



Obsession: The Unspoken Sin (Seven Deadly Sins #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: A ruined lady. A righteous earl. A second chance no one saw coming.

He came to drag her home. He didn't expect to want her.

Lady Alice Masterson was meant to disappear quietly into Scotland. Instead, the Earl of Denbigh finds her thriving in London's most infamous gaming hell—brazen, beautiful, and scandalously off-limits. She's his best friend's sister. He's the last man she can have.

But when old sparks turn to slow-burning fire, and long-buried secrets come to light, passion may be the one thing they can't resist.

Desire was never part of the plan... but neither was falling in love.

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Page 1

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Laurence Casterleigh, the Earl of Denbigh, lived a predictable life.

It'd come as something of a surprise to Polite Society, considering he'd been sired by a libertine who treated women of all stations as sport. Though, Denbigh himself briefly entertained a roguish lifestyle, he'd quickly shut the door on such an existence.

Back then, it'd nearly cost Denbigh his friendship with the Marquess of Exmoor who was Denbigh's brother in everything but blood.

Exmoor followed a strict moral code, and Denbigh had briefly deviated from that path himself. From then on, he'd vowed to live honorably in all regards.

Exmoor was as predictable as Denbigh.

Part of their usual and normal routine included a ride at dawn through Hyde Park.

Today proved no different.

They rode vigorously, shouting to each other sporadically in between. They exchanged pleasantries, caught up on one another's families, and then rode back to their respectable Mayfair townhouses, with the intention of repeating it all again the next day.

That was, today proved no different, until instead of guiding his chestnut mount back around, Exmoor stopped at the east end of the park.

He doffed his hat and beat it against his leg.

Denbigh took in that movement and frowned. It was the other man's tell. It indicated this wasn't a usual morning ride.

This time, Exmoor had brought Denbigh here to discuss something, and whatever that unknown something was had the man troubled. Denbigh's stallion, Fidelis, sensing the tension within his master, danced nervously back and forth.

Denbigh preferred the predictable. A tumultuous upbringing had that effect on a man, but neither was he one to shy away from those who were distraught or in need. Certainly not Exmoor. He'd give his life for the man.

Something bothered the marquess. Denbigh didn't need to ask what. He knew Exmoor well enough. He'd share in due time. Exmoor confided everything in Denbigh. They confided in one another.

They—

"Alice isn't in Scotland," Exmoor blurted.

Denbigh cocked his head. It was a singularly odd announcement, considering they had just spoken about Alice and the entire family making preparations for the debut of Exmoor's youngest sister, Elspeth.

"Yes, I believe you said she was returning." He'd be tortured again with her company. "I take it she has." Denbigh dreaded the idea, and yet his heart pounded at the thought of seeing her.

Exmoor doffed his hat. "Alice hasn't been in Scotland for some time now." This time, the gentleman beat the tan top-hat with such vigor, it was a wonder he didn't

snap the brim. “Alice does not want to return for Elspeth’s debut.”

Denbigh frowned. He’d known Alice Masterson since she’d been a babe. She possessed an obstinacy of spirit to rival a thousand mules. She’d been like a younger sister to him. They’d sparred on every occasion. She possessed a keen wit and a sharper tongue.

Yes, she’d been like a sister to him...until she hadn’t .

Selfishly, even though he’d enjoyed her company—too much—it had been somewhat of a relief when he’d learned the lady had decided to quit London altogether.

She’d retired to Scotland, their family’s favorite country seat, so she could paint and sketch and ride and live freely.

Denbigh had secretly envied her. He’d missed her, but he’d also been ever grateful that she’d gone.

“I need her to come home.”

Exmoor’s pleading voice infringed on those bad best friend thoughts.

The tumult in Exmoor’s eyes bespoke a tortured man, and the glint there set off a frantic sensation in Denbigh’s own gut.

He loved this family. He loved Exmoor. He loved the gentleman’s mother, who’d been like a second mother to him. He loved his sisters.

“I need you to help me bring her home,” Exmoor said, his voice sounded somewhat steadier, though his eyes were still troubled.

Denbigh treaded carefully.

“You know the lady can’t be brought around once she’s made up her mind. So, she quit Scotland and doesn’t want to return to London. You have plenty of other seats. Allow the lady the space she desires.” And as I require .

Denbigh wasn’t a good man. He realized his protestations came from a place of self-preservation. He silently flagellated himself for that betrayal.

“There is more,” Exmoor said tightly. “This isn’t just about obedience. This isn’t just about enjoying her own time in her own space. This is about—”

Denbigh’s ears latched on to the unspoken remainder of his friend’s sentence. He waited in vain for the other man to clarify or explain.

“The lady doesn’t want to attend another dull, boring Season,” Denbigh cajoled. “You and I can both understand and appreciate that.” And I appreciate not having to fight my feelings for her.

The other man didn’t dispute his words.

“She belongs with her family, Denbigh. You know that.”

He did.

Denbigh, however, proved a selfish, coward, because no good could come from her return.

“Exmoor, you’re the most devoted brother there is, and I don’t say that lightly because I consider myself a fairly good and reliable brother to my younger brothers. But you see her for the holidays.” Denbigh paused and corrected himself. “At least

most of them.”

It so happened that whenever he spent holidays with the Masterson family, Alice was—not so inconveniently—absent. He’d alternately longed for her company and been grateful for her absence.

“You see her, Exmoor, about as much as I see my brothers.” One was in university. The other newly out. Both were sowing their oats and experimenting with their late father’s title of rogue—as Denbigh once had.

What his own wild days had cost him...

Exmoor turned and looked squarely at him. His gaze pierced Denbigh’s.

For a moment, Denbigh believed the other man knew he stood here silently ruminating over Alice. After Denbigh’s brief stint as a rake, Exmoor made it all too clear—

“She is in London, Denbigh.”

A wave of relief hit him. Exmoor hadn’t caught on. “All the better. So, see her at your own time. She’ll pay you visits. She just doesn’t want to attend the—”

“She’s residing at the Devil’s Den and working there.”

Denbigh’s entire body jerked. His every muscle tautened and recoiled to the point of pain. “The Devil’s Den?”

Exmoor nodded.

Denbigh hadn’t even realized he’d spoken aloud.

Surely, Denbigh heard him wrong. Surely, surely, surely.

A thousand different surely's . For surely , there was some explanation for why he'd heard what he'd heard because Exmoor simply couldn't have stated that as a fact.

It had been a jest. Yet the gentleman's deadly serious features confirmed there was no joke at play.

"Say something, Denbigh."

Denbigh's stomach churned until he thought he'd be sick. What the hell did Exmoor want him to say? "Working." His voice emerged, strangled and distant to his own ears. Surely, Alice wasn't employed at one of the most debauched gaming hells in London. " Working ?"

Exmoor, as a protective older brother, would never force her into such a state. No, it didn't make sense.

"She's been commissioned to restore artwork at the club and create new pieces," Exmoor said, his voice deadened. "She's painting portraits of the Killorans and their family."

All the air left Denbigh on a swift exhale through his tightly clenched teeth. "My God, man, how could you ?"

A flush instantly settled on Exmoor's cheeks. "This was her choice."

"Her choice? Her bloody choice?" Denbigh's voice climbed. He stopped himself just before calling into question the man's abilities as a brother. Only loyalty, fraternal loyalty, kept him from finishing his thoughts.

The marquess's face grew even more strained.

“You said yourself that she's spirited. She is also a grown woman and has made up her mind.

” Exmoor sounded tired, so very tired. “I have tried to convince her to return home. I have sent letters, but I cannot enter the club. Not without raising questions about my presence there. I need you to help me.”

Of course, Denbigh would do so. Surely that wasn't in doubt?

“Nor am I worried about my reputation,” Exmoor continued. “But in my being there, it'd bring society's attention to the place Alice currently resides and—”

Denbigh brushed that off. “You needn't explain further.” He knew Exmoor well enough to know he'd not even let that be a consideration.

His mind still couldn't fathom sweet, innocent Alice, living and working at that debauched club.

The other man misinterpreted the reason for Denbigh's silence. “I wouldn't ask unless—”

He hurried to reassure Exmoor. “I will go today. Immediately . I'll bring her home. I'll convince her to return.” And if that didn't work, he'd throw the minx over his shoulder and haul her off. “You needn't say anything more.”

Instead of relief, Exmoor's features grew more strained. “It won't be that easy.”

Knowing Alice—and know her he did, it certainly wouldn't.

“She’ll require cajoling and convincing, Denbigh. She won’t be ordered about.”

A long-ago memory slid in; of Denbigh and Alice. One of his mousers had eight kittens. She’d insisted Denbigh not separate the mama from her babes and that he instead make them all pets. He’d laughed and declared he’d do so under no such circumstances.

More than a decade later, he still had all eight of those now-cats, who to this date enjoyed free roam of his country house in Somerset.

Denbigh found his first spot of amusement. “Yes. I’m very familiar with the lady’s stubborn ways,” he said, wistful over his recollection. “I know a thing or two about charming women. Even with your sister, I should have some success.”

His good humor instantly fled.

“...Laurence,” Alice gripped him by his lapels, and lifted pleading eyes to his. “I do not need a Season. I know who I want to marry. I know who I love. It is y—”

Denbigh swiftly closed the door on that always raw memory. He’d been such a fool...

He grunted. “I’ll convince Alice to return, Exmoor. She’ll be home before the night is through.” Guilt stabbed at his conscience. What if she still believed herself in love with him? What if...?

He swiftly thrust aside that irrational fear.

“She is no longer a girl, Denbigh.” Exmoor tortured him with a reminder Denbigh far from needed. Far from it. “She is a grown woman. If you believed her spirited then can you begin to fathom how she’s changed living at a naughty gaming hall? She

is...”

As his friend went on to unknowingly torment Denbigh with all the ways Alice had likely been transformed, a long-buried, but still familiar secret came to life.

He yearned for his best friend’s sister.

It’d been a discovery made too late. Whereas Exmoor had followed a straight and narrow path his entire life, Denbigh, during university briefly travelled in his debauched father’s steps.

From drink, to women, to wagering, he’d wanted a taste at what the appeal was for the late earl.

Denbigh had convinced himself all men sowed their oats, but that hadn’t been true.

Exmoor hadn’t.

It mattered not that Denbigh had quickly gotten himself together. By then, the damage had been done.

When two or so years later he’d ‘jokingly’ put forward the idea of courting Alice, Exmoor’s deadly serious response killed that fleeting hope.

After she’d retired to the country, Denbigh convinced himself he’d torched his very own garden of Eden to the ground. Now as he listened to Alice’s brother speak, Denbigh’s hungering for the lady sprung from fertile ashes.

His was a sin far greater than the original one committed by Adam and Eve.

“I will be forever grateful, Denbigh,” Exmoor was saying, pulling Denbigh back to

the moment and further twisting that blade of guilt. “There is no friend more loyal and honorable than you.”

The gentleman wouldn’t feel that way if he knew the thoughts filling my head...

Denbigh needed to put an immediate end to the undeserved praise being heaped on him. “Worry not. Yours is an easy ask and an even easier task.”

As obstinate as Alice was, he’d also managed to bring her around, more often than not.

Unlike before, relief had entered the other man’s tortured eyes, but so did a strong dose of skepticism.

Exmoor needn’t be skeptical. Denbigh was beyond certain. He’d have her ready to return home within an hour of their reunion.

And God help him when they were again living in the same world.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

Lady Alice Masterson stared at the partially filled canvas and evaluated the scene of Bacchus and Ariadne.

The rendering, though incomplete at this moment, was a good one.

Evocative. Colorful. Bacchus at the center, surrounded by a harem of nubile nude beauties, all vying for his attention and affection, and all bestowing their touch and their mouths on various parts of his broadly formed, muscular body.

It was the centerpiece of the main suites rented and inhabited by patrons of the Devil's Den, who called this gaming establishment home.

This was the hour when noblemen were all slumbering off their drunken revelry from the night and early morn before.

There was no risk of discovery for her here.

These quarters had been closed off and were being newly made over.

It was safe. No one here would discover she was the respectable Marquess of Exmoor's sister.

Not that discovery was something she'd come to fear for herself.

Her, a polite lady, living in a place such as this was an incongruity that wouldn't make sense to a gentleman.

They wouldn't see a lady here because it would never cross their mind that one from a prestigious, respectable family would ever dare be here.

Still, she didn't worry for herself, but for her brother, sisters, mother, and her niece and nephew.

It was why she'd lobbed off her blonde curls and kept her hair boy-length short.

She could be any street urchin or nameless maid.

Distracted from the artwork before her by worries about her family and any discovery that should be made, she thrust those thoughts aside.

She hadn't worried about such matters in a long while.

It'd taken years without whispers or mentions or hints of speculation about where she'd gone and what she'd done, before her dread had eased.

It was only when letters arrived from her brother, the latest of which had come yesterday morning, that she began being distracted. It was why she wasn't working.

God love her big brother, Wynn, the Marquess of Exmoor.

There wasn't a more loyal, loving brother in all of England.

Even if his sister wasn't deserving of that devotion, she would do anything for him and their family, which was why she'd left.

She just wished he'd stop writing and trying to get her to come back to the fold of the family.

Alice grimaced.

My God, did he truly think she would return when their sister made her Come Out, or that she would dare risk Elsbeth's debut?

Because when society saw Alice, they'd be reminded all over again that there'd been another Masterson sister.

Now, they believed she was just a spinster living in the country.

Spinsters were boring. They were uninteresting, and they were forgotten.

The minute Alice was resurrected from the dormant corner of people's minds, she'd have to start all over again, getting them to forget her.

If Alice rejoined the ton, it would be ruinous for Elsbeth.

As for Alice, she'd been ruined long ago. She'd been selfish enough before, believing herself in love, and she'd made the worst mistake. She was the one paying the price of atonement, and she'd be damned if Elspeth or anyone else did, too.

"You have been looking at that painting for a lifetime. You going to finish it?"

She cast an amused, playful look back at Addien.

Everyone here at the club called the young woman "Snap", and given the maid's short fuse, well it was an ideal nickname.

Addien kept everyone at bay. But for some reason, when she'd met Alice, she'd taken a liking to her.

The proud woman seemed to recognize on sight that Alice wished to keep a low profile here at The Devil's Den.

Not because she thought she was better. Rather because the fewer people who saw her, the better off she was. In that, she and Addien were alike.

Alice looked at the painting as the other woman saw it. "It looks remarkably like all the other ones I've done." A single curl fell over Alice's right eye, and she blew the strand back.

"Nah." Addien hitched herself up onto the worktable containing Alice's art supplies. "This one's even more vulgar." Addien flashed a naughty smile. "Dynevor is going to love it."

The Earl of Dynevor, as in one of Alice's employers, was a relative of her sister-in-law's family.

He'd opened his club to Alice as a refuge.

The establishment had faded from its once glory and the young man had set to restoring and rebuilding.

Hence, the work Alice was afforded. He, along with Lachlan Latimer and the Earl of Wakefield, had been supportive of her presence here.

The greatest of the surprises being Lord Wakefield, whom she'd known from back in her polite society days. They both had a secret on one another. No one knew of his ownership in this place. He preferred not to wildly and freely share that information.

Addien interrupted Alice's wandering thoughts. "The painting is not what's bothering you."

Alice nodded, then shook her head. She was a terrible liar. It was another reason she'd left polite society. She didn't bother hiding things from Addien, and it felt good to have someone to share one's life with.

"The marquess again." Addien correctly surmised for a second time.

Alice sighed. "The same."

Her friend cursed. "Bloody nobs."

Except her brother wasn't just any nob. "Wynn isn't like other noblemen," Alice said gently. It wasn't fair to let Addien, who was so mistrustful of peers, believe they were all bad. "He's a good man, and he's an even better brother."

Her friend snorted. "If he was a better brother, he wouldn't be haranguing you to return to a world you don't want to belong to."

Addien spoke with the sureness of a woman who'd been an orphan and raised herself on the streets alone.

Releasing a sound of frustration, Alice reached for her brush, dipped the bristles in crimson paint, and resumed her depiction of the Titian-haired goddess kneeling between the gentleman's legs.

"It's not that simple, Addien," she said tiredly.

"And why not?"

"Because..." I miss my family. Alice wouldn't say as much to the younger woman.

Addien didn't have any family. She'd been orphaned as a babe.

Whereas Alice? Alice made the choice to exile herself.

Yes, she'd done so to protect her family.

Still, it had been Alice's decision to never again see the Masterson's.

Now, Addien explained the real reason for her presence here. "Wakefield's got a new assignment for you."

Ah. "A new patron's room to paint?"

Addien nodded.

That was another wonderful thing about the young woman's friendship. She didn't pry. If Addien asked a question, and it wasn't answered, she moved on.

"A new member," Addien mumbled with all the loathing and disdain she carried for the haute ton. "Another fancy lord."

Alice's lips twitched. "All the patrons here are noblemen."

"Oi, that'd be the one downside of working here," Addien muttered.

Finishing her stroke, Alice put her brush on the tray and wiped her hands upon her apron. "When does he want me to begin?"

"He said as soon as yer done for the day with this room."

Alice's stomach sank. Her shift was supposed to be over. "Bloody Wakefield," she muttered to herself. "He's a pain in my arse."

Alice had an appointment with Laurel.

She wasn't a fan of Wakefield either and only tolerated him now because the new Countess of Wakefield had been a single-visit patron whom the earl fell in love with and had gone on to marry.

At some point during the new countess's time here, she and Addien formed some kind of quick friendship—a rarity for the young woman who trusted none. Not even truly Alice.

Addien made to say something more when a resounding, deep, booming voice broke into the quiet. “Snap! There's a new patron here. Get below stairs before you're late.”

The Marquess of Thornwick—Mauley, as he was known here—had become second in command guard, after a family scandal. His had been a public one. He recognized Alice from the ton. She recognized him. She didn't fear he'd divulge her identity. They were both hiding from different things.

People here kept their secrets, especially if one wanted to stay alive in Dynevor's establishment.

Cursing a whole string of vicious epithets about Thornwick, Addien reluctantly made her way down the hall and accompanied the big, broad-shouldered guard.

Finding herself alone, Alice resumed focus on her latest creation.

If anyone in her family could see the work she did here, they'd certainly have swept in.

And, despite all the protests on Alice's part, they'd force her away from the Devil's Den.

But Alice wasn't a gentle, demure, blushing debutante. She'd fallen. As far as Eve herself.

She knew far more than even most married ladies ought to about lovemaking. As such, her art was just that— art . She took great consolation in the fact her family didn't really have any idea what she did in this place, and she intended for it to remain that way.

“My God, Alice ?”

That melodic, smooth, familiar baritone hit her with the weight of a thousand stones. Alice spun around, flicking gold flecks and specks of paint all over the walls and into the face of—

Her heart stopped in her chest. Laurence, the Earl of Denbigh—her brother's best friend. So much for keeping her work here a secret from her family.

Bloody hell.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

Denbigh had always been rather good at putting on a show.

He'd often worn a smile for his younger brothers' and late mother's benefit to compensate for all the suffering the previous earl had inflicted.

When Exmoor tasked him with rescuing Alice—an assignment Denbigh committed to the moment he discovered where she was living—he'd gone over in his head their first chance meeting.

Upon seeing her, Denbigh was hit with absolute shock, surprise, confusion, and horror at finding her vigorously and passionately painting a scene that would've made any virgin reader of the Kama Sutra blush. He discovered that no pretend disbelief had been necessary on his part. My God!

If Exmoor knew what Alice was doing, he'd have dragged her away from this hell, where London's worst gentleman played, and not sent Denbigh to do his dirty work.

Despite the noble work that brought Denbigh here, he found himself weak as the rest of the sinners in this place.

He stared wide-eyed and unblinking at the Bacchanalian orgy.

With the deities' mouths slick with lust and their thick, voluptuous, thighs spread for both the God Bacchus and viewers on the outside, the fevered scene was evocative enough to get a cock rise from most mature men, himself included.

Heat slapped his cheeks.

Get yourself in order, man! This was Alice's artwork.

Flabbergasted, he managed to blink slowly and bring his gaze to Alice. It had been too long since he'd seen her.

He'd missed her.

"What happened to your hair?" he asked quietly.

His was a peculiar detail to mourn, given all the changes that had been wrought to her and her lifestyle and her very existence.

And yet something about the loss of those exquisitely long, lush, sun-streaked blonde locks left him hurt somewhere inside.

At what and for what reason, he couldn't say or understand.

Stricken, Alice touched her cropped curls.

They nearly brushed her shoulder and framed her diamond-shaped face. Though slightly fuller, her high cheekbones possessed a magnificent, pronounced sharpness that caused a terrible best friend's attention to linger on her face—and then linger longer on her lush crimson mouth.

"Laurence?" she whispered.

Rattled, he shook his head wildly.

"What are you doing here?" Her quavering question cut through all the noise of confusion, horror, and sorrow.

New heat climbed his neck and filled his cheeks.

He spoke as calmly as he was able. “Me?”

He needed to be calm. He needed to be the affable, charming, brother-like fellow who reminded her of how good she had it back with Exmoor and the rest of the Mastersons so he could whirl her back home.

Now, it just remained to be seen how to handle that now nearly impossible and dangerous feat with fury stirring inside him.

He gritted the back of his teeth. “Me?” he repeated, hardness creeping into his tone. “You ask me what I am doing here, Alice,” he hissed.

So much for patience. Fortunately, his agitation chased away that wounded doe expression she wore and restored the fiery-tempered spirit to the mink’s pretty blue eyes.

“You have no place being here,” Alice said in clipped, crisp tones he’d never before heard her use with him or with anyone. And that was saying a lot, considering the fact that they’d bickered and quarreled on and off throughout the whole of their lives.

My God. She was looking about as if his getting caught here was the scandal and not her actually working here.

“You have to go,” she whispered.

Denbigh was still recovering from the shock of her artwork—work that the lady’s older brother most definitely did not know anything about—when her words reached him.

Heat slapped his cheeks.

“Laurence, are you listening to me? I said you have to leave.” Alice wrapped her paint-stained fingers upon his sleeve, leaving streaks of crimson and gold upon his tan jacket.

Since seeing Alice this morning, he’d been besieged by a host of volatile emotions.

Rage.

Disbelief.

Fear for Alice.

Now, Denbigh found himself swallowed up and consumed by a far greater, more overwhelming, and even more dangerous emotion.

Desire .

Denbigh looked to where Alice’s fingers curled about his bicep.

The muscles bunched and rippled and came alive in ways that were heinous and unforgivable, but also undeniable, as it had been some four to five years ago when he’d realized Alice Masterson was no longer a girl.

Scorched by her touch and shamed by the feelings eclipsing his senses, Denbigh wrenched away.

Alice’s eyes bore the same startlement as his. She too had sensed something charged in the atmosphere, but she could have no idea, and never would, of the feelings her slightest touch roused within him.

“You cannot be here, Laurence,” she said, this time more earnestly and less angrily. “Dynevor will be livid. These are private quarters. He doesn’t want patrons wandering about. It isn’t good for his family who lives and visits here.”

Denbigh brought his eyebrows together. “I’m not worried about Dynevor,” he whispered silkily. “I am wondering what the hell you are doing here and what you’re working on.”

Her confused gaze followed his over to the half-filled canvas she’d crafted with her talented fingers.

She’d always been a master with a brush.

When she’d been a girl, he’d delighted in trying to distract her from her projects.

He’d often failed. Her reverence and love of painting and sketching proved far greater than her annoyance with him, which was saying a great deal indeed.

But this... Her work here, now...

It was evocative. Vibrant. A sight to behold—it stole one’s breath and drew one into the painting. Alice had centered Bacchus amidst a bevy of voluptuous, adoring, subjects who existed for the primal god’s pleasure.

Denbigh’s eyes bulged. “This...is what you are doing here?” His voice came out thick and guttural. A product of his desire at the realization that in Alice’s head, she’d conjured up and crafted this carnal masterpiece.

Denbigh had to take in a slow breath.

“How do you know of such—?” He stopped himself.

It'd be prudish of him to complete the thought, and also hypocritical. After all, he'd had lovers. He'd kept mistresses. It seemed that Alice, to create such a real rendering of carnality, had as well. Her work said as much. The jaded guardedness in her eyes only lent further confirmation.

Alice arched an impertinent blonde eyebrow. "Were you going to ask how I know about such things?"

Denbigh wanted to toss his head back and hurl and rage and snap and hiss. For surely there'd been many lovers. Even one was too many.

He'd always known what she was thinking, or he thought he had. Unfortunately, she'd always known the thoughts in his head too. It proved inconvenient at this moment, especially when he remained wholly at sea, confused and disoriented around her, when she was a rock of steadiness.

"Forgive me," he said stiffly, "if it is not my place to put that question to you."

"No, it isn't, Laurence."

She needn't explain and didn't have to. He deserved neither an answer or an explanation. Either way, it was abundantly clear. In the same way men sowed their oats and explored freedom, Alice proved no different.

The one difference being that she was a lady and always had been unlike any other woman he'd known.

The fact remained true now and also accounted for why one such as Alice should be in this place.

She was a bohemian. Now it made sense. He didn't hate it any less.

If anything, he despised it down to every last fiber of his resentful being.

Everything within him urged him to try again, to make her see reason. He opened his mouth to do just that when his gaze caught on a painting farther down the hall. The appeal died on his lips.

Pulled by the delicate golden figure centered in a portrait at the opposite end of the hall, Denbigh found himself moving toward her.

It was a painting, and yet Alice's works had always possessed a feeling of humanity and vivid realness.

They weren't just things like the watercolors and floral paintings all the other ladies in London did. He stopped before her.

The woman in the red rendering possessed pale, shimmering, silvery-white blonde hair that hung about her naked frame.

She stood poised in the Garden of Eden with her body half turned towards the artist and partly concealed with her knee brought up at a slight angle.

She shielded enough of herself to hint at modesty, but the beginnings of sexual awareness.

She was a mix of shy, tender, innocent with experienced Aphrodite, Goddess of Love.

He stepped closer and closer until his nose nearly kissed the canvas. There was a familiarity to this goddess, a girl dancing on the cusp of mature woman and vital innocence.

“She was my first one.” Alice’s murmuring brought him reeling to the present.

Dumbfounded, he was still lost in the artwork and confused by Alice’s words.

“Here,” she clarified. “It was the first piece I painted at the Devil’s Den.”

He looked over in consternation.

At some point, Alice had drawn next to him, where he’d examined her work with reverent eyes. She stared with critical ones at the masterpiece.

“The problem is I didn’t commit,” she explained with regret.

Alice gestured at the creation, pointing out its flaws, or rather what she perceived to be imperfections.

“See here,” she pointed. “I have her gaze downward, but the look in her eyes seductive. She does not know whether she wishes to be a temptress or a tenderhearted innocent. There was a lack of commitment on my part, and it shows completely.”

Forgetting the real discussion, he should be having with her and engrossed with her perspective and discussion about the canvas, he attended Alice. Denbigh hung on her every word, fully part of the exchange and unwilling to let her disparage that masterpiece.

“I disagree,” he said strenuously.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

A wry and welcomingly familiar smile edged her lips up at the corners. “That is unsurprising.”

They shared a smile.

“Yes. Well, this time I’m not doing so with the sole intent of getting a rise out of you.”

He gave a playful tug at one of her curls. Alice swatted his hand playfully in return, and just like that, they were restored to the easy way it had always been between them.

“I’m being entirely serious, Alice,” he said more emphatically this time. “It is a masterpiece.”

“A masterpiece?” She snorted. “Dynevor heartily disagreed. He said he wanted them to be more risqué, more passionate.”

“Dynevor is a boy,” he pointed out.

Alice sent her startled glance about the hall, as if she feared offending the revered gaming hall’s owner.

Denbigh narrowed his eyes. Did she fear the gentleman or revere him?

Either was a horrid possibility. Both made him want to kill the younger earl.

Both also made him want to toss Alice over his shoulder and whisk her away from this place.

Denbigh didn't press her on it, and she didn't volunteer anything more, and he left it that way.

A discussion about her employer wasn't anything he really wanted right now.

In this moment alone with her, all he wanted to speak about was her artwork.

"I'm serious, Alice. There's a maturity here. You have beautifully—" He grimaced at the insufficient praise for her drawing.

"It doesn't have to be vulgar and crude and completely show everything to be evocative.

In fact, I would state with absolutely conviction that this"—he pointed to those previous areas Alice had identified as a defect— "is a masterful rendering of a woman who's just had her eyes opened to lovemaking, is conflicted with the extent of her hungering, and has a fear of abandoning her innocence for forbidden passion. "

Denbigh's skin prickled, and he glanced over and found Alice's wide eyes upon him. They were pale aqua pools as clear as those Scotland lakes he'd believed she'd been dipping her toes these past years. Contained within them was a startlement and something else.

"Go on, go." The air sizzled around them. It came alive in ways that were dangerous and always had been with this woman.

Alice moved her gaze over his features. "Why are you here, Laurence?"

Sharing a first name with his evil sire, he'd always gone by his title, but the Mastersons had all insisted that he needed a given name and used his middle one.

Laurence.

Hearing her speak his name—those two syllables wrapped in her sweet, soft, lyrical voice—hummed through him.

These were the dangerous sensations that caused him not to ask after her these past years.

But he should have because then he wouldn't be here trying to figure out how the hell to get her back home.

Understanding dawned slowly in Alice's eyes.

"My brother," she said softly. Horror flitted across her delicate features.

Her brother. That's right. She was the forbidden fruit, and Denbigh was the evil best friend.

"God, no. Do you think Exmoor told me you were here? Because if he had, Alice, you can trust I would've been here long ago."

The first part was a lie and slipped out too easily. The weariness faded from her expression and intensified the guilt within him for deceiving her in this way.

"But you are here," she ventured. Suspicion returned to her eyes. "Why?"

Think, man. Think.

He should have planned far better than this. She'd always been too clever, far too clever, certainly more intelligent than he.

"Alice," he said, lowering his voice. "Only because you are, Alice, and we both discovered one another here, I'm forced to confess something shocking."

How he despised himself for layering deception upon deception.

"Something shocking about you , Laurence?" her query contained a smile.

"I am not as good as you believe I am, Alice." There, that much was true.

"I don't believe that, Laurence," she gently murmured.

At her misplaced faith in him, Denbigh faltered. God he couldn't bear this. His next words came tumbling out.

"I recently obtained membership in various clubs. Ones I'd never ever dare speak about to your brother. He'd be horrified if he knew."

That was probably the biggest lie in the world, considering the other gentleman had known his sister was working at the Devil's Den and hadn't said anything or fetched her out in all this time.

A pink blush settled on her cheeks.

" Oh ."

And he hated that knowing color in her beautiful face. He hated the conclusion she'd drawn, the one he'd wanted her to draw, for she saw him as a scoundrel, and he didn't want her to see him in that light.

It shouldn't matter. There could never be anything between them, given that she was Exmoor's sister, but still, he didn't want her to have that unfavorable opinion of him.

"I take it I will possibly be seeing more of you?" he ventured.

He'd already ascertained that speaking quickly about getting her out of here and acting high and mighty was destined to fail.

"No," she murmured; sadness tinged her voice. Or maybe he imagined that with his own hope and ears? "I keep away."

Her meaning couldn't be clearer; she couldn't be seen about.

"Yes, well, given we're now occasionally sharing the same roof. I wouldn't say it's altogether impossible, either," he ventured. "Would you?"

It wasn't impossible. He consecrated his very life to getting her out of here.

"It is possible," she conceded, but the look in her eyes told a different tale. She thought this chance meeting was the last meeting. It was anything but.

This was only the beginning.

As if she'd heard that unspoken promise in the air, Alice jumped. "I have to go," she said, hurriedly gathering up her art materials. "I have an assignment to see to."

Denbigh bowed. "Of course, Alice," he called after her as she started to take her leave.

Alice looked back over her shoulder.

“It was so very good seeing you,” he said softly, meaning those words. He’d missed her more than he could say. More than was appropriate.

A tremulous smile formed on her lips.

“It was so very good seeing you too, Laurence.”

With that, she took her leave, and Denbigh stood there.

Suddenly, the immediate need to rip her from this place left him disconcerted.

Not because he feared he couldn’t or wouldn’t, but because he’d gathered from their all too short exchange that she genuinely cared about her work here, relished her freedom, and had found a home.

And when he took her away from this and brought her back to her family, where she belonged, she would also be stuck in a gilded cage, which she so hated. She would hate him forever.

And he could not bear it.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

As Alice made her way to the assignment Lord Wakefield had doled out that apparently took precedence over the Earl of Dynevor's orders, her heart raced.

Certainly, it was not frustration at the change in directions.

Having multiple employers, she often found herself pulled in different directions.

Given the current living quarters for patrons in residence was currently usable space that had already been largely completed with the exception of the finishing touches, it did make sense that if the situation called for it, she be moved here in the interim.

Yet her mind couldn't get past one thought.

Laurence is here.

She couldn't have been more stunned had the Lord himself returned and stood before her in the flesh. She'd been cut off from her family so long in self-imposed isolation that it had become second nature not to see them or think of them. It was easier that way.

In the immediacy of her decision to exile from the family, she'd been aggrieved for fourteen days straight.

She had cried. She'd mourned their loss.

She'd missed them. She'd wanted to return and decide that family reputation and everyone else be damned.

Alice told herself she wanted to be with them more than anything, and that should have mattered most. But she hadn't gone back to them because she wasn't selfish.

Then, after a fortnight, the pain, though it hadn't faded completely, had become dulled. It was as though fourteen days and nights marked the period in which a person could come to an acceptance that they would not see their family. And what remained was what was in front of one.

In Alice's case now, that was the Devil's Den, her new place of employment and home—and her daughter when she had Laurel.

Laurel.

Alice stopped in her tracks, so quick her sapphire muslin uniform and painting apron fluttered and snapped about her ankles. She closed her eyes.

Her daughter. The sole reason she'd given up the siblings and mother she loved, and the homes she'd grown up in, was because and for Laurel.

She'd been born of Alice's greatest and worst mistake, and from that mistake, Alice had been granted the greatest and grandest gift.

Being able to openly claim Laurel as her daughter and live with her without fear for their reputations or recriminations from a judgmental high society—who made every other person's life and business their own—she'd found peace here.

She missed her family and loved them. But she had her daughter, and she loved her most. Those two worlds, her past with the Mastersons and her present and future with Laurel, could never be separated, but neither could they be entwined.

She'd come to accept that and understand it. The two worlds could never mingle.

But now, Laurence was here. Laurence now shared the same roof, if even just periodically while he came to sin at the Devil's Den. He shared the same walls and roof as Alice...and, against his knowing, Alice's daughter.

Seeing him had resurrected all those same feelings she'd had the first fortnight she'd spent in the Devil's Den.

That had been lifetime ago. Seeing him was dangerous for the risk it posed, and for all the feelings he stirred inside.

Being with him was comfortable, and right, and fun.

She'd forgotten what it was to be like with him, to be herself.

Not even with the treacherous scoundrel she'd given her virtue and heart to had she truly been herself.

With Laurence, she'd been able to be that and more.

He wasn't her brother, who served more of a fatherly role.

Oh, Laurence had teased her just the same as any brother, but she'd been able to confide in him and share with him, to enjoy his company without feeling fathered or brothered or lectured.

With him, he'd always felt an equal. He'd treated her that way. Now he was here.

"I am sorry I had you taken away from Dynevor's assignment for you."

Gasping, her heart startling, Alice spun.

The Earl of Wakefield stood there stoic as he always was, barely smiling.

He was a serious fellow. It seemed like that was the way of everyone in this place—somber.

Everything and everyone who had been brought together here, be it proprietor or staff member, had all come for personal reasons, secret to their own selves.

“My lord,” she murmured, dropping a curtsy.

He bowed in return.

She’d been familiar with Wakefield during her time amongst polite society. He always was unfailingly polite, respectful, and respectable, and that hadn’t changed with his being here at the Devil’s Den.

He bowed to all the women, regardless of whether they’d been born on the streets, worked on their backs, or, in Alice’s case, had a baby out of wedlock and lived husbandless here.

“No apologies, my lord, I understand the establishment is undergoing renovations and growth. And as such, I’m expected and understand that flexibility is required of my role.”

He motioned to the chamber doors.

“This wing’s been newly completed, though not fully finished. We have several new patrons who have been on a waiting list for suites, and this is the closest we have to fully restored. It is our hope that they will be fully completed and occupied within a fortnight.”

A fortnight.

That meant she needed to complete and add the finishing touches to the work she'd already begun in this area. And start fresh on the additional rooms the proprietors had just added to the floor.

“While I’m working?”

“The floors will not be occupied by all those on the list. Exceptions may be permitted and only then if the risk of their seeking our membership at Forbidden Pleasures or Lucifer’s Lair proves a threat.

In which case, you’ll need to be working on these halls while they are occupied.

However, the arrangements will be carefully coordinated so that you needn’t interact with anyone who is on this floor. ”

Alice nodded. Either way, she wasn’t fearful in the least. Some lofty lord who entered these rooms and chanced upon her painting here would never in one-thousand million years see the polite Marquess of Exmoor’s long-lost, missing sister here at work.

They’d simply see a woman born of a different class with cropped hair and uniform attire.

“I want all your attention here.” Wakefield gestured to the door next to him. “You are to make these quarters your priority.”

Alice nodded. “It will be done.”

It would be done. It would take her more time than she cared to think about. And it meant less time she had with Laurel. She had to forcibly tamp down her

disappointment.

“I understand,” Wakefield said gently, “your clever assistant, Miss Laurel, might be of service to you at times as you complete the project. She has quite a way with the brush.”

Relief and so much gratitude swarmed Alice and threatened to bring her to her knees. Emotion filled her throat. This was why she needed to be here. These people understood. They didn’t keep her daughter from her. No. If anything, they went out of their way to be sure she had time with Laurel.

“Thank y—”

Lord Wakefield lifted a gloved palm in response to her thick, emotion-filled response. He cut off her thanks.

“Thank you for all your efforts,” he said quietly. “I will leave you to your work, Alice.”

With that, the earl bowed, she curtsied.

When Wakefield left, Alice pondered her latest space.

When she had a room to herself and the unlimited possibilities in a new project before her, she was at her happiest. For a husband-less, mother who worked, and didn’t have the support of a nursemaid, quiet time for oneself was as rare as the gold at the end of a rainbow.

These precious moments belonged to Alice, and in them, she lost herself in the freedom of her own mind and spirit.

This time, seated at her art table, marked an exception. She stared distractedly at the empty page in her sketchpad. She tapped the pencil tip over and over, drumming it over and over.

The ornate King Louis XIV cartel clock ticked the passing seconds; each beat mocking Alice for the black spot in her head.

She stared at the sheet until her eyes went crossed. Why couldn't she find something to inspire her?

You know.

Laurence.

"Stop it," she muttered, forcing herself to begin drawing something, anything. Alice sketched and sketched, and then when she'd finally selected a subject, found herself in front of her blank canvas and painting.

At last, she lost herself.

For a long—but not long enough—moment.

As engrossed as she was, she failed to hear the door open and close and as a person joined her. She felt him before she heard him.

"Alice."

Her eyes squinting at the white wall, she stiffened and all her nerves came alive.

A tingle traversed her neck and ran along her spine, a sense of heat and awareness. She turned. Not for the first time that day, her breath caught as she looked upon the

man who brought her past where it shouldn't be.

It appeared she'd been wrong. She was destined to meet him again.

And, dangerously, she was so very glad for having a second chance to meet with him.

"Laurence," she greeted softly.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

“Laurence,” Alice said softly, unlike the occasional peevishness from her tone at their last meeting two hours earlier. This time, her husky, tremulous voice contained a thread of joy.

He recognized it all too easily because he’d heard it so many times before. He knew what made her smile. Painting. Horses. Teasing him and vexing her brother.

And in this instant, she felt joy at his being here.

Would she feel that same way if she were to know what truly brings you here?

Muscling aside an overwhelming sense of guilt, Denbigh forced a crooked smile.

“We meet again.”

A twinkle lit Alice’s breathtaking eyes.

“I’m beginning to believe this is no coincidence. Two run-ins after all this time apart? If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were stalking me, Laurence.”

The grin froze uncomfortably on his face. His muscles felt like they formed something more of a grimace.

Alice’s gaze grew startled.

With a teasing laugh, she swatted his arm. “I’m jesting, Laurence. Have you lost your humor since we last saw one another?”

He had. Not completely, but he definitely laughed less with her gone. Now, the relaxed joy that came from her presence felt undeserved because of his intentions and his absolute determination to get her out of here.

“Forgive me, it is just...” He searched for words to explain how it felt being with her now.

“It feels different, doesn’t it? Uncomfortable, and yet foreign, and yet at the same time, nothing’s changed.” Alice aptly summed up everything he hadn’t been able to and couldn’t.

She turned the subject. “I take it these rooms will be yours?”

“I will be residing here as soon as they’re available and for the foreseeable future,” he said.

He’d stay as long as it took to get her out of here.

“I’d seen them once before, but the Earl of Wakefield informed me that new renovations were taking place, and I took it upon myself to visit and see what changes were in progress.”

“I didn’t know you would be here.” Yet another lie he gave her.

“Lord Wakefield will not be happy with you coming here without permission,” she murmured. “None of the proprietors will. They protect the people here.”

Denbigh stiffened.

“Not that I am saying I am at a risk, or that you pose any danger to me or any of the other women here,” she said on a rush. “Just that—”

He cut her off in quiet tones. “I am not worried about myself, or being discovered here, or the wrath of any of the proprietors here, Alice.” Denbigh looked her squarely in the eyes. He willed her to see the passion and full force of his emotions.

“I chafe and tense with outrage and dread for the peril you could find yourself in with other patrons here. The men who are not me. The ones who will see you and put you at risk.”

With every reality uttered, images paraded in his mind.

Of men, unscrupulous ones; all the blackguards and bastards he’d never kept company with, stumbling upon Alice.

With every horrifying possibility, fierce rage rose up inside him.

All guilt at his purpose for being here melted into nothing as the fear of what faced her here dominated everything.

“Alice, surely you see that you are at risk being here. I understand you love to paint,” he said imploringly, “but you must understand—”

His words were stopped by the delicate touch of her fingertips against his lips.

They were more calloused than he remembered, but still paint-stained.

Never, however, had he felt those fingertips against his mouth.

A shameful surge of lust bolted through him.

A hungering to know her mouth in ways he shouldn’t and couldn’t.

“Laurence,” she said softly, gently. “I am happy. I am safe. Here, I am at peace.”

The primal thoughts and urges he had vanished in a flash. Rage rose up again.

“Safe?” he asked, emphasizing that word. “Safe,” he repeated. This time he forced out a harsh, ugly, mocking laugh. “Do you truly believe you are safe—?”

“I wanted to paint too!” A wilting child’s voice piped in. “You were supposed to be painting with me, M...” A little girl registered Denbigh’s presence. “Miss Killoran.”

With a feeling of being yanked mid-gallop from his horse and hurled to the ground, he whipped around and faced the intruder.

He stared blankly at the child.

A little over three feet tall and possessed of long, slightly tangled golden curls, the little girl bore a familiar look. A strange feeling settled inside him as, under Denbigh’s feet, the Earth’s axis shifted, leaving him struggling for balance. Those curls. He knew those eyes even better.

My God .

He had always possessed a way with words.

They’d never eluded him. From his father, he’d inherited an ability to charm, disarm, and a way with and around words.

But unlike his profligate father, Denbigh had never used them as a weapon against innocent ladies.

Words had never failed him. Until now. Fortunately, the impish, bright-eyed, dimple-

cheeked, adorable little girl had words for all of them.

“Hello.”

Hello . It was just that one word, a greeting, and from it, she gave Denbigh a roadmap to follow.

“Hello,” he murmured.

At his side, Alice stood stiff, her face whitewashed, unbending and afraid.

She was afraid. And within him, with every breath he inhaled and every beat of his heart, he hated that she should be afraid in this instant.

My God, she has a daughter . There were a thousand—no, a million questions he had.

There had been a man, one who had not done right by her.

The rage at that and the desire to hunt down and kill the bastard, however, would wait for later.

Right now, he need only be present in this moment with this pair.

The little girl looked up at him with the biggest, widest eyes he’d ever seen.

“Who are you?” she asked with all the truthful innocence and directness only a child could manage.

It was as though that query brought Alice alive in a war. “This is the Earl of Denbigh.” She moved quickly and made to position herself between him and the little girl.

His heart hurt. She sought to hide the girl from him? Did he believe he would judge her?

Laurence dropped to a knee and slid himself in a way that prevented Alice from hiding the girl as she would a dirty secret. Which is what society had forced her to be.

“It is very nice to meet you,” he said softly and gently.

He held out his hand. The tiny child, all too trustingly, slipped her fingers into his and gave his hand an impressively firm shake. She got that from her mother.

“Will you be painting with M— Miss Killoran?” the tiny girl incorrectly surmised.

Had there been men who came to paint here with Alice? The very idea of it knifed at him. Ripe, unrivaled, unceasing jealousy threatened to eat him alive. He reigned those volatile emotions in.

“I fear not, Miss—?”

“Kill’ran,” she supplied. “We’re all Killorans here,” she explained, this time correcting her mispronunciation of the notorious family name.

Killorans.

The hell Alice and her daughter were.

Those were thoughts for a later time.

The child gave his hand a tug. “You may call me Laurel.”

Denbigh went motionless.

“Laurel,” he whispered.

He dimly registered her zealous nod. He was lost. Lost in thoughts of the past; memories of him and Alice.

“...Someday, Laurence, you must name one of your daughters, Laurel...”

“...Oh, I’m having daughters, am I?” he drawled.

“...Five of them,” an impish thirteen-year-old Alice piped in. “Laurel, Laurelia, Laurina, Laurette, Laurelei...”

A claymore to Denbigh’s chest couldn’t have inflicted more suffering.

He felt Alice’s gaze on him.

“Miss Killoran?” Laurel’s worried voice cut across anguished remembrances of simpler times, of how it once was with Alice...and how she’d wanted it to be. “Did I make His Lordship sad?” She didn’t allow Alice to answer; she swung her gaze to his. “Are you sad because you want to paint?”

Get it together, man.

Denbigh cleared his throat of emotion. “Not at all. I am thinking of how honored I’d be to call ‘Laurel’.” He leaned close to whisper. “In truth, I am not much of a painter, Laurel. That skill belongs to your m—”

Alice’s breath hitched noisily.

“Miss Killoran,” Denbigh corrected before he slipped completely.

A tremble racked Alice's frame. He saw it and he hated it. He hated that she'd adopted a name that wasn't her own. He hated her fear. Her uncertainty. The secrets. The outright lies. He bloody hated everything about this.

"Do you have a given name?" Laurel asked in her singsong voice. She wrinkled her cute, button, nose. "Or are you like all the toffs and only His Lordship, My Lordship, My Lord."

"Laurel ." Alice gave that gentle rebuke.

"No, no," Denbigh murmured. "It is fine. I have a name." His voice sounded thick to his own ears. "My name is Laurence."

Some sort of dawning realization sparked in the child's blue eyes.

"Laurence?" The child whipped her focus up to Alice so quickly, her tangle of curls bounced wildly around her. She looked to Alice for some sort of confirmation. " Your friend Laurence ?"

"Yes, Laurel," Alice said softly. "The very same."

All the breath became trapped in Denbigh's lungs.

She'd spoken about him. She'd told her secret daughter about him.

For there could be no doubting the girl belonged to Alice.

What had Alice shared? What stories had she told?

And it seemed so very unfair that he should know absolutely nothing about Laurel, that she should have been a stranger before now.

He wanted to know about her, everything there was, from the moment she'd been conceived to now when she stood before him, a happy, smiling child.

An exuberant, happy meld of a laugh and cry cleared some of Denbigh's fog. Laurel launched her little arms about his neck and squeezed him tight.

"I am so excited. I never met M-Miss Killoran's f—" The child caught herself and peeked up at Alice. "Friends. "

"Oh?" he said, his voice like he'd swallowed a handful of gravel. "Who are Miss Killoran's friends?"

"You and Wynn," she happily prattled, like it was the most natural thing in the world for a girl more babe than child to lie about her connections. "Elsbeth and Caroline."

Alice's friends ? His heart, that organ responsible for his life's blood, seized painfully and viciously.

Alice cleared her throat. "Laurel, let me accompany you back to the nursery." Her facial muscles were as tight as his own. "I promise this will not be the last you see of Laurence."

Somehow Denbigh found the strength to stand. Did Alice truly mean that? Did she make Laurel a real promise? He searched for some hint but Alice remained a vault. In their time apart, she'd become adept at concealing her thoughts and emotions.

"Yes," he murmured. "You may count on us meeting again, Laurel."

As he watched them go and stood alone in his future—temporary—residence, he made another vow. He'd arrived at Exmoor's behest. He'd promised to bring Alice home, and he would, but when he left, Denbigh would also be leaving with another

person—Alice’s daughter.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

Denbigh had always been clever. That's one of the reasons she'd so enjoyed sparring with him.

He possessed a sharp wit and a keen intellect.

He enjoyed debating the enlightened philosophers, and he read everything from Wordsworth to Voltaire.

But even if he hadn't been the cleverest fellow, even if he'd suffered a fall from his mount and had his faculties knocked around, it wouldn't have taken much for him to deduce the fact that she had a daughter.

Even when Laurel had caught herself and addressed Alice as Miss and not as Mama , she'd seen it in Denbigh's stunned, clear blue eyes—he'd have known the identity of the little girl at her feet.

He'd been so tender, so gentle. Alice had a glimpse of what life would've been like with a man such as Laurence, good, honorable, wonderful with children, loving to all, as her father had been.

Instead, Alice made the mistake of finding someone who'd been a shadow of Laurence.

He'd put on a great show, whereas Laurence's had never been an act.

He was who he was. A good man, and an honest man.

It's why she'd asked him to meet her here.

Now, at quarter past eleven o'clock the next night, she dismounted in Hyde Park and let her borrowed mount—one she was freely allowed to use by the Earl of Dynevor—wander. He found a nearby patch and made it his own.

And Alice waited.

She wasn't alone. She knew that. One of the guilty pleasures she'd allowed herself during her time at the Devil's Den were midnight rides at Hyde Park.

After all, at this hour, one could be absolutely certain there'd never be a respectable lord or lady about.

Not in these grounds. No, this was when peers and peeresses were attending fancy soirees, lavish balls, theaters, and operas. This was Alice's time .

But she wasn't alone. The proprietors at the Devil's Den allowed their female staff freedom of movement, but they also ensured that protection and security were provided. Guards went with them anywhere, but they kept their distance and stayed away.

Alice's unease had nothing to do with the surly, scarred guard in the shadows.

No, it had everything to do with her impending meeting.

The spring breeze tugged at her cloak. Not that she feared seeing Laurence.

Strangely, if she'd have been face-to-face with her brother, in a chance meeting, she'd have felt a great deal more awkwardness.

She supposed, however, she should feel a great deal more dread at this meeting she'd requested with Laurence.

Alice rubbed at her chilled arms and looked around for a sight of him.

Oh, she wasn't nonchalant or unaffected.

Maybe, more than anything, it was that her joy at seeing him again proved greater than all the discomfort that would come after she let him in on her secret.

It was a secret only her non-blood family knew.

Laurence was like family. When she was sixteen, she'd opened her heart to him and admitted the long-held secret that she loved him.

He'd handled it with the grace and aplomb only the Earl of Denbigh could.

He'd basically patted her on the head and said her feelings were just confused.

That she was Exmoor's sister and she'd find the real gentleman she loved one day.

And what had she done instead? She'd settled and made a muddle of her life in the process.

The gravel crunched on the path behind her. Alice stiffened and looked toward the sound.

Laurence stepped from the shadows. Attired in a fine black wool cloak, black breeches, black boots, and a short black hat, the only thing that set him apart from a highwayman was a black domino.

Alice let her arms fall to her side. “I expect you have questions,” she said, by way of greeting.

The small, boyish half-grin he’d always worn around her quirked his lips, and it still had the same effect it always had.

“Well, what I was going to say was good evening,” he riposted with a teasing wryness.

Just like that, the tension eased from her body. He’d always had that effect on her, and thank God it persisted even now, when she’d asked him here to share something he’d likely already gleaned.

Clasping his arms behind him, Laurence tipped his head back and inhaled the clean night air. “It’s interesting that you should ask to meet me here now.”

Alice stared at him. With his eyes closed, it was all too easy to take in his chiseled features, his strong, nobly cut jaw with a slight cleft in his chin, his sharp cheekbones, and a nose cut like it had been plucked from DaVinci’s Michelangelo, then affixed and brought to life upon this living, breathing man.

Her belly fluttered inside. A thousand butterflies danced in time to the light flicker of his tawny eyebrows. He might’ve been adamant that her feelings for him would go away, but they hadn’t. When she failed to respond, Laurence opened his eyes and looked at her.

Alice cleared her throat. “And why is that?”

“I come here every morning with your brother.”

Her features froze, and her heart stuttered. If she moved wrong, she’d break.

“I didn’t know that,” she whispered, her voice catching.

She came here because this was the place where her family had gathered for the last time before Alice left.

It had been Caroline and Winchester’s wedding day.

The sun had shown brightly and they’d all gathered.

Laurence had been the best man, teasing and tossing coins in the air.

Knowing that not only her brother, but Laurence too, came to this very spot that she herself visited nightly felt like a full-circle moment, as if they’d been inhabiting the same world in the exact same place, but at different times.

“I’ve missed you, Alice.” Laurence’s profession came through the quiet.

Tears formed in her throat.

“I have missed you too,” she said shakily. “I’ve missed you all,” she hastily amended.

How humiliating it would be to admit that she always had and always would carry a torch for him.

Alice moved deeper under the protective cover of the white birch’s high canopy of green leaves, sat, and drew her knees up against her chest. She patted the place next to her, inviting Laurence to sit.

He joined her on the ground and took up a like pose.

They sat that way, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, and knee to knee. Neither spoke.

They just stared out at the same spot where Alice's brother had fallen in love, a place of happiness and peace, a place of calm.

"You always said I would fall in love," she murmured.

"And...you did?" Laurence ventured.

There was something dark and unidentifiable underscoring his deeper-than-usual baritone. It was a tone she'd never before heard from him. And one she couldn't make anything out of. Alice couldn't bring herself to look at him. She continued staring out. She nodded.

"I thought I did," she said.

She'd wanted to be loved. She'd wanted to be in love.

She'd known she couldn't have Laurence. He'd never see her in that light, and so she turned her gaze elsewhere and tried. She'd even convinced herself she had been in love.

It was secret. It was exciting.

"Obviously, the fact that he insisted it remain clandestine because of his reputation, and his need to build a fortune so that my brother would allow his suit, should have been all the warning I needed," she murmured.

"I think I knew it. I just let myself not heed it. Eventually, he went on to die in a duel, killed by his lover's husband. "

"And you?" Laurence murmured.

“And I was left ruined in every way.” That whispered admission barely reached her own ears.

Alice remained still. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him. Instead, she suffered and sat in the misery of her own discomfort.

“Laurel is your daughter,” Laurence said quietly.

His wasn’t a question. He spoke with the absolute conviction of one who’d taken one look at Alice’s daughter and deduced her identity. Once again, she tried to see whether he felt disdain, disgust, or shock, but he did a remarkable job of revealing nothing and leaving her to wonder.

A muscle pulsed at the corner of his eye. “And so you exiled yourself and shut your daughter away from all her family and all her future. You consigned her to a gaming hell. Instead of—”

“How dare you?” Alice shot back. She nourished herself with his judgment.

It kept her from breaking down and collapsing into a million tears.

“How delusional you are. Acting as though I could live openly and freely with an illegitimate daughter and that there’d be absolutely no repercussions for my sister and Caroline and Wynn. ”

“So, Exmoor knows?” he demanded.

“I’m not discussing my brother with you.”

The relaxed demeanor of before left Laurence. He sprang into movement, launching to his feet and then into a fast back-and-forth pace. His restlessness proved

contagious.

“I’ll ask you one more time, Alice,” he said, “is your family aware of your presence here? And the reason behind it?”

Enraged at his insistence and unsettled by this all-powerful, commanding stranger issuing directives and demanding answers, she climbed to her feet and stumbled over her words.

“It matters not. It matters that this is my place. Here I have a new home and a new life. And now you know why.”

Suddenly furious with herself for having leaned into a weakness of the past, she fumed. “My God, I can’t believe I told you any of this.”

He took an angry step toward her. Despite knowing he’d never hurt her, reflexively, she found herself backing away at his approach.

“Alice, when I came upon you, I understood, or I thought I understood,” he said, putting a steely emphasis on that particular word.

“You were always spirited and independent and loved art. I believed you were here of choice, that your Bohemian spirit sent you to this place, a gaming hell, of all places,” he hissed.

“But this.” Angrily, he slashed a hand up and down in the air.

“This isn’t a choice as much as you may present it as one.

You have not chosen to be here. You have forced yourself to stay here.”

Alice sputtered, indignant and outraged at his high-handedness.

“Oh, you can deny it all you want, but I don’t believe for one moment that if you were free to live somewhere else with your daughter that you wouldn’t.

You’ve chosen a self-exile and imposed yourself here, believing your family will eventually resent you and hate you for circumstances that belong, not with you, but with some bastard who betrayed you. ”

Vitriolic rage dripped from his tone.

“A bastard who, if he wasn’t already dead, I’d happily hunt down and rip apart with my bare hands. He is the one who deserves to be punished. Not you. You, however, are determined to play the martyr, and in doing so you’d force your daughter into an unsafe, uncertain, and horrid exist—”

Alice struck out, catching him in the face with her palm, so hard, quick, and with such ferocity his head whipped back. The crack of flesh meeting flesh rang in the nighttime still.

Nauseous, her heart rang sickeningly against her rib cage. Alice stared at the mark her palm had left upon his beloved cheek. With a stoic calm, Laurence swiped his hand down his marked cheek.

Oh God. She’d struck him. “I’m so sorry, Laurence.” Tears filled her throat and made speech a struggle. “I didn’t mean to strike you.”

She’d rather pluck out her fingernails than hurt him. He’d driven her to such rage by questioning her intentions and her ability to care for her daughter but he wasn’t deserving of her violence.

Alice took in a steadying breath. “But questioning how I raise my daughter and everything I sacrificed for her... I will not have you disparage my intentions or my love or commitment to her.”

The solemn way in which he nodded and pardoned her offense only made her feel all the worse for that loss of control.

In his reappearing in her life, he’d resurrected all the old love and longing she’d carried for him and would forever carry for him. She’d let him in, and it had been a mistake. It would take her more than a fortnight to erect walls again.

It’d take her a lifetime to build a fortress big enough to erase this day-long reunion.

A steadying breath.

“It’s not my intention to fight with you, Laurence,” Alice said, with greater calm. “You are my friend. You’ll always be my friend.”

That’s what he’d said. He’d been the one who’d declared that to be the entire extent of their relationship forevermore.

“I would never hurt you, and I know you would never hurt me. As such, I’m asking that you not speak to my family about our seeing one another here. And for you and I, there is no further need for us to meet now. Everything else has been said.”

Before she did something stupid and reckless, like wrap her arms around his narrow waist and hold onto him and fight to never let go, she somehow managed to bow her head, return to her mount, climb astride, and leave.

They’d never really had a chance to say goodbye when she’d left the first time.

This marked an actual closure that both she and he were aware of, and it carried with it a finality that cleaved her heart in two.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

Denbigh's outing with Alice had gone not only bad, but spectacularly so.

He sat at his private table in the Devil's Den. Slouched in his seat with a thick cloud of smoke hanging just above his head, he looked on at the evening's entertainments with unseeing eyes.

Judging by the swell of guests surrounding the stage and all the patrons eagerly shooting their hands up, crying out bids for the pretend demure beauty on the stage, the men were crazed with lust. Each fellow fought for the privilege of stealing some young woman's virtue.

There was a game of pretend, except this game of pretend hit entirely too close to home for Denbigh.

Absently, he toyed with the rim of his also untouched snifter.

He'd suspected the child was hers, based on looks alone.

After Alice and Laurel took their leave of him earlier in the day, he'd gotten himself to a rational place.

He'd even convinced himself the child he'd taken for hers was in fact a girl who happened to live in the Devil's Den; that Denbigh had indulged in a flight of fancy where he'd imagined a beautiful, inquisitive, and smiling daughter born to Alice.

But to have his first inkling confirmed with Alice's words while they'd been alone at Hyde Park had wrecked him. Utterly, absolutely, and completely destroyed Denbigh.

Seeing her become another man's wife would have always broken Denbigh, but he could have suffered in silence. Just as long as the man Alice wed consecrated himself to her love, laughter, and every happiness.

He stared emptily into the bottle of spirits he'd ordered but never drank from this night.

To know it was some black-hearted knave who'd stolen her virtue, her heart, and left her in ruin, and with a babe to care for?

Denbigh squeezed his eyes briefly shut. And now Alice and her daughter lived together in a den of iniquity, sin, and danger.

In fairness, how could Denbigh have remained levelheaded? With Alice's detailed telling, every feral urge had risen up within him so that he'd wanted to toss his head back, roar, and pound his chest like a primal beast.

Denbigh stared from over the top of his snifter at the spectacle on the stage—a virgin auction.

A hard, bitter, empty, grin formed on his lips. How bloody fitting. Such salacity's would have never earned anything but his disgust. But with his and Alice's exchange still fresh and raw in his mind, the act at play repulsed him. Nausea churned in his belly.

What gentleman could be driven to desire at the idea of ruining a woman?

The stage production hit Denbigh in the face over and over, like a fresh wound scabbed over that continued to be picked and picked and picked, reminding him that Alice's situation wasn't a playact.

Hers hadn't been a performance. What had happened to her had been real.

She deserved your calm-headedness , a voice in his head lashed. Alice should have been free to talk without any recrimination on your part.

His features spasmed, and Denbigh's eyes slid shut.

He grimaced as he downed the rest of his glass, welcoming the fiery trail it burned along his throat.

It had been two days since he'd seen her, and only now had he gotten it into his head what to say to her.

From the head proprietors' table, the Earl of Wakefield sat conversing with Lachlan Latimer and the Earl of Dynevor while the club's action played out.

As if he felt Denbigh's gaze, Wakefield briefly paused in whatever he'd been saying to his partners and looked Denbigh's way.

Just as he'd looked at the other gentleman countless times since Denbigh arrived at a table, he wanted no part of, Denbigh waited for a signal that he would be able to meet Alice alone.

At long last, a slight nod of confirmation came from the Earl of Wakefield.

Purpose-driven and fueled at the prospect of starting over and trying again with Alice, Denbigh took another quick drink and set his glass down.

He waited only so long as to be sure Wakefield had his partners' undivided attention and that there wasn't a risk that it'd be found out that Wakefield was in cahoots with Denbigh.

Only then did Denbigh stand and excuse himself from the raucous play around him.

Not that anyone would notice a gentleman who happened to leave.

There was such a crush of bodies and patrons, and all attention was fixed on the dais at the center of the club.

Denbigh quickly made his way from the club and headed for the private suites he occupied.

At least the ones he occupied so long as Alice lived in this place.

And he'd only remain here until she left with him, and if she didn't?

Then this would be his permanent residence forever. His own earldom be damned.

He'd been retiring for the night for a ton function, at least that was what he'd said, and what he'd worked out with Wakefield, who had allowed Alice to return to painting the canvas in his suite.

As he approached his door and proceeded to fetch a key from his front jacket pocket, he knew he didn't need it.

He knew she'd be there. And he felt not the first stab of guilt at all about the ways in which he'd lied to her.

It was for her own good and wouldn't matter when she discovered the truth, which she would when this was said and done.

It wouldn't stay secret forever that he'd come here to restore her to her rightful place with the Mastersons.

Still, prepared as he was to see her at work before that enormous canvas, the sight of her always caught him like he'd spied a shooting star.

Fleeting and fast and so faint. A person didn't know if it had been real or a spark of his imagination.

When he entered, she was not at her painting as he'd expected.

Rather, she sat at the edge of the bed where he'd lain his head these past two nights.

She stared vacantly at the rendering, so very colorful and vivid and real.

Her head angled slightly as her gaze moved and found him at the door.

There was no surprise there. It was as if her expression said, 'Of course, you're here. I knew you'd be here.'

Suddenly uncertain and at a loss, he stood there beating his left hand against his side before he realized what he did. He caught himself from that distracting staccato tap and cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry. I know I'd indicated to the proprietors I would not be staying the night," he said. "There was a change of plans, and so I'm here," he finished lamely.

"And so, you are here," she repeated on a soft murmur.

Alice stood. "I should leave. You're here for your chambers."

"Please stay," he called as she rushed over to gather up her supplies.

Alice stopped in her place.

Denbigh pulled a face.

“May I?” he asked, gesturing behind him.

Alice nodded, giving him permission to close the panel so they were allowed their privacy.

“I would be lying if I didn’t say I was hoping to find you here, Alice.”

No, that wasn’t at all true.

“That the reason I’ve come to my rooms was the hope that you would be here, as you’d anticipated I’d be gone for the night.”

He found some comfort in giving her that truth at least.

“Alice,” he murmured, drifting closer. “I owe you yet another apology. I was an unmitigated ass. I was stodgy and boorish and judgmental, and that was never my intention—”

“And you’re forgiven, Laurence,” she said with a gentle smile.

Stopped mid-soliloquy, Denbigh blinked with rapid succession.

“Laurence, you’re a paragon,” she said with a wry smile.

“Given everything, I shared last evening, I’d have been surprised if you’d responded with an effortless nonchalance.

I mean, it was not as though I was telling you how I’d been celebrating my birthdays these past years or what I’d had for breakfast. You just found out that I have a child.

You'd never before heard that information. How else were you to respond?"

All the sweet relief her forgiveness brought vanished with her next words.

"I'm the one who should be apologetic, Laurence.

" Alice resumed twisting that blade of guilt, all the deeper.

"As I said last evening, I shouldn't have struck you.

" Her eyes grew stricken. "Regardless of what was said, I had no right to put my hands upon you. I regret that and always will, Laurence."

Yes, this was to be his hell for his deceit against her.

The Lord had punished him with her undeserved penitence.

This was to be his hell, and here is where he deserved to be, for it mattered not that he was here on Exmoor's behalf and supported his best friend.

She was a friend to him too, and he'd come here under duplicitous means.

Desperate to climb out of this hell, he swiftly switched topics.

"Please don't let me stop you from painting. I came here because I hated the way it ended between us yesterday, Alice. And I'd ask that you allow me to remain."

He couldn't make out what she was thinking.

Then, as if she had given it serious thought, she nodded.

“May I stay?” he asked.

“You want to watch me paint?” she asked, a twinkle in her eye. “That would be a first.”

Taking her playful tone and resurrection of their time together in the past as an invitation, he sauntered over.

“Whoa, that isn’t at all true. I enjoyed watching you paint when we were younger.”

Alice snorted. “You’re a terrible liar.”

Denbigh flinched. For a moment, he believed she knew the truth. She knew, and she was just torturing him slowly and viciously for his lies.

“I did love watching you paint,” he murmured. “I enjoyed it more than I should have. Certainly, more than your brother would have allowed or welcomed.” He issued that later reminder for himself.

Feeling Alice’s eyes on him, he looked over.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

A memory rose up of when she'd been sixteen and attempted to teach him how to sketch.

She positioned herself behind him, took his arm, and proceeded to guide him through the motions.

It had been the first time he'd been unable to deny his desire for her, and shortly after, she'd declared her love for him.

It had been unpardonable that he had encouraged her so.

"You always teased me about my sketches and painting," she chidingly reminded him.

"Oh, yes. We both were very good at that."

"We still are," she rejoined.

"May I join you while you paint?"

"You may," she said.

And with that, she danced over to those art supplies she'd always been a master at manipulating.

Loosening his cravat, he headed to the foot of his bed and sat.

He watched her as she worked. The quiet wasn't the uncomfortable sort.

There was a gulf of time between them, and so many stories and memories, but the comfortable companionship proved a welcome nest upon which they perched.

Denbigh watched her, and as he did, time slipped by. Seconds turned to minutes and minutes into who knew how long. So, when Alice lowered her palette and brush and reached up to rub the sore muscles of her neck, an hour or a lifetime could have passed.

The glow from the hearth and lit sconces bathed her mesmerizing features in a soft light.

Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she came and joined him at the foot of the bed. She plopped herself down gracelessly. And yet as her delicate form bounced slightly, it somehow exuded a grace with it, too.

Denbigh turned his head. There were so many questions he had, but one more important than any other. "What is she like?"

Denbigh possessed an overwhelming urge and need to know about this little human born of Alice, and in her image.

Alice didn't pretend to misunderstand.

"She loves to be around people. And she is a master at charming all the staff, especially those in the kitchen. They insist on giving Laurel her favorite treats, even when she doesn't want them."

Denbigh hung on her every word, swallowing up each intimate detail she imparted like the gifts they were.

“Laurel loves to draw and paint,” Alice said. “and she has a special fondness for depicting animals.”

“Ahh,” he said with a lift of his head. “She a mix of her mama and her aunt.”

“Oh, she is all Elsbeth.” Alice laughed. “Laurel only inherited my love of art.”

He’d spent just a short time with Laurel, but even that’d been enough to realize she was just like her mama.

The happy color faded from her cheeks, and she looked down with somber eyes at her lap.

“You miss your family,” he murmured.

Alice managed a jerky nod. “Of course, I d-do,” she said huskily.

Studying her intently as he did, he easily caught the tear she dusted away with the pad of her thumb.

His heart broke and bled.

“Oh, Alice,” he groaned.

With that, he pulled her into his arms, and it was as though, in holding her, he freed her.

Alice curled herself into him, gripped the front of his shirt, climbed onto his lap, and sobbed. She cried big, noisy, deep, heaving gasps of air, sobbing what must surely be more than a lifetime’s worth of misery and loneliness.

Squeezing his eyes shut tight to keep from joining in, Denbigh buried his nose against the top of her head and clung as hard as he could.

Maybe if he held her tighter, he'd stop from splintering apart.

Her grief was his grief and threatened to upend him.

She cried and cried and through it, he continued to hold her, conferring his warmth.

Giving her the support she'd been so desperately in need of and would have once again, he vowed, until it appeared she'd cried the last of her tears. They faded into a watery hiccough.

Denbigh continued to hold her. He eased away some but retained his grip. All the while he held her, he lightly stroked the back of her head.

"I've missed you," she whispered.

His heart froze. It thumped and not in an uncomfortable way.

"I've missed my brother and my sister and my mother. I miss Caroline. I hate that I've never met their child or that our children do not know one another."

He moved his lips against her temple and placed a gentle kiss there.

"Better?" he breathed.

Alice gave a wobbly nod. In his arms, she went still at the exact moment his body became granite.

The air crackled and simmered and sizzled around them, coming alive all at once

with a new energy. A volatile one, throbbing with a whisper of desire and the forbidden.

His throat grew suddenly thick. And the reminder of their one almost embrace came to life in his memory. Not an almost embrace. It had been a kiss. He'd blocked it from his remembrances. He wanted to kiss her more than he ever had.

"Alice," he said.

His voice garbled, he confessed, "I can't...set you away. I want to...kiss you."

Alice lifted her head and tipped her eyes back to his. The long ends of her lashes fluttered. The sigh of her breath came quick and warm against his lips.

With that, all sense was forgotten.

"I am lost," he groaned.

"You've always been contrary," Alice moaned. "For I am found."

With that admission, the world melted away and from its remains sprung a long-suppressed desire he'd carried forever for this woman.

Their mouths found each other. Even as Denbigh cupped a hand about her nape and angled her head, she caught him by his neck and drew him closer so their mouths melded as one.

He kissed her over and over. He savored her lips.

He cherished them first with gentle meetings.

She deserved to know the way he'd once wanted to initiate her.

And then, with every breathy moan and soft plea and escaping sigh, he deepened his strokes.

With his opposite hand, he used his thumb and forefinger to coax her lips apart.

And she immediately granted him entry. She greeted him warmly and enthusiastically.

They tangled with their tongues. His flesh and hers, a heated brand that they touched to one another's, leaving each other's mark, so this kiss could be imprinted upon, not only their flesh, but their very minds and souls and entire spirits.

"You are so perfect, Alice."

"Laurence ," breathed Alice in between their kiss.

"I have wanted to kiss you forever," he confessed at long last.

He'd denied that truth from even her.

Alice gasped, moaning. She tipped her head back and bared her neck to his worship. He complied, sliding a trail of light bites and kisses and licks until he found the place where her pulse was pounding for him.

He needed her. He needed her forever. One kiss would never be enough. Panting, Denbigh filled his hand with her lush breast.

She gasped through the fabric of her uniform. He ran his thumb along the pebbled peak of the mound.

Alice gasped. Catching his hand between hers, she pressed his palm against her flesh and anchored him there. Kissing her mouth once more, he massaged and molded the soft, supple flesh, learning the texture and feel of her.

“Oy! Thought you weren’t keeping rooms here.”

Denbigh and Alice broke apart.

Alice, with a gasp—this one of shock and horror—jumped to her feet, leaving Denbigh angrily digesting that the Earl of Dynevor had interrupted a moment that had been forever in the making.

The head of the club glared darkly, not at Alice, but, rightfully so, at Denbigh.

“Alice, see yourself out,” the Earl of Dynevor ordered.

A black curtain of rage fell blindingly across Denbigh’s eyes at the jaded young pup’s familiar use of Alice’s Christian name. At the bastard ordering her about and at the speed with which she hastened off like she was some servant.

“Alice, you’re not going to be ordered about,” Denbigh called after her.

She paused and glanced back. The look in her eyes told a different tale than the book he was reading from.

“I have to go,” she mouthed.

Then without another look back, she departed. The door closed with a slight click, and Denbigh and Dynevor were alone.

It wouldn’t do to anger the irascible earl more than Denbigh already had.

“You needn’t worry, Dynevor,” he said as soon as Alice left. “The lady and I have history together. We are family—”

Dynevor cut him off. “Do ye go about snogging your own sisters and cousins like that?”

Heat climbed Denbigh’s neck. He had no sisters, but the other man’s point was clear.

The younger earl continued with his advantage over an off-balance Denbigh. “And I know who you are. I know your history together.”

Dynevor leveled him with an all-knowing death stare. “Just as I know what brought you here, Denbigh. I’m aware of what’s going on between you and Wakefield.”

The tall, athletically built younger man took a swaggering step closer. “Now, let me share some helpful information with you . Alice has made a life here. And if you ruin it, you’ll not only have her wrath, you’ll have mine as well.”

Denbigh sharpened his gaze on the ruthless proprietor. The street-raised nobleman’s devotion to Alice sent that dark serpent of jealousy slithering down Denbigh’s spine. “You strike me as especially devoted to Lady Alice.”

“I am.” Lord Dynevor flashed a smug grin and Denbigh’s fingers twitched with the hungering to haul back and plant him a bloody facer. That false expression of amusement faded as quick as it’d come. “Make no mistake, Denbigh, I ensure my people are safe...and Alice is one of my people.”

“The hell she is, Dynevor,” he said on an icy whisper.

Dynevor drew his jacket back enough to reveal the jewel-studded dagger sheathed there along with a gun.

“You think I’m afraid of you?” Denbigh sneered. “Because I am not.”

“You should be,” Dynevor snarled. “If you knew what was good for you.”

“I’m here for Alice. I’m here because I care about her, and her family cares about her.”

“If you cared about her, you’d respect and honor her decision. But you know that it’s not about what Alice wants. It’s about what you want and what her family wants.”

And with that unerringly accurate barb leveled, the Earl of Dynevor saw himself out.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

“Y er sure this is a good idea?”

As Alice examined her reflection in the mirror in the room, she shared with Addien, Alice wasn’t really sure of anything anymore.

It had been five days since she’d been reunited with Laurence.

And every one of those five days, he’d come around.

No, not really come around. He lived here.

She found a strange kind of peace in sharing a residence with him—even if it was a debauched gaming hell.

“The gents who come here don’t come to take tea with a lady,” Addien pointed out from just beyond her shoulder.

With that, a vicious twinge pulled, a biting, sharp, jagged-tooth-like jealousy got a hold, squeezed, and held tight.

No, her friend was right. That was one very important detail Alice couldn’t ignore but had forced herself to.

The only reason men came to this place, as the maid pointed out, was for sinning.

Laurence had never been a wagering man. But he had kept mistresses.

Oh, discreetly. But she'd been pathetic enough to have kept her ears open for any hint of information exchanged between he and Winchester when they thought they were in private.

No doubt he'd come for the same reason all the other gentlemen came here.

To take part in carnal sinning. But a gentleman such as Laurence, the Earl of Denbigh, would never dare pursue such wickedness as long as his best friend's sister was near.

Nor could he simply walk away. No, his conscience wouldn't allow that. And so, he kept company with her.

"Alice?"

"We don't take tea," Alice said out of absolute necessity. "You make it sound like I get into my day's finest and we sit at a tea table across from one another."

"No," Addien drawled. "Having a light repast on the floor in his rooms, while he keeps you company as you work, is entirely different. Definitely less intimate," Addien said with such dryness, heat slapped Alice's cheeks.

"You make it sound as though it is something forbidden," she muttered.

Her friend's pixie-like features grew deadly serious. It was her usual state for everyone, with the exception of Alice.

"It's because it is more dangerous," Addien said, emphasizing that mention of peril. "You've got the look of a lady in—"

"Don't say it," she exploded.

Breathlessly, her heart pounded because the moment her friend spoke that word, there'd be no escaping it.

Addien's expression became shuttered. "Oi was going to say lots of trouble."

No, she hadn't. Alice knew as much and so did Addien. One thing sisters in this place never did was to mention one another's weaknesses. Female survivors stuck together.

"I just want you to be careful, Alice," Addien said. "Men don't bring ye nothing but heartache."

Alice had seen the way the other woman looked at the guard Roy. She knew Addien wasn't as unaffected when it came to matters of the heart, though she likely believed herself indifferent.

Her friend narrowed her eyes. "Oi'd mind yer tongue, if I were you."

Alice widened her eyes and feigned innocence. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't need to. Roy's different," Addien stated as absolute fact. "And either way, he doesn't know Oi exist. Yer fine earl, on the other hand, very much knows it, and I don't trust it worth a damn. Oi see the way he looks at you. It ain't good."

Her heart jumped. The way he looked at her?

Alice didn't ask it.

But she wanted to.

Alice looked at the clock hanging on the wall. She was late. He'd be there.

Of course, he'll be there, you ninny. They were his rooms, but he knew she was coming.

At first, it was an invitation and a request, and then it was an understanding. This meeting, however, would be different.

Addien never let herself reveal any emotion. This time, however, her features were arranged into a mask of nothing but worry. "Are you sure you want to do this, Alice?"

They'd already worked out that Addien would escort Laurel to Laurence's suite so the two could be properly introduced.

"I want to do this," Alice promised.

"Oh, Oi'm sure you want to do this, but do you think it's a good idea?"

The unflappable maid's uncharacteristic discomfort stirred Alice's own unease.

No. She wasn't sure of much anymore. Introducing Laurel as her daughter to Laurence would bring their relationship to a place, she knew wasn't safe.

He'd not prodded her or asked to see Laurel, but neither had he been secret in his interest about Laurel.

He asked questions about what Alice's daughter loved and liked.

He wondered about her pastimes and hobbies.

He quizzed her about the little girl's favorite toys.

At first, she'd been close-lipped, but as time progressed, it had been natural to share. No, it was more than that. It'd felt so bloody good to share her daughter with someone whom she loved. In doing so, she and Laurel weren't alone. They were part of a wee family, if even just for a bit.

"Then I'll be along shortly," Addien said with a slight hesitancy that conveyed her reservations.

And with the warning ringing in her friend's tones, Alice headed to see Laurence. And as she did, she felt more alive than she ever had before.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

He knew she was coming. She'd never been late to visit during the times that were slated as her breaks during the day.

He hated that her time was not her own. He wanted to give her every single second of every minute of every hour of every day so that it was her own with which to do as she pleased—to paint, to smile, to just simply be with her daughter.

But this was what he had with her and of her—for now.

By the time she stood before him, his gut was as tight as his cravat had been when he'd begun waiting for her to arrive.

He just hadn't anticipated the reason for her delay or what would be different about their meeting together this afternoon.

"Close them." Alice gave him a teasing pinch, and not a light one either, pulling him from his thoughts.

Denbigh winced.

"I'd like to point out that since I'm being blindfolded, closing my eyes seems a tad redundant," he said drolly.

Alice gave the black strip about his head an extra tight tug. "Oh, hush." She finished tying the fabric.

Denbigh waited. And waited. And continued waiting.

When absolutely nothing happened, he checked to make sure he wasn't alone, "Are you still here, Alice?"

"I am," she piped in happily.

Several more beats passed.

"And we are?" he drawled, when she still didn't say anything.

"We are waiting," Alice said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Waiting." Denbigh paused. "You're nodding, aren't you?"

"I am, Laurence"

He counted the seconds.

Denbigh got to a whole thirty before he pressed his mysterious partner. "And exactly what is it we are waiting for, Alice?"

"Well, if I wanted you to know, you wouldn't be blindfolded," she pointed out.

"Very true," he allowed. "Very true."

He counted the seconds once more. This time, he made it to ninety-six.

"I'd be remiss if I failed to point out being blindfolded in this place of all places has a hint of wickedness to it."

"This place being your bedroom," she drawled.

“Well, I did refer to here, at the Devil’s Den.” He paused for a beat. “But I would say as confirmation to your question that, yes,” he purred silkily, “being blindfolded in my chambers could hint at wicked—”

“Mama, are you playing blindman’s bluff without me?”

That sweet, slightly wounded child’s intonation brought a curse flying to his lips. Denbigh instantly swallowed as much of it as he could. Frantically, he wrestled with the knot Alice had wrapped at the back of his head.

A rather impressive knot. Maybe it was more that his fingers shook so badly. The task was impossible. Somehow, he managed to wrestle himself free of the bindings. And he looked.

A powerful, painful, swell of emotion lodged in Denbigh’s throat. Unlike the only other time he’d come face to face with the little girl when she’d referred to Alice as Miss Killoran. This time she freely called her mother.

“No, Laurel, we were not playing without you,” Alice said softly.

Suddenly, he put together the reason for the blindfold, the surprise she planned, and the little girl being allowed to drop her guard.

Alice fell to a knee beside her daughter. “I was surprising the earl with you .”

“ Me ?” Laurel lifted those enormous eyes up to Denbigh. Adorable confusion creased the even more adorable little girl’s freckled forehead. “I’m not a fun surprise.”

In an instant, Denbigh fell head over heels, over toes, over his entire self in love with a little girl, with Alice’s daughter. So much love took hold of him, as did an all-

consuming, all-powerful need to protect her.

Denbigh dropped to a knee beside mother and daughter. “On the contrary,” he said hoarsely. “I cannot imagine a greater gift than getting to spend time with you, Laurel.”

Alice’s daughter erupted into a fit of giggles like he’d just told her the most hilarious of jests “Mama, Laurence is funny.”

“Yes, he is,” Alice said, her voice thick with emotion.

Denbigh had to force himself to tear his gaze from little Laurel, he needed to look at Alice. The same way in which he was overwhelmed and consumed by the moment, so too was Alice.

A light tugging on his hand brought him back to the moment. He stared at Laurel’s fingers; she’d laid her palm in Denbigh’s. So trustingly and tenderly, her fingers so small, so tiny, so delicate against his larger, darker, harder ones.

And all he wanted to do was fold his palm around hers and protect her forever. Her and her mother.

“Do you know any jests, my lord?”

“I do,” he acknowledged.

Laurel’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, you must tell me. Please, please, please !” With every plea, she tugged at his hand. “Tell me .”

“I will,” he promised. Denbigh dropped his voice to an exaggerated whisper. “But first you have to promise me something.”

Alice's daughter all too trustingly bobbed her head in an enthusiastic nod. The ease with which she capitulated only reminded him of all the boundaries out there. Who would be there to take advantage of her just as they had Alice? Never again. Not with this young girl. Over his dead body.

“Yes?” Laurel pleaded.

“You shouldn't refer to me as my lord . My father was the my-lord sort of fellow. I like to think of myself as just Laurence.”

Laurel flashed a dazzling smile to rival the brightest star in the clearest sky. “Okay,” she giggled. “‘Just Laurence’.”

Just Laurence. It was perfect.

Alice and her daughter...were both perfect.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

“P at-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker’s man. Bake me a cake as fast as you can.”

Clap, clap.

“Pat it and prick it and—”

As Alice’s daughter clapped her hands quickly in time, Laurence followed suit.

Then, all of a sudden, he reached over, plucked Laurel up for the twelfth time since they had played the pat-a-cake game, scooped her up, and tickled her.

Laurel erupted into giggles, laughing uncontrollably until she struggled to breathe.

Laurence let up. He set her back, and they resumed their child’s rhyming game.

“Mark it with an L for Laurel...” Laurence intoned.

“And me,” Laurel piped in.

They exclaimed in unison as the partners in play erupted into laughter. Laurence’s bigger mightier and deeper laughter mingling with Laurel’s higher, lilting child’s cadence. Alice only fell even more deeply in love with the Earl of Denbigh.

She’d loved him forever. Despite his insistence all those years ago that she was like a sister, and his assumption that she’d seen him as a brother.

She’d viewed him as a hero. He’d been a confidante.

She'd wanted him to be a lover and even more.

She'd wanted to be his wife. It had been he, however, who'd seen her as a sister.

But she'd loved him with all the force of her woman's heart, and she'd always secretly hated whomever the lucky woman would be who'd become his countess.

Now, seeing the manner of father he would one day be to his own children only added an unholy, unforgivable envy within her.

Alice continued to stare while Laurel and Laurence began yet another round of pat-a-cake.

Some other woman would be his wife, and she'd give him a child.

Other children would become his babes, and Alice would be left alone, unmarried, with the mistakes of her past and the knowledge that there was a man who was all things good—loving, loyal, respectable, and honorable. He just wasn't hers.

And yet a voice needled in her head. He'd insisted that she was only a sister to him.

But when he'd taken her in his arms, there'd been nothing fraternal about the power of his desire.

The only time she'd ever made love with a man had been with the dastard who'd taken her virtue.

It had been quick, sloppy, and painful. His kiss had stirred her some, but that had been all.

There had been no tender caresses. There had been no passionate embrace.

He'd given her some slobbery kisses, yanked her skirts up, parted her legs, and inserted his member inside her.

She'd been all too glad when it was over.

But when Laurence touched her, when he'd kissed her, there had been Vauxhall fireworks and explosions of warmth and hungering.

She'd never known she could hunger for a kiss.

In his arms, she—a woman who hadn't been a virgin for a long time and who had a child—at last discovered passion.

It had ended too quickly. And it appeared it wouldn't be repeated.

But he had wanted her. She'd felt his desire for her.

That organ, long, thick, and hard, had pulsed against her belly, an indication of his want for her.

From across the room, as if he felt her eyes upon him, Laurence looked up from whatever questions Laurel was currently peppering him with. His eyes held Alice's.

God help her, he saw her, and there was no doubt he saw that which she couldn't conceal—her hungering, her regret, her longing for more—with him. She knew by the way his tall, muscular body tensed and the spark of passion in his eyes.

The moment was shattered by Laurel's loud, noisy sigh.

It was time for the little girl's nap. There came a clearing throat sound from over where Addien stood in the doorway.

The young maid glared darkly at Alice and Laurence.

Alice's cheeks instantly went warm at having been caught observing her daughter and Laurence like a dazed, daft romantic who was about to get herself into significant trouble.

But then isn't that exactly what you are?

"Oy, come along, Laurel, the angels are looking for you."

The angels being none other than those women who'd been hired as nursemaids and caregivers for the prostitutes, servants, and serving girls who found themselves in the family way, or who'd arrived here with children.

None were turned away. None who wanted work and were good, honest, and loyal to Dynevor and the Devil's Den.

Instead of rushing over to greet the gruff Adeline, as she usually did, or whichever girl had been sent to retrieve her from whatever assignment her mother was working on, this time, Laurel lingered. She put out her lower lip that trembled and made a grab for Laurence's hand.

"I don't want to sleep," she said miserably. "I want to stay with Laurence."

And the aggrieved look in Laurence's eyes indicated he wanted that very much too. The evidence of his desire and interest to remain conversing with her child left Alice filled with an actual physical aching for something that could not and would not be.

Even worse, when she wrenched her gaze from Laurence's, she discovered a shocked and furious Addien staring back. Dumbfounded, when she was never anything but largely expressionless, Addien made no attempt to conceal her emotions.

“You need to get going too, Miss Killoran,” Addien snapped testily. “You’re going to earn the earl’s wrath.”

From the corner of her eye, she noted the way Laurence’s body arched forward, as if he’d had a visceral reaction to the idea of Alice answering to anyone, even her own employer, especially her own employer. Addien took a step towards him.

Anticipating that this was headed nowhere good, Alice hastily stepped in between Addien and a charged Laurence.

“Thank you so much. I’ll be along.”

Addien, defiant as the day was long, stood in wait, clearly intending to wait Alice out.

Fortunately, Laurel saved the day for Alice. Laurel gave several tugs on Addien’s hand, and with that and not another word or look back, Addien squirmed the child abovestairs. Her friend also very intentionally left the doors open.

Alice and Laurence rushed to speak and did so at the same time.

“She is—”

“She is—”

They stopped and shared a smile.

“You first,” Alice demurred.

“I was going to say she seems friendly.”

“She is protective of those she cares about.” Alice paused. “And I can identify only

three who earn that devotion.”

Laurence inclined his head. “I take it two of those people being you and Laurel?”

Alice nodded.

“And the third?” he asked curiously.

Alice shook her head. She’d never betray the other woman’s confidence, even if it hadn’t been a spoken one and only one Alice herself had deduced.

Laurence glided over, and with every languid step that brought him closer, her heart tripled its beat until it threatened to pound from her chest. Then he stopped before her.

He brought his hand up and, with a whispery soft touch, he caressed the backs of his knuckles along her cheek.

“I would never begrudge or resent anyone who has looked after you, Alice,” he murmured melodically. “I am grateful to her.”

His eyes flashed dangerously.

“Hell, I’m even grateful to Dynevor,” he said between gritted teeth that rattled, indicating what that admission had cost him.

The knuckles he lightly stroked over her face stilled, and she wanted to plead with him to continue that tenderest of caresses.

“It should have been your brother,” he said with a voice of steel.

Alice swiftly opened her mouth to dismiss mention of Winchester. Her brother wasn't to blame for anything. He'd allowed her freedom, even as it had cost him so much to do so. He'd cried when she left, and that had been the hardest thing of all.

Laurence stopped her. "But more, Alice," his eyes took on a fiery passionate glimmer, "more than anything, I wish it was me," he said.

Alice went absolutely still more than half thinking and fearing. She merely imagined and dreamed the words he now spoke. And then he said it.

"I want it to be me, Alice," he said thickly. "Let it be me."

Before her mind could process whether that vow was in fact real, and that beautiful, glorious dream in her heart had in fact been uttered into existence, Laurence lowered his mouth to hers.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

Lord help him, Denbigh was going to hell.

And as he made love to Alice's mouth and ran his hands over her supple frame, learning the feel of her, he couldn't sort out which was the greatest of his sins.

The woman whom he'd fallen in love with being the sister of his best friend.

Or the fact that he'd come here on a lie to this woman, whom he'd yearned for, and yes, loved, far longer than he should have.

Denbigh slid his fingers through her short gold-blond curls, teasing the strands, remembering the feel of her, and luxuriating in the feel of them. "God, you are so beautiful, Alice. I have missed you," he rasped against her mouth.

She answered by moaning softly and opening her mouth for him. He didn't claim her; he conquered her as he longed to. He thrust his tongue inside, and she was there to boldly thrust and parry against him. Their breaths, ragged and discordant, came in some kind of earthy symphony.

Denbigh dug his fingertips into the soft curve of her hip, sinking them in and massaging. He clenched and unclenched his fingers against her. "I know this is wrong, Alice," he said between kisses. "But I have always had feelings for you."

Her eyes, clouded and dazed with passion, struggled to lock on his face.

A question quivered on her full, trembling lips, damp from his attentions and slick from his mouth.

In her heated gaze, she tried to make sense of what it was he was saying.

He'd fought it so long, the truth came tumbling out, and it was as though it set them both free.

He expected he should be more terrified and horrified, but instead, there was a sense of absolute rightness.

He'd fought his longing and love for her so long, he'd convinced himself it was the honorable thing to do.

But what did it cost him? What did it cost both of them?

That is, assuming she feels for you everything you feel for her .

All he knew was that he'd fought it for so long and denied himself that which he'd wanted, the only thing that he wanted—her.

And he'd been miserable for it. It was time for honesty.

And he'd have a future with her if she'd allow him.

Her and her daughter. Yes, he'd come here on a lie.

That would have to be something he owned up to and confessed, but surely, she could forgive him.

He told himself that, all the while he moved a path of kisses down the curve of her jaw.

He moved down to worship her neck in that way he'd learned only just days ago that

she so loved.

Denbigh guided the neckline of her dress down, easing the modest blue dress enough so that the tops of her breasts were exposed.

Then he laid gentle, worshipful kisses on those generous swells.

Alice let loose a long, torture-filled moan. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she gripped him hard, anchoring him close, and he learned something new about Alice—how much she enjoyed him teasing, kissing, and playing with that flesh.

Stop this. Stop until all the truths are out.

But Denbigh was the worst of sinners. He ignored his conscience and the voice of reason on his shoulder railing at him to stop. She deserved honesty. She'd not had it with the bounder who'd broken her heart and left her in the most fragile state.

I am different though. I will give her my name. I will give her my heart. I will give her my everything.

Alice tugged the rest of her neckline down, so that her breasts were fully exposed to his worship and gaze.

Then, her head bent down, looking upon him like the queen she was, the most gracious benefactress, she took his head between her hands and guided his mouth to the pebbled peak of her right breast.

I am lost.

His heart hammered, his breathing grew harsher and raspier, and he opened his mouth, then closed his lips around the turgid flesh and suckled.

He sucked and teased and lightly nipped, grazing his teeth along the sensitive flesh.

Alice cried out.

Her legs seemed to give out from under her, and she sank onto the edge of his mattress. He instantly fell at her feet and continued his adulation.

He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any woman in his life.

He craved her and hungered for her in this moment of passion, more than his lungs craved the very air he breathed.

To stop would be to nearly kill him. But to continue, when not all the truths were known, would absolutely kill him—and certainly shatter her trust in him.

It took every ounce of strength within his body to stop.

But somehow, he found the strength to do so.

With a shuddery, shaky breath, he placed one last kiss upon the peak of each breast. His was a regret-filled apology, as he knew from the way her body quivered and the moans coming from her lips just how badly she craved this.

He looked up. Alice stared up at him with wide, half-crazed, and confused eyes. “Why did you stop?” she whispered, her chest rising and falling so quickly that each great gasping breath she took, drew Denbigh’s scoundrel’s gaze to the creamy white flesh.

Closing his eyes, he fought back a groan. “I can’t do this, Alice,” he said aching. “We can’t do this.”

Alice's eyes grew more desperate. "Yes, we can. You're worried because of my brother."

No, actually, this was the first time he hadn't thought of Exmoor.

Reluctantly, he drew her dress back into place.

Alice must have seen something in his eyes.

"What is it?" she asked, running her gaze frantically over his face.

When she tried to stand, he urged her to remain seated and stayed on his knees.

"Alice, I have a confession to make."

You mean you have two confessions to make. You should start with the obvious one. But you are a coward, and you are a terrible, deplorable gentleman.

And he was. For he took the coward's way out.

Alice stared at him, then nodded slowly. "Yes?" she said.

"I have wanted you for longer than I can say. Longer than will ever be deemed respectable or appropriate or honorable." All the words came tumbling from him, the secrets he'd kept from everyone, burying them so deep that he hid them even from himself. No longer.

"I told myself I had no right to you, Alice," he said gutturally. "You are Exmoor's sister," he said. A sharp, pained laugh exploded from his tightly constricted lungs. "I mean, what kind of bastard yearns for his best friend's younger sister?"

The very worst kind. I am the worst. And I don't even give a shite about Exmoor. I care about all the times I haven't been honest with Alice—especially now.

Alice's fingertips lightly caressed his cheek and chin as she guided his face up to hers. "You... yearn for me?" she breathed unsteadily.

He nodded shakily. "I have fought it for so long. That day you told me how you felt? I lied to you. And worse, I lied to myself. I pushed you away, and I have regretted it since. But I want you in my life, Alice. I always have. I am done fighting it."

With a shattered cry, half-laugh, half-sob, Alice threw her arms around him and squeezed tight. His arms found their way around her, and he gripped her, holding her so close he had to make himself relax his hold so he didn't hurt her.

"But Alice, there is something—"

"There's something Denbigh has got to be telling you."

Denbigh stiffened. This meeting felt all too familiar to the first one the young, cocksure, arrogant bastard had interrupted.

This one, for all the similarities and sameness of the place, and the loathing in the other man's tone and gaze, felt decidedly more ominous and permanent.

His gaze moved to the man accompanying Dynevor—the Earl of Wakefield.

His stomach sank. No .

"What is it?" Alice asked tremulously, looking from her employer to Lord Wakefield's unexpected presence and then back to Denbigh.

“Yes,” Dynevor said, confirming he’d spoken aloud.

Please don’t do this. Not here, not like this. Those pleas ran through his head. The look in Wakefield’s eyes told him everything he needed to know.

No, no, please.

“I didn’t like it when you were here, playing games with Alice,” the Earl of Dynevor said in low, warning tones. The young man narrowed his dangerous eyes. “But now you’ve involved the lady’s daughter, and that’s where I draw the bloody line.”

“What is he talking about, Laurence?” Alice asked tremulously, looking around the room.

“Alice.” Denbigh’s voice emerged as a strained croak.

But he couldn’t give her any more than that.

God help him. He was going to lose her. And here he thought he’d never have her, only to find he’d been this close to allowing himself that which he’d always wanted—a future with her.

With his duplicity, with his lack of being forthright and honest with her, he’d lose her. He didn’t doubt it.

His heart was breaking and splintering and making it impossible for him to stand upright, let alone function.

“I brought Wakefield here too because he has something he wants to share or confess.”

Denbigh got to his feet and stood absolutely stiff; his muscles strained so tight they felt on the verge of breaking.

Wakefield's expression was strained, and the look in his eyes conveyed more of an apology than any words the other men spoke. Not that they were deserved or needed. He did wrong by not being up front and honest with Alice. These sins belonged to Denbigh.

“Tell her, Wakefield,” Dynevor demanded.

The Earl of Wakefield's features grew strained, and when he began to speak, his voice emerged hesitantly. Reluctantly.

“Tell her !” Dynevor barked.

Denbigh closed his eyes. “I will,” he said, his voice thick. “If I may have a moment alone with Lady Ali—”

Dynevor snorted. “I don't think so. You lost that opportunity.”

“Tell me what?” Alice's voice came weak and distant to his own ears. When no one immediately answered her, she repeated herself in a thready, high-pitch. “Tell me what ?”

Unfortunately, Dynevor spoke for him. “Has Denbigh here happened to mention that your running into him here was no coincidence?”

Denbigh's eyes slid shut. I'm going to be ill .

The Earl of Dynevor's damning revelations kept coming.

“That Denbigh coordinated here with my proprietor and partner, Lord Wakefield, to coordinate your running into one another on behalf of—”

No .

“No,” Alice echoed Denbigh’s silent plea.

“The lady’s brother, the Marquess of Exmoor. So that he could convince you to return ‘home to polite society.’”

Alice’s body jerked like she’d been struck. But then in a way, he knew it was certainly greater than any physical blow she could have been dealt. She’d been betrayed by another man. Lied to.

And I have done just that to her .

“Alice,” Denbigh entreated. He took a step closer with his hands held out in supplication.

Alice stared vacantly with empty eyes. “Is this true?” she whispered, her voice quivering with a plea.

“I—”

“Is it true?” Alice repeated, this time her voice rang out as a cry echoing around the room in the walls of his breaking heart.

“Yes, Alice,” he confessed, his voice cracking. “But I need you to know everything else, everything I said here today all these days, was true—” He held out a hand toward her.

Alice slapped it away.

Her rejection hit like a poison arrow that had landed square on his heart. “You lied to me!” she cried.

He flinched. But he didn’t deny it. He couldn’t deny it.

“Get out,” the Earl of Dynevor commanded. “You’re not allowed here. Consider your membership revoked.”

He had wronged her, and yet he couldn’t leave. Not like this. He couldn’t be turned away. If he were, he’d never see her again. It would be the end of them, this time forever.

“Alice, I’m not going. Not unless you’re willing to hear me out. Say you’ll hear me out. I’ll only go, Dynevor, if she orders me gone.”

“What’ll it be, Alice?” the younger earl put to Alice.

Denbigh kept his pleading gaze on Alice, willing her to see his love, willing her to give him those minutes he asked for, just so he could attempt to beg forgiveness.

Alice looked away.

And Denbigh’s soul died inside.

She’d decided.

“You have your answer, Denbigh,” Dynevor said. “Now go.”

He had his answer.

She was lost to him.

This time, forever.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

Seated at his cluttered desk, strewn about with wrinkled paper and ink stains splattered everywhere, Denbigh began his morning as he usually did.

With a new letter.

In the first five days of being thrown out of the Devil's Den and separated from Alice, and being told by Dynevor's men the lady never wished to see him again, he'd sat in this very spot and deliberated over each word and each letter he'd written to Alice.

He pored over the pages. He labored over each sentence he put to paper. He'd read and re-read pages upon pages and then wrinkled them all, determining they were insufficient, only to start all over and send something close to a missive he did not hate.

Each one came back unopened.

Not only that, as salt in the wounds, Dynevor sent one of his hard-faced, merciless guards with a note from Alice.

Each time, Denbigh's heart leapt with the hope born of an optimism he didn't know where it came from.

He'd had a miserable father. A difficult childhood.

And a legacy of ugliness connected with the title he now carried.

Even with that, somewhere inside, he'd believed and been so certain one of her letters would be a note with a concession to meet. To just hear him out.

All he needed was time with her. Even as he knew that wasn't even a sure thing and probably wouldn't be enough. But at least he'd see her one more time.

At least, at least, at least—

Denbigh's bloodshot gaze fell to the neatly assembled stack of letters.

There were five of them, lovingly stacked and tied with the same turquoise ribbon he'd caught that day she vowed her love.

He'd hidden it in his pocket, the lone piece of her that he could keep.

Now, there were her letters. Each one saying the same thing, and with the same words.

Five words. Seven if one included his form of address. Please, do not contact me . He opened her notes. She never opened his. And he would continue doing so until he drew his last breath.

Denbigh stared blankly and emptily at today's first letter.

"Alice, please hear me out."

"Alice, I am undeserving of your grace—"

"Alice, I implore you, I beg of you, please, please—"

Nothing! Nothing he said mattered because she wouldn't even open his letters.

It didn't matter what he had to say. The only thing that mattered was what he had done.

And what he had done was betray her. It didn't matter that his intentions had been good.

It didn't matter. He'd had her best intentions, and then her daughter's.

But what mattered was that it had been Denbigh who'd decided what was best for her.

He could've been forthright with her. He could have explained that he'd initially come because Exmoor had begged him to do so.

He could've then gone on to explain that along the way, it had changed.

That in seeing how happy she was, and her reasons for staying, he understood and respected and supported it.

But then explained she held his entire heart in her hands, and that was the only reason he would take her from this place, if she'd let him.

Oh, it would rip him apart to leave her at a place where he knew she wasn't safe—not truly.

Where there was sinning happening and evil blackguards residing and playing with fortunes and drink, danger lurked and could and dangerously might one day find her.

But in his loyalty to Exmoor, he'd destroyed any hope for true happiness and any potential future with Alice. He'd warned him off Alice. Denbigh had complied.

Time and time again, he'd chosen Exmoor because the man had been his friend the longest and like a brother to him. But Alice? Alice was the person Denbigh loved above all others.

Defeated, Denbigh sagged in his chair. Blindly, he reached for the bottle that was always within reach.

The stopper had already been removed and spit to the floor days earlier.

He sloshed the remaining contents around the crystal bottle.

Without looking, he took a long swig, finishing the rest of his brandy.

There came a brief rap at the door.

"Get the hell out!" he shouted, surely at his servant. He didn't want to be bothered. There was no one he wanted to see. There was no one he wanted to see unless it was—

His eyes slid shut and, desperate for a reprieve from the vicious pain gnawing at his insides, Denbigh tipped the bottle back in search of whatever drops remained clinging to the sides and bottom of the decanter.

The door opened and inside stepped, not his butler or footman or anyone other than...

"Exmoor," Denbigh mumbled, slowly lowering the bottle to his side. He let it hang uselessly, dangling from his fingertips over the sides of his chair.

Exmoor, who had prided himself on being the perfect son, father, brother, and gentleman, caught a glance of Denbigh and balked.

Shock brought Exmoor's dark eyebrows climbing high. He didn't even attempt to feign or conceal his disbelief at discovering Denbigh so.

The other man found his voice. "My God, man. Since when have you begun breaking your fast with brandy?" Then, not allowing a response, Exmoor tightened his mouth. "Look at you, Denbigh. You're a bloody sight!"

Denbigh had caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he'd passed through the halls on his way to his office.

He knew precisely what he looked like and just how the other man saw him.

His blond hair was tangled and in need of a good comb.

His cheeks sported a beard. His eyes were red from exhaustion and drink.

But Denbigh didn't give a shite what he looked like. Propriety, rules, decency, and decorum all be damned.

Narrowing his eyes into thin, angry slits, he lifted his empty bottle and mockingly toasted Exmoor. "Exmoor, old chap! How very good to see my dearest of friends."

Exmoor's jaw moved. His slightly too sharp features indicated he'd heard the jeering quality to Denbigh's greeting and sensed his anger and resentment.

But with the familiarity afforded him as a brother in everything but blood, the marquess strode across the room and slapped a gloved palm down hard on Denbigh's desk, sending letters and papers jumping under the force of that movement.

"I have sent letter after letter, and not one of them have you answered," Exmoor clipped out the way Denbigh's father had right before he delivered a smack to one of

his sons.

“You have been inside that den of sin, and I am looking for some word, some information about my sister, and you cannot be bothered to respond to a single note? Instead, you,” Exmoor scraped a derisive glance up and down Denbigh’s disheveled person.

“ What ? Get yourself lost in drink and God knows what else when you were supposed to be—”

“When I was supposed to be doing what?” Denbigh cried, climbing to his feet. “When I was supposed to be spying on her? When I was supposed to be serving in the role of de facto brother because her real one failed her so spectacularly?”

All the blood drained from Exmoor’s cheeks. Denbigh had landed the unkindest cut. And he didn’t feel bloody bad about it one bit.

“Did you know she had a child?” Denbigh asked, his voice a whisper, because even as rage battered at him and hysteria threatened to drive him to madness, Alice was still and would always be his foremost worry, concern, and thought.

Somehow, Exmoor’s skin had even more color to shed, leaving him a sickly, white pallor.

“Did you know?” Denbigh stormed around the desk as he asked the question, gripping his best friend by his lapels, dragging him up on the balls of his feet, and lifting him so they were at eye level. “ Did you —?”

“Of course I did,” Exmoor whispered, his eyes ravaged with pain and not their earlier anger. “You know there is no reasoning with Alice—even more so after she tragically lost her sweetheart.”

She'd obviously told Exmoor some lie about a good, honorable , sweetheart who'd gone missing.

It hadn't occurred to bloody Exmoor to find out everything he could about Alice's lover?

"You sent me to do what you were unable to do," Denbigh said flatly. "I went there and did your bidding. I did a favor for you. And because of it, I have lost everything ." He released the marquess quickly. So fast, Exmoor stumbled and struggled to right himself.

Staggering, Exmoor looked at him in abject confusion. "I don't...What are you—?"

"I love her," Denbigh bellowed that confession after a lifetime of lies between them.

"I have loved your sister since she was but seventeen, Exmoor. She was too young. She was your sister. And I never acknowledged it, even to myself, because I knew it was forbidden and she was off limits." A sharp, empty bark of laughter exploded from his chest. He slashed a palm angrily between them.

"And in doing that, in putting our friendship first, and not my love for her, it cost me her, and very likely it would've led to a different fate and future for her. "

All the fight and the last vestige of energy he'd found since being apart from Alice left him with the expediency and swiftness.

Exmoor reeled back on his heels. " What ?"

The same way one's soul departed one's dying body so too did the life leave Denbigh.

His legs went limp, and he sank onto the edge of his desk to keep from sinking onto the floor.

Except, in so doing, he came to rest right beside that turquoise ribbon and stack of notes he lovingly caressed and smelled and then saved forever.

Agony sluiced through Denbigh like a rapier being expertly placed by a master tactician. He swiped a tired hand across his face. “I put our friendship before everything else, including Alice, and now that has cost me any chance of a future with her.”

Denbigh distantly registered the other man taking up a makeshift seat beside him on the desk. “I... had no idea.” Exmoor sounded like he had taken a shot to the solar plexus. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Denbigh let loose a cynical chuckle. “Oh, please. The one time I did broach the subject you made it clear you didn’t approve?” He scoffed. “I was a bloody lad at university and you held my brief actions against me.”

Guilty color filled his friend’s cheeks.

Exmoor hesitated and then shook his head. “I would have come around, Denbigh. I would have, eventually realized you’d behaved only respectably with my sister and would be loyal to her and—”

“Yes, Exmoor. Since we’re playing out pretend experiences that happened, I would’ve gone into the Devil’s Den and freely admitted that you’d sent me there to your sister, and avoided all of this.

” He flashed his best friend a cold, strange smile “My, how much easier it is when we invent the perfect way we handled or would’ve handled situations. ”

Exmoor winced.

And yet the fact remained that only one of them was to blame—and the person to blame was Denbigh.

He was the one who'd agreed to do so at Exmoor's behalf.

He could've gone and been straightforward with Alice.

But he hadn't. And that was something that would cost him.

No, it had cost him his heart, the very air he breathed.

"I take it," Exmoor haltingly ventured, "Alice gathered the reason for your being there?"

Denbigh nodded once.

"And I take it she responded with her usual spirit and passion."

Actually, she hadn't. She'd been reserved. She'd been stricken. She'd been cut open and hurt and betrayed, and he'd been the one responsible this time. Not some notorious, shameless rakehell. Him. Denbigh .

"You attempted to tell her, and she was less than receptive?" It turned out Exmoor did know his sister.

Denbigh released a strained laugh. Half crying into his palms, he scrubbed them over his face and shook his head.

"I have tried everything. I've written letters.

I've even visited the Devil's Den and," He gestured to a fading bruise at the corner of his eye.

"attempted to get inside to see her," he said and flashed a wry grin. " Unsuccessfully ."

Exmoor winced.

The other man felt guilty about Denbigh sporting a black eye? The sting left by the once respectable Malric Mauley, the Marquess of Thornwick—now one of Dynevor's goons—may as well have been the brush of a gnat compared to the vicious agony of Alice's rejection.

"She is stubborn, Denbigh," Exmoor said. "In time—"

A sound of frustration left Denbigh. "It is not that simple. I deceived her, and Alice was—" Viciously betrayed before. He caught himself. She'd made that confession to Denbigh. He'd keep her confidence.

The marquess narrowed his gaze. "Alice was ' what '?"

"She was hurt," he said instead. "And she needs to be able to trust..." His words trailed off.

Alice needs...

"Denbigh? Exmoor prodded.

Denbigh, however, remained lost in a realization.

How often and how much had Alice been told what she needed ?

By her family. By her brother. By Denbigh.

Hell, even Dynevor was making choices for her.

But Alice hadn't ever really had a choice.

The Devil's Den was as close as she came to it.

Telling her what she needed was a sin. Lady Alice was a strong, spirited, intelligent woman, who didn't need men making false promises or secretly manipulating her and her life, which is precisely what he'd done.

He had wronged her. Words, the ones he was writing over and over again in letters, were futile.

Alice didn't need to be told anything...

He stilled. "My God," he whispered. "Of course. Why didn't I think of that?" He exhaled that query on a fading breath.

"What?" Exmoor urgently prodded.

Yes, he didn't need to tell Alice anything. She had made her decision, and that included her decision about him. If she didn't want to see him or take his letters, he owed it to her to respect that decision. What he would do was show her the ways in which he was sorry.

Perhaps she could forgive him. That would be the best and all that he could hope for.

It had been a fortnight.

Fourteen days had passed since Laurence had taken her in his arms, professed his feelings, and spoken about his want of her. It had been the singular dream she'd longed to have come true. Not just since they'd been reunited. No, since she'd become a young woman and seen him with a woman's eyes.

And then that dream, like so many others in her life, had been quickly shattered with the arrival of the Earl of Dynevor and Lord Wakefield.

Reality had come crashing in and charges had been made against Laurence.

He'd been accused of lying to her and coming to the Devil's Den under false pretenses.

He'd not denied it. As much as she'd wanted him to, as much as she would have believed him, first and foremost before Lords Dynevor and Wakefield. Because she knew Laurence. Because she loved him. Because she trusted him.

Except he hadn't denied it.

He'd acknowledged what truly brought him back into her life. He'd come as a favor to Alice's brother. He'd only ever seen her as an extension of the Marquess of Exmoor.

And that he'd positioned himself here, on behalf of Wynn, all the while pretending he was a patron but planning to convince her to return to polite society.

There was nothing fraternal in the way he touched you . The passion of their embrace, the hot vitality of his hands he'd scraped over her body as if learning and memorizing the feel of her, hadn't been fraternal. No sense of devotion to Exmoor had been involved there.

Can that not possibly mean those two things could be true? her inner voice nudged. Maybe he had come here on behalf of Wynn but had been so overwhelmed in his feelings for Alice that he'd finally capitulated and—

“You aren't painting, Mama.” Blinking slowly, Alice tugged her sightless gaze from the latest piece commissioned by the Duke and Duchess of Somerset and put it on her daughter.

Positioned next to Alice and in a matching outfit with a white apron over her dress, Laurel stood before her own smaller canvas. She was Alice's exact image at work.

With one exception being the full colorful brush strokes of the Earl of Dynevor's stables. Alice's daughter had been far more engrossed and more productive than Alice.

“Are you still sad, Mama?”

Alice's heart scissored.

“Why do you think I'm sad, Poppet?” Alice asked softly. Even as she asked that question, Alice silently railed at herself for having failed to shield her daughter from Alice's own sorrow. She tweaked Laurel's pert nose. “I haven't cried, have I?”

Instead of giggling as she usually did, Laurel's too-serious expression remained.

“You don't smile. You aren't laughing. Y-You don't finish your a-art.” Of all the

warning signs mentioned, the latter appeared to trouble Laurel the most. Her fuller lower lip trembled. “You miss him.”

Alice didn’t move. “Miss who?” she asked carefully. Surely her daughter couldn’t have noticed—

“Laurence,” Laurel said. “He is your friend, and now he is gone. I miss him too. I only played with him once. You played with him a lot. I want more time with him too.” A pout lined Laurel’s lilting voice.

“Yes, I do miss him,” Alice confessed. Her daughter, at the very least, deserved that.

“Did he go away?” Laurel asked. The worry creasing her high little brow deepened. “Can’t we see him again?”

If only Alice could...

But you can , a voice of reason echoed in her head.

Not for the first time since the note had arrived two days earlier, Alice looked at the last letter he’d sent.

She only knew it was the last letter because the guard who’d returned with it had done so under instructions from the Earl of Denbigh, informing Alice there’d be no further.

But that if she could just hold onto this one and open it, open it when the time felt right, or if she wished to burn it, she was free to do so.

He just asked that she not return it, and she considered reading it at her own time.

“Did you quarrel, Mama?”

Again, Alice’s heart squeezed. Would she refer to her last exchange with Laurence as a fight? Could it be truly considered so when he’d asked, nay pleaded , for her to hear him out, and she’d allowed Lord Dynevor to—

I will not feel guilty. I will not feel guilty. I will—

Except it wasn’t about feeling guilty. She just felt...Bloody awful . It was as though, when he’d left, she pricked her heart with the tip of a blade and continued to turn the hilt, inflicting greater pain and suffering upon herself.

“Mama?”

Alice found her voice. “We didn’t raise our voices or shout.”

It was important that her daughter understood that.

Laurence had come here with the most well-meaning of intentions.

Did she truly believe his feelings and declarations had been feigned, a product of his sacrificing himself to bring her back home?

When in so doing, it would have brought shame to him and his family if she were linked to him in any way?

“I’ve wanted you forever,” he’d insisted.

All this time, he’d felt the same way she had?

“I want a future with you.”

Alice's brother had asked Laurence to bring her back home; but that did not mean a man of Laurence's convictions would commit to a future with her because of Wynn .

Alice set her brush down and sank to the floor, where she sat with her knees in a triangle and her ankles crossed. She patted the floor, and Laurel followed suit.

Her daughter stared with wide, expectant eyes, waiting the way she might for her bedtime tale.

"Laurence came here because he wants me to go—" Home .

It seemed wrong to refer to a place where Laurel had never been and where she'd never resided with Alice as a home.

"Where does he want you to go?" Laurel asked.

"To see family whom, I haven't seen in a long time—family you've never yet met."

Laurel's eyes flared. "Oh, are we? Are we?" She proceeded to jump up and down, clapping exuberantly. "Please, say yes."

As soon as her unvarnished child's enthusiasm peeked out, a frown was there to steal its place.

"Does Laurence not want us to go see our family?" she asked with a wounded expression.

"Oh, no, no, not at all." Alice reached out, caught her daughter by the waist, and pulled her onto her lap. She placed a kiss atop the jumble of golden curls. "It is the opposite, Poppet. He wants us to return—"

Correction .

“He wants us to return together.”

Confusion dawned in Laurel’s always revealing eyes. “Why don’t we go? Why don’t we go?” she repeated that as a little mantra, all the while bouncing up and down on Alice’s lap.

Her stomach clenched. “Because...” What was she to say here?

How to explain to a child that the entire reason they existed and lived in this gaming hell and not amidst Laurel and Alice’s real family was because of the little girl’s very existence?

Alice took the coward’s way; she pushed that complex exchange to a far distant future, to a time when Laurel was much, much older.

Alice hedged. “Do you want to go see our family?”

Laurel giggled. “You’re silly, Mama. When do we go?”

There wasn’t even a question on the girl’s part that Alice would’ve said anything but yes.

“I—” Alice stumbled and searched for words.

“But why are you mad at Laurence?” Laurel interjected with another question. Somehow, this one was even more disconcerting. “Don’t you want to see Grand’Mere and Uncle Wynn and Aunts Elsbeth and Aunt Caroline? You’ve talked so much about them. I want to see them.”

Alice wanted that more than anything. She wanted that more than the very air she breathed. Even more, she wanted it for her daughter.

So why, then, have you rejected Laurence's attempt to speak? Why did she turn him away? Letter after letter. She knew it was because he'd not been honest.

He acknowledged as much, didn't he? that voice in her head nudged again.

It's because she loved him so hopelessly and beyond all reason, and the idea that they'd been reunited by chance and came together in truth with their feelings had been her heart's greatest wish.

Just because it didn't happen to be the entire way you wished it had; can it not be still the start of a future...?

Or are you going to be a ninny yet again and allow a man to lie to you?

Conflicted, she hugged her daughter tight.

"We shall see," she said.

It appeared to be enough for Laurel. She seemed to take it as confirmation that they'd have a meeting Alice hadn't even realized the girl had thought about.

Laurence hadn't been wrong in that. No, he'd been completely true in talking about how important it was for her daughter to meet her family. Her eyes went to the letter he'd written. The Devil's Den's nursemaid arrived to take Laurel off for her nap with the other children.

Laurel lovingly and trustingly slipped her fingers through Billy's small fingers.

“Billy, I’m going to meet my grandma and uncle and aunt.”

Askance, Billy switched her stunned gaze to Alice.

Alice closed her eyes. “Oh dear.” She gave her daughter a final hug and kiss, then found herself alone.

Alone, with the exception of Laurence’s letter. She made her way over to the hearth and picked up the envelope written in Laurence’s hand and containing the Denbigh seal.

She turned it over in her hands. Alone with his letter...

“Oi, Dynevor’s got you shut away doing family portraits, does he?”

Alone, with the exception of the letter and Addien. She forced a smile for her friend’s benefit.

“I don’t mind doing portraits.” She was just grateful for employment and a place to stay.

Painting naughty scenes of fictional and Greek and Roman figures had long lost its appeal. It was as though she continually created the same piece, just in different shapes.

“What had you far rather be painting?” Addien prodded, showing the first and any real interest in Alice’s work.

Puzzled, she looked on as Addien held over a newspaper.

“Says there Mr. Latimer’s sister wrote that piece.”

Her confusion deepening as well as her curiosity, Alice accepted the pages and proceeded to read.

“The Baroness and Baron of Bolingbrook continue to deepen their commitment to female artists, artisans, and musicians. In addition to young ladies of the ton who wish to pursue artistic endeavors, they’ve since expanded upon their philanthropic efforts.

This opportunity will expand so that women, regardless of station, those with limited means and a talent and desire to paint, may attend school or live freely while they create their art.

The new venture is only possible through the inception of an unknown sponsor who not only put forward a sizable donation, but purchased and donated the property.”

Alice’s heart stilled, as did her gaze upon that particular sentence. She frantically read the rest of the words there.

The program has already begun enrolling those women interested and in need: widows, women without the benefit of family to look after them and their child or children, and those ladies wishing to live an independent existence without relying on the generosity and goodwill of relatives will now have control of their future... ” et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Alice’s arm dropped to her side. Breathless, her heart swelling so big it knocked painfully against her rib cage and the organ threatened to burst from the force of emotions within her, she made her way over to that letter on unsteady legs.

This time, she snatched it up and ripped the pages open.

My dearest Alice,

I wronged you. I owed you complete honesty. Instead, I only gave you partial truth. It has only been you. I have longed for you. That is no lie. I want you in my life, but more, I want you to be happy. I do not presume to know what you want, and I never should have.

However, if you desire a life of your own, one where you are permitted to let your muse dictate your artwork, then know there is a place for you.

I hold the deed of a place that is yours.

It is yours and Laurel's. I leave it in your possession.

I entrust it into your hands. There are no expectations on my part. I would just ask your forgiveness.

Ever yours.

Laurence

A sheen of tears filled her eyes and blurred the beloved words written there. He'd done this for her. He would allow her control of her future and freedom from the Devil's Den, if she wished, without making her reliant upon her family or him.

Addien grunted. "Seems like they're not all bad," she muttered.

Alice wiped tears from her cheeks; tears that continued to come.

"No," she said thickly. "No, they aren't."

In fact, Alice knew the best of men, and now? Now, she was determined to have him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

Standing in the well-lit, since-converted ballroom of his most recently purchased property—an expansive, standalone white stucco townhouse just on the edge of Mayfair—Denbigh rubbed the back of his neck.

He winced.

His muscles ached from having had his head down, positioned in a work posture, for weeks straight.

The venture he'd undertaken had been an ambitious one for a team of gentlemen taking on a project.

It had been even more of an undertaking for a single gentleman who had kept his ambitions and efforts a secret from society.

He'd not done what he had with the expectation or hope he might win Alice back, or, for that matter, even restore her trust in him, or gain forgiveness.

What the art school had given Denbigh, however, was purpose. He'd buried himself in a project that had been conceived with her in mind. In so doing, he had quit wallowing and lamenting and writing useless letters. He'd quit drinking.

He'd found purpose from her and because of her.

He'd gone with little sleep and even less food. He spent hours meeting with solicitors and his man of affairs, finalizing and cementing details.

He'd believed his work completely finished—until receiving a note from his man of affairs indicating Denbigh had one more matter of business to see to.

As such, he'd arrived at the requisite time, only to find himself waiting for his prodigiously efficient and usually punctual servant.

Denbigh consulted his timepiece, then stuffed the gold chain back inside his jacket pocket. He swapped it out instead for the turquoise ribbon that had previously held Alice's letters together. Rather, his letters to Alice, the ones that had gone unopened and returned.

In the time since his duplicity had caused him a broken heart, a self-inflicted wound so grave as to never be recovered from, he'd actually come to find solace in the blue scrap that was fading with time.

He'd come to appreciate it in more ways than he ever had.

It was a piece of Alice he carried with him still.

As long as he had the scrap from long ago, he'd have something that she'd touched with her own fingers, reverently tied, and affixed to those boisterous curls.

There was solace in this. Having a piece of her still, though it was a small, insignificant material piece, was something of her, and he'd take anything he could get.

In the absence of his tardy man of affairs, Denbigh—ribbon in hand—took a slow walk about the studio, equipped to comfortably allow thirty artists space enough for them to each work on life-size canvases.

There had only been Alice whose advice he wished to have, but in the absence of

that, he'd enlisted help from the Baroness Bolingbroke.

At first, when he'd arrived for an audience with the lady and presented himself for a meeting, she'd been coolly distant and rebuffed his attempts at an audience.

Why shouldn't she have? Through familial connections, she was closely linked with proprietors of not only the Hell and Sin Club but also the Devil's Den. Dynevor and Wakefield had made it their place to notify anyone they suspected Denbigh would reach out to in support of his suit for Alice.

In underestimating Denbigh's character, they'd overestimated the lengths he would go to secure a meeting with Alice. And when he'd been adamant and clear that his venture and his role in it was to remain a secret to society, he'd easily secured the help.

The Baroness had provided different avenues for him to consider. She'd provided him with eight options and her opinions on each. Denbigh selected the largest, most elevated structure that was most exorbitant in price but in need of the least work.

He paused at the large north-facing windows and stared out. The property situated at the end of Charles Street, a solitary residence, provided the townhouse with expansive grounds and gardens that stretched for several miles.

The gardeners who tended the space put in by Capability Brown himself meticulously maintained the grounds.

The land possessed a hint of overgrown wildness, but upon closer inspection, the high hedges and carefully manicured London planes and tall English oaks were set off far-enough back and around the perimeter to keep out prying eyes.

There were gardens and graveled paths set off far enough from the property and the

trees positioned in a way that did not obstruct sunlight to the residence.

Horse chestnut trees and sweet bays, along with roses and lilac and boxwoods and hydrangea, left the landscape a magnificent, bucolic place with which to provide serenity to thinkers and artists.

This particular art space, positioned at the north-facing windows as it was, allowed sunlight to be diffused and ensured consistent lighting and no impediment of shadows which would hinder artists' drawings and paintings.

The equally high ceilings were conducive for large easels and canvases.

The open floor was of more than nearly one hundred feet long and some fifty feet wide.

The room had even been fashioned with a central dais, since converted to a model stand.

Alice would love it.

At least, that was what Lady Bolingbroke had assured him. Not the space was a gift, but rather, Alice and any artist would appreciate the room as an ideal art space.

Denbigh took in a shaky breath.

It was done. His venture.

That was if Alice ever opened his letter and decided to take over ownership of the establishment as he offered.

He'd made it clear that he didn't desire to offer her the academy as a chore, but rather

as a choice.

And if she was not interested and instead wished to remain employed by the Devil's Den and reside there, she had absolutely no obligations to the venture he'd funded.

It would be privately managed by a board comprised of those he trusted and respected; among them would be Exmoor.

He'd sent that note to Alice days ago, and there'd still been no response.

His shoulders sagged.

Nor would there be.

"God, you have always been more headstrong than any girl who ever wore a bonnet," he said, his voice hoarse from weeks without sleep. His laugh emerged rusty. "But then that is just one of the things I love about..."

Denbigh's words trailed off as, from through the gleaming crystal windows, his gaze alighted on a delicate figure reflected behind him.

She'd discarded her cloak upon entrance. Whereas Dynevor kept Alice attired in drearily dark fabrics, the lady had arrived in a soft, floral pink-and-yellow patterned gown that put him in mind of a dress she'd worn long ago.

With his heart in his throat, Denbigh turned around slowly. He feared that if he moved too swiftly, she'd vanish like the cool morning mist.

It turned out, Denbigh needn't move at all.

Alice glided towards him. More she floated like a benevolent specter; her steps as

graceful and elegant and languid as the light steps of a delicate reel.

Then she stopped.

A ray of sunlight bathed the cherished lines of her delicate face. “You were saying?” Alice softly asked.

Denbigh tried to figure out what he’d been thinking before he’d caught her visage in the windowpanes, but came up empty.

Alice cocked her head. “That is one of the things you love about ...?” she murmured.

“ Alice .” Her name came out all strangled.

My God, it was truly her.

“That is one of the things you love about Alice ?” She ventured with a teasing but also hopeful look in her eyes.

No. Surely, he merely saw the emotion he wished to see.

“Alice,” he breathed again, nothing more than her name.

He was more than half afraid he’d conjured her from his greatest dream, and in this plane, he wanted to exist forever, here and now.

The slight smile at the corners of her lips eased.

She is real. This is real.

Denbigh belatedly recalled what she’d said. Hers. It had been a greeting.

He found himself speaking quickly. “Your name...it was a greeting . Of sorts. On account of...” His words all rolled together into one. “My surprise at discovering you here, because I wasn’t expecting you.”

Denbigh grimaced. Bloody hell, here is where he wished he possessed a smooth tongue like the Dukes of Argyle, Rothesby and all the other rogues.

He rushed to explain, “Not that I wasn’t excited to see you, Alice, because I am. Very much so, just surprised...”

Alice touched a single gloveless index finger against his mouth.

“I was teasing, Laurence.” Her eyes and voice were so tender, so gentle, so... loving ? Or did he imagine that because he wanted to hear that emotion so desperately from her? For him .

Denbigh’s throat worked spasmodically. “I wasn’t sure if we were in a place where we’d tease one another ever again.”

His voice was as raspy as when he’d suffered a vicious throat infection as a child. There had been talks amongst his doctor and his father that he’d register while stirring in the throes of his illness, suspicions that he’d not make the night and would die, a mere lad of ten. His mother had wept.

His father had been perturbed but grateful that he had two other sons to fill his place.

As for Denbigh? He’d been so very fearful about dying and missing the rest of his life. Now, with Alice before him, Denbigh appreciated just how tragic it would’ve been to depart this earth without ever having known her .

They spoke at the same time.

“I—”

“I—”

Filled with arrestive desperation, Denbigh didn't even attempt to do the gentlemanly thing and let her go first.

“But it was true, Alice. Your indomitable spirit is one of those things I love about you. There are so many of them.” He murmured that last part to himself.

She'd come here for a reason that likely wasn't him waxing on about her. It suggested he was attempting to sway her and persuade her to forgive him and give him a chance to love her.

“Forgive me, you clearly came for a reason. I take it you read my note.”

That could be the only way that she was here at this very place even now.

Alice nodded in confirmation.

“I was expecting my man of affairs.”

“Yes, I know,” she murmured. “I asked him to arrange a meeting for us here.”

His loyal man of affairs had carefully left out that important detail. Then it hit him...

Denbigh quietly cursed. “Forgive me.”

Alice stared at him askance.

“I'd made it clear to Bishop that he was to deal directly with you were you to ever

contact him. I will speak with him about the transgression and make sure it will never happen again.”

His chest aching, Denbigh took a hasty step to leave. He’d made it less than half a pace when Alice inserted herself directly in his path.

“I didn’t come here to see Bishop,” she said frantically. “I came to see you.”

“Me,” he repeated.

The lump in his throat moved up and down wildly again. He held himself motionless, awaiting the confirmation of something to be true.

Alice nodded.

And as he’d spent far too much time talking and failing to listen, he respected her right to speak.

Except, she didn’t speak. Alice, drifted close, leaned up on tiptoe, wrapped her arms about his neck, and kissed him. While she kissed him, tenderly touching her mouth to his, he hovered with his arms outstretched on either side of him, in prayer, in supplication, in surrender.

“I love you, Laurence. I always have,” she breathed against his lips.

A sheen misted his eyes. He waited for her to speak—only... she stared expectantly at him.

“Is there a but in there?” Fear lent a warbly quality to his halting query.

Alice dusted a tear from his cheek. He’d never cried before now. And he didn’t care.

He'd have her see all of him. He'd never again hide his emotions from her.

"I was furious that you were not honest with me," she said softly.

"I kn—" His voice broke. "I know," he said when he was able to fully speak.

Then he groaned and buried his mouth against hers, kissing her with all he was and all the love he'd carried for her.

"I love you," he rasped.

Panting, Alice returned his kisses with a matched passion. "You love me?"

"How could you not know?" he asked.

He brought a hand up between them for her to see.

Alice's eyes went to the turquoise ribbon. Her lush lips wet from his kiss parted. Her passion-filled gaze moved from Denbigh to the old scrap and then back again to him.

Her breathy exhalations of desire blended with joyous wonder. "My ribbon," she whispered.

Denbigh joined their fingers around the satin strip. "I have fought myself for so long, denying what I want, but you are like breath, air to my lungs. You are the reason my heart beats and the blood flows in my veins."

Moaning his name, Alice gripped Denbigh hard by his nape, and attempted to force his mouth to hers.

It took every bit of restraint, but he managed to turn from her volatile kiss.

Alice cried out. “Why did you stop?”

Denbigh dropped to his knees and lovingly took her hands in his and brought them to his mouth. He dropped a kiss upon the tops of each knuckle, lifting his gaze to her slightly dazed one, and asked her the only question he wanted, putting one final plea to her.

“Please, marry me, Alice. Let me spend every single moment of every single day making you smile and laugh and making Laurel happy too.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

Please, marry me, Alice.

Alice kept still, afraid to move.

Laurence wants to marry me.

“You want to marry me?” she repeated quietly, reverently, hardly daring to believe...

“That’s all I want. A future with you and Laurel and...” He held her gaze. “Laurelia, Laurina, Laurette, Laurelei...”

Alice caught a shuddery gasp behind her fingers. “You remember that?” she whispered.

Somehow, Laurence’s gaze grew even more tender. “Oh, Alice, I remember every moment with you. They’re engraved right here.” As he spoke that avowal, Laurence touched a hand to his heart.

Hers hitched in reply.

When she’d teased him with that promise for his future, she’d been but a girl. It hadn’t been until she was a young woman that Alice discovered she wanted to bear his children.

“Alice,” he murmured. “Please, say you’ll spend forever with me. I want the rest of your tomorrows.”

With him kneeling, she lowered her brow and touched it to his. “Yes, Laurence, I want you.” He’d given her the greatest gift, the one she’d never believed to have. He’d given her the right to choose, and she chose him. “I want to spend forever with you. I choose you .”

With that pledge, she cupped his face in her hands and proceeded to show him every way in which he was her choice. She kissed him desperately, madly, deeply, with an unceasing urgency. She parted her lips and invited him in.

Laurence gave her what she craved.

He thrust his tongue inside and tangled that hot flesh against hers. He wielded it like a brand, burning her from the inside out, until she sagged like a pile of ash at his feet while the embers kept her afire.

Panting, Alice gripped Laurence’s hands and dragged them to her breasts. She placed each large, open palm, one against each mound.

“Touch me here,” she ordered desperately.

“Anything you want,” he said, his voice as ragged as if he’d run the same route as the great Greek god Apollo.

Anything she wanted. That was the difference between this man and all others. He allowed her agency of self, of surrender, of her future, of their future. And it was the headiest of fine wines that she’d sampled at the Devil’s Den.

A sharp ache settled between her legs, a fierce throbbing, somehow exquisite in its pain.

Moaning wildly and wantonly, she rocked her hips. They moved of their own

volition.

“I’ve never felt this way.” She broke their kiss long enough to make that raspy confession.

“I’ve never known it could be like this.”

He continued to palm her breasts through the fabric of her dress; he teased and tweaked her over-sensitized nipples.

Alice’s eyes slid shut and she drew in and exhaled slow, low, unsteady breaths.

“I want to show you all of how it can be,” he said raggedly, “but we should stop. I want to wait until I do right by you.”

The anguish in his voice revealed the very fine grasp he had on self-control and restraint.

Alice lovingly stroked her fingers through his delicious, loose golden strands.

“You’ve always been honorable. The most respectful and respectable gentleman,” she said throatily.

Laurence nodded unevenly. “I try to be.”

She knew. He made as if to ease away from her, but Alice grabbed his hands and anchored them to her breasts. His fingers curled into the flesh, and she bit her lower lip as a fresh wave of hungering bolted through her.

“Don’t,” she ordered, hardly recognizing the authoritative, sultry quality of her voice. “I don’t want you to be a gentleman with me now. You’ve allowed me a choice in

everything. And now I'd have you show me that same power in this."

Her eyes grew heavy. A bright, unholy glint came to life in his eyes.

"You wish to be in control, mistress," he purred silkily.

Alice nodded.

"Then order me as you would." His thick, long lashes swept low, and he stared at her through thin, dangerous, and lust-filled slits. "I'm a mere servant, here to serve you, Alice."

...I'm a mere servant, here to serve you...

That this all-powerful, strong, muscular, formidable man let her take charge and acquiesced lit an explosive heat within her, her lust and longing so great, it threatened to consume her in a fiery conflagration.

Alice untangled his cravat and left that white satin fabric about his neck, and she then used it, leading him, all but dragging him, to the white satin chaise available as a prop to the future artists who'd inhabit this hall.

All the while she went, he kept the pace she'd set and followed along on his knees.

She stopped at the chaise and held his gaze with hers.

Lust sparkled within those dangerous blue depths that possessed a danger that had never been there.

The feral hardness in them set her pulse to pounding.

A slow, knowing virile grin teased his lips up into a seductive smile. He knew what she wanted. He knew she delighted in this sensual power over him.

“What will my future bride have me do?” he asked in a low, seductive baritone; that lust-filled question, coupled with the primitive way in which he peered at her, pulled a moan from Alice.

“Remove my dress.” Alice thinned her eyes into narrow, cat-like slits. “Now .”

How did her command emerge so steady and self-possessed when she was liquid heat inside?

“As you wish, my future bride,” he purred, the most feral of black panthers loose in London.

Unleashing danger and opening the civilized apparel, never taking his gaze from hers, Laurence reached his hands behind her and undid button after button with such expediency she didn’t even have time to order him to move faster before he had her bodice down and the top of her dress shoved about her waist.

Laurence gazed upon her bare flesh the same way the first sinners certainly had on the forbidden fruit.

A low, agony-laced groan, rumbled from his chest, and he leaned forward to place his lips against first her right mound.

She wanted his attentions more than she wanted the air she breathed.

She craved it. His kiss, his touch there.

Still, somehow, she found the restraint to stop him just as his lips would’ve closed

about her turgid peak.

“Did I ask you to kiss me, Laurence?” she asked, threading hardness into her voice; the faint tremble in her tone, however, weakened her command.

Still, he committed to Alice being in complete power and control.

“What would my mistress have me do?” He breathed that question so close to her trembling flesh, his lips brushed against her nipple in an incidental kiss.

Alice’s breath caught.

“Take my breasts in your hands and play with them, Laurence,” she demanded, when she trusted herself to properly order him about.

Laurence instantly complied. He lightly massaged and molded her flesh in his large hands.

She moaned. It wasn’t enough.

“Harder,” she ordered. “Tug them. Pull on them.”

“Yes,” she hissed as he so dutifully followed her instructions.

A capable student to her austere teacher.

Alice let her head fall back and let the sighs and moans ease freely from her lips, recognizing and rewarding him for his efforts.

Eyes closed, she reveled in the feel, the sorcery of his touch.

Then she breathed, “Take me in your mouth. Suck on me.”

Having lived in a notorious gaming hell, where she was charged with creating erotic paintings, there had been too many times when she’d been filled with a rapacious hunger.

She’d hungered before she’d even learned how to bring herself some relief from that sharp ache between her legs.

But nothing compared to having a strong, good, skilled man and lover tend her.

As he filled his mouth with her nipple, she opened her mouth, prepared to order him to suck hard, but he’d seemed to grasp all too quickly and keenly exactly how she liked it and what she craved.

Laurence sucked wildly on the tip. He flicked his tongue over the tip and lightly bit the turgid peak.

Alice’s cry pierced the room and echoed off the high ceilings. The reverberations of her lusty cries and his ragged breathing drove her heat to another level.

The titillating sense of power she had over this moment, and, more importantly, this powerful man, drove her mad.

Her head suddenly proved heavy, and she let her head fall back.

Having learned so quickly how she wanted it, how she needed it, Laurence brought her breasts together and teased both peaks as one.

He vacillated his tongue back and forth between the engorged tips.

Then he took the stiffened crests deep in his mouth and sucked.

Laurence, the Earl of Denbigh, a man she'd loved forever and had once been rejected by, now lived for her pleasure.

That together with sounds of her long, sultry moan enflamed her.

That need-soaked spot between her legs proved unbearable.

Alice, grunting like the lusty animal he and his touch had transformed her into, drove her hips wildly against him and empty air.

Her cunny throbbed. The moisture wrought by his exquisite ministrations seeped from her curls and slicked the inside of her thighs.

Alice whimpered. The pressure built.

She was going to come and from nothing more than the lavish attention he paid her breasts.

He sucked those rose-pebbled peaks. He flicked them with his tongue and only stopped so he could tug hard at them.

His every caress pulled her higher and higher to the peak she knew only from her own hand.

But this? There was no words to describe what it was to have the man one loved torturing her with her all-consuming lust.

I am going to come...

Laurence's low, lust-filled chuckle rumbled in the charged air between them. "I take it my mistress is pleased by my efforts," he breathed against her breasts.

Beyond pleased.

In his strong, capable arms, her soul sighed and her body sang.

At her silence, a pleased, all-knowing grin teased Laurence's lips in a cocksure grin.

But she craved far more from him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:20 am

Wrestling herself back from the precipice of bliss, she gripped his thick, loose golden curls in her hands and shoved him away.

His eyes, fierce as fire, glinted with raw hunger and surprise.

Alice luxuriated in wrestling back power over him. “If you are to make me come, I want far more than having my tits played with, Laurence.”

His breath hitched. His eyes darkened. “And what is it my mistress wishes for me to do?” His primally low baritone contained a low, guttural rawness she’d never before heard from him or any man. “Tell me. I live to please you, Alice,” he rasped, turning his palms up.

For me. Laurence will supplicate himself to me and my pleasure.

A bead of moisture trickled from her sodden center and slicked her inner thighs.

Mad with desire, Alice sank her teeth into her lower lip hard to keep in her want-filled moan. The metallic tinge of blood filled her mouth.

Laurence sucked in a sharp breath. “Please, mistress. Instruct me. Tell me how I can please you.”

Alice prayed to all the gods and goddesses whom she’d given eternal pleasure to upon her canvases for strength to not surrender so that she could live in this wicked, lust-filled moment forever as they did.

Alice stared at the top of his head, bent as if he too prayed to the same gods and goddesses of carnal love that she did, when, in fact, Alice knew it was she whom he consecrated himself to.

Somehow, she found the strength to edge away.

“Take my gown off, Laurence.” She ordered him to do her bidding with far less strength than she wished, but the most she could manage.

With an even greater care and reverence than her lady’s maids of before, Laurence set his strong hands at her waist and began to tenderly work her chemise and dress down past her hips.

As he did, Alice gazed upon him with heavy eyes. Love and longing clouded her vision.

Then, when he’d eased her gown all the way down to her ankles, he lifted his gaze, looking to her for permission.

She trembled at that deference.

Her pulse pounding, Alice nodded once and lifted her right foot first and then the next.

Without a word spoken, Laurence slipped the material all the way off. With the same beautifully tender regard he showed her and her body, he set Alice’s gown aside so it lay upon the floor beside them.

Her breath quivered.

He was the only man she’d ever wanted—the only one she needed. She’d longed for Laurence to be the one to teach her passion, and settled for less, and what she’d

known with her faithless, fleeting lover had left her cold, empty, and absent of carnal pleasure.

Laurence remained in full-kneel, with his head bowed. His body conveyed what his words needn't.

What would she allow him to do to her next?

Alice inhaled sharply.

Somehow, through the ravenous desire consuming her, she found the strength to speak. "Look at me, my lord."

He immediately complied with her sharp command.

Their gazes locked; the heat of her hungering was reflected back in his. Their chests rose and fell in a fast, like rhythm.

Lying back on her elbows, Alice let her legs splay. "Put your hand between my legs and make me come," she impelled.

Laurence drew in a breath on a sharp inhale. His nostrils went into a full-flare like a ravenous beast ready to rut.

"As my mistress commands," he purred.

Then he set to work giving Alice exactly what she craved. He palmed her mound and placed the heel of his hand over her sodden curls, applying a deep pressure. Every nerve ending and fiber of her body tunneled on her hungry center.

He teased her swollen folds with a lone, long finger.

All the air left her lungs on a swift exhale.

Impatient for his touch, Alice jerked her hips up. "I said touch me," she ordered.

Laurence did not disappoint in following that directive. No, he attended her and the assignment like an enthusiastic, obedient servant who lived to fulfill his employer's wishes.

This time, there was no gentleness. He pushed the heel of four fingers hard against her pulsing cunny. A hiss exploded from between her teeth. Laurence, her friend, now lover, alternately put pressure where she ached and eased a single finger along her slit.

"Like this?" he murmured.

Suddenly, he pressed two fingers deep inside her.

Alice cried out, and her hips jerked wildly. Nodding wildly, she undulated in opposite rhythm of his downward strokes.

Her pulse pounded like the steady beat of a drum, and every part of her centered on the splendorous torture he inflicted upon her.

Eyes closed, Alice sank further back on her elbows and rocked against him.

She'd known it could be like this. When a woman lived in a gaming hell, amongst debauchery and libidinous worshippers of sin, one learned all too quick everything there was to know about lovemaking.

It was impossible not to. Alice lived amidst women who made their coin from the carnal.

She was surrounded by literary works like the Su Nu Jing , Kama Sutra , The Perfumed Garden , and Sappho's erotic poetry.

When she'd first arrived, she'd been instructed to study on the Khajuraho Temples, Chunhua, or spring pictures from the Ming and Qing dynasties, the classical erotica of Pompeii and Herculaneum... and more.

Laurence continued to slip his fingers through her wetness. He smeared the hot dew of her desire over her curls and around her clit.

A slow shiver traveled through Alice. Her eyes closed, she focused on breathing and...on feeling .

Yes, she'd known it could be like this. She'd just never believed it would be like this...for her.

She'd chosen a second to Laurence—the man she could not have—and ultimately ended up with nothing. Not love. Not true passion. Not lust-filled surrender and surcease.

For the first time, her body was awake. Now, she learned what it was to feel how it was to come alive in a lover's arms.

That pressure between her thighs, the confused pressure that hovered between acute pain and the ultimate pleasure, built.

Moaning, Alice's hips, of their own volition, began to move; the upward and downward thrust of her hips took on a frantic quality. Her body moved to its own rhythm of desire; Alice existed as just a vessel for that all-encompassing need.

Close. I am so close.

“More ,” she keened, pushing herself against his quixotic fingers.

Laurence, oh so dutifully, did her bidding.

Alice gritted her teeth. Digging her elbows hard into the white velvet upholstered cushions, she drove her hips up to meet his strokes.

“Tell me what you want, Alice,” Laurence whispered gutturally. “Tell me what you want?”

His question contained a harsh, pleading quality that added to her frenzy.

“Put your mouth on my cunny, Laurence.” The naughty command tore ragged from her throat and filled her ears; that lusty issuance thundered and echoed in this space. This haven he’d built and gifted to her.

“As my lady wishes,” he said throatily.

Laurence buried his face between her legs.

“Laurence!” she hissed his name. Alice’s hips shot up, and she gripped his head hard in her fingers.

Her obedient lover devoted himself to her pleasure. He licked her. He laved her. He sucked at her nub. He thrust his tongue over and over within her hot channel until words and logic fled, and Alice was reduced to a puddle of all-consuming lust and longing.

At some point, Alice had collapsed completely upon the chaise.

Her lower body moved as if possessed. Her core burned and she distantly registered the broken sobs falling from her lips.

She held his head tighter to that place she needed him most; the only place she wanted him right now.

She ground herself against his mouth and jaw.

Laurence didn't let up.

Alice wanted his loving to go on forever, but her center trembled with such need, she felt on the edge of breaking.

“Make me come, Laur—ence.” She hissed the last syllables of his name as he thrust his hot tongue deep.

Alice broke apart, shattering in an explosion of fireworks over a clear night sky—so bright, so vibrant—and the force of that cataclysmic beauty left her briefly blind.

She wept, tears of ecstasy leaving her cheeks damp. She cursed. “Laurence!” She screamed his name over and over, an entreaty, a prayer, a ballad of love.

A final deep, long shudder rocked her throughout.

With a broken, shuddering gasp, Alice collapsed into the folds of her makeshift mattress. As she lay there, her body replete, she tried to get her breathing to a place where her lungs did not fail her.

Her heart put up a valiant fight to return to its natural tempo. Her nerves tingled and thrummed.

And then, like a feather that'd flown too high and floated back to earth but settled instead upon the softest of clouds, she settled.

A slow, sated smile teased her lips, but her surrender left even her mouth too tired to

form a full smile.

Laurence dropped the tenderest, most worshipful of kisses upon her soaked curls first. Then upon her soft, sweat-slicked inner left thigh. Then her right.

She trembled.

When he at last moved away from her, Laurence sat and drew Alice atop his lap, cradling her close.

Her gaze was drawn, riveted, to the gleaming dampness upon his mouth and chin from where he'd dined on her nectar.

"Is my bride-to-be pleased?" he murmured.

"Most pleased," Alice purred.

Even as he leaned down to claim her in a kiss as deep, penetrating, and soul-searing as the one he'd shown that place between her legs, she reached up and kissed him. She tasted herself upon him. Salty, hot lust.

That ache rekindled anew, and as they tangled with their tongues in a gentle waltz, Alice's hips began to move again.

Laurence's breath hitched.

"I trust my lady wants more?" His silky whisper teased her lips.

It took all she was, but Alice managed to draw back.

Cradling his chiseled cheeks between her palms, she ran her gaze adoringly over him. "Indeed, I do, Laurence."

His eyes darkened, unquenched lust making his eyes volatile and dangerous. “And what is it you require? I am yours to command.”

He’d give her this power. He’d give her control of this. Him. Their future together.

“I want forever with you, Laurence,” she whispered, her voice catching. “I want forever.”

Through the desire glittering in his eyes, an even more powerful emotion flared to life—love. Bright, beautiful, and all-powerful love.

“My lady’s wish is my command,” he vowed, his voice thick. “I love you, Alice.”

Tears blurred her vision. “I love you more, Laurence.”

A half sob, half laugh tore from him. “Impossible, love.”

They came together as one, drowning on the nectar of one another’s lips. Their breathing tangled and merged in unity with their souls.

Laurence gripped her jaw gently in his hand, urging her to open for him, but Alice stopped.

He stared at her questioningly.

“There is one more thing I’d ask of you, Laurence,” she murmured.

A question clouded his eyes. “Anything.”

Alice let her lips form a naughty smile, and then, leaning close, she whispered precisely what she wanted.

And Laurence proceeded to give her—and do—exactly that.

The End

One sin isn't enough.

Give in to the rest of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Wrath—The Devil Duke

In 19th-century London, rival gaming hells battle for power—but love is the deadliest gamble of all. He fell from grace. She's out for revenge. Together, they'll ignite something dark, dangerous, and utterly irresistible.

Lust—The Bad Earl

He was made to kill. She was born to tempt.

Ruthless, emotionless, and England's deadliest secret weapon, Severin Cadogan has no use for hearts—or complications.

Until she arrives. Lady Raina Goodheart is everything he shouldn't want: pure, poised...

and wickedly drawn to darkness. But as desire turns dangerous, and hearts become weapons, one thing's certain—neither will escape unscathed.

Pride—The Rogue

He built an empire from vengeance. She's about to set it on fire.

Lachlan Latimer is ruthless, powerful, and hellbent on destroying the dukes who

betrayed him. Love? That's a luxury he buried long ago. But when defiant, beautiful Livian Lovelace crashes into his world, one reckless night changes everything. She wants freedom. He offers only desire.

But some sins burn too hot to walk away from.

Sloth—The Fallen Earl

She was never meant to be his. One scandalous night changed that.

When Cressida Alby is put up for auction at London's most notorious den of sin, salvation comes in the form of the only man she's ever longed for—Benedict, the Earl of Wakefield. Bound by duty, he should've walked away. Instead, he claimed her.

Now, one reckless night has tied them together in a tangle of desire, scandal, and impossible choices.

Will honor keep them apart—or will passion rewrite the rules?

Obsession—The Unspoken Sin

He came to drag her home. He didn't expect to want her.

Lady Alice Masterson was meant to disappear quietly into Scotland. Instead, the Earl of Denbigh finds her thriving in London's most infamous gaming hell—brazen, beautiful, and scandalously off-limits. She's his best friend's sister. He's the last man she wants.

But when old sparks turn to slow-burning fire, and long-buried secrets come to light, passion may be the one thing they can't resist.

Coming August 2025

She was his scandal. He was her undoing.

Greed—The Savage

In a world where survival demands sharp edges and silent loyalties, Addiden “Snap” Killoran has mastered both. Raised with nothing and trusted by no one, she’s clawed her way into the only kind of power she understands—one built in shadows and silence.

Malric Mauley, the Marquess of Thornwick, once had everything—until scandal stripped him of his title’s respectability.

His brother’s treachery tainted his name, but Malric wears the ruin like armor.

On the fringe of society, he thrives in the shadows, dealing in secrets and sin, wielding scandal like a blade.

His revenge is slow, calculated—and deeply personal.

Their paths were never meant to cross. He wants nothing more than to provoke, to destroy. She wants only to keep what little she’s earned. But when ambition meets recklessness, when loyalty and desire blur—nothing stays buried.

Not secrets.

Not lies.

Not hearts.