



# Sweet Duke of Mine

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Second Chance Romance ? Forbidden Love ?  
Amnesia ? Class Difference

He doesn't know his name.

He doesn't know why he's here.

But he knows her.

Waking up in an unfamiliar place, battered and bruised, the man once known as the heir to the Duke of Lovington has no memory of who he is or the life he left behind. Yet, in the gentle hands of the woman tending to him, he feels a pull—something deep, something important. She tells him he is safe. But she won't tell him everything.

Daisy Montgomery never expected fate to bring him back into her life—not like this. The boy she once loved is now a man with no recollection of the past that tore them apart. And as she nurses him back to health, she knows it's only a matter of time before he remembers. Before the truth unravels. Before she loses him all over again.

But what if, just this once, love could rewrite the past?

Sweet Duke of Mine was originally published in 2023 as part of the I Like Big Dukes anthology. Now, escape to another world with this enhanced edition, a full-length standalone novel brimming with swoon-worthy romance, longing, and a love too powerful to be forgotten.

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# Page 1

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## FIRST LOVE

“ I am going to speak with your father tomorrow morning, Daisy Montgomery.” Alastair William Frampton, the future Duke of Lovington, inhaled the fresh scent of Daisy’s hair as he tightened his arms around her. My Daisy.

A hint of vanilla from the pastries she’d baked earlier competed with the grass and trees surrounding them, but there was also something warm and floral.

Moving closer, he inhaled the subtle scents of the latest oil she’d mixed.

“I like this blend.” He nuzzled his face along hers. “A new one?”

Her answer was a relaxed, lazy hum as she rubbed her bare foot up his leg.

Together, they lay entwined on a wool blanket in the shade of the remote woods on his father’s property.

“I used honeysuckle with clove and sage...” she answered.

“It’s my new favorite. You drive me mad, you know.”

“I hope so. Because I feel the same.” Daisy hummed again. “Let’s never move from this spot—just stay here forever.”

Cradling the supple weight of her breast with one hand, Alastair settled the other over the intimate flesh between her legs—sweet and inviting, tempting him to throw

caution to the wind.

Today, they had very nearly taken matters too far.

Alastair could still taste her on his lips, feel the warmth of her hands in his hair, as if she might anchor them in this moment forever. His pulse thundered with each soft sigh. And he'd never felt more complete than when her breath mingled with his in the cool evening air.

But they were not engaged. They were not betrothed. And no matter how much he wanted to pretend otherwise, the brutal truth remained—he lived in the main house, and she in one of the tenant cottages.

If either of their parents knew what they had been up to, there would be hell to pay.

And yet, despite the risk, despite the chasm of class and consequence stretching between them, Alastair could wait no longer.

He would not—could not—stand idly while the world decided their fate for them. Daisy was not some passing fancy, not some fleeting infatuation he would simply outgrow. She was in his blood, in his bones. And if loving her was a sin, then he was already damned.

Three years ago, when he had first met the girl who would become the center of his world, she had been all wide blue eyes and sharp wit, hovering at the cusp of womanhood. He hadn't meant to care. Hadn't meant to notice the way she laughed, the way she challenged him with her clever tongue, or how her smile could undo him with a single glance. And yet, he had.

Somewhere between stolen hours and whispered confidences, their friendship had evolved. Affection had deepened into longing, a desire so fierce it stole his breath. He

had fought against it— they both had —but now ...

Now, they stood at the edge of a cliff. One more kiss, one more touch, and there would be no turning back. The past, the expectations, the impossible divide between them—all of it would cease to matter in the face of the only truth that did.

They were on the verge of embracing forever.

Alastair would act with honor, would claim her as his wife—protect her as he was meant to.

His father would disapprove, of course. That much was inevitable. And his uncle, Lord Calvin, who oversaw Woodland Priory in his father's absence, would undoubtedly forbid the match.

But none of that mattered.

Alastair would make a personal appeal to his father, a man who'd loved his wife dearly. The duke would eventually relent. There was no other option. Alastair was not going to allow anyone to change his mind.

His heart already belonged to her.

Life would not be worth living without his sweet Daisy, with her curly blond hair—ringlets so tight he could barely run his fingers through them—and her large blue eyes and cherry red lips. He loved seeing the world through the unique lens she shared with him, listening to her laughter, teasing a blush to her heart-shaped face. But his love went beyond all of that. She was his best friend, his confidante, and soon...

She would be his lover in every sense of the word.

But first, he needed to make her his wife.

On the last few occasions they'd met in secret, kisses had turned heated, touches had lingered, and tasting her had become both a torment and a necessity. It was no longer enough—never would be.

Each time he left her, he ached, body and soul, for more. And if they continued on this path, if they allowed their desires to follow nature's course, he would endanger not only her reputation but her future .

Their future.

Alastair had never considered himself reckless, but where Daisy was concerned, all reason abandoned him. He could not bear the thought of causing her harm, of forcing her into ruin because of his own selfish need to love her fully, completely.

He would not let her suffer for loving him.

Lying beside her now, he stared at the few wispy clouds visible through the branches, his mind full of the life they could have. A life together, where he would never have to steal moments with her, never have to pretend she wasn't the most important person in his world.

Daisy nuzzled closer, her breath a warm whisper against his neck, and his chest tightened.

Yes, it was time. Not just because it was the honorable thing to do, not just because it was right—but because he loved her.

And that wasn't going to change.

Ever.

He plucked a sprig of flowering clover from the grass above her head and brushed it over her forehead, tracing the delicate line of her brow before sweeping it down around her mouth. “So sweet.” His voice was little more than a whisper, reverent, as if the words themselves were a vow.

Then, with a boyish grin, he sprinkled the blossoms in her hair, letting them fall like tiny blessings before claiming her lips in a kiss—soft at first, then lingering, as if he could bind them together in ways that no one, not even their families, could undo.

They were soulmates—it was a concept Alastair knew his father would ultimately understand, even if his uncle would scoff at it.

Daisy sighed against him but did not let go. “My father will say no,” she murmured. “Even if mine approved, your father will never allow it.” A small, bittersweet laugh escaped her. “Especially if your uncle has a say. ”

They had spoken of this often, in hushed tones beneath the cover of trees, in hurried whispers when they could steal a moment alone.

Daisy, having grown up on the estate, knew his family’s dynamics better than most. She had seen firsthand the rigid traditions that ruled their lives, the weight of duty pressing down upon Alastair since the moment he was old enough to understand what it meant to be his father’s son. She knew that his uncle, Calvin, wielded more influence than he ought to, that he spoke as though the title were his to command rather than merely borrowed in his brother’s absence.

But Alastair refused to be bound by the ways of the past.

“My uncle will not have the final word,” he said, his voice low but firm. “He is not

the duke. Nor is he the heir.”

His jaw clenched. Sometimes his uncle needed reminding of those facts.

Alastair hadn’t yet achieved his majority, but he was his father’s son.

In less than two years, his father’s younger brother could no longer pretend he was Alastair’s master.

“My father loved my mother,” he insisted, his grip tightening around Daisy as if sheer will alone could shape the world to his liking. “He will not stand in the way of true love.”

At his words, Daisy stiffened. Then, shifting in his arms, she turned to face him.

“Love?” she echoed, her voice uncertain.

This was not how he had intended to tell her. Not like this, spoken in the heat of a promise, as though love were a shield that could ward off every obstacle in their path. And yet, he met her gaze head-on.

“You know I love you,” he said simply. “I have for years.”

She was his anchor—his one unshakable truth in a world that often felt too rigid, too confining.

Now that his school days were behind him, and with his father spending more time in London than at Woodland Priory, Daisy provided light in his life... a special joy he’d never known with anyone else.

She was the reason he could see beyond the cold, impersonal weight of duty and

obligation. With her, he was more than a name, more than an inheritance.

She made him believe his worth wasn't measured by the blood in his veins—but by the thoughts in his head.

She made him believe there could be more—that he was more.

And in her, he saw something greater than birthright or station. She was proof that there was truth in the writings of John Locke—that every soul entered this world as a blank slate, shaped not by the accident of their birth, but by their choices, by the fire in their spirit.

And his soul, his heart, his very being... had already been shaped by her.

“You must know I have loved you from the beginning,” she said softly.

Her lips curled into a smile—genuine, open, holding nothing back. But then, just as quickly, a shadow of doubt flickered behind her eyes.

“But... you know that you cannot marry the daughter of a tenant. It's impossible.” She grimaced, squeezing him tighter, as if she could soften the blow. “Let's just enjoy what we have now.”

Alastair shook his head. Not in denial—because, of course, what she said was true. By every expectation, by every rigid rule ingrained in them since birth, marriage between them was unthinkable.

But that did not mean he would accept it.

Dearest Daisy had always been the practical one. A little too practical sometimes.



But on this—on them—she was wrong .

Not because he was blind to reality. Not because he was some reckless, lovesick boy who did not understand the weight of what he was asking.

But because he refused to let archaic customs dictate his future.

Such rules were obstacles meant to be outmaneuvered—walls that could be climbed if one was clever enough. And if there was one thing Alastair had always been, it was clever.

Since childhood, he had found ways to bend circumstances to his will, to charm and cajole and push until the world shaped itself to his liking. Why should this be any different?

The notion that something was impossible, to Alastair, had always felt more like a challenge. Especially when he wanted something.

And he had never wanted anything— needed anyone —the way he wanted and needed Daisy.

Daisy Montgomery would be his duchess. And he would prove to the world—and to her—that love was stronger than tradition.

On more than one occasion his uncle had suggested a betrothal between himself and the Marquess of Waterbury's daughter, but such a match would never come to pass.

Because Alastair was in love with Daisy.

And their love, he knew, would conquer all.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### A STOLEN MOMENT IN TIME

Lying on the cool grass beside her true love, Daisy pushed thoughts of the future away.

Unlike Alastair, she held no delusions that the time between the two of them could go on forever. They might have one more year together, or one more month. But eventually, this surreal connection between the two of them would be severed.

One day, Alastair would be duke.

She would always be the daughter of a man who worked the duke's land.

Alastair would leave her.

Daisy had always known it, had understood it from the moment she first laid eyes on him, from the day he'd sought her out.

Their stolen moments were temporary, a fragile dream she would have to wake from sooner or later.

When the time came, yes, her heart would break—but hearts were resilient things. Long after he married a proper lady of high birth, someone chosen for him by his father or uncle, she would still have this .

These memories. These golden, fleeting moments of reckless happiness.

She would toil in the fields beside her father, planting and harvesting as the seasons turned. In the evenings, she'd cook and clean beside her mother, hands busy with the simple, steady work of living. Perhaps one day, there would be a husband at her side, children to chase after, a life built from practicality rather than impossible dreams.

And yet, no matter what the future held, she would always have this.

A secret she could tuck into the quietest corners of her heart.

Memories of being loved so wonderfully, so completely, by a beautiful, honorable, and perfectly unattainable gentleman.

A man who was never meant to be hers.

Unless Alastair is right...

For all her practical thoughts on the matter, she could not help but dream—that their love was different. Special. That somehow, against all odds, it was powerful enough to overcome the dictates of society.

But now wasn't the time for dreams—or worrying.

Because right now, Alastair's mouth traced the curve of her face, his breath warm against her skin, and everything else melted away. She turned into him, seeking his lips, inhaling his essence, savoring the spicy heat of his kiss as if she could capture this moment and keep it forever. "Daisy," he murmured against her lips. "My everything." He rolled her onto her back. She widened her legs, her gown already gathered around her hips as he settled between her thighs.

Nothing else existed. Only Alastair. Only this feeling. Only this love, bared beneath an endless sky, blessed by the summer sun.

She thrust her hips up at the same time he shifted, growling into her neck, and the entire world disappeared .

Time whirled into infinity, impossible to contain. Willow branches draped around them, nature's cover. Fresh grass spread across the ground as their bed.

“I love you, Alastair.”

Daisy needed him to know this.

Long after the two of them went their separate ways, he would know that he'd been fully loved—that he forever possessed her heart.

He moved one hand between them, fumbling at his falls.

She belonged to him. Nothing else mattered in that moment. This day, this hour, this second. It belonged to the two of them.

And so Daisy moved to help him, her fingers working the buttons free, one by one. The fabric parted, exposing glimpses of the familiar planes of his chest. Together, they tugged his shirt up and over his head, the garment falling somewhere beside them, forgotten.

She had seen him like this before—many times.

Alastair had taught her to swim in the secluded pond at the far edge of his father's estate, where the water was cool and hidden from prying eyes. She had watched the sun gleam off his bare shoulders as he moved through the water with easy grace. Had even felt the smooth, warm texture of his skin beneath her fingertips when he had held her afloat, his strong hands steadying her, guiding her.

But here, now, in the hush of this moment, it felt different.

The intimacy of it—of undressing him—made her pulse quicken.

And as her gaze traced the familiar lines, she paused, trailing her fingertips from his shoulders to the rippling muscles of his abdomen.

He trembled.

No one knew him as she did. No one else had heard the quiet confessions of doubt, the fears he never dared utter to anyone but her.

Others only saw the heir to a dukedom—strong, privileged, untouchable. But she knew the truth. She knew the restless uncertainty that lived beneath his skin, the weight of expectations he feared he might never meet.

When he had admitted feeling inadequate, she had listened. She could not take away his worries—words alone would never be enough.

Someday, his actions—the choices he made—would reveal the truth of his own worth to him. He would rule the dukedom he had been born to inherit.

And he would do so not just with wisdom and power, but with heart.

Because that was who he truly was. Some day.

Not yet.

Today, he belonged to her.

She arched her back while his palms and fingertips skimmed her tender flesh.

Drinking kisses from his mouth, she welcomed his touch.

Sounds clawed up her throat, incoherent words and thoughts expressly for him. “Need. You. Mine. Love...”

She nearly wept when he drew back, kneeling between her legs, his breeches unfastened. Her pulse pounded in her ears while he stared down at her with heavy eyes, his mouth glistening and parted. Daisy settled her gaze on his member... his penis .

An air of wonder, of discovery and excitement, hovered around them both.

She pushed herself onto her elbows, reached forward, and touched it. “It's hot,” she said. “And so soft.” She caressed the texture, which reminded her of the finest silk.

God's silk .

“Not soft.” Alastair covered her hand and wound both their fingers around it. It was thick, pulsing beneath her palm.

Milky liquid appeared at the tip.

She pushed away hesitation, thoughts that she should look away. That a good girl would be squeamish, or allow guilt to ruin this moment.

Instead, she swirled her thumb over the single pearl, spreading his seed around the skin.

Alastair inhaled a sharp breath.

“Does it hurt?” She wavered, waiting.

“You touching me?” His voice caught. “Feels like heaven. I’ve dreamed of this...”

She moved her gaze over his face, and warmth curled through her at what she saw. The sharp angles of his cheekbones hadn’t yet lost all their boyish softness, but there was already a promise of the man he would become. His aquiline nose, the determined set of his jaw, and the bright, intelligent gleam in his eyes would forever set him apart from other boys his age.

And oh, how those green eyes stole her breath—always alight with hope.

But in that moment, she saw more.

She saw desire. Adoration. Soul-consuming love . His looks stole her breath, but she loved him for the man inside.

And she always would.

Alastair’s hand left hers and when she nodded, he gathered her skirts up higher.

This was a first for both of them—because neither kept secrets from the other. And when he swirled one finger around a very intimate curl, her breath hitched. His gaze slid from her face to between her legs. Another first for both of them.

Exploring.

She studied him while he studied her.

She moved her gaze down his neck, over his taut belly to his shaft. No words were necessary. Trust bound them together, casting out all inhibitions.

Their eyes locked, both filled with questions. This level of familiarity was too much

and yet it was not enough.

Daisy nodded, and Alastair lowered himself onto her. Chest to chest, hip to hip, mouth to mouth.

“Daisy,” he breathed. “My precious Daisy.”

She cradled his face between her hands, their mouths fused, breathing the same air. Loving him.

Fullness. A twinge of pain. But then more fullness. And for the first time in her life, she felt like a whole person. No longer one heart, but two.

She’d been created for this very purpose. She’d been created for this man.

“Yes.” He shifted back and then entered her again. “Yes,” she urged him.

“Love you,” Alastair said. He shifted out and then in again. “Love you.”

Daisy moved with him, allowing fate to guide this pinnacle act of love.

Alastair’s movements grew more deliberate, each touch sending a fresh wave of sensation spiraling through Daisy—coiling low in her belly, spreading warmth through her limbs, filling her chest until she thought she might burst from the sheer wonder of it.

And then he stopped.

Her body cried out in protest, her lips parting to beg him not to—only for his finger to press gently against them, silencing her before she could utter a sound.



Then she heard it too.

The thunder of hooves, fast and unrelenting, closing the distance between them. Each strike against the earth sent vibrations through the ground, rattling the fragile cocoon they had wrapped themselves in .

Alastair's horse, loosely tethered to a nearby tree, let out a sharp whinny.

Someone was approaching. And fast.

Their gazes locked, the heat between them still simmering, but they... could not.

Alastair withdrew, and the flash of frustration in his eyes—perhaps even pain—mirrored her own sense of loss. But there was no time to lament. They would find one another tomorrow. Or the day after.

The hoofbeats slowed, then stopped altogether.

Panic jolted through Daisy, and in a flurry of frantic movement, she and Alastair scrambled to right themselves. Fingers fumbling, she smoothed her skirts, trying to banish any telltale signs of what they'd been doing. Alastair yanked his shirt over his head, raking a hand through his hair to tame its wild disarray.

The curtain of thick willow branches parted with a sharp rustle.

“Alastair!”

The voice—sharp, furious—made Daisy flinch.

Alastair's uncle stepped into their cocoon, his imposing figure backlit by the sunlight filtering through the thin branches. His gaze swept over them, taking in their

disheveled state, his expression darkening with every passing second.

He was livid.

And they were caught.

Feeling exposed, ashamed, Daisy wanted nothing more than to hold onto Alastair—for him to be her shield.

But she... could not.

“The entire household has been searching for you,” Lord Calvin practically spat, affording Daisy no more than a disgusted glance.

Daisy had seen the man from a distance several times, and of course, she’d heard him shouting at various workers. But, as one would expect, she’d never been introduced to Lord Calvin.

Close up now, she immediately noticed the family resemblance. He shared Alastair’s thick mahogany hair—albeit streaked with gray—high cheeks, green eyes, and aquiline nose, but it ended there.

Whereas Alastair stood tall, with broad shoulders that tapered to a flat belly, his uncle hunched over, and his jacket strained at his paunch. And although the older man’s eyes were the same shade as Alastair’s, they lacked any goodness or warmth whatsoever.

According to Daisy’s father, Lord Calvin did not possess the same character that the Duke of Lovington did. And, unfortunately, until Alastair reached his majority and while his father was away, Lovington’s younger brother had been charged with acting as proxy.

Alastair tossed his jacket to Daisy to provide her some measure of protection and rose to face his uncle. “Well, you’ve found me. What is so urgent that you’ve come after me like a madman?” He sounded angry, but underneath that, she could hear concern as well.

“A message from London.” Lord Calvin frowned, softening his voice in what sounded like sympathy. “You must go to your father immediately. It might already be too late.”

Alastair shook his head. “What’s happened?”

“No time to explain.” The older man’s gaze finally shifted to behind Alastair, where Daisy sat huddled. “He is gravely ill.”

There was silence for a moment, and when she looked at him, Alastair was pale. “Alastair, you must go.” Daisy handed back the jacket, hoping that she had covered herself decently enough.

Alastair loved his father.

Her dearest friend, her one true love, turned back, looking torn. “I need to escort you home.”

“No.” She raised a hand, holding his gaze and speaking firmly. “I’ll be fine. You mustn’t waste time. Go.”

Still, he hesitated. He’d wanted to speak to her father tomorrow.

A sharp pang squeezed her chest. She didn’t want to believe it was a premonition, and yet deep down, she knew. Nothing would be the same.

She knew.

He would go to London and take his place in Society—with or without his father. Proper ladies who had been raised to be perfect duchesses would be presented to him. They would be beautiful and refined, and she would be relegated to no more than a pleasant memory.

Lord Calvin folded his arms across his chest. “Time is of the essence, Wadsworth.” He addressed Alastair by his courtesy title. How long before he was truly the duke?

Which only further reminded Daisy of all the reasons talk of forever had been a mistake. What had she been thinking?

She’d been thinking that she loved him—that’s what.

She’d made a conscious decision to take whatever joy she could have before it ended.

Alastair turned back, more torn than she’d ever seen him. “I’ll return,” he promised, his eyes searching hers. There was a silent conversation between them, unspoken words only the two of them could comprehend.

I won’t leave if you don’t want me to.

Go to your father. I love you.

I am so sorry we were interrupted. I love you. I’ll return soon. Wait for me.

“Go.” Daisy reached out and squeezed his arm. One last time...

His love for her would fade. They were lucky that they’d been interrupted—that he had not spent inside of her. “Be safe.”

Following a very long moment, a moment in which Lord Calvin's impatience thickened the air, Alastair finally nodded and allowed his uncle to draw him away.

Long after the sounds of hooves disappeared, Daisy sat alone on the blanket they'd shared, remembering.

And then weeping.

Because deep inside, she knew.

It was the end.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### THREE MONTHS LATER

Daisy placed a gentle hand on her father's shoulder, giving him a small squeeze before shaking him lightly.

"Papa," she murmured. "Mr. Kemp is here to speak with you."

Randolph Montgomery stirred, his brow creasing, although he did not rouse from his slumber. He was a sturdy man, thick through the shoulders from years of tilling the land, though time and hardship had begun to carve themselves into the lines of his face. His once-dark hair had faded to an iron gray, and the sun had left its mark on his skin, deepening the creases around his eyes and mouth.

He had fallen asleep in his favorite chair, as he often did after a long day in the fields—exhausted but sated following the hearty meal she had prepared for him.

He carried the weight of their struggles on his back, never complaining, never faltering, even when the land failed them.

Daisy's stomach tightened. Mr. Kemp was the new estate manager, having taken over less than a month ago, and nothing good ever came from an unexpected visit from a steward.

Two months had passed since the old Duke of Lovington's death. Two months since everything had changed.

And not for the better.

A poor harvest had plagued them from the start—first the dry spring, then the relentless rains of August. With the season's yield only a quarter of what it should have been, her father would not have enough to meet his rent.

Which meant trouble.

Lord Calvin, Alastair's uncle, was still acting as landlord, despite Alastair now holding the title in name.

Daisy swallowed against the unease low in her belly. She had only encountered Lord Calvin a handful of times since that awful day when he had torn through the willow branches and found her with his nephew.

He had not spoken a word of it to her father, but he had not needed to. In the weeks that followed, he'd extended his contempt to her entire family.

And although Daisy knew why he would do this, she didn't have the heart or the courage to tell her father.

Her father loved her fiercely. She was his only daughter, and he often boasted about her to others, full of pride for the young woman she had become. Daisy could not bear to disappoint him, to tell him that his precious daughter had been caught in an embrace that had cost them more than just her reputation.

Her father had not gone so far as to forbid her from seeing Alastair, but he had, on multiple times, expressed his concern.

Daisy's shame, along with guilt, hurt nearly as much as losing Alastair had.

The fallout would eventually hurt her entire family so much more.

“Father.” Daisy shook his shoulder using more force, jolting him awake. When he opened his eyes, he pretended he had not been asleep. “Mr. Kemp is here to speak with you. ”

Her father’s mouth pressed into a thin line. By now, neither of them pretended that a visit like this was anything less than a hardship.

“Send him in, Daisy.” He straightened his back, his tone unusually tense as he sent her to fetch the austere gentleman.

“This way, Mr. Kemp.” She beckoned the estate manager to precede her into the parlor.

The room was small, but it was cozy, and a cool breeze blew through an open window. Upon seeing the man to the settee across from her father, she closed the two inside.

But she didn’t return to the kitchen.

In order to know what was coming, so that she might prepare for any troubles that lay ahead, Daisy listened through the wood.

Out of necessity, rather than curiosity.

Because her father, bless him, took to heart his position as the head of the family. He would carry their burdens alone for as long as possible, which would only make matters worse in the long run.

The floor creaked, and she recognized the sound of her father rising to greet the other man. It was the movement of a man whose bones ached from a lifetime of labor.



“Might I ask my daughter to bring tea?”

“This isn’t a social visit, Mr. Carpenter. And you must be aware that Lord Calvin’s patience has been dwindling for some time now. Your rents are in arrears, and this crop looks to be no better than the two years prior.”

Daisy’s heart plummeted.

She couldn’t make out what was said next, as Mr. Kemp’s words dropped to an incomprehensible murmur, but then?—

“A fortnight! But my wife can’t be moved. She’s in the family way. I beg of you. One more season. His lordship will not regret it. I’ll do anything. ”

Daisy swallowed around her suddenly swollen throat. She’d never heard her father sound like this before, desperate, pleading.

Her mother’s late-in-life pregnancy was both a gift and a curse. Because although she seemed well enough, the midwife had ordered her to remain abed through the end of her confinement. And managing the farm without her mother had been difficult.

“You know as well as I that you can’t make good on such promises. The fields are too far gone, and unless you’ve stumbled on buried treasure, you’ve nothing with which to pay your debts. Lord Calvin is allowing you a fortnight to vacate the cottage. With the shift from agriculture to livestock, the estate needs tenants with sons—strong men to do the work.”

Daisy winced as she listened to her father’s continued attempts to bargain with the steward, making impossible promises of future payments, of performing additional work... None of which moved the steward’s position in the least.

“I cannot renew your tenancy, sir. As matters stand, you’re already six months in arrears. I am truly sorry about your wife, but these are his lordship’s terms.”

His lordship? Not the terms of His Grace?

When solid footsteps approached the door, she backed away and silently slipped into the kitchen.

They were going to lose everything.

Not just their means of making a living, but their home—the only life Daisy had ever known.

And Alastair?

He had either forgotten her or deliberately cast her aside, relegating her to his past as nothing more than a fleeting indulgence—a meaningless fling with one of his father’s tenants. Until this moment, she had not allowed herself to believe that. Had not wanted to accept that his silence was a choice .

But it had to be.

He hadn’t even had the decency to write to her. Not a single word. And now, her family’s future was frighteningly uncertain.

She stood frozen, staring at the worn wooden floorboards beneath her feet, listening without moving as her father walked the steward to the door and bid him farewell. Nor did she move when he returned to the kitchen, his heavy footsteps dragging through the quiet house.

“I suppose you heard all that,” he said softly.

Daisy nodded. Of course she had.

Her father sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. “You mustn’t worry. I’ve already written to my sister in London. She’s willing to take us in.”

London.

Daisy swallowed hard, forcing herself to nod again, though every part of her rebelled against the idea. She didn’t want to move to London. She wanted to stay here in the country, where the air was fresh and the fields stretched wide and?—

Just in case...

Her father cleared his throat and pressed on, his voice unnaturally light. “You can help your Aunt Theodora with her soaps. Perhaps do something productive with those oils you like to mix. Meanwhile, I’ll find a job in one of those new factories. I hear there’s plenty to be made in town these days.”

Daisy’s throat tightened. “But Mother...” she protested. “The midwife said?—”

Her father set his hands on her shoulders, his grip firm, steadying. “We’ll keep her comfortable,” he assured her. “Don’t worry, Daisy. Think of this as a new adventure.”

His eyes were bright. Too bright.

Daisy swallowed down the lump in her throat, but she couldn’t see it—not the way he wanted her to.

What part of this was supposed to be an adventure ?

Being evicted? Forced to rely on Aunt Theodora's charity? Forcing Mother to endure the journey to London when she was in such a delicate state?

Nothing about this felt like an adventure.

It felt like the end.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### HONEYSUCKLE & LYE: TEN YEARS LATER

“T oo bloody hot today,” Daisy muttered into the steaming cauldron.

The heat pressed down on her like a heavy fog, thick and unrelenting. Sweat gathered at her temples, threatening to sting her eyes, but she caught the droplets with a quick swipe of her arm before they could fall. Even so, she kept her other hand steady on the long wooden paddle, stirring with slow, deliberate movements.

The contents—olive, coconut, and almond—bubbled and thickened, releasing their subtle, nutty fragrance as they blended together. The lye had dissolved just as it should, but she wasn’t foolish enough to look away, not even for a moment. The fire had to stay at the perfect temperature, the mixture constantly moving, or the entire batch would be ruined.

And she couldn’t afford waste.

Every ounce had to be accounted for, each batch measured carefully to produce the maximum number of cakes. Necessity demanded it.

Because this wasn’t just about business .

It was about survival.

It was about raising her brother properly, about giving him a future better than the one she’d been handed. A future free from worry, from uncertainty, from the scraping and scrounging she had endured for the past decade.

Gritting her teeth, she tightened her grip on the paddle and kept stirring. The rhythmic motion was steady, familiar—but it did nothing to quiet her mind.

Because when her hands were busy, her thoughts wandered.

And today, they wandered back to those first desperate days in London.

She could still see it, as clearly as if she were living it again.

Three days after the exhausting move from Woodland Priory to her aunt's cramped house on a noisy street just east of Covent Garden, Daisy's mother had brought her brother into the world—a red, kicking, fussing boy full of life.

Two days later, she was gone.

The midwife had shaken her head, murmuring about too much blood lost. About how the strain of the journey, the upheaval, had likely been too much for her.

Grief had settled over their small household, thick and inescapable. But mourning would not put food on the table.

So Daisy had forced herself to keep moving.

Her Aunt Theodora certainly had.

There had been no time for wailing or collapsing under the weight of sorrow—not when there was work to be done, soaps to mix, customers to serve. Aunt Theo had simply kept going, her hands always busy, her focus unshaken, as if sheer determination alone could hold their fragile world together.

And so Daisy had followed her lead.

She buried her sorrow in work, finding solace in the quiet precision of blending oils, incorporating them into the soaps her aunt sold. If Theodora could press on, then so could she. If work could keep her aunt standing, then surely it could do the same for Daisy.

And maybe, just maybe, if she kept moving forward, she wouldn't drown in everything they had lost.

The steady rhythm of stirring, the delicate balance of scent and texture—it gave her something to cling to, something to control when everything else had been ripped away.

Her father... Well, at least at first, he had managed. He'd found work in a textile mill. But the city had little mercy for men who toiled with their hands, and misfortune struck again.

A little over a year after they arrived, he suffered a disabling injury.

That was when his optimism—his unshakable, infuriating optimism—finally faded.

A year later, her father had died a broken man.

And yes, it had been devastating, but Daisy considered herself lucky.

She had her shop—her own shop. And she had the best brother a girl could hope for, the only family she had left in the world.

Caring for Gilbert gave her life meaning. But blending her soaps? That was her passion.

Her salvation.

Her life.

And so she churned.

In fact, she embraced the process.

Once the mixture cooled, she would divide it, pouring half into another pot before adding more of the scented oils she had prepared earlier. This was her favorite part. The moment when the entire shop—and the small apartment above it—became bathed in rich, luxurious fragrance, the kind normally reserved for royalty.

Because, contrary to common practice, soap did not have to smell like pig fat, cows, or—God forbid—fish .

It could be heavenly. It could transform a mundane task into a ritual of indulgence. It possessed the power to elevate even the simplest life.

And lucky for her, there were plenty of Mayfair residents who had the means—and the good sense—to pay for such a luxury. The discerning ones, at least.

They paid well enough that she and Gilbert never went hungry. Well enough that he could attend a proper school—one that would give him opportunities he never would have had if they'd remained at Woodland Priory.

She had gotten good at that—finding silver linings in every storm cloud.

A quick glance into the large pot confirmed the lye had dissolved completely into the oils, the mixture thickening just as it should. But before she could turn her full attention back to her work, the familiar ringing on the shop's door rang out.

“Just me, Daisy!”



Gilbert's bright voice carried through the space, pulling a smile to her lips.

Her brother—not quite ten years old, but already so dependable—never failed to come straight home from school. First, he would run any errands she needed, then settle at the table with his books, scratching away at his studies until it was time for their evening meal.

It was just the two of them now.

But that was enough.

Daisy was more than a sister to him—she was his mother, his father, his guardian. And Gilbert... he was not only her younger brother.

He was her heart.

Aunt Theodora, well into her sixth decade by the time she passed, had taught Daisy everything she knew. Daisy, already enamored with mixing scents and oils, had taken that knowledge and built upon it—developing new soaps, growing the business, and somehow managing the impossible.

She was making a life for herself and Gilbert.

They were by no means wealthy, but they were comfortable, safe, and happy. Her income covered Gilbert's education and the costs of maintaining the small building she had inherited—left to her explicitly in Aunt Theodora's will. A rare independence for a woman, but one her father's elder sister had ensured she would have.

But Daisy had also brought a small piece of the country with her.

Behind the shop, she had fenced in a tiny courtyard, transforming it into a protected

garden where she grew herbs, spices, and fragrant flowers. The deed to her property was vague about who, if anyone, owned the narrow strip of vacant land between the buildings, but since none of her neighbors had claimed it, she had quietly made it her own.

Gilbert came up beside her, and she pressed a quick kiss to his forehead before handing him the paddle.

“Will you stir this while I collect some petals for this batch?”

Rose petals added a special touch to the soaps, and early May was when they bloomed at their best.

“I’ve got it,” Gilbert declared, taking over the stirring with a proud grin. A few streaks of dirt smudged his cheeks—a reminder of the errands he had run—but his face was full, healthy, unlike so many of the lads who lived in the shadows of this city. Furthermore, his eyes, bright with intelligence, met hers with excitement.

“And then I’ll show you my essay! Third highest marks!”

Daisy’s heart swelled. “I knew it was good when you showed it to me,” she said, smiling warmly.

Still beaming, she made her way to the back of the shop, pushing open the door and stepping into the filtered sunlight of her small, carefully tended garden .

The space was by no means vast—she could cross it in fewer than eight steps—but it was enough.

With the high fence and colored netting stretching from the posts to the cottage wall, it remained overlooked, ignored, hidden. Just as she preferred.

Here, beneath the soot and stench of the city, she had carved out her own paradise—a sanctuary of green where life thrived despite London's grime. A place that not only brought her peace but allowed her to grow the herbs and flowers that made her soaps truly special.

She reached for the shears, intending to snip a few fragrant roses, when a scuffling noise on the other side of the fence stilled her.

Her breath caught.

"You think he's dead?"

Daisy froze as an unfamiliar voice echoed off the surrounding brick buildings. The callous tone—so indifferent, so unbothered—sent a shiver sliding down her spine.

Instinct told her to turn away, to ignore whatever was happening beyond the fence. But curiosity, mixed with a sinking dread, rooted her in place.

Perhaps it was an injured animal, left to suffer in the narrow walkway? She crept forward, careful not to make a sound, and peered through a gap in the wooden slats.

Two men hovered over something on the ground. Their backs were to her, obscuring the object of their attention.

They were not the sort of men she had expected to find lurking in the alley—not drunkards or common ruffians, but more... official.

They wore dark blue jackets and tall top hats—the unmistakable uniform of the newly formed Metropolitan Police force, and the casual way they tapped their truncheons against their palms, slow and rhythmic, was strangely mesmerizing. It was the kind of motion she had seen constables make—a gesture of quiet authority, a

silent reminder of the power they wielded.

That, more than the uniforms, convinced her.

These men were bobbies .

And yet... something felt off.

One of them shifted, and what Daisy saw made her blood turn cold.

The thing on the ground wasn't an animal.

It was a man.

Before she could fully process the sight of so much blood covering a listless form, the shorter of the two bobbies raised his baton and swung down hard.

The sickening thud echoed in the tight alley.

Flinching, Daisy had to swallow to keep bile from rising in her throat.

"If he weren't dead already, he is now," the bobby declared with a smug chuckle.

The taller man nudged the lifeless figure with the toe of his boot.

"Just what His Lordship ordered. Take the ring off his hand for proof. No one will look for him here. Just another penniless bloke whose enemies caught up with him."

Daisy's pulse pounded in her ears.

The shorter man knelt, plucking something from the heap of rags and lifeless limbs.

Even in the dim alley light, it glinted.

"I got it. But Giles—what about his clothes?"

"In this neighborhood? They'll steal them off his back. The crows will take care of what's left."

A bark of laughter, sharp and callous, then their conversation faded as their boots scraped against the cobblestones, their voices dissolving into the hum of the city.

Daisy remained frozen, fingers gripping the fence, breath shallow, chest tight.

Her gaze drifted back to the dead man—barely visible between the gaps in the wood. Little more than tangled limbs and fabric, discarded with less care than a sack of spoiled potatoes. Or one of the alley cats her aunt used to feed.

Although his body lay face-up, his features were unrecognizable—half obscured by a thick, matted beard, the rest a ruin of blood and bruises.

A wave of unease rolled through her.

There was no shortage of dead bodies in London—some killed by starvation, others by sickness. But this? This wasn't some unfortunate soul who had wasted away in an alley corner.

He had been murdered.

And not by just anyone, but by men who were paid to keep the peace.

Daisy bit down on her bottom lip, torn...

With Gilbert to feed and a business to protect, she couldn't afford to involve herself in whatever this was. But...

A rotting corpse would attract attention she couldn't risk. It would be found, most likely. And the presence of a murder victim might then draw attention to the tiny but valuable courtyard. Some person of authority might wonder why a woman on her own had claimed a space no one had questioned before.

And then what?

Her garden wasn't a whim or an indulgence, it made up a vital part of her business.

But even as she weighed the risk, the decision was ripped from her hands.

Because just as she resolved to turn away—to pretend she had never seen a thing—the body moved.

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### ALIVE—JUST BARELY

Silently, Daisy unlatched the carefully camouflaged gate, the hinges creaking as she slipped through. She paused, glancing in all directions, her pulse a steady thrum in her ears. The narrow alleyway was empty. No footsteps, no curious eyes.

Satisfied, she cautiously approached the body.

As she drew closer, details sharpened. The man's boots—though caked with filth—had once been finely made. His tan breeches, waistcoat, and jacket, though torn and stained, were unmistakably tailored from fine fabrics. This was no common beggar or factory worker.

Daisy dropped to her haunches to get a better look, all the while keeping her ears open in case those bobbies returned.

His chest rose and fell, barely. But it proved he was still alive.

For now.

“Who did this to you?” she whispered, not expecting an answer.

And then the stench hit her .

Beneath the unmistakable copper tang of blood, there was something far worse—the cloying, sickly odor of decay.

Wounds left untreated, festering.

Today's beating could not have been his first.

Her stomach turned. If infection had already set in, there might be nothing she could do for him.

A low sound escaped his throat—not quite a word, not quite a breath.

Then he moved—a sluggish, pained shift of limbs—and this time, he groaned.

Daisy's gaze swept over him. Thick thighs, broad chest, solid arms. He had the build of a man who had not avoided physical labor, yet well-fed, well-muscled, someone who'd had the means to keep himself strong.

Who was he?

“What are you doing out here?”

Daisy jolted at hearing Gilbert's voice, right before his head popped around the gate, his expression mildly curious. “The lye is cooling.”

Then his eyes flicked downward, landing on the man.

Daisy clenched her jaw.

I can't just leave him to die.

She didn't have the luxury of compassion. And yet, she knew she couldn't live with herself if she just walked away.



“This man is injured,” she murmured, keeping her voice low. “Help me get him into the garden.”

Gilbert’s brows shot up, but he didn’t argue. He moved swiftly, only wrinkling his nose when the stench hit him full force.

Between the two of them, it took several minutes—grunting, straining, nearly losing their grip more than once—before they finally dragged him through the gate.

Gilbert shoved the lock into place while Daisy sagged against the garden wall, her muscles trembling with exhaustion.

The man lay motionless on the ground between them, as if they hadn’t just spent the last several minutes wrestling his deadweight into safety.

“What do we do with him now?” Her little brother wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

It was a good question.

If one of those horrid bobbies were to return and discover their victim was missing, they would search the area. If they searched the area, they might find her garden—and if they found her garden, they would start asking questions she couldn’t afford to answer.

But leaving him to die?

That would make her no better than them. Under all that blood and filth was a human being.

Daisy sighed. She would do what she could to help him—and hope that he lived.

Apparently, she wasn't as cynical as she'd imagined.

The bobbies who had left this man to die hadn't done so to keep the peace. What they had done was evil, pure and simple.

And the shorter one—he had enjoyed it.

A cold trickle slid down her spine.

If those bobbies discovered their victim had survived, they would finish what they had started.

Daisy squared her shoulders. She had to try.

“I need... a sheet, maybe?” Dash it all, she was a soap maker, not a physician! “And something to clean... this?”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose, trying to recall what Aunt Theodora had used on her father when he had been injured. Honey, vinegar, alcohol, and... onion juice? Was that right?

He would need willow bark tea for the pain, perhaps—laudanum? That thought made her hesitate .

Before she could spiral into uncertainty, Gilbert returned, arms full with not only the sheet she'd requested, but a few clean cloths, a bucket of water, a half-bar of soap.

“Perfect,” she said, flashing him a quick, reassuring smile.

Her eyes drifted back to their unexpected patient, drawn to the barely-there rise and fall of his chest. And her breath caught. Was it already too late?

She ignored the creeping doubt in her mind—the fear that their efforts might be futile. But she would try her best to save him.

Because it was the right thing to do.

Gilbert cleared his throat. “What should I do about your batch of soap?”

Daisy blinked. The rose petals—she’d forgotten all about them.

“Keep it warm, and ladle it into the pans,” she instructed.

Gilbert nodded, and Daisy absently noted that his curly hair, so similar to hers, needed shorn. Later.

“Anything else?” He flicked a wary glance toward their patient. “If you want to finish the soap, I’ll keep an eye on him,” he offered.

That was her brother, small but earnest. She shook her head. “No. I’ll do it.”

“What if he wakes up?”

Daisy suppressed an amused grin at the protective note in Gilbert’s voice. He was getting to the age where he thought it his duty to guard her, which was very sweet, but... well, Gilbert was still at least a head shorter and more than a stone lighter than she was.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him.

“If you’re sure...” He still hesitated.

“Quite. Now, get in there and save my soap while I clean him up.”

Gilbert frowned, but a few moments later, from inside the kitchen, she heard the soft clatter of pans as he set about following her instructions, ensuring her hard work hadn't gone to waste.

Alone with the stranger, Daisy cautiously began wiping the dirt from the man's face and head, working in slow, careful strokes.

Even through the grime, his skin was unnervingly pale, his lips nearly bloodless beneath the bruises.

Would her efforts even matter?

She worked faster, pushing past hesitation. She scrubbed harder, the lather turning pink as she washed away dried blood. When the wounds on his face were finally clean, she dabbed at them with a dry cloth.

But he didn't stir.

Was he already too far gone?

Daisy barely had time to dwell on the thought before Gilbert returned and together, they wrestled the deadweight of the unconscious man into the kitchen.

It would have been impossible to carry him upstairs, so their only real option was the pantry, just a narrow space tucked behind the kitchen. But it was dry, clean, and, most importantly, secluded from the rest of the shop.

By the time they settled him onto an old threadbare mattress, Daisy's arms burned from exertion, her muscles trembling with fatigue.

The hour had grown late, and Gilbert looked as exhausted as she felt, though he tried

to hide it behind a furrowed brow and stubborn stance.

“I can help look after him,” he insisted.

Daisy shook her head, gentle but firm. “No, love. You’ve had a long day.”

“But—”

She pressed a reassuring hand to his shoulder. “You need some dinner, and then sleep, Gil. Think of school. ”

Gilbert frowned but obeyed, trudging toward the table where his school papers waited beside their simple supper. Daisy hovered long enough to make sure he ate a proper meal, sitting with him in the quiet kitchen, her mind only half on the food.

Once he had cleared his plate and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, she squeezed his hand. “Off to bed, now.”

He hesitated, flicking a glance toward the pantry, then back at her. “You’ll wake me if you need help?”

He was still just a boy, but he had so much heart.

“I will,” she promised.

Only when his footsteps faded up the stairs did she finally return to the pantry.

The stench of decay, in the small space, was even more noticeable now.

Daisy swallowed hard, but then quickly fetched a small wooden box—Aunt Theodora’s old collection of tinctures, salves, and remedies. Her fingers brushed

against glass vials and paper packets, her mind sorting through what little she had left. Willow bark for the pain. Vinegar to cleanse the wounds. Honey, if her patient was lucky, to help him heal.

Her gaze landed on a few packets of laudanum.

He needed rest, but rest alone wouldn't save him. Not if infection had already taken hold.

Because she knew the truth. It wasn't the wounds themselves that killed—it was what festered inside them.

That thought jerked her into action, shoving away any lingering sense of modesty or hesitation.

Within moments, she had removed what was left of his clothing, the blood-crusted fabric peeling like old parchment from torn skin. Her fingers, although shaking at first, eventually turned methodical as she focused on one section at a time.

Beneath the grime, bruises bloomed like ink spills, deep and dark across his ribs and abdomen. Knuckles split. A gash along his thigh, scabbed over but still angry and red.

His right shoulder bore the worst of it. The torn flesh there was swollen, hot to the touch, the edges darkened—a sign of trouble.

She pressed a clean cloth soaked in vinegar to the wound, wincing on his behalf even though he made no sound. Next, she swept away debris with careful strokes, using the warm water and soap, the scent of lavender only partially covering the smell.

Not all of him was battered.

His left side—from his collarbone to his waist—was nearly untouched, the skin only marred by smudges of dirt. And aside from his thigh, though streaked with cuts, his legs appeared mostly unharmed beneath the bruises.

He had fought.

Whatever had happened to him, he had not gone down easily.

Daisy ground her teeth together and continued her work. Poultices next, then bandages. Then all she could do was wait.

Long after Gilbert had retired to his room, long after she had cleaned up the pantry and then picked at a meager supper, Daisy remained beside the near-dead stranger, terrified that if she left, she'd find him cold and lifeless in the morning.

Rather than retreat to her own room, she settled into a chair, arms wrapped around herself.

Keeping vigil.

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### THE GUEST

Whether it was the result of a miracle, simple good luck, or Daisy's clumsy attempts at medical care, just before the sun crested the horizon, her patient was still alive.

When he'd thrashed around sometime after midnight, she'd dosed him with some laudanum that was left over from her aunt's illness. Long after he'd settled down, she had remained at his bedside, cradling a cup of tea, staring at him.

Because there was... something.

With his face hidden by that thick beard, his eyes swollen closed, and bruises coloring nearly every other visible inch of skin, the man was utterly unrecognizable.

And yet, a sense of familiarity pricked the back of her neck.

But no.

True, he was the approximate age Alastair would be by now, and he wore the clothing of a gentleman, but she had been awake all night. Fatigue played tricks on the mind, and she was likely becoming delusional.

Besides, the Alastair she had known would never have ended up in a place like this, half-dead in an alley, left to rot .

Daisy shook herself, forcing her thoughts away from the past.



Whoever he was, what had he done to invite such violence upon his person?

As she'd sat watching her patient, she'd had plenty of time to consider the implications of his current situation. If a lord had ordered his death, then this had never been a simple robbery. Most likely, the attack had to do with honor. Perhaps her guest had ruined some debutante and refused to act honorably.

Daisy frowned, her gaze drifting over him as her mind churned.

A single white band wrapped around the base of his right pinky finger, the only evidence of a missing ring—likely stolen by those so-called officers before they left him to die.

But nothing indicating he'd worn a wedding band.

So who was he?

Had he been a gambler who wagered one too many vowels?

Or had he witnessed something he shouldn't have—perhaps evidence of political corruption, or even a murder? Her mind darted in all directions, trying to fit this broken man into a story that explained why someone had wanted him dead.

And then?—

“Hrgmph...?” A rough, garbled sound broke the silence.

The stranger turned his head, and his eyes fluttered open for the first time.

Eyes that were the deepest green, framed by thick lashes.

And holding her breath, for a fleeting moment, she could almost believe...

But no.

The exhaustion from her overnight vigil was playing tricks on her, allowing her foolish mind to conjure impossible memories.

She blinked hard and rubbed her eyes, forcing herself to focus.

Before she could say a word, the man stirred, a flicker of awareness sharpening his gaze. Then, with a low grunt of effort, he tried to push himself up.

Pain contorted his features, and his arms buckled beneath his weight as his head fell back onto the mattress. A sharp hiss escaped his lips, his breath ragged.

And in that moment, she saw it—not just pain, but fear.

Daisy instinctively leaned forward, her voice firm but soft. “You’re safe.”

His gaze snapped to hers.

She hesitated, then placed a steadying hand near his shoulder, careful not to startle him. “You are safe,” she said again. “No one knows you are here.”

His chest rose and fell in uneven bursts, his fingers twitching as if still expecting a blow.

The older wounds, layered beneath the fresh bruises and gashes, told her enough—he’d been held captive.

Daisy had endured much in her eight and twenty years—loss, hardship, hunger,

grief—but still, the depth of cruelty men could unleash upon one another never failed to astonish her.

It was so very senseless.

Pain for pain's sake. Suffering without reason.

Bile crept up her throat.

What kind of man did this to another? What grievance had earned this stranger such brutal treatment?

Someone had not only wanted him dead, but they'd wanted him broken first.

Daisy determined she would do what she could to undo even a fraction of this harm .

“You can trust me,” she said softly, more for herself than for him.

Because trust was a fragile thing, and this man—whoever he was—had every reason not to give it freely.

“I... don?—”

Daisy pressed a steady hand to his chest, barely needing any strength to keep him down.

“Please. Just rest for now,” she said firmly.

Slowly, she lifted the half-full cup of willow bark tea she'd used throughout the night, giving him a silent invitation.

But he hesitated, wary and guarded.

“I won’t hurt you,” she reassured again.

For a long, tense moment, he didn’t move. Then, at last, his eyes flickered shut and he sipped, swallowing with effort.

Daisy let out a slow breath.

But that look of terror in his eyes lingered in her mind, squeezing her chest, breaking her heart more than a little.

“Is there someone I can send for?” she asked gently. He was awake now, but she couldn’t assume he was out of the woods. His injuries had been left untended for days. Fever would no doubt set in, and then, there would be little she could do but comfort him and hope. “I’m not a physician. Is there someone who might come and help you?”

He opened his eyes again, blinking as though struggling to process the question, and then?—

The door creaked open.

He flinched violently, his fingers clawing weakly at the bedding, as if bracing for a blow.

Daisy’s head snapped up even as she covered his hands with one of hers.

“It’s just my brother,” she said quickly.

Gilbert stood in the doorway, freshly dressed, his face scrubbed clean and his curls

neatly combed .

“He didn’t die, then?” His voice broke the quiet like a crack of thunder.

The eagerness in his expression made Daisy blink back to reality, the weight of everything else that needed doing crashing down around her.

Breakfast needed making—Gilbert needed to eat, to be alert, ready for school.

Soaps needed packaging.

Deliveries had to go out.

The garden required tending.

And all of it had to be done on no sleep. She sighed, exhaustion dragging at her limbs.

But even in her weariness, she was grateful. Because life—hard and relentless as it was—still meant survival.

Other families who had been ordered to leave the priory by Lord Calvin hadn’t been so lucky. Some had found work on new estates, scraping by with just enough. But for every one of them, another had been swallowed by the workhouses—or worse, by the streets, by debtors’ prisons, by death.

Her father’s oldest friend had taken his own life.

A farmer without a farm had little to live for.

Daisy exhaled, pressing her fingers to her temples, forcing the thoughts away. Her

aunt had taught her well. To stay alive, and hopefully one day thrive, one needed to keep moving.

“Not dead. Obviously,” she said, stretching as she rose. “But you need to eat before school. We’ll talk about what we’re going to do when you get home.”

“I could stay with you?—”

“And get behind in mathematics? I think not.” She shooed him along. “Wash your hands, and I’ll be right out.”

“I’m almost ten, not five,” Gilbert answered from the kitchen.

“And you still forget to wash your hands.”

Reluctant to leave her patient alone, but needing to start her day, Daisy stared down at the man’s face—at his thick lashes, his forehead, his lips. She’d washed away a good amount of dirt, but even with the lower half hidden behind his beard, something scratched at the back of her mind.

He was resting, his eyes closed once more, laying perfectly still.

Too still?

Please live .

It was the same thought that had echoed over and over in her head for most of the night—that had kept her spooning liquid into his mouth. It had prevented her from leaving him alone for more than a few minutes.

He was a person who, for reasons unknown, had been brought to her by angels, the

universe, or... fate?

He was wholly dependent on her—a perfect stranger.

Please live.

He made no sound. No movement.

Nothing.

Daisy held her breath, watching the faint rise and fall of his chest.

Only when she was certain his breaths weren't labored did she stretch her shoulders, exhaling slowly. She needed to get Gilbert off to school and package the batch of soap she'd mixed the day before.

With a careful glance at the unconscious man, she reached over him, grabbing a loaf of linen-wrapped bread and the jar of butter before making her way into the kitchen.

Gilbert sat at the table, a book spread open before him, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“We didn't have a proper supper last night, Gil.” Daisy cut into the bread. “I imagine you're near starving this morning.”

He glanced up, but instead of answering, he asked, “Why would the police beat that man up? ”

Daisy stilled, her fingers tightening around the knife. It was the same question that had plagued her for half the night.

Gilbert, at the tender age of nine, had seen too much—lost too much. As a result, he was not ignorant as to the cruelties life could serve up.

“Do you think he’s a criminal?” he pressed. Then his eyes widened with realization. “He could be a murderer!”

Daisy sighed. “We don’t know anything for certain, Gil.”

Last night, she had explained the little she knew—what she’d seen, what she’d overheard, and why they couldn’t leave the man to die. Because although she was his older sister and guardian, she and Gilbert were a team, and he understood the importance of keeping their garden a secret.

Living in the city had taught her quickly—any protected space was vulnerable. To vandals. Vagrants. Or worse.

Her growing space was too important to risk.

But above all else, Daisy would have Gilbert understand one thing.

Life had value.

All life.

“He doesn’t look like a murderer,” she said, though the words felt strange even as she spoke them. Because what did a murderer look like?

And yet, she would trust her gut. She knew she was right.

Gilbert frowned, chewing his lip. “Then why wouldn’t they just put him in jail?”



“I don’t think that man in there is a criminal.” Daisy set the bread on the worktable. “Which means those bobbies are the worst kind—corrupt.”

She rolled her lips together, thoughtful. “Hopefully, he’ll wake up soon and tell us what happened.”

If he lives.

Gilbert crossed his arms, his brows drawing together in a deep furrow. “That’s dumb,” he said with all the blunt certainty of a nine-year-old. “For a member of the police to be corrupt.”

“Agreed.” Out of the mouths of babes.

She let out a slow breath. “They aren’t all like that.”

Not sure she believed her own words, she steered the conversation back to their unconscious guest.

“He must have people.” She added a dollop of berry preserves to the butter. “Judging by his clothing, I’d imagine he’s the sort with family who might be looking for him.”

Nobs. Privileged men with homes and titles.

And yet... it had been a lord who wanted him dead.

Gilbert considered her words. Then, after a beat, he asked, “Are you sure you don’t want me to stay home with you today? In case he wakes up,” he rushed to add, looking concerned. “Or worse, in case those men come back. I’m not sure I should leave you alone.”

Before he had even finished the suggestion, Daisy was already shaking her head.

Warmth filled her chest at his protectiveness, but she wouldn't allow it. She was the one protecting him.

And part of that meant making sure he made the most of the education she worked so hard to pay for.

Because he deserved better in this life. Because he could be someone.

"I'll be fine." She moved around the table, ruffling his hair before pressing a quick kiss to the top of his head.

It seemed, these days, that he grew overnight. Just a few more years, and he'd be a man.

But for now, he was still her little brother.

"You mustn't worry about me." She softened her voice, then placed her hands on her hips, straightening her spine in an attempt to look stern—confident. In control. "Just focus on your studies and getting high marks." She lifted her chin, adding with mock gravity, "I will deal with our guest. "

For a moment, Daisy thought her brother was going to ignore her orders.

But then, with a slow, knowing grin, he quipped, "I suppose you can just plant him a facer if he makes any trouble."

Daisy huffed a laugh, ruffling his curls again. "Precisely."

She gave him a gentle shove toward the door, but as he moved to leave, she caught

his arm.

“Not a word about...” She gestured toward the pantry.

Gilbert’s smile faded. He didn’t need the reminder. His eyes met hers and he nodded.  
“I know.”

And he did.

Not just in the way a boy follows orders, but in the way someone who understands the gravity of a thing truly does.

Daisy nodded once. Then, without another word, Gilbert slung his satchel over his shoulder and headed for the door, his usual playful air back in place again.

And then Daisy was alone.

With a stranger.

Who was, quite possibly, dying in her pantry.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### NOTHINGNESS

One second, fire raged beneath his skin. The next, his body was wracked with violent shivers.

But every time he opened his eyes— she was there.

A distant dream, blurred at the edges. Or was she a memory?

Pain dragged him under before he could decide.

It pulsed behind his eyes, a relentless throbbing, squeezing his skull like a vise, tighter and tighter. Every attempt to focus, to grasp at consciousness, was met with a fresh wave of agony.

For days, weeks, months?—he was trapped between earth and hell—untethered, drifting, lost.

And yet... he didn't care.

Had he given up on life? What life?

The question echoed empty in his mind.

He searched for anything to anchor himself—a name, a place, a purpose—but over and over again, he came up empty.

Nothing.

Just fragments of sensation—vague recollections of a cold, dark room, boots kicking him. Endless beatings.

“Swallow,” the mysterious woman ordered .

He didn’t have the strength to fight her. Didn’t have the strength to fight much of anything.

When panic threatened to drown him, he latched onto the comfort of her voice, the occasional warmth of her touch.

Warm. Soothing.

When the pain grew unbearable, he welcomed the darkness again. Over and over, sure it must be the end.

There was no sky, no shifting of light, nothing to mark the passage of day or night. Just the ebb and flow of pain, pulling him under, dragging him back to that dark place where time didn’t matter.

Until, finally, the thick fog in his mind shifted. Unconsciousness eased its grip, and instead of falling back under, he floated up.

Sounds sharpened.

A faint creak—wood shifting underfoot.

More awareness took hold.

The mattress beneath him was thin and lumpy, but it wasn't stone. There was warmth in the air, not damp, not freezing.

His mind fought to find facts, anything tangible—but over and over again, it came up empty.

With great effort, he forced his eyes to open, blinking against a very dull light. The room was dark, but not the same suffocating blackness as before.

This wasn't the place where they had imprisoned him.

Delicate aromas drifted to his nose, unfamiliar yet oddly comforting. Was this... a larder?

Turning his head, a fresh wave of pain lanced through him, but before he could dwell on it, the door creaked open.

And then—she appeared.

The woman from his dreams.

She was real.

His head still throbbed, his entire body was one giant ache, and yet... staring at her, he felt ...

“You're awake!”

Her voice rang through the small room, light and clear as a bell, and for a moment, he thought he might still be dreaming. Was she an angel?

Her eyes widened with something between relief and disbelief, as though she hadn't quite expected him to live.

And then—she smiled.

Warmth flickered in his chest—an odd sensation, given that he should be in agony.

“I—” the single word died on his tongue.

But it didn't matter because he didn't know what he'd been going to say anyway.

She disappeared back out the door but then almost immediately returned, this time with a cup in one hand.

She moved easily, with purpose, yet even in his muddled condition, his gaze caught on the graceful lines of her form, the way the filtered light dusted her features.

As she lowered herself onto the footstool beside the mattress, he sensed something else too—a steady presence, one that had been here long before he was aware enough to notice it.

Had she been watching over him all this time?

“Willow bark tea. I ran out of laudanum two days ago.” Leaning over, she touched his forehead, and he felt her soft breath on his cheek. “I think it's gone now. The fever. I thought we were going to lose you more than once.” And then she sat back, staring at him.

"Where am I?" The question rasped from his throat, raw and unfamiliar, like everything else in his head.

The woman—his angel with curls—cocked her head, studying him as though weighing how much he could handle.

“You’re not in danger, if that’s what you’re asking.” There was a cadence in her voice that tugged at his mind—a memory just out of reach .

It wasn’t the clipped refinement of Mayfair or the drawling indifference of a London aristocrat.

No, this was something softer, earthier—familiar. A country lilt.

“I’d reckon you’re still feeling muddled.” She sighed, shaking her head as she reached for the tea.

“Who... who are you?” His voice came out gruff-sounding. Raspy.

She handed him the cup, grimacing with a shrug.

“You are in my pantry,” she announced. “And I am Miss Daisy Montgomery.” When he made no response, she peered closer. “Who are you?”

He nearly lost himself in her eyes, large and blue and inquisitive. Daisy. Her name whispered through him, and all he could do was try to remember why. She blinked, but then she shook her head.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“I am?—”

The words caught, his tongue moving but producing nothing. “I am...”



His stomach clenched. His mind soured. The emptiness inside him swelled, and with it, a slow-rising panic.

Who was he?

His hands shot up, clutching the sides of his aching skull as if he could physically hold the missing pieces in place.

“I cannot...”

“Shh...”

Her hands were gentle but firm, pushing his away. A cool cloth pressed against his brow, soothing the heat pulsing beneath his skin.

“You’ve been... you were badly injured.”

Injured?

Miss Montgomery’s gaze flickered away, just for a second—too brief to be intentional .

“You mustn’t upset yourself,” she went on, her voice steady, careful, as though willing him to believe her.

But her words didn’t quite land. Because beneath them, something unspoken hummed between them. Something she wasn’t saying.

“Trust that you are safe here.”

Safe.

The word settled uneasily in his chest, foreign and fragile, as though it didn't belong to him.

"I won't let anyone hurt you." He latched onto her voice, clinging to it like a drowning man. Even though he was the one who should be saying that to her.

He was a gentleman, for God's sake. A man.

A protector.

A flicker of something distant, buried—a sense of duty, of purpose—tried to claw its way free.

"I should?—"

"Hush."

Her soft command silenced his unease.

"There will be plenty of time to talk later." She reached for the cloth again, pressing it lightly over his temple. "For now, just rest."

Her voice was a lullaby in the darkness.

He'd been resting for days now, possibly weeks. How much rest did one man need?

But a massive weight held his limbs down, and the spinning in his head dragged him away from reality.

The darkness returned, and he slept.

Daisy exhaled, and only when she was certain he slept did she force herself to leave the pantry.

Back in her kitchen, she determined to finish her tasks before Gilbert arrived home. There was soap to measure, to cut, to package for delivery. Orders to fill. Responsibilities to keep.

She was a businesswoman, a successful shopkeeper. She had made goals for herself, and through sheer will and careful planning, she was achieving them.

And yet?—

When she reached for the knife, her hand trembled.

She stilled, staring down at her fingers, at the subtle, traitorous shake.

His eyes.

She hadn't seen those eyes in years.

Light green. Alive. Hopeful. Mesmerizing.

If not for the flecks of amber swirling near his pupils, they might have seemed cool—but she knew better. Oh, how they could burn.

Similar eyes had once melted her heart.

Now, they unraveled her. So familiar, yet so distant.

Her grip tightened around the handle of the knife.

It was not him.

It couldn't be.

Lack of sleep was playing games with her mind. That was all.

Nearly a week had passed since she and Gilbert had begun caring for him, and it had been a week of uncertainty, of exhaustion, of waiting.

More than once, she'd been sure he wouldn't survive.

There had been nights when his pain was so great, so all-consuming, that she believed he might have welcomed death.

But he had held on. He had endured.

As had she.

And now, her imagination must be playing tricks on her.

It was not him.

It could not be him .

"Get a hold of yourself," she whispered.

And now she was talking to herself.

Her fingers pressed into the wooden worktable, grounding her as she exhaled. Oh, but for one fleeting second, she had been seventeen again. Swept back to a time before?—

Before the old duke's death.

Before her world crumbled beneath her feet.

Before she had learned that love was not enough.

She had been so young, so hopeful—so in love.

Throughout their friendship, their stolen moments, Daisy had always known change would come.

But she had never expected that day—that warm spring afternoon—to be the last time she would ever see him.

At first, she had been concerned. Then she had been angry. And in the end?—

She had been devastated.

But God help her, she had never been able to fully banish the hope.

After the move to London, the premature birth of Gilbert, and her mother's death—followed by her father's decline and Aunt Thea's illness—she had grown up quickly.

Grieving the loss of a childhood romance had not been practical. So she had done what needed to be done. She had pushed him from her thoughts, burying him beneath work, beneath necessity, beneath survival.

And she had succeeded.

Except in the dead of night. Or while performing mindless tasks—the kind that left

her thoughts unguarded.

Like now.

She swept the shop, the rhythmic drag of the broom across the wood normally soothing, but today, it did nothing to calm her racing thoughts.

Nor did washing some bedding. Or scrubbing the floor.

Because of him .

Because, on more than one occasion, she had imagined seeing Alastair walking down the street. She had fantasized that he was looking for her.

That he had been desperately looking for her for years.

Only to be disappointed—over and over again.

“It isn’t him.” The words came out sharp, gritted between her teeth.

Determined to banish her foolish thoughts, she returned to work on the soap, cutting five vertical lines, then five horizontal, creating thirty-six evenly portioned cakes.

She’d just finished wrapping the last one in cloth and tying it off with her signature ribbon when Gilbert burst into the kitchen.

Daisy stared at the clock in disbelief. Eight hours had passed. Had she really been working that long?

She had checked on their unexpected guest a few times, but he had slept the entire day away.

Hopefully, that was a good sign.

Gilbert's eyes—so like hers, so like their mother's—were full of his usual curiosity.

“Is he still alive?”

“He is.” Daisy untied her apron, suddenly bone-weary in a way that settled deep in her limbs. “And he woke up.”

Gilbert's brows shot up. “That's good then, right?”

“It is.”

“Who is he?”

Daisy exhaled. Because, of course, Gilbert would have questions.

“I still don't know.” She ran a hand down her skirt, smoothing her apron. “He was only conscious for a few minutes, and he wasn't very... aware.”

She paused, replaying the brief encounter in her mind, tilting her head.

No. That wasn't entirely true .

He had been aware.

Of the pantry, the low mattress, the dim candlelight.

Of her.

But not of...

Himself.

Daisy's fingers grasped the sides of her apron. "He's most certainly a gentleman." She knew it. There was a quality—a cadence to his speech, and even in pain, he had apologized to her.

Twice.

For what? Because he couldn't answer her questions? Or simply for no reason at all?

A gentleman's reflexive politeness.

His frustration had been palpable—he had tried, and then his pain had overtaken him again.

"Do you think he'll live, then?" Gilbert's voice pulled her back, his curiosity as sharp as ever.

Her brother had been as helpful as she would allow, but the reality remained—the man in their pantry was, in fact, a man.

No man had lived under this roof since their father's death. And if this gentleman's presence was discovered—if gossip took hold—her reputation would be damaged. Beyond repair. And she needed that reputation. Without it, she wouldn't be able to do business with the ton .

Daisy let out a slow breath. "The fever's gone. So I think so..."

It was the outcome she'd hoped for when she and Gilbert had dragged him inside, half-dead. And yet, his continued survival did not negate the difficulties his presence would bring.



Gilbert plunked his books on the chair by the door, shaking her from her thoughts. “Mrs. Farley asked about you.”

Daisy’s stomach tensed .

“She’s wondering why you haven’t come ’round for tea this week.”

A reminder. That people noticed her absence. That she had a routine, a life to maintain, watchful neighbors. All compelling reasons to proceed with caution.

Daisy forced a rueful smile. “Dear Mrs. Farley. What would we do without her?” The question was rhetorical—as they would likely never find out.

“I’ll drop in on her tomorrow after I’ve made my deliveries.”

Mrs. Farley, one of Aunt Thea’s old friends, had lived next door for decades. She made it a point to remind everyone that she had never missed a Sunday at church—even going so far as to critique the vicar’s sermons when she found them lacking.

Daisy had once asked her aunt why she endured the relentless scrutiny of their neighbor.

Aunt Thea had simply shrugged. “Mrs. Farley is lonely.”

And Daisy could not argue with that. Once one got past the woman’s penchant for unsolicited opinions, she was mostly tolerable.

And so, Daisy had taken up her aunt’s practice—sitting for tea once a week, listening to harmless gossip, playing the role of dutiful neighbor.

“Better to be friends with your neighbors than enemies,” Aunt Thea had added.

And Daisy had conceded the wisdom of it.

Unfortunately, and occasionally a little vexingly, Mrs. Farley considered it her Godly duty to keep Daisy appraised of her opinion—on other families who lived nearby, as well as the state of Daisy’s soul, which was in peril, seeing as how she, a woman of seven and twenty, insisted upon living her life without the protection of a husband.

But Daisy would deal with Mrs. Farley later.

For now, with the stranger showing signs that he might live, Daisy had an altogether different concern.

What on earth was she going to do with him?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### EYES FLECKED WITH GOLD

When Daisy checked on her patient after supper, she was pleased to find that his fever had not returned. And for now, his sleep seemed restful. Restorative.

She hadn't allowed herself to contemplate the shock she'd felt when she had first looked into his eyes. Not until later that night, when the house was quiet and the world had slowed.

Lively green eyes. Identical to the ones she had lost herself in years ago.

Except, Alastair's eyes had always held light. Hope.

The man in her pantry? He mostly just looked confused and lost—when he was conscious enough to look any way at all.

Later, after she had finished her chores and long after Gilbert had completed his homework and gone to bed, Daisy crept into the pantry and lowered herself onto the small stool beside the mattress.

Now that his fever had broken, she could finally study him properly.

After washing out the dirt and blood, his dark hair had emerged sleek and silky, just as Alastair's had once been .

But the beard was wrong. It had thickened with each passing day, obscuring the lines of his cheeks, his jaw, his mouth.

It made it impossible for her to be sure.

Ten years had passed.

Alastair would be nearly thirty now—a titled gentleman, not the reckless young man on the brink of adulthood she had once known.

Would his shoulders be this broad?

The stranger stirred, and Daisy jumped. And then his eyes opened again, reaching inside her heart and squeezing it.

She'd never seen anyone with eyes like Alastair's—that striking green, flecked with gold.

Until now.

His gaze met hers, steady, searching.

“Hello.” The word came out gravelly, and Daisy had to clear her throat. “Do you remember where you are? My name?”

He blinked, his expression unreadable. When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse from disuse—and the fever.

“Daisy.”

The name landed like a stone in her stomach.

For a half-second, she thought—it is him. He knows me.

But then, his next words pulled her right back into reality.

“You’ve been nursing me—caring for me.”

Her heartbeat steadied. Of course. She had introduced herself before. Hadn’t she?

Daisy reached for the cup of water, her hand unsteady. “You should drink.”

She helped him lift his head, pressing the rim of the cup to his lips.

She had felt perfectly comfortable touching him when he had been on the brink of death—bathing him, treating his wounds, forcing medicine between his lips when he had been too weak to swallow .

But now that he was awake? Now that his sharp gaze tracked her movements? This enclosed space in her pantry, her sudden awareness of how intimate all of this was—unseated her confidence.

“How do you feel?” she asked quickly. “Are you in much pain?”

He shifted, propping himself up slightly—and Daisy was reminded just how large he was. Why was she so flustered?

“Some,” he admitted, voice still thick with exhaustion. “Not as bad as before.”

His gaze flicked around the room, taking in the towering shelves, the rows of supplies, the half-open door. “What is this place?”

“My shop—Honeysuckle and Lye,” Daisy said. “Well, technically—my pantry.” She let out a small sigh. “I make soap. Scented soap.”

His brow creased further, and for reasons that made no sense at all, she found herself wanting to explain. Wanting to tell him how she had improved upon her aunt's business, how she'd figured out how to make better soap than most in London—how she had learned to turn a profit in a world that hadn't been made for women like her to succeed.

But none of that would matter to this man.

A finely dressed gentleman who had nearly been beaten to death in an alley wasn't likely to give a fig about how she grew herbs to make her own oils, or how she wrapped each bar in cloth before tying it off with a ribbon.

And she had bigger concerns than impressing this enigmatic stranger.

“Do you remember what happened to you?” she asked instead, shifting the conversation back to what mattered.

His frown deepened. His stare grew unfocused, like he was searching for something just out of reach. Something she might need to help him find .

So she oh, so gently added, “You were beaten badly and left for dead.”

She waited, watching as his throat worked around a swallow, as his hands curled into the blanket.

“I found you behind my garden,” she said. The words sat heavy between them. “You were unconscious. And it was clear you wouldn't last the night if someone didn't... help.”

A small crease formed between his brows, his fingers flexing against the blanket again.

“I couldn’t just leave you there,” she continued. “So my brother and I... we managed to... get you inside.”

His eyes widened slightly—perhaps in surprise. Perhaps at the thought of being dragged around by a woman and a boy.

But he remained silent. Not in disbelief, but as though she was talking about someone other than him.

Daisy exhaled. “You’ve been here a week. Feverish. Delirious.”

She thought back to those long nights, to the moments she’d worried he wouldn’t make it—to how she had held cool cloths to his brow, spooned medicine between his lips, willed him to fight.

And now he was staring at her, alive, but still so lost.

“Do you know why someone would want to harm you?” she asked again, softer this time.

The muscles in his throat bobbed with another swallow.

“I can’t recall...” His voice came out strained. He pressed his fingers against his temple. “...much of anything.”

Then, his gaze swung back to her. “I was in a dark room—not this one. It was cold. I remember... pain.”

There was an agony in that one word that summoned a stinging to Daisy’s eyes. His haunted expression had her hugging her arms in front of her.

“And before that?” she prompted.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and winced. “It’s there.” But that defeated look was returning. “I just can’t...” He looked up at her again. “You are familiar, though. Your scent. It’s?—”

“Honeysuckle.” It was the scent of her most popular soap but also the perfume she made for herself. Sometimes it permeated the entire shop. He would have been smelling it on and off since he’d arrived.

Although, it had always been her favorite, and it grew ubiquitously in the trees where they’d spent hours and hours together, alone, talking, and eventually... loving.

No. No. No!

This man was a stranger.

This man was not Alastair.

The Alastair she had loved would be safe and sound at one of his estates—possibly married to a well-bred wife.

“Who is your family?” she asked.

He frowned, and Daisy felt her stomach twist.

She could not continue keeping a strange man hidden away in her storeroom. There had to be someone out there—someone who cared for him, who would come looking for him.

But what if those looking for him weren’t... friendly?



A troubling thought crept in, one she'd pushed aside until now. She'd been so focused on protecting her garden, on keeping Gilbert safe, that she hadn't truly let herself consider the deeper implications.

Had someone with power ordered his death?

She looked at the man before her—refined, well-spoken, a gentleman through and through. Who was he?

She needed to get her hands on the latest Gazette. If he was someone of note, surely there would be a notice—a missing person's report, a desperate plea from family or friends.

She needed to know if anyone was looking for him.

“Who are you?” she asked, locking her stare with his. “What is your name?”

More silence .

He stared down at the sleeve of the night shirt she'd found for him—one of her father's old garments. He lifted his wrist, turning it from side to side, flexing his fingers as if testing their movement.

A long, weighted sigh left his lips.

“I don't know.”

The words landed heavy in the small space, and the memory of that final blow—the one delivered with cruel precision by the meaner of the two bobbies—flashed through her mind.

Had they damaged him permanently?

If he didn't even know his own name... how could he possibly find his people?

She couldn't keep him here—not without his presence being discovered.

Handsome though he might be.

Her gaze flickered—not for the first time—to the open vee of his nightshirt.

Beneath the fabric, taut skin stretched over firm muscle. He was lean but strong, his chest broad, his skin smooth.

She knew all of this because she had bathed him.

And she had not skipped anything while bathing him. Only because his fever had burned so hot. Because she had been faced with a choice—her modesty or his life. And she had done what needed to be done.

Thank God he had not expired.

He was very much alive—and still waiting for a response.

Her mouth felt dry as she tore her gaze away, forcing her thoughts into order. “It’s only been a few hours since you woke up,” she said, keeping her voice even. “I’m sure you’ll remember everything by tomorrow.”

But what if he didn't?

His dark stare echoed her thoughts—doubting, filled with hopeless resignation. She didn't like that look in his eyes. It made her want to do something for him, though she

didn't know what.

Flustered by her thoughts, she smoothed her skirts and glanced around the small storage room.

“Are you hungry? I have some soup left over from supper.” With all the complications this man had brought to her home, she was happy to address something she could actually help him with. He needed nourishment. That she could do.

He would be better in the morning, surely.

When she met his gaze again, he smiled, just a small tilt of his lips. Warmth danced from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. It was that feeling. A feeling she'd all but forgotten, one she hadn't known since Alastair left to be with his father in London.

“Finally a question I can answer,” he murmured before looking up at her sheepishly. “I'm starving, actually.”

Daisy found herself grinning back at him, and although it was short and ironic sounding, they both laughed just a little. When she rose, however, he turned serious again.

“I'm inconveniencing you, though. Am I not?” Even disheveled, not quite sitting on a ragged mattress, he appeared dignified. Definitely a gentleman. “As soon as I'm able, I'll take myself out of your way—out of your pantry. So you might go on with your business.” A wince this time, masquerading as a tight grin.

Daisy shook her head. “You're not inconveniencing me,” she lied. He'd only turned her life upside down.

But he'd been through a lot—more than she could even imagine, really.

For the first time in a very long time, she felt... Something she didn't fully understand.

Inspired, somehow ?

But that was not why she intended to let him stay.

“You were beaten and left for dead. Your wounds need to heal completely before you put yourself back in danger.”

Which meant her guest wouldn't be going anywhere soon.

Not if she could help it.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### EMERGING

Nothing.

No names, places, or... much of anything.

Disappointment swept through him the next morning as he lay on the mattress staring into the darkness. He'd forcefully attempted to search all the places in his mind but had come up empty over and over again. He couldn't remember... anything, really.

Flashes of faces—there, then gone in an instant. But for similar flashes of a large country manor, he landed on nothing that provided him with any useful information.

Voices sounded just outside the door, low but distinct.

He ran a hand through his too-long hair, exhaling sharply. From the brief rundown Daisy had given him the night before, he recognized what must be her brother chatting with her in the kitchen.

The previous night, after bringing him soup, she had sat with him, speaking in quiet tones, almost like a bedtime story meant to lull him into rest.

She had told him about her brother and his schooling, the soaps she made, the clients who bought them. She had steered her monologue away from his situation, filling the silence with details of her own life rather than pressing him for information he did not have.

He had listened, clinging to every word.

Even now, hearing the soft rhythm of her footsteps, the subtle weight of her presence in the next room, he did not feel quite so... lost.

Daisy Montgomery.

Her name fit neatly in his mind, as though it had been there before—as though he had always known it. In fact, when he grasped at nothingness, he always landed on her.

Wide blue eyes. Curls wild and golden, refusing to be tamed as they framed her face.

The image provided him with something tangible. Something real.

No doubt, it was simply because she had been the one to care for him. Aside from her brother, an eager lad of about ten, she was the only face he knew.

The only face that meant anything.

But this morning, he was ready to end his bedrest.

The pain in his head had dulled to an ache, a far cry from the crippling agony that had held him hostage before. His body protested, his muscles stiff from disuse, but he had been idle long enough.

He needed to see the light of day.

Ignoring the pull of aching joints, he threw back the blanket and sat up. Much better. But he needed to move.

Aside from a few lingering bruises, a collection of aching ribs—possibly

cracked—and the dull throb at the base of his skull, he was not as bad off as he could have been.

Grasping the nearest shelf, he pulled himself to his feet, biting back a curse as his muscles protested the movement.

It was a damn good thing he had something to hold onto .

For the first full minute of standing, the world tilted, and his legs held all the structural integrity of pudding.

He exhaled sharply, forcing himself to steady. His body might be weak, but a man could only lie abed so long.

And considering he had no earthly idea who he was or how he had ended up here, he really ought to do a bit of exploring.

Not particularly concerned with his apparel—or lack thereof—he pushed the pantry door open and stepped into the kitchen.

Under normal circumstances, he would have preferred to don proper clothing first. But considering there was nothing to be done about that at present, and the nightshirt he wore fell past his knees, modesty was a battle already lost.

Besides, Daisy had already seen more of him than any proper lady ought.

The thought humbled him.

Catching sight of her standing at the stove, he recalled that she'd had her hands on him. She had pressed cool cloths to his fevered skin, tended to his wounds...

A familiar sensation stirred to life, this one not humble at all.

Well.

At least one important organ had remained intact.

The timing, however, was spectacularly inconvenient.

He forced his thoughts elsewhere, willing blood to more appropriate appendages. The nightshirt was worn rather thin, and he had no desire to send Daisy—or worse, her brother—into a fit of mortified shock.

Grateful that neither of them had yet noticed his presence, he paused, rifling through information she had shared with him the night before.

The exercise was only partly successful.

Because, as it turned out, his mind was stubbornly preoccupied with the woman moving about the kitchen .

Daisy. Daisy.

She worked with quiet efficiency, her skirts shifting softly with each step, her curls tumbling in a cascade of gold down her back. Some had settled along the curve of her neck, others bounced slightly whenever she turned her head.

The sight was... distracting.

And it wasn't like him—at least, he didn't think it was—to be so utterly captivated by a woman.



He had heard tales of military men falling for the women who nursed them back to health, but that wasn't what was happening here.

No, this was something else entirely.

Daisy Montgomery was a stranger, and yet... not. Who the devil was she?

Yet another question he couldn't answer.

Before the frustrating thoughts could hit him full force, he closed the door behind him and approached the tall worktable. Against the far wall was a cooking range, a washbasin, and a few shelves filled with neatly stacked dishes. Everything looked well used, but the place was tidy, the tools lovingly maintained, and the setup was meticulously efficient—a reflection of the owner, he surmised.

It did not surprise him.

“You're awake!” The boy—who bore a striking resemblance to his sister—announced the obvious with wide-eyed enthusiasm.

Daisy whipped around, and he couldn't help but notice the faint flush that crept up her cheeks.

“What are you doing out of bed?” She scolded him, but he could also see that she was a little pleased.

Because it meant he was getting better, and the sooner he could remain upright for more than ten minutes at a time, the sooner she could be rid of him .

The thought of leaving shouldn't have knocked the wind out of him as much as it did.

But whether it was regret at leaving the comfort of Daisy Montgomery's care, or outright fear at facing the unknown, it didn't signify.

He'd relied on this woman for everything these past days—food, care, answers she couldn't provide. He couldn't go on like this.

His gaze flicked over the kitchen, taking in the well-scrubbed work surfaces, the wrapped cakes of soap waiting for delivery, the simple but tidy surroundings. She worked hard to keep her shop running, to make ends meet, to pay for her brother's education.

And he was an added burden she had not asked for.

When he settled his affairs, he would find a way to repay her.

"I can't lie abed indefinitely," he said simply, rolling his shoulders as if shaking off the weakness still lingering in his limbs. "I need to find some answers."

Then he glanced down at himself, taking in the threadbare nightshirt that, while clean and serviceable, left much to be desired in terms of propriety.

"Although I suppose I'll have better luck if I can borrow a pair of breeches."

Daisy opened her mouth—likely to protest—but before she could speak, the shop bell jangled, signaling a customer.

But the footsteps that followed did not stop in the outer room.

They moved closer and closer to the kitchen.

With deliberate. Purposeful. Strides.

He barely had a moment to react, but even if he'd had his full wits about him, he wouldn't have hidden. Because hiding wasn't in his nature .

And yet, how could he know that, but not know his own bloody name?

“Miss Montgomery?” A sharp, reedy voice pierced the quiet. “ If the mountain won't come to Mohammad, then Mohammad will ...”

A woman appeared at the threshold, her small, sharp eyes narrowing behind thick spectacles, which she promptly lowered to the tip of her hawkish nose. She took her time looking him over—from the nightshirt to his exposed legs—before finishing, with ominous finality:

“.. .come to the mountain .”

Must come , he mentally corrected her. Mohammad must come to the mountain...

Well, at least his brain wasn't completely useless. He'd only forgotten the important matters. Like who he was. Where he lived. His entire damned life up until this moment.

Having no plausible explanation for his presence or his lack of trousers, he wisely held his tongue.

He might have misplaced his identity, but he hadn't forgotten the value of discretion. And if Daisy had already devised some explanation, anything he might say to the contrary would only worsen her predicament.

The older woman standing in the threshold, however, had no such reservations.

“What sort of immoral behavior are you exposing young Gilbert to? He's naught but

a child!" Her voice rose an octave, shaking with righteous fury. "I would think that you, of all people, would know better than to..." The quivering hand she clutched over her chest made it seem as though she might faint dead away.

He doubted it.

"As I live and breathe," she continued, each word landing like a gavel striking a courtroom bench, "your dear Aunt Theodora would be rolling in her grave to witness such goings-on."

Her bright, beady gaze returned to him, pinning him with all the force of an executioner's axe, and then swung back to Daisy.

"Pray tell, why is there a naked man standing in your kitchen?"

"He isn't naked, Mrs. Farley!" Daisy's brother, Gilbert, pointed out while Daisy stepped forward as if to shield him.

"Wait. Please." Daisy lifted a hand, her voice steadier than he expected, but edged with wariness. "This isn't what you think it is."

But even to his own ears, she sounded uncertain. Apologetic.

Because of him.

His very presence had placed this woman—his savior—in a precarious situation.

"Oh?" Mrs. Farley's voice dripped with disapproval. "Then, by all means, enlighten me."

He opened his mouth—only to realize he had nothing to say.

Curse it all, he didn't know his own name, much less a plausible explanation that might appease this fire-breathing octogenarian.

Daisy, however, was scrambling, her eyes darting about the kitchen as though the perfect excuse might be hiding behind the sugar tin.

Mrs. Farley's lips pursed into a thin, judgmental line. "I should have known something like this would happen the moment your aunt passed."

Daisy's head snapped up. "That was nearly four years ago!"

Mrs. Farley sniffed. "What difference does that make? I imagine this unseemly side of your character would have come to light eventually. "

Daisy's nostrils flared, but Mrs. Farley charged ahead.

"I warned Theodora. I told her, 'That girl needs a husband before she gets too old.' But no, she insisted you knew what was best." She wagged a gnarled finger. "And now, left to your own devices, you've fallen into a life of sin."

"I have not fallen into a life of sin!"

Mrs. Farley arched a brow, clearly unconvinced.

Daisy's jaw tightened. Then she lifted her chin and declared, "This man is... my husband."

He blinked.

Husband?

Did she just say husband?

“Mr. Alastair... William...son,” Daisy finished, her voice almost too smooth, as if she hadn’t just shattered his tenuous grip on reality.

She turned to him, her expression daring him to argue. “Alastair, this is my neighbor and very dear friend, Mrs. Farley.”

What. The. Hell.

His first instinct was to demand answers—loudly—but he bit it back. Think. Observe. Why hadn’t she informed him of this rather pertinent fact earlier?

She must have known his name then. Likely his entire history.

Rage simmered beneath the surface, a slow burn. He’d be angry later— very angry. But for now...

For now, he felt something else: Relief.

It was absurd. Infuriating. But undeniable.

He had nothing—no memories, no identity, no sense of self whatsoever.

Now he had a name.

Alastair Williamson .

The syllables settled into his mind like an ill-fitting coat. Familiar, but not quite right. He turned the name over, testing its weight, waiting for it to spark recognition .

Nothing.

And yet...

Having Daisy as his wife felt plausible.

It explained her willingness to care for him—the intimacy with which she had done so. It made sense of the undeniable pull he felt toward her.

But what else was she keeping from him?

Were they estranged? Had they had a falling-out? Had he wronged her?

Had she wronged him?

His jaw tensed. They would have a very serious discussion about all of this the moment their guest departed.

For now, he did what any gentleman in his position would do. He stepped forward.

“I apologize for my attire, madam,” he—Alastair—said smoothly, shooting Daisy a pointed, suspicious glance.

She, however, very deliberately kept her gaze elsewhere, her attention fixed on the elderly woman.

“My wife and I weren’t expecting company so early this morning,” he finished.

At that, Daisy’s lovely complexion flushed pink. He didn’t miss the way her hands twitched slightly at her sides.

Interesting.

Alastair wasn't, in fact, wholly opposed to the notion of being married to the spirited blonde he'd come to know since waking up.

Despite how little he knew of her, this woman made up his entire world.

"Your husband?" Mrs. Farley squawked, adjusting her spectacles as if inspecting him anew. "But you are Miss Montgomery, not Mrs. Williamson, and you've never mentioned him—not even a word. How can this be?"

Had she kept his existence a secret?

"He—Alastair has been away," Daisy said, stepping forward and winding her hand firmly around his arm. "I wasn't sure when he would return... or if he would. And it was simply easier this way."

With admirable dramatics, she lifted her chin and sniffed loudly.

"But where have you been, young man?" Mrs. Farley's sharp gaze cut back to him. "Are you a military man?"

Curious to hear the answer, he remained silent.

"Not the military," Daisy said quickly. "But he worked on a ship—er—importing and exporting and... whatnot."

He arched a brow. Whatnot?

"It was attacked by pirates," she added solemnly.



Pirates.

Alastair pressed his lips together, willing himself not to react.

Daisy clutched his arm tighter, sending him a subtle warning squeeze.

“I hadn’t heard from dearest Alastair for nearly a decade,” she continued with feeling, “but now he’s returned, a little battered, but he is safe now. I couldn’t be more pleased.”

Mrs. Farley narrowed her eyes, visibly sifting through the details.

Alastair exhaled slowly. Good God.

She was making this up. He didn’t know how he knew, but he knew her. And she was lying.

Why, though? And just how much of this tale was falsehood, and how much was truth?

Were they... not husband and wife? Or was she only lying because she was ashamed of the real reason he’d been gone?

The two of them would definitely have a much-needed conversation after this.

Mrs. Farley’s eyes remained suspicious, but perhaps a smidge less so. “Why didn’t your aunt mention this when I encouraged her to find you a husband? ”

“Out of respect for my sensibilities,” Daisy answered solemnly. “Alastair is, in fact, the very reason she resisted your suggestions.” Daisy swiped the back of her hand across her eyes as though holding back tears. Alastair noticed that her brother was

looking almost as fascinated with his sister's tale as himself. "Aunt Thea knew how devastated I was at his disappearance."

"Hmm, a decade you said? You must have married awfully young, then. What were you, all of six and ten?"

"Seven and ten, actually. And I was old enough to fall in love," Daisy returned.

Alastair glanced down at her. Of all the announcements she'd made this morning, this particular one rang true. And although her cheeks were pink, her eyes blazed like blue fire.

He inhaled a sharp breath, and the sweet scent of honeysuckle filled his senses.

Was she telling the truth? Had he fallen in love with this woman ten years before? But he couldn't get any reliable answers as long as they had an audience.

"So, you see," Alastair said. "Everything is quite above-board." Or was it?

Mrs. Farley studied each of them but then finally dipped her chin in approval.

"I'll come for tea this week," Daisy said. "I promise." All along his side, Alastair could feel Daisy relax beside him, a near-silent sigh of relief escaping her.

She'd been afraid—for her reputation? The realization only deepened his determination to solve this puzzle.

She released his arm then and, chatting about recipes and tea, steered Mrs. Farley out of the kitchen and out the front door. Only after they'd disappeared did Alastair turn to Gilbert, who was looking more than a little entertained by the entire exchange.

“We’re brothers then, eh?” Alastair cocked a brow .

“Maybe.” Gilbert proved quite loyal to his sister, clamping his mouth shut and backing out of the room.

Leaving Alastair to wait for Daisy.

Who was, apparently, his long-lost wife.

### TALL TALES

Daisy's heart raced as she all but shoved Mrs. Farley out the door and onto the street. Not in a hundred years would she have imagined that her unexpected houseguest would stroll into the kitchen wearing nothing but her father's old nightshirt.

Goodness.

She hadn't even realized he could stand.

And yet, there he had been—towering, bare-legged, looking impossibly dignified for a man in such indecent attire.

But she couldn't spend time marveling at that now. Because before they'd been interrupted, he'd announced his intentions to leave the safety of her home... to leave her care.

This morning wasn't going at all as she'd envisioned. Not even close.

It was her fault, really. She should have anticipated that Mrs. Farley might drop by, especially after Gil had mentioned that their neighbor had been asking about her.

But the timing? Rather inconvenient. Catastrophic, really.

Now she was stuck with the colossal lie she'd spun in desperation .

Hopefully, Mrs. Farley had believed her.

Otherwise... there might be a problem.

Closing the shop door behind her nosy, meddling neighbor, Daisy locked it this time, then pressed her back against the wood, exhaling slowly.

She had long since made peace with the fact that she would never marry, nor would she ever rely on a man. She did just fine on her own.

But where her business was concerned?

Reputation was everything.

She sold her soaps to the snobbiest set in all of London—the Mayfair elite. With just a single whisper of impropriety, her clientele would vanish like mist.

Whatever Mrs. Farley believed, the woman had undoubtedly already begun spreading the tale to half the street.

Daisy's heart dropped, and she pressed her palms to her cheeks.

It wasn't that Daisy required a spotless reputation in the way other young women did. But her business did.

Her brother did.

If even a handful of her customers took their business elsewhere over something so ridiculous as this, she wouldn't be able to pay his tuition. More than a handful, and she'd go under completely.

Selling specialty items to people who figuratively— sometimes literally —lived and died by the rules of propriety was, ultimately, a delicate business.

Which was why she'd told such an outrageous lie.

Declaring her patient to be her long-lost husband had been the only viable way to explain his presence in her home.

Practically naked.

But calling him Alastair? What was her reasoning behind that?

Just a coincidence, foolishness, or wishful thinking ?

She pushed off the door and made her way toward her kitchen. Oh, but how simple her life had been before she'd decided to help this unsettling stranger.

Before facing him again, Daisy brushed her hands down her skirt. What must he think of her now?

She would learn soon enough, because when she stepped into her kitchen, he was the only one waiting for her.

Wincing, she met his gaze.

"I imagine you're wondering what that was about?" She couldn't quite keep the shaking out of her voice.

Alastair—or whatever his name truly was—watched her closely, his frown deepening.

"I suppose you could say that." His tone was mild, but his eyes sharpened, searching hers. "I had intended to take my leave today. Tomorrow at the latest." He tilted his head slightly. "But why would I do that," he asked slowly, "if you are my wife?"

Daisy stilled.

So Gilbert hadn't told him anything.

"You don't remember anything, then?" she asked carefully.

He exhaled heavily, his hands flexing at his sides. "I've tried. Believe me, I've tried." His jaw clenched. "It's like staring into the dark, knowing there's something there but not being able to make it out." He shook his head. "And yet... you feel familiar to me."

Daisy's stomach dipped, but she ignored it.

"You can't leave." Her voice was firmer now. More insistent. "Your body needs more time to heal. You nearly..." Her voice dried up.

"And I appreciate everything you've done." Then his gaze darkened. "But I refuse to be more of a burden than I've already been."

"You're not a burden," she said quickly.

His lips pressed together, like he didn't quite believe her .

"Although..." he continued, still watching her intently, "being married to you would explain a few things."

Daisy's heart lurched.

"What things?" she asked, her voice quieter now.

Alastair cleared his throat, rubbing a hand down his face.

“The feeling I have when I look at you...” His voice had softened. “The fact that you took me in.” He held her gaze. “That you cared for me—so thoroughly.”

Daisy’s pulse thumped violently in her throat.

The air between them thickened, the weight of the things he was alluding to.

Because, yes, she had cared for him. She had washed him. She had seen every inch of him.

And why?

Because it was the right thing to do?

She swallowed hard. She should say something. Anything.

But all she could do was stare—because she wasn’t entirely certain of the answer herself.

“Wouldn’t any decent person care for someone in need?”

“No.” His answer came quickly. “Not in my experience.”

Did that mean... “You have some memories, then?”

“Yes. No.” He frowned. “Nothing helpful.”

He seemed to shake the thought off, then focused on her again, his gaze sharp with meaning.

“But you haven’t answered my question. Are you my... wife ? You knew me before I



was attacked?”

This man had never been her husband—nor had Alastair.

And yet... seeing him standing there, listening to the cadence of his voice, sent a chill down her spine.

It felt familiar. Right.

Like the last drop of oil to round out a scent.

“No,” she answered... regretfully ?

Certainly not.

He was a stranger to her, nothing more. Nothing less. Then, anticipating the question she knew would follow, she added, “But Mrs. Farley is a horrible gossip, and it was the only explanation I could think of for how you came to be standing in my kitchen...” Daisy closed her eyes, exhaling. “Practically naked. I do wish you’d stayed in the pantry...”

“So none of it was true, then? It was just to protect your reputation...” Did he look... disappointed?

Of course he did. This meant he was back at square one.

He didn’t even know his own name, for heaven’s sake.

“Being ruined presents different repercussions for a woman like me. My clients... My blends of oils and soap are special—too expensive for common people to buy. It’s taken a good deal of work to build up my customer base, and I rely on them—for

everything.” She sighed. “And these customers. They are... proper.”

He nodded, his expression pensive, and then his eyes met hers.

Nobody had looked at her like this in a very long time—looked at her as though he not only wanted to see her, but also hear her and understand her. As though he wanted to know all the things she wasn’t saying.

The same way Alastair had.

She resisted the urge to squirm.

“Then I must leave,” he finally said, his tone resolute. “I’m too much of a burden, and I could become a liability. Tell your nosy neighbor that your wandering husband refuses to settle down.”

Daisy shot out a hand, stopping just short of grabbing his arm. “You can’t leave. You might feel well enough to stand now, but your fever only just broke. If you don’t give yourself time to fully recover, you could fall ill again, and then everything I’ve done will have been for nothing.”

He gave her a sheepish sort of grin, and for the briefest instant, it swept her back to ten years before—to a time before she carried all the burdens that came with the harsh realities of life. But just as quickly as the feeling surfaced, it was gone.

“I assure you, I will take care,” he said. Then he cleared his throat, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face. “But... did you keep my clothing, before...?”

“I did. But...” She hesitated, gripping the edge of the worktable. “You cannot go.”

Something in her voice made him pause.

Deep down, a niggling voice taunted her. Why are you so reluctant to let him go?

But no. This was about his health, his safety . And the fact that if he stepped out that door, he could very well collapse in the street or, worse, be found by the very men who had left him for dead.

“The men who were beating you,” she continued carefully. “They’re still out there.”

This reminder, more than anything, had him hesitating. “Did you get a look at them?”

“Barely,” she admitted. “I was outside in my garden when I overheard them through the fence. But the attack—it wasn’t random.” She frowned, searching her memory for exactly what she’d heard. “They needed to report to someone. ‘ His Lordship ’, they called him. Whoever wanted you dead is a lord. And they took a ring from you—to bring to him as proof.”

He glanced down at his hands and flexed them. The pale ring around his pinky finger was faint, but still visible.

She watched as he absorbed the information, his jaw tightening.

“I initially thought they might be taking a wedding ring. But it’s?—”

“The wrong finger.” He frowned.

“They were going to use it as proof, which means it could be a family ring? Something that would have revealed your identity. ”

He stared at his hand again, looking incredibly thoughtful. Was he remembering something? She kept silent for nearly an entire minute, not wanting to interrupt him in case some of his memories were returning.

But then he shook his head and exhaled. “I don’t know,” he finally said.

“Which is precisely why you need to keep out of sight for now.” Daisy swallowed and, sensing his resolve weakening, she pressed her point. “If you walk out that door now, you might not make it twenty steps. You are too vulnerable. It was two bobbies who left you there. They would easily recognize you. You wouldn’t know who your enemies are if they stood right in front of you.”

“Possibly.” His brows furrowed. “What could I have done to make someone want me dead?”

“It might have more to do with who you are. But until you remember, you can’t go gallivanting through the streets showing your face.”

He kept right on watching her. “But none of this is your problem. You have your soaps to make and your brother to care for.” His eyes searched hers. For what? “You are not keeping more from me, are you? Because you do seem familiar to me. More familiar than anything else.”

His admission sent a tremor through her.

Daisy swallowed hard. “You remind me of someone. But you cannot be him. I think I’m familiar to you because my face was the one you saw when you were wracked with fever. At times, you would open your eyes, but you were somewhere else.” She twisted her mouth into a small smile. “I am not keeping anything from you.”

She would not go into more detail than that. She didn’t discuss Alastair with anyone, and now that her parents had passed, no one remembered that she’d once been in love with the son of a duke .

To imagine that someone like her had been so foolish was a little embarrassing.

“I see,” he said.

“But I cannot allow you to put yourself in danger. A few days ago, I thought you were going to die. Give yourself some time before seeking out whoever was trying to kill you. At the very least, wait until you’ve fully regained your strength.”

“You’re too generous.”

“And you’re looking too tired. I’ll be terribly angry if after all my trouble, you die on me anyway.” It was a morbid thing to say, but she truly didn’t want him to push himself too hard. “Mrs. Farley will already have told half the street that I’ve a newly-returned husband, so your presence is already explained. When the time comes for you to leave, then I shall complain of your inconsistency—that you are a man unwilling to settle down and have returned to your wandering ways.”

She laughed and was surprised that it sounded a little sad. Because, although his eyes looked tired, even dressed in nothing but an old dressing gown, there was something about this man. He was so very handsome, but he also carried himself with a confidence she was unaccustomed to seeing. He was unafraid.

And what had he said?

The feeling I have when I’m with you...

He’d not seemed displeased when he’d thought she might be his wife. No, he’d seemed almost relieved... And if she was going to be perfectly truthful, the fantasy was not a distasteful one to her either.

Even with Gilbert, her soaps, and her business to keep her occupied, there were moments—quiet, lingering moments—when she wished for something more. Someone to hold her at night, to share the burdens and the triumphs, to laugh with

over tea...

Maybe, just maybe, she was a little bit lonely .

She stomped down the thought. Loneliness was a foolish thing to dwell on. Dangerous, even. She had everything she needed. And she would not let a man—especially one who could disappear just as easily as he had appeared—make her yearn for something that could never be.

“Very well,” he said, nodding. “I’ll rest today, but as soon as I feel well enough, I need to look into all of this. And until then, I refuse to be a burden. If I’m to remain, I will do all that I can to be useful.” He let out a short laugh. “I suppose Alastair is as good a name as any. At least you didn’t call me Cornelius, Obadiah, or some other god-awful name.”

But Daisy didn’t laugh.

“You wish for me to call you... Alastair?”

“It’s what you told Mrs. Farley, so I think I am stuck with it,” he said.

She winced. “True.”

What had she been thinking when she’d used that name? Had she been thinking at all? Her mouth had simply run ahead of her mind, latching onto the first thing that had felt right—even if it wasn’t. Now, he was right. They were both stuck with it.

Having to call him Alastair was going to be... painful. The wound of her past had long since scarred over, but this man—this stranger with no name—was pressing against it.

“And your brother? Will this be a problem for him?”

Daisy shook her head. “Gilbert knows the truth, but he also knows the dangers of gossip and will understand the reasons for the deception. He’s not quite ten, but is unusually mature for his age.”

Too mature.

She and Gilbert had been lucky—lucky to have a home, lucky to have food on the table, lucky to have each other. But luck wasn’t something Daisy trusted.

No matter how carefully she planned, no matter how hard she worked, the fear of losing it all never left her. She knew what it was to lose everything. And she would do anything to keep her little brother from ever knowing that kind of devastation.

Which was why she couldn’t afford to let a single whisper of scandal taint her reputation.

Why she had to do whatever it took to keep her customers.

Protecting Gilbert, providing for him... It was her greatest purpose.

And nothing—not even a nameless man with green eyes and a too-familiar face—would get in the way of that.

“Now,” Daisy said briskly and brushed her hands together, “It’s time for you to rest.” But when she walked across the room, intent upon steering him back into the pantry, he didn’t move.

When she grasped his arm, he simply stared down at her. “You’re terribly bossy, you know.”

Was he teasing her?

Feeling his arm, warm and firm beneath her hand, awareness thrummed through her.

She liked touching him.

She liked him . She didn't even know his real name, but she liked him—not just as a friend, but in the way a woman likes an attractive man.

Was keeping him here a mistake?

“Just efficient,” she finally answered. “And I'll take it as a compliment.”

He laughed. “I'm sure I can come up with a better compliment than that.”

His gaze skimmed over her face, and she felt a warm blush on her cheeks as she looked away.

It was almost as though they were flirting.

But that was ridiculous.



### CLOTHING THAT MAKES A GENTLEMAN

Daisy had plenty of time to prepare answers for Gilbert's inevitable questions while he was at school, and sure enough, he barely set his books down before launching right in.

"So, you aren't really married, are you? You just made that up."

"You know I'd never keep something like that from you." Because they were a team. Because they were all one another had.

Daisy handed him some bread and soup. She always tried to have something ready for him when he came home—he was a growing boy, after all. Already taller than most boys his age, Gil never refused food. How long before he towered over her entirely?

"Do you understand why I would lie, though?" she asked, watching as he tore off a piece of bread with his teeth.

Gilbert snorted. "Because he wasn't dressed."

Ah, yes. He understood, if only on the most basic level.

"Him joining us in the kitchen like that was most inappropriate," she agreed. "And yes, his lack of proper clothing certainly made it worse." She took every opportunity to instill manners and propriety into him. He might need them someday.

“I don’t suppose he had much choice, though,” Gilbert reasoned. “Stuck in the larder like that.”

“True.” Daisy couldn’t help but smile at his logic. “But you and I need to talk. He still hasn’t remembered who he is, so he’s going to stay with us a little longer. And since I told Mrs. Farley that his name is... Alastair,” Daisy forced herself to continue, “and that he is my husband, we’re going to have to keep up that story until it’s safe for him to go.”

Gilbert, who had been listening intently while he chewed, nodded. “Will he still sleep in there?” He gestured toward the pantry door.

That was... a good question. Daisy hadn’t thought that part through. There were only two small rooms upstairs—hers and Gilbert’s. And her brother’s was so tiny there was barely enough space for his bed, much less another person.

After her aunt’s passing, she’d refashioned the parlor into a proper salesroom for her soaps and oils, leaving only the kitchen and the small dining room where they took their meals and where Gilbert did his schoolwork. It was also where she sometimes sat for tea with Mrs. Farley.

But the dining room was larger than the pantry. It had a window.

If they moved the mattress in there, he’d be more comfortable. Gilbert could do his homework in the kitchen, and if Mrs. Farley came for tea, they’d simply move the mattress elsewhere.

She certainly couldn’t share her small bedroom with him.

Alastair.

Impressions from a long-ago afternoon unexpectedly raced through her mind. Wildflowers in the grass, his fingers stroking along her cheeks and brow; bright green eyes and a tilted, boyish smile. Memories she'd struggled to keep at bay because they hurt too much.

Please, leave me be.

“We'll move him into the dining room next time he's up. Before Mrs. Farley comes for tea, we'll simply move the mattress elsewhere.”

But then she changed the subject, not wanting to think any more about this stranger who didn't feel like a stranger. “Now, tell me about your day...”

Gilbert, although not a gossip, could go on and on about academic subjects that interested him. History and philosophy topped that list.

“We're reading from the writings of John Locke,” he announced just before tearing off another bite of bread.

Daisy arched a brow. “The philosopher.”

Her brother nodded enthusiastically. “The fourth book of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* .”

Before their father had taken up farming, he'd attended the small village school where he'd learned to read, studied history, and even dabbled in philosophy. So much so, he used to joke, that he'd married the teacher.

Daisy and Gilbert's mother.

Both had gone on to encourage Daisy to share her lessons over supper, or while

working alongside them in the kitchen or the fields. Looking back, she'd realized they'd been tricking her into learning.

So she'd adopted the same habit with Gilbert, encouraging him to share his lessons each evening. If he could teach them to her, he would have an even stronger grasp of the material.

And aside from the practicality of it, Daisy—like her father—wasn't opposed to filling her brain with new thoughts. She especially loved literature and history.

She had loved listening to Alastair discuss new ideas he'd learned while away at school .

"Tell me about Mr. Locke," she said as she scrubbed out one of the bowls she'd used earlier.

John Locke, she remembered all too easily, had been one of Alastair's favorites.

"He was a physician first," Gilbert explained, "which allowed him to write from a unique perspective—about humans as physical individuals, but also how they exist with one another, and how governments ought to work."

At times like this, Gilbert truly did seem too mature for his age.

"And when did he live?" Daisy prodded.

"The seventeenth century. And before you ask, he was English. I believe he was born in Bristol."

"I have heard of him." Daisy pinched her mouth together, placing the bowl she'd just dried on the shelf while Gilbert continued.

“He writes that humans are born with no preconceptions about anything. That our minds are blank slates.”

“A state which I am, unfortunately, far too familiar with.”

The abrupt comment came from behind her.

Daisy turned in surprise, meeting her patient’s stare as he cocked a single brow. How did he do that? In less than twenty seconds, his presence had sent the temperature in the room soaring by at least ten degrees.

“Although,” he added, his voice laced with dry amusement, “I’m not sure my particular condition is what Locke had in mind.”

She swept her gaze over him, noting his improved appearance. She had left some of her father’s old clothing in the pantry, and while they weren’t a perfect fit, they were far more appropriate than the thin, worn nightshirt.

“I have your clothing,” she said, anticipating his next question. “The ones you wore when I found you. They’re clean. But—” She turned to a nearby cupboard, extracting the neatly washed and mended garments: a fine linen shirt, an embroidered waistcoat, well-cut breeches, and a pair of worn Hessians. Holding them up, she gave him a pointed look. “Although I’m not sure what Mrs. Farley would think if she saw my seaman husband wearing clothes fit for a king.”

She moved to put them away, but he was already stepping around the worktable toward her.

“Let me take a closer look,” he said. “Please.”

As he crossed the room, she noted that although his movements were careful, he was

no longer limping. It was remarkable that he was up at all.

He lifted the fabric, studying each piece, and as he stood beside her, Daisy resisted the urge to lean closer to him.

Perhaps she was coming down with something. An illness that caused temporary loss of one's self-control.

That would certainly explain the ridiculous flutter in her chest.

Because... this man was one kind of attractive while vulnerable and bedridden, but quite another while he towered over her, his broad shoulders brushing hers, examining clothing that could only have belonged to a wealthy gentleman.

A titled gentleman?

“Do you—” She swallowed the strain in her voice. “Do you remember them?”

He unfolded each piece, smoothing his palm over the fabric. Daisy took a measured step back—partly to get a better look at him, partly to put a bit of space between them.

Two faint lines appeared between his brows. “I know they’re mine, and yet, they aren’t specifically familiar.”

“Like Locke?” Gilbert piped up.

He let out a low chuckle, still focused on the garments. “Like Locke.”

But then he found one of the patches she’d sewn and ran his thumb over the stitches .

“The garments are very fine,” Daisy pointed out, her voice measured. “Even mended.”

She held her breath, waiting—uncertain of what, exactly—until he lifted his gaze and met hers.

“You didn’t need to do this.” His voice was quieter now. And then, almost reverently, he murmured, “Daisy Margaret Montgomery.”

Her name in his mouth sent bells ringing in her head. A wave of dizziness threatened to wash over her.

How could he not be Alastair? She touched the worktable to maintain her balance. Why would he say her full name like that?

Because she’d introduced herself to him—that was why. Hadn’t she?

“I had plenty of time to work on them while you slept,” she admitted before deliberately steering the conversation back to her original point. “But a working man would never wear pieces such as these.” If she’d wanted to, she could have sold them for nearly half a year’s profits.

“No,” he said. “He would not.”

Gilbert looked on in awe. “That means you’re probably a nobleman! I thought you might be a nob by the way you talk.”

Alastair nodded.

Daisy turned back to face the worktable but couldn’t seem to remember what she’d been doing.

“He’s not wrong,” she said softly.



### A GOOD SHAVE

While Gilbert finished his snack—along with listing more of his impassioned opinions on John Locke—Daisy cut off another slice of bread and poured soup into a bowl for Alastair, who had not been without his own thoughts on the subject.

The conversation had been both fascinating and disconcerting.

Fascinating because so many of the ideas were new to her.

Disconcerting because it all felt so unbearably natural.

As though Alastair belonged here.

And that was dangerous. It made it all too easy to forget that his presence in her kitchen was temporary.

“I need to start writing my theme, so I’ll be in the dining room, Dais,” Gilbert announced, gathering his books before turning to their guest. “Thanks for the help, Mister... Alastair. Now I need to get these ideas down on paper.”

“The tricky part,” Alastair said with a knowing nod.

“Indeed,” Daisy inserted, feeling oddly left out of the conversation. Once Gilbert disappeared, she busied herself with wiping up stray crumbs, but her mind wasn’t on the task .

This growing inability to concentrate whenever Alastair was near was getting more than a little annoying.

“Daisy?” The quiet way he said her name made her pulse stutter. He could sense her unease. “I can’t very well call you Miss Montgomery if you’re my wife, can I?”

“I don’t suppose it would be wise.” She forced a bright smile. “Are you still hungry? That wasn’t much of a meal...”

He shook his head, rubbing his fingers over the scruff along his jaw. “Actually, I wondered if you might have a razor.”

“A razor...? Oh! Yes, you can use my father’s.”

Without waiting for a response, she spun on her heel and hurried upstairs, grateful for the excuse to put some distance between them. She needed a moment to breathe—to gather herself.

Inside her room, she knelt before the wooden trunk at the foot of her bed, the familiar creak of its hinges echoing in the quiet. She ran her fingers over the smooth grain before lifting the lid, releasing the faint scent of cedar and time.

Inside lay various belongings she had kept of her father’s—a worn leather-bound journal, a neatly folded handkerchief, and the battered gloves he’d worn in the fields. She hesitated before reaching for his old shaving kit, the weight of the past pressing against her chest.

After her father passed, she hadn’t been able to part with these remnants of him. They weren’t just objects; they were memories—the scent of his pipe, the echo of his laughter...

She swallowed down the emotion that rose unbidden. Now wasn't the time for sentiment.

Clutching the shaving kit, she descended the stairs and found that Alastair had claimed the seat Gilbert had vacated.

"My father kept it sharp, but it's been a while..." Daisy set the small velvet pouch on the table, opening the flap to reveal a gleaming razor nestled beside a well-worn leather strop. With practiced ease, she took the blade between her fingers and ran it over the leather, the rhythmic motion releasing a familiar scent—oil, steel, and a hint of cedar. The fragrance transported her to a different time, back when her father had still been the man she'd adored—before the accident, before the pain, before the gin.

She swallowed, pushing those memories aside.

"You've never been married, then?"

Alastair's voice cut through the quiet, pulling her back to the present. She jerked slightly, the razor slipping in her grip before she tightened her hold.

"Oh, no." She laughed, but the sound was light and hollow, as if the question itself were absurd. As if it didn't strike right at the core of something she didn't want to examine too closely.

She bit her lip.

Once he shaved, she would know—she'd be certain. Because if he truly was Alastair... she would recognize his mouth, his chin, every sharp and softened edge of his face.

The thought sent an unsteady ripple through her chest.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” he said, his tone gentler now, as if he sensed her disquiet, if not the real reason behind it.

Daisy exhaled, forcing herself to meet his gaze. “It’s fine. Just not a bothersome question, I suppose.”

“My apologies,” he said.

Her heart gave an erratic thud, and she dropped her gaze to the razor, focusing on the steel rather than the man watching her so intently.

“It’s quite all right,” she added quickly. “But marriage isn’t for me. I have Gilbert to think of, and my shop...”

She ran the blade over the strop again, though it was already sharp enough. The motion kept her hands busy, kept her mind from spiraling. But it didn’t stop the whisper of doubt—of impossible hope—pressing against her ribs.

She had suspected. From the moment she looked into his green eyes, she had felt it. But the bruises, the beard, the fever—they had kept her from knowing for sure.

Now, in just a few strokes of the blade, she would know.

“You look as though you know what you’re doing,” Alastair commented.

“My father liked having a good shave, but his hands shook horribly in the end.” She rarely spoke of those days. She certainly hadn’t reminded Gilbert of them.

But it had been hard. Watching her father’s condition deteriorate and then... afterwards, once he was gone... For years, although not alone, she’d felt incredibly lonely.

Knowing she would lose herself in this stranger's eyes if she looked directly at them, she kept her head down, blinking away the sudden storm of emotions—memories of carefree days spent working the farm, before Alastair left the Priory.

It was foolish to let her thoughts linger like this, on a part of her life she could never return to. Pointless to imagine.

Even if he was Alastair, they could not go back in time. They lived in different worlds, always had, actually...

She couldn't be distracted by past disappointments. No, she had Gilbert's future to think of—and her own. And she was succeeding, dash it all!

What was she doing, imagining she might find Alastair's face beneath that thick beard?

She felt his gaze on her as she prepared the blade, and she couldn't help but ask. "Are you sure you're up to the task?" Just a few days ago, he'd been unconscious, so weak he could barely swallow a spoonful of willowbark tea.

He hesitated, his fingers grazing his beard as if assessing the effort it would take. "I suppose there's only one way to find out," he finally said.

His tone was light, but Daisy caught the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. He was testing himself, gauging how much strength he had truly regained. For all his confidence, he was still recovering, and... lost.

"Here." She set the blade down and sighed. "I can help if you need me to."

He glanced up at her, his gaze unreadable. "I appreciate that." And then he rubbed his jaw again and said, "I can't imagine I've ever allowed it to grow this long. I am

feeling quite uncivilized.”

Ah, yes, his speech was indeed that of a refined gentleman.

“Looking uncivilized isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” Daisy said, keeping her voice light. “Rather dashing, if I say so myself.”

He propped his elbow on the table, resting his chin in his hand while he studied her. “Shall I leave it, then?”

Her breath caught. Green eyes would forever be her favorite—especially his shade, the color of a lush forest, spring green. Alastair’s eyes had always held a light, a quiet hope that danced beneath the surface.

That same light flickered now. And, inexplicably, it lifted her spirits.

“Absolutely not. I want to see your face.” The words left her lips before she had a chance to soften them. But it was true—she needed to know for certain. She needed the truth. “And lucky for you, I just finished a batch of my gentleman’s soap this morning.”

His lips quirked. “How is it different from a lady’s soap?”

Ah. This was a subject she could discuss with ease.

“I make it with a higher fat content—vegetable fat—to create a thick barrier between the blade and your skin. And I use earthier scents.” She turned to the cupboard and withdrew a wrapped bar. “Cedar, rosewood, orange, bergamot, clove, saffron, cinnamon... leather.”

His brow lifted. “Leather? How does one make soap smell like leather? ”

She smiled at his curiosity. “By using warm spices—ones with animal notes.”

He held up a hand, shaking his head. “It’s for your customers. You shouldn’t waste any on me.”

She scoffed, placing the cake of soap into his palm anyway. “It’s not a waste. I’ll consider it research, so I can see how well it works on such a thick beard as yours.”

She was also curious to know the effect of the cedar and rosewood oils with his personal fragrance.

Because scents were different on different people. And she might just have had him in mind while putting this blend together.

Not him. Alastair.

She swallowed and glanced around the room, looking for a distraction.

“I have a small looking glass, but that’s in my bedchamber—” She cleared her throat and pressed on. “Why don’t you allow me to do it this time? I believe I’ve seen enough blood this week to last a lifetime...”

The words were meant as a half-joke, but his expression sobered. “Was it that bad?”

Her fingers clenched around the soap, nearly losing her grip.

Because yes, it had been bad.

She nodded, unwilling to lie. “Even after I got the bleeding to stop, a few of the wounds festered. I was terrified you were going to die.”

He watched her for a moment, his gaze unreadable. “I was a stranger to you.”

“You are a human being.” Her voice wavered despite herself.

He exhaled.

Then, softly, “In that case, I would appreciate your help, very much.”

Before she could respond, he moved—rising from the stool, carefully placing the soap onto the counter, then pouring water into a small basin.

And then, he reached for her.

His fingers wrapped around hers, warm and firm, a steady contrast to the tremor she could feel in her own hands. He didn’t say anything—just held them. A moment of quiet acknowledgment. A thank you without words.

She could pull away.

She could put a safe distance between them.

But she didn’t.

Because at this moment, standing here with him, hands entwined over a simple bar of soap and a basin of water, a part of her needed to hold on.

Even if just for a little while longer.

Without stopping to think, she dropped her head and rested it on his shoulder, relishing in the simple physical contact.



It wasn't that Gilbert never allowed her a short embrace or a playful ruffle of his hair, but this was different. It was man to woman, and with each second that passed, reassuring warmth spread through her.

"Thank you," he whispered from above her head. "Thank you for saving my life."

She wanted to protest, but he shushed her before she could do so. "You are a compassionate and courageous woman. Not everyone would do what you did. In fact, I think most would be inclined to look the other way."

"I couldn't." For some reason, Daisy felt like crying. She sniffled a little and then reluctantly pulled away until he had no choice but to drop his arms. "I would do it again."

"I know," he said.

They stared into one another's eyes, and she swallowed hard.

"Now." She cleared her throat. "Why don't you sit down, and we'll see about civilizing you again. "

"You're sure you don't mind? I could likely make do myself."

Without a mirror, the only thing he'd be likely to do was maim himself.

"I am sure." Daisy poured warm water from the kettle into the basin, soaked a clean cloth, and lathered the soap. Already, the scent had transformed the mood of the room. She inhaled. "Do you smell that?" she asked.

"Cedar?"

“And a combination of rosewood and roses. If you concentrate, you’ll notice something else.”

“Smoke?” Alastair tilted his head. “I like it.” He tucked his feet under the stool and sat waiting while she arranged the tools. “It’s not too flowery.”

“No.” She willed herself not to shake and then turned to face him. “That’s the idea. To keep the scents subtle and low and clean. There’s nothing worse than a man who smells like he’s been doused in perfume.” Was she rambling?

“Wouldn’t want that,” he agreed.

In the days she’d nursed him, she’d touched him intimately—she hadn’t had a choice, really. Bathing his fevered body, tending his wounds, pressing cool cloths to his skin.

And yet, she’d never felt the connection she did now.

Not like this. Not with him watching her. Not with her hands steadying his face as though he belonged to her.

“Here we are...”

Her voice barely rose above a whisper as she dipped the cloth into the warm water and soaked his beard. This was the easy part. The impersonal part.

But then, scooping up a bit of soap with her fingers, she lifted her hands to his jaw.

His gaze caught hers, dark and hooded, and as she smoothed the lather over his whiskers, something shifted in the air between them. Heat flared behind his eyes, coiling tension in her belly, sending an ache through her limbs .

Being the object of his close attention shook her. It also thrilled her. It made her stomach flutter, her skin hum, her pulse trip over itself.

Ignore all of it, Daisy.

Her grip tightened slightly on the razor. She was about to touch a blade to his face and neck, and any misstep could hurt or scar him permanently. She had to focus.

Reining in her thoughts, she set her fingers at the hinge of his jaw, stretching the skin taut. “Hold still,” she murmured, angling the blade just so.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The corners of his mouth twitched in a small, teasing grin.

“And don’t talk.”

His smirk deepened, but he obeyed.

Slow, deliberate, downward strokes. She traced the edge of the blade over his cheek, revealing high cheekbones, smooth skin, a jawline far sharper than she remembered.

Older.

Harsher.

He’d been on the cusp of manhood the last time she’d seen him. Now, he was all man.

Her fingers trembled.

Of course, it was him.

Ten years older. With no memories.

But he was...

Alastair.

She forced her breathing to stay even. Forced her hands to remain steady as she worked her way lower, over the hard planes of his face. The razor glided down his jaw, revealing the man beneath the bristle, the man who had once held her heart in the palm of his hand.

Had she known all along? From the moment she'd stared into his eyes?

She paused, the blade resting at his throat .

He leaned his head back slightly, exposing the long column of his neck, his Adam's apple shifting as he swallowed.

"You trust me?" she whispered.

His lips parted slightly, as if the question surprised him. Then, with quiet certainty, he said, "Completely."

His voice, low and rough, sent a shiver through her.

She rinsed the blade, exhaling slowly.

Steady, Daisy. Stay steady.

With careful precision, she resumed, sliding the razor over his throat, feeling his pulse hammer beneath her fingertips.

For these few minutes, he was hers again.

And God help her, she wasn't sure she could bear to let him go. But then, like a clap of thunder, she clamped down on such foolish, dangerous thoughts. No. No. No!

Had he not hurt her enough already?

This changed nothing.

"Open your mouth," she ordered. "Make an 'O'."

He followed her commands, and Daisy went to work on his mustache. Slow, steady. His breath caressed her face while she allowed the blade to do its job.

She remembered this mouth. She remembered the scar just above his lips, a half-inch cut he'd given himself chasing her up a tree when they'd been so very, very young.

When she finished, she set the blade aside and then, using cool water this time, smoothed away the remaining soap. When he went to rise, she held him in place.

"Wait, I have a balm."

Again, he obeyed, sitting patiently while she poured the silky liquid into her hand.

"What is it?"

"Shea butter and grapeseed extract." This particular product sold for a pretty penny. She didn't care.

This was Alastair .

She smoothed the mixture over his cheeks, around his jaw, and around his neck.

For good measure, she brushed some over his forehead and down his nose.

Somewhere between the flood of memories and longing, between the pain of the past and the sheer pleasure of the present, time fell away.

She parted her lips, leaned in, and?—

She kissed him.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

OOOPS

A last stair stiffened beneath her hands, the tension in his body a brief hesitation—just long enough for Daisy to wonder if she’d made a terrible mistake.

And then everything changed.

His hands slid around her waist, strong and sure, fingers pressing into the fabric of her dress, molding her to him. The heat of his palms branded her, sent tingles cascading down her spine.

“Daisy.”

Her name vibrated between them, more felt than heard, his voice raw with feelings that made her toes curl.

The kiss was familiar—achingly so—but it was also brand new.

They had been two dreamers once, free to love in a world of their own making. But time apart had reshaped them, carved new edges, buried innocence beneath betrayal. And yet, in this moment, none of that seemed to matter.

In the years since they’d parted, she had breathed.

She had eaten. She had even loved .

But she had not felt like this.

This was life rushing back into her, a current of heat and longing igniting every nerve, every pulse point. This part of her heart had been frozen, locked away in the past—untouched, unreachable. And yet, by returning her clumsy kiss, Alastair had found it, warmed it. And shattered that ice.

Along with the scent of the lather she'd smoothed over his skin, she tasted him—clean, fresh, and something else, something undeniably him. A taste both familiar and foreign.

Older.

Stronger.

Intoxicatingly sexy.

His mouth left hers to burn a scorching trail along her jaw, teasing her skin, featherlight, only to return—hungry, insistent—to claim her eager mouth again.

Daisy's fingers curled into the thick hair at the nape of his neck, reveling in the feel of him, the way he felt so solid, so real.

“Alastair,” she whispered, breathless, awed. “It's you.”

His hands framed her face, thumbs sweeping along her cheeks, tilting her head just so, deepening the kiss.

“So sweet,” he murmured, voice rough, reverent.

She didn't realize he was guiding her backwards until the edge of the table pressed into the backs of her thighs. His hands found her waist, sliding lower, gripping as he lifted her onto the tabletop, and she—God help her—parted her knees, welcoming



him between them.

She didn't want the dream to end.

She clung to him to her, her body pressing into his, arching closer, seeking more.

For the first time in years—long, lonely, endless years—she wasn't thinking.

She wasn't worrying .

She wasn't planning.

She wasn't sacrificing.

Not today.

Today, she wanted. And today, she was taking.

And then... he snatched it away.

One moment, Alastair was pressed against her, his warmth sinking into her skin, his hands anchoring her in a way that made her feel cherished. Claimed.

The next, he was gone.

Standing two feet away. Breathing harshly. Looking torn.

And—oh God—was that regret?

Daisy's stomach flipped, the warmth in her chest evaporating into cold, creeping doubt.

His eyes met hers, apology written all over his face. “My apologies, Daisy.” His voice was laced with emotions she didn’t want to decipher. He shook his head, as if trying to clear it, as if trying to undo the last few moments.

Her breath hitched.

“No. I was the one... I—I kissed you,” she said, barely forcing the words past the tight, aching lump in her throat.

She was the one who’d started this.

She.

Kissed.

Him.

What had happened to her good sense? Her self-control? Her pride?

“I didn’t stop you.” His voice was low. And oh, yes, that was regret.

Oh, God.

A rush of heat—shame, humiliation—swept through her. She clenched her hands into fists.

She had thrown herself into a man’s arms—his arms—like a foolish girl ruled by impulse and longing. And worse? She’d done it knowing he didn’t even remember her .

He was injured. Weak. Vulnerable. He didn’t know his own name, let alone hers.

He had belonged to her once—a very long time ago. But not anymore.

And now? He was a stranger. A man who had deliberately ended that kiss.

He had stopped, and then stepped away.

The humiliation of it burned through her like fire licking up dry parchment.

“Wait.” He reached for her, but Daisy jumped down from the table, her heart slamming against her ribs.

She couldn’t explain herself. Not now. Not yet.

Oh, God.

“Please, forgive me,” she said stiffly, forcing her tone into something cool, something controlled. Something not utterly mortified. “If you’ll excuse me, I have... things to do.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned and fled, practically flying up the stairs before locking herself in her small bedchamber.

She pressed her back against the door, chest heaving.

What have I done?

She stared blindly out the window, not noticing how the sun hovered on the horizon and then dipped below it.

She was going to have to return to the kitchen eventually. Face him. And when she did...

What would she say?

What could she say?

Would he be angry? Or worse—would he pity her?

Pity the poor shop woman who had thrown herself at a man who had no recollection of her—who might very well have a fiancée waiting for him?

He wore no wedding band, but that didn't mean there wasn't a wife.

A wife. A home. A whole world she wasn't a part of .

Kissing him, as incredible as it had been, had been a mistake of historical proportions.

But as she lay back on her bed, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling, the warmth of his lips still lingering on hers, she couldn't bring herself to regret it.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### A GLIMPSE

A lastair hovered over her, his palms braced against the soft earth, his arms straining to keep his weight from crushing her—but he wasn't going anywhere.

Not while she was beneath him, her hands clinging to his shoulders, her lips parted, waiting for his.

Honeysuckle and sweet lemonade. The scent of her skin, the taste of summer on her tongue.

His Daisy. His best friend. His everything.

Alastair's fingers tangled in her unruly curls, the silk of them slipping between his knuckles as he imagined all the tomorrows they would share. He could see it—her in white, laughing as he carried her across the threshold of their home. He could feel the weight of their future children in his arms, hear their laughter as they played beneath the very trees that shaded them now.

Daisy made up the other half of his soul.

He would live for her.

He would die for her.

Alastair leaned down to claim her lips, his heart pounding with devotion, desire, certainty ? —

And suddenly, she was gone.

He gasped and shot upright, his chest heaving, fingers clutching at empty air.

Darkness surrounded him, save for the faint sliver of light seeping beneath the door.

His pulse roared in his ears, the dream clinging to him like mist. But was it only a dream? Or something else?

Something real?

His hands fisted in the blanket around his waist as he struggled to slow his breathing.

It had felt real. More than a dream, more than mere fantasy—it was as though he had been there, in that meadow, holding her, knowing her, loving her.

His mind had not conjured that from nothing.

Had it?

His Daisy.

But no. The woman from his dreams was Daisy, but not.

She was younger, untouched by the weight of the world, by hardship, by the sorrow he sometimes glimpsed in her eyes now.

Yet in his dream, she had been his.

Beloved.

A shuddering breath escaped him, and he pressed a hand to his forehead, his temples pounding as fragments of the past taunted him, just out of reach.

Sucking in air, he inhaled hints of cedar and rose—Daisy’s soap. The scent grounded him, bringing him back to the present, to the warmth of the blanket, to the quiet of the pantry.

To the memory of gentle fingertips on his face the night before, as she shaved away the last traces of the man he’d become in his captivity.

Alastair ran a hand over his jaw, where Daisy’s palms had smoothed fragrant oil into his skin the night before. She had touched him so carefully, deliberately—her hands gliding over his face as she worked, steady and sure.

The woman was damn near irresistible.

More than once, he’d been tempted to take the razor from her hands, to capture her mouth and kiss her senseless. But she had kissed him first.

And he’d done nothing to stop it.

Dear Lord in heaven, if he never recovered his memories, if he never found the life he’d lost, he could almost—almost—be content living out his days with Daisy Montgomery by his side. In her home. In her bed.

Almost.

But that wasn’t who he was.

He was a man of purpose. A man with a past. And until he reclaimed it—his history, his legacy—he couldn’t afford to dream of a future with her.

Why it mattered so much, he couldn't say. But it did.

With a quiet groan, Alastair pushed himself upright. He rolled his shoulders, testing the sore muscles, and stepped to the doorway, peering into the kitchen.

Sunlight streamed through the window, bright and accusing. Gilbert would already be off to school, and Daisy had likely left for her deliveries.

God, he was a pitiful excuse for a man. His head ached from the strain of trying to summon something useful— anything at all —and every bruise on his body made itself known as he moved. Still, he refused to sit idle. He had no name, no past, and nothing to offer—but he could at least make himself useful.

She had mentioned wanting to move him into the dining room, and ignoring the sharp pull of sore muscles, he grabbed the mattress and began hauling it through the kitchen.

But he could not dismiss what had happened the night before.

She had kissed him .

He'd stepped away. Just barely.

And immediately regretted it.

And then—she had fled. As though the hounds of hell were at her heels, actually.

And after she'd slammed the door to her bedchamber, she had locked it so loudly he had heard the bolt slide into place from downstairs.

Alastair had been too stunned to go after her.



That kiss had left him paralyzed, a chaotic storm of emotions churning inside him. Arousal. Affection. The sense that he had discovered something he had lost long ago.

But also... confusion.

If he'd had a few more minutes alone with her, he might have taken her right there, on the kitchen table—with her brother under the same roof.

By God, he'd nearly made love to her.

Love?

He hardly knew her.

Except... he did, didn't he?

Alastair exhaled sharply, forcing himself to focus on the task at hand. He dragged his makeshift bed into the dining room, setting it down in the far corner where it fit snugly without disturbing the table or chairs.

The night before, after Daisy had locked herself away, he had paced the length of her shop, trying to quiet his racing thoughts. When exhaustion put an end to that, he had returned to the pantry, where he lay awake staring at the ceiling for hours.

The few times he had drifted off, he had dreamed—dreams that felt like memories—but they always slipped from his grasp the moment he opened his eyes.

Something important was buried in his mind. But for the life of him, he couldn't reach it .

Now, restless and unwilling to dwell on the unknown, he ran a hand along the dining

table.

It wobbled. And although he didn't remember his own damn name, this was something he could, in fact, fix.

Grateful for the distraction, Alastair located some tools, measured the legs, and began shaving down the wood until the table was perfectly level. Once that was done, he tested the chairs, adjusting each one as needed.

Having completed her early morning deliveries, Daisy unlocked her shop door and tentatively stepped inside. She wasn't sure how she felt about facing Alastair again—for two reasons.

Firstly, because she'd kissed him the night before and... he had ended it. That fact alone sent hot embarrassment flooding through into her cheeks.

But she was also nervous because of the newspaper article that she had come across this morning. She had to show it to him. She had to tell him the truth.

With both the sales room and kitchen quiet, she imagined he might be sleeping. A peek into her pantry revealed otherwise, however.

It was empty! Even the mattress was gone!

A sick feeling landed in her stomach. Had she scared him away with her clumsy... advance? Had he left because he'd finally remembered who he was?

Maybe—just maybe—his memory had returned, and the first thing he'd done was leave her little shop behind to return to his grand townhouse in Mayfair.

Where his uncle no doubt waited for him—his father's younger brother, Lord Calvin.

Daisy was all too aware that if anything happened to Alastair, Lord Calvin was next in line to inherit the Lovington title...

A chill crept down her spine.

She swallowed hard, but before her thoughts could spiral further, a scraping sound from the back of the house shattered the silence.

Shaking off her sudden onslaught of concerns, Daisy forced herself to follow the sounds of movement.

At the threshold of her dining room, she stopped.

Alastair—dressed once more in her father's clothing—was bent over one of her mismatched chairs, measuring and adjusting the legs with an air of quiet determination.

She should have announced herself. Should have spoken right away.

But instead, she watched.

Watched the way his muscles flexed beneath the thin linen, how his strong hands worked the chair with steady precision, how easily—naturally—he moved about her home, as though he belonged here.

She clenched her fingers at her sides.

“What are you doing?” she finally asked, no longer reluctant to face him.

He glanced over his shoulder, and though a shadow of his beard had returned, there was no mistaking him now.

“Fixing your table and chairs,” he said simply.

Squatting, he nudged a chair in and tested its balance. For as long as she could remember, those chairs had wobbled precariously. Yet now, under his hands, they were steady.

He moved around the room, checking the other three, then gave the table one final push, as though ensuring it would hold.

“You didn’t have to?—”

“It’s the least I could do.”

He straightened and turned to face her, gripping the edge of the table with his hands before resting his weight against it .

He stared at her, his green eyes searching. Trusting. “How are you?”

Such a simple question. And yet, she had no idea how to answer it.

The truth, she supposed, was as good as anything.

“When I saw the pantry empty, I was afraid you had left.”

His expression remained unreadable. “I wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye, without... thanking you.”

His voice was calm, even. But his eyes never left hers.

Oh, dear. He was going to make her say it out loud, wasn’t he?

“But... I kissed you.”

Realizing she'd been gripping the doorframe, she let go, clasping her hands at her waist instead.

“I don't know what... I mean, I—I apologize.” She stumbled over her words. “I don't know why. I'm not like that.” She shook her head. “It's just that—” She drew in a breath, readying herself to tell him everything. He deserved to know the truth.

But before she could form the words, he tilted his head and said, “You have nothing to apologize for. If you hadn't, I would have.”

The words on her lips vanished. “You would have...?”

“Kissed you.”

“Oh.”

Oh.

He didn't look pleased with himself. Not in the least.

“And I shouldn't take advantage... After all you've done for me...”

Pushing away from the table, he took a step toward her, his frustration palpable. “But you, Daisy Margaret Montgomery, are not an easy woman to resist.”

Her breath caught. Good heavens!

To say she was stunned would be an understatement .

Scowling, he ran a hand through his hair, sending some of those too-long silky brown waves into disarray.

“You are a beautiful, compassionate woman. Not to mention intelligent, brave, and,” he gestured toward her soaps, “talented.”

Daisy swallowed, her heart drumming an erratic beat against her ribs. Had any man—had his younger self—ever spoken about her like that? Had she ever been seen like this before? As something more than a daughter, a shopkeeper, a caretaker, a sister?

With no hesitation whatsoever, she reached out.

Skimming her fingers along the crisp linen of his borrowed shirt, she traced the sleeves down to where the material had been folded back, revealing sinewy, capable forearms, their olive skin warm beneath her touch.

She shouldn't do this. And yet, she couldn't help herself.

Circling her fingertips over the fine black hairs, she felt the way his muscles tensed beneath her touch, the slight intake of his breath.

A shudder ran through him. But he didn't push her hand away.

The room felt impossibly small, the air thick and pressing in around them. The pull between them—like the sun and the earth—remained undeniable.

What does it mean?

Noticing the raised gooseflesh, she lifted her gaze, and there it was—confirmation. Desire flickered in his green eyes, mirroring the reckless longing swirling in her own

chest. You are irresistible, too. You always have been...

“But you barely know me,” she said instead.

He exhaled a slow, deliberate breath. Then, he shrugged—but not dismissively. Thoughtfully. As if he, too, couldn’t rationalize any of... this .

And then, he turned his hand and clasped hers, his grip firm.

“It doesn’t make sense.” His thumb brushed over the back of her hand, sending ripples of heat shooting through her. “But...” Another shrug. A small, almost helpless smile. “You feel it too?”

She nodded.

God help her, she did.

And yet... Nothing had changed. Not really.

### LOVINGTON

T his was still the same man—the same Alastair—who had once left her behind so that he could take on his father's dukedom.

She hadn't blamed him. She'd blamed his uncle, his father... even, at times, her own dear father.

But now, for the first time, she was angry with him.

Not because he'd accepted the stark divide between their stations in life. No, she had always known that was inevitable.

She was angry with him.

For leaving her behind without a word.

For never coming back.

For moving on so easily while she had been left to pick up the broken pieces of her heart.

And she was angry, too, for all the people he had abandoned—not just her, but the families his uncle had turned off Woodland Priory. Families who had worked that land for generations, who had trusted in their noble protector, only to be cast aside like they were nothing.



Her fingers curled into fists at her sides, nails pressing into her palms. She had spent years pushing that pain down, convincing herself she had imagined what they had shared, that she had been nothing more than a childhood folly for a boy destined for greatness.

This moment felt like the cruelest of tricks.

But standing here now, his nearness wrapped around her like a force she could not fight—God help her, it was as if no time had passed at all.

And that terrified her.

She wanted to rage at him, to demand why he had never checked on her, why he had never cared enough to come back.

And the worst part? The man before her didn't even know he had wronged her.

He didn't remember breaking his promises. Didn't remember choosing his title, his responsibilities, his entire life over her.

Even if she screamed all the pain in her heart, even if she let it tear free like a wounded animal, he would only look at her in confusion.

He could not answer for sins he did not remember committing.

And that realization...

It left her feeling utterly powerless.

Because once again, she had no choice but to swallow it all down—again.

“As much as I want you...” He continued, unaware of the storm raging inside her. “In good conscience, I can’t... We cannot...” His fingers found her chin, tipping her face up, forcing her to meet his gaze. “ Ah, hell .”

She had lost him once before, and now, even without his memories, he was pushing her away again.

It wasn’t fair! Because now, she was angry with herself.

“I want nothing more than to do... so many things with you.” His voice was rough, and his jaw flexed as though the words cost him dearly. “But we need to wait. ”

Wait.

Like she had waited for him all those years ago?

Because, as pathetic as it was, she had waited.

Even when she’d told herself to move on. Even when she had forced herself to face reality, to accept that they had no future. Somewhere deep inside, she had still waited.

She had clung to the foolish hope that he would come back for her.

But he never had.

And now, after all these years, here he was, asking her to wait again.

He dragged a hand through his hair, completely unaware of the way he was ripping her heart to shreds. “I know there’s no evidence that I ever wore a wedding ring, but that doesn’t guarantee I’m not married. Until I know...”

Daisy exhaled, steadying herself against the crushing ache in her chest.

Until he knew.

Until he remembered who he was.

And when he did? If he had a wife waiting for him? If he had a life where she had no place?

She would lose him all over again.

Her warring emotions left her speechless.

Helpless.

He lowered his head, resting it against hers, his breath unsteady, his hands fisting at his sides as though he wanted to hold her but wouldn't allow himself.

"I'm so damn sorry, Daisy." His voice was hoarse, raw. "Someday, maybe... but until I have answers, I can't promise anything."

Someday.

Maybe.

She squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself not to crumble.

She had once believed in someday-maybe .

And it had nearly destroyed her.

Enough.

Enough!

Daisy stepped back and reached shaking hands into her apron pocket. “T-t-this might provide a few answers.” She handed over the folded article, pretending she was fine.

Pretend you’re fine.

Pretend it doesn’t matter.

“This is from last week’s Gazette.” Her voice came out too even, too calm. “I can’t afford a subscription of my own, but one of my clients passes them to me after her husband has read all the articles,” she explained a little defiantly, lest he think she had kept the information from him.

He took the paper, his fingers brushing against hers—warm, rough, real.

She almost pulled away too quickly, but he didn’t move. He just stood there, watching her. And then, slowly, he unfolded the article.

Daisy braced herself.

“Duke of Lovington Missing, Presumed Dead.” His voice was quiet, but the words echoed between them.

A furrow formed between his brows.

“That is you,” she said, barely hearing her own voice over the sound of her heartbeat. “You are the Duke of Lovington.”

He didn't react. Didn't blink.

Didn't breathe.

The silence stretched, thick with tension.

"How do you know this?" he finally asked, looking up at her with narrowed eyes.

Daisy wasn't quite ready to answer with the truth, so instead she stated the obvious. "The timing," she said. "The description. Your accent, your clothing. Everything adds up."

He glanced down at the article again and she forced herself to ask, "Does the name mean anything to you? "

Alastair shook his head but kept reading until he'd finished the entire article, absorbing every word with a grave expression.

Daisy already knew what he was learning—most notably that, although he worked diligently to promote his progressive ideas in Parliament, he had avoided other responsibilities, such as marriage and securing an heir.

"I am Lovington." He spoke as though testing the words.

Her stomach clenched. "Yes."

His gaze skimmed over the page once more. "Alastair Frampton, the Duke of Lovington. Unmarried," he murmured. "No sons."

Daisy's throat tightened. "Your uncle is your heir presumptive. Lord Calvin. Do you remember him?"

Alastair shook his head again, his frown deepening.

She exhaled slowly, forcing herself to remain calm when all she wanted to do was shake him—to beg him to understand that beyond her little shop, something terrible awaited.

She didn't know where, or why, but she was sure of it.

“With the little information we have, your attack may have been ordered by your own people, perhaps even... your uncle.” Her voice hardened. “Your estate is one of the most valuable in all of London.”

His jaw tensed, but before he could speak, she pressed on, her voice thicker than usual. “Until you remember what happened, you aren't safe. You were not attacked randomly. Someone deliberately ordered you dead. And that person was a lord . You cannot show your face in public until you get your memory back. It would be...” She swallowed, her voice breaking. “You would be putting yourself in too great of danger.”

Oddly enough, his shoulders seemed to relax at her passionate plea, as though her worry steadied him instead of burdening him .

“Any of that is possible.” He glanced around thoughtfully before wincing. “But I can't hide forever.”

The tears stung before she could stop them.

She had no right to care this much. No right to feel this desperation clawing at her ribs. But the idea of him being taken from her—from this world!—made it impossible to breathe.

Then, before she could recover, he stuffed the article into his pocket and very much surprised her.

By taking her into his arms.

And oh, it felt perfect. Too perfect.

His warmth surrounded her, and she could almost believe that he would share her burdens, her worries...

His breath stirred her hair, his voice a quiet rasp. "Damn myself for involving you in this."

"It isn't your fault." Daisy swallowed against the sudden tightness in her throat.

He pulled back slightly, just enough to study her face. "You knew it might be dangerous," he said, his voice quieter now, rougher. "But you still helped me."

She let out a breathless, incredulous laugh. "Of course I did."

She had known the moment she heard those men outside her garden that they were doing something cruel. She had known the decision to bring him into her home had been a perilous one.

But she had brought him into her home anyway.

Still, hearing him say it—knowing he recognized the risk she had taken—it made something in her chest go tight.

His fingers flexed against her back. "You saved me."

“You don’t even remember what you were saved from.”

“I’ll remember—eventually.” He exhaled, long and slow, then drew her close again, tucking her head beneath his chin. “Will you think me a selfish bastard for not being sorry fate brought me to you?”

“No.” If he was selfish, then what was she ?

Daisy squeezed her eyes shut, holding him tighter despite herself. “At least no one knows about you.”

“Except your neighbor.”

She let out a shaky laugh, pulling back just enough to look up at him. “True. But not even Mrs. Farley could imagine I was secretly harboring a duke. I think we’re quite safe.”

But even as she said it, fear licked at her heart.

Because she was eventually going to lose him.

Even if she kept him safe, even if she protected him from whoever wanted him dead, she would still lose him in the end.

Because he would remember.

And then he would leave.

And yet, if anything happened to him before then, she would never forgive herself.

She didn’t want to hold on, but she couldn’t let go.



“Promise you won’t leave until you remember.” She nearly choked on her own words. “Don’t go home until you know who your enemy is.”

A sad smile curved his lips. “What if my memory never returns?”

“Then you stay here with me.”

Her smile was just as sad. Just as foolish.

And before she could pull away, this time, it was Alastair who kissed her.

### THERE IS MORE

He kissed her softly at first. Because he was a guest. Because he was a gentleman. Because, despite the way she set her own course in the world—running a business, raising her brother—there was a vulnerability beneath her strength. One she had no doubt worked hard to conceal.

And he wanted to know why.

Likely, she hadn't even realized she'd exposed that part of herself, but when she had stated, so simply, that he could stay with her... something had cracked open in him.

And now, here they were.

He caressed her arms, his touch deliberate, sliding slowly up to cradle her heart-shaped face. She was warm beneath his hands, the scent of honeysuckle and soap surrounding him like a memory just out of reach.

"Alastair," she whispered against his mouth.

She parted her lips, and he took his time—exploring, savoring her taste like a man starved.

When her arms wound around his neck, his control began to slip. When she pressed her body against his, it slipped even further.

Daisy's enthusiasm fired his own, sending heat racing through his limbs, coiling tight

in his gut. His body responded in ways that would make any honorable man take pause.

Because they were alone.

Because she was trembling in his arms.

And because, even though he had no memory of his past... he knew himself well enough to recognize that this woman—this moment—deserved... all of him.

She was a woman to be reckoned with—one who would bring a dying stranger into her home and then take it upon herself to nurse him back to life.

He smoothed his palms down her arms, learning her shape, appreciating the slim strength beneath her softness. Then lower, around her waist, anchoring her against him.

Daisy . The name was perfect for her. A flower not only beautiful and sunny but strong enough to endure harsh sun and strong winds.

“We shouldn’t,” he whispered. Not with his future unknown—or his past for that matter. And yet the present was all he had. It was the only thing that was real.

And Daisy was real. Her mouth, her skin...

She broke the kiss and moaned into his neck. “Finally,” she whispered. “It’s been so long.”

Finally?

What the devil?

Alastair froze, his arms still locked around her.

As badly as he needed to keep right on kissing her—to act, in fact, on a slew of wicked cravings—her words gave him pause.

“ You made up the name... Alastair,” he murmured, testing the name on his tongue. “It’s not a common name.” His voice hardened as realization struck. “The name you gave me. ”

He took a step back, arms falling to his sides. “What’s going on, Daisy?”

She stared at him, eyes wide—guilty.

“I want the truth,” he pressed. “Did you know me before?” His gaze swept over her, searching for answers. “I can’t imagine a soapmaker moving in the same social circles as a duke.”

And then a horrid possibility swept through him. “Are you working with them?” It was impossible, and yet. How would he know?

She paled. “Of course not.”

“Then what the devil is going on here?”

Her lips parted slightly, but she hesitated.

Alastair waited.

“I knew you before—” Her voice was soft, almost reluctant.

She dropped her lashes. “A long time ago. My father was a tenant on Woodland

Priory, as his father was before him, and his father before that. I grew up there.” A shadow crossed her face. “Until your uncle evicted us.”

She hugged her arms around herself, and the weight of her confession settled over him.

Woodland Priory . An image stirred in the back of his mind—just out of reach.

“You grew up on the Duke of Lovington’s estate?” he asked.

Her expression turned guarded. “Yes.”

That gnawing sense of familiarity—the one that had plagued him since the moment he’d first laid eyes on her—tightened around his ribs.

“And we were... friends?”

Daisy swallowed, the movement of her throat betraying her hesitation. “More than friends.”

The words sent a jolt through him.

His gaze locked onto hers, and suddenly, his dreams didn’t feel like dreams anymore. The kisses, the way she fit against him like she belonged there .

Because she had belonged there.

“How much more?” His voice came out low, rough.

Pink bloomed across her cheeks. She dropped her gaze again, just for a moment, then lifted it, meeting his head-on. “We were... lovers.”

Something in his chest knew her answer before his mind could catch up. His body remembered. The way she felt in his arms, the taste of her lips, the fire that ignited when he touched her.

But with those feelings... a sharp unease pricked the back of his mind.

Had he taken advantage of Daisy and then left her? Had he abandoned her, knowing there was no future for them? That didn't feel like something he would do.

But from what she'd said, he... had.

His hands flexed at his sides, torn because he still ached to touch her. But uncertainty held him back. If he had loved her once, how had he ever let her go?

"Daisy," he said carefully. "What—exactly—happened between us?"

She exhaled a shaky breath.

It was too much.

Alastair pulled out one of the chairs and gestured for her to sit. "I think we need to talk," he said.

But she only shook her head, ignoring the chair. "It doesn't matter. It's all in the past."

"It does matter, though. All of this matters. Why didn't you tell me... before?"

She plucked at her apron, avoiding his eyes. "I didn't recognize you at first. When I found you, with your beard and all the blood, there was little to recognize." She crossed to the window and gazed out at her carefully tended garden. "I didn't suspect

anything until you opened your eyes. The color... it's quite memorable. But still, it didn't seem likely. ”

“You recognized... my eyes?” Why did that make his heart skip a beat?

He wanted—no, he needed to know everything now. She knows me . It was difficult to imagine that this woman , that Daisy would give herself easily—or that she'd allow intimacies merely because he was the estate owner's son.

What wasn't she telling him?

And she'd recognized his eyes...

“The green color... it's surrounded by yellow flecks that glow like gold.” A rueful smile flashed across her face. “I didn't say anything because it seemed impossible, you know? Too much of a coincidence that it would be you, after all these years.” And then she looked up again, and there was no missing the confusion in her haunted stare. “Why, of all places, would you be left for dead behind my shop?”

Fate?

Alastair dropped into the chair he'd drawn out for her. Not because he'd tired himself out, but because her simple explanation all but crushed him.

After all these years...

“I need to know what happened. Before.” If she'd been one of the tenants' daughters, he never should have become involved with her. But even as he acknowledged this truth, he understood why a younger version of himself would have pursued her.

Because this... connection between the two of them had been so powerful, it had

managed to invade his dreams when nothing else had.

She let out a nervous-sounding laugh.

“We were friends at first. You caught me picking berries and insisted I share them. The next day, you taught me how to fish. I was four and ten and you were two years older—so very grown up. I didn’t realize you lived in the manor, and by the time you told me who you were, I didn’t care. We swam. We climbed trees. I’d never had a friend like you. Those are some of my fondest memories. And then later...”

“Later?”

“Things changed. The second summer, you held my hand. And sometimes kissed my cheek. We were pirates, but we were also spies. We even pretended to marry once.” She laughed. “And by the third summer... We believed ourselves to be soulmates. We were incredibly naïve, of course. By then, my parents knew we met sometimes. My father warned me not to become attached. And rightly so.”

She tightened her arms around her middle before continuing.

“What happened?” Alastair pressed. Why did it end?

“Your father became ill, and you had to leave for London.”

“But not forever,” he said.

She let out another short laugh. “Yes. Forever. After your father passed, your uncle took over managing the estate. With your approval, he evicted the tenants who were behind in their rents.”

If her words were the truth, he had been a cad. And deep down, he knew she wasn’t



lying.

Perhaps it would be better all-around if he never remembered.

Damn my eyes.

“I’m—”

“I don’t blame you.” She held up a hand. “Families with sons to work the land were allowed to stay. The steward said that in order for the estate to thrive, changes were necessary. I knew it wasn’t your fault. I realized that. I just wished?—”

Guilt pressed down on Alastair as he waited for her to finish.

She picked at a thread in her dress.

“Your uncle wanted me gone.” She swallowed hard. Dear God .

“What did you wish?” Alastair needed to hear it.

“I wished you had come back to face me—to tell me goodbye yourself.”

There was pain in her voice—a pain he knew she was trying to hide. A pain that he, apparently, had inflicted.

“We were friends first. You were my best friend. When I had to quit school, you brought me books to read. You encouraged me, and I almost believed I could be anything. Because you believed it.”

He’d obviously lacked backbone as a young man. Alastair clenched his jaw.

By God, he might be missing some memories, but he knew his own mind. And regardless of what happened between Daisy and himself now, he'd never let her suffer again.

“Not remembering—I cannot...” He needed answers—for himself, but also for her—even if he ended up resenting the person he'd been.

Daisy crossed to where he sat. “You will remember.”

But Alastair simply shook his head. “You must have hated me.”

She dropped to her knees and took his hands in hers. “I never hated you. Your father meant the world to you, and he needed you. And I understood that upon his death, incredible responsibility would land on you. Your uncle, I think, believed he was protecting you...”

From Daisy?

Alastair stiffened.

“He knew about the two of us, and of course, he didn't approve. I've no doubt he did his best to discourage you from coming home.” She squeezed his hands. “I was upset, but I understood.”

“I should have returned.” Alastair's throat felt unusually thick. He didn't like the truth she painted, and yet, he believed every word she said .

But now that he had a few pieces of the puzzle, he wanted to sort them out. “Tell me more about this uncle of mine.” He tugged her upward. “But from up here.”

He didn't want her on her knees, especially on the heels of what she'd just told him.

He was the duke, and she'd been a tenant's daughter. And scoundrel that he was, seeing her like that gave him massively inappropriate ideas.

He drew her onto his lap, and she did not resist. Instead, she made herself comfortable.

Holding her like this felt as natural as breathing. As though his body remembered everything, even if his mind did not.

“Lord Calvin Frampton is your father's only brother—his younger brother. It was he who delivered the news of your father's decline. He found—he interrupted...” She ducked her head. “Well, he came upon the two of us at a very inconvenient time.”

“Ah...” Alastair raised his brows, recalling his dream...

“I knew who he was, but of course, we had never been introduced. My father later admitted that your uncle advised him to keep the two of us apart, which he tried to do. But I didn't take the warning seriously.”

Neither, it seemed, had he. “And later, your family was evicted,” Alastair surmised.

“Yes.”

“You believe my uncle was behind it.”

“Your uncle hired a new steward. At the time, I believed that might be your way of dealing with me. Only later did I realize that, until you turned one and twenty, your uncle, as your legal guardian, was running the dukedom. Especially as you needed to finish your education.”

“Right.” Alastair didn't want to make excuses for himself.

“He is your heir presumptive.” Daisy spoke the words as though they had great meaning .

“Yes.”

“You used to joke that Lord Calvin coveted your position. And of course, you dismissed the existence of any real threat, but when I saw the article this morning, I couldn’t help but remember...”

“You think it’s possible that my uncle was the one who ordered me killed.”

Her suggestion landed like a punch to the gut. Was it truly possible that his own blood would go to such lengths?

Alastair didn’t want to believe it, but without his memory, and with no other evidence to go by, the possibility had to be considered.

“Like I said, I never knew him that well. But he would, in fact, benefit from your death... I could be wrong, but...”

Alastair shifted but kept his arms around Daisy, processing everything he’d just learned.

“That is precisely why I need to do something. How can I hide here when someone wants me dead?” He asked himself as much as her.

“You don’t have much choice right now, but you’ll figure it out.” Her voice softened. “Don’t act hastily, please? Give yourself time to remember.” She held his gaze steadily, and her mouth hovered a few inches from his.

“I hate when wisdom contradicts my wishes.”

“I know you are frustrated, but once you’ve healed, once you remember, you’ll have the advantage.”

“Because they think I’m dead.”

She winced, but replied, “Yes.”

His gaze flicked from her eyes to her mouth. And by God, he wanted nothing more than to see her smile again—to chase the concern out of her eyes. And to taste every inch...

“In that case.” Alastair swallowed hard. “I’m going to need a lot more furniture to repair.”

“I’ll be happy to arrange that.” She wriggled a little and sent him a teasing smile. “You could always help out with the laundry.”

“Laundry?” He lifted one of her hands, hands which knew hard work, hands that had labored to keep him alive. He pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “Your wish is my command.”

“Only if you’re feeling better...”

“I’m fine.”

“Except for your head.”

“Well, yes...” He brushed his thumb along the back of her hand. “And I’ll deal with the laundry later. But right now, I’m going to kiss you.”

She sucked in a breath. “Because of the past?”

“Because of the present .”

Alastair leaned forward, capturing her mouth with his, surprised at the tenderness she brought out in him.

So strong, but she needed protecting. So proud, but she needed support. And there was so much more...

Several minutes passed, hands exploring, hearts racing, and the kiss that began like a gentle rain erupted into lightning and thunder.

Ragged breaths broke the silence when Daisy drew back, ducking her head.

He should be sorry. He was not.

He should regret it. He did not.

“This is all too much.” She stared at her hands, both planted on his shoulders. “Part of me wants to throw caution to the wind, but I’ve been here before. And...”

“There are no assurances, are there?” Blast and damn .

“It’s... complicated. And a little terrifying,” she admitted, finally looking up at him again.

“We need to... wait,” he said. Doubt and pain lurked in her gaze, and as much as he wanted to promise her the world...

She didn’t answer but pushed herself to stand, and after sending him a sad little smile, she disappeared into the kitchen .

Leaving Alastair to curse the person who'd treated her so callously in the past.

But also making a vow.

He would bring joy back to those blue eyes of hers. He'd ensure she had a reason to laugh every single day.

Unless fate wasn't playing matchmaker after all—but was instead playing a cruel joke on them both.

### SETTLING IN

Following the uncomfortable admissions Daisy made when showing Alastair the article, she had anticipated awkwardness between them—hesitant glances, strained silences...

Oddly enough, though, none of that happened.

If anything, the atmosphere in her small home seemed lighter, clearer, as though the tension between them had broken and drifted away like storm clouds after a summer rain. Perhaps it was because, in the end, they'd been honest. Painfully honest, yes, but at least the air was clear.

Or perhaps it was simply that she refused to dwell on what she couldn't control. Alastair was here, and he was safe. For the moment, that was all that mattered. She would not waste this time worrying about what the future held, because there was no guarantee of a tomorrow—at least not one that included him.

No sense borrowing trouble.

And although his presence seemed to affect every part of her being, the two of them seemed to have reached a silent understanding—to resist, for now, the undeniable attraction that lingered just beneath every interaction. Aside from an occasional spark, moments where Daisy struggled not to reach out and brush a lock of hair from his brow or to simply touch his hand, conversation flowed effortlessly between them, just as it always had.



Gentle banter about the weather, the latest eccentricities of her clients, Gilbert's schooling—simple topics, yet each felt rich and meaningful because they shared them together.

It was remarkable how quickly they slipped into that easy rhythm, as though their bond had never truly been broken—only paused.

And since Alastair had no trouble recalling his academic knowledge, the two of them could discuss current political issues, such as taxation and the Voters' Reform Act, along with other Parliamentary goings-on, and even fictional books they'd both read.

And her soap.

Alastair listened but also assisted in tending the garden while she described the importance of her fragrant oils and other key ingredients that made her soaps superior. The days flew by, and the evenings took on similar idyllic rituals. Once Gilbert learned the extent of Alastair's breadth of knowledge, her brother happily discussed his latest lessons while Daisy cooked supper.

Daisy didn't mind having such moments to herself—to calm her thoughts and regain her balance. This was when her father's voice echoed in the form of her conscience, whispering that she needed to curb her expectations.

Because yes, he was Alastair, but he was not the same person she'd loved. He had no memory of the friendship they'd shared. Or of his life as the Duke of Lovington.

Someday, all of that would change .

So, although she'd decided there was nothing to do but live in the moment, she did her best to keep some distance between herself and Alastair. It was safer this way—smarter.

Because he would, undoubtedly, return to his old life. He would be duty bound to take his seat at the head of the dukedom once again, just as he had been ten years before.

And the man who lived that life, the Duke of Lovington, was the man who'd hurt her.

He was the one her father had warned her about.

And on this night, it caught up with her.

She tossed and turned, determined not to dwell on the undeniable magic lingering between the two of them, nor on the future she'd once dared to dream. But sleep remained stubbornly out of reach as her mind drifted again and again to Alastair—then and now, the memories they'd created, and the ones they'd been denied.

Because, truth be told, she'd never fully let him go. No matter how hard she'd tried to convince herself otherwise, a small, hidden part of her had clung to the memory of him.

And with that reminder, her eyes flew open in the darkness.

She remembered her weakness from long ago—something she'd done consciously, feeling desperate but also foolish.

Something she'd eventually hidden away, ashamed...

But perhaps it hadn't been so foolish at all.

Heart pounding, Daisy pushed the covers aside and slipped from her bed. Dropping to her knees, she reached beneath the bedframe until her fingers brushed against the

small, familiar box she'd kept concealed for years.

With a combination of fondness and foreboding, she sat back on her heels and brushed a layer of dust from its lid.

She might be able to help Alastair remember.

How could she have forgotten about these clippings? Moving to where the moonlight cast a filtered light into her room, Daisy opened the well-worn wooden box and lifted out old treasures.

It didn't matter that she would be embarrassed at having once followed his life so diligently, she needed to show these to him.

His accomplishments. His successes.

Gossip regarding a few unsavory exploits.

But any of these details could possibly jar the puzzle pieces of his memory back into place.

The sooner Alastair regained his memory, the sooner he could secure his safety—and the sooner he could return to his own life before he claimed an even greater space in hers.

She worried about Gilbert as well. Her brother was already becoming accustomed to Alastair's steady presence—not merely enjoying his help with schoolwork, but soaking up the masculine attention and guidance craved ever since her father's debilitating injury.

And if Daisy were honest with herself, she was struggling against cravings of her

own.

Determined to do the right thing, she left the box out and slipped back under the covers.

After a fitful night's sleep, she rose early the next morning, carried the box downstairs, and paused at the threshold of the kitchen.

Would the articles help him remember?

Did she want him to remember? Yes, but also... For a few seconds, her lungs couldn't find enough air.

She could not allow herself to think such selfish thoughts. But that didn't stop her from enjoying the sight that met her.

Alastair was already up, heating water on the stove and moving confidently around the kitchen as he prepared breakfast. She smiled softly, remembering his first attempts at cooking. Initially, his lack of experience had been charmingly obvious, but that only served to endear him further to her .

As did, of course, the fact that he managed to look ridiculously handsome so early in the morning, with his hair ruffled, his shirt unbuttoned, and his feet bare.

"Good morning." He shot her a proud expression as he slid one slightly burned egg onto a plate.

It felt odd not to be the first one awake—not to be the person responsible for setting the tone of the day and ensuring everything unfolded exactly as it should.

"Good morning," Daisy said softly, tucking a stray curl behind her ear and wishing,

not for the first time, that it would stay there.

Lately, against all common sense, she'd begun taking greater care with her appearance. She spent extra time each morning taming her unruly hair, tying it back in a pretty knot, and selecting some of her more flattering gowns. It was silly, really, considering she always ended up covering them with an apron.

"Are you hungry?" Alastair asked, glancing at her proudly as he set the plate in front of her.

She exhaled, pushing aside the familiar flutter in her stomach with a gentle laugh. "Ravenous." But instead of taking a seat, she placed the small box carefully on the worktable between them, and not meeting his eyes, casually added, "I brought something down for you to look through."

Crossing to the hook where her apron hung, she slipped it off and fastened it over her gown, the action feeling oddly like donning armor.

"I just added three eggs for Gilbert." Daisy felt Alastair's curious gaze follow her.

"He'll inhale them, as usual..." But she waved him toward the box on the table. "Why don't you look at those while I finish breakfast?"

He hesitated, his expression wary, but then took the seat near the box .

"What are these?" he asked, eyeing the box with clear suspicion.

"A few clippings I'd forgotten that I saved. But they might be helpful..."

His lips quirked wryly. "Why do I feel like I'm about to regret this?"

Still, he unlatched the lid, revealing a stack of carefully cut-out newspaper articles. The folded papers near the top were more of a crisp white, but those buried deeper had yellowed with age.

“Oh, Daisy...” Alastair’s shoulders relaxed as he carefully lifted them out.

Daisy all but held her breath while he sorted through the top articles. One by one, he read various headlines aloud.

““ Lovington betrays father’s memory by siding with the Whigs... Lovington unwilling to abandon election reform... Is Lord Griswold’s daughter good enough for the elusive Duke of Love?’ These cannot all be about me.” He paused to peruse a few of the articles but dismissed twice as many.

“My apologies for their condition.” Daisy turned to the stove and checked the water, mostly just to give her something else to focus on, and shrugged despite the heat ebbing up her neck. “My client’s husband reads over breakfast.” She pointed to an old stain. “Hence the remnants of kidney pie and spilt tea.”

“You cut out articles about... me,” he said. “And saved them.”

“It’s terribly embarrassing, really, and I never expected you’d be such a favorite of the gossip columnists. But I remembered I had them last night and realized they might be helpful now.” Her insides shivered because they hadn’t discussed the past—their former relationship —since that long conversation in the dining room a few weeks before.

He had to know why she’d saved them.

The gossip sections were the worst, tying him to various ladies of the ton—notably a beautiful and famous opera singer. She hadn’t minded when she’d read of their split.

Oh, how she'd hated those, yet she'd kept each and every one.

Would she ever be able to let go?

"It's like reading about someone else." He glanced up. "Honestly, I'm a little appalled at... myself."

"But you should be proud, too." Daisy pointed to one of the political ones.

Daisy watched his slim but strong hands sort the clippings out across the table.

Why did his attackers leave him outside her garden, of all places?

"Fate has a wicked and twisted sense of humor, wouldn't you agree?" she asked.

He didn't answer. Instead, he moved slowly around the table toward her, causing her breath to catch and her heart to race when he slid his arms around her waist.

"I don't know what to say." His voice caught, and his warm breath stirred a few errant curls. "You were here... All along."

She twisted around and, unable to stop herself, buried her face in his chest. "I tried to let it go—to let you go." She sniffed. "And I did. I really did."

His hand stroked the back of her head. "Of course you did. You were just curious about an old friend."

"Exactly." She nodded. "I was just curious."

Curious enough to torture herself when he'd become engaged, and curious enough that she'd celebrated silently when she'd learned the story hadn't been true. And then

she'd tortured herself again each time a columnist wrote of his rakish behavior. Until, that was, he abandoned his wayward ways and involved himself in politics.

A champion for the people, of course. He'd always been foolishly optimistic .

"You should read them. You never know what may or may not restore your memory." She stepped out of his arms. "They're mostly in order."

"It's a little daunting." He stared at the articles as though one of them might jump up and bite him.

"I cannot imagine." Daisy feigned nonchalance as she scurried into the pantry, located the ingredients required to make bread, and did her best to keep busy so she wouldn't be tempted to watch him read.

She had a large bowl of dough rising near the stove by the time he set them aside.

"I don't think it was my uncle who wanted me dead," he announced.

This was not at all what she expected.

"Did you remember something?"

He shook his head, then separated a handful of articles and slid them across the table toward her. "Seems I've been rather outspoken about the Reform Act—not the best way to make friends in Parliament. I've likely made some powerful enemies."

Enemies who would also be... "Lords."

"Yes." He tapped one of the articles. "Take the Marquess of Denningham, for example—he outright said I ought to be shot for treason."



“Because you want to extend the vote to those who do not own property.”

“Yes.” He looked grim. “Ultimately, most of my ideas are doomed. I’ve put myself in the minority.”

Could that be the reason he’d nearly been killed?

Even as a very young man, he’d shown empathy for those who were less fortunate. So much so, that she’d not only been disappointed when he’d not come back to tell her goodbye, but... surprised.

“I need to speak with my uncle.” His confidence should have reassured her, but instead, that heavy unease trickled down her spine.

“Maybe...” She hesitated, then stepped forward, gripping the back of a chair as though it might steady her. “But just... wait a little longer—please? Just a few more days to remember. This marquess fellow might be the reason you were... hurt. But what if he isn’t? What if, by seeking out your uncle, you’re walking straight into danger? You don’t know who’s against you if you can’t remember what happened.”

He exhaled sharply, his fists clenching as he paced the length of the table. “Perhaps I need...”

She held her breath. “Yes?”

“I need to walk around Mayfair—put myself in familiar surroundings. Perhaps something I see there will trigger some of my memories. Help my brain function normally again.”

“Your brain is functioning just fine,” Daisy said. “It’s just temporarily in need of repair.” She tried to lighten the mood, half regretting her decision to show him the

articles.

“What if my memory loss is permanent, though?”

Daisy swallowed hard, sensing she was fighting a losing battle.

“What if someone recognizes you?” she countered.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “I’ll wear a disguise,” he said.

If he was half as stubborn as he’d been ten years ago, he’d not give this up.

Which meant she wouldn’t be making any soap today.

“In that case...” She dusted her hands off on her apron and lifted her chin. “As soon as Gilbert leaves for school, you and I will venture across town.”

He blinked at her. “You want to come with me?”

She nodded, sending him a look that dared him to argue with her.

He might be stubborn, but so was she. And Daisy was not about to allow him to go out on his own .

“I saw those men who left you for dead, Alastair. I may not have gotten a clear look, but I remember enough that if I see them again, I’ll know.” Her voice firmed, the protectiveness in her flaring despite herself. “And besides, you’re not the only one who wants answers.”

They faced off for a moment before he nodded.

### FINDING THE FAMILIAR

The decision made, the morning rituals passed in a flurry of activity.

While Alastair ate breakfast with Gilbert, Daisy hurried upstairs to gather what they would need. As soon as she heard the door close behind her brother, she set to work disguising them both.

Alastair's beard had already begun to grow back, and it made for an effective mask. She tugged a cap low over his brow and dressed him in several layers of her father's old clothing—worn and shapeless, meant to downplay the height and power of the man beneath. By the time she stepped back to assess her work, he was nearly as unrecognizable as he'd been the day she'd found him.

To disguise herself, she stuffed most of her hair into a large bonnet and dressed in a thick, matronly gown that had belonged to her aunt. To complete her ensemble, she opened an old lace parasol that might come in handy if they ran into trouble.

They would blend in—at least, she hoped so.

Although it was likely that his uncle had long forgotten the young woman with whom he'd discovered his nephew that sunny afternoon, Daisy couldn't discount the possibility that she'd be recognized.

Taking a steadying breath, because she wasn't at all sure this was a good idea, she turned to Alastair, nonetheless. "Are you ready?"

His lips quirked into something almost like a smile. “As I’ll ever be.”

But when they stepped onto the street together and Daisy locked the door behind her, Alastair glanced up and down the road and then, blinking, he froze.

“What is it?”

“I don’t...I don’t know where it is.”

“Mayfair?”

“My home.”

“I do.”

His brows shot up and his eyes met hers.

Daisy shifted her stare away from him, cursing the heat flooding her cheeks. “I have clients in Mayfair,” she explained.

The truth was that of course she’d wanted to know where he was—how he lived. “This way.” She began walking in the direction that would lead them toward the upscale neighborhood. Although it might as well be situated in a completely different world than hers, the lordly dwellings of Mayfair existed a surprisingly short distance away. “Lovington House is situated across the street from the park.”

Tucking her hand in the crook of his arm, Alastair leaned close. “And you know this because...”

She lifted her chin. “Common knowledge.” Well, not exactly common. But common to her... after a little investigation. “It is a ducal townhouse.”

Not once had she ever seen him coming or going, which had left her feeling grateful, but also disappointed.

But she had known he was near .

Which had been utterly foolish, even if the information came in rather handy on this particular day.

“It’s not far,” she said, filling the silence.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed, you know. Not with me.” He covered her hand with his, as though he knew...

Of course he knew.

The reality of walking beside him—the boy she had loved, the man who had shattered her heart—nearly made her stumble.

She exhaled slowly, steadying herself. “It is... surreal. Walking with you.”

His expression flickered. Was that regret? Sadness?

He didn’t let go of her hand. “Did you and I ever come to London together?”

She shook her head. “We spent endless hours in one another’s company, but we never left the estate together. We couldn’t, really.” She hesitated before adding, “If we happened to run into each other in the village, we’d lock eyes—but only for a second.”

It had been thrilling then, stolen moments that had felt like secrets only they shared. But later, with the clarity that came with heartbreak, she had realized those fleeting

glances were not promises.

They had been warnings.

A glimpse of what the future held for them.

Betrayal. Separation.

Except... that wasn't entirely true. Because here they were, walking together toward Hyde Park.

"Is any of this familiar?"

"It is," he mused, glancing around as if seeing the city anew. "The air. The hackneys and carriages. The energy." His brow furrowed, then smoothed. "I believe I own a racing curricle. A blue one. Someday, I'll take you riding. "

"Oh, Alastair..." She sighed, unable to stop the wistful ache curling through her chest.

They walked in silence for several steps, the rhythmic sound of their footfalls filling the space between them.

Then, as if unearthing a long-buried truth, Alastair sighed. "I'm beginning to believe that, of the two of us, you were the practical one."

Daisy nearly stumbled, because his words cut too close to the one thing they'd argued over most.

"It's not that you weren't practical," she said carefully. "Only that... you wanted to believe practicality didn't apply to you."

His lips curved, but there was no humor in it. “And yet, it did. Apparently.” He exhaled, tilting his head toward her. “I’ve been thinking, a lot.” He shot her a sheepish look. “If I had been... more aware of my father’s expectations, and those of my uncle, I think... I hope that I would have handled matters differently.”

Matters.

Such a simple word for something that had upended her world.

Matters, as in a young man’s foolish hopes.

Matters, as in an affair that was never meant to last.

Matters, as in a love that had been doomed before it ever had a chance to begin.

“When we were younger, you rarely took my concerns seriously,” she murmured, a soft smile touching her lips. “It was oddly... endearing.”

He had loved her. And she had loved him. And for a time, he had believed that was all that mattered.

“I was reckless.” His voice held a heavy note of regret.

“Yes, but...” Daisy turned to look up at him, searching his face. “I want—I need you to know that I wouldn’t change any of it.”

She had asked herself the question countless times—considered whether she would erase the past, if given the chance. And the answer was always the same.

The great love she had known had ended in great pain.

But what was life without seasoning?

His smile, when it came, was faint. “I will be grateful for that, then.”

They reached the park, and Daisy drew in a steadying breath, shaking off the wistful haze that had settled between them.

Because they were on a mission.

And neither of them could afford to be distracted.

“Lovington House is just ahead,” she said, lifting her chin. “On the right. We’ll have a clear view from the clearing if we go this way.”

The hour was too early for the elite of Mayfair to be venturing into the park yet.

“You walk here often?” He kept her hand securely tucked in the crook of his arm.

“I deliver my soaps personally—to my clients’ back doors, of course.”

“This is where you disappear to every morning,” he said.

“Usually,” Daisy said. “On the days I’m not delivering to other shops.”

“They are lucky.”

“Oh, indeed.” She chuckled and slid him a teasing glance.

“And so very modest.” He laughed with her, but then his expression softened. “But you should be proud, Daisy. You’ve built something remarkable. You parlayed your gift, your skills, into something not only profitable, but also... special.”



This was Alastair. Encouraging. Supportive. Always believing in her.

As they neared his rather grand townhouse, Daisy leaned in slightly. “And you do remarkable things as well.”

He let out a quiet breath. “But do I? ”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

Alastair exhaled a long sigh.

“You always did admire Locke,” she mused. “Even when we were young, you spoke about people having the potential to rise above their circumstances.” A small smile tugged at her lips. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that you’re fighting to expand the reform bill.”

His brows lifted slightly, as though the realization struck him as well. “But how could I vote otherwise, in good conscience?”

“The one thing money doesn’t buy.”

Alastair shot her a questioning glance.

“A conscience,” she murmured.

They reached the edge of the park, and Daisy stilled. Alastair, who was chuckling at her irony, followed suit.

“There it is.” She tilted her head toward the imposing stone manor that loomed across the street.

He stiffened, and Daisy waited.

“I remember it.” He continued staring, for such a long time and so intently, that Daisy worried someone might take note.

And yet, she didn’t want to interrupt his thoughts—especially not if buried memories were working their way free.

A carriage rolled to a stop only a short distance away, and as the door swung open, Daisy’s pulse spiked. She grasped Alastair’s arm and tugged him sharply, forcing him to turn onto a path leading in the opposite direction.

“Have a care,” she murmured, casting a discreet glance over her shoulder.

A tall, older gentleman had stepped out of the carriage. Impeccably dressed, from the polished crown of his black hat to the gleaming tips of his boots, he carried himself with a confidence that spoke of power and entitlement.

Daisy recognized him.

“That’s your uncle,” she whispered .

Alastair stiffened beside her.

As another horse and buggy passed, he took advantage of the moment to glance behind them as well, his movements careful and measured. Then, just as quickly, he led them away at a steady, unhurried pace.

“I didn’t get a good look at his face,” he admitted under his breath. “But the house—the carriage... I know them. I remember them.”

Daisy tightened her grip on his arm. “That’s good! It means the rest of your memories can’t be far off.”

And she was happy for that.

She was, truly.

But the sharp grimace on his face stole her breath. “Everything is so close, it’s infuriating,” he muttered. “I feel it, who I am, what I was—right there—but before I can focus, the memories... they turn to smoke...”

His frustration was more than palpable, his fingers flexing restlessly at his sides. Wanting to ease the tension, Daisy forced a smile and nudged his arm. “Then let’s stop chasing the smoke for now. Tell me, what are your thoughts on rose-scented shaving soap?”

“For gentlemen?” His brows shot up, and when he saw her expression, he was shaking his head.

Daisy exhaled, relieved. For now, at least, she had managed to distract him from the frustration of his lost memories.

“What do you think it looks like inside?” she asked, glancing back at the grand townhouse.

“Not as formidable as the exterior,” he answered, not hesitating for even a moment. “When my father ordered renovations, he preserved much of the original structure out of respect for the dukes before him. But he wasn’t opposed to modernization.”

Her pulse skipped. He’d answered without thinking.

“Does it have running water?” she asked, testing him .

“Hot and cold,” he said, nodding. “And someday, every house will be plumbed—”  
He cut himself off, his expression tightening.

Daisy’s grin widened. He was remembering.

As they strolled back toward her shop, she stopped at a vendor’s cart and ordered two piping-hot savory pies, pressing one into his hands before he could protest.

Alastair frowned, clearly unsettled by the fact that he had no coins with which to pay.  
“I don’t like this arrangement.”

She smirked. “I’ll collect once you’re restored to your abundant riches.”

He huffed, but his lips twitched at the corners.

Afterward, they visited a bookstore and then stopped at one of the mercantiles where she proudly pointed out the display of her soaps.

“These are sensational,” he said. “Not just the concept, but the ribbons, the design...”  
But the look in his eyes conveyed something else.

You are sensational.

And for what remained of the day, the sky shone brighter than usual, and the air smelled sweet and fresh.

Daisy felt like she had her friend again.

### brEAKING POINT

A lastair's world had tilted on its axis.

The brain was a peculiar thing—locking away crucial memories one moment, offering fleeting glimpses of the inconsequential in the next. It allowed him to function, to speak, to reason, all while withholding the very moments that should define him.

On one hand, Alastair knew himself. Or at least, he thought he did. He knew the kind of man he was, the principles he stood for. Yet on the other, entire stretches of his life—recent events that should have been crystal clear—remained maddeningly out of reach.

But standing outside his townhouse in Mayfair, something had shifted. The curtain had lifted, just slightly.

And Daisy...

She had been there, not just in the present, but in his past. The realization left him breathless.

A flood of emotions followed. Longing. Regret. Something deeper, more complicated.

He remembered that they had begun as friends. And just as Daisy had told him, their friendship had blossomed into something more.

For as long as he could remember, he'd been set apart from other boys his age—too privileged to be one of them, too isolated to form true bonds. Then he'd stumbled across her on his father's land, this fierce, golden-haired girl who didn't care about titles or expectations. She had seen him for the person he was, not the duke he was meant to become.

She had given him something to look forward to, a reason to anticipate life beyond the stiff, preordained existence laid out before him. He'd imagined a future with her—Daisy as his lover, as his wife, bearing his children, laughing with him as they carved out their own place in the world.

Oh, but along with being head over heels in love, he had been painfully naïve.

Unfortunately, the memory that still escaped him—what his mind had locked away—was why he had abandoned her.

Why would he have left someone who had meant the world to him?

The question gnawed at him. What could have been so insurmountable, so impossible, that he had not returned to claim her? Never written? Never followed through with his promises?

And why would his mind allow him to recall the tenderness, the passion—but not the betrayal?

“You're quiet,” Daisy said, breaking into his thoughts as they walked side by side back to her house.

Alastair blinked, dragging himself back to the present.

The district she lived in wasn't even a mile from Mayfair, but it might as well have

been on the other side of the world.

That was something he hadn't understood when they were younger. He'd thoughtlessly failed to comprehend the barriers between them, the walls society had built to keep them apart. How had he not seen it? How had he been so blind ?

And worse—why hadn't he fought harder? Why hadn't he tracked her down?

"I remember you." His voice emerged thick, rough with emotion.

Daisy's steps faltered, but she kept walking. "Everything?"

"Mostly. The beginning." And the middle.

Not the end.

They reached her door, and when she lifted the key, her hands were visibly shaking. Not just her hands—her shoulders, her chest. Her breaths came unevenly, betraying the turmoil she tried to hide.

Alastair reached out, his fingers brushing hers as he took the key and unlocked the door for her.

"When was the last we were together?" he asked.

"The day you were called back to London—because your father was ill."

She had told him this before, he was certain, but it held a new weight now. The day he was summoned. A decade ago. And he had never returned for her.

Again, the emptiness clawed at his chest. The more he uncovered, the more the gaps

tormented him.

He had never believed in fate, but of all the places in London they could have left him to die, why had it been the alley behind her house?

His entire body ached with the need to know.

“When you brought me into your home, are you sure you didn’t recognize me?”

She hesitated before answering.

“I didn’t think I did. But now, I can’t help wondering if, on some level, part of me suspected. I just... I knew I couldn’t let you die.” Her voice softened. “I was desperate to keep you alive.”

She turned away from him, putting space between them, her arms wrapping around herself before she continued .

“I think I knew the moment you woke up. When I looked into your eyes.” A short, humorless laugh escaped her. “Seeing you without the beard only confirmed everything.”

Then, suddenly, she spun to face him, her eyes flashing, her voice sharp with old betrayal.

“Why didn’t you say goodbye?” Her throat bobbed, and she let out a slow, shuddering breath. “I thought I understood... but I deserved... something.”

Before he could answer, she shook her head. “Never mind. You don’t need to explain. I understand.”



But she didn't.

"No. You don't understand," he said, his voice hoarse with frustration. "Because I don't understand. I don't have the answers—to give you, or myself." His hands curled into fists. "Didn't I write to you? I would have written. I would have missed you—desperately."

Daisy frowned. "I never received anything..."

A cold certainty settled over him. "Someone didn't want us together." His jaw clenched. "Your father?—?"

"None of this was my father's fault." She stared up at him defiantly. "Yes, he warned me away from you, but only because he feared for me, for our family, and he was right to do so." She narrowed those captivating blue eyes at him. "It was your uncle who found us together. After you left, he made it clear to me that I was why we were turned off the estate." She dropped her gaze and swallowed hard. "I was too ashamed to tell my father. And he blamed himself. For all of it."

When she lifted her gaze again, this time, it was haunted and filled with guilt. "But I couldn't tell him. Sometimes... I wonder if it would have changed anything. If I'd told him the truth, maybe he wouldn't have spent his last years thinking he had failed. Maybe he wouldn't have started drinking, sending himself into an early grave..."

Alastair stood frozen, his stomach twisting into knots .

Christ.

A decade ago, he had been so certain, so reckless in his belief that love alone would be enough. But now, standing before Daisy, hearing the raw pain in her voice, he saw the depth of his betrayal.

His uncle had sent her family away.

And Alastair—whether through blind trust or willful ignorance—had let it happen.

His throat closed, bile rising. “Daisy...” He reached for her, but she took a step back.

“I’ve lived with that guilt,” she said, her voice steady now, though her hands still trembled at her sides. “I can’t change the past. Neither can you.” She met his gaze, resolute. “What matters now is keeping you safe. Finding out why someone tried to kill you.”

And just like that, the conversation was back to the troubles at hand.

Alastair wasn’t sure he could move on so easily. But...

“You still think my uncle is behind the attack,” he said.

She nodded. “I think it would be a mistake not to.”

Alastair’s pulse pounded. “My uncle ran the dukedom until I came of age.” He rubbed his temples, frustration mounting. “I can’t remember those months—those years. But by the time I returned to Woodland Priory, you were gone. And I was told you had married.”

Daisy didn’t flinch. She only nodded, her expression unreadable, as if she had already come to terms with this long ago. “The new estate manager sent us away shortly after your father passed.”

“You never married.” His voice was barely above a whisper. Timelines, memories, words, tumbled around his head, almost as confusing as the emptiness had been.

“No.” A wry, brittle chuckle escaped her lips. “I never married.”

The backs of Alastair’s eyes burned. He had loved Daisy. He was certain of it. Even now, even after everything, the pull toward her was stronger than gravity.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

Worthless words.

Meaningless words.

He stepped forward, slowly, carefully—like approaching a wounded animal. When he placed his hands gently on her shoulders, she didn’t pull away.

When he had first woken in her pantry, his mind blank, his body weak, his heart had somehow known her.

And now, he saw all of her—the woman she was today and the girl she had once been.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she murmured.

“But I do.” His grip firmed. “And I swear to you, I will find out why.”

And once he did?

He’d spend a lifetime making it up to her.

As though exhausted suddenly, Daisy tucked her head under his chin. “You remember our time together,” she murmured. “And that it was special.”

Alastair understood why she needed this. She hadn't lost her memory. No, she remembered everything, but he had left her in a different kind of darkness.

A darkness filled with unanswered questions, loss, and... betrayal.

"You were the light of my life." Alastair buried his face in her hair. "I remember the first time you let me kiss you. Do you remember? I'd just returned from school, and yours was the only face I wanted to see."

"You said you hated school that first year."

"And you scolded me for that."

She let out a tinkling laugh. "You liked when I scolded you. "

"Not at first." He exhaled. Not until I realized she scolded me because she cared .  
"You made me read to you."

She tilted her head, and Alastair kissed her neck.

"I liked that," she whispered.

"I remember feeling like you were a part of me." Her pulse fluttered beneath his lips.  
"We made love," he said.

She let out a soft, broken cry and reached up, her arms locking around his neck as if afraid he'd vanish the moment she let go.

" Daisy."

Alastair crushed his mouth to hers.

It was impossibly perfect. A dream. A memory. A homecoming.

The kiss ignited fathomless longings, the ache of lost years, the despair of a decade spent apart. The dam had held for too long, and when it broke, it wasn't gentle. It was desperate, consuming—an urgent need to reclaim what had been stolen from them.

Nothing existed but her. The taste of her, the feel of her, the heat of her pressed against him.

“I missed you so much,” she murmured against his jaw.

Alastair's insides clenched. “Too long,” he rasped, lifting her into his arms.

Daisy gasped but didn't protest, her fingers tangling in his hair as he carried her effortlessly toward the staircase. He took the steps two at a time, his body charged with a new, electric kind of energy. A certainty.

Was this what they'd had before? This all-consuming, demanding, insistent need for one another?

He kicked her door open, pausing only long enough to take in the small, tidy room—a modest wardrobe, a desk, a carefully made-up bed. The air was thick with honeysuckle and her.

Daisy.

His Daisy .

Alastair stepped inside and shut the door, sealing them in a world that belonged only to them.

Before he even set her on her feet, she was working the buttons on his shirt, her fingers quick and determined while he hastily unfastened the ties of her gown. Of all the questions in his life, she was the only answer.

His gaze roved over her delicate features, memorizing every curve, every breathless expression. Then he bent his head, pressing his lips to the soft, fragrant skin along her neck.

Sweet. Smooth.

Mine.

Desire tore through him in a way that was both achingly familiar and utterly new. There had been women in his life—beautiful, practiced lovers—but none had consumed him like Daisy did.

Because Daisy...

Daisy was the other half of his soul. She held his heart in her hands.

How did a man begin to comprehend feelings that spanned both past and present? That eclipsed time itself?

A sudden, desperate need overtook him. He dragged the thick material of her borrowed disguise down past her shoulders, past her waist, until it pooled at her feet. She pushed off his jacket, fingers trembling, and then lifted his shirt over his head. He all but tore her chemise, desperate to rid her of the barriers between them. She wrestled with his boots, cursing softly, and he huffed a breathless laugh before helping her.

And then?—

Nothing stood between them.

She was pink and creamy, soft and strong, and infinitely more beautiful than she had been even in his most fevered dreams.

He took a step back, reverent, awestruck.

She was glorious .

No woman in all his life had ever left him so shaken as she did. Despite the gaps, he knew this to be true on the most basic level.

Because no one else was Daisy.

He could almost believe she had been made for him.

Her lush curves and contours celebrated feminine strength. Curves and contours...

“I never saw you...” he remembered.

In the meadow, they’d remained partially clothed. She had been shy and concerned they’d be found.

She’d been right to worry.

“This is not the first time I’ve seen you,” Daisy admitted, her voice quiet, but steady.

Alastair’s breath hitched. When?

But even before he could ask, realization struck.

“While I slept,” he murmured.

She nodded. “I had no choice. But I...” Her teeth caught her lower lip, and his gut clenched at the sight. “I didn’t avert my eyes like I probably should have.”

Sweet, funny, alluring, and delightfully naughty— Daisy.

He huffed a laugh, low and rough. “You are forgiven.” He took a step closer, his voice dipping. “Because, if it had been you...” He shrugged.

Understanding flared in her gaze, something knowing and just a little wicked.

She reached behind her nape, fingers deftly loosening the knot that kept her hair pinned up. With a single shake of her head, the thick, silken braid unraveled, slipping over one shoulder, draping down between her breasts—plump, high, and so maddeningly tempting that his hands clenched at his sides.

“Daisy...” His voice was raw, thick with longing. “You are sure?”

She stepped closer, tilting her chin up, her expression wide open. “Tomorrow is never guaranteed. ”

God help him, he couldn’t argue with that.

For an instant, he thought he caught a flicker of something—doubt, fear—dancing in the depths of her eyes. But then, her lips curved into a slow, sultry smile, melting away the shadow before he could grasp it.

Locking his gaze with hers, he tackled her onto the bed, his body caging hers, bracing his weight so she was safe beneath him. “That day, in the meadow,” he murmured, his breath teasing her lips, “I remember thinking you were the most beautiful person



to walk this earth.”

Her fingertip traced a slow, languid path along his arm. “And now?”

The question held the air of teasing, but there was something else beneath it. Something fragile.

His jaw tensed, and he forced her to see the truth in his eyes. “Even more beautiful.”

And then he kissed her—deeply, thoroughly—before abandoning her lips to slide lower, his mouth mapping her throat, her collarbone.

“Alastair,” she gasped, trying to pull him back up, but he had other plans.

Today, he would remind her—remind them both—that she had always been his. And he would always be hers.

Alastair was a man on a mission, one he would not abandon until he had mapped every inch of her, until she knew—body, mind, and soul—that he belonged to her.

He moved lower, settling his chest between her thighs, resting his chin against the soft dip of her belly.

A single fingertip trailed downward, featherlight, teasing the most sensitive part of her.

The only time they had made love before had been their first—rushed, urgent, fueled by youth and longing. He’d been too eager, more than a little clumsy.

Not this time .

This time, he would worship her.

He pushed himself up, kneeling on the bed, drinking her in. The sun coming through the window kissed her bare skin, painting her in gold.

“Open for me, sweet Daisy.” His voice was a low command, edged with reverence.

She hesitated, her breath hitching—but then, trusting him, she slowly parted her knees.

His breath left him in a rush.

“God help me,” he rasped, palms sliding reverently up the soft skin of her thighs.

“Plump and pink and perfect.” Alastair growled and fingered her opening, which was already wet, ready for him. His cock stiffened almost painfully, but he ignored it.

As much a man could, anyway.

Because this time, he was determined to make this perfect for her.

No rush, no stolen moments with the fear of discovery pressing down on them. No lingering innocence, no clumsy hands or whispered promises made in desperation.

This time, he would cherish her.

He would take his time, learn every reaction, every sigh, every delicious shiver. He would tease and taste and drive her to the edge—again and again—until she understood, truly understood, that she had never been forgotten.

He explored her everywhere, using his fingertips to explore the circumference of her

wrists. The strength in her shoulders. The allure of her ankle. Her calves.

Her thighs.

He wanted to know her everywhere—more, even, than he needed to know the secrets in his own mind.

Nothing mattered but Daisy.

He palmed a breast with one hand, circling the intimate flesh between her legs with the other .

Tiny dust motes swirled and shimmered in the air, stirred by each soft, uneven breath she released. “Ala—Alastair.”

He crawled lower, kissing the indent of her belly and then tasting the skin around her hip bones. She cried out, and he dragged his whiskers from one side to the other.

Her hands clutched his head now, her fingers practically tearing out his hair.

“I don’t...” she gasped.

He paused, lifting his gaze to see her face—flushed, lips shining, her eyes sparkling beneath heavy lids. “You don’t...?”

“I don’t remember it being... like this.”

“Ah, Daisy.” Alastair felt the weight of guilt because he’d been such a?—

“It was perfect.” She cut off his thoughts. “But... so is this.”

And then she sent him a smile that cut to his very core. She shouldn't trust him. She shouldn't forgive him. He didn't deserve her. And yet...

"Don't stop." She licked her lips, looking a little worried.

"Never." He'd remove his heart and hand it over in that moment.

Humbled, Alastair lowered his chin again. Overwhelmed to be here, to be with her again, he kissed her opening and inhaled.

He could do this forever.

"I like..." She was thrusting herself against his mouth. "I like that."

Alastair couldn't quite stifle his chuckle, because his sweet Daisy was a cautious woman, but that didn't mean she wasn't adventurous.

"You taste like heaven." And honeysuckle, and sugar...

Alastair circled his tongue around her bud. He drew it into his mouth and then scraped the tender skin with his teeth.

He lapped his tongue along the seam of her sex. Not enough. Not nearly enough .

Greedy to know all of her, he dipped his head lower and delved inside.

Her body jerked, and he added a finger, listening so that he could learn her signals. Pants of pleasure. Signs of what she liked, what she needed, what she loved.

"Argh..." She wiggled her hips. "Oh. Yesssss."

With the scent of her essence filling his nostrils, on his lips, his tongue, he struggled not to get ahead of himself.

Heaven. Daisy. A stream of foolishly romantic words hammered him.

His.

Not just a dream...

He felt her hands tugging his hair, and then her entire body tensed as she reached for a feeling... the sensation...

Alastair savored her satisfaction when her legs tensed on his shoulders, when her fingernails dug into his scalp as she clutched the sides of his head.

And then... A violent shudder ran from her core to her limbs. Completion rolled through her, again, and again, and yet again...

Alastair stayed right where he was, still, patient, with feelings—so tender, so protective, that they nearly broke him.

She trembled beneath him, her breath hitching, and then—a few short, breathless sobs escaped, raw and unguarded. The sound sliced through Alastair, lodging in his chest like a blade. His own breath hitched, his body suddenly too tight, too wound.

He'd wanted her, he knew he had feelings for her, but this had unraveled into something far deeper—something almost too vast to name. It wasn't just desire; it was need. It was connection.

It terrified him.

He forced himself to hold steady, to give her space to catch her breath. Only when he felt her body soften beneath him did he push himself up, crawling up the bed to take her in his arms.

He brushed his lips over hers, featherlight. And when he reached up to smooth a few damp curls of hair from her face, his hand trembled.

“Are you all right?” His voice was rough, low.

She let out a slow exhale and opened her eyes, locking onto his with such intensity that his stomach clenched.

“Very much so,” she whispered. Then, with quiet, aching certainty, she touched his face, her fingers tracing the sharp edge of his jaw. “But Alastair, I want all of you.”

### COMPLETION

The instant Daisy spoke the words out loud, sending them up to the stars, she couldn't summon them back. Her meaning went beyond that room, beyond that moment.

She wanted whatever he was willing to give. Did that make her weak? Did that make her immoral?

And having just experienced a banquet of pleasure, did it make her greedy?

If the answer was yes, she didn't care.

Her body still trembled in the aftermath, warmth spreading through her body like golden honey. She should feel spent, sated—but instead, a new kind of hunger had awakened inside her. One that had nothing to do with desire and everything to do with him. His touch, his weight, his whispered words against her skin.

She had spent a decade pretending she didn't need this—didn't need him. And yet, here she was, reaching for more.

And she did not make this decision lightly. It was practical, logical, and rational, because she refused to live the rest of her life with regret .

They might only have one day, a few weeks, or even months. He was different, as was she.

But also because a flicker of hope still burned, deep, deep inside.

Firstly, he'd been left behind her house—which was nothing short of a miracle. And he'd lived.

Another miracle.

And then, he remembered her—he remembered loving her.

Dare she imagine it was fate that brought them back together?

“All of me?” Alastair stared down at her, looking determined, but oh, so very sweet. It was the same face she'd always loved, hardened and chiseled now. But he was Alastair.

Alastair.

She didn't need all the details to know he'd collected a handful of scars. She had scars of her own.

And yet, here they were. In her bed. Loving one another.

Lovers and friends. He'd already tugged his shirt over his head, kicked off his shoes, and shucked his trousers. He was here.

With her.

And she didn't want to waste a single breath of this moment.

“All of you,” she whispered, tilting her chin up, savoring his closeness, not taking a second of this for granted.



Alastair's eyes darkened as he exhaled a ragged breath. "You have all of me, Daisy. I think you always have."

She trailed her fingers over his shoulders, down the strong planes of his back. "I know." Even when everything told her she'd lost, her heart kept beating for him.

His lips brushed the curve of her throat, then lower, tracing a path of fire down to her collarbone. "You know?" He nipped at her skin .

A thrill rippled through her, sharp and sweet. "I know." Had she always known?

He captured her lips again, and this time, his kiss was deliberate, consuming. Slow and sure, like he was memorizing every inch of her with his mouth alone. As though he had all the time in the world to rediscover her.

Daisy arched against him, heat pooling low in her belly. "You didn't take this much time the first time."

He groaned, nuzzling the hollow of her throat. "I was a fumbling fool. Desperate."

She hummed. "And now?"

His lips curved against her skin. "Still desperate." His hands slid lower, possessive, reverent. "But wiser."

She felt the evidence of that wisdom pressing insistently against her thigh. With a sultry smile, she slid her fingers down, wrapping them around his thick shaft.

Memories of silken steel flooded through her.

Alastair shuddered, his breath coming in harsh pants. "You're going to undo me."

“It’s only fair,” she murmured. “Isn’t it?”

His laughter died into a groan as she guided him to where she needed him most, teasing him, teasing herself.

She had never forgotten that afternoon of loving. If she had, she’d never have known what she lost.

But she, too, was wiser now. She knew that perfect moments like this one were fleeting. Even the most powerful love could be shattered.

But love could also be magic.

Alastair pushed inside, and every cell of her body came alive.

Magic. The depths of the deepest valley followed by the pinnacle of the highest mountain.

He withdrew and then went deeper.

Fate .

She moved with him, cherishing each sensation, each kiss, each touch, each stroke and thrust. And again, while embracing everything about him, a second round of tears escaped. Tears of awe and joy.

The world beyond them ceased to exist.

The walls, the bed, the sun—everything blurred, faded into insignificance. There was only this. Only them. The desperate rhythm of their bodies, unspoken emotions crackling in the air.

They moved together purposefully, holding one another's gaze even when the intensity made it feel impossible. His green eyes burned into her, searing straight to her soul, the golden flecks burning.

"My love, my Daisy," he rasped, his voice thick with emotion.

Alastair drove into her, deep and sure, each stroke unraveling her more than the one before, drawing her closer to the edge.

She clung to him, touching his face, gripping his shoulders, feeling the slick heat of his skin beneath her fingertips.

Oh, how she needed this.

Oh, how she needed him.

And when this second wave of pleasure crashed over her, she shattered into a thousand pieces. She came apart willingly—crying out, arching beneath him, her body pulsing around his.

He followed with a shuddering groan, deeper than ever before, releasing inside of her body, his entire frame tensing as he surrendered to the ecstasy of it.

For long moments, neither of them moved.

She smoothed her hands around his neck, over his shoulders, her touch featherlight, soothing. And when she wanted to say something, anything...

Words escaped her.

His weight settled over her like a loving blanket. She wrapped her arms around him,

pressing her lips to his damp temple.

She would always love him.

No matter what came next, no matter where fate led them, this would always be true.

A cloud drifted across the sky, covering the golden sunlight right before they drifted into sleep, lost in the moment where nothing else existed.

### RUNNING OUT OF TIME

When Daisy awoke, it was to the sounds of her brother and Alastair downstairs in the kitchen. She ought to rush down to join them, ask Gilbert about his day at school, but she remained lounging in her bed, the covers rumpled around her.

She wanted to draw out the afternoon—a few stolen hours she never could have imagined.

After they'd made love, she'd barely slept a few minutes before waking to Alastair's touch. "I want you again," his voice had rumbled near her ear.

She smiled sleepily, recalling his hand between her legs, his mouth tasting her everywhere.

He'd rolled onto his back, shifting her legs so that she straddled him.

He'd told her to take what she wanted, to move how she wanted, and she'd done just that. Had it been too good ?

She shivered even as an unexpected vise squeezed her chest. Was it fear? Understandable, yes. But for now, Daisy refused to acknowledge it .

But it did get her moving, washing up and changing into a different gown than the wrinkled one on the floor.

Downstairs, she didn't immediately announce herself, but waited at the threshold,

watching her brother chop vegetables while Alastair sautéed slices of meat on the stove.

And the sight, it brought a massive lump to her throat. Her brother had barely known their father, and seeing him enjoying the companionship of another male figure was bittersweet.

“Don’t forget the salt. And garlic. Daisy always adds at least four cloves of garlic.”

Alastair was cooking her recipe. With her brother.

Dash it all, if she didn’t shake this off, she’d turn into a puddle of sentimental treacle. So she pushed herself away from the door and stepped inside. “Supper smells like it’s going to be delicious.”

Alastair glanced over, sending her a look that further weakened her knees. Her brother halted the movements of the knife and studied her with concern.

“I’ve never known you to sleep in the day. Are you unwell?”

“Just lazy, I’m afraid. But I’m well enough.” She most certainly couldn’t tell her younger brother that, although her muscles ached, her body was a giant lump of satisfaction.

Alastair raised a brow.

“Quite well, actually,” she added. She would not blush.

She donned her apron and went to work dicing an onion and again found herself melting inside as the conversation flowed around her.

All of this felt too natural— too perfect.

In no time at all, the stew had thickened, and the three of them sat down to eat dinner together.

Gilbert, as per usual, enthusiastically shared the more interesting facets of his lessons that day. Alastair encouraged him with astute comments and challenging questions .

And Daisy sat and listened with half an ear, quieter than usual, reeling from all that had happened that day.

“Have you remembered anything yet—who you really are?” Gilbert asked toward the end of the meal. It was the first thing Gilbert had asked her every morning since Alastair arrived. Who is he?

But the answer was far more complicated than a simple name.

Was Alastair her friend? Her lover? More than that?

Her past.

Her future?

“Not yet. Just a few images, unfocused, though.” They’d decided that until Alastair knew all of the truth, they would keep his identity to themselves. “Interesting that I’ve retained the benefits of my schooling. The brain, young Gilbert, values education.” He laughed, meeting Daisy’s gaze as he took a bite of stew.

She dipped her chin in an almost imperceptible nod.

She didn’t want to bring Gilbert into any of this. It was all too new. Too... fragile.

And possibly dangerous.

When they finished eating, Daisy shooed her brother off to finish his homework while she and Alastair remained behind to clear the table together.

The quiet between them felt heavier than it should have. And, inexplicably, she wasn't sure what to say.

“You don’t have to help me, you know.” Her voice came out softer than intended, almost uncertain. You’re a guest.

She suddenly felt stiff in his presence, acutely aware of the newness between them—this fragile, unspoken thing that had formed in the wake of that afternoon.

Had she allowed herself to hope for too much? No. She hadn’t reached, she assured herself. She had only dreamed .

Alastair didn’t seem to notice her tension. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her from behind, pulling her close, warming her with his touch until she exhaled and melted against him.

“I told you,” he murmured against her temple. “I refuse to be a burden.”

“I know,” she whispered, tilting her head to rest against his chest. But what happens now?

She turned in his arms, lifting her gaze to his, searching for an answer she wasn’t sure she wanted. “I just...”

“I need to speak with my uncle.”



The words sliced through the moment.

Daisy stiffened. “But?—”

“Until I figure out who tried to kill me, every day spent in your home puts both you and your brother in danger.” His voice was steady, determined.

Resolved.

She shook her head. “But your injuries?—”

Alastair silenced her with the brush of two fingers against her lips. “Physically, I’m fine. And with most of my memories returned, I need to seek out the truth.”

The truth. Meaning, the identity of whoever had tried to kill him.

And just like that, the delicate world they’d built between them was slipping through her fingers.

Again.

“But what if... what if it was your uncle?”

Alastair shook his head. “My father’s brother would never harm me. There was too much love between them.” He touched his hand to his heart. “It’s impossible.”

Daisy didn’t completely agree, and she couldn’t help remembering times in the past when he’d been optimistic—when he’d assured her they could be together. Forever...

But... How could she argue ?

How must Alastair feel to hear someone suggest that his uncle would try to kill him?

She could be wrong. She wanted desperately to be wrong.

Something that was entirely possible.

Especially when the articles she'd saved suggested Alastair had, in fact, cultivated more than one powerful political enemy.

"It would be good," she spoke cautiously, stepping out of his arms, "If your uncle could help. When will you go?"

But she already knew.

"First thing in the morning."

She dried a dish, placed it on its proper shelf, and then turned around to meet his stare. "Will you come upstairs?" she asked. "Later?"

She didn't want to risk her brother discovering the two of them, but she felt... afraid.

Desperately afraid for this man.

Alastair had been in her life once and then disappeared for what could have been forever. She would never take him for granted again.

"If you'll have me," he said.

"Oh, yes."

"But you'll have to be quiet."

Her brows shot up. "I am quiet!"

But he shook his head. "More than once this afternoon, I feared the lovely Mrs. Farley might come knocking, demanding you show your face to prove that I wasn't murdering you."

"She wouldn't!" But Daisy vaguely recalled a few particularly intense moments...  
"Perhaps I was a little loud."

"Don't worry." He stole a kiss, cradling her breast with one hand, sliding his knee between her thighs, and holding her there with the other. "I'll take care of that mouth of yours."

She gasped as he nipped at her lips, sparking every inch of her skin to life. When had she become so sensitive ?

She dropped her hands over the wool of his breeches.

"I have a few ideas," she whispered.

"Daisy?" They jumped apart at the sound of her brother calling from upstairs. "Do you have an extra pencil?"

"I'll be right there!" But her gaze dropped to where she'd been touching Alastair. He wanted her again.

Would this ever be enough?

### COMPLICATED

“ A fter breakfast?” Daisy exhaled, content—practically boneless in his arms.

Midnight had long passed, and in the wake of a good deal of catching up, she ought to be sleepy. She ought to feel nothing but warmth and satisfaction.

But instead, unease curled deep in her belly.

“I need to get to the bottom of this.” Alastair’s voice was a low murmur against her hair. He drew lazy circles on the back of her wrist with his thumb, the small gesture somehow making her feel cherished, even as her heart braced for what was to come. “Because I want more of this .”

Daisy’s breath hitched.

His words hinted at a future she refused to imagine. They echoed her deepest, most desperate desires. But they also taunted her. Because no matter how much she wished to believe him, she couldn’t forget the reality of their circumstances.

“It’s not that simple, though.” She’d argued this before—more times than she could count .

But this time, rather than dismissing her concerns, he surprised her.

“It isn’t.” He let out a quiet chuckle, his lips brushing the sensitive skin of her shoulder. “In fact, it’s complicated as hell.”

She twisted around to study his face, half expecting to find amusement lurking in his expression.

But there was none. Instead, his gaze held hers, steady and sure.

He was no longer the boy from her youth. He was a man, confident, proud, and ... utterly unwavering in his intent.

A man who had seen the world, who had fought for his beliefs, who had nearly died—and yet, here he was...

A man who had once walked away.

And a man who, despite everything, was now telling her he wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

“Anything worth having, Daisy, is never going to be easy.” His voice came out rough with conviction. “You are my heart, and I’m prepared to fight for us this time. I’m no longer an ill-informed heir—easily manipulated by Society’s dictates.”

Daisy swallowed hard, her fingers tightening over his. “Or those of your uncle,” she felt it necessary to add.

His mouth flattened slightly, but he didn't argue.

“He only did what he thought was best, I suppose.” A sigh escaped him. “He mourned my father as deeply as I did. And he is my uncle. My flesh and blood.”

Daisy hesitated. She wanted to push—wanted to tell him that there were different kinds of loyalty. That the ties of family could be both a comfort and a prison.

But she had not been there. She had not lived in his world.

And she could not argue with the love he still held for a man who might have betrayed him.

“Do you have a plan?” She trusted Alastair.

Fate, not so much.

He rolled onto his side, brushing his knuckles against her cheek. “I will learn what my uncle knows.” A determined glint entered his eyes. “And I will tell him I’ve found you again and that this time, there will be a betrothal. Afterwards, you and I will go to the authorities together. They’ll need a description of my attackers. I’ll hire additional watchmen until the culprit is brought to justice.”

Daisy’s lips parted, but no words came.

Betrothal?

As though it were already decided. As though this future she’d only ever allowed herself to dream of in the quietest moments of longing could actually be real.

But reality had a way of tearing her dreams apart.

She curled her fingers around the sheet beneath her, willing herself to ignore the cold trickle of fear in her veins. Because no matter how much she wanted to believe in him, she couldn’t forget the lesson she had already learned.

Hope was dangerous.

So was love.

And yet, he was in her bed. She was in his arms.

She twisted around again, this time feigning indignation. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” She swallowed against the effervescence bubbling in her chest, fighting the ridiculous urge to grin.

Oh, how she adored the way the moonlight softened the sharp angles of his face, the shadows along his jaw, the fullness of his lips. But most of all, she adored the way he looked at her—with undisguised affection, with something perilously close to reverence.

He frowned, puzzled for only a moment before realization dawned in his eyes, sending those gold flecks dancing. “I have not asked you yet.”

A thrill ran through her, even as she fought to suppress it. “This is the first time I’ve seen you blush. ”

He rolled over, pinning her to the mattress. “I never blush,” he said gruffly, his breath teasing her lips.

“How would you know?” she murmured, biting back a laugh.

His expression turned solemn, the teasing flickering away like a candle snuffed by the wind. “Marry me, Daisy. Be my wife.”

This time, he was not a boy.

She sucked in a breath. His proposal was too perfect. Too much of a dream.

“I am no duchess,” she whispered, searching his face, waiting for him to see reason.

But he didn't waver. The gold in his eyes blazed with determination, fierce and unwavering. "You need only be yourself. We'll figure everything out later. But I can't lose you again." His voice dropped, rough with emotion. "I refuse to lose you again." He exhaled sharply, like a man making a final gamble. "Please, my love, make me the happiest of men."

He was impossible.

Because he was asking for a promise neither of them could keep.

And yet... he was willing to fight for her. For them .

Was she such a coward that she would surrender before the battle had even begun?

"I'm not..." She swallowed hard. "I don't even know how to set a table properly. I wouldn't know how to exist in your world." Surely, he must understand this.

His lips twitched as if he might laugh, but instead, he smoothed his hand down her arm, his thumb tracing slow, reassuring circles. "Which, if I'm being honest, is part of what makes you the perfect wife." His expression was utterly sincere. "You are intelligent beyond your years, truly elegant in your honesty, and on top of all that, you are breathtakingly beautiful." He cupped her cheek, his palm warm and grounding. "But more important than all of that, you are real, Daisy. And you make me real. "

Her breath hitched. His words were finding their way into the cracks she'd tried so hard to seal.

He placed his palm over her heart. "You've proven yourself stronger than most men, Daisy. You've cared for your brother, built a business, survived against all odds. You have done what people in my world could never do."



She stared up at him, stunned.

“You are compassionate and kind. Daisy, by God, you possess the heart of a queen.” His voice wavered now, raw with sincerity. “But most important of all, I love you.”

The words sent a tremor through her, stealing her breath.

“I’ll fight for us too,” she whispered. But a part of her was terrified—because what if they lost? What if this all crumbled beneath them? Failure felt like the most likely outcome, and she wasn’t sure her heart could survive losing him again.

“Is that a yes?” His grin was boyish, hopeful—too confident, as if he already knew her answer.

And how could she say anything but yes?

Her lips curled, and she wound her arms around him, tugging him down so his full weight pressed the breath from her lungs in the best possible way. “If this all works out,” she murmured against his skin, “I’ll marry you.”

“It will work out.” His mouth found hers, sealing the promise. “Trust me.”

Very early the next morning, while Daisy slept soundly beside him, sleep eluded Alastair. The weight of all that needed to be done pressed heavily on his chest.

By the time a hint of rose-colored light peeked over the horizon, he had slipped out of bed, dressed in the clothes Daisy had mended, and begun pacing the room.

He debated waking her.

If he left now, he could speak with his uncle and possibly have everything sorted

before she even finished preparing breakfast.

But if he woke her, she'd... not try to stop him, but perhaps distract him, delay him.

So instead of nudging her awake, instead of seeing that soft, worried look in her eyes, he leaned down and pressed a light kiss to her forehead, lingering longer than he should. Then he crept downstairs, moving as quietly as possible.

What he had not anticipated was Gilbert, already awake, seated at the kitchen table with a book open in front of him, a single flickering candle casting long shadows over the room.

The moment Alastair emerged from the stairwell, Gilbert looked up, his young face a mask of stern disapproval. His jaw lifted proudly—so much like Daisy's that Alastair almost smiled.

"You have remembered," the boy said. Not a question. A statement. He was sharper than his years suggested.

Alastair inclined his head. "I have." He kept his voice low.

Gilbert's eyes narrowed. "And so, you're sneaking out before daylight—sneaking out of my sister's bed." He sat up straighter, shoulders squared. "I'm going to have to challenge you."

Alastair blinked, first in surprise, then in fierce pride. The sheer audacity of the boy stunned him—but only for a moment. Of course, Daisy's brother would stand up for her honor. Young though he was, he carried himself like a man already, a testament to how she had raised him .

Alastair exhaled. "I'm not sneaking out," he assured him. "And I'm certainly not

abandoning her. Or you.”

“She knows you’re leaving, then?”

Alastair hesitated for only a moment before answering. “We discussed it.”

The boy’s eyes darkened, and Alastair sighed.

“She wanted me to wait until after breakfast, but... I cannot wait.” He met Gilbert’s eyes and then added, “And I swear to you, I will come back to her.” He hesitated, then added, “To both of you.”

Gilbert studied him in silence for a long moment, his young face far too serious for his years.

Alastair scrubbed a hand down his face. “When she wakes, she’ll explain everything to you.” He wouldn’t presume to tell the boy anything without discussing it with her first. Daisy might wish to keep some of their history to herself.

Gilbert’s eyes didn’t soften. “You were only supposed to pretend to be her husband so the neighbors wouldn’t talk,” he reminded him. “But you’ve taken advantage of our hospitality, and now you intend to leave.”

It wasn’t an accusation made lightly.

Alastair met his gaze squarely—man to man. “I am leaving to clear the way so I can marry her.” He let the truth settle between them before he said firmly, “I love your sister.”

Gilbert’s jaw twitched, his expression unreadable as he absorbed this.

“She has agreed to this?” His voice had lost some of its heat.

Alastair crossed to the table and placed his palms flat on the surface. “I should have talked with you first.” He showed her brother the respect he deserved. “I’d be honored to have your blessing.” The thickness in his throat surprised him, but following a tense few seconds, Gilbert nodded.

“So long as it’s what she wants.” There was no talk of marriage contracts or dowries. And yet, the genuineness of the moment would be with him forever.

“It is,” Alastair said. He then rose to his full height. “But first, I need to settle my affairs.”

“Are you in danger?”

“I’ll be careful.”

“You promise?”

“Absolutely.”

Alastair strode to the door but then paused and turned. “Tell her I love her. And that I’ll return soon.”

“I will.”

Then, slowly, he gave a single nod. It was not full acceptance, but it was enough.

Still, Alastair hesitated. “Look after her until I return.”

“She’s looked after herself just fine without you,” Gilbert muttered.

Alastair smiled wryly. “That she has.”

And with that, he slipped out the door into the breaking dawn, determined to prove himself worthy of the woman waiting for him upstairs.

### SHE WAS RIGHT

A lastair moved through the streets with purpose, keeping to the shadows, his collar turned up against the morning chill. The city was just beginning to wake, but he remained acutely aware of every footstep, every passing figure. He had no way of knowing who had tried to kill him, which meant he had to assume everyone was a threat.

When he reached Lovington House, he did not bother approaching the front entrance. Instead, he skirted around the side of the property, slipping through the alley that led to the servants' entrance at the back.

The heavy door creaked as he eased it open, stepping into the familiar warmth of the kitchen. The scents of fresh bread and simmering broth wrapped around him, stirring something long-buried in his memory.

And then he was met with a sharp, startled gasp.

Mrs. Tanner, the formidable woman who had ruled this space for as long as he could remember, stood stock-still, flour dusting the front of her apron. For an instant, the blood drained from her familiar, ageless face. She clutched a rolling pin in one hand as though it were a weapon .

“They said you were dead,” she breathed, her eyes wide. But then, as if coming to her senses, she straightened her spine, her sharp gaze raking over him. “You aren’t a ghost, are you?”

“Not a ghost, Mrs. Tanner.” Alastair offered her a reassuring smile. He remembered this woman—not just from stories or articles but truly remembered. The way her hands never ceased moving, kneading dough, chopping vegetables, stirring pots. The way a younger version of himself had pilfered biscuits from the pantry while she’d scolded him in a way that suggested she wasn’t truly cross.

She recovered quickly, as he’d expected. “You look like a street urchin,” she muttered. “Half-starved, bruised up—what have you been about, then?”

“That’s a rather long story.”

“Hmm.” Mrs. Tanner folded her arms. “Long story or not, should I send for the authorities?”

This woman was no fool, and she, of course, would suspect that some kind of foul play was at hand. Servants always knew more than their employers gave them credit for.

“Refrain for now,” he said. Because Daisy had said the men who’d left him for dead had been police, and Alastair had no way of knowing which bobbies were in his enemy’s pocket.

“Is my uncle awake yet?”

Mrs. Tanner’s mouth tightened as she wiped her hands on her apron. “Of course. You know he rises with the sun.” Then, after a pause, she sniffed and added, “He’s in the study. Your study, as we speak.”

The tone in her voice, as much as the words themselves, shifted something in Alastair’s gut.

His study.

He'd been clinging to the belief that his uncle—his father's own brother—couldn't possibly pose any real threat to him.

But standing here now, in his own home, hearing something...off in Mrs. Tanner's voice—something she wasn't quite saying aloud—he felt the first real stirrings of doubt.

Alastair gave the astute woman a meaningful stare before nodding and then forcing his features into a neutral mask.

“My thanks, Mrs. Tanner.” He pivoted toward the door that led to the small stairway normally reserved for servants.

“Your Grace?” Her voice halted him mid-step.

He turned back.

She hesitated, then squared her shoulders. “It's good to have you home again.”

There—just for a moment—her normally sharp gaze softened, and if he wasn't mistaken, there was the faintest shimmer of moisture in her eyes.

A strange warmth spread through his chest. Home . He hadn't realized until this moment how much the idea of it mattered.

By God, how long had he been gone?

“Good to be back,” he said, swallowing around the lump in his throat before disappearing through the narrow passage. He turned toward the steps leading to the



main floor with quiet precision. The house would have felt peaceful if not for the sound of his pulse beating loudly in his ears.

When he reached the landing, he paused, pressing his back against the wall and peering down the corridor. No sign of any footmen.

The house was waking. Soon, his presence would be impossible to hide.

He knew exactly where to go, as if he'd never left, every room and hallway as familiar to him as the back of his hand.

He did not knock before stepping into the study that would always remind him of his father.

Everything about the room welcomed him, from the rich walnut molding to the deep leather armchairs and the warm coals glowing in the massive hearth .

And yet, seeing his last living relative so comfortable nearly made him feel like an intruder.

The man sitting behind Alastair's desk, in Alastair's chair, with the windows at his back, should have been a familiar sight—should have stirred a sense of security, of kinship.

Instead, Alastair felt something else entirely.

Foreboding.

A warning .

"Uncle Calvin," he said. His voice was calm, but his body coiled tight.

Lord Calvin Frampton looked up from the papers in front of him, his jaw going slack.

For a long, stretched moment, he did nothing but stare. Then, suddenly, he lurched back so violently that his chair nearly tipped over. “My God!” he gasped, scrambling to his feet. “What the devil—? How?—?”

A flicker of something crossed his uncle’s face. Shock. Fear.

Guilt?

But just as quickly, as if by sheer force of will, the emotions smoothed over into a practiced mask of relief.

Alastair’s gaze drifted over his uncle—the elaborate lace at his wrists, the rich purple velvet of his jacket, the finely embroidered waistcoat beneath.

And then...

The ring.

His ring .

Resting on the man’s left pinky as though it had always belonged there.

She was right. Of course .

Daisy had been right all along.

A strange calm settled over Alastair, one that came with the brutal clarity of truth. The last missing pieces of the puzzle clicked into place, and in a rush, he remembered everything.

“Who, precisely, are you calling on for help, Uncle?” The words left his mouth before he could stop them, low and lethal. “God... or the devil?”

The locked pages of his mind had opened. It was as if they’d never been closed.

Alastair had never forgotten Daisy. He had never stopped searching for her.

And for all that time, he had assumed his uncle had been his greatest ally.

The man before him—his father’s own brother—was someone Alastair had trusted without question.

But he had not known this man. Not truly.

Lord Calvin clumsily reached across the desk, as if to draw him closer, his expression carefully measured. “My boy... where in God’s name have you been? We were beginning to believe the worst had happened.”

Alastair recalled the article. His uncle had all but declared him dead.

His lip curled. “Not the worst. Not quite.”

He stepped forward, extending his hand.

His uncle hesitated but took it—Alastair clasped it firmly, searching his face, watching for the flicker of truth beneath the mask. “What did you think happened?”

The older man withdrew his hand almost immediately.

“Well, we had no idea,” Lord Calvin said, not meeting Alastair’s eyes, but smoothing down the lace at his wrists. “Scotland Yard has been turning the city upside down.

One day you were here, and the next..." He gave an elegant shrug. "You were not."

"You must have been devastated," Alastair said, his tone as dry as dust.

"I was. I was! We must... er, celebrate." Then, obviously forcing his enthusiasm, his uncle turned and tugged the bell pull—summoning tea, or perhaps something stronger.

Alastair did not move .

His uncle's casualness—the way he had so seamlessly taken possession of Alastair's space—sent a bolt of rage through him.

The worst recollection slammed into him, along with other volatile emotions. Shock. Anger.

Pain.

His voice emerged deadly calm. "You knew where I was going."

His uncle faltered for only a second. "I... well?—"

"What I don't understand," Alastair continued, stepping closer, "is why, if you wanted the title, you would wait so long take action."

Ten. Long. Years.

For half a second, Alastair thought his uncle might deny it.

But then—his entire demeanor changed.

Any pretense of concern drained from Lord Calvin's features, leaving nothing but cold, calculating ugliness. At the same time, a tension seemed to bleed from his shoulders—almost as though he was relieved to stop pretending.

"I never intended for it to come to that," Lord Calvin said at last, his voice flat. Dead.

Alastair stared at him. "Then why?" His breath came rough.

His uncle's expression twisted. "Don't pretend you don't know. And I refuse to allow you to taint the line with that... with that..." He waved a disgusted hand. "Boy."

Boy?

Alastair went still. "What boy?"

"How you managed to find her after..." His uncle shook his head. "Do you think I haven't known you were staying with them all this time? Your father was a fool to allow you to cavort with one of them. I won't make the mistakes he would have. I won't allow it. Do you hear me? I won't allow it." The older man practically spat.

A sharp chill lanced through Alastair's veins.

Them ?

What the devil was his uncle talking about? And what boy was he talking about? Surely his uncle didn't mean Gilbert ?

"You couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" Lord Calvin's voice was almost weary now, as if Alastair were the one causing him an inconvenience. "You had to go looking for her."

His uncle exhaled sharply, shaking his head in disappointment. “After all I did to get rid of her, the matter ought to have been resolved long ago. Ten years, Alastair. Did you really imagine I’d allow her into your life again?”

Alastair’s fingers curled into fists.

“... ‘All you did to get rid of’ ... who?” Alastair prompted.

“Don’t be daft. Of course, I sent the Montgomerys away while you were with your father.” Alastair had sat with his father for the last week of his life, and then Alastair, too, had become ill.

“I wrote her letters.”

“Letters are easily... lost.” His uncle looked so proud of himself. “Besides, she and her family had already been evicted. Once I realized they had settled in London, I had a few of my men keep tabs on the family. That’s how I learned about the boy. But as long as she ceased to exist for you, the child wasn’t a problem.” He pointed at Alastair’s chest. “This is your own fault.”

His uncle’s words unraveled a darkness Alastair hadn’t realized he’d been living in.

Dear God, he had confided his feelings for Daisy to his uncle on more than one occasion. Alastair clenched his fists at his sides.

He’d told him that he would never stop searching for her.

After years of chasing leads that led nowhere, it was sheer luck that finally put him on the right path—luck, because an unexpected clue had fallen right into his lap .

And of all places, it had happened at the Duchess of Willoughby’s ball.

While waltzing with the Countess of Grassley, he'd offhandedly complimented her perfume. Beaming with pride, the widowed lady had revealed that it was custom-made by a young woman who owned a small shop just outside of Mayfair.

The fragrance wasn't the same as he'd remembered, but until then, Alastair had never known another woman to wear that particular blend of honeysuckle oil.

Fashionable ladies of the ton, he'd discovered, preferred more common perfumes—blends of lavender, jasmine, and rose.

When he returned home that evening, he'd made the very unfortunate decision to confide what he'd learned to his uncle—along with the fact that he would go there—that he would meet with this soapmaker. Alastair had been bent on following a strong suspicion after so long with nothing, but Uncle Calvin must have known immediately that he was on the right track.

“I was going to find her. But you couldn't allow that, could you?” His voice shook with both anger and pain. He'd trusted his uncle. “How could you?”

“Everything I've done has been to honor your father and the dukes who came before you.” His uncle tugged a second time on the bellpull behind him. “If you'd think beyond your own selfish desires for once, you'd see that you should be thanking me.”

For a decade, Alastair had lived in ignorance—believing Daisy was the one who left him, believing their love had simply not been meant to last.

But he had never let her go.

And neither, it seemed... had his uncle.

The memory of Daisy's tortured expression flashed in his mind.

I was too ashamed to tell my father. He blamed himself for all of it.

Alastair's chest burned.

Because he now understood.

Fate hadn't torn them apart, nor had it brought them together again.

Their estrangement had been orchestrated by Alastair's own flesh and blood.

Daisy had been right all along. And he hadn't wanted to believe it. Damn my eyes.

"You're mad," Alastair said.

Alastair had been going to her shop when the bobbies attacked. They had come out of the shadows, striking before he had time to react. The next thing he knew, he'd been dragged into a cellar and held there for what could have been days—weeks, even. And they had beaten him. Repeatedly.

Weakened but not broken, he had bided his time, feigning unconsciousness until an opportunity presented itself. When one of his captors grew careless, he fought through the pain, using every ounce of strength left in him to escape.

He'd been disoriented, had no memory of Lovington House or his own name. With nothing but an address he'd found in his pocket, he'd made his way there. He hadn't known Daisy was there, but the shop had been his only hope.

In an attempt to shake his pursuers, he'd limped around to the back.

But they had found him anyway. Beaten him and left him for dead. Simply because of his uncle's prejudice, his lust for control, and ultimately, power.



Bile rose in Alastair's throat. There must be a special place in hell for his uncle and the men he'd paid off.

"You would kill me for... the honor of a bloody title?"

"You forced my hand, Lovington!" His uncle leaned forward. "Because of the boy. You must know his very existence is a threat to the dukedom."

"What boy are you talking about?"

"The boy who lives at the shop. Your son, of course."

Alastair blinked. Was it possible? But no... It was not.

"I have not sired a son!" Alastair paced the length of the room. "The boy who lives in the shop is Daisy's brother, for God's sake." True, they had lain together once, but they had been interrupted. He had not ejaculated.

Still, he experienced two seconds of doubt.

It was possible, he supposed, that a small amount of his seed had somehow made its way...

Had Daisy given birth after leaving Woodland Priory?

She was not above a lie in order to protect what was hers. But Gilbert had said his birthday was in autumn—which didn't add up.

Unless that was part of the deception. A false birthday.

She had told him everything. Of course she had! Gilbert was her brother .

But his uncle had cultivated some misguided idea that Daisy's brother was a threat to the "sanctity" of the Lovington dukedom.

And the more distance Alastair could set between the two, the safer Gilbert would be.

"Even if he was my son, he wouldn't be legitimate. He wouldn't inherit." Surely his uncle comprehended this. The laws were quite clear when it came to these matters.

Alastair rolled his shoulders. His uncle was wrong.

Not that Alastair wouldn't have been proud to call the young man his son, but his feelings on the matter would not have been legally relevant.

While Alastair was wrestling with the possibility that he could be the father of a ten-year-old boy, his uncle had retrieved a file from the desk drawer and tossed it down for Alastair to open. It had been compiled by Alastair himself and contained every note or piece of evidence he'd collected over the years while searching for Daisy.

The last time he'd read it, he'd locked it in his safe.

"But the boy is legitimate." His uncle slapped open the front page. "And the proof is right here. A marriage certificate."

Alastair blinked at the familiar souvenir from his youth and would have burst out laughing if not for the fact that his uncle had used this to justify murder.

He and Daisy had drawn up the very unofficial document one summer afternoon when they'd pretended to marry. A mere game. They had also drawn up treasure maps, secret magic spells and all manner of foolishness that could spring from the imagination of youth.

“I failed to find verification at any of the local churches, but I couldn’t risk that it was authentic.”

And that was the moment Alastair turned livid. Leveling an ice-cold stare across the desk, he spoke very softly. “Believing I was hiding a secret son, a secret heir, you decided... to kill me?”

There was a look in his uncle’s eyes that told Alastair he was only partly right.

“It never would have been an issue if you’d only stayed away from her. I told you long ago she was a mistake. You should have listened to me then.”

But Alastair had no time to waste.

His uncle knew where Daisy lived.

His uncle believed Gilbert was Alastair’s legal son. He’d seen the two of them together recently. And he’d hired corrupt officers to do his bidding.

But, most alarming of all—Alastair had left the two alone this morning—unprotected.

Even as tension coiled through his muscles, the door burst open.

Two officers of the new police force stood on the threshold .

Alastair’s entire body snapped to attention, a surge of raw instinct flooding his veins. His mind flashed to the cellar, the cold bite of iron shackles, the sickening crunch of fists against bone.

Every inch of him sharpened, poised to strike first or flee if necessary. His gaze flicked over their uniforms, assessing their stance, their expressions—calculating the

odds. Were they in his uncle's pocket? Had they come to finish what their predecessors had failed to do?

“Where are Officers Brown and Giles?” His uncle demanded in a voice that was both frustrated and alarmed.

Brown. Giles.

Alastair knew those names.

He remembered their voices sneering in the darkness, the casual cruelty in their fists, their boots.

But these men were not them.

Mrs. Tanner was hovering behind them. Her voice cut through, steady and sure. “I called for them, Your Grace.”

Alastair exhaled sharply, the tight coil in his chest loosening—but only slightly. These were not his uncle's henchmen. Mrs. Tanner had summoned them. And if she had called for the law, it meant—for the first time in weeks—he was not the hunted.

But he did not fully stand down.

Daisy and Gilbert were alone.

Straightening to his full height, he lifted his chin, his voice ringing with the authority he had been born into. “Excellent timing, Mrs. Tanner.”

He turned to the bobbies. “Lord Calvin Frampton has made an attempt on my life.” He could feel his uncle bristle at the accusation, but Alastair didn't so much as glance

his way. His focus was singular. “But that is not my immediate concern. A ten-year-old boy’s life is in danger.”

Gilbert .

And Daisy—God help him. Because she would do anything to protect her brother.

And his uncle had said he’d had people watching Daisy’s shop. They all too easily could have seen Alastair leaving earlier that morning.

“I need a horse.” Alastair’s tone left no room for argument. “Now.”

He flicked a sharp gaze over the two bobbies, selecting the one with the broadest frame. “You—come with me.” Then he turned to the smaller man. “You will take Lord Calvin into custody immediately. I’ll provide a statement once I know my household is safe.”

Without waiting for confirmation, Alastair spun on his heel and strode outside, his movements efficient, controlled. He was a man reclaiming his destiny, a duke taking command.

Alastair swung onto the saddle of the officer’s mount in one fluid motion. Digging his heels into the horse’s flanks, he took off at a gallop, his entire being focused on one singular truth?—

His entire life was waiting for him in that small shop.

And he would not be too late.

He’d already taken far too long to find her, ten years of waiting, ten years of existing with a gaping hole where his heart should be. If he didn’t make it in time now...

No. He refused to entertain the possibility. He would go to Daisy and her brother, and he would protect both of them from here on out.

Once he had Daisy in his arms again, he'd never let her go.

### UNWANTED VISITORS

“Where is he?” Daisy pounced on her unsuspecting brother the minute she stepped into the kitchen. She then strode across the room and opened the cupboard where she’d left Alastair’s mended clothing. Her heart dropped to see it bare.

“He said he’ll be back later today.” Gilbert’s cheeks flushed. “He also said that he loves you. And he wants to marry you.”

“When?”

Gilbert’s eyes scrunched together in confusion. “When... will he marry you?”

“No! When did he leave?” The hour was early, and yet the house was unusually quiet. Foreboding curled around her. She’d known he was gone the moment she’d opened her eyes. It was almost as though her soul could feel his absence.

“Half an hour ago, maybe more? He said he’d be careful.” Gilbert drew back his shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure.”

Daisy ran her hand through her hair and scowled when her fingers got caught in tangled curls. She’d come downstairs in such a hurry that she hadn’t bothered with her appearance whatsoever.

Was there something to worry over or was this feeling— this fear —a result of

having lost him once before? He'd said he was going to speak with his uncle today, so this situation wasn't entirely unexpected, but he hadn't informed her that he would be leaving so early.

Still, if nothing was wrong, why had her heart dropped the moment her hand met the cold, empty mattress?

Daisy forced herself to breathe, to think, but her heart pounded a frantic rhythm against her ribs. She paced the length of the kitchen, torn between clinging to reason and surrendering to the gut-wrenching certainty that something was very, very wrong.

If Alastair was right about his uncle, then perhaps she had nothing to fear.

But if he was wrong...

The thought was unbearable.

"I need to go after him." The words tumbled from her lips before she had fully processed them. It was likely too late to catch up with him, but standing here and doing nothing was impossible. There had to be something—anything—she could do. She'd figure it out on the way.

She turned on her heel, only to curse under her breath. "Drat it all, I need to get dressed first!"

Not waiting for Gilbert's response, she tore up the stairs two at a time, barely registering the feel of the wood beneath her bare feet. Once in her chamber, she dressed with trembling fingers, pulling a plain gown over her chemise, skipping stockings altogether. Her hair remained unbrushed, but she shoved her feet into her half-boots and barely managed to button them before rushing back down.



Gilbert stood at the door, arms crossed, his jaw set with a stubborn determination .

“I’m coming with you,” he announced, his chin lifting in defiance. “I can afford to miss a day of school. I can’t afford to lose my sister.”

Something inside her softened. Her brave, wonderful brother.

“You’re not going to lose me,” she promised, though her stomach twisted as she said it.

She should have argued, should have sent him somewhere safe, but the truth was—if there was trouble at Alastair’s townhouse, she could send Gilbert for help. Her brother was young, but he was fit, and he was smart.

And, it seemed, he wasn’t going to back down this time.

Instead of protesting, she reached for Gilbert’s hand, squeezed it tightly, and nodded toward the door. “Come on, then.”

But when she opened it, her blood turned to ice.

Standing just outside were two men she’d hoped never to see again—the men who had tried to kill Alastair.

Her pulse thundered in her ears, her breath caught painfully in her chest. Thank God Alastair wasn’t here.

Whereas minutes before she’d wanted nothing more than to see his face, now, she desperately hoped he stayed away—long enough for her to outmaneuver these villains.

Summoning every ounce of composure, she plastered on her best shopkeeper's smile. "Good morning, Officers." Her tone was smooth, pleasant. Not at all like she was staring down two murderers. "If you'll excuse me, I was just walking my brother to school. Perhaps you can return later today—I'll be happy to provide you with samples of my newest gentleman's soaps."

"I'm afraid our business can't wait." The larger man blocked her path, his stance heavy with the sort of arrogance that made her skin crawl. "If you and your brother don't mind stepping back inside. "

"Not at all, Officer...?" She tilted her head, playing the part of the polite, cooperative citizen. A good shopkeeper always remembered names, after all.

"Giles," the shorter one answered. "And this is Officer Brown."

Daisy nodded thoughtfully. "Always a pleasure to know with whom I am speaking."

Brown scowled, looking impatient.

"Now, then," she said breezily, as though her entire body wasn't coiled like a spring, "I'm happy to help, but my brother needs to get to school. He's working toward perfect attendance, and he mustn't be tardy over something that isn't urgent."

Her voice dripped with good-natured authority, a tone that had tamed many a difficult customer.

"Run along, Gil," she added, keeping her expression serene but sending him a look that could cut glass.

Get help.

Gilbert hesitated—she could feel him weighing his options. But then, playing his part, he gave a slow, reluctant nod, looking for all the world like an obedient little brother.

But as he turned, Brown's hand shot out, fingers clamping around Gilbert's arm.

"You aren't going anywhere." The horrid man was relishing this.

Daisy's stomach clenched, but her smile didn't falter.

But inside? Inside, she was already planning how to rip these men apart.

"Unhand him!" Daisy demanded before a hand covered her mouth. With no onlookers to help, the two bobbies clumsily dragged Daisy and Gilbert back into the front room of her shop.

The instant the hand left Daisy's mouth, she inhaled, intent on letting out a piercing scream. She didn't get the chance, though, before pain exploded along the side of her face.

She barely registered the sound of the door slamming shut as she staggered, reeling from the blow.

"Daisy!" Gil's cry made her chest go tight.

Her ears rang. Her cheek throbbed. But she still managed to meet her brother's stare. He was ineffectively pulling against the officer's hold.

"I'm fine," she assured him.

Stay alert.

Officer Giles flexed his fingers like he was considering hitting her again, then grabbed her wrists instead. She didn't fight him. For now.

"So, we're offing her too?" he asked, tightening his hold.

Too??? Oh, God. Did that mean Alastair was already... no. She refused to believe it.

Brown shrugged. "His Lordship said no witnesses. Nothing to lead the authorities back to him."

A cold knot formed in her gut.

Officer Brown sighed, irritated. As if Daisy were nothing more than an inconvenience. "Let's get away from the windows."

"Right."

Daisy and Gilbert were rudely shuffled back to the kitchen, away from the street. But being in her element meant she was not without options.

Her pulse pounded as she mentally considered possible weapons.

Cast iron pots. Knives. Boiling water.

She just had to wait for the right moment.

"Let's deal with the boy first, eh. Then we can have a spot of fun with her." The fiend's breath blew hot on her neck. And although his nearness physically repulsed her, it didn't matter.

"What do you mean, 'deal with the boy'?" she demanded .

Above all, she would protect her brother.

“You’ll know soon enough,” Officer Brown responded in clipped tones.

“We’ll slit his throat—make it look like a burglary.” Her captor was glancing around. “But tie him to a chair first.”

“We should charge extra for two of ’em. His Lordship can afford it.” Officer Giles sounded almost gleeful.

Charge him extra. Daisy’s breath shuddered in her lungs. Gilbert, caught by the other corrupt policeman, was looking on with more than a hint of terror in his eyes.

“But why? Why are you doing this?” Daisy tamped down her panic. None of this made sense, but if she and Gilbert were going to get away from these thugs safely, she needed to keep them talking.

The two men exchanged a look. Then Brown shrugged.

It was Giles who answered. “Commoners can’t be dukes.”

Daisy blinked. “What do you mean?”

“The boy—Lord Calvin says it goes against nature—even if he is Lovington’s spawn.”

Lovington’s what? But... “I never! He isn’t!” The absurdity of it nearly made her laugh—if the situation weren’t so dire. “Gilbert is my brother . He is my father’s son.”

Brown arched a brow, unimpressed.

She had to make them listen.

“My mother gave birth after we were forced off the duke’s estate. Gilbert is no heir to anything, least of all a dukedom!” Her voice rose as she shook her head, pleading. “This is a horrible mistake. If Lord Calvin believes my brother threatens his claim, he couldn’t be more wrong. Please. Go back and tell him—he has nothing to worry about.”

“She’ll say anything to protect him.” Officer Brown’s eyes narrowed, darting around the room. “Close those curtains.”

Officer Giles kept hold of Daisy’s hands behind her back, but he’d inadvertently loosened his grip .

“But this is a mistake!” She kept her voice lowered, as calm as she could. “Gilbert has no relation to the Duke of Lovington! Lord Calvin is mistaken!”

“Enough from you,” the man beside her snapped.

Daisy flexed her fingers, preparing to act—but then she hesitated.

Something had changed.

Gilbert no longer looked quite so terrified. His wide eyes had narrowed, his focus shifting just over her shoulder.

Someone had entered through the garden entrance.

As much as she wanted to turn around to see who it was, she remained focused on their captors.

"The two of you must be thirsty."

The words slipped out smoothly, though every inch of her was strung tight.

Giles hesitated, and his hand dropped away from her wrist.

Brown's expression darkened. "This isn't a bloody tea party."

Daisy forced a laugh, casually shifting a step toward the counter. "No, but I have scones. Preserves. Cream. And I've mixed a new blend of tea, you must try it."

Another step.

She lifted the kettle off the stove. "It'll just take a moment."

Tightening her grip on the wooden handle, Daisy whipped around.

Officer Giles yelped in agony as scalding water doused the lower half of his face.

And then?—

A gunshot.

The thunderous explosion ripped through the room right before a dark stain bloomed across Officer Brown's chest.

The bobby's eyes widened with shock, lips parting as though he might protest. But no words came.

He crumpled .

Daisy's breath left her in a shudder.

Alastair stood in the doorway, pistol in hand, his gaze cold and unyielding.

“Step away from her or you're next.” His attention was just over her shoulder, and the words were calm. Deadly.

But Daisy recognized the tension in his shoulders, the fire in his eyes.

He had come for her. He had come for them.

But it wasn't over.

Daisy was grabbed again, from behind—the injured man's arms like iron bars.

The boiling water hadn't been hot enough. She had hoped it would subdue this villain but instead, she'd only enraged him.

She struggled, but he was too strong. With a swift motion, he snatched the bread knife from the counter and pressed it hard against her abdomen.

She should have been terrified as the murderer began dragging her toward the rear exit.

But Alastair was here. And he had to know the truth.

“Gilbert truly is my brother.” The words flew from her lips, unbidden, urgent. If these were her last moments, she wouldn't leave this question unanswered.

Truth mattered. It meant everything.



Alastair's eyes flicked from Giles to her, his gaze warming for just an instant.

"I know." His voice was steady, certain. "You would have told me if he wasn't."

Daisy resisted the tugging. "I would have."

Alastair trusted her. Without hesitation, without question.

"Not that I wouldn't be proud to have you for a son, Gil," Alastair said. "Especially one who reads as much as you do. It's easy to overlook the value of a good philosopher." All his attention was on the man behind Daisy, even though he was speaking to Gilbert .

Gilbert , who had silently moved closer to the stove and carried something behind his back.

The Treatises of Government by John Locke.

God bless this boy.

Gilbert swung the book with all his might, slamming the heavy volume into the side of Giles's head.

A grunt. A curse. A stumble.

Daisy twisted free, just as Alastair launched himself across the room.

A flash of steel. A struggle for the knife.

Alastair wrenched it from Giles's grasp and twisted his arms around the man's throat, locking him in a vise-like grip.

“I’ve got him.” His voice was deadly calm, his knuckles white. “Are either of you hurt?”

His gaze swept between Daisy and Gilbert, sharp and searching.

“He hit Daisy,” Gilbert answered. He was pale as a ghost but standing taller than she’d ever seen him before.

Alastair glowered.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Now that you’re here.”

Her hands trembled, and her knees felt as though they might give out beneath her. For the first time in her life, she truly understood why ladies fainted.

Alastair, still restraining the stunned villain, glanced between them, concern still haunting his eyes. “You were amazing. Both of you.”

Daisy exhaled, trying to steady herself. “You came.”

Her voice was barely a whisper, but Alastair heard it. He met her gaze, unwavering. “Best grow accustomed to it.”

And then, before she could say more, the kitchen was suddenly swarmed with uniformed men.

“Good show!” A burly, broad-shouldered man stepped forward, clapping Alastair on the shoulder before jerking his chin toward the now-subdued Giles. “We’ve been trying to get solid evidence against these two for months. Looks like today’s our lucky day.” He reached into his coat and produced a polished badge. “Inspector Barrington. I’ll have my sergeants take this one back to Scotland Yard, but I’ll need

statements from all of you.”

Daisy forced herself to nod. She wasn’t the kind of person to collapse in the face of adversity. She never had been.

She was her aunt’s niece—the girl who had learned that the best way to get over adversity was to move on to the next challenge. She had built a life, a home, a future.

And so, she would hold firm now.

She would not fall to pieces.

“Of course. We can talk in the dining room.”

But her feet didn’t move.

Alastair was beside her in an instant. He pressed his hand gently against her back. “You’re shaking.” His voice was for her ears alone. He wound his arm around her waist. “Are you up to this?”

She nodded, even though she wasn’t sure. But what choice did she have? This needed to be done. And after that...

After that... She didn’t know...

Inspector Barrington gave her a kind look. “This will only take a moment,” he assured her. “But it’s important.”

Gilbert, who had barely spoken, let out a breath and grinned up at Alastair. “Good shot.”

Daisy let out a shaky laugh, the sound both normal and absurd in the aftermath of all that had happened.

Gilbert was safe.

Alastair all safe.

So why was she on the verge of hysteria?

“This way.” Alastair led them from the kitchen, guiding Daisy with the same confidence he always had, as if he knew her house as well as his own. She hadn’t even realized she was clutching his hand until she felt his reassuring squeeze in response.

They were fine. The villains had lost. And Alastair had most of his memories back.

Still, her insides trembled at the near-tragic turn of events.

And she had questions.

Many questions.

Alastair pulled out a chair for her, and Daisy sank into it gratefully.

She inhaled deeply, gathering her composure as Alastair took the seat beside her. Across from them, Gilbert straightened his spine as the inspector retrieved his notepad.

Daisy folded her hands in her lap.

Finally, she would have some answers.

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### THE STATEMENT

The officer turned to Alastair. “Your uncle’s statement is being taken as we speak, but we’ll need your account as well. Start from the beginning, if you will.”

Alastair hesitated.

Daisy saw it—the flicker of restraint in his posture. He exhaled, slow and measured, then looked at her.

Where had it all begun?

“This is Miss Daisy Montgomery,” Alastair finally said, his voice steady, sure. “We were engaged but forced apart a decade ago—when my father fell ill.”

Daisy’s breath caught. Engaged.

He turned to her then, and she saw the weight of memory settle over him.

“I was called to London for his final hours, but then I, too, fell ill.” His breath a little shallower now. “Over the course of my illness, I wrote to Miss Montgomery—letters explaining everything. But they never reached her.”

Daisy’s pulse thrummed. He had written.

She could barely think over the rush of emotions colliding inside her—the pain, the years lost .

Alastair's voice dropped, low and cold. "My uncle confessed to me that he'd had them intercepted."

Of course they were.

All those years of silence. The unanswered pain. And now, at last, the truth.

"You were ill?" she turned, searching his eyes. Until she'd read about him in the newspapers, there had been times she'd wondered if he was still alive.

"Cholera—my father succumbed to it, but I had youth on my side."

This time, it was Daisy who squeezed his hand. She'd come so close to losing him forever. More than once.

"How bad was it?" She didn't want to know, and yet, she needed to know everything now.

"I was out of my head for weeks, bedridden for months. It felt like a lifetime."

The inspector cleared his throat. "But you recovered, obviously, and have since reunited." His gaze flicked meaningfully to where Daisy's fingers were laced with Alastair's, the way she unconsciously leaned into him, as though needing the reassurance of his presence. "What does all of this have to do with my officers?"

But Alastair turned to Daisy, his thumb brushing slow, deliberate circles over the back of her hand.

"The fact that I was behind your shop was not a coincidence. It was not fate." His voice was low, rough.

Daisy barely managed to draw breath. “But how?—”

“Honeysuckle.” His mouth tipped into a small, wry smile, but his gaze was intense. “Your soap.”

From the corner of her eye, Daisy noted the inspector’s puzzled expression, but she couldn’t look away from Alastair, not when his fingers traced along the inside of her wrist as if committing the feel of her to memory.

“I don’t understand.”

“I caught the scent while dancing with one of your clients at a ball,” Alastair explained. “The Countess of Grassley mentioned you, and... I wasn’t certain, but I had to find out.” His voice softened, his gaze searching hers. “I was coming here that day—when they stopped me.” He lifted a hand, hesitating, as if resisting the urge to touch her cheek. “I was on my way to you, Daisy.”

Her breath hitched.

“Accosted?” The inspector prompted.

Alastair’s hand dropped, and he curled it into a fist.

“By your two officers,” he addressed the inspector again, gesturing toward the kitchen where one man lay dead and the other was having his hands and feet bound. “Both Mr. Giles and Brown were on my uncle’s payroll, whom I’d made the mistake of trusting.” When he turned to meet Daisy’s gaze, the green in his eyes was almost black. “You were right about him all along.”

His words sent a shiver down her spine, but Daisy didn’t waver. She lifted her chin.

“I know,” she murmured.

And just like that, he was touching her again—fingers brushing over her knuckles, trailing up her arm, as though he couldn’t stop himself. As though he needed the connection just as much as she did.

But Daisy still had questions.

“Those men said Lord Calvin believed Gilbert was your son.” She forced her voice to stay even, though her mind raced to make sense of it all. “But what I don’t understand is... even if he was— which he is not!— Gilbert wouldn’t have been legitimate.”

Heat crept up her cheeks.

God help her, was she actually discussing this ?

It wasn’t just the absurdity of the claim—it was the implication. The fact that she’d had to assure Alastair he wasn’t a father meant that anyone listening could easily infer that they had?—

“The marriage certificate,” Alastair cut through her spiraling embarrassment. “I saved that damned certificate you drew up.”

He let out a slow breath, dragging a hand down his face.

Daisy’s brows pulled together in confusion. “From when we?—?”

“From our secret ceremony.” His voice was low, weighted with meaning.

Her stomach flipped. “When we were practically children?”



Alastair's expression darkened. "But... we weren't."

The realization hit like a bolt of lightning.

"He believed it was authentic?" she asked, her pulse hammering.

Before Alastair could respond, Gilbert, who had been listening intently, suddenly paled all over again. "Wait—you're my sister... aren't you? Please, don't tell me?—"

Daisy whirled around, immediately reaching for Gilbert's hand. "I am your sister," she said firmly, squeezing tightly. "I was there when Mother gave birth to you. If you don't believe me, ask Mrs. Farley."

Gilbert stilled, his shoulders slumping slightly in relief, though his wary eyes remained locked on hers.

Daisy swallowed hard. Yes, she had loved Gilbert as if he were her own. She had raised him. But...

"Mother and Father loved you. Never doubt who you are." She met his gaze, willing him to believe her. "You are my brother."

But Gilbert, ever inquisitive, wasn't done yet.

"Are you and Alastair secretly married?"

"It was only a pretend ceremony—a game we played when we were young." The memory softened something inside her. She glanced at Alastair, and despite everything, she couldn't help but smile. "You picked wildflowers for my bouquet, and one of the stable cats played vicar."

Alastair's half-smile wasn't just amused—it was fond, nostalgic... and a little sad. “You insisted we say proper vows,” he murmured, eyes locked on hers as if the past had suddenly become just as vivid to him. “And you wore your mother's lace handkerchief as a veil.”

Daisy's chest constricted at the memory. “You said I looked beautiful.”

Alastair's expression softened further. “Always.” His voice was quieter now.

He let out a breath, shaking his head as if the moment had caught him off guard. “I saved the certificate as a memento... but it wasn't real.”

Yet, at the time, it had felt real.

Alastair's expression darkened, his jaw tightening. “My uncle believed I had replaced him as heir—with a son who, in his eyes, would tarnish our family's bloodline. He didn't approve.”

Daisy met the inspector's stare, swallowing the anger rising in her throat. “Your bobbies tried to kill His Grace weeks ago,” she added, her voice shaking. She explained what she'd overheard the morning she'd found Alastair near death—their talk of reporting to a lord, how they'd stolen a ring from his hand. “If you press Mr. Giles during questioning, I have no doubt he'll confirm it.”

Alastair stiffened beside her. “My uncle was wearing that ring when I confronted him earlier,” he said, his voice low, vibrating with restrained fury.

Inspector Barrington's brows shot up. “A ducal ring?”

Alastair's jaw tightened. “My ducal ring—the one I've worn since my father passed.  
”

The inspector let out a slow breath, shaking his head. “Nasty business whenever nobs are involved. Your uncle is under house arrest for now, but it looks like I’ll have to bring him in.”

Daisy’s stomach lurched. “He hired men to abduct his own nephew—and then ordered an innocent boy killed.” The words tasted bitter on her tongue.

The inspector’s mouth pressed into a grim line. “True. And we mustn’t let disgruntled heirs get away with this sort of thing, now can we?” He sighed. “Is there anything else you wish to add to your statement?”

Gilbert, who had been silent until now, lifted his chin. “You need better bobbies if you want people to trust the police,” he said. “That uniform ought to mean something.”

The inspector’s expression flickered—whether with shame or frustration, Daisy wasn’t sure. “I couldn’t agree with you more, young man, but I’m afraid you’ll have to take that up with the commissioner.”

Alastair straightened. “We’ll be sure to do that.”

“Thank you, inspector,” Daisy added.

“If we think of anything else, we’ll send for you,” Alastair said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

And with that, the inspector was effectively dismissed.

As the man approached the door, Alastair slid his arm around Daisy’s shoulders.

“I’ll help with the dead one,” Gilbert announced, far too eagerly. “I’ll bet I’m the

only boy at school to see one get shot.”

The inspector, visibly taken aback, froze mid-step and gave Gilbert a long, assessing look. “That won’t be necessary.”

Daisy couldn’t allow herself to dwell on the body in her kitchen—not now. Too much had happened in what should have been a simple, ordinary morning.

Which reminded her?—

“School!” She turned to her brother. “You’re terribly late, aren’t you?” Her voice faltered, thick with emotion. “I’m so sorry.”

It was because of her that he had been in danger.

“It wasn’t your fault, Dais. And I’m perfectly fine.” Her brother straightened his shoulders, clearly proud of how he’d handled himself. “Besides, I have that test on Locke this afternoon. Drat, the book has blood on it now. How am I going to explain that to my professor?”

Alastair smirked. “Tell him you saved your sister’s life with it. That ought to earn you extra credit.”

“Yes, tell him the truth,” Daisy added, still too overwhelmed to think of anything more creative.

Gilbert was already on his feet, and the inspector rushed after him, leaving Daisy and Alastair alone.

Daisy exhaled slowly, wrapping her arms around herself as if that might steady her.

“It wasn’t fate,” she finally said after the door clicked shut. “Finding you that day.”

Alastair’s gaze held hers. “Not fate.”

He said it with certainty, but she wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Fate hadn’t delivered him to her doorstep—circumstance had. A carefully plotted crime, one that should have taken him from her forever, had instead brought him back.

“Fate’s overrated,” she eventually said.

Alastair pulled her onto his lap, and she went willingly, draping her legs over his thighs as if this was where she belonged. His arms came around her without hesitation, holding her close, his grip firm—certain.

He exhaled against her temple. “You were right about my uncle,” he admitted, his voice tinged with regret. One hand roamed up her back. “I hate that I failed to see what he was doing.”

Daisy softened against him, threading her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. “You couldn’t have known. ”

But he shook his head, jaw clenched. “I should have.”

She pulled back just enough to meet his gaze, but he didn’t let her go far. Instead, his forehead rested against hers, their breath mingling, their bodies impossibly close. Whatever distance had been between them before had vanished entirely.

All those years, she’d secretly strolled past his townhouse, imagining he’d forgotten her—imagining he had found some other woman to love.

But he hadn’t.

“This is better than fate,” she said.

“This?”

“Love,” she answered. “Because with fate, we’re at the mercy of chance, but when it’s love, our future depends on us.”

Slowly, he lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “You’re right,” he murmured, his lips warm against her skin. “I was careless with love once. I didn’t guard it the way I should have. But never again.”

The boy she had once loved had been passionate, full of reckless certainty. But the man before her now—this man—was steady, resolute.

A shiver ran through her, but not from fear. This was different. This was trust, anchoring her to him like the roots of an ancient oak.

“Love is not something to leave to chance,” he continued. “It’s something to fight for, to protect—always. And I swear to you, Daisy, I will protect ours with everything I am.”

Her breath caught, the words stealing past all the hurt, all the years, and settling deep inside her heart.

She had spent so long holding herself together. So long believing she had to do everything on her own.

But now... she wasn’t alone.

Not anymore.

### A VICAR WHO ISN'T A CAT

A lastair and Daisy were not, as it turned out, left alone for long.

After Gilbert had resolutely decided to go to school—remarkably unfazed, all things considered—and the inspector and his men had finally cleared the body from her shop, yet another storm arrived at her doorstep.

Mrs. Farley bustled in without preamble, eyes sharp, already spouting questions as she set down her basket. “What in blazes happened here? The whole street is buzzing, and I’ll not be left in the dark.”

Daisy sighed, rubbing her temples. “Good morning, Mrs. Farley.”

“Morning is long gone, Daisy. Now, out with it.” She folded her arms expectantly.

Alastair, standing beside Daisy, murmured near her ear, “Is she always this subtle?”

Daisy fought a smile. “Not in the slightest.”

Of course, their neighbor had witnessed everything from her front window. Even the most reserved person would have been curious about the morning’s commotion—gunfire, shouting, and then a dead body carted away by an army of the new police force.

At least this time, Alastair was properly dressed. In the apparel Daisy had mended, he looked every inch the duke.

Daisy, on the other hand, hadn't had a moment to fix her hair or change into a clean gown, but she made no apologies as she endured Mrs. Farley's inquisition.

Which was more than a little tricky, considering her neighbor still believed Alastair to be her long-lost husband.

Daisy carefully confessed that Alastair had not, in fact, been sailing around the world. And that he wasn't really a commoner but was—well...a gentleman.

But as the minutes dragged on, Alastair's patience thinned.

The moment Mrs. Farley set down her empty teacup, he seized the opportunity to bring the visit to a close.

"Thank you so much for your concern," he said smoothly, already guiding her toward the door. "Daisy will send for you if she finds herself in need of your sage wisdom."

Before the older woman could utter another word, he had her outside, bid her farewell, and shut the door with a decisive click of the lock.

Rather dashing of him, really.

Daisy exhaled. "Thank you."

"You never have to thank me," he said, watching her intently. "For anything." A shadow passed over his face. "In fact, all of this is my fault. I put Gilbert in danger. I put you in danger. And it wasn't the first time."

"You were fighting for your life, and your uncle was all you had left. How could you have known he would betray you like he did?"



“I took him at his word,” Alastair admitted. “I shouldn’t have. Deep down, I should have known that you never would have left if you hadn’t had to. ”

Daisy swallowed past the lump in her throat. “I could have followed you.”

But she hadn’t. She had let fear and uncertainty hold her back.

“We were too young to know what we had or how to hold onto it.” Alastair pushed off the wall and crossed the room. But instead of sitting beside her, he swept her up into his arms.

Right where she wanted to be.

“We’re wiser now,” he murmured, carrying her effortlessly from the dining room and up the stairs.

“I should hope so,” she teased, looping her arms around his neck.

His lips quirked, but there was something fierce and determined in his gaze as he lowered her onto the bed.

Then, sitting beside her, he took her hand, tracing the lines of her palm with his fingertips, as if mapping out their future.

“I believe I’ve had enough of London to last a lifetime,” he said, voice low.

Daisy tilted her head, waiting. “Oh?”

His eyes lifted to meet hers, raw and sincere. “I want to spend time in the country. With my wife . I want her to have time to come to terms with being my duchess.”

The depth of his conviction took her breath. It reminded her of the boy she had fallen in love with—a young heir who had spoken of forever with the certainty of a fairy tale. But back then, his promises had been woven with hope, not experience. And in the end, it hadn't been enough.

Now he was a man. A duke. And this time, he would see it through.

Daisy licked her lips.

“You wish to take a wife to Woodland Priory?” She was ninety-nine percent sure of his meaning, but she needed to hear him say it .

Because yes, he'd said as much before—but that was before...

“I do,” he confirmed. “Because it's where we fell in love. And I'd like to renew our vows.” One side of his mouth curved into a wry smile. “With a vicar who isn't a cat. And a legal certificate. We'll make it official.”

Her heart swelled. Woodland Priory. Home.

Giant, happy tears swelled in her throat.

“If you're asking what I think you're asking...” She inhaled deeply, then exhaled with certainty. “I'd love that.”

His thumb brushed over her knuckles. “So, you'll marry me?”

“Yes.”

Relief flickered across his features before he pulled her close, his lips capturing hers. “We have so much time to make up for,” he murmured against her mouth. “So many

kisses...”

“And more,” she whispered.

Their lips parted, and Alastair cradled her face in his hands.

“I lost you once, and that never should have happened,” he said. “I was reckless to trust my uncle with my heart, with my legacy. Going forward, I want to be more involved at the Priory. I can’t change the past, but I can make better choices for the future.”

“I like the sound of that.” Daisy traced a finger along his jaw, her smile growing. “I can still make my soaps.”

“You can do whatever you like,” he vowed.

She could teach the tenant wives her craft—help them earn a better livelihood for their families.

“I’ll hire a tutor for Gilbert,” Alastair added. “And when he’s ready, if he chooses, we can send him to Eton.”

Daisy’s breath caught. It was surreal, making plans for a future she had never allowed herself to dream of. And yet, here they were.

And today, right now, they were alone .

She searched his face. “Are you sure?”

Alastair’s eyes burned with conviction. “More than ever.”

She would finally belong to him. And he would belong to her.

“My sweet duke,” she whispered.

She reached for him, captured his mouth in a kiss that tasted of love, of promise.

“Sweet duke of mine.”

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:43 am*

### AUTUMN, WOODLAND PRIORY

Daisy sighed as she nestled closer to Alastair, her cheek pressed against his chest, her fingers lazily tracing the embroidered crest on his waistcoat. The crisp autumn air carried the faint scent of honeysuckle—remnants of summer clinging stubbornly to the vines that were climbing their willow tree.

“It still feels strange sometimes,” she murmured, watching a russet leaf twirl lazily from the branches looming around them. “Being here like this.”

Alastair hummed, his hand drifting absently along her back. “Strange in what way, love?”

Daisy tipped her head up, vaguely counting the gold flecks in his green eyes—six in the left, eight in the right.

“That this is real?” Daisy murmured, stretching languidly beneath the canopy of golden leaves. “That Woodland Priory is our home? That we’re lying beneath this very tree again—except this time, we’re properly wed, and your uncle isn’t lurking about?”

Alastair chuckled, shifting onto his side, propping himself on one elbow so he could stare into her eyes. “And no one is here to interrupt us, either,” he said. “Not even Mrs. Farley.”

Daisy sighed, recalling exactly what they’d been doing just moments ago—and what they would no doubt be doing again. “She’d be positively scandalized.”

"A pity, really," he mused, dragging his mouth over her bare shoulder. "I do enjoy a touch of scandal."

"Wicked man."

His green eyes gleamed with mischief before turning warm, reverent. "Although, marriage has tremendous advantages. Such as... having you in my bed every night. Waking up to your kisses every morning..."

"And free gentleman's shaving soap?" she teased him back.

"Ah, yes. You do know that's why I married you, don't you? To get my hands on your... soap?"

Daisy laughed, flattening her palm against his chest. "You've had your hands on more than my soap, Your Grace."

A gentle wind swirled the leaves around them, and they both listened, appreciating the comfortable silence.

Until Daisy sighed. "I'm still a little cross that Gilbert had to leave for Eton so soon after the wedding. I miss him."

"You'll see him at Christmastime." Alastair smoothed her wind-tossed curls from her cheek. "And besides, he's thriving. You saw his last letter. He's already challenging his professors on Locke's theories."

She sighed. "I did see that. And I was terribly proud."

"As was I," Alastair agreed. "Though I do feel a bit sorry for his tutors."

Daisy chuckled but then grew quiet, her fingers finding the steady rhythm of his

heartbeat beneath her palm again.

She swallowed against the lump in her throat. "You always know exactly what to say, don't you?"

"That's because I'm your loving husband," he said. "It's in my job description. "

Daisy rolled her eyes, but the teasing moment just as quickly unraveled as a new wave of emotion welled inside her—tender, overwhelming.

She'd been having several of these waves lately—sudden swells of feeling that caught her off guard. Joy so fierce it almost frightened her. Love so deep it made her chest ache.

She reached for his hand, twining her fingers with his. She'd meant to wait—to be certain before saying anything. But how could she keep this from him? He was her husband. Her heart.

Her throat tightened, her breath coming fast. "Alastair," she whispered, barely able to contain the tremble in her voice.

His teasing expression vanished in an instant. He shifted, fully focused on her. "What is it?"

Instead of answering, she guided their joined hands down, pressing them low against her stomach.

"We're going to have... a baby."

The words felt impossibly big, and speaking them aloud made everything more real. But as she gazed up at him, searching his face, she realized she had nothing to fear.

Because Alastair looked as if she'd just handed him the world.

Her sweet, adoring husband was completely speechless. His lips parted, his breath hitched—but no words came.

Then, suddenly, he pulled her into his arms, pressing his forehead to hers.

"A baby?" His voice scraped out, rough with emotion.

She nodded, her heart pounding. "A little duke. A... dukeling."

Alastair exhaled a shaky laugh, wonder flickering across his face, but even as he pulled her close, she felt the shift in his hold—the way his grip was firm, but gentle, as though she might break.

Daisy had carried this secret close to her heart for several days, letting the knowledge settle and bloom inside her. But for him, it was brand new—a revelation still taking root. Closing her eyes, she stayed quiet, letting him have this moment, giving him space to grasp the reality that he was going to be a father.

Slowly, his hands slid around her waist, then back up to frame her face, his thumbs brushing tenderly over her cheeks.

His breath was uneven, his mind clearly racing ahead—to the future, to responsibilities, to her.

"You should see a doctor," he said, his voice gentle but firm. "Childbirth can be—" He broke off. "You need care. The best care. Have you been feeling well? Any sickness? Weakness?"

Daisy smiled softly, cupping her palm around his cheek. "I'm perfectly fine." She squeezed his hand. "I already made an appointment with the midwife in the village."



Relief flooded his features, and he let out a breath before resting a warm palm over her stomach again, this time without hesitation.

"You truly are the most incredible woman I have ever known." His voice was thick with reverence as he kissed her—slow and deep and full of wonder.

"A little dukeling," he mused between kisses, the hint of a grin breaking through.  
"God help us both."

—The End?—