



The Lyon's Dilemma (The Lyon's Den Connected World #86)

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Category: Historical

Description: She shattered his heart—now she's his perfect match.

Felix Seward, Duke of Kempbury, does not want to be at a house party. Any house party. But the matchmaker Mrs. Dove Lyon has promised him that his perfect match will be there, and Felix yearns for a wife.

He is horrified to find that the woman who meets the matchmaker's description is Adaline Beverley. His nemesis. His Achilles heel.

The one woman on Gods earth he will never marry. Not after what she did last time they were betrothed.

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Adaline Beverley straightened the pile of paper on her desk out of courtesy to the person who had employed her services as an investigator.

The woman needed a moment to read Adaline's report.

Since the client was still reading, Adaline then tidied her desk drawer, though it was already in perfect order.

What next? But no, her client had read the report twice and was now placing it back in its card folder.

"I see," she said. "Are you certain... but you are, of course. You would not have told me anything you had not checked."

"Triple checked, my lady," Adaline assured her. "The information came from three different persons, and in each case, I followed the rumor back to its source, and confirmed with eyewitnesses, then sought out the documentary evidence."

"But mine was the original marriage," her client insisted.

"That is true." At least, as far as Adaline had been able to discover.

It appeared unlikely that the lady's husband had had another, earlier marriage, since Adaline had investigated the man's life back until he was a child still in a schoolroom, and nothing indicated he was a bigamist. Until he had run through the money that her client brought to the marriage.

“I can recommend a lawyer,” Adaline offered.

“I would rather handle this without publicity,” the lady said. “I cannot allow a scandal. I must think of the children.”

“I understand, my lady. I am sure the other two wives will feel the same.”

That fetched her a glare. “Mrs. Beverley, you are working for me. Not for these women who only think they have married my husband.”

“They need to be told, my lady. Not only is it the right thing to do, but if you wish to keep the entire matter secret, you cannot afford for them to discover on their own. For the same reasons, the fourth prospective wife must be warned.”

Her ladyship considered that, her mouth screwed up in a disapproving pout. After a moment or two, she shook her head, but conceded, “You have a point. You shall handle them.”

“I have a suggestion,” Adaline said. “A meeting of the three wives, here, chaired by me. I shall present the other two with copies of the report, and then we shall discuss what must be done. I shall meet the fourth lady, and explain to her that Mr. Rogers is already married. I may need to prove the point, my lady, but I will aim to conceal his true identity and the situation with the other two ladies.”

“Do not ‘aim’. Succeed,” her ladyship demanded.

“I shall do my best.” That was the most Adaline would promise, for she prided herself on keeping her promises. “The fourth lady will not want a scandal either,” she pointed out.

After another half hour of argument, her ladyship agreed, and Adaline was left to

make the arrangements for the meeting.

Once, she would have been exultant to have followed her client's vague suspicions to such a conclusion, and to have stopped a scoundrel.

The man had found marriage to an heiress to be the easiest solution to continuing his affluent lifestyle despite his chronic mismanagement.

The one tick in his credit column was that he had not killed his first wife before taking a second.

Then a third. And now, though he had not yet succeeded in tying the knot, a fourth.

Yes, she was pleased to have uncovered the story—but exultant? Not really. In fact, she was irritated with the first wife's disregard for the other women, and disgusted by the entire situation.

She had started on this investigator career out of desperation, when scandal expelled her from the ton, ended her betrothal, and broke her heart.

Adaline had been certain that her half-sister was behind the sudden defection of the man she loved.

She had been able to prove it, but not to her former betrothed.

He would not see her and her one letter was returned unopened.

No. Two letters. She had sent a second eight months after the first and it received the same treatment.

Well. That was ancient history. She had since married and become a widow. She had

been making a good living as an investigator for seven years, ever since her husband died, leaving her and her daughter in danger of destitution.

It was time she retired. It was time, in fact, that she re-married. Melody kept wistfully asking about a father, about brothers and sisters. Adaline wanted that too, more than her daughter could know, and her thirtieth birthday was nearly upon her. Not too late, but she could not afford to delay.

She opened the drawer again and took out a calling card that sat on its own in a clear space within, easily readable every time she opened the drawer. It revealed the one way a woman like her could find a husband. A woman who had owned a business. A woman with scandal in her past.

It was a simple card—ivory pasteboard with a silver lion rampant stamped at the top and the name in black ink.

Mrs. Dove Lyons

Nothing else. But it was all that Adaline needed.

Dukes don't wait. Dukes keep other people waiting, but they are never left kicking their heels in the absence of the person on whom they have condescended to call—after making an appointment, mind you.

Felix Seward, the Duke of Kempbury, was tempted to get up and leave, but coming here once was hard enough. Leaving and then returning was unthinkable. And nothing else he had tried had worked.

He sat on the uncomfortable chair to which he had been directed. It was at least, a private parlor, but he could not forget that the establishment was a gambling den, and one in which light-heeled ladies—or prostitutes, if one wished to avoid polite

euphemisms—prosecuted their trade.

Felix had been here once before, and he had been at a disadvantage that time, too.

That previous time, it had been his own fault. Mrs. Dove Lyon, the proprietress of this gambling den, had been rightly protective of her guest, and rightly reluctant to allow him to see her.

He had been operating on false information—believing what he had been told about his half-brother's widow by his other half-brother and stepmother. He should have known they were lying—he should have investigated for himself.

It had all turned out well. The widow had married nine months ago, becoming the Countess of Somerford. Felix saw the Somerfords often—her, her doting husband, and their delightful son Stephen, who was the son of her first husband, and therefore, his nephew and currently, his heir.

Indirectly, Dorcas Somerford and her son had sent him here. Stephen Seward was a delightful boy, and made him long for a son of his own. Dorcas and Ben had that rarest of things, a happy marriage, and Felix wanted one, too.

Which was why he had come to the Lyon's Den, after weeks—no, months —of indecision. Mrs. Dove Lyon was a highly successful matchmaker. Dorcas and Ben had married as a result of her machinations, and Felix knew of at least twenty other marriages that, from his observations, were credits to her work.

The truth of the matter was, he needed a matchmaker.

Felix had had no success in finding a wife.

A duchess? That would have been easy. Almost any woman in the ton would be

delighted to take on the role.

But wife? Felix didn't know how to ferret out a lady's true character.

Nor did he know how to make himself agreeable to a lady in a way that would lead her to look on him with favor.

Him. Felix the man, rather than Kempbury, the duke.

In his mind's eye, he could see them, the women who slavered over him when he was forced to make an appearance at a social event.

As they looked up to him with adoring eyes they did not see the man at all.

For them, he was simply his title, the words obscuring him entirely—words that were capitalized, perhaps in gilded letters and possibly shedding gold dust: The Duke.

Gilded title or not, Felix wanted to be simply a man to his wife, if to nobody else.

“Your Grace.” The widow had finally arrived, stepping into the room without fanfare and speaking before she'd even seated herself.

Felix stood politely. She was veiled and dressed in black—her habitual garb.

Felix understood that her husband had been dead for years and years, so if she was in mourning, nobody knew what—or rather, why—she mourned.

“Mrs. Dove Lyon,” he returned. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“I apologize for keeping you waiting. A small crisis in the kitchens.” She settled in her tall-backed chair by the fire and extended her hand toward the chair across from

her, a command to seat himself.

Felix sat and nodded his acceptance of the apology.

It was fair enough, he supposed. Unlike him, not everybody had one hundred servants whose only function was to make sure their needs were met.

Nor did they have several supremely capable servants who managed the rest, so that it would be the task of one of them—the housekeeper, he rather thought—to resolve a crisis in the kitchens.

One of Mrs. Dove Lyon's servants arrived with a tea tray, and the next few minutes were devoted to establishing Felix's beverage preferences and providing him with a cup of tea made to his liking, and a plate of small delicacies.

Once Mrs. Dove Lyon had poured her own cup, she came straight to the point.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Your Grace?" she asked.

Plain speaking, was it? That suited Felix. "I need a duchess, Mrs. Dove Lyon."

"The ton is full of suitable ladies, well-trained and of good reputation and demeanor, Your Grace," the lady replied. She took a sip of tea while he considered his reply.

"I need a duchess," he repeated. "But I want a wife. I want a marriage of mutual respect and affection, and a lady who will be a good mother to our children." Once he was started, all that he'd been considering poured out.

"I do not know how to find one. I am not a good judge of women—witness how I initially treated Dorcas."

And the disaster that was his first and only betrothal, to a woman he had esteemed above all others despite her unfortunate birth.

He had not believed that such a woman was doomed to repeat the sins of her mother—until he found his betrothed in the arms of another.

Adaline Fairbanks. Further evidence that he was no judge of women.

No need to share that shameful history with Mrs. Dove Lyon, however.

“I do not have female relatives I can call on. Nor female friends, come to that. Dorcas, of course, but she has just had another child, so will not be going out in the ton this Season. And she is not familiar with the ton, in any case. You have an exemplary record of making successful matches. I need your help, and I am prepared to pay your fee.”

“Very well,” said Mrs. Dove Lyon. “A lady capable of being a duchess. A lady worthy of your respect and affection and who is able to reciprocate those feelings. A good mother. Those are your requirements? You are not concerned about social status or bloodlines?”

Felix had to pause to think about that question.

“Not overly,” he decided. “Provided she is genteel and refined, the rest is unimportant.” Adaline had been country gentry, the elder daughter of an untitled country squire.

It hadn’t mattered to him. It still didn’t, but thinking of her reminded him of another requirement.

“She must be of good character,” he said.

“I do not require a young woman. Indeed, I would prefer the candidate to be mature enough to have some conversation and self-confidence. But I do require good character. I intend to be faithful and will expect faithfulness from my wife.”

“Understood,” said Mrs. Dove Lyon. He stood when she did, but she merely moved to the pretty little desk in the window, and sat again, dipping the waiting pen into an ink well and writing on a piece of notepaper.

She blotted the paper, folded it in half, and handed it to Felix. “My fee,” she said.

Felix glanced at the figure. Astronomical, but not unreasonable for the perfect duchess. “Half now and half on delivery,” he suggested. Negotiating fees was comfortable territory for a man who had been a duke since he was a boy.

“Half now, a quarter when the betrothal is agreed, and the final quarter when the marriage agreements are signed,” countered Mrs. Dove Lyon.

“The final quarter on the morning of the wedding, once vows have been exchanged.” Perhaps overcautious of Felix, but it was a lot of money.

“Agreed.” The lady held out her hand. Felix had never shaken hands with a lady, but after a moment’s indecision, he met her hand with his. Her grip was firm and her shake as decisive as any man’s.

“By ‘now’, Your Grace, I mean I will draw up the contract. If you return tomorrow, you may sign our agreement and pay the deposit.”

There was nothing more for Felix to say except, “Thank you. Good day, Mrs. Dove Lyon.” He bowed and left the room.

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Mrs. Dove Lyon's instructions had been less helpful than Adaline had realized. Find the dragon scroll and dragon tooth pendant. Remove it without being detected. Return it to me, Mrs. Dove Lyon, the rightful owner.

The objects that would probably be displayed close to or with the tapestry were Adaline's guarantee of the truth of Mrs. Dove Lyon's tale.

Adaline did not mind breaking the law when the cause was just, and this errand was the price for Mrs. Dove Lyon's matchmaking services.

Even so, she did not intend to deprive someone of something that was rightfully theirs, no matter how great the reward.

The story seemed valid, at least on the surface.

"My husband, Colonel Dove Lyon, was something of a collector, in that wherever he was posted with the army, he purchased things that appealed to him. When we married, his wedding gift to me was a painting he had purchased in Canton—a dragon painted in the Chinese style on a silk scroll. It used to hang on the wall of our drawing room, where I could see it from my writing desk. And for our first anniversary, he gave me what was claimed to be a dragon's tooth, in a silver setting.

It had a loop that allowed it to be worn as a pendant. "

Mrs. Dove Lyon had sighed and looked into the distance for a moment.

Adaline had felt a stab of envy for what were clearly happy memories.

That was what she wanted! Richard Beverley's death had been a release from a marriage that had been indifferent from the first. Next time, she had promised herself, would be better.

"When the Colonel died," Mrs. Dove Lyon had continued, "he left debts, some of them to friends, one of whom was a collector himself. At first, he thought he could take the value of the debts in..." she'd paused momentarily, and Adaline had the idea the widow was swallowing her distaste, "personal services from me. When I refused, he threatened me. Finally, he agreed to take some of the objets d'art in payment of what was owed.

I was occupied with packing up and moving rooms—I'd already had the plan to convert this house to the Lyon's Den.

It was some time before I realized that the dragon scroll was missing, and so was the tooth. "

"You asked for it back?"

"Of course." Mrs. Dove Lyon had said stiffly. "I pretended to assume a mistake, though I had made it clear that the dragon scroll and the tooth pendant were my personal property, and not to be included. When he denied possession, I accepted his word, for what else could I do?"

"Then what has changed?" Adaline had wanted to know.

"Someone who knew me all those years ago recently commented on the dragon scroll. She was surprised I had let it go. When I questioned her, she confirmed that my husband's old friend had shown it to her husband, another collector, in her presence.

When she said she had seen it before, he insisted he had purchased it himself, somewhere in the East. But she was certain it was the same scroll. ”

The scroll would be on display somewhere, both women had assumed, and Mrs. Dove Lyon had somehow procured an invitation for Adaline to a house party at the country home of the suspected thief, Viscount Stillwater.

His heir’s wife had two daughters on the marriage market, and she and her husband, Lord Stillwater’s son and heir, were holding the event to provide opportunities for them to get to know their suitors.

It had seemed simple. Attend the house party. Ask for a tour of the house. Note the location of the scroll and confirm the presence of the corroborating items, and come up with a plan for their disappearance, preferably in a way that did not reflect on Adaline.

“I wouldn’t ask,” Mrs. Dove Lyon had said apologetically.

“Except that I understand you did something similar for Mrs. Fleming when her ruby parure was stolen by her father-in-law, and she did not want to involve the police. Of course, if there are any difficulties, I shall take responsibility. I am certain Viscount Stillwater will want matters kept quiet. You need not fear legal repercussions.”

Social repercussions worried Adaline more. The goal, after all, was to find a husband. A new scandal—one, furthermore, that labeled her a criminal—would destroy her chances. Particularly when added to the scandals of her youth.

Now she was certain she could think of a sensible way to lift the scroll as soon as she found it. Unfortunately, her plan failed from the first step. The scroll was nowhere to be seen. Nor was the tooth.

She did find some of the other items on Mrs. Dove Lyon's inventory list, scattered around the house or in a room set apart for Lord Stillwater's collection, but they had all been taken legitimately, in settlement of the colonel's debt.

Meanwhile, two days of the house party had passed, bringing her no nearer to completing her commission to Mrs. Dove Lyon. As for meeting a suitable husband, she was older than all the unmarried men at the house party.

If not in actual years, then certainly in maturity and experience. They were all boys in her eyes, and she had no doubt they saw her as more as a matron than a young miss, even those a decade or even two her senior.

Then, on the second evening, their hostess, Mrs. Stillwater, announced that dinner would be delayed by thirty minutes to allow time for a late-arriving guest to change from his traveling clothes.

"I was not sure he would come," she exclaimed to her husband, ignoring Adaline who was standing nearby.

"He accepted the invitation," said her husband, the Honorable John Stillwater.

(Lord Stillwater, his father—whom Adaline had taken to calling the Dis-Honorable, at least in her private musings—had not yet put in an appearance.).

"One thing you can say for the duke," Stillwater said.

"He might not be the most sociable of people, but he keeps his word. He is late? His wheel broke. Could have happened to anyone."

A duke? There were only a few dukes who were unmarried, but surely it couldn't be him? Fate would not be so cruel.

“He is here now,” said Mrs. Stillwater. “What a coup, Stillwater. Kempbury at our house party. Imagine if he takes a liking to one of our girls!”

The Duke of Kempbury. Apparently, Fate was crueler than Adaline had imagined. She was possessed by the sudden urge to flee. She ignored it. Why should she run? She had done nothing wrong. Whatever Kempbury thought.

Felix arrived at Viscount Stillwater’s country manor in time to change for dinner, or so said his hostess. In fact, from the looks on the faces of the guests waiting in the parlor, dinner had been held back to allow him time to wash and change.

He looked around the room. Knowing that Mr. and Mrs. Stillwater were attempting to find husbands for their two daughters, he had expected to see the flock of maidens who looked as if they had only recently learned to walk creditably with their skirts down. He would not find his duchess among them.

Yet, despite his dislike of social events, he could not avoid them all, and Mrs. Stillwater was a notable hostess. He recognized many of the guests, and knew which were married and which were widows with roving eyes. No duchesses there, either.

“You will be able to recognize your prospective wife,” Mrs. Dove Lyon had insisted.

“Mrs. Beverley will be one of the maturer young ladies—she will be thirty years of age at her next birthday. She was widowed seven years ago and has been living a quiet life with her daughter. Her husband left few funds, and she has been supporting herself. I shall let her tell you the details.”

There were three possibilities. Perhaps four, but the fourth lady was turned away from him, so he was only judging by her back. As Mrs. Stillwater gave the signal to go into dinner, she turned around, and Kempbury knew her immediately.

No! It can't be .

It was, though, and if he had had any doubts at all, they would have been put to rest when she saw him, paled, then flushed bright red, and turned determinedly away.

Somehow, he managed to offer his arm to his hostess, lead her into dinner, and even carry on something of a conversation with her. All the while his mind was reeling and his heart was a pit of despair. Adaline Fairbanks.

Surely, Mrs. Dove Lyon did not think to match him with that lying jade. She had said "Mrs. Beverley," but that was not reassuring. In a decade, Adaline might well have married, had a child, and been widowed.

He needed to find out, so he did something he usually found too difficult to contemplate. He engaged his hostess in conversation, asking about each of the guests with whom he was not personally acquainted.

He retained enough self-possession to ask about both men and women, but he doubted that small amount of camouflage fooled Mrs. Stillwater for a moment. She was much more informative about the ladies than the gentlemen.

One by one, her mini-biographies eliminated each of the ladies he'd marked as possibles.

One was married. One betrothed. One was a devoted social butterfly committed to life in London, which would not suit Felix.

Besides, she had turned down every proposal she had received in her eight years on the Marriage Market.

"She has a private fortune," said Mrs. Stillwater.

“She declares she has no intention of marrying.” She shook her head at the thought.

“Then we come to Mrs. Beverley, who is a widow, Kempbury. She is attending with her daughter, who must be ten years old, or close to it. Our governess says she is a delightful child. That’s Mrs. Beverley sitting between Baron Thornwick and Mr. Thompson.

I understand she has been a widow for seven years, and that she runs a business, which is very enterprising of her.

I do not know much more about her. I sent her an invitation at the request of a friend, but have found her to be a very pleasant guest.”

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Mrs. Beverley. Adaline Fairchild. One and the same person. Did she really have a child of ten? If so, the child must have been a baby when they were betrothed, so that had been something else she had hidden from him all those years ago.

There was no point in him being here, but it was too late now. He would not insult John Stillwater, his charming wife, and the viscount his father by cutting his attendance short. Still, he would write to Mrs. Dove Lyon tonight and tell her that Mrs. Beverley was not a possibility.

She was older, of course, but still lovely. Widowed seven years? He had heard of women claiming to be widows to hide the consequences of an irregular relationship. Perhaps there had never been a Mr. Beverley. That would fit with the wanton behavior he himself had witnessed.

Mrs. Beverley had not looked at him once since her first startled glance back in the parlor. Good. Let her ignore him, and he would ignore her. He would pay her the courtesy expected of a gentleman, little though she deserved it. Distant courtesy, then.

But inside, the wounds she had inflicted ten years ago tore open and bled anew, as painful now as on the day she first betrayed him.

Kempbury was avoiding her, Adaline decided, after two days of rain kept the house party inside. Nothing overt or openly rude. He managed to be leaving every room she entered, or to change his mind about entering any room in which she happened to be.

Excellent. She was avoiding him, too, and between them, they might be able to go through the entire house party without having to exchange a single word.

Some part of her objected to that plan. That part wanted to sit Kempbury down and force him to listen, and to talk, too. To tell him she had not done what he thought she had, and to explain about Emmeline, her half-sister.

It had been obvious from the first that Emmeline must have been playing her tricks again. When she recovered enough from the shock of being summarily jilted—by letter, furthermore—Adaline had asked questions.

Several people at the house party had claimed to have seen Adaline when she knew she had been elsewhere.

Since Emmeline and her mother had not been invited, it could not have been an innocent case of mistaken identity.

Furthermore, the lady who had spread the worst of the gossip had said she saw Adaline intimately coupling with someone who was certainly not Kempbury.

Since Adaline knew she had embraced no one except Kempbury, it must have been Emmeline. Wearing a fair wig, she could easily have masqueraded as Adaline, especially at night, when their different eye colors would not be obvious.

Adaline had visited Emmeline, who had been both gleeful and jubilant.

She had not confirmed Adaline's suspicions before inviting her to leave, and to not bother to return.

Not in words. The laughter in her eyes said it all.

Emmeline had ruined Adaline's engagement—her future, her life—for her own pleasure.

They had never been friends, though only a few months separated them in age, and they had been raised in the same nursery.

Adaline supposed she could not blame her father's wife for being resentful, but it was not Adaline's fault her father kept a mistress, nor that he brought his love child into his own house after her mother died giving birth to Adaline.

Emmeline's resentment was copied from her own mother, and had been given further force because Adaline and Emmeline resembled one another so much.

Emmeline, even though she was the younger by four months, had held a childish belief that Adaline had copied Emmeline's looks to spite her.

According to Emmeline, that justified wearing Adaline's clothes to play naughty tricks on the governess and other servants.

Adaline had suffered many punishments for things she hadn't done, and for lying about her guilt. And then Emmeline was caught in the act, and Adaline was sent away to school. "For your own sake," her father had said. Adaline had enjoyed school well enough. But it was an exile, nonetheless.

Her own childhood experiences made her all the more determined to ensure that Melody never had cause to doubt that she was loved.

Sad to say, that goal had been aided by Richard Beverley's death.

He had been a poor choice as a husband, as it turned out, though better in the circumstances than none at all.

He had been shaping up to be an uncaring father, to the point that none at all was definitely preferable.

“Are any of the gentlemen going to be my new father?” Melody asked.

The schoolroom party was taking advantage of today’s fine weather to walk to the pond to feed the ducks, and Adaline had elected to join them.

She looked around to see if anyone else had heard the question, but Melody and Adaline had dropped behind the rest.

“I do not think so, darling,” Adaline said. “But remember I told you I have seen a matchmaker who will be looking for a husband for me.” Not Kempbury. Damn Kempbury, for invading her mind and setting her pulse beating just for him, as it had once before, long ago.

Melody frowned, thoughtfully. “I do not think I would want someone else to choose me a husband,” she said.

Adaline had certainly not done very well on her own, but she kept that thought to herself.

Ah! Here was the pond. Oh dear. And here was Kempbury.

He had obviously come here for some privacy and solitude.

He had a propensity for going off on his own—Adaline remembered that about him.

She almost giggled at the thought of his dismay when his refuge was invaded by ten children of assorted ages, four nursemaids, two governesses and Adaline.

He nodded to her with distant courtesy, and then turned his gaze on Melody. All thought of laughter fled. But no. He would not guess. Melody was only a child. And even if he wondered, he could not be certain.

Besides, what could he do? Melody was legally a Beverley, and Adaline was her mother.

He narrowed his green eyes, while Melody stared back at him, her head to one side, her own, very similar green eyes alight with curiosity.

“Might you be Miss Beverley?” he asked.

“Melody, make your curtsy to the Duke of Kempbury,” Adaline prompted. Melody, her most winning smile to the fore, curtsied. “I am Melody Beverley, sir,” she said, “and this is my Mama.”

His expression, which had warmed while observing her daughter, chilled again as he looked at Adaline. “Mrs. Beverley and I were acquainted a long time ago,” he said.

“A very long time ago,” Adaline agreed. “Before you were born, Melody. Look, Miss Winchard has corn for the ducks. Get in line for your share, my dearest.”

Melody bobbed another curtsy, briefer than the first and said, “It was a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace,” then rushed off before he could reply.

“Your Grace,” said Adaline, with a curtsy of her own, but before she could follow her daughter, he put out a hand to stop her.

“You and I need to talk, Mrs. Beverley,” he said. His voice was so cold it was a wonder her blood did not turn to ice. Instead, she felt a rush of heat, as if steam was about to come out of her ears.

“You and I needed to talk ten years ago, Your Grace. I wrote what I needed to say. Twice. Both times, you returned my letters unopened. You had no interest then. I have no interest now.” She looked down at his hand, still grasping her arm.

Even after his cruel dismissal, his touch still made her tingle.

“If you will excuse me, I am on an excursion with my daughter.”

Kempbury dropped his hand and Adaline stalked away, conscious that he was watching her. After a few moments, though, she glanced back and he was gone. This isn't over , she thought. If he suspects, he won't let it go .

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Felix did not go back to the house. More than ever, he needed to be alone. He needed to think. He took a path that led further out into the park. His mind was reeling.

In his country seat, Felix had a miniature of himself as a child of nine or ten. Melody Beverley could be that child's twin, green eyes, and all. It was easy to tell where her name had come from, for Adaline had once told him that her mother's name was Melody.

Felix remembered everything she had told him in the brief few weeks of their romance. Everything she said and did, though his memories were colored by what came after.

He should have expected her to be a wanton. She was, after all, the baseborn child of Arthur Fairbanks and his mistress, even if she was raised in the Fairbanks house with the legitimate daughter. She had been honest with him about that even from the first.

He had admired her for it, he remembered, had said that he was a duke and could do anything he pleased short of treason, had said she would be a duchess and—even if people did find out about her tarnished birth—it wouldn't matter, because she would be ranked above all but the queen and the royal princesses, and a score or so of other duchesses.

Even when she came to his bed, he didn't despise her for it. They had made promises to one another, after all. He had thought only that she loved him too much to wait, or to make him wait, for them to repeat those vows in a church.

He had, at the time, believed her to be a virgin, though he had doubted that later.

Whether or not it was true, he could no longer doubt that the child—of whose existence he had so recently learned—who went by the surname of Beverley, was conceived on that night.

She was his daughter, and Adaline had kept her from him.

Felix was, he realized, being a little unfair. She had visited him at his townhouse and been turned away. She had written to him twice, and he had ordered the letters returned, refusing even to touch them.

He did not feel like being fair. He did not know how he felt, in fact. His mind, heart—his soul even—echoed with the beat of the repeated words. I have a daughter.

A daughter who was four months past her ninth birthday, if she was born nine months or so after the night that Felix and Adaline spent together.

Felix had missed more than nine years of her life.

It hurt more than he could bear, like an ache over his entire being.

He felt as if he had missed her all his life, though two days ago, he had not even known she existed.

“Adaline will not keep me out of my daughter’s life anymore,” he swore.

Melody. She seemed a nice child. She spoke politely and curtsied beautifully, and there was obvious affection between her and her mother.

But was Adaline a fit person to raise a child? A daughter? If he did not intervene, would he not be condemning his own child to the kind of life Adaline must have lived? Condemning some poor fool to the kind of betrayal he had experienced?

He could take Melody from Adaline, citing her immoral conduct as a reason. The legal ground would be shaky, but he had no doubt he could succeed. Wealthy dukes had few limits. But was it the right thing to do?

No child deserved to lose a loving, even if unfit, mother. Felix did not remember his own mother, but he had seen his sister-in-law Dorcas with his nephew Stephen and her new baby. The impersonal attention of servants was no replacement for maternal affection.

No matter how far he walked, he could not make up his mind.

“Felix, you need more facts,” he decided, as he made his way back towards the house.

“Talk to Mrs. Stillwater. Talk to others who know Adaline. Talk to Adaline herself, as distasteful as that may be, and to Melody. You are no longer a cub, still wet behind the ears. You won’t be taken in again. ”

Felix was not altogether confident about the last point. Even with everything he knew about her, he still felt the tug in Adaline’s direction. But he was a man in his thirties, a respected peer, and a gentleman. He could trust himself to resist Adaline’s wiles and to do the right thing.

Couldn’t he?

Kempbury did not approach Adaline again that day, but she frequently felt his eyes on her, as Mrs. Stillwater herded them out onto the bowls lawn to play, and then set the men to rowing on the lake, with a lady or two as passengers.

Refusing that task, Kempbury took station in the pavilion on the lake shore, and watched the revels.

Or watched Adaline, surreptitiously, to avoid the attention of others.

She was grateful for his discretion. She did not want any talk that might reignite the scandal of ten years ago, especially since no one here present seemed to have made the connection between Adaline Fairbanks, the woman that Kempbury jilted, and the widow, Adaline Beverley.

Mind you, they might, if he kept watching her.

All day and into the evening, she caught him casting her a glance and then looking away.

Bah! She did not have time for Kempbury's nonsense.

She had been waiting for Viscount Stillwater to emerge from his chambers—Mrs. Stillwater had said he was indisposed, but she had heard a couple of footmen saying he had a cold.

He had at last joined the house party for dinner, and she had managed to strike up a conversation with him.

Yesterday's treasure hunt, organized to entertain the house-bound guests, had given Adaline an excuse to view every public room in the great house.

The dragon scroll was not on display. Adaline guessed it must be in Lord Stillwater's rooms, where he could see it whenever he wished but could keep it from the prying eyes of anyone who might report its presence to its true owner.

No doubt he moved it after Mrs. Dove Lyon's friend saw it.

So, it was a great relief to hear that that he was at last joining the house party.

“I have been confined to a chair by my fire, Mrs. Beverley,” he told her.

“With a blanket around my shoulders and a supply of handkerchiefs to wipe my nose. You would have been sorry for me—indeed, I was sorry for myself.” He chuckled. The man was rather charming.

She managed to get him to talk about his collection by commenting on an ornately carved statue that decorated the mantelpiece in the parlor to which they headed after dinner.

After that, the challenge would have been stopping him.

He told her where he had found the piece, how he had bargained to get an excellent price, what pieces like that were worth in England, what significance it held in the barbaric land from which it came, and what other similar pieces he had seen in the collections of other people and how his was better.

His surface charm did not survive the opportunity to indulge in his obsession.

The more he talked about how he had bested other collectors, the more credible she found the story Mrs. Dove Lyon had told her.

Furthermore, she was wary of the light of passionate avarice in his eyes.

When he invited her to come and view the items in his collection room, she raised her voice slightly and angled her body to include others nearby in the conversation.

“I would love that, my lord. Mrs. Stillwater has allowed us to view it, of course, but to have you show us the pieces, and explain what they mean and why they are so desirable—everyone, Lord Stillwater is going to give us a guided tour of his collection!”

Several of the other guests exclaimed how delightful that would be, and Lord Stillwater inclined his head and led them all down the hall to the collection room, stopping along the way to point out a large painted vase on one hall table, a charming little statuette on another, and a silk scroll with an ink drawing of mountains on a wall.

“These dots and lines are Chinese writing,” he explained at the third object, holding his candelabra high so that they could see more clearly.

“A good luck wish, I was told. They write with brushes, rather than pens as we use, and use the same brushes and inks for these marvelous scenes. Mrs. Beverley, note how they manage to make an impression of a mountain with just a few strokes.”

“How marvelous,” she said, and, “Isn’t that wonderful?” and, “How clever you must be to remember all that,” and other admiring comments, as seemed appropriate. If she displayed enough interest in Chinese art, perhaps he would be encouraged to show her the stolen scroll and the pendant.

On the other hand, perhaps she’d encouraged him too much. In the collection room, he continued to give a general explanation of each of the objects, then singled Adaline out for a more detailed comment. Several times, he took her arm or brushed against her.

Adaline was very pleased she had not gone off with him alone.

Perhaps a third of the objects in the collection room included depictions of dragons. They curled around pots and bowls, along painted screens, and across fans. They were carved into knife handles and table legs, and molded into statues. In fact, they were everywhere.

Adaline was trying to think of a way to ask him whether he had others when one of

the other guests managed the job for her.

“Why so many dragons, Lord Stillwater?” he asked. “Have you a Chineese St. George tucked away to stop them from devouring all the princesses?” The ladies he had escorted giggled.

“Chinese dragons are quite different to the European breed,” Lord Stillwater explained.

“Our dragons are wicked, destructive, and treacherous. But in China, dragons are symbols of good luck. They are powerful, but benevolent and wise, unless one offends them.” He chuckled.

“Any devouring is strictly benign.” He sent a sly look at Adaline, who pretended not to notice.

“I have many more,” he offered. “I would be happy to organize an exclusive viewing of my favorites.” Once again, his gaze drifted her way. It made her skin crawl.

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This was Adaline's opportunity, but she was not keen to take it. An exclusive viewing of Lord Stillwater's bed chamber might entail a price she was not prepared to pay.

She was going to have to burgle his room while he was not in it.

Adaline was probably in bed. Of course she was. It was after midnight, but Felix needed to talk to her privately, without anyone noting—and misinterpreting—his interest.

He couldn't get past her anger. He was the one with the right to be angry, wasn't he? She had betrayed him, and with the Duke of Richport, of all people. Richport, who was all the things Felix was not—confident, handsome, and wild to a fault.

But she had seemed genuinely hurt he had left without speaking to her, and that he had refused her visit in London and her letters.

He could not have been wrong about what he saw.

It was dark, but her face was clear enough.

And besides, he had spoken to her, when she came to his bedchamber not an hour later, and she had admitted to everything.

"It was just a bit of fun, Kempbury," she told him. "Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud. What sort of a marriage did you want, anyway?"

She had not sounded at all like herself, but that was the real her, of course.

His stepmother had been the same—all sweetness and light when she wanted him for some reason, and then laughing at him for being taken in.

Again . By the time he was fifteen he had learned not to play her nasty games. Or any woman's.

But still, Adaline had managed to fool him. Felix felt ill at the thought of it even ten years later.

Unless her behavior that day was some weird aberration.

Perhaps she had lapses. Felix had heard of such a thing—a kind of madness in which the person would act in ways quite contrary to their usual behavior, and then have no memory of it after.

Yet, apart from that once, he had never seen any sign of madness in Adeline.

Again, he wondered if she was the person who should be raising his daughter.

Now, he knocked quietly on her door, and after a few moments, knocked again. When she opened it a bare inch, all he could see of her was one eye showing dark in the light of his candle and the barrel of a small pistol.

“Oh,” she said. “It is you.”

His suspicion surged. “Who were you expecting?” Someone unwanted, by the look of the pistol.

“Lord Stillwater, probably. He was making some very improper suggestions earlier, and I thought he might want to follow up on them. Baron Thrick won't make another attempt, since I promised to put a bullet in the equipment he suggested I might wish

to sample.” She sounded more tired than indignant.

Felix’s reaction was far beyond indignation.

His urge to incapacitate both men was as strong as it was unexpected.

His reason reminded him that the woman standing in front of him was a wanton and a tease, but his instincts were in charge, and those instincts roared that those men had dared to insult his lady.

“I suppose you want to know about Melody,” she said, and opened the door wide. “You had better come in. I don’t want anyone to see you standing there.”

Melody. Yes . “We need to talk.” He stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Would you care for a brandy?” Adaline asked. “It is to Mrs. Stillwater’s credit that she asks her guests what they prefer, instead of assuming we ladies would prefer ratafia or some other oversweet horror.”

And why not . Felix did not need to be a barbarian about this.

He waited while she poured the drinks, one for each of them, and lit a branch of candles from the one she had taken to the door.

She brought him his drink and then carried her own and the candelabra to the fireplace.

Another man would make polite conversation.

Felix never bothered. He never knew what to say. Even with Adaline, and especially now.

The silence held until they were seated opposite one another on the fireside chairs with their drinks, the candelabra casting a pool of light from the mantelshelf over the fire.

Adaline was the one to speak first. “Kempbury, the woman you saw with Richport was my half-sister, Emmeline. It was not the first time she had pretended to be me so I was blamed for things I did not do, but it was the worst and the last. I have not seen her in years. Indeed, I believe she and my step-mother left for Jamaica shortly after I married Richard Beverley.”

Kempbury had not been certain what she would say, but that wasn’t it. “Your half-sister,” he repeated. “Emmeline.”

“Yes. I didn’t tell you much about her, did I? We have never been friends.”

“She looks so much like you?”

“Very like. Her hair is dark, but she had a wig of hair my color that she used when she pretended to be me. When I found out what other people were saying I had done, I knew it must have been her. I confronted her, of course, but she merely laughed. She was triumphant. Joyous, even.”

Felix didn’t know what to think. Such a convenient explanation, but he had known that Adaline had been raised with her half-sister, and that both that sister and step-mother hated her.

And in support of her contention, he had his own observation that the Adaline who confronted him that night was not the Adaline he thought he knew.

Careful, Kempbury. Women cannot be trusted. His own step-mother had taught him that.

“I tried to tell you,” Adaline said. “If you had met Emmeline and seen how much like me she is, you would have known even then. Her eyes are a different color, and her chin is more pointed. I think, too, that I am a shade taller. But instead, Emmeline won again.” She sounded tired. Even defeated.

The thought consuming his mind was that if she was telling the truth—and he had a terrible, sinking feeling she was— she had not betrayed him.

Instead, he had betrayed her.

“Then I discovered I was with child,” Adaline said.

“I had been looking for proof that Emmeline was the culprit, and I uncovered some other things that had nothing to do with Emmeline’s horrid trick.

Except that one of them was a secret Richard Beverley preferred to keep concealed.

Before the wedding, I wrote to you to tell you about Melody.

When the letter came back unopened...” She shrugged. “I needed to give my daughter a name.”

Felix frowned. “You blackmailed your way into marriage? I understand you must have been desperate, but—”

“Don’t be offensive! If Richard had not known I discovered his secret, I would never have told a soul.

As it was, it was he who suggested the marriage, as a solution to his problem, as well as mine.

I suppose, since he has been dead these seven years, it cannot hurt to tell you, in confidence, that he and his valet were...

very close friends in a way that might have seen them both hanged. ”

“Oh,” said Felix, fighting not to seemed shocked. “I see.”

“It was Richard who told me to write to you the second time, because he said he would not stand in my way if you wanted to marry me instead. But you sent the letter back again. Unopened.”

Felix winced at the grief she managed to express in that last word.

Woman cannot be trusted , old habits said, but his heart insisted that Adaline was telling him the truth.

And after all, hadn't he recently discovered, as Dorcas and Ben had drawn him into their social group, that his stepmother was by no means typical?

He would trust Dorcas with anything. And her friends Laurel and Seraphina were both cut from the same cloth—ladies of integrity for whom love, not pride, was the driving force of their lives.

Yes, and Mrs. Dove Lyons had a reputation for making marriages that were happy for both parties, and she had sent him to meet Adaline.

“When I thought you were false—when you came to me and laughed at me for thinking you would be faithful—it nearly killed me,” he said.

“Emmeline came to you? Laughed at you? Oh, Felix. I am so sorry.” She leaned forward, bringing her lovely, somber visage closer into the pool of candlelight.

Her brown eyes were full of compassion, and she had not aged at all.

Queenly , he thought, as he had so often during their courtship. Beautiful, to him.

The sorrow in her voice was for him, and almost, it overcame the fears that told him not to believe her.

Speaking for her was the difference in character between the woman he had spent such precious hours with and the woman who had cruelly laughed at his desire for fidelity.

In lamplight, he had not noticed her eye color.

Was her chin pointier than Adaline's? He hadn't seen that difference either.

But what if Adaline were telling the truth!

Incredible though the story was, it explained things he had never understood.

"I have spent the past ten years only half-alive. If this is all some vast game, Adaline, I beg of you, tell me now. Have mercy on me, and let me go. For I swear, I will not survive losing you again." He barely recognized his own voice, strained as it was through all his fears and the pride that wanted him to keep silent.

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Felix had broken her heart again, but this time it broke for him. She should have realized how deeply Emmeline's deception would have hurt him. She knew how his step-mother had played on his emotions.

Indeed, after they had spent all one long afternoon talking about their childhoods, she had concluded that hers was better experience, since her step-mother's behavior was completely predictable—all sweet kindness while in the presence of her father and all cold cruelty in his absence.

Felix had never known what to expect. His step-mother had eventually had him exiled, but prior to that, she blew hot and cold, treating him as her own and a favorite at that, and then switching in a moment to screaming abuse or icy punishment.

"Felix," Adaline said now, leaning forward to touch his hands.

"I am speaking the truth. I loved you. I would never have been unfaithful to you, even if you had not meant more to me than life itself. I am so sorry you were hurt because Emmeline chose to use you as a weapon against me." Adaline frowned.

"How stupid you must have thought me to go to all that trouble to catch a duke and then to ruin it at the last minute for a tom cat on the prowl like Richport."

From the arrested look on Felix's face, that had not occurred to him.

"You would not have done it," he said, sounding impressed by the revelation.

"If your goal was to catch a duke, you had one. And I was a much better prospect

than Richport. Everyone knows he will not marry again, and would never be faithful if he did marry. I didn't think of that.

I don't think I thought at all, Adaline.

And I have lost us ten years because I let your sister fool me. ”

He turned his hands so he could clasp hers. “Is it too late for us? Tell me you are willing to try again, Adaline. For Melody's sake, if not for mine?”

Fear rose in her, so potent that it choked her for a moment, then the yearning and anxiety in his eyes freed her tongue. “I am afraid, Felix.”

“I let you down,” he said. “I should have listened to you.”

Knowing now how Emmeline had mocked him, Adaline understood why he had turned her away. “You thought you had already listened to me, and that I had laughed in your face.”

“My brain was trying to tell me it wasn't you. Something was off. Her expressions, the words she chose. What she said. I thought you had been putting on an act while we were courting.”

“If only I had told you how Emmeline used to pretend to be me. You might have questioned what you saw, if you'd known about her tricks.”

“We cannot change the past, my darling,” Felix said. “Can we start again? Can we build a future?”

“Not for Melody's sake. Or, at least, not only for her sake. For mine, Felix, for my heart has been yours and only yours since the day we met.”

“It is the same with me,” Felix agreed. “For all three of us then, we will marry? You will be mine at last?”

“We will marry. I have always been yours, Felix, and now the world will know it.”

“But not, I think, your sister,” Felix cautioned. “Not, at least, until I have my ring on your finger.”

“She is in Jamaica,” Adaline said. “Or, at least, that was where they intended to head. My father owned sugar plantations in Jamaica. My half-sister’s mother insisted they had been left to her.” She grimaced. “I wanted no part of them, in any case. The workers are slaves.”

“We agreed on that, I remember,” Felix said.

“But too many people in the United Kingdom make huge incomes from the sugar trade. We finally managed to ban the abominable trade in slaves throughout the British empire, but slave labor? When it is far away across the Atlantic and the people who want sweet tea and sweet treats do not have to see the price those poor people pay? We shall ban it in the end, Adaline, but it will take years, perhaps decades.”

“I fear you are right. In any case, I did not challenge Mrs. Fairbanks’ claim.

” As a bastard daughter, she was unlikely to have won against her father’s widow.

It would have been a waste of the little money she had, and despite her relative poverty, she had never regretted it.

Mind you, Adaline, if you and Melody had really been destitute, it might have been a different story.

“I remember,” Felix said again. “When your stepmother turned you out, you took your inheritance from your father and used it to give yourself a season. Which was how you met me. You were concerned about not having enough if you did not find a husband, Adaline. I hope this Richard Beverley left you comfortably situated.”

Not at all. “Richard’s entailed estate went to his second cousin, and his personal effects were left to his valet,” Adaline replied. “I support us from my business. I am a private investigator, Felix.” She sounded proud, she realized. Well, that was fair. She was proud of what she had achieved.

“A private investigator? You mean, like a Bow Street Runner?”

“Not exactly. I help people find things out, I suppose you would say.” Adaline told Felix about trying to find out what Emmeline had done, and how, after Richard died, she managed to piece together several clues to find out who had been stealing trinkets at the local manor, thereby exonerating the governess.

“Women will often tell other women things they would never mention to a man,” she said.

“I have been able to make quite a nice living for us, thanks to my business. In fact, I am on a case at the moment.”

His eyes widened and he looked around the room as if looking for what she sought. “Here? At this house party?”

“Yes, my client obtained my invitation, though I have no idea how. I shall have to tell her that I do not need my fee.” Whoever Mrs. Dove Lyon had lined up to match her with, she was marrying Felix.

“If you’ve earned the money, you should take it,” Felix said.

“Oh, it is not money. I suppose I am not breaking my client’s confidence if I tell you.

I had decided it was time to marry again, to give Melody a father and myself the chance to have more children.

I went to a matchmaker and offered her my savings.

She said that she would make a match for me if I would retrieve something for her. ”

“What do you mean?” Felix asked. Retrieve what?

She told him. “That is why I am here—to fetch the scroll and tooth for Mrs. Dove Lyon so she will make a match for me.” She paused. “No matter who he may be, I want you to know—I will only marry you. You are the man for me, and always have been.”

He sighed, and she supposed felt the same “Mrs. Dove Lyon,” Felix said, somewhat grimly. “So that was it. Adaline, I went to her, too, looking for a wife. I have been lonely for so long —it seems my whole life, except for those few weeks of our courtship.”

“ You went to Mrs. Dove Lyon?” Adaline asked.

She had heard that men were often tricked into marrying one of Mrs. Dove Lyon’s brides, all of whom, like her, had some count against them. Scandal, lack of birth, something. She had not heard of a man willingly employing the matchmaker’s services, though she could see how it would appeal.

Felix told her about his half-brother’s widow and the way Dorcas had eloped with Vespasian straight from the schoolroom, and had followed the drum with him. Augustus, Felix’s other half-brother, had persecuted her, and lied about her to his

mother and to Felix.

She had become a protégée of Mrs. Dove Lyon, and had married the Earl of Somerford in a love match, brokered by the matchmaker.

“I wouldn’t take Augustus’s word for the color of the sky or which direction the sun rises,” Felix said. “Why on earth did I believe him when he told me that Dorcas was a liar and a wanton?”

“Because she is a woman, and women have let you down,” Adaline said. Including her, though she had not meant to. She should have tried harder to see Felix, instead of retreating into her own pain.

Felix smiled at her. “Dorcas has restored my faith in women, Adaline. She is a wonderful mother to my nephew, and deeply in love with Somerford. She is kind, clever, determined, and good. Because of her, I went to Mrs. Dove Lyon, who sent me to this house party to meet my intended bride. You are the only person present who could be the lady Mrs. Dove Lyon planned to match me with. And because of her, I was willing, finally, to listen to what you had to say.”

“Then I am grateful to Lady Somerford,” Adaline said. And jealous. The warmth in Felix’s voice when he spoke of the lady made her wonder if he would have preferred a wife like Dorcas. Would Adaline be his bride only because Dorcas was already happily married?

If so, it was no more than she deserved, and she would not allow it to upset her. She would just have to love Felix enough for them both, and trust that one day her love would spark his own.

“I am, too,” Felix said. “I used to wonder what it was like to have a sister, though some time I will confess to you how badly I initially treated the one Vespasian gave

me when he married. Now we are reconciled, I couldn't be more delighted.

She is the sister I never had, and her husband is a better brother to me than either of mine were. ”

A sister! That was better. A sister hadn't been a joy in her own life, mind you. “I would like a sister who was kind, clever and good,” she said.

Felix chuckled. “I shall share mine,” he said. He turned serious again. “But enough talking about other people. May I kiss you now, my dearest love?”

One kiss led to another and eventually to bed, for apparently their bodies remembered the night they had shared. It was as wonderful as Felix remembered.

One event marred the night. They were asleep in one another's arms when they were woken by knocking, at first barely audible and gradually louder. Felix leapt out of bed ready to fight, but Adaline begged him to have some regard for her reputation.

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“I shall deal with it,” she said. “And if I have any difficulties, you shall protect me. Promise me you will stay out of sight unless I am in immediate physical danger.”

“I shall,” he promised, reluctantly. He did not yet have the legal right to rearrange the teeth of any man who insulted her, but that did not mean he didn’t have the urge.

The visitor was Stillwater. “Mrs. Beverley, let me in,” he crooned, when she opened the door just a few inches. He pushed against it, but Felix was standing against the door with his shoulders against it, and the older man had no chance.

“Let me in, Mrs. Beverley,” he insisted. “You know you want me.”

“You are mistaken, Lord Stillwater,” Adaline said, her voice very calm. “I am not looking for a lover. I am a respectable widow. I expressed a genuine interest in your antiques. It was not an invitation.”

He swore at her then, calling her a tease and other more insulting names, and when Adaline tried to shut the door in his face, he put his boot in the way so he could spew a vituperative description of the trouble he would make for her in retaliation for refusing him.

Felix pressed against the door until the nasty worm yelped in pain, then released the pressure. As he had predicted, Stillwater removed his foot, and Felix slammed the door shut. Adaline turned the key.

“Bottom-dweller,” Felix said, keeping his voice low. “Snake. Slug!”

“He is a mean and horrible man,” Adaline said. “I wish I could finish my task for Mrs. Dove Lyon. It is not stealing, is it, when you take from a criminal to return something to its rightful owner?”

For Adaline, the fact the scroll had been a wedding gift made Lord Stillwater’s crime worse, but Felix thought the man’s worst sin was the way he preyed on widows, pressuring them to be his lover, threatening them, and then—in Mrs. Dove Lyon’s case—stealing from them. Either way the man was a cad.

“I will help you,” he said.

“You, Felix? But you are the most honest man I have ever met,” Adaline said.

““It is not stealing,”” Felix quoted her, ““when you take something from a criminal to return it to its rightful owner.’ It will be safer if I help you.”

That low life should not have threatened Felix’s lady. Losing the scroll he had taken from Mrs. Dove Lyon would be only the first part of Felix’s retribution.

“We shall make a plan in the morning,” Felix said. “For now, shall we go back to bed? I am wide awake, but there are other things we can do in bed, if you would like.”

Adaline declared that she would, indeed, like. They returned to bed and eventually, to sleep.

Felix crept back to his room before the dawn, feeling so light he was sure his feet were not touching the ground. Adaline was his . She had always been his, as he had been hers.

He and Adaline would deal with this small matter of Mrs. Dove Lyon’s errand, and

then return to London and arrange their wedding.

A small wedding. Adaline wanted Melody there, and Felix would like Dorcas and her family to attend.

Other than that, they agreed on their other main requirement.

It must be soon. Neither of them wanted a long delay.

Felix was looking forward to building new memories with her, and they had made a start in the night, rediscovering the passion that had created their daughter. He could not wait to get to know Melody better. Could not wait to see Adaline grow round with Melody's little brother or sister.

The halls and passages of the manor house were deserted, and Felix easily reached his room without being seen.

He startled his valet, though. Poor Williams must have thought he was still asleep, for when Felix slipped in through the door from the passage to his chambers, Williams let out a shriek and dropped the little tray of shaving equipment he had been holding.

"Your Grace!" Williams peered around Felix at the door, looked behind him toward the suite's bedchamber, and then back to Felix. "You are awake, Your Grace. Shall I fetch Your Grace's coffee?"

Three 'Your Graces' in a row. Williams was severely discombobulated. He knew Felix preferred less formality in his own chambers.

"Please do, but first, I have news. Confidential for the moment. You are the first to know."

Williams' chest swelled at this evidence of his importance in Felix's life. "News, sir?"

"I have asked Mrs. Beverley to be my wife, and she has agreed. You may congratulate me, Williams."

Williams beamed. "I do, sir. I do. Mrs. Beverley seems to be a fine lady. The servants like her, and her little girl is a favorite in the nursery."

"Excellent," said Felix, his own chest feeling several sizes larger at the praises to his womenfolk. "Thank you, Williams. Oh, and Williams, I have a task for you."

Today, Felix would ask Lord Stillwater for a private tour of the man's collection. Rumor said it included items unsuitable for a lady, kept in drawers in the collection room, away from sight. The dragon scroll might be there, and if so, Felix would see it.

If not—if it was, indeed, in the man's private suite—Adaline needed to know that both Stillwater and his valet were occupied so she could search the bedchamber, dressing room, and—if he had one—sitting room.

"Have you met Lord Stillwater's valet?" he asked Williams.

"Yes, sir. Poor man."

Poor man, was it? Felix could only imagine.

"I want you to talk to him today. I'm going to be busy—hopefully—with his master at noon for approximately an hour.

If he is free. If there is a change, I will let you know.

I need you to keep his valet out of his chambers at the same time. Can you do that for me, Williams?"

"I can, sir. Am I allowed to ask what it is about?"

"It is a favor for my future duchess," Felix explained. "Stillwater has stolen something, and we need to keep him and his valet out of his rooms so that my duchess can steal it back."

Williams looked somewhat alarmed. When Felix thought about it, he was alarmed, too. He was about to participate in a crime! But Adaline was worth it, and Stillwater was a mongrel.

"We are on the side of the angels," Felix assured Williams.

"We are on the side of the duchess, Your Grace," said Williams, with fervent conviction. Which was true.

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A daline had been searching for thirty minutes before she found the dragon scroll.

It was in Stillwater's dressing room, mounted inside a wardrobe door.

When Adaline removed it, the patch of brighter wood left behind was glaringly obvious.

If Stillwater didn't notice, the valet would, but she had come across a folio of obscene prints during her search of the bedchamber.

She picked the least salacious, and pinned it in the scroll's place.

She would have to hope that the valet was so used to the piece being there that he would not actually look at it.

In a drawer at the base of the wardrobe, she found a clutter of items, including the mounted dragon's tooth. That and the dragon scroll went into her bag, and she returned through the rooms, making sure that everything else was put back the way she had found it.

By now, three quarters of an hour had ticked by. Adaline needed to leave. Felix had promised her an hour, but it wouldn't do to push her luck. Besides, what she had come for, she had. She let herself out of the dressing room door and closed it behind her.

She made her way downstairs, and paused for a moment at the open door to the billiard room.

Stillwater was bent over the table, and the other two men were focused on his play, but Felix must have been watching, for he saw her and gave a small nod before turning his attention back to the billiard table.

He must have suggested billiards after finishing in the collection room.

Felix could be depended on. Adaline's heart swelled at the thought.

Adaline made her way upstairs to the nursery, where Melody greeted her with enthusiasm. "Mummy, have you come to take me painting? Mrs. Rodgers said you sent to say we would be going out. Is it time? Are we going now? I have my bonnet and my painting satchel ready. Shall I fetch them?"

She rushed off at her mother's nod of agreement, and Adaline exchanged a smile with Mrs. Rodgers, the governess who ruled the Stillwater schoolroom, and who had agreed to take Melody under her wing during the house party.

"She is very excited," Mrs. Rodgers said, and then chuckled. "I did not need to tell you that, for you can see for yourself."

Adaline had arranged with Mrs. Stillwater to have refreshments set out in the little folly by the ornamental lake that formed the focal point in the vista from the southern windows of the manor house.

Adaline helped Melody set up her easel and then left Melody to don a pinafore to protect her clothes, lay out her paints and set up her paper, while she then took a seat in the folly, facing back the way they'd come so that she would see Felix, who was going to join them.

But first, she needed to prepare Melody for the changes to come. "Melody, darling, there is something important I need to say to you, and I need to ask you to keep it

secret. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I can," said Melody, with more confidence than Adaline thought was warranted. But the secrecy was just for convenience. Everyone would know soon enough. "Do you remember the Duke of Kempbury?" she said.

"Yes, of course, Mummy."

Ah . There he was, coming down the stairs from the terrace. Still too far away for her to see his face, but she still recognized him—recognized the way he moved.

"I knew him a long time ago, and now that we have met again, he would like to marry me, Melody. Marry us ."

Melody put down the charcoal she was using to block out the scene before her, as she had been taught, and turned to face Adaline. "Marry us? As in, he would be your husband and my father?"

"Yes, dearest."

Melody turned back to the easel and resumed her blocking. "Would you like to marry him?" she asked.

"Yes, I would. Very much."

"We have been happy, just the two of us," Melody commented, her voice contemplative.

Adaline's heart sank. If Melody was adamantly against the marriage, how could Adaline go ahead? "We have," she agreed.

“But I should like a baby,” Melody said. “You said you could not have a baby unless you married again. Would the duke like you to have a baby, Mummy?”

“Perhaps several,” Adaline said. In the distance, Felix stopped and raised his arm in a wave. He had seen them. Adaline waved back.

“Also,” said Melody—she was squinting at the paper as she added a detail—“Also, Mummy, I shall be grown up one day. In seven years, perhaps. Or eight. I will find a husband and go to live with him. If you like the duke and he likes you, you will not be lonely.”

“That is true,” said Adaline, her heart filled with wonder that her little girl was so concerned about her mother’s future happiness. It was an unusual trait in a child. Melody was truly a special girl. “Here is the duke, Melody. He wanted to talk to you, so I asked him to meet us here.”

Felix rounded the folly and greeted the girl. “Good afternoon, Miss Beverley.”

Melody curtsied. “Good afternoon, Your Grace. Mummy says that you want to marry her.” Felix’s brows shot up, and his lips twitched as if he was suppressing a grin at Melody’s dignified statement.

His expression remained grave but his eyes danced as he said, “I do. Very much. I love your mother, Miss Beverley.”

Adaline’s eyes narrowed and she met his gaze with a solemn look far too adult for her little face. “You do? Well. That is very good. Mummy deserves to be loved. I love her, of course, but I am all she has had for a long time now, and I worry about her.”

Felix went down on one knee and took one of Melody’s hands in his own.

Adaline's heart melted at the sight of their interaction.

It was everything of which she'd ever dreamed.

"I will make it my life's work to cherish your mother as my own dear love, and you, too, as my daughter, if you will allow me to do so. "

"Your daughter ?" Melody repeated. "I do not remember my own father. He died a long time ago. I think I would like a father."

Adaline felt a catch in her throat and moisture in her eyes.

"That is most convenient," Felix said, seriously. "For I should like a daughter, Miss Beverley. Especially if she is exactly like you."

"I think, then," said Melody, "that you should call me Melody. I shall call you 'Father' after the wedding. Will you come to live with us, or shall we live with you?"

"May I be seated?" Felix asked, rising with a wince as his knee crackled. "Come and sit beside me on the steps here, Melody, and I shall tell you all about the homes we shall live in."

The lump in Adaline's throat drew larger as she watched their two heads close together. To her, the resemblance between them was obvious. No doubt, others would also notice. I must speak with Felix about telling Melody the truth before somebody else does .

This conversation had turned out better than Adaline expected, but telling Melody that Felix was her actual father was likely to be much more difficult.

Or perhaps not, for Felix was promising her a pony of her own as soon as she could

show she was a competent rider, and lessons so she might achieve that happy state as quickly as possible.

He had already referred questions about a kitten and a puppy to the higher authority of Melody's mother, so she suppressed her instinctive indignation at someone else making decisions about her daughter without consulting her.

Perhaps he thought that the stable was his domain.

Certainly, the conditions he was putting in place were fair and reasonable.

"Did you hear, Mummy?" Melody said, turning to see her watching.

"When His Grace is my father, I am to have a pony." She paused, her face scrunched in thought.

"I think it should be a lively gray pony and I will name her Misty and tie pink ribbons in her tail. Or blue, if Misty is a boy, but I think a girl would be better, for I am a girl." She nodded in satisfaction.

"We will live in our country seat, Willowbank Close." She shot a glance at Felix as she pronounced the name, and he nodded his approval.

"We shall live at Willowbank Close for part of each year," Melody continued, "but if I like riding, and I am sure that I shall, His Grace says that arrangements will be made for when we are not at The Close. What does that mean, Your Grace, 'arrangements will be made'?"

"If we are staying somewhere for a short time, and there is no suitable pony in the stables, Melody, we shall hire or borrow a pony," Felix explained, quite unbothered about being interrogated on the matter by a nine-year-old.

“If we are staying in another place for some time, and it is close enough for your pony to be brought to us, we shall do that. Or we could buy you another one, but that pony would be sad if we go away again for a long time.”

Melody frowned. “That would be bad,” she said. “Could we let it be used by, or perhaps given to, to a child who does not have a father? She would be so very, very happy, Your Grace.”

A child like Melody, she meant, and Felix understood her meaning, because his smile was wistful. “We shall decide at the time, my dear girl,” he said.

After a few more questions about what Melody’s life might be like as the daughter of a duke and his duchess, Melody went back to her painting, and Felix came to sit by Adaline.

“Did I do wrong, darling, offering Melody a pony?” Felix asked.

“Not at all,” Adaline told him, forgetting her momentary irritation. “As long as she has lessons, I am thrilled she will have her own pony.”

“I was mistaken then,” Felix said. “I thought I had offended you.”

Felix was disturbingly acute. “I apologize for that,” Adaline said. “For a moment, I was uncomfortable that someone else was making such an important decision. Felix, you have every right to buy your daughter such a present.”

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“But I should discuss such things with you,” he said. “All things that affect our family.” He had been very serious, but on the last word a grin spread across his face. “Our family ,” he repeated. “We are a family. Oh, Adaline, I do not believe I have ever been happier in my life.”

His smile ignited hers. “I am just the same,” she assured him. It was, indeed, a dream come true.

The afternoon passed quickly, and eventually it was time to pack up the painting equipment, being careful not to smudge Melody’s artwork.

Melody returned to the schoolroom bubbling like an overheated kettle, and it was not surprising that the news that Adaline was to marry Felix clearly boiled over and flooded the junior set, and from them spread to the adults.

When she came down to wait in the parlor for dinner, Adaline soon realized people were talking about her, and the way they looked from her to Felix told her the topic. “Felix, I think Melody has let the cat out of the bag,” she said.

Felix looked at her, his eyes concerned. “Do you mind?” he asked. “I am happy for everyone to know.”

“I would rather have told Mrs. Dove Lyon myself,” Adaline said. “I have signed a contract. She could be difficult if she wishes.”

“I am convinced she chose me for you,” Felix reminded her. “And if she makes a fuss, I shall pay her enough to make her happy again.”

How simple things were when one was a wealthy duke.

Mrs. Stillwater approached when Felix went to fetch Adaline a drink. “Is it true? Did the Duke of Kempbury really ask you to marry him?”

“It is,” said Felix, coming up behind the lady, “And I did. Fortunately, Mrs. Beverley said ‘yes,’ and so did her daughter, so we are to be married.”

How Adaline loved the dear man! And she had to admit to a little pleasure in the hastily disguised chagrin displayed by most of the single female guests, their mothers, and the occasional merry widow.

Lord Stillwater kept his distance, and no one could have told by his demeanor that he had had his own plans for Adaline.

Dinner was not too bad. The men assigned to the seats on either side of her had little interest in her prospective marriage, and were happy to take her invitation to talk about what interested them.

One bored her throughout the entire first remove with stories of his stable. She liked horses as well as the next woman, but the man droned on. And on.

The other made the second remove interesting with tales of the Roman relics dug up at his estate, and his speculations about the lives of the men and women who had known the objects before they were lost to time.

He was a fascinating speaker, and brought that far-distant past alive in her imagination.

The parlor after dinner was another matter. One of the downcast mothers set the tone, asking, “Were you not betrothed to the duke once before, Mrs. Beverley? Before your

marriage, that is, when you were Miss Fairbanks?”

Adaline would not deny it. “Yes, Mrs. Penworth, I was.”

“I heard about that,” said another of the women with a sly, sharp look at Adaline. “One cannot help but think it rash for a woman to dally with Richport when she had Kempbury on her line.”

No point in telling the cats that the woman with Richport had been Emmeline. They would not believe her, and it would only cause more talk. “It would have been, had I done so,” Adaline replied. “Not merely rash, but completely idiotic. Kempbury is by far the better man.”

“Even if she did, dear,” said Mrs. Penworth in an aside to her friend that was meant to be heard, “at least Kempbury had decided to ignore it. And if there were adverse consequences—well, it could have been either of them. Her daughter was born quite soon after the marriage, and is fair, like both dukes. Beverley was dark-haired was he not? But green eyes, dear. Richport’s are blue, of course. Yes, I think the girl is Kempbury’s.”

“One hopes you will be able to retain his interest for longer this time, Mrs. Beverley,” said a lady who clearly hoped quite the opposite. The conversation continued in the same vein, with one barbed remark after another and Mrs. Stillwater doing nothing to turn the topic and provide support.

Then the men joined the ladies and Felix came to her side and took her hand.

“We were just saying to Mrs. Beverley,” said Mrs. Penworth, “that we hope her second betrothal to you lasts longer than the first.” She smiled sweetly, but her hard eyes glittered.

“I doubt it will,” said Felix. He lifted her hand to his mouth and placed a gentle kiss on the back.

“The wedding will be as soon as we can possibly contrive, for I am anxious to make up for lost time. The misunderstanding from years ago has cost me ten years without my duchess at my side, as my hostess, my chatelaine, my partner, and my friend.”

While his words were pleasant, the look he gave Mrs. Penworth and her friends put them on notice that those who offended Adaline had better remember she would soon be the Duchess of Kempbury and far outrank them all.

Adaline had needed to be reminded of that, too.

She was marrying Felix, but the title came as part of the package, and she would need to do Felix credit in the role—“my duchess, my hostess, my chatelaine”, he had said.

The thought distracted her, and she soon made her excuses and said her good nights.

Felix escorted her upstairs, whipping her into the nearest convenient alcove.

She went eagerly, expecting a kiss, but the one she received was merely a peck on the nose.

“What is worrying you, darling?” Felix asked.

“Is it those cats downstairs? They will soon change their tune when you are my duchess.”

“Felix,” it came out far more like a wail than she intended. “I don’t know how to be your duchess or your chatelaine, or the kind of hostess that a duke requires.”

“Neither will the little fools fresh to the marriage market I was expected to marry,” said Felix. “Even when you were nineteen, you had more sense than any of them, and now you have run a business, raised a daughter, taken charge of your own life. Everything can be learned, darling.”

Her momentary panic subsided as she listened to his comforting voice, and—even more—felt the comfort of his hands stroking her back and flanks, softly but firmly, over and over.

“Who will I learn from,” she objected. “Your stepmother will not teach me.”

“My stepmother will not be allowed near you. Adaline, I have friends whose wives will welcome you into their lives—at first for my sake and soon for your own. They will be able to help you.”

He wrapped her in his embrace and kissed the top of her head. “But truly, love, I will tell you what a very wise young lady once told me when I was afraid. Stepmother had been telling me ever since my father died that I would never be the duke that he was, and that I was doomed to fail.”

Yes! Adaline remembered. When they first met, he had just passed his majority.

He had been kept from the business of the duchy by his trustees and guardians.

Having discovered the mess they had made of his affairs, he had been determined to take over, but what he didn’t know had loomed like a great tall mountain that he had to demolish before he could truly be duke.

“That young lady told me I should learn from those I trusted, by all means, but that I didn’t have to be the kind of duke my father was.

I was the duke, whether my stepmother and her allies liked it or not.

I would be the duke and the rest of the world had better learn to accept the kind of duke I chose to be, for the title was mine, and the wealth, and the power. ”

It was me , Adaline realized. I said that .

“You shall be duchess, because you will be my wife,” Felix told her. “You shall be the kind of duchess you choose to be. Also the kind of hostess and chatelaine. And that kind will be the right kind. For the title will be yours, my love, and all the wealth and the power I have will also be yours.”

When Felix returned downstairs, Lord Stillwater provided an excellent excuse for them to leave the house party before it was over, because of how he had been drinking heavily since before dinner.

“So, the Beverley bitch trapped you, eh, Kempbury?” he said, in an overly-loud voice that fell into a natural lull in the conversation like a cannon ball, silencing everyone in the room.

“My future duchess has been good enough to accept my proposal,” Felix responded, coldly.

“Must be a good lay,” Stillwater declared, ignoring his son’s frantic efforts to silence him. “I had a go at her myself—a widow, you know. Nothing wrong with that. She had bigger game in mind, of course. Hope you know what you’re doing. Once bitten, am I right?”

“You are being offensive, Lord Stillwater.” Felix knew how to invest his words with so much ice that the onlookers shivered.

“Give thanks for your gray hairs and the fact that you are drunk, or I would take you outside and flay some manners into you.” He turned to address the man’s son, “Stillwater, I suggest a couple of footmen to see this sot to bed.”

“This is my house, you young fool,” the viscount declared in the over-confident way of drunken men. “If you do not like what I say, then leave.”

“With all due respect to your daughter-in-law, who has been an exemplary hostess, and to your son, I shall leave,” said Felix.

“In fact, Mrs. Beverley and I shall both take our leave of you in the morning, Mrs. Stillwater. I cannot stay under a roof where my future duchess is open to such insult. I will take it very unkindly—” he paused to look around the room, catching the eye of anyone who was bold enough to face him—“very unkindly indeed, if Stillwater’s assertions are shared with people who are not here.

And now, I will bid the company good evening. ”

A duke’s unkind distain was not to be sought after, and several people stopped him on his way to the door to assure him that his duchess had their complete support.

Mr. Stillwater and his wife were both up early in the morning to see them off. Felix felt sorry for Mrs. Stillwater, who was obviously embarrassed still and very apologetic, but defending her was her husband’s task. As for him, Felix would never let anyone disparage his Adaline ever again.

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Felix enjoyed the journey back to London. The distance was such that he would normally do it in a day, leaving at sunrise and arriving at his London residence late in the evening. His own teams awaited him at seven inns along the way, and the carriage was well-appointed and well sprung.

Adaline said that Melody could not travel for fourteen or fifteen hours, no matter how comfortable the carriage, so he gave orders for a rider to take rooms at the half-way point of the journey, and set out to enjoy traveling with the woman he loved and their daughter.

By the time they arrived at their stop for the night, he had tumbled even further in love, though he would not have considered it possible. My ladies, as he'd decided to think of them, were excellent company—far better company than the estate files with which he normally traveled.

Melody and Adaline sang songs and played games. Adaline read to them both, and then, after bit, opened her reticule to produce the dragon's tooth.

"This is a special necklace," she told Melody, draping it around the girl's neck. "And that is a dragon's tooth!"

"How did you get it?" Melody asked skeptically, lifting the pendant to peer at it. "Are you sure it's a dragon's tooth?"

"Well, that is what I've been told," Adaline answered. "And dragons' teeth, I'm told, grant wishes, though I do not know if it is true! Shall I make you a story about a dragon's tooth?"

At Melody's nod, she asked, "What will you have in the story? Three things, remember. The dragon's tooth is one, so two more.

This was obviously a practice with them, for Melody furrowed her brow in thought and then decided the story should contain a pony and a pet puppy. Would Melody like a puppy? A silly question. What child would not want a puppy? He had better talk to Adaline.

His beloved began to spin a tale in which a dragon's tooth that granted wishes was passed from person to person, performing its magic for each one, three wishes apiece.

One of the fortunate recipients wished for a pony, was granted the most beautiful pony that ever lived, and then wished for a stable and a field full of lush grass.

One was a lost puppy, who wished for a little girl to love and be loved by, and was found by a homeless little girl.

The puppy then wished for a family to love them both and finally a farm for them all to live on.

Felix was enchanted, as was Melody—he was sure this was to become a favorite story.

"What should I wish for?" the girl asked eventually, lifting the tooth and considering it with near-reverence.

"Well...I'm not sure," Adaline told her. "It seems to me that your wishes may have come true already."

"That is true," Melody said in a grown-up sounding voice after a few more moments of speculation. "If I can get a puppy. To go with my pony."

Felix bit back a snort of amusement. Adaline grinned and caught his eyes with her own. Then she said, “And now, I’ll take it back. It belongs to a friend of mine who asked me to retrieve it for her from that country party. I need to keep it in my bag, where it is safe.”

“All right,” the girl answered with obvious reluctance, but then obediently pulled the necklace over her head and handed it back to her mother. “But will you tell me that story again?”

“As many times as you wish,” Adaline promised.

After lunch at an inn along the way, they took a brief walk around a village market, and he purchased cheap but sparkly combs for both his ladies, and a handful of ribbons for Melody.

Pink and blue for the promised pony. And red, “In case I decide to wish for a puppy,” his daughter said. “She will have a ribbon too.”

In the afternoon, he and Melody played several games of chess. She was only learning the game, but he thought she showed great promise. And in the evening, after a shared dinner, Adaline left Melody to the supervision of her nurse and came to his room.

He could not have imagined that two days of travel could pass so quickly and so pleasantly.

It was a rude shock when, near the end of the second day, a messenger caught up with him with an urgent message.

Standing by the coach, where Melody sat all ready for the last stage of the journey, he read the brief missive.

A disaster. A fire at Willowbank Close, his principal seat.

“You’ve come from the Close?” he asked the courier.

The man looked as if he had been in the saddle for hours.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“How bad is it?” Felix asked. “Was anyone injured? Any animals?” Adaline slipped her hand into his free one, and he squeezed her fingers, the rest of his attention in the courier.

“It started in the stables, Your Grace. We lost two horses. Got the rest out. One end of the stable block and part of the adjoining wing of the house are burnt out. I don’t know how bad the rest is, Your Grace. As for the people, a few burns. No one was killed.”

Felix let out the breath he did not know he had been holding. “That’s something. That’s... it’s good. We can rebuild things. Adaline, I must go to Willowbank Close. You heard?”

“A fire, Felix. Of course, you must go and make certain your people are cared for.”

She understood. Of course she did. Even in the midst of his busy planning, he spared a thought for what a wonderful duchess Adaline was going to make.

As if to underline that truth, she said to Melody, “Darling, just sit tight for a moment. We will carry on to London once I have helped His Grace on his way. He must go and look after the people and horses who have been hurt by the fire.”

“Yes, Mummy,” Melody said. “I am sorry about your fire, Duke.”

“Thank you, Melody. Adaline, you continue in the coach. I will arrange a riding horse—it will be faster.”

“I shall organize a bundle of food for you to carry.” She smiled at the courier. “Come with me. I shall arrange a bath, a meal, and a room in which you can rest before you return.”

What a woman. No fuss. No complaints. She saw what was needed and got on with it. Felix was on his way in fifteen minutes, taking only enough time to assure Adaline that, if she took the dragon scroll into Mrs. Dove Lyon, he would write to the lady and agree to her terms.

“I should be back within the week, my love,” he told her, kissed her on the lips despite the busy innyard, and rode on his way.

It was more like nine days, but at last Felix arrived back in London. The fire was worse than the courier thought, having broken out again after everyone was certain it was extinguished. They had lost more than half the stable block, and most of the west wing of the house.

There were casualties among those who fought the fire, but no deaths. And the stable master had suffered a broken leg when the horse he was rescuing panicked and ran over him on its way back into the worst of the fire.

He had had two letters from Adaline during his absence. The first was a chatty epistle about Melody, her pleasure at being in her own home, and her curiosity about the ducal townhouse. “I told her that we would visit once you were home, Felix,” Adaline wrote.

She had not yet seen Mrs. Dove Lyon. “I have sent Mrs. Dove Lyon a note letting her know that I have the dragon scroll and tooth, and that I met you at the house party. I

thought it best to notify her that we are betrothed. I think you are correct in saying that this was her intention, darling, but let us leave nothing to chance. I will write again once I have seen her.”

And she had written again, three days later—a remarkably short letter to say that Mrs. Dove Lyon had approved their betrothal and had arranged a license and an appointment at St Mary’s Whitechapel.

The wedding was tomorrow, and the marriage agreement was waiting for him on the desk in his study.

He would sign it before the wedding, but he couldn’t wait until tomorrow to see Adaline, and besides, Melody wanted to visit his townhouse.

Her room was ready—the letter he had sent to his housekeeper had meant all was prepared for his new bride and his daughter. It lacked only her personal items.

He wouldn’t wait. He would call on Adaline right now. It was late in the day, but surely Adaline and Melody would be at home, and it was not too late for a short excursion?

But when he arrived at the address Adaline had given him, her butler refused him. “Mrs. Beverley is not receiving visitors,” he said.

“I am the Duke of Kempbury, Mrs. Beverley’s betrothed,” Felix told him. “Let Mrs. Beverley know I am here, please.”

The butler sniffed, but went away to carry the message to his mistress, leaving Felix in the entry hall. A few minutes later, Adaline called down to him. He looked up. She was standing on the upper landing, leaning over the balustrade, smiling down at him. “Kempbury. You are back in London.”

Kempbury? Was she cross with him? “Of course. It is our wedding tomorrow.”

“Yes, which is why I am turning away guests tonight, dear man. I want to be at my best for you.”

“But not me, surely?” He sounded like a whiny boy, and all because his plans had been overturned. Felix moderated his tone, and managed to say calmly, “I thought you and Melody might like to have a quick look at my townhouse. It would not take long.”

“Tonight, Kempbury? No, surely not. We shall see it tomorrow. I shall see you tomorrow, at the church. And afterward, I shall make it up to you for not receiving you tonight.” There was a wealth of promise in her voice, but Felix could not deny that he was disappointed.

“If that is what you want, Adaline,” he managed to say. “I shall see you and Melody at the church.”

Adaline chuckled. “Tomorrow,” she said. “But Melody will not be joining us, darling. She has a bit of a sniffle.”

He knew something was not right. “How is she? Has she seen a doctor? Should I call one?”

That prompted another laugh. “Oh, Kempbury, how sweet of you. It is just a sniffle. Children recover quickly, I promise you. She needs to stay at home in bed for a day or two.”

With that, Felix had to be satisfied. Outside on the steps, he wondered what had just happened. Something was off. Adaline was not herself. She had not seemed at all concerned about Melody, and she had called him “Kempbury”, thrice.

Surely, he had not been mistaken in her? She loved her child, he knew that. And she loved him, did she not? Perhaps she was overwhelmed at the thought of the wedding. Yes. That must be it. Tomorrow, she would be his wife, and all his doubts would fade away.

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Adaline was furious. With herself, partly.

She should have turned to run, or at least screamed for help, as soon as she saw her sister in her parlor, reading the letter that Adaline had intended to post to Felix that morning.

Instead, she had stopped to talk, and before she knew it, her sister's henchman had burst into the room, overpowered her, and put a cloth over her mouth and nose.

A sweet pungent smell had filled her nostrils, and that was the last thing she remembered before waking up in this room.

This small bare room with barred windows, a locked door, and nothing she could use to break herself out.

She was fed once a day, at which time her chamber pot and jug of water were swapped for fresh ones.

The door was unlocked and swung back against the wall, and the henchman entered gun first, gesturing for her to back against a wall while the maid, the only other person she had seen since her arrival, put down the tray and collected yesterday's tray and the chamber pot and water jug.

She had tried to talk to them, bribe them, threaten them with Felix's power and title. To no avail. They both ignored her as if she was not in the room, except that, if she tried to move, the henchman glared and waved the gun at her.

Emmeline, who had been there when she first awoke, said his instructions were to shoot her in the leg if she did not obey. “I do not want you to die, Adaline darling. Dead people cannot suffer, and I intend for you to suffer.”

“I thought you were settled in Jamaica,” Adaline had said.

Emmeline had shrugged. “Mama married again. Her new husband was jealous of me. He told Mama I was crazy. He wanted to lock me away.” At that, she gave a great cackle. “The house burnt down. He and Mama died. I left Jamaica.”

The bare-bones recitation chilled Adaline. Had Emmeline set fire to the house? Had she killed her mother and stepfather? Adaline was not going to ask, for fear it angered her half-sister. But then, she wondered if she’d set the fire at the Close.

Emmeline had visited only one other time, a day later.

Her purpose was to gloat. “I have been to visit the Black Widow of Whitechapel, Adaline darling. She is very pleased with you. I gave her the dragon scroll, and my wedding—I beg your pardon, your wedding—is set for five days from now. Aren’t you a clever little thing?

Brokering your larcenous propensities to win yourself a duke!

And here I thought you to be law-abiding!

I should have known that a bastard like you could not be honest. Miss Butter-Wouldn’t-Melt-in-her-Mouth Adaline. ”

“Why are you doing this?” Adaline asked. “How have I ever hurt you?”

Emmeline’s eyes were wild. “You hurt me by existing. How dare you pretend not to

know. Papa insulted Mama, and me too, by insisting that you grow up in my home! You should never have existed, and if your mother had not tempted Papa to break his marriage vows, you would not exist. I should have Slugger shoot you right now.”

She was screeching by the end of the tirade, but she suddenly spun away from Adaline and stared at the wall, taking deep breaths and muttering to herself, “But no. That is not the plan. I have to stick to the plan.”

She turned back with a bright smile. “Good day, Adaline. I shall not say goodbye, for I shall visit again. When I am the Duchess of Kempbury.”

She breezed out of the room, but Adaline had seen enough to conclude that Emmeline was skirting the edges of sanity, a point that she raised with Slugger, the henchman, next time he came to her room. He ignored her, as he ignored everything else she said.

So here she remained, six days later, on the morning her wedding, a prisoner while her sister stole her identity and ruined her romance with Felix. Again.

And what had become of Melody? Under her anger, her frustration, her despair over Felix, throbbed the constant worry. Emmeline had refused to answer her questions about the child. Surely the woman was not so wicked as to take out her hatred on an innocent child?

The early morning, not long after the sun rose, was not time for the daily visit from Slugger and the anonymous maid, so she was not expecting the door to crash open. Slugger was, as always, the first in the door, but the person who came next was a surprise.

Melody wrenched herself free of Emmeline’s restraining grasp and dodged around Slugger to throw herself into Adaline’s arms. “Mummy, you are alive,” she sobbed,

rubbing her hands on Adaline's face as if she needed the physical evidence that her mother was really there.

"She will remain alive, and so will you," Emmeline said, breezily. "As long as you do what you are told."

Adaline wrapped protective arms around her daughter and glared at Emmeline. "Making war on children is despicable, Emmeline."

Emmeline stuck out her tongue and made a rude noise.

"She shouldn't exist either." She giggled.

"You made such a fool of yourself in that letter to Kempbury. Melody this and Melody that. And he was just as bad in his replies. He was buying her a new bed, and a doll with real hair, and a real artist's painting set..."

Her mood changed as rapidly as it had on her last visit, and she snarled, "So many more things, and all for a girl that should never have been born. The bastard daughter of a whore's bastard."

Melody turned her face into Adaline's shoulder.

"I plan to keep you so Kempbury will do what he is told," Emmeline informed them. "But remember, I do not need to keep you both, or to keep you whole. Ah well. I do not have time to stand here chatting with you. I must go to your house to dress for my wedding. Come along, Slugger."

Adaline didn't watch them leave. She was too concerned about her daughter, whose shoulders were shaking.

But when Melody lifted her face from the refuge of Adaline's shoulder, she was not crying. Instead, the eyes that lifted to Adaline's were filled with anger and determination.

"That lady says she is going to be you," she said. "The duke will not believe her. She is mean and she looks mean. She is not really my aunt, Mummy, is she?"

"In a sense she is," Adaline had to admit. "We have the same father but different mothers, so that makes us half-sisters. But she has never acted like a sister to me, and she is certainly not acting like an aunt. I wonder what she has planned for us when she gets back?"

"Do not worry, Mummy," said Melody. "We shall not be here when she gets back." She was grinning.

It was a moment before Adaline made sense of what Melody was holding out in her hand. "That is a key."

"It is the key to this door. Phyllis said to wait until she has fed Slugger his breakfast. She is going to put lorda... lorda-something in his beer."

Laudanum. The hope was so unexpected that Adaline's knees gave way and she sagged onto the floor. "We can escape?"

Melody nodded. "Phyllis 'don't hold with locking up brats,' she says. And besides, she says Mrs. Redmond is crazy-mad." If Emmeline was Mrs. Redmond, then Phyllis was right.

"Is Phyllis the maid?" Adaline asked.

"I guess." Melody did not sound certain. "I've only seen Phyllis and Slugger. Phyllis

is Slugger's sister, but she doesn't like him much. She says she only came to work here because the pay was good, but the money ain't worth hangin' for, and Mrs. Redmond is headin' for a hangin' , Phyllis says."

"Phyllis is right," Adaline agreed. "I wonder how we shall know it is time to escape?"

"Phyllis is going to wait until Slugger is asleep, then knock on our door," Melody explained.

"Then she is going to run for it, she says. Because Slugger will be mad as fire when he wakes up. And the crazy lady too, except she will be out, Phyllis says. Slugger isn't going to get his breakfast ale until he has taken Aunt Crazy Lady to our house. "

Adaline was very tempted to use the key immediately, but she didn't want to run into either Slugger or Emmeline. Rather, Aunt Crazy Lady , which was a good name for her half-sister.

So instead, she and Melody sat on the bed and speculated about what Kempbury might have purchased Melody. It passed the time, and Melody enjoyed letting their imaginations run away with them, populating the nursery with a fantasy of creatures both real and fabled.

Still, Adaline's nerves were stretched thin and raw, so she found it hard to keep up the amusing patter. When the knock eventually came, Adaline jumped out of pure tension, then hurried across the room, fitted the key to the lock, and turned it. The maid was already gone.

Together, she and Melody crept down the stairs. She could hear snoring coming from behind a door at the back of the hall. Slugger had already taken Emmeline to Adaline's house to dress for the wedding, returned home, drunk his ale, and passed out, but the front door was open and freedom beckoned.

In seconds, she and Melody had tiptoed across the hall, out the door, and down the steps. Adaline did not recognize the street, but she stopped at the corner and asked the street sweeper the way to the Lyon's Den.

It was only a few streets away, but they would need to be quick.

The plan was that they would call at the Lyon's Den and ask for Mrs. Dove Lyon. If she was not there or could not help, someone might know what church had been chosen for the wedding.

As they hurried along the footpath, Adaline heard the bells of various churches chiming the hour. It was ten o'clock. Her heart sank and her breath caught in her throat but she didn't stop walking. Emmeline and Kempbury could be married by now!

They arrived at the Lyon's Den to be told that Mrs. Dove Lyon had gone to a wedding at St Mary's Whitechapel.

"Your wedding, Mrs. Beverley," said the man who answered the door.

"Come on. I'll take you there. Hey!" The last remark was addressed to a gentleman who had just turned up in a curricule.

The man hurried up to exchange a few words with the gentleman, and within moments, she and Melody had squeezed in beside the gentleman, and Mrs. Dove Lyon's guard had swung up behind.

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The Earl of Somerford, or Ben as he had invited Felix to call him, had agreed to stand up with Felix at the church, and had arrived early at Felix's town mansion.

"I left the carriage for Dorcas and the children," he said.

"They will be much better behaved if they don't have a long wait, so they'll see us at the church. Are you ready, Felix?"

"I am." More than ready, and the sense of dread that plagued him was surely just some sort of wedding nerves.

He'd dreamed of his wedding during the night, and in the dream something was terribly wrong.

Something, but what it was, he could not now recall.

Still, he was determined not to let his wedding day be shadowed by a dream. A dream he could not properly remember.

He ordered his own carriage, and tried to engage Ben in conversation.

He was unsuccessful. When his mind was not drifting off into ruminations about his future life with the two females he loved, it fretted away at wisps of the lost dream, which would not quite coalesce into something he could remember.

It was a relief when a footman announced the carriage was at the front steps.

Ben yawned as they took their seats and the carriage set out for the church.

“A late night?” Felix asked.

“A son who wants to be fed in the early hours of the morning, and then won’t go back to sleep until his father sings to him,” Ben said. He added, “One wonders why one bothers to pay nursemaids.” But his smile as he said it could only be described as smug.

Felix sorted through the implications of Ben’s explanation. “Dorcas is feeding him herself?”

“She is. She says she fed Stephen, and she is certain that is why he is so strong and robust. And, of course, she is even more tired than I, so while I get up when she does, I send her back to bed once Noah is fed. Joking aside, Felix, that quiet half hour in the middle of the night with my son is one of the finest parts of every day. Dorcas and I hope you will be able to enjoy the same experience.”

“If I have a son,” Felix warned, “he will take Stephen’s place as my heir.”

Ben shrugged. “Of course, but Stephen has no idea that he is your heir, so it won’t make any difference.”

“The money and estate I have already settled on him as the inheritance he should have had from his father will still be his, of course.”

“Between us, we shall make sure he has a good start in life,” Ben agreed.

“You don’t need to be concerned about Stephen.

Marry your Adaline and make babies, Felix.

Being a father is wonderful. And I love Stephen every bit as much as I love Noah.

Your new daughter is a little older, but I'm sure it will be the same for you. ”

“More than you might think,” Felix said. He was still amazed no one at the house party had guessed Melody's parentage—or if they had, no one had mentioned it to him. If they had seen the painting of him as a child, they would have guessed in a minute. Given her green eyes, they probably had.

Come to think of it, Ben would probably guess, and Dorcas, too.

“Oh?” Ben raised an interrogative eyebrow.

“Adaline and I were betrothed ten years ago, Ben. Suffice it to say that, before things went wrong, we...” No need to go into detail.

“The point is, Melody is my daughter. I had no idea she existed, but I knew as soon as I saw her that she was mine. You will know, too, for Stephen and Melody could be brother and sister. Which is unsurprising, since they are cousins.”

The carriage stopped outside of the gates of the church, a couple of footmen leapt down to open the gates, and the carriage then proceeded to the steps of St Mary's.

Felix checked his pocket watch just as various bells started to ring the hour. It was ten o'clock. The wedding was set for a quarter past ten—perhaps to fit it in between other weddings, for another happy couple and their friends and family were just emerging from the church.

He and Ben waited for a few minutes for the newlyweds to make their way down the street, followed by a crowd of cheerful, celebrating, people, and then went into the building.

“My quarter past wedding?” asked the minister.

“Yes,” Felix acknowledged. “I am Kempbury, and my friend is the Earl of Somerford.”

The minister held out his hand for first Felix and then Ben to shake. “Daniell Matthias. You are the groom, Your Grace?”

Felix agreed.

“Come and wait inside the nave,” Mr. Matthias invited. “I shall be with you shortly. That was my second wedding of the day, and I have six more before noon, including yours. I trust you will not be offended if I shut myself in the sacristy for five minutes and have a cup of tea.”

“Not at all,” Felix assured him, amused at the man’s slightly belligerent apology.

He and Ben took a seat in the front pew, and not long afterward, Mrs. Dove Lyon arrived.

It was only fair for her to be there, since she had brought him and Adaline back together.

She nodded to them both and sat on the bride’s side of the church.

Dorcas was next. She, with Stephen at her side, little Noah in her arms, and a nursemaid at her heels, entered the pew behind the one in which Felix and Ben sat.

The minister reappeared, and looked down the aisle, then nodded toward Felix with an air of expectation. Ben nudged Felix. “Time to stand in front of the altar,” he said.

Felix had no sooner taken his place than Ben nudged him again, this time looking down the aisle to the main doors. Adaline had just entered. His eyes devoured her as she glided down the aisle. He smiled. A special walk for her wedding day. Adaline was more of a striding sort of a lady.

She beamed back at him—he could see that much through the short veil that was fixed to her bonnet. She had not described her gown in her first letter. Just that she had ordered a new one. She said nothing about it in her second.

It was a kind of bluey-green—women probably had a fancy name for the precise shade, but that was as close as Felix could come.

The same color had been used for ornate embroidery covering the bodice and cuffs, and forming a deep hem on the skirts.

Something—glass beads or jewels—sparkled in the light as she moved.

As she approached, he looked behind her and frowned. When she came up beside him, he whispered, “How is Melody?”

She shrugged but didn’t answer because Mr. Matthias had already begun the words of the ceremony. “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

“I give myself,” said Adaline firmly. Her voice was huskier than usual. Did she have a cold? The same cold as Melody, perhaps?

Mr. Matthias gaped at her for a moment, then continued, addressing the congregation, telling them the reason for the gathering. Under cover of the minister’s voice, Felix asked, “Is Melody worse? Is something wrong?”

“Melody is fine. She is at home. Like I told you she would be.” Adaline’s reply was

impatient. “A wedding is no place for children. Shush. He is talking.”

Felix tried to peer through the veil. What he was thinking was just not possible. The priest was asking if anyone had cause to think they could not be lawfully joined together, and Felix was suddenly certain he had very good cause.

When Mr. Matthias asked the two of them directly—more, he solemnly charged them, out of fear of judgement, to tell the truth—Felix spoke up. “This woman is not Adaline. She is not my betrothed.”

Gasps came from Dorcas and Mrs. Dove Lyon.

The woman flung back her veil and looked up at him, her eyes full of tears. “Kempbury. Darling, what are you saying?”

Ben, beside him, said, “Steady on, Felix.”

Now their few onlookers were standing. The baby had started to cry.

Felix stared into grey eyes that were certainly not Adaline’s lovely, familiar hazel ones. And yes, the chin was more pointed. In fact, in a dozen ways, the face was subtly wrong.

He had seen enough. He turned to Mr. Matthias.

“This is Emmeline, Adaline’s half-sister. I don’t know how she did it, but she has taken Adaline’s place.” He turned back to the woman standing next to him. “Where is she, you fiend?”

Emmeline, if it was her, turned to Mrs. Dove Lyon.

“I am Adaline Beverley,” she insisted. “Tell him, Mrs. Dove Lyon. I am the one who brought you the dragon scroll. You thanked me and you said you planned to hang it in your bedchamber, where you could see it every morning. I signed the marriage agreements. I am Adaline Beverley.”

Felix’s certainty wavered but firmed again. This was not Adaline. In the next moment, a new voice joined in the dispute. “You are not,” said that beloved voice. “I am Adaline, and you cannot destroy my happiness again, Emmeline.”

There she was. His beloved, his darling. Looking tired and bedraggled, in clothes in which she must have slept, possibly for days, from their wrinkles. And she was hand-in-hand with Melody, who was equally disheveled. They were both breathing heavily and were red-faced, as if they had been running.

Emmeline gaped for a moment then spun to face Mrs. Dove Lyon. “You said Kempbury would marry the person who gave you the dragon scroll. I did so. Kempbury is mine .”

“I will not marry you,” Felix declared.

“You signed a contract,” Mrs. Dove Lyon reminded him, looking deeply worried. “I signed a contract. And yet...”

“Breach of contract.” Emmeline sounded delighted. “Kempbury will go through with the marriage, or I shall sue you both. A wealthy duke and a rich gambling den operator? I shall sue you until all you have left are your shirts.”

Adaline spoke. “Mrs. Dove Lyon, I retrieved the dragon scroll, not Emmeline. She drugged me, stole it from me, and locked me and Melody up so we could not interfere.”

Emmeline snarled at her. “I retrieved the scroll. Your word against mine. In any case, I returned it to Mrs. Dove Lyon.”

“Adaline retrieved the scroll. I was there,” said Felix.

“You would say that,” Emmeline sneered at him.

“What of the tooth?” asked Adaline.

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“The tooth?” For a moment, Emmeline looked panicked, then she drew herself up. “The tooth has nothing to do with it,” she said.

“Mrs. Dove Lyon, when we met in your office...” Adaline began.

Emmeline tried to shout her out. “Enough of this! Get on with the ceremony.”

Adaline raised her voice to speak over her. “You told me that the tooth had also been a present to you from your husband. I found it with the scroll. I took it to give back to you.”

“That tooth! I have that tooth,” Emmeline said, her eyes wild. “I will give it to you later, Mrs. Dove Lyon.”

“Describe it,” said Mrs. Dove Lyon.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Emmeline replied. “It is a tooth. We have a contract.”

“It is a dragon’s tooth,” Melody piped up. “Dragons’ teeth grant wishes. I wish you would go away, Aunt Crazy Lady. I don’t like you one bit.”

Emmeline took a threatening step toward the child, and Felix grabbed her arm. “Leave Melody alone,” he ordered.

Emmeline sagged against him and looked up through her eyelashes.

“Felix, darling, you don’t want to marry this hag.

Look at her! She is developing wrinkles.

She has had a child, and everyone knows that children destroy a woman's figure.

Besides, she is my father's by-blow. A duke cannot marry a bastard. "

Felix shook her off. "Enough, Emmeline. You have lost. Tell her, Mrs. Dove Lyon. The contract is null and void."

Emmeline had not given up. "The contract was to deliver the dragon scroll," she said. "And I did it."

"The contract was to retrieve the dragon scroll," said Adaline. "Which I did, with Felix's help. And I have the tooth to prove it. It is a large tooth, in a silver setting."

"Then produce it now," Emmeline demanded.

But how could Adaline do so if it was back at her townhouse, as Felix thought it must be? Adaline set her jaw, and Felix knew she did not have it.

"Well, Mrs. Dove Lyon?" said Emmeline. "Am I to sue you and Kempbury for breach of contract?"

"Excuse me please, but I have the tooth," said Melody, lifting it by the chain she wore around her neck so that it hung outside of her pinafore.

"Sorry, Mummy. I only wanted my wishes. I hadn't actually made any yet—except maybe for a puppy—but getting us free seemed to be an important one and I thought maybe I could get a puppy without a wish.

Anyhow, I was going to give it back." She took the item off and handed it to Adaline, who passed it to Mrs. Dove Lyon.

Emmeline emitted a shriek. “No! That—that’s the wrong tooth! You have it wrong!”

“I think not,” said Felix. “But the truth of the matter is that you have not fulfilled the contract with Mrs. Dove Lyon, nor is the marriage agreement with me valid, since you signed Adaline’s name, and you are not Adaline.

Somerford, can you see if there is a constable anywhere about?

Kidnapping and false imprisonment will do for a start. ”

Before Ben could move, Emmeline hurled her flowers at him. As he fumbled to catch them, she ran off down the aisle, pulling her skirts up to give her freedom of movement. He took off after her. Mrs. Dove Lyon nodded to a couple of her tall ex-soldiers and they followed him.

Felix knelt before Melody. “You are wonderful,” he told her. “I am so proud of you.”

She regarded him solemnly. “Aunt Crazy Lady is gone,” she observed. “The dragon’s tooth does grant wishes, Mummy! My first wish was for us to escape. My second was for her to go away and never come back.”

“She did go away. And we shall make certain she cannot come back.”

There was shouting from outside. Felix ignored it, and so did the others.

Melody tipped her head on one side. “I can tell you my third wish after you marry my mummy,” she offered.

“Then let us do that now,” said Felix. He met his bride’s eyes. “If that is acceptable to you, my love.”

Adaline looked down at her disheveled gown. She must look a dreadful sight. But

truly, did it matter, when Felix was regarding her as if the sun rose and set in her eyes? When he had trusted her enough to realize that Emmaline was taking her place again?

She shrugged. “Yes,” she said, and turned to the minister. “Carry on,” she said.

It didn’t take long. Lord Somerford had returned and taken his place beside Felix in plenty of time to hand over the wedding ring, and soon they were signing the register, with Mrs. Dove Lyon and Lord Somerford signing as witnesses.

“You are all invited back to my townhouse for a wedding feast,” Felix told them, which was a step too far, for Adaline.

“I need to stop at my townhouse, Felix, so Melody and I can wash and change.”

“Of course you do,” said Lady Somerford. “May I act as your hostess, Felix, until you and your duchess arrive? Adaline, I am Dorcas, and I am looking forward to having a sister. I have always wanted one.”

Adaline winced and Dorcas noticed.

“That was insensitive of me,” she said. “But you must know that your half-sister was never a true sister to you. We shall start as friends, then, shall we not?”

“I would like that,” Adaline agreed. “Friends and then sisters.”

Lord Somerford had been murmuring swiftly to Felix, who appeared grave. He looked up and met her eyes. “I suggest we go out of the side door,” he said. “Somerton has arranged for the carriage to be brought around to the back.”

“What is it?” Adaline asked. “Did Emmeline get away?”

“Emmeline has gone away...rather permanently,” Felix told her. He lowered his voice so that Melody could not hear. “She ran out in front of a mail coach.”

Adaline couldn't react with the horror she felt, because their daughter began jumping up and down with excitement.

“The wish worked,” Melody announced. “Permanently means ‘forever’. So we escaped from the bad aunt. That was my first wish. Aunt Crazy Lady has gone away forever. That was my second wish. Shall I tell you my third wish now that you are married?”

She was talking to Felix, but Adaline nodded, too.

“I wished for you to be my real father,” said Melody.

Felix dropped back to one knee in front of her, and held out his arms. “I am, and will always be, your real father, Melody Seward.”

And Adaline felt happy tears cutting streams across her dirty cheeks as her husband and the child they had made hugged for the first time.

The End