



Pretending to Love a Lyon (The Lyon's Den Connected World)

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Category: Historical

Description: They clash like fire and ice, but their attraction is undeniable.

Lady Amelia Clark finds herself in a desperate gamble when her twin brother, the Earl of Alston, falls victim to a tragic accident. To protect them both, Amelia must keep his dire condition a secret from their enemies, and Amelia's only ally is the man who loathes her—her brother's best friend, Mr. Graham Blakewood.

Despite their tumultuous past, Graham vows to protect Amelia at all costs, even if it means masquerading as her fiancé. As they navigate societal expectations and lurking threats, their fake engagement becomes dangerously complicated. And when their facade unravels and long-buried feelings come to light, they must confront the consequences of their tangled web of lies.

In a final, desperate attempt to save her brother's life, Lady Amelia strikes a bargain with the notorious Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon, the Widow of Whitehall, for her discreet services and powerful influence. But there is always a price to pay when gambling with love and death.

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“What’s happened?” Lady Amelia Clark cried as she rushed up the stairs.

“He took a fall,” Graham Blakewood said.

Despite her frantic racing, Mr. Blakewood continued to march steadily behind her.

Amelia spun around. “This is your fault. I told you not to let him ride that devil of a horse. I should shoot that mad beast myself.”

He paused two steps below her, their gazes level, and said, “He wasn’t on Titan. He took your words to heart.”

Amelia’s heart tumbled around like a pebble caught in an avalanche. Her bottom lip shook, and she bit down to hold the bloody traitor still. Mr. Blakewood stared back at her, calm and resolute, his gray-green eyes filled with worry, his auburn hair tousled like he’d been grabbing it in fistfuls.

Her twin brother Sam, the Earl of Alston, the only sibling she had—and the only family she had left besides her aunt and wasteful cousin on her father’s side—lay abed upstairs. She would not waste a second being a foolish, simpering girl during his last moments. For that was what Mr. Blakewood’s eyes said. He wouldn’t be worried if there weren’t something to worry about. The man was as immovable as a mountain and as emotional as a marble bust. But at this moment, he’d let go of his control enough for her to see the man under the marble.

His worry was the cold breath of Death on the back of her neck.

Amelia spun, losing her balance, and a hand caught her on her lower back, gently shoving her forward. She caught her step and resumed her climb to her brother's bedside. She opened the door to Sam's room, her heart stopping as the doctor backed away from the still, pale form on the bed.

A wail burst from her lips as she ran forward to cling to her brother, the other half of herself.

The doctor approached. "Lady Amelia, I must insist you remain calm, or you will be removed from the room. Your brother has sustained a grave injury and must remain absolutely still."

But Amelia could hardly hear him beyond her own cries of anguish. That is, until her brother's eyes opened. She went limp. If not for Mr. Blakewood's swift catch, she'd have collapsed on the floor.

"Sam?" she cried hoarsely.

"Amelia . . . I see you."

Mr. Blakewood's hold eased, but oddly, it was Amelia who did not want to let go of his sturdy support. She forced herself to release her grip on his thick arms.

"Sam, what on earth did you do?"

"Carson stepped in a hole," Sam said with a wince. "Poor Graham had to put him down. The break was too bad."

"And what of you? Did he shoot you as well?"

Amelia heard Mr. Blakewood's huff of annoyance. He hated her humor. Far too

serious a man, dull, and prone to lectures about duty and honor, which is why she chafed in his presence. But he was good for Sam. He connected with Sam in a way that other gentlemen Sam's age could not.

Sam chuckled softly. Her heart eased into a calmer rhythm now that he seemed to be at least able to laugh. He couldn't be dying if he could laugh, could he? She stepped closer with Mr. Blakewood on her heels, as if she were a danger to her brother. Amelia ignored the looming giant and sat on the edge of the bed, taking her brother's hand.

"What is your condition?"

The doctor stood on Sam's other side. He cleared his throat. "There is some internal injury, Lady Amelia. Lord Alston is in dire health. You should summon family and Lord Alston's man of business."

Amelia stiffened. "That won't be necessary."

Dr. Bradley frowned. "My lady . . ."

"Just say it, Bradley," Sam said.

Amelia shook her head. Already knowing what he would say. "No."

"His demise could be imminent," Dr. Bradley said. "Every second is a gift."

Amelia swayed where she sat. A hand touched her shoulder. Steadying her. For one heart-wrenching second, Amelia considered turning and leaning into Mr. Blakewood's hold. He might be a cold statue, but at least he had the strength to hold her when Sam could not. Sam was all she had in the world. He was the only person who understood her and accepted her as she was, who fought for her, who stood by

her through everything. Including when she was wrong.

Amelia pinched her eyes closed. Tears pressed against her lashes, hot enough to scald. A sob caught in her throat, and for a moment she couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't even think.

"Amelia," Sam said. "Don't cry."

"What am I supposed to do? Tell me what you need me to do to help you."

"Aunt Ruth and Nelson should come."

Amelia shook her head. "Anything but that."

Sam laughed with a hitch of pain. Amelia squeezed her eyes tighter. She couldn't bear this. She would not survive if he didn't.

Amelia sucked in a breath and opened her eyes. "You can't die. I won't allow it."

"Lia, we all die. We know that better than most."

It was painfully true. First, their mother had died during their birth, and then their father had passed away when they were twelve. Sam had born all the responsibility, assisted by their guardian and fraternal uncle, Roger Clark, who had passed just last year.

"But not you, Sam. Please live. For me. We've always been together. You can't go anywhere without me, least of all..."

He smiled weakly. "Lia... your stubbornness will not win this time."

“Don’t say that. You underestimate me.”

The doctor cleared his throat. “I’ve done all I can. There is medicine to keep his lordship comfortable. Send for me when—”

Amelia cut him off with a glare.

“Thank you, Doctor Bradley,” Mr. Blakewood said.

Amelia had almost forgotten about him. He was so quiet.

“You may leave as well,” she said to Mr. Blakewood. “I want to be alone with my brother.”

She could feel his reluctance, but all he replied was, “I’ll see the doctor out.”

“Thank you.” Amelia waited until the door closed behind the two men.

“You’ve got an ally in Blakewood,” her bother said. “He can protect you. He’s almost as stubborn as you are.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “He loathes me. And there is no reason for him to be here without you.”

“Amelia, consider . . . you could marry him.”

Her chest turned cold at the hopelessness in his voice. “Don’t.”

“If I ask him to, he’ll marry you.”

“Stop. You don’t need to worry about me. I have my own money and house. I don’t

have to marry at all if I don't wish to." A sharp pain rose in her throat, and she had to swallow before speaking. "How did this happen? How did you... get so hurt?" The abnormal blue shade of his lips terrified her, but she remained strong, keeping her tears at bay so she could speak to him longer.

"I landed on a rock. It felt like I took a cannon ball to the side."

"But you're talking to me. Surely, you'll be all right in time. You just need to heal. The doctor is wrong." Or was it wrong to keep him talking? Was she taxing him further?

"I've got some broken ribs, and he suspects I'm bleeding inside my body."

"You're supposed to do that. The blood belongs inside."

He half-smiled. "In my veins, yes, but not in other places."

Amelia swallowed. His hand was so cold in hers. She didn't know what a deceased person looked like—she hadn't been allowed to see her father or her uncle—but she could well imagine it looking like this. Sam's color was all wrong. It was as if all his life had already been leeches out of him, and she was talking to his ghost.

"No more speaking for now," she said. "You need to rest. And your hands are cold. I'll build up the fire." She turned away, uncertain whether her legs would hold her as she took that first step. But she managed the few paces and then knelt before the fire, where she added another log and shifted the coals. Returning to his side, she pulled the coverlet up to his neck and laid another blanket on top. His eyes were closed and his breathing labored.

"Fetch Graham," he whispered.

Amelia went to the door, pausing to look back at him in case it was the last time.

She steeled herself. It would not be. Hellfire would not pry her from this room until she was certain her brother would not die. They came into this life together, and he would not leave it without her.

Amelia opened the door to call for a footman to find Mr. Blakewood, but he was already there, hands braced on the jamb as if he'd been holding himself back from entering. He hadn't moved since she'd opened the door, almost as if he weren't aware she stood there. His eyes were closed, his brow furrowed. His coat was gone, and his waistcoat and cravat undone. She'd never seen him so disheveled. It was the most vulnerable and the most human he'd ever seemed.

"He's asking for you," she said quietly.

His eyes opened, their pale gray-green bright with unshed tears. Stunned, Amelia couldn't move.

"Lia . . ."

"Don't. Please."

He'd never called her that before, only Sam did. There had always been a wall between them, a barrier of polite—and sometimes impolite—indifference. And she wanted nothing about their relationship to change—not because of this. She certainly didn't want any advice. He was Sam's friend, not hers. He'd made that clear years ago when he had rebuffed her offer of friendship. She didn't need his comfort now for something that she'd already determined wasn't going to happen. If she had to be the one to believe enough for all of them that Sam would be fine, so be it.

Amelia stepped aside, and he lumbered past her. He moved slower, heavier than

usual, like his fears pressed down on him and he struggled to carry it. She almost reached for him—to do what, she didn't know. Pat him on the back? Comfort him ? That was not the relationship they had.

Amelia took a breath and poured herself a glass of water. In Sam's dressing room, she saw a shadow move.

“Petrov?”

“Aye, miss.”

Amelia came forward, pausing at the doorway, and the valet sat on a stool with his head in his hands.

“He'll be well again.”

Petrov looked up at her. Even in the dark, she could see his grief. Petrov was a Russian immigrant who had been with them in one capacity or another for as long as she could remember. He was older than she and Sam were, but not old enough to be their parent. Still, he was almost family anyway. Someone who provided stability by just being there for most of their life, like much of the household.

Her stomach dropped when she saw the streaks of tears running down his cheeks. She didn't know men could cry so. The sight of Petrov shook her, and her courage wavered. What was she going to do? She couldn't be strong for everyone, could she? She'd never been this alone, but right now, with Sam fading and the house stricken with grief, she already felt the weight of everyone's worries settling on her shoulders. She didn't know how to withstand it.

Amelia peeked over her shoulder at Mr. Blakewood and her brother. Blakewood bent over him, as if listening for breath. Amelia dug her nails into the door jamb, a

whimper escaping. But then she saw Sam's chest rise, and Blakewood nodded.

Her brother's lips moved. He spoke very slowly, and Blakewood replied.

His last wishes? Amelia held a fist to her stomach, digging into the hollowness as if she could punch through it. This couldn't be happening. They were only two and twenty.

She stepped forward hesitantly. A hand grabbed her elbow.

"Miss," Petrov whispered.

"What is it? My brother needs me."

"What will happen to us?"

"Nothing is going to change," Amelia assured him. "But we have to be strong. We have to make him better, Petrov. We all need him, and he needs us."

Petrov nodded, but his eyes held sorrow.

Amelia turned away. She wasn't going to give up. She strode across her brother's room and went to his side. "You should drink something." Surely that would help, wouldn't it? A body needed water. She reached for the glass and pitcher that stood on the table near his bed.

"Lady Amelia," Blakewood said sternly. "Dr. Bradley advised we give him nothing."

Amelia stared him down.

"Stop arguing over me." Sam whispered.

Blakewood held her gaze and nodded toward the hall. Amelia shook her head.

“Please,” Blakewood said.

Her brother’s breath rattled.

“Petrov? Come and wait with Lord Alston. I’ll only be one moment. I’ll be right outside. Try to offer him water.”

Petrov glanced between her and Mr. Blakewood.

Amelia led the way, chin firm. In the hall, she turned to face him. “Make it quick.”

“He made it known what his final wishes are.”

Her stomach trembled, and her skin was both cold and hot. “If you even mention marriage, so help me, I will do you bodily harm.”

His jaw clenched. “Be reasonable. It’s better to be prepared for the worst outcome than to try to make decisions later. We don’t have to marry—”

“Correct. I’ve spent years fighting off my cousin’s advances and his mother’s machinations to take hold of my inheritance, and I won’t be convinced to give it up now. I don’t need to be cared for like a child. I don’t need a husband to rule my life.”

“That doesn’t mean you won’t need support in one way or another. He told me about your aunt and Nelson. Let me help.”

“He is not dead, and if you let me see to my brother, he will not die .”

“Are you going to make a miracle? I saw him fall. I could hear his body breaking. He

hasn't long. Don't make his last moment fraught with... contention."

"Or what, you'll put him down like you did his horse?" Amelia said in the kind of irrational anger that could only come from fear. She regretted it instantly.

His jaw flexed and he shook his head, and then he strode away, muttering.

Amelia wasted not a moment more on him—perhaps she would try to apologize later—and returned to her brother's side. Petrov was wiping a damp cloth over Sam's parted lips.

"He is too weak to take water," Petrov said.

"Tomorrow will be better," Amelia said.

Petrov's lips tightened in response.

For the remainder of the evening, Amelia and Petrov kept watch over her brother. Amelia savored every breath, noting the seconds that passed to minutes and hours. Her hope grew as her energy waned. Petrov bid her sleep and said he would keep watch. Amelia promised to try for a half hour, and then he could rest. She managed only to lay back in her chair with her eyes closed, aware of every sound and movement, including that of Mr. Blakewood as he returned and took a chair by the hearth. Holding his vigil, just as they were.

She knew better than to try to make him leave. He was as immovable as she was.

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Graham woke with a start, the first streaks of dawn piercing the lace curtains of Alston's room. He shot to his feet, twisting toward the bed. Lady Amelia looked up, her pale-blond hair in disarray and her blue eyes streaming with tears, but she smiled at him. He took it like a punch to the gut, his breath catching painfully. She never smiled at him, not since the fateful night of her come-out when they shared their first and only dance.

That was the night Graham had realized that Lady Amelia had the ability to stir something hungry and wild inside him. He'd been fighting the urge ever since, pretending to be unaffected by her presence, burying his feelings behind a facade of cool disinterest that he knew she misread as dislike. But what could he do? Alston could never know that Graham wanted her in this way. In truth, the strength of his longing troubled him, made him feel unlike himself. And it was that, as much as anything, that kept him silent.

However, he was only a man, and yearning still lingered. If she sighed, he heard it; if she chewed her fingernail, he saw it; if she dozed off over her embroidery, he knew it. She was never still unless she slept. These were the stolen moments that he pocketed under Alston's nose. He hoarded them like treasure.

In the bed, Alston lay still, deathly pale but breathing. Graham scrubbed a hand over his bristled face. He dared not speak. He would not interfere with whatever magic was afoot that kept Alston alive. Petrov entered with a tray of steaming hot tea and toast.

The poor valet had deep pouches of exhaustion under his eyes, but he was plainly brimming with hope. Graham took a cup of tea from Petrov. He walked over to Lady

Amelia and offered it to her. An olive branch. She wiped a tear from her cheek and accepted it.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Are you hungry?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think I can eat.”

“He’d want you to,” Graham said, warily. He was treading carefully with her.

She cradled the cup of tea in her hands and didn’t reply. She took a careful sip, closing her eyes and sighing.

“Is it to your liking?” he asked. How was he going to persuade her to eat?

“Come sit, miss,” Petrov cajoled.

Lady Amelia got up at Petrov’s urging and came to the small table. Graham nodded his thanks to Petrov and he took the chair across from her. They needed to talk. He had decided he would not leave Alston’s side. Moreover, Alston had asked Graham to look after his sister for him. He didn’t want to force his presence on her—Lord knew she hated to be managed—but he was going to be here for her, whether she liked it or not. He just needed to figure out how.

But no matter what, he would not leave her alone at such a time. She’d have to drag him out herself.

Graham watched Alston’s shallow breaths as he gathered his thoughts, his neck stiff from sleeping in the chair. Alston had said Graham was like the brother he’d never had, and Graham felt the same. Despite their ten-year difference in age, they had a lot

of common ground, including sisters. But Graham's sister was younger than Amelia by four years and their personalities were complete opposites.

"Lady Amelia." Her gaze flicked up to his, eyes red and swollen. "Please let me stay and help you."

Her bottom lip trembled.

Graham began carefully, "I'm asking for your permission. I know we have our differences, but we both care for Alston. He asked me to remain here to support you and I will not go against his wishes, so please don't make me fight this. You don't have to endure this hardship alone. Whatever tension there is between us, we must put it aside and work together."

Lady Amelia pushed the toast around on her plate. "I concur."

Graham sighed with relief. "Thank you."

"You may stay under one condition. Do not speak like his death is inevitable."

Graham nodded. "Then we have a truce?"

"Until he is better."

"Will you tell me what sort of trouble your aunt and cousin will cause? Alston warned me they could be trouble, but not specifically how."

She took a bite of her toast before answering, and then said. "Our Uncle Roger was made guardian for Sam and me after our father died. He took charge of us, his wife and son coming to live with us in Alston Abbey. My Aunt Ruth... she wanted Nelson and me to marry. She had no designs on the earldom, even though her son was next in

line, but she wanted my inheritance. She made it her mission to turn me into the ideal lady, the perfect bride for her son. Nelson kept his distance at first—he is six years older than I am and had little interest in a twelve-year-old girl. But when I turned fifteen and he came home from school during the summer, he had a change of heart. He thought he could woo me, but learned quickly his advances were not welcome.”

Graham set his cup down. He knew of Nelson, had met him from time to time, but this cast a whole new light on his character.

“It didn’t stop there, of course. My Aunt Ruth is relentless in her aspirations. She hounded me night and day with lessons in decorum, dancing, music. She drove me mad, trying to... mother me, and mold me into her son’s wife.”

“What did Alston do?”

“What he could, but he was busy trying to learn his role as earl and with his schooling. I prayed for the day when I’d reached my majority and could escape them.”

“Your uncle did not intervene?”

She shook her head. “He said I was his wife’s responsibility.”

“And still Nelson wants you.” He swallowed the bile of jealousy in his mouth.

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “On our eighteenth birthday he proposed. They—he and my aunt—would simply not accept my refusal. Sam stepped in. He threatened Nelson, and that seemed to work for a little while.”

“So, they will be of no comfort to you.”

“No. Never. All they want is to use me. Nelson is not the only man to approach me and try to woo me into giving up my freedom and inheritance. I might never marry, unless I fall in love.”

“I’m sorry. If anyone treated my sister like that, I’d gladly hang for their murder.”

“How old is she?”

“Daisy is nineteen.” He held her gaze for a moment.

She looked away. “Has she debuted? Or was I not invited?”

“She has not.”

That made her look up again. “Why not?”

He wasn’t sure. His mother had said something about needing more polish. “I’m told she isn’t ready. She is rather shy. She doesn’t have your spirit.”

She raised a brow. “Is that a compliment?”

He sighed but couldn’t fight a smile. “We’re not enemies, Lady Amelia.”

“But we’re not friends, either.”

He sobered. We could be. He almost suggested it, but then he remembered. The longer he watched her, the harder it became to look away. Now they would be sharing a roof. That was already a scandal in and of itself. The temptation she presented was too great. He had to keep the wall between them.

“No, we’re not.”

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Household members began leaving flowers by the door to Alston's bedchamber—Graham had nearly tripped over them that first day—but few dared to enter other than Petrov and Mrs. Keen. The housekeeper kept him and Lady Amelia fed that day and reminded them to change their clothes and clean their faces.

The second day, Alston remained the same. He was still too exhausted by his wounds to say more than a few words at a time, but he was alive. The longer he stayed that way the better his odds were, according to Dr. Bradley after his morning visit. Though his utter shock at Alston's continued existence annoyed Graham and enraged Lady Amelia.

After that first night, when he'd dared to touch her not once but three times—on the stairs, holding her at Alston's bedside, the hand on her shoulder—he did not venture so close again, though he ached to give her comfort. When she wasn't furious with the doctor, she appeared so forlorn and small beside her brother. The two of them were near the same height, but as a man, Alston was broader, an inch taller, and thicker, while she was sleek and rounder in the hip.

Their main difference of personality was her stubbornness and Alston's ability to balance his impetuous streaks with cool logic. She was fire, while Alston was steel, forged by that same fire but tempered by his responsibilities. Alston had matured young, hardened by inheriting his title at the age of twelve. Lady Amelia, on the other hand, could be infuriatingly impulsive and selfish, even now that she was grown. Alston claimed she deserved to be, and he always gave her everything she asked for, desperate to fill the void their parents' deaths had left in her heart. He had protected her as well as he'd been able, sheltered her as often as he could, though it sounded as though she'd had to largely fend for herself with her aunt and cousin. And the result

was a beautiful, intelligent woman with less sense of accountability than she should have and no fear.

But right now, she was as brittle as glass. If he touched her, she might shatter, surely taking slices of him with her.

By the third day, he stank to high heaven, and he let Petrov convince him to retire to bathe.

The distance gave him clarity, and he thought about what Alston had asked of him.

Aunt Ruth will take everything away from her, including her spirit. She is of age. She cannot be forced to marry, but they will try. They know she has our mother's inheritance. It's equal to half the Alston estate. Protect her, Graham. You don't have to marry her—I know you're too different to get on comfortably. But she needs someone. As much as she won't admit it, she needs someone to shelter her.

It was a lot for Alston to say, and it had taken a lot out of him, but Graham hadn't been able to tell Lady Amelia about it before she'd shot him down. The notion of marriage had stunned him, threatening to wake sleeping desires he'd buried long ago. Nothing was easy regarding Lady Amelia. He should have been kinder to her over the years and spoken with her enough to earn a bit of her trust, but whenever he got too close to her, the attraction he fought to keep hidden took hold. He never thought he'd be in this position. In days past, Alston had named him her guardian, though it wouldn't be legal anymore, not at her age. She was free to do as she wished with herself and with her own money. But a woman alone in the world was in peril.

He had, at least, made sure that the vultures circling their family had not been alerted to Alston's condition. And he hoped his truce with Lady Amelia would last long enough for him to make arrangements to see her protected—however that needed to happen.

Graham returned to Alston's room to find Lady Amelia gone and Petrov changing the bedding—difficult to do alone with Alston still in the bed. Graham hurried to assist him. Once finished, Petrov handed Graham a note.

“This just came.”

Graham slit open the fine envelope. “An invitation to Sir Daniel's private card game at the Lyon's Den. Suffice it to say Lord Alston will be declining.”

“But Lord Alston has never missed an event, and I know we must keep his secret for Lady Amelia's sake. Won't this be seen as odd?”

“It's short notice,” Graham muttered.

“It is Sir Daniel's way, says his lordship. He likes to keep opponents on their toes.”

Graham grunted. He didn't gamble, but Alston was quite good at cards, and they'd spent many nights at the Lyon's Den carousing as members. “I know Sir Daniel, but I've never received an invitation to one of his private games. And Lord Alston can't go. There is no doubt about that.”

Petrov wiped Alston's face. “You'll think of something. The earl trusts you a great deal, Mr. Blakewood.”

Graham wished he had Petrov's confidence but his new mantle of protector weighed heavily. He stared at the invitation. Perhaps appealing to Lady Amelia for help would help keep their communication smooth in this difficult time. He went in search of her, and a maid led him to her parlor, where she was speaking urgently with the butler, Mr. Keen and the housekeeper, Mrs. Keen.

“Everyone must keep quiet. The family will descend like jackals to pick our bodies

clean before he can recover, if they find out. Speak to all the household.”

Graham halted in the entry and cleared his throat. “An invitation has arrived from Sir Daniel. What would you have me reply?”

She sucked in a breath, her demeanor shifted to panic, and she started to pace. “Oh no. My brother has never missed a game, not even that time he broke his toe. He’s undefeated against Sir Daniel. Sir Daniel will know something is wrong. And he’s acquainted with Mr. Humphrey, who knows Sir Garth, and Sir Garth is always with Mr. Kenneth...”

Graham waited while she rattled off acquaintances.

She turned to him, her eyes wide. “Would you please suggest something?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps we claim that it is you who are ill.”

“He wouldn’t stay home for me, not when I have my maid and Mrs. Keen.”

“Severely ill.”

“I’m not sure... that might summon my aunt. No, we cannot risk it.”

“And he cannot go.”

“Of course he can’t go, but I—” She bit down on her fingernail. “No—yes.”

Graham folded his arms. “What?”

“I will go in his place.”

Graham blinked. “What good will that do?”

“I will go as my brother .”

His stomach fell to his feet. “To Sir Daniel’s private card party? In a gaming hell? No.” He’d never gone to Sir Daniel’s private games or anyone else’s. Cards bored him to death. But he still knew all about them. He’d been told, in quite amusing detail, about the parties. Cards were not the only entertainment.

She straightened. “We did it all the time as children.”

He resisted the urge to look at her breasts. “You are not a child, nor will you pass as a man.”

She rolled her eyes. “I certainly can with the right clothing.”

“Lady Amelia, please reconsider.”

She shook her head and then shrugged one shoulder. “Have you any other ideas?”

“I think my suggestion of claiming you to be ill is reasonable,” he said.

“You don’t know Sir Daniel like my brother and I do.”

“I assure you that I do,” he countered.

“You don’t go to his parties.”

“That is because I loathe the man, and he knows it.”

She fisted her hands on her hips. “Well, have you any other ideas besides playing

sick?”

“Truly anything else will suffice rather than you dressing up as your brother to attend a card party at a gaming hall. Sir Daniel is a known reprobate.”

She scoffed. “Sir Daniel, a reprobate? He would like to be, wouldn’t he?” she snickered.

“Lady Amelia, please. What would your brother say?”

She sobered. “He can’t say anything. It’s up to me.”

“I will help you in any way I can,” he pleaded, “but this is folly.”

“It’s not helpful when you stand in my way.”

Graham clenched his own hands behind his back. “And if you’re caught, what then?”

“I never get caught. You’ll see. Meet me in the drawing room in one hour. I’ll convince you how good an actress I am.”

Graham shook his head and strode away. He would think of another way. Something. He returned to Alston’s room and sat by the bed ruminating, occasionally remarking out loud how obstinate Lady Amelia was to the only other person who understood: Alston.

At the hour mark, he strode into the drawing room and his heart seized. For an instant, Graham could almost believe it was Alston standing by the mantle, drawing on an unlit pipe, elbow perched in a casual fashion.

Their resemblance was uncanny. Except her eyes. Too pretty, the lashes too long and

feminine. And there was the obvious... difference of form. He swallowed. Aside from her long hair, the top half was well disguised with the cravat, shirt and waistcoat—she was not a woman of large curves—but the bottom? The trousers hugged her derriere so lovingly that it pained him to drag his eyes away. His guts went hot, his pulse pounding in places it should not be.

“Lady Amelia,” he said abruptly. His tone was too deep, too heavy, and far different from any she’d likely heard from him in the past.

It seemed to catch her off guard. “What? Am I not convincing? I’m prepared to cut my hair.”

He closed his eyes. “You need to put on a jacket. Now.”

“My brother dresses like this all the time,” she argued. “I’m not going outside right now. I just want to prove you wrong.”

“A. Jacket. Now.” Graham uttered it between gritted teeth.

The footman behind him snickered. Graham threw a murderous glare over his shoulder.

“Oh, I see,” she said.

He didn’t want to know what she saw. He avoided looking at her as she passed by him. Lord help him if she ever knew what he’d seen when looking at her. Her rear, perfectly rounded, was plump, and seemed to him to be begging for his hands, his attention, and his adoration.

He’d never seen a woman in breeches before—not until now, until Lady Amelia. He’d never get the image out of his brain again. It would torture him nightly until he

went insane, he was quite sure of it.

He poured himself a drink, and then another. The burn of the whisky tempered his lust as she returned, a jacket on and covering her sweet arse, this time blushing with what she now understood to be the problem.

“My maid, Fran, also added some more padding to my shoulders. Better?”

Graham tossed back another dram of whisky as he watched her. “No.”

“I’ve offended your gentlemanly sensibilities. I apologize.”

“You cannot go out like this.”

She set her hands on her hips. “Have you any other suggestions?”

He didn’t see or hear Alston at all now. Just Lady Amelia. Lady Amelia’s intriguing blue eyes lit with mischievous silver sparks. Lady Amelia’s whip-smart mouth, always impudent and cheeky. Lady Amelia’s silky skin. He assumed. Rarely did he have the opportunity to touch her naked skin. In fact, not once. Ever.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “You can’t go.”

“You’ll come with me, keep things from getting out of hand, prompt me on what Sam is like out of the house. I’m not stupid. I know he may act a bit differently out among the gentlemen than he does around me, his sister.”

“This is far beyond inappropriateness or stupidity.”

“We’ve no choice. If my aunt finds out...”

“I know. Alston said as much. But this...”

“Help me protect him. Please.”

She said it so meekly that his knees weakened. He studied her. “My job is to protect you . This isn’t it.”

“And my job is to protect my brother.”

“It is not. I’m certain he’d agree with me.”

“Only because he will believe he is acting in my best interests and all that patriarchal nonsense. But he isn’t here. I know him and my family better than you do. They cannot find out he is... unwell. We must do anything to hide it. This is the best solution. I can go out as him, and sometimes as me, and then no one will suspect a thing.”

Graham turned away and sat, his head swimming with anxiety.

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A melia's toes cramped in her brother's finely made shoes. Her maid had rolled up stockings to fill the toes and folded some of Sam's handkerchiefs under her heels to give her some extra height to complete the transformation, but it wasn't particularly comfortable.

And she was still blushing from that earlier incident. She hadn't realized... hadn't thought... about what her own behind looked like in breeches.

But when Mr. Blakewood had looked at her... she'd felt naked. Fran had teased her about it without ceasing while she'd put on a jacket.

"Some men can't resist a fine back end, my lady," Fran had said.

"My back end is simply that—my back end. He seemed quite put out and embarrassed."

"Only to your innocent eyes," Fran said with a wink.

Amelia scoffed. "Mr. Blakewood doesn't see me like that. I annoy him."

"Certainly, but a fine back end can overrule any number of annoyances. I tell you—no, I ought not to."

"What? You should tell me. Should I not be knowledgeable?"

"Pfft. You'll get ideas. We can't have you, of all young ladies, getting ideas. I'm protecting you. You'll be the ruin of yourself if you're not careful. Truly, you should

just marry, but you hate when I say that, so I won't."

Amelia rolled her eyes. "You just did."

"If you want to know things, find a husband. He'll teach you."

Amelia drew a breath as she suppressed a scoff at the memory of her talk with Fran and pushed it away. She took the chair across from Mr. Blakewood while he glared at her.

"Well?" she asked.

"Even if this were to work—which it won't—it isn't a permanent solution."

"Of course not," she agreed. "Sam will get better. We just need to give him time."

Mr. Blakewood dropped his head into his hands, weariness draping over him like a cloak. She chewed her lip as a pang of guilt struck her. She was trying to find solutions, but she could see she was making things harder for him when they needed to work together. They were just so different, and her ideas seemed always to be in conflict with his. Would they ever find common ground?

Amelia leaned back into the plush chair. Her mind raced with thoughts and fears. In her heart, she knew that Mr. Blakewood was right—masquerading as her brother couldn't work. Recalling his and the footman's reactions finally convinced her of that much. Amelia sighed to herself. It felt like she never did the right thing. And now it was so important that things go smoothly. She'd pray nightly until Sam was well.

All this would be so much easier if she were a man herself and not just trying to pretend. She wondered what her life would be like—no threatening aunt, no viperous relatives, no being pushed to marry Nelson. Would she have been able to pursue her

dreams, to marry whomever she loved, and to carve out a life that was uniquely her own? Or would she have been constrained by society's expectations in other ways, forced to lead a life that was stifling and unfulfilling? Did Sam like his life? He'd inherited young and had been saddled with mountains of responsibility, but he also got to do things Amelia could never do.

Mr. Blakewood's voice broke through her thoughts. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head. "Are you?" A stray thought struck her. "Don't you have your own responsibilities to tend to? Your own life? How are you able to be here for so long?"

"My parents are in Bath taking the waters, and my sister is staying with our cousins in Wilton. I've arranged for my correspondence to come here. When Alston asked me to stay, I could not, in good conscience, leave you to manage this on your own."

"I'm not incapa—"

He held up a hand. "This isn't a judgment on your capabilities. No one could do this on their own." He leaned forward. "Let me help—truly."

Her throat tightened and Amelia nodded.

He sighed heavily and leaned back in the chair. Lines of exhaustion bracketed his eyes, and he rubbed his face, holding a hand over his eyes like his head pained him. Amelia sat back, folding her arms around herself. She shifted to get comfortable, enjoying the freedom of movement the trousers allotted her. It had been so long since she'd swapped places with Sam, she'd forgotten how easy it was to dress in boys' clothing.

"This is comfortable," she murmured.

He dropped his hand for just a heartbeat, then lurched forward, grabbing her knees and locking them together in his iron grip. Amelia lurched forward in surprise, bringing them face to face.

“What are you doing?” they both said in unison.

“You cannot sit like that,” he said, voice thick.

His hands were still on her knees, and she could now feel the warmth of his touch through her trousers. It trickled up her legs, and strangely, she enjoyed it. No one had ever touched her like this. Gripped her. Held her... her knees. She bit her lip. Her knees were just knees, and yet the touch felt... scintillating. Intimate.

“A woman can’t sit like a man. It’s improper.”

So were his hands on her knees, but Amelia would not state that fact aloud. Because then he’d remove them. And he’d no doubt be scandalized and horrified. But somehow it seemed he hadn’t noticed he was touching her. In fact, he never touched her. He might extend a hand, offer an elbow, do as gentlemen do, but there was always a buffer of air between them. And Amelia usually rebuffed his offered touches, but now his hands were on her, and it was... hot. Her skin flushed. She was growing warmer every second he touched her. Maybe it was simply that it was a needed distraction from all her cares, but she discovered she liked it—this fire and heat, this touching that had never existed before now.

She feigned innocence. “Why ever not?”

“You just . . . can’t.”

“But you can do it, so why can’t I? Dresses don’t let me sit like that—too narrow—but in trousers it’s so freeing. My legs feel unrestricted and weightless.”

He swallowed. “As a woman, it is wholly improper.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “You said that already. And anyway, you can’t use that argument anymore. You staying here while my brother is recovering is also improper. So we must suspend judgment of what isn’t and what is improper for the time being. Don’t you think?”

“Only when necessary. Which isn’t right now. I insist you remain cognizant of that fact.”

“But we’re alone.”

“Lady Amelia, please . . .”

“What is it that so offends you?”

“I can see too much of you.”

She snorted. “These trousers are not transparent.”

“No, indeed. But you are shaped differently.”

He spoke every word with difficulty, like he had to wrestle each one off his tongue.

“Yes, I concede that is true. But you sit like that, exposed to the world with all your shapes, and think nothing of it. Can you explain that to me?”

He stilled. “What?”

Amelia bit back a smile. “If we are speaking of differences in shapes, it may as well be said that as a woman, I have an absence of shapes in my trousers while you—”

He covered her mouth with his hand. Amelia just sighed. She could not read his expression, but he'd taken a hand off her knee, and it appeared the spell was broken. He quickly let go of her altogether and hugged a pillow over his lap. Amelia did the same.

“See how ridiculous this is? Men behave as though my body is something that I must cover and protect, and yet yours is displayed quite openly. You're free, and I am in a prison made of muslin because of what, exactly?”

He said tightly, “Society's rules are for your protection.”

“Protection from what?”

“The perversion of abuse and defiling of your body comes from bodies like mine.”

Amelia cocked her head. “So, the male body is the threat, but we imprison the females. It makes perfectly cruel sense.”

He watched her with hooded eyes, or at least it felt like it.

“I didn't make the rules of the world,” he said finally.

“But you do uphold them.”

“Lady Amelia, please, for my sake—just do as I ask.”

Amelia leaned forward. “That is precisely it. You haven't asked. You've ordered. And you expect me to obey without explanation. I just want to know why. Why must I live so caged if the problem is men and not women?”

“We long ago accepted that we men are disgusting creatures of base urges. My

apologies. We're only trying to protect you."

"From yourselves."

"Yes."

"But you are not all of mankind. So why is it such a problem when I am only here with you? What are you protecting me from when it's just the two of us?"

He remained silent. And that silence spoke words that Amelia wasn't prepared for. Awoke questions she didn't know how to ask him.

For the first time, she looked at him and saw something she'd never cared to see before. A man. And he saw her as a woman. A woman who inspired his base urges.

She should have been scared.

But this was serious Mr. Blakewood, and for all his talk of disgusting men and their urges, she did believe he would always protect her. She may not like his choices or his personality, but truly, he was a man she could trust with her well-being above all things. Her brother obviously felt the same, and that was why Blakewood was here at all. She would do her best to be more considerate of his help.

But a card had been flipped, altering the course of this game. She saw him differently. And he had revealed he saw her as a woman, even dressed as she was right now in Sam's clothes. She swallowed, determined to get the conversation back on track and away from this intense stalemate.

She stood and came to stand beside his chair. "What if I refuse Sir Daniel's invitation and you and I go someplace crowded and dark, like Convent Garden, where I can be seen as a perfectly healthy Lord Alston from a distance."

“No. You cannot leave the house dressed like this. He would never forgive me if I let you do this. I’m sorry.”

“Please, we don’t know how long...”—she swallowed and set her hand on his shoulder—“how long he’ll be unwell.”

Or alive. The unsaid words hung in the air between them.

Blakewood put his hand over hers. Bare skin to bare skin. He held his breath. Even her hands were too pretty to be Alston’s.

“Mr. Blakewood, please,” Amelia begged. “I might be losing my brother. I’ve never been so scared in my life. Just please help me.”

“I will do whatever is in my power to help you. But not this. Go change. We will think of something. You’re scared and exhausted. With rest, things will be clearer.”

Fat teardrops rolled down her cheeks and Amelia angrily swiped at them. Mr. Blakewood brought her close against his chest with a tug of her shoulder, keeping his hands on her upper back, and she didn’t fight him. He held her, letting her cry into his shirt, until she was able to draw a steady breath and stepped out of his hold.

Amelia mentally shook herself, jerked her jacket back into place, and lifted her chin. “What about tonight?” she asked.

“Tonight you’re both ill. The fish was bad.”

She sniffed and rolled her eyes. “Very well.”

“I’ll send the reply.”

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The next morning, Graham took a bath in the chamber that had somehow become his by default over the last few days. He was more comfortable here than in his own lodgings, which were rented rooms in a fine house suitable for men like him, wealthy gentlemen unencumbered by things like inheritance and titles. That was his uncle's problem and his cousin's future problem. But his great-grandfather had made wise investments—as had the generations that had come after—and thus, even though Graham's father had been only a second son, he'd carried on a fine legacy for himself: wealth, security, status born from said wealth, and entry into the highest levels of society. A good name carried itself well even without noble status, as long as there was money to be had.

But he was saved from the marriage mart by being a mere mister and—as Alston would say—so quiet at times he could be a house plant.

Graham liked to observe, to watch the world pass him by like a story being told. Rarely did he want to participate, except when it came to the Clarks. Alston made life more vivid, entertaining, and jovial enough to draw Graham into the action. Lady Amelia, Lord help him, had a way of stealing his breath just by entering a room. Ever wily and quick witted, she reminded him of a fox; playful, beguiling, and so disarming in appearance one could easily forget that foxes had fangs and would not hesitate to draw blood if threatened.

He had infinite knowledge of Lady Amelia's personality, her likes, and dislikes, by way of Alston's chatter, and his obsessive need to watch her when she and her brother weren't looking. Yet it still wasn't enough—he was always hungry for more. But now that hunger had a new meaning. They were under the same roof, and he had no escape from this constant ache. He'd buried it for so long, since the night of her

come-out when he'd first felt the force of his attraction and realized he could never have her. He couldn't let four years of self-control disintegrate now. Alston trusted him to care for her, not seduce her under his nose.

But last night had only whetted his appetite.

Those trousers, the image of her sitting, spread across from him like an invitation to explore his forbidden fantasies. He didn't need to wonder if she would take to bed sport like she did everything else—with reckless abandon—he knew it. He knew she'd be the greatest lover to lie beneath him, even without a stitch of knowledge or experience. Her curiosity and her enthusiasm would be enough to drive him to an exquisite death.

Death by sex with Amelia.

His tombstone would be an etching of his smiling face.

But those things would never come to pass.

Ever.

Ever. Ever.

They were all on the edge of catastrophe. He could feel it. A fuse had been lit. If only Graham could know how long they had until the explosion. His thoughts full of a lurking unease, Graham finished dressing slowly and read through his correspondence. Only once that was done, would he be ready to face Lady Amelia and keep an iron grip on his desires.

Later that morning, another letter arrived. Sir Daniel had taken note of Alston's absence, but their story had bought them perhaps two days in which Alston could be

ill. In the meantime, according to Lady Amelia's new plan that she described to him in detail over breakfast, she would go to the theater to show society that all was well. Alston would have escorted her under normal circumstances, but Graham must go in his place.

"This way," she told him, "I can lament about Sam's terrible stomach trouble and also appear unconcerned enough to still meet my familial obligations. Lady Harriet will be there tonight, sitting in Lady Camden's box. We've never missed her garden party. Sam must be revived before then."

Graham considered this information again in stoic silence that evening as the carriage turned toward the theater and they entered the row of carriages unloading their occupants. He swallowed. Amelia sat in weak lantern light, her cloak swept back in the warmth of the carriage, the diamonds in her necklace winking at him like stars before dawn over a valley of cream hills in a dress so low-cut that his mouth filled with ash.

Graham swallowed again. Their carriage stopped, and he got out first, holding out his arm.

She took it. The touch rocked through his body. He always offered his arm, but she never took his arm. She stepped out, doing a little wiggle and adjusting her dress. Her scent filled his nose. Her perfume, far from being a delicate flowery scent, was instead sweetly seductive, drawing him closer to decipher each note of fragrance. He couldn't think. His mind had gone vacant and his ears were thumping with his pulse.

"Lady Amelia . . ."

She paused and turned toward him, looking up into his down-turned face, so inappropriately close. If he dared, he could look down into the tempting ravine between her breasts, lose himself, forget his honor, defy all good sense, and simply

revel in the devilish hot surge in his blood.

Pure. Carnal. Lust.

Forget the theater, forget this charade. He could have her back in the carriage and six blocks to his rented rooms in less than thirty minutes. If he even made it thirty minutes, which he wouldn't. He'd pull her into his arms the moment the carriage door clicked shut and cover her mouth with his.

"Mr. Blakewood?" She stared up at him, her eyes liquid pools of half concern and half curiosity.

Did she know? Did she know what she did to him? Her smell, her presence, and every breath she took unraveled his sanity and made him a monster of pure need.

Her lips parted, and her gaze searched his. Between them, the air crackled. She drew in a slow breath, and her breasts brushed his chest.

He blindly reached for the carriage handle, ready to—

She turned away. "Come along. We can't be late."

Graham drew in a shuddering breath of thick evening air. He looked up at the sky, the stars hidden by clouds of factory smoke. What was happening to him? Where was his prized self-control and steady reason?

In two strides, he was at her side, shaken, but his feet firmly planted on solid ground again.

What had just happened between them? Had he imagined it?

He cut a side glance at her. Her cheeks were flushed, and her breathing was quick and clipped.

His hands clenched at his sides as they were ushered into the theater and herded into the throng of guests maneuvering toward their seats. The house lights were high, and Graham took every chance he got to watch her, between bumping into other patrons, muttering apologies, and nodding to acquaintances too far away to stop and properly speak to. This show was the most popular of the year, a wicked rendition of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, bordering on the improper, which meant sold-out shows every evening.

But every time he got a look at her face as he followed her path through the crowd, she was still flushed, her eyes bright, and her energy frantic like a hummingbird. The crush of people pressed in around them. They'd almost made it to the stairs to the upper boxes when a group of drunken dolts collapsed on each other, pushing between Lady Amelia and Graham. She tripped, her cloak snagged by one of the idiots as if he meant to pull himself up by it. Instead, he pulled Lady Amelia—and her dress—down.

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Graham's vision turned red as her eyes, wide with fright, locked with his as she gripped her bodice.

Graham pushed himself through the crowd, stepping on those louts as they wiggled like worms on the floor, laughing like fools. He reached for Lady Amelia, scooped her up in his arms, her cloak forgotten in the melee, and lifted her away from the scene. She tucked her face into his neck as patrons parted, and he climbed the carpeted stairs away from the chaos. He kept his gaze averted as she readjusted her bodice, giving her the privacy and dignity she deserved while his mind seethed, and imagined the pain he'd inflict on those wastrels. He couldn't wait. It took all his control not to set her down and turn around, but he wouldn't leave her until he knew she was safe and out of sight of prying eyes. He set her down just outside the curtain of the private box where their seats were, ensuring the other guests waiting on the other side of it couldn't see them yet.

She was still flushed, but not with the glowing blush of before. Now she was an angry red.

"Those mongrels—I should have you go back down there and pummel them."

"Are you all right?" Graham asked.

She nodded. "I didn't expose myself, but everyone saw you carry me away, saw those men pawing at me like—" She shook her head and swallowed.

"Have a seat, and I'll be right back."

She nodded and slipped past the curtain. Graham marched back down the stairs, everyone still dodging him and averting their gazes from his. He reached the lobby, where the buffoons still loitered, laughing and leaning on each other while sharing a flask. He walked up to where one sleepy-eyed fellow held Amelia's cloak and sniffed it.

"Mm," he moaned, "still freshly perfumed."

Graham grabbed his collar and dragged him outside. A chorus of gasps followed him as Graham dragged the spindly-legged young man around the corner, his friends following him in protest.

"Unhand me," he squealed.

Graham dropped him in a damp alley beside the theater, where broken set pieces and furniture were left, and out of sight of the crowd. The man didn't have his footing under him and sank to his knees, cursing the state of his expensive buckskin breeches.

"Get up," Graham ordered.

He got to his feet, scowling petulantly at Graham as his four friends joined him in the alley and started removing their jackets. Smirking at Graham, he made a show of removing his own jacket, but the fashionably tight fit ruined the intimidating effect. He struggled to get it over his narrow shoulders, and a friend came to his aid, giving the jacket a firm tug that nearly toppled him again.

Graham huffed out a laugh and removed his, placing his jacket carefully over a broken standing mirror and beginning to roll up his sleeves. The young wastrels smirked at him, throwing taunts at him. Graham grinned back.

"Do you know who I am?" the lad Graham had dragged outside said. He was their

leader, apparently, though he couldn't have been more than twenty.

"I don't care," Graham answered. He should have felt a sense of remorse for what he was about to do, but his only concern was Amelia and how upset she had been, humiliated by these fools tonight. He was older, heavier, and stronger by the looks of these whelps. Five against one made it even.

"You think you can take on all of us?" one pallid-looking young man jeered.

"I know I can."

"Who are you?" the leader asked.

"Does it matter? By morning, you won't remember how you got your black eye."

They all scoffed, and one by one they came at him.

The first went down easy; he could barely walk straight. One tap to his chin, and he sank like a rock. The second and third had some skill in fisticuffs but not strength. Graham took two hits to his stomach before he could shove one into the other, and they collapsed in a pile of refuse. One fellow, likely the intelligent one among their little band of rich sons with no sense, fled the scene. The last one—the leader—squared up, but then he sized Graham up and seemed to second-guess his plans. Graham waited for a moment, letting the lad make the right choice, but in the end he still swung, leaving his face unguarded, and just like he'd said, Graham landed a solid hit to his right eye, which would certainly result in a deep-purple bruise by morning.

The young man stumbled back, holding his eye.

"Take your friends and go," Graham said.

“We were just having a bit of fun,” he muttered.

“Do you want more fun?” With a threatening grin, Graham picked up Amelia’s cloak and shook it out.

The lad shook his head and grabbed one of his accomplices in stupidity, while the other two helped each other up and slunk away.

Graham pulled on his jacket and returned to the theater, reaching their box just as the house lights dimmed and the curtains rose.

“Where have you been?” Amelia asked.

“I got your cloak back.”

“Oh, thank you.”

The other chairs for their hosts remained empty.

“Where are our chaperones?” Graham asked with a frown of concern.

Amelia held up a note. “Their carriage broke a wheel. They’ll be late.”

“We’re alone? Unchaperoned in a private box?”

“They think I’m here with my brother,” she shrugged, as if didn’t matter one whit that he and she were unmarried and of the opposite sex.

He stiffened.

Amelia cast a side glance at him. “You can sit and relax. Enjoy the show. We’re

chaperoned by the whole theater. No one would suspect you, in all your sainthood, of ravishing me in a theater box.”

A vision filled his head of doing just that.

“This is inappropriate. Anyone could turn and look up here. Rumors don’t have to be true, only entertaining enough to sell papers.”

She twisted toward him. “And what would anyone see if they turned to look? Me, sitting here by a scowling statue. Think of what the papers will say about that.” She raised a brow.

Graham clenched his teeth. This was just like her to throw propriety to the wind at every chance. Even after she’d just been accosted by those ruffians. She was smarter than this. He knew she was.

He rigidly lowered into the seat and scooted away, putting more space between their chairs.

She scoffed. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“And you’re being reckless. As usual.”

“You think you know me so well.”

“I do. I’ve known you for years.”

“False. You’ve known my brother for years. Four, to be exact. Hardly a lifelong friendship at that.”

He sighed. “You are an unmarried woman, sitting in a private box with an unmarried

man. You must see that it flaunts our society's ideals and conventions and threatens your reputation."

"But it's you ."

He narrowed his gaze at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"No one suspects you might do something inappropriate. You may as well be a maiden aunt."

Hot rage bloomed in his chest, along with a confusing blend of ego and lust, driving him to prove just how wrong she was. But he reined it in. He needed this—he needed her to remind him how naïve and ignorant she truly was about the threats in her world. This was precisely why she needed him by her side sheltering her, just as much as her brother had done, though she'd neither realized it nor appreciated it.

"Would your Aunt Ruth mind? She's no maiden, but she does intend for you to marry her son. She might have some questions about our presence here. Alone. Together. What if she decides she wants an explanation?"

She sat up straighter. "What would you have me do?"

"We should leave."

"Oh, that wouldn't seem questionable at all. Leaving alone together. Entering a carriage alone together. Entering my house. Alone. Together."

"Do you have a better idea?"

" You could leave."

“And leave you alone entirely?”

“Far more proper than your being here with me. Isn’t it?”

The lights dimmed further, and the crowd quieted. Graham turned to stone in his chair. So far, no one had turned to look in this box, but at any moment, someone could take note. He moved to the row of chairs behind hers and sat in a shadowed corner.

She looked back at him once and folded her arms as she turned toward the stage, her chin high and her lips pressed in a thin line. Graham folded his arms, his stomach twisting in knots. This would have to suffice. For now. Every plan of hers seemed riddled with holes. Gaping, jagged holes for them both to tumble into. He understood her fears about people finding out about Alston, but this was madness.

They needed a new plan.

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The following morning, Amelia sipped tea at her brother's bedside. Mr. Blakewood had not yet come to join her, which she tried to feel jubilant about, but she was far too irritated with his behavior last night. Could he not unclench his arse for one evening and enjoy himself? They already had enough concerns about Sam, and sitting in a box in public wasn't nearly as scandalous as he made it seem. The other guests, Mr. Granger and his wife and daughter, arrived just before intermission, and their only concern had been for Sam's absence. Mrs. Granger was hoping to impress upon him her daughter's fine qualities. Amelia and Mr. Blakewood hadn't spoken for the rest of the evening.

Amelia was two and twenty. Hardly in her first blush, and most of society did not care what she did or with whom. Because of her Aunt Ruth's scheming and the number of fortune hunters who had hounded her skirts during her first season, Amelia had declared she would never marry, and most of the ton knew it. So unless she committed some heinous transgression in the eyes of polite society, her reputation would remain unscathed by most things that would tarnish a young lady searching for a reputable match.

And still Amelia was invited everywhere due to her brother's title and wealth. Sam would one day be the most eligible bachelor in London and no marriage-minded mama wanted to slight the sister of such a man. She existed in her own bubble that most wouldn't bother to pop. Except for Graham.

Amelia frowned down at her tea, her feelings about last evening swirling in a mixture of confusion and anger. When he'd swept her into his arms and carried her to the box, her stomach had fluttered like a swarm of butterflies, her pulse racing like a shooting star, but then he'd returned to his stodgy, lecturing self and ruined the effect. She

must have imagined that moment outside the carriage. When he'd looked down at her, she had been certain just for a moment that there was something in his eyes—something that made her quiver inside. She'd waited, holding her breath for something she couldn't yet grasp. But then she'd pulled back from those feelings, terrified of what they were or what they meant.

This was Mr. Blakewood. Stoic, boring, and judging Mr. Blakewood. A person incapable of such a change so suddenly, if at all. She should be glad they'd argued in the box. It had brought her back to her senses, smothering that peculiar quiver she did not want to acknowledge and suffusing her with the comfortable heat of anger once more. They shared one purpose, but between them, there would never be more than a cold acceptance of the other. She would rein in any outright hostility, but only for Sam. Sam needed all their attention.

Petrov entered, intent on shaving Sam and shaking her out of her reverie. Sam slept soundly, but his face was still as pale as white cotton. She swallowed down a chill of desolation as she studied the waxy details of his face. Every day he lived was a miracle. A gift. Even as her fear turned her heart cold, she tried to remember that gift.

“Did you give him water?” Amelia asked.

“Not yet, my lady.”

Amelia swallowed nervously. Doctor Bradley had changed his position on giving Sam water and advised them that if the injury had not yet killed him by now, dehydration surely would. For the past few days, attempts to get him to drink had been few and largely futile. He couldn't stay awake long enough to swallow much without risk of choking.

“I'll help,” Mr. Blakewood said from the doorway.

Amelia hated the way his presence made her feel slightly braver.

“We can’t jostle him. If his blood is clotting—”

“I know. I spoke with Doctor Bradley yesterday.”

She moved to Petrov’s side, gently lifting her brother’s head, while Petrov tucked a pillow underneath. Sam’s brow furrowed as she settled his head back down on the pillow and Amelia gasped.

“Sam? Are you awake?”

His lips twitched. Amelia snatched the glass of water from the side table, spilling a little on the bed. Her hand shook as she dipped the spoon in the water. Sam didn’t open his eyes, but his mouth moved, and his dry lips parted.

“Lady Amelia,” Blakewood whispered.

“I can do it.” She drew a slow breath to steady her nerves. “Sam, here’s a bit of water to wet your mouth. You have to swallow it, Sam. We’ll go slow. Take your time.”

She tipped the spoon over his lips, dribbling the water over the cracked skin. Sam’s tongue peeked out, as if trying to catch it. As she tipped more water into his mouth, Amelia bit back a relieved whimper. Blakewood reached over and rubbed his throat.

“Swallow,” he said.

Sam’s throat moved under his hand. Amelia closed her eyes for a second, willing back the rush of tears, and then opened them, and for several silent minutes, they fed Sam water half a spoonful at a time.

“That should suffice for now,” Blakewood finally said.

“Do you want more, Sam?” She didn’t need to take Blakewood’s word for it, after all.

Sam didn’t answer. He licked his lips with his pale pink tongue and sighed. He slipped back into unconsciousness, his features going slack. Amelia grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “That was perfect, Sam. We’ll try again soon.”

“We cannot rush this,” Blakewood said softly.

Amelia knew it was true, but she hated going slowly for any reason. But annoying as he had been last night, she was still determined to honor their truce, such as it was, and since she couldn’t think of anything neutral to say, she said nothing.

“I’ll shave him now, my lady, and change his bedding,” Petrov said.

Amelia nodded, taking one last long look at her brother, and stepped into the hallway. She bit her fist, trying to stuff the torrent of emotion back inside and lock it in her chest.

“That was good,” Mr. Blakewood said, following her out of the room.

Amelia couldn’t yet speak through the vice around her throat.

“Still determined to not speak to me, I see.”

Amelia looked up at him and found her voice. “What is there to say? Nothing really. It isn’t the first time we’ve disagreed about something, nor will it be the last. I don’t intend to let it ruin the day.” She took a breath, mentally shaking herself. “We’ll be attending Lady Cecily’s garden party this afternoon, if you recall.”

He winced.

“I know. Sam hates them, too. But she was my mother’s friend. She will wonder where Sam is. My aunt will be in attendance, too.”

He straightened, tugging at his waistcoat and rolling his neck. “And what will we say? Is he still sick?”

“He couldn’t be. He...” She turned to face him and shrugged. “I’m out of ideas. I’m... tired.” She wanted to slump against the wall.

“I know, Lady Amelia. I’m exhausted, too,” he said, his voice rough.

She didn’t have the energy to be properly angry with him. “I’m tired of being the intelligent half of this charade. You think of something.”

He cocked his head. “If you’re the intelligence, what does that make me?”

“The brawn.”

He half-smiled. “Careful, that sounds like a compliment.”

“It isn’t,” she replied, but her cheeks warmed as she took in his massive size. He made the spacious hallway feel smaller. He wasn’t looming over her, but he did demand all her attention.

He cleared his throat. “I’ll think of something.”

“Something so banal, no one would dare question it. Something so boring that people will be half asleep before you finish speaking. I have complete faith in your ability.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw—was that amusement?—but he turned away without answering.

Amelia almost smiled, but that would have taken more energy than she had at the moment. Sam had drunk water. That had been her only hope for the day and it had been accomplished. Nothing else mattered now.

And at least the conversation between her and Graham felt normal once again, maybe even slightly friendlier. Certainly, none of those odd feelings from last night remained. She had no reason to be nervous around him. He may be large and overbearingly protective, but he was harmless to her. From now on, he wouldn't stir any more emotions from her other than annoyance. She knew it. Last night was an oddity. Those anxious moments when he saw her in the breeches were only a brief moment of idiocy. Nothing had changed between them.

Nothing at all.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

Amelia wore a deep-maroon day dress. She matched the burgundy roses that covered the archway entering Lady Cecily's garden perfectly. She'd tossed away her virginal white gowns a year ago and never looked back. Now Aunt Ruth glared at her from the refreshment table. Amelia pretended not to see her, or she'd be trapped into speaking with her. But she turned away, and there stood Nelson instead. Amelia didn't bother hiding her slight grimace. After all, he didn't hide the fact that he only wanted to marry her for her money.

"Dearest cousin, what a delight to see you." His gaze roved over her body as he strolled nearer. Unlike her, Sam, and their father, Aunt Ruth and Nelson had inherited the brown locks of their fraternal grandfather. But they did share eye color. He smiled broadly as he met her gaze again.

"Nelson," Amelia replied dryly.

He pouted his lips. "Not as delighted to see me as I am to see you? Whyever not?"

Amelia took a long sip of her rum punch before answering. "Do you want the truth?"

Someone jerked her cup from her grasp, causing droplets to spill down her chest and the front of her bodice. Amelia turned in outrage to see her Aunt Ruth.

She pushed a new cup into Amelia's hand. "I've brought you a fresh cup of lemonade, my dear. So much more refreshing and appropriate than punch. Good heavens, what's happened to your dress?" Her aunt feigned innocence.

"How dreadful. Let me help." With a flick of his wrist, Nelson drew out his

handkerchief and moved to dab at her breasts.

Amelia grabbed his wrist and squeezed. He yelped. Ignoring the lemonade her aunt still held out to her, Amelia took the handkerchief from his hand and wiped herself as she bit back a snarl of frustration and rage. He really thought he could touch her right here, in front of everyone, as if he had some sort of proprietary right to her body.

Amelia fought to unclench her jaw. “No, thank you. Don’t worry about the dress, my dearest aunt; the color of my dress will hide the punch. How fortunate that I chose to wear it today.”

Aunt Ruth pressed her lips together before remembering their surroundings and smiling brightly. “Yes, indeed.”

“I do adore this color on you,” Nelson said. He held out his hand for the handkerchief.

Amelia handed it back. He held her gaze as he rubbed the fabric between his fingers, and then he sniffed it before pocketing it.

Amelia stepped back and bumped into a broad chest. She didn’t turn. She recognized the mountain standing behind her and felt relief, though she wouldn’t show it on her face. She was loath to show such a weakness here among the jackals.

“Good day, Lady Ruth, Lord Clark, Lady Amelia.”

“Mr. Blakewood,” Aunt Ruth nodded. “And where is my nephew?” She peered around the garden. “He has not yet come to greet me.”

Amelia froze. In her panic, she couldn’t remember what story she and Blakewood had agreed upon this morning, and she’d not seen him since she’d arrived to remind

herself. They'd decided to arrive separately, he on horseback and she in the carriage, and he'd assured her he'd keep his distance. But now she couldn't be more appreciative of his keen observation. He'd obviously seen her being cornered by these two and come to assist. She could feel the tension in his body and hoped he remembered their excuse for Sam.

"He's not here," Amelia said.

"Whyever not? Who escorted you to the party?" Aunt Ruth demanded.

"Lord Alston had to leave urgently. There was a problem with the residence in Stirling," Blakewood said, his tone flat.

Amelia gathered herself together and nodded in agreement. She remembered now.

"He left first thing this morning."

"The house in Scotland?" Nelson asked.

"Yes, that is where Stirling is," Amelia gritted.

"What could be wrong?" her aunt asked.

"A sheep plague," Amelia answered without thinking.

Blakewood cleared his throat. "There is apparently an issue with one of the wells. Some of the sheep have taken ill. I'm sure he'll handle it quickly and return immediately."

Her aunt scoffed. "Off to Scotland? He'll miss most of the season. And what of you? You can't stay in that house alone."

Amelia frowned. “Why not?”

“It isn’t done.” Aunt Ruth scolded. “You need a chaperone.”

“I’m twenty-two, not a child. I could live on my own, if I wished.”

“Mother, we can come and—”

“You absolutely will not,” Amelia said, glowering at him. The idea of him under the same roof, stalking the halls at night, shook her. “If you step foot on my doorstep without invitation I’ll have you tossed on your arse by Mr. Keen.”

“Amelia,” her aunt said in a hushed voice and stepping closer. “Where are your manners? It is unacceptable for you to reside alone. Think of what people will say and the damage that your reputation will sustain. And you will need an escort for social events. If you had a husband you wouldn’t be so ill tempered and have these preposterous ideas about independence. It only makes sense that Nelson and I—”

“Lord Alston asked me to escort Amelia in his absence,” Mr. Blakewood interjected.

Aunt Ruth and Nelson turned in unison to face him.

Amelia smiled nervously as she glanced around. Other guests had noted their tense conversation and her heart started to pound. This plan had seemed so simple this morning during breakfast at Sam’s side. Now it was close to unravelling. What if they insisted? Amelia swallowed, her mouth dry.

“Why you?” Nelson asked.

“That isn’t at all appropriate,” Aunt Ruth whispered to Amelia. “Just because you are of age and declared yourself a spinster with no wish to marry does not mean you are

above speculation, dear niece. You are still an unwed lady of the peerage, with no husband to protect you.”

“Correct, Mother. And if Lord Alston is away, then naturally that duty falls to me,” Nelson said.

Panic rose in her throat, tangy and thick. Nelson squinted his eyes at Blakewood accusingly. Aunt Ruth had that bullish set to her face that made the hairs on her upper lip stand out like whiskers. Amelia could feel the situation slipping away from her. Aunt Ruth would demand Amelia let them into the house. They would discover Sam. They’d never leave and she’d be stuck with Nelson every day, him dogging her every step. They would drive her mad with their incessant prattling, attempting to convince her to marry Nelson. Or worse, Nelson could take it upon himself to compromise her and force her hand. Her aunt would not let this go, just as she refused to believe Amelia would choose to never marry. But as far as Amelia could see, the only good a husband could ever do for her would be to put an end to all of Aunt Ruth and Nelson’s harassment.

Then an idea struck her. Her thoughts raced. Her stomach hollowed like she was falling. It was mad, worse than mad, it was stupid and reckless. Graham would be furious and likely never forgive her, but it could work. As sweat beaded on her brow Amelia could think of nothing else that would make Aunt Ruth and Nelson give up on her completely.

She tucked a hand around Mr. Blakewood’s elbow. “This wasn’t how we wanted it to be done, but with my brother away, it may as well come out before anyone makes any rash accusations.” Amelia focused on her aunt. “Mr. Blakewood and I are engaged to be married. He will help me manage my ill temper and preposterous ideas of independence from now on. I need nothing from you.”

His arm turned to solid rock under her fingers. He turned slightly to look down at her,

his face emotionless, but she could see it in his eyes. The panic. The anger. She smiled up at him and cupped his cheek, her heart pounding so hard it made her nauseous. All conversation around them had stopped.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just couldn’t hold it in any longer.”

Was he even breathing? He only stared down at her, not even blinking.

Please , she begged with her eyes. The passing of time seemed to slow and Amelia considered fainting to get out of this heaping pile of dung she’d just thrown them into.

“What news is this?” Lady Cecily clapped her hands as she inserted herself between Mr. Blakewood and Nelson. “Did I hear this correctly?”

Amelia beamed, her back teeth grinding as she leaned into Mr. Blakewood. “Yes.” In for a penny, in for a pounding headache once they were alone and Graham lectured her until her ears bled. No matter. She’d deserve it this time. All of it.

He straightened and cleared his throat. “Yes, my lady.”

She should be relieved, but this was only a temporary pardon. He was too self-controlled to murder her in public, that was all.

“Where is your brother?” Lady Cecily asked with a smile. “I know he’s been praying for this day. How serendipitous to give his sister away to such a good friend, such a worthy gentleman as you, Mr. Blakewood.”

Praying? Her brother hadn’t cheered her decision to not marry after her first season, but he certainly hadn’t put up any argument.

Amelia licked her lips. “He had to leave this morning to see to the property in Stirling. Something about the well. Isn’t that right, Mr. Blakewood?” She peered up at him and batted her eyes.

“Yes.”

Amelia turned back to her aunt, whose face had gone pale. Nelson’s cheeks had reddened, but he only nodded and turned away, strolling toward the lawn games. Amelia smiled at everyone who issued their congratulations until her cheeks hurt. She hoped she didn’t look as deranged as she felt.

What had she done?

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Maybe Blakewood was right. She was foolish and impulsive, and why did her mouth have to spit out words before her brain could properly examine them? Her aunt had thawed herself and accepted congratulations, as if she'd had anything to do with it, though her eyes were bright with some volatile emotion. But she too eventually wandered away, leaving Mr. Blakewood and Amelia in a shrinking crowd of well-wishers.

“Would you like to take a walk around the labyrinth?” Mr. Blakewood asked with a tight smile.

“That would be lovely.”

He angled them toward the end of a flagstone area, where the walled garden spread out into wide lawns. To the right, through another ivy-covered arch, was the labyrinth. They passed a young married couple with flushed cheeks as they entered the labyrinth, but then they were completely alone. They strolled without speaking, walking deeper into the maze until they could not hear a single voice. Amelia finally let go of his arm and folded hers, chewing her lip as she waited for him to unleash his anger.

“Go on. Berate me. I know. I know I just made everything worse, and I am sorry. I don't know where that ridiculous idea came from.” She covered her face with her gloved hands.

He drew in a breath. “What can I say now when you've already said it?” he asked, his voice deep with quiet anger.

Amelia spread her fingers to peek at him. “What do we do now?”

“Containing the damage is all we can do. What do you think your Aunt Ruth will do now?”

Amelia dropped her hands and shrugged. “Try to convince me to invite her to stay with me at the house or get me to leave and reside with her. But I won’t leave, and I can’t let her in. I’ll have to barricade the doors.”

“Maybe you should go to her house to avoid that. I can stay with Alston.”

Amelia snapped straighter. “No. I will not leave him.”

“Then how will you keep her away?”

“By being exactly as I am: a difficult, petulant, stubborn person.”

He snorted. “Is that really your plan?”

“I now also have a fiancé who is wildly possessive and prone to fits of jealousy,” she said, poking his chest. “I can’t reside in a house with Nelson. You won’t allow it.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Amelia could see it unfolding now. Of course, Aunt Ruth wouldn’t care what Amelia thought about where she should be allowed to stay, but Mr. Blakewood? As her future husband, no one would question him—which still galled her and only reaffirmed she never wanted to marry, however useful it was in this moment.

“Is there a reason I should be jealous of Nelson?” Blakewood asked, rolling his eyes.

“Certainly. He’s repulsive and predatory. Did you not see him sniff the handkerchief I used to wipe up the spilled punch on my chest? He once told me that there will come a day when I’ll be too desperate and lonely to refuse his advances.”

Blakewood grew stony again. “He what?”

Amelia nodded. “He’d probably steal my undergarments if I had to share a roof with him.”

He pivoted and strode away.

“Where are you going?”

“To murder him.”

“Wait!” She grabbed his arm and tugged him to a stop. “I’m not serious. Well, maybe a little.”

His breathing had quickened. “I will rip his—” He stopped, a flush creeping up his neck.

Amelia raised a brow. She’d never seen him like this—protective of her, with a common enemy—and damn it all, she found herself liking it rather too much. “His what?” she encouraged.

“This is serious, Lady Amelia.”

He stepped closer to her, and Amelia’s laugh caught in her throat. She backed up into the shrubbery, but he didn’t stop until the buttons of his coat brushed her bodice. He put a knuckle under her chin and lifted it until she held his severe, heated stare. Her stomach swarmed with butterflies, but her eyes narrowed.

“Do I have cause to think Nelson would make unwanted advances if given the chance?”

“He’s made advances toward me since I was fifteen, and they have all been unwanted. Don’t all men behave that way?”

His jaw flexed. “No.”

She raised a brow and shifted her eyes to look down at the negligible space between them. “Are you certain?”

“I’m your fiancé; I don’t count.”

She huffed a shaky laugh, trying to hide how his nearness made her heart race, as if there might be a chance he’d hear it.

“It’s not real. We’re going to pretend to be engaged.”

“You just announced our engagement to half the ton at a garden party. That’s as real as it gets. We should have discussed this earlier.”

“I didn’t think of it earlier. I didn’t—well, it doesn’t matter. I can’t take it back now.”

His eyes searched hers. “You must know that I would marry you to keep you safe from all the men like Nelson.”

Amelia’s heart dropped. She jerked her chin out of his grip and shoved at his chest. “Just what every woman wants to hear. A proposal of protection. Be still my beating heart.”

He sighed. “I know how you feel regarding marriage, which leads me to my next

question. Wh—”

“What was I thinking? I don’t know. I got scared. But you don’t have to marry me. We’re going to pretend to be engaged until Sam is better.”

“And then what? You’ll leave me at the alter?”

“It won’t get that far.” Her chest tightened, and annoying emotions clogged her throat.

“Won’t it? And what if he doesn’t get better?”

Her lip trembled, and she shook her head. “Don’t say that. He will.”

“We have to plan for all outcomes.”

Her breath hitched. She tried to draw in a full breath, but all she got was a small sip of air not nearly enough to fill her lungs. “Engagements end all the time,” she said, her voice small.

“Not easily. And what happens if the ton turns on you—about this or something else? Every time I turn around, you are digging yourself into a deeper hole, and the burden of pulling you out falls on me, at least for the moment. You may not like it, but I made a vow to your brother, and I will uphold it.”

Amelia dropped her chin and bit her bottom lip. Sam had asked him to do this, and he couldn’t turn Sam down. Not as he lay there dying. Graham Blakewood had made a vow. How wretchedly noble of him.

“Fine, I’ll throw you over,” Amelia said, choking back her emotions. “Then women will flock to you to comfort your wounded heart, since you are such an honorable and

gallant gentleman. But either way, I won't be marrying you."

"You've made that quite clear."

"Good. You only need to pretend to be my fiancé. Once Sam is recovered, we will end it amicably."

"How the devil do we explain this to your brother? There is no way we can hide this from him once he recovers. Someone will mention it to him."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Clearly," he muttered.

"He'll have to be told the truth. I think... he'll understand. I will take all the blame and the truth will remain between the three of us."

He drew in a breath and exhaled loudly. "We'll have to weather whatever your aunt means to do together. But no more sudden outbursts of ideas. And as for Nelson, you let me handle him," he said darkly.

"I've been handling Nelson for years. He's not worth your effort."

"If I'm your possessive and jealous fiancé, that means I will deal with him."

Amelia swallowed. He seemed to grow larger, more menacing, more... something that made her warmer from the inside. This was a side of Blakewood she'd not seen before, and she still didn't know how to feel about it. The safest emotion was irritation.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine."

“We must return and try to make a good showing now. We want to keep your reputation intact when we dissolve the engagement.”

“You mean your reputation. Mine has never mattered much to me since I don’t intend to marry.”

“It matters to me.” He stopped walking.

Amelia twisted toward him. “I’m sorry.”

He folded his arms and glared at her.

She sighed. “Well, I am. What more do you want me to say?”

“Not more. Less. Say less of everything that pops into your head, and maybe both of us can escape this charade undamaged. Can you manage that? If not for you, or me, but your brother?”

Amelia nodded. “I talk more when I’m nervous.”

“It’s just me and you. Why are you nervous?”

She hated the way tears were constantly lodged behind her eyes now. She just wanted to hang on until Sam was better, but every day that he lay there, she lost a little more of her strength. She blinked them away. He saw it. Her weakness. He stepped toward her, and she raised a hand.

“Save it for when we’re in the public eye. I don’t need you to coddle me right now.”

He shook his head and strolled past her. “Come along, little fiancée.”

Little fiancée. The words sent a jolt of shock through her. Amelia ground her teeth as she followed, though he did have a point. Every time she opened her mouth, she made matters worse. From now on, she'd try to outdo him in stoic silence.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

The following evening found Graham sipping whisky at the Lyon's Den, the burn not quite enough to drown out the simmering anger that pulsed through his veins as he watched his fellow Lyons mill around the main floor of the gaming club. The night was early, and the real games and gambling hadn't yet begun. But Graham hadn't been able to sit next to Lady Amelia any longer at Alston's bedside. Not without reaching out to strangle her. Or hold her, promising he'd make all her troubles go away, bring Alston back to health, and hang the moon and stars in her bedroom to give her light. Or worse still, pull her into his lap and seduce her to within an inch of her life.

But he didn't have long to sit here and smolder in his thoughts. Tonight he would escort her to Lady Smythson's musicale. He would be expected to remain by her side as—what had she called him? Ah, yes, a possessive and jealous fiancé.

Those words had rocked him.

Those were the precise emotions he'd felt when he'd seen Nelson leering at Amelia.

Possessive, because Amelia was his to protect. Jealous, because he'd spent years fighting his own urges to stare at her with longing. No one was allowed to look at, or touch, or even think about her in such a way. Not even he let himself dwell on those wicked thoughts that wanted to fill his mind with visions of her soft skin, and the sweet moans she'd sigh into his ear—

He slammed his glass down but couldn't seem to loosen his grip around it.

Now they were engaged. And it didn't matter if the two of them knew their

engagement was a fake one. In society's eyes, it was real. His family would soon hear about it—shit, he needed to tell them first. His mother would be furious if she were the last to know. Graham needed to send out letters immediately. What would he say? The anger rose again. Amelia acted so carelessly. She'd put him in such a bind, both physically and morally. His parents wouldn't understand if he told them it wasn't real and that it was a temporary distraction. And if they knew he was sharing the house with her, his parents would demand a wedding. There was no way around their inevitable hurt and disappointment. And what of his sister? His broken engagement could affect her, too.

Before he crushed it, he let go of the tumbler in his hand.

He felt her presence before he turned. Despite knowing she was just a woman—though a mysterious, conniving, eccentric woman, to be sure—he felt a chill on his neck and a tinge of fear. She moved like a phantom, her face covered by her black veil.

Graham straightened and turned to stand before the Black Widow of Whitehall. Owner, matchmaker, master manipulator, queen lioness of the Lyon's Den. She cocked her head, and though he couldn't see her eyes, he could feel their perusal of his rumpled clothing.

“Heavens, I never thought I'd see such a sight. The impervious Graham Blakewood is in disarray. To what do we owe this pleasure? An impetuous tryst?” She chuckled in that sultry way of hers that hinted at her rumored past as a courtesan.

“I beg your pardon, madam, for my attire.”

She placed a hand on her cocked hip. “I'm intrigued, you see; I just received word of a bit of gossip, which I certainly hope isn't true. I had such grand plans for you, after all. It would be such a shame.”

Graham swallowed. Plans? “What gossip would this be?”

“That you’re engaged to Lady Amelia Clark. Is this true?”

He nodded. “It was announced yesterday afternoon at Lady Cecily’s garden party.”

“And yet you don’t look pleased by this occasion. May I be of service?”

“I am pleased, but the announcement was sudden and rather unexpected.”

“Ah, yes. Lady Amelia is much like her brother. Reckless, but not witless. I adore Lord Alston. I love to watch him pummel his opponents into withering, desperate messes I can exploit.” She peered around. “Is he here?”

Graham’s hands went cold. “No, madam.” He didn’t want to say more. He surely didn’t need to explain Alston’s whereabouts unless directly asked. The less that people knew, the better the lie would hold.

“Pity, that. He is still unattached, isn’t he? I hope I won’t be hearing of his abrupt betrothal, too.”

“No, madam. He has no immediate plans to marry that I am aware of.”

“Good. He can leave those plans to me.”

Graham didn’t reply to that. Alston had expressed no interest in marriage as yet. He was too young, but he also might not live to see his wedding day, or the sun rise tomorrow. The thought cooled all Graham’s anger, banking the coals with a wet blanket of melancholy.

Please, let him live.

“Will you play a game tonight? I know you don’t gamble, but you have other talents, yes?”

“I’m due to escort my betrothed to a musicale this evening.”

She sighed, her veil fluttering. “Very well. Do bring Lady Amelia around. I’d love to meet such a creature as could trap you.”

Graham forced a smile. “Another time. Good evening, madam.”

“It’s not good yet,” she said as she sauntered away. Graham turned back toward the bar top and exhaled. If she knew of his betrothal already, the news must be circulating fast. He needed to get ahead of it and inform his parents.

Amelia might think this betrothal was fake, something she could brush aside when done with him, but to Graham, this was all too real. For now, at the very least, the insufferable, reckless, and beguiling Amelia was his.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

Amelia pretended not to notice when Mr. Blakewood returned and that he hadn't taken his dinner with her as they habitually did now together at Sam's bedside. Her throat tightened with the guilt and hurt warring within her. She'd done something unforgivable, more so than she'd realized in the moment. He was honorable—to a fault, in her mind—morally rigid, stubborn, and cold. And deeply self-controlled. And she'd usurped his control and declared them engaged.

But it wouldn't stick. He had to realize that. Engagements weren't a permanent affliction. There might be some bumps in the road ahead, but once Sam recovered, things would smooth. She had to believe that.

Amelia sopped up the last of the juices from her meat pie and turned toward Sam. He lay still, pale, eyes closed in sleep, but he was still here. He was her confidant, her twin soul, and her only real ally.

“Before he returns and gives you a far more nefarious account of this afternoon, I'd like you to know that I do regret what I did, but I truly believed at that moment that there was no other choice.” She set her plate on the side table and smoothed the napkin across her lap.

“If you could have seen the rabid sparkle in Aunt Ruth's eyes and the disgusting glint in Nelson's, you'd agree with me. I know you would. She wanted to move in here or take me hostage in their house. Neither option could happen. Not without risk to both you and me. So I told them and everyone at the garden party that Mr. Blakewood and I are to be married. It's only temporary, of course.” Amelia swallowed, lifting her gaze cautiously to Sam, as if she'd find him glowering at her.

“See? Not so terrible. If you remember correctly, it was your idea that he marry me, so I’m sure you approve of the plan. But once you return to health, we can dissolve the engagement. There won’t be a shortage of reasons why we shouldn’t marry.”

Amelia huffed, but then guilt flooded her again, and she took hold of Sam’s hand. She hated how pale and waxy it appeared. She wrapped her hands around his, trying to warm the chilled skin.

“We loathe each other,” she went on with a tight throat. “For good reason. We are utter opposites. We would only make each other unhappy. I might even be driven to kill him. Can you imagine the lectures he’d give me over breakfast? In his mind, I can do nothing right. I’m sure of it.” She brushed away the greasy hair on his brow. “You know, sometimes I think he’s right,” she admitted. “But I don’t want him to know that.”

Sam’s brow furrowed.

“Sam?” Amelia leaned closer. “Can you hear me?”

His eyes opened, bleary and dry. Amelia’s heart raced as she reached for the cup of broth. He’d taken water earlier, and now she wanted to try a liquid with more sustenance. Amelia wiped his face with a cool rag.

“I’m here, Sam. I have some broth for you. It’s not overly salty like you hate; I made sure.” She choked back a sob, dribbling a little over his lips. He slowly blinked at her, but his lips parted.

“Good, Sam. Take as much as you can.”

It felt like an eternity, dripping broth into his mouth until his eyes closed and his face went slack. Amelia dabbed at his chin.

Tears rushed into her eyes. “That was perfect. You’re getting better every day.”

The ever-present vice around her heart tightened, and she couldn’t take a breath as she set the bowl of broth down and stood, backing away. She bit her fist until it hurt, fighting the emotion that threatened to swallow her whole. She couldn’t do this. She was going to fall apart, and she had no one to hold her or help her bear the weight of this crushing fear. Her entire body trembled, unable to contain the scream of anguish that was building inside her. She ran into the dressing room. She didn’t want her brother to see; or even if he couldn’t see, he might hear her.

She dropped to her knees, and dragged a blanket to her face, bundling the fabric against her mouth, and screamed. She was utterly alone, having dismissed Petrov to eat in the kitchen with the other servants, and Mr. Blakewood— bloody Blakewood —was thankfully not here to witness her transformation into a bawling babe.

Amelia drew in a breath, the sobs scalding her throat as they wrenched her apart from the inside as she vented them into the thick blanket. A hand touched her back, and she jerked, falling on her hip. The scent of cigar smoke and pressed linen filled her nose as Blakewood picked her up in his arms, cradling her like a child.

Lord, how she wanted to cling to him. He lifted her like she was nothing. She was not nothing. She was taller than average and an active rider—hardly a waifish English rose. But she felt small in his hold, delicate even. Delicacy was not tolerable. She couldn’t afford such a luxury when she was the only one standing between her brother and Death and the leeches intent on bleeding them dry.

“No,” she wiggled, her voice raspy.

“Amelia.”

“No,” she said, pushing at his firm chest. He set her down. Amelia held the blanket to

her front. A shield against him, his strength, his stupid honor, and his ethics. “I don’t need to be coddled. It was just a hysterical moment that caught me off guard.”

He folded his arms, his mouth set in a stern line. He was already dressed in his evening attire. “Crying is not shameful.”

Amelia sniffed and shook her head at him. “Of course not, but it is something I don’t do, even if I’ve cried more in that last few days than I have in years. I am unused to it, and I don’t like it. Others can perceive crying as a weakness, something to exploit. I learned that a long time ago.”

He frowned.

“Never mind, it’s not important. I need to go dress for this evening.” She brushed past him. He didn’t stop her as she expected. He was different than before. In the maze, he’d been temperamental and gruff in a way that felt human. Now, once again, he was cold and austere, like a statue. Revealing nothing or feeling nothing—she never knew which.

“Sam took some broth,” she said without turning. To hide her puffy eyes, she laid the blanket over the end of the bed, keeping her back to him. She didn’t need any further humiliation today.

He cleared his throat. “I wrote to my parents and my sister,” he said.

“Oh?”

“The news of our betrothal is spreading quickly,” he said stiffly. “I don’t want them to hear it as a rumor before speaking with me.”

“It’s fortunate they’re away. They won’t have to deal with the gossipmongers like we

will.”

“I’m betting they will want to return to town when they hear the news.”

Amelia pressed her eyes closed. She’d met his family once, when she’d attended a family dinner with Sam. They were nice people, which made the scorn of their son all the more unpalatable. Even his sister was sweet, and Amelia could see her as a friend, if only her brother weren’t him .

“Wonderful.” She turned and headed for the door. She paused and looked back to see him at Sam’s side, speaking softly enough that she couldn’t make out the words. Tonight would set the tone for the rest of their engagement, for however long it lasted.

And it would be awful. She needed armor against Blakewood as much as she did against the unyielding gaze of society that would now be focused on her. Unfortunately, her armor only came in satins and silks. And for tonight she needed a dress that would be both stunning and standoffish. She knew just the one.

Blakewood was going to hate it.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

Graham waited in the hall for Lady Amelia to come down. He glanced at his pocket watch for the tenth time. She wasn't delaying them, but he could feel every second that passed like it was a hair plucked from his skin. He didn't know what awaited them tonight, and it worried him. What other calamity could Lady Amelia's mouth bring down on them? His neck ached from the tension of grinding his teeth. He'd spoken to Alston about the afternoon and how he wanted to rip Nelson's arms from his body for his indecent behavior toward Amelia, though he wasn't sure Alston had been aware of him. But he didn't speak of their conversation in the maze. Even if his friend couldn't hear him, that had been a moment he couldn't describe. He'd almost lost control. He had almost taken her in his arms in a fit of anger and jealousy. He'd wanted to show her she belonged to him, only him, and any man who touched her would forfeit his life.

Which was insanity. This engagement would be temporary. He simply had to regain his composure and wait for the tempest which was Lady Amelia Clark to run its course. And if luck favored them, he and Alston would one day laugh about this whole deranged charade over whisky at the Lyon's Den.

Graham closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, stilling the clashing currents of thoughts inside him. The stairs creaked, and he looked up to see Lady Amelia descending, eyes on the carpet, in a steel-gray satin gown. He ground his teeth and clamped his mouth shut, sealing in the groan that rose to his throat. The dress hugged her breasts, lifting them and presenting them like desserts on a platter. The fabric moved with her body, somehow taunting him with the shape of her figure as it swayed with her steps. The candles set off the silver gems on the bodice, making her sparkle. A simple and elegant necklace with a single drop-shaped diamond floated right above the valley of her breast, teasingly, as if at any moment it might fall into

the dark heaven and disappear. A storm—a beautiful, chaotic storm—morphed into a woman draped in a dress spun of rain clouds and shimmering with icy drops.

She tentatively locked eyes with him and then dropped her gaze back down.

Graham knew he was scowling. He couldn't do a damn thing about it. The alternative was to throw her over his shoulder, take her to his room, and peel that dress off—but no. No. Those were the thoughts he had to bury. Deeply. In an unmarked grave.

He turned away, and a footman held out his cloak and hat. Graham gathered himself together as Lady Amelia stood behind him, accepting the help of a maid to put on her cloak. He sighed in relief. At least she'd be covered by her cloak in the carriage.

The footman held the door, and Graham waited for her to exit first, his gaze pinned to the elegant jumble of curls on her head that was likely crafted with a multitude of pins but seemed to taunt him, tempting him to claw his fingers through them. Longer curls bobbed around her shoulders, begging him to give them a tug. Everything about her appearance tonight enticed him to touch. Was that intentional? Was she trying to tempt him? Torture him? Stun him into willing compliance?

He fisted his hands for a moment as he stopped next to the carriage and offered to hand her in. She bit her lip, her cheeks blooming with color as she set her hand in his. He followed her, curious about her sudden bit of shyness, and took the seat across from her.

On the short trip to Mayfair, they didn't speak. She stared out into the misty evening, and he did his bloody best not to stare longingly at her. When they pulled into the queue of carriages, the mist turned to sprinkles, and by the time they disembarked, they had a proper rain shower. She exited with her hood over her curls, and he followed. Once inside, they gave their cloaks to the waiting footman and followed the other guests into the music room. Doors opened to the drawing room, alleviating

some of the crush.

Graham paused to ask her where she'd like to sit, but she stood frozen, tucking herself behind a door.

"Whe—what are you doing?"

"Aunt Ruth is in there," she whispered.

"We knew she'd be here."

"But . . . I'm not ready. I'm not composed."

Unchecked, his gaze wandered eagerly over her body, and he swallowed. "You appear composed." He would not mention the blush in her cheeks or the rapid pace of her breathing.

"I thought I was, but then you glared at me, clearly disapproving of my gown and this dress was supposed to be my armor, and yet I feel naked—"

"I beg your pardon," he growled, stepping closer to her. "Do not utter the word naked in my hearing—or anyone's hearing."

She glowered at him. "Metaphorically speaking, I feel vulnerable. Is that better, you prudish ninny?"

He tugged at his cravat and stepped away from her. "What would you like to do?"

"I just need a moment to gather myself." She drew in a breath.

Graham glanced away, needing to look at anything but the rosy blush spreading down

her neck and her chest.

“I’m ready.”

She lifted her chin. Her hand slipped around his elbow, and he braced himself for her touch and nearness. Her perfume floated toward him, an invisible hook that snared him and drew him closer as he inhaled deep. Sultry and sweet, like burnt sugar. His body locked up as he fought his arousal.

She cast him a peeved sideways glance. “There is no need to look so sullen.”

“This is how I always look,” he gritted out.

“Yes, but could you perhaps try to appear, I don’t know, pleased to be engaged to me? Just a little. Nothing to ruffle your starched sensibilities.”

Familiar, vague annoyance overtook the clawing lust inside him, and he let out a breath of relief. “It might arouse suspicion if I change my character now.”

“Perhaps others might think you’re happy. For once. For the first time? Did you come out of the womb frowning?”

He smiled. “Is this better?”

“No. That smile is not at all natural and is quite sinister. Please stop.”

His lips twitched, but he held back his genuine smile at her words. “Then what do you want me to do?”

“At the very least, seem bored rather than disagreeable. People often misinterpret boredom as sophisticated aloofness.”

“Spectacular. Like this?” He raised a sardonic brow and slowly peered around the crowded drawing room.

“Yes. Perfect.”

“Why don’t we find refreshment? Some wine might soothe your fears.”

“I’m not drinking wine.”

“I’m fairly certain I’ve seen you drink wine before.”

“Not tonight.”

“Why not?” Graham asked.

“I want to keep my wits about me and not blurt anymore proposals in panic, preferably.” She shrugged one shoulder, and the motion dragged his attention back to her supple cleavage. He ripped his focus away. She continued grudgingly. “I’ll have to endure tonight with only lemonade and remain woefully sober.”

“My condolences.” He led her to the table and accepted a tumbler of whisky. She might not be partaking, but he would need the courage to get through this night. Something to dull his senses and the allure of her warm body.

Bloody hell. He had to put an end to this madness. There was absolutely nothing remotely romantic or compulsory between them. This was only lust—unbridled, neglected lust. And only on his side. She was a beautiful woman and he’d gone too long without feminine company, and this was the result. He just had to endure. Their close proximity made these feelings all the more tangible. That was all. There was nothing between them. Nothing.

He threw his drink back in one swallow, relishing the burn that cleared his thoughts. “We should find seats.”

He led her into the music room, one of four locations in which Mrs. Gibson would display the many talents of her musical grandchildren. Every chair was taken. They returned to the drawing room, and he led her to an open row of chairs.

She stepped closer to him and leaned in, her perfume thick and sweet, sending his head into a dizzying spin. “Wait, we should wait until my Aunt Ruth sits and then select our seats as far from her as possible.”

His mind had gone blank, so he just nodded. She tugged him toward the back of the room, where other guests had congregated, some of whom he knew as acquaintances.

“Blakewood, surprised to see you here. I thought you’d be haunting the corners of the Lyon’s Den while...” The young man stopped as he noticed Amelia. “Lady Amelia, a pleasure. I know your brother well. We met last season at the Archeron Summer Solstice party.”

“I’m afraid I don’t recall,” she said.

“Mr. Phillip Deveraux,” Graham offered.

“Oh, yes. Now I remember. You went to school with my brother.”

“Indeed, is Alston here? I have a wager I’d like to discuss.” He paused and peered around the room.

“He’s traveling north for... Mr. Blakewood? What was the urgent issue?” She peered up at him innocently.

Graham cleared his throat. “An issue with the well water.”

Deveraux grimaced. “I’m pleased to remain a mere third son and let my father and two older brothers handle estate matters.”

“Indeed,” Lady Amelia returned. Some of the stiffness left her. “My brother is always busy.”

A lady joined their small triangle, and Deveraux made room for her with a coy smile. Graham recognized her instantly and cursed in his mind.

“Lady Foxcroft,” Mr. Deveraux crooned.

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Amelia studied the vision in pink silk gliding into their group. Julia Whistler, the beautiful young widow of the Viscount of Foxcroft, delivered the aged gentleman three healthy sons and ensured herself a life of comfort and freedom. The new viscount was just ten years old.

So young, just as Sam had been when he'd inherited.

Amelia had not yet met Lady Foxcroft but envied her for her independence and sophistication. Her black hair was smoothed into a neat coil, and she wore a tall black feather in her hair. Her eyes were a stunning green, like emeralds.

"Graham?" Lady Foxcroft smiled warmly at him, ignoring Deveraux's swoon. "Did I see you at the Den earlier today?"

"Perhaps," Graham said, his voice rough as though he'd swallowed gravel. "May I introduce Lady Amelia Clark? Lady Amelia, the Viscountess Foxcroft."

The stunning woman turned her attention to Amelia. "Lord Alston's sister? A pleasure, my dear. My, you do look like him."

"Thank you, Lady Foxcroft."

"Please, call me Julia. Graham and Alston do. I dislike formalities among friends." Her gaze moved back to Blakewood and shifted to something Amelia could only describe as heated.

Amelia went cold, fighting an uncomfortable shiver as many ideas and feelings

occurred at once—thoughts she did not want to investigate—one of which seemed suspiciously like jealousy. But she couldn't be jealous. Of what? She knew nothing about this woman or the extent of her relationship to Blakewood. She only knew that this woman looked at him with such intent that Amelia had to wonder how certain Lady Foxcroft—Julia—was of his regard in return. How well did they know each other? And what was the Den? Amelia stood beside Blakewood, hand cupped around his elbow, and shrunk inwardly, feeling young and insignificant. A child who needed to be sent to bed while the adults discussed adult things.

Amelia would not accept these thoughts. “My brother had to go up north to tend to an estate. Something about well water, wasn't that right, Graham?” Amelia turned to him, rubbing his forearm as if she also knew him quite well—she was his fiancée, was she not?—well enough to touch him with such familiarity, and looking up at him just the way Julia looked at him.

Julia caught sight of her hand stroking Graham's arm, and Amelia could have sworn the faintest of frowns marred her face before swiftly disappearing behind the beautiful mask of serenity she wore.

“Yes, the well water may be tainted. Terrible news. He will return as soon as matters are rectified.”

“How unfortunate,” the viscountess murmured, her attention bouncing between them. “And you remain here, Lady Amelia? Are you not alone in the household and unmarried?” She presented a convincing frown of concern.

Amelia wasn't certain how to read this woman. It was a pity. Before meeting her, Amelia had imagined becoming friends with her at one point or another, but now... she had a feeling she would soon come to dislike Julia Whistler. Was she a genuine person? Or was this whole persona a performance?

“I’m looking after her,” Graham said.

“Graham is my escort in my brother’s place.”

“Oh?” Julia raised a brow.

Deveraux cleared his throat, reminding everyone of his existence. Amelia might consider him handsome if he weren’t so young. Though on reflection, he was also Sam’s age. And her own. Odd.

“I heard a rumor . . .” Deveraux said.

“Oh, do tell.” Amelia winked at him. “There is nothing more exciting than hearing scintillating gossip. Something that stirs wicked intentions.”

Blakewood cleared his throat. Amelia ignored the stern look he directed at her. Instead, she beamed at Deveraux, fluttering her lashes. She knew she was only using the poor man to taunt Graham for making her feel insignificant and jealous over this delightful woman, not that he had done it on purpose. But just the idea of him and Julia together made her stomach burn with acid, and her feelings needed an outlet.

Deveraux’s face reddened as he stuttered. Julia sent her a wicked half-smile. Dash it all, Amelia did want to like her. She wasn’t that much older than Amelia, but she was wildly more experienced and worldly. A woman who controlled her own fate.

Envy only stoked the burn in Amelia. Was this the kind of woman who could hold Blakewood’s attention?

Deveraux rocked back on his heels, eyeing Blakewood warily. “Uh, well.”

“Let me guess,” Blakewood said dryly. “You heard Lady Amelia and I are

betrothed?”

Deveraux turned redder. “Yes.”

“It’s not a rumor if it’s true.” Blakewood glanced around the room, appearing bored, and Amelia suppressed a smile. Perfect sophisticated aloofness.

Julia’s full, red lips formed an O of genuine surprise, and then she beamed, but the smile did not reach her eyes. She said to both of them, “Felicitations.”

Amelia tried to smile happily, but all she felt was awkward. “Our thanks. We only announced it yesterday.”

“Alston must be thrilled,” Julia said, with a touch more genuine interest.

The tension in Amelia’s spine softened. Perhaps there was nothing of consequence between Julia and Graham. Or if there had been, it was long ago and they were just friends now. It didn’t matter, Amelia reminded herself. Gentlemen did as they pleased with whom they pleased.

“He is,” Amelia said, giving Blakewood a side glance. He stood stoic, as if they were discussing the weather. She dug her nails into his arm, and he focused on her. “Isn’t he?” she prodded.

“Yes. We’ve been close friends for years, and now we’ll be family.”

“They’re already like brothers,” Amelia added sheepishly. “My brother will be relieved to have another male in the house instead of just his annoying sister.”

“But you won’t live together, won’t you?” Julia asked. “You’ll have your own home to care for once you’re married.”

Amelia blinked. “No, I wouldn’t leave my brother alone. Not until he’s married.” She looked to Blakewood. “And you agree, don’t you? We can’t leave him alone.”

Graham was already nodding in agreement.

“How peculiar, but I suppose Graham and Alston are such close friends they wouldn’t mind such an arrangement,” Julia replied.

The strains of a violin blanketed the conversation, and the guests were invited to take their seats. Graham led Amelia toward the chairs just as her Aunt Ruth entered, searching for her with her hawk-like gaze.

“Julia, Mr. Deveraux, why don’t you sit with us?” Amelia asked.

“I’d love to,” Julia replied.

They filtered through the crowd until they found four chairs. Blakewood and Amelia sat, and Julia took the chair on Blakewood’s left and Deveraux beside her. Which left the seat next to Amelia perilously vacant. Amelia set her fan down and searched for a friendly face to border her. To her relief, Lady Hendricks took the seat, smiling in greeting. She was hard of hearing and rarely spoke, for which Amelia was thankful. Her luck ended as her Aunt Ruth and Nelson took the seats behind her. Amelia tensed as Nelson put a hand on the back of her chair. His vile finger brushed the back of her neck, and she resisted a shiver.

The crowd quieted as a trio of young women took the platform with their violin, flute, and cello. Amelia turned to Blakewood, hoping in spite of herself that he’d noticed Nelson’s forwardness and would turn that powerful glare upon someone else for a change. But he was turned toward Julia, and they were speaking quietly.

Amelia’s insides went up in flames. She faced the front, waving her fan as a flush of

anger washed through her.

Fine. So she was jealous. Hadn't he stated only yesterday that he wanted to deal with Nelson himself. But now he was so easily and completely distracted by the incomparable Julia. Nelson's breath fanned the nape of her neck, and she stiffened.

"A pleasant evening to you, cousin."

Amelia ignored him. The music had begun, and she gave all her attention to the young women who nervously devoted themselves to their instruments.

Blakewood and Julia paused their conversation for a moment, but then resumed as the stringed instruments grew louder. Her stomach somersaulted as images of them together, laughing, dancing, and staring at each other like lovers, flipped through her mind like the pages of a book. A hand touched her shoulder and Amelia lashed out with her fan. Nelson yelped behind her and Amelia grinned with satisfaction.

Blakewood glanced her way. Finally.

He leaned close. "Is something amiss?"

"Just a bug. Never you mind. Don't let me interrupt you." She didn't look at him, but she could feel his gaze. When she met his stare, she raised a brow.

His jaw flexed as he turned back toward the performers. It took Amelia a moment longer to pull her gaze from his profile. She thought she knew who Mr. Graham Blakewood was, but she'd never seen this side of him: the handsome man who drew beautiful admirers. She could admit it bothered her more than it should. It was clear he had some sort of an intimate history with this woman, and that knowledge turned her stomach sideways. Amelia couldn't stop her traitorous thoughts from comparing herself to Julia and finding herself lacking. Was this the kind of woman Blakewood

admired?

She didn't want to care, but she did.

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Graham escorted Lady Amelia through another three rooms before the musicale came to an end. Her aunt and cousin haunted their steps everywhere they went, but did not approach. However, he did hear them on more than one occasion discussing the betrothal joyfully, as if the aunt had arranged the whole endeavor herself in Amelia's favor. An intriguing tactic.

But they'd both survived, somewhat unscathed. Graham was collecting their cloaks while Lady Amelia visited the ladies' retiring room. Graham waited as the guests thinned, until Lady Amelia at last appeared, red cheeked and eyes bright with a false smile as she sailed through the front door. Graham watched her, then chanced to look back at where she'd come from and saw her aunt and cousin watching him.

Bloody hell. They'd cornered her, hadn't they? Likely said something awful to upset her. He followed her out. She hadn't waited for him and was already inside the coach. The groom closed the door, and they sat in darkness, the curtains closed.

"No lamps?" he asked.

"There's nothing to see. Why bother?"

He sighed and sat back. She was ready to take heads with her tone. He wasn't interested in losing his at the moment, even if he did have a headache coming on. Besides the wailing music, Julia had questioned him closely about the issue with the well water and the sick sheep. Graham had tried to answer intelligently, but he was not a sheep farmer nor was he experienced with sheep illnesses. And he'd had no idea that while her husband had declined in his last years, she'd taken it upon herself to control the estate and now had a head for business and animal husbandry. Julia was

always a pleasant surprise—more than just a seductive widow. However, she would be of no help to their imaginary problem, and diverting her had taken all his mental efforts.

He closed his eyes and must have nodded off because, when he opened them, the carriage was stopped and Amelia was climbing out again without waiting for his assistance.

Once inside, they handed off their cloaks and climbed the stairs toward Alston's room, but before she took this volatile energy in there, he wanted to calm her down.

“Lady Amelia.”

She didn't respond as she climbed the stairs ahead of him.

He ground his teeth, taking two at a time, until he passed her and blocked her path.

“Would you like to tell me what is wrong?”

“No,” she growled.

“What did your aunt say? Did Nelson do something again?”

“Oh, you didn't notice?” She stepped around him and made it to the landing. “No, I suppose you wouldn't have. You were too engrossed in your conversation with Julia.”

He'd turned to follow her, but at that, he froze. She carried on, heading toward Alston's room.

When he was speaking with Julia? He'd been sitting right next to Amelia. How could

anything have happened then? He shook his head and caught up to her, his larger strides easily closing the distance before she made it to Alston's door.

"Tell me what happened."

"It doesn't matter," she said, back to him. He touched her shoulder, and she shook him off. "Don't touch me."

Clenching his fists, he tried to restrain his anger, but he'd had enough of the constant strain. His sanity was wearing thin, and he was beyond exhausted. He took hold of her shoulder and turned her, backing her against the wall, placing his hand flat above her left shoulder, and stepping close enough she couldn't dodge him or look away.

"I'm invoking my right as your fiancé to know what it is that upset you tonight, and I will not be denied."

She leaned closer, their noses almost brushing. "Pretend fiancé."

"Not when we're out there in the public eye."

"Then why don't you act like it?" she said between clenched teeth.

"Act like it? Like you belong to me?" He was confused. Did she want him farther away or closer?

"You truly want to know what my aunt said? Just before we left she said she wanted to warn me. You were likely after my inheritance, and after we wed—if not already—you'd carry on a dalliance with the likes of Lady Foxcroft. She called me naïve and softhearted, lovestruck by the first man to come along and give me attention." She pressed her lips together and swallowed. "Isn't that ridiculous? You ignored me most of the evening, but somehow I've been swayed to marry you by

your charms and attention. As for Nelson, he kept touching me in the drawing room until I snapped at his fingers with my fan. He had the good sense to leave me alone after that. I thought being engaged to you would somehow protect me, but I was wrong. Now they're simply rabid to get between me and my inheritance before you steal it yourself. But other than that, it was a lovely evening, wouldn't you say?"

Graham fisted his hand. Nelson had been touching her? And her aunt...

"I was by your side all evening."

"Yes, much like a footman, waiting to hold my glass for me, but you weren't with me. Don't you understand that? You can't even pretend to care for me. I fear you don't have a future treading the boards." She turned her face away from him.

Graham didn't know what to say. He thought his own evening had been difficult, but he'd missed so much of her misery. He'd thought that by avoiding the potential for bickering and insults, and instead focusing on answering Julia's questions as convincingly as he could, he and Amelia would better impress upon the crowd that they were betrothed. But in his neglect, he'd fed her to the wolves.

"I... I see. I apologize. I don't know how to do this, Amelia."

"Do what?"

He sighed. "Court a woman. Be... I don't even have the words."

Amelia huffed with a laugh. "You've never pursued a woman?"

"Not in the presence of polite society, no. I've never had cause to."

"Not when women like Julia fall into your lap." He scowled at her, and she smirked,

knowing she'd hit her mark. "What would you say to me if we were alone?"

"We are alone."

"No, not as you and me, but as other people. People who like each other. A man and woman who are interested in each other romantically. How would you seduce me?"

Graham wanted to groan. He lifted his gaze to hers and leaned in. Her breath caught, and the air between them thinned. His body pulsed to be near hers, and his heart thumped heavily in his chest. What would he say to her—not Amelia, but another fictional woman? No, it wasn't working. All he could see was Amelia. There was no use pretending. And he definitely couldn't tell her the things he'd say to her.

He stepped back. "I can't be doing this, not with you. Not ever."

She lifted her chin. "I don't know what this is. Explain."

"I can't explain it. Seduction, being drawn closely to another—it's an experience, knowledge gained through action. It's an instinct."

She scoffed. "And we have nothing but animosity between us. That's why it's so awkward. If you could just pretend, Graham. Treat me like a woman, not a naïve child—"

"You are naïve. And you're impulsive and innocent and Alston's sister. I can't treat you like any other woman."

She sobered. She reached out to touch his chest. Could she feel his heart pounding? Hear the rush of blood surging in his veins at her nearness?

"You have to. For Sam. You promised him you'd protect me like he would, but you

are not my brother. We are in this ruse together, but I can't play the part of a blushing bride-to-be if you... if you don't even want to be near me. Can't you at least try to pretend to like me? Is that really so difficult?" She swallowed. "Am I that awful?"

Her solemn words cut him. He cupped her cheek. "No. But I'm using restraint to protect us both."

"You're using too much. If we are engaged, there has to be a connection, a certain level of—what did you call it? Knowledge? Perhaps we need more history. Where did this relationship even begin?"

Graham fixed his gaze on his hand on her cheek. So soft and warm. Her perfume rose to his nostrils, and he tried to take small breaths. He remembered the first time he met her, but that wasn't his strongest memory of her. No, that was the day she'd worn a white gown sprinkled with seed diamonds, when she'd made her debut into high society. Alston said it had cost a fortune, but she was worth every pound. She had sparkled like sunlight on fresh snow, glimmered like an angel as she made her grand entrance, ready to take on the ton and all its eligible bachelors. He'd stood there, unable to take his eyes off her. She was a fever dream. For just a moment—a fleeting, maddening moment—he thought he could fall in love with her. That smiling, sparkling girl. But by the end of the evening, he'd realized he was too old for a girl like her, too dull for her shine. He'd never wanted a woman like this—with heat and passion lighting him up from the inside. But her antics that night had cast a stark contrast between them, and he'd fought to bury his confusing feelings. He hadn't known how to manage those emotions other than by pushing them down. So as she had danced with men more suitable to her exuberant nature, Graham had watched from the wall.

She had been a force of nature, refusing to be tamed.

She still was. But looking at her now, he could see what he didn't know back then. It

wasn't arrogance that made her so resistant to conforming to society's rules or her aunt's machinations, but fear. She wanted control. She'd lost so much so young, and she was looking for something she could hold on to. But as a woman, very little was hers.

That , he realized now, was why she needed him. Not to simply watch over her, distant and aloof. She needed him to match her courage and to stand with her. He grazed her cheek with his thumb and focused on her mouth. She licked her lips.

He drew in a breath, calming the raging seas inside him. To do this he needed all of his restraint and a clear head.

"I'm going to kiss you. Just this once. That will be the intimate knowledge we have of each other. It may help with the way we act around each other when we need to be a couple."

Or hinder it.

She sucked in a breath. "Mr. Blakewood—Graham," she said breathily. "Are you sure this is wise?"

"Absolutely not. Nothing we're doing here is remotely intelligent. But we've crossed that bridge. There is no going back."

She nodded unconvincingly. "Very well." She closed her eyes, her lips pressing together like she was bracing herself for something unpleasant.

"Is this your first kiss?" Graham asked huskily, biting back a smile. Need and desire sank low in his belly. He had to hold tight to his chains.

"Don't make a scene about it, but yes. The first rule my brother ever gave me was

‘don’t let the lads kiss you.’”

Graham wanted to laugh. If only Alston knew what they were doing now. He’d kill Graham.

Graham braced himself, intent on giving her a light kiss. Something delicate and sweet. But as soon as his lips brushed hers, all that flew out the window. He didn’t expect her to kiss him back, but she molded her mouth to his. A soft sound came from her throat as she leaned into the kiss, like she’d done this before, like she’d kissed him a thousand times.

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A melia's heart took flight as Graham's lips touched hers. She should have been shocked. Nervous. But she felt none of that. His mouth was familiar, safe, soothing, and so much more. Had she done this before? In a dream she couldn't remember? She'd never, for the life of her, wanted to kiss Graham any more than she'd wanted to kiss a fish.

But now she couldn't stop. The warm, pliant, silky softness of his lips lured her in. Why were his lips so soft? And had they always been this full? She couldn't remember. The longer they kissed, the more her mind fragmented into a prism of colors and feelings that swept her thoughts away.

They should stop. They must stop. But then his fingers dug into her hair, pulling her close. She held the lapels of his coat, the warmth coming from his body drawing her into his embrace. His lips did not part. She knew there were some forms of kissing that involved tongues and thrusting. She'd heard about that, but this kiss was not like that. It was... addicting. Their mouths moved together, molding, shifting, and pressing, like dancing. Her breaths grew sharp and quick, and his scent filling her head.

She slid her arms over his shoulders and mimicked him, slipping her fingers into the short hair at his nape. He made a sound deep in his throat, dark and needy. Heat pooled inside her, that sound sending thrilling shivers right to her—

Amelia suddenly pulled away, afraid of what that sound meant, terrified of what it had made her feel. She broke the kiss, stepping back until her shoulders met the wall, and she held the back of her hand to her mouth. She couldn't look at him, only the plain silver pin in his cravat.

She'd certainly gained enough knowledge. More than enough. She'd never look at Graham Blakewood the same again, knowing what his kiss felt like, what his hands in her hair could do to her, and the noises he made.

"That's enough," she said. "I'm going to change. See to Sam."

He didn't reply as she darted past him.

Her heart pounded as she reached the end of the hall, climbing the back stairs through the shadows until she reached her room. The clock struck the hour, and eleven chimes filled her room.

Fran was there. She set a book down and stood.

"How was the musicale?" she asked. She gestured for Amelia to the stool at her dressing table. Amelia blinked, taking her seat and still searching for the right words to... understand what had just happened.

"He kissed me," she whispered.

"What the devil happened to your hair? Did you pull these pins yourself?"

"Mr. Blakewood did it," Amelia said absently.

Fran's hands froze. She caught her maid's stare in the mirror.

"I beg your pardon. I couldn't have heard what I thought I just heard."

Amelia swallowed. "He doesn't—we don't like each other. But we had to kiss. We have to pretend we're engaged."

Fran dropped the pins she held on the dressing table with a clatter and turned away, muttering a prayer.

“My lady, you did not tell me of this.”

“I didn’t?” Amelia sobered enough to start taking down her hair herself while Fran paced. Her head ached, and her lips throbbed. Such a wicked sensation. She was impulsive and often wild, but she wasn’t a woman who sought male attention. She’d never felt bodily urges to be intimate with someone. She’d assumed it was because she hadn’t met the right person.

Until tonight. Until Graham kissed her. Now her whole body needed touch. She needed things she could not explain.

Fran approached her, cupping her face. “What have you done, Amelia Jane Clark?”

The use of her middle name, her mother’s name, snapped her out of the fog. “What? Oh, it just happened yesterday afternoon. But it isn’t real, you see. My aunt and Nelson were being pushy, as usual, and I just blurted out that Graham and I were engaged. She was already threatening to move in with me while my brother was away on his pretend journey. But with Graham as my fiancé, she won’t, and she can’t pressure me to marry Nelson—at least that was the idea. But what about my brother? Has anything happened while we were gone?”

“Petrov gave him more broth.”

Amelia sighed with relief.

“Finish your story.”

“Well, tonight we had to act engaged, but it did not go well. There was tension

between us from the start. Then there was Julia Whistler, Lady Foxcroft, who was whispering with Mr. Blakewood during the music, and he was ignoring me. My aunt used it to insinuate that he was only marrying me for my inheritance. Then we got home and fought. I told him... I told him he needed to do better at pretending to like me. He said something about experience and knowledge that I still don't understand." Amelia bit her lip. They remembered the feel of Graham's, and her panic rose all over again.

They'd kissed. If she licked her lips, would she taste him? She picked up a cloth and wiped her mouth.

"Continue, please," Fran said as she finished taking down Amelia's hair and brushed it out.

"He said he would kiss me. That doing so would... make us appear more as a couple because then we'd have shared something. Does that make sense?"

"Of course it does."

"Does it? How?"

Fran smiled. "When a couple has shared intimacies, there's always a look about them. They're always taking peeks at each other, smiling like idiots, looking for any excuse to be alone. It's obvious when two people are in love."

Amelia scooted around to face Fran. "But we're not in love. How do we become a convincing couple? We need to make this last as long as possible, long enough for my brother to recover."

"So, Mr. Blakewood kissed you. Did you kiss him back?"

“Yes, what else was I supposed to do?”

“How did it make you feel?”

Amelia blushed. “All sorts of things.”

“Such as? Revulsion, bitterness, nausea?”

Amelia frowned. “No. Pleasant things. I felt warmer, tingly.” Her eyes widened. “What does that mean?”

Fran’s eyes danced with humor. “It means he can give a proper kiss. Not all men can.” She said it with a wink. She cocked her head and looked up at the ceiling. “Aye, Mr. Blakewood is likely talented at a lot of things. He’s got big hands. And the quiet ones are always the most...” She drifted off as she studied Amelia. “Never mind.”

“No, tell me. What does it mean?”

Fran poked her nose. “It means you enjoyed the kiss.”

“And?”

“And that’s all. Why do you think that new maid Millie West has a new man every week? She enjoys the chase, and she enjoys being caught. She’s not a woman who loses her heart. She just likes to get to know a man. If you know what I mean.”

“No,” Amelia argued. “There is nothing clear about any of this!”

Fran sighed and lowered to her knees, face-to-face with Amelia. She took hold of Amelia’s hands.

“You’ve got so much to learn and no mother to teach you. I suppose it is time, and I’m the only woman close to you who can do it.”

“Do what?”

“Explain the natures of men and women. Intimacy is grand. But it isn’t always about love. It can be for mutual enjoyment.”

“You’ve lain with a man? But you’re not married.”

Fran scoffed. “Doesn’t mean I haven’t loved someone. He had to move to the Americas, but I don’t regret our time together. I knew I had to be careful and not get myself with child. But I enjoyed his company. I’ve also lain with a man I haven’t cared a ha-penny about, but he was handsome, and I was lonely. We had mutual needs that we could satisfy together. You see?”

Amelia reflected. She’d always rather viewed them as the same age, but Fran was older and more experienced in life. A life that Amelia had seen very little of and was having trouble entirely understanding now.

Amelia shrugged in confusion. “Not really.”

“I’m saying you liked the kiss because it was a good kiss. It doesn’t have to mean anything more than that.”

“Oh...” Amelia considered that. “That’s a relief.” However, she knew she would not rest tonight after that kiss. Relieved or not, she was still warm and tingly, and still too curious for her own good. She wanted Fran to tell her everything, including what it meant for Graham to have big hands.

“But I remind you, women in your position can’t be going around kissing lads for the

fun of it. Engaged or not.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I’m not your mother, but I feel it is my duty to give you the pertinent knowledge. Lord knows where this plan of yours will land you. I’d rather you go into battle armed.”

Amelia nodded. “With knowledge, you mean?”

“It’s always best to keep a small knife in your bag, too.”

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Graham sat beside Alston until midnight, watching his chest rise and fall. Amelia arrived, and he bid her goodnight and retired to his own room. There was nothing more to say—nothing he could say—after that kiss in the hall. His composure was shattered. He thought he could teach her something with a kiss? That was his idea? He didn't know now. He couldn't remember much that had happened before that kiss, except that they'd been arguing. She was so sad and angry—that he understood. Things were so volatile between them, but then they kissed... it was not an explosion, it was a revelation. Her taste, her scent, the way her mouth and body pressed to his.

Kissing her was far gentler than any of their other interactions. Peaceful. Like the coming of dawn after a long night. Quiet in its intensity. Silent like a starry sky, yet overwhelming by its vastness. That kiss had been so much more than a kiss, and he wished he'd never done it. This wasn't regret—he didn't feel disgusted or wrong because of the kiss. He felt altered.

She wouldn't understand the gravity of their kiss, and for that, he was thankful. She could never know he felt this way. He wasn't even certain if the kiss would fix the issue of their obvious incompatibility. He was not a person who hid behind a facade. More than anything else, that was what truly made this so difficult for him. He wasn't accustomed to lying. That was part of the reason he didn't like cards. He couldn't bluff. He was honest to a fault, as Amelia would say.

Which meant the situation she'd put them in was likely to fall apart, revealing everything, ruining everything they wanted to protect, including Alston's recovery, if this could be called a recovery.

Graham pictured Alston's face. He was still pale, but peaceful, as if he were sleeping

the most divine of sleeps and would wake up refreshed. But something fearful in Graham told him he wouldn't wake up. They would battle for time, but it was time that would ultimately kill him.

He'd spoken to a student of medicine earlier at the Den, asking questions as carefully as possible to better understand what might be happening in Alston's body. Dr. Bradley had said if Alston's blood would clot sufficiently, it might keep him from bleeding out. But anything could change, and at any moment.

The young student confirmed that information. Given the right circumstances, a small enough vessel injury, the blood would bind together and seal the wound, but it was fragile. Slight movement could dislodge the clot, and the bleeding would start all over again.

But now, as he thought of Alston, he wondered. How big was his injury inside him and how long would the clot hold before the dam broke? How long did he have left with his best friend?

Just four years ago, Graham had met Alston when he'd found him squaring up against three other men, determined to bloody some noses rather than give up his valuables, but instead, he was losing quickly. Graham had come to his rescue. Afterward, they'd gone to the Lyon's Den to celebrate their win over some good whisky, and a friendship had formed. Alston had been so young. So wretchedly daring. He'd thought he was invincible. But the more Graham had learned about Alston's life, the more his respect for the young man grew. Alston had inherited at the age of twelve after his father's untimely death and had learned very quickly how to manage the estates in his care, the people on those estates, his tenants, not to mention his twin sister. And he'd done it all with the often-indifferent assistance of his guardian uncle.

Graham's throat tightened. "Please live," he begged into the silence of his own

bedchamber. “We need you.”

Without Alston, Graham didn’t know what to do with Amelia. She drove him to distraction, made him do reckless things, agree to terrible ideas. He had known acting as her protector in Alston’s stead wasn’t going to be easy, but he’d never imagined things would end up like this. A scandalous mess. A fuse lit and racing toward a barrel of powder that would destroy everything. Only Alston, alive and well, could help them out of this mess.

He couldn’t trust himself anymore, not where Amelia was concerned. He’d lost control—if he ever truly had it. He was a fool to think anything they’d concocted together would work. He should have pushed harder to call for Alston’s man of business and left the pieces to fall where they may.

Graham thought for a moment about betraying Amelia and summoning Alston’s man of business himself. They would have to reveal Alston’s injury and present state. And afterward, Graham would bear the brunt of her wrath.

Graham rubbed his hands over his face. He wouldn’t be sleeping tonight, but he undressed anyway, sliding into bed naked and dousing the candle at his bedside. He closed his eyes, and it wasn’t Alston who filled his mind, but Amelia. Her lips, her breasts, and that bloody noise she’d made. His blood turned hot, and his cock became hard. He sat up and punched his pillow, throwing himself back down and willing himself to sleep. But thoughts of her persisted, stubborn even in his fantasies. She taunted him.

After an hour of tossing and turning and a cock that would soften, only to harden again as soon as he closed his eyes, he surrendered. He took himself in hand, stroking himself with thoughts of Amelia. He imagined her scent, her lips, her pert nipples that he would take in his mouth, and the moans he’d draw from deep within her. He fantasized about the way she’d cry out his name as he took her hard against a wall

and she came with him deep inside her. He imagined in great detail everything he could never do or let live in his thoughts in the light of day.

Amelia. His mind created for him a version of her that wanted him, craved him, and begged for his touch.

He groaned through his release as he came into his hand and then cleaned himself up. He now felt a sense of calm, but he knew it wouldn't last long. As the clock chimed three, he closed his eyes, and this time he could sleep.

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The cloudy, misty morning would not stop Amelia from taking a walk in the park. She needed to get out of this house, out of sight of Graham—as she couldn't help but think of him now—while she gathered her thoughts about that kiss and what it could have meant. Did she believe Fran? Fran had said many things last night that still rattled around her mind like spilled pearls. She had educated Amelia in all the ways a man and woman could share their bodies with each other, and while not scandalized by the information, she was confused. Not everyone married for love, but it was difficult to imagine the women of the ton enjoying their husbands in such a fashion. Except for women like Julia Whistler.

She appeared to be enjoying her widowhood. Likely Julia had enjoyed some time with Graham, based on their closeness at the musicale. It bothered Amelia, and she was jealous, though she refused to examine why.

Another thought occurred. He wouldn't compromise their secret for Julia, would he? Had he? It would be a gross betrayal if he had. No one could know what they were hiding, not even former paramours.

It all made Amelia curious about what other facets of himself Graham hid beneath the stone exterior he seemed to reserve just for her. He'd been different with Julia, more relaxed. He was never that way with her. He seemed to have a secret alternate identity of illicit expertise, and yet he presented to her a stick-in-the-mud facade. And the idea that Graham was somehow masterful at all the things Fran had described last night had also kept Amelia awake into the early hours.

She didn't understand these complex emotions, but all of it was uncomfortable and she didn't want to look at him. If she did, she'd think about that bloody kiss again,

and then she'd think about him doing the other things she'd learned about.

She'd rather eat raw eggs.

So here she marched, the damp sidewalk crunching under her boots as she headed toward a smaller park near the house. There was a lily pond surrounded by lovely willows, and though quite public, it felt private and peaceful. Just what she needed. She needed peace, calm, and a place to get her head back in order.

She stepped onto the gravel path and slowed, taking a deep breath as she let the strain leave her shoulders and drew in the moist air, fragrant with grass and dew. Before seeing the pond, she heard the ducks softly quacking at each other. Soon there would be ducklings to fawn over.

Following the curved path around the pond, Amelia stopped at her favorite bench, nestled between two willows. She sat, unbuttoning her pelisse and leaning back. She didn't know how long she sat there, but the sounds of the surrounding neighborhoods grew louder, the mist thinning as the sun dried the grass and streets. A shadow of a man fell over her, and she jerked, clutching her reticule. She'd followed Fran's advice and put a small sheathed blade from Sam's collection in her reticule.

Amelia twisted toward her foe. "I'm armed," she blurted.

The man grinned, twin dimples winking at her beneath piercing blue eyes, shadowed by a black, John Bull top hat. He was neither young nor old, and his station was ambiguous. Was that intentional? Those with wealth displayed it with their fine clothing. His was well-made, but not overtly expensive. Amelia summarized that all in a blink. A useful tool Sam taught her when facing opponents over cards.

But all of that paled in comparison to his stunningly gorgeous face. He was a pretty man, but his beauty was not the kind to put one at ease. His attractiveness had a

dangerous edge. His focus was too sharp, his smile too practiced and smooth.

“I should hope so,” he said teasingly. “May I sit?”

“No,” Amelia said warily.

“Please, I have an injury, and if it helps, I am acquainted with your brother, Lord Alston.”

Amelia watched him as he sauntered around the bench and sat down. Not too close to her.

“How do you know my brother?”

“The Den.”

She cocked her head. “Forgive me, I’ve heard of the Den, but I don’t know what it is.”

He stroked his chin. “Truly? You must not know your brother very well. He spends quite a bit of time there.”

“I’m his twin. Of course I know him, but since he is my brother, I don’t care to know where he is every moment of his day.” And especially not now, after what she’d learned from Fran last night. Fran assured her that her brother was quite successful with women, if rumors were true. Amelia had gagged.

“No, of course. The Den is the Lyon’s Den, a gaming club run by Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon, the Widow of Whitehall.”

“Who?”

He frowned at her. "Are you sheltered miss?"

"No more than any other woman of two and twenty, or so I thought," Amelia muttered. She really had been naïve. "Can women play there?"

"Certainly, though your brother might not approve. Speaking of which, I have not seen him there as frequently lately. What has he been doing with his time if not divesting idiots of their ready cash?"

Amelia felt the now-familiar prickle of panic, but she schooled her voice. "Oh, he was called away to Scotland. The estate there is having well-water issues, from what I've been told."

He cocked his head. "How boring."

"I assume so, though Stirling is beautiful."

"Oh, is that where he went? It's lovely. Why did you not go with him?"

Amelia considered that. "I didn't want to miss the season." There was something rather intriguing about this man's stare. She couldn't look away. "My brother said he doesn't know how long he will be gone and that I should stay and enjoy myself." Why had she said that? On reflection, she was beginning to reveal rather too much about herself and Sam, all while looking into this man's eyes. She ripped her gaze away and peered out at the gliding ducks.

"Interesting," he replied.

"Not really."

In her periphery, she noticed him turn to face the pond as well. He leaned forward,

resting his elbows on his knees. She studied him more closely, now that he wasn't looking at her. He had thick arms, which she found attractive. What did he do to build such muscle, and why did she like it?

Graham also had muscular arms.

She shook herself out of that thought.

"What is your name?" she asked him abruptly.

He angled his head toward her, those dimples appearing again, and she wanted to sigh blissfully. That kiss had changed her. Her eyes were open to appreciating handsome men in an entirely new fashion. She focused on his lips, and his grin broadened.

"Tristan Chase," he said. "You should come to the Den."

Her stomach fluttered. Was this flirting? "Perhaps I will."

"Splendid. If you see your brother before I do, please inform him that Mrs. Dove-Lyon is intent on speaking with him."

"I will," she said.

He stood and tipped his hat at her before striding away.

Amelia pressed a hand to her dancing stomach. He had nice, broad shoulders, too. Was that something she liked on a man? Yes, yes, it was.

Graham also had large shoulders.

Remembering Graham, she blinked. She was engaged—to the world at least—and yet

she'd made no mention of it to Mr. Chase and enjoyed their bit of banter, if that was the right word for it. She had so many more questions for Fran. Fran would definitely want a detailed description of Mr. Chase. Amelia smiled as she stood and made her way back toward the house. She chewed her lip, guessing at the wicked things Fran would say. Running her hands through the dripping leaves of a willow as she passed, she stepped on something squishy. Wincing, she turned to wipe her boot on the edge of the grass. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement. It was fast, like a shadow, but one thing had been clear.

A John Bull top hat.

Suddenly, Mr. Tristan Chase was not the handsome, flirting fellow she met on a park bench. He was a stranger she'd given more information to than she should have. Cold slithered down her spine as she wiped her shoe and stiffly resumed her walk. She slowed, turning her head left and right as if taking in the sights.

Was he watching her now? Had the shadow been someone else? She couldn't tell if it were her imagination or if it truly felt as though someone was watching her. Or following her?

She crossed a street, passing a flower cart and pausing to turn and smell a flower. She peeked back toward the park, and there he was, exiting the park and turning right, but he looked right at her and winked.

Then he had been following her?

She turned and walked swiftly toward her house. She didn't know what to do, but she knew she must tell Graham. He would know what to do. And if this man knew Sam, he had to know Graham as well. Then she'd have to confess everything she'd said to Mr. Chase. Hopefully she hadn't ruined their scheme, but the chill in her stomach wasn't reassuring. Deep down, she knew she'd done something witless again.

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Graham was at Alston's bedside, reading and sipping coffee when Amelia entered, frantic as she discarded her gloves and coat that Petrov hurried to scoop up.

Graham stood, all thoughts of the night before and the torture it was causing him forgotten as he took in her flushed cheeks and wide eyes.

"I was followed at the park, but before that, I met a man."

"When were you at the park?"

She went to Alston's other side and Graham sat down in his chair.

"This morning."

He felt his apprehension rising already. "Continue."

"I was sitting when a man joined me, introducing himself as a friend. No,"—her eyes cast down as she searched her memory—"an acquaintance. He said he was an acquaintance of Lord Alston's from the Lyon's Den." She paused and raised a brow.

"That's plausible. He's there frequently throughout the week. As am I."

She tilted her head. "Isn't it a gaming hall? You don't play cards."

"No, but I like to watch your brother play, and there are many types of entertainment there."

She looked up in surprise, a blush flooding her cheeks. Graham narrowed his eyes at her as she shook herself out of whatever she'd just imagined.

"Do you know Mr. Tristan Chase?" she asked as she lowered herself to the chair.

Graham sat back and covered his eyes. "Damn." This wasn't good.

"Damn?"

"Damn," he repeated. He should remind her she shouldn't curse, but he didn't have the energy, and he doubted he'd rid her of the habit she'd learned from her brother anyway.

"Who is he?"

"A spy."

Her mouth dropped open.

"Not for the crown. For Mrs. Dove-Lyon."

"The Black Widow of Whitehall," she murmured.

"You know her?"

"He told me about her."

Graham sat forward. "Just how long did you spend conversing with this gentleman?"

She bit her lip. "Not long. But before I knew it I was talking about Lord Alston being away and he'd wanted me to stay in town for the Season..."

He glowered at her. “What all did you say to him?”

“Just that he had gone to Stirling, that there was a problem with the estate there. Then he recommended I visit the Den and that if I saw my brother, to inform him that Mrs. Dove-Lyon would like to meet with him.”

Graham considered her words. “That was all?”

“It wasn’t just what I said to him that worries me. He left the park first, and then I started to walk home. But then I noticed he was following me. And I think he wanted me to see him following me, to frighten me. It was a warning of some sort.”

Graham stilled. “What does the Widow want with Alston?”

She pressed her lips together. “Is she anything like Julia? Maybe she’s interested in his skills outside of cards.”

Graham held her stare. “I beg your pardon? What does the viscountess have to do with any of this?”

“Don’t pretend innocence. You’re not good at it. I’m talking about romantic interest.”

His jaw flexed. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon is the proprietor of the Lyon’s Den. She doesn’t fraternize with the members, as far as I know, and she’s... actually, I don’t know how old she is. She is always veiled in black.”

Amelia leaned forward. “She’s veiled? Always? How fascinating. I think I’d like to meet her.”

Graham could almost chuckle at her giddy curiosity, but there was far too much weighing on him. He finished his coffee and stood. “I’ll go to the Den and look into

the matter. What are the required engagements for the day?"

"Ugh, don't say that word," she muttered. "There are no plans. We are free to avoid each other all day. Isn't that splendid?" Her smile was falsely cheery as she stood.

"I suppose," Graham replied. "I have to see my man of business, and then I'll go to the Den while it's quiet and see if I can meet with Mr. Chase."

"If you're lucky, he might be right outside our door," she teased.

"If he's lucky, he won't be."

She raised a brow at him.

"I'll see you at dinner."

"Or don't." She took his leftover scone and his chair, picking up the book he'd been reading, and dismissing him with inattention.

Graham sighed and left the room. This was probably better, returning to their comfortable dislike. Safer, too. He didn't want to broach the subject of the kiss, but he had a feeling that what had happened between them last night would fester like a wound and would need to be dealt with. Sooner or later.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

A melia wanted to be brave and nonchalant about her meeting in the park yesterday morning, but in truth, she was scared. She'd spent the day locked away in Sam's room. He'd taken broth from a spoon for her twice, but as she watched him, a cold ache began to grow in her chest, a chill she couldn't rid from her skin, no matter how many cups of hot tea she drank or thick blankets she draped over herself. By the evening, she couldn't take it anymore, and she'd had Fran fill a tub of scalding hot water. She sank into the steaming water, hissing as her skin adjusted to the heat. When she closed her eyes, all she could see was blue eyes looking back at her and those charming dimples. What a pretty predator he made, Mr. Tristan Chase.

Now that a new dawn had broken, she wanted to know more, but there was uncertainty in her heart. How had she not realized that the gilded cage she lived in was of her own design? She longed for freedom, so she thought, but if she'd learned anything these past few days, she'd learned that she was woefully unprepared to face the world on her own. She understood it too little.

Graham knew it. He knew the snares she'd stumble into because he was older and wiser. And what had she done? Ignored most of his advice and made things worse—or at least more complicated. So what could she do? How could she make up for her mistakes and still protect her brother's estate, his recovery, and her inheritance? She needed help. And she had to begin to truly change her petulant attitude and listen before she acted—if only for Sam's sake.

This wasn't going to be easy for her, but something had to change. She had to play the part of a proper young lady and be so boring that no one would think to look twice at her.

First change? No more daring gowns. She could wear white, but perhaps that was too drastic a shift. Pastels—yes, a few pastels. She'd walk with a parasol and only with an escort—a footman and her maid. Graham would drive her around the park, where they could be seen by society but not heard.

Those were decent ideas, now that she thought about it.

And for the next two days she played the part of a demure young lady. She attempted needlework but stabbed herself too frequently. Reading was always a favorite pastime, but thoughts about her brother and Blakewood made concentration difficult. She tried writing in her journal and drawing next, but again grew bored. She was a woman of action, archery, hunting, riding. She didn't have the ability to be still and docile for long periods of time. It wasn't part of her makeup.

During these fruitless ladylike pursuits Graham had been exceedingly busy and absent from the house and Sam's bedside. They had no events demanding their attention for those two days, but then that evening was one of the first significant balls of the season, and it could not be missed.

Dressed in a buttery yellow that frankly wasn't the best for her complexion, Amelia paired it with a pale-blue shawl that matched her eyes. The dash of color, though light, helped tremendously. Graham was not yet ready when she came downstairs, but he was home according to Mrs. Keen. Amelia waited in the drawing room. Before he entered, she heard the clip of his shoes on the tile.

He looked underfed and unrested, as evidenced by the grayish half-moons under his eyes, but still as elegant as a statue. A David dressed in evening attire, if David had had the shoulders of a blacksmith.

"Ready?" Amelia asked.

“Who is our host tonight?”

“The Duchess of Lumond. She has three daughters all out for the season. Tonight’s theme is the birth of spring.” She paused at his side, and he was frowning at her dress. Her modest yellow dress reached nearly to her throat. He couldn’t possibly find fault with it.

“Is this a new dress?” he asked.

“A gift from my aunt last year. Won’t she be pleased that I’m wearing it?”

“Will she be in attendance?” He continued his unwavering inspection of her gown.

“No.” Amelia spun in a circle so he could finish his appraisal. “She is not acquainted with the duchess.”

“But you and your brother are?” he asked as he waved for her to proceed with him into the hall.

“Of course. Sam is a titled bachelor. He’s invited to everything and, therefore, so am I,” she spoke over her shoulder.

Graham chuckled as they entered the front hall. “I’ve never been swarmed by the marriage-minded mamas, and for that I am thankful. Must be my lack of title, and fortune born from hard work.”

Amelia stopped before the mirror to check her hair one last time. Fran had formed her plaited hair into a crown and pinned it in place with blue topaz combs.

“And you’re especially safe now that you belong to me,” Amelia said. He suddenly stilled behind her, and his gaze sought hers in the mirror. There was something

devastatingly honest in his eyes. A startled realization of the truth in her words, and then, heat. A memory of that kiss came flooding back to her, and warmth rushed up her throat.

Blast it, she only meant to tease him. Not provoke this. But this was what he and Fran had meant, wasn't it? A knowledge. A look. There was something about him that reminded her of their kiss. Did she look the same? Would others be able to decipher her expressions and know what they had shared?

He broke eye contact and accepted his greatcoat from the butler. Amelia waited for the maid to secure her cloak.

She hated how suddenly aware she was of Graham. She was captivated by his walk, the sway of his shoulders, and the memory of the silky feel of his hair between her fingers. The groom held open the carriage door, and Graham waited, offering his hand as usual. Amelia took it, reminding herself not to be contrary any longer. She needed him. Sam needed him. She tucked her hand in his, and the warmth shocked her as it soaked through her glove. Taking her seat, he followed, sitting across from her.

"You look enchanting tonight," he said.

She almost smiled. "Enchanting?"

"Is that not appropriate?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "I'm not sure. This gown is not something I'd consider flattering for me. I've worn much prettier gowns, and you've said nothing."

"Would you have accepted a compliment from me if I had?"

“Probably not. But enchanting ?” This time, she did smile.

His lips twitched, and he rolled his eyes. “Fine. You look like a doll my sister Daisy would have set around the nursery table and served tea to.”

Amelia laughed, and he grinned.

“That I believe,” she said.

Something tight in her belly loosened, but there was still an awkwardness. What did they really have to say to each other if they weren’t arguing or talking about Sam?

The carriage ride passed in silence, Graham’s profile highlighted by the lamp through the window. What was he looking at? What was he thinking? she wondered. She tugged at the fingers of her gloves, more anxious about tonight than she’d ever been about an evening event. Not even at her come-out ball had she felt this fluttering in her chest, like if she leapt high enough, whatever was inside her would carry her into the sky.

Now that she recalled it, her come-out ball was the first and only time she and Graham had shared a dance. He’d told her Sam had requested he dance with her, not that she was wanting for partners. But she couldn’t refuse him. He’d looked at her differently that night, watching her from across the ballroom. She had taken far too many peeks at him, his chiseled jaw and those captivating green eyes had her well on her way to succumbing to an infatuation that night with her brother’s new friend. He was older than Sam’s other friends. A mature man. Someone steady and knowledgeable. Someone she could rely on and trust. She’d thought they would at least become friends themselves, if not more.

But something had happened that night, and those magical feelings had vanished. Was it him? Or was it her? She couldn’t remember anymore exactly what had spoiled

everything between them.

But tonight he would dance with her again, likely more than once. Time would tell if he could tolerate it or if she could. Amelia couldn't tell what would happen next, though it did seem that their kiss had shifted something between them. Would they continue to dislike each other? Would they become friends after all? Something more? No, she wouldn't even think about it. That was absurd. Even a lasting friendship was highly unlikely. But a lifetime together?

She snorted, and he briefly glanced at her.

To share a lifetime with him would be torture. Whatever her first feelings had been, whatever that kiss had momentarily awakened, he now simply made her feel inadequate almost without fail. To feel so undeserving—so unloved—for the rest of her life would drive her mad. Then he'd lock her away in Bedlam.

Although, she could see he did have his reasons for his past criticisms, even if she thought he should have been kinder. These recent days had shown her the errors of her impetuous ways. Or perhaps she was simply maturing, the way traumatic events forced one to reevaluate themselves. Amelia had thought she'd done enough traumatic maturation ten years ago, after losing her father and having to face so many adults who wanted to usurp her life and keep her away from her brother.

Her first and best friend was always her brother, the other half of herself. The only other person who knew how Papa liked a bit of chocolate in his coffee or how he took three biscuits to bed with him every night. The sound of his roaring snores. Only Sam could keep those memories alive for her, and everyone had wanted to separate them, set them on two different paths into adulthood. She and Sam had fought so hard, as mere children, to stay connected. Now... now Death wanted to take him. She'd fight Death too, if she had to.

But at least she wasn't doing it alone. She'd had Sam back then, and she had Graham now. However this ended, she wouldn't forget that Graham had tried. She sighed inwardly. She would not hate him anymore. She couldn't promise she'd like him, but she wouldn't hate him. She'd no longer insult him for his stodgy attitude, boring demeanor, or scolding judgment. He was serious and steady, and she could respect that.

"Are you ready?" he asked, breaking through her thoughts.

"We're here already?"

The door opened, and he stepped out, waiting to hand her down. She placed her hand in his, stepping out and standing by his side. He linked their arms and placed his hand over hers, where it rested on his forearm. The touch sent tingles up her arm, but Amelia didn't pull away. In fact, she wondered what it would be like if they stayed like this. How would it feel to be close all night, tender with each other, affectionate? What if she pretended to be a woman he would want to marry? A woman who did not embarrass him or insult him, one who let him be the one in control—at least sometimes. Part of her revolted at the idea, but another softer part, a tired part, wanted to let go, let him carry the weight of expectation for both of them. She was sure he could do it easily with those broad shoulders of his.

They entered the front hall, lining up with the other guests to greet their host.

He leaned in. "You're quiet," he said.

"I know. Just thinking."

"Of?"

"Everything and nothing."

His brow pinched.

“No need to worry. I’m worn out, too tired to be the nuisance I usually am.”

He only grunted in reply. They reached their host, and Amelia summoned a dazzling smile to greet the Duchess of Lumond, the duke, and their three daughters, Maryann, Diana, and Juliet.

“My dear, where is your brother?” Her Grace asked.

Amelia turned to Graham. He cleared his throat. “He sends his regrets, Your Grace. He had urgent business with his estate up north.”

She frowned, casting a regretful look at her daughters. “How unfortunate.”

“Yes,” Amelia said. “But he will return as soon as possible. I know he is sad to miss your party.”

She appeared mollified by that. “Once he returns, he will have make a morning call to make up for it.”

Pleasantries completed, Graham led Amelia to the ballroom, guiding her down the crowded hall into a glittering room of polished white marble floors. The walls and ceiling shimmered in gold paper and paint. Garlands of flowers were dripping from every available surface, and bird cages filled with colorful birds were placed sparsely around the edges. Spring had exploded into the room and surpassed beauty into something garish.

“Interesting,” Graham muttered.

“It’s hideous. These poor birds appear distressed.”

“Indeed. Promise me you won’t do something reckless like let them out.”

Amelia gasped up at him. “I would never! The poor things could get hurt! And most of them aren’t native to England and should not be set loose only to suffer and die in our differing climate. What do you take me for?”

“Forgive me,” he said, a hint of a smile just visible.

“Maybe, maybe not.”

He chuckled, and it sent a riot of shivers through her body. She drew a breath, once again tantalized by the idea of playing a part that would make him weak for her. At least she thought she knew what type of woman he’d want. Someone sweet, pliant, quiet, and reliant on him. The opposite of everything she was.

“Will you be dancing with me?” she asked.

“Am I not obligated to?”

“Yes, but not more than once. And you don’t play cards, so how will you occupy yourself while I’m on the dance floor?”

He looked out at the dance floor where no couples had yet ventured. “You plan to dance often?”

“As much as possible. I love to dance.”

“With whom?”

“Anyone acceptable who asks.”

He gave the gentlemen around them a hard, assessing look. “But I am your jealous and possessive fiancé. What if I don’t let you?”

Oof, something hot and urgent erupted inside her. His words both infuriated and delighted her. She thought of her idea again—to be everything he wanted, just for one night, just to see what he would be like.

“Do you want to keep me all to yourself?” she said in a lower, breathier tone.

Then he did that thing she hated where he went rigid all over, as if so offended by whatever she’d done or said that he’d turned to stone, like she was Medusa, cursing him. “Er, you should do what you normally do.”

Amelia sighed and shrugged one shoulder. “That wouldn’t be wise. Dancing until my feet ache and then trouncing gentlemen at cards until my brother—or you—drags me away doesn’t fit with my new image. I also like to lure men into the garden for a game of seek and find, but they never find me until they wander back into the ballroom, ruffled and angry, and then I apologize and say I forgot we were ever playing. I usually do that to the rude men who insult the wallflowers.”

He frowned. “Let’s not do that tonight.”

“No, probably not the best idea. So what should we do?”

“We’ll dance two dances, both waltzes, and then you may dance with gentlemen I approve of. I’ll escort you into dinner, and afterward we’ll leave.”

No seek and find? I’ll let you catch me , she wanted to tease but wisely kept her mouth shut.

“Very well.”

He raised a brow. “That’s all?”

“I’m not going to argue with you tonight.”

“Are you unwell?” he asked incredulously.

“No, as I said, I’m tired. I’m exhausted in all the ways a person can be, inside and out, in every waking thought and in every dream. I’m too weary.”

Something unreadable passed over his features. “I know what you mean. I am, too.”

“Then let’s be easy on each other tonight.”

“Deal.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

The first strains of music floated through the air, and the birds sang on cue in response. The crowded ballroom took a collective gasp. Graham had the pleasure of watching Amelia's face light with awe. He'd never seen such a thing. She tended to view her surroundings with an arrogant smile, which always infuriated him. But he couldn't remember why as he looked at her now.

The birds sang, and the quartet accompanied their airy thrills and chirps.

"I wonder how long it took to train them!" she said over the music.

Graham couldn't pull his focus away from her glistening lips. He swallowed, heat rushing over his body as only one thought came into his head.

Let's play seek and find in the garden.

Instead, he bent close so she could hear him. "I'll get us some champagne." She nodded, her wispy curls caressing his face, and he couldn't stop himself from inhaling the fragrant scent of her hair and skin. He wisely stepped away and put distance between them, heading toward the refreshment room while everyone was occupied with being serenaded by the birds.

The birds finished their regal display, and footmen whisked away their cages to the applause of the crowd as he returned to Amelia with two glasses, finding her exactly where he'd left her. For some reason, that surprised him. What didn't surprise him was the presence of Sir Daniel. He hoped the man wasn't fishing for details about Alston's recent absence from his private card parties.

“There you are,” Amelia said, smiling at him as she accepted the glass of champagne. Her eyes brightened the instant she saw him, and he was momentarily stunned. Was that relief he saw? Affection?

“So it is true,” Sir Daniel said, breaking his focus on Amelia. “Engaged?”

“As I said,” Amelia replied.

“I couldn’t believe the rumors, not even as rampant as the gossips were. By Alston’s account, you two don’t get along, do you?”

Amelia slid her arm through his and leaned close, her breast brushing his bicep. His mouth went dry.

“On the contrary, as I’m sure you can see. And it makes perfect sense,” she argued. “Who else would my brother trust more with my wellbeing?”

She didn’t have to lie there.

“Hm, and here I had hoped one day I might have that honor,” he laughed. “Where is Alston tonight?” Sir Daniel asked.

“Scotland,” Amelia replied, her tone cooler. Graham should dispose of Sir Daniel before he stirred her temper further, but part of him wanted to see her eviscerate Sir Daniel.

“Indeed? Why would he leave at the start of the season?” Sir Daniel pressed.

“The well water may be rotten, and some sheep became ill,” Amelia said. “Or something of that nature.”

“Oh,” Sir Daniel blanched. “That is rather unfortunate. Something similar happened to Mr. Pibley. He lost his whole flock in the space of a month. Devastated his estate.”

Amelia turned to Graham in concern. “Might we lose the whole flock? That’s over two hundred sheep!”

“Alston will take things in hand, I’m certain.”

“When did he leave?”

“A week ago? The day of Lady Cecily’s garden party,” Graham said.

“Yes,” Amelia said. “I announced the engagement that day. It slipped out in conversation with my Aunt Ruth.”

Also truthful. Should he be worried she was getting better at deception?

Sir Daniel nodded. “Your cousin is trying to ingratiate himself with me in your brother’s absence. He seems certain he’ll one day hold the title.”

Amelia said nothing and sipped her drink. Graham shifted closer to her as Sir Daniel studied her in the awkward silence.

“Well, forgive me,” he finally said, “but I see a friend. I eagerly await our dance, Amelia.”

Graham stiffened. “Lady Amelia.”

Amelia glanced up at him in surprise.

“Did you give him leave to use your name so informally?” Graham asked. He then

turned to Sir Daniel. “Did she?”

“I did not,” Amelia said.

Sir Daniel laughed. “My apologies, I misspoke. Your brother speaks of you so frequently, I forgot we’re not as good friends as he and I are.” He bowed.

“Well it remains Lady Amelia Clark to you,” Graham said. “Soon to be Lady Amelia Blakewood.”

Amelia’s hand tightened on his arm, but he did not look at her as Sir Daniel examined them both with renewed interest.

“You know, your brother has also mentioned you are quite adept at cards,” Sir Daniel said.

“Quite adept,” she agreed frostily.

“Might we have a little game this evening?”

“I’m afraid—”

“Certainly,” Graham cut across what was clearly about to be Amelia’s refusal. “A game in place of your dance,” he said.

Sir Daniel smirked. “Perfect. Until then.” He sauntered away, and Amelia again looked up at Graham, waiting for him to acknowledge her. He turned to face her, blocking out the crowd.

“You said no cards,” she said accusingly. “If I play him, I will undoubtedly embarrass him when I beat him thoroughly.”

“I would love to see that, and I have every faith in you to do so. I’d prefer that to watching him put his hands on you.”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. “Oh.”

Graham tossed back the rest of his champagne and turned back toward the dance floor. “The dancing is about to start.”

“Yes,” She finished her glass in one swallow, and a footman collected both glasses. The music started, summoning the dancers to the floor.

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The room spun, but they hadn't yet begun to dance. Graham set his hand on her lower back, and she placed one hand on his shoulder, the muscles shifting under her fingers.

Their other hands were clasped together, and the tension rose as they waited for the first steps to begin. With her weight on her toes in anticipation of that first step, she could not look at him, not right now. She knew her cheeks were flushed, her pulse racing like a hare, and he would notice these things, but she could not look him in the eye, so she stared at his throat. He had three freckles that dotted the right side of his neck. He had a superb jaw line, cut like a Roman god, and she could see the stubble of his hair just under his skin. All things she'd never noticed before. Such ordinary things, but they seemed to smooth the edges he'd used so bluntly on her over the years. She had molded him into such a monstrous figure in her mind—a cold, unfeeling block of stone—and yet there was something so human about those freckles, that beard stubble. He'd be quite hairy if he didn't shave. What would he look like with a beard?

The music began, and he stepped forward. Caught off guard, Amelia nearly stumbled, but he tugged her close, lifting her against him just enough to catch her feet once more as they went into a turn.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes, I was just taken by surprise. I was thinking.”

“About what?”

She hesitantly peered up at him. “What you’d look like with a beard.”

He half-smiled. “A beard? Like my father, I suppose.”

“Your father has a beard?”

“He grew it this last year. My mother hates it.”

Amelia bit her lip. He danced so easily, without effort, and so lightly that they floated across the floor.

“You dance exceptionally well,” she admitted.

“Alston danced with you when you were learning, correct?”

“Yes,” she smiled, the fond memories stirring her joy.

“It was the same with Daisy and me. I had to stand in for many lessons. Mother said it was for my improvement, as well.”

“Ah, so my brother’s excellent dancing skills are thanks to me. I’ll remind him of that.”

Graham smiled, but it slipped away. A heavy cloud of melancholy fell over them both as they turned. At that moment, Amelia guessed they were both thinking of Sam. He wouldn’t want them to do so. If he were there he’d say something ridiculous to bring levity to the moment.

“Can you imagine what he would say if he saw us now?”

Graham’s smile returned, and he laughed. “He’d swear we were up to some scheme

concocted by you, and you were blackmailing me to go along with it.”

“Blackmailing you? With what?” Amelia asked eagerly. “What could you possibly have done? Chip a teacup?”

His gaze caught hers, shining with amusement. “Think of something. What could I do that’s worth blackmail?”

Amelia couldn’t stop herself from smiling. This was fun. She was having fun with Graham, and they were dancing. Something extra must have been in the champagne. “I’ll have to think about that. It must be something diabolical.”

He laughed again.

“I’ve got it. You’re an elusive art thief, wanted in every country.”

He raised a skeptical brow. “An art thief?”

“Would you prefer jewels?”

“Perhaps. Easier to lug around than a painting.”

“Very well, jewels it is. At every party you attend something goes missing. Being the observant person I am, I see you pocket the duchess’s diamond brooch. I search your cloak while you’re in the study with Sam, not going over ledgers like you say, but drinking yourselves silly, and find a stash of gems. When I confront you, I demand you spend an evening with me, being nice.”

“Nice? Is that all?”

“Yes, it’s quite the feat for you, and Sam would—”

“Am I truly never kind to you?” he asked in a serious tone.

Amelia bit her lip. “Are you going to keep interrupting me? That’s not very nice.”

He half-smiled. “But am I?”

“If I’m being honest, we’re not nice to each other . It’s not just you. I do things to irritate you on purpose.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it forces you do human things like scowl and bicker with me. You can’t be a faultless, perfect marble statue when you’re berating me for leading a goat into the drawing room to sketch it sitting on the settee.”

“That goat destroyed my hat. And you didn’t have to clean up after the goat. Do you never consider the work your larks create for others?”

“Yes, I do. And yes, I did.”

“Did what?”

“I took care of the cleaning myself. My brother dragged you away, and I made my quick little sketch, and then I swept up goat droppings.”

“ You ?”

“You believe me so delicate I cannot sully myself by performing a menial task?”

“I suppose I did. Not delicate, but rather... spoiled. I forget sometimes that you don’t have everything I have. Things I likely take for granted. You and your brother have

both done a remarkable job making it this far together, considering all things.”

Amelia rolled her eyes but smiled. “Yes, I could be much worse.”

He chuckled. “Much, much. I can only imagine.”

“So where were we?”

He spun her one final time, and the dance was over.

“You’ve discovered I’m a jewel thief,” he said quietly as he led her off the floor.

Her next partner approached, but Amelia wanted to hide. She wasn’t ready to end her time with Graham—something that had never happened before.

“What will you do during the next dance? Pickpocket the other guests?”

He smirked. “I will dance as well.”

“With whom?” A burst of jealousy soured her tongue.

He peered around. “Miss Flemings seems rather bored there, against the wall.”

Amelia peered over at Miranda Flemings, dressed in a gown two seasons old and trying her best to be invisible. Graham would be kind to her. He really was a bloody saint.

“Just remember, you’re already engaged. Don’t let her steal you from me.”

His smile broadened. “I’ll do my best.”

Amelia's heart skipped as he strolled away, and she fisted her hands. This was getting ridiculous.

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Four dances later, Amelia needed a rest. She always left her fifth dance free to find refreshment or simply sit and rest her feet. Graham was by her side immediately once the music ended, and she discovered she enjoyed the lingering touches and secret smiles they shared when they found something amusing. The way he seemed to dote on her. Was this pretending, or was this the beginning of actual friendship between them?

“They’re opening the doors to the cooler air,” he murmured in her ear. Her skin prickled with bumps. Maybe not just friendship, then. The longer this went on, the more she caught herself staring at his mouth, and she was really beginning to be annoyed with herself for how quickly her body had betrayed her after one kiss. One kiss .

She shouldn’t be swayed so easily, but there was something about Graham that slipped under her defenses. Perhaps it was because he was safe. Yes! He was safe because he was ultimately not interested in her, and there was nothing more than physical attraction. That was all. She knew he didn’t want her or her money. This removed all the usual obstacles that made her keep her emotional distance from gentlemen.

But Graham, her pretend fiancé, was no threat to her freedom, and that only made it too easy to feel these confusing emotions. Like wanting to kiss him because that kiss had been revolutionary. Or to feel held, because with her emotions so chaotic, always trampling her for one reason or another, she could use a hug. And if he truly understood the weariness she felt down to her bones, he likely needed a hug as well. He needed someone who understood exactly why he was hurting and would be a great comfort. Like her.

But also, thinking on everything Fran had said and her newfound knowledge , she knew there was more to experience. And with Graham, there was no way he'd let anything happen that would hurt them. Perhaps she could convince him that a little more kissing would only help their fake engagement appear more real until they no longer needed it.

“A walk in the cooler air would be nice, then I will trounce Sir Daniel in the card room.”

He smiled wickedly, and she felt that smile, if such a thing were possible, inside her body, where banked coals of curious desire glowed brighter. If she were to convince him to be a little reckless, he couldn't know she was doing the convincing intentionally. He'd never agree to it then.

Many of the guests had already escaped to the chilled evening air, taking in deep breaths and sighing with relief. All those flowers and fountains had added to the humidity and heat of the ballroom, and the crush of people had grown to uncomfortable levels. Graham led Amelia down the steps, where footmen lined the walks with lit torches to ensure proper behavior and adequate light. The Duchess of Lumond would entertain no scandal on her premises that would mar the reputation of her parties and her daughters.

For once, Amelia was not interested in flaunting her rebellious streak and chose a bench in view of everyone taking the air, while Graham stood to the side. Amelia slipped off her dancing shoes under her skirt and flexed her feet with a wince.

“Feet sore?”

Amelia nodded. She kicked out one of her dancing slippers to show him the delicate creation.

“Why do ladies wear such flimsy dancing shoes?”

“How else will I float and flounce like a will-o-the-wisp without scraps of fabric for slippers?” Amelia said. “My marriage prospects depend on my ability to appear utterly without solid substance to trick unsuspecting men like yourself.”

He chuckled. “I am utterly bamboozled.”

“Bamboozled. Such a silly word.”

“Indeed. Daisy and I have a game where we report to each other the most bizarre words we can discover and keep score. She is winning.”

“And you let her win.”

“Don’t tell her that. She’ll be displeased with me.”

Amelia raised a brow. “Now I do have something to blackmail you with.”

He folded his arms. “What about my light-fingered habit?”

“The scorn of a sister is far more devastating.”

“True.”

Amelia slipped her shoes back on and stood. “My feet feel better.”

“Are you ready to crush a man’s spirit?”

Amelia’s heart fluttered. Why did he have to be so sweet to her? Wait, was that sweet?

“Always.”

Few women were permitted in this card room, but she received an invitation to join the fray, or rather, to join a table seated across from Sir Daniel. He gave her a smile that made her stomach feel like she'd swallowed grease.

“Do you know how to shuffle cards, or would you like me to help you?” Amelia asked, the very picture of concern.

The few of Sir Daniel's friends in attendance laughed at her quip. Sir Daniel handed over the deck and leaned back, folding his arms, still smiling.

Amelia shuffled the deck the way Sam had taught her and then the way she'd taught herself, which made Sir Daniel's smile slip, especially because she did it without breaking eye contact with him. Behind her, Graham stood like a sentry. She lifted her chin and dealt the hands.

Sir Daniel eyed her carefully and the tension around the room quieted as they played. Amelia kept her cards close, being watchful of Sir Daniel, his maneuvers, his confidence as each hand was dealt. He was stealthy, tricky like a fox. He won the first round of Commerce and shrugged with a pouty and false frown.

“Deeply regretful,” he said as his cronies chuckled like he'd said something witty.

Amelia smiled sweetly and batted her eyelashes. “One more chance, please?” she pleaded. His gaze narrowed on her, but he nodded.

“Of course. Who am I to refuse such a dulcet request?”

“Thank you,” she said, grinning as she took the cards he dealt.

He winked at her and Amelia winked back.

Then, round after round after round, she watched the joy leave his face more and more completely. His color deepened, his confused frowns turned to frustration and then anger as Amelia took him for everything he had. Well, not everything. He was smart about his wagering, but she took every coin he'd won that night from the poor fools he'd played earlier as well as the silver fox pin in his cravat.

But unlike most gentlemen who loathed to lose to a woman, Sir Daniel's anger lifted swiftly as Amelia accepted her winnings, holding out her hand for the silver pin.

Sir Daniel came around the table and sat on the corner, his gaze wandering over her.

"I underestimated you."

"Yes. Don't do it again, and perhaps next time we play, you won't lose so much."

He half-smiled and cocked his head, his thick dark hair pomaded into dashing waves falling over his brow, no longer so tidy after he'd been running his hand through them in aggravation. His dark-brown eyes lit with interest.

"Will there be a next time?"

"I haven't yet decided."

He set the fox pin in her palm and covered it with his hand. "Let me know when you do."

Amelia pulled her hand from under his and considered the pin. "You know, on closer inspection, it's not to my taste. You can keep it. Goodnight, Sir Daniel." She set it down on the table and stood and turned. Sounds of appreciation from onlookers

followed her as she walked away. Graham stood by the drinks table where he'd remained for the final two rounds, sipping whisky, not watching her but looking past her. His expression was dark.

"He doesn't look crushed," he said.

"I know. I think he liked it."

Graham set his glass down and took her hand, leading her out of the room. Her heart took off excitedly, far more so than when she'd beat Sir Daniel over and over and over. He did not take her back to the ballroom, but down a quiet hall, farther away from the music, to a quiet alcove shrouded in shadow next to a large window with a padded bench.

Amelia felt her excitement ebb away and she prepared herself for a lecture. He must be displeased with her card playing for some reason and was looking for a quiet spot to scold her properly. But she couldn't control how Sir Daniel felt about the game. It wasn't her fault that he was flirting with her.

He tugged the tie of the curtain, and it fell over the alcove.

"What are you doing?" Amelia whispered. "Do you know what this looks like?"

"No one saw. I made sure. Why? Are you familiar with being led to a private alcove?"

"Yes. A few men have tried and learned never to do so again. But your intent is undoubtedly not lascivious; therefore, I can only assume you want to berate me for what happened in the card room."

"I'm not particularly happy with the way Sir Daniel was looking at you, no."

“I don’t have control of his eyeballs. It’s not my fault.”

“Of course it’s not your fault.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

“I just needed a moment.”

Amelia folded her arms. “Moments can be taken in the retiring room. Why am I here?”

He stayed silent. His face was a mask of shadows. Amelia reached for the curtain.

“Don’t leave.” He grabbed her hand.

“Are you mad? We can’t be caught like this. Not only for the obvious reasons, but because we will never be invited again, and my brother will want to know specifically why.”

“We’re engaged. It doesn’t matter.”

“We’re not really engaged, so it does matter. We can’t compromise each other. There is a future after this where you may want a spouse, as will Sam and your sis—”

He tugged her close and covered her mouth with his hand. “Just be quiet for a moment. I know all those things. I know all the stakes. I just wanted to be alone with you to calm myself before I did something daft and broke his hand for touching you.”

Amelia drew in a breath. Her lips twitching against his palm, even gloved, made the act feel intimate. She nodded in understanding, and his hand fell away. He was being jealous and possessive for real. He felt those emotions because of her. She didn’t

know what to do or say with that information, so she remained still and silent as their breathing filled the space of the alcove. He still held her hand. She was suddenly very aware of her body and how close they stood—how just shifting her weight from foot to foot could bring them closer. He was a looming shadow, but he did not frighten her. She wanted to reach out and touch him.

Her feet ached still, and when she tried to roll one ankle to take the pressure off her heel, she lost her balance. She fell against him, and his arm came around her.

“Sorry,” she said. “My feet are still sore.”

His head bent near her ear, like he was going to say something, but he didn’t. Amelia turned her head toward his, mistaking the distance, and her lips brushed his chin. She hadn’t meant to, but then he swooped in, catching her mouth, groaning quietly into the kiss as his arms brought her tightly into him and her head tipped back.

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Graham knew this was wrong, but he couldn't bring himself to stop. He'd lit a fuse with that first kiss, and he'd been steadily burning ever since. Amelia both pushed and pulled at him in so many different ways, and a man could only take so much. Her eyes followed him, her touch lingered, and her voice softened when she said his name.

Somewhere between Alston falling off the horse and this moment, he'd lost his mind.

He dragged his lips over hers more forcefully than before, parting the delicate seam and taking that first sip of the glory inside. She opened her mouth, and he took more. He'd take everything she gave him.

He reminded himself that this charade would eventually come to an end. It had to end, one way or another, with Alston alive or with Alston's death. He could not keep this volatile, exasperating, remarkable woman. He could not live the rest of his life feeling so... unraveled.

Her tongue touched his, timid, soft, and hot. She made a little sound, and he stiffened all over, his cock tightening his trousers. She was molded to him; she would feel it; she would know how badly he wanted her, and he would have no excuse, no words in his vacant brain, to deny what his body so readily craved.

Graham groaned, his mind creating visions of her here, right now, against the wall right behind her, lifted in his arms, legs around his hips as he covered her cries of passion with his mouth.

She answered, moaning so softly that it was only for him. He broke the kiss, trailing

his tongue down her neck. Her fingers dug into his hair, and her head turned to the side, giving him more tender skin to taste. Now she squirmed, pressing closer. He slid his thigh between her legs and reached for her hips, lifting her to her toes, and rocking her. She let out a little cry as she bucked against him, the folds of her dress a hinderance between them. His cock throbbed for her beneath his breeches.

He dragged his teeth down her neck, cursing this blasted dress and its modest neckline. He wanted to lick her breasts and leave marks all over her delicate skin, but he'd already reached the frilly ruffle of her neckline, too far from the valley of her breasts to take her into his mouth.

He lightly bit the curve where her neck met her shoulder, and she shuddered. He buried his face into her neck, bracing himself for what he was about to do next, to shed the very control that made him who he was—a gentleman, a man who lived by his word. That would all come to an end when he lifted her dress and did every imaginable wicked thing he could think of doing in this alcove at this ball.

“Oh, Graham, don't stop, please,” she whispered achingly.

Her words stunned him back to sense.

What was he doing? How had he—they—? He lifted his head, stepping back and letting go of her.

She slumped back against the wall, panting and needy. “What are you doing? What's wrong?”

“I'm not going to take you in an alcove during a ball. I am not that man, Amelia. Not with you, not with anyone.”

Her hands were shaky as she stared at him, clasping them together at her chest, like

she was cold without his arms around her.

“So you’ve decided you don’t want me? You dragged me to this alcove, and you kissed me. But now you’ve changed your mind? And what am I supposed to do? Just accept that?”

He ran his hand through his hair, pulling at the roots, hoping that the pain would sober him. “Yes. We can’t be doing this.”

“And yet we did. What does that mean?”

“I’m sorry, I... I crossed the line. I got caught in the moment, the jealousy, and I didn’t think; I just acted.”

She drew in a breath. “Go away.”

He looked down at his rigid shaft. He couldn’t leave, not like this. She noticed it, and he didn’t bother to hide it. He let her look at him and see him for what he was, just another carnal beast who couldn’t control his urges.

“I’m just a man, Amelia. I can’t help what I feel or think.”

“About me, or about any woman? Could I be any woman standing here, and you’d act the same way? Was I just the one standing closest?”

He winced. “Christ, no. That isn’t what I meant. You know this is not who I am. It’s being close to you that does it to me. I confess, you drive me mad—you’re so damn beautiful. You’re my betrothed, but you’re not, and yet when I look at you...”

Her breathing had become ragged. “What? You look at me, and what?”

“You’re mine. I look at you and think no other man should touch you because you’re mine.” He couldn’t look away from her, and the way she stared back, his cock wasn’t softening anytime soon. There was a challenge in her eyes—to prove he meant it, to step toward her and take what was his.

But that wasn’t the truth. She wasn’t his. They’d both been clear, and he couldn’t let her impulsive fire spread to him.

“You should go first,” he said.

She huffed out a laugh of disbelief. “That’s it? This is over?”

“This is all that there will ever be. You’re not really mine.”

She stepped closer to him, and he tensed. He would not be able to stop a second time.

“You’re right. I’m not yours. Because you’re a coward.”

Ice replaced the fire in his blood. “Thank you for the reminder.”

She slipped through the curtain and disappeared. Graham stayed, breathing deep and hating the way his body fought with reason. At last, he got himself under control, but the night wasn’t over. They would be returning to the same residence, woefully unchaperoned, and the only thing keeping their attraction in check was their mutual anger—at him. He wanted her; she wanted him. They both knew that now. There was no hiding it. But that didn’t change anything about the inevitable future. She still believed they would part ways, with nothing more lingering between them than their shared love for Alston and their current mutual attraction.

But Graham wasn’t so sure if he could walk away from this unscathed.

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A melia returned to the ballroom. Their waltz was underway, but she and Graham would not be on the floor. In fact, she would never get so close to him again. Even the carriage would test her limits.

In that alcove, she'd wanted everything. She'd wanted him to touch her bare skin, and she'd wanted to touch him in return. He'd stood there, his manhood stretching his trousers, and he'd let her see it. She'd felt it between her legs, even through layers of fabric, how hard and aroused he was for her. Her body ached now, empty, and her thighs were slick at the apex.

She was still overheated, her skin agitated by her clothing which now felt too tight. And now she had to stand here in discomfort because his honor had reared its cowardly head. Was it the right thing to do? To stop them from making such a mistake? The logical answer was yes, but her body revolted. It wanted all the things his body had promised. Her anger only grew the longer she stood there, ignoring the interested glances of people who wanted to speak with her.

She had to get out of here. Preferably without seeing Graham again. She pivoted and returned to the front hall and asked for her cloak and carriage. The footman held the door for her as she climbed inside, and she shrouded herself in shadows as the door clicked shut. Lost in her thoughts, ruminating on the emotions Graham had spurred inside her, she reached home all too swiftly. But before the door could open, the tiger and coachman were speaking with someone.

Amelia opened the door, expecting to see Graham miraculously there to hand her out, furious she'd left without him, but blue eyes caught hers.

Mr. Tristan Chase.

She steeled herself, not wanting to show her weakness, not wanting to reveal how scared she was to speak with him again, even in the presence of two men she trusted to protect her if necessary. He strolled forward and offered her his hand. She rejected it and stepped out by herself.

Smirking at the slight, he tipped his hat toward her.

“Good evening, Lady Amelia. I expected to wait much longer.”

Amelia folded her arms. “Why are you waiting for me at all?”

The door opened, and the butler and a footman waited for her to enter, watching Mr. Chase warily. She’d never been more appreciative of her household and their loyalty. She nodded at them.

“I have more questions about your brother.”

“He isn’t here to answer them, and the hour is late. Call again in daylight at a more appropriate hour, Mr. Chase.” She moved past him. She really didn’t think he’d do her bodily harm, but she didn’t want to linger and tempt fate.

“I’m a busy man, I’m afraid. Now will have to do, if you can spare me but a moment.”

He hadn’t moved, but something in his face—or was it his stance?—told Amelia he would not be put off by a couple footmen. Her mind whirled, and she turned and instructed her coachman, “Please take the carriage back for Mr. Blakewood.”

He nodded, and she could see understanding in his eyes. She wanted Graham here as

soon as possible. The tiger leaped to the back, and the coachman cracked the whip, taking off with a jolt.

Mr. Chase watched and turned back to her. "I'll wait for him, your fiancé, if you'd like. But I will speak with you both tonight."

Amelia stood at the top of the steps with the safety of the light of the front hall and the two men at her back and made one more attempt at subterfuge.

"He won't be returning here. The hour is too late for company."

Mr. Chase smirked. "Lying is not becoming, my lady." He peered around the empty street. "I know he stays here with you."

Amelia stiffened. "What is it you're after?"

"The truth."

Amelia's heart pounded. He was suspicious, but he couldn't know anything, not really. If he did, he seemed like the kind of forthright man who would call her on her bluff immediately. Maybe it would be better to let this play out. "You may come inside and warm up in the drawing room."

The butler stiffened. "My lady?"

"We'll let him ask his fruitless questions, and then he'll be on his way. I'd rather not have to see him tomorrow."

Mr. Chase casually climbed the steps as Amelia turned and went inside and directed that tea be prepared. The butler led Mr. Chase to the drawing room while Amelia went upstairs to change out of her rapidly disintegrating dancing slippers and put

away her reticule. She would not look into her brother's room. Somehow she feared Mr. Chase would know. Graham would be here soon, she reminded herself.

After changing slippers and removing some of the more painful pins from her hair, Amelia entered the drawing room. Mr. Chase was seated comfortably next to the tea tray.

"Mr. Blakewood should be here soon," she reminded him.

"You have a lovely home," Mr. Chase replied. He spoke with confidence, as if he'd already inspected all of it.

"Thank you, would you like tea?" She poured him a cup and then herself, and they sat in silence studying each other. A footman stood beside the open door, and Amelia knew two more had been roused and stationed in the hall.

"Do you enjoy your work?" Amelia asked.

"It has its moments of excitement. Mostly, I just troll the gambling floor and listen for snippets of useful gossip."

"Is gossip ever useful?"

"It is to my employer, the Widow."

"Ah, yes. I hear she is always veiled. Is that true?" Her interest in the mysterious widow was enough of a distraction to calm her nerves. This could be her chance to learn more about the Widow of Whitehall.

"She is, but it only reaches her chin. She isn't shrouded like a ghost."

“And she is, in fact, a widow?”

He nodded as he took a sip. “Have you not yet visited the Den? I do think you’d like it.”

“And why is that?”

“You seem like a young woman with an interest in things that are not the typical pursuits of fine ladies. I’ve heard you’re excellent at cards, for instance.”

“I’m not certain whether I should be insulted or not.”

“Don’t be. I think you’d enjoy the chaotic energy of the Den. Many women of your station attend. There is a ladies-only entrance and there are ladies-only tables. Quite safe. But I know your esteemed betrothed would certainly wish to accompany you, as well.”

“Do you gamble, Mr. Chase?”

His face hardened. “No.”

“You dislike gambling.”

He didn’t appear pleased that she’d read him clearly. As if he too had things to hide.

“I’ve watched gambling ruin too many. Why would I give in to such a vice?”

Amelia raised a brow. “Why work at a gambling hall if you find the pursuit so disagreeable?”

“Why indeed. I have my reasons for the things I do that are not important to you.”

She cocked her head. He definitely didn't want her to know anything personal about him, which made him even more interesting than he had been previously.

The door opened in a flurry of energy as Graham came straight to the drawing room.

"What the devil are you doing here at his hour?" he barked at Mr. Chase. To Amelia he said, "Why would you let him enter the house?"

"I didn't want him on the front steps talking about you living here for the moment."

Graham pressed his lips together, and the look he sent Mr. Chase both excited and scared Amelia. She'd seen him spitting mad but never angry enough to commit violence. That might soon change.

Mr. Chase sipped his tea. "You don't want anything I have to say to be spoken out loud, I suspect."

Graham pinned him with a glare before he slapped his top hat against his thigh and sat in the chair beside Amelia's. Her skin pricked in awareness of him, and she was reminded of earlier, when he'd made her into liquid heat and then left her cold and empty. She clenched her teeth and turned her attention to Mr. Chase. She was almost glad he was there to distract them.

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“Y ou said your brother went north to manage his estate in Stirling, yes?”

Amelia schooled her features into a mask of indifference. “Yes.”

“Get on with it,” Graham ordered.

Mr. Chase dropped his friendly facade. “I have made various inquiries and it seems your brother never hired any horses or carriage along the Great North Road. Does this concern you?”

Amelia couldn't regulate her breathing, if she were breathing at all. They hadn't discussed the particulars of how he would have made the journey. Normally, he'd take his own horse and change horses along the journey or hire a carriage depending on the weather. But Mr. Blakewood had put Sam's usual horse down out of mercy and the remains had been dealt with by the head stableman. Amelia didn't know much more beyond that. She thought quickly.

“My brother sent a message,” Amelia blurted. “He arrived safely.”

“Why would you inquire in the first place?” Graham asked, pulling Mr. Chase's attention off her. “What business of it is yours?”

“It isn't my business. I work on Mrs. Dove-Lyon's behalf. She wishes to know. May I see the letter?”

“No.” Amelia said firmly. Why was Mr. Chase so invested in her brother's whereabouts? What did he want with him?

“For what purpose is she interested?” Graham pressed. “I know Alston has no outstanding debts with the Den.”

“Indeed, he always wins,” Mr. Chase said.

“Are you implying he cheats?” Amelia asked with outrage on her brother’s behalf.

“No, not at all. I’ve watched him play. He is highly skilled.”

“Then what does she want—?” Graham paused and swallowed, a hint of realization washing over his features.

Amelia looked between them. “What? What is it?”

“He would have told me if he had agreed to a match,” Graham said.

“He hasn’t agreed yet.” Mr. Chase replied. “But Mrs. Dove-Lyon worries about his absence and its impact on her plans.”

“Are you discussing marriage?” Amelia asked.

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon loves to play matchmaker, you see,” Mr. Chase answered.

“He is only two and twenty,” Amelia said in shock. “He won’t marry anytime soon.”

Mr. Chase shrugged. “I’m only here for answers, my lady. Truthful answers.”

Amelia frowned but didn’t look to Graham. She didn’t want anything other than disdain to show on her face.

“He uses an alias when he travels alone,” Graham said. “It prevents bad characters

from making him a target for robbery. Either way, we know he safely made it to his estate and that is all you need to know. Alston will handle whatever business he has with the Widow once he returns, until then, do not approach Lady Amelia again.”

Mr. Chase glanced between the two of them as he stroked his chin. “Very well, it seems my concerns were unfounded. My apologies,” he said this to Amelia, “if I frightened you.”

“Accepted. But I’m not concerned. If something horrible had happened to my twin, I think I would know. He’s fine.”

Mr. Chase studied her with a pinched brow. “What an intriguing concept. I will take my leave now.”

“The footman will see you out.”

Mr. Chase stood, as did Amelia and Graham.

“I hope your brother returns soon. It would be unfortunate for him to miss out on a chance at a fated union.”

“What has fate to do with arranged marriages?” Graham asked as he herded Mr. Chase toward the door.

“You don’t believe in fate?” Mr. Chase chided. “But consider the two of you. Always at odds until something brought you together. Isn’t that correct?” He smiled slyly. “Perhaps it is my heritage, but that sounds like fate.”

Amelia watched in confused silence as Mr. Chase departed, with Graham standing at the entry until the front door was shut and locked. Now they were alone, and there were too many things to say that she didn’t want to say.

Instead, she marched past him, intent on checking on her brother. He walked behind her, seemingly aware she didn't want to talk, even though she still expected a reprimand for allowing Mr. Chase in the house.

Opening the door, she couldn't believe her eyes. Sam was awake and eating soup from a bowl on his chest with the help of Petrov.

Amelia covered her mouth to stifle a cry of joy. Sam raised his eyebrow at her.

Graham stood behind her. He put a hand on her lower back and whispered, "My God."

They both rushed forward but slowed midway, as if any disturbance might shatter the illusion before them. Petrov had tears in his eyes.

"All of you need to calm down," Sam said. His voice dripped with exhaustion. "What has it been—a day or two that I've been asleep?"

"Sam—" Her throat closed, and she looked to Graham to answer his questions.

"You don't remember?" Graham asked.

Sam snorted and winced. "My damn ribs. I remember the fall and Dr. Bradley wanting you both to prepare for the worst."

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"It's been several days," Graham said. "You've been in and out of consciousness, taking water and broth."

Alston blinked, looking around and scrubbing his hand over his smooth jaw.

"As if I'd let you be in disarray, my lord." Petrov chided. "We've been a mite worried over you."

Alston smiled at all of them. "But now I'm getting better." His face fell. "That long? It doesn't feel like it."

"How do you feel?" Amelia asked, tears glittering in her eyes. She kneeled at his side and took his hand. Alston gazed down at her fondly. He appeared younger; his cherubic curls were free of the thick pomade he used to tame them.

"Much better. Tired, weak, but better. Things are foggy, like I've had the strangest dream."

"Of what?"

He swallowed, his eyes becoming glassy. "Mother, father. Do you remember the time I broke the window in the church? I dreamed of it. Only they were both there, lecturing me about it." He smiled. "I'd never felt happier."

Amelia broke and a sob slipped out. She pressed her forehead to Alston's hand. Alston looked to Graham for help.

“Has she been like this the whole time?”

“We all have,” Graham said.

“You’ve been crying at my bedside? In your evening attire?” Alston teased.

Amelia lifted her head and glared at him. “You have no idea what we’ve been through, you hornet’s arse.”

Alston started to chuckle and winced again. “Tell me. I’m wide awake, now that I’ve slept so long.”

Graham and Amelia shared a heavy glance. Alston sluggishly looked between them.

“What is it? What have you done?”

Petrov took that as his moment to leave.

Alston frowned. “Just tell me.”

“We kept your injury a secret from Aunt Ruth, Nelson, and everyone else. They think you’ve gone to Stirling for sick sheep.”

“Sick sheep?”

“We didn’t know what else to say,” Graham said. “Amelia was certain if your aunt knew you were so injured she’d take over the household.”

“And try to marry her to Nelson,” Alston said. “I think I recall this discussion.”

“So we lied; we’ve been lying.” She pinned Graham with her gaze while Alston

stared at his bowl of soup in thought.

She shook her head slightly, just for him to see. She didn't want her brother to know about the engagement. And Graham understood why—Alston would never let it go. And if he knew the way Graham felt and the way he'd kissed Amelia and hungered for her, he'd make them marry for sure.

Graham cleared his throat, but the thick wedge of guilt remained. They wouldn't be able to keep it a secret forever. Too many people knew. "I've been playing escort."

"We've done the usual events, keeping up the lie so you could recover in peace," Amelia added.

Alston nodded. "My thanks to both of you. Nelson might have tried to murder me if he'd known I was so weak and defenseless."

Amelia nodded. Graham had to rip his gaze from her. Alston would see everything, otherwise. He would notice not only their usual tension and bitterness, but also the attraction, the friction.

"What do you need now?" Graham asked.

"I'll summon Dr. Bradley to look me over again in the morning. He'll shite himself."

Graham chuckled. "He deserves it for the way he gave you up for lost."

"I'm sure he's had my coffin built," Alston quipped.

"Stop it," Amelia said. "Don't joke about such things. Not yet."

Alston smiled at her. "You look older than I remember. You look like her."

“Who?”

“Mother. You both do that thing where you narrow your eyes and shake your head at me.”

Amelia’s lip quivered. “You don’t know that she ever did that.”

“I think it was them, Mother and Father, coming to spend a bit of time with me in my dream.”

Fat tears rolled down her cheeks, and Graham flinched, instinctively wanting to go to her side and hold her. He was losing himself again. Or perhaps he was already lost. Although aggravation and frustration still coiled inside him as well. She’d left Graham at the ball without warning, let Chase into the house—and yet in spite of everything, he wanted nothing more than to be next to her.

Something cold spread through his chest and it scared him as he realized what he was feeling.

He’d fallen for her. He’d fallen for her, and once Alston knew, once Alston understood they’d had a fake engagement, Alston would ask him why Graham had agreed to such a thing—or rather, gone along with it. He hadn’t agreed. It had been too late to say anything after Amelia announced it at the garden party. But Alston would see that Graham felt something real—something terrifyingly complex for Amelia.

And Amelia... wouldn’t marry him. Even if she knew how he truly felt. She wouldn’t dishonor them both by entering into a marriage where one person loved and the other could not.

“I’ll give you two some privacy,” he said aloud.

“Don’t leave, Graham,” Alston bade him. “I know this must have been a madhouse, with just the two of you holding the reins. What’s happened?”

“Nothing. We’ve been bored and scared for you,” Amelia said.

“That’s not quite true,” Graham objected.

Amelia sat up and glared at him. “Don’t say anything to distress him.”

“What is it?” Alston asked.

Graham sat in the chair to Alston’s right. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon has a match for you, and she’s been sending around Mr. Chase to see why you haven’t been about.”

Alston sighed. “Why am I not surprised?”

“You knew?” Amelia asked.

“No, but she always has her intense focus on me, as if I were a prize bull.”

Amelia made a disgusted face, and Graham smiled.

“Why me and not you?” Alston said with a suspicious glare at Graham.

Graham shrugged. “I’m not an earl.” This felt like old times, like a normal day spent bantering over newspapers and coffee. Except Amelia looked ready to collapse. She rested her head on the bed, her face toward Alston. He knew how she felt.

“I’m going to change out of these clothes.” Graham exited. He paused outside, leaning against the wall as a wave of emotion swelled in him. Alston was awake.

Sam was awake .

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They talked all night, until the early hours of the morning, long after Amelia had fallen asleep, curled up at the end of Alston's bed like a cat. Alston had grown tired, eyes heavy, and Graham had ordered him to go to sleep, too, told him they'd have breakfast together in the late morning after everyone had rested. Alston had nodded, but he was already half asleep. Even then, dawn was breaching the horizon.

Graham considered leaving Amelia there but decided not to. He picked her up, though it hardly required effort. At some point, she'd put on her nightgown and robe, and both were thin enough that he could feel every curve and dip of her body as he carried her to her room, the warmth seeping into him.

Her door remained partially open, and he nudged it wider, expecting her maid to be waiting either awake or asleep, but the room was empty, her bed already turned down. Graham laid her down on her side, peeling off her robe as milky-blue light filled the room, lighting her achingly beautiful face. He got the first half of the robe out from under her, and he glided the other sleeve down her arm, slowly, admiring her stunning beauty while she couldn't castrate him emotionally, but then she opened her eyes.

She smiled, her eyes glowing. He thought maybe she was dreaming, not seeing him at all, or she wouldn't look so happy.

"He's awake," she said in a sleepy, raspy voice that made him want to kiss her.

"He's resting now. I promised we'd all have a late breakfast together, but you need to sleep, and so do I."

She reached up and grabbed his shoulder, giving him a little shake. “But Graham, he’s awake.” She said it once more. Because it was a miracle. An absolute miracle.

He grinned down at her. “So you are more stubborn than Death.”

She scrunched her nose playfully as she smiled and sat up, shrugging, clearly more awake now. Her nightgown slid off her shoulder, the neckline falling low on her breasts. Graham tried not to look, but he was as weak a man as he’d ever been, and in the early morning light, he could see the shadow of her nipple, just below the edge there, tempting him. He tore his gaze away and met her eyes. She licked her lips, and once again, there was a challenge in her stare.

Do it, you coward. Touch me. I dare you. I want you to.

He was more than just a coward. He was a man, fallible, and too tired emotionally and physically to gather the strength he needed right now to resist her.

He reached out, dragging a knuckle over her bare shoulder. She didn’t move. She just watched him, her cheeks blushing with rosy colors.

He did it again, but this time he went slower, down the slope of her breast to the edge of her nightgown, and over the pebbled tip of her breast.

She drew in a shaky breath, biting her bottom lip.

He repeated the motion, this time snagging the edge of the gown and pulling it down to reveal her dusky-pink nipple and the fullness of her breast.

She closed her eyes, a whisper of a sigh slipping out of her moist lips, before opening them again.

Blood molten, cock straining in his tan breeches, he kneeled on one knee next to her bed. He cupped her breast, pinching the nipple lightly, and she softly moaned.

That was it for him. He unraveled, the shackles of his control falling away, the loud clanging a knell of warning in his mind. The final warning. One hand on her breast, the other dug into her hair as he pulled her to him and claimed her mouth, breathing deep the sleepy, sweet smell of her warm skin. She arched into his hand this time, opening her mouth to his and drawing him even closer.

She wanted him, and for his bruised heart, that was enough. On this quiet morning, full of light and hope, she wanted him, and he gave in to the reckless, wild impulse to let himself have her.

He broke the kiss. He stood to close the door and lock it. She watched him, breathing erratic, not covering her one exposed breast from his hungry gaze as he stalked back to her, his cock hard, his resolve harder.

She looked over his body, gaze catching on his cock bulging the fabric of his breeches. He was at her side again, sitting on the edge of the bed with her and pulling the other shoulder of her nightgown down to free her other breast. He held one in his hand and drew the other into his mouth as she lay back, pulling him down beside her.

She cried out, fingers in his hair, holding him to her while her hips squirmed on the bed. They said nothing, as if both were aware that words might break the spell. Graham ran his free hand over her hip, gathering up the length of her nightgown to her waist. He sucked her nipple to a rosy red, then licked it to soothe the smarting peak. He slid his hand between her thighs into the slippery warmth pooled there and she moaned, parting her thighs for him, giving him access and permission with abandon.

This is how she would be if she were his wife. Impetuous, wanton, affectionate, and

confident in bed. She wouldn't hold back. She'd let him lead as long as he gave her what she wanted, and he would. Whenever she beckoned, he'd come crawling on his knees to her.

That was still a fantasy that fate had not promised him, but for right now, he could pretend. They had a fake engagement and now were playacting as husband and wife, at least in his mind.

Graham spread his fingers through her wetness and teased the sensitive peak that made her buck her hips into his hand and part her knees wider. He wanted to feel her beneath him, skin to skin, heart to heart, but he knew if he did that, there'd be no going back, no more pretending, and he wouldn't force her hand like that. She'd let him take her innocence, too caught up in the passion to see reason, but then she'd balk at having to marry him.

So instead, he would taste her. He stood back up, grabbing both her legs and turning her so he could pull her hips toward him, to the edge of the bed. She lay there, open to his heavy stare, vulnerable and trusting, nightgown gathered around her waist. He took in the beauty of her body, her flushed, creamy skin, her rosy nipples, thrusting up with each breath, and the glistening hollow of her body. He stood between her spread thighs, his cock straining. He could unsheathe himself and press into her. She was slick with arousal and aching with need. He closed his eyes, battling his own will. His head clashed with his body, and the temptation to bury his cock deep inside her.

She propped herself up on her elbows to look at him. "Graham?" she whispered.

Her gentle question was just enough to break through the haze. He dropped to his knees and lifted her knees over his shoulders. She gasped but did not pull back as he arranged her the way he wanted to feast.

“I’m going to kiss you, Amelia. Here,” he said, kissing her inner thigh. The muscles flexed in response. “And here,” he said, kissing her other thigh, and she let out a shivery sigh.

“That feels so good, Graham.”

“And here.” He took a deep breath, inhaling the essence of her—the glorious scent of her arousal, everything that was Amelia down to her very being. Then he closed his mouth over the hooded peak of her sex, gently sucking.

She cried out, half scream, half an exhale, and started to shake.

“Graham, oh Graham. I don’t know what’s happening to my body.”

He pressed his eyes closed, groaning as he explored her further, licking, sucking, and teasing until she writhed beneath him. Her knees squeezed his head, and he knew she was coming to the rise—the explosion that would leave her weightless. Perhaps for her first time. He was honored to be here—for her first taste of intimacy, of carnal ecstasy.

He wanted it all. All of her heart, all her firsts, and all of her lasts. His head spiraled as he continued to devour her, and her body tightened like a rope until she snapped, arching and reaching for his hair and pulling, holding his mouth to her until her fingers and legs went slack. He gazed up at her, her breathing ragged, her face a portrait dazed bliss, and pride filled him.

The urge to claim her returned full force. Now was the perfect time. She was weak with release, relaxed, and pliant. He could slide into her and she’d feel no pain. Only pleasure.

He turned his face into her thigh, taking a deep breath and fighting himself. She

stirred, reaching for him again, this time running her fingers through his hair tenderly.

“I’ve never experienced such a thing. Fran tried to describe it to me, but it was nothing like what she said.”

Graham smiled into her thigh, his ego soaring. He had to stand, back away, and cover her delicious body.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

Amelia sat up, her bunched nightgown twisting around her waist, her heart still racing from the highs of her first orgasm, as Fran had called it. Graham was huddled near her womanhood, his breath warm against the sensitive skin of her thigh, so quiet but breathing hard.

“Graham?” She spoke quietly, unsure of what he wanted or what he was thinking after they’d done something he’d no doubt call a mistake, but to Amelia it was mind-shatteringly spectacular. How could anything that felt so wonderful be a mistake?

He lifted his gaze to her, his green eyes so bright, his pupils large pools of black. He slowly stood. She widened her legs reflexively, giving him room to stand close to her. She didn’t want him to go.

Graham didn’t back away. He just watched her, but something else caught her attention, something fascinating and forbidden. His manhood surged forward in his breeches, with a dark wet spot at the tip. He didn’t pull away from her as she openly stared at his groin. Did that mean...? She looked up at him, searching for direction. Would he let her touch him?

Fran had also gone into great detail about a man’s anatomy, its sensitivity, and what happened when a man found his pleasure. The fluid that erupted. The seed that could create children if one were not careful.

She tentatively raised her hand, her stomach tightening with anxious curiosity and desire. He tensed, but he did not stop her. Knowing that he would stop her if she went too far, she reached for him, her palm cupping him.

His breath hissed out between his teeth.

Amelia pulled back. “Does that hurt?”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. What did that mean? He wasn’t helping her at all. She tried again, her touch firmer as she attempted to grasp him. He pushed back with his hips, his breath hitching.

Now she understood. He did want her touch, but he also wanted to stay in control. She smoothed her hand over the length of him, feeling the tension in his body and the way it indicated what felt good. That wet spot grew, and Amelia was curious. He had kissed her before like he would die without her. Would it be that way for her if she tasted him? His head had fallen back, and she leaned forward, touching her tongue to that spot.

His hips bucked and he groaned, attention snapping back to her.

“Amelia, you shouldn’t.”

“Shouldn’t but... I can?” She did it again. She loved seeing him so unraveled. This time, she lightly sucked at the fabric, tasting him.

“Oh God, I can’t—I don’t have the will to resist you,” he said, his voice guttering.

The power she had over him thrilled her. This appendage was truly every man’s weakness. It was no surprise they caused so much trouble. But Amelia was not done exploring. He’d ravished her and sent her to a place she’d never known existed. She wanted to understand this power and what it could do. Remembering Fran’s words and how unappealing this act had sounded, Amelia now understood what she was supposed to do. She reached for the buttons on the flap of his breeches, and to her surprise, Graham helped her. His face was a mask of tortured yearning. He wanted

her. He wanted her to touch him, taste him, and love his body in this intimate way, and that sent her heart soaring. She couldn't imagine doing this with anyone else, feeling this empowered and safe to explore this new world.

He freed himself, his organ prodding out, and he gripped the base, running his fist upward. Amelia watched in fascination as a little bead of pearly liquid appeared. She licked her lips, then licked the tip. His body shuddered in response, and she was done waiting. He let go and gave her control. She took him in hand. Not knowing how she was meant to do this, she followed her instincts. Amelia opened her mouth, taking the tip of him in.

"Amelia," he sighed. His hand slid into her hair, and he guided her slowly, cautiously, to take him deeper into her mouth, deep enough to almost gag, and then pulled her back.

That was enough instruction from him. She wanted to learn by doing. So she took over, measuring her own pace, and her own depth, teasing him with licks and strokes in between. He stopped guiding her but still kept his hand in her hair, fingers tightening. He gently thrust into her movements, breathing ragged, groans slipping through as if he couldn't stop them, like she pulled them from his soul.

His hips and thighs tightened, and he bucked, pulling her head back.

"I'm going to come," he said, his voice rough. "Keep your hands on me."

As his body locked up, Amelia kept up her ministrations and he pulsed in her hands. He covered the tip with his own hand and caught his release.

This was the eruption Fran had described, and it was fascinating to see. His face, his shoulders, his stomach, and legs. He felt it everywhere, his whole body reacting just as hers had to the immense pleasure. And then he relaxed, letting out a lengthy sigh,

his knees weakening as he bent forward, one hand on the bed to steady himself.

He leaned over her, and all Amelia wanted to do was hug him and pull him down to lie with her, to bask in this glowing feeling for as long as it held, but for some confusing reason, that felt like too much, too close to being something they were not.

A couple. A real, loving couple.

No, they were something different, something illicit and secret that should shame her but did not. Because this was Graham, and as long as Graham was with her, then it wasn't wrong. It couldn't be. He was never wrong.

So she leaned back, giving him space as he gathered himself together, regaining his strength to stand. His heated stare fell over her bare body, and she could not and would not hide a single thing from him. The way he worshipped her with his gaze made her feel like a goddess.

He reached out and tugged at her breasts, as if he simply could not resist touching her, and she liked that too. He couldn't resist her. He reached for the coverlet, wiping his hand and then he tucked himself away to Amelia's disappointment. Now she felt like it was her turn to right herself, but she didn't want to. If he wanted her covered, he could do it himself.

"I'm—"

"If you apologize, I will shoot you, so help me, Graham."

He sighed heavily this time, not with pleasure and lust like before. "Amelia, this was..."

"Wonderful. I feel wonderful and beautiful."

His focus steadied on her face. “Do you?”

“Yes. So don’t ruin it. Don’t say something foolish or prudish, or say words like duty or dishonor . Please.”

He looked at her, and Amelia leaned back farther, pushing her breasts out. They felt heavy and sensitive under his gaze, in need of attention. His eyes darkened once more, and she wanted to smile with triumph, but she wouldn’t. His sensibilities were too fragile. If startled, he’d quit and run.

He leaned over her with his weight on one hand propped on the bed and cupped her breast with the other, bending to tease the tip with his tongue, and Amelia shivered, arching into his kiss. She didn’t want this moment to end.

But then he drew back, tugging her nightgown up and over her arms and shoulders.

“Fine, I won’t say anything. It seems you already know what I would say.”

“I do, and I don’t care to hear it.”

“Then I’ll leave you to rest.”

He strode away, unlocking the door and pausing to glance back at her one more time. Reluctant to leave? she wanted to taunt, but she held back. She wouldn’t spoil this moment with sharp words either. Not when it was still so perfect. So she lay back on her side, pulling up her coverlet. Her eyes were already heavy as the door clicked shut.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

A melia slept too long. Fran woke her, having been sent by Graham to make sure she didn't miss this time with her brother, who was awake once more. Dr. Bradley had come at last to check in on Sam.

Amelia hurried to dress, not caring about her hair, only fixing it in a plait and heading to Sam's room. The door was open, and her heart leaped as she heard her brother's voice.

"How much longer?" Sam was asking as she entered.

"I cannot say, my lord. I don't have the ability to see what is happening inside you. This is miraculous. I feel—and it pains me to say this—I am out of my scope with you. I'd like to refer you to a colleague at the medical college.

"No," Amelia said. The three men turned to her. "No one can know, not yet, not until he is well on his way to recovery."

"Amelia," Sam chided, "I am, but I'd like to know what my capabilities are."

"Rest, Sam," Amelia said. "It has worked so far. You'll feel better in time."

He sighed. "I still feel weak." He said this to Graham and the doctor. "Is that normal?"

Graham nodded and the doctor shrugged.

"Rest should help your ribs. They should heal with as little movement as possible.

Bones are predictable things. They break, they mend. But you also have a wound inside your body, and I don't know how to treat it."

"Please explain," Amelia drew closer and folded her arms.

The doctor sighed. "May I show her?" he asked Sam, who nodded.

Dr. Bradley folded the blanket back, revealing Sam's chest and the frightening pattern of bruising along his side. His abdomen looked unusual to her. Like he'd been stuffed with feathers.

"You see?"

Amelia's stomach dropped. She did see it. She'd never be able to unsee this. Sam drew the blanket back up, and she looked him in the eyes. She could see his fear. He may be awake, but they were both still bluffing with Death.

"Can you consult with your colleague without naming my brother?" she asked. "See what can be discovered? If we need to, we will meet with him."

Dr. Bradley sighed and nodded. "We can try."

"Is that that blood you suspected was leaking slowly?" Graham asked.

Dr. Bradley nodded. "Yes, it has filled up the available space."

"Clotted, you mean?" Amelia asked. "We learned this earlier from you."

"Yes and no. This is why I need further help. This is beyond me."

Amelia tucked her shaking hands behind her back. "What do we do for now?"

The doctor addressed his instruction to Sam. “Remain still, rest, and continue to take in as much food as you feel like you can. Don’t eat if you don’t feel up to it.”

Sam nodded. “I’ll take up knitting to pass the time.”

Amelia walked to his side and took his hand. “You’ve always wanted to learn Greek.”

Graham escorted the doctor out of the room.

“Why do you look so worried?” Sam asked. “Tell me what has you so troubled.”

“It’s obvious my worry is over you. What else could it be?”

“If I had to guess, it would be Graham’s constant presence. He has been constant, hasn’t he?”

“I can’t seem to be rid of him,” she said, not quite meeting his eye.

“Come now, I can hear it in your voice. You’re glad he’s here, aren’t you?”

Amelia bit her tongue.

“I know you better than you know yourself,” he continued. “You don’t have to say anything—I know Graham annoys you bitterly. You’d rather eat soil than have a conversation with him. But I’m also sure he’s been helpful to you.”

Amelia laughed at the image that brought to her mind, harder than she’d been able to in days, but those tears turned to sobs. He did know her, but he didn’t know what was in her heart now. The way Graham pulled her at opposite ends. She wanted to kiss him madly, and then she wanted to stuff a glove in his mouth to stop him lecturing

her. There were times when he looked at her like she was the most stunning creature he'd ever seen. Then the next moment he would look at her like she'd stuck a frog in his breeches. She was hot and cold, hard then soft, floating, and then sinking, and all these sensations made her want to scream.

But her brother couldn't know these things, that she was a woman hungering for a man's touch. Sam would rather shoot his toe off than know what was in her mind regarding Graham, she was sure of it.

"Lia," he said sweetly, "Lia it's all right."

"It's not. I'm so scared, Sam." The memory of his horrible, bruised and misshapen side loomed in her mind's eye, more important in this moment than anything she felt about Graham. "I can't lose you. Promise me, Sam. Promise me you will never leave me."

"You're not going to lose me. And you know we're part of each other no matter where I am or where you are. Though I promise from now on, I will take no more risks. But remember, living in fear is not living."

"Don't quote father to me." She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

"You needed the reminder. And be good to Graham while I'm stuck here. He's doing his best. He doesn't know how to handle a woman like you."

Amelia looked away from her brother. Graham seemed to be handling her just fine. "I will do my best, as well."

"Thank you. Now, would you be a dear and get me one of those naughty romances you like to read? It might keep me sane while I molder in this bed."

“Which one would you prefer? Princess Peony and the Lost Duke or The Wilds of Winifred ?”

“Definitely Winifred. She sounds interesting.”

“If you read my books you have to promise to never make fun of them again.”

“I can’t make such a promise. Not until after I read them,” he teased her.

Amelia folded her arms in mock sternness. “Then you can’t have them.”

He stuck out his bottom lip. “Please, Lia? I’m going to be here for days yet.”

“As I said before, you’ve could always learn Greek.”

“I don’t have the mental stamina to learn anything. I’m still healing. Take pity on me.”

Amelia relented. “Winifred it is.”

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Farther down the hall, out of earshot of Alston and Amelia, Graham stopped Dr. Bradley. "Tell me the truth."

Dr. Bradley ran a handkerchief over his sweating brow. "I don't know what to tell you. He is still at grave risk. He is a mystery. A medical anomaly."

"How can you not know?" Graham bit out.

"Medicine is, and likely always will be, an ever-changing entity. We know things we didn't know last year. But there is still so much we don't know."

"And the clotting?"

"The clotting is just a guess, my lord. Will the clot hold? Will the injured veins heal enough not to need the clot? I'm telling you this isn't my area."

"All right. I understand, Dr. Bradley. Do what you can without revealing who he is until we absolutely need to."

Dr. Bradley nodded. "I'll go to the college now."

Graham shook his hand. "Thank you."

He took a moment to bury his cold fear before returning to the room. A footman was setting the table with eggs and bacon, all of Alston's favorites. Cook was a marvel, preparing everything so quickly. They filled plates and sat beside Alston as he took small bites of his eggs.

“Apparently, you’re a medical anomaly. Maybe you’ll end up in a book,” Graham quipped.

Alston chewed thoughtfully. “Will they have to draw me naked?”

Amelia smiled behind her fork.

“Women of the ton will take a sudden interest in medicine,” Graham said.

Alston smiled, setting his plate on his lap. “So, what’s the plan for today? Any engagements?”

Graham couldn’t help but notice how he and Amelia both froze ever so briefly at the word engagement . He’d been doing all he could these last few hours to not think constantly about their time together this morning. But he only had to look at her and he could taste her, smell her, and recall the feel of her on his lips. He pushed his eggs around the plate to keep himself from staring hungrily at her.

“None that I wish to attend,” Amelia said. “I want to go to the Den.”

Alston blinked at her. “Absolutely not.”

“Ladies do attend,” she rebutted.

“Yes, but not you.”

“Why not me?”

“Because you’d love it. It’s seedy and loud. Filled with vile talk, crude behavior, incredibly high stakes card games, as well as...” He frowned at her. “How do you even know about the Den?”

Amelia looked to Graham, then back to her brother. “You remember what we told you earlier, don’t you?”

His frown deepened. “Vaguely?”

“What do you remember?” Graham asked.

He pressed his lips together. “Remind me.”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon has a bride in mind for you, and your absence at her gaming tables has been noticed,” Graham said.

“Do you know Mr. Tristan Chase?” Amelia cut in.

“Yes,” Alston answered. “Well, I remember who he is, but I don’t know him personally.”

“He’s come around looking for you,” Graham stated.

Alston stiffened. “He isn’t the type I want around. He’s a ghost in the shadows.”

“I agree,” Graham affirmed. “He came here last night after the ball, and he warned us that you hadn’t hired any horses to go north.”

“Why does he think I went north?”

Amelia chewed her lip. “I may have told him earlier.”

“When would you have spoken with a man like him?” Alston asked angrily.

“I was taking my morning walk at the park close by. Where we always take our

walks.”

“And he just happened to be there, to stumble upon you?” He turned to Graham. “I thought you were looking after her. Where were you when this was happening?” Alston demanded.

Graham folded his arms. “With you. I didn’t know she’d gone, because it is Amelia, and she does what she pleases whenever she pleases, which you’ve encouraged.”

Alston glowered at his friend. “I asked you to take care of her.”

Amelia stepped in. “He has been. It was my error, and I went straight to him to tell him. It’s my fault I was there alone, Sam. Not his. He’s not my nursemaid, and I am not a child.”

Alston huffed in annoyance.

“Do not distress yourself,” Amelia pressed.

“He isn’t a gentleman. I know that much,” Alston said.

“He isn’t a threat to Amelia,” Graham said. “He’s a threat to our secret. Though I don’t know what he’d do with it. What can he do? Mrs. Dove-Lyon keeps many secrets. What does she care if you are ill?”

“Secrets are leverage, no matter how little,” Alston said. “If she knows the truth, she’ll use it against me. Somehow.”

“I want to meet her,” Amelia said. “Perhaps if she knew a little of our circumstances she’d soften.”

“You want to tell her the truth willingly?” Graham asked in disbelief.

“No? I don’t know. You know her better than I do.”

“Stay away from the Den, Amelia,” Alston ordered. “Don’t get entangled in her schemes.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

Alston glared at her. “I hope you mean that.”

“Of course I do.”

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The next afternoon Amelia stepped out of the hired hack and lifted the hood of her cloak over her head. This was the ladies' entrance, supposedly. It was on the side of the building, cleanly kept, and private, but still not a place Amelia wanted to linger. She knocked on the door, and it opened. A woman stared at her expectantly.

"May I enter?"

"Name?"

"Is that required?"

The woman looked her up and down. She seemed to be deciphering who she might be and how wealthy.

"Come in, my lady." She stepped back respectfully. "I suspect this is your first time at the Lyon's Den. Would you like someone to assist you?"

"No, I want to look around myself."

Amelia was taken up a flight of stairs. This appeared to be like a regular town home, and yet... not. The woman held a door open and waved her into an entry room. After taking her cloak, the woman returned to Amelia and smiled.

"My name is Helena. How may I be of service, my lady?"

Amelia wasn't quite sure. "Where do I go from here?"

“Would you like to play a game? Place a bet? We have the ladies’ parlor to your left and the ladies’ dining room and gallery just this way. Whatever you wish, the Lyon’s Den can usually provide. Anything, anything you wish.”

She said it in a way that made Amelia pause. Anything could be anything . It was no wonder her brother didn’t want her here. But she wasn’t here for just anything. She was on an investigative mission, and if she stumbled upon a certain veiled widow, well, that was only a happy coincidence.

“Why don’t I sit you at a table in the gallery? It overlooks the main playing so you can get an idea for what might interest you,” Helena suggested.

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

Helena led her through the dining room to an open gallery where women were milling. She brought her to a small table—one of several—at the edge of the gallery near the railing, and soon a maid brought her a pot of tea and a plate of lemon cake. Amelia surveyed her surroundings noting the elegant, papered walls and intricate plasterwork of the ceiling. Everywhere she looked, it was luxurious. Amelia surveyed the other women at the gallery tables enjoying refreshment and watching the festivities below, noting some she knew and others she did not. She removed her hood. She wasn’t going to hide her presence. She was a woman of two and twenty and engaged, as all society knew. She had every right to be here and no need to fear judgment.

It didn’t escape her notice that while sitting here she was doing some of the very things she swore she wouldn’t do any longer—like indulging her mad impulses. However, here she was. But this wasn’t too scandalous, was it? She was sipping tea. Nothing scandalous happened while sipping tea.

But then she felt a presence behind her, like a ghost stood over her shoulder.

“Mr. Chase.”

He took the open seat across from her at a table that was far too small and intimate to share with a man who wasn't her betrothed.

“Why am I not surprised to see you here? Alone,” he said with a smile.

“How do you know I'm alone?”

“If you were with your fiancé, you'd be elsewhere, wouldn't you?” he taunted.

“Where is elsewhere?”

He smirked. “Where indeed?”

“You told me I should visit, and so I am.”

He looked down over the railing. “You ought to play a game. According to rumors, you play Commerce exceptionally well. Sir Daniel is quite enamored of you.”

Amelia ignored that.

“Any word from your brother?” he continued.

Amelia smiled, thinking of her brother sitting in boredom. Sam was already complaining about his restrictive rest. He was never a man to sit still.

“No. I'm certain he is busy sorting out matters at the estate. I don't expect to hear from him often.”

He stroked his chin. “Is that so?”

“Why do you act as if you don’t believe me?”

“I don’t believe you.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “And why is that?”

“I’ve observed your brother. I’ve seen him do reckless things, but never would I take him for a man who would leave his cherished sister alone. He’s protective of you above all things. Any capable estate manager could handle the sheep problem.”

Amelia scoffed. “I’m not alone. I have a household full of servants and a fiancé. And maybe you don’t know my brother as well as you think you do.”

“My instincts are never wrong.”

“Not that you know of, anyhow. But as I asked before, why does it matter what my brother is doing?”

“It matters to the Widow. That is all that matters to me.”

Amelia brightened as he provided the avenue to move conversation away from her brother. “May I meet her?”

“Certainly. She’d love to meet you.” He stood and offered his arm.

Amelia declined to take it. Whatever she might say, she did care for her reputation a bit, after all, especially when she did not yet know what the Den truly had to offer.

He smiled and lowered his arm, leading the way back toward the entry room Amelia had found herself in initially. They crossed it and entered the ladies’ parlor Helena had mentioned, and they came upon a figure shrouded in black, a lace veil covering

half her face. She turned, apparently sensing them.

“Madam, may I present Lady Amelia Clark?” He stepped back but did not leave them.

“Mr. Chase has had much to say about you and your brother.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon sat on the settee and beckoned Amelia to do the same.

“I hope they’ve been entertaining things,” Amelia replied.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon laughed softly. “Some. I’ve heard you play cards as well as your brother, if not better.”

“I do.”

“Won’t you partake of my establishment?”

This felt like a challenge. A test of her mettle. Would the pampered sister of an earl run away from the seedy gaming hall?

“I’d like to observe first, see what interests me.”

“My Den has much to offer.”

“My brother comes here often, I’ve learned.”

“Frequently enough to be missed lately.”

“I understand you want to marry him off. Would I approve of this mystery bride?”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon turned toward her, and Amelia could feel her scrutiny.

“I think you would.”

“And would you truly know? We’ve only just met.”

“I’m good at reading people. I can see them for what they are and not what they portray.”

Amelia dwelled on that statement. “I think I will play,” she said after a moment.

“Excellent. Helena will show you to the ladies’ tables.”

“Can I not play on the main floor?”

“The main gaming floor is for men only. We have a ladies’ gaming room for you to enjoy. I was not pleased to learn Mr. Blakewood is off my market. But after meeting you, I can see you’re a good match.”

Amelia didn’t know what to say to that. They were a terrible match, physical attraction notwithstanding. Utter opposites, destined to drive each other mad forever. Right now, all they had was a truce. Sam’s well-being overshadowed their conflict.

“Thank you,” was all Amelia replied.

Helena appeared. “Right this way, my lady.” She led Amelia back across the rooms she’d already seen, through the gallery, to the ladies’ gaming room on the opposite side. The afternoon was waning, but she could stay for a little while—for research, of course.

Amelia tried a few games and found herself having a grand time, but her mind continued to drift back to the main gaming floor where the gentlemen played. She wanted a challenge few women could provide.

Amelia made her way down the servants' stairs connecting the ladies' gaming room to the main gaming floor. She hesitated on the last step and took in the scene. There were enough patrons for the place to be active, but it wasn't crowded, not like it would be later in the evening, she was sure. How much more exciting would it be then? Would she have the opportunity to come back at night? She could just imagine the revelry, the stakes, the crazed fever of winning. No wonder her brother spent so much time here.

"Lady Amelia, just my luck."

Amelia tensed, but she painted on a smug smile as she turned to face Sir Daniel. "Sir Daniel, a pleasure to see you again."

He moved closer to her, closer than was appropriate, and touched her arm. "I must say, I've been dreaming of this moment."

She raised a brow. "Of standing here and talking to me in a gaming hall? How banal."

His smile broadened. "Not exactly." He took in her subdued attire. "The den offers many incredible... opportunities to test one's mettle, to broaden their horizons."

"It's a gaming hall," Amelia said dryly, ignoring his suggestive tone.

"It is not only a gaming hall. There are many things to—"

"Yes, you're flirting and implying that there are illicit activities. What is your point?"

His gaze sharpened. "You never fail to intrigue me. It's a wonder that you've tied yourself to such a boring ape as Blakewood."

The mention of Graham gave her gooseflesh.

“Why is that? He’s an honorable and respected gentleman.”

Sir Daniel stepped even closer, and to Amelia’s chagrin she lost her route of escape as he put his hand on the railing, blocking her path back up the stairs.

“You’re a woman of action. You’re smart, stunning, and I’m willing to guess so much more that I’ve yet to discover. Marriage to him will fade your vibrant colors. He can’t make you happy. He won’t appreciate your skill like I do. Let me know when you grow tired of him.”

He tried to step closer still, leaning as if he intended to kiss her cheek but Amelia put a hand to his chest.

“Don’t think for one more second that you could play on my level.”

He chuckled and stepped back. “I’m a patient player, my lady. I can play the long game. I can play all night.” He bowed and slinked away.

Amelia wanted to gag but instead she quit the main level. Sir Daniel couldn’t approach her where he wasn’t allowed. She would play a few more games with the other ladies before she went home so her last taste of the Den wouldn’t be tainted by Sir Daniel.

But when she next noticed the time, Amelia gasped. She’d been here too long and not a single person knew where she was. Sam had been resting and Graham busy tending to his correspondence when she’d slipped out of the house.

Time had flown far faster than possible, and she hadn’t noticed. She would be in so much trouble if Graham or Sam knew. She gathered her winnings from an unknown servant and hurried down the corridor toward the ladies’ entrance to collect her cloak. Helena promised a hack would be waiting for her outside.

“Lady Amelia.”

She froze as she took her cloak from the waiting servant, that dark voice halting her in her steps. She didn't know what to expect when she turned. She would not pretend she did not hear him. The time for reckoning would come one way or another. She schooled her face into something no one around her would read as surprise, and she smiled as she pivoted.

“Graham, I was just returning home now.”

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He strolled toward her, his face unreadable. A perfect example of cold calm. But she knew better, and her heart was pounding. He was angry, enraged even.

“Will you escort me?” she asked. “They procured a hack for me. Or did you just arrive and intend to stay?”

“I can’t be in the ladies’ area, but I was informed you were here and was permitted to collect you.”

Collect her? She didn’t like that one bit, but she bit her tongue and stepped to his side like the dutiful future wife she was pretending to be.

“Wonderful. I’d love for you to see me home.” She hugged his arm, looking up into his face adoringly. Over his shoulder, she spotted Mr. Chase smirking at her.

“Come this way and put that on,” he said, nodding at her cloak. He led her down the stairs to the ladies’ entrance and out to the street.

“Graham I know I should have—”

“Not now.”

They were silent as they climbed into the Alston carriage and Graham took the seat across from her.

“Alston House,” he instructed the driver. “We have just enough time to make tonight’s engagement if you dress quickly.” He said it with a tone strung tight like the

cords of a violin. His gaze wandered over her as if he had to make sure she wasn't missing any pieces. This overprotectiveness was something she was struggling to accept. Really, he was being rather dramatic.

"I don't want to go," Amelia said.

"You will be missed. Won't that cause a stir?" The harsh lines of his face softened. "Are you all right?" His concern warmed something inside of her, and the part of her that wanted to rage at his attempts to control everything lessened. Despite his tendency toward being overbearing, he did care for her—she knew he did.

"Yes. I am perfectly fine. Though I am tired and would rather go home than to another engagement. I'll send a note."

"Fine," he said. He turned his head toward the window and Amelia studied his profile.

She was confused and not quite over being angry. At herself, for proving to Graham once again how right he was about her impulsive and reckless behavior, and at Graham, for thinking he always knew better. Although Amelia was beginning to see that his priggish behavior wasn't judgment so much as concern. For her.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone," Amelia blurted. She pressed her eyes closed in embarrassment. Would he gloat? It wasn't like him, but after all the trouble she'd caused him, she probably deserved a bit of mocking. She opened her eyes when he didn't speak.

He was staring at her, the outside lanterns casting his face in gold. He was so handsome. Had he always been this gorgeous? In a way, she'd known it all the time, but his frigid behavior toward her used to mute the effect.

“If you know you shouldn’t have gone, why did you?” he asked, far gentler than she expected.

Amelia bit the inside of her cheek as she searched for something better to say than because I wanted to. But she had no excuse. She was curious and wanted to meet the mysterious Widow who ran a gaming club and had a spy working for her.

“I don’t have a good reason. I did what I wanted to do, and I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d try to stop me.”

“Do you have no care for your safety or the worry of others?”

“I was safe. The Den is a luxurious and respectable establishment from what I’ve seen—if a little eccentric. But I do have regrets about making you worry. Does Sam know?”

“No. He was sleeping when I got the note.”

Amelia frowned in confusion. “What note?”

“Mr. Chase sent me a note as to your whereabouts.”

She bristled. “What right does he have to—” She cut herself off and shook her head.

“This was a trap. Why else would he encourage me to attend and then tattle?”

“Perhaps he knew the dangers better than you and had a crisis of conscience.”

Amelia shook her head in aggravation. “Why does everyone insist on treating me like a child? Even if going to the Den today wasn’t the wisest choice, I still deserve to have a life of my own and to garner my own experiences. Please help me understand why I can’t.”

“You can’t traipse around alone in a gaming club and think that you will leave the same young woman who entered.”

“But there were many respectable matrons there.”

“Yes, matrons . You’re an unwed young lady of the peerage. There are things you don’t know yet, Amelia, and shouldn’t learn there.” He leaned forward. “Moreover, we already have too much attention on all of us. One misstep and you’ll be scorned by all of society. Then your brother will be forced to marry whomever the Widow chooses—all because you will have dragged the family name through the mud by putting your interests first. I’m sorry you were born a woman and are held to a different set of expectations than Alston or me, but that doesn’t change the situation we must deal with now. When you’re married—if you marry—it will be different.”

“And If I never marry? What then? At what age will I truly gain my independence? Thirty? Fifty? Am I supposed to remain chaste and unknowledgeable while I wait this undeterminable amount of time before I’m allowed free agency?”

“Amelia, a woman as beautiful and wealthy as you will always be a target. I can’t stop you from whatever future you make yourself once this charade ends, but right now you are mine to protect, even if I must sometimes protect you from yourself. And I may only be your pretend fiancé , but I will burn this world to the ground before I let anyone or anything hurt you.”

“Graham,” she whispered. Her heart lurched at his words, beating so loudly that it was all she could hear. Her gaze moved over his face, like she’d never seen him before. Or like she was seeing him for the first time. She didn’t know what this feeling was that bubbled up inside her, but it was powerful and it made her want to crawl into his lap and kiss away the lines of worry between his brows.

“Don’t take me home,” she said. If they arrived home they’d go straight to Sam and

never finish this conversation.

He shook his head. “Why not?”

“I want to... we should keep talking. There is so much between us, and I don’t think I understand any of it. For instance, when did we decide to hate each other?”

“I’ve never hated you, Amelia.”

“Then why did you distance yourself from me for so long? What did I do to deserve the way you’ve treated me, spoken to me? Is it just because I’m a woman?”

He looked up to the carriage ceiling and wiped his hand over his face. He knocked on the roof and called through the window, “Circle the park, Clyde.”

“Aye, sir,” came the reply, and the carriage, which had begun to slow, picked up pace again.

Amelia waited, her nerves stretching. “Why are we circling the park?”

“I thought you wanted to talk. This ensures us the most privacy if we’re not returning to Alston House.”

“Except for Clyde.”

“Do you plan on yelling?”

Amelia laughed quietly. “No. Not unless you don’t answer my question.”

He tugged on his cravat. “What question?”

Amelia crossed to his bench. “What is it about me you don’t like?”

He took a deep breath. “It isn’t that simple. I conduct myself as a gentleman should in regard to his behavior toward a gentlewoman.”

“You weren’t this cold when we first met. Why can my brother be your friend but not me?”

He tilted his head to the side. Because of the shadowed interior she couldn’t read his expression.

“For one, you’re a woman, and much younger when we met. You were just a girl then and reminded me a great deal of my sister, so that was how I treated you—not as friends, but with respect. I acted with honor and integrity. And your brother may be the same age in years, but he had far more in common with me even then than he did with men his own age. But the same could not be said for you and me.”

“I understand that, but why did you become so cold? Not polite and aloof, but cold. That isn’t how one treats a sister, and it isn’t respect. Everything I did upset you, no matter how small. Why?”

There was a moment of silence and he was as still as a statue. “I’d only just met Alston four months before. I hadn’t had time to truly get to know you. Then he invited me to your come-out ball and you were so damned beautiful that night it shook me. I knew I had to adjust my way of thinking and acting around you. I couldn’t talk to you as though you were a little girl like Daisy. So I put a wall between us to keep my distance for propriety’s sake and out of respect to both you and Alston.”

Heat washed over her body. “You went from congenial to disdain overnight, and I never knew what I did to deserve that.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I never meant to hurt you, and you didn’t do anything. Once I saw you that night I knew I had to force this distance between us because I didn’t trust myself. You made me feel weak and reckless. I suppose the colder I was, the easier it was to maintain the distance I needed.”

His admission stunned her. After a moment she replied, “I grew to dislike you for that distance, and I looked for reasons to irritate you. I wanted to punish you for hurting my feelings.”

“You must admit I was right to impose that distance between us, however badly I did it. My attraction to you makes me do things I would never do otherwise.”

Amelia blushed. “Like enter into pretend engagements.”

“Or kiss you in an alcove at a ball. Your brother trusted me to take care of you, but not like this. What we’re doing is scandalous and will ruin all of us. Unless you’ve changed your mind and you agree to marry me as Alston suggested, this farce is destined to end badly.”

“He said that when he was dying, but now he is better. We needn’t marry.”

“I would beg to differ given recent events.”

Amelia’s mouth popped open to refute him, but he was right. “There is something strong between us, I won’t ignore that, but that doesn’t mean we must marry or deny what we feel. You haven’t married every woman you’ve dallied with.”

“You are not just any woman. You’re not a widow, not are you a woman who is outside the expectations of society. I cannot simply dally with you.”

“What about what I want? How am I supposed to ignore these feelings? I can’t go

back now. I want you to touch me, kiss me. I want you to need me like I need you.”

He pressed a hand to his brow. “Amelia...” He turned away toward the window, but Amelia grabbed his lapel and made him face her.

“Listen to me.”

He leaned toward her. “No, you listen to me. I will not defile you, insult your brother, and risk the ruin of your reputation for a bit of dalliance. So unless you will marry me, this stops.”

Was he asking or giving her an ultimatum?

“You don’t want to marry me, Graham. Whatever was the cause of our animosity before, it fed on our differences which already existed. It was easy for me to stoke your ire, and you knew exactly how to make me feel smaller.”

“Amelia, I never wanted that. I admit I did it badly, but I was fighting a battle every moment I was around you. But you’re right. We are too different to get along in a marriage. You’re vibrant like a rainbow and I’m... gray through and through.”

Amelia shook her head at him. “You really believe that?”

“I was burning for you. I didn’t want Alston to know. I didn’t want him to think I was panting after your skirts like a lecher, like every other man at your come-out ball. You’ve made it clear how dull I am and you’re not wrong. I’m a simple man with simple needs except when it comes to you. But a marriage cannot be sustained on passion alone.”

She yanked him closer. “You’re not just gray, Graham. You’ve got colors of your own. They may not be the same shades as mine, but you’re still beautiful. You’re are

shades of earth like the sea green of your eyes.” She ran her hand through his hair and thought she felt him shudder. “You’re warm mahogany with licks of red and orange like autumn leaves. You’re smooth white marble and the dark gray of unbreakable steel.” She wanted him so badly her body ached with a hollowness only he could appease.

He closed his eyes. “Amelia, don’t tempt me.”

“Tempt you? You make me feel such wicked things I don’t know what to do.” She wanted to climb into his lap and let this desire consume both of them, but she knew he’d resist.

“This is why we have to stop,” he warned, opening his eyes and pinning her with his stare. “You don’t know the perils of succumbing to lust like I do.”

“This doesn’t feel like peril. Graham, if we set aside our differences and just for this moment you could have me, what would you do? If you’re burning, I’m burning too. But we can burn together—we don’t have to resist this.”

The carriage grew silent, the outside world muted as the sound of his breath quickened.

His breath fanned her neck, and she tilted her head to the side, enjoying the warm caress. His nose brushed the skin just under her ear, a delightfully sensitive place. She gripped his lapel tighter, arching her neck more.

“Don’t do this,” he said, his lips brushing her skin.

“What am I doing?”

His arm snaked around her. “You know exactly what you’re doing.”

“How can I? According to you, I am the epitome of all things naïve and innocent.”
Her lips brushed his ear.

He growled, the vibration sending shivers over her skin.

“Do you know what you do to me?” she whispered. “I feel hot and liquid. My body wants to melt into yours. Why is that?”

“You are overcome because you are not used to it. I’m older than you, and I have more experience in these matters. It’s dangerous to let ourselves succumb to these feelings. We can’t keep doing this. There are repercussions—devastating, life altering consequences that will hurt you much more than me. I’m trying so desperately to keep you safe, Amelia.”

“I am safe with you.”

He pulled away, just enough to meet her eyes. “Do you truly believe that?”

Amelia cupped his face. “I do.” Didn’t he know this?

She pressed her lips to his, feeling the groan of strain that lifted in his throat. He would try to resist her, but he could not. She knew that now, and she was not so noble as to ignore it. She was seeing, hearing, and feeling things she’d never felt before, and in her heart she knew it didn’t have to end badly, whatever his fears might be. This could be good for both of them.

“What is it you want from me?” he asked.

“I want you to touch me.”

His breathing grew ragged. He kissed her, cradling the back of her head and holding

her mouth to his. Amelia slung her arms around his neck, delighting in this savage side of Graham that only she had begun to witness.

Graham could have all the control if he needed to, she decided—at least he could right here, right now. He could ravish her. He could take the reins and give her what she was asking for on his terms. If he needed to lead, he could lead. He had her unreservedly.

She pressed her breasts into his chest, needy for friction and contact. Something about him made her want to be consumed. She playfully nipped at his bottom lip.

“Touch me, Graham,” she begged.

He pressed his forehead to hers. “You’ll be the death of me.”

“We’re alive right now, aren’t we? Embrace it.”

He snarled a curse under his breath. “You want me to defile you?”

Amelia scoffed. “Don’t utter such nonsense. You could never defile me. You care too much for me.”

“Yes,” he said with a smoky voice, his gaze searching hers.

“I want you to touch me.”

He held her stare, and closed the carriage curtains. He pulled her close, his hand gliding under her ruffled hem. Amelia parted her thighs. His hand reached her bare thigh, and the tips of his fingers startled her as they grazed her. She was slippery with need, a fact he discovered when he slipped two fingers along the seam of her sex.

“Bloody hell, Amelia.”

This wasn't as glorious as when he'd put his mouth on her, but it was equally scintillating in that it was so public here in the carriage yet still so discreet. He swirled his finger around the hood of her sex, that sensitive bead sending shards of pleasure through her belly. She squirmed against his light touch, needing more, and moaned into his mouth. He wasn't kissing her any longer, his focus entirely dedicated to his ministrations between her legs.

He spread her open, courting the entrance to her body, teasing the delicate flesh with probing fingers until he slipped one inside. The intrusion was at first strange, such a foreign sensation that she couldn't describe how it made her feel. He pressed in, and she rode the palm of his hand, her breath catching as he caught her lips again, taking in her desperate sounds. She got used to the feeling quickly, eagerly chasing that stroking finger with her body when Graham added a second, and her walls had to stretch to accommodate it. That feeling of fullness rocked her senses. Everything became heightened as the implications of innocence and purity became strikingly clear.

Her virginity—that elusive, invisible stigma that had determined her value as a young woman—had always been a specter she could dismiss. But now she understood. To her body this was all new, not just the sensations and wonderful burst of pleasure, but the claiming. Graham, the first man to touch her so intimately, was marking her deeply. Everything faded to just the two of them. Him, stroking her to life, and her, basking in the magnitude of this moment. For the rest of her days, a part of her would belong to Graham. That should alarm her, but it didn't. This was Graham, and there was no better man to entrust her body to. He'd even hold her heart for safekeeping if she asked him to.

Somewhere along this nightmarish journey, their common goals had smoothed the edges of their animosity, revealing something else, though she'd been slow to see it

for what it was: comradery, dare she think it friendship, trust, and now this.

This substance she dared not name. She wasn't qualified to identify it. She wasn't willing to, either. She just wanted to live inside this moment, in this bubble of safe pleasure with him.

Her hips moved with his hand of their own will, that shimmering summit of rapture glowing brighter as she neared it. He held her mouth captive, his unyielding fingers wringing the most indecent sounds from her body, and she loved every second of it. But like most good things, it must reach its eventual zenith and end.

She cried into their kiss, breaking away only to draw a full breath. Her head floated in the clouds and her body sank into weighted bliss. He pulled his hand out from under her skirts, his other hand still cupping the back of her head like she might flee if he let go.

Amelia never wanted him to let go.

Their gazes touched again. He wiped his fingers with his handkerchief and tucked it away. Amelia swallowed, her brilliant flush of ecstasy fading to one of anxious anticipation.

He didn't have the look of a man enslaved by passion. He looked resigned.

He knocked on the roof once more. "Alston House."

"Aye!" Clyde called back.

Perhaps she was the one who couldn't let go.

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Graham changed out of his evening attire. There was no point wearing it now. His thoughts were churning with the events of their carriage ride, the things he'd revealed to her and what she shared in return.

"You're not gray, Graham. You've got colors of your own. They may not be the same shades as mine, but you're still beautiful."

Her compliment had crushed his resolve to resist her. He'd had women whisper endearments to him, calling him handsome, virile, but none had ever resonated like Amelia's words. It had undone him.

That night at her ball he'd been ambushed by his own swell of attraction and then the swift drop of knowing he was too drab in comparison to a woman like her. She sparkled, and he was a matte shade of brown. All his life he'd been called many things—strong, intelligent, steady, loyal—but none of those things were exciting draws for women. Least of all one who outshone the rest with her dazzling eyes and the kind of laughter that sounded both joyous and wicked at the same time.

She was strong and brave, stubborn but valiant, and intelligent—when she slowed down enough to think things through. She fought for what she loved and what she believed in. But she didn't know or understand this side of desire. She didn't know how easy it was to confuse these feelings for something more than they were, for infatuation to become obsession. That was what she was becoming to him. An addiction. The further he fell, the more he knew his heart would not survive the break when he finally hit the ground. He left his room, still agitated and aroused, and his emotions were held on a short leash when she appeared on the landing.

“Graham?” she said, her eyes heavy with uncertainty. “You’re upset with me. Do you regret what you said? What we did?”

The carriage ride had revealed too much. He was raw and exposed like a nerve, and the hurt in her voice clawed at his insides. He stalked toward her, and she backed up against the wall. His heart beat so loudly that it was all he could hear.

Her eyes widened in bewilderment. Could she see it now? Did she finally see him as a man who, until now, had buried the emotions he’d felt for her behind a mask of indifference and disdain.

He’d been suffering for so long he could no longer be that civilized man. He’d made himself cold, rigid—like a statue, a block of ice next to her flame. But he’d gotten too close, and now he was melting away, his heart exposed. She thought she’d been in a cage, but he’d been chained to a dungeon wall by his own hand. Tortured by her smile, her scent, and the sharp wit she threw at him like knives.

Now that he’d kissed her, tasted her, and heard the soft sighs and clipped moans of her release, there was no going back to how things had been. There was no more pretending to himself where she was concerned. He was certain now.

“Amelia, you mean more to me than I have words to articulate. I’m not a poetic man, and for that, I’m sorry. I cannot adequately describe what you make me feel. Other than... everything. You make me feel everything.”

“Graham,” she whispered, “what are you saying?”

He wanted her, needed her, and he would die for her if she would only let him be her protector, her lover, her husband until his final breath. That’s what he wanted to say. But he could not utter the words that would alter their lives forever. Though it already belonged to her, he could not open his heart to her because she did not feel the same.

She saw marriage as just another cage. She'd made that clear time and again. To her, this was temporary. He was only a safe diversion that brought her comfort and pleasure. He would not lay his soul so bare now only to force her to reject him again. He would not survive it.

So instead, Graham took her lips in one last searing kiss. Her mouth opened under his, their tongues searching for each other, their moans colliding on their breaths. Their fingers laced together at their sides, and Graham raised her arms until he had her pinned to the wall. Her body bowed into his, and all the blood rushing from his brain left an echoing whirring sound in his ears.

He pulled back, and she whimpered as he reluctantly let go.

"Graham . . ."

"I have to go."

She'd broken the chains of his control, and now he was free. However, his freedom didn't guarantee her heart, and he would not settle for less. The control he found now—control that had eluded him in the carriage—was born of his own increasing pain. It was the sort of sharp, head-clearing anguish that would help him walk away.

"Aren't you going to see Sam?"

"I'll go and say goodbye. I shouldn't be staying here any longer."

She reached for him, but he stepped back, and she said, "Don't do this. Don't leave now after all that... I need you here. I can't do this without you."

His head hung. "I can't be this close to you and not have you."

“You can have me.”

“No, I mean to have you and to keep you, and you don’t want that. You don’t want to lose the freedom of self-determination you’ve fought to protect, and I understand it. But I can’t deal in half-measures any longer, and I can’t stay away from you if we’re under a shared roof.” He could not look at her. He’d break.

She dropped her hands and turned, flying down the stairs. He gripped the railing. The urge to follow her had him rooting his feet to the floor until the feeling passed. Then he marched to Alston’s room, intent on saying goodbye to his friend and putting the distance that was necessary between them.

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Graham paused outside Alston's room, taking a deep breath to calm his pounding heart. Before he'd left this afternoon, Alston had been looking better. He was more awake, talking, and had started to eat small amounts. Though he hadn't moved much other than bending and straightening his legs. He hated eating while on his back.

Graham opened the door and nearly tripped over his feet. Alston was sitting up, a newspaper in his hands.

He charged in. "Alston!"

"Petrov would like me to explain that he did not approve of or help me in sitting up."

Petrov sat by his side, polishing a boot and glaring at it.

"That I believe. But he could have overpowered you." Graham spoke as he strode to his friend's side, searching for any signs of distress.

"He wasn't here when I did it. Look at me, though. I'm fine. I look better, don't I?"

He did. Another sign that it was indeed time for Graham to leave. He took the chair opposite Petrov, and Alston studied him.

"You look contemplative."

Graham sighed. "I've just had a... disagreement with your sister."

"I'm glad not much has changed."

“I think it’s time I return to my own lodgings.”

Alston frowned. “Truly? You want to leave?”

No. “It’s the proper thing to do.” Between Alston and Amelia, he might not have the will to walk out that door. Fencing words with one Clark was enough trouble; two ensured defeat.

“She’s driven you away, has she?”

Graham rubbed the back of his neck. “No, actually. Amelia wanted me to stay. It is my opinion that I should leave. You’re awake and getting better. We don’t need to court scandal by having me here. The worst has passed.”

Alston scrutinized him with narrowed eyes. “You don’t have that usually stony edge to your voice. You don’t want to leave.”

Graham folded his arms. “I like your cook.”

Alston snorted and grimaced, touching his bruised ribs. “Bloody hell.”

“I’ll leave tonight.”

“No, you won’t. I forbid it. You’re going to eat cake with me, and we’ll play games.”

“Alston.”

“If you must go, I expect you to return as frequently as possible to entertain me. It will be abominably inconvenient going back and forth. You may as well just keep your room. In fact, why don’t you move in here permanently?”

Graham rolled his eyes. “I don’t think Dr. Bradley considered the effects of your injury on your mental state.”

Alston smiled. “I want all of the people who care for me to be close. Is that so wrong? If I’ve learned anything from this experience, it’s not to take the people we love for granted. None of us are owed time. We have to make the most of it with what we have, even if we must beg, borrow, or steal.”

“I don’t think most of society will agree with those sentiments, sincere though they are. Amelia’s reputation will take the brunt of it.”

Alston rolled his eyes. “She doesn’t care for it anyway.”

“Oh, I am aware. But she ought to, and you ought to.”

“She’s been saying she won’t marry at all, unless it’s for love. I can’t think of a single man who could sway her heart. She’s fiercely independent now. The older she gets, the more she wants to make good on her promise to Aunt Ruth to die a spinster. But—don’t tell her I said this—I think one day she’ll meet her match, and marriage won’t feel like a trap, but a journey. And I...” He stroked his chin in thought.

“ You will marry a woman of your choosing who will bring you happiness,” Graham said. “Not a marriage of convenience orchestrated by the Widow because you have no other options,” he added pointedly.

“Oh, yes, that .”

Graham smiled. “Forgotten already?”

“I had. I’m too young to marry. Look at me—a right hellion. Too wicked to settle down. What could she be thinking?”

“One never knows.”

“I’ll send a missive and inform her I appreciate the thought, but I respectfully decline. That might stave her off for a little while.”

Graham glanced down at his hands. The hands that had recently pinned Amelia’s to the wall. He was a dishonorable rake—and right under Alston’s nose. If his friend knew what he’d done—what they’d done—he’d never forgive Graham. Alston would want to force them to wed on principle, and their friendship would be blemished forever. And Amelia would hate them both for trying to force the issue. It would splinter them apart. Graham didn’t want that.

“Do you want to marry?” Graham asked quietly.

Alston twisted his mouth in thought. “Eventually, but not now. You? You’re getting on in years. I dare say it is time for you.” Alston narrowed his eyes at him again. “Is that what you’re afraid of? If word gets around that you’ve been here all along, it threatens your chances at a respectable match. Is there someone in particular you like?”

Amelia came to mind, and Graham pushed the thought away. “No.”

“But are you ready?”

Graham’s heart thumped painfully. He rubbed at his chest. “I think I am.”

Alston whistled. “Well, don’t bring me down with you.”

Graham half-smiled. “You’re in no shape to please a woman.”

Alston grinned. “My hands and tongue are enough.”

“For what?” Amelia entered carrying a tray of tea and cake.

Petrov jumped to his feet and took it from her. Graham stood reflexively and rubbed the back of his neck. He could see she’d been crying, her nose red and her lashes sticking together. The sight pierced his heart. The blood drained from his heart, and his hands turned cold. Would her effect on him ever lessen? Or was he doomed to live his life half living, half dead?

“Take my chair, my lady,” Petrov said. As Petrov set up the tea and cake, Alston smiled at his sister.

“Now, what were you saying about your hands and tongue? Are they numb? Should I call Dr. Bradley?”

Alston groaned while Graham chuckled uncomfortably.

“No, I was referring to food.”

Amelia looked between them, her gaze lingering on Graham as Petrov handed her a teacup. “Very well. I’ve got your favorite cake, lemon and poppy seed.”

“Fantastic. And I’m pleased you’re both here. Now we can have one more evening together before Graham leaves in the morning.”

“You told him?” she asked Graham without looking at him and took a sip of her tea.

“He wants to marry,” Alston said.

Amelia spit her tea back into her cup. “What?”

“Amelia, what a mess you are.” Alston tossed her his handkerchief from his lap, and

Petrov brought a towel.

“Sorry, I—what do you mean?” She looked between the two of them.

Graham’s face flushed with heat. “He means nothing.”

“I think he wants to quit the house to maintain his respectability so he can begin searching for a wife.” Alston continued to slaughter Graham’s pride.

She set her cup and saucer down. “Oh.”

“I said no such thing,” Graham said.

“It’s not my business who you marry,” she said.

“But it is,” Alston argued.

She blinked. “It is?”

“We’ll have to spend some time with her. She can’t be someone who is insufferable. I will have to interview these potential brides.”

Graham groaned. “I didn’t say I was looking for a wife, Alston.”

“You’ll be going gray soon,” Alston teased. “Better to get it over with while everything is in working order.” Alston winked at him.

Graham caught sight of Amelia shrinking into her chair with pink cheeks. Not very long ago, she might not have known what her brother was alluding to, but now she did. She knew intimately how Graham’s body worked. He ground his teeth as unwanted visions infiltrated his mind.

“How about we talk about something more pleasant?” Graham suggested. “You wanted to play games.”

“Let’s have some cake first,” Alston said. “Maybe a bit of whisky?”

“Absolutely not.” Graham and Amelia said it in unison.

Alston looked between them. “Spooky. I’m used to Amelia and me speaking as one, but you two? Maybe you have been spending too much time together. I don’t want you influencing each other.”

Amelia hid behind her teacup and Graham cleared his throat.

“Games?” Graham prompted.

“Right. I want to play games right here and celebrate our last night together. I’m already succumbing to boredom, and both of you must entertain me.”

“Wonderful,” Amelia muttered.

Alston frowned. “I thought you’d like this idea.”

“I do, but...” Her gaze flicked to Graham.

“Tired of his company? You can stomach him for one more night for me.”

Amelia nodded, throwing Graham a quick glance. “For you.”

Alston picked up a deck of cards from his bedside table and began to shuffle.

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They played games until well after midnight. Sam hadn't wanted the night to end, but he was rather peaked, and Amelia forced his hand by claiming she was overtired and headachy. She left first, escaping to her room before Graham could see her in the hall.

She had wanted to talk some more or throw her arms around him and kiss him like mad, but the idea also made her palms sweat and her heart flutter with something close to a thrill but also fear.

What he'd said had shaken her to her roots. It was more than just pretty words—they were real. Each syllable had struck her like an arrow through her heart, and she didn't know what to do about it.

“You mean more to me than I have words to articulate. I'm not a poetic man, and for that I'm sorry. I cannot adequately describe what you make me feel. Other than... everything. You make me feel everything.”

Amelia paced her room, unpinning her hair and dropping pins on the floor in aggravation. She tortured him, he'd said. That's exactly what he was doing to her right now. What was she supposed to think? Do?

Fran was already in bed. She had a cold, and Mrs. Keen had made her a strong toddy. So Amelia was left alone to contemplate the day, everything Graham had said, everything Graham had done. To reminisce about the way he'd pinned her to the wall. She clawed her fingers into her hair in frustration, then yanked off her dress. She left everything on the floor in disarray, knowing that tomorrow Fran would look at the mess and shake her head.

She hated to admit he was right, but perhaps he should leave. And if that was what he wanted, then she wasn't going to beg him to stay. She replayed his words in her mind over and over, even the nothings he'd uttered as he'd sat across from her, losing hand after hand of cards. He'd hardly looked at her, and tomorrow he would leave, and then what? Would he still be her escort? Would he answer a note if it came from her? Would he look at her like he'd done this morning ever again? She couldn't go on without seeing that look again and feeling his hands on her body.

Would he marry? Could she stand to see him marry someone and look at his wife like that? Amelia threw herself on her bed. All these questions had no answers. If she were a braver woman, she would go to him, demand to know whether he meant to marry or if it was nonsense spoken for her brother's sake. Was he truly tortured by his feelings for her? He didn't look it. If he were, if he'd meant all those things he'd said, then how could he simply move on to another woman?

Her body revolted at the thought—stomach hollowing, throat burning. She could not see him with another woman. Not now, not ever. But she could not keep him for herself, either. Could she?

No. They were too much at odds. Even if his touches and kisses were magic, their words were still poison too often. Even now with their mutual understanding over Sam, too much of their time had been spent arguing and not just talking about the things they liked: music, theater, books, sweets...

“You make me feel everything.”

She let out a soft sob. Everything. He made her feel everything, too. She ran the gamut of emotions when in his presence. Even feelings she didn't want to admit. When his arms came around her, her body sank with relief. When his jaw brushed her temple, she had to fight the urge to smile. If she was close enough to catch a whiff of his scent, his soap, or whatever he used that made him smell like Graham, she

calmed, her mind and spirit quieting.

Why was she so loath to admit these things?

When he'd danced with her at her come-out ball, his hands had been hot against her dress, and she'd sweat from every pore of her body, barely able to hold his gaze. Graham was like no other man. Which made him hard to read and hard to manage. He challenged her.

Did she want to be challenged? Yes. How boring would life be without it? But was it enough?

Amelia grabbed her brush to run it through her hair. She stared at her reflection, sullen and flushed. She blew out the candle on her dressing table, her reflection now cast in shadows and sat there silent and troubled in the darkness for a long moment.

There was movement behind her, and she stilled, watching the mirror as if what happened there might reveal the future to her and tell her what to do.

It showed Graham slipping into her room, dressed casually in his breeches and shirt, untucked, feet bare. He did not spot her by the dressing table and instead moved toward the bed where her one candle still burned. In the candlelight she saw him frown, finding her bed empty. She bit her lip. This was the perfect opportunity to frighten him.

"I'm over here," she said quietly. She chose the mature route, the path that might lead to the places her heart and body yearned to go—Graham's arms.

His head snapped toward her, and he straightened.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a strained whisper.

She waved her brush at him. “What are you doing in my room, sir?” She could be mature but still herself, couldn’t she?

He ran a hand through his hair, and she bit back a smile. He seemed flustered, and she enjoyed it. She set her brush down and pivoted to face him on her stool. She lifted her shift to her thighs to roll down her stockings.

He made a small noise and came around the foot of her bed, gripping the post, but no farther. “I came to see if you were all right. I know you are upset.”

She shrugged, her amusement fading. He was coming to check on her because that was the kind of person he was, but that didn’t mean he’d changed his mind about staying. “I can’t force you to remain here. If you want to go, go.”

“You know I don’t want to go. Don’t pretend.”

She yanked her stocking off her foot, and it floated to the floor. He watched it intently.

“Pretending, isn’t that what we’re doing?” she asked sharply. Why was he doing this? He wanted her, but he wanted to leave. What was she supposed to do or feel besides hurt?

“We were,” he said, refocusing on her legs as she rolled down her other stocking. His breathing quickened. “Is that still what you want?”

She wanted him, that was all she knew. Amelia cleared her throat. “Will you still escort me to social functions until my brother is able?”

“I’ll do anything you need me to do.”

Her stomach tightened. Would he? If she begged, would he stay? She'd asked, and he said no, but if she begged him on her hands and knees, would he change his mind? Would he forget about finding a wife and simply be hers without strings attached?

Was that what she wanted? Graham, for herself, always?

Yes.

The realization washed over her body like a sunrise. She closed her eyes and leaned over her leg, forgetting to continue rolling down her stocking. The touch of his hand startled her as he took over, rolling the silk over her foot and tossing it away.

"Graham," she said, more needy than she'd ever been. She was ready to beg. But she didn't know what to say to make him stay.

He set his hands on the stool on either side of her hips. "I'm trying to do what is best for both of us. I let things get too far. I don't want you to think any of this is your fault."

She sucked in a breath, catching the pain in his eyes. "You feel guilty, is that it? You think you took advantage of a naive girl."

"No. It isn't that simple, Amelia. There is a line I cannot cross, but every day with you, it fades a little more and I don't want to continue down this path when I know that we won't arrive at the end together."

"What does that mean? What path?" She shook her head in confusion.

"The path to marriage. I am not a man who takes a woman to bed carelessly."

"But you have. I can see you have engaged in a relationship with Julia, and yet you

are not married to her. What makes me different from her?”

“You’re different because you mean more to me than Julia ever did. With Julia, neither my heart nor hers was at risk. I did not love her, and I had no intention of loving her.”

Amelia’s heart lurched. What was he saying and why was she so terrified to hear it? It took a few more seconds before his words penetrated her foggy thoughts and she understood. He wanted more from her than just physical desire or nothing. He wanted to love her and marry her—not for her brother’s sake but for his own. And love and marriage were two things Amelia had thought she’d never have after her first season, and she’d accepted that. Men had seemed inclined to want her for her money more than for her heart, so she’d built a wall around her heart. She’d given up on the notion of marriage so completely it sounded utterly foreign to her now. But... if she were brave enough, could she claim his love for herself, in spite of it all?

Did she deserve his love, after how utterly selfish she’d been?

She wasn’t certain she did, and now it made sense. He wanted to leave to protect himself.

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Graham watched realization wash over her face, followed by fear. Exactly as he suspected. She did not feel the same as him, and that's why this could never be. He wouldn't make love to Amelia when she had no intention of becoming his wife. He loved her. Once he had her, he'd never be able to let her go.

He stood, turning his back to her. In a whisper of fabric, she was at his back, hugging him from behind.

"I'm sorry, Graham."

The words tore at him. "You've nothing to be sorry for."

"I do. I didn't think about you, not the way I should have. I'm selfish."

He wouldn't disagree. "Consider it over. Tomorrow is a new day. We can begin again. But this time, we're going to do things properly. No more hiding Alston, no more secrecy."

She sniffed and let him go. "How can we explain the lies we've already told?"

Damn. He'd forgotten the tale they'd spun. "He returned late this evening, injured. He never made it to Stirling. Will that suffice?"

"It's another lie."

He ran his hand through his hair as he stopped at her door and turned to face her. "One more won't hurt. We'll maintain our pretend engagement for now until Alston

is completely recovered, then you'll throw me over."

She frowned as she turned to him. "I've hurt you. I've been hurting you. How can you be so calm?"

He wanted to comfort her and assure her that his pain was minimal, but he wouldn't lie about his feelings anymore. For his own sake, their relationship could never be the same again. He would have to slowly distance himself once Alston was better. He couldn't stand to be in her presence as nothing more than a friend or a guardian. It was his turn to be selfish to protect his own heart.

"Goodnight, Amelia," was all he answered. He slipped out of the room into the darkened hall, making his way to his own room. He wanted to get drunk, but he didn't trust himself to stay away from her when inebriated, so he got dressed again and left. He'd return to the Den and let the whisky drown his sorrows.

A moment later—or was it a year?—Graham jerked awake as a firm hand gripped his shoulder and shook him violently. He blinked, losing his balance on his chair and hitting the floor with a grunt.

"Look at him. Pathetic." A gruff voice spoke before stomping away.

A blurry figure leaned over him. For the life of him Graham couldn't see through the gritty film covering his eyes or remember where he was. Nor could he defend himself.

Water splashed on his face and he coughed, rubbing his eyes. The world cleared into sharp focus and he winced.

"Good morning," Tristan Chase said from a squat at his side.

“It’s morning?”

“Half past six. I suppose you’ve heard the news. I wasn’t keen to believe it, but seeing you here like this confirms its validity. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Graham swallowed. His tongue was too dry and thick to function. Bile rose in his throat. Had he heard right?

Mr. Chase held out a glass of water. Graham pushed himself to a sitting position and took an eager sip. “Who’s dead?”

Mr. Chase cocked his head and frowned. “Lord Alston. It’s all over town that he is believed to be dead.”

Graham shook his head, his thoughts fumbling with the information. “Bloody hell, who would say that?”

“Many people, some claiming to have heard it from someone associated with his man of business. It was the talk of the town all last evening. I’ve tried to have the information verified by my contacts, but I’m still waiting—”

“He’s not dead!” Graham stumbled to his feet. The room spun, but he remained standing. Who was saying Alston was dead? He had to get to the bottom of it. If word spread... the aunt, the cousin, they’d be knocking down Amelia’s door.

Mr. Chase stood and shook his head at him. “Apparently, a body was found by the river. A wealthy gentleman, according to the constables involved. The man is not... easily identifiable at the moment, but there were some identifying objects, a handkerchief with Lord Alston’s crest.” Mr. Chase sighed. “Whoever discovered him took the news straight to the papers. Go home and clean yourself up. I’ll send a note when I hear something more definitive.”

Graham grabbed his shoulder to steady himself. “What do you mean?”

Mr. Chase glared at his hand. “Which part are you struggling to understand?”

Graham crowded in close. “All of it. Who said Lord Alston was dead? How many people heard them say it?”

“It’s in the gossip rags, Blakewood. It’s all anyone is talking about.”

His knees nearly gave out again, but Graham managed to straighten and let Chase go. “He’s not dead, but he will be if I don’t stop them! I need a hack, now!” He yelled out to anyone who would listen. He had to get to Amelia and warn her.

Minutes later, Graham arrived at the house. All looked quiet from the outside, but he couldn’t be sure. He knocked on the front door until the butler answered.

Graham pushed his way past. “Where is Lady Amelia?”

“Still abed, sir.”

Graham spun to face him. “There is a rumor Lord Alston has died. We have to prepare for the aunt and cousin’s arrival. Summon his man of business.” Graham said as he hurried up the stairs. His stomach lurched as he reached the top, but he didn’t have time to vacate the contents before reaching Alston.

His door was open, and a maid was carrying out sheets. Graham peeked in, and Petrov was covering a sleeping Alston with a blanket. Graham stood in the doorway until he saw Alston’s chest moving steadily. Petrov, looking at him with confusion, approached him.

“We’re about to be bombarded. Place two footmen outside this door and keep out

anyone but me or Lady Amelia.”

Petrov nodded. “Who is coming?”

“Their aunt and cousin. Rumor has spread that Lord Alston is dead.”

Petrov’s eyes widened.

Graham touched his shoulder. “We need to keep him calm, but we can’t keep this secret any longer.”

“Sir, may I suggest bathing and a shave? You look quite dead yourself.”

He felt it. Now that he’d stopped moving, he could smell the liquor oozing from his skin. He nodded, and Petrov led him back to his room and ordered coffee. Graham’s stomach roiled, but he was the last line of defense between Amelia and her family. He had to be presentable and formidable.

Once clean and dressed—which he did in record time—he went to Amelia’s room. Her lady’s maid opened the door and, after a hurried word from him, walked swiftly to the windows to open the curtains, leaving the door ajar. Amelia was in her bed, huddled under a mound of covers.

“My lady,” the maid called soothingly. “It is urgent that you wake up. Mr. Blakewood is here to speak to you.”

Amelia grumbled something, then sat up, pushing wisps of hair out of her face, and Graham’s gut tightened at her soft, sleepy beauty. This would be the first and last time he’d see her like this.

“What is it?” She rubbed her eyes, then stiffened. She leapt out of bed with alarm. “Is

it Sam?”

“No, your brother is sleeping comfortably,” Graham said, nudging the door open a bit more.

She put a hand to her heart, breathing hard. “Then what is it?” She asked as her maid pushed her into a robe.

Graham licked his dry lips, turning his back to her to protect her privacy. Her nightgown was little more than thin silk. “Last night a body was discovered by the river. Someone with considerable wealth who had a handkerchief with the Alston crest on it. Whoever found him sold the story to the newspapers and now rumor has spread that Alston is dead.”

“Bloody hell. My aunt will have heard of course. I’m sure she’ll be here any minute. What do we do about Sam? This is madness.”

“Mr. Chase is looking into it further. I told him it wasn’t possible.”

He peeked over his shoulder, and she was at her dressing table, angrily brushing out her hair. “We must assume the worst and prepare for your aunt and Nelson to arrive to confirm it with you.”

“To take immediate control, more like. That’s what they will try to do.”

“How do you intend to stop them?”

She stood, eyes downcast. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll leave you to dress and we can meet in your brother’s room. We’ll think of something.”

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The knock echoed throughout the house. Despite expecting it for the past thirty minutes, Amelia jolted in surprise. She still didn't know what she was going to say. She had looked in on her brother and Graham, but she thought it better not to wake Sam—he needed all his rest, and it was about to be threatened once her aunt was inside. There hadn't been time enough to form a real plan. She wanted Graham to be with her, but she also wanted him to remain with Sam.

Graham rose but she held up a hand. “Stay.” Whatever came next, she needed to do this on her own. She'd hardly slept after he'd left her room last night. He was right. He was always right. He had to leave for his own reasons, and she had to let him, because that was the right thing to do. Now Amelia had to face her aunt alone. That was the right thing to do, too.

She wouldn't always have her brother as her shield. At her age, she didn't want to need a shield. She'd relied on him—and lately Graham—so much already. She'd blamed them both for being overprotective, but what had she really done to earn her independence? She hadn't done anything to change her circumstances. Truthfully, she liked her life. It was comfortable—too comfortable. Boredom had driven her to push boundaries when all she had to do was step outside her gilded cage and take responsibility for her own needs.

That was the problem, wasn't it? Amelia wasn't maturing like other women her age, marrying, having children. She had lived the same life for the last ten years. Frolicking in gardens, enjoying the benefits of her brother's title. She'd taken it all for granted. She'd let the fear of leaving her brother's side rule her choices.

Graham had opened her eyes.

She had to change, for Sam's sake, for her own sake. To be the woman she wanted to be, she had to start now.

Her aunt and cousin bickered heatedly in the drawing room. Amelia paused outside to prepare her nerves. She knew what they were going to say. What she couldn't decide was what her reaction should be. Should she act surprised? Tell the truth? Her stomach dropped at the thought. They would try to twist anything she said to their advantage.

The footman opened the door, and Amelia walked in. "Aunt Ruth, to what do I owe this early visit?" She blinked at the presence of Mr. Crest, her brother's man of business. Why was he here with them? Graham had told her he'd sent for the man himself.

Her aunt darted forward, taking her hands. "Dearest, you must sit. We have terrible news to impart." She tugged Amelia to the settee and crowded next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and cinching Amelia close to her side. Amelia fought the urge to roll her eyes.

Nelson remained quiet, his features fixed in a frown.

"What is it? Is everything all right?" she asked, deciding for the moment to let the conversation play out.

"Nelson, you know the facts. You tell her." Her aunt sniffed and held a handkerchief to her nose.

"I heard from my acquaintances last evening and now it is in the papers, but you should hear it from family, not the gossip rags." He paused, taking a deep breath, and Amelia began to see this for what it was. A performance.

“Yes?”

“Near the river, in a dangerous area, a man was found. He was a gentleman by all appearances, robbed, murdered, and disposed of. The only identification they have is a handkerchief with the Alston crest. Amelia, dear cousin. It looks to be Alston. He never made it out of the city.”

Amelia swallowed back bile as guilt stole her breath. It wasn't possible, she knew that logically, but still, the image of him lying face down in the dirt appeared in her mind. Tears scalded her eyes, and she did not stop them from falling, but she shook her head. “It's not Sam.”

“Amelia—” Nelson strode forward, kneeling before her and pulling her hand off her lap. “It is Alston. I was summoned. I viewed the body myself.”

“You're wrong.” She pulled her hand free of his and stood.

“Dear, we understand this is a shock and you don't want to believe it is true,” her aunt said.

Mr. Crest spoke up at last. “My lady, Mr. Clark summoned me to confirm the identity. I concur it is Lord Alston. Is that not why I was summoned here this morning?”

“You're all cracked. My brother is fine—”

“You're upset,” her aunt pressed. “She knows it's true,” she said to Mr. Crest. “She's always been spiritually connected with her twin.” Aunt Ruth stood with her arms open, as if Amelia would accept any form of comfort from her.

“I will thank you to stop trying to convince me my brother is dead, when he is no

such thing.” Amelia spat.

“Unless Alston appears miraculously alive,” Nelson said, “we must accept that he is gone, no matter how difficult and painful it is.”

Amelia stepped back. The idea of telling them the truth, letting them in to see Sam and disturb him... it made her sick. The back of her mouth filled with acid. She would have to tell them enough to make them leave. Amelia fisted her hands and remembered the story they’d agreed upon.

“My brother returned last night. He is upstairs, in his bed, sleeping. Now, kindly get out.” Amelia pointed at the door. “Get out before I have you thrown out.”

Mr. Crest looked between the three of them with bewilderment. “I think I should leave while this private matter is sorted out.”

Aunt Ruth stilled, stoically folding her arms. “You’ve succumbed to hysteria. It is no surprise. Mr. Crest, kindly fetch a doctor. My niece may need something to calm her nerves in these trying times.”

“Yes, madam.” He pivoted to go.

“You will do no such thing!” Amelia cried. But he only glanced back at her. He would take their instruction over hers? He was almost out the door. This was the last straw; she would never let these people near her or Sam again. She turned back to her aunt and cousin, livid. “Get out.”

Nelson grabbed her shoulders. “Amelia, please let us help you. I have always sworn I’d take care of you, and my feelings have not changed.”

“Sam is upstairs!” she cried, pushing out of his grasp. She put a chair between them.

Nelson and Aunt Ruth stared at her. Mr. Crest paused at the threshold.

“If that is true, summon him,” Nelson said.

“I won’t,” Amelia said. “He returned late last night and needs to rest.”

“Amelia,” her aunt pleaded falsely, once more trying to approach her. “He isn’t there. No matter how much we all wish he were safe at home, Nelson and Mr. Crest have confirmed his death themselves. Please, let me comfort you.”

“I’ll summon him myself if I must.” Nelson turned and tugged on the bell pull.

“He won’t come down here,” Amelia argued. “He can’t. He was injured on his journey. He must remain in bed.”

Her Aunt Ruth only frowned at her with pity. Nelson folded his arms and waited.

Even if they saw Sam alive, he didn’t look well—he wasn’t well, not yet. They’d interfere and ruin all semblance of peace here. She was sure they would badger him until they made him worse.

“You’d better hope he never hears what you tried to do this morning.” She looked past them to Mr. Crest. “And you will be fired shortly.”

“Show us,” Aunt Ruth said.

“I will not. He has a right to his privacy.”

“Then I don’t believe you,” her Aunt Ruth said. “Your behavior has been troubling for weeks now. This cannot go on. Send for the doctor, Mr. Crest. It is far more urgent than we thought.”

He hesitated, scrunching his hat in his hands.

“Don’t you dare, Crest.” Amelia ordered. What was she to do? She couldn’t bring her brother down here. Not in his state. Maybe if she could simply convince them of his injury? “He took a fall from a horse. He has a bruised rib.”

“I was not informed of this,” Mr. Crest said.

“Why would you hide that information unless it weren’t true?” Nelson said.

A maid had appeared in the doorway, watching them nervously.

“I feel it necessary that I confirm his condition, my lady,” Mr. Crest said. “As an impartial witness.” It seemed she wouldn’t be able to avoid them seeing Sam. She’d have to bring them to him.

“Inform Mr. Blakewood that my brother will have visitors shortly,” Amelia said to the waiting maid.

“Your fiancé is here at such an hour? This is scandalous behavior.” Aunt Ruth tried to corner her again.

“He visits Sam often. He always has. Once you see him, you will leave, and if you know what is good for you, you will never return. You will remain here until summoned. I won’t have you barging into his room without warning.” Amelia quit the room and began hurrying to Sam’s bedchamber herself. “Delay them,” she said to a footman as she passed. He nodded. She knew very well they wouldn’t wait to be summoned.

Amelia sprinted up the stairs to Sam’s room, out of breath by the time she arrived, just as Graham was exiting.

“What is going on?” he asked.

Amelia drew a deep breath. “I had to tell them he was here, and he is injured, but not how severely. They won’t leave without seeing him. They had Mr. Crest confirm the body of the dead man was my brother’s, so he needs to see Sam as well. Is he awake? Does he look well enough?”

Graham winced. “Well enough compared to what he used to look like, I suppose.”

“It has to be enough.”

Graham stiffened as there was a flurry of footsteps and voices coming up the stairs, and they would soon be coming down the corridor. He touched her elbow. “Go wait beside your brother. Tell him as much as you can. I’ll hold them back.”

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Sam blinked his sleepy eyes and smiled at her. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. I hope it isn’t me.”

Amelia gave him a watery smile as she took his hand. “Don’t say such things. And you must listen. Aunt Ruth and Nelson are here. I can’t keep our secret any longer. I told them you returned last night and are injured from falling off a horse.”

He sighed. “It couldn’t last forever, could it? Help me sit up.”

Petrov hurried over, taking Sam’s arm to pull him up gently, and Amelia stuffed pillows behind him. Petrov combed through his hair and straightened the linens. Every second loomed over them until the knock came, and Graham opened the door, preceding Aunt Ruth and Nelson.

Aunt Ruth paused as she gawked at Sam, her hand shaking as she covered her mouth.

“Bloody hell, Alston,” Nelson blurted.

“You look well, aunt and cousin. Why are you here at such a dreadful hour?”

They shuffled closer, eyes wide and faces pale.

“Goodness, fetch a doctor!” Aunt Ruth cried.

Sam sighed wearily. “I’ve seen the doctor. I’m recovering nicely and only need to rest a few more days. Mr. Crest, did I send for you?”

“No, my lord. I received a summons from Mr. Blakewood on your behalf.” He backed away and into the hall.

“You look like death,” Nelson warbled. “Like father did when I saw him before the funeral.”

“Bite your tongue, Nelson,” Amelia spat.

“Pale as a sheet,” Aunt Ruth whispered. “We must prepare.”

“For what?” Sam asked, increasingly annoyed.

“Dear, how long have you been like this?”

Sam shrugged. “I was returning home yesterday on horseback, but then I took a tumble. I hired a carriage for the remainder and arrived after midnight.” He winced, and Amelia barely noticed it. Hopefully, Aunt Ruth and Nelson didn’t see it at all.

“We came to see to your sister’s welfare,” Nelson said, his voice regaining some of its belligerence. “A body was discovered by the river last evening. He carried one of your handkerchiefs with the crest. I was summoned to identify the person, and he looked like you. Mr. Crest can confirm—I sent for him to identify you as well.” He shook his head. “We came to tell Amelia the terrible news before she read about it in the papers.”

“Well clearly, I am not dead. I’d like to continue resting now. You may take your leave. You are no doubt anxious to inform the relevant constables of your dreadful mistake.”

Aunt Ruth stepped forward, putting a hand on the end of the bed. “My lord, you look quite unwell, frighteningly so. I must insist that neither of you is fit to make decisions

here when in this state of distress. Truly, without your presence Amelia has become a hellion.”

“I beg your pardon,” Graham broke in. “Lord Alston told you to leave. And you would do well to not insult my betrothed again.”

Nelson backed up a step, but Aunt Ruth whirled on him. “My niece may be of age to marry whomever she chooses, but there is something nefarious going on here. You’re not family—”

“He’s more family than you,” Sam spat. “You’ve been asked, now I am ordering you to leave. Get out. I’ll have none of your underhanded assistance. Amelia and I know why you’re here and what you want, and it’s not out of care or concern for our wellbeing. Amelia—wait, Blakewood, did you say betrothed?”

Amelia’s knees buckled. She caught herself and sat clumsily. He had. Graham had revealed their engagement to Sam.

Graham swallowed, taking in the room and all who were present. “I did. Do you not remember? We told you the morning you left. Though we tried to keep it private from wider society, it did slip out.”

Sam frowned and Amelia touched his hand. “Graham and I are engaged. It was your idea, after all.”

He held her gaze. “Forgive me. It slipped my mind for a moment.”

Amelia nodded, her hand tightening around his in apology.

“I’ve heard enough of this nonsense,” Aunt Ruth said. “I will be returning with a proper doctor. Dear nephew, you are far more ill than you would have us believe. I

raised you like my own, and I know when the two of you are being dishonest.”

Amelia got to her feet and stood before her aunt. “Do not, for one second, think that we believe you care for us and this family. You did not raise us, you are not our mother. What you did was spend years of my childhood trying to coerce me into marrying your son. You’re nothing but a greedy witch, and you would do anything to get what you want!”

In a blink, her aunt slapped her across the face. The slap stung, but Amelia was more surprised than hurt. She stared at her aunt, fury building, fists clenching as the urge to strike the woman back surged, but the immediate uproar prevented any action from her. Sam was yelling threats, and Graham charged in like bull. Even Nelson shouted in shock at his mother. He took his mother by the shoulders and dragged her toward the door.

“We’ll return with a doctor,” Nelson warned. “I don’t believe a bruised rib is the cause of your sickness.”

“Get out!” Sam bellowed. His voice hitched at the end, and Amelia turned to him. His face rapidly drained of color, and he fell back on the bed.

“Sam!” Amelia screamed. She and Graham were at his side at once. Her brother’s gaze flicked back and forth between them, but he did not speak.

“Fetch Dr. Bradley,” Graham said to Petrov.

Petrov was at the door, trying to herd Aunt Ruth and Nelson out, but they stood there watching Sam with rapt attention.

“Sam, just rest now. It’s all right,” Amelia cried, sobs slicing at her throat. His hand was cold in hers, and Amelia just knew his life was draining from him, right before

her eyes. “Sam, please. Stay with me.”

“Just as I suspected, mother,” Nelson said. “There is much more to his illness than a fall. We’ll return once he has passed.”

Amelia glared at them with the promise of murder, and they faded into the hall. “Do something!” she screamed, but not to anyone specifically. She just needed someone—anyone—to save her brother.

Graham tore down the coverlet and lifted Sam’s shirt. He pressed down on Sam’s side.

“What are you doing?” Amelia cried.

“When a wound is bleeding you apply pressure. I don’t know what else to do,” his voice broke. “His wound is inside. I don’t know what to do.”

He looked at her, haunted, and every bit as helpless as she was. But even if the worst happened and all her fears came true, she would never be more grateful for Graham than she was right now. He’d stay with her. Through everything. He’d fight the whole world to protect the people he loved. To keep them safe, he’d stand as immovable as a mountain. He was the greatest man she knew and the only one who loved Sam as much as she did.

But it was more than that now. He was the only one who would love her as much as Sam did. She knew it. He’d give everything of himself to the woman he loved, and she wanted to be that woman. Amelia wanted to be the one to give him the fierce love he deserved, to be worthy of that honor.

An invisible hand squeezed her throat, and she swallowed hard. “Where is Dr. Bradley?” She touched her brother’s cheek. His eyes were closed and his breathing

was too fast, but he was still here. Maybe this wasn't the end, just a step back. He'd sleep and then he'd be well again. Tears welled over her eyes, and she touched her forehead to her brother's.

"I will still fight Death for you," Amelia swore. "I'm not giving up. We beat him once. We can do it again. Fight with me, Sam. Fight hard. I want you there when we marry. I want you to walk me down the aisle and entrust my wellbeing to Graham. Do you hear me, Sam?"

Dr. Bradley entered. He must have already been in the house for his regular visit to have arrived so quickly. "What happened?"

Amelia wiped away her tears. "He was well, talking, eating, but then there was an argument with family, and he collapsed." As Dr. Bradley started to examine him, Amelia stepped back.

"What are you doing?" he said to Graham.

"Instinct tells me to push on the spot that is bleeding. I don't know why."

Dr. Bradley frowned at him. "Curious."

"What do we do?" Amelia asked.

He sighed. "My lady... I fear there is nothing we can do. I warned you this was always a possibility."

Amelia fell to her knees. Graham wanted to come to her—she could see it in his eyes—but Amelia shook her head. "Don't stop. You may be the only thing keeping him alive."

“Mr. Blakewood, I’ve been communicating with a colleague about his lordship. While theories exist, not much has been done in practice regarding surgical intervention for bleeding. To be frank, cadavers don’t bleed. However, two years ago, an American doctor successfully removed a tumor from a woman and she survived. Since then, there has been increasing interest, and he’s been traveling to further the knowledge.”

“What does that have to do with Alston?” Graham asked.

“Well, to remove the object, blood vessels would have to be ligated or the patient would exsanguinate.”

“What does that mean?” Amelia cried.

“Bleed to death,” Graham said. “What’s this surgeon’s name?”

“His name is Sloan, but—”

“Bring him here!” Amelia got to her feet.

“My dear, he cannot save your brother.”

“You just said he could do it. He fixed that woman. Stopped her from bleeding to death, yes?”

He nodded, wiping sweat from his brow. “Yes, but this is a very different surgical situation. I don’t know how I could convince him to come.”

“But he is in London?”

“Yes.”

“Bring him here.”

“You can’t order him to perform a reckless procedure. Even if he would agree to do it, your brother would almost certainly die before we could reach the surgery amphitheater.”

“Where can I find this man?” Amelia asked impatiently.

Dr. Bradley shook his head belligerently. “I’m sorry.”

Amelia warned. “You will be if you don’t answer the question.”

“He’s staying with Dr. Smithson’s family in Penny Square. But I don’t know what you think you can do, my lady.”

“I know someone who is skilled at convincing men to do just about anything.” Amelia looked to Graham. “You stay. Keep him alive. I’ll be back.”

“Amelia, what are you thinking?” Graham asked.

“I’m going to make a deal with the Widow. She’ll make him do it, and Mr. Chase will collect him.”

Graham nodded. Surprise stunned her, but she turned away and ran down the hall. Outside, the street was busy with the usual comings and goings of the morning. Amelia peered around. She knew he’d be out here. Lurking.

“Where are you?” she called. “Come out, Mr. Chase!”

In her periphery, he stepped around the corner, strolling toward her as he lit a cigar.

“You summoned me?”

Amelia wasted no time with banter. “My brother is upstairs dying. He’s bleeding inside his body, and it won’t stop. There is an American doctor staying at the Smithson residence in Penny Square. Convince Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon to make him fix my brother.”

Mr. Chased raised his eyebrow. “What makes you think she will do your bidding?”

Amelia swallowed. She only had one card to play. Sam would not like it. He might even hate her for it for the rest of his life, but as long as he was alive, she didn’t care.

“She wants him to marry a woman of her choosing. I will guarantee it as long as he survives.”

Mr. Chase narrowed his eyes at her. “You aren’t in a position to do that.”

“I’m his twin. I can make him. Just save him, please.” Her throat tightened. “I don’t know what else to offer.”

He tilted his head to one side as he studied her. “If your offer is accepted, where am I to deliver this sawbones?”

“Here. He must also bring everything he needs to perform the surgery here. I know it’s risky.”

Mr. Chase chuckled. “It’s damn pointless, no doubt.”

“I don’t care what the odds are. I will not stand by and watch him die. I must do something. Anything.”

He sighed. “Very well. Send word if . . .”

She nodded. “He won’t. We’ll be waiting.”

“Does Death do your bidding?”

“He has so far.”

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Hours passed. Amelia languished beside her brother, counting every breath, her hand over his heart, feeling every tenuous beat. Graham was right there with her, and servants loitered in the hallway. A heaviness settled over the house, like a held breath. When word came that Mr. Chase had returned—with the doctor, the Widow of Whitehall, and a third man—Amelia thought she was dreaming.

She slipped from Sam's side, Graham watching her quietly as she went into the hall.

The doctor was young—too young. Dr. Bradley had gone but said he'd return if anything should change or he was requested. Amelia didn't know if his presence would help or not.

Behind the doctor stood Mrs. Dove-Lyon, veiled in black, like the specter of Death itself. Beside her was an unknown man of middling years.

"I wish to see your brother," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. "Our deal hinges on his survival, and you will sign as his proxy. This is my barrister, Mr. Chambers."

Amelia nodded. They entered Sam's room, which seemed to shrink with so many bodies inside it.

"Should I summon Dr. Bradley?" Amelia asked the young doctor. He hadn't yet introduced himself. He was oddly quiet, and Mr. Chase was ominously serious beside him.

Mr. Chase introduced the doctor. "Lady Amelia, this is Dr. Roland Sloan. He has agreed to help."

“I will need help with such an arduous condition,” Dr. Sloan said. “But I’ve sent word to an acquaintance for assistance. I will attempt to save your brother under the explicit terms that you understand this is highly dangerous. I will not be held responsible for any outcome, including Lord Alston’s death, which I feel obligated to tell you, is the likely conclusion. However, this is an opportunity to advance our understanding of surgical methods and I shall take it.”

Amelia’s heart dropped as she nodded. “I understand. Please, just try.”

“Everything must be cleared around him.” The doctor touched Sam’s wrist. “His pulse is weak.”

Petrov nodded and gathered footmen to help clear the nightstand and other clutter around Sam. But Graham didn’t move.

“Sir?” The doctor raised a brow at him.

“Dr. Bradley suspects this is the location of the bleeding. I... I don’t know why I thought I should put pressure here. Only it seemed natural to plug a hole by putting something over it.” Graham shrugged helplessly.

“Your instincts are not unfounded, Mr. . . .?”

“Blakewood.”

“Remain as you are for now. I will inspect the area once I have everything prepared. If he is bleeding readily I will have to move quickly. What else can you tell me?”

Graham recounted everything that had happened the last several days, starting with the accident.

Amelia stepped back. The Widow sat at Sam's table, Mr. Chambers at her side, and beckoned Amelia over.

"Let's get this out of the way, shall we? First, I am sorry about your brother."

Amelia nodded. "Thank you."

"He is one of my favorite players, after all. So much potential in a young man should not be lost. I commend you for not giving up on him."

"I'm very grateful you could help us."

"This is an altogether intriguing situation." She set the papers before Amelia. "Sign here as your brother's proxy. You are agreeing that should he survive his injury to a state of health enabling him to marry, he will agree to marry a bride of my choosing."

"And if he doesn't? What will you want?"

The widow looked in Graham's direction. "Perhaps I'll take Mr. Blakewood's agreement in his place."

"No," Amelia barked. Several heads turned toward them, and she shrank in her chair. "I mean, he is already betrothed to me."

"But I may need a replacement. And you said you'd do anything, according to Mr. Chase."

Amelia's heart pounded. She put both hands on the table and leaned forward. "But not him. He's mine."

She sighed. "I need proper compensation. And if you don't think you can convince

your brother to uphold the agreement, I have no need for you as his proxy.”

“My cousin Nelson is available. He would inherit after my brother.”

She couldn’t see it, but Amelia thought she might have curled her lip.

“No.”

“Please. There must be something else that is in my power to give if my brother refuses the arrangement.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon was silent for a moment. The world seemed to pause as the Widow reconsidered. But it was too late now. The doctor was here. Amelia would hold him at gunpoint if she had to.

“Very well, you will be the guarantee.”

“But—”

“Not for marriage. Something else. Something more... interesting.”

She said it with a coy edge to her voice, but Amelia would agree anyway. She only needed her brother and Graham. Everything else in her life was negotiable.

“Yes.”

“Quill and ink?”

Amelia retrieved them from Sam’s writing desk by the window. Maids were bringing in extra towels and sheets. A cast-iron pot was hung over the fire as it was built up to the doctor’s specifications.

Amelia signed the contract committing to Sam's marriage to a woman who was hopefully not terrible. Or, barring that, agreeing to some unknown future favor from herself.

The Widow stood, handing the document to Mr. Chambers, and Amelia escorted them both to the door.

"Thank you," Amelia said. "No matter the outcome, thank you."

The Widow nodded and left.

Dr. Bradley arrived on the heels of Dr. Sloan's acquaintance, Dr. Avery Hanslik. After that, only the most essential people were permitted to remain in the room: Graham, still at Sam's side, the doctors, one footman, who had experience in gory situations Amelia didn't care to speculate on, and a maid whose father was a butcher. Everyone else was ordered away. The doctors conferred with each other, or more precisely, argued over Sam while Graham waited to be told to leave or stay. Amelia waited by the door.

"This is a radical misuse of medicine," Dr. Bradley was protesting. "To experiment on a peer is reprehensible."

"I'm sure you'd prefer I practice on a ruffian from the streets whose life you deem less valuable," Dr. Sloan countered.

Dr. Bradley blustered angrily. "I would never suggest such a thing."

"You said you weren't qualified to help Lord Alston," Graham reminded Dr. Bradley. "Listen to these men and help, or get out."

"I... I want to remain. If there is anything to be learned, I want to know it."

Dr. Avery nodded in understanding. “This situation is far from ideal, but given the patient’s state, I doubt there is an ideal situation to be had.” He was an older man than Dr. Sloan, with streaks of gray at his temples, thinning brown hair across the top of his head, and spectacles. Dr. Sloan was young and might be considered handsome with his dark hair and dark eyes. He was tall, with a slim, blade-like frame. But there was something about him that felt cold and calculating to Amelia.

“Agreed,” Dr. Sloan said. “I am ready to begin. Mr. Blakewood, you may remove your hand.”

Graham hesitated. Amelia watched him war with his instincts to protect Sam, but he let go and stepped back. Amelia stepped into the hall. Graham surprised her by stepping out shortly after.

“I thought you’d stay,” she said.

“I can’t. I can’t watch them do whatever they are going to do. I can’t watch him—”

He choked and turned away, walking farther down the hall. Amelia followed, sliding beside him and taking his hand.

“Then stay with me. Keep me from losing my mind.”

He looked down at their linked hands.

“There is a sitting room right here,” she continued. “It will be more comfortable than the hall.”

He nodded, and she led him inside.

Petrov came to the door. “Do you need anything?”

“Whisky,” Graham said. “And tea for Lady Amelia.”

They sat beside each other on the settee and Amelia leaned her head on his shoulder. She could feel his stare.

“Please don’t ask if I’m all right. I’m not and you’re not either.”

He put his arm around her. “I wasn’t going to. Sometimes, I just need to look at you.”

Amelia supposed she could understand that. She leaned into his touch.

“If I tip a bit of whisky into my tea, will you scold me?” she asked, her voice shattered with sorrow.

“Why don’t you have a dram with me?” Graham said.

She looked up at him. “Truly?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t before.”

“I’ve smelled it. I never understood how Sam could go on about its flavors of smoke, vanilla, pears, and honey. It’s noxious stuff to the nose.”

He grunted. It might have been a laugh, but if he felt anything the way she did, it was caught somewhere in his throat.

“Take one sip,” he said. “It will burn at first, but then the flavors come.”

Petrov walked in with a decanter, followed by a maid with the tea set. Graham poured a bit in her empty teacup and a bit in the tumbler. He lifted his glass and Amelia mirrored him.

“To Alston,” he said.

Amelia’s eyes watered. “To Sam.”

Amelia set her cup down, as tears slid down her cheeks. It wasn’t the whisky. It did burn, but there was a sweetness to it, too.

“Should we have said goodbye?” she whispered. She did not want Death to hear her words and think he had permission to come take her brother. A miracle had to occur tonight—she was owed this. After losing her mother and father, she would not accept any other outcome no matter how impossible it seemed.

Perhaps her Aunt Ruth was right and she’d succumbed to hysteria. Perhaps her mind and heart were already too broken and she would never be the same again after this day.

“Or is it too late?” Her question was barely audible.

Graham tucked her close to his side. “It’s never too late. He’ll always be with us. He’ll always be our Sam.”

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Graham's mind wouldn't form words as Amelia leaned into his side. Was it the alcohol? Or was it the fact that his friend was being cut open in his own bed right now? Graham prayed he wouldn't wake when they began to slice into him. He shut his eyes and the world spun. The only thing steady, warm, and soothing was Amelia's body pressed against him. Whatever the reason, she was looking to him for strength, and he would give everything he had.

Though, at present, he possessed none for himself.

He didn't want to say it out loud, but he didn't think Alston would see the other side of this. Amelia would be devastated. Her aunt and cousin would try to take her away from him. Graham would sooner hang before he allowed that to happen. There was no force on this earth strong enough to take Amelia from his side. Not now, not as they sat here together on the brink of heartbreak. No one else would understand their pain. They only had each other now.

He peered down at her, hands laced, nose red, and lashes wet and clumped together. They were alone here, not that anyone cared to chaperone them in this moment.

Graham put his knuckle under her chin and tipped her face up until she met his eyes. Not long ago he'd thought leaving the house was the right thing to do, to sever the connection between them and lessen the pain of their eventual parting, but he was wrong. She belonged with him. And his place was right beside her.

"Whatever happens, I will not leave you. You will not face a single moment of this alone. Do you hear me?"

Fresh tears bloomed in her eyes, and she nodded. "I know you won't."

"No more pretending. You will be my wife. You will let me protect you, shelter you, and love you the way you deserve to be loved. Let me be the husband Alston would want for you. We may not always agree, but we'll figure out a way through as long as we work together."

A flicker of a smile appeared.

"I will always be here for you, Amelia. Always. Will you be my wife, in truth? So long as I draw breath, you will never want for anything."

She licked her lips, her limpid eyes swallowing him in their shimmery depths of crystal blue.

"Yes, Graham."

His heart lurched, relief and terror colliding in him at once. She would marry him? Just like that? That was all he needed to say?

"You're certain?" he questioned. This was the wrong moment for this conversation, he realized. Her life would change forever if Alston died, and he almost certainly would. She was going to lose the one person who had entered the world with her, grieved with her through the deaths of both their parents, and shielded her from forces that tried to take her freedom from her.

But Graham didn't know when he would find a better moment. He had to reassure her now that, even though it seemed her world was crumbling around her, he would be here. He would do everything in his power to make it right again.

He loved her. He loved her in so many ways that he couldn't fathom it. He just loved

her. Her taunting smile, her wicked humor, her tenacity, and her courage. He loved her.

“Yes. I’m certain. There is no one in the world more dependable than you or more giving. I could never say no. Not after all you’ve done for me. I didn’t see it before. I was too young and too impetuous to understand that the most important things in life are the people who are there for you. Even when you could barely tolerate me, you were still there. Ready to fight with me and for me. As if you were specifically made for me.”

His throat went dry. “Amelia,” he said hoarsely.

“I want to be worthy of you, Graham. I’ve never felt this way about anything. I am so scared of the words and thoughts that fill me when I think of you. But then, when I look at you, everything seems clearer and easier. I think that is love. You’ve become just as important to me as Alston. There is nothing else it could be. It’s so large, like a stone on my chest that only becomes weightless when you’re near me. Does that sound like love? If so, then I am in love with you.”

His heart ruptured with joy, an antithesis to the heavy sorrow that filled his limbs, and he could not stop himself from kissing her. But this was not the time for seduction. Not when they both waited for Death’s final decision and the loss of the one person they cherished most. He kissed her lightly, a brush of sweet promise against her lips. A vow to a future where they would never be apart.

He touched his forehead to hers. “I know what you mean. I fell in love with you a long time ago. I’ve been living with this crushing weight for years. But now it’s gone. Because now I have you.”

She smiled, sniffing and pressing her face against his shoulder. Graham cupped the back of her head and held her close.

They sat there like that, silent and comforting, until they fell asleep, leaning together on the sofa. They only woke when Petrov roused them sometime later.

“They are done, my lady,” he said gently.

Amelia stiffened. Graham eased to his feet. His body hurt from his bones to the roots of his hair.

“He’s alive?” Graham asked.

Petrov nodded as tears filled his eyes.

“Can we see him?” Amelia asked.

“Yes.”

Graham held out his hand to Amelia. She took it and he pulled her up, tucking her against his side as they returned to the corridor outside Alston’s room. The door was open, and footmen were carrying bloody sheets away. Amelia covered her eyes.

Graham paused at the door. “Do you want to stay out here?”

She peeked through her fingers. “Is it gruesome?”

“You may come in. He’s cleaned and covered,” Dr. Bradley said. “He’s alive still. That’s the best we could hope for.”

They entered, and Dr. Sloan was washing blood from his hands in a bowl of water.

“Your brother lives for now. A truly astounding outcome. The bleeding occurred from an organ called the spleen, but it was a small rupture, which may be the reason

he survived this long. I found a great deal of old clotted blood and removed it. I also repaired the small laceration and the bleeding is now minimal. His organs, while pale, are clinging to life. His body will still need to do its part, and time will tell us if we have succeeded in thwarting death. There is always a risk of infection. In fact, I guarantee it. We will watch him carefully for fever and check the incision frequently. When infection comes, it will need to be treated quickly and completely if he has any hope of living.”

“I will make visits twice a day, my lady.” Dr. Bradely assured her. “Your brother continues to defy the odds, and I will be here to help him do it. He is a miracle.”

Amelia nodded. “I told you. We are both more stubborn than Death.”

While cleaning his glasses, Dr. Sloan approached. He was even younger than Graham had thought, though he hadn’t taken the time to study him earlier. The doctor’s gaze paused on Amelia in a way that made Graham’s hackles rise, but he suppressed his annoyance. He could hardly call the man out when he’d possibly saved Alston’s life.

“I would like to monitor his progress and take notes. If it is amenable to you, I’d like to remain here as guest and physician. Your brother’s surgery is an opportunity to progress medicine. There is much to observe and document.”

Amelia looked to Graham.

“You are the lady of the house. It is your decision,” he said.

She swallowed and turned toward Alston. She dropped Graham’s hand and went to her brother’s side. Graham joined her. Alston’s hands looked like white wax, so pale and void of color. His face wasn’t much better. His lips were a maroonish-blue. But his chest moved, not restful and deep, but light and slow, as if at any moment it might stop. Graham’s own hands were cold and numb. Even with the fire well fed and the

room warm, there was a chill that hovered around Alston.

“He can stay,” Amelia whispered. “Sam would want to help others. If he knew that studying him could help save someone else in any way, he would.”

Graham turned back to the doctor and nodded. “Have Mrs. Keen ready a room for Dr. Sloan,” he said to the footman standing by.

“Thank you,” Dr. Sloan said.

“What do we do now, Graham?” Amelia asked.

“We wait, and we hope. We never stop hoping. Alston is young and strong.” Those things were all true, but Graham felt a pang of guilt as if he were lying to her, only protecting her from the crushing sorrow that pressed on him. His hope was false. He feared the time they had now was only time to say goodbye.

“Can we have a moment alone?” Graham asked. The remaining people left the room.

Graham pulled two chairs close to the right side of Alston’s bed and they sat.

“Do you think there is some part of him that can hear us?”

“I don’t know. But I have something to say all the same.”

She looked at him sadly. “You’re saying goodbye.”

“I’m going to take this chance just in case it is the only chance there is.”

She bit her bottom lip and faced her brother again. “Go on.”

Graham took Alston's hand.

"Alston, I'm going to marry Amelia. Not because you asked me to or out of some expectation of duty or obligation. I'm going to marry her because I love her. In the days that you've been here resting, I saw what I didn't want to see before. I found answers to questions I'd been afraid to ask for years. Amelia stole my heart, but I didn't know if I could trust her. I didn't know if she would ever return my affections." He caught Amelia's teary gaze. "But I fell in love with her anyway, and she agreed to marry me."

Amelia smiled. "It's my turn now. Sam, Graham left quite a bit of information out, but here is the truth: when I stopped trying to see the worst in him, I realized he was everything I'd been waiting for. I fell in love with him, and I'm going to marry him. I don't think I deserve him, but I'm going to try. I've never wanted anything more than to be worthy of his love." She reached for his hand.

Graham cleared his throat. "If I never speak to you again, I want you to know how much I have loved you like a brother. Until I met you, I didn't realize how bored I'd become. I did everything right—studied hard, worked hard, did what was expected of me in every way—but I'd wasted my chance to be young. I became complacent in a way that was making me miserable. But then you came into my life, and it felt like I'd always known you. We're ten years apart in age, but you made me feel like I had that time back. Time to laugh, to be frivolous, and to live in the moment. You showed me what it means to have a true friend and to go out and experience the world. You taught me that life waits for no one. People must reach out and claim the things they want. Many say that I am the strong one between us, but in truth, you are the strongest man I know. I've learned to be a better man because of you."

Amelia wept as he spoke, and Graham held her hand. There was nothing left to do now but watch and wait.

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In the early evening Graham was called away to meet with Mr. Chase, who had been ensconced in the drawing room by the butler. He held out a small piece of folded parchment to Graham when he entered.

“What is it? Graham asked warily before taking it, as if the paper might strike him. It didn’t sit well that Amelia had signed an ambiguous contract in her brother’s place. He should have read it himself before any deal was struck.

“A wedding gift.”

Graham frowned.

“I suggest you hurry and use it. Even now, the aunt, Mrs. Clark, and her annoying son are planning Lord Alston’s funeral. Neither have any understanding of the word discreet. They’re telling everyone within hearing distance that Lord Alston is on his deathbed, and that Lady Amelia and you have been living together unmarried.”

Graham almost crumpled the paper. “How do you know this?”

“I have eyes and ears everywhere. Even the shadows report to me.” He flashed a smile.

Graham took the parchment and unfolded it.

I am loath to lose yet another stud from my stable, but I never could resist a love match. I will one day collect on this debt with interest.

BDL

Along with her brief note was another piece of parchment, and Graham couldn't believe what he saw. How was this possible? The very idea that the power the Widow held not only in her club but in all of London could reach all the way to the Archbishop of Canterbury? Diabolical. The woman should be in politics, but instead she ran a gaming hell and enjoyed crass betting games. He shook his head, blinking at Mr. Chase as if he were about to disappear in a puff of smoke. Shadows, indeed.

But the evidence was right here in his hand. A special marriage license. He and Amelia could marry immediately. All they needed was a priest.

"Shall I procure a priest?" Mr. Chase asked, as if reading his thoughts.

Graham scoffed. "What will that cost me? It seems I now owe a heavy debt already."

Mr. Chase smirked. "A good bottle of whisky will be my fee. I'd also require being present for the wedding and for much of Lord Alston's recovery. In fact, my employer insists I be given leave to come and go as I please, ensuring all parties hold to the bargain."

Graham only stared at him. "You think he'll live?"

Mr. Chase shrugged. "I'm not a betting man, but fortune does favor the bold, and the Clark family is certainly full of boldness."

Graham's chest tightened. He couldn't draw breath, and yet something warm and glowing floated in his chest. He could marry Amelia right now. She would be safe from her aunt and cousin's machinations and protected from the apparently rapidly unfolding scandal.

“Fetch the priest.” Mr. Chase tipped his hat and hurried off.

Graham’s heart pounded. He was going to marry Amelia. Tonight.

Well, hopefully. After all that had passed between them this afternoon, he was now sure of her affections, but he wasn’t certain she’d want a rushed wedding at her brother’s deathbed. But Graham could not see it happening any other way. Alston had to be there.

He took the stairs back to Alston’s room, his feet heavy but his heart light.

Amelia looked up from her vigil over her brother. “Is everything all right?”

Graham went to her and cupped her cheek, tilting her face up enough so that he could bend and kiss her.

“We can marry tonight.”

She blinked and leaned back. “I beg your pardon?”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon purchased a special license for us. Mr. Chase just delivered it. I know it’s soon and far from the romantic wedding many women dream of, but I fear we don’t have the time. I want your brother to be with us, and I know you do, too.”

Her bottom lip trembled as she nodded in agreement. “I do.”

“You can still refuse. We can wait. But Mr. Chase also informed me that your aunt and cousin are at present spreading word of Alston’s inevitable death and our shared accommodations. I think Nelson intends to ruin you out of spite.”

Her face hardened. “Very well.”

He squatted beside the chair. “If you don’t want to, we don’t have to. I’ll think of something. We’ll barricade the doors and windows to keep the gossip mongers at bay and take an extended break from society.”

She snorted and wiped at her eyes. “That will only support everything they’ve said.”

“She can’t make such a claim—not really. And Dr. Bradley can also attest to the truth of the situation. She’s desperate, but not that powerful.”

“Neither am I,” Amelia said. “Not without Sam.”

“But with me you will be. Lady Amelia Blakewood—whether you choose to accept me today or not.”

She grinned, her eyes lighting with so much joy his heart leapt. “Hurry up and marry me.”

He smiled back and leaned in for another kiss. “I’ll ask Mrs. Keen to prepare for an impromptu wedding here in Alston’s room.”

Moments later, Amelia went to her room to change. Then Graham did the same. The gravity of his actions weighed on him, though there wasn’t a force in this world that could stop him. He wished his parents and sister were here. They would not be pleased to learn he’d married so swiftly. A scandal was sure to ensue—there would be no doubt about it once the news spread of Alston’s accident, their deceit about it, and their hurried nuptials. But all that paled in comparison to the momentous weight of Alston’s looming death. They would exchange vows at the foot of his bed. Maybe he would hear them. Maybe he couldn’t hear anything at all. But all the same, they would not do this without him.

Alston had talked of one day giving Amelia away to some faceless man. Someone not

good enough for her—because no man was—but a decent enough fellow who she'd fallen in love with. That was all that mattered, he'd said. He wanted her to have a love match. That's why he'd never pressured her to marry after her debut. He wanted only the best for her.

Graham would either be that man or die trying. This is what he would promise his friend—vow, even, just as he would make vows to Amelia.

He finished dressing and stared at himself for a long moment in the looking glass. He was dressed in his finest clothes—his wedding clothes, now—a gray, double-breasted coat, a blue waistcoat, and dark-blue trousers.

He returned to Alston's room, but Amelia had not yet returned. Petrov had taken his place at Alston's side, ready to assist his master at a moment's notice. Graham wondered what Amelia would wear to marry him. A dress he'd seen before? It didn't matter if she wore a flour sack. She'd stun him to pieces.

The room had been carefully and quietly transformed by the staff. Dozens of candles had been lit. Fresh flowers bloomed in crystal vases, and garlands of ivy and roses in white, pink, and yellow hung from Alston's bedposts. White cloth covered the floor before the bed, sprinkled with pink rose petals. Charming is how he would describe it. His throat tightened. It wasn't much at all—hardly elegant. But it was made with love, and that made it more worthy than any expensive wedding.

“We wanted to arrange flowers around his lordship, but it appeared too much like a wake,” Petrov said.

Graham smiled. He'd combed Alston's hair and tucked a loosely tied cravat around his neck. Pressure built behind Graham's eyes. There was a single pink rose tucked in his hand and his favorite pin, the gold phoenix, Amelia had gifted him last Michaelmas, was pinned to his cravat.

Alston would hate this. He'd hate that he was so helpless in bed, unable to see them or touch them. But there was nothing left to do now. There might not be another chance. In time—if he lived—he would understand. Maybe one day he'd be well and happy enough to forgive Graham for rushing this.

“We're ready,” Mrs. Keen said from the door.

Graham took stock of the room once more. The few household servants who remained in residence—four footmen, four maids, and two cooks—hovered outside the room. Mrs. Keen and the butler, Mr. Keen, waited beside Petrov. Mr. Chase stood back in the shadows, his hat held in front of him, observing everyone quietly. The priest stood next to him, a bit wide eyed and pale. Graham wondered what Mr. Chase had done to get the man here. Dr. Sloan was not present. Graham nodded to Mrs. Keen to begin.

Mrs. Keen wiped her eyes as she stepped aside. Amelia appeared in the doorway and his breath caught. Her dress shimmered with stars caught in a sea of silvery-blue fabric.

Her come-out gown, the same gown that had enthralled him four years ago.

In her hands, Amelia held a spray of pink roses and white tulips. Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears, and her smile was brighter than the sun. It filled him with a light so bright that he felt he might burst. His heart pounded as she stopped before him and bit her bottom lip. The urge to kiss that plump pink skin overwhelmed him, but he held back. Soon, she'd be his. Soon, nothing and no one could ever part them. Not even the specter of Death that was present in the cold, dark corners of the room. For now, it was subdued, driven back by golden candlelight and love. There was so much love in this room, Graham could feel it pressing against his skin.

The priest stepped forward and cleared his throat.

“We are gathered here this eve to witness the holy union of these two souls, Lady Amelia Clark and Mr. Graham Blakewood. I’ve been made to understand that while this union is blessed by love, the circumstances under which it must take place are steeped in sorrow, and for that, my lady, Mr. Blakewood, you have my condolences.”

Amelia, looking at the priest, reached for Graham, and he took her hands in his and gave them a comforting squeeze. Tears brimmed on her lashes, but something in her face—anguish, yes, but also tenacity and force of will—let him know she had strength enough for this.

“I cannot rightly say whether your brother, your twin, is truly present with us now in any scientific sense, but if you believe in the power of the soul, of the unshakable bonds built by familial love, then you can believe that he is here with you now. Watching over you as I know he’s done since your first breath.”

Amelia nodded as a sob slipped out.

“Do not cry, my lady. Your brother is with you, and he always will be.” He turned his attention to the Bible in his hand and opened it, beginning his sermon.

Graham heard none of it. The only sounds in the room were his own heartbeat and Amelia’s breathing. But he seemed to answer every question correctly, even when he grew impatient. They should have made it clearer how time was of the essence. Or was it that he just wanted Amelia to be his already? He might not be able to take a full breath until she was.

“Do you have the ring?”

Graham froze. A ring. A bloody ring. He hadn’t even thought—

“It is here.” Fran approached and held out a small box. “It was her mother’s. She was

always meant to wear her mother's ring."

Graham nodded gratefully and took the box. His throat burned with so much feeling, he couldn't speak. He opened the box and took out the simple silver band with an emerald-cut diamond bracketed by a trio of smaller diamonds on each side.

Graham took her hand and looked into her eyes as he slid it over the tip of her ungloved finger. They kneeled.

"With this ring . . ."

Graham repeated the vows, his heart lifting with each word as if it would leave his body and transfer itself into her keeping.

"You may stand. A prayer—"

But Amelia could apparently take no more delays and gave the priest a frustrated look. "There has been enough prayer in this room this past week to marry all of England. Please just move to the end. As I've been told repeatedly, every second of my brother's life is a gift, and I don't want to spend any more of it in ceremony."

To Graham's shock, the priest took no offense and nodded in agreement.

"I understand. Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. As Mr. Graham Blakewood and Lady Amelia Clark have consented together in holy wedlock and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth to each other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a ring, and by joining of hands. I pronounce that they be man and wife together, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Amelia gave Graham a brilliant smile and Graham was too speechless to move. It

was done. They were married. If he were a man of weaker constitution he might have fainted. His head went light, and the space around his vision twinkled with silver specs as she stepped closer to him. Mrs. Keen stepped forward with the register, and they signed their names, as did their witnesses. The priest stepped back and the household gave their well wishes.

Graham still couldn't believe it was done. Amelia was his wife. Mrs. Keen had biscuits and sherry for everyone. There was even a cake, plain and white but decorated with flowers. Everyone had put so much care into this ramshackle wedding, and he'd never been more honored to know them. He would have to thank them somehow for their care and loyalty to Amelia and Alston.

"Before I go," the priest pulled Graham aside, "would you like me to give last rites to Lord Alston?"

All the light that had filled his heart stuttered. "I... Amelia," he called her over. She was smiling brighter than she had in days; her cheeks flushed as she laughed with her maid, Fran, and another housemaid.

Graham hated to darken the moment, but he would not take this decision from her.

"Do you want your brother to have his last rites read, just in case?" he added.

The joy blinked out of her. Her mouth popped open, and then she frowned. "Oh..." She glanced back toward Alston, on the bed, as still as a statue except for the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

"I suppose it would be best. Just in case." She turned back to Graham and took his hand. "He'll be amused once he wakes."

Graham tried to smile at that thought. The cheer faded slowly as the maids began

clearing the room of food and most of the decorations, but Amelia requested the vases of flowers remain. They stood by Alston's bedside as the priest gave him his last rights. After that, he left with Mr. Chase and they were alone.

Amelia leaned against his arm once more. He could feel the weight of her weariness. It slowly drained his energy as well.

"Why don't you go change into something more comfortable?" he suggested. He plucked at the diamond-studded fabric. "While stunning, this can't be the most comfortable."

"It is and it isn't."

"Go. I'll stay with him."

As Petrov returned with a fresh ewer of water, Amelia glanced toward the door. "Petrov, please take care of my brother for a while."

"Of course, my lady. You need not spend your wedding night tending a"—deathbed hung in the air, unsaid—"sickbed. Allow me."

"Come. Walk with me, husband."

His body lit with heat at the word. He glanced down at her, but she was looking away, tugging him toward the door.

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A melia sensed Graham dragging his feet. This night was nothing she imagined it would be for her wedding, but for now, it was enough. Her head ached after that emotional ceremony. She'd smiled, and truly, she'd been weightless with happiness as Graham pledged his troth to her, but there was a chill at her back and she didn't want this night to be left cold.

She was going to have her wedding night.

She reached her room and pulled Graham inside. He stared blankly at the space. She'd already arranged things with Fran. A bath, pails of hot water, champagne, small sandwiches, and a piece of their wedding cake. Fran had even sprinkled her bed with pink rose petals.

She stood before Graham. He was either too overwhelmed to comprehend or too anguished. Neither boded well. But she wasn't going to give this up when they'd sacrificed so much of their special moment already. Petrov had strict instructions to alert them no matter what if Sam's condition changed. That was all they could do for him now.

So right now, she wanted to give her attention to Graham. Her husband. The word sent shivers down her legs.

“Will you undo the back for me?” she asked as she turned around.

That seemed to shake his senses. He looked down at her, and Amelia smiled over her shoulder.

“Amelia, are you certain?”

“Yes. You’re my husband now. You can’t deny me any longer.”

He let out a sigh and swiped a hand down his face. “I haven’t—never mind. I don’t think this is the right time. We’re both torn to bits over your brother.”

Amelia turned back to face him. “Yes. But that can’t matter right here, right now, in this room. We can’t only exist for Sam. I need to be close to you, to make this real.”

He cupped her cheek. “It is real.”

“Show me how real it is. Touch me. Distract me. I need to not think about what happens tomorrow. I don’t want to know. Right now there is only the two of us. There is nothing outside this room. Can you give me this?”

He searched her face. “I will give you anything you ask of me.”

Amelia stepped in, wrapping her arms around his torso and splaying her hands over his broad back. “Then make love to me. I’m asking you. As your wife,”

A groan rose in his throat, and his green eyes darkened. “Say that again.”

Amelia smiled, her chin pressed to his chest, and she stared up at him. “I’m asking you to undress me, as your wife.”

“Again.”

“Take me. I’m yours. I’m your wife.”

His eyes shuttered closed, but he kissed her savagely, stealing the gasp from her

mouth. He dutifully undid the back of her dress and stays, and Amelia squirmed out of them. He lifted her, tucking an arm under her legs, and carried her to her bed. Setting her down on her feet beside the bed, he broke the kiss, dragging his lips down her neck as he hooked the neckline of her shift with his thumbs and pushed the fabric over her shoulders.

The shift whispered down her body to the floor where Amelia kicked it aside. Cool air touched her skin and Amelia sucked in a breath. He grazed his fingers along her hips and over her derriere to cup her and lift her against him. He bent her back, and Amelia arched. He drew the sensitive peak of her breast into his mouth and sucked. Her core clenched, heat racing through her blood, and her skin prickled with cold fire. A soft cry left her lips, born of surprise and need.

He bent at the waist to lower her down, following her with his lips and tongue, his hands wandering over her body. He covered her other breast with his hand, pinching her pebbled nipple. Amelia reflexively lifted her knees up, her hips drawn to him. He did not cover her with his body yet, and she wanted it. She wanted him to cover her, so she could feel the weight of his strength and need. But he was not yet undressed.

Amelia pushed at the shoulders of his coat. He chuckled against her breasts, licking that sensitive skin as he helped her remove his jacket. Then his busy hands went right back to her body. But he was still too clothed and too far away. She wanted all of his skin against hers.

“You’re supposed to be driven senseless by my seductive ministrations, Amelia.”

“I would be if you’d remove your clothing swiftly. I’ll gladly forget my name, my birthdate, and my first pony once you are undressed, Graham.”

He smiled down at her, and she’d never seen him so... at ease. His green eyes glowed, and his face flushed. His lips were pinker and swollen from their kisses.

His gaze slid down her body, and Amelia had the peculiar sensation of warmth following and pooling low. Her core tingled, needing touch, pressure, and friction. He dragged his hand down her body, from her collarbone, down the valley of her breasts, the trembling plane of her stomach, and finally, exquisitely, to her womanhood. He paused there, his attention fixed, as he caressed her with two fingers, spreading her open to his hungry gaze. He licked his lips before his eyes flicked to hers. Holding her gaze, he pressed a finger inside her. Amelia's body clenched, drawing him in. The way her body yearned for him was so delicious, her arousal slicking the path to her pleasure.

Holding her gaze still, he withdrew then added a second finger. Her stomach tightened as she opened herself wider for him, all sense of modesty and insecurity turning to ash under the scorching heat of his stare. This time, he swiped his thumb over the focal point of sensitivity. She sucked in a breath.

“Yes, Graham,” she moaned. “Whatever you're touching, don't stop.”

“This?” He did it again, shooting sparks of pleasure through her body.

She nodded while biting her lip.

Amelia sucked in a breath as he bent again to lick the length of her. Words failed her. She only wanted to feel, not think. Like he did before, he brought her legs over his shoulders and dedicated himself to the task of shattering her with pleasure.

He toyed with her body, dragging moans from deep in her throat, but this wasn't what she wanted—not entirely, at least. She loved this and wanted this sort of attention every day—perhaps with chocolate in the mornings—but her singular goal tonight was consummation. While she was certain they would get there, Amelia had never been one for patience.

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So he reached down and tugged on his hair.

He lifted his head. “What’s wrong?”

“I want you. I want to feel more of you,” she panted.

Graham slowly rose to his feet, shucking the rest of his clothing under her yearning gaze. She could not look away as he unbuttoned the flap of his trousers, edging the fabric down until his cock was exposed. He paused, fisting his base and dragging his palm over the length. Amelia licked her lips, and he groaned.

“We have to go slow,” he warned.

Amelia narrowed her eyes. “You know I don’t like to do things slowly. I want everything all at once, and I will not be denied.”

Graham smiled as he leaned over her. “Who am I to deny my wife?”

“Exactly. This is an excellent start to marriage, I dare say.”

He swooped down and claimed her breast again, and she cried out. “Graham!”

He chuckled. “Very well, fast now, slow later. Scoot up to the head of the bed.”

Amelia moved back, and Graham lay beside her. He cupped her head and kissed her once more, dragging out the anticipation and yearning of her body. She tugged at his shoulders, trying to pull him over her, but he was too strong and too broad.

“Graham,” she cried again.

He sighed. “Amelia, I’m not going to fall on you like some oaf. I care for your delicate body. I want you to enjoy every second of this moment.”

“I am,” she said. “But this is something I’ve waited to have for too long. I didn’t know I was waiting for you, and now that we’re here, I can’t wait. Not a second longer.” All the humor left his face, and he stared down at her, serious but also so tender that her throat tightened. “Please, Graham.”

His gaze searched hers, and the seconds passed. Amelia didn’t know what to do with these feelings inside her. She felt like she had to run toward the things she wanted most, or they’d slip through her fingers. If she blinked, if she was too slow, they’d be gone—he would be gone. Everything she loved would be gone. She took his hand and laid it over her heart.

“Your heart is beating so fast,” he said.

“I’m scared, Graham.”

His face crumpled. “That’s fine. We can wait. I told you we should wait.”

“No, that’s not it. I can’t wait, because it feels like I’m going to lose everything. That’s why I’m scared. That’s always why I’m scared.”

“You can’t lose me now.”

Her throat tightened. This was not what they were supposed to be doing on their wedding night, but she couldn’t stop the wave of emotion rushing through her.

“I love you. I love you so much that my heart can’t contain it. All the joy we’ll make,

the memories, the promises, and the love. No matter what is happening outside the door, I want us to only think about living. We need to live, Graham. Right now.”

Graham kissed the top of her head, then her eyes, her nose, and her lips. He looked into her eyes. The green of his irises was so deep and beautiful, she could weep. She never knew love would feel this fathomless. Like she could just fall into it and never hit the bottom.

“There is so much I want to say to you,” Graham said, his voice quiet and tender. These words were for her ears alone. “When I look at you, I can’t even describe what I’m feeling—I’m no wordsmith. But I love you, Amelia. I love you so much that it aches if I’m not touching you. You don’t have to wait any longer. You have me tonight and for all the days after. Until the last star winks out. Until the sun burns no more, I am yours.”

He shifted over her. Amelia spread her legs, cradling his body as he nestled between, raining soft kisses on all the skin he could reach. He ran his hand over her hip, reaching her knee and lifting her leg higher. His weight settled on her, and his cock notched at her entrance, leaving her breathless. He kept most of his weight on his other elbow.

“I love you,” she whispered, her heart pounding and her pulse filling her ears. She cupped his head. “I love you, Graham.”

He smiled down at her and then sealed their lips, thrusting his tongue into her mouth, claiming all her words and moans. She felt the first nudge as he slowly entered her, the feeling so overwhelming and thrilling as his body joined hers. Nothing had ever felt so right. The moment was dreamy and surreal as she felt him with her whole body and her whole heart. There was pain, a sting, and a slight resistance, but he pressed on, and it faded, soothed by the silky heat of him filling her. She sucked in a tight breath and broke the kiss.

Graham tucked his face into her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she said breathily. “I’m perfect. You’re so perfect.”

He shook his head and lifted himself to look down at her. “I think I’m the one meant to be uttering sweet compliments in this moment.”

“We don’t need any more words right now. Just love me.”

“Always, Amelia. Always.”

They moved together, her hips rolling with his, like a dance they’d practiced only with each other. Nothing existed beyond them now. There was no townhouse, no deathbed watch, no aunt trying to steal their future—only them, only this—and Amelia had never felt so complete. Like she’d finally found herself. She understood who she was meant to be and what she wanted.

A simple life of joy, family, and love. Now she had everything.

The tension in her body built, the tempo of their lovemaking changing. Her muscles tightened, and the tingling bliss in her body spread like a fire across her nerve endings. She threw her head back, arching into him to get closer, to chase that sensuous tingling, trying to catch something elusive just under her skin.

“Don’t stop,” she begged.

He groaned into her neck. “Never.”

It was there, just on the horizon, a sunrise, the dawn after a long dreary night, shimmery and beautiful, and when she closed her eyes she could see it. She was there, all glorious light and color. She cried out, her body tightening all over with

stunning bliss that held her in the heavens of sensation until she could no longer breathe, and then she floated, weightless, before lazily sinking back into her body. Graham ground his hips, growling like a wild beast as he spent himself inside her. She held him, gripping his wide shoulders with a smile pressed to his sweaty chest.

This was better than her first time experiencing an orgasm. The release was so much greater because he was there with her, surrounding her, and inside her. She blinked at her canopy, silver specks floating in her vision, and took an exhausted, deliciously full breath.

He moved to the side of her, taking his slick, hot skin away, and she pouted. He kissed her lips and pulled a blanket over their cooling bodies.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, brushing her tussled hair out of her face.

“Like I could fly.”

He smirked. “Like you could fly?”

“Yes, like I could leap from that window, and the magical feeling in my body would lift me up, and I could soar among the stars.”

“That’s how I feel when I look at you.”

Amelia cupped his cheek, brushing her thumb along his stubbled jaw. “I know once we leave this room, nothing will have changed, all our problems and fears are right outside that door, but with you, I know I can face anything.”

“Together, we can face anything. Together, we will make the most of living.”

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They had two whole days of peace. They suspended all engagements. Visitors came knocking and were efficiently turned away. Flowers filled the drawing room, Amelia and Graham's room, and Sam's room. They made love as much as they could.

Her brother still lived, but there was no change in his condition. He did not move or respond to anything they did or said. Dr. Sloan monitored him closely, but it was more like Sam was an experiment gone awry, not a patient. Amelia kept her distance from the odd doctor to keep from scratching his eyes out.

They'd just finished breakfast at Sam's side on the third day after the wedding, when Mrs. Keen came to inform them that Amelia's aunt and cousin were downstairs and would not be turned away. Mr. Crest was with them, along with another unknown man. Graham sent an urgent message for his own legal counsel to come at once. Then he took Amelia's hand, and they went downstairs to confront her aunt together.

Before entering the drawing room, Amelia requested tea for the visitors. She did not want to appear inhospitable and distressed, like her aunt claimed her to be. The more composed she was, the more crazed her aunt would become. She steeled herself and put on her most benign expression as she stepped into the room.

"Aunt Ruth, Cousin Nelson, who are your friends?"

Mr. Crest introduced the stranger as Dr. Williams.

"How do you do, Dr. Williams?" Amelia asked politely.

"Very well, Lady Amelia," Dr. Williams said. "Why don't we cut straight to the heart

of the matter? I've been summoned to oversee some concerning questions about Lord Alston's state of health and your wellbeing and mental state."

Amelia wanted to roll her eyes at the sheer audacity of her aunt to bring a doctor here to question her sanity, but didn't. Appearing contrary wouldn't be in her favor.

"Indeed. I'm sure you will find everything as it should be. Dr. Williams, this is my husband, Mr. Graham Blakewood."

Aunt Ruth shook her head aggressively, and Nelson puffed out his cheeks in anger.

"Impossible." Aunt Ruth said. "You weren't married three days ago!"

"Amelia and I married by special license three nights ago." Graham handed the license and marriage certificate to Mr. Crest. They'd both known they'd need ready proof of their marriage as soon as Ruth and Nelson arrived.

Mr. Crest opened the document, frowning down his nose as he perused it. "This looks quite official and appears legitimate."

Amelia narrowed her eyes at him. "Clearly."

"How did you attain such a license so swiftly?" Nelson asked with disdain. "This cannot be a legal marriage."

Mr. Crest frowned at him. "Are you implying I cannot distinguish between a proper license and a forgery? Have you even set eyes on a special license?"

Nelson flushed. "I've never had cause to do so. It's scandalous."

"How did you come by this license?" Mr. Crest asked. "It takes powerful figure to

reach the Archbishop so swiftly.”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon procured the license for us.” Graham said.

Mr. Crest’s eyes widened for an instant, then the expression passed.

“Oh, very well, then. Next, Dr. Williams shall need to see Lord Alston. Is he available to join us?”

Amelia pressed her lips together. “He is resting in bed. You will have to follow me to his rooms.” Amelia turned toward her aunt. “You will remain here. The last time you came to speak with him, you made him worse.”

“He was dying as of three days ago,” Nelson spat. “And you were hysterical beyond reason.”

“If my wife says you are not permitted to leave this room, then you will not leave it,” Graham said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Nelson threw up his hands. “This is preposterous! You have no right to order me about in what will soon be my home. If Lady Amelia is indeed your wife, then she resides with you and is no longer living here.”

Amelia turned to Dr. Williams. “As you can see, my brother has had difficulty recovering from his injury due to their hostile interference. They upset him greatly on their last visit and set him back. We had to call in a special doctor to care for him.”

“Lies, Dr. Williams, do you see how disturbed my niece is by her brother’s accident?” Aunt Ruth exclaimed. “She cannot think clearly, let alone marry a man without the consult of her family!”

“What sort of accident was this?” Dr. Williams asked.

“A riding accident,” Graham replied. “He took a fall and landed on his side on a boulder. To verify the information, Dr. Bradley will arrive shortly, and you may confer with Dr. Sloan who is residing here to see to Lord Alston’s recovery process.”

Dr. Williams faced Nelson and Aunt Ruth. “I must agree with Lady Amelia. You should remain here unless called for.”

Nelson threw up his arms and turned to face a window, pouting.

Amelia hid her smile. She still had to bring the interloping doctor and Mr. Crest to Sam’s bedside and convince him her brother was not going to die.

“Please follow me,” Graham said.

Dr. Sloan was present when they arrived. Graham made Dr. Williams wait while he consulted Dr. Sloan before allowing the men inside. For once, Amelia was glad of Dr. Sloan’s intimidatingly intense stare and his sharp, blunt method for discussing his patient’s condition.

“What are the odds of him surviving the outcome?” Dr. Williams asked.

Dr. Sloan folded his hands behind his back and paced slowly like he was giving a lecture to students. “It’s impossible to say. This is a groundbreaking case study. The first of its kind.” He smiled.

Amelia’s stomach rolled at that smile. He didn’t have to be so excited about watching her brother live or die.

“What is this?” Dr. Williams strolled closer to Sam, and there on his nightstand was

an open notebook with drawings on the visible pages.

“I must document every step of the procedure performed so that other physicians can learn from my efforts.”

Amelia peeked past Dr. Williams—it was a roughly drawn sketch of Sam’s upper body, his belly cut open and displayed in pencil. Amelia covered her mouth and stepped back into Graham’s chest.

“You don’t have to stay for this,” Graham whispered.

“Yes, I do.”

“Not for the weak, is it, Lady Amelia?” Dr. Sloan commented. “But rest assured, whatever the outcome, your brother will be recorded in medical history.”

Amelia stared at him. “I cannot adequately convey how comforting that is. Thank you, Dr. Sloan.”

His lips twitched in amusement.

Dr. Williams set the book down and leaned over Sam. “Lord Alston, can you hear me?”

Amelia fisted her hands, praying Sam would move, open his eyes, or do something to give them hope.

“I do not expect such a rapid return to consciousness,” Dr. Sloan said. “But his present state does not determine the final outcome.”

“Then what does it mean?” Mr. Crest waved a hand at Sam. “The succession of an

earldom is dependent on him.”

Dr. Sloan cocked his eyebrow. “This isn’t my business, but if you’re looking for a medical opinion, at present, the Earl of Alston is alive.”

Amelia wanted to double over and lose her breakfast. His callous words were a punch to her stomach. Maybe she ought to step out. She was going to either be sick or hurt someone. But he made a very valid point in Sam’s favor. Her brother was alive.

“What is your specialty, Dr. Williams?” Dr. Sloan asked with a predatory gleam.

Amelia straightened. “Apparently, he’s here to determine my sanity.”

Dr. Sloan folded his arms. “She’s sane enough for a woman.”

Amelia grit her teeth.

“I have dedicated my time to studying diseases of the mind,” Dr. Williams said, answering the question and ignoring both their comments.

Dr. Sloan smiled slyly. “Ah, I see. You’re not a doctor at all.”

Dr. Williams blustered. “And just who do you think you are, young man? What experience could you have to lend to the medical community?”

Now Sloan smiled with all his teeth. “I’m so glad you asked. Come have a look at my notes, and I’ll show you just what I intend to bring to the medical community.”

Amelia moved forward, ready to remove Dr. Williams from the room herself if needed. There would be no more raised voices in Sam’s room, whatever it cost her in that man’s eyes. But Graham touched Amelia’s elbow and pulled her back. “Wait, I

want to see him eviscerate Dr. Williams.”

Sure enough, after two pages of Sloan flipping through his drawings and explaining them in detail, Dr. Williams was turning green and covering his mouth.

Dr. Sloan gave him a disgusted look. “I won’t have you getting sick in my patient’s room. Get out.”

“You’re a butcher!” Dr. Williams said as he hurried away.

“I’m the pinnacle of current surgical medicine,” Dr. Sloan gloated unabashedly as Dr. Williams closed the door behind himself.

Amelia shook her head at Dr. Sloan, and he winked at her.

She rolled her eyes and turned her attention to Mr. Crest, who had lurked silently near the door through the entire exchange. “Well, as Dr. Sloan has said, he is alive. You may go now.”

Mr. Crest straightened his jacket. “Lady Amelia, Mr. Blakewood, thank you for allowing us to see his lordship. If Lord Alston should pass or never improve, please do not hesitate to summon me.

“He will recover,” Amelia declared.

Graham left to escort Dr. Williams and Mr. Crest back downstairs, and Amelia went to Sam’s side. “Sam, if you can hear me, you need to get better fast.” She peered at Dr. Sloan, who watched her from Sam’s other side. “Do you think he can hear me?”

He shrugged. “My only interest is piecing his body back together. I’ve made it my life’s purpose. I am aware you disagree with my—”

“You speak like he isn’t a person. You gleefully describe his insides like it’s art.”

“It is art, my lady.”

That stunned her. “I beg your pardon?”

He snapped his book closed and set it down. “The human body is a fantastical mystery. Its workings are stunning in their variety. There is so much to discover, and yes, I find it beautiful to look upon its internal structures and marvel. I want to find better ways to save lives.”

Amelia tried not to balk under his dark stare. “I hope you do.”

“I’m certain I will.”

Amelia sat next to her brother while Dr. Sloan resumed his notes.

Graham returned. “They’re gone.”

“My Aunt Ruth left that easily?”

“Indeed—it was surprising. However, we have another guest.”

“Oh, who is it now?”

Mr. Chase strolled in, hands in his pockets. “Good afternoon, Lady Amelia. I see Lord Alston is still lingering.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“I brought someone to introduce to you. She is waiting in the corridor. Mrs. Dove-

Lyon thinks she will be beneficial in helping with Lord Alston's recovery."

Amelia could feel Sloan bristling with insult.

"Is this one of her contractual requests?" Graham asked.

Mr. Chase smirked. "Yes, it is. She goes by the name of Miss Smith, and she has experience tending to the ill and infirm."

"I'll decide that," Dr. Sloan murmured, pointedly looking down at his notes.

Mr. Chase glared at the top of his head. "She's a bit shy and quiet. Be kind, or I'll be forced to express my displeasure."

Dr. Sloan glanced up at Mr. Chase, and they held a battle of stares before Dr. Sloan shrugged one shoulder and dismissed him as inconsequential.

"You are welcome to enter, Miss Smith," Mr. Chase beckoned.

His tone had softened. Who was this woman he was so protective of? Amelia wondered.

A slight woman wearing a robin's egg-blue gown and carrying a satchel shuffled in. To Amelia's surprise, she was young and quite beautiful. She had rich brown hair mostly covered by a white cap. Her eyes were a deep brown, and she was almost as tall as Amelia. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the handle of her satchel and looked around the room. Her gaze paused on each of the men with a slight alarm.

Amelia stood. "Welcome, Miss Smith." She approached her with a friendly smile. If there was one word to describe Miss Smith, it was skittish. Amelia touched her back and escorted her to Sam's side. As she passed Mr. Chase, she threw a confused frown

at him.

“This is my brother, Lord Alston. His name is Sam, and as you can see, we’re twins.” Amelia glanced at Dr. Sloan to see if he might want to take charge of the nurse, but he only stared at Miss Smith with no discernable expression. This might be a serious issue if Mrs. Dove-Lyon demanded Miss Smith’s presence but Sloan refused her help.

Amelia cleared her throat to summarize Sam’s history. “He fell from his horse and landed on his side. He has a broken rib, but his worst injury occurred inside his body. He was slowly bleeding inside for days. Dr. Sloan performed a surgery to stop that bleeding, and we’re hoping in a little while he will wake up.”

Miss Smith’s shyness lessened as she examined Sam. But she flinched when Dr. Sloan stood.

“The present concern is infection.” He flipped back the sheet, exposing Sam’s chest and the ugly incision on the right side of his abdomen. “Are you familiar with the signs of infection?”

“Yes, Doctor,” she said timidly.

She spoke so softly, Amelia struggled to hear her.

Dr. Sloan nodded. “Good. I could use another set of hands for tending the wound.”

She nodded, and to Amelia’s surprise, Dr. Sloan backed away to his chair at Sam’s desk and resumed his notes. He was almost... nice... to Miss Smith. He was perceptive to her delicacy in a way Amelia did not expect him to be.

“Will you be staying here? Should I prepare a room?” Amelia asked.

“No,” Mr. Chase responded. “She will come back to the Den every evening. I will escort her to and from the residence and check in frequently.”

Amelia frowned at him. “That seems tiresome. She can stay here easily enough.”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s orders were clear.”

Amelia shared a glance with Graham.

Graham said to Chase, “Can we speak outside?”

Mr. Chase nodded and they stepped out of the room and into the hall.

It was clear that Graham didn’t like Tristan Chase one bit or how they’d been forced to allow him to come and go as he pleased to check in on Sam, and she couldn’t help but agree. Amelia gave Miss Smith a speculative look. That young woman was clearly uncomfortable. Was she here of her own volition? Amelia walked quietly to the doorway to listen. This was a conversation she wanted to hear for herself.

“What’s going on? There was said nothing before about being required to have a nurse at Alston’s side.” Graham’s voice was calm, but his annoyance was plain.

Mr. Chase feigned innocence. “Whatever could you mean? This is a most benevolent gift to encourage Lord Alston’s speedy recovery.”

“Who is that woman? Why does she seem terrified to be here? And why are you her keeper?”

Mr. Chase straightened, and real anger slipped through. “She is who I say she is. She stays at the club because that is where she’s been living the last three weeks.”

“As?” Graham asked pointedly.

“As a guest. She doesn’t work there. She’s one of the Widow’s charity cases.”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon has charity cases?”

“Would it surprise you to learn she has a soft spot for women in need?”

Graham frowned. “No, but I’ve never seen it firsthand.”

“Why would you? As I said, she doesn’t work in the Den. She stays in the living areas.”

“She’s frightened of Sloan. How is this supposed to work?” Graham asked.

“He’s a frightening fellow, but she’ll get used to him. He’s not the type to leer. He seems too obsessed with Alston’s innards to take notice of a pretty girl. But I’ll be here watching. Don’t you fret. How is the marriage? Any regrets?”

Graham rolled his eyes. “Only that you’re here so bloody often.”

“You can be rid of me as soon as Lord Alston wakes up and can marry.”

“Do you know the bride?”

Mr. Chase shrugged. “Not likely.”

“I thought you knew everything?”

“I know what I need to know.”

“Can we trust this girl?”

“As much as you can trust me,” Chase said with a grin.

“We don’t trust you,” Amelia said from the doorway, unable to remain quiet any longer.

Mr. Chase touched his chest. “Why not? I’ve been nothing but truthful and came to your aid in a desperate hour of need.”

“You’re doing it for the Widow. It’s transactional,” Graham retorted.

Mr. Chase straightened. “Exactly. You don’t need to trust me or like me. This is business. Clear, cut, and dry. You’ll hardly notice when I’m here, unless I want you to.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

Two evenings later, Graham and Amelia were getting ready to have dinner at Sam's side. He had some color to his cheeks, a red flush that had brought Amelia to tears when she first saw it, but Dr. Sloan was quick to remind her that it was only the fever setting in. He was warm to the touch, but after his skin had been cold and waxy for so long, the warmth gave her hope. Hope that Dr. Sloan was always quick to burst.

"He's concerned about dehydration," Amelia said to Graham. "Petrov has taken to dribbling water over his lips, but Dr. Sloan said it's useless if Sam cannot swallow."

"Trying is never useless," Graham said. He always knew what to say to make her feel better. These past few days had been a blur of either waiting at Sam's side or being in Graham's arms.

"I'm here for my charge." Mr. Chase entered unannounced and peered around the room for the absent Miss Smith with a frown.

"I believe she went down to the kitchen with one of the maids for a cup of tea," Amelia said.

Mr. Chase frowned. "She's not supposed to do that."

"Why? Are you afraid she'll meet men more interesting than you? Speaking of which, how did you get up here without a footman escorting you?" she demanded.

"I know all your footmen now. They know they don't need to escort me."

Amelia scrunched her nose. "I'll have Mrs. Keen discuss that with them."

“Where’s your kitchen?”

“She’ll return for her satchel. Just wait like a good errand boy.”

Graham coughed as he set his glass down. “Amelia. Don’t taunt him.”

“Yes, Amelia, don’t taunt me.”

Graham snapped a glare at him.

“Beg pardon, Lady Amelia.”

Amelia stood and approached him, studying the way he leaned in the doorway with a practiced pose of nonchalance, but really he was tense, ready to react.

“What did you do before you became a spy for Mrs. Dove-Lyon?” Amelia asked. But at that moment, Miss Smith arrived.

“Good evening, Mr. Chase. I’m ready to go,” Miss Smith said. She smiled at Mr. Chase and it seemed to send a jolt through him.

“See you tomorrow, Miss Smith.” Amelia said.

“Yes. Thank you, my lady.”

Mr. Chase left without a word. Amelia went to the table where Graham sat, watching her with a wry grin.

“You’re making mischief.”

“He’s smitten with her. I just know it. Everything he does is a performance but when

she smiled at him, he flinched.”

“Flinched?”

“Yes.”

Graham chuckled. “What does a flinch mean?”

Amelia sauntered toward him. “Oh, you know. A man flinches when he’s caught off guard by a woman’s beauty. You’ve done it dozens of times. Sometimes in a single day.”

“Oh, have I? I must be so transparent.”

“You’re desperate for me. I can feel it.” She grinned as she leaned in and kissed his cheek.

Graham cleared his throat. “Amelia, let’s have dinner with Alston first, and then I’ll happily show you how desperate I am.”

Amelia sat in her chair. In truth, she was the one who was desperate. Perhaps it was their newly wed state, but Amelia couldn’t conceive of ever tiring of Graham. Sir Daniel had been wrong about her and Graham. Next time she played and beat him, she’d make him eat his hat. Literally.

Graham was everything she needed and wanted. The things she needed from him were obvious. His calm, his strength of character, his unwavering loyalty, and his unbending integrity. Those attributes were the pillars that made Graham. To discover what she wanted from him, she’d had to learn the hard way. She wanted him to be challenging, wicked, hungry for her, and tender with her heart. He was all those things and more.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“You, and how much I love you.”

He drew a clipped breath. “You’re intent on not letting us finish this dinner, aren’t you?”

“I can’t help it.”

“Try for your brother’s sake. Behave as if he were awake.”

“One kiss?”

He smiled. “The anticipation will be worth the wait. Eat. I promise you’ll need the energy.”

Amelia sighed and took a bite of her fish. Her gaze moved to Sam and her heart swelled with her fear and joy. His life was still so fragile, and yet he’d come this far, defying all the odds. It had to mean he’d eventually heal, and she’d have her brother back one day. He might not be pleased with how things came about—like marrying a stranger for Mrs. Dove-Lyon—but they’d all be together again. She had everything she wanted in the world right here in this room and she would fight to keep it no matter the consequence.

Always.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:26 pm

A knock startled Graham from a deep sleep. He took a moment to reorient himself and register where he was and who was snuggled tightly to his side. Naked and soft. He couldn't stop his grin. Something in Amelia had made her insatiable tonight. The sound did not occur again. It must have been part of a dream. Graham rolled to face Amelia.

Amelia. His wife.

He still couldn't believe it. He felt like he was going back and forth between a dream and a nightmare. The nightmare was for Alston, suspended in a state of unconsciousness and never knowing from one minute to the next whether he would live or die. Graham knew the odds were not in their favor. But he never let Amelia hear these thoughts. She needed hope and reassurance, and he'd give it to her until the bitter end.

The dream, of course, was being married to Amelia.

She sighed in her sleep and rolled away from him. Graham tugged her close again, her back to his chest and her bottom nestled to his hardening length. He ran a hand over her hip, and she arched in her sleep. He kissed her neck, rubbing his nose in her hair and breathing deep the scent that was only Amelia. To think there was once a time when he didn't want this. When he considered her and all her feverish antics a menace to society.

She might still be, but she was his menace.

"I love you," he said, mouthing the words into her skin, and into her dreams.

The knock came again, and Graham tensed. The first knock hadn't been part of some dream, then. He couldn't see the clock, but the hour felt late, and if they were being interrupted, it had to be urgent. Graham eased out of bed and tugged on his trousers and shirt. His gut tightened as he approached the door. He paused, looking back at Amelia, still asleep. He rubbed the gritty sleep from his eyes and opened the door a crack. A maid stood there.

“What is it?”

“His lordship opened his eyes,” the maid said.

Graham's heart skipped several beats. He opened the door wider, freezing on the threshold. Amelia, he had to wake Amelia.

“We'll be there in a moment.”

He quickly shut the door and swiped up her nightgown and dressing robe, which were hanging on the changing screen, and gently rocked Amelia awake.

“Wha—Graham?” She sat up and immediately draped her arms around his neck. “Come back to bed.”

“You have to wake up. Alston opened his eyes. We need to go see your brother.”

“Sam?” She bolted awake. “What's wrong?”

“Shh, he's awake, Amelia.” He grinned, his eyes stinging. “He's awake.” And maybe, unlike last time, he'd stay awake, because despite Dr. Sloan's odd personality, he was a miracle worker.

She threw back the coverlet, and he handed her the clothing. She tugged on her nightgown and robe and stumbled into her slippers. Graham wiped his sweating

hands on his trousers before opening the door and lacing his fingers with hers. The short path to Alston's room was fraught with tension. Neither spoke. It was as if the slightest thing might burst this bubble of hope. The door stood open, light spilling through. There were multiple voices coming from inside the room. As they crossed the threshold, candles and firelight lit the room.

Dr. Sloan was there. He peeled Alston's eyelids apart and looked in, but they closed again when he removed his fingers. He picked up Alston's arm and dropped it back on the bed, then he pinched his fingers one by one.

"Is he..." Amelia halted by her brother's bedside. "He opened his eyes? What does that mean?"

"I can't rightly say," Dr. Sloan replied. "It was only a moment, witnessed by Mr. Petrov. I'm trying to stimulate him."

Amelia whirled to Petrov.

He stepped forward, worrying a handkerchief in his hands. "I was reading to him, my lady—that book he likes about Miss Winifred—and his lashes flickered, like he was waking or having a dream, and then they opened. But they did not focus like he could see me."

Amelia squeezed his hand. "Is this good?" she asked Dr. Sloan.

"The fact he is still breathing is astonishing. I'm not humble about my skills, but this is a new frontier. I can't predict anything. It's not bad, though."

Amelia nodded, biting her lips as her lashes flooded with tears. Graham put an arm around her. He couldn't keep his hands from shaking. He felt like his heart might give out with the amount of excitement and hope bubbling inside him.

“Do you recommend we try to wake him more or let him rest?” Graham asked.

“Rest,” Dr. Sloan said, tucking Alston’s blanket around him again. “If added stimulation were useful in this moment, it would have made a difference already. So for now it’s rest again. If he wakes, he will do it on his own and in his own time. Nothing should be rushed. However, I do think he has enough awareness to swallow. He’s done it multiple times since I’ve been examining him.”

“Thank you,” Amelia said. The doctor departed and Graham had to convince Amelia to go back to bed. Dawn was only a couple hours away. In bed, he held her tightly, but he knew she wasn’t sleeping, just like he couldn’t.

In the morning, they bathed, dressed, and returned to Alston. Dr. Sloan was there yet again, ear to Alston’s chest. He straightened and acknowledged them with a nod before resuming his ministrations. Miss Smith was there as well, waiting for instructions. Graham blocked Amelia’s view. The blanket was down, Alston’s chest and belly exposed, along with the large puffy red scar from his surgery.

“You might not want to look,” he warned her.

“I need to,” she said, pushing past him. “I’m part of his care, I can’t be—” Her steps slowed as she took in her brother. “Bloody hell, Sam.”

Alston’s eyelashes flickered.

“He’s been doing more of that,” Dr. Sloan said. “It’s not consciousness, but he could be dreaming, and that’s a good sign. He’s still there.”

Amelia stepped closer, taking Alston’s hand. She hissed. “He’s hot.”

“The fever from the infection is continuing. I expected this.” Dr. Sloan said.

Amelia picked up a damp cloth and wiped it over her brother's face. He turned his head toward the cool cloth. Amelia bit her lip, trying not to grin as she turned to Graham and then the doctor.

“Sam?” she asked shakily. “Can you hear me?”

He winced, and then his lashes fluttered. As they stood around him, holding a collective breath, Alston opened his eyes.