



My Ruthless Duke (The Twisted Dukes #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Don't be mistaken. It's not that I have a heart of ice. It's that I possess no heart at all."

With her father dead and her mother drinking herself into oblivion, Cordelia has to find a way to escape spinsterhood. And fast. Even if it means tying herself to the Ruthless Duke.

Ruthless. Murderer. Merciless. The Duke of Davenport is consumed by guilt. And he would endure any torture to atone for his sins. Even marry the daughter of the man he killed to save her from ruin.

In this Regency Romance by bestselling and award-winning author Loretta Levine, a desperate lady matches wits with a Duke so ruthless she never expected to fall so madly in love with.

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“Have you seen my Mama?”

Cordelia Farrington felt as if she were undertaking an impossible task. Though given that she was hunting down a woman so predisposed to theatrics, she ought not to be having such a difficult time. Normally, her mother, the Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury, had the sort of voice that could fill theaters with its resonance.

Except for tonight. The older woman being silent was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it meant that she had likely not yet gotten herself into trouble. On the other hand, she could not be located, which could mean she was being scandalous behind a closed door somewhere. Cordelia's nerves could not handle either option.

Marina Marner, Cordelia's dear friend, clutched her wine glass and looked around herself. “She was just here a moment ago...”

“That is what I was afraid of.” Cordelia sighed.

“I saw her at the refreshments table, but now... surely, she cannot have gotten too far?”

If only that were true.

“Alas, she is a slippery woman, Marina; do not underestimate her,” Cordelia answered.

At least Marina had the decency to cover her mouth with the back of her hand instead of openly laughing at Cordelia. “Cordelia, dearest, relax. She cannot be into anything

terrible in such a short amount of time!”

Cordelia’s head whipped around; her search momentarily paused as her eyes widened. “Do not jinx me!”

Marina pushed at her shoulders, urging her to continue. She spoke with a laugh, for she knew too well just how embarrassing Cordelia’s mother could be from time to time. Given the quality of the wine served tonight, Cordelia’s concern was well-founded. “Then you better hurry.”

At the last ball she had attended with her mother, the woman had taken it upon herself to declare the quartet inept and chose to host a one-woman opera show. Loudly and sorely off-key. Lavinia had spent the entire afternoon moping around their house, lamenting the loss of her husband and complaining that her life was not supposed to be the way that it was. Mother liked to blame all their woes and misfortunes on the premature loss of her husband. Though Cordelia personally did not see how missing a shoe or misplacing a teacup could have anything to do with her father’s death.

It was Cordelia’s fourth unsuccessful season in the marriage mart, so her mother’s embarrassing behavior was unlikely to be the reason she did not take a husband for another summer—but that did not mean that the humiliation would be any easier to endure.

Slowly, casually, Cordelia wove through the socializing bodies without paying much attention to whom she passed or to whatever gossip they were sharing with one another. Such things were of very little interest to her on a good day and even less so now.

Her mother was wearing a blue dress; she could remember that much. But nearly everybody, including herself, had chosen to wear some shade of blue this evening.

The hour was growing late, and whatever the Blithe family had planned for their grand end-of-ball celebration was bound to begin at any moment.

Glass shattered on the opposite side of the ballroom, and Cordelia's heart plummeted into her stomach. "Not again."

Every possible worst-case scenario of her mother being an irritating lush ran through her mind at double speed as Cordelia gathered her skirts in her hands and started for the commotion as quickly as she possibly could. She wove through the people while attempting to make her slight frame smaller so that she would not draw unwanted attention to herself. There was nothing that she hated more than being the center of attention.

I suppose I have to thank Mama for that.

In her haste, she did not account for those around her—nor the man who stepped into her path. Cordelia stumbled, her ankle threatening to roll as her knees buckled. The man gasped, nearly fumbling his wine glass all down his shirt, and had to drop it entirely. His arm caught her about the waist, steadying her.

"I am so sorry, my lord!" Cordelia gushed, attempting to smooth down her dress and bend to grab the wine goblet—and the man did the same, causing their foreheads to bump together painfully. She recoiled, pressing the heel of her palm into her forehead and hissing in discomfort.

"It would seem that clumsiness is not a thing that one grows out of, after all," the man said kindly, a smile in his voice.

Only then did she realize that she knew him, fortunate indeed. "Matthew?" Cordelia squinted through one eye, ensuring that she was not seeing things. He stood, holding out his hand to help her up with a grin. "Oh, Cousin! I thought that you were still in

the country! I had no idea that we were to expect you this Season! What happy news!”

“It would be, but it seems that just as in childhood, our bumbling is worse around one another.” He laughed, putting her more at ease about the faux pas.

“It would seem so! Though, I do not know how many times I can possibly apologize for the accident that ended in you breaking your arm.”

“The ground came out of nowhere; I still maintain that.” Matthew grinned and placed his empty goblet on a passing footman’s tray. “Where are you off to in such a hurry, might I ask? If it can wait, I would be sorely tempted to test fate by asking you to dance.”

Cordelia could not help but laugh. “Sir, I fear your feet shall never recover from being trampled!”

Her cousin was such a kind man. It would bring her joy to dance with him, and she knew it. Were her mother somebody else, were they in a less influential setting, then perhaps she could have allowed herself to be a touch more indulgent. Cordelia answered with a sigh. “How about we leave this for a different time? I am my mother’s keeper this evening, it would seem.”

“How do you mean?”

It was a perfectly logical question to ask her, and yet she found herself hesitating. How was she supposed to explain the shift in her mother’s behavior? Before their father passed, they were a beloved and well-respected couple. How was she supposed to tell him that her mother was falling into a drinking stupor? The habit was bad enough, but actually voicing it out loud? She was not sure she could do that.

Matthew's smile softened, his eyes impossibly kind as he easily shifted the conversation. "Perhaps we have a good deal more to catch up on than I originally assumed?"

"That... is one way of putting it." Cordelia smiled softly. She was beyond grateful that he was not pressing the issue further.

"You will agree that there is no time like the present? You shall give yourself wrinkles if you keep frowning like this all the time, Cousin." Matthew reached up, rubbing two fingers into the lines on her forehead as he urged her to calm down. "You deserve to have a little fun as well. Whatever tragedy that your mother is concocting can surely wait a few moments?"

As if on cue, a loud crash resounded from the other end of the room. Cordelia cast her cousin a pitying look, and he released her hand, nodding in understanding as she hurried toward the sound. There was a collective gasp from those around them, the crowd of gossiping busybodies moving to circle around the spectacle that filled Cordelia with shame and dread the moment it came into focus.

There her mother was, her hand on Lord Blithe's chest, their host, as she slurred her words. "You know, my lord, I have always wondered what it might be like should you let your guard down." Lavinia's hands moved up to his collar, running a finger brazenly along his skin as if to loosen the fabric right there in front of all of these people. "I think that we could make this evening a good deal more fun. Interested?" Her cheeks were wine-reddened as she grinned. Lavinia's eyes were half-lidded as she ran her tongue over her lips.

Shame curled low in Cordelia's belly as the crowd noticed her, glancing from her to her mother and then hiding behind their fans.

We should have stayed home.

“Lady Salisbury! What do you think you are doing?” Lady Blithe gasped, using her closed fan to smack at Lavinia’s shoulders and arms as she lavished seemingly unwanted attention on the woman’s husband. Lady Blithe was ashen and paling as she glanced at the gawkers around them. This was going to be in every gossip sheet come morning. Both that Lavinia, the embarrassment of the ton , could not contain herself—and that Lady Blithe could no longer keep an eye on her own husband in their home. It would be disastrous.

“Lady Salisbury! Get off of him!” Lady Blithe protested once more; her teeth clenched. She glared daggers at Cordelia’s apologetic and sheepish smile as she moved forward to extricate her mother from the man who was not protesting half as vehemently as he ought to.

“I am so sorry! My mother is too deep in her cups... she is still very bereaved...” The words felt hollow as they left her mouth. She had said them so many times that it was so highly unlikely that anybody was going to believe them anymore.

“Do not speak for me!” Lavinia slurred as she attempted to push her daughter’s steady hands away from her. “I was merely jesting. I t is not my fault that Lady Blithe is too self-absorbed to see that her husband is miserable.” She practically sneered at the hostess’ name as she waved her hands in a grand, dismissive gesture.

“Mama, please ,” Cordelia hissed, hoping that her mother would take the hint. However, her gut told her that would not be the case.

“Get out. I knew that I never should have invited you. I thought that I was doing you and your mother a favor by inviting you! This is the thanks that I get?” Lady Blithe hissed.

It might have been kinder had she simply slapped her.

“Lord Blithe does not wish me to leave, does he?” Lavinia continued shamelessly winking at the hostess’ husband—who was not protesting nearly enough to satisfy his wife’s outrage.

“Of course, we are leaving! I... apologize once more, my lady,” Cordelia muttered lamely, her face burning as she half-dragged her mother through the ballroom, who giggled like a mad woman.

Cool night air wrapped around them the moment they were outside, and Cordelia shuddered against the assault on her senses. Lavinia curled into her daughter’s arms.

“Cordi... It is so cold...” Lavinia muttered, attempting to siphon warmth from her daughter. “Where is your father? If only... if only he had not left me, then he could have been here to keep me warm...”

“Father is gone, Mama. You know this,” Cordelia whispered, attempting to keep her temper in line as she waited for their carriage to be brought around to take them home.

“Selfish...” Lavinia hiccupped. “Selfish bastard. He left me all alone!”

She ought not to be angry with her mother. It was not her fault that her husband had killed himself. Their fortune had practically dried up overnight. Year after year, Cordelia had failed to secure a suitable husband who might have aided in their misfortunes. She knew that the fake tears were coming next. Lady Salisbury, when this drunk, tended to follow a predictable pattern.

A single hot tear rolled down Cordelia’s cheek but she quickly wiped it away.

When was it going to be her turn to mourn? Was this truly going to be her fate? A spinster forever destined to run after her mother, cleaning up all of her messes?

“I will have my revenge, Cordi, I will. That worthless man never should have left me!” Lavinia wailed, her voice carrying through the night and drawing the attention of the various footmen standing by their carriages.

“Could you cease, please? Just for a moment? You are the selfish one here!” Cordelia whispered sternly.

Lavinia turned, ready to fuss at her daughter, before seeing the look on her face. One solemn enough to sober her for just a moment.

“You are humiliating me. You are humiliating yourself, and you do not seem to care! I cannot fix this, Mama, you are ruining...” She paused, wiping another tear from her eye. “It is bad enough to insist on coming where we are so clearly not wanted. But, to drag me down with you?”

Lavinia’s mouth floundered as she struggled for words. She tried to stand on her own without leaning on her daughter for support and failed. No doubt she was ready to give another long-winded, blubbing excuse about how her actions were justified and that Cordelia simply could not understand what it was like to have to live with such a broken heart.

“No man shall ever wish to marry into such a disgraced family. What man will tolerate such belligerent behavior at all social events, Mama? You... you are hurting me with this behavior,” Cordelia said. There was no telling how much her mother was going to understand. There was no way to know if she would even remember their conversation in the morning after.

Cordelia dared to glance down at her mother, hoping for some flicker of understanding in the shorter woman’s eyes—but only defiance reflected there.

“Take me home at once! You cannot speak to me like this! I am your mother!”

Lavinia started, her short burst of anger and indignation fading into child-like whines. “I am tired , Cordelia.”

The crunch of wheels on gravel was like a lifeline to her as their carriage was pulled around. They did not have much staff left to them as their estate was bordering disrepair, but at least their horses were still healthy enough to lead a carriage. For now, at least. Panic and dread overcame her—as it always did when she allowed herself to think about the future. Something her mother seemed to have wholly and utterly given up on.

With the assistance of their footman, she helped her mother into the carriage like a dutiful daughter.

She longed to go back inside and pretend that this was all some bad dream. But she was becoming less and less welcome among her peers with every passing week. Even her friends could not show their support for her in the ton anymore. Soon, she and her mother would be all alone—destitute.

As the carriage pulled away, her mother’s head hit the side of the carriage wall, her eyes already closed. Sleep would hold Lavinia for a day or two, Cordelia hoped.

We cannot go on like this.

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“Do you realize your crime?”

The only sound in the room apart from the crackle of the fireplace was the governess' soft sobs. Dorian Hashen, Duke of Davenport, understood what it was that she was hoping to accomplish. Every few moments, she would glance up at him from her position on the floor with overly widened eyes, hoping to appeal to his better nature and be released with an inferior punishment.

Unfortunately for her, he did not have a better nature.

“P-please, Your Grace... I did not... I shall never do this again!” The woman blustered, fat tears making tracks down her red face. He would not be moved. Least of all by pathetic displays of emotion.

“What should your punishment be, hm?” Dorian mused, easing back into his chair. He plucked at the worn leather of the armrest idly, not even bothering to look at her as he spoke. “Flogging? Imprisonment? Or, perhaps, you would rather share the late duke's fate?”

Only then did he look at her. He enjoyed the way her face paled, the fear entering her eyes.

Dorian's reputation for patricide was renowned. Everybody in the ton assumed that the only reason he inherited his title at such a young age was because he murdered his father in cold blood to get it. The governess in front of him was well aware of that same reputation, judging by the sheer panic on her features. She ought to have known better than to cross him. Knowing that his reputation preceded him, why anyone

would dare to test him was beyond him.

“I shall never do it again, Your Grace, please, I beg of your—show mercy!”

“I do not think that you have earned any mercy. Your acts were willful and deliberate,” Dorian answered, leaning forward in his chair, elbows resting on his knees.

“Your Grace, perhaps if we asked—”

Dorian’s gaze cut sideways over to where his butler stood on the side of the room. His hands were respectfully clasped in front of him, and the moment he realized Dorian was looking at him, he stopped speaking immediately. Dorian’s hand lifted, two fingers gesturing to the butler to stop speaking. This quarrel was not with him, and while he sympathized with the older man’s conscience, it would not serve him here. The butler’s mouth snapped shut, and it only took half a moment before the governess seemed to understand that her only possible ally in this interrogation feared the duke just as much as she did. The woman fell forward, her body bowed in front of her, her hands clasped together in some form of prayer as she muttered her apology over and over again.

If nothing else, he hoped that her fear would cause her to think twice before ever harming another child again.

Dorian’s lip curled upward, derision clear on his face as he leaned back in his chair. He flicked his wrist for the butler to collect her. “Get her out of my sight. Don’t you ever set foot on my lands again.”

The relief was instant as the governess started to utter words of gratitude and praise the moment the butler lifted her off of the ground, half dragging her. The moment that she was on her feet, she scrambled so quickly out of the room, that Dorian was

certain that it was not going to occur to her that she had left all of her belongings until she had run off of his grounds entirely.

The butler stood silent for a long moment, staring at the open drawing-room door and the wake of the terrified woman.

“Your Grace, did you have to be so hard on her?”

Dorian’s brow arched as he looked at the man who had served his family for longer than he cared to remember. It was the only reason that he was allowed to say such things to him. He did not care for his judgment or choices to be called into question.

Not even a beat later, his youngest footman came running into the room so swiftly that his shoes squeaked against the polished floor. “Your Grace! You were right about her! We have recovered two golden gilded candlesticks from the governess’ bag!”

Dorian’s lips wore the ghost of a smirk as he waved his hand at the butler as if to say, ‘see?’.

“Your Grace, she must have had her reasons... she...” The butler appealed, but Dorian was in no mood to be heard.

He rose from his seat fluidly and started toward the front door. “Summon the constables. Have the horse master ride out and catch her. I will not allow her transgression to be dismissed now that the evidence is right in front of us.”

“Your Grace—” The butler started once more, and Dorian rounded on him.

“If it were your grandson, Monty, would you allow a worm of a woman to lay a hand upon him? To steal from him?” Dorian hissed through clenched teeth. “I think not.”

His words were practically a snarl as the footman walked backward slowly to carry out his orders.

“Dorian, I think you have done more than enough already!”

Dorian paused in the foyer, his sister’s voice giving him pause as she hurried down the main staircase, her slippers a soft whisper against the carpet runner. Dorian’s tongue ran over his teeth.

“George is your son, Mary, and you wish to allow this woman to harm him and get away with it?”

“He is all right, Dorian. You can just let her go, firing her without a recommendation should be enough of a punishment.”

“She beat my nephew, Mary!”

Of all the people in the world, his sister and nephew were the only ones not afraid of him. Mary was the only one who did not shrink or recoil when his voice was raised. Perhaps the only one who could stand toe to toe with him, yelling back, that would not invoke his particular ire.

A fact she was currently exploiting.

“It was but a few lashes, Dorian! He is all right!”

“I will not tolerate such abuse under my roof!” Dorian shouted, his face only inches from hers. “That cycle shall not be repeated in this home, Mary! I told you when we buried Father, there shall be no more pain in this home. The walls have seen enough violence! Or do you not remember?”

Mary flinched.

Of course, she remembered. He could see it in her face. The pair of them wore more than their share of scars over the battered and ruined skin of their backs and thighs from their father's sadistic whippings. Georgie was but a six-year-old child, and no child deserved to be harmed for their transgressions. He did not care what his crime might have been.

"Our father ruled by fear. He demanded blind obedience, or he beat it into us. How is that any different than the tactics that you are employing today, Brother? You ought to be careful lest you become more like him than you realize." Mary finished, turning sharply on her heel and starting to head back upstairs.

"You are mistaken. I shall never become like that bastard, and I certainly shall never have children. This bloodline ends with me."

Mary paused on the stairs, her hand delicately resting on the banister. "You should not say such things." She turned slowly, her chin angled over her shoulder. "Normally, when you are in better control of your temper, you are a wonderful uncle to Georgie. You would be a good father, Dorian."

Dorian scoffed. "What man in his right mind would be willing to risk passing on this madness gene to a poor child? That would be true cruelty."

"There is no such thing as a madness gene, do you even hear yourself?" Mary said, brandishing her arm in his direction. "Our father was a cruel man, Dorian. But he was just a man. You need to find something to channel this..." she gestured to his chest. "Energy. Or, perhaps, I do not know... take a wife. Perhaps that would give you something to occupy your time with and thaw out that frozen heart of yours."

"Oh, do not mistake my issues, sister. It is not that I have a heart of ice. It is that I

possess no heart at all.”

Dorian had already indulged deeply in his cups well before he arrived at White's. It was perhaps a poor choice of location, given the sheer amount of people that had chosen this evening to frequent the club. It was such a rare thing that Dorian actually wished to be around people. Tonight, it was not so much a desire to be social that motivated his actions, but rather, a need not to be idle. He could not stay in that house for a moment longer, listening to his sister's needling comments. She was already cross enough with him for refusing to attend the Blithe's ball. The last thing he needed was to spend his night being performative and false in his actions and words.

No, he needed to drink at least until his mind had found a healthy numb to level him out.

“Whiskey,” Dorian ordered as he shrugged out of his coat and handed it to the attendant near the door. “And keep them coming.”

He did not pause to hear the words of greeting or welcome. He merely wandered into the main room, where men gathered around small tables, playing cards or conversing softly. There was a layer of smoke in the air from the pipe tobacco, and the lighting was mercifully dim. It made the roaring inside of his skull softer and easier to manage.

“Your Grace! Over here!” Patrick Hislop rose from his seat to motion him over to the table where he was surrounded by Dorian's acquaintances. Rhysand, Duke of Huxton, and Xander Harrison, Duke of Larsen.

Dorian did not consider himself the sort of man to have friends, but these gentlemen were some recent acquaintances at White's. As Dorian joined them, an attendant brought his glass of whiskey to the table on a small napkin. It appeared that Xander and Patrick were in the middle of a heated debate about something that he could not

find the energy to care about as he nodded to Rhysand in greeting.

“Long time no see, Davenport.” Rhysand seemed unaffected by the lack of answer as he began collecting the cards from their table and shuffling them so that they could start a new round that would include Dorian as well.

“Have they been squawking all night?” Dorian asked, his voice low as he nodded his head toward the arguing couple.

No sooner had he commented than the argument paused. Xander blinked at him as if seeing a ghost.

“He speaks?” He reached out and grabbed Dorian’s shoulder, which Dorian swiftly pulled away from. “I had no idea that you were capable, Davenport. I thought that your emotional range was limited to brooding and staring judgmentally.”

Dorian’s brow arched as he sipped his whiskey. “If that is what you think, why do you think teasing such a man would be a wise choice?”

“Perhaps I simply enjoy the thrill of walking such a dangerous line,” Xander continued.

Dorian noted that Xander’s glass was empty. “Do not push your luck. There are a great many things that you do not know about me.”

Xander shook his head with a laugh before speaking sarcastically. “Color me intimidated.”

Drunk or not, there was no reason to mock him. Dorian paused, waiting for the man to apologize.

Xander sighed, his hand raking down his face. “Normally, I would be glad to take this outside. But I promised my wife that I would be on my best behavior. Eleanor has forbidden me from fighting.”

Dorian snorted. He could not fathom allowing a woman to have that sort of control over his life.

“Perhaps we ought to return to more interesting topics of conversation? Hm?” Patrick interjected, motioning for Rhysand to hurry up and deal the cards already. “I was speculating as to Lady Salisbury’s motivations for her conduct at the ball earlier.”

Salisbury? The name was so familiar to him. He tried for a moment to summon the image of a face to his mind but was drawing a blank.

“To whom do you refer?” Dorian asked, unable to help himself despite not normally bothering with such gossip.

“Lady Salisbury? Quite the fall from grace. She and her daughter both. I cannot imagine my wife or child attending ball after ball if I were to have died and left them on the brink of ruin like her husband has. No amount of misfortune can excuse her conduct though, that much is for certain...” Patrick commented as he took his hand of cards.

The pieces clicked into place, and Dorian sobered nearly instantly.

Bile rose in the back of his throat as guilt gripped him. Of course, he remembered that man.

Lord Salisbury.

Dorian was the one responsible for the Marquess’ death.

And apparently, for his family's misfortune.

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“M y lady? I apologize for interrupting your work, but we have a visitor.”

A visitor?

Cordelia sat back on her heels and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. Her dress was covered in soil. Her brunette hair was unkempt and messy. The very last thing she wished to do in her current state was to entertain guests. They were not expecting callers, so she did not even have the faintest idea of who it could be.

“They are here, now?” Cordelia breathed, resting back on her heels.

“Yes, my lady. Your mother has said to receive them in the parlor.”

Oh no.

Why did it have to be today of all days? The first time that she actually carved out time for herself to be in her garden was bound to be interrupted. Beside her was a basket of bulbs that she was supposed to finish planting. She had not even gotten to the flowers yet, let alone the herbs. The afternoon sun was at its warmest, and Cordelia desperately wished to make the best of the light while she had it. Spending the afternoon indoors, making idle conversation while attempting to ensure that her mother did not make a further fool of them both, did not sound like fun.

Pulling her bonnet from her hair and pushing as many flyaway hairs from her face as she could, she closed her eyes and tilted her face to the sky. She let the sun warm her skin and settle her mind. It was the first time she had felt so calm and at peace since the ball.

Might as well get this over with.

Cordelia dropped her garden spade and pulled her gloves from her hands. She untied her apron from her dress and handed it and the gloves to the servant. "Who is it?"

"The Duke of Davenport, my lady," she answered, folding the apron carefully. "Should I take over the planting for you?"

Cordelia forced a smile that did not quite meet her eyes. "That would be lovely, thank you."

Either way, the work had to be done today. She just wished she could be the one to do it.

"Shall I help you change first?"

"Change?" Cordelia tilted her head to the side in confusion and then looked down at the state of her dress. The hem was at least two inches in the dirt, and bits clung even to her bodice. Oh, she supposed that would be wise, would it not? The last thing that she needed was to cause further damage to their reputation by the guest reporting that she could not even manage to be clean inside of her own house. "Yes, I will summon Ann to help me, though, so that you can finish up here."

"As you wish, my lady." The maid smiled and gave her a small bow.

Cordelia turned to head back inside, attempting to wipe any excess soil or bits of plant that clung to her arms. She pulled her wide-brimmed hat from her head and tucked it under her arm. If she had known that they would have had guests, she would have planned better.

Halfway down the hall, she could hear her mother's loud giggling. She sounded

borderline unhinged for the way she was laughing at her own jokes. When had she started drinking this morning? It felt surreal. Was she truly going to have to look after the woman every hour of every day? She certainly hoped not.

There would be no time to change, after all. She would have to intervene straight away to ensure that the mother did not do anything too scandalous.

She did not wait to be announced before stepping into the parlor; her mother was pouring herself another drink from an empty bottle as she swayed in place. Cordelia crossed directly to her mother, pulled the empty bottle from her hands, and escorted the older woman to the couch to sit.

“Lady Cordelia, I presume?”

Cordelia straightened. “Yes, I apologize for my mother’s behavior—she is... grieving.”

She had said that phrase so many times now that it no longer felt like they were actually words. Only when her mother was settled and grinning did she turn to greet the duke—and was taken aback. He was so tall she only came up to eye level with his chest, and his shoulders were nearly double her size. Clean-shaven, brown hair and the most stunning honey-brown eyes looked back at her. He wore no smile, nothing more than a quizzical brow as he waited for whatever she was going to say next. Though, it took her a moment to remember that she was capable of speech in his presence.

His eyes drank her in, absorbing every detail of her as they raked down her frame. However, the moment he landed on how dirty her dress was, she could practically feel the judgment rolling off of him.

“Did you have business with my mother, Your Grace?”

“Only in so far as I came to ask for your hand in marriage.”

The words were so blunt that she laughed without thinking. The sound was a soft chuff of air between them as she blinked incredulously at him. Perhaps the reaction could be considered a touch rude, but she had been taken so off guard by the suggestion. Surely, he would claim to be joking or teasing her for some reason she could not guess. Only, he did not smile. There was not even the smallest hint of emotion on his handsome face. “Wait, I beg your pardon?”

“No pardon required, my lady. I apologize if this comes as a surprise to you. I simply wished to make my intentions clear, and I do not much care for beating around the bush.”

Cordelia was frozen in place, but Lavinia chose that moment to come to her senses. “Marriage?” she shook her head a touch too vehemently. “My daughter is not for sale, Your Grace!” She hiccupped and paused to compose herself. In a rare moment of sobriety, she continued. “I know perfectly well of your reputation, and I shall not have my daughter cavorting with the likes of you! We may not be as proud as we once were... but... but...”

“Everyone has their price. Name yours,” the duke answered dryly.

This could not be happening. They were not about to haggle over her worth right in front of her face. “I am standing right here, you know.”

Neither party acknowledged that they could hear her if they could.

Though, it was nice to have her mother on her side for this.

“She is my daughter! You cannot—”

“How about a lifetime supply of the liquor of your choosing?” The duke offered; his face still unreadable.

Cordelia laughed bitterly, her arms crossing over her chest. She had never heard such a ludicrous offer in her entire three-and-twenty years of life. “Your Grace! This is ridiculous! If you think that my mother would—”

Lady Salisbury perked, hopping up off of the settee and extending her hand happily to the duke. “Well, then, we are in agreement!”

Cordelia had to scoop her jaw up off of the floor. “Mama! You cannot be serious? You will not sell me for a few bottles!”

She gestured widely to the duke, who had just the slightest hint of a smirk on his lips. How could he be so shameless as to make such an offer? She had never been so insulted, never been made to feel so cheap, in her life. Which, given how things had been going for her recently, was saying something.

“Quiet, Cordi, we are talking about your future with this lovely and generous duke here,” Lavinia continued, her whole demeanor shifting. Lavinia took the duke’s arm, stroking it affectionately. “We shall start planning straight away! We have so much to do if you wish to be married by the end of the Season!”

“I see no reason that we should have to wait that long.”

“Well, then! Let us sit and have some tea, and we can discuss dowry and salary requirements! You see, my need for funds has...” Lavinia gushed, attempting to pull the duke toward the tea table.

Cordelia would not listen to any more of this. She had endured so much humiliation on her mother’s behalf, and this was truly the icing on the cake. Her hands balled into

fists at her side. She was not going to stand here and listen to them haggle over details as if she were invisible. Clearly, she was not to be considered when making such important choices for her own future. The whole ordeal was wholly and utterly preposterous.

She turned so quickly on her heel that it left a scuff mark on the polished floor. Space. She needed space. She just needed a moment to breathe. She would not allow herself to cry, but she felt so damned hopeless that she did not know what to do with herself. It would appear that her mother truly had no tact, no limits left that she was unwilling to stoop to. The drinking addiction had consumed everything that her mother once was. She attempted to wipe her hands clean on her skirts as she walked. The first door that she came across, she flung it open and nearly hurled herself into the room, throwing the door shut behind her. However, it did not slam as she intended—instead, it smacked against something, and she whirled to see a man’s hand on the lip of the door.

The duke’s large frame took up most of the doorway as he stepped inside, pushing the door shut behind him gently. She had not even noticed that he had followed her out of the room in the first place! Cordelia whirled, her eyes widening as he closed most of the distance between them in a single stride. Her heart leaped into her throat.

“What are you doing? You cannot be in here!” She yelped, her voice higher pitched than she would have liked. She wished she could have told him off soundly. She could not be alone in a closed room with a man! “If you do not leave at once, I... I shall scream!”

The corner of the duke’s lips quirked upward, and he closed the rest of the distance between them, his hand covering the lower half of her face with ease as he pushed her up against the closest wall. Her hands scrambled for purchase, for something to defend herself with, but could not reach even the closest bookshelf.

“Be my guest. I can think of several ways to quiet you, Little Flower.” The duke’s gaze looked near ravenous as it dropped to her body. “Though, I am not sure you will like them.”

The quiet, reserved charm that he had had in the parlor was gone—replaced with something far darker.

Panic made her bold.

Her hands braced against the duke’s firm chest as she attempted to push him away from her. He would not budge. He was so much larger than her that she had no chance of getting away without his permission. Slowly, his hand left her face, resting on the wall on either side of her head.

“T-this is indecent, Your Grace! We cannot be unchaperoned!”

He shrugged, just a lift of one shoulder. “I do not care much for such trivial rules,” he paused, taking in every detail of her face. “Besides, I think that your mother is quite fond of me already.”

“And which version of you is supposed to be the real one? The falsely charming one, or this brutish one?” Cordelia snapped, her anger palpable in the air between them. “You do not fool me, Your Grace, and you will find that I am not so easily bought, either.”

“Is that right?” The duke asked.

“Yes! Even if my mother has consented to this engagement, I have made no such vows. I am well aware of your reputation, and I shall not be shackled to the sort of man that you are.”

His fingers curled, lifting her chin to look at him, and she could not bring herself to tear her eyes away.

“And what sort of man am I?”

It was hard to breathe properly when he looked at her like that. A sadistic sort of amusement glinted in his eyes. She did not think that she could bring herself to run from him even if she had had the space to do so. If only he were not so painfully handsome, then he would not be so distracting!

“You.... you are a killer. Everyone says so...” She breathed.

It dawned on her a moment too late how foolish it was to accuse him of such things in a situation like this one. If he were indeed a killer, she could be risking sending him into a rage. If he were not, then she was gravely offending him with accusations. Neither of which was going to allow this exchange to end in her favor.

The duke smirked, an incredulous sound leaving his lips before he pressed his lips to hers.

She thought to pull her face away, but she could not will herself to do so.

This was not at all how she imagined her first kiss.

Only, his grip on her face shifted. Instead of lifting her chin, he cupped her jaw in his hand and held her in place as his lips softened against her own. Every thought eddied out of her head, leaving a buzzing silence and the sharp awareness of his lips against her own. Her body responded on its own. She swore it did as she found herself kissing him back.

The hands she had been pushing him away with softened, and he absorbed every inch

of leeway that she gave him. A man who insulted her so deeply ought not to feel so nice pressed against her; his lips had no right to make her feel so sinfully good.

When he broke from her lips, she could not open her eyes right away.

“Does that change your opinion of me?” He asked softly, his voice as gentle as a caress.

Cordelia shook her head. Her eyes lifted, heavily lidded as she could not stop feeling the force of his lips against hers despite the distance between them. “You should... you ought to find somebody else to marry. Leave my mother and I alone.”

Surely, he did not make a habit of cornering women and kissing them. Why was he so interested in her in the first place?

“No, my lady, you are the only one that I wish to make my duchess.”

“Why... Why me?”

“Let us just say that I knew your father,” he answered as his thumb brushed over her cheek, sending goosebumps down her spine.

It was almost as if he made it his job to be as cryptic as possible.

How did he know her father? If that were true, why did she not remember him at her father’s funeral? She would have certainly taken note of a man who looked the way that he did.

“I cannot marry you,” she insisted, though her words did not even sound convincing to herself.

No, Cordelia, do not look at his lips!

“And why not? Shall I convince you some more?” The duke teased, leaning down once more.

Oh, she was sorely tempted to let him. She had not felt so desired in her life. It was so nice to feel something other than shame and worry. Her mind begged her to let go of her control for just a moment—to feel again.

No, I will not be a slave to my desires.

“I am already being courted by another,” she lied firmly. “That is where my heart lies.”

The duke shook his head like he could see right through her. He brushed his knuckles down the side of her neck, trailing the line of her shoulder. “No,” he said confidently. “You may like whoever you choose, Little Flower, but you belong to me.”

“I... I do not!” She spat as indignation and something else welled up inside of her. He traced the line of soft skin back up her neck, his thumb resting on her pulse point. “I certainly will never be yours!”

The duke’s answering smile was not kind. “You are a terrible liar. And we will marry before the week’s end.”

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This is for the best. This is the right thing to do.

In truth, it was the only thing to do.

The wedding itself passed by Dorian in a blur. The preparations were simple enough, and his steward handled most of the details. It was not until Dorian found himself standing outside of the chapel, married, that things started to feel real for him.

He stood dutifully beside his carriage, waiting for his wife to finish speaking to her mother and friends. Though, he was not entirely sure why she was acting as if she would never see her mother again. By wedding him, she had all but assured that her mother would be well cared for. It was as much to assuage his own conscience as it was for her benefit. When he arrived at her family house a week ago and saw the shoddy state that it was in, he knew that his work was cut out for him. The only way to atone for being the reason her family was struggling was to care for them.

Cordelia had yet to meet his gaze once.

Even now, she was looking everywhere but him, stalling with every tactic that she could seem to dream up that would mean she did not have to get into the carriage with him. Dorian ought not to care how she chose to spend her time, nor should he care what she chose to look or not look at. But he found himself fixated on the back of her head. There was something simply intoxicating about her. On his end, it would be simpler were she ordinary. But her cherry-red lips dominated his thoughts. Dorian had not been so drawn to a woman in, well, ever.

One by one, with lingering glances and long-winded speeches, Cordelia forced him to

wait as she kissed each of her friends in turn and then her mother. He would ensure that a proper caretaker was assigned to her mother's care so that the woman did not spiral in her absence.

When she finished, he offered a hand to assist her into the carriage, which she, of course, denied.

To his eternal chagrin, her obstinance was intriguing.

"Words of gratitude would not be unwelcome," Dorian said to break the silence as he leaned back against the padded seat in the carriage. He watched as Cordelia's jaw clenched, her fingers closing into a fist—but she only stared out the window.

"Your mother shall be well cared for; you do not need to worry about her any longer," he continued, hoping that she might respond to him, even if it was just to tell him off.

The scenery outside of the carriage passed in a blur of greens as they started to pull toward the outskirts of town where his home was located. Just close enough to the city to be annoyingly relevant to society but removed enough that Dorian did not have to deal with a single one of them should he choose not to.

He was the one accustomed to ignoring others. He was certainly not accustomed to being the one ignored, and he did not care for it.

"Answer me when I speak to you," Dorian commanded.

That, at least, got a reaction.

"Is that how you imagine this to be, Your Grace?" Cordelia snapped. "You shall treat me as if I am some dog to command?"

Dorian's brow arched at her outburst. He could not help how appealing her anger was. There was a sparkle in her eye that only seemed to exist when he was getting on her nerves. So, keeping her irritated was the key to making her talk to him? He could do that.

He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he watched Cordelia instinctively lean back as if there was enough room in the small carriage for her to have any hope of getting away from him. No, he was encroaching on her space, and he intended to stay there.

"I do not care if you hate me, but you need to understand your place."

Cordelia scoffed. Dorian was intensely aware of how labored her breathing had become. Good. He reached forward and grabbed her chin, forcing her closer to him as she whimpered.

"We are married. By law, you belong to me, Little Flower. Every look, every insult, every breath belongs to me." His eyes lingered on her eyes, lips, and chest as he spoke before releasing her.

As if he had burned her, she wrenched her pretty face from his grasp.

"Perhaps if you understand my intentions, you will be put more at ease?" He wanted to keep talking, as her attention was finally wholly on him and him alone. "I do not expect an heir, nor do I desire children. But there shall be rules between us. It would behoove you to learn and obey them without deviation."

Her brow pinched. "Rules?"

He dipped his chin in a nod, never breaking eye contact. "First and foremost, you are never to avoid looking at me again."

Cordelia pulled her full bottom lip between her teeth.

“Secondly, you will never take a lover,” he finished firmly.

She considered his words for a moment, and Dorian wondered if she was going to attempt to argue that there was another who had her heart again. Clearly, she was not all that devoted to him as she had tried to lie in the first place.

“Questions?”

Cordelia shook her head, her lip popping out from between her teeth. “I suppose that those simple rules are fair enough...”

She started to look away from him, and he clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Cordelia’s gaze snapped back on him, and a deep sense of satisfaction curled in his gut. Perhaps there was hope for this arrangement after all.

“I wish to make a rule of my own then. You have two. I think it is perfectly fair to request the same from you.”

Cute.

“I shall have no issue abiding by your rules,” she continued. “For as long as my rule is also being followed.”

“Very well, what is it?” Dorian asked, leaning back in his seat once more.

“As this is to be an arrangement between us, I want you to promise that there shall be no lying between us.”

She was charming when she was so serious. Of course, she would demand the one

thing that he would never be able to give her.

Dorian smirked. “Oh, is that all? And what sort of arrangement do you presume that this is?”

“It is a marriage of convenience and nothing more.”

“Ah, you have decided this all on your own, have you?”

She folded her arms across her chest and nodded once.

“I think that it is charming that you feel so emboldened,” Dorian teased, knowing fully well that she would hate to be mocked.

“Do not dare belittle me, Your Grace.” She quirked a brow. “This is how it must be between us.”

Dorian did not answer, but he leaned forward once more, two of his fingers resting on her knee and walking upward slowly. He watched her expression carefully as her breath hitched. He could not help but wonder which part of the statement was more important that she get confirmation on. Was it the no lying? Or was it because she did not think this was truly a matter of business? She was not wrong on that front.

Holding her gaze, he had managed to walk his fingers nearly to her hips before she swatted his hand away like a spider. “Your Grace!”

“I like it when you blush, Little Flower.”

His words made more of that beautiful pink tint flush over her cheeks. She had buttons so easily pressed. He could not help but wonder if she would be equally as responsive to him in other matters as well.

He leaned back, a humorless chuckle on his lips as he interlaced his fingers behind his head. They were going to have great fun together.

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“O h, my goodness! Is that...?” Cordelia could not help herself. Her words were nearly squealed as the first thing that she saw the moment the carriage had stopped was the largest greenhouse that she had ever seen in her life. She did not wait for the footman to escort her down, nor did she wait for permission to leave before she hurried over the grounds. She gathered her skirts in her hands so that movement was easier as she started to head off of the path, only to be stopped by a hand around her bicep.

“The greenhouse is off limits.”

She felt as if water had been dumped over her head. “What do you mean? I could work miracles in a greenhouse like that! You cannot even imagine the sort of rare flowers that I could bring to life with that much space and light!”

Working in a garden had always been her happy place. It was the one thing that no matter what was happening in her life around her, there was always that. There was something cathartic about working with her hands in the soil and knowing that she was bringing something to life, helping it to thrive. Her smile was so wide it was making her cheeks hurt. Surely, the duke could be reasoned with. After all, she had just married him—she had come all this way; was he truly going to deny her first desire?

“I said the greenhouse is off limits to you,” the duke repeated.

There was something in his gaze that both gave her pause and deflated her at the same time. She could ask why; she could ask what the consequences would be. But something in his eyes stopped her. There was a story there, one that she did not know

if it would be wise to go searching for just yet.

“There are a great many diversions available to you inside the house. I am certain that, while you are still adjusting, you will hardly have time for gardening anyway,” he continued.

Gardening was the sort of thing that she would make time for.

“Do you have some sort of animosity toward plants?” Cordelia asked, attempting to lighten the mood.

“Hardly.”

The front doors to the massive estate opened, and the butler came walking out, a couple of maids behind him. It was a far cry from the sort of formal presentations that she was otherwise accustomed to when visiting estates like this.

“Your Grace?” The butler asked, looking very confused.

“Ah, yes. Monty, may I present my new duchess? Lady Cordelia, this is Monty, our butler, and some of our staff. The housekeeper is likely around the back at the moment. So, you will have to meet her later. Feel free to pick any of the female staff to be your lady’s maid or whatever you might need,” the duke said with a dismissive lift of his hand.

“You got married, Your Grace?” Monty asked, surprise evident in his features.

“That is what I just said, is it not?”

“You what ?” A female voice demanded from the darkness of the doorway. “Dorian, you did not go and get married without so much as sending a letter home. You did not

even care to invite me? What in the heavens is wrong with you?"

Oh, Cordelia sorely hoped that was not his mistress.

"You ought not to have been so secretive!" The woman chastised.

However, the duke seemed content enough to allow her temper. Interesting.

"It is lovely to meet you," the woman turned to her, pulling Cordelia into a firm hug without waiting to be properly introduced. "Since my brother has more rudeness than sense, I am Mary."

Oh, she liked her already.

"Cordelia. It is a pleasure to meet you!"

"Likewise. My rascal of a son is somewhere in here. Well, I suppose that makes him your rascal of a nephew now, does it not?" Mary chuckled, linking her arm through Cordelia's. Mary did not so much as cast a backward glance at her brother as she pedaled the pair of them away and into the house.

"I think you and I are going to be fast friends," Cordelia giggled. She, however, did cast a single backward glance to see the look of faint irritation on her new husband's face.

"I certainly hope so. I have wanted a friend to help liven this place up for a while! I know that my brother can be somewhat... difficult to handle from time to time. But the trick is to not let him know when he gets to you. It drives him mad."

Cordelia laughed, already thinking about all the ways she could put such an inside tip to good use.

“Where should we start, hm? How about a tour?” Mary offered.

“I would love that!”

When Cordelia looked back once more, the duke was already gone.

“Uncle, look what I have made!” Georgie’s small voice never seemed to slow down. Of course, Mary insisted on him sharing every meal with them. She claimed that it was the only way to have him learn the best ways to conduct himself in society. She had a point, but he had a sinking suspicion that Mary just secretly liked watching the fraying cords of Dorian’s temper threatening to snap.

Every inane conversation felt like a test.

He loved his nephew. There was no denying that he was intelligent and high spirited... very high-spirited. Dorian’s gaze rolled over to where Georgie seemed to have constructed some sort of building on his plate out of his glazed carrots and the bit of potato left on his plate. He was toying with his food. Mary flushed a deep red and immediately scooted her son’s chair closer to her own. He could not hear what she was whispering to the boy, but little Georgie started to sink lower into his chair.

“Auntie Cordelia! Look! I can make my peas fly!”

Dorian watched as the young man loaded a pea onto the bucket of his spoon and launched it toward the construction that he had made on his plate.

Only, it did not go onto his construction. It bypassed it with such impressive distance—all the way into Dorian’s soup bowl.

Mary arched a brow, giving her son a disapproving look, but Cordelia only laughed. “Quite the feat, Georgie. Though I am not sure if your peas were meant to travel so

far.”

As if either one of them needed to be encouraging the other.

Mary leaned forward, whispering in a fashion that was very much meant for Dorian to hear her. “If he keeps this up, we will be serving dinner from the ceiling before long.”

“At least it would make for an interesting conversation piece.”

Georgie took their lack of reprimand as a clear challenge and happily sat up on his knees in his chair as he excitedly bounced in place. “I can make them go even higher. Watch!”

Mary sighed, seeming to have surrendered any efforts that she might have had to eat. She cast an exasperated look at Cordelia. “He has not sat still for more than five minutes all day. I do not know where he gets the energy.”

“Perhaps you should start serving whatever it is he has been eating. Might perk the rest of us up.” Cordelia only grinned. “Heaven knows I could use the energy boost.” Dorian pinched the bridge of his nose. Perhaps it would have been wiser to have simply had dinner sent up to his study. The women seemed to be getting along just fine, and as they were dominating the whole conversation apart from when Georgie interjected himself, Dorian was clearly not needed there.

“—He is just testing the limits, Mary. I have heard that little boys do that. You did say he was up early?”

“Before dawn. I thought letting him run around the garden would wear him out, but look at him now. I am starting to wonder if he is part squirrel.”

“If you find him hiding nuts in your shoes, you will know for sure. Imagine the havoc he could wreak with a broom instead of a spoon.”

“You have no idea. The last time I asked him to help in the stables, he tried to ‘groom’ the hens with a rake! I swear, he is the reason our stable hand began losing his hair.”

“He is creative, I will give him that...”

Dorian could not even keep up with the conversations that they were having, they were bounding from one topic to another so quickly that the pair of them might as well have been speaking in a foreign language entirely.

Cordelia caught his attention again, her head tilting back as she laughed. “If this is what he is like at dinner, I can only imagine how bedtime must be.”

Mary groaned none too quietly. “Oh, you do not even want to know. It is like negotiating with a tiny emperor. ‘Just one more story, Mama, just one more biscuit...’ No nanny can handle him.”

Georgie’s foot started to tap against the closest leg of the table nearest to him, shaking the goblets and silverware as he did so. He hummed an unfamiliar tune, once again wholly absorbed with doing anything other than eating the food that was in front of him.

Cordelia sighed, leaning back in her chair as she watched him. “He really is a force of nature. I feel sorry for his nanny and governess.”

Mary nodded, “Well, that... He is a force I can hardly control. If he were any more energetic, I would have to tie him to the chair.”

“I am sure that could be arranged,” Cordelia agreed impishly.

Dorian had done the right thing in bringing her there, had he not? It was still the wisest choice to have taken her as his bride. Was it not? She did not seem displeased to bond with his sister or nephew at least.

So, why did he still feel so guilty?

It was not as if he had simply abandoned her mother to fend for herself. He had already ensured that she had adequate care and assistance. She could drink if she wished, and the staff that he had employed for her would also ensure that she did not make a fool of herself. He did not wish to have anything or anybody in a position to embarrass his wife ever again.

Across the table from him, Cordelia seemed amused by Georgie’s antics. No matter how Mary attempted to settle him down, he was only being riled up further from their attention. That was all that he truly wanted: attention.

The tension in Dorian’s jaw was so tight it nearly pulsated. This was perhaps the hardest part about having Georgie around. He knew very well how this situation would have been handled by his father. The late duke was everything that Dorian did not wish to be. And yet, the impulse to demand that Georgie sit down and behave himself or else was there. He hated it.

“How about we make a bargain?” Cordelia’s voice interrupted Georgie’s fit of giggles. “If you can finish your supper while pretending to be the perfect gentleman, then I shall allow you to show me all of your toys.”

Georgie’s eyes widened. “All of them?”

Cordelia nodded. “I am a woman of my word.”

Georgie picked at the food on his plate, a frown sprouting into a sour expression. “I do not know if I wish to be a proper gentleman. It’s boring.”

“Well, you shall have to be one when you grow up. So, it is always best that you practice. Shall I tell you the easiest way?” Cordelia offered, there was a strange inflection in her voice that Dorian was not quite sure if he liked. It unnerved him.

Georgie nodded happily and scooted closer to her.

“You see your uncle? You simply must do exactly as he does. Do not worry; I know that he will be quite proud of you. Shall I show you?” Cordelia sat up straighter in her chair, pushing her shoulders back and tilting her head up just a touch to almost appear snobby. “Start here, and then you must arch your brow and gaze down upon all of those around you. Must take small bites, appearing bored and arrogant at every moment.”

Georgie copied her instantly.

Was this truly what she thought of him? It was impossible. “That looks nothing like me.”

Cordelia grinned. “I disagree. Now, move your hands like this, do not say a word, and never look at your plate, of course.”

She was getting very carried away with her gestures. He wanted to think that it was simply to ensure that Georgie did what he was supposed to do, but he was not entirely certain on that front either. If she was attempting to ridicule him, she was on the right path.

“Do you disagree, husband?” Cordelia asked. “If you have something to add, we are all ears.”

What did she seem so happy about? He had every urge to drag her right out of this room and bend her over his knee for such provocative comments. Though, that thought was enough to calm his nerves a little. He wondered what she might even do in a situation like that. No doubt, the thought had never crossed her mind.

Tempting.

Mary laughed. The sound was short and immediately cut off by her pressing her hand into her mouth to smother any other offensive noises. “Apologies,” she muttered, flicking her eyes at Dorian. “He just... he truly resembled you for a moment, Brother.”

They were attempting to lure him into their little game.

As if he would ever sit here and allow himself to participate in the mockery of himself.

Almost against his will, Dorian’s eyes rolled in the direction of his nephew. His shoulders tensed.

They are right.

This would not stand.

Dorian pushed himself away from the table and dropped his cloth napkin on his plate. He was not very hungry in the first place. Let them think that he was rude all that they wished. It was likely better that way, regardless.

It would be easier for her that way. If she grew fond of him on a real level, she would be crushed when she found out the truth about him.

Cordelia could not come to like the man who killed her father.

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O f all the foolish choices that Cordelia had made in her life, tonight might have been the very worst one.

What were you thinking?

The servants had readied her for bed hours ago, but she could not settle herself. Her newfound friendship with Mary had caused her to let her guard down too much. She should never have allowed herself to become quite so comfortable. It would have been far more intelligent on her end to have kept her focus on the duke. He was, after all, her husband now. There were probably certain duties and obligations that she needed to fulfill for him. He had not mentioned anything to her specifically, but she knew that he was going to come for her. He was a man. The way that he looked at her... he always looked at her like he wanted to eat her.

Heat washed over her skin, warming her against the chill of the room, if only for a moment.

Cordelia had not yet decided if she felt that his attention was good or something that should be avoided.

If for no other reason than the fact that he was a murderer.

There were bound to be repercussions for her behavior. After he had stormed off during dinner, she had asked Mary if that sort of behavior was typical for her brother. She hoped it would have opened up a dialogue about Dorian and his tendencies. If anybody knew the best ways to keep him appeased, it would be his sister. Would it not? But Mary had had very little to say on the matter, heavily implying that she was

trying to keep herself out of her brother's affairs where she could.

Every creak and noise of the house settling in the dark of night had her jumping at shadows.

Sleeplessness was never something that she had been plagued with, but this was her wedding night, and she was frightened. Unable to pace in the same setting any longer, she put her slippers on and wrapped her arms tightly around herself. At least she could occupy herself with something useful. She just needed to be quiet. Mary and Georgie's rooms were in a wholly different wing from where she and Dorian were. Likely for the best, but at present, it made her feel impossibly lonely.

Shadows seemed to stretch up the walls and watch her from every corner as she attempted to memorize the twists and turns of the halls that were now her home. She hoped that her mother was all right. Dorian promised to provide for her. She would have to trust that he had, given how well Georgie and Mary were cared for.

The estate was impossibly larger at night than it was during the day.

Turning the corner while wholly absorbed in her thoughts, she nearly came out of her skin as she collided firmly with another body. A shrill scream left her before she could stop it, the sound swallowed by the tapestry on the wall as the person with whom she had collided grabbed her firmly by the shoulders to ensure that neither one of them fell gracelessly on their behinds.

"Shh! You shall wake the young master! Or worse!" The woman hissed at her.

A motherly woman, at least, and not some frightful creature from a nightmare.

Even seeing the housekeeper in front of her was not enough to quell her nerves or calm her racing heart.

“Apologies, I did not mean to frighten you.” Cordelia pressed her hand into her chest as she willed herself to take normal breaths. It was practically an impossible task.

“Oh, Your Grace! I did not recognize you in the dark! Forgive my tone! What are you doing awake at this hour? Shall I escort you back to your room?” The housekeeper offered, her tone softening with every word.

Cordelia shook her head. “No, thank you. It is just an unfamiliar place, is all. I felt restless. I did not mean to bother you.”

“You could never be a bother, Your Grace. In truth, I am glad that I did not find one of the staff roaming after the lights were out. I would have a whole other issue on my hands then! I was just doing some final rounds before turning in myself.” The housekeeper offered.

Cordelia smiled brightly. “Forgive me, but I did not catch your name earlier?”

“Matilde, Your Grace,” the housekeeper said as she held a hand in the direction that Cordelia had just come from.

She allowed herself to be guided but walked slowly. Might as well take advantage of the opportunity that had been placed in front of her. “Matilde, do you enjoy working for His Grace?”

The woman regarded her out of the corner of her eye as if she were debating explaining herself or not. It was understandable, she supposed. Dorian’s staff certainly did seem very loyal to him. She could respect that.

“I do.”

“What... I do not mean to pry, but I know so little of him. Surely, you could give me

some insight? He seems so reluctant to speak... about anything really.” Cordelia sighed. It was unfair that his face swam so easily into the forefront of her mind. Was he sleeping? Certainly, he would not be up in his room, pacing as she was. No doubt, if he had an issue, he would make it known. Right?

“His Grace can be somewhat contrary, but he is a very serious man. Though, with the upbringing that he had, it is to be expected.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have been in service of the family for many years now, and I was... well, I do not know if fortunate is the correct word to use in this instance, but I was in employ here when His Grace’s father was still alive.”

“Anything that you could tell me would be very much appreciated,” Cordelia said.

“It is not my place. Forgive me, I have said too much already.”

“I understand that I am placing you in a difficult position, I do, but I just wish to know a little bit more about the man that I am married to. Surely you can understand that desire?”

Matilde hesitated for a moment, but there was sympathy for her plight in her eyes, she could see it. But Matilde shook her head again. “No, I really should go to bed. As should you, Your Grace.”

Cordelia took both of the housekeepers’ hands in her own, practically begging. “Please?” From the way that she was speaking about him, Cordelia was not sure if the ending of this story was going to be a happy one.

“It is not truly my place to say,” Matilde continued. “But Lady Mary and His Grace

did not have the easiest time in their youth. I suppose that I tell you this just to request that you have patience with the duke. They suffered a great deal at the hands of their father. The sort of suffering that leaves wounds on the soul that are not so easily healed.”

With that, the housekeeper took her hand gently, patting it softly in an almost motherly gesture as they continued to weave through the halls that the housekeeper could have likely navigated wholly blind. There was a burning curiosity in her gut that almost wanted her to beg for more information. There was so much that she was sure she could learn from Matilde, but it was unlikely that Dorian would ever be willing to tell her.

She chewed on her tongue, debating if it was worth it.

“Does that somehow have something to do with the greenhouse? If it is just in need of repair or cleaning, I would be more than happy to—”

“The greenhouse is off limits, Your Grace,” Matilde interrupted gently.

There was no invitation for further questions about it either.

Before she could think better about it, she asked. “Does it have something to do with the murder?”

Matilde stopped walking and turned to face her properly. “I know there are a great deal of rumors surrounding His Grace, but I beg you to do him the kindness of asking him yourself. He is your husband now.”

Yes, he was her husband.

That did nothing to quell her fear of him being a murderer.

“Is there nothing that you can tell me? I have heard so much speculation. I simply wish to know if I am safe here... if I need to fear my husband,” Cordelia asked in a small voice. The limited encounters that she had had with him so far did not make her think she ought to be. But if he was a man capable of murder... he did not seem like it.

But what did she think that a murderer would truly look like? Was she merely being naive? If Matilde had been comfortably employed here all of this time, he could not be so bad, could he?

“I confess I do not know much myself. As you can imagine, it is not a subject that is brought up here.” Matilde sighed. “I do not know how it happened. I know that Monty, the butler, was present when the body of the late duke was found. He was dead, on the ground, and His Grace was over him.”

Matilde shuddered, seeming to push the memory away. But now, it was all that Cordelia could imagine. It was such a vivid picture in her mind that she could not shake it. She did not know if she wished to know more that would make the image even more real than it already felt.

“This is where I leave you, Your Grace. Your door is second on the left there. Unless you require anything else?” Matilde asked sweetly. She had such a warm, comforting presence even with the heavy subject matter they discussed.

“No, I shall be all right. Thank you for your assistance,” Cordelia said in what she hoped was a reassuring tone of voice. She smiled softly as the housekeeper turned and headed back down the hall. Cordelia briefly considered continuing her exploration, but perhaps it was best if she at least attempted to rest. The feeling of unease would not dissipate. She moved into her room, unable to shake the image of Dorian standing over a faceless dead body.

She clicked the latch into place and spun slowly—only to nearly faint once more.

There was somebody in her room.

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“ You scared me half to death!” Cordelia gasped, clutching at her chest once more. She braced an arm against the door she had just closed as she attempted to steady herself.

“I do not understand your surprise, wife. This is our wedding night, is it not?” Dorian said flatly with an insinuation that she did not immediately place.

“And you are standing half-bathed in shadows! Do you have no concept of how terrifying that is?” Cordelia responded instantly. His only answer was to arch his brow at her in curiosity. As if it was perfectly natural for him to be standing here in the first place.

Silence stretched between them, and she found insecurity starting to creep into her mind once more. He did not offer any explanation or words that might put her at ease. It was almost as if he relished in her discomfort.

“I thought that this was simply to be a marriage of convenience,” she said finally. It was the only reason that she could think of for him to have come into her room like this. Though, if he expected her to perform her marital duties, she was wholly and utterly unprepared. She did not know what to... Cordelia severed that line of thought right away. He had already told her that he had no intentions of siring an heir.

“What gave you that idea?” Dorian asked, stepping toward her just enough that the silver beams of moonlight peeking in through the parted drapes licked over his profile, giving him something akin to a glow. What was it about him that she was so drawn to? “I do not recall any part of our limited conversations in which I said that I did not desire to consummate this marriage properly.”

She felt rooted to where she stood on the carpet. It was hard to breathe when he was so close. Perhaps, on some level, she ought to have been afraid of him, but she simply was not. Even after his housekeeper had assured her that the rumors of his being a murderer were all but confirmed.

Dorian lifted a hand, letting his knuckles run down the outside of her arm but not moving any closer than that. Goosebumps erupted in the wake of his touch, and she did not dare shudder. The last thing she should want to do was to invite his attention further, but even in this low lighting, he was so handsome. It ought to have been a sin to look the way that he did while having such a dour personality.

“Do you doubt who you belong to, Cordelia? You vowed yourself to me, body, mind, and soul. It was only this afternoon. Do not tell me that you have already forgotten?” Dorian said in a low tone, his words smooth like butter as they rolled off of his tongue.

He had done this last time as well. This strange transformation into somebody that set her skin aflame the moment that they were alone together.

“I am more than happy to remind you if you need it,” he said, his eyes lifting from where they had been watching his fingers trace over her skin and snapped up to meet her gaze.

Cordelia’s breath hitched as if being trapped under his gaze was enchanting; it enthralled her and set her heart pounding. What a silly reaction.

“Di-did you truly murder your own father?” She blurted, unable to stop the words from tumbling out. It was the only thing that she could think of that would lessen... whatever that was that was building between them.

It worked.

She might as well have dumped a bucket of water over his handsome head. Dorian's hand dropped, and he nearly jerked a half step away from her. His hands moved to clasp together behind his back. That fire that had been burning so brightly in his eyes a moment ago was absent now. "Yes. I did not do anything that my father did not deserve."

She blinked. Knowing that it could be true and hearing the words from his own mouth was another thing entirely. He did not seem even the slightest bit remorseful. Was it truly so easy for him to extinguish a life? Had it not left a mark on his soul as it would for most others? The small, tiny part of her that had been clinging to the hope that it was all merely rumors fizzled out.

"Are you afraid, Little Flower?" Dorian asked, his face somehow transformed into something truly frightening.

She could not look at him. Fear and something else mixed within her as he closed the slim distance between them. She quickly averted her gaze, but he caught her face and forced it back center once more. He seemed to be looking for something in her expression that he simply could not find. When he found her wanting, his lip curled, not in disgust but something close to it. Disappointment? Had she failed whatever little test this was?

"I shall give you a week to adjust, but then I intend on claiming what is mine and mine alone, Little Flower. You ought to prepare yourself for the occasion."

Dorian released her and stormed out of the room. She could still feel the burning of his firm grip long after he left. She did not know just how long it was that she stood there, mutely staring at the door.

A week certainly did not feel like enough.

When she did manage to drag her weary body into bed after locking the door—she could not sleep a wink.

The busy work of the estate was not quite enough to distract her from the fact that the days were passing. She thought that if she was productive, the ominous, not quite threat, of only having a week would feel less overbearing.

Cordelia and Mary settled at a small wooden table on the terrace with a gentle breeze that rustled the leaves of the nearby trees. Mary poured steaming tea into delicate china cups.

“Do you think I am overdoing it?” Cordelia asked, breaking the comfortable silence. “I have thrown myself into organizing the estate, but sometimes I wonder if I am just keeping busy to avoid—”

Cordelia hesitated. Did she have the right to express her reservations about her marriage? Dorian was Mary’s brother, after all. Perhaps that was crossing the line.

“—thinking too much?” Mary finished for her, her tone light but knowing. “Oh, I think we all do that from time to time. Look at Georgie; he can hardly sit still long enough to finish his toast.”

Cordelia chuckled softly. “True enough. But you know, I sometimes wish I could sneak out and spend a few hours in the garden, tending to the flowers. I miss that. It is where I felt the most at ease.”

Mary’s eyes flickered with an unreadable emotion before she quickly sipped her tea, diverting the conversation. “The garden is quite lovely, is it not? I heard from the gardener that the roses will be in full bloom soon. Perhaps you could arrange a small gathering when they do.”

“Yes, a gathering would be lovely, but...” Cordelia hesitated, her fingers tracing the rim of her cup. “But it would feel strange to have anyone here right now. The duke and I are still—”

“—in your honeymoon period!” Mary interjected cheerily, her smile bright but perhaps a little too forced. “And what better way to celebrate that than with some quiet time together? Just the two of you.”

“Yes, of course,” Cordelia said slowly, sensing the change in the air. “But sometimes, I wonder if I should reach out to my friends. It has been ages since we have had tea together, and I feel rather isolated here.”

“Isolation can be nice, don’t you think?” Mary said, her tone shifting slightly. “A respite from the endless chatter of society. Besides, Georgie has been a handful; I cannot imagine you wanting to bring that chaos into your gathering.”

Cordelia raised an eyebrow, clearly teasing her sister-in-law when she spoke. “You think I would invite Georgie?”

Mary laughed a genuine sound that eased some of the tension. “Oh, perhaps not! But you must admit, inviting people over just now would be a little inappropriate.”

“Yes, but I could use a little... something,” Cordelia said, her voice softening. “It might bring some life back into the estate. Instead, I am stuck with organizing old ledgers and supervising repairs. I thought running the estate would be... different.”

Mary looked thoughtful for a moment, then quickly changed the subject. “And speaking of repairs, I heard the roof of the stable needs attention. Have you seen that yet? It would be a shame if it fell in on Georgie while he was playing at being a horseman.”

Cordelia nodded, though the mention of the stable made her heart sink further. “I will have it looked at. But, Mary, I—”

“—would not want to burden my brother with that,” Mary interrupted again, this time with a hint of urgency in her voice. “After all, it is a lovely day, and we should savor our tea while we can.”

“So what sort of things would be appropriate to bother your brother about?” Cordelia asked, trying her very best to keep her irritation out of her voice. “I feel like I know so little about him still. Perhaps if you could give me some more insight? Or, perhaps, a way that I can connect with his grace more easily? If I could understand him better, or his history then maybe—”

“You would have to ask his grace yourself, I am afraid. It is not my place.”

“It is not your place? Did you not share a history with him? Your childhood might have been uncomfortable, but—”

“You ought not to inquire about painful things, Cordelia, and I hope that in this setting I can continue to speak informally with you, but there are simply some things that are better left in the past,” Mary said gently, but firmly.

“I try not to press about young Georgie or his father or what might have happened there because I am trying not to be insensitive or make you uncomfortable, but it seems that the list of topics I am not allowed to speak about is growing longer than my arm. How can anyone navigate with such restrictions?” Cordelia huffed.

Mary did not answer that time. The silence between them grew uncomfortable as Mary stared deeply into the teacup in front of her. Cordelia could not help but to feel more and more like an outsider each day she was here. Like she had not yet managed to earn enough of their trust to be allowed any insight to their history.

When Mary spoke again, it was abundantly clear that the conversation was closed, and needed to shift in another direction.

“Perhaps this afternoon you would like to accompany me to Georgie’s riding lesson again? He only goes in circles just yet, but the weather is just too nice today to be cooped up indoors, do you not agree?”

“Right,” Cordelia said, feeling a hint of frustration but keeping her tone light. “Tea and sunshine, the perfect way to ignore all worries.”

It was harder and harder to have a serious conversation with her when she insisted on changing the subject every time that things even broached a ‘too serious’ subject.

“Exactly!” Mary exclaimed, raising her cup. “To ignoring worries, then!”

“To ignoring worries,” Cordelia echoed, clinking her cup against Mary’s but wishing she could be more honest about her restlessness.

What Cordelia was unwilling to even attempt to ask was why the greenhouse was so forbidden. She had snuck down there the other day just to see if she could sense what all of the fuss was about. The doors were chained shut, and from the rust on the chain, it seemed to have been that way for a very long time. There was too much grime on the windows, and she could see nothing beyond the untended, long, withered plants that seemed to have been left there to rot from neglect.

It was the same greenhouse that she could see now out of the corner of her eye. It was like she was inexplicably drawn to it.

More of her attraction to the dangerous or forbidden, she supposed. Fitting, with Dorian in the same house. It was the same for him, was it not? She could not deny herself the allure of him, frightening or not.

The one task that she knew would ease some of the weight in her heart was the one thing that everyone kept telling her that she was not allowed, under any circumstances, to do.

Being off-limits did not make the greenhouse any less appealing.

Everything in this estate seemed to be a secret wrapped in an enigma and all forced up onto a shelf that she was not allowed to touch.

The cup of tea in her hands had gone cold quite some time ago. The two women stared out at Georgie, watching him silently.

“Mary, do you know anything about the duke’s acquaintanceship with my father by any chance?” She asked finally, moving just enough to place her tea on the small metal table that rested between them.

Surely, this was a neutral topic to gain insight about.

It took Mary a moment to shift her focus from her son. “I beg your pardon, what did you ask me?”

Cordelia smiled. “I was just asking if you happened to know my father or the business dealings that he had with the duke?”

Mary tilted her head, attempting to remember. “My brother, understandably, does not involve me in his business ventures very often. It is a rare thing that I even meet any of his contacts. He usually prefers to handle all things of that nature on his own.”

“I see.” Cordelia nearly sagged into her chair. “I had hoped that maybe it was a closer relationship than I presumed. He said that it was because of my father that we were to be wed in the first place.”

Mary eyed her curiously but did not comment.

Cordelia did not dare approach the duke himself with the subject, not yet. She certainly was not comfortable enough for something like that.

“I suppose that it is good he can stand up for some morals,” Mary muttered into the brim of her teacup. It was so softly said that Cordelia was not entirely certain if it was meant for her to have heard in the first place.

“Hm?” Cordelia questioned, giving Mary the chance to shy away from the topic.

Instead, Mary smiled at her with a thin-lipped smile. “Nothing, do not mind me. I know not of what I speak.”

Perhaps there was more between Mary’s relationship with her brother than it appeared on the surface.

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“It would be far simpler to just talk to her, Dorian.”

Dorian was not a person who startled easily. However, his sister interrupting his private time was not something he ever anticipated. His jaw tightened as he turned to glance over his shoulder. How could she possibly know he was watching his wife out of the window? It was so improbable. Cordelia was on the lawns again, just outside his window. She was merely taking a leisurely afternoon walk, and it should not be nearly as tempting as she was. Did she know how the sunlight seemed to illuminate her skin? Slender frame and delicate curves, but it was always the cherry red lips that pulled him in.

“She would not be likely to reject you if you simply went down there and asked to join her...” Mary continued as she invited herself further into the room. Perhaps it would be simple enough to go down there and join her, but that would be counterproductive.

“My wife seems perfectly content on her own,” he answered, pulling the drapes shut in protest and turning away from the window entirely. He dropped himself roughly into his leather desk chair.

“I do not pretend to know why you feel like you need to keep her at arm’s length. She married you. Cordelia is here in your home, and yet you insist on treating her like a stranger. Why did you marry her, anyway?”

“This is none of your business. Besides, I have not stopped attending your insipid dinners, Mary. What more do you want?” He sighed, pretending to focus on any of the papers on his desk.

“She has been asking questions about you. I feel that if you would simply speak to her and attempt to get along with her, she could satiate her curiosity.” Mary sat gently in the seat across from him, studying him carefully. He understood her point, but answering questions, getting to know her—he could not allow himself to care about her that much.

“If you do not like her inquisitions, simply tell her to stop asking. She is an adult, as are you. You can fight your own battles,” Dorian said offhand. His heart was not truly in the conversation. His mind kept wandering back to Cordelia. This morning at breakfast, she had not looked the best. Was she unwell? If he attempted to ask Mary, she was going to read too much into the subject.

Cordelia was a grown woman; she could care for herself. It was only his guilt that made him feel otherwise. Certainly, her life here was better than the one that she left behind, right? He placed no restrictions on her apart from the greenhouse. He had not dictated her time nor interfered. There was enough in this house that she could use as a diversion if she was bored or otherwise lacked occupation, that was through no fault of his own.

“Do you truly intend on spending the rest of your life hiding away in this study? Marriage is hardly a temporary thing, Dorian. I do not know why you are simply putting off the inevitable. You will have to interact with her, God willing, there will be chil—”

“Enough. I have made myself completely clear on this: there will be no children,” Dorian countered, cutting her off completely.

“This is unheard of.” Mary glared at him, sitting overly stiff in her chair. “Listen to me, Dorian. Whatever game that you think that you are playing, this will not end the way that you hope.”

“I do not see what concern it is of yours. Should you not be supervising your son’s lessons?”

“You cannot ignore me and pretend that I am wrong,” Mary insisted. “I know that you would love nothing more than to sit here, be miserable all by yourself in this house, swallowed up by the past and the demons that you refuse to exorcise,” Mary started, raising her voice as she spoke. She rose from her chair and leaned over his desk as she continued to fuss. “You brought her here; you have included another person into this home, and I will not stand by and watch you—”

Dorian’s temper threatened to overwhelm him. “Watch your tone when you speak to me.”

“Or?” Mary continued. “Somebody needs to speak the truth to you, Brother. Somebody needs to inform you when you are being...”

He waited for the insults to come, but she wisely stopped before his temper wholly broke.

Mary took a moment to compose herself. She smoothed down the front of her dress. “You have a very bad habit of abandoning people who need you the most, Dorian. I do not have any intention of standing by and allowing you to do the same to that lovely woman.”

Dorian’s fingers tapped against the desk. He needed something to help settle himself. “So, what you mean to say is that this is about you and your feelings, not genuine concern for my wife.”

He understood how she felt. Mary was very clear about how she felt that he had abandoned her when she needed him. So, her words struck true, just as she had wanted them to. They hurt every time.

“It would make things easier for you if that was the case, would it not?” Mary continued, her hands trembling with the anger that surged inside of her. He could see it written on every part of her face.

“How long do you intend on blaming me? How many more years will it be before you end this punishment?” Dorian answered, his own words becoming thin and sharp.

Mary stepped back, frowning to herself as she considered her next words carefully. Every part of Dorian wished to dismiss her from his company before she could utter another breath. This conversation, the same one that they had had so many times before today, was just as exhausting now as it had been in the beginning.

“You think I enjoy this?” she shot back, her voice rising slightly. “You do not know what it is like to lose everything. After Father died, I was left alone, floundering. I needed someone to hold me up, but you were nowhere to be found. And then I...”

Dorian’s expression shifted, the accusation cutting deeper than she had intended. “And I was supposed to keep an eye on you, not let you ruin yourself, while branded as my father’s murderer? I was trying to find my own way out of this! I had my own battles to fight.”

“Battles?” Mary echoed incredulously, laughter tinged with bitterness escaping her lips. “You were busy securing your future while I was left to fend for myself and my child out of wedlock! You were all that I had left to protect me, Dorian! I was too young, and I fell for too much, and you should have been here to tell me better! I fell prey to a man who showed me a shred of kindness, only to have him ruin me. I never asked for your pity, Dorian, but I did expect your loyalty!”

“I have spent all of this time trying to make amends with you. I will sit in penance for failing you for the rest of my life if that is what you demand.” He clenched his fists at his sides, the weight of her words pressing down on him. “I have ensured that you

and Georgie want for nothing. You may resent me, but I have done my duty.”

“Your duty?” Mary shook her head, a mixture of anger and hurt flashing across her features. “You think providing is enough? Do you think I could ever forget that you were absent when I needed you most? That your neglect left me vulnerable?”

Dorian’s jaw tightened. “I never intended for any of this. I was wrong—”

“‘Wrong’ does not change what happened, Dorian!” Mary interjected, her voice trembling. “You do not understand what it is like to feel abandoned by everyone. Do you think I wanted to be trapped in a situation where...”

She trailed off, and he knew why.

He opened his mouth to argue but then faltered, his defenses crumbling. “I never wanted to be your enemy, Mary. I thought I was...” He did not even have a justifiable reason to explain his actions.

Mary’s expression softened for just a moment, the fury replaced by something akin to sorrow. “And yet, it was your absence that caused me the most pain. You think of yourself as my protector now, but you were not there when I needed you the most. And now, I am left with this resentment, this bitterness that I cannot shake.”

“Gratitude for what I provide and resentment for what I did not do are two sides of the same coin,” Dorian replied quietly, the fight ebbing from him.

“You have learned nothing, have you?” Mary’s voice softened. “If you cannot accept your mistakes and grow with them, your wife is going to pay the price. If you are miserable, so be it. Do not spread that misery around.”

“What happens between my wife and I is none of your concern,” Dorian said with

finality. "I do not have any desire to continue this conversation."

"Would it truly kill you to apologize? Do you have no remorse for your actions?" Mary continued.

"What is it that you wish me to apologize to you for, specifically?" Dorian answered flatly. "You clearly have some sort of penance planned for me here, why do you not just come out and explain it directly instead of standing here, wasting my time?"

Mary paused and seemed to debate whether or not she wanted to answer.

She spoke on her way out of the room. "As if you had anything better to do with your time."

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Outside, a storm was raging. The sky was a dark blue, flecked with white bolts of lightning and angry claps of thunder. Heavy rain droplets pelted the windows and ceiling, making the cold glass creak and groan. The very walls seemed to shudder with the intensity of the heavens opening up overhead.

In her bed, Cordelia tossed and turned. At least, at first. The louder the storm became, the smaller she made her body. She curled up under the sheets. A pillow clamped firmly over her head to block out the noise. But that only made the echoes of her heartbeat in her ears just that much louder. Panic gripped her tighter and tighter.

Everything is going to be all right. Everything will...

She might as well have been a child again.

It was always the same memory that storms like this pulled to the forefront of her mind. Every time, it felt more sinister.

The lightning cracks overhead, and she screams. She screams and screams and screams, wanting somebody to find her. Where is her mama? The hedges are too tall, and she is too small to see over the tops. Everything is frightening, and nobody can hear her voice over the cracks of thunder that make her heart feel like it is going to burst clear out of her chest.

There is nobody here. She is lost in the gardens. The flowers do not even seem friendly like this, the branches prick and pull at her dress. She is running so hard that her lungs hurt. The rain is freezing, and it makes it hard to breathe. She is going to be lost out here forever. Why did nobody come to find her?

She was going to freeze to death in the rain, alone and terrified.

Is there nowhere that she can hide? Nowhere that she can take shelter for just a little while?

Lightning strikes the brush beside her, and she screams again. She screams until her voice feels like it is going to tear her throat open, and she sinks into a ball, smaller and smaller...

“Cordelia!”

To the sound of her voice, she thrashed awake violently. The storm still raged outside, her eyes wild as they tried to acclimate to the darkness around her. Strong arms were holding her tight. The heartbeat that she could hear did not belong to her but to the man holding her.

“What is the matter? Are you all right?” He asked, his eyes wide with concern as he petted her hair back.

Despite how nice it was to be held, to feel secure after something so frightening, embarrassment flooded her entire body. She felt her face flame as she attempted to push herself away from him.

“It-it is nothing,” she answered in a trembling voice. She hardly even recognized herself. “Your Grace, what are you—”

“Surely, you were not screaming for nothing. What happened? Are you injured somehow?”

“Nothing of the sort. I am sorry for waking you, Your Grace.”

She could not look him in the eye. She was humiliated .

Dorian's gaze narrowed as he refused to let her go so easily. "Did you have a nightmare, perhaps?"

Cordelia glanced at the window, jerking in his arms as lighting danced once more, followed by thunder's sharp punctuation.

"Is it the storm?" Dorian asked, a hint of amusement seeping into his tone.

"I beg of you, do not mock me!" Cordelia pleaded.

Despite her request, he laughed pityingly. "Oh, you truly are a Little Flower, are you not? You only smile when it is sunny. And you are afraid of storms."

"You are cruel." Incensed, she pushed away from him firmly, putting enough distance between the pair of them so that she was able to pick up a pillow and toss it at him.

The smile fell right off of Dorian's face. In the dim lighting, the shadows flickered over his face almost sinisterly as she put her back to the headboard. She pulled another pillow into her chest, ready to throw it if that was what she was truly going to need to make him stop. He should not have been in here anyway! It was her room, and their week was not over yet.

Dorian was at her side in an instant. He pulled the second pillow from her hands roughly so that she could not throw it at him. The linen shirt that he wore was loose, untucked, and exposed far too much of his chest to be decent. She was painfully aware of how thin the nightgown she wore was, and now that he had taken her pillow, there was even less distance between them.

“Do not do that again, or I shall have to punish you,” he said in an authoritative tone.

Cordelia scoffed, half-expecting him to break into a smile. “You are jesting.”

But Dorian did not smile. His brown eyes remained locked on hers, unreadable yet dark with intent. Not in the slightest. Her smirk faltered as she blinked up at him, confusion mingling with something... else. What was that supposed to mean?

“I am not,” he said coolly, his voice unwavering.

“What exactly do you think you will do?” she asked, forcing her voice to stay steady though her pulse quickened. “You would not dare lay a hand on me, Your Grace. No matter what people say, I am not afraid of you.”

His lips curled in that dangerous way, a smirk filled with knowing confidence. “Would I not?” His voice was a low rumble, sending a shiver down her spine. Why did his tone affect her in such a way? It worked its way under her skin, making her want to rake her eyes over his frame. She shifted under his gaze, her mouth opening to protest, but nothing came out. That tone, so firm and deliberate, seeped into her skin like heat. It worked its way through her, igniting something in her she could not quite place. Her eyes flicked over him—broad shoulders, the cut of muscle along his chest, his shirt hanging loosely enough to expose the expanse of skin. He was not even trying to hide the power that came with his physical presence.

Her cheeks flushed, a sudden rush of warmth flooding her as her nipples tightened beneath her gown. She forced herself to look back at his face, away from the tantalizing sight. The storm outside seemed so distant now, the real tempest brewing inside her chest. So much skin. It was... it was improper. Heat flushed through her, her nipples hardening under her gown as she forced her attention back to his face.

Did he truly have to be on her bed when he was speaking to her in that tone?

Dorian stepped closer, his looming figure casting a shadow over her. “You would not dare,” she said, her voice daring but unsteady. “If you touch me, Your Grace... I shall scream.”

That earned her a smirk, the dimple on the left side of his face deepening with amusement. “Scream all you like,” he said softly, his voice like silk over iron. “I already told you—I have several ways to make you quiet.”

“And how do you suppose you could achieve that?”

His gaze lingered on her lips as though imagining them already silenced. The intimacy of it made her heart race, a flush creeping from her chest to her throat. Her breath caught, but she could not tear her eyes away.

With a deliberate slowness, his hands dropped to his waist. He untied the buckle of his robe and pulled it free, the movement smooth, calculated. Her eyes followed the belt, her mind spinning. What was he going to...? She swallowed hard, heat spreading lower in her body, coiling tight in her belly.

Why could she not look away?

Dorian leaned down over her, the belt in his hands. She should have protested, should have pulled away, or fought back. But instead, she froze, every nerve in her body alight with a tension she did not understand. When his fingers brushed her cheek, her breath hitched—just a light touch, barely grazing her skin, but it sent a shiver down her spine.

“Open up for me, Little Flower,” he whispered behind her ear. She could not help but obey as if mesmerized.

Then, with unexpected gentleness, he slipped the belt between her lips, pulling it tight

enough to muffle any sound she might make. The fabric was firm but not painful, pressing against her lips and holding them in place.

Cordelia's heart pounded in her chest, each beat reverberating through her as the weight of the situation settled in. She was gagged—silenced—and yet... the fear she should have felt was absent. Instead, a sharp current of curiosity surged through her. What was he going to do to her now? Why did the idea of being at his mercy stir something deep and unfamiliar inside her?

Her body tensed, a strange mixture of arousal and confusion warring within her. She leaned back against the pillows, her eyes wide as she gazed up at him, searching for any sign of what would come next. Her breathing was shallow, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Every part of her felt attuned to his presence, waiting, anticipating.

Dorian's lips hovered just inches from her own, so close she could feel his breath on her skin. "Much better," he whispered, his voice rough and low. The words sent a pulse of heat through her, her body responding in ways she had not anticipated.

She squirmed beneath him, her mind racing with a thousand questions, each one drowned out by the thrum of desire that now beat steadily in her veins. Why did she want him to do something, anything, to close the unbearable gap between them?

I must have lost my mind completely.

But just as quickly as the tension had built, it shattered. Dorian straightened, a smug smile curving his lips as his finger ran temptingly down the curve of her body, knuckles brushing along the line of her leg, and then—nothing. His intense brown eyes lingered on her for a moment longer, watching her, measuring her reaction.

She felt as if her insides were on fire with need; she wanted him to come back, and with the gag in her mouth, she could not even ask him for what she desired.

“Next time, you should be a good girl, hm?”

She blinked, and he was across the room, smiling at her smugly like whatever unspoken battle that was happening between them was a victory in his favor.

His brow arched knowingly, and he slipped his hands into the pockets of his robe. His intense brown eyes lingered on her, and then he left —just like that.

But why did she feel so damned disappointed?

Why is it so difficult?

Dorian could not bring himself to make good on his promise. Two weeks had passed, and he had still not gone to claim his wife. After seeing her so frightened that night, he could not do it. Every morning at breakfast, she seemed more drawn and reserved. Despite how much time she spent out in the sun, Cordelia seemed to be growing paler. She clearly was not sleeping well, and he did not know how to accommodate her. She almost seemed sick, but she never complained. He had instructed the housekeeper to keep an eye on her to ensure that she was given anything that she might want. She should not be wanting for anything, and yet, she was not thriving.

It was troublesome.

Dorian's work was slipping. He ought not to worry himself with things so trivial as how she spent her day, but how could he not when she was starting to seem ill? Mary had been avoiding him for nearly a week now. He was jittery and on edge for reasons that he could not explain. Even now, his hand felt uncomfortably twitchy. If only there was a way to shake her and demand that she tell him what was the matter so that he could fix it. Was that truly so much to ask?

Cordelia was wilting away. He was failing. Again.

Guilt was an annoying emotion. That must be it. He was just overthinking his debts to her father, though he did not think of them as debts. It was not his daughter's or wife's place to languish and suffer as a result of his sins.

This afternoon, he was attempting to read a book. He was trying to distract himself

enough to collect himself to resume his work. Cordelia would not ask the housekeeper for anything. But he was at a loss. How could he help her if she would not let him?

Mary sat across the room from him, working on her needlework slowly. Every few strokes of her needle, she paused to look in his direction. Given that she also happened to be catching him at the same moment that he was watching Cordelia out of the window, he was of a mind to banish his sister from the room entirely.

“You can admit that I am right, any time now, you know,” Mary said in a singsong voice. She was overly proud of herself. “Or, is this something perhaps even more than I originally expected?”

Vexed, Dorian set down his book and angled his body away from the window to remove the temptation from himself. “What are you implying?”

“Most men would be only too happy to have feelings for their wives, you know,” Mary continued, barely keeping from smiling, though the gloating was abundantly evident in her voice.

“I do not know what you are referring to.”

“Brother, you are far too intelligent to play so stupid.”

“I do not have feelings for her. It is a convenient arrangement and nothing more. That is all.”

“Do you think that I am blind?” Mary put down her needlework to focus on him better. “Do you think that I cannot see the way that you watch her at dinner? The way that you refuse to answer even the smallest questions from her? Even Georgie has noticed it! Are you that afraid that she might like having a conversation with you that

you freeze her out entirely?”

“Are you finished?”

“I will be finished the moment that you admit that you are at least fond of her,” Mary pressed.

“You are a highly meddlesome woman; do you know that?”

Mary lifted her hands in mock surrender. “Have it your way.”

Dorian nodded and opened his book back up forcefully. He could not read a single word on the page. No matter how hard he tried to focus, he was just glossing over the same paragraph time and again, absorbing nothing. All he could think was Cordelia. Finally, with a huff of frustration, he put it back down and gave up the pretense.

“If you have a solution to how I could make her... less miserable, I would be open to your suggestions,” he said reluctantly.

“I thought you would never ask!” Mary chuckled, basking in her victory for a few moments. “I have learned that she does love flowers...”

Dorian pressed his tongue against his teeth. It took him less than a moment to understand what she was getting at. Of all of the things that she could have suggested, that was the one wholly off-limits. He would never, under any circumstances, open that greenhouse again. He truly did not know why he had not had the whole thing leveled a long time ago. “Absolutely not!”

“You asked. If you do not like my answer, that is your fault,” Mary said. “All she talks about are the flowers that she had back home and how extensive her garden was. If you truly want her to be happy here, then you need to meet her in the middle.”

“Find another middle,” Dorian insisted.

“She only wants to renovate the greenhouse, Dorian. She will transform it into something all her own. It will not be the place that Father—”

“Do not dare speak of it or him,” Dorian warned.

“She will plant flowers, Dorian. Perhaps cover it all in a fresh coat of paint or something so that you will not even recognize it anymore. Perhaps you could put stipulations on how much she could change? I would be happy to help her so that you are not involved in any of it.”

“Enough! I should have had that cursed building destroyed years ago!”

“You have to stop living in the past sooner or later, Brother,” Mary said.

“That is rich, coming from you,” he answered with equal venom. “Are you not still living in the past, Mary? Accusing me of every little or big thing that has ever happened to you?”

He could see the fight building. He knew that there was no point in fighting with her once things escalated to this point. She was going to become unreasonable, and the last thing that Dorian wanted was to lose his temper with her.

“I only want for you to see sense! I do not see why you are being so stubborn about this!” Mary nearly shouted.

“Get out,” Dorian warned. He could not continue this. He had his reasons, and he would not explain them to his sister. Did she truly think that he did things for no reason? That he would wish misfortune on the only ones that he cared for in this world?

“Typical. I make you slightly uncomfortable, and you push me away.”

“Get out!” He yelled, hoping that she would hear him.

Mary wanted to have the last word; he could see it on her face. Her hands twitched at her side as she struggled to keep her comments to herself, and then turned and stomped out of the room, her needlework wholly forgotten.

The door slammed, leaving him alone with his thoughts. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. This was supposed to be a simple solution to a problem, and it was becoming such a thorn in his side. He was not supposed to be attracted to her. That was the crux of the issue.

He reached behind him to the rope cord on the wall, the one that was attached to the wall of bells down in the servant’s quarters. It would summon assistance to him. Thankfully, it was the housekeeper that arrived in the doorway. She was the easiest to handle. More importantly, she was the only one who never seemed to attempt to pressure him into doing things that he did not wish to do.

“Is there something that I can do for you, Your Grace?”

“The gardens to the south of the property; would there be sufficient space to add in another few raised potting boxes?” He asked, not looking at her when he spoke so that he would not see if she connected any dots or not.

“I believe so, Your Grace. I could have the butler order supplies this afternoon, perhaps?”

“Spare no expense. Make sure to acquire whatever seeds or bulbs of flowers that would grow this season as well. I wish to give it as a gift to my wife.”

“Very thoughtful, Your Grace,” Matilde answered without inflection.

It was then that he glanced at her. She was still looking at him expectantly like his gesture would not be quite enough.

“And... perhaps... inquire as to what her favorite dessert is?”

This was embarrassing. He felt so deeply uncomfortable. How was he supposed to know if she even had a sweet tooth or not?

“Whatever it is, I want it served more often at dinner,” he ordered.

He did not truly care for the detached look on the housekeeper’s face. A grander gesture might be preferable, certainly, were this a true marriage or an arrangement of a different nature. It was likely his company that was distressing her so anyway.

Why do I even care if she is happy or not? Marrying her should have been enough to atone for my sins.

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“This is for me?” Cordelia gushed. For the first time, she felt as if she truly had something to look forward to. “Truly? It is just for me?”

Matilde stood beside her, smiling softly as Cordelia explored the new space. It was a small row of three raised planting gardens of a sufficient size. There was a wheeled cart between the two of them, overladen with tulip bulbs and various seed satchels. She could not wait to explore what had been gifted to her. It was such a thoughtful gesture that she was almost at a loss for words. There was abundant natural light available as well. For the first time in weeks, she felt as if there was something that she could have here that she could call her own, rather than wandering these halls feeling like an intruder at every turn.

“Is the duke in his study?” Cordelia asked without thinking. “I should like to find him and express my gratitude.”

“His Grace is out for the afternoon, but he should be back at the estate for dinner, I believe.”

The disappointment was disproportionately crippling. She knew that she should not feel so sad over the fact that he, once again, was busy.

“Are Mary and Georgie in the parlor?” Cordelia asked, hoping to have somebody to share her good news with at least.

“I believe that Lady Mary is watching young Master George’s riding lesson this afternoon, Your Grace,” Matilde answered softly.

“Oh, but of course she would be. I do not know how I forgot,” Cordelia answered with equal softness as her hands tightened into fists in the fabric of her skirts.

It was the loneliness that was getting her. For years, she had thought that the only thing that she wanted was to be alone. Since her father died, her primary company was her mother, and she was constantly exhausted. But now she had more leisure time than she knew what to do with, and she was so painfully lonely. She could not begrudge Mary for having her own life, and Georgie was but a child.

Dorian, however, she had thought, would have at least attempted to spend time with her. If for no reason other than to put her at ease, considering his particular reputation. But he, too, seemed happy to let her believe the worst about him. Why was that? He had not even followed through on the one thing that he had promised her thus far.

Which she was happy about.

She was.

It was not as if she had come around to the idea of laying with him... or began to wonder what it might be like to be in his arms once more.

Perhaps if he had, she would have been able to sleep better. The nightmares had not returned since the night of the storm, but none of the little sleep she was able to achieve in that large room was anything near restful. It was not fear that kept her away any longer, but it was instead the feeling that Dorian must not like her very much. Which directly contradicted the way she felt when it was just the two of them.

“There is one more thing, Your Grace,” Matilde said.

Cordelia nodded that she should continue while she walked over to the rolling cart to

examine some of the bulbs sitting there for her.

“Please forgive me if I am overstepping, but I thought... you might want to read this.” Matilde extended in her direction three gossip pamphlets.

Cordelia was almost reluctant to take them from her, knowing that it was only going to further confirm her fears. She should have stayed home. Or, she should have insisted that her mother be brought here with her... or something of the sort. She flipped through the first one, her eyes lingering only momentarily on the contents.

‘It has come to our attention that Lady Salisbury was caught in a heated exchange in the gardens of Lady Ashworth’s soiree, where she was seen in a rather cozy position with the charming Mr. Thompson. Sources say that a nearby bush provided an unwelcome audience to their rendezvous, prompting speculation about Lady Salisbury’s virtue.’

Without being there to keep her in line, Lavinia was running amuck. Spectacle after another, she was continuing to ruin their already tarnished reputation. It was not as if there was much of a boost when Cordelia married a duke. Becoming a murderer’s duchess did not gain her many points. But she had hoped that it might at least appease her mother enough to not wish to further sully her new rank. It was not just them who were being dragged through the mud any longer, but Dorian and his family as well.

She flipped to the second sheet, afraid of what she was going to find there as well.

‘This season, Lady Salisbury has adopted a rather daring fashion sense that has left the ton buzzing. She was seen wearing a gown that, while exquisitely tailored, featured a scandalously low neckline that many deemed entirely inappropriate for a woman of her station and age. Fashion-forward or simply too risqué? Opinions vary widely!’

There was only one way that she could think of to put an end to all of this, and her husband was just going to have to deal with it.

“It is only for a fortnight,” Cordelia explained, her voice soft as she spoke only to Dorian, who had grumpily occupied the head of the table. Though, from the barely veiled anger that he wore, he was only a few moments away from storming out of the dining room entirely.

Her mother had only arrived that afternoon while Dorian had been away.

However, he had not needed to be home long to have known that there was a disruption in his usual peace. Lady Salisbury was not the sort of woman who remembered the definition of quiet any longer. First, there had been an argument over the fact that the trunk she had brought with her had only been filled with wine and not a single stitch of clothing for her to change into or even a nightgown. Then, she instantly started snooping through all of the rooms, crying loudly if she came across a locked door until she had found what Cordelia presumed was the duke’s private stash of liquor. Cordelia had managed to coax her from the cabinets and locked them while her mother had only pilfered two bottles. No doubt he would be doubly angry when he realized that they were missing. Lord only knew how long it was going to be until they were discovered.

Even now, the rest of them were sitting at dinner, and Mary had pulled Georgie tightly into her side after Lavinia had requested a third bottle be opened on her behalf. She had not stopped muttering about how she wished to see how the other half lived, even though she had lived her entire life as a member of the ton.

“It should not be any days at all,” Dorian said in a low, carefully measured voice.

“Did you not read any of the scandal sheets? Have you not seen what she has been up to?” Cordelia answered, attempting to match his calm voice.

Lavinia, however, had no such compunction. “Oh, if only they were able to report half of it! I keep trying to make the front page, but—” she snapped her fingers as if disappointed and then started to laugh so hard that she nearly fell out of her chair.

Cordelia glared at her mother and then turned to Dorian as if to say ‘see?’

“You cannot just invite people into my home and—”

“Our home,” Cordelia corrected. “We are married now, Your Grace. That means that there are two people to make choices here.”

“Do you not know how inappropriate it is to have your mother here during our honeymoon period?”

“Why? Is there something untoward you are worried about her seeing?” Cordelia said it and then instantly regretted it. Her face flamed, her cheeks likely a bright red. She did not want him to know that she was in any way thinking about the promise he had not made good on. She quickly spoke again to correct her faux pas. “My mother was running about and making a fool of herself. You promised that she would be cared for. It is why we are in this arrangement, is it not?”

“She was to have full support. I have provided that.”

“And yet she has no handler when she so obviously needs one,” Cordelia continued, exasperated.

“I would not need a handler if my husband were still here,” Lavinia interjected dramatically. “He cared for me better than anyone else was capable of. You... you could not have asked for a kinder, sweeter, more generous, handsome—”

She was going to work herself up, Cordelia could see it coming.

“And then he left me,” Lavinia continued, the tears streaming down her cheeks right on cue. She drank the rest of her wine in a single gulp before wildly waving her arm for a refill in the direction of the closest servant. The footman looked to Dorian for permission to pour the refill, and he subtly shook his head no. “He abandoned me! Just like that! He was there one moment, doting, and then I am bereft! How could any woman ever hope to recover after such a loss!”

“Mama, settle down.” Cordelia attempted, glancing at Georgie who was starting to look scared.

“He is a pig!” Lavinia continued, no signs of slowing. When her glass was not refilled, she threw it across the room, where it shattered against the floor. Georgie yelped and hid into Mary’s side. Cordelia was nearly brought to tears herself from the display. “A wretched, horrid... horrible... man... excuse for a...”

Lavinia put her head into her arms, sobbing heavily into her arms.

Cordelia did not know what to do. She was at a loss as to how to settle her down. “Mama, calm down, please. Oh, I know! His Grace knew Papa, did you not?”

With pleading eyes, she was begging Dorian to help her, to at least diffuse the situation even slightly.

Lavinia’s head perked up instantly, suddenly dry of tears. “You did, Your Grace? I was not aware.”

Dorian looked highly uncomfortable for the focus of their conversation to be back on him again. “Briefly.”

Why did he look so pained? Did he truly have such an issue with her family? Or, was he just that reluctant to share even the smallest bit of information about his affairs

with her? The room was so quiet that one could have heard a pin drop.

When it became apparent that he was not going to share anything else, not even the smallest anecdote to keep Lavinia calm, Cordelia attempted to pick up the slack. “Papa was always there for my mother. He was incredibly doting, almost over the top most of the time. You can understand why the loss of such a great love would be so detrimental to her.”

Lavinia bowed her head toward the table, pushing the untouched food around her plate mutely.

“It was so unexpected. No matter what he might have been facing, he was never one to allow the troubles of the world get to him in such a way that—” The knot in Cordelia’s chest tightened. She had been dealing with her mother’s grief for so long that sometimes she forgot that she had her own, as well. “It was a shock when he took his own life. It still is.”

Dorian shifted in his seat uncomfortably. No doubt the weight of the topic was uncomfortable for him. She could not explain why it was so important that he understand her mother, or why things were the way that they were. He certainly had not given any indication that her feelings or history was important to him, or even that she was important to him beyond the fact that he had married her.

“If you have any insight, or perhaps if there was something that happened in your time knowing my father that would help us understand why he did what he did and...”

Dorian shook his head. She knew that he was attempting to dismiss her. He was attempting to tell her to change the subject or that he did not wish to discuss it. But the topic was open and she was not ready to move on so quickly.

“If something happened that was hidden from us, or if there was a warning sign that was missed or—or anything that could help my mother find some semblance of closure, I know that she would—”

“Stop. Please.” Dorian interjected.

The words were not angry, they were tired and strained. It was the rare softness in his words that brought her up silent. And yet, she could not let the subject drop.

“But, Your Grace, you told me that you were acquainted with—”

“Enough!”

Dorian pushed away from the table. Dinner was not yet half finished and something hurt about the way he was just choosing to leave the conversation without further explanation. He could have this conversation with her. He could at least explain why it was because of her father that he had married her. That he had brought her to this huge empty house to languish and rot all alone. If he could not stand the sight of her, if he did not desire her, then what was the point? She needed a reason. She needed something.

“I was not friends with your father. I do not aim to disappoint you, but that is simply the fact. Now, I am tired. I am going to bed,” Dorian said firmly like everybody in the room was just going to have to accept it.

Like hell she was.

Dorian walked out of the room, his strides even and with purpose.

It took Cordelia only half a heartbeat to rise and follow him. His temper could be damned. She was owed an explanation. Frustration threatened to boil over inside of

her as she followed him down one hallway and then the next.

“Your Grace! Stop! I am not finished with this conversation!” Cordelia called to his retreating back.

“I am. Return to dinner; I have no desire to speak with you any further.”

Dorian turned into the library and attempted to close the door before she could follow him, but her hands lifted to stop the door from shutting so firmly that it rebounded and nearly hit him.

She felt foolish for crying but she could not help herself, she was so overwhelmed and confused.

“What did you mean? Why would you say that you were not friends with my papa? Are you so cross with my mama’s presence that you felt compelled to lie? Were you just trying to hurt me?”

Dorian’s eyes widened in surprise. “I have no desire to harm you.”

“Then why lie? You promised! That was our accord that there would be no lies between us. You must have had a close relationship with him. What other reason could you have possibly had to force yourself to marry me? Most of all when it is so abundantly obvious that you cannot stand to be near me!” Cordelia yelled; she could not stop her voice from rising. She could not stop the outpouring of all of the emotions that she had kept pent up since their wedding day.

“As typical, you misunderstand.” Dorian’s chin lifted. “Boredom born of lack of friendship or adequate companionship, nothing more.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Cordelia continued, closing in on his space. She

could not live the rest of her life like this. She could not stay here, alone, hoping that her mother was all right. She could not and would not haunt these halls avoiding this man because he did not wish to speak to her.

“It means that I took pity on you,” Dorian answered.

“You promised not to lie.” Even though the lie felt like a slap in the face, the anger that he would dare to say such a thing to her in the first place overpowered that sensation. “How can you stand here, say these things to my face when I know, I know that—”

She was silenced when Dorian took her face in his hands. He pulled her toward him, her body practically slamming against his as he pressed his lips against hers. Whatever protests or angry words that might have left her were silenced when he groaned. The sound was like he had finally allowed himself the object of his desire that he had been denying. It was such a far cry from the chaste kiss they had shared on their wedding day.

No, this? This was something alive. This was a living flame that coursed through her and coiled in her core. Dorian’s hand slid around her face to cup the back of her neck while the other dropped to the small of her back, pulling her into his chest until every exhale met his inhale. She was not even wholly aware that they were moving until her back collided with the library wall. Her mind felt fogged over in the very best possible way. It took her a moment to realize that she, too, could move her hands. Softly, they trailed over the outsides of his arms, up over the caps of his strong shoulders, and indulgently trailed over the muscles there.

Some small, distant part of her brain urged her to push him away, to slap him, to tell him that this would not solve anything. It should likely alarm her just how easily that part of her brain was wholly and completely silenced.

Instead, she kissed him back. She learned the movements of his tongue and lips against his and mirrored them back into his own. The tingling sensation bubbling up in her gut was overwhelming, even as he pushed her up the wall, his hands dropping to her rear and thigh to coax her legs up and around his waist.

Cordelia broke the kiss the moment he settled between her legs, the friction of him against her core, unlike anything that she had ever felt before. It was wonderful and heady, and she wanted more. Her arm banded around his shoulders, keeping herself close as he kissed her again. She was acutely aware of the fact that he was pushing her skirts up over her legs, exposing them to the warm library air.

Every inch of stocking-covered skin that Dorian's hand traced tightened and tingled. She had no idea what was coming next, but every time he touched her, she was putty in his hands. She was easily moved and shifted. Dorian's lips dragged over the corner of her mouth, teeth closing so softly over the corner of her jaw, and then traveled lower. Her head fell back, offering him access—anything he wanted, anything so long as he kept touching her. For the first time in weeks, she felt alive. She felt like she was at home in her skin.

"I love how you taste," he groaned against her skin, the heat of his breath sending shivers down her spine. "You are intoxicating... utterly irresistible."

Then she was a being of a whole other plane of existence when his fingers brushed over her sex, smoothing the wetness over his fingers and her folds as he groaned again. Such a raw sound, proof that she had been right—it was not lack of desire that kept him away. It was something else. She knew not what it was, but it was something else. It did not matter, not yet. His teeth and lips closed over the skin of her neck as his fingers parted her, tracing the lines of her core and circling over the swollen bundle of nerves that had her hips bucking forward into his hand. Each movement was hungry, bordering on frantic, the sounds of their breathing and her soft moans practically swallowed by the abundant books around them.

More.

She got what she wished. Her back arching off the wall, her body had a mind of her own as she arched into every point of contact and Dorian slipped his fingers inside of her. A whole sensation in and of itself. What had she denied him this for? She could not remember. It felt like a punishment that she had been denied this at all. Her hands fisted into the fabric of his jacket, clinging to him because the rest of her felt boneless.

“That’s it,” Dorian growled, lips brushing her ear. “Let me hear you. I want to hear every sound you make.”

Her breath came in short, sharp bursts as his lips lavished attention over her neck and collarbone while his fingers thrust up into her, over and over again—but it was his thumb, pushing against that part of her that nearly made stars burst on the back of her eyelids. Words threatened to tumble from her lips, but she did not dare break the bubble that they were in.

Dorian’s teeth closed softly over the top of her shoulder, the slight burst of pain combined with the pleasure in her core and she was pushed over the edge. Her body spasmed and tightened, her lungs froze as pleasure crested over her in waves.

“You are perfect,” he breathed, his lips tracing her jaw. “So responsive... so beautiful when you fall apart for me.”

He did not stop his fingers until the tension melted from her core and she could breathe freely on her own once more. Dorian set her back to rights ever so slowly, though her legs still felt weary and shaky. She braced her palm on the small table beside where she stood, not trusting herself to attempt to move even as her eyes locked onto his.

What she would not give to know what he was thinking.

Dorian brought his fingers up, letting his tongue lick off what was left of her from his skin, another low groan the only sound of parting that he gave before he left her there in the library.

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“Do you remember the time you convinced me that your governess’ spectacles could see through walls?”

Oh, now that was a memory that she had not thought about in quite some time! Cordelia could hardly contain her deep amusement as her smile widened. She could not will herself to stop laughing. It was so nice to finally be allowed to catch up with people again.

Matthew had come to call upon her a handful of hours ago with a lovely housewarming gift. And, thankfully, he had not asked too many probing questions about her married life or anything about the duke. He seemed to be perfectly content to sit there and reminisce with her. It was exactly what her lonely heart needed. The lightness and companionship were such a welcome distraction from constantly trailing after her mother and attempting to make things better with her. For however long her cousin’s visit would last, she could just let her heart be light.

Now she was laughing until her face ached. What a perfect way for her to spend her afternoon.

“How could I forget? You avoided her for a week! You were so terrified she might catch you sneaking into the kitchens.”

Matthew laughed, seeming to relive the memory in his mind’s eye. “I was convinced she would somehow see the crumbs in my pockets before I had even had a chance to eat them. Your powers of persuasion were dangerously effective, even then.”

Cordelia’s cheeks were starting to hurt from laughing as much as she was. “Oh, but I

only did it to protect you! You were always too bold for your own good."

"Ah, and now you wield that same power over an entire household as a duchess. I daresay the duke has no chance at all."

And that was about as effective as water doused over her head. Her smile flickered. It was hard enough to relive the feeling of the duke's hands on her every time she had to think about him. Even just the slightest passing glance of the man was enough to set her aflame. It was humiliating if she was being honest. Her only relief was knowing that the probability that he knew about how he affected her was slim to none. "Perhaps not, but I assure you, I use my influence far more judiciously these days."

She did not honestly feel as if she had any influence these days, actually.

It was almost as if every choice that she attempted to make in this house was the wrong one or that she was disturbing something that she ought not. Lord knew that her husband did not care for her mother being here. Even Mary seemed to be slightly vexed over the influence that Lavinia might have over young Georgie.

The small clock on the mantel chimed the hour. It would not be long now before she would have to track down her mother and force her to have tea with her. If she did not watch the older woman through the entirety of the day, then she would simply have wine for all her meals. It was not a habit that she could allow to continue. It seemed almost impossible to dry Lavinia out, but she needed to at least try. Cordelia tried not to be resentful of her mother or the position that she was continually put into because of her, but it was certainly much more difficult whenever it meant that it also made her position with the duke more complicated.

"Oh, is that the time? I have dominated far too much of your afternoon," Matthew continued as he pulled his pocket watch from his vest to verify the hour. "I had hoped

to perhaps see my aunt before I left. How is she?”

Cordelia attempted once more to force a smile. Her shoulders shrugged softly, and she shook her head. “You know that my mother is a woman of her own mind. I shall be sure to send her your regrets for not meeting with her.”

Matthew stood, understanding the implications of her words, his gaze lingering on her in a way that made her somewhat uncomfortable. “It was absolutely lovely to see you again, Cousin. We truly ought to spend less time apart. I always find your company so very enthralling.”

“Of course.” Cordelia’s smile tightened. She could not get Dorian out of her mind. Something in her gut told her that he would not care for the way that Matthew was speaking to her. Then again, he did not seem to care for many things at all.

“Well then, I suppose I should take my leave before I tempt fate, and you send me scurrying off like those poor gardeners you terrorized with your royal commands,” Matthew added with a knowing wink.

Cordelia could not stop herself from playfully shoving her cousin’s arm. “I never terrorized anyone! Look at me, I am tiny. And harmless.”

Matthew grinned impishly. Most of her memories of him were from their childhood, back when things had been so simple. “Oh, of course not. Though I distinctly recall your ability to strike fear with nothing more than a raised finger. Truly, a talent.”

Cordelia scrunched her nose, poking at his ribs as she spoke and teasing him right back. “And yet, you still risked visiting.”

Matthew laughed and moved evasively from her sharp fingers. “Only because I have spent years honing my skill in strategic retreats.”

“Honestly, Matthew, you make me laugh more than anyone. I had missed this,” Cordelia snorted; a very unladylike noise that she swallowed so quickly she almost choked when the duke walked into the room.

He eyed the pair of them curiously and moved to stand beside Cordelia. His hand warmed her waist as he pulled her toward him possessively.

“I see you have found a way to entertain my duchess. Quite the talent you have, making light of things, Mr....?” Dorian said, his expression and tone flat.

“Lord Debonaire, Your Grace.” To his credit, Matthew did not seem intimidated in the slightest, which was a talent in and of itself.

“We were merely sharing a few fond memories with my cousin, Your Grace. Lovely to see you again,” Matthew answered with an easy, comfortable smile.

Dorian tensed beside her. Was there something more to this conversation that she was somehow missing? Why did her husband seem so vexed?

“Ah, but surely, some memories are best left in the past, would you not agree?” Dorian said, and every word somehow managed to sound like a threat.

“Do-Your Grace, we were just having a bit of fun. You are more than welcome to join us,” Cordelia added, softening deliberately under his touch and turning into his side as if that would make him soften as well.

“No, thank you. Some of us have actual work to do on a weekday afternoon.”

Matthew bristled under the slight but said nothing.

Cordelia could not breathe. The very last thing that she wanted was for her husband

and her cousin to start arguing right here. It would ruin her whole morning.

Dorian leaned in to kiss the top of her forehead, something that he had never done before, and walked out of the parlor. She could tell how angry he was from the tension to his shoulders alone, even if she did not have the faintest clue as to why he could be angry. She had not done anything wrong. He could not think that she was going to spend the rest of her time here, never hosting her friends, did he?

Or, was it merely the fact that it was Matthew?

“I apologize for overstaying my welcome. I...”

Something in the room next to them shattered—something large smashed across the wall that connected to the parlor that they stood in. Loudly and abruptly enough that Cordelia flinched and scooted away from the offending wall as if it would somehow open up and lash out at her.

“Was that... did the duke do that?” Matthew asked, all earlier brightness gone from his expression.

“I am not sure...”

If it was the duke, it was something new. Was she supposed to have gone after him? She had never thought of him as the sort of man to throw things when he was angry or anything of the sort. He seemed far more like the sort of man to isolate himself until he had calmed down.

Well, apart from their brief moment in the library.

“Cordelia, please do not take offense when I ask you this, for I only ever want the best things in life for you.”

“Of course, I know that you do.”

“Has the duke... has he harmed you? Is he terrorizing you or even making you sad?” Matthew asked as he closed the distance between them. “I have heard what people say about him. If he has been violent, then—”

“No, Matthew. That is not... His Grace is not a violent man.”

Her reflexes told her that she ought to step back from him, to create space, but the question caught her off guard. It would be so nice to have somebody that she could confide in fully. Somebody that she knew would be on her side and would only truly want the best for her in all things. Surely, Matthew could be that person for her, but to tell him anything somehow also felt like a betrayal of her husband’s trust.

Matthew placed a hand on her upper arm and bent down to make himself more level with her eye as he captured her gaze. “You can tell me anything, you know? I am here for you, Cordelia.”

It felt too intimate. Bells of warning chimed in her head. The way that he was looking at her felt... far too much. It was heavy and she did not know how to process it. At the same time, she wanted to cry.

“You look unwell, my dear cousin, if anyone is harming you—I do not know what I would do,” he confessed.

“N-no. Nothing like that. His Grace has been nothing but kind to me,” Cordelia said quickly to reassure him.

“I know what sort of man that he is rumored to be, Cordelia. I should hate for a beast like that to—”

“My husband would never harm me, Matthew, I am certain of that. I am merely having some difficulties adjusting to life here away from the city. All of my friends are back in London, and you are the first to have made the trip to come and visit me.”

It almost seemed like Matthew was going to call her out on what was likely an obvious story, but he did not. “Perhaps you ought to throw a party then. Something that will give you the social outlet that you crave and allow everybody to properly celebrate your new marriage.”

“Oh! What a lovely idea!”

“I am rather known for those sorts of ideas,” Matthew said with a hint of playful arrogance to relieve the tension. “You are quite welcome.”

Her smile faltered for a moment, the words touching a deeper nerve than he perhaps realized. She quickly masked it with a brighter expression. “You are right. I think I could arrange something grand. Something fitting for a duchess.”

He leaned back in his chair, nodding approvingly. “Exactly. And I will gladly attend, of course. You shall need someone to keep the conversation lively, after all.”

He softened at her admission, reaching out to take her hand gently. “Cordelia, you are more than capable of handling this. You always have been. And... if you ever feel lost, I will always be just a letter away.”

Her heart warmed at his words, and for the first time in days, she felt a sense of comfort settle over her. “Thank you,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I truly do not know what I would do without you.”

Matthew smirked, the mood lifting again. “Well, it is a good thing you will not ever have to find out.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:04 am

“ This is what you said that you wanted, Dorian. Was it not?”

Mary asked with a smug smile as she stood on the sidelines of the grand ballroom. The place was positively transformed. A small stage with a string quartet played in the far corner, and decadent food was arranged for those who wished to graze throughout the evening. While it was only to be a small affair, allegedly, it was decorated as if it were a ball. He had been forced to listen to Mary and Cordelia’s planning and them putting their final touches on the event all afternoon. They had planned the guest list, the games, the schedule, and where everyone would sleep should they choose to stay over for the morning. An equally elaborate breakfast was supposed to be planned for tomorrow.

Mary had insisted on that part, as it was the only portion of the events Georgie would be allowed to attend. He had not gone to bed with his nanny easily. They did not host functions like this here, and he was over the moon with excitement. To be deprived of it had started the biggest pouting fit he thought he had ever seen from the boy, which was saying something.

Alas, Georgie does not realize how lucky he is...

Mary pressed a glass of wine into Dorian’s hand as she hummed happily to the music. “You wanted her to smile, and now she is. What could you possibly have to be so surly about?”

Did they have to have it here? This was supposed to be his home, a place for peace and quiet. If he had wanted those people here, he would have invited them.

“You truly are not going to interact with them at all?” Mary asked, frustration seeping into her tone. After he did not answer her, she heaved a long-suffering sigh and shook her head. Mary moved toward the group of guests and Cordelia, intent on joining in the games with the rest of them.

He glanced out over the small groupings of Cordelia’s friends and their very familiar husbands, and then there was Patrick Hislop. Those would have been enough even if his wife had not also insisted that her infuriating cousin return for the festivities as well. Something about the Viscount of Debonaire did not sit right with him. He did not care for the way that his gaze lingered on Cordelia. She did not belong to him. He had no right to even share her air, let alone look at her in the covetous way that he insisted upon.

I still cannot believe I reacted like that.

Dorian glanced down at his knuckles; the bruising nearly faded now. He should not have allowed himself to lose his temper in the way that he had. The large imported vase from the upstairs room was broken, and the hole that he had created in the wall... well, he had blocked off the room for the time being until he determined what it was that he wished to do with the space now.

Or should it have been his smug face instead?

Glancing out over the small grouping of people, Cordelia truly seemed to be in her element. It only made him feel even more guilty for keeping her locked away from people here. Not that society was being kind to her or her mother. It felt like a situation in which there truly was no winning.

Cordelia’s smile stretched from ear to ear. It was not as if he did not wish for her to be happy.

I have never managed to make her smile like that.

It felt like the gap between his life and hers was too wide to cross. There were brief moments where the chasm narrowed, but usually, they were far too opposite. He did not want this. He did not enjoy parties, or socializing when he could help it. But, was the whole point of this not to make her happy? Penance for his actions?

Quickly, he looked away and sipped at his glass of wine slowly.

There should not be any part of him that cared about Cordelia on a real level.

He refused to let himself care more, and he was nothing if not in control.

It was why he stood on the sidelines as one of the women played the piano and the other women sang along joyfully. He watched with as much patience as he could muster through the parlor games and the many bottles of wine.

Dorian watched as Patrick monopolized his sister's time and attention. So long as he was keeping her occupied, his meddlesome sister was far less likely to come over and bother him or make insipid comments about his holding up the wall.

He did not even need to be here. It would detract nothing from the party if he would leave. The only thing stopping him was that he did not trust Lord Debonaire alone with his wife. Not for a moment. Not anymore. He could not tear his attention off of Cordelia. He wanted to be the one to make her smile.

Was he being foolish in thinking that if Cordelia truly wished for him to join her, then she would have said something? He was here physically to show her his version of... well, it was not support, per se.

But he was here, that had to mean something, right?

If only he could sort out his feelings properly and find a way to act on the desires that he kept telling himself that he was not allowed to have. He had slipped up far too many times as it was. She was... Cordelia was temptation incarnate and he could not explain it.

Dorian forced himself back center, watching and listening.

Eleanor, the Duchess of Larson, forced Xander to sit at the piano next, her laugh tinkling through the air as she insisted, "You play, and I shall sing, my love. For me?" She smiled at him, a hint of mischief in her eyes. Xander sighed and acquiesced, his fingers brushing across the ivory keys as a soft melody began to fill the room to the backing accompaniment of the quartet.

Cordelia, standing not far from the piano, tried to join in the spirit of the evening. Dorian watched her, his jaw tightening. She had been smiling all night, her laughter light and carefree, but he could see the subtle glances she cast in his direction, each one a quiet question he did not have the strength to answer. Not now. Not while Debonaire was still hovering like a vulture in the corner, his eyes always finding her, as if she was the only thing in the room worth noticing.

"You must dance, Cordelia!" Eleanor chirped, the familiar tone of her teasing voice cutting through the music. "It is no fun to stand by all night."

Cordelia smiled politely as she glanced toward Dorian for a brief moment. "I think I shall sit this one out," she said softly, but Eleanor would have none of it.

"Your Grace, you cannot possibly deny your wife a dance, can you?" Eleanor's voice was playful, but Dorian could feel the weight of her gaze. He stood stiffly, his grip tightening on his glass.

"I—" he began, but his words were cut short by Cordelia's soft, disappointed look, and

before he could take another step forward, Debonaire swooped in with a broad grin, bowing deeply before Cordelia.

“His Grace clearly has better things to do. I can happily take his place. Of course, if you would do me the honor?”

“Oh, I am not sure. I—”

“Come now, Cousin. Don’t be such a spoilsport. The song is almost over!”

Cordelia’s gaze lingered on Dorian for only a moment longer before she held out her hand toward Matthew.

Without hesitation, Matthew took her hand, leading her out onto the floor. Dorian watched in silence as Cordelia allowed herself to be swept away, her laughter bubbling up as they twirled together. He should have been relieved that Matthew’s jovial nature had lifted her spirits, but all he felt was a dark, simmering frustration tightening in his chest.

“Shame, really,” came a low voice from behind him. Dorian turned to find Rhysand leaning casually against the wall, his sharp eyes following Cordelia’s movements. “You had your chance. Now look at you, standing here like a man watching his ship sail away. Pathetic.”

Dorian’s throat tightened, but he said nothing. He could not tear his gaze away from the way Debonaire’s hand rested just a little too easily at the small of Cordelia’s back, how her smile came so naturally when she was with him. His hand clenched around his glass, knuckles white.

“I would not be so calm if that were my wife,” Rhysand added, his voice barely more than a whisper, but the words hit Dorian like a punch to the gut.

Anger flared within him. He was about to speak, to tell Rhysand exactly what he could do with his unsolicited advice, but instead, he downed the rest of his wine and set the glass aside. Without another glance at Rhysand or the dance floor, he turned and strode out of the room, his footsteps heavy as he made his way toward the darkened hall.

I shouldn't care.

What was the matter with him? Of all of the insane, impulsive, reckless things that he had been inclined to do, this one might take the icing on the cake. He had truly been about to hit that man for daring to touch Cordelia. Dorian knew how that would have ended. It only would have resulted in the guests screaming, his reputation being even worse than it had been before. Cordelia would be cross with him for injuring her cousin. There were a dozen or more reasons that he could not do what he longed to do, but he would have felt better.

She deserves better than this.

The moment that bastard's hand found her waist, he had seen red. Paired with the words from Rhysand's mouth, he was playing with fire.

No, I cannot hurt any more of the people she cares about.

He did not stop walking until he was on the balcony leading out into the back gardens. The cool night air wrapped around him, holding him tightly and seizing his lungs. Good. That was exactly what he needed. Something to calm his temper if nothing else.

He stopped at the banister, setting his glass down on the stone and looking out over the lawns at the raised beds that Cordelia had managed to transform into something wholly stunning in such a short amount of time. From the array of colors, it appeared

that she had repotted existing flower plants and spaced them for the ones that had not yet started to grow.

He sighed, letting his head hang as his fingers scraped against the stone and then curled into a tight fist. No matter what, he needed to figure out his plan, and quickly. He could not allow Cordelia to continue to affect him so strongly. He ought to make a move or let it go.

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“Do you know where the duke has gone?” Cordelia asked Mary. Her sister-in-law was still swaying softly with the piano music. “Mary?” Cordelia said again, louder this time since she was not certain if she was being heard properly or not.

Dorian had been there, looking tense and uncomfortable on the sidelines when she had started her dance. Then, he was gone by the time she finished. If he was upset, then perhaps he ought to have accepted the invitation to dance with her in the first place. But he had declined.

“I think that he might have gone outside?” Mary answered, leaning close so that she would not have to speak too loudly either. “If he wishes to spend his evening sulking, then you might as well let him. There is simply no talking to him when he gets into this state.”

Cordelia nodded. She knew that Mary and her brother had been fighting more often as well. There were far too many unspoken things around this house. All she wanted was for everybody to have an outlet to uncoil some of the tension. She could hardly fathom what Dorian would be like with his guard down, but at least Mary seemed to be enjoying the party. She had gone through so much trouble in planning everything.

“I will only be a moment then, all right?” Cordelia explained, squeezing Mary’s arm before leaving the room.

She had not made it far before Matthew interrupted her with a bright smile. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“I shall be but a moment,” she repeated to Matthew, not wanting to be interrupted. It

was obvious that Matthew did not wish to allow her to walk away from him so easily, but she would not be stopped. She was on a mission. “Please, enjoy another drink on my behalf.”

“Cordelia, I...”

“I’m sorry, Matthew. I have to speak to my husband.”

Matthew blocked her path for only a moment before conceding and sidestepping her as if she needed permission to move freely about her own home. She did not allow herself the time to question his motives or why he suddenly needed to monitor her when he had never done that before. Instead, she focused on searching for Dorian.

Why was he so stubborn? She could not understand why he could not talk about his feelings like a normal person? Had she not attempted to make herself available to him when it had seemed as if he needed to speak to her? Then again, those few times they were alone, things had ended, well... there had been very little talking. This rift between them was so infuriating.

What is his glass doing here? Perhaps he is wandering through the gardens?

She had only taken a few steps out onto the lawns, bracing against the cold night air when the skies above opened up, fat droplets pelting down all around her without any warning or pretense. She had nothing to shield her from the downpour. Panic gripped her. The world around her started to become hazy as the clouds gathered and darkened.

Despite her efforts to breathe through the building panic that tightened and squeezed her chest, she felt herself like a child all over again. It was her nightmares come to life. This time it was so much worse because she could not even cling to the safety of being indoors. For years and years, she had done everything in her power to avoid the

rain. She did not dare step foot outside in storms. When she could manage it, she sat in front of warm, cozy fires to ensure that the demons of her past would not plague her.

So many years had passed and yet the moment the sky got too dark, she was a child.

The same fear threatened to swallow her. Cordelia flinched every time the sky illuminated with a bolt of lightning overhead. The claps of thunder nearly took her to her knees as tears ran freely down her face. She could not stop them; she could not even feel her limbs as she trembled, staggering in the darkness as she was.

In her mind's eye, she was that same little girl, her dress snagging on brambles and thorns, her slip soaked through, and her toes cold as she cried out for help, for anyone to come and help her. Cordelia's hand curled into the fabric of her dress over her chest, squeezing tightly and trying to find some relief from the panic, but it did not work. She felt as if the rain were trying to drown her.

Memories from the past that she had kept so deeply repressed started to swim to the surface, memories of her stumbling into a clearing in her childhood home. The garden maze opened up in front of her child form, and a tiny sliver of hope bubbled up inside of her chest as she hurled herself toward perceived shelter. Anything would do, so long as it got her out of the rain. Only, in her memory... there was somebody already standing at the door of that shelter.

Remembering even just that much made a headache build at the base of her skull and stemmed upward like the same lightning that was terrifying her. Dizziness came next, and she was terrified that she was going to pass out. She could not allow that to happen. What if nobody came here, what if nobody found her?

Panic blinded her, making her wholly forget her mission as she took off across the lawns in the direction of the closest shelter. Cordelia's feet moved of their own

accord, no path or destination in mind. The only thing that she knew that she needed was shelter, a roof, and four walls. That was the only thing that mattered. She ran toward the greenhouse, as it was closest. Until today, the doors had been chained and locked. It did not occur to her to question the rusted hinges or the grimy glass panels shaking as she yanked open the door and threw herself inside.

The pungent scent of old soil and overgrown plants assaulted her instantly. It wrapped around her like a blanket as she moved further into the greenhouse, overwhelmed by the untamed beauty all around her. It needed a lot of work, but it was so distracting to finally see the inside of the marvelous structure that she almost forgot about the storm. She was dripping all over the floor, shuddering from the lingering chill making her shudder.

A noise came from further in the greenhouse, the sounds of shuffling that froze her in place.

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“ W -who is there?” She called, hoping that it was an animal or a rat that might have squeezed in through one of the broken glass panels to take shelter from the storm itself.

The shuffling was followed by a potted something or another breaking and muttered cursing.

Cordelia froze in place, realizing that she was not alone in the greenhouse. At least she did not have to listen to the way the rain was almost echoed all around her.

Dorian walked around the corner in a huff; his gaze narrowed as he walked with purpose toward her, grabbed her by the elbow, and started to pedal her out of the greenhouse swiftly. “Have you lost your mind? You are not supposed to be here.”

“Neither are you!” Cordelia dug her heels in as she was pulled toward the exit. She could not go back out into the storm. She could not. “Dorian! Stop! I cannot go back out there.”

He must have been the one who broke the chains. If it was off-limits, why would he do that? What was happening?

“I told you that this place was expressly forbidden, and here you are.”

“The door was open!” Cordelia protested. “And you are in here as well! I was only looking for you! You left in the middle of the party; it was quite rude!”

She managed to wrench her arm out of his grasp and took two steps back into the

greenhouse so that he could not pull her out so easily.

Dorian huffed and shook his head. “Rude? You have no right to speak to me about rudeness.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“The man that you were interested in has been invited to my house not once, but twice now... paraded in front of my face both times and you expect me to take it with grace? I cannot presume your motives, but I daresay that rude would cover a large portion of it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Lord Debonaire, correct? The man you claimed to be interested in when I asked you to marry me,” Dorian said harshly, acquisition dripping off of every word.

Cordelia recoiled, trying to formulate words that would diffuse the situation, but she was failing. She floundered, trying to explain herself or deny the accusations.

“No, you do not understand, I—”

“What was it that you insisted upon? No lies ,” Dorian hissed, too close to her face for her to be unaffected by his words.

“Matthew is... he is my friend, my cousin .” Cordelia attempted to explain. She ought to put more distance between the pair of them but she could not. She was always so powerless the moment that he was close to her like this.

“I do not care for the sound of his name on your lips,” Dorian continued, his words forced through his teeth. “The only man whose name should be on your tongue is

mine.”

Cordelia’s lip curled. “Why? You certainly do not seem to have any true desire for me! You run hot and cold! I never know where you stand from one day to another!”

“You are my wife, and you belong to me!” Dorian said in a low, warning tone. “You have defied my orders, time and time again. You are the only person that I have ever indulged and yet... you are still defiant.”

He straightened, a strange sense of calm seeming to settle over him.

“You have defied my orders, and for that, you need to be punished.” Dorian closed the distance between them, towering over her as his lip curled upward into something akin to a smirk. “As this is your first, I shall allow you the choice of punishments. You can either go inside and tidy up my personal library, or... I can spank you.”

Cordelia’s eyes widened and her heart fluttered. “You cannot possibly be serious.”

But he appeared to be perfectly serious. He did not speak again, and he did not back down either. Dorian’s gaze was heavy on her as he waited expectantly for her reply.

It was harder for her to force the words past her lips than she had originally presumed. “Well... let me think about it. I-I am not a very bookish lady... and I much prefer being out of doors.”

The slight widening of Dorian’s eyes was the only indication of his surprise.

“I think I shall accept the spanking,” Cordelia said with faux bravado and crossed her arms over her chest.

She might grow fond of surprising her husband.

“Oh, did I just call your bluff, or?”

The thunder and lightning cracked loud overhead, and she jolted. Dorian took the opportunity to close the distance between them. He spun her around, grabbing her hand and placing it flat on the dust and soil-covered table beside her. Her fingers spread, bracing herself against the sudden hitch in her breathing. Dorian grabbed her skirts and flipped them up over her hips without a preamble. Roughly, he kicked her feet wider so that she was arched away from the table with her legs parted—exposed and wholly vulnerable. Her heart started to race. Was she supposed to be doing something? Why was he not touching her? It was something so wholly strange to know that his hands had been here before, but nobody had ever... looked at her so intimately.

For a moment, time stood still. The air around her froze as her skin buzzed with anticipation. Why was he not doing anything? Did she need to?

All thoughts emptied from her head as his fingers trailed lightly over the curve of her rear, feeling the soft skin there and seeming to savor each one of her little reactions. She glanced at him over her shoulder, but Dorian’s eyes cut sharply to her as he clicked his tongue. She snapped her head back center—and then he spanked her.

It took the breath right out of her. She could no longer focus on what was directly in front of her. Any remaining oxygen was trapped in her lungs as he spanked her again. Such a strange sensation. The smack of his palm hurt, but only a little—and she knew he was using a fair amount of force from the way that her body jolted with each one. The sharp bite was followed by a curling tendril of desire that left her wet, sliding down her thighs.

“Count them for me. I think fifteen will suffice,” Dorian commanded.

“Wh—”

Another slap, firmer than the ones before it.

“If you cannot follow a simple instruction, Little Flower, I will start over.” Dorian’s voice lowered until it was almost heavy.

Another slap and a moan left her lips before she could bite it back. With each hit she felt her mind clearing, settling into the tantalizing sting and knowing that she could endure it. There was no more stress about what might or might not be happening inside the estate. The sounds of the storm overhead slipped into the background. It was all second to the sound of Dorian’s palm against her skin and how intense her desire was becoming.

“F-four,” she whispered.

“What was that?”

“Four!” She panted—and was rewarded with another.

“So obedient, pretty Little Flower.” Dorian paused, and her back arched to make his job just that much easier.

By the time he finished, her legs were trembling, and she was coated in a fine sheen of sweat.

Dorian trailed his fingertips over the reddened skin, dipping between her thighs to find just how soaked she was. She did not dare move lest he stop his exploration. All he had promised her was the spanking and nothing more, but she could not allow it to be over, she wanted to feel his fingers inside of her once more—she was so keenly aware of how empty she was. He had awoken a craving within her in the library that day, the same one that had been plaguing her dreams ever since. If only he could be like this, this attuned to her body all of the time. However, she was not certain that

she would be able to truly survive that much-concentrated attention.

His fingers dipped down, spreading the wetness over his fingers and parting her, her legs shuddering as he brushed against the bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs. She felt overheated. The cold night air could not touch her; she was practically overrun with need.

“So responsive, I think that you liked your punishment a little bit too much, hm?” Dorian teased in a husky voice, not expecting an answer.

He pushed two fingers inside of her easily, and she nearly collapsed onto the grimy table. It did not even register to be bothered by the lack of cleanliness or to insist on a change of location. She had never wanted anything as badly in her life as she needed him to bring her pleasure again.

“Please, Dorian—”

“Say my name like that again, Little Flower, and I will give you the world.”

Her head swam. “Dorian,” she whispered again as he fit a third finger inside of her. She was so aroused that it was sliding down her thighs, if she thought that she could have gotten away with moving, she would have. He pulled his fingers from her, spreading the collection of her over her reddened cheeks with a low groan.

“Do you belong to me, my Little Flower?” Dorian asked, his voice sounded far off, like he was in a trance.

“Yes!” Cordelia answered instantly and without thought.

“Above all others, that is what you vowed to me, is it not?” Dorian continued, his fingers dipping between her thighs like he was going to enter her, and teasing her

along the slit instead. She tried to chase the movement with her hips, wanting more but he did not relent. “Your body, your heart, every part of you belongs to me. Does it not?”

“Yes!” Cordelia panted. She turned to look over her shoulder at him in a clear challenge. “If it is proof you need, then claim me , take me as your wife as you should have long ago.”

Dorian stood behind her, the bulge in the front of his trousers a whole other sort of friction as he brushed against her. His hands undid the laces, never breaking eye contact with her as her breathing hitched. She shifted her hands to grip the edge of the table, unsure of what exactly was coming next—until he freed himself. Her eyes widened. She had been told where his manhood would go, she logically knew that it would replace where his fingers were... but there was no way that he would fit.

An almost cruel smirk twisted his features as he registered her thought, and lined himself center with her, his hips rocked forward—and the stretch was instant. Cordelia started to bow forward, her knees weakening only to be caught around the middle with one arm, the other banding over her chest to pull her back against him, her hands wrapping around his forearm as he pushed further into her.

The bright burst of discomfort only lasted a moment, covered by the incredibly full feeling of him filling her. She tried to adjust, to prepare herself, but the friction of his open breeches against her raw, puffy skin was driving her mad—and then he started to move.

“God, you are so tight,” he muttered, his voice low and gravelly. “You feel better than I imagined... better than I dreamed.”

The world simply disappeared around her. He started slowly, kissing her cheek and urging her face back to his own so that he could kiss her, his tongue tangling with her

own as he claimed her, deeply and thoroughly. Her legs threatened to give out entirely were it not for the strength of his arms.

He shifted, lifting her knee onto the table and bending her more fully over it. Her dress would be ruined, and it did not even occur to her to care. She could not stop the stream of sounds that left her, only half with her awareness as he gathered her skirts in his hands to use as leverage, the slapping skin against skin seemed to echo through the stillness of time as he thrust inside of her.

“Come for me,” Dorian urged, his voice thick with command as he felt her tighten around him. “I want to feel you. I want to watch you unravel in my arms.” Had she known that this existed, that she could feel like this, all of their arguments would have been solved far more simply. This was a whole new world for her to explore and experiment with. Grunting, Dorian bent over her, his hand wrapping just under her lifted thigh to pinch that swollen nub that he had been circling earlier—and the cry of pleasure should have rattled the glass walls as she shattered around him, squeezing tightly around him, making his movements stutter as Dorian’s hand tightened around her hip. Heat pulsed deeply inside of her, and Dorian stilled.

His hands ran the length of her back, up to her shoulders, to pull her back so that he could kiss her once more. “You feel so perfect around my cock, Little Flower,” he spoke between kisses. “Mine, and only mine.”

“Only yours,” She echoed mindlessly as he slipped from her, and she could feel their combined pleasure sliding down her legs.

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“ W e have company, Your Grace!” Cordelia giggled frantically as she furiously pushed her skirts back down.

“I do not care,” Dorian answered easily as he attempted to lift her skirts once more. “And I told you to call me Dorian.”

He dropped down to one knee in front of her and managed to place a single kiss just above her stocking on her inner thigh before Cordelia squealed and shoved him away.

“Dorian, they will hear us!”

“Let them hear. I do not wish them to be here anyway,” Dorian insisted and pushed forward again.

Cordelia took advantage of him being so off-centered. It was not that she did not wish to take advantage of the sight of her husband on his knees, desperately attempting to get between her thighs. She had lost count of how many times he had renewed his claim on her. Her legs had a constant tremble, and they had company .

Besides, as tempting as he was, as much as she enjoyed his company... there was still so much that was left unsaid between them. There was so much that they ignored because this was all that they seemed to ever do. There was not so much room for conversation, not really.

Every time, Cordelia promised herself that she would confront him, that they would have a conversation but then he touched her and she forgot.

“I promised your sister that I would chaperone for her!” Cordelia explained as her hand wrapped around the doorknob. She placed her back firmly against the door, relishing the look of pure frustration on Dorian’s handsome face with no small amount of glee.

“She ought not to have that cad in my house anyway. If you walk out of this room, then I will only be more resolute in my opinion.” Dorian sighed.

“Mr. Hislop has been nothing but kind to Mary, and very generous. I think that she is rather fond of his company.”

“He has already called on her three times. It is excessive,” Dorian insisted.

“Just because you take some sort of perverse pleasure in your loneliness...”

“I would much rather take my pleasure from you.” Dorian reached for her dress, and she knew that the moment he got a hold of her, he would pull her right down onto the floor with him. He had made her blind with pleasure just last night. Though he did not spend the night with her after, he seemed wholly intent on making the most out of every instance of their being alone together.

Cordelia bit down on her bottom lip, debating whether she should add the information that she knew was going to sour his mood. But it might be the only way that she got to leave the room unsullied.

“Do not be angry, but... Matthew has joined Mr. Hislop this time.”

Dorian’s amusement dried instantly, just as she knew that it would. “All the more reason why I should be deep inside of you, lest you forget.”

Heat surged south, her thighs clamping together at the prospect, but she swallowed

against her already dry throat. “You are incorrigible.”

“I disagree, I have my priorities in the correct order. It is you that seems to need the reminder.” Dorian’s tone started to lace with authority toward the end. If she did not leave right this instant, she was going to cave, and she knew it.

“You will have to catch me first, Your Grace.”

Cordelia twisted the handle open and ducked out of the room quickly so that she would not second guess the temptation. She practically ran down the hallway to the parlor, where she knew that Mary was waiting for her. Somewhere in the distance, she could hear Georgie running around giggling and chose to ignore that as well—she needed to focus and leave Georgie to his governess. She certainly did not need to give any thought to the possibility of being with child at some point herself. With the voracity Dorian seemed to apply to the task, it felt inevitable. Was it not?

Focus, Cordelia.

Smoothing down her dress and hoping that her face was not too flushed, she hurried into the parlor with a bright grin at Mary as she moved to link her friend’s arm with her own. “I am sorry to keep you waiting,” she grinned.

“Not at all,” Mary answered with a quizzical look in Cordelia’s direction. “Are you well, dear? You look flustered.”

She quickly shook her head; this was not the time nor the place to be discussing what she was so flustered about.

“I hope that we have not come at a bad time?” Mr. Hislop asked.

“Not at all! We are thrilled to have you here, please, sit!” Cordelia gestured to the

couch and moved to take a seat of her own, still tender from Dorian's touches when she did. But she felt that she did a good job of concealing it. It was next to impossible to keep from thinking about her husband when she could still feel the ghosts of his hands and... other parts every waking moment. He truly had an insatiable appetite. She did not have it within her to protest when she was enjoying it as thoroughly as she was.

It took less than a minute for Mary and Mr. Hislop to fall into an animated conversation. They were lost in their own world, leaving Cordelia and Matthew to occupy the time in their own way.

"You seem to have adjusted well in the time since I last saw you," Matthew said.

Somehow, it did not feel like a compliment the way he was phrasing it. She smiled nonetheless. "Thank you, I think so as well. I feel... better."

"No further issues with your husband?" He asked, not breaking eye contact.

Cordelia's brow furrowed. "To what issues are you referring, Cousin?"

"I do not mean to be crude, Cordelia, but for a man of his reputation, I have certainly not seen anything about his treatment of you that would make me think he is anything other than the rumors about him," Matthew explained gently.

But all she could focus on was the part where Dorian was handling her. She shifted and crossed her legs tightly. "I assure you that you have nothing to worry about, but I am grateful for your concern."

"How much can you truly know about the man that you were forced into marriage with?" He continued. "Other than the fact that he murdered his own father. Only a ruthless man could be capable of such things."

He... sort of had a point. It was not as if Dorian had been very forthcoming about his past or the things that he had endured with his father. Any time they had even gotten close to his history, the subject was always swiftly changed. There was still so much that he did not trust her with. Of course, she knew that things were progressing between them... but perhaps she ought to question things more.

She offered Matthew a thin-lipped smile and eased back into the couch. Besides, her new relationship with Dorian was still so fragile that she did not wish to put it in jeopardy.

Cordelia opened her mouth to respond to Matthew, but the sound of Mary's laughter beside them drew both their attention.

"Did you hear what Mr. Hislop just said?" Mary called out, her eyes bright with amusement as she glanced at Cordelia.

"I was telling her about the time I attempted to ride sidesaddle," Patrick explained, grinning, his humor infectious.

Mary covered her mouth, shaking her head. "He lasted all of ten seconds before falling off and declaring it an impossible feat."

Cordelia chuckled, the lightness of the moment breaking the tension in the room. "I am surprised you tried at all, Mr. Hislop."

"Anything for a good story," Patrick replied, shooting a playful wink in Mary's direction, which earned him another soft laugh. "Also, I had somewhat lost a bet to Huxton."

Matthew leaned closer to Cordelia, his voice low. "I do believe your sister-in-law is rather smitten."

Cordelia smiled but said nothing, watching as Mary's smile lingered in a way that spoke of more than just passing infatuation.

Later that night, Cordelia lay in her bed, warm and satiated, with the bedding wrapped around her chest. It would only be a few moments before Dorian left her again. He never stayed after they finished. She did not know how to ask him to stay or why he felt that he needed to leave. Dorian shuffled around the bedroom, plucking his shirt and breeches off the floor and dressing very lazily.

Just ask him .

There could not truly be a better time to broach the subject. It could go badly, she knew. But she could not live the rest of her life in the dark. This was a gap that would need to be bridged sooner or later.

Inhaling sharply, she attempted to muster courage the best that she could. What was the worst that could happen? He could shut her down again, and things would be exactly where they were right now.

“Dorian...”

She did not mean for her voice to sound quite so small when she spoke.

“What is it?” Dorian answered as he slipped his legs into his breeches and started to tie the laces around his waist.

Cordelia swallowed, suddenly feeling more vulnerable. “When are we going to talk about... us?” The question hung in the air between them, heavier than she had thought.

Dorian stilled, his fingers pausing. His expression grew guarded, a flicker of

something unreadable crossing his face before he turned away from her. “What about us?”

Cordelia sat up, clutching the edge of the blanket. “Are we to have a real marriage, Dorian? I... I do not know what this is supposed to be between us.” Her words tumbled out in a rush, each one laced with uncertainty. “Do you... care for me? Or are we simply fulfilling obligations?”

Dorian’s eyes darkened as he turned toward her, his usual composure slipping for just a moment. But then, as quickly as it had appeared, the emotion was gone, replaced with that familiar mask he wore so effortlessly.

“Cordelia,” he began, his voice steady but evasive, “I have given you everything I can. Is that not enough?”

She shook her head, feeling frustrated by his deflection. “I am not asking for material things, Dorian. I want to know what I mean to you. You never talk about your feelings or...” She trailed off, changing tactics. “I feel like I am in the dark.” She hesitated, then pushed forward. “I deserve to know some things about you.”

His gaze flickered again, tension pulling at the corners of his mouth. “Trust me, it is better this way.”

“No,” she countered, her voice firmer now. “I need something, anything. If you will not tell me how you feel, at least tell me something about your past. Why will you not talk about it? About your father, about the things you have endured? I am your wife, Dorian. I have a right to know.”

Dorian exhaled sharply, a muscle in his jaw tightening. “Some things are better left buried.”

She felt the familiar pang of frustration and helplessness rise within her, but she was not going to let it go. Not this time. “All right,” she said, her voice quieter now but no less insistent. “When can we talk about the greenhouse then?”

Dorian’s brow arched. “What do you mean?”

The way his gaze raked over her semi-nude frame, he knew what she was hinting at. She was talking about the time that they spent there together. Her face flushed, her body warming with the suggestion despite how serious the topic was.

“I mean... why do you keep it chained and off-limits?” Cordelia asked.

There. It was out there. She had asked the question. She could not take it back.

However, the silence in the room instantly grew very uncomfortable as he angrily pulled his shirt over his head. “I do not wish to talk about it.”

“You cannot avoid telling me the truth forever, you know,” Cordelia said gently, hoping that she did not trigger his temper. It was not as if she felt he would lash out, but she did not want to have the subject closed in her face all over again. “You promised not to lie.”

Dorian paused, lingering where he stood before sighing heavily and pinching his brow. “This is not a subject that you are just going to let go, is it?”

Cordelia shook her head.

He crossed the room and sat on the edge of her bed, facing away from her. She was sorely tempted to close the distance between them. Whatever the reason was, it was obviously a memory that was still painful to him. She did not wish to be rejected if she attempted to offer him comfort. No doubt, it was a foreign concept to him.

“You will not speak of it. Your sister will not speak of it; there is clearly a story there, and nobody will tell me, and I just...” Cordelia attempted to explain why she wanted to know, knowing that she was over-explaining herself.

“My father was a very violent man,” Dorian admitted in a soft voice, but it was very clear that he did not wish to even share that much.

It was an olive branch made of spun sugar. She felt that it would shatter it if she so much as breathed.

“He...” Dorian sighed and shook his head. His hands curled into fists in his lap, pressing into the tops of his thighs like the motion alone was grounding him in the present. “I was something of a soft child. A trait that my father abhorred more than anything else. He would not tolerate anything that he perceived as weakness, least of all from his heir.”

It was such a drastic difference from her own upbringing. Her father was always doting on her, bringing her little gifts and trinkets from his travels. Her mother was not anything like the woman she presently was; she was full of light and loved nothing more than to invent fun little games for them to play together.

“I had a love for animals and farming. I wanted to learn everything that I could about them. Something he thought was wholly foolish and a waste of time. I was... seven or eight when I found a little lamb. He followed me everywhere, and, at night, I would sneak him into my bedroom so that he could sleep with me where it was warm. I do not know what I was thinking. He was the closest thing to a friend that I had had at that age. It went on for weeks, but a boy cannot conceal a lamb’s manure under his bed for long before being discovered by the servants.”

A sense of dread was building in Cordelia’s stomach. No matter where this story went next, it was going to be horrible.

“Well, one afternoon, he waited until I brought the leftovers from my dinner up to my room to share them with the lamb, and my father was there with a butcher knife. He slaughtered him right in front of me. The blood stains never came out of the carpet. It had to be thrown out and burned in the yard.”

Cordelia could not breathe. It was so needlessly cruel. She could not imagine the effect that that must have had on him at such a young age. She could not stop herself from closing the distance between them, throwing her arms around him and pressing her chest against his back as she embraced him. He placed a single hand on her forearm, keeping her there softly.

“He said that I needed to be cured of my softness, no matter what it took. So, he dragged me through the house. I was sure that my arm was going to rip clear out of its socket. He took me into the greenhouse and threw me inside. Those chains on the door were the same ones that my father put on the doors all those years ago. Those doors had not been opened until the other night.”

Just when she thought that it could not possibly get any worse... it did. Horror consumed her.

Just what kind of a monster his father was?

“I was in that greenhouse for... I think five days without seeing a single soul. I drank water from the planters and tried to eat the plants after the first couple of days. Children are not much accustomed to being hungry like that. I eventually had to break open the walls to get out. I do not know what would have happened had I not broken myself free. I would not have been surprised if he intended for me to die there.”

“Dorian...” Cordelia trailed off. What was there to possibly say to such a thing? She could not process it.

“I injured myself on the way out and limped back into the house—where my father was serving lamb for dinner, of course.”

Her hands dropped over his torso, tracing over the scar on his abdomen. “Is that where this came from?”

Dorian froze for a moment, perhaps not expecting the question, and dipped his head in a tight nod. “I was but fourteen when he died.”

Cordelia’s ears perked at the information, and it felt like the air in the room thinned as she waited for him to continue speaking.

“I cannot remember why I was in the parlor with him, I remember him yelling, and how frightened I was that his temper was going to result in another beating. He had... hurled his drink into the fireplace and the glass had shattered.” Dorian trailed off for a moment, seemingly lost in the memory. “He had risen from his seat, screaming that I had forced him to make a mess, that I needed to clean it up... but there was glass all over the carpet and I did not wish to cut my knees. He towered in front of me, screaming until he was red in the face and then he had just... collapsed, gasping on the floor and clawing desperately at his chest.”

What was she supposed to say to that?

“He demanded that I help him... and the demanding turned to whispered pleading, and I just... stood there. I watched him take his very last breaths until I was sure that he could never hurt Mary or me again...”

“I am so, so sorry that that happened to you,” Cordelia said. It did not feel anywhere near sufficient of a thing to say for the magnitude of what he had just shared with her. She wished that she could make it better or somehow erase such a traumatic event from his memory.

“Yes, well. Now you know. The rumors spread about my father, and I simply never bothered to deny it. But I cannot stay here any longer,” Dorian said as he slid from her arms and left the room so swiftly it felt like he took all of the warmth in the room with him.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:04 am

“Mama, are you coming with me to my riding lesson this afternoon?” Georgie asked Mary over breakfast. They had increased the frequency of his riding lessons to accommodate more sessions over the week because his nephew seemed to have such an affinity for such things. He was a natural. If only Dorian could get him to show such dedication in his archery or swordsmanship, then perhaps he would have been on his way to becoming quite the accomplished young gentleman.

It had been a long time since he had gone to watch one of Georgie’s lessons himself. Perhaps if Mary was going as well, then it would be the perfect time to discuss a few things with her that he had been allowing to slide by. His sister was taking advantage of the fact that he had become so infatuated with the time he shared with his wife, and she spent too much time with Patrick Hislop.

“Not today, sweetheart, but perhaps I shall attend the one day after tomorrow?” Mary answered.

Georgie accepted the answer easily, turning back to his breakfast.

“How so? What are you doing this afternoon?” Dorian inquired, sipping at his black tea.

“Pardon?” Mary answered far too quickly, a blush forming over the apples of her cheeks.

“What could you possibly be doing that would prevent you from going with Georgie this afternoon?” Dorian continued, only glazing at his sister over the brim of his teacup before setting it back down.

“I... well, if you must know, Mr. Hislop is coming to call upon me this afternoon,” Mary said a touch too quickly to be considered casual.

Mary glanced at Cordelia with a curt nod of her head as if they were conspiring to keep knowledge from him.

“I am not sure if I like how casual you are with Mr. Hislop, Mary. It is starting to feel far too familiar with how often he is here. People will talk,” Dorian said as he reached for the paper. He knew enough about Patrick to know that he was nowhere near good enough for his sister. The last thing that he was going to allow was Mary to be put into a position where she could be hurt for a second time by a subpar match. Furthermore, he would be extra selective about the sort of man that would be stepping into Georgie’s life. It would need to be somebody of the right sort of caliber, and he did not think that Mr. Hislop fit that bill.

“I am very fond of Pa—Mr. Hislop.” Mary countered stubbornly. She used a tone of voice that heavily implied that she was not going to be moved on the subject either.

“Is that right?” Dorian asked, putting the paper back down before he had the time to read a single article. Had not even glanced over the titles before he felt Mary’s irritation flung in his direction. “You deserve more than to settle for a man such as him.”

“Tell me, Brother, what sort of man do you imagine that a ruined, unmarried mother like myself is entitled to?”

“Do not do that. Do not reduce yourself to your circumstances.” Dorian sighed, already regretting making his opinion sound like an option.

“It has been years , Dorian since a gentleman has looked in my direction with anything but a sneer on their face. Do you know that? Have you any idea what that

feels like?” Mary continued with a very careful grip on her temper. Georgie glanced in her direction as if checking whether he should be upset or not. Most of the time, he simply ignored their conversations entirely.

Mary motioned for Georgie’s governess to come and take him out of the room. Whenever things got heated for either of the siblings, they did their best to remove Georgie from the situation. Dorian was adamant that he not grow up around yelling as they had.

The moment that Georgie was out of the room, Mary rounded on her brother once more with fiery accusation in her gaze.

“Tell me, Brother, what more do I deserve than a man who is accomplished, funny, and who seems genuinely interested in me?” Mary continued.

“Are you implying that he has made some sort of declaration?” If he had, without bothering to come to Dorian first, this conversation was going to shift entirely.

“No! But if he had, I do not think that I would be opposed to it!”

“Have you truly not heard what Mr. Hislop has done?”

“I am sure that you are going to remind me, though I do not see how it could possibly change my opinion of him.” Mary sat back in her chair, looking very much like a petulant child. Dorian had half of a mind to call her out on it, too.

“Mr. Hislop fled the country and left his sisters to fend for themselves. If it had not been for Rhysand—”

Mary’s answering laughter was bitter and humorless. “And suddenly that is a crime? How is it any different from what you did?”

“Is that not exactly why you should be averse to it? The same crimes that you lay at my feet hold no consequence because it is from an outside gentleman?” Dorian countered, working very hard to keep from raising his voice.

He glanced at Cordelia out of the corner of his eye. He tried to avoid quarreling with his sister in front of her for this exact reason. When Mary got upset, she did not know how to keep things to herself.

“He is a solicitor now, Dorian. He has changed. At least he was repentant of his crimes, and his sisters have forgiven him. Are you? I think not. Whatever offenses that you might lay at his feet, at least he has not killed his—”

“Enough!” Cordelia’s voice rose above the other two, shocking the siblings. She had never interrupted one of their fights before. It was true that they quarreled often, but the matter was always laid to rest. Albeit in a shallow grave that they were constantly digging up. “Mary, please do not get so cross. Dorian is simply attempting to express his care for you in his own way. I am positive ,” she paused long enough to glare at her husband. “That he only has your best wishes and happiness at heart.”

Mary’s brow lifted, looking to Dorian for confirmation that his pride did not wish to allow.

Everything about the relationship with his sister only made him wish to argue and protest over even the smallest things.

“I cannot claim to have been there for whatever bad blood lay between you. Lord knows that neither of you wants to sit here and talk about your feelings, but your brother must have had his reasons for making the choices that he did,” Cordelia finished with a parting shot at Mary, “Do you truly believe that he would harm you or your son on purpose?”

Mary bit down on the inside of her cheek and leaned back into her chair once more. If she had anything else to say on the subject, she kept her mouth shut about it and her opinions to herself.

On the one hand, it was a nice surprise to have somebody stand up for him the way that Cordelia was. He would not have expected it from anyone, not in a hundred years.

But that did not change the fact that she was wrong. He had been fighting the guilt since he had lain with her the first time. He could not keep himself from her addictive body, and he knew that there was no point in even trying to deprive himself of something that had become a need.

Would she think the same of me if she knew what I did to her father?

Sooner or later, Cordelia would find out the truth—and she would hate him, too. There was no other option. The closer that he allowed himself to come to her, the less sure he was that he was going to be able to survive the fallout.

Cordelia looked from one sibling to another and nodded contently to herself that the argument appeared to be finished. With her brow arched, victorious, she started to eat her breakfast once more.

How was he supposed to handle the look of horror on her face when he found out his true crimes? There would be no defending him then. She would likely not even be able to look him in the face. He was being ruthless and selfish to allow himself to indulge in her. But how could he deprive himself of the woman who was becoming more important to him than he knew how to handle?

I am going to hell for all this. I should keep my distance from her before it is too late.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:04 am

Cordelia woke to the soft light of dawn filtering through the curtains and an empty bed again. Each morning that she woke to find herself alone, she was disappointed for reasons that she could not even begin to explain. She stretched lazily beneath the blankets, her mind still hovering in that peaceful place between sleep and waking. But something was different. There, resting on her pillow beside her head, was a missive. A folded piece of parchment sealed with Dorian's distinctive wax seal.

What could that be?

Her heart quickened, and she sat up, blinking away the last remnants of sleep as she reached for the letter. Had he left the estate? She hoped that it did not mean that he was planning to start traveling again; things had just started to seem like they were reaching progress between them. Had she really been that wrong?

As her fingers brushed the paper, she felt something small and hard. She broke the seal and carefully opened the note. A small, delicate key slid into her palm. For a moment, she simply stared at it, her mind racing.

The greenhouse?

The letter was short, written in Dorian's sharp script:

You have waited long enough. Go make something beautiful.

– Dorian.

Cordelia's breath left her in a rush. A wide, uncontrollable smile split her face. She

could not believe it. It felt impossible. She did not think that she was truly going to let herself get excited until she had the doors to the greenhouse open in front of her.

In her excitement, she forgot all pretense of decorum. She tossed the letter onto the bed, yanked her dressing gown over her shoulders, and took off the stairs at a run. Her feet made almost no sound as she bolted through the estate, her fingers clutching the key tightly as though it might vanish if she let it go. She did not care that her hair was loose, cascading in messy waves down her back. She did not care that she was dressed entirely inappropriately for the morning, let alone going outside.

She had to see it.

She needed to feel it.

The house was still quiet, the staff not yet fully awake. She slipped through the halls unnoticed, her feet pattering lightly against the marble as she burst out through the front door and into the morning air.

The grass was still dewy beneath her feet as she ran across the lawn, the cool breeze brushing against her skin. She did not feel the chill. Her heart was racing far too fast for that, each step bringing her closer to the one place she had dreamed about since she had first seen the estate.

And then, there it was. The greenhouse bathed in the soft light of the rising sun.

Cordelia slowed as she approached, her breath coming in small, excited gasps. She reached the door and paused, her hand shaking as she fit the key into the lock. The chains that she had started to think of as a permanent fixture were gone, all hints of rust brushed away like it had never truly been locked away from her in the first place. For a moment, she hesitated, savoring the anticipation. Then, with a soft click, the door swung open.

It was real. He was truly giving her the space to do the one thing that she loved above nearly everything else.

A single tear slipped down her cheek as she smiled. She could already see it in her mind's eye—the flowers, the herbs, the vines trailing up the walls. It did not matter how long it was going to take her, she located a pair of old garden gloves covered in grime and hit them against the same table that still bore her knee and handprints. She fought against the instant surge of arousal that seemed synonymous with her husband now. When the gloves were as clean as she could get them, she pulled them onto her hands.

No matter how difficult it was to control the things outside of this building, her mother—Dorian, and Mary, Matthew—this was a place where she could control the outcome, an outlet that she so desperately needed. It was all up to her.

Cordelia pushed up the sleeves of her nightgown, her heart still racing with excitement as she stepped further into the greenhouse. Her work was certainly cut out for her. Rusted hangers for potted plants hung haphazardly from the ceiling, and the wooden tables were warped with age and water damage. She moved slowly through the space, her fingers trailing over the surfaces as she imagined what it would look like once she breathed life back into it.

But despite its worn-down state, the heart of the greenhouse—the central garden bed—still had a spark of life. In the center stood a single tree, its branches stretching upward toward the broken glass ceiling. Against all odds, it appeared healthy, its bark dark and sturdy. Even though the trunk was covered with moss and vines, it seemed to have endured. A small smile tugged at the corners of Cordelia's lips as she reached out, gently brushing her fingers over the rough bark.

It was so much like the greenhouse that her father had promised to her when she was little. Even from a young age, she had had a green thumb. She had started with just

flowers and pretty things like butterflies and how they liked to linger on the prettiest flowers. She wanted to make beautiful things grow and nurture them.

Every time that her father had traveled, he had always been sure to bring her back seeds that were native to wherever he had gone. Though, after he had died... she had ruined most of her garden. She had not understood. She could not grasp why a man who appreciated such beautiful things in the way that she did, would take his own life. It simply made no sense. He had seemed so happy.

This was not the time for tears.

Quickly, she brushed them from her face so she would not sour her new adventure with sorrowful memories. Her mother would come to at least pretend to appreciate the garden. But the enthusiasm was not the same. She appreciated beauty in the form of pretty, sparkly things like diamonds and jewels, new dresses, and fine paintings. Growing things and nature were not exactly her forte. Something that Cordelia had never begrudged the woman in the slightest.

But, at times like this, it only made her miss her father that much more.

As she circled the garden bed, something moved in the corner of her eye. A flicker of motion caught her attention, and she turned just in time to see a barn cat slinking in through a hole in the side of the greenhouse. The feline, a scrappy tabby with a patchy coat, prowled through the undergrowth, tail twitching as it stalked a small mouse darting across the floor.

Cordelia paused, watching the cat. He must have entered through the same panel that had saved Dorian's life all those years ago. Perhaps he had made a home here, fending off the vermin. Cordelia knelt down slowly as the cat caught its prey, and when the feline noticed her, it hesitated, eyeing her warily.

“Good job, thank you for helping me clean up,” she whispered, her hand reaching out to offer a gentle pat. The cat gave a rumbling purr and brushed against her fingers before darting off. At least Cordelia was in good company here. First things first, she set off to start pruning anything dead and broken to be placed in a pile outside.

Before she knew it, she was humming again.

“I will see you later, all right?” Cordelia got up, leaving her breakfast plate half-empty.

She seemed to have started a whole new routine. Every morning, she hurried through breakfast just conversationally enough to be still considered polite before hurrying to the greenhouse. She had made remarkable progress in such a few days. It was harder to coax her inside for meals now, but Dorian was happy that at least she had something to occupy her time with. That was the point, was it not? He certainly hoped so.

Yet, the few times he encountered her in the halls, she still seemed paler than she ought to despite the sun she was getting. The exhaustion he could excuse as nothing more than the additional physical labor paired with the intimacy that they shared. But there was still something off that he could not quite put his finger on. He had even surrendered his pride enough to inquire with his sister if there was anything that she still complained about. But Mary said no every time. Matilde was at a loss, and naturally, Georgie did not see anything amiss at all. He was overjoyed to be helping his aunt in the gardens and was regaling them with vivid retellings of plant facts and explaining the various flora to them over dinner each night.

But, even with the greenhouse she claimed she coveted above all else, something was missing. He could not explain how he knew. But for some reason, she was not happy.

So, what was it?

Watching her through the window was not nearly informative enough. He was working to keep some distance but some things were wholly unavoidable at this point.

With Matilde's help, he had ordered a special dinner just for the two of them and ensured that Mary and Georgie would be otherwise occupied for the evening. All her favorite dishes were prepared, even if it was a surplus and more than the two of them could eat. Roasted mutton, turbot with hollandaise sauce, peas pudding, with all of the sides to accompany it, and he had ensured that Blancmange be available for dessert so that she could be as happy as she possibly could be.

When she arrived in a stunning plum-purple gown, Dorian nearly forgot the entire reason that he had wanted to be alone with her in the first place. It was so hard to keep his wits about him when faced with her beauty. The short, tantalizing moans that she made when he was deep inside her— no .

Dorian cleared his throat roughly and gestured politely for her to join him. Candles decorated the table instead of the normal overhead chandeliers' light, and their place settings were moved closer together.

"Is it just the pair of us tonight?" Cordelia asked with a smile as she moved toward her chair almost hesitantly. "I feel so very underdressed for whatever occasion this is."

"You look perfect. It is nothing like that, I just thought it might be a nice change," Dorian said as they both took their seats.

"Oh, is that right? No ulterior motives at all?"

"Very honest motives," Dorian answered honestly.

Cordelia laughed, a rich sound that almost echoed around the room. He was taken aback by how freely the sound left her lips considering he did not think it was because of him that she had cause to laugh. He had merely been honest with her—not trying to be funny in the slightest.

She looked at the confusion on his face and laughed anew. “Apologies, I... it is just, this is so nice... and you...” She pulled her napkin onto her lap and angled herself toward him. “So, what business are we discussing?”

Dorian gestured to the servants who started to serve the prepared dishes to them both. He only spoke again when they were finished. “You, if that is all right?”

“Oh! Then I suppose that I should tell you again how grateful I am that you reconsidered the greenhouse for me. Truly. I asked Matilde to order new iron stems for the hanging planters. Was that not all right? Is that what this is about?”

“Are you happy, Cordelia?”

Whatever she had been expecting him to say, it was not that. She snapped her mouth shut so swiftly that her teeth clicked together. “I beg your pardon?”

“I thought that access to the greenhouse would make you happy?”

“Of course, it does,” Cordelia answered easily. She could not figure out where he was going with the line of questioning for the life of her. “Have I... missed some fight that we have had? I am not sure what cause you have to think that I am unhappy?”

Dorian leaned forward, his hand lifting to cup the side of her face, delighted in no small part when she leaned her face into his hand. He let the pad of his thumb brush softly over the bags under her eyes that never seemed to leave no matter how much she slept.

“You look... worried.”

“Oh, that. I...” Cordelia started as Dorian pulled his hand away, noting the way her features seemed to be even more sunken under the dim lighting. “I worry about my mother, you know that.”

“I do. The care that she has now has been wholly replaced. She has around-the-clock company that serves as companionship as well as monitors for the amount of wine that she consumes. I can start having their reports delivered to you, if you like?”

She nodded. “That would be fine.” Cordelia’s fork plunged into her fish, but there it stayed. She did not take a single bite. “Do you want the truth? I miss my father. All the reports about my mother will not change the fact that she lost the love of her life and I my father. And here I am, renovating a greenhouse while she is in pain.”

“If there is anything I can...”

“Can you tell me why a seemingly happy man would take his own life?”

Cordelia almost looked like she was about to cry.

Dorian did not know what to do with tears. His hands tightened until his knuckles were white.

“I know you said that you were not his friend, that you did not actually know him but... but I cannot help but to think there is still more that you are not telling me. Dorian. You have shared so much with me, and I know it was not easy for you... so why can you share that but keep whatever knowledge that you have about my father from me?” Cordelia said flatly. A single tear rolled down her cheek that she wiped away just as quickly.

Because I killed him.

Awkwardly, he pushed his napkin in her direction, but she shook her head.

“No, I did not mean to cry. You have planned this lovely evening for us and I do not mean to sound ungrateful for all of the effort you have gone through on my behalf, I promise. I was just caught off guard by your question,” Cordelia answered, but she would not look him in the face as she spoke.

Guilt reared its ugly head in Dorian’s gut. It spread and festered as he watched his wife suffer.

It is all my fault.

It hurt him more than he thought was possible to see her in so much pain.

The truth would crush her.

It would crush her.

Perhaps it was endlessly selfish, but he could not tell her—he could not be the one to break her. Not if there was any other possible option.

“Is that what keeps you up at night? I hear you pacing some nights,” Dorian asked softly, keeping his gaze focused on his plate.

“Is my pacing why you will not share a bed with me?”

The softness in her voice was unlike anything he had heard from her. His gaze jerked up, clashing with her own. Her bottom lip was trapped between her teeth as she awaited his answer.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why will you not sleep in the same bed with me? You will lie with me, and then the moment that we are finished... you abandon me. Every time. What is it? Why do you leave?”

A muscle in Dorian’s jaw feathered uncomfortably. His fingers twitched as he struggled for an appropriate answer. “I... it would complicate things between us.”

“How? What is it about this entire marriage that has not been complicated already?” Cordelia insisted.

She had a point. How was he supposed to combat her logic?

“I do not like sleeping alone, Dorian. I feel alone so often than when I know you are there... when you are near and I can hear your heart beating, no matter how large and frightening this house can be at night, I know I am all right.”

Dorian was at a loss for words. What could he say to that? He was afraid of crossing that line. If he did not continue to keep some boundaries between them, it would only hurt them both in the end. If he slipped and told her the truth? If he allowed her to feel close enough to rely on him for restful sleep? All of that would backfire eventually.

He was far too aware of each and every risk he took when it came to her already.

But when she looked at him like that... reason went straight out the window.

If that was truly how she felt about him in her heart, did he truly have any right to refuse her? It was more affection than he deserved, more than he would have ever thought was possible. He had been so certain that she was merely being a dutiful wife

most of the time, but could she actually have begun to feel safe around him? Truly?

“If you could find it in your heart to stay with me, perhaps that would help.”

Cordelia’s eyes locked onto his own. She was begging in her own way, begging for him to spend the whole night with her, to share her bed, to wake in the morning with her sweet face nestled against his chest. Dorian never thought he would have gotten so lucky in any version of this life. It felt surreal. It was not even as if she was asking a lot from him. On the contrary, this should have been something far simpler to grant her than giving her the greenhouse that was so painful for him.

“Oh, dear. Listen to me,” Cordelia said with a scoff as she blotted her eyes with her napkin. “You must think me so foolish.”

There were a great many words that he could have tied to her, and foolish never would have been one of them.

“I do not,” Dorian said gently. Quite the opposite. Which was the issue that he was having. “But what you are asking me for would only complicate things between us further. I do not think that it would be wise.”

“Complicate? We are married, Dorian,” Cordelia continued softly.

The gentleness that she was showing in this conversation was going to shatter him. She looked so vulnerable, so open. His wife was asking him for something that she needed and he was unable to give it to her. The guilt over being unable to provide her with something so simple was breaking his heart.

“Cordelia... I...”

“I know that you are unaccustomed to such things. Truly, I do. But I think that if you

would perhaps try to...”

Dorian pressed his fingers into the bridge of his nose. “That is not...”

“I want to sleep with you, Dorian. To share a bed with my husband. I have never had to sleep alone before coming here. It is harder for me than I ever expected it would be. I do not know how to...”

Dorian’s hand dropped, and he watched as she seemed almost moved to tears while speaking before she stopped and shook her head. He could not stand being the one to make her feel like this. He hated that she was so upset, and he knew it was wholly and completely his fault. Why was it that every time he thought he was starting to do the right thing, it was backfiring on him?

If it would help, did he truly have the right to refuse her? Was this whole arrangement not supposed to ease the suffering that he had placed upon her family in the first place?

“All right,” Dorian conceded. “I will try, I cannot guarantee that it shall—”

Cordelia’s answering smile silenced everything that he had been about to say. To keep her smiling like that, there was almost nothing he would not do. He would simply have to find a way to make it work, one way or another. He just had to hope that, in the meantime, the feelings that were nearly overwhelming him were not going to make him fall for her completely.

Is this how I lose my mind?

Perhaps it was the very last vestiges of sanity fraying and slipping out of his grasp. Had he wholly and completely overestimated his capacity here? He had only taken her as his wife in the first place to assuage his guilt over his involvement with her father... and now it was only growing.

Never before in his life had Dorian doubted his own capabilities of handling whatever task that he set his mind to. He was a gentleman of firm morals and standards. Even if they were his own, instead of what society might have otherwise deemed unacceptable or acceptable.

Every passing day that was spent with Cordelia, the love in his chest grew painfully. It filled his heart until he could not take it. The guilt was still in equal measure. Every time that he thought about telling his wife the truth, he simply imagined the horrified look on her face. He imagined her crying, perhaps crumbling to the floor, telling him how much she hated him. All of which were outcomes that he simply could not allow to happen.

“Brother?” Mary asked from the doorway to his study. It was messier than it had been the last few times she had come to visit. Dorian had not even properly noticed the way his study appeared to be in shambles until he was aware of the fact that a second pair of eyes were now upon his space.

He looked up from his work, awkwardly starting to push papers aside to make space for the tea tray his sister held in her hands. He was of a mind to attempt to explain that things were not the way they looked, or perhaps apologize for his

uncharacteristic untidiness, but the words would not come out. However, he could feel her judgment in the way her eyes swept over the space, examining the books propped open, the bits of ink where they ought not to be, and the sheer number of ledgers and papers scattered over his desk.

“You did not need to bring me anything,” Dorian said as she placed the silver tray down on the cleared space of the desk. Mary did not answer at first, humming a noise of assent and rolling her shoulders. Silence stretched as she set about pouring them both a cup of tea and extending his out to him. He took it, even if he did not much feel like drinking it. “Is there something that I can assist you with, Sister?”

Mary turned and looked about the room, her eyes roaming over the bookshelves and the general unkemptness he had surrounded himself with. Then, she finally stopped at the curtains that were still snapped shut behind him despite the afternoon sun still high in the sky. He had already spent far too many hours peering out of that window toward the greenhouse, and he could not afford to become any more derelict in his duties than he already was. “When was the last time you got some fresh air, Dorian?”

“Is that what you came in here to ask me?” Dorian’s hand rubbed the stubble on his chin as he answered, hating that she might have a point already and that he was in denial of it.

“I came in here to see to my brother, is that a crime?”

Dorian was sorely tempted to point out that any time she had ever come to see him in here had resulted in an argument every time. But he forced himself to stay quiet.

“No. I do not think so, but I will reserve my final answer until I know the reason for your visit.”

“Are you always so suspicious of everything? It is a wonder that your forehead is not

covered in wrinkles,” Mary said with a sigh as she stirred her tea slowly. “I think you are in this study far more than Father ever was.”

Dorian’s brow flattened. “I am not interested in discussing history right now, Mary. I am very busy with work, and discussing our father is certain to put me in a terrible mood.”

“Oh, is there a time when you are not in a foul temper?” Mary teased, the hint of a smirk lifting the corner of her lip that she quickly covered with her teacup and drank slowly.

“Why do you not just go ahead and say whatever it is that you were hoping to accomplish with this visit so that you can relocate elsewhere?” Dorian said with a heavy sigh.

“Honestly, why you are so determined to be miserable at every possible opportunity is something I shall never understand.” Mary set her teacup down on his desk just softly enough to keep the contents from sloshing over as she fell heavily into one of the seats across from him. “Despite what you might think, Dorian, I do care for you. I might not have forgiven you, and I might not ever truly forgive you for abandoning me back then, but this? I cannot stand by and watch you self-destruct like this.”

Dorian frowned and set his quill down. He moved the papers in front of him absently in hopes that he could ignore her words. “I do not understand your meaning.”

“Do not play dumb with me, it is not a look that flatters you,” Mary snapped. “Do not cheapen my concern for you with your quips either.”

“What would you have me do?”

“I think you should tell Cordelia the truth,” Mary said simply.

The bluntness of her words took him off guard momentarily.

“Be realistic,” Dorian said and shook his head.

“I am being realistic, Dorian! I see the way you look at her. You spend hours pining after the woman who is your wife . You do her no credit by constantly underestimating what she is and is not capable of handling! You should not be making that choice for her. She is not some frail little wallflower for you to make choices for. She is a woman who knows her own mind and is far stronger than you believe her to be.”

“You presume that you know my wife better than I do?” Dorian’s temper flared as he rose from his desk. “Do not insert yourself into matters that do not concern you, and my marriage does not concern you.”

“Oh, I see,” Mary huffed. “So, your marriage concerns me just fine when you feel you need help or insight, but when I show concern for my friend, then it does not concern me?”

The muscle in Dorian’s jaw ticked as he shook his head. “I do not have to listen to this.”

“You cannot simply ignore every conversation that makes you uncomfortable, Dorian!” Mary continued, following him out of his study and into the corridor. “You have to face this sooner or later! Marriage is for life! You have been barely hanging on just the last month!”

He tuned her out and walked with long strides down the hall. He grabbed his coat from the foyer and did not stop at any of Mary’s shouted words or insults.

He knew enough about his wife to know that this news would break her.

London was not as inviting to him as he had hoped it would have been. He had hoped when he had left, that putting physical distance between himself and the problem might have soothed his nerves, even just a little bit. But that was proving not to be the case. He could not get Mary's annoying voice out of his head. Now, it sat there right at the forefront of his mind, right beside how he imagined Cordelia's face would crumble the moment he told her what he had done.

She would never forgive me.

And then what? He had to purchase her another home in the country so that she could be far enough away from him? Perhaps he should have done that from the beginning. At least, then, he would not have come to desire her so greatly. He would not have ever allowed himself to miss her face, to see the sparkle in her eyes when she smiled. Perhaps then he would have been able to have actual control over this whole situation instead of allowing this to become the mess that it presently was.

The doors of White's were opened for him as he arrived, the servants keeping their gaze dutifully straight forward. Another came to relieve him of his coat as he moved without stopping toward the main room. There was the usual scent of cigar smoke and tobacco pipes, the sweet almond of whiskey, and cherry notes of brandy that seemed to be the constant perfume in the air. There was a low hum of conversation converging from the various card tables as well as seating areas.

Dorian was only interested in one particular table occupied by three familiar faces, and a man he did not recognize. Still, he did not wait for an invitation to sit with them and simply pulled out the chair for himself. Patrick was the only one who rose to his feet to shake Dorian's hand. He almost did not wish to do it, given how he felt about the whole situation with Mary. But it would only bring about more questions if he refused to greet him properly.

One of the attendants brought him his usual order and placed it on the table for him,

which he was only too happy to accept. He gestured with his hand to keep the drinks coming and took his first sip. He hoped that the alcohol would help steady his nerves.

He should have been doing that this whole time.

“We did not expect to see you for another week or two, Your Grace. To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?” Patrick asked conversationally.

Dorian’s brow arched. “I was not aware that there was a schedule that I was meant to follow.”

Patrick faltered, shuffling the hand of cards that had been dealt to him, arranging them differently as he watched Dorian over his cards. “Well, we are always happy to share your taciturn company, Your Grace.”

Patrick spoke without any sort of inflection to his words, but Dorian understood anyway. But out of all the men at the table, Patrick was the one he wished to hear about the least. Certainly not after he had just gotten into yet another fight with Mary.

Xander tried to diffuse the situation. “So, Davenport. Let me introduce Aaron to you. He is the Duke of Harper. He does not go out much, but we managed to convince him to join us today.”

Dorian shook his head in a nod when Rhysand moved to deal him in, easing back in his chair. He could tell why he had not seen Harper around White’s. The man sported a big scar along the right side of his face, and Dorian tried not to stare too much. He shifted his attention elsewhere. The hands in front of him moved; cards were slid across the table as one round faded into another. He knew that they were giving him sideways glances from time to time, but he was still attempting to process everything.

Or, rather, he was—until Patrick started to press the issue once more.

“When you return home, you would do me such a great favor if you could relay my well wishes to your sister,” Patrick said happily. “I do hope that she is in good health?”

Normally, Dorian would simply tell him to ask her himself, but that was the last thing he wanted.

“I shall consider it.”

“Oh, come off it, Davenport,” Xander interjected with a sigh. “Let the man be smitten.”

That was the entire heart of the issue, in his opinion. He had been watching Mary pine after the man relentlessly. She and Cordelia spoke of him at every tea and meal. Mary was constantly humming around the house as she played with Georgie. However, it was when Georgie himself started to ask more questions about Patrick that made Dorian realize the seriousness of the situation. His sister was falling for Patrick Hislop, and Dorian was unsure what that would mean.

Mary deserved nothing but the best. No matter how they argued or any sibling spat they might have had—it was his duty to protect her. The very same duty that he had failed in before and he was not the sort of man who was simply going to repeat such a huge mistake by being anything less than diligent. If Patrick expected Dorian to consent to this marriage, then he was going to need to earn his approval.

“It is my duty to do everything in my power to ensure that my sister is well taken care of,” Dorian answered flatly.

Patrick’s brow arched. “Are you accusing me of something, Your Grace?”

Dorian finished off his third glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Are you telling me that I should not be concerned? That you only have my sister’s best interests at heart?”

“I could! Because it is the truth!”

Dorian scoffed. “I have heard such things plenty of times before.”

“I have nothing but honorable intentions toward Lady Mary, as I have expressed before. I am quite fond of her, and she of me!” Patrick insisted, his voice rising slightly.

“She has been hurt enough in the past.”

“I am not going to hurt her, Your Grace.” Patrick continued, the game of cards seemingly forgotten by everybody at the table. “I intend to marry her.”

Dorian shook his head. “Not without my permission, you are not.”

Something that Patrick had not even done him the courtesy of asking for. He had not met with Dorian privately once on his visits. Out of deference to Mary, he had chosen to overlook what might have otherwise been considered a slight against him, given how seriously the pair seemed to be courting.

Perhaps Patrick needed a firmer reminder that it would only take one word from Dorian to end this whole thing.

“Let us not be hasty,” Xander said firmly. “Tempers can flare high; Patrick and I had a rocky start as well when I first met him.” He turned to Dorian as he set his cards down. “But he is a reformed man. Have you not punished him enough?”

It would be so easy to continue to escalate the situation. Some large part of him,

perhaps the alcohol-fueled part, was itching to work his frustrations out in a fight. But it would solve nothing. Mary was unlikely to forgive him if he were to inform her that he had injured Patrick when he knew that she, too, was rather fond of him.

Rhysand, who looked bored the whole time, decided to step in. “Patrick might look like a fool at first sight, but he is also my wife’s brother. I can vouch for him if I have to.”

Patrick bristled from where he sat, turning to Rhysand as he spoke. “I almost killed you once, you know. I do not need vouching for.”

Rhysand smirked and shook his head. “We both know that you would have died if it had been an actual duel.”

Some of the tension at the table started to lessen.

“Besides, will it not be to your advantage to have your sister and nephew out of the house? I imagine it must be quite a lot to have such a full house as newlyweds,” Xander said easily as he picked back up his cards. “It sounds like a win-win situation for everybody involved, no?”

Dorian did not answer, he did not know what to say.

“Frankly, it would be beneficial for us all,” Rhysand interjected.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that Penelope will not stop talking about how enamored Lady Cordelia is with you. So, if I have to sit through another dinner, hearing about your marriage, I will come for you,” Rhysand finished.

Enamored? With him? If anything, it was he who was—

And then it hit him. He could deny it to himself no longer. Cordelia was a constant in his thoughts and an ever-present fixture. It was not supposed to have gone this way. She was not supposed to be so important to him. It was supposed to merely be a convenience, and atonement for the wrongdoings but now... oh, he could not picture his life without her.

Dorian glanced down at the glass in his hand, his heart feeling heavier with each passing moment. The alcohol was making him sentimental. What would his life be if she had not entered it... stagnant and stale... the same thing every day. She had forced him to look at parts of himself, things about his past that he had been convinced he would have kept buried forever.

Cordelia might be infatuated with him, but he was absolutely in love with her.

“Eleanor is also concerned about Cordelia’s infatuation with you. So, stop playing so hard to get, Davenport, and save us all some nagging,” Xander said, downing his drink.

Silence fell at the table, and all eyes turned to the Duke of Harper. When he did not add anything to the conversation, Xander elbowed him.

“Well, truth be told, Marina is quite concerned about her friend as well. She fears she will have her heart broken.”

Dorian nodded and accepted his fourth glass of whiskey with a polite hum.

If only that were true.

But what reason would Cordelia have to lie to her friends? Was not the information

she gave to them in private an accurate representation of her true feelings? They would have to know better than he did, right? Was Mary right after all? What a chilling thought.

Could telling her the truth be not so bad after all?

Dorian certainly loved her enough to try.

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“O h, by Jove, Cordelia! You have done all of this by yourself?” Penelope gasped as she stepped into Cordelia’s greenhouse, her neck craning as she looked this way and that.

“Oh, that is exactly the reaction that I had been hoping for!” Cordelia said with a happy clap. “I have been working on finishing it for over a week now just to make sure that everything is exactly where it needs to be.”

“Your hard work has certainly paid off!” Eleanor continued as they moved further into the room.

Cordelia stopped by the doors of the greenhouse, watching her dear friends move into the transformed space. She had not yet been able to replace all of the glass ceiling panels, but everything else felt almost renewed. All of the rust and tarnish had been scrubbed from the brass fixtures, and the spiral staircase to the back of the greenhouse that led up to the second floor was replaced. She wished to fill the whole place with flowers from everywhere that she could think of. She had managed to pot and fill so many different variations as it was!

In the main part of the greenhouse, positioned around the massive tree that dominated the space, was a small collection of tea carts and circular tables. Each was decorated to reflect a different flower and color scheme while the tea carts were covered in aromatic blends of tea and steaming pots of water, along with various finger foods. She had wanted to go all out for her dear friends and the looks of shock and awe on their faces was everything that she had wanted.

“Please, feel free to look around as you see fit. Careful with the orchids in the back,

they have been a little sensitive lately. Tea?” Cordelia offered helpfully and moved to sit at one of the tables herself. Matilde stepped forward right away to start placing biscuits and small sandwiches on a plate for Cordelia as well as poured her a floral blended tea that put her right at ease. Which was good, because Cordelia was starting to speak a touch too quickly, allowing herself to become flustered.

“I simply do not know how you have turned this old place into... this...” Mary gushed as she sat down beside Cordelia. “Of course, I saw you hurrying in and out every day, hem soaked in mud, and I had not wished to distract you, but I will not deny being powerfully curious!”

“I know that my hands-on approach is not always appropriate, but I cannot deny the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that comes from a hard job well done,” Cordelia answered as she sipped her tea. If only her mother could have been able to be here to see it. While Lavinia never seemed to care much about what Cordelia planted, or the names of flowers, she was always there to listen and nod along. It had been a very hard choice not to invite her, but she did not wish to make her friends uncomfortable and she knew how Lavinia had come to be whenever she was feeling as if she were not the center of attention at all times. Perhaps it was simply her being a bad daughter, or selfish, but she did not wish to have this greenhouse tainted with any more negative memories. Not when she had worked so hard to turn it back into something of a respite.

Maybe, just maybe, someday Dorian would be willing to come in here with her and feel happy, instead of consumed by the bad things that had happened to him in his past.

“I do not care what is, or is not fashionable when this is the result! I have never seen so many colors in one place before!” Eleanor answered before taking her seat and pulling a pastry toward herself. “What does your husband think of all of this?”

Mary and Cordelia exchanged glances, and Cordelia shifted the topic with her answer. “Well, I am hoping that when I invite him to join me here, he will be so overwhelmed by the beauty that he will not hear me tell him that I wish to raise my own bees as well.”

“Oh, how exciting! Bees are so pretty.” Marina was the only one to love all animals, even insects.

“Bees!” Penelope shuddered. “Whatever for!”

“To pollinate the flowers of course!”

“You wish to handle them yourself? I cannot handle even the thought of them buzzing around me, let alone touching them!”

“Well, there are certainly protective garments to wear.”

Mary snorted. “I beg your pardon; I was merely envisioning the vein in my brother’s neck bulging from stress at the thought of you having bees here.”

“Oh, is he the overprotective sort? How sweet, he does not wish you stung! I cannot blame him,” Penelope added, taking a bite of a strawberry.

“I do not think there is any world where I could be comfortable touching bees!” Eleanor interjected with a soft shudder.

“They are simply misunderstood, is all! They are hard little workers,” Marina continued.

“I have a book about them, should anyone be curious,” said Cordelia.

Mary snorted. “Is that why you were climbing all over the library muttering about horticulture?”

The conversation flowed quickly, all of the women speaking over one another as they added in their thoughts on their favorite flowers, their own hobbies, and the things that they liked and disliked until the tea carts were nearly empty and the sun was starting to climb lower in the sky. An afternoon absolutely well spent—at least until Eleanor spoke next.

“Oh, how pretty it is going to be when you have a little one of your own running around here. I bet they will have the natural green thumb that you do, Cordelia.”

She meant no harm by the words, of course. Cordelia knew that her friend would never say anything to intentionally hurt her. She also had no idea that the duke had no intention of having children. No, only Mary knew that. But what was the point of keeping pointless secrets? They were her friends, after all.

Cordelia nodded, tracing the rim of her teacup with the pad of her finger. “Dorian does not wish for children, actually.” A small bubble of hope rose in her chest. She could not help it. It was something that she had been thinking about over and over again but did not dare to voice out loud. “Or, well, he did not... I do not know if that was simply because he did not know me all that well yet, or if it is truly because he is opposed to children. I will not deny that I keep hoping the closer that we get...”

Mary shook her head. “Oh! This is my brother you are speaking about! Please, spare my ears the details!”

All women laughed, even as Penelope leaned in closer. “But you are... consummating, right? Would not a child result naturally from laying with your husband?”

Cordelia flushed a deep red; she could feel it. “Well, of course, I—”

“I beg of you, please do not finish that sentence,” Mary groaned.

Cordelia could not help but laugh. “I just mean to say that maybe he will change his mind about children. Perhaps he was just afraid of the prospect of being a father.”

Eleanor nodded and suppressed a giggle. “It is normal for a man to be a touch apprehensive about such things.”

“It is true, it is always said that a woman becomes a mother when she is pregnant, but a man does not truly feel a father until he holds his child in his arms for the first time. Trust me, Rhysand was like that,” Penelope assured her.

Cordelia nodded, hoping that maybe that would be the case but she was not entirely certain.

“I have always desired a large family of my own, and I know that if he allows himself to be, he would be a wonderful father,” Cordelia explained absently as she accepted another cup of tea.

“Do you truly feel that way?” Marina asked gently.

Cordelia’s brow furrowed. “Why do you ask?”

“Well,” Eleanor paused, glancing around at the other women as if looking for their support. “I do not mean to be crass or anything, but we have heard his reputation, same as you. We are well aware that he harmed his own father... so maybe...”

Cordelia’s eyes widened at the same time that Mary’s narrowed.

Before her sister-in-law had a chance to speak, Cordelia answered. “I understand your concern, truly, I do, but that is all a misunderstanding. Things are not like that, not exactly.”

Her friends did not look convinced. She wondered if she would have been if the positions were reversed. It was only natural for her to defend her husband. But Cordelia loved him, and she wanted her friends to see the side of him that she knew and loved. Like herself, they likely just needed to spend a little bit more time with him.

“A... misunderstanding that resulted in—” Penelope started, but a loud crash of the greenhouse doors interrupted their conversation.

Cordelia’s mother stood at the entrance to the greenhouse with her arms stretched over her head and a bright smile on her face.

When had she arrived?

The doors banged shut behind her, and Cordelia internally winced at the thought of the new glass panels being broken from her mother’s erratic motions. Even from across the greenhouse, she could see the ruddy color of her mother’s cheeks and the red tint to her chest.

“I see you started without me!” Lavinia said loudly, her hands lifting over her head as she dramatically waved to them all. “But I am here now!”

“Excuse me, ladies, this will only take a moment.” Cordelia hurried over to her mother, second-hand embarrassment flushing through her. “Mama, what are you doing here?”

“My daughter is having a tea gathering, and you thought that I would miss it?”

Lavinia giggled and reached between them to pinch Cordelia's nose between her fingers with a wet giggle.

"How did you even know about it?"

"Do... does my daughter not want me here?" Lavinia spoke with her voice raising with every word as she dramatically started to pout.

"That is not what I said, of course, I am happy that you are here, Mama," Cordelia answered, looking back over her shoulder for Matilde, who was at her side quickly.

"What are we gossiping about, ladies?" Lavinia shrugged out of Cordelia's hold and moved toward the table, her eyes narrowing as she was no doubt looking for wine. Lavinia seemed unable to even stay on her feet properly as she swayed this way and that. "Men? You have to be careful... most men are pigs. My husband was a pig. That is why he left me all alone."

Lavinia staggered over to the seat Cordelia had abandoned and sat in it.

"You must all listen to me; I know what I am speaking about," Lavinia said in a sage voice as she helped herself to whatever she wanted on all of the ladies' plates. "My husband left me all alone. Your husbands will leave you all alone, too. That is simply what men do. You cannot trust them!"

Cordelia wanted to cry.

Matilde squeezed her hand and took over the situation gently. "My lady? I believe that you were wanted in the parlor. Come, I shall assist you."

"Hm? Wanted? Oh, you... yes..." Lavinia said as she pushed another sandwich in her mouth before allowing Matilde to escort her back into the house.

Cordelia could have melted right into the floor.

Matilde wrapped a supportive arm around Lavinia, guiding her back toward the door—but Lavinia stopped beside her daughter. There was something that Cordelia could only read as remorse on her features as Lavinia frowned.

“I have done it again... have I not?” She asked softly, her voice barely audible.

Cordelia did not know what to say. Lavinia swayed in place, only to be caught better by Matilde’s steady, strong hold.

“Let us get you upstairs and a nice cup of tea, hm?”

But Lavinia would not move, not yet. “I have embarrassed you... again...”

Cordelia’s instinct was to decline that anything was wrong, to tell her mother that it was all fine and that she would handle everything like she always did. But the whole reason that she was here was so that they could take care of her... and she had been doing well on her drinking. At least, she had thought that she had.

No matter how she tried to speak, the words would not leave her lips. She did not wish to make her mother feel poorly for what had happened, but how could she deny the way she felt? She did not wish to lie to her mother.

“I am... I am sorry... Cordelia...” Lavinia reached up and cupped the side of her daughter’s face affectionately. “I can still see so much of your father in you sometimes...”

Cordelia steeled herself against the sudden onslaught of emotion.

Lavinia nodded to Matilde, and the pair of them left the greenhouse, leaving a weight

of feelings tangled into a knot in Cordelia's chest before she inhaled deeply, and turned to face her guests once more.

The last of Cordelia's guests had left after dinner, and Cordelia found herself the last one in the dining room. Dorian had not returned home all day. He had not been present for dinner, and she did not know how to take that. She did not know if she had upset him or if this was how things were to go after their little talk. She had thought that today was going to be the day.

He must have decided that what she asked him for was too much to handle.

In her mind, she had thought that they were going to go up to bed together tonight and that when he had finished making love to her, he would pull her into his arms and keep her there until the morning light. Had he decided to take it back already? She did not know how she was to handle that, if that was what had happened.

"Your Grace, you have a visitor," the butler announced.

"At this hour?" Cordelia glanced over her shoulder to the setting sun outside curiously. She had not been expecting anyone, and it certainly was uncommon for anybody to call upon her at this hour. She was of half a mind to deny the visitor given that her husband was not even here. "Who is it?"

"The Viscount of Debonaire, Your Grace."

Matthew? How unlike him to show up unannounced, and at such a late hour too. It must have been something very important that he wished to share with her to come here this late. "Very well, invite him in please."

The servant bowed and left the room. Cordelia looked over the empty dining table and wondered if she ought to call for dessert, cognac, or something given the room

that she was in. She could have taken the time to have the parlor prepared, perhaps, but she did not wish to keep him waiting.

When Matthew walked in, she stood to greet him. He wasted no time crossing the room and taking her hand; he brushed a polite kiss across her knuckles as he smiled brightly at her. "I am glad to see you, as always, Cordelia."

"And I you, Cousin, but I did not think that it would be at such an hour," she said as she invited him to sit, which he did—but it was strange that he chose to sit at the head of the table, directly where Dorian was meant to be.

"I understand that it is unorthodox but I have something to discuss with you that simply cannot wait," Matthew continued.

Cordelia could not help but laugh as she summoned one of the servants. "You sound so serious, Matthew. Wine? Port?"

Matthew started to shake his head and then stopped. "Either would be acceptable, thank you."

"See? Nothing needs to be so grave, right?" Cordelia let her elbow rest on the arm of her chair, her chin resting on her bent wrist.

"I am afraid what I am about to tell you is."

Part of her wanted to ignore whatever was about to come. The last time they had spoken, she had lost her temper more than she cared to admit. Given that he was once a great friend to her, she hoped that this was him coming to apologize to her so that they could put things back the way they were.

The servant placed the drinks on the table, but she did not touch hers. Matthew,

however, downed the whole thing in one gulp. Her eyes widened, but she said nothing.

“I have long struggled with whether or not I should bring this piece of information forward to you. It brings me no pleasure whatsoever to have to be the one to bring this news to you, but it is apparent to me now that your husband is too much of a coward to tell you the truth, and I will see you played the fool no longer,” Matthew said in one breath.

“Do not start this again, Matthew, I am not in the mood.” Cordelia sighed and sank back into her chair, crossing her legs. “I understand that you dislike my husband, you and half of the ton, but that does not give you the right to speak about him like this. He has not done anything to you to warrant this witch hunt you seem determined to hold against him.”

“How can you sit here and defend a man like that? You might have been forced to marry him, but you cannot play ignorant to the accusations against him! He is a murderer, Cordelia. If you are unwilling to keep yourself out of harm’s way, then I shall be forced to protect you from yourself as well,” Matthew said firmly.

So firmly, in fact, that Cordelia was slightly intimidated by how worked up he seemed to be. She had never seen him like that before. He certainly had never spoken to her in that tone. “I beg your pardon?”

What right did he have to pretend that he was the one who had the right to protect her? And where was he when her family needed him before?

Matthew’s jaw tightened. “Your husband killed your father, Cordelia. Has he admitted that to you yet?”

The comment was so far-fetched that she could not even believe it. It would have

been more feasible to hear that flowers were falling from the sky outside. “What?” Cordelia laughed. “You have truly gone mad. Honestly, I have heard enough.”

“Dorian is a ruthless, cruel man. He is a killer. He does not, and never will care about anything but himself,” Matthew continued with a serious expression.

Something about him speaking so informally about her husband truly got under her skin. It crawled deeper, making her more uncomfortable with each passing moment.

“Do you have proof?”

“Proof?” Matthew echoed.

“I know that you did not come uninvited into my home, to accuse my husband of such horrible things without evidence. I will see your proof now, or you are going to get out,” Cordelia said firmly, all hints of her smile gone.

“You are seriously not going to say anything else?” Matthew did not move as he spoke. “I have known you nearly your whole life, and you are just going to dismiss me like that?”

“So, you have no proof. You have come here uninvited at such a late hour to throw around baseless accusations about my husband. And, for what? Do you truly think of me as such a cloud-headed woman as to not have taken the time to properly get to know my husband? You are wrong. I certainly know him better than you ever shall. Now, go.”

Cordelia nodded her head toward the door, determined not to say another word. Could he truly not see how much his words were hurting her? He was one of her oldest and dearest friends, and to say such very hurtful things to her... it was like he was tearing their friendship apart, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“Listen to me, Cordelia. I do not like you being alone with that man. He is dangerous. If nobody else is willing to caution you away from him or is trying to shield the truth from you—he is responsible for your father’s death.” Matthew concluded as he rose from the chair. “If you do not believe me, ask him yourself.”

She glared at him, as he stood there waiting for her to buckle or to come to her senses. Had he really thought that he could say such things and she was just going to blindly believe him? Dorian had confessed things to her that made her understand him, and she certainly was not going to make light of that effort.

When it was clear that she was not going to budge in her stance, Matthew hissed and started to leave.

“Fine. Have it your way, Cordelia.”

He paused in the doorway and had the audacity to look at her with longing.

“I shall be waiting for you when you find out the truth but do not say I did not warn you. I can be a far better husband to you than him.”

Was that what this was about? Did he think that if he was the one to ruin her marriage, she was going to throw herself into his arms and beg and plead for him to help her? Was this just misplaced affection? Either way, he was hurting her. How could he choose to be so blind to the pain he was putting her in with such terrible accusations?

“Enough. Get out,” Cordelia hissed.

Matthew turned his heel and left Cordelia, sitting at the table with a head full of questions.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:04 am

“ I wondered if you were coming home tonight...” Cordelia’s sweet voice greeted Dorian when he staggered into her bedroom.

The hour was late, and it would have made perfect sense for her to have already been asleep. Despite the last vestiges of whiskey still soaking his mind, he had not meant to make her wait around for him. He had just needed to mentally sort through some things before he had been able to return to her.

There was absolutely nothing about the conversation that he was going to have with her that was going to be easy. He had made up his mind that this was going to be the right move for them, but it made nothing easier. Dorian pulled off his boots and started to undo his waistcoat. He was moving with deliberate slowness in an attempt to compose himself or think of the best way that he should mention thighs... where to even start. If he was being wholly honest, he was stalling.

“You missed quite an eventful evening,” Cordelia continued when he did not speak. “Though, that might be for the best, considering one of the events was less than pleasant.”

Oh, he had missed her tea, had he not? He had been so distracted, so consumed with his own thoughts that he had been careless about it. Now he would have to make that up to her, too.

Dorian glanced at his wife; the way she was holding the blankets clutched to her chest, waiting for him to join her, or to say something. She looked so very beautiful like that, with her hair loose around her shoulders and her cream-colored nightgown slipping off her shoulder just ever so slightly. It would be easy to go over there and

crawl into bed with her. Even simpler to affix his lips to hers and seduce her, to quiet her troubles with his tongue and hands until she was writhing under him. But, if he did, then he knew that he would not tell her anything.

She was so painfully beautiful that it made his heart clench.

“What happened?” He asked, hoping he did not slur his words. It had been... more than a little liquid courage that he had needed.

“My mother invited herself to my tea party, for one,” she said as she shifted in bed so that her legs were in front of her, her arms wrapped loosely around her knees. “And then Matthew came to call after dinner.”

Dorian paused, his hands untucking his shirt and quickly thinking better of it. “Debonaire?”

“Mmhm,” Cordelia agreed with a hum.

As if Dorian had not made his feelings toward the man perfectly clear on all fronts. At least, he had thought that he had. “What did he want?”

“Honestly, I do not have a proper answer for that question,” she started with a sigh, her eyes seeming to follow his movements as he loosened the fit of his clothes but did not wholly remove them. “He said the strangest things.”

“Such as?”

“Well,” she laughed humorlessly. “First, he tried to convince me that you murdered my father.”

Dorian’s shoulders seized. How was that possible? A cold sort of dread froze his

lungs and threatened to stop his heart in his chest as she continued speaking.

“I told him that he was being ridiculous and threw him out, of course.” Cordelia shrugged one shoulder, smiling until she seemed to realize that he was not smiling back. He could not even blink as he stared at her. Here it was, the moment and opportunity; it was now or never. He had no idea how Debonaire knew or if he had merely been grasping at straws that happened to be factual. Whatever the reason was, he could not lie to her anymore.

“Dorian? What is the matter?”

“He is correct.”

“What?” Cordelia rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Dorian, that is not funny. You know how sensitive of a subject that is.”

Dorian nodded, his focus shifting to his hands as he took a seat on her bed close to where she was. “I am being perfectly serious.”

“No. You are not,” Cordelia insisted as she scooted away from him.

There it was, the wary look full of caution on her face that he had been dreading. Next would be the outright horror and demanding to never see nor hear from him ever again. He deserved it all.

“I am afraid that I am, Cordelia. I cannot lie to you any longer. I apologize for being dishonest with you about such things. I came here tonight to tell you the truth, to tell you that I have fallen in love with you,” Dorian said softly, feeling a touch rawer than he had expected to feel.

“What... what are you saying?”

“I am directly responsible for your father’s death, but I had no other choice. I am sorry that his passing caused you pain. Believe me, that was not the intention, but... let me explain,” Dorian continued. He struggled to speak directly and without too much inflection, but he found himself nearly choking up at the words coming out of his mouth.

“I cannot hear this.” Cordelia shook her head, her hands lifting to cover her ears. “I will not hear any of this!”

Dorian shifted, pressing a knee into the bed as he pulled her arms from her ears. “You can, and you must. I will only say this once, so please lend me your full attention. Then, if you wish never to see me... if you...” Dorian could not get the words out, he feared the outcome of this conversation far too much. “Just listen.”

Cordelia’s breath was sucked in so deeply that her chest heaved.

Dorian mustered his courage and started to speak. “Two years ago, I was leaving a pub in some back alleyway of London in the hours before dawn. I was on foot, staggering through the streets, hoping that the cold morning air and the long walk would help sober me up enough before I got home. I had not made it more than halfway home before the sounds of distress came screaming at me from another alleyway. A woman yelling for a man to get off of her, to leave her alone, punctuated by soft sobs...” Dorian trailed off as he noticed Cordelia shudder. “Well, I did what anyone would do—I ran to her aid. I might be a terrible man, but I will not stand by and allow a woman to be harmed if there is anything that I can do to stop it.”

Dorian paused, the memory of that night two years ago flashing so vividly in his head. No doubt, since it often was a focal point of his nightmares, that he was destined to keep reliving it. The poor barmaid was shoved up against the brick wall, her nails torn and bloody from the struggle as the man shoved her face against the wall. He had hiked her skirts up over her rear, exposing her to the world as he worked

on opening the front of his trousers when Dorian arrived.

He had seen red.

“The young woman was being accosted by your father. I did not know who he was at the time, but I ran into the alleyway, grabbed him by his shirt, and shoved him off her,” Dorian continued.

Her father’s mocking laughter still echoed in his mind. Dorian would not tell Cordelia how he offered for Dorian to wait his turn as Dorian pulled the woman’s skirts down where they ought to be and told her to run. That was when her father’s expression had soured. The moment Dorian had deprived the man of his alleged ‘prize’ something in him had snapped. He had charged at Dorian like he was more animal than man. Dorian had barely caught the glint of something metal flashing in the moonlight before the burning hot pain in his stomach.

Dorian cleared his throat carefully, giving himself a minute to speak. He dared a glance at Cordelia, and the tears ran freely down her cheeks as she kept her hands firmly clamped over her mouth to let him finish speaking.

“We fought, and he pulled a knife. I shoved him away from me... the marquess fell back into the wall and hit the corner of the brick.”

The sound of his skull hitting brick was one that he would never forget. The man had gone from a near-snarling rage to being off balance to sounding indignant, and then... nothing. The marquess’ eyes had unfocused as his fingers twitched, and he slid down the wall slowly, his eyes wholly unseeing by the time he hit the ground.

“I am ashamed of the fact that I ran instead of taking proper accountability for my actions. I should have... maybe then I could have arranged for better care for you and your mother from the beginning. But I disappeared instead, trying to keep as good of

an eye on the pair of you as I could from a distance. When it all happened, I never imagined that he would have been a titled man, let alone a man with a family. When I learned who he was...”

Dorian shook his head and scrubbed his hands up and down his face. He had taken the cowardly way out, in his opinion. He had panicked and run. The woman had never come forward with what had almost happened to her, to his knowledge. Nobody else would have had any cause to know that he was even in that alleyway.

“No matter how it happened, nor my intentions, does anything to change the fact that his death is in my hands. I am nothing more than the murderer that everyone presumes me to be.”

With his story concluded, Dorian waited. He had no idea how much time must have passed between his final words and when the tears stopped pouring down her face and over her fingers. He longed for her to say something, to do something, anything.

“Cordelia,” Dorian said when he could not take the silence for a moment longer. He turned toward her, his hand reaching—but she flinched away.

“Do not touch me,” she hissed, her eyes still brimmed with unshed tears. “You promised me that you would not lie. And you have done nothing else since the day I met you.”

Dorian flinched, out of all of the things that he had expected her to say, it was not that.

“I—I did not know how you would react; this is not exactly the ordinary sort of secret.”

“The scar on your stomach is not from the greenhouse then, like you claimed that it

was, but it was from my... when he..." Her breath hitched, wholly unable to say the words, and he could not blame her. Dorian had been worried that she would call him a liar in the capacity that he had made up the story or that she was going to try to defend her late father or something of the sort.

"Cordelia, I—"

"No lies!" Cordelia choked as she swallowed back the tears in favor of what seemed to be rage. "You had the nerve to marry me, to bring me here! All the while sitting there, giving my mother false hope of stories or closure when you have known this whole time."

"I did it to help you."

"Help?" Cordelia asked incredulously. "Get out of my room."

There it was, the look that he had been dreading this whole time—the look of pure disappointment and heartbreak that she was finally seeing him for the monster he truly was. All he had done was prolong the inevitable.

"Get out!" Cordelia sobbed. "I never wish to see you again!"

Something in Dorian's chest broke, seeing her shudder like that, the pure desperation in her voice as he pushed off of her bed. What else could he do? While every instinct begged to pull her into his arms and make it all better, he knew that would never be possible.

Dorian left her room and softly shut the door behind her.

He heard her sobs all the way down the hall.

Sleep was an impossible goal for Cordelia.

Outside of her window, the sky was still and quiet. She had sat in her window seat for a good long while, watching the stars above her. She must have played the conversation with her husband in her mind at least a dozen times over. It did not make better sense the twelfth time she had replayed it any more than it had when it had first happened.

For hours, she had been drifting in and out of sleep. It felt as if every time she closed her eyes, she drifted back into the nightmare that normally only plagued her when it rained. She kept waking herself, over and over, with the intention of pushing the nightmare away. Yet, it just kept coming back, pulling her further and more deeply into the nightmare.

First, she was lost in the storm.

Then, she was lost in the maze.

Every time, her childhood self would start screaming, pleading for help, and wishing to be rescued. She woke up each time, only to fall fitfully right back where she left off. Hours of restlessness as the moon moved further across the sky.

Most troubling of all, was when she found herself in the clearing in the middle of the gardens.

She was looking up at the sky in her young body, and the sky seemed so far, and so high up over her and such a plain gray. The rain had stopped, it was like the scene that she found herself in was frozen in time, the moment still. Impossibly, her adult self walked behind her own smaller frame. Each step perfectly mirrored. Surreal as it was to see herself from outside of her own body as it was, it felt as if she could see more of the nightmare than she had ever been able to before.

Up ahead was their gazebo, the focal point of so many of her parent's parties. Mama liked to have her tea out in the gazebo more than anything else. But, the person up ahead of her had frightened her so deeply last night that she had had this nightmare, and no one was there to rescue her.

The body of the second person had been hidden behind the other. The man's broad shoulders nearly obscured the woman's body from view entirely until she could see hands, pushing at the man's shoulders—a scream that was just barely hidden under the clap of thunder as the nightmare suddenly spurred right back into motion.

Rain poured down as the couple in front of her struggled with one another. The man's hand lifted, striking the side of the woman's face, and she collapsed to the ground in a heap. Cordelia could hear herself yelling, screaming even louder and the man spun, looking at her with wide, frightened eyes.

Cordelia woke in a cold sweat, and could not sleep again.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:04 am

“A re you sure that you want to do this?” Penelope asked as the pair of women stood outside a pub labeled only as ‘The Boot’. The wooden sign hung above the wood, swinging in the light breeze. Cordelia stood with a small scrap of paper clutched in her hand tightly, blinking at the door as she tried to come up with an answer to that very question.

Getting even the name out of the pub from Matthew had been difficult. He had tried to stand there and gloat, to boast that he had been right all along even though Cordelia’s only words to her cousin had been that she wanted the name of the pub and how he came to have the information that he did. He had been rather glib on his sources, and she still was inclined to disbelieve him just because he refused to be open and honest with her.

Neither he nor her husband seemed to be any better than the other.

Thankfully, Penelope had been willing to come with her to find out the truth of the matter for herself. There was no guarantee that the woman she was looking for was even still in employ here, but she had been given a name and she had to try. No matter how uncomfortable it might be. She deserved the truth.

“Yes, I am certain.”

“I do not love the idea of spending longer in this pub than we have to,” Penelope admitted in a small voice.

“I agree.” Cordelia nodded and boldly walked into the pub. She had never been inside of such a place before. Nearly everything was furnished in wood, with little to

nothing on the walls. There was a small lifted stage area that was presently unoccupied, but she was certain that it had lively music in the evenings. The single bar had a surly looking gentleman with a long beard who glared at them without any semblance of a proper greeting. Penelope pulled closer to her side as Cordelia looked around the room.

“We are looking for a Miss Rebecca, is she here?”

The man behind the counter did not pause cleaning the glass in his hand long enough to speak. Instead, only his small eyes drifted to the side door that must have led to the kitchens. Thankfully, a woman walked out only a moment later.

“Miss Rebecca? Who is asking?” The woman demanded the moment she was in the room.

“I am,” Cordelia answered, but she was slightly put off by the sarcastic tone that the woman was using. Why was she so defensive?

“And you are?”

“I... well. I am the Duchess of Davenport.”

It felt strange to use her formal title in such a place as this.

“I have no business with no titled ladies.”

“Are you Rebecca? I promise I only need a moment of your time. Please, I just have a couple of questions to ask you,” Cordelia explained, but the woman was not convinced.

“It will cost ya, Your Grace .”

Cordelia and Penelope exchanged a glance. This was fully out of their depth, but what choice did they truly have if they wanted answers? “All right.”

Rebecca nodded them toward a dingy-looking table. Penelope seemed hesitant to sit, but neither wished to be rude so they joined her.

“If it is money that you are after...” Cordelia started, but the woman shook her head.

“I do not want your money, this is putting me at risk. I want something that matters,” she explained flatly.

Cordelia pulled off her pearl earrings, holding them out to the woman in front of her. “Is this enough?”

Rebecca took them, eyed them, and then put them in her pocket. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, I just hoped to ask you about something that might be rather uncomfortable that happened two years ago...”

Rebecca’s brow arched, clearly not understanding what she was referring to. Cordelia reached over, took Penelope’s hand and squeezed it tightly to give herself strength to keep talking.

“A lot of things happened two years ago; you are going to have to be more specific. Or else I have work to do.”

“Two years ago, a man attacked you in an alleyway... or, I was told that was what had happened. I do not mean to bring up a painful memory, but I was hoping that you could shed some light on the subject. You see, the man who interrupted the attack—”

“Do you know him?” Rebecca asked quickly. “I did not get his name. Do you know where he is? I have wanted to... thank him for what he did for me that night.”

All hesitation and pretense of detachment was gone from the woman’s face instantly.

But she had just confirmed that she had, indeed, nearly been taken advantage of in the alleyway. Dorian had told her the truth. The sour feeling in her stomach only grew as she sat here, hoping that it would magically be the wrong man or a case of mistaken identity or something of the sort.

“Well, he was—is—my husband and I...”

Rebecca pulled her pearl earrings right back out of her pocket and practically forced them back into Cordelia’s hands. “Why did you not say so earlier, Your Grace? Please, I cannot express how grateful I am. I do not... the man had come out of nowhere. I do not think of myself as a woman surprised by much but that night, my whole life could have gone in a very bad direction if your husband had not been there to save me. He is nothing less than a hero.”

Cordelia could not help but smile at that. “The man who attacked you, I am not sure if you know... but he died.”

It was hard to speak about her father like this, even though she was not naming him.

“Good. That rat bastard deserved what he got then,” Rebecca continued.

“They claimed that his death was a suicide... do you have any idea why they would have thought that?” Cordelia asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Rebecca exchanged glances with the bartender, who nodded once. “When I ran away, Moe was the first person that found me after... I told him what had happened. He did

not want anything that could tie the incident to the pub, of course. He went back with me to make sure that it was handed... so... he made it look like he had taken his own life... so that nobody could come looking around for us, or me..." She trailed off, knowing that what she was confessing to was a whole other crime in and of itself. But at least it gave Cordelia some closure. "We were not too certain if it had been an accident... or if the man had done it... it did not seem right to have that man get in trouble for saving me when he did not have to."

Cordelia did not know what to say. Penelope squeezed her hand more tightly in support.

"I... wait here, I have a letter that I would be honored for you to pass along on my behalf," Rebecca continued quickly.

"Of... of course," Cordelia stammered and was frozen as the woman hurried out of the room to fetch the letter.

"Are you all right?" Penelope asked gently.

"No."

It was the only answer that she could give with any honesty. Her father had attacked this poor woman. It was too much. It was entirely too much to fit in her mind.

"It would be strange if you were," Penelope agreed, pulling closer to her as Rebecca came back downstairs and pressed the letter into Cordelia's hand with another bow of gratitude.

"Here, Your Grace. I had the vicar write this for me, and I kept it just in case."

"I shall be sure to pass this on, on your behalf. I promise."

“Thank you,” she agreed. “Any time that you or your husband come here, drinks will be on me. All right?”

Cordelia smiled softly. She doubted that Rebecca would feel the same if she knew that the man who had almost attacked her was actually her father. “I must be going. Thank you for speaking with me.”

The pair of women left the pub quickly. Cordelia did not know if she was ever going to be able to process this properly.

The other question nagging at the forefront of her mind—how was she going to tell her mother? Lavinia was not going to take the news well. Assuming, of course, that she even believed her in the first place.

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When they arrived back at the duke's manor, it took almost little to no convincing Lavinia to escort her back to their home in London. She claimed that she was feeling nostalgic, but in truth, she did not wish to have either of them under the same roof as the duke until Cordelia could sort out her feelings. Besides, with how much her mother had been grieving lately, there was no promise that she would not attack the duke herself. The whole ride from their manor back to their home, Cordelia said not a single word. She merely peered out of the carriage window and let the scenery attempt to calm her mind. She felt as if she were grasping at straws or looking for evidence in her memory that might not even exist.

Some part of her knew that it was the truth the moment Dorian had told her. But why? Why had she not outright refused him? If somebody had said such slander against Dorian himself, she would not have stood for it and instantly rebuked the person. But... maybe it was the way that he had been speaking to her that was so raw and real... but then again... perhaps she knew that there was something off about her father.

Cordelia mourned her father, of course, she did, but not to the same extent that her mother had.

Until now, she had just assumed that it was because her mother had lost the love of her life, and Lavinia simply was capable of feeling things more deeply than Cordelia must have been herself. And yet, that was not right either.

"Are you going to be so silent the whole time? My head is pounding. You did not bring me anything to drink, not even a hint of wine with breakfast, and now you are leaving me alone with my thoughts? Have some mercy on your poor mother,"

Lavinia whined, rubbing at her temples as she spoke.

At first, Cordelia was going to rise to the bait. She could have pulled a random topic from out of nowhere that would have appeased her mother but then when she found out the truth, she would only be mad at Cordelia for waiting. They were presently in such a small space for her to share such volatile information. She did not wish to break her mother's heart either.

"What is the matter with you? Has the cat got your tongue, daughter?" Lavinia asked as she crossed her arms over her chest like a petulant child.

Cordelia closed her eyes and focused on her breathing for a moment.

"Honestly, Cordi! Dispense with the dramatics!"

When Cordelia opened her eyes again, her mother was halfway to fuming. "I found out some information about Father that I do not think that you are going to like."

Lavinia huffed. "Oh, is that all? I could have told you that already. Most of the things that man does vex me. He did leave me here—"

"All alone. I know, Mama." Cordelia leaned forward, letting herself sway in time with the carriage. "I have learned that he did not take his own life after all."

Now, she had her mother's complete and utter attention. Lavinia seemed to sober instantly and was more the mother that Cordelia had known her to be.

"Do you remember the night that I got lost in the hedge mazes in the rain? I could not have been more than eight or so I believe. It was night, and I was wandering in the maze for hours..."

Lavinia nodded. “And you had nightmares for months after that.”

Cordelia was not going to dispute that or inform her that in truth, she had been afflicted with nightmares as a result of that night even to this day. “I always wondered how I had found my way back inside. There has been this gap in my memory from being terrified in the maze and then I remember being in a warm bath, and then in my bed.”

It was so strange to see Lavinia so still and quiet these days.

“All morning I have not been able to get the memories out of my head. I just keep thinking about it over and over again.”

“What did you find out about your father? Who has come forward with information?” Lavinia asked flatly.

“On that night, he died because someone pushed him, and he hit his head. It was done in defense of the woman that he was attempting to force himself upon,” Cordelia said quickly, fresh tears starting to swim again.

Lavinia scoffed and shook her head. “No, I do not pretend to know your motivation for such lies but—” and then Lavinia looked at her, really looked at her, saw the distress on her face and the unshed tears in her eyes and silenced herself.

“Recently... I have come to remember some parts of that night in the maze that I had been choosing to forget all of this time. It was not because of how scary the thunderstorm was, or at least it was not completely that, but it was because I saw Father with another woman. My governess with her bodice ripped and Father behind her... I was too young to understand what I was seeing. I did not know how to process it... Father had to let my governess go so that he could attend to me, and she ran...”

Lavinia's eyes widened. It had been a topic of heated debate in their house as to why Cordelia's governess had simply disappeared overnight. They had blamed her for why Cordelia had been out of bed in the first place. They thought that she had run away due to shame for her actions. Her father had claimed that.

Her mother switched over to where she was sitting, and pulled her into her arms, holding Cordelia tightly against her chest while she finally released everything that she had been keeping trapped inside of her chest. Every emotion that she had been attempting to repress since speaking to Rebecca seemed to overflow as she allowed herself to be held. She did not move until the carriage had stopped.

When the footman opened the carriage door, Lavinia squeezed Cordelia's shoulder, gathered her skirts in a huff, and stomped off toward the front door.

"Mama? Mama, where are you going so quickly?" Cordelia called after her, hurrying to catch up.

"I need to speak with the housekeeper. There is not a single thing that has happened under this roof that she is not aware of. If your father was being sly, then she would have had to hide it from me," Lavinia seethed through her teeth.

How long had it been since she had seen her mother in quite a tizzy like this one?

Up the stairs and through the house, Lavinia hunted until she could corner the poor housekeeper, the one that had been with them for nearly Cordelia's entire life. The woman was working on changing the linens out in one of the many spare rooms.

"My lady! Your Grace! What an unexpected pleasure!"

Lavinia was having none of it. Her hands were firmly planted on her hips as she narrowed her eyes. "You and I have some talking to do, Agatha. Do we not?"

Agatha cast an almost panicked glance from her to Cordelia and back again. “Is something the matter, ma’am?”

“I should say so! I find out that my housekeeper has been keeping things from me about my husband. How many years have you served this family, Agatha? I know that I can be a handful but you are more than fairly compensated! What reason could you possibly have to keep such things from me?” Lavinia nearly shouted.

Cordelia knew that, since the duke had taken over the day-to-day affairs, nothing had been anything but fairly compensated, if not generously. At least Agatha had the decency to look embarrassed over it.

“I am not sure... that I know to what you are referring,” Agatha started, her voice far softer now.

“My husband is dead! You have no reason to defend him! I demand to know the truth!”

Cordelia wanted to assure her that they merely needed closure and confirmation. She wanted to tell her that that was all there was to the story but she was not certain what her mother was going to do after she learned more.

Agatha clearly was reluctant to speak.

“Please, we just need to put the pieces together, Agatha. Any information that you might have that could—”

“Tell me!” Lavinia yelled.

Cordelia whipped to the side, a default apology ready to roll from her lips about her mother’s behavior—but she was crying. Maybe it was the tears that moved Agatha to

Speak; it did not truly matter what the cause was because she started to tell them what had happened all of those years ago.

“I was grateful when the master of the house no longer came home,” she admitted softly, keeping a wary eye on the two of them. “I always pitied you, mistress, for the master was not a virtuous man.”

Lavinia staggered, a single tear falling as she slumped heavily onto the bed that Agatha had only half finished making and hung her head, but she did not stop Agatha from speaking.

“Please, go on,” Cordelia answered as she moved to take her mother’s hand supportively.

Agatha hesitated for only a moment longer before speaking. “The rate at which we had to hire and fire new maids here had been... high, as you are well aware, my lady. Those that were caught with him... those who were found unwed and with child as a result of his philandering... the lord attempted to hide it, of course, but you know how the staff can speak... the young petty women that were hired and would leave with heavy pockets...”

Cordelia was going to be sick.

“...with child?” Lavinia asked.

“Yes ma’am, I never wished to be the one to tell you... I am sorry, I know that it was not my place.”

Lavinia waved her hand dismissively as she stared hollowly forward. He had been operating behind their backs this whole time, pretending to be something that he simply was not. Every memory that she had ever had of her father was going to be

forever tainted now.

“I cannot believe that I had been so blind. I feel like such a fool!” Lavinia muttered. It was like her whole demeanor shifted, changing right in front of Cordelia’s eyes. “Well, I spent so many months now calling him a pig, but I had no idea just how correct I had been this whole time. I am done ruining my health for a man like him!”

Lavinia stood, strolling out of the room with purpose and quickly moving into her own bedroom. Cordelia watched in silence as her mother pulled bottle after bottle out of their hiding places. She followed her mother mutely through the whole house as she went from place to place, gathering bottles until her arms were full. She kept depositing them in the kitchen and then going to fetch more. It took at least half an hour to gather everything up and carry it all down into the kitchen.

Lavinia shoved a bottle into Cordelia’s hand and uncorked her own, dumping the liquor and wine in the buckets. Slowly, somewhat more hesitantly than her mother was, Cordelia started to do the same thing.

“I am never going to drink or cry ever again from this day forward. Mark my words, Cordi.”

Cordelia could not help but smile. She certainly hoped her mother’s declaration was true.

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“Your Grace?” Agatha asked several hours later. Cordelia and Lavinia had been sitting together, swapping stories and going over theories and such for hours now.

She felt almost like a child again, being so close to her mother. While it was such horrible news that had brought them to this state, perhaps there would be a positive ending in sight.

“Yes?” Cordelia answered with a gentle smile. There was still so much that they needed to go over, so many events from their history that were only slowly starting to add up and fall into place, and likely would take many months to come... but at least the pair of them had closure now. At least they knew that her father had not taken his own life and abandoned them. She also knew that Dorian had not even meant to kill him; it had been self-defense.

“The duke has been waiting outside for you, Your Grace.”

Cordelia did not know if she was ready to speak to her husband just yet. It was not surprising to her in the slightest that he had come all this way to meet with her when he realized that she was not home. Dorian had been waiting outside for hours now, having only asked that she allow him to explain. “Perhaps I have punished him enough for one day?”

There was just so much that they all needed to speak about, so many things to be covered.

“Shall I invite him inside? It is starting to rain, after all. The butler and I agree that there is a storm brewing on the horizon. I predict that the storm shall hit before

nightfall.” Agatha advised softly. She had never been wrong about the weather before. At least not when it came to predicting when storms were going to happen. She had come to rely on that in her youth to help keep her from panicking.

If there was going to be a storm tonight... she certainly did want Dorian here. The nightmares were never half as bad when she was around. “Very well, bring him in,” Cordelia answered, and Agatha left them. With weary arms and tired legs, she pushed herself up off of the floor. “Do I look all right?”

Lavinia smiled up at her with a nod. “At least you managed to marry a man with virtue, my dear. Sort of.”

Cordelia could feel herself blushing as she pressed the back of her hand into her cheek. “I shall be in the parlor, then, if you need me?”

Cordelia made it halfway to the parlor when Agatha came rushing back toward her, meeting in the middle of the hall, looking distressed right as the sky seemed to open up. A shock of thunder clapped, and Agatha frowned. “His Grace seems to have left...”

“He left?”

That was not like him in the slightest.

“Well, I mean, he is not outside anymore, but his horse is still tethered out front...”

A knot of dread curled in her stomach as lightning flashed outside of the window. It was so much more than mere panic over the storm that plagued her now.

Where could he have gone without a horse or carriage in this weather?

“Please tell me that you at least have some sort of grand plan for all of this?” Dorian asked his captor.

Matthew paced back and forth in front of where Dorian was bound, seated, and his arms tied behind his back. Matthew had found Dorian in front of Cordelia’s family home and forced him into his carriage at pistol point. At the time, it had not even occurred to him to fight him on it. Cordelia was finished with him, that much was obvious. She had refused to allow him into her house, not even to let him explain, and he could not imagine what she thought of him.

“You know that you will not be walking out of this room alive. Do you not?” Matthew warned him, still pacing.

Dorian’s brow arched. “Are you planning to talk me to death, or will you just get on with it?”

“You are that eager to die? How cowardly!” Matthew laughed.

Cowardly had nothing to do with it, and he was certain of that. “I do not care what happens to me anymore. If I cannot have Cordelia, if she hates me... then what is the point?”

Matthew scoffed. “As if you do not deserve her hate? You are nothing more than a dirty murdering bastard!”

“And yet, here you are, wishing to reduce yourself to my level.” Dorian sighed. It was all too ironic for him. This was a waste of time. If he was to die here, if that was truly Debonaire’s plan, then he ought to get on with it as quickly as possible so that he did not have to waste his last moments. It was already bad enough that Debonaire, of all people, was going to be the last thing on earth that he saw.

“I shall never understand what she sees in you,” Matthew scoffed, stopping to squat down in front of where Dorian knelt.

“Are you looking for a list of reasons why I am superior to you?” Dorian prodded, knowing very well that it was only going to serve to make him even angrier over the situation. “Or is it that you have no plan? Were you hoping to kidnap my wife instead? Did you think that abducting her would somehow make her choose you? She could have, and she chose me.”

It might not be the wisest thing that Dorian had ever done, provoking such a madman, but he was not going to meet his death as a coward or with any fear in his heart. Cordelia had become so important to him, his everything, and now that she knew what he truly was... well, what was the point of anything else?

“For now. I have told her the truth, you know! I have told her what you have done and she is never going to trust you again. I am merely doing her a favor by hurrying along the process. I will save her from your loveless marriage and then when I swoop in to support her, she will be only too grateful for me!” Matthew finished with a grin. He pressed the tip of his pistol just under Dorian’s chin as he spoke.

So that was his end game all along? He thought that he could handle a woman like Cordelia? How very unlikely. If anything was to be said about Debonaire, then it was certainly something to be said about the sheer ego that the man possessed.

“Have you ever even held a pistol before today?” Dorian pressed further.

“Do you really think that it is wise of you to continue pushing me like this?” Matthew sneered, his teeth clenching as the vein in his forehead started to stand out prominently against his pale skin during his rage.

“If you are going to kill me, then do it!” Dorian sighed, allowing his eyes to drift

closed. “If you think that you have what it takes to pull the trigger anyway.”

If he pushed the man hard enough, then perhaps it would actually just end it all.

It would be doing him a favor. It would be what was best for Cordelia to be free and able to live any life that she chose. Matthew could not have been more wrong about the loveless marriage. He was absolutely head over heels in love with his wife. So in love with her, in fact, that he could not accept a future where she was not his. If he could not have her... he deserved death for the crimes that he had committed in this life.

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“Dorian! Dorian!” Cordelia shouted in what seemed like a futile attempt. She could hardly hear her own voice as the rain continued pouring down in sheets.

Oh, Dorian, where are you?

Overhead, the storm raged on, the sky an angry mixture of blue and purple that was punctuated by yellow and white bolts of lightning every few moments. Cordelia was half soaked through with rain as her poor horse fought against the rapidly strengthening winds. It was hard to see in front of her, but she had to find Dorian. If something had happened to him because she had refused him entry into her home, she would simply never forgive herself.

But the man that she loved was nowhere to be found.

How could they fix things and have even the slightest chance at their happily ever after if he was gone? She knew in her heart that he would not have left her doorstep by choice. He was far too stubborn of a man to simply give up like that. He would at least want to hear her first. Was she truly so wrong about him?

She had asked the footmen and the stable hands, who had pointed her toward where they had thought that they saw another carriage headed. It had to be wherever Dorian was. There was no time to waste.

Perhaps he managed to find shelter here?

The wind was freezing when she rode into the courtyard of Matthew's home. She dismounted and pulled her horse toward the barn, roughly tying him and hoping for

the best as she took off toward the main house. Her dress clung to her legs as she went, making moving difficult as she entered through the unlocked servant's quarters.

“Matthew!” She called up the stairs. The whole house was asleep, but she could not allow herself to care. Her gut told her that this was where she needed to be. If anything, her cousin could help her in the search for Dorian. However, the same halls she used to play in as a child felt somehow sinister now. “Matthew, are you home?” She called again as she reached the main hallway, dripping all over the floor as she went.

Are there no servants around here? What is going on?

Slowly, she ascended the stairs, which got darker and quieter as she went.

Something is wrong here.

Then there it was—something soft was calling to her. It almost sounded like her name before the sound was so sharply cut off.

“Who is there?”

She moved blindly, looking in every open room that she passed and feeling very much like she was simply grasping at straws. If her cousin was indeed here alone, she was going to feel quite foolish and not have a single word of explanation to offer him.

But there, at the end of the hallway behind the library door, came a crashing sound. Not enough to have been a bookcase falling, but very close. She gathered up her heavy, soaked skirts and hurried toward the origin of the sound as her heartbeat started to climb anxiously up into her throat.

She pushed open the door slowly, but apart from the moonlight coming in from the

very far windows, the library seemed otherwise wrapped in shadows. “Is everything all right?” She tried again. “Matthew?”

The door closed behind her with a soft click, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the low lighting. She could not breathe. Why was she so scared? Adrenaline started to course through her as she moved, eyes straining around the corners until she crossed to the open seating area in the center of the library and promptly tripped over something very large and very solid.

Cordelia crashed into the floor and hit her elbow heavily at just the right angle to make her see stars burst along her clenched eyelids. Pulling her legs back toward herself, she caught a better glimpse of what she had tripped over—a prone male form. She crawled closer, ignoring the pain in her arm, and started to roll the man onto his back—and gasped. Dorian ! He was unconscious, it seemed, with a swollen knot on his forehead and a bleeding cut in the same area. Her fingers probed against the tender skin gingerly.

“Oh no... what happened?” She whispered, hoping that somehow her cold hands would soothe the pain enough to rouse him... but nothing changed.

“Leave him,” a dark voice said, startling her.

Cordelia whipped around, straining for the source just as Matthew leaned forward in one of the chairs, showing just enough of his sinister seeming face in the moonlight to frighten her. She had never seen him make that face before.

Keeping herself between Matthew and Dorian’s unconscious body, she tried to summon whatever strength and courage she had left, even if her teeth chattered with cold when she spoke. “What have you done? Why is he here? What did you do to him?”

“Nothing more than what society ought to do with unruly mutts like him. Animals like that do not deserve land and titles, and they certainly do not deserve wives like yourself, Cordelia. Do you truly not understand how far beneath you he is? I should have never allowed you to marry him,” Matthew said pityingly.

Cordelia could not believe what she was hearing. “Allow me? I was not aware that you had any influence on my choices!”

Matthew smirked in a way that made her skin crawl. “You were always meant to belong to me, Cordelia. It might take some time for you to come around to the truth, but you were meant to be with me.”

Cordelia turned and started to shake her husband; she needed him to wake up, and she needed him to be awake now. Her hands fumbled with the bindings on his hands behind him, untying him as best as she could. “Have you lost your mind, Matthew? Do you think that I could ever be with a person so cruel to another?”

Matthew laughed mockingly. “How can you say that? Your husband is a murderer!”

“You do not know anything about him!” Cordelia nearly shouted back at him.

Matthew shrugged. “I know the end result, that is all that matters. Just as I know that he would never have been enough to deserve you, not like I do.”

“How did you even find out about all this?”

“You would be surprised by how much you can find out at this pub with a few shillings. I knew that there was something off about your duke and this sham of a marriage the moment he said that he knew your father.”

“Since you found out that he was involved in my father’s death, then you must know

the whole story. Dorian acted out on instinct to protect the barmaid. My father's death was practically an accident."

Matthew let out a scoff. "I care little for a nameless barmaid. What I wanted and managed to prove is that your swine of a husband killed a man, your own father, and hid the evidence."

Cordelia's eyes narrowed. "The only thing that you have proven is that you are insane. I hate you."

Matthew rose from his chair and started advancing toward her. "It is such a fine line between love and hate, is it not? You will come to forgive me; you have forgiven him. And if not, then you can take the rest of our lives learning how to live with it, to accept that your rightful place is by my side."

"I will do no such thing!"

"You do not have a choice," Matthew sneered, his hand jerking out as if to grab her, but a flurry of movement behind her stopped his hand. Blood dripped down Dorian's face; the rage that had contorted his features had opened the cut on his forehead once more. Dorian squeezed Matthew's arm so tightly that even in the low lighting, Cordelia could see his face pale. He winced and tried to thrash away from Dorian, but it was of no use.

"Take your hands off my wife," Dorian seethed, speaking through his clenched teeth.

Matthew tried to speak, tried to snarl in rage as Cordelia scrambled away quickly from the two men.

"She is not some possession for you to claim, and she most certainly and will not ever be yours. It does not matter if I am dead or not; she will never be your little

possession,” Dorian continued to seethe.

It was perhaps somewhat inappropriate for her heart to flutter at his words, but she could not help herself.

Matthew swung wide, his arm arcing toward Dorian’s face but was swiftly blocked with his other arm. Dorian attempted to subdue Matthew, twisting his arm behind his back and lifting it as Matthew cried out in pain. She wanted to look away from the struggle, but she could not.

The men were a flurry of movements, grunts, and punches as they moved over to the floor until she could take it no more and had to close her eyes. Cordelia curled into as small of a ball as she could manage, shaking with the cold as she covered her ears against the sounds.

The next thing she knew, she was being touched softly on the shoulder, but she flinched anyway until she noticed that it was Dorian on his knees in front of her.

“It is all over now, Cordelia? Are you all right?” Dorian asked softly.

Clearly, he was very unaware of the state of his face to actually be asking her if she was all right. Her chest tightened before she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around her husband’s neck and pulling him close to her until her arms ached from holding onto him so tightly.

She risked a glance over his shoulder to where Matthew lay on the floor, his arms restrained with what appeared to be bits of fabric torn from his shirt. But he was unmoving, and his eyes were closed. She could still see the shallow breaths that he took, but he was wholly unconscious.

“It is all over now; I am here, I promise. But we need to summon the constables at

once,” Dorian reasoned, speaking gently so as not to frighten her more as he pulled out of her arms and pulled his jacket off. There was blood on the collar. She could not stop staring at the spot as he wrapped the coat around her shoulders, rubbing at her arms softly to warm her.

He started to pull away, and she latched onto his arm. “No! Do not... do not leave me here with him!”

“I promise you; he is unconscious,” Dorian assured her, but she was still not convinced. “All right, here.”

He pulled her to her feet, and arm in arm they walked down the stairs.

It took a few hours for the constables to finish their business. A physician was called to check on both Dorian and herself to ensure that there was no lasting damage. Presently, Cordelia was seated close to a roaring fire to help stave the chill out of her bones. Dorian was finishing giving his statement to the constables, but she could not listen to a word that they were saying.

It was only when the very last constable left that Dorian came to rejoin her. Instead of taking the seat beside her, he knelt in front of her just between her knees. His hands hovered over her thighs and waited for her soft nod of permission before he touched her.

“We ought to get you home, and changed out of these wet clothes before you catch a cold,” Dorian said softly.

Her hand lifted between them, ghosting over the knot on his brow. “Are you truly all right?”

“I have endured far worse than this, I assure you. I am perfectly fine,” Dorian told

her.

“I do not see how you can be all right when your forehead is dented and your eye is swollen...” Cordelia spoke around the knot of emotion in her chest.

He grabbed her hands softly and lowered them. “The only thing that would have hurt me, was not seeing you again. I cannot believe that you braved your fears to come after me. You continue to surprise and impress me every day.”

She threaded her fingers through his, scooting closer to him on the chair as she shook her head. “No, I—”

“I do not deserve you. I have done nothing to deserve a love like yours, Cordelia. I—”

“I am sorry that I did not believe you, Dorian. I was so afraid of what it might mean if you were right. You were trying to be honest with me and at the first test of my loyalty to my husband, I failed. If it were not for me then—”

Cordelia’s frantic speech was cut off by Dorian’s impossibly gentle hands on either side of her face, pulling her closer so that he could kiss her. A soft, tender press of his lips against hers seemed to say all the things that words were unable to. She arched into his hold, letting her hands wrap around his shoulders as she pulled close enough to feel the warmth of him through her dress. Their kiss broke only as she pressed her forehead against his, breathing him in.

“Never apologize to me again, Little Flower. I am the one who needs to make amends, and I—”

“No, let me finish. I... I have something that I need to tell you. You were honest with me, and if I am to be perfectly honest with you as well... there is something that I will share that I am afraid you will not like,” Cordelia said quickly.

It was the same news that had been sitting heavily on her heart since she had asked him to stay the whole night with her. She had wanted to be closer to him before sharing the news that she was so certain of. Only, she did not know if this was going to cause more issues...so before they left this house, before anything else happened between the two of them... he deserved to know.

“Anything; you can tell me anything,” Dorian said.

He might believe so, but she was directly violating one of his wishes. “I... Dorian, I am with child.”

She studied his face, carefully watching for any sign of rejection or anger. She did not know what she would do if he was cross with her. She knew that he had no desire to have an heir or to be a father, but she had been hoping so desperately that he would change his mind on the issue... she had been dreaming of having a family with him.

Dorian said nothing for a long moment, his hands dropping from where he cupped her face down to her belly, pausing over her womb as if he could feel their child through her skin.

“I am not very far along... and of course, there will be plenty of time left to figure things out...” Cordelia continued, speaking too quickly.

“Shh, Little Flower, I am thrilled ,” Dorian said with a bright smile so wide that it made her heart ache. “You have made me the happiest man in the whole world... I was wrong about so many things. I want to leave the past behind me. And have a family with you. If you will have me.”

“You mean it?” Cordelia could hardly believe her ears; how lucky she felt.

Dorian nodded. “I am absolutely, wildly in love with you.”

“And I you, husband.” Cordelia beamed. “Take me home.”

Dorian stood and scooped her up into his arms, her head cradling against his chest. “I would love nothing more. Let me show you how much I missed you.”

Three Months Later

“Where is my brother?” Mary asked for the fifth time that morning as she paced back and forth in her bedroom. She was still in her undergarments with her hair half pinned up as she waffled between which earrings she wanted to wear. Mary’s wedding dress hung over the edge of her four-poster bed, ready and waiting for her if only she would stop pacing long enough to put it on.

Cordelia smiled kindly at her sister-in-law. “You asked him not to see you before the wedding. Remember?”

Mary nodded, her hands rubbing together anxiously. “What if he says something to Patrick? What if he scares him away?”

“That is just your cold feet talking, Mary. You and I both know that he would not do such a thing. I know he can be hard-headed, but he would not do anything to keep you from your happiness.”

“I do not have cold feet!” Mary protested.

“Perhaps I am mistaken.” Cordelia walked over to Mary, standing directly in her path and forcing her to stop pacing. “It would be only natural for you to feel apprehensive over this.”

Mary nodded. “I mean, the last time... the man who was supposed to marry me, he—”

“Mr. Hislop is not like that; he adores you. He is going to treat you properly, you and

Georgie both. And if for any reason he does not, then you can allow your brother to lose his temper... or me,” Cordelia said with a grin.

“You cannot do anything; you are with child,” Mary countered, her brow arched.

“That is all the more reason that you ought not to anger me then, is it not? Would not wish to distress the baby,” Cordelia teased, her hands falling to the slight swell of her abdomen. It would still be a few months yet before she was truly starting to show. Every milestone the physician had warned her about thus far had only been exciting, and she could not deny that she was looking forward to all of them still yet to come. Mary had been an indispensable help so far with her pregnancy, and she only wanted to repay every bit of kindness shown to her.

“For now,” Mary sighed. “I am nervous.”

“I know.” Cordelia released Mary’s hands and moved to the wedding dress waiting for her. “I think it is time to put this on. Do you agree?”

Mary nodded, smiling softly. “I never thought that I would ever get married. I know that I shall be joined with him before God so very shortly, but it still feels so surreal.”

“I think Mr. Hislop came along right in time for you to have what you truly needed. You deserve a happy marriage with a man who truly loves and cares for you... that will treat you and Georgie well,” Cordelia assured her as she helped her friend into her wedding dress. Mary’s maid stepped forward to finish all of the buttons and laces, making sure that every part of the gown fit perfectly.

“I just do not wish for anything to go wrong. Georgie is so excited about having a new father figure in his life... what if I have allowed myself to move too quickly?”

Cordelia laughed. “You have not moved half as quickly as I did, so do not fret. Every

couple will face their own challenges and strife, but I know that you are more than stubborn to work it all out.”

Mary grinned. “You are right about that. I will not have any qualms about expressing myself.”

The maid finished applying just the slightest hint of rouge to Mary’s cheekbones and finally, they were ready. “You said that Georgie was waiting downstairs with Dorian?”

“Yes. I am sure he has driven his uncle half insane by now.”

“Good. He should get used to a little madness, it is good practice for him and what is to come.”

Mary snorted a laugh. “I still cannot believe that I am going to be an aunt. That is something that I never thought would happen. I cannot tell you enough how happy I am for the two of you and how happy I am that all of the rest of this has been put behind us.”

“So, does this mean that you and Dorian have worked things out between you?”

“I... We did talk. I admit that I have been unfair to him and blamed him for all the bad things that happened to me. But I forgive him.” Mary tried her earrings on. “How do you feel about the issues with your family?”

“You mean the unpleasantness with my cousin?” Cordelia said with a somber tone. “I am glad that it was all over.”

“Dorian finished with the trials last week, did he not?” Mary asked gently.

For the entirety of last week, Dorian had been in and out of the estate. He had been obligated to split his time between London and home as he had to attend Matthew's trials and give his statements. Cordelia had been tempted to go, but secretly, she had been relieved that her husband had been able to handle those issues for her. She did not know what she would have done if she had to face Matthew again. So many years of friendship were just thrown away like nothing.

"He did, and Matthew was sentenced to exile to..." Cordelia answered simply. "I think either North Holland or the West Indies."

"Are you... all right?"

"It is for the best." Cordelia forced a smile. "It is as it ought to be. I am just happy that we can all move forward and close that chapter of unsavory darkness. Now we can focus on much happier things like your union! Though, it will be strange not hearing Georgie running around the house and seeing you every day."

Mary surprised her by throwing her arms around her and holding her tightly. "I never thought I would be so lucky to have a sister like you. I am going to miss you, and I promise to come to visit all the time!"

"You better not dare to come to visit me!" Cordelia laughed. "Not for a good long while anyway!"

Mary nodded. "All right, I will wait until after the honeymoon, at the very least."

"You shall have to come back to collect Georgie anyway!" Cordelia continued. They were going to be keeping him here during the period of the honeymoon so that the newlyweds could have some proper time together.

"I still think that I am going to end up caving and cutting the honeymoon short

because I will miss him so much. This will be the first time I have ever been away from him; do you know that?”

“He is going to be but a carriage ride away, never fear.”

“With you? Never,” Mary teased as they linked arms with one another. “Do I look all right?”

“More than all right! Mr. Hislop is not going to know what to do with you.” Cordelia winked as they headed downstairs, where the sounds of conversation and distant music greeted them. Mary had chosen to be married at the estate. The lanes had been transformed beautifully with every color flower imaginable from Cordelia’s own garden. She had taken great care to make it a veritable floral wonderland for her and Patrick to be married. She had even managed to decorate an archway with the flowers for them to stand under. It was certainly pretty enough to be a painting, and she hoped that the artist they had commissioned for the event was going to capture their image quickly enough.

Mary and Cordelia stood at the end of the long aisle with all their friends and loved ones seated in rows to either side. Slowly, Mary released Cordelia and walked up the aisle, and Cordelia trailed behind her at a respectable distance before taking her own seat next to her husband. She had been incredibly honored to be asked to accompany her sister.

Rhysand and Penelope stood proudly watching from the front of the aisles. Patrick’s younger sister, Lydia, and her husband, Phillip, smiled as Mary moved toward her future husband.

The happy couple stood facing one another, the priest reciting the familiar words and having them repeat their vows, even if Patrick stumbled over the words in quite an adorable fashion.

“He had better make her happy,” Dorian muttered under his breath so softly that Cordelia almost did not hear him.

“Oh, hush now, they love one another very much,” Cordelia silenced him with an eye roll.

“And if he mistreats her?”

“You know that he will not. Do not fret, my dear husband, you will not make the same mistakes twice with her. You are not the same man that you had been before, and we both know that to be true, do we not?”

Dorian nodded somewhat reluctantly.

“And besides, you are thrilled to spend more time with your nephew, are you not?”

“He has insisted upon riding lessons every day for the next fortnight,” Dorian grouched.

“And what if he has? Presuming that he does not tire of it, there is certainly no harm.” Cordelia sighed. “And then, when this is all over with and he is taken to his new home, we both know that you shall miss them both dearly.”

Dorian did not answer, though he shifted his weight anxiously from one foot to the other with a curt nod. It was more difficult for him than he wished to admit, the thought that his sister might be out and vulnerable again, but he could not hold too tightly to what he loved.

“Then, I shall have you all to myself, shall I not?” Cordelia whispered just low enough for him to hear.

The tips of Dorian's ears reddened and he did not answer that either.

Most of all, Lavinia had moved back to her London home for good. She had been true to her word, and she had not had so much as a single drop to drink since that night that they had dumped everything. She was thriving again, so much more the mother she had grown up with instead of the dramatic mess that she had become. With the amends she was making to her reputation, Lavinia hoped to be back in the good social graces of the ton with proper standing... no more making a fool of herself because of how her heart ached.

Her mother was healing, and Cordelia was working on doing the same. She felt that so long as she had Dorian by her side, all things were going to be possible moving forward. It would be a whole new chapter for the pair of them to live alone in the great house, but it was an adventure that she was greatly looking forward to undertaking.

Before she knew it, applause came from every direction for the happy couple and Mary's smile was so wide that it almost looked like it would split her face from how happy she was to be on her now husband's arm.

The quartet played them out of the garden as they headed inside, but Mary stopped for but a moment just before she went into the house to look back for Dorian, who tightened his grip on Cordelia's waist the moment that he caught Mary looking at him.

It was their own silent goodbye to one another as she smiled softly at her brother, and Cordelia almost felt as if she were witnessing something too intimate. At least, until Georgie jumped down off of his chair and started to sharply pull at her dress.

"Do we get to go to dinner now, Aunt Cordelia?"

Dorian sighed and bent to scoop his nephew up to carry him into the house after all the other guests. Her hands dropped to the rounded swell of her belly as she watched Dorian and Georgie speaking to one another. Her heart fluttered in her chest at the sight of it. She just knew that he was going to be a great father. Cordelia could not be more thrilled.

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:04 am

Seven Years Later

“Mama, Mama, come look!” Young Charles called to Cordelia, running happily toward her with his hands cupped together. Though she knew that whatever he was bound to have cupped inside of his hands was unlikely to be something she wanted to see, she put the same bright smile on her face as he came to meet her. He stood, practically bouncing from one foot to the other as he waited for her to hold her hands out to accept whatever it was he was about to give her.

Chapter 1

“Miss Hislop, I have received strict instructions from the lady of the house not to let you in.”

“Oh Bernard, it would only be for a moment,” she tried to side step him but he blocked her with his arms opened wide.

“Miss Hislop, your request is beyond me!”

She smiled sweetly at him and went under his arms to the other side.

“Miss Hislop, you cannot—”

“Thank you, Bernard; I shall make sure to repay this kindness.”

The distressed butler sighed, but there was not much he could do to stop Penelope. She was a friend of the family, after all, and he had seen her pass through those doors since she was a little girl.

“I will just have a word with Eleanor, and I will be out of your hair.” Ironically, the older man had no hair, but Penelope, or Penny, as her friends called her, had always made such jokes with him, and he secretly loved it, despite the glare he passed her.

Penny, true to her word, wanted to have a word—or lots of words—with her childhood friend, who had been kind enough not to invite her to the ball her family hosted the night before. It had come as a shock to Penny when she found out that she

had been left out without an explanation, or maybe there was one, but she did not want to think that her friend was that frail-minded.

No, Eleanor would never.

She pushed the door open, and the sight before her felt like a direct blow to her face.

“What is going on here?” Penny demanded with a frown. She had earlier rehearsed her speech to Eleanor, but that was when she thought Eleanor would be alone. She should have suspected this much when Bernard told her Eleanor was in her drawing room and not her bedroom. Penny had merely thought Eleanor was overseeing the rearrangement of the room as she told her she would some weeks ago. But now, with the sight of all her friends, finely dressed and all sipping tea from the tiny teacups they all held, Penny knew that her lack of invitation to the ball was purposeful. Eleanor did not simply forget to send her an invitation.

All of her friends paused, but not one of them had the nerve to look her in the eye, even Eleanor, her supposed best friend. The room fell silent until Marina coughed. She might have thought that would help alleviate the awkwardness, but it only made it worse.

“Penny...” Eleanor dragged and dropped her teacup on the table with the saucer underneath. Penny watched her swallow and smoothed out her pastel pink dress.

“You called everyone for tea, and you did not think to invite me?” They were the first words at the tip of her tongue. The other four girls cleared their throats, still looking away.

“Penny, you must understand that—” Penny shook her head, disbelief flooding her sight.

“I was not invited to the ball last night. Is that something I must understand, too?” Eleanor raised her hand to her head, fixing the little tendrils of red hair behind her ears.

“Penny, this matter is far more—” Eleanor started but was once again cut off by Cordelia.

“It is best if you tell her the truth, Eleanor. She needs to know,” her words were without venom; her voice was cool, calm, and collected like Cordelia always was, but it stung just the same. The black-haired girl had no expression on her face, but her words had a hint of annoyance, not at Penny, but at the situation. Penny averted her gaze to her. Eleanor stepped aside.

“Given the situation shrouding your family, I am sure you understand that it has become difficult for us to be seen with you... especially out in public...”

Penny bit down on her lower lip as tears threatened to fall.

“You are a smart girl, Penny, smarter than most of us. You should know how these things work.” Feeling defensive, Penelope took a step toward the oak table the girl sat around.

“My family is innocent!” Her face burned. “The duke should be blamed for this. He framed my father, and you all know it,” she was close to tears now, but she could not cry, not in front of these women who now stared at her as though she was less of a lady than they were.

“If that were true, your brother would not have fled the country and you know it,” Marina shrugged, and Penny’s chest caved. She bit harder on her lower lip until she tasted blood.

“Even if it were so, my sister and I have no ties to the matter. It is between my father and that... cruel duke!”

Gasps arose at the insult.

“Penny! You will not speak of His Grace in that manner in my home!” Eleanor rebuked. Penny could not believe her ears. She had watched Eleanor say less than nice things about the duke in question multiple times. He was the Cruel Duke, after all. “We know you and Lydia are innocent, but it is just so unfortunate that you both have to suffer the burn of it.”

Penny had never felt such rage before. It held her by the neck, aching for release, but there was nothing she could do but suppress it. The ladies were right. Her family’s ruin was the talk of the town. Her brother had fled England, and her father was imprisoned. It was very bold of her to march into the Langley house as though she was not aware of the situation.

She was aware, very much so. It was the sole reason she came anyway.

“Very well then, enjoy your tea, do not let me spoil the mood any longer,” she mustered a smile, and with one last glance at them, she ran back home. She should have listened to her inner voice that warned her of what may happen if she went to the Langley house. Penny had been stubborn— foolish— to think that her friends would be any different from the rest of the Ton. It had only just dawned on her that she was alone now, save her sister and Aunt Augusta.

Penny wiped the tears from her face the closer she got to her family home. Lydia would be home, and she would hate for her to see her in such a state. With a hard smile, Penny walked in.

“Oh goodness, you are back,” Aunt Augusta smiled. Confusion struck Penny as she

looked around the drawing room where old dresses lay on the bare floor.

“Lydia and I began putting together dresses for her debut,” Aunt Augusta patted Lydia’s head, and the young girl smiled warmly. Aunt Augusta had been a rock for them both, stepping up as their mother after Penelope’s mother died. She had been more than delighted to take the role since she had no children of her own as she never married.

“How was your outing?” Lydia inquired.

Penny did not have the answer Lydia wanted to hear, so instead of replying, she joined them on the floor, looking through the old modes, some even belonging to their Aunt Augusta. Penny instantly regretted selling off her dresses when she did, but she did not have much choice in the matter. Her father had just been imprisoned, and any little money he left behind, Patrick, the eldest, took it and fled, leaving them in utter penury. There had been heaps of bills to pay, and Penny could not handle them all on her slender shoulders. All their servants had left due to the lack of money, and it was a miracle they were able to cook and clean by themselves.

“What have you found?” Penny asked Lydia after a beat had passed. Lydia smiled and got up, showing off the lavender dress that belonged to their Mama. The color suited her, and she looked just like their mother. Even Aunt Augusta let out a soft gasp at the sight.

“You look magnificent, dear sister!”

Penny smiled, but deep down, she knew that Lydia would be scorned and overlooked all the same without a dowry.

Later that evening, Penny gathered her family at the table and served them dinner.

“This looks delicious,” Lydia beamed but Penny knew the taste would be far from the word. The sweet potatoes had been a gift from one of the sellers who Penny usually bought from. The kind man had noticed Penny did not have much money left on her to buy potatoes, so he called her and handed some to her. Little by little, Penny and her family had eaten them, sometimes with nothing in them but water. This time was no different. Even the parsley Penny had managed to sprinkle in it did not make it taste better than before.

“It does, does it not?” Penny smiled back; her eyes locked on the oak table. Perhaps she should sell the table and use it to buy some meat for the coming days?

“What are you thinking about, sister?” Penny lifted her eyes to find a happy Lydia staring at her.

“Nothing to worry your pretty head about, dear.”

“Perhaps you should tell her—” Aunt Augusta started but one look from Penny made her cease talking. Lydia did not have to know how bad their situation was, she should focus on her debut and nothing else.

Penny loved her family so dearly that she thought it impossible to feel anything other than deep love and affection for them, but Patrick had changed that.

What kind of brother just leaves and abandons his sisters like that?

She loathed her brother for letting them fend for themselves without a protector. Despite her faltering smile, she swore to kill Patrick if she ever set eyes on him again.

Or perhaps I should kill the Duke of Huxton for putting us in this mess in the first place.

Chapter 2

What is that?

As darkness covered the corridor, the bunch of white lilies in the black vase was sure to catch Rhysand's attention. He had originally walked past it in haste to get to his uncle in his study, but the splash of color revolted him. He retraced his steps to it, picked it up, and assessed it. In turn, the innocent flowers mocked him, reminding him that he would never have such beauty in his life.

"Who did this?" He raised the vase with the flowers in them. He whipped his head in the direction of footsteps coming from behind him. Rufus, his butler, stilled where he stood as he watched his master's eyes darken. "Who put these here?"

Rufus parted his lips, but he knew better than to say he had no idea who dared to decorate the Black Mansion in anything other than black.

"I-I am sure Betsy will know, Your Grace," the older man disappeared but soon returned with the housekeeper, a petite woman in her late forties.

"I am told you know who did this?" Betsy's eyes zeroed in on the flowers, and a soft gasp escaped her lips. She recovered quickly. "It... it must have been the doing of one of the new maids, Your Grace." She lowered her head, afraid of the fury she would see in his eyes if she looked up at him.

"Do I have to remind everyone in this household that I absolutely detest any kind of decorations in my home, especially flowers?" His words were as cold as ice water.

“I apologize for my inadequacy, Your Grace; I shall give them all a stern warning.” Betsy bowed.

When Rhysand spoke again, his voice was warm. “Take it away.”

Betsy wasted no time in taking the forbidden decorations from the duke’s hands and scurried away.

Rhysand turned to Rufus, who stood a few paces away from him. “Has the new valet arrived yet? Surely, he has some sense of punctuality?”

Rufus took a few steps closer and cleared his throat to respond. “Your Grace, forgive me, but the valet scarpered the moment he stepped foot into the mansion.” The duke’s jaw ticked as his brows furrowed. “His reason had been the darkness that plagued the place. Perhaps it is time to paint the walls a brighter shade?”

Rhysand shot the older man a look filled with irritation at the subject.

“I have told you this shall not happen. Double the salary offered and get me someone who can do his job!” He thundered, annoyed because it was not the first time Rufus suggested the change. Each time he did, Rhysand had turned him down, and this time would not be any different.

“What is this clamor so early on this fine day?” Slurry words floated around them.

Rhysand turned to see his uncle, clearly jolly from the few drinks he must have had so early on this fine day . Rhysand sighed as his uncle, Harold Patterson, inched closer. He reeked of whatever he had been drinking. Though he loved his uncle and it had been years since they had been living together, he was not used to the sight or the stench.

“Today is a good day, is it not? We are to celebrate and be merry, for all our dreams have come true,” Harold staggered, but Rhysand was quick to hold him lest he fell on his arse like he had done a couple of times.

Sensing the need to give his master some privacy, Rufus bowed. “Excuse me, Your Grace, sir,” he rushed and disappeared into a corner.

“Lighten up, my dear Rhys. We must discuss how we should celebrate.” Despite his disapproving groan, Rhysand let his uncle drag him to his study where he offered him a glass of whiskey.

“Drink with me.” Rhysand took hold of the glass with long, tapering fingers and brought it to his lips, but he could not find it in him to take a sip. Rhysand, like every man in London, loved to drink. A glass or two of whiskey was a must after dinner, but day drinking had never been his forte. There was already a day drinker in the family, and he doubted they needed another one. Harold took a sip from his glass and dropped it on the large rectangular oak table, a frown on his face.

“What troubles you, my boy? You should be happy today, of all days, that your family’s killer is locked behind bars, and he shall be staying there for the rest of his miserable days.”

It was the truth. After ruthless planning and years of patience, he had successfully punished the man who ruined his life in the only way that was legal. Left to him, a bullet or two in his head would have been far more fulfilling than sending him to prison for debt, but he swore never to stoop as low as his enemy. Societal ruin was a far better punishment since there was nothing Wilson Hislop loved more than his reputation. Without his reputation, the man was nothing.

It had happened on what was supposed to be one of the happiest days of his life, on his twelfth birthday. His mother had asked the maids to prepare a little picnic for the

family of four and had been very eager to do it. It was all Rhysand wanted: to spend a little time with his family, laughing and eating until he appeared. Wilson Hislop.

Rhysand shut his eyes and took a deep breath. It had been nearly two decades since then, yet the anger he felt was fresh like the incident had happened just yesterday. His uncle, since then, moved in with him and dedicated his life to taking proper care of him. Uncle Harold never got married or had children because, according to him, Rhysand was enough for him.

He had planned his revenge, and finally, he could revel in it, but somehow, it did not feel as fulfilling as it should have felt.

“I know what you need,” Uncle Harold cut into his thoughts. “You need a drink.”

Rhysand’s lips tipped up a little, “I do not.”

“Perhaps a new property? We should take whatever property Wilson Hislop has left and—”

“I do not care about that, Uncle. It is clear you do not know what I need. You should give up trying.”

“I am your uncle; I shan’t do that.”

Rhysand said nothing and a beat passed.

“You should get married and produce an heir then. Surely, raising your heir will take your mind off things.” Rhysand considered his uncle’s words.

“I have had my fair share of women, Uncle, but nothing can be done about the emptiness I feel inside. A child will not be any better,” he chuckled darkly. “Perhaps

it is my curse, the incapacity to feel or long for something, for surviving that afternoon.” Uncle Harold dropped the glass on the table.

“You are not cursed . You just simply underestimate the power of having your own family. A new Season is upon us. Use it to find yourself a proper bride and produce an heir, or heirs, if you wish.”

He shook his head at the older man.

“Finding a lady desperate enough to marry the Cruel Duke will be no easy feat, no matter the number of balls I attend.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:04 am

With a deep breath, Penny flattened out her pink dress. The color had been vibrant in its time. It was one of the dresses she had dumped when its Season passed but now dusted off to wear since she was lacking in dresses. She sighed.

Oh, how low our family has fallen .

“You can go in, Miss, but not for long,” the prison guard urged, and with a nod of her head, she entered the room where her father awaited her. It had been three days since her visit to Eleanor had put her in her place, but she had to see her father.

The place reeked of old irons and piss, dark with barely opened windows, and she had almost tripped on her foot from the darkness. If she knew any cuss words, that would have been the right time and place to unleash them. The stench of the place triggered an ache in the front of her head, but she knew it was more than just the stench. It was the fact she was to meet with her father.

Despite his lack of a title, the Ton had respected her father, for he was an avid businessman who rose to wealth in his craft. His father had a title, Earl of Brimsley, which was unfairly passed to his older brother. It was why her father worked hard, to prove he could surpass his brother even without a title. Now her uncle, the Earl of Brimsley, after claiming he wanted to mend his relationship with his brother, was nowhere to be found, renouncing every relationship with them. Penny gulped hard.

Then her father appeared.

Penny hid her hands behind her immediately and bowed her head.

“Are you well, Father?” He did not look well. He looked as though he had aged a few years in the two weeks he had spent there. A stubborn bush of hair surrounded his chin, and a flare of despair coursed through her. The Duke of Huxton was at fault for this, he had reduced her father to... this. A criminal.

“I should ask you that,” her father responded, a gruff edge to his tone. He did not look her in the eyes as he spoke. He could not bear to.

“I am well, Father. Aunt Augusta, Lydia, and I are just scraping through,” she responded, unsure if she should tell him just how different and difficult life was without him or Patrick around.

“As expected, women have their ways of surviving.”

Penny did not understand her father's words or the implications behind them. Instead, she nodded.

“Patrick, however, fled the country, and took with him whatever was left,” Penny could not leave without telling her father what Patrick had done. The older man sucked in a breath, and with a little pout, he nodded.

“I am sure he thought thoroughly about it. He had to save himself,” he said.

In the list of outrageous things Penny had heard since her father had been imprisoned, this was by far the worst one. It sat undefeated at the top of the list.

“Father, he left us with nothing?” Her statement had come off as a question instead. Perhaps her father thought she and her sister were truly well because she said they were? She merely wanted him to feel at ease instead of worrying for them, but he could not take Patrick's side in this matter.

“And now you must make something of yourself to help your sister.”

Penny felt as though a bucket of ice water was doused over her head. Surely, there was nothing her father could do for them from prison, but was he going to shamelessly drop all the responsibilities on her shoulders instead of finding a way to have Patrick return?

“Father...” she stressed, but the man was unwavering in his stance.

“The Duke of Huxton and his drunkard of an uncle are to blame for this,” his voice grew dark. “The Cruel Duke is truly despicable to his business rivals. I still marvel at how low he stooped to ruin me.” Penny could feel her father’s anger as it came down on her like a heavy coat, blanketing her in the fierceness of it. She sighed and a long awkward silence stretched for several minutes. “Patrick had to save himself. And you... you must return now, Penny; these parts are far too dangerous for a woman like you.”

She nodded, and as she left, her heart broke into tiny pieces at seeing her father escorted away. The anger that she had suppressed for days returned, and with it came a stinging pain of hunger. She recalled she had not broken her fast, and the sun sat high up in the sky, shining down ruthlessly on everything in its wake.

The Duke of Huxton could be lounging around in his drawing room, eating a fine piece of ham, while she and her family wallowed in despair while wishing for some savior to whisk them away and provide for them. All because of him.

I will give that beast some piece of my mind!

It was unfair. The duke was unfair. No, he was cruel! A wicked, evil soul that deserved no good thing, and she had to let him know, demand an explanation. With full determination, Penny marched to the hill, where a lonely mansion sat. Large and gloomy it was, but it did not deter her until she called on him.

Inside the mansion, the butler wiped beads of sweat from his face as he pondered on

what to do. The duke had been in a foul mood since he arose. He went about breaking things in his room, and no one could tell what angered him so. For this reason, Rufus paced back and forth until Mr. Patterson appeared.

“What is the matter, Rufus? You look like you have seen a ghost.” Harold approached him, and Rufus could not be happier. He quickly explained the situation at hand and how Miss Hislop stood outside, seeking an audience with the duke.

“Let her in; I will inform him myself.” With a bow, Rufus thanked the older man and went out to meet the young lady, letting her in.

The doors opened, and Penny sucked in a harsh breath as she took the seven stairs that led to the heavy black double doors.

This was a mistake. She sighed, but she could not get her legs to turn around. But I cannot back away now, she thought as she made her way to the duke’s study with the old butler leading the way. She was going to face the man who had brought misfortune to her family.

Or that had been the plan.

Something about the mansion reminded her of the prison house. The darkness. Only that the duke’s mansion was far worse than the prison house. Everything in her line of sight was black. The walls were painted the darkest shade of black she had ever seen. She did not know there was such a paint as dark as the night sky without stars or the moon. She had passed by windows with heavy black damask drapes covering them.

How does one even breathe in such a place?

The duke’s study was no different. A black pedestal desk greeted her the moment she stepped into the room, with a matching chair behind it. To her left sat two settees, the same color with sophisticated designs; she could only wonder where he had gotten so

much black furniture from. The room lacked life, like all the other parts of the mansion she had passed. It seemed the Duke of Huxton detested any form of color or light in his life. She shuddered and bit her lower lip as a chill ran up her spine.

“What brings Miss Hislop to my doorstep so early this morning? Are you not aware it is quite improper for a lady to call upon a bachelor, nonetheless, in broad daylight?” The voice startled Penny as she had not heard any footsteps prior to his voice thundering behind her. She turned around and faced him. Had she not been burning with anger, she would have given in to the thrum of her heart at the sight of his wet, dark hair and stormy blue eyes. Or was it the slit of his exposed chest through his shirt with the first two buttons undone?

“Would you rather I call upon you at night then, Your Grace?”

Her boldness surprised her.

It seemed it surprised the Duke of Huxton as well as he took long, intimidating strides toward her, erasing whatever space was between them. She took one step back quickly to keep a safe distance from him. Despite her boldness, she knew she should not stand too close to him lest he burn her with the fire he harbored in his eyes.

“Brazen and shameless. That foul tongue will land you in trouble,” his voice hardened ruthlessly.

“In more trouble than you have landed my family in, Your Grace? I highly doubt it,” she spoke with light bitterness.

Rhysand raised a dark brow, peering at her with surprise and curiosity. The sheer audacity of her to walk into his home and speak to him in that manner! She bit her lower lip, forcing the dimples in her cheeks to deepen far more than they did when she spoke. He took note of this.

Penny took the duke's silence as a sign to continue speaking.

"You ruined my family on a whim, and now my sister and I suffer daily with no male protection!" Her chest heaved, and his eyes caught the movement.

"I can assure you; I never do anything on a whim, and your father's punishment was due after years of reasoning and proper calculations. Justice was served," he said tersely.

"My father never did anything wrong! Did you forget that you and my brother were friends once? How could you do this?" At this, Rhysand leaned dangerously close to her to make sure she heard clearly what he was about to say.

"I do not have friends, Miss Hislop, and you will do well to remember that," he pulled away. "Your father is guilty of those crimes and many more. Now, if that is all, I suggest you take your leave. I have more pressing matters I must attend to," he turned away. One step forward, and he heard a thud. He whipped his head so fast he feared he broke a bone in his neck, and his lips fell into a flat line at the sight.

Penny fell to the floor on her knees. She had wanted to keep her dignity, to show him that she had a fire in her that he could not quench no matter what, but he simply did not care. He saw her father as a criminal, and it seemed nothing could change his mind from that prospect. She wondered what her father could have done to the duke that made him plan his ruin for all these years.

"Please," her voice broke as her vision blurred. "Patrick abandoned Lydia and me. He fled with what money was left, and I have strived to make ends meet with everything I could. We are out of funds, food, and every basic necessity."

His brows drew together in an angry frown. Throughout all his years as an acquaintance of Patrick Hislop, he had known him to be far from bright, but taking off and leaving his sisters with no protection to save himself was the height of

cowardice, and it repulsed him. He watched her lips quiver, and his frown intensified.

“My sister, Lydia, is about to step into society, but I fear a hope for a plausible match is out of the way because of our situation. I would not have come here... to you, Your Grace, if we were not in dire need of help...”

The duke’s brows shot up in obvious amusement as he peered down at her.

“Pray tell, why would I go out of my way to help you or your sister?” A drop of water emerged from his hair and dropped to the floor. Penny stared at it like it was something of great importance. Then she swallowed and looked up at him, full of angry determination.

“Your Grace, I am willing to do whatever it takes for Lydia to marry well and escape this miserable life. I made a promise to her, and I must follow through with it.”

Sudden interest in the lady before him flowed throughout his body at her words. “Your Grace, I am willing to do whatever it takes.”

Such bold and unbecoming words from a lady. Unconsciously, the talk he had with his uncle the day before danced at the forefront of his mind and sparked him with an idea.

“Whatever it takes, you say?” He took a step forward.

“Yes,” she replied with a step backward. They continued this dance until her heels hit a hard surface, and there was nowhere to run to. The duke did not stop at this; he closed the distance between them, pressing the hardness of his body softly against hers. Her cheeks flushed immediately, and alarms set off in her head.

Suddenly, the air became incredibly warm, too warm, and her dress felt bothersome and constricting. Unintentionally, her gloved hand went to rest above her quickening

heartbeat. The duke's gaze had followed her hand to her chest, but his eyes rose to hers. His fingers, which were still hovering over her face, reached out and softly began to stroke her jaw.

Penelope's heart was racing with a mixture of emotions as she felt heat spike through her body. His gaze was full of heat, attention, like a predator stalking its prey. She suddenly wondered what exactly it was that she had gotten herself into.

"What are you doing, Your Grace?" Her voice expressed her shock and anger. Did he think she was a lightskirt or on her way to becoming one all because she asked for his help? She raised her neck from his exposed chest, keeping her gaze on his face, and then she parted her lips to tell him to kill whatever thought of impropriety he envisioned, but he beat her to it.

"I have just the proposition, but can you handle it?" He was teasing her. The duke was trying to scare her away, but she had already made the promise to leave only after she had secured help from him.

"Try me, Your Grace."

His arched brow indicated his humorous astonishment at her boldness.

"I will make sure that your sister is happily married to a fine gentleman before the end of the Season..." he watched her brown orbs widen. "... if you agree to marry me and give me an heir."

A breath Penny did not know she had been holding exited through her mouth, and her brows creased. She had always dreamed of marrying for love but this? Marrying the very man who put her father in prison was beyond absurd.

"Are you in jest, Your Grace?"

He smirked at her question. “I do not possess the time nor patience to jest, Miss Hislop.”

“Surely you jest, Your Grace, for I fail to believe that a sane man would make such a proposal to a lady whose family he ruined.”

“How do you dare to call me insane?” His words were harsh, but his eyes were far from it. They were amused. Penny went silent. “I will take your lack of response as your refusal to heed my proposition, then?”

Penny did not reply, blink, or breathe. She pressed her back further against the wall. But with nowhere to go, the duke only leaned in closer, his head dipping to the curve of her neck, right above where his hand rested. She was too focused on the smell of him—fresh and oh-so masculine. How improper of her. But she was not to be blamed for he did cage her between his large body.

“I must say, it is too bad. For I thought your bravery was a part of you and not the cause of your nerves,” his voice was low as his lips placed soft kisses on her neckline.

“Accepting my proposal...” he raised his hand and settled it on her neck, his long fingers tracing a vein at the side of her neck. Slow and temptingly vile. “Will pull your family out of ruin and secure a match for your dear, dear sister...” It was as though every functioning nerve in her body was attuned to him, to his touch. A droplet of water from his hair fell to her face. It seemed to wake her.

“It is an absurd proposition, Your Grace. You do not know me, neither do I you, besides your reputation, for it precedes you.” At the mention of his reputation, or perhaps it was her notion that he wanted to court her, Rhysand’s jaw ticked.

“I assure you, Miss Hislop, that this proposal is not one in search of love or romance. It is strictly business. I am incapable of love, so I will pay no mind to you as long as you provide me with an heir. And when it is confirmed you are with child, you will

have a house of your own, where you will live at your will as the duchess. You shall not lack a thing.”

Penny heard the words and registered them in her head and heart, but by God, he was too close. He had leaned toward her again, and she feared their lips would touch if she all but spoke.

“So, what is it going to be?” The duke probed and sunk his head to the crook of her neck. Heat spread through her body, followed by a stillness when his lips parted and nibbled on her flesh.

“I... all right,” she gasped as he continued kissing her.

Suddenly, the duke’s lips left her neck, his eyes blazing as he looked at her.

“Say it,” he commanded softly as he held her tightly against him.

Penelope moistened her lips. As she did so, the duke’s burning gaze pierced her, silently demanding her to obey.

“I will marry you.”

“I thought we would come to an agreement.”

Gently, he let her go and stepped back. He ran a hand through his dark hair and fixed his coat as he eyed her possessively.

“Now, let us begin.”