Stanton, aged 50, collapsed Tuesday night at White’s and could not be resuscitated. His wife, son, and daughter will hold a service in Southwark Cathedral on Saturday.”

“William,” he gasped. He’d been so self-involved coming to grips with his drinking and, well, life, he hadn’t checked on William. Now with his father dead, William was an earl.

Luke shook his head. He’d lain there the night before congratulating himself on accomplishing weeding a garden and polishing a floor. He was such a failure. His friend had more responsibility than he needed, while Luke struggled even though he had none.

“I thought you might want to write a note, and I suppose you’ll need to attend the

funeral.”

“Yes. Yes. Blast, I—” he could not even finish a thought. William’s house would be overrun with the transition of the earldom and arrangements for the funeral. That meant he’d help his friend more by staying away, despite wanting to check on him. A note, Belle had said. As though it was that easy to find words. And it was Friday already. The funeral was tomorrow.

She led him into the dining room. “Have tea. We can make a plan.”

Luke closed his eyes and nodded. Internally he berated himself for his relief at her use of “we.” If he had a few more days of peace, he could grapple with his future. A plan had started to coalesce in the dark of night. However, it seemed fate had other plans this morning.

A new fear gripped him. He was not yet ready to venture back into the world. This miniature private house party was helping him establish new habits. Would Belle release him now because of the funeral? If she did, he had no idea how he’d pay his gaming debts or avoid the temptation of whisky.

Slouching into his chair, he gulped the tea she poured, registering vague surprise at her willingness to serve him.

An hour later, he’d managed a semi-coherent note including, with Belle’s permission, an offer to have drinks at their usual public house with William and Nate after the service.

“We shall need to discuss your time in the pub, but your friend needs you. Take today to consider how you can support him.”

“No, please.” He knew if he sat idle, he’d spiral into negativity and end up craving

whisky.

Her chin jerked back in surprise.

“I need to stay busy. The physical work helps quiet the noise in my head and distracts me from wanting to drown my sorrows.”

She nodded in understanding. “Right, then.”

Thus he sat in the dining room polishing all the silver the staff could find. Each time someone entered with another vase or letter opener or the like, they attempted to keep a straight face, but it was no secret they were enjoying the help from this strange guest of their employer’s.

The repetitive work soothed him, allowing him to align his jumbled thoughts. As he rubbed the cloth over a silver tureen, the unfairness of the paters that fate had handed William and him wafted over him again. William had earned exemplary marks at Oxford and had leapt into helping the earldom before his last year at university. His choices and efforts would have overjoyed The Earl. William’s drunken father, on the other hand, could have provided an excellent excuse for Luke’s own choices.

Even Nate, whose father was loving but remote and without resources to help, had established his own career in record time. He tilted his head as he set the tureen aside. Nate and Belle had much in common. An ugly twist of emotion churned in his stomach. He didn’t like to think of Belle and Nate suiting, or Belle and anyone suiting, for that matter.

Grabbing a bowl with ornate decorative filigree on the handles, he selected a narrow brush, scrubbing the tiny metal swirls as he shook off thoughts of Belle’s impending marriage. He had his own future to worry about.

He was stuck with The Earl, so he needed to confess his sins. Better to do that with a plan for his future that he was proud of—his hopes of paternal pride were low. Belle's story of her sister, as well as her gentle guidance of his own path to sobriety and indeed to maturity, had sparked the strategy he'd outlined on the dark ceiling.

If he could remain sober and be an example to others, perhaps he might help those in need wean themselves off gaming, spirits, or whatever vice they'd taken too far. He was still debating the logistics regarding where he'd do this, the number of people he could help at one time, and whether he should open it to aristocrats, working men, or both. His preference was both after hearing Belle's story. He was not yet ready to navigate chaperones or mixing men and women in one building, so he'd decided to begin with men.

Discussing the project with his father still made his stomach hurt. The Earl would no doubt find fault with it, no matter how detailed the design. However, Luke would practice his presentation and calculate paths to success without his father's support if needed. Given The Earl's good health and disappointment in his son, the man's invitation at the holiday was not likely to be to demand he start learning the earldom. He was grateful to have time to mature, as well as friends such as William and Nate who were farther along in life than he was.

That night, he didn't sleep. Worry about going out in public without Belle's supervision jockeyed with guilt over his self-absorption rather than considering William's needs, interspersed with disparagement of himself as a man given his sudden desire for supervision. He would never be able to help others if he could not handle himself.

Luke woke to a clean suit hanging on his wardrobe, pressed and ready for him to wear to the funeral. Belle must have procured it from his house. The woman was an excellent caretaker for spoiled men.

After performing his morning ablutions, he dragged on the first layer of garments, wishing he could remain here where no one knew his whereabouts, and he did not have to navigate society without the warmth of whisky in his belly.

However, he'd never forgive himself if he did not support William, no matter how tolerant his friend was. Belle had given him strict instructions, but even those had put ideas in his head. Nipping into a pub on the way to fortify himself, pestering Nate or others he'd know at the service for a flask.

Shame flashed over him in a hot wave. He'd gotten free of spirits. Belle would not stand for him to fall back into old habits. Nor did he want to contemplate feeling as he had those first few days again, or where she'd make him sleep after another misstep. Beyond that, the idea of helping others as he'd been helped had piqued his interest, and he did not want to jeopardize that. He just wished he could delay venturing back into society for another few days.

On the other hand, William needed his support. From past conversations, he suspected his friend was juggling relief as well as sorrow at his father's passing, given how much of a mess the prior earl had made of his family's finances.

Luke frowned. William was an earl—now, not someday. That new development made his own future feel more pressing. Gah, one drink. He just needed a few sips to deal with all this reality.

A knock on his room door made him turn.

Before he could invite the person to enter, Belle stepped into the room.

“Shall we go over this once more?”

“No, Belle. I understand.”

Her gaze narrowed. “I did not give you leave to address me by that name.”

“I have slept in your room and held your feet in my hands, and”—he wiggled his eyebrows—“you’ve seen more than that on my form. Might you consider offering me the privilege?”

“We shall see how today goes. Now, I know you say you understand, but this bears repeating. No flasks, no wandering off from the service. If William and Nate can get away after the funeral, no gaming, no spirits, and only one drink—a cider, as you’ll sip that slowly out of dislike.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She held out the shoes she’d been holding. “I am sorry for William’s loss. Please convey my sympathies when you see him.”

When she stepped forward to help him with his cravat, a vision of her doing this every day as his wife stole his breath. Dismissing it as a stress-induced fantasy, he muttered his thanks and turned away to don his shoes.

He climbed into Belle’s carriage, marveling at the quality. It was as nice as his, demonstrating yet again her triumph over her humble beginnings. Hating himself, he stuck his fingers behind the squabs and ran them over the support for the bench seat, looking for flasks tucked away or hidden compartments where he might find whisky. His lovely housemate had removed them, if indeed there had ever been any.

He avoided looking out the window for fear of stopping at a tavern along the way. Instead, he practiced words of sympathy for William and his mother. The countess, or Ruth as she insisted they call her, had adopted Nate and Luke as her own. No matter how deficient a husband and provider the earl had been, she had loved her husband, supporting him publicly and covering for him privately. Luke ached for her loss even

more than William's.

Nate was lingering on the church steps when Luke arrived, looking nervous. He should have arranged to pick Nate up on the way. Just as Belle declined to attend the service, his working-class friend no doubt felt out of place at an earl's funeral. The familiar sensation of disappointing someone he cared for weighed his shoulders down again.

Nate spied him and sighed in relief, waving him over.

Luke greeted Nate and asked, "Have you spoken to Will?"

The blacksmith shook his head as they entered and selected the end of a pew off to the side.

Luke glanced around. Several regulars from the Lyon's Den caught his eye and nodded. He gulped a swallow, his parched throat once again craving the unique soothing combination of fire and water in whisky. Ruth turned to say something to William, the lines on her face more pronounced with grief and fatigue than he'd ever seen.

He pictured himself in that front row, his father gone with no more opportunities to reconcile, and a new layer of grief washed over him. No matter how much he resented The Earl's unrealistic standards, he had a better appreciation for his father's oversight and protection as he watched the grieving family. And perhaps because he was sober for what felt like the first time in years.

And that brought his thoughts right back to whisky. Blast. Gripping the pew in front of him, he pictured Belle, his wish to make her proud, and his own desire to succeed. He rather liked the idea of being able to turn and hold out his hand to help someone else in a similar predicament. But one day at a time. He needed to get through this

funeral and support his friend.

After the service, he hugged William and asked in an undertone if he wanted to meet them at the public house near Nate's business. William slanted a look at his mother and shook his head. "Two nights from now."

Luke nodded, sighing in relief at the reprieve. He climbed back into the carriage and leaned forward to watch the streets go by, eager to share his success.

Alighting, he rapped a quick succession of knocks on Belle's front door for entrance. But the butler only opened the door a foot, leaning forward to hiss, "Mrs. Rossi has a visitor, a lady. Please go 'round to the kitchen door."

Luke nodded and stepped back to turn. She did not want her visitor alerted to his presence. He frowned, strangely hurt by that thought.

She was a courtesan. Why did she need to hide a man in her home? Unless it was personal; unless he embarrassed her.

Cook let him in at the back door and directed him to the servant staircase. He trudged upstairs with a myriad of conflicting emotions. Perhaps Belle would come chain him to her bedpost like a wayward pet again. His jubilation at getting through an outing without having a drink evaporated. He was such an imbecile. A ten-year-old should be proud of that. A man of two-and-twenty should be able to do that every day, nay, every hour with no sense of accomplishment needed. And without clutching a pew and craving a drink halfway through. No wonder she was embarrassed by him.

Morose, he passed his bedroom and entered hers to lie on his pallet, like the ill-mannered mongrel he was.

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Belle had managed to drink one sherry to every two of Charlotte's, but she still felt the effects as she helped her friend up the stairs and into her usual room, the bedroom Luke had been using to store his clothes. She'd moved those to the third bedroom for the time being.

Charlotte had sent her a frantic note and had come to grieve the self-inflicted end of her affair with William after watching him mourn the loss of his father at the funeral.

After trying and failing to convince Charlotte that she needn't give William up so he could find a younger woman more likely to bear him heirs, she'd given up and drunk with her friend, giving her the time to process her grief.

She attempted to distract Charlotte with idle chatter, but part of her remained focused on Luke, worrying about how he was faring, wanting him to succeed. As the sherry levels lowered, her concern turned to longing. She'd enjoyed his company these past days once he'd gotten past the whining stage of recovery.

She would miss him when he was gone. No, she needed to contemplate marriage prospects, not young entertaining lordlings who accepted her as she was and even sought out her guidance. Her feelings stemmed from the lack of structure around their association. Always before, she'd known ahead of time what a partner expected. Even marriage had at least a loose set of guidelines.

Luke was an anomaly, that was all. She could not want more with him. She did not want more with him. His reputation would suffer from association with a retired courtesan nearly a decade older than him, and her emotions would not allow her to enter a contractual arrangement with him as his mistress, even if his funds allowed it.

She suspected Charlotte would want to stay for a few days to avoid William, and she was not quite sure what to do with Luke for the duration. The temptation of having him in her bedroom that long might prove more than she could handle.

However, she was not prepared to think about alternatives after an entire decanter of sherry. Thank heavens she had extra spirits and wines down in the root cellar and that Luke had not thought to check there. As it was, she might have to send for more if her friend stayed, as Charlotte had managed two bottles herself.

Stumbling into her room, she faced her immediate dilemma—whether the greater need was to lie down or to remove her stays. Swaying, she leaned one hand on her dresser and held her candelabra aloft, blinking at the attractive nuisance curled on her floor. She'd wondered whether he'd choose the guest room or come willingly to hers.

He made the right choice. She giggled, attempting to remain quiet.

That thick hair begged for her fingers, and the nobs of his spine were perfect notches for her tongue to explore on the way to bite that delicious derriere she'd been watching work for the past week.

Sighing, she set the candelabra down with a clack and twisted her arms to undo her dress. An older courtesan had once advised her to make her gowns as easy to get out of as possible, and her modiste had accommodated that ever since. Forgetting about the screen, she slid her gown off her shoulders and moved to the laces of her stays and the tapes of her petticoat.

The stays dropped with a muted clunk to the floor.

Luke stirred, rolling onto his back with the covers at his waist. Her gaze roamed, enjoying his shirtless torso.

“Mmm,” she moaned. Clad only in her chemise and stockings, she threw herself sideways across the bed to lie on her stomach, head propped on her elbows to enjoy the view.

That T captivated her. Most men had more of a heart-shaped cloud of chest hair pointing downward. In her current mood, the T seemed significant.

“Perhaps ’tis for tempting,” she whispered. “Or tantalizing... or, oh, treasure. Or it could be pointing ‘this way.’”

Luke stirred, raising a hand to rest on the cross of the T .

She giggled and whispered more ideas. “Or target.”

“What is a target?” His voice was a sleepy grumble. “Is someone else here or are you talking to yourself? And what is so funny?”

“Someone else is here. Charlotte is in your room. And I’m attempting to decipher your T . Oh, I know. The Tower of Luke. Terrifying.” She was outright laughing now, the bed jiggling under her.

He sat up to peer at her in the dim candlelight, bringing him within reach for more than a wandering gaze. “What are you going on about?”

“Touch!” she proclaimed, shooting out a hand to trail down his chest.

He sniffed and raised a brow. “Sherry? Did you bring me some?”

“No, silly. You’re not allowed. Besides, I have not worked out what to do with you yet. Or what your T stands for.” She gasped. “I hope it is not tiny!”

He narrowed his gaze and glanced to where her hand lingered. His head shot up and he growled, “No. You’ve seen it. You know ’tis not tiny.”

“What about thrust?” she giggled, listing sideways without both hands to prop her head. Her fingers curled in his chest hair and tugged.

His hand came to cover hers. “No thrusting shall happen tonight. Not when one of us—the wrong one, I might add—is another t word: tipsy.”

“Oh, Clodpate,” she sighed, folding her arms under her head.

“No,” she heard above her. His arms came around her and half-lifted, half-dragged her up to her pillows where he tucked the covers around her.

“Sleep, Belle. We can talk”—he emphasized the T and she giggled—“in the morning.”

Hearing whispers, Belle rolled onto her back and groaned. Her mouth was full of cotton.

A fully clothed Luke approached with a tea tray as the door closed. He set it down on her dresser with a minimum of rattling.

Thank goodness. Her head was almost as cottony as her mouth. She dragged herself up against the pillows, taking a moment to regret that his T was covered. She supposed she should be embarrassed by her behavior last night, but she was used to having leeway as a courtesan. If it scared him away, all the better, before she gave into her yearning for more of him.

“Good morning,” he whispered. “Your guest is still asleep.”

“That is for the best. Please, Luke”—he blinked at her rare use of his first name, but she had a more immediate concern—“do not tell William where she is. She needs a few days to sort out her thoughts. And whilst I hope she’ll realize that she is what’s best for him, I am not confident in that outcome.”

“Why?”

She shook her head. “’Tis not my story to tell.”

“Fair enough.” He stood with his teacup in hand, not drinking. “May I ask why you do not want her to know I’m here?”

Facing direct questions and finding the diplomacy to answer them after a bottle of sherry were less than ideal. She put a hand to her head, resting her cup and saucer on her lap. “For two reasons. The last thing she needs is any reminders of William.”

“Ah.”

“And second, I am trying to protect you.”

He snorted a laugh.

“Shh.”

“Sorry. But what from? You’ve said it yourself. The only way I might be freer to do as I pleased is if I were the offspring of a duke or royalty.”

“True.” Bitterness rang in the word, and she raised her head to glare at him. “However, my thought was to protect you from your cronies finding you, your creditors finding you, temptation finding you, and so on.”

He nodded, and his shoulders dropped an inch. “I see. Thank you.”

After finishing her tea, she asked the question that had plagued her all evening until the sherry took over. “How did you fare yesterday?”

“Quite well, actually.” He grinned. “Of course, it was not a happy day, but I doubt William was all that broken up at losing his father. There had been little love lost between them in recent years. As for me, I admit to craving whisky at one point, but overall I was rather proud of myself. Of course, we did not go to the public house; he asked that we meet there tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a good start, though.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to take daily walks in the neighborhood if I am going to remain hidden away whilst Lady Charlotte is here?”

“I suppose you’ve earned your shoe rights back,” she conceded. “Although, the outing for drinks will be your true test.”

“I suspect there will be several of those along the way.”

After he let himself out of the room to sneak down the back stairs, Belle lingered in bed, pensive. It appeared as though her assigned project—the only framework she had for her interaction with Luke—was nearing an end. Charlotte’s sadness echoed in her heart. For all her restraint, losing her housemate would hurt.

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I nordinately proud of having earned his shoe privileges back, Luke hastened through breakfast to take his walk.

The alone time worked like the assigned chores had, freeing his mind to think about his new plan. He craved Belle's thoughts on it, but that was not possible for a few days with Charlotte visiting.

He knew what he should do, but he needed to take this one step at a time so he did not fall back on old habits. Belle's support had gotten him this far, and he welcomed the crutch while he had it. But it wouldn't be there past the next fortnight in all likelihood, so he must begin implementing changes on his own.

The next afternoon, he settled back into the comfortable carriage with a sigh. He'd mastered one outing; surely he could handle a second one. He'd even earned shoe privileges. Imagine what he might get if he navigated this evening successfully.

As the carriage slowed at the men's favored pub, his nerves returned. Other than guzzling the altar wine or frisking someone for a flask, he hadn't had access to drink. Tonight he'd be lingering within easy reach of bottles and bottles of delicious temptation.

Inching into the pub, he waited for his eyes to adjust to the low light. Their preferred corner table was empty. He was the first to arrive. How easy it would be to order and gulp a glass of golden nectar before his friends appeared.

His hands fisted. Perhaps he'd wait outside. The place reeked of spilled beer, burned tobacco, and old grease from the kitchen—all among his favorite aromas these past

months.

Straightening his spine, he strode over and plunked down on the bench. He'd hold the table for his friends and control himself, like the mature adult he was attempting to be.

Nate arrived moments later and looked surprised he had not already ordered their drinks. When he raised a hand to the barmaid, Luke stopped him and gestured her over. "A cider for me today, please."

Nate stared, his eyes wide. Both friends knew Luke's distaste for cider or any sweet drink.

"I'll explain when Will is here. Tell me what you've been doing. I know I've been... unreachable."

They discussed Nate's specialized metal products and new inventions by his business partners while waiting for William.

Their drinks arrived. Luke took a tentative sip. Nasty as ever, coating his tongue. He waited for his belly to warm with contentment as it did with whisky. Instead, it rolled, reminding him of his first days at Belle's, when he could barely stand the smell of food. He lowered the mug to the table. As usual, Belle had been correct—drinking cider slowed him down even if his self-control did not.

William arrived, and Nate and Luke rose to hug him and exchange words of sympathy there had not been time for at his father's service.

William did not notice Luke's cider, ordering his own ale, and Luke decided to explain after hearing about his friend's more important challenges.

William described his father's last failure, a poorly managed shipping investment with his cronies. The shipment had been ruined, a total loss, and William would likely have to release some employees. His frustration showed in his deep frown and deeper gulp of ale. He'd told Luke and Nate months ago that he'd lost all respect for his father once he'd seen the state of the earldom and the man's ongoing lack of attention to it.

Nate shook his head. "'Tis horrid, like one last slap from the grave, if I may say so."

Luke swung a hand with a glass and a cheroot in it. "Well at least 'tis the last. Hear, hear." He raised the glass, and they all toasted.

Will sighed. "He's undone over a year of work. I am just thankful I had gained enough ground that we aren't begging on the street."

Still unsure how his friend had invested so successfully, Luke felt a stab of jealousy. Recalling what Belle had told him about Charlotte teaching young women, he realized William had also benefited from her knowledge. He half-joked, "Yes, well done, chap. I confess I must have missed that class at university, I've had nowhere near the returns on my investments that you have."

"Perhaps you drank more of them away?" Nate murmured.

Luke elbowed him, faking joviality. In reality, the dig hurt. He'd been obvious in his lack of control, and he was trying to face that head-on. Reminders of both his friends rescuing him from gaming hells in the past and pouring him into bed shamed him. He glugged more cider, which reminded him to enlist his friends' support in his ongoing recovery.

William smiled, although the curve of his lips was tinged with sadness, and confirmed Luke's suspicions. "'Twasn't Oxford, South. 'Twas Charlotte, Lady

Peterborough to you. The lady you doltishly addressed as a wench in her own home.”

Of course. The person William and Belle had in common.

He raised a hand to the serving girl, gesturing for another round and rolled his eyes. “I apologized for that, old chap. Are you ever going to let me forget it?”

William snickered.

The other two ordered another round. Concerned about William’s reaction to Charlotte’s rejection, Luke also wanted to distract them from the fact that he wasn’t adding his own drink. He asked, “You know, we haven’t seen you here much these past months. You’ve been at the ever-so-lovely Lady Peterborough’s. Why are you not there now?”

William shook his head, lips turning down. “She won’t see me. As far as I can tell, she is not even home.”

“Wait, do you mean she found you inheriting an earldom awful enough that she hied herself off somewhere?” Luke joked, trying to keep things light so his expression would not give his knowledge of Charlotte’s whereabouts away.

“What, was her first marriage to an earl so horrible it put her off for life? Or is she wealthy enough to want to keep a string of young men to play with, but never wed?” Nate added.

“Watch it!” William sat up. “I’ll not have you speak of her like that. Do you really think I’d be someone’s plaything?”

Nate shrugged, muttering almost to himself, “If the sex was good...”

Luke roared with laughter a little too hard and loud for the topic, preoccupied with the need to confess his sins to his friends.

William glowered, and Nate changed the subject to a funny interaction with a customer, reminding Luke of the point of the evening—to cheer his friend.

When the evening ended without Nate asking him about the cider, he took it as an excuse to delay the inevitable. His lips twisted in derision. Perhaps they were enjoying not having to pour him into his bed too much to question it.

Luke walked William back to his house as though headed to his own townhome, then changed course to Belle's, hoping she had avoided drinking sherry all evening with Charlotte. He wanted to celebrate. He'd conquered the pull of the bottles of liquid gold behind the bar, and was more than ready to return to her preoccupation with his chest hair.

As he rounded the house to the kitchen door, he grew excited about the potential of her following that T .

Luke crept up the servants' stairs, the candle in his hand casting eerie flickers. The heels of his shoes clicked against the wood despite his best efforts to be silent, so he bent to unbuckle them and slip them off. No point in waking up the entire house. Turning to continue up with them clenched in one hand, he lifted his candle to find Belle standing at the top of the steps in her red nightrail and wrap, hands on hips.

"Hallo." He grinned at her, happy she was awake so they might revisit the prior night's conversation.

"Clodpate. You're louder than a herd of elephants. Get up here and into my room."

"I am at your service, milady." A chap could hope. He bowed when he reached the

top of the stairs. “How do you know what a herd of elephants sounds like?”

She shoved him into the room and clicked the door shut. Through clenched teeth, she asked, “How many drinks?”

For a moment he flashed back to standing in front of The Earl, being reprimanded about grades when he’d tried his best. He’d long ago stopped trying to earn his father’s respect, however, so this hurt worse. He wanted Belle to be proud of him, and her doubting his self-control pierced his balloon of happiness.

Reminding himself he had to do things because he wanted them, not to impress others, he straightened. Glaring, he answered, “Not even one, but gee, thank you for the trust.”

“What?” She gaped.

“Disappointed? Are you so rarely wrong?”

“No, no. I simply cannot believe anyone can make that much noise sober.” She placed a hand on his arm. “I am sorry, Luke. I should have asked a different way. It was only because you clattered up the stairs, as it took me back to the night of the sherry raid.”

His lips pressed together, he muttered, “’Tis fine.”

“Actually, it is not. You deserve a reward.”

He perked up, his brows raising as his lips relaxed. He should make her go through the three steps of begging his pardon, but he was too eager to take advantage of her interest from the night before.

“Like what?”

“Anything.” When he opened his mouth to respond, she added a quick qualification.

“Anything other than wine or spirits.”

“I don’t want that.”

Her eyes widened in surprise.

Replaying his quick refusal, he realized it was proof he was on the path to being cured of his dependence.

“Shall I offer some choices then?” she asked.

“No, thank you. I know what I want. I want to touch you.” Since before he held her feet in his hands, he’d wanted to see all of her, touch all of her. He stalked toward her. For every one of his steps, she retreated a step. The back of her knees hit her bed, and she lost her balance, sitting hard. Dropping to his knees before her, he put his hands on her ankles.

She looked nervous, but played it off with a blasé tone. “Another foot rub? ’Tis rather unimaginative of you, Clodpate. But I suppose I can live with it.”

“Hmm. Unimaginative? I dare say, I can do better, my Belle.”

She glared at his use of that name.

Undoing his cravat, he began unfastening his shirt.

“What are you doing, Clodpate?”

“Given your interest last night, I thought to offer you visual stimulation whilst I take my pleasure.” He tugged his shirt off and sat back on his heels. When she remained silent and her gaze roamed his chest and belly, he grinned.

With that, he slid his hands up to just below her knees and yanked her closer to the edge of the bed. Off balance, she fell back. Before she could rise, he slid the satiny fabric up her body as far as her supine position allowed. He held the hem in place with a hand on her belly, his lower palm burning at the feel of her bare skin.

She gasped.

“I want to worship you in all the ways you’ll permit.” He licked the top of her knee. “You taste far better than that cider. You shall be my sweet treat and reward all in one.”

Her mouth closed and opened.

He smiled for a moment. His Belle was finally speechless. He scanned her silk-clad form. The hard tips of her nipples and rapid rise and fall of her chest told him she was not averse to this act of contrition. But he needed to hear her permission.

Lowering his head, he ran his lips up one inner thigh from knee to crease, then the other. At long last, his hands resting on her hipbones with thumbs teasing the edge of her nether lips, he asked, “May I enjoy my reward?”

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Belle knew he needed her to form words, but they were beyond her. She needed a minute to process. Having a man solely focused on her pleasure rather than his own had been rare in her role. Rarer still were men interested in putting his mouth where Luke's was. For a time early on, she'd been known as a dominant lover, willing and able to direct men to worship her at a whim. However, she'd done that because men were willing to pay surprising amounts to be debased. She'd discovered to her disappointment that they'd rather kiss her shoe than her quim.

For a man to choose this of his own volition was unheard of in her circles, and in fact only her favorite client, North, had enjoyed the act. This—Luke requesting it as his reward—was a whole new level of interest.

She flinched at yet another disconcerting similarity between Luke and the client she'd loved most.

Until now. She shook off the thought, replacing it with a better one. If she was going to be hurt, why not enjoy the time she had with him? He had succeeded in eschewing temptation even sitting in a pub with two friends who were drinking. She no longer needed to oversee his recovery. They were equals, or as equal as they'd ever be.

Running one last gaze down his gorgeous, lettered chest, she dropped her head back and said, "You'll have to work hard to do better than the foot rub."

"Feel free to direct me if my performance is not up to your expectations." With that, he half-stood, leaned over, and brushed his lips over hers. Once, twice, then he nibbled on her upper lip.

Her hands came to his furred chest, scrabbling for purchase. Before she could gather her wits to return the kiss, he was back on his knees, his breath wafting over her inner thighs. She'd never been so passive a recipient of a kiss in her entire career. He did not seem to care about her response, however; that wasn't part of his reward.

He licked up her center and blew a breath over her damp flesh as his thumbs teased her open, and her wandering thoughts scattered. Pointing his tongue, he circled the nub already swelling.

Raising his head, he licked his lips, "You taste better than any spirits. This might replace all my cravings. I shall wish for this every night."

She thumped her head against the pillow. "Less talking, more stroking, please."

He laughed, hushing it quickly in light of the guest in the next chamber. "Ah, Belle. Please recall, this is my reward."

He leaned in, obstructing her view, and her head fell back, determined to enjoy this rare treat to its fullest. Without vision, her other senses intensified. When he licked just under the hood of her clitoris, she gasped and moaned.

He did it again, and she almost twisted away, the sensation was so powerful.

His fingers paused at her opening, as though waiting for her consent.

"Please..." She twisted her head against the bed coverings, needing him to fill her, hungering for the friction of thrusts. No, of him. This was not simply a carnal act between two consenting adults. This was Luke, someone she cared for despite and because of his failings as well as his strengths. The difference manifested in every stroke, lick, and word, the emotions layering more sensation than mere physical touch.

He responded to her plea by pressing two fingers into her.

“Yes.”

At that, he drove them deep into her.

“Clod—Luke, yes, there.” She corrected herself. It did not seem fair to call him by a derogatory nickname when he was doing such a good job at pleasuring her.

Her hips lifted off the bed as his fingers curled to rub a sensitive spot on each plunge and she did lift her hand to clutch his hair and press his mouth to her. “Please, lick hard. Mercy, I’m so close.”

So he did.

She exploded against him, feeling his firmed tongue press against her spasming nub. Bliss swirled outward from his still-moving fingers, and she had to bring her other fist to her mouth to stop a loud moan. Ecstasy bowed her hips off the bed, pulsing for long moments as she squeezed her eyes shut to savor the release.

She could become accustomed to this. Perhaps it was stronger because her last bed partner had been months ago, rather than due to Luke’s skill or her emotion. She’d keep telling herself that until she believed it, given the short-term nature of their living arrangement.

Finally, hyper-sensitive, she loosened her fingers and gave his head a little shove. She squirmed even from his breath gusting over where his lips and tongue had been.

He withdrew his fingers and sat back on his heels.

She pushed herself up on an elbow to gaze at him.

His eyes were bright with lust, his breathing ragged. “Thank you, Belle.”

Her brows rose. She’d expected him to leap up and demand his own pleasure. This was a new side of Luke, rather more mature than she’d dared hope. She smiled and said, “Definitely better than a foot rub.”

“Thank you.” He bowed his head for a moment to acknowledge her praise. “Will you bind me again, then?”

“Did you...?” She grimaced. How could she, a courtesan, an instrument of pleasure, nay an instructor of pleasure, not be able to finish the question?

He seemed to understand. “No. I’m not asking for that.”

“Right.” She was confused. His reward should have been achieving his own pinnacle or at best both of theirs. No man had prioritized her enjoyment to this extent. But her brain was not working correctly after his ministrations. The stirrings of respect and liking for him were too fresh for her to act on, and she wasn’t ready to leave her own bedroom so he could finish himself. In the end, she took him at his word. “There is sherry in the house for Charlotte, and I don’t want to tempt you further tonight, so yes. I will cuff you.”

He stripped down to his smallclothes and lay on his back, his cockstand tenting his clothes.

She licked her lips and attempted not to stare at it. For heaven’s sake, her lust should be sated.

After cuffing him, she laid down and snuffed the candles. She stared into darkness and imagined what he would have done next if she’d given him leave. She’d never look him in the face again without picturing his lips wet and swollen with her juices,

fresh from tasting her. Her memory was fuzzy after years, but she swore not even North had taken her to such heights of pleasure. Luke had achieved a new record without using his cock.

However, the fact that she'd denied him pleasure rather than contemplating her own was what kept her awake for hours.

Five days later, Belle had relived that night every chance she had. Often the fevered reminiscing occurred in bed with her hands mimicking his actions. Not able to find an excuse to reward him or punish him again, she sent Luke back to his own room as soon as Charlotte left and hoped he'd initiate further play. When he didn't, she was bereft, but it was better not to start anything more when he was leaving soon.

When they were alone in the house again, he'd described his idea for helping other drunkards, looking eager for her approval even as she'd winced at his choice of words. His wide eyes and forward lean gave her a new understanding of what Charlotte saw in a man so much younger than her. There was much to be said for youthful exuberance and resilience.

Despite her best intentions, she imagined that resilience in the bedroom.

Ignoring her inner devil, she'd praised him and asked a few questions. He'd thought through as much of the logistics as he could without knowing what capital he'd have available, and she was impressed.

Between his sobriety, his newfound interest in contributing to society, and his oral skills, her feelings for Luke Lynwood were unstoppable. However, in addition to a decade difference in their ages, they had an insurmountable class gap. Not only was she not of the aristocracy, or even the gentry, she was a harlot. A well-paid, highly sought after one, but a harlot nonetheless, and therefore unsuitable to marry someone who would one day be an earl.

Not that he'd offered. But she was finished with unions with a contractual end. She wanted a lifelong partner, and she refused to have children out of wedlock. Indeed, one of the main reasons she wanted to leave London was to bury her past well enough to ensure her children were free of censure.

Her advice to Charlotte to marry William and not worry about heirs was viable only because the two were both titled. She did not have the same choices, but she longed to see more of Luke's progress.

His expertise in the bedroom continued to tantalize her. Part of her wished to search for reasons to make him beg again, to see what he'd choose as his next penance. But despite his obnoxiousness when drunk or hungover, she enjoyed a sober Luke. Thus, she encouraged his success.

When he'd managed a second outing to console the still-single William without drinking, she knew their time was drawing to a close. Without mentioning it to Luke, she requested an appointment with Bessie Dove-Lyon for them both.

The widow replied with an invitation for the next day.

Showing him the note, she braced herself for his jubilation.

His reaction was subdued, however. Head still bent over the note, he murmured, "Do you really think I'm ready?"

She curled her hand over his holding the paper. "I do."

They were brought in through the side entrance. Belle snickered at the circumspection; it was not as though she was coming alone to have a marriage arranged this time. She supposed it was for Luke's sake, as she likely knew half the gaming den's clients socially from demi-monde balls and the like.

Bessie Dove-Lyon skipped the pleasantries. “I see you managed not to kill the Lyon cub, Belle. How did you fare these past weeks?”

“He was a trial, but he’s been sober for a fortnight, managed two outings without drinking, and has a plan for his future.”

“So he is ready for his independence?”

Luke shifted. “He has a voice.”

The widow arched a brow at him, before returning her gaze to Belle.

“Yes.”

“May I ask how you passed the time?”

Belle narrowed her gaze. Mrs. Dove-Lyon never indulged in idle chitchat. There was a reason for the question, but she could not determine what it was. “We both enjoy reading. Some shared elements to our pasts were topics of discussion. And we started outlining next steps for an idea he had for a new direction in his life.”

“Excellent.” Lips just visible beneath the veil curled a fraction in a semblance of a smile.

Belle frowned. That curved mouth was more fearsome than inviting. Replaying her own words in her head, she realized their activities mirrored those she’d described to Bessie on her previous visit, and those had been with North. No wonder she was drawn to Luke. More than his oral skills fit with her desired traits in a mate... other than his need for heirs with a reputable wife.

The widow said, “I am happy to tell you that I’ve secured a suitor who meets your

requirements perfectly.”

“Oh?” Belle sat forward and slid a glance toward Luke. Surely Bessie would not discuss this with Luke still in the room.

Bessie nodded and sat back.

“May I ask who it is?”

Never one to prevaricate, the widow nodded again, this time tilting her head toward Luke. “If I recall, you were looking for companionship as well as... I believe the phrase was ‘bedroom activities.’ Reading, conversation, taking care of one another when you are sick, understanding loneliness.”

Belle gaped. The woman had not taken notes during their first discussion, but she remembered every detail of what Belle had said. No wonder her fees were so high.

The widow’s tilt of head registered. “Wait, you cannot mean—”

“Lord Lynwood here is your choice.”

“What?” Luke had apparently just caught up to the conversation. “I mean...” He trailed off, looking thoughtful.

“No. That is not fair to a young man who has made a few mistakes, yes, but who has just begun to get his life on track. And he did not come to you for marriage.”

“Ah, but his markers did.”

“No. I cannot. He would be saddled with my past and ostracized from his peers. As would our children.” She ignored the pang of longing her heart gave at the idea of

having children with Luke.

“His seat is almost as far from London as one could be and remain in England, which is what you wanted. That will also help him remove himself from the temptations of London.”

“I know nothing of being a countess.”

Bessie slapped a hand on her desk. “Oh, please. You have attended more demi-monde balls than I can count. You’ve interacted with countless titled lords in a myriad of social settings.”

“What about hostessing and the like? I was looking for respectability, not responsibilities.”

“You’ve hosted small gatherings, and you’ve run a household. You shall be fine.” Bessie shifted her attention to Luke. “You look thoughtful, Lyon cub.”

His hand supported his chin, elbow on the chair arm. “I’d never thought about it. Belle has been a magnificent hostess, teacher, and support these past weeks...”

“Never say you’re considering this, Luke,” Belle gasped. Goodness, if his father disapproved of him already, what would happen if he announced a betrothal to a courtesan? Trying to make him see reason, she voiced that thought. “Think of what The Earl would say.”

“Ha. I have to stand on my own two feet. I have reached my majority and can marry who I please. And no, it couldn’t make my life much more difficult than it has been.”

“You’ve been sober for less than a month.”

“What?” he asked, sounding outraged. “You just told Mrs. Dove-Lyon here that I was ready to take on the world. Yet I’m not ready enough for you to marry?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Belle murmured, reaching a hand to him.

Bessie’s voice cut through their conversation. “You’ve been sharing a household for almost a month now. Why do you not go home and consider it and return in a fortnight?”

They both turned to stare at her.

It was as though the widow was giving Belle permission to act out her fantasies before letting him go. She cast a sidelong glance at Luke. It wasn’t as though she needed to protect her virtue...which also meant she had a fortnight to explore all those sexual proficiencies she’d been imagining the past week. His departure was going to break her heart anyway, so it seemed expedient to enjoy this additional fortnight without worrying about the future. She could seduce him. A jolt of heat went through her.

“Keep in mind, your fee is due no matter what you decide, and I do not promise another option,” the widow reminded her.

Her warning did not register. Belle was already mentally undressing Luke to follow that T. “Fine.”

In her carriage, Belle peered wide-eyed across the space at Luke. He looked as shocked as she felt.

She tried to list merits for her plan, in case he resisted. First, he might marry someone without ensuring compatibility in the bedroom, but she never would.

Second... her gaze roamed the carriage, her thoughts stuck on that first benefit. There was enough room for her to straddle him. Her nether lips swelled against the carriage, the bouncing of the vehicle adding to her eagerness. Saliva pooled in her mouth at the thought of kissing her way down his T .

No, she needed to stick to her plan to seduce him. Not because she wanted to wed him.

Don't you?

She couldn't. It didn't matter what she wanted. However, if they only had a fortnight, she was going to damn well make use of every minute, which meant ensuring he'd want to take advantage of those two weeks as much as she did.

At home, she ordered a bath, noting that they had an hour until supper.

Luke asked if he might have one after hers, and the maids acquiesced.

Strolling upstairs, Belle's courtesan demeanor settled over her. An added sway showed in her hips when she walked. Her movements were more languid, soft and smooth. A brush of her hair off her shoulder, a lick of her lips. She sank into her alter ego, enjoying the swish of her inner thighs brushing, the scratch of her chemise and stays against her breasts.

After her bath, she asked the servants to light extra candles in the dining room and donned one of her most provocative gowns. Cut as demurely as any day dress, it was an innocent ecru with embroidered flowers on the cap sleeves, empire waistline, and hem. But without stays or undergarments, the imported raw silk was lightweight enough to allow the shadows of her cleavage and areola to be visible in the right light. She'd also checked the rear view, and sure enough, the cleft of her bottom and shake of her cheeks were perceptible. Bringing him upstairs could prove entertaining,

providing he did not trip.

With the front of her hair pinned off her face, she left the rest to curl around her shoulders and made her way to the stairs. Still in persona, she trailed her fingers along the banister as she meandered downward.

Lounging in her dining chair, she sipped the glass of wine she'd requested be brought from the root cellar and waited for her next conquest. Her nipples were pebbled in eagerness, and she crossed her legs to provide a bite of pressure to the swollen flesh between her thighs.

Luke rounded the doorway with a smile, saying, "What shall we—" His voice stalled as he caught sight of her.

Belle lifted a brow and smiled, arching her back a fraction more.

He gaped at her, stumbling the last step forward to grip his chairback with a white-knuckled hand.

"Sit. Aren't you hungry?" she asked through her lingering grin.

"I am most definitely hungry." He sat with a thump, still staring and making it obvious what he wished to eat. His gaze kept dipping, but he brought it back to meet hers each time.

How sweet. He is at least trying to keep his eyes on my face. He was so gentlemanly and mature about respecting women. And now about owning his future and avoiding delinquency in the gaming hells. He'd make an excellent husband.

For someone else.

He shook his head, closing his eyes once. But as soon as they opened, they returned to roam her form.

She might have to rethink the stairs for fear he'd hurt himself. After all, having him precede her would provide a delectable view.

Belle had asked the housekeeper to keep their meal short and sweet. Thus the soup course had been skipped, and they were served a vegetable pie and mild sausages. She asked Luke to pass the breadbasket, forcing him to look at her again as he did so. She swiped the bread through the liquid from the pie and ate it. Putting the remaining piece down, she sucked her thumb into her mouth as though it had sauce on it.

He stared, knife and fork in hand, unused.

Her tongue curled out around her thumb, then she hollowed her cheeks and sucked hard. While her movements were designed for show, she kept imagining his cock in place of her thumb and wanted to squirm in her chair. Releasing the digit with a pop, she moved to her forefinger.

His eyes shuttered. Placing his fork down, his hand dipped below the table, likely to adjust himself in his trousers.

Perfect.

“What were you saying when you came in?” she asked, testing whether he wanted to discuss the revelations of the day or his reaction to them. Unfair, perhaps, when she'd already distracted him, but if he had any concerns, she'd rather know them now.

“I cannot recall,” he said, twisting his head side to side. His gaze slid to the shadows outlined against her bodice.

“Right, then. Is the food to your liking?” She frowned. He’d managed only a single bite, and she rather hoped he’d need his strength later.

“I am enjoying the meal, thank you.”

She smiled at the innuendo and managed another forkful, although she could not taste the food for want of tasting him.

After three more bites, his chair scraped back. He stood, reaching for her hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Come. I’ve had enough. I prefer to have my next course—and given your attention to your thumb, perhaps yours—in the bedroom.”

Off-balance, Belle followed him. At his gesture, she preceded him up the stairs. This was unscripted territory. Always before, if she took the role of seductress, it was either agreed upon beforehand or the client followed her lead, enjoying being the center of the interaction.

She was so distracted she forgot to add seduction to her movements. Nonetheless, she heard a groan from a few steps below her. He’d caught sight of her rear moving under the diaphanous fabric.

In her bedroom, she regained her equilibrium. Turning to him, she trailed one finger down his waistcoat to play with the fall of his trousers. Biting her lip in a practiced move, she asked, “You mentioned something about more to eat?”

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Luke had spent the carriage ride contemplating Mrs. Dove-Lyon's proposal, Belle's reaction, and his own. After the initial shock had passed, he rather liked the idea. He'd meant what he'd said about Belle's guidance and encouragement. She was captivating—the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

He'd never been in love, but he imagined it would be a short fall to that state from where his thoughts were already.

There was, of course, the hurdle of his father that they'd have to discuss. However, one thing The Earl had never had issues with was class differences. Hell, he'd had paramours both in Northumberland and London; Luke had seen evidence of them when he'd visited from school and later university. Small touches like flowers in parlors and extra care in the shine of the silver that his father had never noticed, as well as a slightly less rigid posture and facial expression on his patriarch. There might be concerns about acceptance, as the women had discussed, but if it were a love match, he thought his father would be less likely to fight it.

In the meantime, there was fun to be had. He wanted to ensure Belle saw the benefits to their liaison before they had a serious conversation about the possibility of it. He'd seen her eyes light up and trail down his frame when the Widow had suggested remaining together for a fortnight.

As a courtesan, he supposed she rarely went very long without a bed partner. Hell, he might be in a longer dry spell than she was. However, his attention was not on gaining his own pleasure, but on ensuring hers. He suspected that even with more frequent opportunities, her profession required her to concentrate on her partner rather than herself. Tonight, no matter the length of his abstinence, he'd keep the

emphasis on Belle. She would not be an afterthought, nor would she have to ensure her own enjoyment. He would take that role.

He plucked her hand away from his trousers and said, “We both have too many clothes for the next course.”

She reached to untie his cravat.

He let her, poking his waistcoat buttons through the holes at top speed. He stripped it off then moved to the cuffs at his wrists. The minute she’d drawn the cravat from around his neck, he reached over his head and yanked his shirt off, tossing it aside.

Even undressing himself was for her, though. Gesturing, he teased her, “I thought perhaps you’d like to continue your vocabulary practice.”

He needn’t have bothered. Her attention was rapt on that fuzzed letter.

Belle laid her hands on his chest muscles and skimmed over the small tight nipples to follow the trail of hair.

He sucked in a breath. When they met over his sternum, she brushed downward, and his stomach clenched. Reaching his trousers again, she moved to open them.

He stepped in, capturing her hand between them, to cup her head and angle his lips over hers. He sipped, relishing their plush velvet, before dipping his tongue in for a taste.

Too impatient to linger, he retreated and brought his hands to her hips to spin her, saying, “Your turn.”

He made quick work of the laces on her dress, his hands trembling at each inch of

creamy skin revealed. He'd never been so grateful for a woman's experience; he needn't worry about shyness or discomfort with him disrobing her. Instead, he could linger over her beauty. Shoving the gown off her shoulders, he walked around to her front and grasped her elbow to help her over the puddle of fabric.

Her nipples did indeed match the berry of her lips. Her waist was narrow, widening to luscious hips that would fill his hands perfectly to control his pace—if his desire allowed that.

She blinked, her dark eyes wide.

“Belle,” he gasped. He needed a moment to find words that did her splendor justice.

She cocked a hip, planting a hand on it and arching her back. Oh no, he did not want a performance. In fact, he wanted everything about the night to differ from her usual lovers. Doubt assailed him. She'd had any number of paramours. What made him think he could stand out? He shook off the worry. Concentrating on her pleasure would be a good start, at least.

“My word”—the gravel in his voice surprised both of them—“you are the embodiment of beauty and passion. You are magnificent.”

In a practiced movement, she ran her other hand up her side, over a breast, then through her hair before gesturing at him. “Come now, I'd like to see the rest.”

He needed to get her out of her routine of seduction. He wanted her to stop thinking, to relax and enjoy his attentions. Also, if his trousers came off, there was no accounting for how long he could see to her pleasure before throwing himself on her. “Later. I need to taste you again.”

A wrinkle formed between her brows for a moment, and her arms dropped to hang by

her sides.

That was better.

“Please, Belle. Lie down. I want to touch and taste every inch of you. In fact, start on your stomach.”

“My stomach?” Her eyes flared. From surprise or pleasure? Both, he hoped.

He nodded.

Obedying his directive, she stretched out on her belly. The lush globes of her behind made his mouth water before he even touched her. He straddled her hips and leaned his head to hers, surrounding her.

She shuddered once.

He breathed in her signature rose scent, touched with the aroma of her arousal. “Relax and enjoy, Belle. I know I will.”

“I’m trying,” she mumbled into her pillow.

When her shoulders dropped a fraction lower, he rose and smoothed his palms up her arms to her back, sweeping her hair to one side. He skimmed down her spine then back up, his fingers stretching around her ribs, feathering along the sides of her breasts where they pressed against the bed.

She moaned, and under him, her back arched an inch more, her bottom pressing upward.

He was desperate to get his hands on that arse, but schooling himself to patience, he

repeated the pattern. Skipping the delectable derriere threatening to distract him, he scooted off her to start at her ankles and stroke upward.

Finally, his hands found her bottom and squeezed the round softness. His cock surged in his trousers impatiently. After a quick adjustment to alleviate the fabric's strangulation, he ignored it.

Bending forward, he ran his lips along her spine then pressed his opened mouth to one gorgeous globe.

She squirmed.

He bit her.

A muffled shriek came from her pillow, and she raised her head. "You bit me."

A mischievous grin spread across his face. "Stay still, then."

He licked the underside of a cheek before running his tongue up her side to toy with the side of her breast as his fingers had. He did it again to her other side.

Her back rose and fell faster now, her breaths audible.

If he turned her and she pounced, he was not certain he'd have the strength to insist on pleasing her first.

"Turn over, Belle, but no touching until it is your turn."

He did not know if he hoped she'd listen or ignore him.

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Belle tingled from head to toe. Luke's breath in her ear, and his hands then mouth on her back and bottom all sent bolts of pleasure to her quim. She would not be surprised if there was a puddle on the bedding.

He wanted her to turn over. As she did, she hoped he would give her front side the same treatment as the back. No, she wished he'd get his cock out and put it to good use. Criminy, she didn't know what she wanted.

For a courtesan, she felt very unprepared. She was always—as she had planned this evening—the seducer. Tonight, though, Luke was seducing her.

She was past trying to wrest control back. From the moment he had bared her favorite furred letter, she was at his mercy. Her inner muscles clenched, impatient for his penetration, but the rest of her basked in his current ministrations. She would ensure his pleasure when he allowed it. Until then, she'd relax and enjoy this novelty as he requested.

She rolled to her back, trying to ignore that her breasts were a little lower and softer than they once had been. The decade of difference in their age was something to worry about tomorrow. Tonight, she would remind herself of his admiring words. She was beautiful, no matter what her age, and could have her choice of men there within the hour with a one-line note.

His lips came to her shoulder again, and she sighed, feeling as though she might melt into the bed. She still expected him to concentrate on his own physical pleasure, despite what he'd once chosen as a “reward.”

He worshipped her breasts for long moments, sucking each nipple deep into his mouth and laving it with pointed tongue before switching to the other.

The tugs had a direct line to her clitoris, and it throbbed in time with his suction and licks.

If it had been anyone else, she would have brought her fingers to that nub. For her pleasure, yes, but also as a show for the client. Luke had told her not to move, but she needed some friction there or she'd lose her mind.

He moved down her body, pushing her legs apart to kneel between them. Turning his wrist so his fingers pointed to the mattress, he laid them against her and pressed.

She moaned and swore her clitoris throbbed against him.

He rubbed the heel of his hand down then up, opening her.

"Luke," she pled.

"Patience. I promise I'll make it good." His tone was guttural, assuring her he was enjoying this almost as much as she was.

Twice he'd made her beg for his touch. It was reassuring to hear the desire reciprocated in his voice. That knowledge did not help her composure, however. Her fingers curled around clumps of bedding to stop herself from shoving his head where she wanted it or taking things into her own hands.

Luke slid further back and lowered his head to her new favorite position.

Her confusion at his interest in the act disappeared in a puff of smoke. Or was that a puff of his breath over her most sensitive flesh?

He lapped at her, humming at her taste. After a few licks he muttered, "I might need this as my after-supper drink every night. And 'tis far healthier than whisky."

A spear of fear about the future pierced her sensory haze, but she shoved it aside.

His mouth returned to her drenched folds, his tongue probing at her swollen nub to circle it, then flatten and press it.

She pushed her hips at him, her hands coming to his hair. "Ah!"

His hands slid under her bottom to squeeze and lift her to him, and with less than ten licks she was trembling and shuddering against him, thoroughly seduced.

He gentled his movements and brought her down by degrees before sliding his hands out. Bracing his hands on the bed by her hips, he leaned over her, panting. He straightened and brought his hands to the fastenings on his trousers, then stilled, gazing at her.

Oh, my word . He was asking permission. She might have swooned if she hadn't already been supine. Recovering, she said, "I told you I wished to see the rest."

He grinned and released a breath she hadn't realized he'd been holding. Making fast work of his trousers, he knelt above her in a blink.

Leaning up on one arm, she reached for the part of him that pointed at her. "This looks a tasty treat."

He snorted, and she sent him a startled look.

"Seems fitting, given the T ." He gestured to the line of hair down his stomach.

She fell back, laughing. A man with a sense of humor even when a willing partner had his cock in her fist. How refreshing. She would miss him dearly when their time came to an end. Despite what Bessie said, Belle couldn't fathom how an heir to an earldom could marry her.

He notched his rock-hard member at her entrance, distracting her wayward thoughts, and met her eyes again.

She grabbed his hips and tugged, nodding. "Yes, now, please."

"Wait. Do you have . . ."

"Oh!" How had she have forgotten that? She'd never! Nodding to the small table by her bed where she'd laid out a sheath, she said, "Yes. There."

He flashed a smile at her preparation as he reached for it. After tying it on, he sank into her in one smooth slide. A feeling north of where they connected stabbed through her. She could not, dare not, identify it, as the thump behind her ribcage was too far from her quim to be a sexual reaction. Sex she recognized. This was something else. Uncertain and new.

He slid back out in the same slow glide, and she lost her breath. Her inner tissues were still sensitive and swollen from her first orgasm, and she swore every vein and ridge caressed her insides.

He swore under his breath, and his jaw clenched. He was holding back. The sweat rolling down his temple and his tense muscles gave him away.

She reached up to touch his cheek. "What do you want? I've had mine. 'Tis your turn now, Luke. Take it."

He blinked, and his nostrils flared. “It has been too long. This may be hard and quick, Belle.”

“Just the way I like it,” she murmured.

“Don’t do that. I want you, not some act,” he growled.

She flinched.

Coming onto his elbows, he smoothed her hair back. “You are beyond lovely. You’re intelligent and independent, and no doubt skilled at your craft. The reason I want honest reactions rather than practiced moves is because the authentic you is enticement enough to have me in this state. I’m about to go off like a schoolboy.”

“Mmm.” She’d need time to absorb that more fully, but for now it soothed her frayed nerves and brought her back to her need for him to move. “Thank you. I meant what I said about your turn. Although, if you don’t start moving soon, I might have to take over.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” His lips met hers, all ravenous aggression.

She met them with equal greed, skill long forgotten in her quest for ecstasy.

When she shoved at his hips, he knelt up and thrust, holding her waist and tucking an extra pillow between her head and the bedframe.

A strangled noise sounded in her throat. The angle of his cock in this position hit a spot on her inner front wall that was just shy of painful.

A few more drives and she was clutching his forearms and shoving back in counterpoint.

He sped up, grunting.

Her nipples, belly, and internal muscles tightened, straining. Heat built to an inferno in her core. One more, one more. She screamed.

He shouted and pistoned even faster as she thrashed under him, keening.

She dug her nails into his arms, arching her back. The spiral of pleasure kept circling, spiking every time his cock pulsed in her, his pubis hitting her hardened quivering nub.

After a handful more thrusts he slowed, and she relaxed against the bed.

“Belle, perhaps you could sheath your claws?”

It took her a moment to get the message from her ears to her muscles, but she loosened her fingers on his arms, dropping her arms to the bed.

She couldn't have him forever, but the next fortnight was going to be amazing.

As was her usual habit, Belle was up early. She snuck out of the bedroom with her clothes in hand, asking her maid to help her with her hair in the room Luke had been using. However, by the time she entered the dining room, Luke was waiting for her.

He poured tea for both of them as she joined him at the table. “Now, shall we talk about the Black Widow's mandate?”

She balked, unprepared for the topic. She'd hoped to put that conversation off until she'd at least enjoyed his rather surprising skills and less surprising enthusiasm a few more times. Past lovers had stayed the night, of course, but their mornings had been spent discussing the newspaper or whatever social engagements they shared. She'd

anticipated that marriage would feel different than her previous engagements, but she found herself wishing for a set of rules. Perhaps the Ton had it right with their betrothal contracts, even if they were wrong to negotiate them between men.

“Luke, I cannot believe you’re even considering this. I am in no way an appropriate marriage prospect for you.”

“Why not? As Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, I fit your specifications.”

“What of yours? Have you even given a thought to what you’d want in a wife?”

His shoulders dropped. “I am younger than you, yes. I had my head up my arse for the past year or more. I understand your concern. I cannot change the past, but those things helped me see what I want to change for the future.”

She smothered her surprise, as she hadn’t believed he’d given marriage much thought. Now, though, he seemed prepared to discuss it.

He continued, “We’ve already discussed how I’d like to help others, and I’ve told you that you inspired me. I meant what I said to the widow. A hostess and supportive partner are very much traits I want in a wife. Like you, I also want someone I can converse with. Lastly, I think last night showed yet another layer of extreme compatibility. I am wildly attracted to you, Belle.”

“I know ’tis unfashionable, but as William went that route, I must ask. Do you not care about love, then?”

One well-muscled shoulder rose, then dropped. “I have never felt it, at least since my mother died. I think my parents were in love, but look where that got them. The other attributes are not only more attainable, they are also here in front of me in a rather delicious package. Many a marriage has been built on less.”

She pressed her lips together.

“Come now. Never say you were looking for a declaration of undying adoration. You’d gone to a matchmaker out of practicality.”

No, she wasn’t, but it still was strangely sad to not hear one from him.

Moving on to her biggest concern, she asked, “What of children? An heir?”

He took a moment to answer.

Of course, she preferred a thoughtful answer. However, that also meant he hadn’t given it as much thought as she had, which worried her.

“Whilst I have always known I was expected to sire a son, I confess it has been a rather hazy part of the distant future.” His eyes flashed to hers, a defiant crease between his brows. “Much of that is because of my lack of maturity. You’ve seen me rectify that. I have nothing against having children. My only fear is knowing how to ensure their childhood is not like mine.”

Frustration at their debate fell away as he voiced her own biggest fear. “I, too, know nothing of how to care for children. I hate the way the Ton shelters girls, taking away any ability to care for themselves. Yet, I would not want my children to have to learn the skills I learned either. Where is the balance? And Luke, that is without considering the sons being heirs to an earldom.”

He leaned across the table to grasp her hand. “Belle, can you not see that you are a natural caretaker? Look at how you helped me. Then when Charlotte needed you, you added that to your tasks.”

Part of her fear about raising children had been that she’d be handling it alone.

Originally that concern had been due to an incomplete picture of a husband, and Luke's struggles had provided an excellent example of why her concerns were justified. His recent progress would put much of that worry to rest—if she were willing to entertain marriage to him. Now, if only she could believe him, Luke's unassailable faith in her was heartwarming. However, she could not forget that they were a completely unsuitable match.

“I am simply asking you to consider it before rejecting the possibility,” he said with a squeeze of her hand. “Now I am wondering what tasks you have to accomplish today, or if we should pursue our compatibility more after breakfast.”

That sounded like an excellent idea. She'd think about the future later, after enjoying the present a bit more.

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L uke spent the better part of the morning ensuring Belle viewed him in a different light than any of her previous partners. After three orgasms for her and an explosive one for himself, they both fell asleep.

He spent the afternoon making notes for his new enterprise. Getting the details correct was important to assist people in succeeding. Staffing, pursuits to alleviate boredom during one's stay, distance from the temptation of gaming hells and men's clubs, et cetera—but more urgently, he needed to show that he'd thought of them. He was attempting to find the bravery to propose it to The Earl to request funding.

At several points, he considered asking Belle about one aspect or another. She'd proven very helpful in the initial stages of planning. However, his ultimate goal with her was to convince her to marry him, and he wished to be seen as an equal. Intelligence and independence were his surest path to her heart if she could get past her initial impressions of him.

To her heart? Yes, that seemed right.

She'd asked about love yesterday, and he'd stepped carefully. He'd been teetering on the edge of falling for her before last night. Last night and the morning had sealed his fate. He wanted Belle, no matter what his father might say. He wanted to give her children, a home she might run or not run as she pleased, and a life of luxury. Most importantly, he wanted her to feel safe, as though she'd never have to defer to anyone again. No member of the Ton, Black Widow, or whomever.

But he feared she'd see his desires as immature or not well thought out. He needed time to show her he was more than her initial impressions had led her to believe.

After supper, he led her upstairs again, undressing her layer by layer, smoothing his fingers over each inch of skin he revealed.

His cock was raging against his trousers at the unequal count from the morning. Ignoring it, he tugged her toward the bed still in his shirt, cravat, and waistcoat.

Belle balked, straining against his movement. She frowned. “Stop. Please.”

“Of course,” he said, releasing her hand. “What is amiss?”

“Intimacy should be two ways. I appreciate your worship-like approach, but when do I get a turn?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps when we are wed.”

She growled low in her throat.

He raised his brows in question.

“Besides the obvious,” she said, swiping a hand away to dismiss the idea of marriage, “I am not willing to wait.”

“You disliked something I did? You should have said. I’ll change it. Tell me how I can make it better for you.” He thought he’d given her pleasure. Blast, he hoped she hadn’t been performing as the courtesan all this time.

She sighed and dropped to sit on the edge of the bed. “That is my point. Like I said, it should be two ways. You know I admire your form. I’d like to play with you just as you play with me, but you don’t give me a chance.”

“I don’t want you to have to.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “That is what I was afraid of. ’Tis like you wish to ignore my past life and pretend it did not exist.”

He was aghast. Sitting next to her, he grabbed her hands. “No, Belle. I am sorry I made you feel that way. I wanted you to know this was different. That you didn’t have to work at it.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders relaxed an inch. “I suppose that makes sense, too. But I need to know that if I take charge or do something you haven’t experienced before, you will not freeze or be distracted or disgusted by thoughts of how I learned it.”

He smiled. She might not realize the reason for her concern, but he did. She was contemplating a future with him, despite her avowals that they did not suit. He was happy to lay her fears to rest.

Standing, he untied his cravat and tugged it from around his neck before tackling the buttons of his waistcoat.

As he removed the rest of his clothing, he asked, “Where would you like me then? At your feet as you direct? On the bed? I am at your disposal, Bellissima.”

Her cheeks went pink at the nickname. Her eyes tracked his T. Smiling, she asked, “Really?”

“Of course. As I said, I want this to feel different. I hope that much of the time, that will mean I take care of your pleasure first. However, I am also happy to be your plaything when the mood strikes. Just promise that you’ll only ever do things you want to do, not what you think I might expect.”

She nodded, her gaze still on his chest, making him grin at her obsession.

“Lie down, please,” she commanded.

His grin grew as he complied.

He thoroughly enjoyed her knowledge of the male body before demanding his turn to lead. She started to lie beside him.

“No.” He held her hips and sat her astride him, where he could touch all her most sensitive spots. With his thumb on the nub in front of where they joined, he said, “Sit at whatever angle works best for you.”

From there, it was a fast road to ecstasy for both of them.

After, they curled on their sides facing each other.

“What else do I need to do to convince you we are a good match?” he asked.

“Nothing. It shan’t work. I’ve gone over it a dozen times in my head. ’Tis not the first time I’ve considered marrying a titled lord.”

He lifted his head to stare at her in the room, moving out of the path of the candle so he could watch her expression. “What? You had an opportunity to marry before?”

“Not quite an opportunity.” She looked chagrined at having said anything, her lips tight. “He hinted several times. But he lived almost as far as you could travel and still be in England, and it seemed like the end of the earth to my twenty-something-year-old self. He was an earl, but older, and already had his heir, so I needn’t worry about besmirching his reputation, as he was not one for Town life.”

“Hmm. Perhaps we should talk about where you’re willing to live then, as one might say the same about my family’s country seat.”

“I’m older and wiser now and prefer to live far away from London, the Ton, and gossip, ironically. But I was serious about how far his home is. He’s on the edge of Scotland and told me once it is a longer trip than to Gretna Green.”

Luke swallowed, feeling his heart pound in his chest. Sweat prickled his palms, and rough memories of maps of the border areas spun in his head. She couldn’t possibly be referring to...? He managed to croak, “Where?”

“Northumberland.”

No. No, no, no, NO!

He shot out of bed to pace the floor.

Belle half-sat, the sheets pooling at her waist. “Luke? What is it?”

He thought back to when they reintroduced themselves after she’d brought him home. The blur of drink and hangover fogged the memory, but he was rather sure she’d cut him off, not caring about his title.

How different these past weeks might have been if she’d allowed him to state fully, “...heir to the Earl of Northumberland.”

Instead, here he was naked, having just come from bedding... his father’s ex-mistress. Worse, Belle had obviously cared about The Earl if he was the only client she’d considered marrying. How could she love such a curmudgeon?

“Luke?”

Best to get it over with. He turned and stood ramrod straight, nudity be damned. “Miss Rossi, I do not believe we were ever formally introduced.”

She sat straighter and clutched the sheet to her chest as he bowed, her eyes wide and unblinking.

Rising, he continued, every muscle locked, his words pushed through tight lips. “Luke Lynwood at your service, madame. Heir to the Earl of Northumberland.”

Belle gasped. After several blinks, she whispered, “Mercy.”

“You didn’t know?”

“No!”

They turned simultaneously to pull clothes on. Luke was far too vulnerable to remain naked for the conversation they needed to have.

“What I wouldn’t give for a whisky right now,” he muttered.

Belle looked dubious.

“No.” He shook his head, surprised to find he meant it. Apparently, he was past the worst of his cravings. “I said that out of habit, but I think we should keep our wits about us for this.”

He needed a clear head in order to reassess. He imagined The Earl’s reaction if he brought Belle to Christmas as his betrothed. His father would pull her aside and tell her of all his past failures. She’d share his sorry state when he’d come to her. They’d turn and look at him as a naughty child.

Hellfire, with this new information, he needed to work out his own reaction to her as his betrothed before he worried about his father’s.

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She could have used a whisky, too. Although she was near to casting up her accounts. Drinking spirits might not be wise.

This night was a raging storm, pulling her safely planted life up by the roots and tossing it around at will.

If she'd had any thought to being able to recover from Luke, his explanation of why he had been seducing her had incinerated them. He'd put himself in her shoes and considered what might worry her. So he'd tried to avoid her feeling the need to be an assertive lover by making her the recipient.

But then she'd learned his title. Had there ever been a courtesan who had been a man's lover and his son's within a decade of one another? Well, probably. Many courtesans chose men based on their money and station, with no care as to any impropriety.

She snorted. She was not in a position to bat about the term "impropriety." Regardless, if there were ever a sign from the heavens that she was not meant to be this man's wife, this was it. The class difference, both of their histories, the decade between their ages, all were enough, but this was the coup de grace.

Luke gestured to the bed, and when she sat, he faced her from the chaise longue. Gazing around the room, he furrowed his brow. Finally, he narrowed his eyes at her and asked, "Why could you consider marrying my father, but not me?"

Because she had been young and selfish enough not to consider the risks to his reputation and that of his family. Not ready to admit that, she heaved a sigh. "He was

older.”

“So there was an age difference, as there is with us.” He shrugged a shoulder and rubbed his forehead.

“He did not need an heir.” She was scrambling. She’d been prepared to fight him before to protect him from being harmed by her reputation, but this was a whole separate level of foolishness, and she could not even form a coherent sentence to defend her position.

“You want children!” he nearly shouted, throwing his hands wide.

Standing, she fisted her hands. She’d had enough. They both needed time to think. “You know ’tis not the same. Regardless, the middle of the night after—after”—she gestured helplessly at the bed behind her, not missing the irony of her continued inability to give voice to their activities there—“is not the time to discuss it. Please, just go. Sleep in the other room, and let us revisit this in the morning? Please?”

His shoulders sagged. He stood and stepped into her space, tugging her against him and wrapping his arms around her.

She clutched him for a second, then dropped her arms.

Hours later, Belle blinked into the darkness, still unable to sleep.

Her emotions looped in an unending circle. Love and yearning for Luke that she’d been fighting until a few hours ago were followed by the crushing sorrow of knowing they could not marry for all the reasons she’d had before, plus her new knowledge of the Northumberland connection. Then she’d remember that Bessie Dove-Lyon had known enough about her that she’d surely known this as well. Perhaps the widow had been toying with her. Perhaps the rumors were not true and Bessie had not been a

courtesan. Perhaps she did not approve of Belle's quest for marriage.

Her whole adult life, she'd negotiated her relationships, vetting her prospective clients and minimizing the risk of either party falling in love. Ensuring, even if her benefactor became confused, that she stood apart. She respected the men she'd worked with and cared for most of them, but she never allowed anyone to get this close.

Now this young university quitter had tipped her over the edge and torn her heart out all in one night.

As she often did when loneliness crept up on her, she conjured memories of love and laughter with North. Card games at the library table, snuggling on the rug in front of the fire. Tonight, though, instead of North, she could only picture Luke sprawled out across her settee, looking the worse for wear as he recovered from years of drinking. Him fisting his cock on her floor, looking exultant despite being discovered. His earnestness as he argued for marriage earlier that night.

She nearly gagged at her mind's trick of replacing the father with the son. No matter what society viewed as morality, she'd always prided herself on being honorable. Having fond, sexual memories of both a father and a son did not feel honorable.

Skirting those thoughts, she realized her memories of North were nothing like the father Luke had described. She needed to ask Luke more about that, certain he could mend the rift with his father by engaging in a conversation or three. They simply needed to understand each other's needs better. That mattered far more than his reputation, and she was determined not to stand in the way of that reconciliation.

Closing her eyes, she attempted to remember, calling up North's laughter... or was that Luke's? North had been squarer, a little stocky, in his mid-forties. His face... blurred into Luke's.

She sat up. When had she lost the memory of North's face? Frowning, she stepped back through days and weeks, trying to find when she'd thought of him last. At the Black Widow's office, but she hadn't taken the time to picture his countenance. Before that, it had been months prior, when she'd first faced her desire for marriage and children and contemplated retirement. Even then, had she thought about his looks or just the way he'd made her feel?

Recognizing that her desperation stemmed from fighting her yearning for Luke, she took a deep breath. His appearance and Luke's did not matter. Neither were appropriate men for her to marry, and she'd do well to remember that, rather than faces or rather impressive cocks.

It was time to release the Lyon cub from the cage and let him roam free.

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Luke didn't even bother climbing into bed. Dragging a chair from the fireplace to stare out the window, he tried to sift through his swirling thoughts and plan.

There was an ache behind his breastbone that felt similar to when his father sent him to boarding school. Rejection hurt his pride, but the more important question remained unclear. Did he still want to marry Belle, knowing she'd almost chosen his father, the very man who had rejected him? More than that, others knew that she'd been The Earl's paramour. Did he want children to suffer for their mother's past?

He snorted. Only in the Ton would children suffer because their mother loved two men, while not being at all affected by their father's past as a drunken sot. It was so ridiculous to consider, it made him realize he cared not one whit for any contrived rules or frivolous-minded gossips who could not see how intelligent and caring Belle was.

However, that only addressed the external concern. He was willing to admit to himself, although perhaps not to Belle, that he trailed her in maturity as well as age. He'd worked hard to make progress on that, though, and he liked to think that was part of their dynamic. He encouraged her to have a bit more fun and be a little more frivolous, while she kept an eye on his focus and goals.

Picturing himself playing hide and seek a sable-haired girl and a chestnut-haired boy, he imagined Belle walking by his hiding spot and him yanking her in with him for a kiss before encouraging her to join their game. The vision changed to them at the supper table, discussing the progress of each of his—their—organization's patrons.

He had already schooled himself to stop worrying about his father's expectations. He

would create his own life, goals, and responsible hobbies, and make no apologies for them. He'd communicate his past transgressions and his plans for the future, and his father would accept them or not. This was simply another layer. He loved Belle. Nothing would change that, including his father's feelings on the appropriateness of their relationship.

And no matter what Belle's experience with The Earl had been, if she was able to accept Luke's feelings and see him as a responsible adult, he wanted her. But therein lay the crux. He'd been foolish to think Belle would find him acceptable as a partner. Hell, even Will, who had his act together, struggled to win the woman he loved. As for him, if his own father found him unlovable, why would a woman who had seen him at his worst think otherwise?

He watched the sun rise, dreaming up then discarding wild tactics to win over Belle. When he heard movement in her bedroom, he ran downstairs and requested that the kitchen start coddled eggs, toast, and tea. He wandered the lower floor until the tea was ready.

When Belle entered the dining room, they both sat as her breakfast was delivered. Looking at her meal that took close to half an hour to prepare, she shot him a surprised look.

"You didn't think I'd learned your preference in meals? Do you really see me as that self-centered?" He couldn't help it. His tone was bitter.

She looked pained. "I am sorry."

"Belle—"

"No. Please. I thought about this all night. I did not feel this match was appropriate when Mrs. Dove-Lyon suggested it, and certainly nothing we learned last night is

going to change that. Also, as I said to her and saw again last night, you are ready to return to your own home, your own life.”

“Blast,” he muttered. He’d feared she’d leap right to this, not allowing him even a chance to convince her.

She was dithering with her silverware, avoiding his gaze.

This was not going to plan.

He took a breath to speak, but she looked up and said, “Luke, the North I knew is not the person you describe. I think there have been miscommunications, or perhaps misinterpretations of actions. If you could—”

“You are taking his side now?” He clenched his jaw in anger, fisting his napkin and throwing it on the table. “How little faith you have in me. I’m so immature I don’t notice what you eat, I don’t see the love pouring out of my taciturn father. Yet again, I am a failure in someone’s eyes.”

“No, no,” she reached across to cover his fist. “I beg your pardon. That came out poorly, I don’t doubt or dismiss your experience. I meant I think there is a way through it. I know your father cared for you when we... were together. Perhaps he did not show it well. Perhaps he was ignorant of how to show it. But if there were—and I hope there were—good intentions, there might be a path to reconciliation.”

“Just as you have taught me, a simple verbal apology will not fix years of ill deeds.”

“I think you want to reconcile. My belief is that you were drowning in whisky and all sorts of destructive behavior to get some reaction out of him, some recognition.”

His brows rose. She might not be entirely wrong. Perhaps he needed to have a

conversation sooner rather than later with his father, especially if it would ease Belle's mind.

"Anyway," she continued, "you are right. It would take more than words to fix things—but what if he wants to do that, also? I think it is worth discussing."

"I shall consider it. I trust your judgment, Bellissima." He caught her gaze and held it. "You have proven my point yet again. You are the most caring person I know. Even as you struggle to see a path for us, you're more concerned with my future than your own."

She flushed. "'Tis more than a struggle. Luke, I cannot marry you."

"You mean you will not, at least right now. I hope to change your mind." Gulping a breath, he caught and held her gaze, and said, "I love you. I am in love with you."

She shook her head and glanced away.

"What, you doubt me?"

"You said yourself you hadn't experienced love. It seems convenient that you've identified it suddenly. 'Tis likely lust or infatuation. Or gratitude for my support with your father and your plans. It shall pass."

He stiffened, glaring at her. How dare she dismiss him, as though he didn't know his own mind. For all she supported him in some ways, she still questioned his maturity. It was the worst sort of betrayal, especially when he'd just bared his heart to her.

His voice tight with anger, he said, "Pardon me, but it feels anything but convenient right now, when you're attempting to oust me from your life. I know you see me as an inept, lazy, entitled lordling who doesn't know his arse from his elbow, but I know

this. I love you. I identify it by emotions I've never experienced before. Not fear of life without you, but rather hatred of the idea. Not the inability to imagine children, but the inability to imagine them without you. Believe what you will. I shall continue to love you. Furthermore, I suspect you care for me, too."

Belle stared, tears dripping down her cheeks. Swallowing, she shook her head again. "I am sorry, Luke. It would never work."

"I shall give you time to absorb all this, but I am not giving up," he said, repeating his vow from the night before. "In the meantime, I will make progress on the goals you helped me form. You have my gratitude for your support and guidance."

Her shoulders sagged. In defeat? In relief that he was leaving?

Either way, it was time for him to prove himself as a man. Not for his father or Belle or anyone other than himself.

"I shall see myself out." Striding around the table, he leaned over to kiss her cheek and left without looking back.

The first thing Luke did at his townhouse was ask the servants to lock the whisky in with the wine, keep them out of sight, and hide the key. He'd give them to William and Nate after he brought them up to date on his life. Guests would be offered tea, not that he had regular guests.

Second, he wrote a note to William, letting him know he was home and asking to meet at the pub near Nate's forge later that week. He owed both friends an apology and wanted to deliver it in person, and he was sadly out of touch with how they were faring.

And last, he contacted Belle's solicitor, thankful he'd gotten the man's name from her

before the revelation about her past. He did not want to work with his father's solicitor in case he reported Luke's actions to The Earl. He preferred to master how to set up an organization without an ongoing critique, no matter how benevolent Belle considered The Earl.

Two nights later, he settled onto the bench alongside Will and across from Nate with a tankard of cider. At Nate's raised brows, he shrugged. "'Tis part of why I asked you to meet. I've spent the better part of the last month breaking my bad habits with the help of a friend. I ordered this to have something to wrap my hands around. Because I don't like cider, this will last me all night."

Both men grinned when he said "bad habits" and were outright chuckling after his explanation of the cider.

"This is the best news I've heard all week," Nate said.

"How can we help?" William asked.

"Actually, you can't. But I understand Charlotte might be able to."

William's eyes narrowed. "With what?"

"Blunt." When William growled, he hastened to add, "Oh, I don't mean hers. I mean helping me find investors. Other investors."

"For what?"

"I want to help others who have fallen into a bottle or gone into a hole at the dice tables. I'm still working on the details. Whether I can help both working-class and titled men will depend on funding, and I'm not sure how to petition for it. That was more the assistance I was hoping for from Charlotte. The how and who."

William nodded. “She’s the right person. I shall ask her.”

Nate asked, “It sounds like an excellent plan so far. Will you open it to women as well?”

“Not at first. The arrangements are difficult enough without worrying about reputations, or worse, physical risk. I’d need to provide separate quarters and chaperones, and I’m not ready. However, I hope to do that in the future. Belle certainly—”

“Belle?!” William sounded shocked.

Blast. He hadn’t meant to mention her.

“Was she the ‘friend’ who helped you? How did that happen? Last I saw, you’d insulted her, and she took you to task whilst giving you a ride home. You complained about that for days,” William asked.

“I remember that,” Nate murmured. “This is an intriguing turn of events.” He propped his chin on his fist and leaned in.

Luke waved a hand. “’Tis a long story, and much of it is not mine to tell. Suffice it to say, we ran into each other again, and she agreed to help me. I stayed at her house for a bit.”

Nate scrutinized him. Without lifting his head from his hand, he said, “You fell for her. You’ve never fallen for anyone before, so it took me a minute to identify that look. But”—he circled his hand around Luke’s face, then William’s,—“’tis like his was early on with Charlotte. Yearning.”

Luke’s cheeks warmed. “She is a compelling woman. And she helped me a great

deal.”

“I bet.” William snorted. “I agree she is a strong lady, like Charlotte. Did she help you in bed, too?”

Luke frowned. “That is not what I meant. She supported me as I overcame my craving for spirits, she encouraged me to find a purpose without directing me, and she answered a slew of questions I had about costs and such to set up the venture.”

“I notice he didn’t answer the question.” Nate slid a look at William.

“She is an excellent resource, a businesswoman. And... her business is pleasure.” William arched a brow at Luke as he finished, and Nate snorted in his beer.

“Was .” Luke’s voice was sharp. “She’s retiring.”

“Really? Does Charlotte know that?” William asked, surprised.

“I’ve no idea. Anyway, I don’t care what she did. Hellfire, Charlotte was no virgin when you found her.”

William’s back shot straight. “’Tis a little different.”

“How about this, then? How many wenches have I bedded in my life? You were always on the straight and narrow at school, and Nate here was working too hard, but you know I was at the bars and often in someone else’s bed. What is the difference, other than her bank account is a lot fuller than mine?”

“I suppose,” William nodded slowly, exchanging a look with Nate.

Luke wondered if they disagreed with his perspective or they were realizing they

needed to tread more carefully on this topic.

William added, “She’s lovely and funny, and an excellent friend to Charlotte. She’ll always be welcome in my house. I did not mean anything of it, other than contemplating what your father might say.”

Luke wasn’t sure he believed that, but he let it drop. It might take his friends a bit of time to get used to the idea of him wedded to Belle. Hellfire, it was taking her a bit of time.

“My father is my next hurdle. I wish to have more progress to show on the Free Your Spirits program before I inform him of it. When I do, I shall tell him of my plans to wed Belle.”

“Wed?” William asked.

“What did you think I had planned?”

“That’s right. You said she’d retired.” His friend’s tone was equanimous. He turned to Nate and added, “Look at our friend, all grown up, finding purpose and considering marriage.”

The three knocked tankards in a toast.

Luke declined to share the added layer of angst around sharing his love for Belle with his father. There were some things a man did not share even with one’s closest friends.

The next morning, he directed the servants to pack his bags. He wrote a note to Belle, assuring her he hadn’t given up, but he’d gone to face his father. He hoped to get a reply, but when he hadn’t by the following day, he called for the carriage to begin the

long trip north.

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K knowing Charlotte was also an early riser, Belle speedwalked to her friend's house, hoping William was not there. Thankfully, he wasn't, and she could enjoy their long-standing tradition: whoever was struggling spilled her woes over breakfast and heard the other's thoughts and advice.

"Belle!" Charlotte kissed her on both cheeks before asking the footman to send a request to the kitchen staff for Belle's favorite breakfast, coddled eggs.

"Hello, love. How are you?"

"I am trying to take your advice and allow William to court me." Charlotte narrowed her gaze. "How are you? Is this about the footsteps in your house when I was there?"

"Yes." Belle threw herself into a dining chair and grabbed the teapot, pouring for both of them.

"New patron?"

"No." Belle folded her hands around her teacup to tether herself and struggled to meet her friend's gaze. "I haven't shared this because of everything going on with you and William these past months, so please do not be angry." She brought Charlotte up to date on her retirement plan, her wish to marry and have children, and her use of the Black Widow's matchmaking.

"I had no idea! I feel like a terrible friend."

Belle clutched Charlotte's hand. "Please do not. 'Tis something I had to do alone. I

know it will be difficult no matter whom I marry, and I needed to be certain I wanted it enough to weather that storm. Turns out, I do.”

“But... not in London?” Charlotte’s lower lip jutted in a pout.

Belle rolled her eyes. “We can visit. Long visits. That pout may work on Puppy”—the nickname for William that Charlotte had made the mistake of sharing with her—“but not on me.”

Her friend giggled. “If you promise. Lots of long visits, please.”

“Right, then. Here’s the rest...” She told her of Bessie passing Luke to her for rehabilitation and her discovery that he was the son of a former benefactor. Not just any man, either—the one she’d nearly stayed with, marriage or no, with whom she’d been half in love.

“Let me see if I understand,” Charlotte replied after the litany. “History aside, you find Luke attractive, compatible, caring, and amenable to marriage and children.”

Belle shot her a withering look.

“Shall we address your concerns?” Charlotte ticked a finger. “An age difference. ’Tis rather hypocritical of you to cite that after all your encouragement that I ignore it.”

“There is not a class difference for you and William.”

“We’ll get to that. I’m dismissing the disparity in age.”

Belle crossed her arms, more than a little fearful of what else her friend would refute.

“You’ve been in love with someone before him.” When Belle opened her mouth to

dispute that, she hurried to add, “Or close enough to consider spending your life with that person.”

“That person being his father .”

“Seems a close enough parallel to Charles and me.” Charlotte referenced her first husband, who had died suddenly a year before she met William. “Charles was old enough that he could have been William’s father in another realm of reality. He was very supportive of me and my strengths, even when they were not traditional pastimes for a woman. He also would have wanted me to find happiness.”

“You know you are oversimplifying this.” Belle glared at her.

Charlotte grinned, then mock-glared back at her friend. “You know you are over-complicating this. Look, many people fall in love before they find their happily ever after. It does not sound as though Luke and his father have a close familial relationship now. So you would not break any bonds, even if the earl does not accept you as a match for his son. On the other hand, why would he not? If he cares for both of you and he is as kind as you say he is, he’d want you both to be happy.”

Her greatest fear was that Luke would regret marrying her for a myriad of reasons. Estrangement from his father was only one of them. But she wasn’t ready to state that out loud. “What if he rejects it out of hand and demands Luke marry someone else?”

Charlotte twisted her lips. “That is between them. William told me Luke was planning to go home to hash it out with his father. He knows there is a risk he’ll walk away without the earl’s blessing for any of it.”

“I want him to succeed. I know there is some part of the story missing. North was so different with me than how Luke sees him.”

“Then if nothing else, you may be the key to bridging that gap between them. In whatever role you want to go in. Perhaps you take the trip with Luke and see how their conversations go?”

“He has already left.”

Charlotte shrugged. “You can always follow.”

She stifled a shudder, imagining knocking on North’s door and having to tell him she was there to support his son. She had no place as a mediator. They were grown men who had to find their own way.

“But Belle,” her friend’s face was solemn. “None of this addresses the real problem.”

“The class difference.” Belle flattened her lips at the reminder. She was unsuitable, and that would not change.

“No.” Charlotte was shaking her head. “The fact that you do not see yourself as worthy.”

Belle blinked.

“Men marry untitled or lower-titled women all the time for their dowries. Gracious, more and more are marrying the merchant class.” They both gave fake gasps at that and giggled. “You are simply a different kind of merchant. A very successful one.”

Belle snorted. She wished she could think of it that way, but there were too many challenges in the House of Lords, in school for their children, and a myriad of other circumstances.

“You are equal to any of them, Belle. Those men in your house were there with you,

remember that. They chose you and are not better than you. I choose you as a friend, as do William and now Luke. And... North chose you as both. In some ways, I cannot imagine a better family to marry into."

"Now you're being naïve."

"I prefer optimistic, thank you," Charlotte answered with a grin. "Were you not going to marry some lord who needed a dowry, anyway? How does this lord differ?"

The difference was that she loved him and thus cared about hurting him with her past.

Charlotte pushed. "You care about him being hurt."

Dratted woman read her mind. She nodded.

"I know you, Belle. You would never marry in cold blood. Let's face it: you don't need to. I know what you have saved. You said yourself you want to marry for companionship and to have a family. I think that all this sounded like an excellent plan in theory. Now that you're faced with the reality, you're balking. You're questioning whether you deserve these opportunities. Now, repeat after me. I am equal to any man and better than most, and I deserve to be loved."

"I . . . I . . ." Belle shook her head.

Charlotte took her hands and squeezed. "We'll work on it. Please, think about all I've said. Those men from your past are walking around guilt-free; why shouldn't you? You offered a valuable service and were well paid for it. And you've found a man who understands that and accepts it. Do not let him get away."

She hated to admit it, but Charlotte was correct. Oh, she still could not envision herself joining Luke and North for a family dinner, as she felt queasy the one time

she did picture it. More than the Ton's attitude toward her, she dreaded the repercussions for Luke. But she deserved to be loved—by someone who would not be harmed by her past.

In a desperate bid to try to move past her feelings for Luke, Belle visited the Black Widow again.

“Where is your husband-to-be?” Bessie asked, her face hidden behind her standard veil, the lighting in the office dim enough that Belle barely saw her lips move.

Belle narrowed her gaze. “He is not my husband-to-be, and he is in Northumberland for the holidays.”

“Hmm. What did you want to see me about, then?”

She led with the request she thought would be easiest to resolve. “Please allow me to pay off Lord Lynwood's debts to you.”

“That is against policy. You may give him the money to pay them, but I cannot release a marker to someone without the debtor's knowledge.”

“But . . . why?”

“Surely you can imagine the ways in which an unethical sort could hold a debtor's vowels over them for control.” Bessie shrugged.

“Are you insinuating I might be unethical?” Belle's spine snapped taut.

“Not at all, my dear, or I would not have taken you as a client. However, rules are rules,” the widow answered, her tone mild.

“As I said, he’s not in London. You’d have your funds a month earlier by taking them now.”

Bessie shook her veiled head, dismissing the matter. Changing the subject, she asked, “Is he requesting his father’s permission for your marriage?”

“No.” Belle frowned. “He is a grown man. He does not need permission.”

The widow smiled. “Why are you not with him then? Are you or are you not betrothed?”

“That is the other reason I wished to speak to you. I’ve realized my guidance to you was not specific enough. I require a non-titled husband. Ideally, not even a second son. Perhaps a merchant?”

“That is not the way it works, Belle. I gave you your match. But I confess to curiosity. Why narrow the parameters now?”

Belle swallowed her panic. She did not want to go through this again after her conversation with Charlotte, but she needed the matchmaker’s help. “Honestly, I never dreamed you would suggest a match with a titled lord. Wedding me would blacken his reputation and that of his family, including children, beyond repair.”

“You do realize the whole purpose of my matchmaking service is to help people whose reputations are already besmirched, do you not?”

“Yes, but there is a vast difference between a titled lady caught in a compromising position that may or may not have been her fault and a courtesan. Particularly one who has had a dozen high-profile attachments to members of the House of Lords.”

A low chuckle came from beneath the veil. “Have you considered that those members

and others who have or had similar ‘attachments’ have no basis on which to judge you?”

“No.” That response mirrored Charlotte’s far too closely for Belle’s comfort. “Those were dalliances. This is marriage. And heirs that will later serve in the House of Lords.”

“Pish. As though that place is not full of bastards already, being paraded about as rightful heirs.” The widow waved a hand. “Why would you think you are good enough for a dalliance but not for marriage?”

Charlotte’s voice echoed in her head again. Both were intelligent women, and in any other circumstances, she’d believe they were correct and she was not. But this was her life. “That is not what I said. I said they’d see me as not good enough.”

“Since when do you care what they think?”

“If it were just me, I would not. But for Luke’s sake, and the children’s...” Realizing how specific she’d been, Belle trailed off.

The widow’s lips curled. “He did not seem concerned at our last meeting.”

“I am concerned for him—them. Hence my request to avoid titled lords in this quest.”

“’Tis too late. Your account is closed. You have your match. If he had rejected it, I might have been able to do something. But you have yet to identify how he does not meet the guidelines you provided, and neither he nor I see an issue with the union. In fact,”—she glanced down—“your solicitor has already paid my fee.”

“I’ll pay another fee. Please.” Belle was begging now, desperate.

“You’d be better served by considering your attitude. You should not settle for whom you think you deserve. This is a lifelong commitment, and you bring considerable assets to the table. If Lynwood views that as enough, why shouldn’t you? Many a harder challenge has been faced and conquered by a united front between loving partners.”

“No one said anything about love,” Belle muttered under her breath as she stood.

“Ah, but you both did. You simply need to acknowledge it.”

Belle had deliberately waited until Luke had left London to discuss him with Charlotte, for fear that her friend would talk her into going.

As it was, she could not get Charlotte and the widow’s words out of her mind. She, who had never feared anything, might be afraid of being spurned because she didn’t feel worthy. Well, that and the link to her past with North.

She’d also found a pair of boots she’d hidden in her room and a comb that Luke had left at her house. Knowing it was safe now that he wasn’t in residence, she walked them over on a gray morning.

By the time she arrived, a drizzle had begun. When she said she was a friend of Luke’s and referenced knowing he was going north for the holidays, the footman evaluated her clothing and deemed her worthy to wait inside, despite being an unknown, untitled person.

He took the items from her and disappeared to hand them off to a maid and find a cloak so he could step out and call her a hack.

Grateful not to have to walk home in the rain, she waited in the front hall. Stepping over to a table to put her gloves down, she spied the pile of letters that had remained

unopened during his stay with her. They were now opened and lay in a haphazard pile, the top one unfolded. Without meaning to, she skimmed it.

It was from North to Luke. Slipping it aside, she read the next one. He asked about Luke's activities, expressed concern about how much he'd drunk during their time together, and requested that Luke write to him, as he hadn't heard from his son in months.

She recognized North's brusque tone in the letters. Given their past association, she knew his words were meant as quiet support and interest. But having also heard Luke's interpretations of his father's actions since his mother's death, she saw how the questions could be taken as overly stern and placing conditions on his affection. What was missing was a mother's, a wife's, softness to cushion North's unyielding approach by encouraging him to be more vocal about support and pushing Luke to communicate better.

Charlotte's words echoed in her mind. In some ways, I cannot imagine a better family to marry into. Her suitability for marriage was a separate issue, but her friend had been right about this. She was uniquely suited to bridge that gap between father and son, having been privy to both of their thoughts.

Drat it all. She was going to have to travel to Northumberland in the middle of winter.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:19 am

Luke had been at his father's house for two days. All he'd managed to impart was that he was abstaining from wine and spirits for the foreseeable future, finding he preferred life seen through a clear lens.

The Earl had looked pleased but had said nothing. Because of course he wouldn't. Heaven forbid he praise his son on a good decision.

Belle's voice sounded in his head, twisting his heart in his chest even more. Not drinking as a form of self-control is a basic standard of adulthood. Why should your father praise you for that?

Still, The Earl's stern countenance made it difficult to muster the courage to tell him about Free Your Spirits. The name, the entire plan suddenly sounded ill-conceived and frivolous. He paced his room, done in dark greens and dark woods, feeling as though he was lost in a forest. And he wished for the millionth time Belle was with him in person, rather than in sarcastic comments in his head.

If he could not discuss his present or his future, how would he raise the past in order to find a new common ground?

Tired of pacing, he rejected a half-hearted wish for a whisky for bravery and went to find The Earl.

He was in his office, of course, seated at the same desk reviewing business for one estate or another to manage the earldom. It was another reminder of how many conversational and learning struggles Luke faced. Funny, though. There were more scratches lightening the wood than there had been, and the desk was smaller, less

imposing than he remembered.

“Luke, come in. Shall I ring for tea?”

“No, thank you. I’d like to speak to you about a project I’ve been working on.” He gestured at the desk. “That is, if you have time.”

The Earl frowned.

Luke couldn’t tell if his father was irritated at the interruption.

But all he said was, “Yes, I have time.” He gestured to the guest chairs.

Luke took one facing the desk and leaned forward.

“What is this project, then?”

The tongue-in-cheek name now seemed frivolous, so he started with the concept. “I wish to set up a home for men struggling with dependencies. I plan to start with drink and dice, but I hope to expand it to more later, and/or to women.”

“I see.” The Earl sat back and steepled his fingers, elbows on the arms of his chair. His evaluation pose.

Luke stiffened. That pose usually preceded condemnation of his actions, or at the very least some probing questions that led to condemnation.

“Does this have anything to do with your decision not to imbibe?”

He gulped. It was time to be his own man and stop worrying about his father’s reactions. “Yes.”

The Earl nodded, mulling this over. He said, “It seems a worthy cause. You can put that Oxford education to good use, eh?”

Blast. Luke once again heard Belle’s voice in his head speaking about honesty and integrity. Apparently, they were going to cover a lot of ground in this conversation. “About that, sir.”

His father’s brows rose.

Luke clenched his hands against the chair’s arms, searching for his bravery. Lifting his chin, he said, “I did not finish my studies, I’m afraid. I was in London most of the past year.”

The brows drew down and together into the scowl Luke had expected. “Where did the funds I sent go?”

“I, um, used them to live off in London...” His voice ticked up into a question without intending to.

“Doing what, exactly?”

Luke squared his shoulders, telling himself to get it over with. If he needed to travel back to London, he might as well know that now.

“Dice and cards. And whisky.”

“I see.” The Earl heaved a heavy sigh.

Luke’s muscles tightened with the desire to bolt in the face of yet another angry lecture.

But his father surprised him, saying, “I begin to understand your motivation for this new enterprise more. Are you certain that having people struggle around you is best—I suppose I should first ask, has all that come to an end, I hope?”

There it was. Condemnation in the form of a question. Luke sighed. “Yes. As for the home, the idea is that there would be no such temptations for the duration of their stay, for a month or so. After that, there would be regular check-ins.”

“Hmm.”

Luke braced himself, unable to see past the stern countenance to what The Earl might be thinking.

“Why, Luke?”

“Why help others? Because—”

“No. Why did you leave Oxford without finishing your degree? And why not tell me? And for heaven’s sake, why would you waste a year on gaming and drink?”

“Why not? Because you’d taught me better?” All Luke’s bitterness came rolling out at his father’s harsh questions. “You didn’t spend enough time in a room with me to teach me anything. When Mama passed, you shut me out and sent me away.”

The echo of his words sounded in the room. His father sat frozen and silent; his hands dropped to the arms of his chair as he stared at Luke.

Knocking at the door broke their gaze.

The Earl called, “What is it?”

A footman stepped in. “Pardon me, your lordships, but you have a visitor. She insisted you’d want to know right away.”

“Well, who is it? And you say ’tis a woman, and she is here for... both of us?” His father’s voice was querulous.

“A Mrs. Rossi, sir.”

They gasped in unison.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:19 am

Belle hated carriages. She'd learned to ride late, as an adult, but had never become comfortable with horses or a sidesaddle. Besides, December was not conducive to riding any distance. So she fidgeted and squirmed on the narrow carriage seat. She hadn't invested in a better-appointed carriage, as she only ever traveled around London. It was fortuitous that she'd chosen a landau that could be fully enclosed, at least.

Her maid sat across from her, serene. She worked on needlepoint when the light allowed and napped or watched the scenery other times. Belle could not even appreciate the company. She refused to contemplate her reasons for bringing a maid for propriety, given her past. It could not be that marriage still lingered as a faint hope in the back of her mind.

The wet and dreary weather did not allow them to travel at normal speed, so the trip Luke had estimated at five days took seven.

Refusing to think about it, she kept a flask of sherry in her bodice and a spare in her small traveling case at her feet. When her book stopped holding her interest, or she became nauseous from the hours of swaying, she sipped, napped, then sipped again.

Arriving a crumbled and parched mess, she called for a bath at the inn in Old Shoreston. Hating the idea of getting back in that carriage for even a few miles, she was determined to look her best on arriving at the castle. Seven days alone had also not provided her with a plan for what to say if she were even permitted entry.

She sent her favorite burgundy dress downstairs for pressing and splashed through a hip bath with the help of her maid before curling up in a chair near the fire to dry her

hair.

Had Luke discussed his future or his past with his father yet? Damnation, what if they'd argued and he'd already left?

No, he'd be there. She knew Luke well enough to know he'd need time to shore up courage to broach difficult subjects with the man he called The Earl.

After a long night with very little sleep, she ate breakfast in her room and paced the length of it until a decent hour to call. Leaving her maid at the inn, she set out for Luke's ancestral home.

She glanced out the carriage window as it turned through a gate in a wall. Set on the edge of the North Sea, surrounded by the wild heaths and marsh grasses, sat a half-castle, half-citadel sprawled across the top of a long hill. She groaned as the carriage followed a long drive winding around to a huge double wooden door set in the stone.

As if she hadn't been nervous enough. What business did a whore born in the London rookeries have visiting this place? Even traipsing around to knock on the kitchen door felt beyond her—if she could find the blasted thing. She'd never had a problem with her vocation. Or at least, she'd thought she hadn't until Charlotte and the Widow gave her cause for concern.

Charlotte's voice rang in her head. I am equal to any man and better than most. Front doors it was, then. She inhaled long and deep, throwing her shoulders back.

These two men had both cared for her, and despite Luke's condemnation of his father, she didn't believe either had a mean bone in his body. If they turned her away, they'd be kind about it.

After what felt like hours, the carriage stopped in a large courtyard. Her heart

hammered in her chest as she marched through a stone archway up to the double doors. She took a breath and rapped her knuckles against the wood hard before realizing the heavy iron rings were door knockers as well as handles. Banging one of those, she waited, unsure whether anyone was close enough to hear her.

She gave her calling card to the man who answered the door, which set off a swarm of insects in her belly.

Several agonizing minutes later, the footman returned with both the older and younger Lynwood following him. She noted new lines on North's face in the miniscule glance she spared him before her eyes slid past him to feast on Luke's tall loose-limbed form.

"Bellissima?" Luke's voice overrode his father's simultaneous, "Belle?"

This was even worse than she'd imagined.

In the moment she needed to regain her voice, North turned to his son. "You know Isabella?"

She silently begged Luke to not make a snide comment. Much as she loved his sense of humor, this was not the time.

Luke didn't, proving his newfound maturity more than she'd dared hope. "Yes. Among other things, she was my inspiration for Free Your Spirits. She helped me past the worst of my drying out."

"Ah." North turned to her. "You have my gratitude, Belle, for taking such good care of my son."

Luke chose then to smirk at her from behind his father.

She grimaced. “I did it for him. At the time, I did not even know he was your son.”

North came forward to take her hands and lean in for a kiss.

She turned her cheek so his lips skimmed her cheekbone.

He did not comment, tucking her arm through his to lead her into the house. “Welcome. I am still struggling to adjust to the sight of you here. I never thought the day would come when you’d be in Northumberland. However did you manage that carriage ride?”

She grimaced. “Not well, if I’m to be honest.”

He led her into a front parlor, done in dark blues and dark woods, with ecru seating and an oatmeal rug with patterns in maroon and several shades of blue to brighten the space. Cream-colored drapes hung at the windows.

Once in the room, she stepped away from North, glancing back for Luke.

He strode forward and kissed her cheek as well, murmuring, “I am thrilled to see you, love.”

Ugh. This was every bit as awkward as she’d imagined, but the endearment, said quietly enough that North didn’t hear it, warmed her heart, even if a future together still seemed impossible to her.

“Tea?” North asked. At her nod, he rang for it and gestured them all to seats. “What brings you so far out of your preferred environment? Not that it isn’t good to have you visit, but I confess to surprise and curiosity.”

Belle chose a chair and sat, twisting her hands in her lap. The men chose seats as

well, North in a matching chair and Luke across from her on the closest end of the sofa. Directing her gaze to Luke, she countered his father's question with one of her own. "How much have you two talked?"

Luke's left cheek creased in a half smile. "Your timing is impeccable as always. We were at the heart of it when you arrived."

North was frowning. "I don't understand."

Belle turned to him. "I got to know Luke quite well"—she shot Luke a glare when he coughed to muffle a laugh—"during his stay with me. When I realized your connection, I could not reconcile the image of the father he portrayed with what I knew of you. I thought..." She swallowed.

"I am at a loss, my dear. Could you finish that statement?" North asked gently.

"I thought I might help. Bridge the gap, so to speak." She shrugged.

Luke leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Whilst I appreciate you coming, Belle, I must learn to fight my own battles. 'Tis overdue, don't you think?"

"What is this about a battle? I am lost," North said, swiveling his head side to side.

Luke was still staring at her, and Belle was enthralled.

He straightened in his chair. "Besides, how am I to prove myself ready for marriage and children if I cannot see my way through a conversation with The Earl?"

She widened her eyes and shook her head in minute gestures, attempting to stop him.

"Marriage?" North's voice was tighter and louder. "Luke? Can someone explain here

please?”

Luke smiled and bounced his eyebrows at her as if to say, You came here. I can do with that what I like.

She stifled a groan. Perhaps this hadn't been her best idea.

Turning to his father, he said, “Yes. I fell in love with Belle during the weeks I stayed with her. I am determined that she be part of my future. However, she feels it is an inappropriate match. Finding out that I was your son cemented that in her head. I'd planned to continue my wooing after the holidays upon my return to London. But”—he sent her another smile—“I am glad to see I do not have to wait.”

“Luke,” she hissed, grinding her teeth at his brows raised in feigned innocence.

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North blinked then blinked again. “You—you’re in love? As in lovers?”

The continued blinking made him look owlish to Luke, not something he’d ever dared think about his father before.

Then The Earl pushed. Gulping a swallow, he repeated, “In love? How can you be sure? You’ve barely lived.”

Luke snorted. “I believe our conversation just before Belle’s arrival should tell you otherwise.”

“And look at the choices you made,” his father snapped. Then immediately held up a hand. “I’m sorry. That was unkind. I’m trying to understand, and you’ve thrown a lot at me in the past hour.”

Luke ground his teeth. He was not ready to forgive anything, especially after that remark. Instead, he ground out, “Were you not a year younger when you married Mother?”

North’s gaze flew to his, and he nodded. “Yes.”

“When something is right, age does not matter.” Luke slid his glance sideways to Belle as he finished that retort.

Before she could react, North turned to her. “Wait, has something changed for you? I swore—no, you swore you’d never marry or leave London.”

A stab of fear shot through Luke at that question. His father had been alone up here for years now. Perhaps he was considering rekindling his affair with Belle on new terms if she was willing to come north, regardless of the fact that Luke had just proclaimed his love.

Belle's voice seemed to hold the same fear, as she blushed and stammered, "I retired recently, with the goal of marriage. I thought it best to leave London behind given how everyone knew me there."

North shook his head side to side. "I understand, but I hate that for you. They were all happy enough to fight over you..." With a glance at his son, he trailed off. "You should not have to leave a place you love because others feel you don't deserve marriage."

Luke gaped at his father, shocked at the supportive and understanding words. He pushed aside his twinge of jealousy to look at Belle.

She had tears in her eyes.

Luke fidgeted, unsure if she'd accept comfort from him and unwilling to be rejected in front of The Earl. Deciding his father's reaction did not matter, he reached for her hand. It was long since time he stopped worrying about his father's opinions, and Luke remained convinced he was Belle's future.

However, Belle regained her composure, swiping at her eyes and lifting her chin. "What I may or may not deserve is not the point. Lu— my husband should not have to endure the snubs and gossip. In fact, I have decided to avoid members of the aristocracy altogether."

"What if your husband does not care a whit what others think?" Luke interjected, his tone fierce.

“We’ve been over this. I care.”

“I am not sure the country squires are quite ready for you, my dear,” North murmured.

Still unwilling to believe in their support, she pushed the issue, deliberately choosing the vernacular of her youth. “Why? Because I was a flash moll?”

Both men flinched at that phrase. North frowned and near yelled, “No! Do not denigrate yourself or anyone else in your profession. You provided a valuable service to lonely men.”

Luke’s brows rose at his father’s words. Apparently, they agreed on this, at least. It was as good a starting point as any.

His father continued, calmer. “I said that because I remember you as a bee among flowers. You flitted from one to another as they needed pollen, with the ability to make honey or to sting. Beautiful with a whiff of dangerous, which was irresistible to so many of us.”

Belle bit her lip. Flashing a glance at Luke that he could not interpret, she lowered her gaze.

He hoped his father’s references to their liaison did not embarrass her. She must know he did not care. It was time to step in. He reached for her hand again and said, “Sir, we should continue our conversation from earlier at some point. For now, though, as Belle is here, I shall inform you that I plan to wed her. Well, to convince her and then wed her.”

The earl stared at Belle for a long moment, noting her hand sitting unresisting in Luke’s. When his gaze came to Luke, he returned the stare unflinchingly. One side of

his father's mouth curled in a half smile. But congratulations were too much to hope for. Instead, he quizzed, "You said you fell in love with her. How long ago did you meet?"

"I'm not sure I believe that you care—"

"Luke," Belle hissed again.

He rolled his eyes at her but finished answering the question. "We met months ago through mutual friends. I was not yet ready to accept help. However, another acquaintance reintroduced us two months hence, and Belle agreed to help me make better choices. When I asked for her hand, she ousted me, and I've been gathering information for Free Your Spirits since then, from the London house."

Belle's mouth dropped open, and he sent her a smirk. He could smooth their story as needed. He hoped she recognized how that would help them in the future.

"So there has been time to separate your feelings from those of gratitude." The Earl nodded. "What of you, Belle?"

"What of me?" she asked, eyes wide.

"What feelings do you have for Luke?"

"I... care for him a great deal. That is why I do not wish to harm his future by marrying him."

Luke squeezed her hand with a smile.

His father nodded again. "What of children?"

Luke interjected again. “We both want them. Neither of us feels all that confident in our parenting ability, but together I believe we’d muddle through quite well.”

“Ah, yes. I suppose that brings us back to our earlier conversation, doesn’t it? I, too, was not confident in my parenting skills. Your mother, though, was a natural. I’ve never seen a person more nurturing, more able to find the balance between setting limits and offering love.” He shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose for a moment. “I’m afraid after her death, I was so heartbroken and afraid of failure, I thought it best for you to have other role models to learn from. That is why I sent you to boarding school.”

Angered at how easily The Earl explained the past away, Luke scoffed, “That doesn’t explain your lack of affection at school holidays, or the constant criticism when we did interact.”

North sat back and steepled his fingers, once again evaluating. This time, though, he seemed to reassess the effects of his behavior on a boy of twelve. He sighed and nodded. “You are right. That first year or two, it was all I could do to get through the holidays without your mother. After that, you had your own walls up. So I kept my questions to school and sports. I suppose in hindsight, you were acting out. We all did, as youths. But I knew you were capable of much more, so I tried to push you.”

The Earl stood and sat next to Luke. The proximity startled him. Never in recent memory had his sire attempted any affectionate gestures.

Twisting to face him, North said, “I love you more than words can say. It has always been difficult to express my feelings in words. It annoyed your mother to no end. But I hoped sending you to the best schools, prodding you to make the most of your experiences there, and supporting you financially would show you that through actions. I wish—for many reasons, but perhaps for this one most of all—your mother was still alive. She balanced my gruffness with warmth. I am sorry I did not make my

affection, my love, clearer to you these past years. But please, never doubt it. You are my son. Drunk or sober. Success or wastrel. You can always come to me for help.”

Luke was silent, unable to form a coherent response. Belle was sniffing, but his emotions were scattered. Part of him wanted to sneer. The other part wanted to throw himself in his father’s arms. The rest remained a lost boy in a man’s body.

Finally he gave a short nod. “Thank you for those words. I need some time to consider this new information.”

His father’s face fell, but he nodded his acceptance.

Luke tried to find a reason to excuse both Belle and himself from his father’s presence so they might have a private conversation. He could not think of one.

The earl turned to Belle. “I see why you thought it might be necessary to intervene.”

She answered, “I was wrong, however.”

Luke snapped his gaze to her.

She continued. “Luke is more than capable of speaking for himself. Whilst I adapted to your stoic nature, it hurt a twelve-year-old boy. He came here of his own volition despite that. So I am very glad you both can see the past differently. I hope that your connection will grow from here.”

Luke’s throat closed. She continued to support him, and she’d come all this way. He was sure she cared for him, he just needed to convince her that marriage was their best option.

“And what of your sentiments for my son?”

Perfect, his father's question would help his quest. Unless—but no, the earl's face and tone did not show jealousy. Luke turned to Belle, hopeful.

“As I said, I care enough for your son that I refuse to sully his reputation and his family's, present and future, by marrying him.”

“That does not answer the question.” Luke and his father spoke at the same time, exchanging an amused glance. Luke couldn't recall the last time he'd shared humor with his father, much less been on the same side of a debate.

Belle arched a brow. “'Tis all I have.”

“What of children?” the earl asked again. “Luke said you both want them?”

She shrugged. “Not that it matters, since I have no plans to wed your son, but yes. I want children—not heirs, children whom I can love.”

His father smiled. “You'll be a wonderful mother. If you can handle my 'strong and silent' attitude and Luke, you can handle anything.”

“Now see here...” Luke said, only half in jest.

Belle and his father chuckled, and Luke realized he'd begun to see past the profile of “The Earl.”

“What do you think of Northumberland?” the earl asked her.

Luke leaned forward to hear her response.

“'Tis deuced cold, but the people in town were lovely. I suppose their warmth makes up for some of the outside temperature. And I imagine it is quite pretty on nice days,

overlooking the sea.”

“See? All that fuss about life outside London, and you were missing this picturesque area for years.”

It was time to intervene. He did not like the other two walking down memory lane for too long. Belle was his. “I imagine she might not have seen it the same way before now, just as I wouldn’t have. So much of one’s view of the external depends on their internal experiences.”

“Well said,” Belle agreed, nodding.

His father sat back. “Luke, I confess I invited you here for two purposes. I of course wanted to spend the holidays with you if you were amenable—”

“Ha.” Luke couldn’t contain his snort of disbelief. “You ordered me here.”

“Yes, well, I did not trust that you’d come of your own volition... never mind, it does not matter. I was wrong to do that, and I’m sorry.”

Belle smiled encouragingly at his father.

Luke merely nodded. “Thank you. What was the second reason?”

His father opened and closed his mouth twice, blushing.

Luke had never seen him at a loss for words. He was astonished.

North took a breath and said in a rush, “I met a widow in Old Shoreston, and we’ve grown closer. I’d like to introduce you to her.”

Luke's brows shot to his hairline. Well, apparently the earl was not jealous of Belle, at least. But introducing him to an untitled widow seemed superfluous, unless...

The earl continued. "I know it may seem sudden, but we've spent a lot of time together over the past year. We'd talked about a Christmas wedding but I was not sure how you'd react to it all, so we did not plan much."

"A wedding?" Luke's voice betrayed his shock.

Belle murmured, "Congratulations, North. I hope I may meet her, if circumstances allow."

"That would be lovely. Now, we've discussed many issues today. Perhaps I should leave you with your guest and time to think about it all, and we can speak again at supper?"

He'd been eager to spend time alone with Belle, and while that hadn't changed, his father's announcement had distracted him. The offer returned him to the most important issue. "Yes, thank you."

The earl stood and held his hand to Belle. "Walk me to the door, my dear?"

She glanced at Luke before nodding and allowing him to tug her upright.

Luke's gaze narrowed on them hovering by the portal.

His father leaned in, speaking in low tones. Nonetheless, Luke heard every word. "Belle. Thank you again for helping Luke. I can see his affection for you, and I think you harbor feelings for him, too. I've always thought of our time together fondly, and I can't think of a more wonderful match for him. If you care for him as he does you, I encourage you to reconsider your decision on matrimony. You have my blessing, if

that was a concern.”

Belle started to cry, and North took a step toward her as though to comfort her.

Luke paced forward. “Thank you, Father. I’ll handle this.”

Without waiting for his father to depart, he tugged Belle around and encircled her with his arms, hugging her tight against him.

“I missed you, wench.”

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Belle was overwhelmed. Pride for Luke's willingness to stand up to his father was followed by concern at North's interrogation and not knowing the reason behind it. All that gave way to a war between fear and longing when his parting words to her resonated with what Charlotte and the Black Widow had both said.

She'd fought her conscience the entire ride about her worthiness versus Luke's happiness and reputation. Then again when she'd spied the magnificence of this home. She could afford a nice enough house for herself, perhaps even a small castle, but this represented the longevity and breadth of Luke's inheritance.

Now, after North's words, she wasn't sure her conscience was strong enough to fight father and son as well as her heart.

Luke's arms wrapped around her, and she gave herself up to the pleasure and comfort of being held by him, despite feeling odd about it in his father's house. She'd lived the last fortnight wondering whether that would ever happen again.

When he tried to lead her back to the settee, she dug her heels in and clung to him, not yet ready to let him go. She wasn't ready to argue with him about a betrothal, afraid she'd succumb to temptation and agree.

After long moments of her heart beating against his, his breath warm on her ear, she found the strength to release him.

"Thank you for coming. Will you sit with me a spell and we can talk, please?" he asked, holding her hands.

“I’m rather weary. Might we speak later, perhaps? I should like to return to the inn and rest and change for supper.”

“No, please stay here. I mean, yes, you can rest, but allow me to send a servant for your things and please use one of our guest rooms for however long you’re willing to stay.”

She nodded, grateful he’d suggested it. They needed to have a difficult conversation, and she wanted to be ready to pack up and go if needed after that. She also wanted him and his father to be clear on what they were offering. It would be interesting to see how North’s widow responded to her at supper the following night.

Joining father and son for their repast that evening, Belle remained quiet, listening to the men talk of the earldom, plans to ride to the tenant farms, and other area news.

She excused herself to bed after the meal, citing travel fatigue. Luke narrowed his eyes at her but said nothing.

Dismissing the maid as soon as her stays were loosened, she changed to her nightrail and wrapper and sat by the fire to brush her hair. Physical desire for Luke warred with the strangeness of contemplating a romp with him with North in the same house. North’s dismissal of her concerns about her reputation and her past and his blessing on their marriage kept interfering with her resolve to resist Luke.

Within an hour, a tap at the door came. At her invitation, Luke poked his head in, scanning the room. He stepped inside and whispered the door shut behind him.

“Might you be avoiding me?” he asked with a smile.

“A little. I wanted to give you and your father time to talk further or think things through.” She set the brush down. “Also, I don’t know what to say to you, Luke.”

“Say you missed me. You have my father’s blessing and my adoration. What more do you need?” He crossed to sit in the chair next to hers, leaning forward to hold her hand.

“I missed you, but that changes nothing.”

“How about this? You were right about my father’s intentions being better than they appeared. I am relieved to see a path forward for us. What else needs changing?”

He was pushing her, making her feel cornered. Both men had ignored her argument about his reputation. Charlotte’s mantra echoed in her head, but she could not bring herself to quite believe it. The following night’s dinner would prove them wrong, after all.

“Hmm. No answer? I’ll take that as an opportunity to woo you here, away from the prying eyes of the Ton. Now”—he held a finger to his lips when she drew breath to speak—“let us concentrate on more timely tasks.” He drew off his cravat and began unbuttoning his shirt.

“Luke! We are in your father’s house.”

“So? Who is to say the lovely widow isn’t creeping down the hall right now?” He shrugged then paused in peeling his shirt off, frowning. “Unless that is what upsets you?”

“No, of course not. But don’t you feel strange?”

“I feel anticipation. I’ve shagged with my father in the house before. But I’ve never made love to the woman I want to marry with him nearby. The idea is titillating.” He discarded his shirt.

The days and weeks of celibacy after his departure had felt longer than the months of retirement before his stay. His words warmed her heart, but his bare chest warmed other parts of her, the emphasis on the t's finally registering. Her skin grew sensitive, her clothes chafing, and her pulse beat in her throat and between her legs from the mere look of him. As he'd said, there was no reason to miss him when he was right in front of her, no matter what the future brought.

Tasty . She licked her lips.

When he chuckled, she realized she'd said it out loud.

Leading him to the bed, she gave him a gentle shove. Discarding her wrapper, she said, "I believe 'tis my turn to seduce you, my lord. Lie back and let me enjoy my treat."

"I'm all yours."

She ignored his serious tone to enjoy the fun for the night. Tomorrow's supper would be soon enough for him to see other's reactions to her presence at an earl's table.

The earl spent the day ensuring Belle felt welcome. He and Luke kept the conversation light, and after breakfast the three drove into town to stroll the shops.

It was a week before Christmas, and the northerners said snow was in the air, so Belle realized she might end up celebrating the holiday with her past and present lover if she did not leave soon. She promised herself she'd decide the next day, after supper with the earl's current lover. Glad she wasn't in charge of seating arrangements, she gave herself over to the holiday spirit and bought a few trinkets for Charlotte and herself.

There was nothing that spoke to her as a suitable gift for Luke, nor did she plan to be

here to exchange Christmas presents. That thought caused an ache in her chest, but she ignored it and bought a hot chocolate for herself, the lords, and their driver. All three men noted her inclusion of the coachman with a smile.

Still, as evening approached, nerves got the better of her. She dithered over the gowns she'd brought, worrying over one being too bright, another being too low cut, then became annoyed with her lack of self-confidence.

Standing in front of the mirror, she practiced the phrase Charlotte had given her, finishing it this time. "I am equal to any man and better than most, and I deserve to be loved."

Her voice came out as a whisper. Squaring her shoulders, she tried again, louder. Better. She almost believed it.

Shrugging, she chose the lower-cut gown which Luke had seen and complimented.

Luke and the earl were in the same front parlor with drinks when she arrived. When she slid a glance at Luke's glass, he offered her a sip. "Cider."

Shuddering, she accepted sherry from his father. Pacing, she turned back to find them watching her.

"Everything all right?" Luke asked.

Her chin went up. "Yes, thank you." Realizing they were waiting for her to sit, she waved a hand. "Please, sit, I am just feeling restless."

A footman entered. "Mrs. Whitcomb, your lordship."

As he stepped aside, a woman about North's age stepped forward. She was several

inches shorter than Belle, and more than a few inches wider around. She appeared... cuddly.

Were you expecting a siren? Belle laughed at herself silently. While she was sure there were attractive women in Northumberland, and beauty took many forms, she had become too accustomed to all the accoutrements of London dress.

Belle had more jewels in her necklace than this woman did on her entire form. Her hair was pinned up in a loose chignon, a mix of blond and gray, and her dress was periwinkle lace over the same color underdress. The cut was several years out of date, but it flattered her rounded figure.

Belle ran a hand over her exposed décolletage self-consciously. Luke took a step closer behind her and placed his hand against her back. She dropped her arm and straightened an inch. The whole point of this dinner was to test others' acceptance of her, after all. This was who she was.

The woman had a small furrow between her brows, and her mouth was pinched.

She looked as nervous as Belle felt.

North stepped forward, taking Mrs. Whitcomb's hands and bussing her cheek before tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow to introduce her.

"Luke, allow me to introduce Eleanor Whitcomb."

"My lord." She executed a wobbly curtsy.

"No need to stand on ceremony," Luke said with a smile. "It is lovely to meet you. Please, call me Luke."

North's shoulders relaxed as the widow exhaled a sigh that sounded like relief at the warmth of his reception. "Thank you, and you must call me Eleanor."

He nodded, and North turned to face Belle.

She gulped.

Interesting. The widow mimicked her swallow. Belle's shoulder muscles loosened a bit at that sign of nerves.

"Ellie, this is Belle. I've told you a little about her, but as my invitation noted, she is here with Luke."

"'Tis a long journey from London. I am so glad you could join Luke for the holiday."

North chuckled. "There is a bit of a story there, but I am glad we can all be here as well."

Belle said, "Lovely to meet you. Can we also be Belle and Eleanor?" At the widow's nod, she asked, "How did you two meet?"

Luke hovered near them, not quite part of the conversation, yet not standing apart either.

"We met at a New Year's celebration in Old Shoreston. The public house there hosts a gathering for any townspeople who want to start the new year with their neighbors. Apparently, Giles was feeling particularly alone out here in this pile of stone and joined us for the first time."

"Hold now. This pile of rocks is going to be your home soon," North remarked, but he was laughing.

The widow swallowed hard again.

“I’d negotiate for a large allowance for updating the decor,” Belle leaned in to mock-whisper without thinking.

Eleanor shot her a grateful look before elbowing North in the ribs. “That is an excellent idea. I shall.”

North groaned. “Belle, please. Do not coach her in negotiating. I’ll be destitute.”

Luke snickered and stepped into the group. “I’ll keep her busy helping me negotiate all the work for Free Your Spirits, if she’ll allow me.”

“What is that?”

A servant announced supper, so Luke explained his idea and the background for it over the soup course.

Eleanor seemed very interested and asked several questions as the servants changed out plates for the next course.

Belle smiled at Luke’s animated answers and moving hands. She dearly wanted to help him see this project through, but she also wanted him to succeed without help, as she knew he could. More than that, she simply wanted to be with him. However, she could not reconcile just how to do that without causing him harm in society. And she declined to be anyone’s mistress again.

The Black Widow hadn’t accepted her change in parameters, and now she was relieved. She did not want anyone besides Luke. Reminding herself she had deferred any decision until after evaluating this woman’s reaction to her, she shook off her thoughts and rejoined the conversation.

Eleanor said, “That sounds wonderful, Luke. We’d like to come visit and see if we can help when it’s established. I wish my son would find his calling.”

“You have a son?”

“Two, actually. One, Bruce, manages the public house in town where Giles and I met. My younger son, Alexander, works for his brother, but is contemplating either going to London or joining the military. He is a restless soul.”

“How old are they?” Belle asked.

“Six-and-twenty and two-and-twenty.”

Both were close to Luke’s age. Thinking of Luke’s mother dying and its effect on him, Belle asked, “May I ask how old they were when their father passed?”

“Ah, well.” The widow stared down at her food, her cheeks darkening. “I can’t tell you about Bruce’s father. He was a mistake I made at seventeen. The father, not Bruce, of course. I moved here after he was born and presented myself as a widow for respectability, as I’m sure you can understand.”

Belle nodded.

Eleanor continued. “I met Alexander’s father two years later. We fell in love and married, and he raised Bruce as his just as he did Alexander until he succumbed to a fever five years ago. This weather is tough on people, and I almost moved south. I’m so glad I didn’t.”

North reached out to pat her hand. “As am I.”

Belle was stunned. This woman had borne a child out of wedlock, yet an earl was

marrying her. Yes, it was North, who was the most open-minded earl she'd met, but it was still staggering to consider.

Luke stepped into the silence. "Perhaps we can go into town for midday dinner at the pub tomorrow and meet them?"

North shot his son a grateful look.

"That would be lovely. They've met Giles, of course, but they're still shy around a titled lord, no matter how often I tell them he chews his food the same as we all do."

Belle giggled, delighted by the older woman's pragmatic view of North. "Giles, eh? I'd forgotten that was your name."

North smiled.

Eleanor responded. "I like having a special name for him, just as he is the only person I'll allow to call me Ellie. My sons were shocked when they heard him use it."

Damnation, she liked this woman. However, she needed to push the situation to show Luke what people's reactions to him would be to reinforce her reasons not to wed him.

"I am sorry I won't be able to meet your sons. I am leaving on the morrow."

"Bellissima, no—" Luke started.

Eleanor's brows drew together. "You are not staying for Christmas? And perhaps the wedding? I was very much hoping you'd consider standing up with me."

"You've just met me." Belle gaped at her. Perhaps the woman did not know about her

past. It was time to enlighten her. “Besides, I hardly think it appropriate for a courtesan to be standing up for anyone at a wedding, especially the person marrying her past paramour.”

Luke gasped and North frowned.

Before they intervened, Eleanor replied, “Don’t be silly, my dear. That was years ago, and obviously you both have found better matches. You are here with Luke, are you not?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“I am not in a place to cast stones, based on my past. Nor did I expect Giles to have remained celibate after his wife passed over a decade ago.” Eleanor shrugged. “I do not see the problem.”

That had not gone as planned. Belle’s confused gaze slid to Luke, who wore a huge grin. Her jaw clenched.

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How could she continue arguing with Luke about besmirching his reputation? Damnation, she'd needed that example. First Luke had dismissed her arguments, then Charlotte and Bessie had. She'd expected North to send her packing when she'd arrived on his doorstep. When he'd welcomed her with open arms as his son's betrothed, Eleanor had been her last hope.

Perhaps hope was the wrong word. A maelstrom of hope and terror swirled in her gut. Overwhelmed by confusion, she declined pudding.

The others did as well, and Eleanor told North to take Luke to the parlor for drinks, while she and Belle enjoyed sherry and some feminine companionship.

North nodded and kissed her cheek as he stood, making a point to ask a footman for another glass of cider to be sent to the parlor.

Luke grimaced at the mention of cider, and Belle snickered, sobering as Eleanor turned to her.

"I sense some tension. Between you and Luke, perhaps? Or is it me?"

"No, not at all." Belle struggled to string words together, still trying to formulate a plan on how to dissuade Luke from pursuing her when he returned to London.

"So you and Luke are to be married? Are you planning to have the ceremony here or in London?"

"No, no. I mean, he asked, but I—" It was awkward explaining this to someone she'd

only just met.

Eleanor leaned against the chairback, tilting her head. After a moment, she nodded.

“You do not feel it is appropriate for someone with your background to marry a future earl.”

Mercy, this woman of North’s was wise. And a more perfect match for North’s open-mindedness and reserve, she could not have conjured in a thousand years.

When Belle remained silent, Eleanor continued. “Do you feel that my association with Giles is inappropriate also?”

“No! Giles—North—should marry whom he pleases, and he seems very taken with you. You stand up to him, too, which I think is always a good balance with a titled lord.”

“Well, then. Forgive me for asking as we just met, but I’d like to understand. What is the difference?”

Belle balked. What was the difference? She trotted out her arguments, but they sounded weaker and weaker each time she said them. “There is the age difference.”

Eleanor lifted a shoulder and dropped it. “By my guess, you are halfway between the men’s ages. So why was one acceptable and the other not?”

Ugh. She, too, sounded like Charlotte.

“And I’m, ah, well-known in London. His reputation would be shredded.”

“Luke’s story about his journey to start this enterprise makes it sound like he’s not

vested in invitations to Ton parties. And I do not see North worrying about whether or not his peers like him. We are too far away. Certainly, you won't miss those gatherings, as you never attended before, if I understand London society correctly. Do I have all that right?"

"Yes."

"So I don't understand. Unless you're planning to continue your... career after marriage?"

Belle narrowed her eyes. She could swear Eleanor was being deliberately obtuse, but she did not know the woman well enough to call out her behavior. So she answered, "No. I retired several months ago. I want to marry and have children. But I don't want to hurt Luke."

"It seems as though you'd hurt him more by refusing. Do you not trust him to judge what is more important for his happiness—reputation or you?"

Belle opened her mouth to respond, but no words came.

Was that part of it? Perhaps more than worrying about her own worth, she did not trust his judgment?

No, she did. With the one notable exception of looking for sherry as he was battling his demons, his decision-making had been sound. He'd managed his drinking when he'd gone out with his friends, formed a plan for his future, and invited her to share it.

And rather than celebrate his success with him, she'd declined and withdrawn. She, who'd had members of the Ton happily suck her toes if she'd asked them. Why had she allowed those same men to cow her? She couldn't recall, and it no longer mattered. She was done feeling less than equal.

I am equal to any man and better than most, and I deserve to be loved.

Eleanor watched her with a small smile.

“Would you excuse me please? It seems I need to talk to Luke,” Belle managed, her hands trembling with a mix of fear and eagerness. But oh, Charlotte was going to be angry that it had taken North and a stranger to get through to her.

“Of course. Perhaps you could send Giles back here to keep me company?” Eleanor asked with a sly look.

Belle barely heard her over the rushing in her ears. Speeding down the hall, she knocked on the almost-closed parlor door. “Eleanor requests your company in the dining room, my lord.”

He nodded to her and Luke and excused himself. Waiting by the door, she shut it behind him.

Luke left his cider on the mantel where he’d been standing talking to his father. His gaze scanned her, noticing her agitation. “What is amiss, Bellissima?”

“I deserve to be loved,” she blurted out, having been reciting it in her head as she traversed the hall.

“Yes. By me. Always.” He pulled her in to wrap his arms around her.

“Ask me again.”

“Ask—Oh. Right, then.” He stepped back, but held her hands, their arms stretched between them. “D’you know, I’m not sure I have asked, per se.”

Surprised, she realized he was right.

“I need to do this right.” He took a minute to compose himself before speaking. Squeezing her hands, he said, “Belle, I am in love with you. All of you—your past, your present, and your future. I cannot imagine where I’d be right now without you, but more, I do not want to envision my future without you by my side. Please, please. I am begging you. Marry me.”

“Yes.” She was crying so hard, the syllable was garbled, but he understood.

He yanked her back into a hug, burying his face in her hair. A sniff sounded in her ear, and his voice was rougher when he whispered, “Wench, you’ve made me the happiest man in England.”

“Clodpate,” she sighed. “Thank you for your patience. I love you—so much I thought I was doing what was best for you even though it hurt beyond words. But now I see. You knew better all along. We are best together.”

Eleanor convinced them to have a double Christmas wedding, and as Luke’s relations with his father had vastly improved, Belle agreed with the idea.

She’d miss having Charlotte there, as he would miss Nate and William, but neither of them wanted the attention of the London set. Luke had even cited a worry that his old crowd from the Lyon’s Den might appear uninvited and drunk.

Charlotte would understand. She’d written a note to her friend, and they’d celebrate when she and Luke returned to the city to continue building his charitable organization.

As Christmas neared, Belle received a surprise note from Charlotte’s late husband’s younger brother. She’d met the Earl and Countess of Peterborough, Edward and

Sophia, at a few demi-monde balls. They were extraordinarily open-minded and had attended to support Sophia's closest friend who had been a courtesan. Come to think of it, Penelope had gone from courtesan to the Countess of Mansfield in quick succession.

Charlotte was sending them in her stead as Belle's family. Trust Charlotte to have found the perfect representation to reinforce how truly acceptable Belle's marriage was. Tears pricked her eyes as she read their missive. Frustrated, she shook her head and swiped at her face. She, the strongest and staunchest of independent women, refused to become maudlin. She deserved this and a life of happiness beyond. She did, however, promise herself to invite Lord and Lady Mansfield for a visit when they returned to London. They might have tips on navigating the murky waters of London society.

Thus, on a cold dark Christmas Day, with winds bludgeoning the stone walls outside, Belle followed Eleanor down the short aisle of the castle's chapel. On one side sat Lord and Lady Peterborough, and on the other sat Eleanor's sons. Luke and his father towered at the steps to the altar, one lean, one bulkier, but both amazing men who had found equally amazing women to love in unexpected places.

This was her family now. Different from the one she'd grown up with in all the ways she wanted it to be. She was content.

Luke captured her hand as she reached him and leaned in. "You look radiant, love."

She was very glad she'd packed the forest green velvet dress. She'd packed it for warmth, and for the tiny chance she'd end up needing a Christmas gown, never imagining it would become her wedding dress.

"You cut a fine figure in your suit as well, my lord." She admired his black suit, dark green waistcoat, and ruby winking in his cravat pin. "You resemble mistletoe."

“In that case, I’ll have to get you under me as soon as possible,” he whispered, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Clodpate!” she hissed. “We’re in a church!”

“And about to make it all legitimate.” He sighed with satisfaction as they turned to the waiting vicar.

She echoed his sigh, unable to stop smiling as she contemplated her future.

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His father had suggested that they stay in Belle's room for their remaining nights. It was in the guest wing, whereas Eleanor and North would be in the family wing where Luke's room was.

The two newlywed couples hosted the guests at a wedding dinner rather than the traditional breakfast, blending Christmas foods and celebration into the day.

After, the family exchanged gifts. Luke had brought a tin of his father's favorite sweets from London and the thickest blanket he could find for his father, as the earl had always loved reading by the fire. He'd found a pretty hand-knitted scarf and matching hat in town for Belle after she'd arrived.

Belle looked embarrassed when she'd opened his gifts. "I have nothing for you."

Luke answered, "You as my wife is all I need, but if you'd like to make it up to me later, I won't object."

Her grin made him want to drag her up to her room at once.

Finally they were alone, a bottle of sherry for Belle and a platter of cheese and bread for that evening having been delivered.

Belle sank into a chair, looking pensive.

"Come, allow me to unwrap my gift." Luke tugged on her hand.

She resisted, her face serious. "Luke, I know you understand my reasons, but I must

say it once more. Please forgive me for rejecting the idea of this marriage for so long, I beg you.”

His eyes lit. Grinning, he said, “That’s not begging. Need I remind you of the three components of a proper beg?”

Her jaw dropped, and he thought she’d give him hell for using her words against her. But she narrowed her eyes, tapping her lip with a finger. “Perhaps you do.”

He laughed. “Happily. First, it must be sincere.”

“Or penitent.” She frowned at him.

“Or penitent. I do not doubt your sincerity or penitence, my love. Please, continue. The second element is a willingness to correct it.”

“I believe that whole ceremony in the chapel took care of that, do you not, my lord?”

“I do, my lady.”

She jolted. Her voice was breathy with wonder when she said, “Oh, my. I’m a titled lady now, aren’t I? If my parents or sister could see me now!”

They laughed together, and Luke said, “I am very glad you can enjoy the thought of the title. I confess I worried you’d need longer to get used to it.”

“No, you, Charlotte, North, and Eleanor have convinced me. And Sophia’s note reminded me I know one other courtesan-cum-Countess, to whom I’ll introduce you back in London.”

“Really? Excellent. I look forward to it. But you still have one more aspect of begging to complete.”

“Ah, yes, a willingness to atone. What can I do to make it up to you, my lord?”

“For the record, I was more resourceful and designed my own act of penance. However, Nate gave me a gift for if or when I convinced you to marry me, and I have it with me.”

She gulped. “Isn’t he the blacksmith who makes implements for intimate torture?”

“Yes.” His grin was wide enough she swore she could count all his teeth.

Giving herself over to the moment, she acquiesced. “Bring it out, then. And you shan’t need to worry about the authenticity of my reactions. I’ve never played with his toys before.”

“Excellent. It will be one of an infinite number of firsts for us, my love.”