



The Lyon's Last Gamble (The Lyon's Den Connected World #80)

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Category: Historical

Description: A game of chance brings fortune unimagined.

Lord Christopher Campbell has been down on his luck. Being the second son was an unfortunate status. Being the brother of a duke even more so. But worse than either of those was losing the family's livelihood because of a gambling problem. Now Christopher has fled the wilds of Scotland for the sophistication of London hoping to turn his luck around. The invitation from Ms. Dove-Lyon looks to be exactly what he needs to put the odds back in his favor.

Miss Whitney Watkins has been blessed with a life of privilege. Her parents ensured she never wanted for anything. She was a much sought after match for many of the wealthy suitors visiting her family home and filling her dance card—until she ruined everything, including her reputation. Now, she spends her days alone, and her nights wishing she would be offered just one dance.

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London, 1815

This would be the one. Lord Christopher Campbell could feel it. He was so close .

The big win hadn't happened yet, but he was still hopeful. He tapped the table in front of him, letting the dealer know he wanted a hit. Christopher closed his eyes as he picked up the card, trying to manifest the card he needed. A four would give him a perfect score and guaranteed win. Something lower and he could stay in and play on.

With a deep breath, he opened his eyes and looked at the card.

Five.

Fuck.

Christopher had lost count of how many weeks had passed since he'd arrived in London, other than it had been several. He'd spent the time bouncing from gambling den to gambling den. Unfortunately for him, his luck wasn't any better here than it was back home in Scotland.

He was hoping to win big and return home to Millwool Castle and pay back his brother, Alexander, the Duke of Argyll. It was the very least he could do for all the trouble he'd caused. The coin he'd cost his brother was high, but the stress he'd forced upon Alexander was even worse. It was the last thing his brother should have had to deal with when he'd returned from the war.

Putting Christopher in charge of the Campbell estates was a decision they had both

regretted. He was too busy laying down bets and playing cards to put much thought into the impact of what his subpar gambling talent was doing to the family coffers.

He was trying to rectify that.

He threw the cards down and pushed away from the table. He needed another drink. The bartender poured him a scotch and with a nod of thanks, Christopher knocked back the liquid in one long pull before slamming the glass on the bar. He paid his tab and exited the establishment.

His wallet was growing thinner by the day.

The only reason he was even able to stay in London was because the Campbell's owned an estate here. Colthrop Hall had offered a great escape. And apparently his brother knew it was where Christopher would run to. Alexander had sent messages to the staff here, ensuring he was taken care of. He also generously sent a monthly allowance. The gesture meant a lot since his brother had to be aware of what he would spend it on.

Along with his allowance, Alexander also gifted him the title of Lord.

Christopher was certain he'd done so because his brother thought it would make things a little easier for him. That Alexander would do such grand things for him, after his actions of the past, said a lot about Alexander and the type of man he was.

All of it was just a reminder of how much of a failure Christopher was.

One day, maybe one day, he could live up to his brother's expectations and the Campbell name.

"Hello, handsome." A small hand caught his arm as he walked out the door. Lottie, a

local wench, smiled. “You look like you could use some cheering up. Bad day at the tables?” Slender fingers walked up his bicep, her pink tongue darting out to wet her lips. “I can make you forget your losses.”

Christopher had spent several nights with her since he’d arrived. She’d provided a much welcome solace when he needed it and normally, he’d take her up on the offer, but not today. His mind was too heavy with defeat.

He shrugged her hand off, lifting the collar of his jacket to ward against the cool autumn air and remained silent.

She jutted her bottom lip out in a pout.

It didn’t sway his decision.

Not to worry, there were plenty of men inside that would take her up on her proposition.

Stepping down from the porch, he headed toward Colthrop Hall.

“I’ll be here if you change your mind,” she called after him sultrily.

He signaled for a driver and by the time he arrived home, the gray skies had opened up and cold rain fell in fat drops, splattering on the ground, turning the path to the door into mud. Gideon, his butler, greeted him in the foyer and collected his coat as soon as he slipped it off his shoulders.

“You’ve returned early this eve, my lord.”

“Aye. I’ve lost my appetite for the tables tonight it seems. I just want a hot bath and to retire early.”

Gideon dipped his head. “Of course. I will have water brought up and a light meal prepared and delivered.” He scurried off, snapping his fingers at servants, delegating orders.

Upstairs, Christopher tugged on his cravat as he walked down the hall to his room that overlooked the garden. As he gazed over the dying flowers below, he couldn’t ignore the scene filling his vision. In the spring, when all the flowers bloomed, the garden was a gorgeous sight. Right now, the garden looked like the status of his life situation—in need of revitalization.

He needed to get his shite in order. The gambling he did day in and day out was obviously not the answer to his problems. The irony wasn’t lost on him in thinking he could solve his gambling problem by gambling.

“Ye’re a fool, Campbell.” He mumbled.

“My Lord?” A servant called from the door, her arms carrying a tray that contained food and a pot of tea.

He shook his head. “’Tis naught. Please,” he stepped forward and gestured to the table. “Thank ye.”

The servant bowed. “Your tub is being filled now and will be available shortly.”

He snagged a piece of cheese and a slice of hard-crust bread off the plate and nodded. “I thank ye again.”

A good soak was what he needed.

A good meal.

A new mindset.

Tomorrow was a new day and he vowed that he would approach it with a new temperament.

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“M ama, what have you done?” Whitney Watkins asked for the third time. “Please, you must tell me.”

Standing in front of the window, her mother wrung her hands as she stared off into the distance. Finally, she spun and faced Whitney.

“Dearest daughter, you know your father and I love you so.”

The tone of her mother’s voice had Whitney worried. She was much too serious and it was apparent that something weighed very heavily on her mind. The crease in her usually smooth forehead was the deepest Whitney had ever seen.

“Mama?” Whitney asked again, trying to swallow the large lump that had formed in her throat.

Her mother approached, clasping Whitney’s hands in hers, and pulled her to the settee so they could both sit down next to each other.

“As you know, your marriage prospects have dwindled to the point they are non-existent.”

Whitney groaned. Not this again. She wasn’t in the mood to be lectured about how she had ruined her life. She was well aware of that already and didn’t need or appreciate the constant reminder. She and Harold were to be married. He’d promised her so. They’d talked of their future. What it would mean for the both of them. The life they would share. The children they would have. The home they would build.

Unfortunately, young, gullible Whitney didn't see the talks for what they were—lies.

All of them.

Not one word Harold spoke was true in any way. He had filled her head with such dreams and fantasies, and was so convincing in the process that not once did she ever have a doubt that he was lying to her. So, when he pushed her to take their courtship to the next level, telling her that it was only natural, she agreed. They were to be married after all. For them to partake in carnal pleasures was to be expected.

She should have known that their future wasn't to be. They weren't courting in public. There were no promenades, no dancing at the many balls they both attended. Harold hadn't spoken to her father to get his blessing.

None of the usual things that happened when a couple courted happened in their relationship. But, yet, in her mind, she longed for the companionship so badly, she ignored all the things that were wrong. She didn't have many girlfriends. And after word got out that she had bedded Harold, and they'd continued the endeavors for quite some time before getting caught, the few friends she did have were prohibited from associating themselves with her. As if what she'd done was contagious.

And then she'd found out that she was with child.

Her father was furious. He was ready to march over to Harold's house and demand he do the right thing. But Whitney would rather be alone than be married to someone who didn't love her.

Between she and her mother, they managed to convince her father to stay home and not confront her former lover. No one ever learned of the baby. It was a well-guarded secret between Whitney and her parents. One that would remain so.

Just a few weeks later, she'd lost the baby. The period of mourning she'd felt at the loss wasn't anything she wanted to experience ever again. Still now, she wasn't sure if she would ever be a mother. Could she carry a child to term? She didn't know. And she wasn't so sure she wanted to try and find out.

The heartbreak would be too much to bear.

"Whitney." Her mother called, drawing her attention back to the present. "Your father and I would like to see you happy. You deserve all the best."

Whitney scoffed. Society obviously did not feel the same way. "I appreciate your concern, mama. It's very kind of you. Unfortunately, it's not you and papa that I need to convince."

Her mother held fast to Whitney's hand. "This is why we've decided to take a new approach." Her mother rolled her lips inward. "It may be considered unorthodox by some in society, but it will be they who look upon you with envy."

She couldn't imagine what plan her mother had concocted now. "Mama, you have me utterly flabbergasted. Can you please get to the point instead of dancing around it?"

With a big breath, she spilled what she'd been keeping inside. "We have hired the services of a woman that will find you the perfect husband. One that will not be deterred by your past discretions in any way whatsoever."

Discretions was a nice way of putting it. But that wasn't the important part. "You've hired a matchmaker? To find me a husband?" She asked with surprise. This was even worse than if they'd paid off a man to marry her. It was practically the same thing. What will everyone say? There will be whispers said behind her back that she was unable to secure a husband on her own, so they needed to pay for one. She would be the laughingstock of society and an even bigger pariah than before.

She dropped her head in her hands. “Mama, this is awful.”

“It will be fine, Whitney, you will see. The woman is not a matchmaker per se, but she does have ways of securing husbands.” She patted Whitney’s hand. “And let’s be honest, your options are zero. I dislike that for you so very much. You deserve the very best and you aren’t getting it.”

“But now I’m going to get who knows what. How is that better?” She slumped into the back of the settee. “If you believe people continued to gossip about me before, just wait until they find out about this.”

“You are being very dramatic. But you worry for no reason. The woman we have hired is very discreet. And we have a lot of say into the specifics of it all.”

Whitney couldn’t believe what her mother was saying. “I don’t know how this is a possibility. What of the man? Does he know the situation he is walking into?”

Her mother grew quiet.

“He doesn’t?” She exclaimed. “Surely, this cannot be real, mama. What does papa say to all of this?”

Straightening, her mother pursed her lips. “Your last two marriage offers—”

“I’ve had marriage offers?” She asked surprised, sitting up straight.

“As I was saying, your last two marriage offers were from two men older than your father. Practically as old as your grandfather.”

Whitney blanched. She couldn’t imagine such a union.

“Exactly. They were not plausible matches and there was a reason why we didn’t even approach you with them. It’s not that you aren’t worthy of a viable marriage. You are. We just need to find the right man. One who deserves you and that’s what we’ve sought help with.”

Whitney pushed off the settee and began to pace the floor in front of the fireplace. “So some poor, unknowing sod is going to be saddled with me, and he’s not going to know there’s an issue until after we’re wed?” She paused, running her palms down the front of her green day dress. “I have to say, mama, I did not see you and papa as such conniving creatures.” She began pacing again. “I have no wish to take on an unwilling husband.”

“My dear.” Her mother threw her hands up in exasperation. “You have no option. It is this or be married to someone old enough to be your grandfather. And I would most certainly suggest you take this offer while it is available.” Her mother stood and walked out of the salon, leaving Whitney there to ponder this new direction her life could be headed in.

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“M y lord, a letter has arrived for you.”

Christopher frowned as he accepted the missive from Gideon. The handwriting was unfamiliar so it wasn't from his brother. Alexander was the only person he received any communications from, so this was interesting.

He turned the letter and studied the seal. Gold wax in the design of a lion. Interesting. But it gave him no inclination as to who it was from.

Popping the seal, he unfolded the paper and read, his brows drawing up in surprise at the odd invitation.

‘Mrs. Dove-Lyon cordially invites you to visit her establishment, the Lyon’s Den, to partake in a game such as you have never experienced before. The stakes are high—and final—but if you win, you’ll be paid handsomely. If you lose, you’ll pay handsomely, but not necessarily monetarily. Either way, win or lose, your life will indeed change forever.

Tonight 6 o’clock sharp. Do not be late or you forfeit your game.’

This was indeed the most cryptic invitation he had ever received. The name was new to him. Was the Lyon’s Den a gambling den? It certainly sounded like it. He sighed. A big win was what he was after. What he’d been after since he had fled Scotland in shame. This could be his one chance to set things right with his brother once again.

But if he lost? He couldn’t afford to pay a handsome price. Though the letter stated that it wasn’t necessarily money that he would lose. What the hell did that mean?

Would he lose a hand? An ear? A foot?

He winced. None of those were things he would be willing to lose.

Colthrop Hall.

Could it be his estate?

Or was this some sort of trickery?

He sank into a chair, resting his elbows on his knees as he pondered the situation he found himself in. It was almost as if it were a blessing and a curse.

Last night, as he had retired to bed, he'd made a vow to change his ways. To become a better man. A responsible man. In order for him to do so, he needed to stop drinking and gambling.

And now this.

"Shite," he mumbled into the empty room.

He read the letter again, concentrating on every word. Did every man in the city receive the invitation? Had he been singled out?

Why?

Reading it again, Christopher was left with naught but more questions. He supposed he could ask Gideon if he was aware of the establishment. It was surprising he wasn't familiar with it. Certainly he had visited all of the gambling hells in the city in his search for the big win.

But this invitation revealed otherwise.

He called for Gideon and waited. When the butler arrived a few moments later, Christopher invited him inside, shutting the door behind him.

“My lord?” Gideon’s brow furrowed in question.

“Are ye aware of, of,” he snatched the letter off the table and scanned until his eyes landed on the name. “A Mrs. Dove-Lyon?”

Gideon’s eyes rounded, but his face remained stoic. “Not personally, no, my lord. Though there have been murmurs throughout the city.”

“What of the Lyon’s Den. Have ye heard of that?”

“Only that it is owned by Mrs. Dove-Lyon. I have never visited the place myself. I believe it is only a select clientele and the proprietors are very strict on who is allowed to enter. So I have heard,” Gideon added quickly. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Christopher dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “Nay, that is all. Thank ye, Gideon.”

The short man nodded and left the room, quietly clicking the door closed.

Christopher looked around the room, pushing his hands through his hair. Colthrop Hall was a beautifully designed and decorated estate. Mahogany furniture, the wood polished to a shine, filled the room. A large bed, with massive posts was the focal piece. The mattress sat high off the floor and was covered with luxurious linens and pillows. The deep blue dyed cloth accentuated the room, along with the cream-colored wallpaper. The same color theme flowed throughout the house. Different

hues of blue added warmth to the rooms.

The estate was worth a lot of money. He'd learned from his past mistakes to not wager where he laid his head down at night. He'd done that one too many times.

What if Mrs. Dove-Lyon required him to put up Colthrop Hall as collateral? Could he?

Would the pay-off if he won be worth risking it all?

He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and blew out a breath. The clock was ticking and he had to make a decision soon. As the invitation stated, he could not be late or he would forfeit his chance to play.

It was just his luck that the morning after he decided to quit gambling, he would get the most enticing gambling invitation he had ever received. Surely, fate was having a good laugh at his expense this day.

Did he dare do it? Did he dare to not even try? The potential payout could be life changing.

The question remained if it would be life-changing in a positive or negative manner.

It was a chance he had to take. One last gamble to make.

Then he was done.

For good.

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It had been two days since her mother told Whitney of the plan she and her father had put in place. She still wasn't happy about it, but after giving it some thought, she really couldn't fault her parents for taking such drastic measures. Surely, no viable prospects were knocking down their door and she most definitely did not want to marry someone her grandfather's age.

Just the thought turned her stomach and she shuddered.

"What do you think of this material? This color?" Her mother asked, trying to engage Whitney in choosing her new clothes—day dresses, gowns—her wedding dress.

They had arrived at the modiste almost an hour earlier and Whitney was bored. She could think of much more exciting ways to spend her day.

But her mother insisted that she be fitted for a new wardrobe for her soon to be husband.

Whitney sighed and shrugged at the rose-colored swath of material dangled in front of her face. "It's fine." She wasn't lying. It would serve its purpose. The color would go well with her brown hair and blue eyes.

Her mother rolled her eyes at her obvious disinterest but turned to the modiste and ordered a gown no doubt in the latest style of fashion.

"Are we almost finished, mama? I think I would like to take a stroll. Maybe we can get a lemon fizz?" She asked hopefully. She did love the tart treat and tried to talk her mother into getting one every time they were out.

“Just a few moments longer. A few more items need to be ordered.”

Whitney wanted to slump in a chair while she waited, but that would make her look like a petulant child, and as bored as she was, she had manners and knew how to behave. Instead she stood at the window looking out at the street bustling with people.

A tall man, with hair dark as the night sky, paused in front of the shop, reading the sign, before glancing in the window.

Their eyes clashed and her breath hitched. Broad shoulders strained the seams of his jacket, promising bunched muscles underneath. Fair skin, brown eyes, and high cheekbones made him most fetching to the eye. And when he smiled at her, dimples appeared.

Realizing she was staring, she quickly backed away from the window and out of sight of the stranger. How rude he must have thought she was. Or uncouth.

Probably the latter. But why should he be any different than everyone else in the city?

She had never seen him before, so maybe he hadn't yet been tainted by the reputation that followed her around like a gray, rainy storm cloud, always dashing away any sunshine she might find in something. When she'd dared a glance back at the window, the stranger was gone.

She wondered who he was. What family he was from. Not that it mattered since her parents had already secured her a husband.

The idea still felt foreign to her and it wasn't something that she was looking forward to. Quite the contrary. And whoever it was, once he found out she was the person he was going to marry, he would probably back out of the proposition anyway.

The city had done an excellent job of ensuring that she would remain single. An old maid. It was hard to think of herself in such terms, but truly, a few more years and she would practically be too old to marry.

Well, one was never too old to marry. But men preferred wives that were young. Pleasant to look at. More prone to bear their husbands a child. Or two. Or three.

Whitney grimaced. She really didn't mind children. As a matter of fact, when she and Harold talked about their future, children were always part of the conversation. He had never learned of the babe they'd made. Nor would he ever be privy to that information. But since that loss, children weren't on her mind. She wasn't even sure she wanted them now—if she could even bear a child. Mayhap she was barren. What kind of man would want a woman like that?

What if her husband ended up being the perfect man, she pondered wistfully, and she could get over the heartbreak, and think about having a child. Those were all very big ifs, but if she really could and they conceived and had a child. She thought back to everything she'd put her parents through and shook her head. She didn't look forward to having to deal with such things from a child of her own. She wasn't sure she had the strength.

“Come, Whitney.” Her mother called. “We are done here for the day. Let us walk as you've requested.”

Whitney spun to the modiste. “Thank you for your efforts. I know I don't appear to appreciate them, but I do. Your work is lovely.”

Outside, she and her mother walked arm and arm as they passed the banker and then the jeweler.

“It is a beautiful day. I don't blame you for wanting to enjoy it, my dear. Before we

know it, winter will be here and all the cold that comes with it.”

Whitney shivered at the thought. “I don’t care to have such thoughts. Maybe we can talk papa into traveling to some place tropical for the winter months.”

Her mother laughed and patted her hand. “Dear child, there are times you amuse me. I don’t think you could convince your father of such an outing. He has too much work here in the city. The only place you could probably talk him into would be the country house. And the weather there will be even colder than here.” Her mother’s brows drew together and her mouth turned down.

“What is wrong, mama?”

She shook her head and gave a small smile. “I was just thinking that it wouldn’t matter if your father agreed to go away. You wouldn’t be joining us. By the time winter rolls around, you will be married and living with your husband.”

Whitney’s heart sank. “You haven’t told me anything about my husband-to-be. Can’t you tell me something? Anything?”

Her mother remained silent.

“What if he’s a monster? How well do you know him? Of his character? Where did you find him?”

“Your father would never allow you to be married to someone of ill-repute, Whitney. You know that. But, also, you must understand that your, er, situation left us with few prospects. We don’t know exactly who your husband will be, but it is between two men.”

Whitney brightened. “So I get to choose?”

Her mother chuckled. “Unfortunately, no. Your father and I do not get to choose either. It will be left to the fates and a game of luck.”

“Pardon?” What did that even mean? “Surely you jest, mama. Something this serious should be given deep thought. Are you saying my marriage will be decided with a game of chance?” Whitney was mortified.

“That is exactly what I am saying. But rest assured. Your father and I have seen each of these men. We know of their backgrounds. Their reputations. Both are good matches. Now, how about that lemon fizzy you were so craving?”

Whitney allowed her mother to try to distract her with her favorite drink, but as she sipped, she couldn’t help but ponder the information she’d just been given.

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Standing in front of the blue building that housed the Lyon's Den, Christopher realized he had seen it before. He'd walked by it many times. However, the building was so unassuming, he had no idea it housed such a business. He thought it was just another establishment. It could have been personal or business. He'd never given it a second thought.

Until now.

Now his heart was nearly pounding out of his chest at the thought that in the next few minutes his life was going to change.

And no matter what, there was no going back.

He sent a quick prayer up to God to let the change be for the good.

The last thing he wanted to do was to head back to Scotland with his tail between his legs. Hell, if he failed at this, he didn't know if he would ever return home. He couldn't face his brother as an even bigger failure than he had been when he left.

He pulled the watch from his pocket and glanced at the face. 5:59. He lifted his hand to knock, and the door swung open, a huge, burly man stood there on the other side assessing him.

Clearing his throat, he said, "I've an invitation for six." He held out the invitation. The bouncer ignored the paper, but stepped aside, allowing him entry.

Odd. It was as if the man knew exactly who he was.

Once through the door, the inside of the den came alive. As quiet as the building was from the street, inside it was a completely different story. He shrugged out of his overcoat and handed it to the coat check.

“If you would like a drink, the bar is open. There is a smoking room if you would like to enjoy a cigar before your game begins. We will collect you when it is time.”

“Thank ye,” Christopher nodded and wandered further in, unsure if he wanted a drink or a smoke. Or both. Mayhap a cigar with a nice glass of smooth scotch.

The first thing he noticed as he wandered through the main floor was that this was not the type of gambling hell he was used to. Nay. Not at all. Firstly, there were no women roaming about. Secondly, the games being played were games he’d never seen before.

For some, cards were involved, for others...did that man have a scorpion crawling up his arm?

Christ. He’d never seen anything like this place. And he’d visited his share of seedy establishments. Though he couldn’t say this one was seedy. It was anything but.

It was very clean with gorgeous woodwork throughout. Security was aplenty. Almost every door was manned by a bouncer. He supposed that a place such as this would need to be heavy-handed to make sure things didn’t get out of control.

Making his way to the smoking room, he looked over the offerings and settled on a Cuban import. The end was clipped off and he lit it, taking a slow draw. The deep, rich taste paired well with the scotch he’d ordered while making his choice.

There were other men in the room. Some milled about and a couple sat at a table. They called him over to join them.

“Are you ready for what’s to come?” An older man, with hair graying at his temples asked. “Thomas Grey,” he announced after.

Christopher took a deep breath and wet his lips. “Christopher Campbell. I’m no’ sure if I’m ready, but time will tell, I suppose.”

“Ah, boys, we’ve got a Scot in our midst. We’ll need to watch for this one.” Grey jested.

“I dinna ken about that. We shall see.”

“Indeed, we will.” A man looking to be about the same age as Christopher spoke. His blue eyes narrowed as he assessed Christopher. “Not all of us can be winners. The odds are surely against our favor. Though I intend to be in the winning category.”

“You truly are an arrogant prick, Jensen,” Grey chided. He turned to Christopher. “Gary Jensen. You can ignore his dour mood. He really is always this miserable.”

Christopher looked at Jensen. The man oozed privilege and wealth. From his well-tailored suit to the tip of his Italian loafers. Christopher disliked him instantly. The way he looked down his nose at Christopher irked him.

“Good to ken,” Christopher quipped, dismissing the cad, and focusing his attention on Grey. “Have ye been here before? I’m curious as to what is to come.”

“Ah,” Grey chuckled. “I haven’t. Though I hear that one time is all you get, so best make the most of it.”

The Lyon’s Den was proving to be curiouser and curiouser.

“Interesting. I’m quite certain I saw a man letting a scorpion crawl up his arm earlier.

I do hope that is no' an entry task."

"I've a feeling we aren't going to know what game we will be playing until we are called. Whatever the results, it should make for an interesting evening."

Jensen stood. "Gentlemen," he said dismissively as he walked away and exited out of the room.

Christopher's eyes tracked his retreat. "He seems a pleasant one," he said snidely.

Grey belted out a laugh. "He's a tightly wound one, that Jensen. Never happy. Always miserable. You must be new to London if you haven't crossed paths before."

Shrugging, Christopher puffed on his cigar, exhaling the smoke in rings that floated through the air. "I've been here for several weeks."

"Is that all? And you've already received an invitation to the den? You must be something special."

With a tilt of his head, he lifted his glass in a cheer. "Or just lucky."

"Let's hope that luck is running on our sides this night. If so, we should have an enjoyable evening, no matter what lies ahead."

The cryptic way Grey spoke had Christopher second-guessing his decision to accept the invitation here. He absent-mindedly patted his waistcoat, where on the inside, tucked in the pocket was the deed to Colthrop Hall. What prompted him to bring it with him, he didn't ken.

In reality, he couldn't afford to lose another Campbell property. He'd done that when he gambled away the family's prize-winning sheep. Thankfully, his brother was able

to get them back before any harm was done to them, but he knew it cost Alexander dearly.

The pain he felt at what he'd put Alexander through felt like it would never cease. It burned in his gut daily. That's where the whisky came in. It helped him forget.

Forget that he was such a disappointment.

This was the night that he would fix that.

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“Mama, I cannot believe we are in such a place.” Whitney looked around the room they’d been ushered into after meeting with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Below them, men played various games. Originally, she thought they were partaking in games of cards or darts. But no, on closer inspection these games were of the sort that she had never seen in her life.

“Shhh,” her mother hushed her. “Soon, you will see your prospects.”

Whitney hated how it sounded like a business deal. She supposed in a sense it was. She’d learned her parents had paid an astronomical amount of coin to the woman who owned the Lyon’s Den. The payment guaranteed her a husband that would overlook her past indiscretions. No questions asked.

From what Whitney had been told, usually it was the men who paid dearly for the chance for a wife.

But for the Watkins, the tables were turned. It was she that needed a husband. She was still unsure about how she felt about that.

Did she want to give away her heart so freely as she had done before? It hadn’t led her to happiness. Why would this situation be any different? Especially with this feeling like she was using some sort of trickery to gain a husband. She didn’t want a man resentful toward her for the rest of her life because he thought she entrapped him in some sort of way. Even though her potential husband would have likely had to sign the same type of binding contract she had upon arrival.

But mama kept assuring her that this union was unbreakable. The contract that had

been written up was permanent. Until death do they part and all that.

Time would be the only way to tell if that were truly the case, but eventually she would find out she supposed.

She looked down at all the men milling about. From her understanding they couldn't see her watching them from this observation room. If these men were here looking for a wife, the world was indeed in trouble. She actually recognized a few of the men below.

And secretly hoped that there wasn't anyone that she knew who was in the running for her husband.

To tell the truth, the thought of having a husband by her side was tempting. One thing that Harold had showed her was that she enjoyed the companionship of a man beside her. She missed that. Missed the passion that came naturally with attraction.

"I believe it is almost time for your suitors to play." Her mother patted her hand excitedly.

"Mama, I think you might be looking forward to this a bit too much. It's as if we are on the search for your husband."

Her mother swatted her on the shoulder. "Stop. You know that I just want to see you happy. And I believe you will be once you see the two prospects."

She sighed. "You could only find two willing participants, I see."

"Hush. That is not the case at all. Believe it or not there were many more, but these two I hand-picked myself out of all the options. I think you will be pleased." She smiled triumphantly.

“We shall see about that. I just don’t understand that if there were so many men willing to step up and marry me, why they just wouldn’t have shown up at our door.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. But that’s a story for another day. Look.” Her mother pointed to a corner of the room where a stack of boxes with holes on one side were being set up in stacks of three. “That’s the game Mrs. Dove-Lyon and I concocted.”

Whitney narrowed her eyes. “They won’t be playing cards?”

Her mother laughed. “The games played here are of the odd sort. Cards are such a bore to watch. This will be much more exciting.”

Leaning over the railing, she looked at the men milling about the room, some pausing to watch the game being set up. Her mother had said that two of these men were her potential husband in the group?

“They’re not here yet,” her mother stated, as if reading Whitney’s mind.

She bit her lip, her knuckles white from gripping the railing much too tight. Her body suddenly a bundle of nervous energy realizing that in the next few moments she was going to lay eyes on her future husband.

The men looking on were shooed away.

Well, that answered that question. She wouldn’t be spending the rest of her life with one of those men.

And that was when she saw him.

The man from the modiste. Well, not the modiste exactly. But the man who had

caught her attention just outside the window while she and mother visited the shop.

He was just as handsome as before, even if he looked a bit nervous as his beautiful brown eyes jumped around the room.

Her breath hitched as she watched him confidently stroll from table to table, finally stopping at the boxes that had been set up.

Oh my. He was one of the men that would be vying for her hand.

She turned to her mother and found that she was watching her closely.

“I will be right back,” she announced, leaving the room in a flash.

How odd. But she turned back to the gambling floor, her eyes searching for the raven-haired man. As soon as she found him, her gaze settled. She wanted to watch him and only him.

Another man joined him and they stiffly shook hands. It appeared they were acquainted, but did not think highly of each other. Could the other man be one of the potential suitors her mother had chosen?

Dear lord, she hoped not. He seemed miserable from afar, she could only imagine what he would be like face to face. And the prospect of having to spend the rest of her life with him, made her stomach do a turn. And not in the same, happy way it flipped when she saw the first man.

She began to wring her hands. What if the second man won the game?

The possibilities were high that he could. He had at least a fifty percent chance.

No, no, no. Whitney spun around to see if her mother had returned, but she was nowhere to be found. After seeing the two men, couldn't she just choose her husband?

Why the game of chance?

Worry had her biting at her nails. If her mother were here, she would scold her for the childish habit. With one look back at the floor, she hurried from the room in search of her mother.

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Hours had seemed to drag on before Christopher was finally called to the gambling hall floor. He perused the different tables, watching some men cheer and others look completely defeated at the outcome of their games.

His gut hitched. He hoped he didn't find himself in the latter position.

He needed this win.

Though he didn't know what exactly the prize was that he would win if successful. Was he daft to believe the invitation that it would be well worth his efforts?

As he suspected, when he had arrived, he'd found out what he would lose if he didn't come out victorious.

Colthrop Hall, as he feared, was the price he would pay for his loss.

The price was huge. And he couldn't afford not to win. Settling for anything less was not an option.

He could not lose the estate. And he had to keep ignoring the voice inside his head continuously questioning him. Asking if he knew what he was doing? Reminding him of his horrible luck in past games. Telling him that he was a fool.

Mayhap it was right. But this was his last chance.

No matter what the outcome, he vowed that this would be his last gamble, and he had all intentions of keeping that vow.

With the contract signed, and Mrs. Dove-Lyon in possession of the deed to Colthrop Hall, all Christopher could do was nervously wait for the game to begin.

“Lord Campbell,” a dealer called to him. “This way, please.”

He followed the man and scoffed when he saw his opponent. “Jensen,” he addressed the man that he’d met earlier.

Jensen nodded stiffly, the prick, and then stuck his nose in the air.

If he’d lifted it any higher, Christopher feared he’d be sniffing the rafters.

“Gentlemen,” the dealer spoke up, drawing their attention to him. “The rules of the game are simple. The loser signs over the deed to his estate to Mrs. Dove-Lyon. The winner will be paid handsomely.”

Christopher rubbed his palms together, his tongue darting out and wetting his lips in excitement.

“This particular game is a game of chance. In front of you are six boxes. Three for each of you. Earlier, you each picked three numbers. Those are the box numbers you will open. To open a box, you will maneuver your arm into the cloth-covered opening and locate the item inside and remove it from the box. You will have to follow the included instructions for each item.”

Christopher smiled. This was something he could do. After all, what could be in the boxes? Surely, not anything that could be considered harmful. That would defeat the purpose of the gambling den, wouldn’t it? Or mayhap that was why everyone only got one chance to visit the Lyon’s Den?

“In one of the boxes there is a key,” the dealer continued. “Whoever draws the key is

the winner. Any questions?”

He pierced each of them with a stern look and when they both shook their heads, he smiled.

“We shall do a coin toss to determine who goes first.”

The man tossed a coin in the air, and Jensen blurted out ‘heads’ as the coin landed in the dealer’s hand. “Lord Campbell wins the toss. You may go first or pass to Sir Jensen.”

Christopher rubbed his chin, deep in thought. He could go first and hope to get the key on the first try. Or he could let Jensen go first and test the waters to give him an idea of what to expect in the boxes. But that meant he could also pull the key.

“Lord Campbell, your answer,” the dealer prodded.

What to do? He blew out a breath and pressed his lips together, sweeping his arm to Jensen. “After ye.”

“Lord Campbell has given the first box to Sir Jensen,” the dealer called out to the gathering crowd.

Jensen stepped up to the table of boxes stacked in two rows of three. Gingerly, he reached out to the cloth covering the opening. The man looked a little pale. Christopher got the feeling he didn’t play games of chance very often.

Slowly, Jensen reached into the box, a couple of times, he jerked his hand back as if he was afraid that whatever was in the box was going to bite it off.

Finally, he closed his eyes and pulled out what was inside the box.

Christopher's eyes rounded. The biggest, hairiest spider he'd ever seen was cupped in Jensen's hand, and the man was practically in tears.

Mayhap the boxes could contain something harmful.

The dealer spoke up. "You have drawn a tarantula. You must allow it to crawl up one of your arms and down the other."

"Pardon?" Jensen asked weakly.

Christopher shuddered. Apparently, Mrs. Dove-Lyon had connections that allowed her to bring in exotic creatures. He'd never seen such a thing in Scotland, and he doubted the spider was native to England.

"If you refuse to complete a task, you automatically forfeit the game."

With a deep breath, Jensen opened his palm and outstretched his arms, trying to hold them steady, but he couldn't stop shaking.

Christopher fought the urge to jump back in case the spider had any ideas to switch hosts. But he remained where he was and watched as the spider unfurled its hairy legs completely and started moving about.

Jensen's breaths were short and fast. He looked like he was about to faint by the time the spider finally completed his route of traveling from arm to arm and the dealer scooped him into a small box with a lid.

Jensen sighed with relief and took a couple of steps back.

Stepping up to the table, Christopher rolled the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbow. Surely they wouldn't have two spiders in the boxes, would they? He took a deep

breath and shoved his hand into the opening, tamping down his own rising fear. He needed to show a brave face. He smiled when his hand closed around something that felt much like a small pie.

He pulled the item out and studied what looked to be a tart of some sort. “You have drawn the special tart. Made of special ingredients including pig intestines and beetles. You must eat the whole tart to complete your task.”

Christopher studied the tart, it wasn’t overly large, smaller than most, but the pungent scent infiltrated his senses. He hadn’t any idea what else was baked into the crust, but he could only imagine how awful the taste would be. It didn’t matter. He had to eat it.

Not looking at the tart as he brought it to his mouth, he tried to ignore the smell as he took the first bite. Chewing as fast and as little as he could, he swallowed, fighting against the reflex to hurl up the disgusting-tasting contents and took another bite. He couldn’t describe the taste other than putrid and nothing like he had ever eaten before.

Three more bites and he was done. He was quite sure he had turned green. But he kept the tart down, and they moved on to the next round.

Jensen pulled a vial filled with a liquid that turned his stomach into a roiling mess, but he managed to drink it and keep the contents of his stomach down.

Christopher had pulled a snake that he had to allow to constrict his neck for thirty seconds. Just as he thought he was going to pass out, the time was up and the snake was pulled off of him. He gasped for air, fighting the stars that had appeared behind his eyes.

“You have both made it to the final round.” The dealer announced. “Since one of these boxes contains the key, and the other,” he paused, “not the key, you will both pull at the same time.”

This was it. He had a fifty percent chance of victory. Now that he could breathe normally again, his body hummed with excitement.

They each stepped up to their respective boxes.

“I will count to three and you both will reach in and pull out the item in your box. Understood?” He asked.

Both men nodded.

Christopher wet his lips in anticipation. He could almost taste the win. His fingers shook to reach in.

“Good luck,” Christopher offered.

“Keep it,” Jensen said in a clipped voice. “You’re going to need it more than I.”

“One. Two. Three!”

He shoved his hand in the box, not feeling anything at first, until his fingers closed around a small, metal object. “Aye!” He yelled in triumph as he pulled the key from the box, holding the key high above his head and waving it in victory.

At the same time Jensen howled in pain. Christopher glanced over and saw that he’d fisted a handful of stinging nettles.

Christopher grimaced, for a moment almost feeling sorry for the man, but then he remembered what a prick the man was and shrugged before turning to the dealer.

“Ye played a good game, Jensen.”

The man scowled. “No doubt it was rigged.”

“Congratulations, Lord Campbell. If you will follow me, you can claim your winnings.”

With one last look at Jensen, Christopher grinned. He’d taken one final gamble and it had paid off. Relief flooded over him. Not only did he get to keep Colthrop Hall, but he was also victorious.

Now to see what he’d won.

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Whitney watched the game play out down below, nearly biting her nails to the quick, hoping that the mystery stranger would win. She ignored the other women that were in the room also watching the various tables. Some looked just as harried as she was.

Her nerves were on edge every time the handsome man stepped up to the stack of boxes. Each time she willed him to pull the key, then felt her heart sink when he pulled some sort of challenge instead. Each one he met without issue, she noted proudly.

But each time the other man stepped up to the boxes, a cold sweat broke out on her brow. She vacillated between wringing her hands and biting her nails. Shooing away her mother's hands when she tried to stop the actions.

"Whitney, dearest. Please cease. Your new husband will not want to see the nubs of your fingers."

"Mama," she said exasperated. "This is very nerve-wracking. I don't know how you can just stand there so calmly and watch how my future is decided by this game."

Her mother smiled. "It will all work out in the end. You need to trust the process."

"That's easy for you to say since it is not your life hanging in the balance," Whitney grumbled, eyes transfixed as both men stepped up to the boxes for the last round.

Her heart was stuck in her throat, making it hard to swallow as she held her breath. This would determine which man would be her husband.

The person she'd be spending the rest of her life with. Was she ready for this? To live the rest of her days with a stranger?

She inhaled a shaky breath and blew it out slowly. She didn't know. But since her parents had made the decision for her, she didn't have a choice.

Her mother clasped her hand and pulled her close. "It's time."

This time, Whitney let her mother hold her as they watched the final game play out.

The raven-haired stranger clenched and unclenched his fist, making the muscles in his forearm contract. The other man, who also had his sleeves rolled up, just glared at his opponent.

They exchanged words, but from this distance Whitney couldn't hear the conversation.

"Are you ready?" Her mother asked excitedly.

She wasn't.

"Mama, I swear if I didn't know better, I would think it was you that was gaining a husband," Whitney said dryly.

Her mother squeezed her shoulders in a hug. "This is an exciting time, dearest. It will not take long for you to see it as such as well.

With a roll of her eyes, Whitney focused on the game below once again. The dealer was counting.

"One. Two. Three!"

The men reached into the boxes and two very different reactions filled the air below.

Whitney blew out a sigh of relief as the handsome stranger belted out a whoop of triumph and held up the shiny key in his fist. Her relief was so strong, she had to fight not to drop to her knees on the floor.

The other man hollered in pain and she could see he held a handful of stinging nettles in his palm. She grimaced, imagining how painful that must be, but she quickly set her attention on the man that would be her husband.

A huge smile spread across her face.

“See? I told you it will all work out,” her mother said conspiratorially.

She raised an eyebrow toward her mother. “Mama, how you could you have possibly known when everything was left up to chance?”

Her mother didn’t answer, only shrugged her shoulders with a smug look on her face. “We should leave now that the game is done. We’ve seen all we can for this night. You will be meeting your husband-to-be soon enough.”

“Do I not get to meet him now?” She asked, confused. Unaware of how gambling hells worked, she was surprised that they would not be introduced here and now.

“Heaven’s no. You cannot possibly want to meet him in a gambling hell. He will call on you at home. Tonight is doubtful, but tomorrow at the latest.”

“How do you know all these things, mama?” She had a strong feeling her mother was far more involved in this game than she was letting on.

“Come on.” Tugging on her arm, her mother pulled her toward the door. “Your father

is waiting for us at home. I am certain he is anxious at the outcome.”

With one last look over her shoulder, Whitney followed her mother out of the room and they made their way out of the Lyon’s Den and onto the street outside.

“Do you know his name?” Surely her mother had to know the man’s name at the very least. After all, she had said she hand-picked the two men herself.

She shook her head. “I do not. I saw portraits of each prospect and was provided generic details of each to aid me in making my decision to whittle it down to two men, but I wasn’t given specifics.”

Whitney was baffled at that information. “How could you possibly make a decision without specifics? What if he’s a criminal?”

“Do not be silly, dearest. He is from a good family. And he is not a criminal. Does he have his faults? Yes. But so do you.”

Whitney opened her mouth to counter, but her mother held up a hand.

“That’s not a bad thing. We all have our faults. They are what make us unique.”

“Has he brought shame upon his family’s name as I have?” Whitney muttered.

They climbed into their waiting carriage and once it rocked forward, bringing them home, her mother finally answered.

“His faults are something that he needs to discuss with you. Just as you’ll need to discuss yours with him. It is not a bad thing. Strong communication in the beginning will build a sturdy foundation for a mighty marriage moving forward.”

Realizing she wasn't going to get any further answers from her mother, she stared out the small window, watching the houses, lit by lanterns, pass by.

And yet, even with all that had transpired this night, she couldn't ignore the flip of her stomach when she thought of the man. The warmth that spread over her skin. The blush of her cheeks.

Maybe this would be exactly what she needed. Her mother was right, her options and prospects were almost none. Now she had a future husband. That he was pleasing to the eye was a bonus that wasn't guaranteed.

Something that if someone had told her last week that would come to fruition, she would have laughed and told them how they teased her so.

Now she only had to hope that his handsomeness wasn't the only fetching quality he held.

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“Pardon?” Christopher asked the mature woman standing in front of him. Once he’d won the game, he’d been ushered into what he assumed was Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s private quarters, which included a lavishly furnished office in which he now found himself sitting.

“The prize for winning your game is a wife,” she repeated as if he were daft.

He raised a brow, his mouth set into a frown. A wife was the absolute last thing he needed. How in the hell was a wife going to help him gain his brother’s favor again?

“She’s a lovely girl,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon continued. “From a good family. A wealthy family,” she emphasized.

His brows perked up. “Wealthy, ye say?” He asked, sitting up a little straighter.

The woman smiled as if she knew exactly what she needed to tell him to draw him in.

“Yes, very wealthy.”

“Then why is she no’ married?” His stomach dropped. “Is she hideous? A beastly woman?” He was never one for making an affair of a woman’s looks, but surely there must be something wrong with the lass if she remained unmarried.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon pursed her lips as if she were growing agitated with him. “The young woman is very fair in looks. You will not be disappointed once you lay eyes upon her.”

“Again, I ask, then why is she no’ married?”

“Just as you have problems that follow you.” She raised her hand and arced it through the air. “Your gambling, in case you have any doubt of which I speak, for instance. But, as with you, behind her past discretions, there is a good woman that deserves to have a husband that sees her for what she is. A strong, independent woman that only wants to be loved.”

He scoffed. “Ye speak as if ye can just order me to marry a woman I have ne’er met.”

Pulling open the desk drawer, she withdrew a piece of paper that he recognized as the contract he had signed and pushed it toward him, tapping her finger on the page. “The contract is binding as you will recall. You cannot refuse your winnings.”

“I was under the assumption that my winnings, as ye call them, would be monetary. A wife doesna seem like much of a prize if ye ask me.”

The woman only smiled. “You may not see it now, but you will be marrying into a wealthy family, with an over abundant dowry that is much higher than what should be offered.”

Christopher mulled over the information he’d been given. With such a generous offering, what the hell had the girl done? And could he overlook it for the coin she would inevitably bring to the union?

He didn’t want to think himself a shallow man, and one that was only out for money, but being faced with this boon, and agreeing to it, he came to the conclusion that he was indeed shallow. That he couldn’t say nay to the legally binding contract didn’t change his evaluation of himself.

If the lass was indeed fair in face and had a body he could lose himself in, he was fine

with that. Her coin would make up for any shortcomings that may have led her and her family to take such drastic measures to marry her off.

He only hoped she wasn't an incessant whiner. He would be hard pressed to stay in her company if that was her countenance. Though the contract only dictated he had to follow through with his winnings. If he found her unpleasant, there was naught in the contract to say they couldn't live separately if he deemed that necessary.

"Here." Mrs. Dove-Lyon held out her hand, an envelope dangling from her wrinkled fingers.

He plucked the paper out of her hand, but didn't open it. He would save that for later.

"Inside you will find the name and address of your bride to be. The names of her parents, as well, along with a brief summary of their family. Any other information you will need to garner from them yourself." She nodded to the man standing at her office door, and he opened it, effectively dismissing Christopher.

He turned and started for the door.

"Lord Campbell," she called from behind him.

He turned to look at the woman.

"It was a pleasure doing business with you," she laughed.

Spinning on his heel, he exited the office, only to find Jensen waiting to go in.

The man scowled at him. "You've cost me my home, Campbell. Do not think this will be the last you hear of me."

Christopher scoffed and cocked his head. “Dinna think the winning prize is any better. There is a reason why they doona tell us what the proceeds of our gamble are. If they did, surely, they wouldna have any patrons occupying their establishment.”

He pushed past the unpleasant man and exited the building.

It wasn't until late that night, when he was in his study at Colthrop Hall, whisky in hand, that he broke the seal on the envelope and read its contents.

Whitney Louise Watkins. Both parents still alive. Her father was a wealthy businessman. The family owned several estates.

His eyes rounded at the amount of her dowry. Not only did it include coin, it also included a country estate. But the amount of coin?

It was enough for him to repay his brother for his past gambling debts and still be set up for the future. There was also a monthly amount he would be paid to keep Whitney living the lifestyle she was accustomed to.

He blinked.

Once.

Twice.

It was the solution he'd been looking for.

And he hated the little voice inside his head that reminded him of how many games he could play in the hells for the amount of money that he would be coming into.

He shook his head, trying to get the voice to stop. He had vowed that the Lyon's Den

would be his last gamble, and he intended to, for once, stay true to his word.

Drinking the rest of his whisky in one long sip, he set the glass down and locked the letter in the top drawer of his desk.

It was too late to call on Whitney now. He would do so in the morning. After he slept off the whisky and bathed the smell of the gambling hell off of his body.

Tomorrow he would meet his wife. And he only hoped that she was pleasant enough in looks, stature, and personality. Someone he could see himself spending the rest of his days with.

Because like it or not, she was what his future held.

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Whitney did not sleep a wink that night. She'd tried. Oh, how she tried, but she kept tossing and turning. Every time she closed her eyes, his handsome face would find her. It was as if he'd infiltrated all of her senses. Every fiber of her being. She'd done so much moving around she was afraid she would keep the house awake.

Finally, she threw back the covers and settled into the window seat of her bedroom and looked out into the starry night sky.

Was her future husband doing the same? Or was he sleeping like a babe as if he had no care in the world?

She still didn't know his name. She supposed she would find out that information some time on the morrow.

She and her mother had waited up long past what was proper visiting hours last night before they both retired for the evening. It was silly really.

By the time they had returned home, the hour was already late. Much too late for a caller. Even if that caller was to be her husband.

When Rona knocked lightly on her door to wake her up, Whitney was sure her eyes were puffy along with dark circles showing under them. Rona would have to work miracles today to make her presentable for her caller.

"Miss, you are already awake?"

Whitney sighed. "Yes, alas, I couldn't sleep. Who could if they were in my

situation?”

Rona smiled. “It is a big day for you. Are you excited?”

“Yes, but I am not so sure my excitement is a good one, if that makes any sense.”

“I am sure it is just nerves, miss. Once you meet your suitor all will be well, I’m certain.”

Whitney laughed. “My suitor. You are funny, Rona. I will surely miss your sense of humor when I move.” Her demeanor immediately soured. She would miss living here. Miss her parents. Miss Rona. Her maid had been by her side for as long as she could remember.

The woman had been her only real friend since her salacious scandal scared the few so-called friends she’d had away.

“Come now,” Rona said as she went around the room, pulling open the drapes from the other windows and allowing the early morning light to fill the room. “There is no need for a dour mood. This is a good thing, is it not?”

Whitney sighed. “I suppose. But is it wrong for me to wish that it had happened naturally? What will people say when they learn our union manifested from a game of chance?” She knew what they would say—that her parents had to pay someone to spend time with her. That no one of right mind would attach themselves to her voluntarily.

Rona planted her fists on her hips as she regarded Whitney. “Since when do other’s opinions matter to you? You never let them bother you before, why should you start now?”

Whitney looked up to the ceiling, throwing her hands up in defeat. Rona was right. She didn't care what people thought of her. She'd stopped caring long ago when she realized how insincere everyone was.

Unlike others, it wasn't in her nature to shun someone for the choices they made, even if society dictated such an action. Especially if that person was a friend. She truly could not fathom doing such a thing.

But her so-called friends had no qualms about doing such a thing to her. And that was when she had stopped caring about what they thought. She couldn't imagine how much worse they would be if they had learned of her pregnancy.

"Come on." Rona pulled her up out of the chair. "Enough of this moping about. It is a happy day. An important one and you want to look your best. Time for a bath."

Two hours later, Whitney was bathed, her skin scented with the lavender soap she'd used to wash. Rona was brushing her hair to a shine before pulling it taut into a chignon at the base of her neck. She pulled a strand of hair loose from each side and curled the locks around her fingers so they fell in loose waves to frame Whitney's face.

"You look beautiful, miss. Your husband-to-be will be taken aback by the beauty he will be marrying."

Whitney blushed, her cheeks heating at the compliment. "I am not certain about that. Like me, my future husband has his own reasons as to why he needed to find a wife at the Lyon's Den." She smiled slyly. "Though I do know he's handsome, so there is no worry there. But I do hope there is more to him and his personality than dashing looks. And strong shoulders," she added with a wicked whisper.

"Miss!" Rona scolded.

She turned in her chair and met Rona's eyes. "Wait until you see him, Rona. He's oh so very handsome. Dark hair, dark eyes. He's tall. And his body." She smacked her lips. "He strained the seams of his jacket. His forearms were sinewy with muscle. With long fingers on his large hands."

Rona bit back a smile. "It would seem you got a good look at the man," she admitted.

Whitney grinned devilishly. "Oh, I did indeed. When mama and I arrived we were ushered into a room that overlooked the gambling floor. We could see everything going on down below. There were two men playing the game mama had concocted. And what an odd game it was."

"What was it?"

She gave Rona a quick summary of the game and the tasks the men had to complete while the woman put the finishing touches on her hair.

"When I saw the two men, one drew my attention straight away. But it wasn't the first time I had seen him," she admitted.

Rona's brows shot up in surprise. "No? Does your mother know that?"

Shaking her head, she studied her hair in the looking glass, turning her head from side to side. "No. I didn't mention it to mama. It's not like I had met him anyway. He just happened to be passing by the modiste when mama and I visited earlier this week. But he was very memorable."

"He must have been," Rona called over her shoulder as she made her way to the wardrobe to pull out a rose-colored gown.

"Once I noticed he was one of the two men that were gambling for my hand, I hoped

and prayed that he would be the one to garner the victory.”

“What of the other man?” She laid the gown on the bed and rummaged around the wardrobe for stockings.

Whitney grimaced. “I did not find that man attractive at all. I suppose he wasn’t ugly. His features were pleasant enough, but the way he held himself and sneered at anyone that he encountered was very off-putting. It made me realize right away that he was not the one I wanted to spend my days with. I can’t even imagine what I would have done if he’d won the game.”

“Well, lucky for you, you don’t have to contemplate such an outcome.” Rona motioned her over and held up the gown.

Once her stockings were on, she slipped on a pair of cream slippers. A pearl necklace and pearl drop earrings her father had gifted her on her last birthday completed the look.

She stared at her reflection in the looking glass, hoping that her husband-to-be would find her attractive.

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Christopher sat in the carriage outside of the Watkins's estate and tried to get his nerve up. It wasn't only his future wife that waited inside. He had no concerns in dealing with her. He was confident in his abilities to charm the lass.

But her parents? They were a different story. He was unsure how much they knew about him, and it wasn't as if every father was knocking down the door of a gambler to have them marry their daughter.

"My lord?" His coachman asked as he waited for Christopher to exit the coach.

"Aye. Thank ye."

He took a deep breath and pushed off the bench. The estate that stood before him was grand. The beige stone was brushed clean. The drive's pebbles matched the color of the walls and blended perfectly to make an attractive welcome. Colorful flowers of pinks and blues filled huge pots that lined the steps that led to the front door.

Not able to delay any longer, he climbed the steps and rapped the knocker against the door. It was but a moment before the door swung open and he was welcomed inside and then ushered into a room that looked like it must be Sir Watkins's study. A huge desk was centered on one side of the room in front of sturdy bookshelves filled with everything from novels, magazines, papers, and statues.

"Lord Campbell," a deep voice called from behind him. "I apologize for the mess of my study. I'm usually much neater than this." He stuck out his hand for a shake. "Adam Watkins."

Christopher accepted the man's hand and shook it heartily. "Christopher Campbell, sir."

"Ah, no need to call me sir. From what I understand, you are to marry my daughter Whitney." The man's eyes brightened with affection at the mention of his daughter.

"I am." He wasn't sure what he should say. Watkins was obviously aware of why he was here, seeing how he was paying dearly for it.

"A Scot, are you? That's an interesting turn of events. Whitney has never been north of the border, but I am certain she'll adjust."

"'Tis a lovely land." He felt like an imbecile, unable to come up with anything more than a few words to add to the conversation. He tugged at his cravat, leaning his head to one side. The air was suddenly stifling. He wasn't used to such scrutiny, and the assessment made him quite uncomfortable.

"It is. My wife and I have been there. Not for quite some time, but we did enjoy our stay there. What part are you from?" The man carried on as if they were old friends and there was naught odd with the current circumstances they faced.

"Argyll."

"Renowned for its wool, is it not?"

"Aye. My family is responsible for that."

Watkins smiled. "Splendid. What part do you play in the family business?"

Christopher cleared his throat nervously. Now was the time when he would be run from the Watkins's estate and ordered to never return. "At this time, none. My

brother handles that business mostly. But I do intend to become more involved in the future.”

He wasn’t lying. He did hope to make that come to fruition.

“Well, I don’t suppose you would have found yourself in the Lyon’s Den if everything was going your way, now, would you?” His tone wasn’t sarcastic. It was more matter-of-fact.

And Christopher respected that. He knew he had his shortcomings. But he also knew he was trying to change that.

“I am sure my wife will enjoy the chance to travel north once again. Assuming we will be invited to your home?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t dream of denying your daughter access to her family.”

Watkins looked pleased with that answer and nodded. “The women will be down shortly. I assume you have had a chance to read through our offering?”

“Aye. ’Tis a verra generous offer ye made.”

Walking over to the sideboard, Watkins poured two glasses of what looked to be scotch and handed one to Christopher.

“Thank ye,” he said, accepting the glass.

“Whitney’s mother and I love our daughter very much. We only want the best for our Whitney. You seem like a nice, young man, Christopher. I understand there are things in your past. My daughter doesn’t have an innocent past either, so in that you are on common ground. I will leave it up to you two to decide when and what to tell each

other. My only advice to you is to be honest with her. Whatever you have done, she will be more than understanding.”

Christopher took a sip of scotch, feeling the burn warm his chest, and nodded. The man’s words were comforting.

Watkins then pierced him with a fierce gaze and he felt the need to square his shoulders and straighten his back even more so than it already was. “And my only warning to you is you better not hurt my daughter in any way. I don’t care who your family is. The dire straits you will find yourself in if my daughter is harmed in anyway will have your head spinning.”

Swallowing the lump in his throat, he could only nod again and then confirm that he would not do such a thing. “I am not a violent man, sir. Your daughter will be safe with me.”

“That also includes her heart. Do not break it. She’s much too sweet and loves too hard to be hurt.”

That was something that was a little harder to promise. He hadn’t even met the lass yet. But he accepted the warning.

Fortunately for Christopher, he was saved having to provide an answer by a knock on the door. A servant made them aware that Whitney and Lady Watkins were waiting for them in the salon.

Watkins stood and clapped his hands together. “Are you ready to meet your bride?”

Was he? Nay, he couldn’t say he was. But it was time.

Watkins clapped him on the shoulder. “There is no need to look as if you swallowed

a fly. Neither of them bite—unless you want them to,” he chuckled and then motioned for Christopher to exit to the left.

He took a deep breath and rubbed his hands together nervously. Here goes naught.

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Whitney wrung her hands together incessantly as she waited for the man that would soon be her husband to join her and her mother in the salon.

They'd been made aware of his arrival a short time ago, and since then, her heart had been stuck in her throat.

Her mother patted her hand. "All will be well, dearest. You have nothing to worry yourself with."

"What if he finds me harsh on the eyes? What if he sees me as an ogre? A troll?" She asked quickly.

Her mother rolled her eyes. "You are being ridiculous. You are none of those things and you know it well. Always, you have been the envy of the other girls your age. Why do you think they were so cruel?"

She thought about that for a moment. It was actually something she had not considered before. Was that really the reason? Or were the words just her mother's way of trying to calm her nerves and her over-active mind?

More than likely, the latter.

The men entered the room, and all the air rushed out of her lungs.

Dressed in a dark coat and a white shirt with a ruffled collar, the man she would marry stood before her, his massive height making her feel small. He was even taller than her father, who wasn't short in stature himself. His tan trews hugged his thighs

and his knee-high black boots were polished to a shine. He looked devastatingly handsome, and she noticed that he looked upon her with trepidation.

It made her stomach do a flip flop and instinctively, she stood. Apparently, he was as nervous as she was. That awareness made her feel a little better.

“Whitney,” her father addressed her. “May I introduce you to Lord Christopher Campbell. Christopher, please meet my daughter, Whitney.”

He bowed gallantly and she immediately dropped into a curtsy.

“’Tis lovely to meet ye, lass,” he said, stepping forward and capturing her hand for a kiss.

Oh my. He certainly was chivalrous. Charming.

And Scottish.

That was something she hadn’t anticipated. She just automatically assumed he would be English.

He let go of her hand and stood straight, but the warmth from his lips lingered on her skin.

“Lady Watkins.” He greeted her mother.

The woman smiled as if he was there to meet her. Whitney was certain that if her mother had been holding her fan, she would be waving it in front of herself. She might even have feigned a fainting spell. Whitney had to refrain from rolling her eyes.

They all sat. Papa in his favorite chair by the fireplace. She and mama on the sofa and Christopher in a chair facing them. His manners were on point as he waited for her to sit before taking to his own seat.

A servant entered, pushing a wheeled cart that contained teacups, a pot of tea, and finger sandwiches made of cucumbers with a dill dressing.

Christopher remained silent as he watched the servant leave then focused his gaze on her again.

Her mother nudged her with an elbow to her side. “Mayhap Lord Campbell would like some tea or food,” she urged gently.

“Oh,” Whitney exclaimed, embarrassed that she in turn had lost all semblance of her manners. “Of course. Lord Campbell, can I offer you some tea? A cucumber sandwich as well?”

“Please, call me Christopher, and I would enjoy some, thank ye.”

He flashed her a smile that nearly had her knees buckling as she walked over to the cart. “How do you like your tea?” She managed to eke out, her voice cracking. God above. It was as if she were in the presence of a man for the first time in her life. What was wrong with her?

“A splash of milk would be perfect.”

Preparing the tea as he stated, she also filled a small plate with a few of the sandwiches. He was a large man, certainly, one small sandwich would not satisfy his hunger.

He accepted the plate and saucer holding the teacup with another devastating smile

and she found herself only able to nod.

Her father furrowed his brow. “Well, it seems our daughter has come upon a rare instance of silence. She is usually much more talkative than this. Not so much to be an annoyance,” he added quickly. “But enough to let you know she is there.” Her father chuckled as if he had just delivered a funny jest, but she felt her cheeks flame.

After what seemed like hours of awkward silence, her mother finally stood. “I am sure you two would like to become acquainted. Your father and I will take our leave. We’ll be in the parlor if you need anything.” She held her hand out to her husband. “Come now, Adam. Let’s leave them alone for a bit.”

Whitney watched her parents walk out of the room, surprised that they would leave her with Christopher with no chaperone. Granted, they were to be married, but there should still be some semblance of protocol afforded them.

Oh, who was she kidding? It wasn’t as if she could ruin her reputation. That had already been done.

The room was quiet for a few minutes after her parents had left. She couldn’t stop wringing her hands as she looked toward the door of the room, trying to think of something to say. But she didn’t know where to begin. She wanted to ask him why he needed a wife so desperately, but she found it an odd way to start a conversation, so she remained mum.

“I wasna sure what to expect when I arrived,” Christopher said, finally breaking the silence. “But I must say I am pleasantly surprised.”

She lifted a brow. “About what?” She asked, not sure if she wanted to know the answer.

“Ye.”

Turning in her seat to face him more fully, she said, “Pardon?”

He nodded, a smile on his face. “Ye are verra beautiful, lass,” he said in that Scottish brogue that sounded so very foreign to her ears. Odd, really, seeing how the two countries neighbored each other. It never ceased to amaze her how people so close, could be so different.

“Oh,” she responded, bringing her hand up to her mouth to cover the small smile he brought to her lips. “That is very kind of you to say, my lord.”

“Christopher,” he insisted. “Or I’d e’en settle for Chris if ye rather.”

How very informal it would be of her to call him by a nickname.

He leaned in close, his eyes dancing with mischief. “We are to be married after all. ’Twould seem strange for ye to call me Lord Campbell dinna ye think?”

“You are right, I suppose. But don’t you find this all a bit strange? Disconcerting, even?” She asked, curious as to what he thought of the situation they found themselves in.

He set the saucer on a nearby table, his lips pressed together in thought. “I must admit, ’tis no’ a position I e’er believed to find myself in. But here we are.”

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. “I do agree. It is not something I could have ever imagined.”

His brows creased, concern darkening his eyes. “I must say I am surprised to find ye here. How does a such a beautiful lass as yourself no’ have men breaking down your

door asking for your hand?"

If only that were the case. Once, in what seemed like a lifetime ago, these halls had seen their fair share of suitors calling upon her. Harold being one of them, of course. The men would line up early in the morning and she would tire of having to entertain and make small talk with each one of them. Mayhap that was why she'd fallen for Harold's charm so easily. He was an easy escape. Conversation with him flowed effortlessly and he had a knack for saying exactly what she wanted to hear. And that was what she had needed at the time.

An escape from everything, especially the pressures being forced upon her to marry, not so much from her parents, but society in general. It was as if a girl that had come of age had nothing to look forward to in life other than marrying. She supposed that was sort of true. What else could she do with herself? It wasn't as if she could get employment. Her parents would never allow it.

Even so, she never felt comfortable with men calling on her. She just wanted to put a stop to it.

Not answering Christopher, she countered. "I could say the same to you. Why were you at the Lyon's Den in search of a wife?"

He sputtered, causing the sip of tea he'd just taken to splash out of his mouth. Grabbing a handkerchief, he unfolded it and wiped at the tea dribbling down his chin.

"Pardon me for that. But that is no' why I was at the establishment."

Whitney raised a brow. "Why do you say such a thing? It was the reason we were both there."

He shook his head. "It absolutely wasna. I didna learn of the marriage piece until

after I had won the game.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock. If he hadn't been there for a wife, why was he there? “You don't want to get married?”

“I didna say that. I will marry ye, just as I said I would. I am no' one to go against my word. But 'twas no' the boon I was after when I agreed to accept the invitation.”

She jumped up from her seat, shock making her stomach turn. “If you'll excuse me. I believe I need some air.” Rushing through the salon doors, she hurried down the hall, and made her way out to the garden. Once outside, she clutched her chest, heaving in a deep breath.

It was a trap.

She refused to be a person that forced someone into a life they did not want.

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Christopher watched Whitney rush from the room as if she had the devil himself chasing her heels. What possibly could be her issue? He'd obviously upset her, but he didn't ken how.

He waited but a moment before he stood and walked into the hallway. Looking in both directions, there was no sign of the lass. A servant appeared, her arms stacked high with linens.

"Do ye ken where Miss Watkins has gone?" He asked.

"I believe she is outside, my lord."

He nodded. "Thank ye." He exited the front door, the same one he'd entered and paused to look around. She wasn't here so he made his way around the side of the estate. Surely, she wouldn't have run to the front. She would be in the back.

Rounding the corner to the back of the house, he spotted Whitney sitting on a stone bench near some potted flowers that matched the same ones that were on the front steps.

He took a deep breath. Thinking about how to approach her. Clearly whatever he had said regarding the Lyon's Den had upset her, though he didn't ken why.

The gravel walkway crunched under his boots as he approached the lass. "May I join ye?" He asked, pointing to the empty space on the bench beside her.

She shrugged but scooted over to the very edge of the seat.

He sat, but remained quiet for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts. “I am no’ sure if ye’re aware, but I wasna familiar with the Lyon’s Den before I stepped foot into the building.” He chuckled. “I had e’en passed by it numerous times and hadna the faintest idea of the secrets held inside.”

“But you were invited to participate.”

He nodded. “I was. ’Twas all a mystery to me.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

He picked at a piece of lint on his trews. “I received an invitation. It promised grand winnings. Something that I could really use, so I couldna turn down the opportunity.”

“You thought you would be winning a monetary prize.”

He dipped his head and smiled, trying to put her at ease, unsure of why he cared so much for someone he’d just met—future bride-to-be or not. “Aye. In the end it wasna, but I am a man of my word. I signed a contract and will follow-through with that.”

She blew out a breath, her hands grasping the edges of the seat. “I also had to sign a contract stating that whoever won the game, well, you know. That we would marry.”

“I apologize if I am a disappointment. But do believe me when I say I will do all in my power to make ye happy.”

She laughed, but it held a somber undertone. “It is not that. I was watching the game from above. Mrs. Dove-Lyon has an observation room up there. When I saw you and the other man that would be playing, I was immediately rooting for you,” she confessed shyly.

He couldn't stop the smile that broke across his face. "Do ye ken of Jensen as well?"

"No," she said, shaking her head, her brown waves swaying in the air. "I didn't know either of you. Still don't really. But I had seen you before."

This was an interesting development. "Ye had? When?" Surely, he would remember seeing her previously.

"It was just for a brief moment. My mother and I were at the modiste shop and you had happened to pause in front of the window I was looking out of. I'm sure you don't remember. It was just a brief glance.

He kenned exactly the moment she was referring to and now he realized those beautiful blue eyes he'd seen that day belonged to the lass sitting beside him. The window had reflected the street back to him, so he couldn't see the face they belonged to, but he remembered.

"I actually do. But I could only see your eyes through the window. But they were memorable indeed."

Her cheeks flushed in the most becoming way, but she didn't say anything.

"So, since we are to be married, I think it only makes sense that we learn about each other. Why do ye no' have men knocking down your door on a daily basis to grovel for your hand?" She was a bonny lass he had to admit. From a respected family. Well mannered. He couldn't see any reason why she hadn't been whisked away yet.

"I fear to say," she said quietly, her teeth worrying her bottom lip.

"Whitney, may I call ye Whitney?"

She gave a small nod.

“We both found ourselves there, contract in hand, for a reason. I am no’ innocent. I would be willing to bet,” he grimaced at his poor choice of words, “that whate’er ye have done, I have done worse.”

Her eyes slammed into his, the blue deep as the sea. “I cannot believe that.”

“Nay?” He huffed. “Did ye lose your family’s estate? Their livelihood? The very thing that keeps coin in their pockets?” He pushed his hands through his hair. So much for easing into how much of a mess he was. But she was being so hard on herself. And why? He had betrayed his family in every way possible. And when it came time to face the consequences of his horrible actions, he ran. Ran from Millwool Castle. From Edinburgh. Hell, he’d run from Scotland altogether.

Like a coward.

No matter what she said, it surely wasn’t as bad as what he’d done.

“Unless ye have done all those things, which I find verra hard to believe, I dinna think ye should be fashing overmuch.”

“You did all those things?” She asked quietly.

“Aye. My brother was fortunate enough to barter back all I had lost, but it cost him dearly. That’s why I was taking a chance at the den. I was hoping for enough coin to pay my brother back.”

Her blue eyes rounded, understanding dawning. “You have a gambling problem?”

He pushed off the bench and paced the area in front of her, his hand cupping the back

of his neck. “Had. ’Twas the reason I came to London, actually. I was looking for that big win.”

“Did you get it?”

Christopher barked out a laugh. “Nay. I most definitely didna. As a matter of fact, the night before I received the Lyon’s Den invitation, I had made the vow that I would no longer gamble. I was done. I would find an honest way to make the money to pay my brother back.”

“But yet, you accepted the invitation.”

He sighed. “I did. I fought a war within myself about it. Once I determined that it wasna a chance I could pass up, I told myself win or lose, it didna matter. ’Twould absolutely be my last gamble. But I also needed to win. When I said it didna matter if I won or lost, ’twas a lie. I needed the victory.”

“You got it. You came out victorious.”

“I did. Just no’ in the way I expected.”

“I am sorry.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Whate’er for?”

She smoothed her palms over the rose-colored material of her gown. “Because you expected to win a treasure, and instead you won a wife. One that you had no idea of going into the game. I apologize for that.”

In an instant, he was in front of her, dropping to his knees, so he could look her in the eyes. He wanted to clear the clouds from them and ease her guilt. Which was

misplaced.

“Nay,” he took her hands in his. “My predicament is my own at no fault of ye. I will admit that I was a wee bit surprised when I learned what I had won. Most people when betting dinna expect to win a wife as the prize. It sounds wrong to my ears as I say it aloud.” He laughed, he couldn’t help it. “’Tis absurd if ye think about it, nay? Barbaric even.”

She studied his face, and her lips lifted into a smile and she giggled. “It is silly when you say it like that.”

“See? Dinna fash o’er it, lass. All will be well.” He pushed a loose tendril of hair away that had fallen across her forehead, rubbing the silky strands between his fingers, and fought the urge to lift it to his nose so he could inhale the lavender scent.

Standing, he held out his hand. “Come, let’s walk the grounds and ye can tell me about your home.” What he really wanted to say was to ask her why she was at the Lyon’s Den, but he thought there had been enough revelations made for the time being.

It was a sense of relief that she kenned of his past. Of course, she didn’t have the specifics of it all. But she had the general idea of why he was in London and how he found himself wrapped up in this game.

In due time, he hoped she would trust in him enough to tell him of her past. Truly, it could not be that bad. She was pleasant in all aspects. She was caring, polite. Along with the other attributes he’d noted before, he couldn’t think of a single reason as to why she and her family felt that such desperate actions needed to be taken.

Until then, he would offer her a strong shoulder of support.

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Walking beside Christopher, Whitney felt, what was the word she was looking for? Comforted? Safe? Secure? In a way she felt all of those things, which seemed odd to her. She had just met the man. Found out that he was a gambler, which is not the best trait to have she had to admit. It sounded like he had caused a lot of hardship to his family. But he also said he was working on changing that.

She hoped that was the case. Family was the most important thing. She could think of no worse predicament than to be estranged from those that should love you the most.

But in the back of her mind, she had a little niggling feeling. He had told her he'd given up gambling, but that was a recent decision. Would he be able to keep to his word? As he'd confessed, he'd broken his vow the very next morning after first stating it.

"Have ye e'er been to Scotland?" Christopher asked, leaving her to shelf her worries for now.

"It's been a long time, but yes. Though I can't say where. I do not have much memory of our travels there."

"When we marry," he paused, and she could tell he was weary of what he was going to say next. "Do ye expect to stay living in London or would ye be willing to move to Scotland?"

In a moment of unusual forwardness, she looped her arm around his. His eyes rounded in surprise, but a smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and he covered her hand with his as they continued strolling the grounds.

“Once I learned you were Scottish, I assumed we would reside there. As long as my parents can visit whenever they want, I think the change of scenery will be welcome.” It wasn’t a lie. What did London hold for her? Scotland could be a fresh start.

His brown brows lifted in surprise, as if that wasn’t the answer he expected. “What of your friends? Will ye no’ miss them?”

She couldn’t stop the laughter that burst from her lips, then quickly pressed them together to gain her composure, her palm flattened on her chest. “There is no need to worry about that. Though I will miss Rona.”

“Rona?”

“Yes, my maid. She has been with me for as long as I can remember.”

“So, she isna a friend?”

“She is. But not in the conventional way, I suppose.”

They’d reached the front of the estate.

“Shall we go back inside?” She asked.

“Of course. And your friends?” He prodded again.

She sighed in resignation. “I have none.”

He paused at the top of the steps and studied her face. “Surely, ye jest?”

“I do not. Let’s go find my parents. I am sure they have things they would like to discuss.”

He followed her inside and didn't ask about her friends again, so she hoped he would drop the subject. Once they started talking about why she didn't have any friends, he would soon learn about the awful person that she was. And truth be told, she was enjoying the time they were spending together. She didn't want to ruin it with the sordid details of her past.

Fast enough he would learn the truth and he would probably run to a solicitor to see if there was any way possible to be released from the contract he had signed. And she wouldn't blame him one bit.

"Ah, did you enjoy your walk?" Papa said as they walked into the foyer.

Christopher smiled. "I can only speak for myself, but I verra much enjoyed getting to ken your daughter better."

Seemingly satisfied with his answer, her father nodded. "If you can stay longer, I think we should discuss future events."

Ushering them into the parlor where her mother was already waiting, her father took a seat and waited for them to do the same. This time, they sat on the settee side by side.

The talk was much more geared toward her father and Christopher. They spoke of specifics, clauses, and the contract, of course. Then important dates. It was all very unromantic. But what had she expected?

Since there was no need to wait for relatives to arrive from out of town, they decided on a wedding date in three short days.

Whitney took a deep breath. That didn't give her a lot of time. The modiste had worked quickly having already delivered on the items she and her mother had ordered

the other day during their visit. She was sure an extra-large payment for her trouble helped.

She and Christopher both agreed that an extravagant ceremony wasn't needed. It would only be attended by her parents and the officiant presiding over the union. Christopher had insisted that his family did not need to attend, so there was really nothing else for them to discuss.

And just like that, her future had been forged. After promising to call on her tomorrow where they would promenade, he left to return to his home. Once he'd departed, she sat quietly in the parlor, noting the concern etched on both of her parents' faces.

"You needn't worry about me, mama and papa."

"Your expression says otherwise," her mother said softly.

Jutting out her chin, she straightened her shoulders. "While I will admit this is not the direction I expected my life to take, I am happy with the situation. Lord Campbell is an excellent choice." She wasn't sure who she was trying to convince more. Herself or her parents.

"Then why are you so forlorn? If your face got any longer, your chin will be scraping the floor," her father stated.

"You know how much I hate promenading. I've only had to partake a few times since, well, you know since when and that turned out to be a disaster. Tomorrow, everyone will be about. Staring. Whispering behind their gloved hands. Discreetly pointing fingers."

"And Sir Campbell will be there to ward off all of that nastiness. It must be done,

sweetheart. A public show of affection is needed.”

She slumped in the chair and rolled her eyes. “It really shouldn’t be anyone’s business but ours.”

“You know as well as us that that is the way of society. Besides, once they see you and Lord Campbell are to be married, they should finally quiet down and find some other girl to be miserable to. You’ve had your fair share of their wrath for far too long now. It’s time you put them in their place.” Her mother quirked her brows, mirth brightening her eyes.

She snorted. “I don’t know if that will do anything to calm the mad hive, but since it must be done, I’ll do it. Just know that I will not be enjoying a minute of it.” She swept out of the parlor and headed to her room. The morrow couldn’t get here fast enough. She only wanted to see their promenade behind them so they could move forward.

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Christopher could count on one hand the number of times he had promenaded with a lass. It wasn't anything he partook in back home, and since he'd been in London, he hadn't spent any time with reputable women to find himself in the situation. Whitney, excluded, of course.

The lass deserved to be promenaded. Hell, she deserved to be with a man worthy of her reputation and social station. He didn't think he fit the note for that.

Currently, she had her hand curled around the crook of his elbow as they walked the path, passing people that he had never seen before. Most passed by with a nod of their head or a smile, but there were a few that as soon as they noticed Whitney, their eyes rounded and they hurried away, whispering excitedly to each other.

He had no idea what the fuss was about, and while he could ignore them, the way Whitney stiffened beside him let him know that she couldn't.

"Are ye alright, lass?" He asked after the third group of people had the same negative reaction.

She sighed and the look she gave him nearly broke his heart in two. "I think we have promenaded enough, have we not? Maybe we can return home now?"

He frowned and his eyes scanned the people walking to and fro, wondering what their issue was.

"We can, if that is your wish." He turned them in the direction of where their carriage waited. "Tell me what's wrong," he demanded softly. Pausing, he forced her to face

him, and he gently swept a curled tendril behind her ear. Letting his fingers linger just a moment longer than he should, he then ran his fingers down her jawline. “I ken we are near strangers, yet I can tell when something is amiss. We are to be married in two days. Tell me. Ye ken I will find out eventually.”

She took in a shuddering breath. “There are some things that aren’t easy to tell.” Her eyes broke from his and focused over his shoulder. “My past is one of those things. Everyone’s reactions are a direct result from that.”

“Lass, look at me.” With his thumb and forefinger, he drew her chin to him. “I dinna care what your past looks like. Hell, my past is a cess pit. I told ye some, but no’ all. Tell me yours and we can work through it together.”

A single tear pooled in her eye and trailed down her cheek. He swiped it away with the pad of his thumb.

“Let us get to the carriage and away from the eyes of people that are upsetting ye. Then ye can tell me.” He bent so she had no choice but to look him in the eye. “Deal?”

For a long moment she held his gaze but finally nodded.

“Good.” He clasped her hand and led her away.

Tucked away in the carriage, Christopher sat across from Whitney, who looked like she wanted some space. He hadn’t given the coachman the signal to go yet, so they sat there quietly.

Fighting the temptation to urge her on, he held his tongue. He got the feeling that this was something that she needed to do on her own, and as much as he wanted to ken what was going on, he wouldn’t force it from her.

After what seemed like an eternity, Whitney finally spoke.

“Since you are going to find out anyway, I shall tell you. Let me preface it by saying that if you would like to find some way of ending our upcoming union after finding out, I will not stop you.”

“Lass.”

She held up her hand and he snapped his mouth shut.

“Those girls snickering and sending me looks of disgust before they hurried away, whispering behind my back, were all former acquaintances of mine. Normally, I might say former friends, but they showed their true colors when I needed them most. I learned they were not my friends at all.” She rolled her lips inward and gazed out the window, her eyes watery with unshed tears she refused to let fall.

“When I came of age and was introduced into society, I hated every minute of it. I didn’t want a husband. I didn’t like the idea of being paraded in front of the ton like a prized pig on display.”

He chuckled, unable to contain his reaction at her description.

She pierced him with a glare, and he cleared his throat, straightening in his seat. “I am no’ laughing at ye, lass. Just at the picture ye paint. I can only imagine how that must feel.”

“It is an awful feeling. I only wanted it to be done. When one man seemed to understand my plight, and offered me an escape, I took it, accepting it like a salvation. Little did I know it was all a ploy. He had no real feelings for me.” She broke eye contact, but not before he saw the hurt that resided there.

“Ye loved him.”

She sniffled and nodded. “I did. I believed his sweet words. His promises of what our future would look like. He knew exactly what to say. As if he could read my mind and knew what I wanted to hear.”

Anger bubbled up inside of his chest. Whoever the bastard was, he’d hunt him down and make him pay for the hurt he’d caused Whitney. He took a sharp intake of breath, surprised at his own reaction for a lass that he had just practically met.

“We,” she paused as if searching for the right words to say. “We did more than court. I don’t think I need to go into specifics for you to understand what I am inferring.”

His eyes rounded. Not at her actions. He could understand how a lass would fall under the spell of carefully chosen words from a man that was only thinking about what he could gain from the situation. The man was vile.

Going through the actions he did kenning the result it would have on Whitney and then leaving her alone to deal with the consequences.

Disgusting.

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T here. She'd said it. She dared not look at Christopher. She didn't want to see the disappointment and disgust that was surely on his face.

She held her breath.

"Whitney," he called.

But, still, her eyes remained on the small window of the carriage. Not really seeing what was happening outside.

"Whitney," Christopher repeated. "Look at me, lass," his voice soft.

Slowly, she did as he said, bracing herself for the anger that would surely be directed at her. But when her eyes clashed with his, she only saw sympathy in their brown depths.

"Ye are no' the first lass to have a lapse in judgement and go against what society deems proper. Hell, 'tis why I prefer Scotland. Ye English are so uptight."

She raised her brows in surprise. This was the very opposite of what she expected.

"Are ye not mad?"

He barked out a laugh. "Did it happen whilst we were together? Nay. It has naught to do with me. Whate'er ye did in your past doesna affect me in anyway."

"M-m-m," she sputtered, trying to get out the words. "Maybe you don't understand

what I am saying.”

“Och, I ken what ye are saying.” He shrugged his shoulders as if he hadn’t a care in the world. “I dinna put any blame on ye, lass. Ye found someone ye loved. And thought he returned the emotion. He took advantage of that.”

“Yes. No. I was a willing participant.” She didn’t want him to think that Harold had taken opportunities with her that she didn’t want. She very much did at the time.

“So, society shunned ye for running with your emotions and acting on them. Nay doubt, he then turned tail and ran?”

Wringing her hands in her lap, she shrugged. “Our relations continued for some time. In secret, of course.”

“Of course. Surely, he insisted upon that.”

Biting her lip, she nodded.

“Ye are no’ the first lass to fall for sweet words and promises. Ye willna be the last either.”

“I understand if you want to appeal the contract. I will go to Mrs. Dove-Lyon and explain things.”

He dropped to his knees in front of Whitney, capturing her chin between his fingers and forcing her to look at him. “I will do nay such thing. Ye ken what? I say we go back out there and promenade our arses off.”

Her eyes rounded at his words.

“I dinna care what they think. We will be married in two days. No one can tell us how to behave. Come on.” He kissed her cheek, before clasping her hand and throwing open the door to the carriage. The footman hurried over, but he waved him away.

“I am going to go promenade with my soon-to-be wife and show her off to all of London. Naysayers be damned.” With a huge smile on his handsome face, he bent and kissed her on the cheek.

She couldn’t hide her look of shock as she followed him back out to the walking path, her head held high. A burst of pride exploded in her chest.

A feeling she hadn’t felt in a very long time, but she liked it. He did that for her. He gave her the confidence to promenade and not feel as if she didn’t deserve it.

This time, when people stared and pointed, she stared right back, meeting their gaze with challenge brightening her eyes.

Surprisingly, they hurried to avert their stares. She smiled at the power she suddenly felt.

Christopher squeezed Whitney’s hand. “I’m proud of ye. Ye are an amazing lass.” He appeared to be telling the truth. Though she wasn’t the best in reading that characteristic. Still, she chose to believe it wasn’t a lie.

The difference in the way she walked earlier and the way she was walking now was tenfold. She felt as if she had found a confidence she didn’t have before. She found it quite exciting. Freeing, even.

She leaned in and bumped his shoulder. “Because of you. The past couple of years have been hard. I’ve let these women dictate how I should live. I see now that I should not have allowed them to do so. I thank you for that.”

Was that a blush that tinged his cheeks? He dipped his head, hiding his expression from her before he spoke. “Ye needna thank me, lass. All of this,” he fanned his arm out in front of them. “All of this ye had inside of ye all along. Ye only needed the right person to bring it out of ye.” He stopped walking and faced her.

“What are you doing?” She looked around them, but for once, it didn’t seem like anyone was paying them any attention.

“I’m going to kiss my wife.”

His head dropped to hers, his mouth capturing hers in a gentle kiss. His lips soft against hers and she nearly melted into him. Her hands splayed on his chest, and she breathed him in. The world around them forgotten. It was as if, in this moment in time, only they existed. This plane was theirs and theirs alone.

She wanted him to deepen the kiss. Her body ached for more. Longed for more.

But this was not the place. She remembered where they were and broke the kiss.

“I’m sorry,” he began to apologize.

“Please, do not apologize. I very much enjoyed it.” She bit her lip as she looked up at him. Grabbing his hand, she steered them in the direction of their carriage. “As a matter of fact, I would have liked to kiss you longer.”

His brows shot up in surprise.

“But I think we’ve done enough to scandalize society for one day.” She laughed. “I don’t need to be the subject of another shunning. But I make no such promises for what is going to happen once we get to our carriage.”

His eyes rounded and he hurried his steps. “Ye dinna need to tell me twice, lass,” he quipped and pulled her along.

Her skin tingled, eager for his touch.

Nearly tearing the carriage door off its hinges, he ushered her inside, then gave quick orders to the coachman to return home before shutting and securing the door.

His look was practically feral as he pounced on her. She giggled as he nuzzled her neck, and she held him close. Placing her hands on his cheeks, she brought his face to hers and captured his mouth in a kiss. This time, she did what she longed to do when they were walking, she pushed her tongue into his mouth, seeking entry, and he happily obliged, allowing their tongues to do a wicked dance that set her body aflame.

The kiss continued, frenzied, as the carriage bounced along the road.

She wanted to feel his skin against hers. She couldn’t get enough of him. Reaching for his jacket, she pushed it off his shoulders, wanting him to rid himself of the constricting garment. She wanted to feel the bunch of his muscles under her palms.

But with a shaky breath, he captured her hands, kissing the fingertips of each one.

“Lass, as enticing as ye are right now, and believe me, ye are verra enticing,” he growled. “Howe’er, ye deserve more.”

Confusion furrowed her brow. “Pardon?”

“Our first time to lay together should not be in the cramped confines of a carriage. I want to see ye splayed out beneath me on the finest linens. Your hair free from pins so that I may run my fingers through the long locks. I want the opportunity to look

upon every inch of ye. Savor ye as ye deserve to be savored.”

She felt her skin flush. Her initial reaction as to what she thought was rejection was gone and now replaced with the beauty of his words. They were heartfelt. Nothing so romantic had ever passed Harold’s lips.

Nodding, she straightened, bringing her hand up to her lips, swollen from his kisses and smiled. “I think I would like that very much.”

The smile that he gifted her with was dazzling.

As they continued their journey home, sitting side by side on the bench seat, her hand enveloped in his, she fought to understand how but only a few days ago, they didn’t know who the other was, and now they were bursting with unchecked desire.

Of course, a marriage needed more than that to survive. But how many marriages were loveless? Passionless? If they had those attributes, they could overcome anything. She believed that to her very core.

A core, that right now, yearned for the handsome man sitting beside her, his fingers softly stroking hers.

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It had been two days since he and Whitney had nearly come together in the carriage. Since then, they had both agreed that it would be best if they waited until after they were married to go any further.

Today, the day had finally arrived. The days had seemed to drag on forever.

The magistrate had arrived a short while ago, and they only waited for Whitney to descend the stairs with her mother.

Christopher found the wait excruciating. But once he got a glimpse of the lass, his breath caught in his throat. The wait was well worth it for the vision appearing in front of him.

She was beautiful. The satin gown she wore fit her perfectly and accentuated her slim figure. Her hair was piled high on her head, and he had a vision of pulling out the pins one by one later, watching her hair cascade down her shoulders tendril by tendril.

He caught her gaze, and her smile was dazzling. For a brief moment, he felt a surge of guilt for not inviting his brother. But Alexander would be an issue that he would deal with later. He didn't want those memories sully the memories of his wedding.

Whitney didn't deserve that. She deserved his full attention, and she would have it.

Once she joined him at his side, and he took her hand in his, the ceremony was a whirlwind. Brief, it only lasted a few short minutes before they were pronounced man and wife, and they kissed in front of her parents and the magistrate. Sealing their lives

together for the remainder of their time on earth.

It was surprising that he had looked forward to the union. Last week he would have sworn up and down he would never marry—or at least not any time soon. But here he was, a week later, most definitely married.

And to the most beautiful woman he had ever had the pleasure of laying his eyes upon. The morn was early and they had decided the night before that they would stay at Colthrop Hall for tonight. Tomorrow they would start the journey to Scotland.

“Are you happy, Christopher?” Whitney asked beside him, her brow creased with worry.

He smiled, casting away thoughts best kept for another day. “Splendidly so. Are ye?”

“I am. I don’t know if I should be, but I am.”

He laughed at that. “We do make an odd couple, do we no’?” He dipped his head in her parent’s direction. “Your parents, however, seem elated.”

She giggled. “They have wanted to see me wed for so long. Look at what they went through to see that it happened?”

“I have ne’er been happier to have a gambling habit.”

Her mouth dropped open.

“Dinna fash, lass. ’Tis only because it brought me to ye. Without it, I wouldna find myself here with ye in my arms and calling ye wife.”

She lifted on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “Do that again,” she whispered

near his ear.

“Do what again?”

“Call me your wife,” she demanded devilishly.

With an arm around her waist, he pulled her close, so she was flush against his chest.

“Wife,” he growled.

With a squeal, she squirmed in his arms.

Her father cleared his throat. “Well, it appears that you two newlyweds are ready to be alone.”

“Papa!” Whitney exclaimed.

He held his hands up in defense. “It is not a bad thing, dearest daughter. I am thrilled beyond measure to see you happy. And I have confidence that whatever may cross your path, you both will handle it well and come out victorious. Now, come here.” He opened his arms and she went to him for a hug that only a father could give his daughter.

Perhaps it was something Christopher could look forward to with his own daughter. “Congratulations.” Adam kissed the top of Whitney’s head. “Your mother and I are very happy for you.”

Lady Watkins stepped in to hug Whitney, tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

Sir Watkins approached him. “Thank you for treating my daughter with respect. Your face glows whenever you lay eyes upon her. That’s all I ever wanted for Whitney. For someone to look at her the same way I look at her mother.”

Christopher bowed. “Thank ye, sir.”

“Your carriage awaits,” Sir Watkins announced.

As they walked to the door, he quickly pulled Christopher aside, slipping an envelope into his hands. “The first three months of allowance that was promised in the contract. It should be more than enough to get you both settled and to enjoy your honeymoon.”

He slipped the envelope in his jacket pocket. “Thank ye.”

Joining Whitney, who was already seated in the carriage, he kissed her hand.

“What was that about? With my father?”

“Och, ’twas naught. He was just giving me some fatherly advice,” Christopher lied. Not wanting to dampen the mood. “Now, wife. Let us get home.”

She smiled happily. “I look forward to that very much.”

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Colthrop Hall was not what Whitney was expecting. She wasn't sure exactly what she had expected, but Colthrop Hall was so much more. It was a huge estate in one of the best parts of the city.

"It's beautiful," she whispered as hand in hand, Christopher led her through the front door. Marble floors shone bright, with a gorgeous art piece front and center of the room. From her knowledge it looked to be Italian. It was displayed on a large velvet covered table. The design intricate. It must have taken hours upon hours to make. "Did you choose this?"

"Nay. I am sad to admit that design is no' my forte. I believe 'tis a piece my father had commissioned some years before he passed."

"I'm sorry to hear that." It was in that moment that she realized exactly just how little they knew about each other. Like that his father had passed for instance. "Is your mother still here?"

He shook his head. "Nay, she died when I was verra young. I doona remember her."

Her heart sank. She couldn't imagine not having both of her parents still in her life.

"Would ye like a drink? I fear today has been a whirlwind. A drink to relax would be nice."

"That would be lovely."

"Actually, before we do that. I should show ye the estate. After all, you will be

running it now that ye are the lady of the house.”

She gasped. She, quite naively, hadn't even thought about that. She should have asked her mother for advice on running a household. The basics, she knew, of course, but anything further. She was at a loss. “I don't plan to take away any tasks from anyone.”

“Nonsense. I am sure that the staff will be more than happy to have someone around here that kens what they are doing.” He leaned in close and whispered. “I havena a clue and it frustrates them.”

“I am certain you are not that bad,” she giggled.

He shrugged his shoulders. “No need to take my word for it, ye can ask any of them. They will all say the same thing. Come, we'll start on the first floor.”

She followed him from room to room as he explained which was which. There were far too many rooms for her to remember and she would need to spend some time with the main servant to get her bearings. That is if they were going to remain here. Perhaps they would visit often? She was unsure. They were supposed to leave for Scotland on the morrow, so maybe she wouldn't have to expend too much energy on this property. Clearly the staff were more than capable. It had been running smoothly for quite some time without her factoring into the equation.

Upstairs, Christopher paused in front of a set of double doors. “I have saved the best for last,” he said, winking, then pushed the doors open.

Her breath caught in her throat. It was Christopher's master chamber. A huge space that fit his personality perfectly. The wood-paneled room was decorated in several shades of blue, all melding together into a perfect palette.

A large bed, made with the fluffiest linens she'd ever seen, called to her. She smiled as a wicked plan entered into her mind. Walking further into the room, she neared the bed before turning to and crooking her finger to Christopher.

"I think it is a good choice to show this room last."

"Is that so?" He quipped as he came closer.

"Yes. Because surely you must know that I don't want to leave this room."

His eyes flared, and his fingers tugged at his cravat. "I still have your chambers to show ye. So, this isn't the actual last room for ye to see."

She dropped on the bed, her hands gliding along the linen of the duvet. "But it is the most important one. And one I have no interest in leaving any time soon." She patted the mattress beside her, inviting him to join her."

In a flash, Christopher sat down, the mattress dipping under his weight, causing her to lean into him.

"Did ye still want that drink, lass?" He asked quietly.

"Oh, I am parched, husband," she drawled out the word husband. The sound odd on her tongue. "But not for drink." She licked her lips and smiled as his eyes dropped to her mouth.

"Ye are a vixen," he accused playfully, pulling her onto his lap, and nipped at her lips.

She giggled. "You bring that out in me. No one else has ever had such an effect."

“No one?” He lifted a brow in question, and she knew he was referring to Harold.

“That was not like this. I was young then. I’ve grown and matured.”

He looked at her as if he were starving. “Grown indeed, lass.”

Grinding her hips, she elicited a groan from Christopher. She felt powerful. Fearless. She hopped off his lap and turned, looking at him over her shoulder. “Undo my buttons?” She asked sultrily.

“Gladly.” He jumped up from the bed, his fingers making quick work of the numerous buttons on her gown. His lips kissing each inch of bare skin that was revealed with each release.

The cool air, replaced by his warm lips had her shivering, but not from the cold.

Desire was the only thing she felt. Deep down, it burned through her veins.

“All unbuttoned, lass,” he murmured, his voice husky.

She turned, clutching her gown to her chest. She wanted Christopher’s eyes on her when she let the material go, revealing herself to him.

His dark eyes followed her hands, watching her every move.

Letting the gown fall, exposing her breasts, his eyes blew wide, his tongue darting out of the corner of his mouth.

“Ye are the most beautiful thing I have e’er seen,” he confessed softly, reaching up a hand to cup her breast, flicking his thumb over the turgid nipple.

She hissed at the contact and stepped out of the pool of material that had gathered at her feet. She removed the rest of her clothing until she stood, completely naked in front of him. Confident in her body, her nakedness wasn't anything she was ashamed of.

His groan of satisfaction had her smiling.

He circled his hands around her waist and pulled her close, allowing him to take a stiff peak into his mouth.

Throwing her head back at the delightful sensation, it was her turn to moan. But she didn't want Christopher taking the lead on this. No. Whitney wanted to be the one to make the moves. To direct the actions being taken.

She stepped back ignoring the way he jutted out his bottom lip in the cutest pout she'd ever seen. Bending, she took his lip between her teeth and bit gently, before licking the bite of pain away.

Grasping the lapels of his jacket, she pushed them over his shoulders and down his arms until he quickly shrugged out of it, throwing it on the floor to join the pile of her clothes.

He pulled the tails of his shirt from his treads and pulled it over his head, discarding it on top of his jacket.

Whitney licked her lips at the sight in front of her. The muscles of his arms bulged, and the ridged muscles of his abdomen called out to her. Dropping to her knees, she licked the hard muscles, nibbling her way down his stomach, until she reached the waistband of his pants.

With a devilish look, she popped the buttons on his trousers, and Christopher obliged

by lifting his hips so he could shimmy out of them after toeing off his boots.

His cock sprang free. Long, hard, standing at attention, waiting for her. She closed her fist around the hard velvet and Christopher threw his head back, hissing at the contact.

Empowered by his response, she darted her tongue out, running it along the thick vein on the underside of his manhood.

His hand grasped the back of her neck as he brought his head up to look her in the eye. "Lass."

But he lost all ability to speak when she closed her mouth around the crown.

"Jesus," he said, his hand gripping her neck tighter as his hips involuntarily juttled up to her.

She smiled around his cock and brought her mouth down, drawing him in before easing back, nibbling on the tip. Then taking him fully into her mouth once more.

His hands on her cheeks pulled her back. Eyes shining so dark they were nearly black. "Ye need to cease, lass. I'll ne'er..."

Pushing on his chest, forcing him to lie back on the bed, she climbed atop his lap, settling so that their cores met. Lifting her hips, she positioned his hardness at her entry and sank down, enveloping him into her softness. Reveling at the feeling of her body stretching to accommodate his size as she moaned in pleasure.

His eyes met hers, a pained smile on his handsome face as she lifted her hips up and down, finding a pace that would satisfy them both.

Soon, he grasped her hips, quickening the pace, as his strained voice repeated her name over and over again.

Heat flushed over her body, as her insides tightened. Bringing her to the precipice that she found so enticing. Her legs began to contract and Christopher, sensing that she was about to lose control, flipped her onto her back, taking the lead as he drove his hips forward, over and over again.

The pressure within her built, rising into an inferno that she could no longer contain.

“Christopher,” she called out, scoring his back with her nails.

He drove harder, sweat broke out on his brow, before he dropped his head, nuzzling her neck.

“Come with me, lass,” he whispered in her ear, then gave the lobe a quick bite.

That was all it took. Fierce shudders overtook her body as she lost all control over her actions, her movements. Her breath coming in short gasps as she closed her arms around him, bringing him closer. She wanted to feel him in her, over her. On every inch of her body.

“Whitney,” he growled low, with a fierce shudder as he drove himself to the hilt within her, holding himself there as his seed filled her.

He collapsed beside her, drawing her to his side as he tucked her head under his chin.

“Ye are amazing.”

She smiled into his chest, happier than she had been in a very long time.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:36 am

With Whitney sleeping at his side, Christopher thought about the direction his luck had taken. He had an amazing wife. One that he couldn't have imagined the skills she was hiding. Thankful he was for the skills.

She sighed in her sleep, and he studied her face, her long lashes, the faintest sprinkling of freckles across her small nose. Her full lips that, lord above, she knew how to use.

He was tempted to wake her up and lose himself in her sweetness again, but that would be selfish of him. The sleep would do her good.

Carefully, he extricated himself from beside her, and careful not to wake her, he slipped out of bed. Grabbing his treads, he pulled them on and did the same with his shirt. He picked up his jacket and was going to drape it over the chair, when he felt the envelope he'd stuffed in the pocket at Whitney's parents' house.

Walking over to the window, he sat and broke the seal so he could see what was inside. His eyes blew wide at the amount of notes inside. It was more money than he handled in a very long time. Also included was the deed to a property in the English countryside. But his eyes kept focusing on the notes.

He could play a lot of games at the tables with what he was holding in his hand.

He shook his head. He shouldn't be thinking of such things. Not only had he made a vow to himself, but he'd also told Whitney that he would gamble no more.

But the amount of coin he could win...

They left for Scotland in the morning. He could be in and out of the gambling hell before Whitney kenned it.

Just one game. One game just to test his luck. No matter the outcome, that would be the end of it.

Just one last time.

He looked back at Whitney. She was sound asleep. She'd been exhausted before they worked each other up into a frenzy. She'll be asleep for quite some time. He would just instruct the staff to tell her he had to run an errand should she happen to awaken and wander downstairs before his return.

Buttoning up his jacket, he took one last look at his beautiful wife before slipping out and shutting the door quietly behind him.

Giving his butler instructions for Whitney, he left, making his way to one of the many gambling hells in town.

Inside, the smell of cigar smoke and bourbon welcomed him in an intoxicating hug. The place was alive with almost all the tables nearly full.

Roaming the room, he searched for the table that would call out to him, letting him ken that that was the one he should take a seat at.

As he walked about, guilt overcame him. What the hell was he doing here? Had he seriously left his new wife home alone?

On their wedding day?

He blew out an exasperated breath, pushing his hand through his hair. What kind of

man did that?

An asshole. That's who.

Realizing he was a fool, that awareness had him spinning on his heel to leave.

"Campbell," a voice called to him. A familiar voice.

He closed his eyes. Jensen.

"After your win, I didn't expect to see you frequenting the hells so soon. Were your winnings not enough?" He asked sarcastically.

"I was just leaving, if ye'll excuse me." He moved to push past the man, but he'd planted his feet.

"No. I don't think so. Do you forget you cost me my home?"

Christopher cocked his head to the side. "Nay. 'Twas no' I that cost ye that. 'Twas ye and your lack of luck."

The man sneered. "That game was rigged from the start and you well know it."

At no point had that thought come across Christopher's mind. Mayhap he would have thought different if he had lost.

"I dinna ken about that, Jensen. I'm sorry ye lost your house, but one of us was going to when we agreed to play the game.

His hands balled into fists at his sides. "It wasn't supposed to be me."

Christopher shrugged. “What can ye do? We both signed a binding contract. If ye have an issue with it, mayhap ye should take it up with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. She made the rules, not I.” He pushed past the seething man. “If ye’ll excuse me. I’ve somewhere I need to be.”

He left the hell, and once on the street, he leaned against the wall, breathing in some air to calm his nerves. He was a fool to leave Whitney.

Never again, he vowed. And this time he meant it. He had no reason to even attempt another gamble. He had all the money he needed. A beautiful wife at home. And once they returned to Scotland, he would pay back Alexander any coin that he had lost in his reacquisition of the Campbell sheep. He’d learn the family business and make an honest man out of himself for once.

Glancing at his watch, he grimaced. He needed to hurry home and hopefully he would arrive before Whitney awoke. Cursing at himself for the stupid decision he’d made, he pushed off the wall and rounded the corner—only to be met with Jensen and two men.

“You should have left when you had the chance,” Jensen chided and the two men advanced on Christopher.

A fist shot out and connected with his jaw in a meaty smack. He briefly saw stars, but he swung back, feeling the connection of his own fist against one of the men’s noses. The sickening crack rent through the air. But it only seemed to anger the man further.

With two against one, Christopher didn’t have a chance. He defended himself as best as he could, but knowing it was a losing battle, he opted to protect himself from the barrage of blows that wouldn’t stop. He dropped to the ground and a kick to his gut had him grunting in pain. He tried to curl into a fetal position to protect himself further, but not before another booted kick landed in his ribs, and he felt several crack

on impact.

Breathing hurt. His vision was blurred. He could hear Jensen laughing nearby. The bastard.

He'd kill him was the last thought he had before a beefy fist came smashing down on his face, knocking him into oblivion.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:36 am

Whitney paced the floor for Christopher to return. It had been hours since she'd woken up only to find herself alone.

After dressing in a day dress she'd packed in the travel bag she'd brought from home, she made her way downstairs, only to be told that he had left to run an errand but would be back shortly.

That was five hours ago. Night was descending and there was no word from her husband.

Had she been too forward? Scared him away? Maybe he had run to Mrs. Dove-Lyon to see how he could get out of the marriage.

Betrayal burned within her. Had she once again fallen for the words she wanted to hear? Words that held no meaning and were only used to get to an end?

"You are a fool Whitney Watkins," she spat out in the empty room, not using Campbell, even though that was her surname now.

She thought Christopher was different. He seemed so sincere. She understood she hadn't known him long. Obviously not long enough to judge his true character, but she really thought he was different from Harold. Perhaps all men were that way.

No. She refused to believe it. She'd seen the way her father treated her mother. Everything he did was to make mama happy. He wouldn't intentionally hurt her.

Should she return home? She brought her fingertips to her mouth, nibbling on her

nails, trying to figure out the steps she should take.

Where could he have gone? The only place she could think of was the Lyon's Den. Had he really gone there to terminate his contract?

She would never know unless she went there herself to find out. Grabbing a cloak, she wrapped it around her shoulders and made her way out into the hall.

A servant appeared, and she felt bad because she couldn't remember the man's name, but she asked for a carriage to be brought around.

"Are you sure, my lady? Surely, Lord Campbell will return soon."

She jutted out her chin. "It has been long enough. I will locate him myself."

In less than an hour, she was begging for entry into the gambling den, but the bouncers at the door would not let her pass. Not without an invitation they kept saying.

"I was here last week. Please. I just need to speak with Mrs. Dove-Lyon," she begged. "It's about my husband." The words were bitter on her tongue as she said them. But one of the men left and she hoped it was to find the old woman.

"Wait here," the other man ordered, and pointed to a bench outside the door.

With a huff, she crossed her arms and sat down.

"Miss Watkins, or should I say, Lady Campbell now," Mrs. Dove-Lyon called to her about fifteen minutes later.

Whitney had been waiting for so long, she didn't think the woman would come out.

“What is the matter?” The woman asked, noting the concern etched on Whitney’s face.

“Have you seen my husband? Christopher Campbell?”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon chuckled. “I know his name, dear. But, alas, I have not seen him. Should I have?”

If he wasn’t here, where could he be?

“I, um, he left home earlier this afternoon stating that he had to run an errand and would be back shortly. He hasn’t been back and it has been hours. I worried that he visited you to null our contracts.”

The woman belted out a laugh. “Absolutely not. There is no nulling of any of my contracts. I’m sorry, dear, he hasn’t been here.”

Whitney pressed her lips together. Where could he be?

“If you’ll excuse me, I must get back to my patrons.”

“Of course.” Whitney stood. “I am sorry to have bothered you.”

Outside, she looked up and down the street. Her coachman approached. “Are you ready to return to Colthrop, my lady?”

“If Lord Campbell were to come to this area, where would he usually go?”

The man shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

She reached out a hand and touched his arm. “Please. I will ensure that ye see no ill

repercussions for providing the information. I need to find him,” she begged.

With a curt nod, he straightened. “The gambling hells is where he would pass his time. A few were his favorites, but they are not near here.” He looked pained. “They are in an unsavory part of the city, my lady.”

“Take me,” she ordered and not waiting for him to argue, she climbed into the carriage and impatiently waited for them to start moving. When the carriage rocked forward, she let out a sigh.

Was he gambling? He’d said he had stopped. It was their wedding day. She thought back to when they’d left after the ceremony. She had noticed her father hand something to Christopher. Was it money?

Had he taken their marriage money and gone to gamble with it?

Anger ran through her veins like fire. How could he? When she found him, in whatever seedy establishment he happened to be in, she would give him an earful.

Betrayal enveloped her as they bounced along the road. Once again, she felt the fool.

The carriage rocked to a halt and shortly after the door swung open. “My lady, we are here.” He looked around. “But are you sure you want to get out of the carriage? It could be dangerous.”

She poked her head out and surveyed her surroundings. This part of the city was darker than the parts she was used to. Men and women of ill repute walked the streets. Some nuzzling and acting completely improper for public show.

Vile words were spoken. A couple were rutting against a brick wall like animals. Her eyes rounded at the sight and her coachman moved in her line of sight to block the

view.

“My lady, this truly is not a place for you.”

She was beginning to think he was right, but she had no choice. She needed to find her husband. “If Lord Campbell is here, then I must find him.”

He nodded. “If you insist, but please, let me ask around. You should stay within the safety of the carriage.”

She would be safer here, where another servant had accompanied them.

“Please hurry,” she begged. As upset as she was for being taken for a fool, there was a small pestering feeling that told her something was wrong. And that it wasn’t because Christopher had betrayed her.

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Christopher groaned. It felt like he had the weight of a hundred men on top of him. He must have been dreaming because he could have sworn that he heard Whitney's voice. But that was impossible.

He heard it again, but it sounded so far away.

Trying to sit up, he hissed sharply. He could barely move. And he definitely had some broken ribs. Whatever was on top of him was heavy. He tried pushing against it, but it hardly budged.

"Whitney," he tried to call out, but it came out as more of a croak than anything decipherable.

He gave the object on top of him a shove, ignoring the pain that lanced through his chest and shoulder. He would never get out from under this if he didn't try.

Shoving again, it slid slightly to the side, but enough that it eased the pressure on his chest. It hurt to take a deep breath, so he tried to keep to small gulps of air. Looking around it appeared he was in an alley. No doubt those bastards that jumped him threw him here after he'd been knocked out.

"Whitney," he croaked out again, hoping to gain someone's attention. Anyone's attention at this point. He needed to make his way back to Colthrop Hall.

"Over here!" He heard someone yell and he felt the weight being lifted off of him.
"Sir! My lord!"

He tried to focus on the face that appeared in front of him, but his vision was blurry. He recognized the voice though. It was John, one of his coachmen.

“How?”

“Don’t speak. Save your energy. Can you stand?”

Christopher thought he was just trying to be kind. It was obvious that he couldn’t.

“Whitney,” he asked.

“Lady Campbell is here.”

Relief flooded through him at the same time anger raced through his veins. What the hell was she doing in this part of the city?”

Then pain pierced his chest as John and another man he didn’t recognize, lifted him from where he’d been dumped, and carried him to the carriage.”

“Oh my heavens!” Whitney exclaimed as they loaded him into the carriage. “What happened? Christopher. What happened?” She cried.

“Is it that bad?” He managed to ask before his world went black again.

The next time he awoke, he was in his own bedchamber, in his own bed, propped up by a mountain of pillows behind his back.

His vision was limited, and he assumed his eyes were swollen. Not surprised. They’d taken quite a few hits.

“Fuck,” he groaned, his throat parched. His body sore all over.

“You’re awake.” Whitney’s face appeared in front of his and he tried to smile, but his lips hurt.

“Ye found me,” he eked out. “I thought I heard your voice.”

She frowned. Wringing out a cloth, she dabbed at his face and he winced.

“You have a lot of explaining to do—once you’ve healed some,” she added quickly. “You look like a right mess, right now. What the hell happened?”

Her gaze held no shame at the curse she’d just muttered. His admiration grew for her. “Did ye come looking for me?”

She dabbed his brow and the cloth came away bloody, so she rinsed it again before repeating the gesture.

“You left,” she accused. “I, I thought you...” She drew in a shaky breath.

Reaching out a cut and bruised hand, he captured hers. “I am no’ that bastard that used you for his selfish reasons. I would ne’er,” he coughed, the pain in his ribs felt like the stab of a hundred daggers.

Concern etched her brow.

“I respect ye too much to do that to ye, lass.”

“Maybe so. But why were you where all the gambling hells were?”

He wanted to laugh, but fought from doing so because of the pain it would cause. “A daft lapse in judgment.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Old habits die hard. I came to my senses though.”

“Is this what coming to your senses means? Who did this to you?”

He grabbed her hand that was dabbing at his cuts and brought it to his bloodied lips, placing a kiss on her soft skin. “I promise ye, I will ne’er step foot in a gambling hell again. ’Twas the universe’s way of telling me to stop.”

She frowned.

“This was the work of Jensen.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know who that is.”

“Ye do. He’s the other man that was vying for your hand.” He coughed and clutched at his chest, groaning.

Concerned marred her features, her hands gentle as she tried to make him comfortable. “The doctor says it will be some time before you are running about. Your ribs are broken. Your shoulder was dislocated. And the cuts and bruises are numerous.”

He gave her a half smile since a full one hurt too much. “I feel all of those.”

“I am certain you do. I will get the law to round up Jensen. Why would he do such a thing?”

“Nay, lass. ’Tis no’ worth the trouble.”

“You could have died! If John had not found you, who knows what would have happened?”

“I just need rest. And ye’re taking such good care of me, I shall heal in nay time at all. Jensen was letting out his frustration at losing. He’ll get over it. And since I’ll ne’er set foot in a hell again, he willna be able to find me again for a chance to finish the job.”

She frowned, and he could tell she didn’t like his answer. “I dinna want any more trouble, lass. I’d say he and I are e’en now. There isna any need to get anyone else involved.”

He closed his eyes. He felt bone weary, but happy to be home. Thankful that Whitney had come looking for him. If she hadn’t he’d more than likely be dead.

“Come here, lass.” He patted the bed beside him.

“I shouldn’t. I don’t want to hurt you any more than you already are.”

“Ye willna. Having ye close will help me heal.”

Gently, she climbed on to the bed next to him, taking care not to shift the bed too much. He hissed when she leaned into his side, and she immediately sat up.

“’Tis alright, lass.” He pulled her back to him. “I’m sorry I made ye concerned. I promise no’ to do that again.”

And he meant it. He was done with gambling. He had a beautiful wife and they would build a life together. What more could he ask for?

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Whitney leaned against Christopher's side, careful not to lean too much weight on him. He'd finally fallen asleep, and she was thankful for that.

He looked a mess, but the relief she'd felt when John had called out to her letting her know he'd been found was immense.

In such a short time, she'd grown to care for this man sleeping beside her. He'd accepted her faults without question. Amazingly, he didn't see them as faults. Instead, to him it was human nature. She supposed he wasn't wrong about that. She only wished everyone else could be as understanding.

She shifted, trying to get off the bed without waking him. "Lass," he mumbled, eyes still closed.

"I'm here," she said quietly, brushing his hair off his forehead. His poor face was bruised and swollen. Practically unrecognizable. With his injuries, there was no way they could leave for Scotland in the morn. His trip back home would have to wait until he was able.

For now, she would take her place as mistress of Colthrop Hall and do the very best that she could while she took care of her husband.

She still couldn't believe they were married. But she was happy about it. Whatever problems came about, they would face them together. Of that, she had no doubt.

"Lass," Christopher mumbled again.

“Shh. You need your rest.”

He cracked an eye open, watching her movements. “I love ye.”

Her eyes rounded.

“I ken ’tis been but a few days. But I dinna need more to ken what I feel.”

Heart bursting, she smiled. Because she felt the same way. And this time, she knew the feelings were genuine. She didn’t know what the future held. But one thing was for sure. It included them together.

“I love you, too.” She bent and kissed his forehead. “Now rest. I need you better. We have a honeymoon to finish,” she said with a wink.

He smiled, the movement causing him to wince. “I promise ye the most exciting honeymoon once I am better.”

“I’ll hold you to that promise. Now sleep. I’ll be back in a bit.”

After she left Christopher to rest, she sought out the head servant, Patricia. They had a long talk and the pleasant woman was more than willing to assist Whitney with getting her bearings when it came to running the household.

“I appreciate all your help with this, Patricia. I just have one more inquiry.”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Lord Campbell’s brother in Scotland. Do you have his address so that I may send a letter? I feel that he should know that his brother has been injured. And that he has a wife.”

The woman nodded, her eyes crinkling with an approving smile.

“I am sure his grace would appreciate such news. Once you’ve written your letter, I’ll ensure it makes it to the Duke of Argyll.”

Whitney’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head as she choked on the sip of tea she’d just taken.

“The Duke of Argyll?”

“Aye, that is Lord Campbell’s brother. Did he not tell you?”

Whitney smirked and shook her head. “No. He appears to have left that information out of our conversations. Thank you. I will have that to you shortly.”

Patricia left and Whitney sat alone with her thoughts for a long moment. Wow. Her brother-in-law was a duke. That was unexpected.

But she knew what she had to do.

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Four weeks later

Christopher had just settled in the back garden with a cup of tea and the day's paper when a ruckus sounded. He turned toward the house gingerly. His ribs were still sore and he found when he moved too quickly, it felt like he was taking a dagger to the abdomen.

"What is all the commotion?"

Whitney shrugged innocently. "I haven't the faintest idea. I should go check."

She stood to go back inside and he grabbed her hand, pulling her towards him. "Ye, my wife, are a horrible liar. What's happening?"

Worrying her bottom lip, her cheeks flushed. "I've arranged something. I hope you are not mad."

He lifted her fingers to his lips, kissing each tip. "I could ne'er be angry with ye, love." And he meant what he said. She was the kindest, caring woman he had ever known. The way she'd taken such great care of him these past weeks. Nursing him back to health. Taking care of his every need. Overseeing Colthrop Hall. She'd even done some decorating, which he thought made the estate more personal.

Gideon appeared on the terrace, and behind him, was that Alexander?

His eyes shot to Whitney, who looked pale, and he quickly tried to make her feel better. "Ye brought my brother here?" He ran his fingers over her arm.

“Are you angry?”

“Nay, lass, no’ at all.” He moved to stand, but Alexander rushed over.

“Brother, dinna exert yourself. Stay sitting.”

Whitney dropped into a curtsy. “Your grace,” she addressed Alexander.

“Ye must be Whitney? The lovely woman who has made by brother a changed man.” He took her hand and pulled her to her feet, wrapping her in a hug. “Ye needna curtsy to me, lass. We are family and ’tis lovely to meet ye.”

“Likewise.”

Christopher had never seen his wife so quiet.

“Ye look like hell, brother.”

“Ye should see the other man,” he quipped with a smile. “I hadna any inkling ye were coming. I would have made sure to be prepared.”

It had been a long time since he’d seen his brother. When he’d left, they hadn’t parted on good terms, and he was sorry for that.

“Your wife has been more than kind in inviting Clarissa and I to London.” He turned back to Whitney. “I believe Clarissa is making small talk with Patricia if ye’d like to introduce yourself. I am certain she’ll be thrilled to have ye as a sister-in-law.”

“I would love to meet her. Thank you. Do you need anything?” She caressed Christopher’s arm, and he sighed.

He truly was the luckiest man alive. “I’ve all I need now, love.” He squeezed her

hand. "Thank ye. I mean it."

Her cheeks reddened. "I'd do anything for you."

He crooked his finger, signaling for her to come closer. "I'll take ye up on that offer later, love."

She gasped and scurried away.

"She seems like a lovely lass. Ye did good, brother."

"She's been verra good to me. She keeps me grounded and on the right path."

Alexander chuckled. "What happened here?" He waved his hand at the fading bruises and the cane leaning up against his chair that he used to help him walk.

"That last gamble was a wild one. A story for another day. I'm glad ye are here. There's so much I want to apologize and make amends for. I caused so much trouble. I dinna ken how ye put up with me."

"I've talked to ye for all of five minutes, and I can already see ye are a changed man, brother. I think I need to thank your wife as well."

Christopher chuckled. "She's an amazing woman. Without her I'd be dead in a gutter somewhere. And that's no' an exaggeration.

"'Tis good to see ye. We have much to catch up on."

"I look forward to the conversation. Whisky?"

Alexander smiled. "I thought ye'd ne'er ask."

Later that night, after mending he and Alexander's relationship, thanks to the actions of his wife, he settled into bed, Whitney tucked into his side.

"Have I told ye how amazing a woman ye are, love?"

She cocked her head to the side, squinting as she pretended to ponder his question. "Ye may have mentioned it a time or two." She lifted on her elbow, caressing his cheek. "Are you angry with me?"

"I could ne'er." He shook his head. "I am glad that you got Alexander and Clarissa down here to London. We had many things to discuss and I had a lot of apologizing to do. It was long overdue." He dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Now, about how ye'd do anything for me?" He waggled his eyebrows and laughed at the wicked glint in her eyes.

"Whatever is it that you could want?" She shifted so she straddled his hips and smiled as she felt his hardness.

Closing her hand around him, she maneuvered his cock to her entrance, before sliding down the length of him in one swift movement, gasping as he felt her stretch around him.

He bit his lip with a groan, reveling at the feel of her. "I love ye, lass." He thrust his hips, ignoring the pain in his ribs.

She gasped. "I love ye, too. Thank ye for taking a gamble on me."

"'Twas my pleasure."

As they worked toward their climax, he couldn't imagine the direction his life would have taken had he not visited the Lyon's Den that fateful night.

And when Whitney came, crying out his name, he knew they were exactly where they were supposed to be—in each other's arms.