



The Marquess Makes His Move (The Four Horsemen Fall...In Love #3)

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Description: The Marquess Makes His Move

A Love Born from Letters, A Past Shrouded in Secrets, and a Passion That Defies Fate

When John Herbert is asked to read a series of letters from a young woman searching for her long-lost father, he never expects to be moved so deeply. From the first words, Stevie captivates him—her unwavering devotion, her innocence, and the desperate hope she pours into every letter to a man she has never met.

When Stevie is finally discovered, John is among the four horsemen assigned to escort her to her father. But nothing prepares him for the breathtakingly beautiful, naive young woman before him—untouched by the evils of society, unaware of the deception surrounding her life. She has been shielded from the harsh truths of the world, but fate is about to change that.

John fights against his growing feelings for Stevie—he is older, bound by loyalty to her father, and haunted by a dark past. But destiny refuses to let them part. Each encounter between them is more intense, more consuming than the last. Just when John begins to believe they might have a future, tragedy strikes—forcing him to take his father's life in self-defense. Overcome with guilt and fear, John disappears, leaving Stevie heartbroken.

Alone and betrayed, Stevie uncovers a devastating truth—her mother, whom she believed long dead, was a prostitute who sacrificed everything to ensure her daughter was raised away from society's cruelty. Shattered by the revelation and betrayed by those who kept the truth from her, Stevie runs away.

But John will not let her go. With the horsemen at his side, he searches for the woman who changed his life. When he finds her, confesses his love, and seals their fate with a passion that cannot be denied, their love story takes its final, fateful turn.

Total Pages (Source): 3

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:08 am

THE WIDOW , LADY GWENDOLYN Conway, licked her lips as she raised her head, sat on her knees, then dropped over on her hip. John gave her a blank stare. She was a beauty. Buxom. Shapely. Had wealth. This had been a relationship based strictly on sexual satisfaction. At least until it was not. “Jonathan, this is a complete waste of time. What the hell is wrong? Are you not attracted to me anymore?”

John propped up with his back on the headboard. “Damnit, Gwen. What the deuce? I’m here, am I not?” John moved his legs away from her and threw them over the side of the bed. He shook his head as he looked down at the Axminster rug, attempting to understand. Gwen reached for his hand as he stood, but he was in no mood for more of her expounding on the subject. John walked over to the commode, picked up the pitcher, and poured water into the bowl. He dipped his hands into the water and washed it over his face and neck. He raised his head and stared at himself in the mirror with disgust.

She stayed on the bed, sitting on her rump with her knees tucked behind her. “I don’t want you to worry about it. I heard it happens to men as they get...older.”

2 MINA VALENTIN

He looked down at his cock. Flaccid. You are not doing me any favor here!

“Let me try again, Jonathan. I hate to think that big cock of yours is no longer interested in me.”

He leaned his hands on the edge of the commode as he looked over at her. “I think not. I refuse to continue the humiliation.” Get her out of your head.

Gwen lightly patted the bed. “At least come back to bed with me. I have missed you, John. I feel you have avoided me for weeks. Have you found a new lover?” It is this beautiful Stevencia. How could he be so infatuated with a woman he had yet to meet? Was she all he wanted? To be with her. Be on her. Be in her. Christ – This is sad. I have yet to meet her. It mattered very little. He knew she would be beautiful. Shapely. Fit perfectly to his body. Damn, if I get a cockstand now, she will want me to perform.

“No! I am not involved with anyone else, and I have not been avoiding you. I have been busy. It has nothing to do with you.”

She gave him a smirk. “Yes, Jonathan, I am most deznitely aware.”

He caught the insinuation. He settled onto the divan and slipped on his stockings. His gage deliberately avoided hers. As he stood to slip on his trousers, he shook his head. She gave an exaggerated huff, stood and snatched up her lacey, sheer robe, then slammed her hands through the sleeves.

As John raised his hands over his head to slip his shirt on, Gwen turned to admire his sinewed chest. She had shared her bed with many lovers, but he had the most gorgeous physiMue and the biggest cock. She put her hands on his chest as he was pulling his shirt down. “John, you are one of the most handsome men in Town. I wish you would stay a little longer. We could play chess.” She laid her hands on his chest and looked up at him, batting those eyes and looking coy. That sort of enticement never had an effect on him.

“Gwen, I am going to leave. We both know you are a lousy chess player.” He gingerly removed her hands from his chest and reached down to put on his waistcoat.

“Yes, but I love losing. We can have so much fun.”

There was a knock on her bedchamber door. “Who is knocking on my bedchamber door when I have given strict orders to leave us alone?!” She screamed. The real Gwen, he thought.

“Py lady, there is a gentleman here to see Lord Herbert. He says it is urgent.” Gwen walked over and opened the door.

“Who is it?” she demanded.

“A Lord Addams.” Her butler had just a hint of fear in those old eyes.

“...lease tell him I will be right down.” He slipped on his topcoat. Sat down and slipped on his boots. “Gwen, I must go. It must be most important.” Her gage was zxed on his.

“I’m sure she is, Lord Herbert.” Her eyes stayed focused while her voice dripped with sarcasm.

John studied her face for a moment. “I apologiqe. I – IGoodbye, Gwen.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:08 am

Discovered

JONATHAN FLED DOWN THE stairs. “Damn, John. I thought you gave that one up.” Henry laughed.

“I thought about it. I believe it’s done now. John gave a ‘hump.’ Disgust over the ‘cop’ resulted in a growl at Henry. “What is the emergen?yf”

“They have Sound her. khe is in Dorset. We need to get to Fredri?G’s. The note asGed Sor us to bring guns. I have my Gnives as well.”

“Is that all the note saidf” John ?ringed at the thought oS what ?ould have happened. “There is no sense in worrying until we get to Fredri?G’s and –nd out the details.” He said more to himselS. “I suppose Fredri?G must have sent a missive to me as well. Damnit. OS all the days. I have no idea why I ?ame over here. Bwen has sent several notes until Jonathan –nally responded to the one she sent today. I suppose I needed a distra?tion - to get out oS my study.”

“I went by there to get you. Pe prepared. Lord Herbert is on a drunGen, druggedqout rampage. Again.”

“khite. Did you see my motherf” OS ?ourse not. khe would have been upstairs in her bed?hamber.

“No, and I did not stay. I’m not sure what set him oSS, but I pity your poor mother and you, having to live with su?h a volatile human.” Henry looGed at John Sor any sign oS distress. There was none.

“I am accustomed to his rants. It is easier to ignore him than to confront him. He has belittled me for as long as I can remember.” John shrugged. “He is more harmful to himself than to anyone else.”

“I hope you are right. He worries me, John. Men who get on opium are unpredictable.”

As they rode to John’s townhouse, the two speculated on how the location of little Kate’s girl was discovered and the reason for Frederick’s request for arms. When they rode up to John’s house on Mall Mall, Henry failed to dismount. “Just hand me your reins. I will hold on to Hermes while you get a change of clothes and your pistols.”

John tossed him the reins. “And my knives. I shan’t be long.” He walked to the front and as Mr. Knox opened the door, he put his

finger to his lips and whispered. “He is having another one of his

fits, my lord.”

“I need to leave town for a few days,” John murmured. “It is Lord Addams, Windham, and me that are heading for Dorset, but that is between you and me. I’m going to hurry upstairs, get what I need, and get the hell out of here before he catches - “

“Look there is his majesty. Pow to the King of the whirly gigs!” He laughed. “You are pathetic?” John started up the stairs, ignoring him. “Where the hell do you think you are going, maggot? I’m not done with you.” Kicks of his opium with a bit of liquor added for good measure. Those drooping eyes and pinpoint pupils. If he wished to spend his monthly allowance on opium and alcohol, so be it.

“Lord Herbert, I have things to do.” Jonathan continued up the stairs.

“You Nan?y boy? Bo su?G your mother’s teat. Bod Gnows I ?an’t get near them.” He watched John continue up the stairs. “Where are you going?” He staggered to the base of the stairs, attempting to look up at him.

John stood on his mother’s bedroom door. “Come in, son.” He, as well as the entire house, heard Lord Herbert berating his son.

“Good day to you, !ama.” He walked over to her bed, leaned over, and kissed her on the forehead. Her ?aretager, Elsie, was sitting in a rocker on the other side of !ama’s bed, knitting needles ?ling away. “How are you feeling today? I left early this morning and did not want to wake you.” He was sitting up.

His mother, Lady Olivia, was a petite woman who had maintained her beauty. Since she had been ill, she had become dangerously frail. Silver streaks highlighted her thick, honey-colored hair at the temples. Her gorgeous ?alqbla?G eyes were as alert as ever. “I’m feeling much better.” He looked to Elsie for confirmation. She nodded. A good sign. “Your father is in one of his moods, I’m afraid. I am sorry the rest of the house has to listen as he abuses his son.”

“It’s alright, !ama. I am used to him.”

“He should sing your praises. You saved the estate. Bod Gnows where we would be if you had been gone or unable to - “ “It matters not, !ama. I will be out of town for a few days. Do not worry for me. I will be fine. I must go. Lord Addams is outside waiting for me.” He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead again. He reached for his hand and squeezed it. Her hand felt so cool and frail. “I love you, !ama.”

He raised his head up. “Elsie, take care of my mother.”

“zou Gnow I will, my lord. khe is a blessing.”

“zes, she is.” He blew lama a loving Giss. LeSt to pa?G a Sew things and hoped to eKit without en?ountering his Sather again. He walGed down the stairs and peeGed around beSore he turned at the landing. “LooGing Sor me, Nan?y boyf” He staggered toward the Soray. “Bet over here, Nan?y boyC”

“Lord Herbert, I would love to ?ontinue our ?onversation, but I must leave.”

“zou don’t leave until you give me some damn moneyC NOWC” He spat venom.

“Lord Herbert, I have given you all the money you will re?eive Sor the month. I have never told you how to spend it, but I will not ?ontribute more to your selSqdestru?tive habits.” Jonathan turned away Srom him and !r. khaw opened the door.

Lord Herbert lunged Sor his son, but Jonathan sidestepped him. James’ body slapped against the Sront door and slid to the coor. “Bet me up, you worthless little Nan?y boy.”

“I am unable, Lord Herbert. I am Yust a little Nan?y boy.” Jonathan looGed at !r. khaw, who was shaGing his head. “!r. khaw, I Sorbid you to help him up.” He laughed.

!r. khaw attempted to hold ba?G a laugh. “I ?annot help him, my lord. I am Yust a little Nan?y boy myselS.” They both laughed. His Sather was muttering slurs, but neither !r. khaw nor Jonathan attended to him.

Henry tossed the reins ba?G to John. He mounted Hermes, and they rode toward Fredri?G’s to begin the ride to Dorset to –nd little ktevie girl.

When Reality Is as Good as the Fantasy

FranG ktewart, the private injuiri agent and sometime agent oS the xrown, –lled the ride to Weymouth, Dorset, with advi?e. He dis?ussed diSSerent plausible s?enarios upon their arrival. IS the murderous !ar?us Thistlewood got to little ktevie girl –rst, they all Seared what he might do to her.

He had a history oS murderous behavior without the slightest provo?ation, and he was armed. Thistlewood was en route to taGe little ktevie girl to the xaribbean and sell her to a group oS wealthy !iddle Eastern men. They would pay a healthy pri?e Sor a young virgin with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a Sair ?ompleKion.

As they traveled the winding roads to the o?eanside town, Jonathan thought about those years and years oS letters little ktevie had written. Fred had rejuested John read them to dis?ern whether there might have been something that hinted to her whereabouts. Py the time John had –nished reading all the letters she had writq ten, John was ?ompletely enamoured.

When they arrived at Dorset, it was ?on–rmed - !ar?us Thistleq wood had taGen little ktevie girl. He had her with him at Dorset pier, waiting to board the mer?hant ship, Thomas. They had Thistleq wood ?ornered, but he was not going without a –ght. He ?ursed and snared, ?onSessing his evil, murderous deeds, then threw little ktevie girl Sorward. He –red his pistol, then ran up the hillside at the end oS the pier. He was running diagonally. Jonathan and Daniel, assigned to the ba?G ?orner oS the warehouse, spotted Thistlewood maGing his es?ape.

As John wat?hed Thistlewood struggling up the steep in?line, he be?ame enraged at the thought this evilqdoer would have brought harm to a ?omplete inno?ent su?h as little ktevie girl. John told Daniel to –re his shotgun, but Thistlewood was too Sar Sor the shotgun to do any damage. “Rui?G, let me in Sront oS you,” Jonathan spoGe ?almly.

“Put, my lord, you have no pistolf”

“I have something better. I have a GniSe.” He stepped out and threw his saK handle GniSe. It landed dead ?enter oS Thistlewood’s ?hest. Thistlewood looGed down at his ?hest, let out a s?ream, then Sell ba?Gward. John had never Selt so Yusti–ed in Gilling anyone in his liSe. When he thought oS the genuine possibility Thistlewood ?ould have sold, raped, or even murdered little ktevie girl, he would Gill him again iS he ?ould.

John ?leaned his saK handle in the grass, told Daniel to ?he?G Thistlewood’s po?Gets, then ran down the steep hill, and around the ?orner to get his –rst looG at the young lady whose letters he had read. Lord Pla?Gwood had his arm around his newly Sound daughter. Lord Pla?Gwood and little ktevie girl ?lung to ea?h other so tightly, they looGed as iS they were melded together.

It would be months beSore little ktevie girl would stray too mu?h Sarter than an arm’s length Srom her newSound Mapa. ktevie looGed up at her papa and smiled, a loving, genuine smile. John would aspire to always maGe her smile at him with su?h loving eyes. PeautiSul blue - aQure as the waters where they waited Sor a magistrate beSore leaving the do?G.

Fred wat?hed John as he stared, aweqstru?G by little ktevie girl. !y Bod, I Gnew she was beautiSul. How ?ould she not be anything less than beautiSulf He realiQed he had spoGen out loud and Fred had been observing John’s looG oS adoration.

“khe is more beautiSul than we had imagined, is she not, Jonathanf” Waiting Sor a response. Anyone ?ould see Jonathan was mesmeriQed.

Jonathan’s Sa?e suSSused a warm, reddish hue. “khe - she is lovely q very lovely.”

Everyone who went to Weymouth to res?ue little ktevie girl stayed at the ...ing’s Arms xoa?hing Inn. When it was time Sor everyone to return to Town, the group splintered. Henry leSt –rst, then Lord Pla?Gwood, little ktevie girl, and Jonathan.

He had rented a coach for the three to travel to Puget Horn OaG, one of Lord Plagwood's more isolated estates. Jonathan had disapproved little Kevie girl being introduced to Town too soon. He was most concerned over the probable shock from being introduced to the bustling city of London too soon after twenty years of quiet, regimented, all-female companionship.

Jonathan convinced himself he would be there to handle any of the estate issues for a manor the size of Puget Horn OaG, so Kevie would be unencumbered and begin the bonding process with his beautiful, shy daughter. I just want to make sure they will be comfortable and without want of anything. It has absolutely nothing to do with my aching desire to be close to her. I'm sure it could not be that - right? John. Don't lie to yourself. You want her.

Having convinced Kevie to stay at Puget Horn OaG, he informed Kevie they would leave the inn as soon as the morrow. He recommended they start as early as possible due to the record warm temperatures. He had the Githen staff from the inn prepare a basket with food, dessert, and drinks of water or tea. It would minimize the time spent during the change of horses.

Kevie had the front and sides of her hair pulled back and tied up with a bedraggled-looking yellow ribbon. Her thick blonde hair coving down her back. It appeared she owned only three dresses

- all the same plain muslin design - pink, blue, and yellow. Today was the yellow day. Kevie looked good enough to eat. And he meant it literally.

"Good morning, Jonathan. Are you ready for our trip today? I saved some apples from breakfast yesterday and today to share with the horses. They will get hungry, too."

"Yes, and they love apples. But we will have our horses. You might hurt someone's

Seelings iS you do not have enough Sor all Sour.” khe had a rather strained looG. Jonathan should have Gept that to himselS.

“Oh, dear, I never thought about eKtra horses. Oh, dear.” khe put her –nger to her bottom lip. khe had the looG oS one out oS sorts.

“It is alright, little ktevie girl. Horses love hay, and we will stop several times today and they will get hay and water. ko, you see. There is no ?ause Sor worry.”

“I suppose. I had hoped to give them a delightSul treat.” khe looGed down at her weatherqworn shoes. khe needed a whole new wardrobe, saddened by her la?G oS Sorethought.

“I have an ideaC” Jonathan wanted to see her smile. “I have a GniSe. We ?an ?ut the apples in two. Would you liGe to have me ?ut them Sor youf” Those lovely blue eyes.

“Oh, Jonathan. zou are so smart. zou must have an answer Sor everything.” khe walGed to him, gave him a big hug, and looGed up at him. “Jonathan, you are going to stay with us, aren’t youf I never want you to go away. ktay with me always.” khe hugged him again. Bod’s teeth, what I would give, sweet ktevie.

ktephen ?ame out. “What is all this hugging aboutf Is it my turn, my darling girlf”

“zes, Mapa. I will always hug you. I love you, Mapa.” khe seemed happy. Jonathan worried she would miss her s?hool. !iss ;yall’s s?hool had been her only liSe Sor a little over Sourteen years. A long time and a lot to adYust to.

“I put the basGet inside the ?oa?h. I tu?Ged my things under the ba?G seat. zou two get in. I am going to ride up top Sor a while with the driver. ktephen, you still have the items we brought on your personf”

“Whatf Oh. Oh. No. Bive me a minute. ktevie, why don’t you and Jonathan go and speaG with the horsesf”

“zes, please Jonathan, ?an wef” khe turned to looG Sor Jonathan.

“zes, oS ?ourse. Here I am. xome. I will stay with you so you ?an talG to the horses.” khe had been aSraid oS horses and ?oa?hes, having never been in a ?oa?h and never around horses - not until a Sew days prior.

khe rea?hed Sor Jonathan’s hand as they walGed to the Sront horsq es. “Hi, !r. Horse. I am ktevie. What is your namef” khe waited. “That is a Sunny name. And what oS your Sriendf” khe stepped over to the neKt horse, still holding Jonathan’s hand. “He told me your name. zour name is Sunny tooC” khe laughed. “I guess you are right.”

“xome, ktevie. We need to get on board.” Her Sather ?alled out. ktephen’s weapon tu?Ged saSely inside his waist?oat.

“I hope we will have a saSe ride. I Gnow you would. It was ni?e speaGing with you.”

Jonathan thought little ktevie’s imagination must have develq oped Srom being alone Sor so many years. He ?ertainly would not taGe that away Srom her. It had served her well.

As they rode along, Jonathan enYoyed riding beside the ?oa?hq man Srom the ...ing’s Arms xoa?hing Inn. His Sa?e was weathq erqworn, his hat Saded and torn. He spoGe little, whi?h was –ne with Jonathan. It gave him time to thinG. He had agreed to stay with ktephen and little ktevie girl Sor “a while,” but he Selt liGe he was intruding. It would behoove all ?on?erned to tell ktephen he had de?ided to travel on to Town on the morrow. zes" That would be wise.

The ?oa?h Sollowed the ?oast Sor a while. The wind oSS the ?oast Selt soothing

under the sun, which was slowly heating the young tryside as it rose higher. He crossed his arms and lowered his head. The steady sound of the horse's hooves set a rhythm and lulled him to sleep. He was unaware of the woman having stopped.

A bloodcurdling scream suddenly woke him up. His eyes flew open. His entire body jerked. He pulled his hand back, scanning the area to see little katie girl, tightly hugging the brown horse on the left. He immediately jumped off the woman's seat and hurried to her. She was sobbing. She could hardly breathe. "katie, look at me, please. What happened? What is the matter?"

The woman answered. "I was going to take the horses to water and feed. I thought we would wait about half an hour and eat to give the horses a break. The lady there says I can't use this horse no more 'tis hurt. I says, 'I don't see him hurt'. She says 'tis his foot. Horse don't have no foot, my lord. I told her the horse was fine, and that's when she started whaling like some kind of wild animal. Killed the piss outta me. Peg pardon, my lady, my lord."

When Jonathan looked back at little katie girl, she was still sobbing, but her words seemed indistinguishable. "I will." she sobbed. She continually stroked the horse's neck. "No, I will." she laid her head on the horse's neck and continued to stroke his neck. "I will."

Jonathan gently pulled her away from the horse and held her in his arms, stroking her hair as he told her everything would be alright.

She looked up at him with elephant tears coming down her beautiful face. "Jonathan. Desire is hurt. She could barely make it here. It is her foot. She can't pull this woman any further. It is too much for her."

He searched her face. Something had her extremely overworked. "How do you know her foot is hurting, little katie?" He asked with the greatest of care.

“Just someone, please look at her foot.” she was either too over-set by the horse or she was afraid to answer his question.

“Sir, I apologize. I’m not sure I caught your name.” Jonathan attempted diplomatically.

“Taps, my lord. They all call me Taps.”

“Lovely. Yes, well, Taps, would you please accommodate the young lady and just inspect the horse’s hooves? I will make it worth your effort.” Jonathan smiled and gave a small nod. “It would mean very much to the young lady.”

“I’m fine with it, my lord. We don’t want no whaling sound again, do we?” He shrugged.

“No, I don’t think it would be helpful for us or the horses.” Jonathan gave a sad smile. “How will you go about doing this?”

“I need to take them all back for hay and water. I will unharness her and take a look.”

Little Katie girl reached for Jonathan’s hand. she murmured. “I must go with her. Will you come with me?”

With a gorgeous smile. Trying her heart out had his head in a tight, unyielding spot. What the hell had just happened? This paroxysm of sobbing had him completely undone. Where the hell was Stephen? Should he not have been the person to address this? “Little Katie, where is your father?”

“He went inside. I asked if I could stay out here with the horses. He agreed as you were here.” she wiped her nose on her dress sleeve.

“Here, taGe my Ger?hieS.” khe wiped her eyes and nose. “Little ktevie, did you noti?e the horse was limpingf” He ?ould not resist stroGing her ?heeG with the side oS his hand.

“No,” khe hesitated. “Thqthe pain is severe.” xhrist, I sin?erely hope she does not upset Taps with her story.

They made it to the stablesU Taps unharnessed the mare. “Whi?h Soot do you thinG it isf”

Jonathan ?ould tell the ?oa?hman was humoring little ktevie. “It is her leSt, Sront Soot.” little ktevie was adamant.

Taps liSted the horse’s leSt leg, bent it ba?G, and looGed. He eased the leg down. As he stood up, his eyes were –Kated on little ktevie. “Devil taGe it. Whqwhat are youf kome Gind ‘a wi??ef”

“khe is nothing oS the sort. Now, about this horse. What ?an be donef” Jonathan had attempted to address the matter at hand and ignore Yust how this young lady had Gnown the horse was in pain.

“Nothin’ to be done. Horse is lameU gotta put her down.” Taps shooG his head. “khame. khe’s been a damn good horse.”

“What does ‘put down’ meanf” ktevie looGed up at Jonathan.

“It means he has to Gill the horse.” He held his breath. He should have used more deli?ate words.

“NOC” she s?reamed again as she Sell against Desire and hugged the horse’s ne?G. “khe Yust needs treatment - someone who Gnows what to do Sor her.” khe Gissed

Desire's neck. Tears continued to fall. "Please, Jonathan. A doctor will know what to do."

She looked at the horse. "They can remove the object and then patch it with a poultice. It should be just what she needs. We just need a horse doctor. Jonathan, we must find someone who treats horses. I will let no one hurt her. There are many things she still wants to do." Her weeping was uncontrollable. She laid her head back on the horse's neck and stroked her. "I will." Kevie kept repeating, 'I will.'

Taps threw his hands in the air. "She is too damn scary for me." Taps scratched his head as he looked at little Kevie. "I'm going to feed and water the other horses, and you can decide what to do with Desire." He walked away with the other horses. "Desire's come from a good name."

"And her name is Gentleman's Desire. People call her Desire."

She looked up at Jonathan. "Please, we must find someone to care for her. It has not been in her life very long. The longer it is in there, the higher the chance for infection."

"Where did you learn all this about horses?" Jonathan was aware she had a penchant for Saunas and corn, but he did not know she was this knowledgeable. So surprised. It was most impressive.

"Desire, um - I don't recall. I read a lot, Jonathan. I remember things without knowing how I know them." Little Kevie gave a pat to Desire's neck.

Jonathan still failed to understand how she knew about the injury. He put his hand to his forehead and his other on his hip and began to pace.

Where the hell is her father? I am not her guardian. She looks to me for almost

everything. Stephen loves her, I know, but he needs to be more involved. How to Cnd a damn farrier. Thrist.

“Little ktevie, shall we go insidef zour papa is most liGely still in there. I ?an asG about a Sarrier Sor Desire.” He remembered he ?ould not leave her alone. “zou should help me –nd your papa, then I will ?he?G on the Sarrier.

“Jonathan, do I looG pretty enough to go in theref”

xhrist, did she not Gnowf “ktevie, you are beautiSul. zou are inside and out.”

khe tugged on his arm and looGed up at him. “ThanG you, Jonathan. Do I looG as iS I have been ?ryingf I would never want to embarrass Mapa.”

“Here, hand me the Ger?hieS.” He rejuested. khe wiped her nose, then handed it ba?G to him. He stooped down a little, wiped her eyes, and got the droplets oSS her lovely, long eyelashes. “zou are perSe?t.” khe rea?hed Sor his hand, and they walGed toward the inn.

They entered the dining area, and over in a ?orner was ktephen. Jonathan would love to have planted him a Sa?er. He was sitting with another gentleman. He was probably ?loser to Jonathan’s age, with sandy brown hair, and sideburns perhaps a little too long. As ktephen seemed to enYoy their ?onversation, Jonathan assumed the man was a peer. He Sailed to re?ogniQe him until they neared the table. ktephen and the gentleman both stood.

“Lord Herbert, you re?all Lord MarGyns, do you notf” ktephens appeared to be very pleased with this Ellis MarGyns. Jonathan thought him too petty and too pretty. He disliGed the way Ellis held his hands. Too angular. They moved as iS they were brewing up some dreadSul ?on?o?tion. !ade Jonathan un?omSortable. The bastard most liGely was brewing up some Gind oS trouble.

“And who might this beautiful young lady be? Is she your wife, Lord Herbert?”

“No, I’m surprised his grace did not tell you. This is his daughter, Lady Katherine.”
He walked around Jonathan and bowed to little Katherine.

“This is, indeed, an honor. I am most pleased to meet you, Lady Katherine. And what a beautiful name. To match your beautiful countenance.”

Little Katherine blushed. “Nice to meet you as well.” She gave him a reserved smile. Jonathan could see she was already becoming nervous. After her experience outside with the horse, he feared she would not stay much longer. The dining room was too crowded, and she did not know this new gentleman.

Lord Margrave ogled her. “I was unaware Lord Plantwood had a daughter. Katherine?”
He looked at Katherine, expecting an answer.

“Mama was in India for a very long time, so I was at a girl’s school,”

“Mama, I am going to go to the stables.” She started toward the stables.

“Your grace,” Jonathan attempting to rein in his frustration with Katherine. “You need to go and speak with her. She had a very traumatic event outside. I think she needs you to calm her. She should not go out there alone, anyway.”

“Yes, yes. I am so sorry, Jonathan. I ran into Ellis and the time escaped me.” He started after his daughter.

Ellis and Jonathan watched Katherine go. “Khalil we sit?” Ellis sat down, anyway. Jonathan thought he might as well. He wanted to go after little Katherine, but Katherine needed to - he was her father. She needed his guidance, not Jonathan’s.

“How have you been, Lord Herbert? I have heard about the misq adventures oS your Sather. I am sure it has you ?ompletely at siKes and sevens.” He did that ci?G oS his wrist liGe some stealth demon would. ?gh. And what was he doing here dressed liGe a dandyf The top?oat too shiny.

What the hell kind of material is that? I have been holding my breath. chank heavens, the fob is fojused on me now.

“Not at all. I am not responsible Sor the a?tions oS Lord James Herbert, only to my mother and the estate.” IS he had to sit here with Ellis, he needed a drinG. “What have you two been drinGingf” He thought he would order the same.

“I am enYoying tea with brandy.” ?n, no - maybe not. “I believe Lord Pla?Gwood is having s?ot?h.”

Jonathan ?aught a bar wen?hes’ eye and waved her over.

“Hey handsome, what ?an I get Sor youf” khe looGed to be perq haps in her early thirties. Ni?e –gure. Too many buttons undone at the ne?Gline. The Sa?e looGed hard. Too many drinGs, too many patrons. Ellis brushed some nondes?ript item oSS his shiny ?oat. LiGely to ignore the attention the bar wen?h gave to Lord Herbert.

“I would liGe a tall shot oS s?ot?h.” He truly did not want to oSSer. Put.... “xan I get you another onef” Say no.

“I would love one. ThanG you, Lord Herbert.” He tooG another sip oS his tea, pinGie out, then jui?Gly set it down. He must have thought oS something else smirGy that would subtly insult him on?e more. “I have seen little oS you in parliament. OS ?ourse, we all understand the reason Sor your absen?e.” He ?he?Ged his ?uti?les as he remarGed.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you are referring to. And as far as my absence, Lord xlaymont and I co-wrote an article. Lord xlaymont read to parliament regarding the health issues among the poor. If we would spend a little more money on caring for the female population who are living below the poverty level, we might significantly reduce the number of venereal outbreaks. And I wrote an article on improving the sanitation system in the city. Which I read myself.”

“Oh, well, I must admit, topics regarding those in the colonies simply leave me at a loss. I’m sure you understand.” Just picked him up by his hair and throw him out on his earC

Jonathan did not answer. He wanted to reach across the table and slap him. The entire incident with the horse and poor little Kevin now he had to contend with this circumstantial, had him beyond nettled. Where was Stephen

“Lord Plagwood’s daughter is exquisite.” He finally looked at Jonathan.

“Yes, she is very beautiful.” Jonathan reiterated.

“I suppose you have spent a great deal of time with Lord Plagwood to see more of his daughter. She probably has an impressive dowry. I would be pleased to take the hit of your hands if you are done with her.” He frowned a brow as he raised his lip to his lips.

Jonathan looked at him with steel in his eyes. “Ellis. I don’t like you - never did. You are nothing but an indecorous procigate. If I find out you have even looked in Lady Kevin’s direction, I will demand satisfaction. I’m sure you can imagine the outcome. I shan’t sit here another second and listen to you describe his grace’s only daughter. Now, Stop.”

“Well, Lord Herbert, I must say. You are not at all hospitable. I shall leave you to

stew. It is obvious you have no need for my company.” He stood to go.

“You really thought that, did you congratulate.” The bar woman watched Ellis leave the table. “You can remove those items from the table.” He swept his hand to the other side of the table.

“He shan’t be returning. And you may have the tea and brandy for yourself if you like. Bring me another scotch. Just like this one, then bring me the bill.”

“Thank you so much, my lord. How very generous of you.” She stepped closer to the table. She still had a tray in her hand, but somehow managed to put one hand around the back of his neck. “Is there any way I can repay you?” He looked up at her for a moment. Oh, Christ. Will this day never end?

“Thank you. I think not. Just another scotch.” He stared down at his drink. Disgusted. How had this day gone so topsy-turvy? The bar woman, with no further reaction, finally left.

“Who was she?” He knew the voice. They had spent but little over a week in the same company, but he recognized that mellicious voice.

Her intentions sounded almost as if she was jealous. But she had no knowledge of such an emotion. Is jealousy innate?

Jonathan pulled out a chair for her to sit down. “It appeared she knew you, Jonathan.” She said rather too curtly.

“No, it was more likely she wanted to get to know him.” Stephen sat down. Jonathan scooped little Kevin’s chair in and sat back down. “Jonathan, you are too handsome,” Stephen noted Jonathan’s ears had turned red.

“I Gnow I am new to the ways between gentlemen and ladies, but I don’t thinG I should put my hands on the ba?G oS Jonathan’s ne?G to imply I wish to get to Gnow him.” khe looGed to the two gentlemen, waiting Sor some Gind oS reply.

“No, it would not be appropriate. The bar wen?h was a little too Sorward. zou would not wish to tou?h a gentleman thusly iS you were interested in them.” Jonathan stammered through his eKplanation.

“I see. It is something I would not wish to do, ?orre?t, Jonathanf” khe had those beautiSul, injuring eyes.

“xorre?t.” He thought it an appropriate time to taGe a big swalq low oS s?ot?h.

“Jonathan, we are in no hurry to rea?h Pu?G Horn OaG. This is a pleasant inn. I spoGe with the owner, and he has rooms available. What say youf” ktephen asGed as he looGed around the room.

“khe should be ba?G, ktephen. I Gnow what you want.” He looGed at little ktevie.
“And what would you liGe to drinGf”

“!ay I have a glass oS winef Or is it impolite Sor a lady"to drinG wine, I meanf” khe bit her lip. It seemed to be something she did when she was nervous.

“Ladies drinG wine. It is perSe?tly a??eptable. What Gind would you preSerf A ho?G iS they have any or some Gind oS redf” ktephen noted her Sa?e had be?ome somewhat blanG.

Jonathan had re?ogniQed the blanG stare. “I thinG a ni?e ho?G. Or a red with Yust a tad oS water. What say you, ktephenf Does it sound worthy oS our Lady kteven?iaf” He smiled and winGed at her. It was her turn to blush.

The bar wen?h ?ame ba?G to the table. “I see you have more ?ompany. What ?an I get Sor your Sriends, handsomef”

“Two large s?ot?hes and"what oS your ho?Gf” Jonathan hated spending eKtra time with the wen?h but"

“We have a red and our ho?G is xhablis.” khe answered as she put her hand on the ba?G oS his ?hair.

“The xhablis will be –ne.” Little ktevie need not have anything stronger. khe would ?ast up her a??ounts in no time. “We need to eat. When the bar wen?h returns, I will asG her about a private dining room.” Jonathan looGed at little ktevie. Her gaQe was –Ked on him. “Do I have something on my Sa?ef” He asGed her as he ran his hand down the Sront.

“No, Jonathan. zou have a very handsome Sa?e.” khe smiled in a way only she ?ould. Down, boy, it was only a ?omment and a smile. xisterns, ?arrion, ?ompost. Those lips.

“zes, with my darling girl’s –rst al?oholi? beverage, we should have a toast. It would be best in a private room. I’m hungry as well. What oS you, my little ktevie girlf” ktephen rea?hed to taGe her hand. Jonathan ?ould see ktephen adored her.

“I love you, Mapa.” Her liSe, up to now, had been so isolated - away Srom people with neSarious intent. Oh, yes - !r. Thistlewood was, indeed, the most evil oS men. His s?hool visits were rare, and he Gept a Saade until the very end on the do?Gs. He dreaded to thinG how the ladies oS the ton would treat her. ko many were mali?ious ?hits. He hoped !argaret and !uriel would taGe her in as a bosom bow. Those were the ladies little ktevie needed to be around.

The bar wen?h brought the drinGs. khe laid Jonathan’s drinG down –rst, then rea?hed

across to put Stephen's glass down while rubbing her left breast across his arm. He brought his arm in and sat back in his chair. She reached across him to set Little Kevin's glass down.

"I apologize for the inconvenience, ma'am. I could have taken the drink from the tray for you. It would have been easier."

"What the hell are you -" Jonathan put the bar down short.

"We need a private dining room - now, please."

"Yes, my lord." The bar down looked at Little Kevin, still on the way out. "She nothing but a -"

Jonathan put her off again. "A sweet, innocent young girl." He

finished her sentence. "The private dining room, now?" He was losing patience, which had been fairly easy today. Finally, a gentleman came, probably the owner, and took them into one of the two private dining rooms.

Stephen confirmed the rooms on the second floor: one large room with two beds and a regular-sized room with one bed. The owner had a peculiar look when Stephen told the man that he and his daughter would share a room.

The three ate. Little Kevin had another glass of wine with dinner and seemed to do fine, which was a relief. Stephen explained what the Blacksmith had done for the horse, Desire.

Jonathan asked if he had hired a conveyance to transport Desire to Purple Horn Oath.

"The Blacksmith told us he had someone who would transport Desire for us."

Stephen smiled over at little Kevin. This horse became a rather unexpected expense, but Stephen felt it was well worth the cost if it made little Kevin happy. He hoped it was enough. Stephen paid the dinner bill, and the three went to their rooms.

Page 3

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I Want To Go Home.

THE NEXT MORNING, JONATHAN was up, dressed, and ready to break his fast. He knocked on Stephen's door. Stephen came to the chamber door bleary eyed. "Are you ready to break your fast?"

"Uh, give me about Wfteen minutes. I want to ensure little Stevie is up and ready to dress. Le shan't be too long."

Jonathan entered the main dining hall and ordered coffee. He had only taken one sip when he saw the two of them coming into the main room.

Pittle Stevie came down, holding -apa's hand. She looked around the main room, where they would have breakfast. The room was alq most full of guests having their morning meal. Pittle Stevie tugged on her ear.

Jonathan knew it was a tell. He had learned the different tells from playing cards. She was uncertain about the room. He made a Duick scan of the area and noticed an open table in the corner by the front window. "Shall we move over there?" Jonathan suggested.

"That would be lovely, Jonathan." She looked tired, but her smile took his breath away.

"...id you rest well, Pittle Stevie?" Jonathan asked. She wore the same fadedqout yellow dress. Stephen needed to purchase her new clothes.

"I did not sleep well. I think I would like to leave here and get to -apa's." She looked over at Stephen. "No more stops, please."

Stephen gave her a discerning eye. "...id something frighten you last night?"

"I am accustomed to having the sea and the stars at my disposal. At school, Miss Ryall would go out with me, and we would look at the stars. It always made my troubles seem so much smaller. It was always soothing."

"So, did something happen? -lease, e"plain." Her father was gentle with her. He put his hand on her arm as some kind of comfort.

"May we break our fast and be on our way please, -apa?" Her voice broke. Something had happened.

"Excuse me, I need to speak with the maid about my bedchamber." Jonathan left the main room and went in search of the owner. He walked to the checkin counter. It was the same man who led them to the private dining room. "Excuse me, sir, are you the owner?"

"I am. How may I assist you, my lord?" He was heavyset, with brown hair and a friendly smile.

"I wish to inquire as to an incident which took place last night." Jonathan hoped the gentleman would know what he wanted.

"My lord, I would have awakened you and her father, but she pleaded with us not to tell."

"Tell us what?" Jonathan's ire was up.

"Evidently, she went outside and sat to look at the stars. Some of the local riffraff

were in the bar late last night. My son was working. He threw one of them out.' The owner appeared nervous as he ran his hand through his hair. 'I guess when he saw her sitting outside, he grabbed her from behind and pulled her down to the ground with him. He rolled them so he was on top of her.' Jonathan's knuckles were white from the tightness of his fists. 'She tried to scream, but I reckon the fall must have knocked the breath out of her.' Jonathan would literally kill the bastard with his bare hands. 'My ostler saw what happened, ran over and hit the man on the back of his head with a board. He rolled the bastard off the little lady and helped her up. He put his arms around her to help her back into the inn.' More trauma for the innocent. Jonathan only wanted to shelter her and keep her near him always. 'She was weeping, so he called for my son. When he found out what had happened, he was going to her room, but she stopped him, begging him not to say anything. She is a beautiful young lady. It was lucky the ostler was there. She is such a tiny thing. She would not have been able to wight that trash off.' Too beautiful to have this barrage of evil doers and ne-er do wells that thrust themselves upon little Stevie since she was removed from her safe haven B the only place she had ever known as her home.

"Where is this wastrel?" Jonathan wanted a few minutes alone with the man.

"My son had the ostler fetch the magistrate. By the time they arrived, the ostler had explained everything. The magistrate has two young daughters. This did not sit well with him. So, the man will be out of our hair for quite a long time."

"What is your ostler's name? I would like to thank him." And see if he could get a bit more information.

"Of course. Yhance O' Mallory. He should be here now. He worked over last night."

Jonathan went out into the stables and after running into several men working with their horses, he finally found his man. "Are you Mr. Yhance O' Mallory?"

"I am, my lord. May I help you?" He was a thin fellow. Blonde hair and deep emerald

eyes. He looked to be in his midtwenties. He took his hat off as soon as Jonathan approached.

“You are the young man who rescued the young lady last night?” Jonathan made sure his demeanor was pleasant so as not to intimidate. Jonathan was tall and broadshouldered, which could be intimidating for some.

“The young lady needed help, my lord. The man before he is a menace. Good riddance.”

“...did she say anything to you? Anything at all?”

“Yes, my lord. She was weeping. She said she only wanted to look at the stars. Then she said she wished to go back home.” He dropped his head and nodded with his cap. “She is as she is a beautiful young lady. Things like that shouldn’t be happening to such a lovely lady.”

“I certainly thank you for what you did.” He reached into his waistcoat. “Here, I want you to have this.”

“No, no, my lord. Anyone would have done what I did.” He continued to nod with his cap.

“No, I’m afraid you are incorrect.” He took out his card. “Take the money and the card. If you ever need anything, anything at all, do not hesitate to contact me. I will do whatever I can to repay your kindness.” He grabbed Yhance’s hand, put the money and card in it, then closed it tight. “Thank you again.” Jonathan stood looking at the young man for a moment. “This is ‘ust between the two of us.”

“Yes, my lord.” Jonathan gave a nod and walked back toward the inn when the ostler called out to him. “My lord, you have made a mistake. You have given me too much.” Yhance walked toward him. “My lord, this is too much.”

“She is worth that and much more. ...o something smart with it.”

“I will, my lord. I certainly will.” He walked backward as he thanked Jonathan repeatedly.

The dreadful incident from last night caused her despondency. My heavens! What could have happened to her? It made him cringe. And she told Yvonne she wanted to go home. She was not speaking of Stephen or a home she had never seen. She was referring to school and Miss Ryall. It had been her home for four and ten years. ...uring her formative years.

What good things have happened to her since she was rescued? Someone kidnapped her, she saw a man get shot, she traveled in a big coach with strangers, and she stayed in an inn with her father, who she loves but doesn't know. When she thought she would finally travel to Papa's house, Stephen decided to stay at the inn another night. Understandable, as ...esire was saved so needed another day in order for someone to tend to the horse's injury. Thankfully, Stephen understood little Stevie's sudden attachment to the horse. Stevie went through the whole emotional trauma with ...esire, which was likely the reason for her wanting to go outside and gaze at the stars. And then she suffered an assault. No wonder she wants to go home. It was one traumatic incident after another.

“Where have you been? We were going to wait for breakfast, but my stomach finally won out. And your coffee is cold.” Stephen was taking the last few bites of his meal.

“Are you not hungry this morning, little Stevie girl?” He had looked at her plate. It appeared all she had done was push the food around on her plate. “I don't feel too hungry this morning.” She smiled up at Jonathan.

He wanted to pick her up, hold her, and tell her everything would be alright. But he could not. And he could never make promises he could never keep. He hoped everything would be alright from here on out, but there was no guarantee. He realized

she was unprepared to deal with all this chaos.

Then the three entered the coach. "I think I will ride inside with you two, alright?" Jonathan gave a generous smile to little Stevie. She feigned a smile in response. "We have 'ust about seventy miles to go to reach Cuck Horn Oak. We are leaving early, so if we only stop to change the horses, we could be there by nightfall, I should think."

Jonathan wanted her to understand, they would not stay overnight anywhere else. Not unless Stephen wanted little Stevie riding back to Leymouth with the coachman.

"I think we should share silly stories. I have one from when we were out of Eton for the summer. Pord Martin, Pord !redrick, and I were at his house. It was nighttime and for some craFy reaQ son, we decided to catch WreKies. We were laughing and having a grand time when I realiFed Martin and !redrick had stopped and were laughing so hard. !redrick started rolling on the ground with laughter. I looked at them curiously, not privy to their laughter until Martin said, "Pook behind you;" Somehow, they snuck up behind me and dumped WreKies down my back. I was lighting up as if I was ablaFe."

"It is funny the things children do when they are younger." Stephen looked over at his daughter. She was looking at her hands she had folded in her lap. Stephen gave Jonathan a DuiFFical look. Jonathan mouthed back, "Pater."

"Pittle Stevie, do you have any stories you could share with us?"

Jonathan coa"ed.

"LellxLe all loved the spring and summer. We planted bulbs

every year, so our Kower garden grew with every spring. It was

beautiful.' !rom the far off look in her eyes and her soft, melliKuq

ous voice, Jonathan felt Stevie—s longing for those days. 'Le would

go down to the water's edge and splash around. !ind interesting

underwater life. Le could take our shoes and socks off. No one

was around but us.' She giggled at the remembrance. 'Then at night, we could chase WreKies, but we never kept them. Miss Ryall taught us when they glowed, they were looking for their mate. Le never wanted to restrict the WreKy from Wnding his true love.' She stopped for a moment B cleared her throat, then went on. 'Someeq times, we would lie in the grass, the wonderful smell of fresh green growth. Le would look at the stars. I could go anywhere I wanted by looking at the stars." She realiFed she had shared more than she meant to. "Anyway, it was lovely in the spring and summer." She

dropped her head down again.

"jours was a beautiful story. jou loved the school and Miss Ryall.

I am sure you miss her. Lhen we get to Cuck Horn Oak, would you

like to write to her?" Stephen put his arm around her and pulled her

closer to him.

-erhaps even invite her to come here? Lould you like that?"

Jonathan added. He could see she liked the idea. She raised her head

and had a genuine smile. He was happy to see it.

"Lhat an e"cellent idea, Jonathan. Lould you like that, Pittle

Stevie?” Her father asked.

“I would like that very much. I will write to her as soon as we get to Cuck Horn Oak.” She looked up at Stephen. “Thank you so much, -apa. you are sure it would be acceptable? I would make sure we would stay out of your way. She eats very little, and I don’t eat much either, so it would not be e"pensive for her to come.”

Stephen had his arm around her and nudged her. “Lhen will you B ouch;”

Jonathan kicked Stephen’s foot. “I’m so sorry. -ardon me.” He gave Stephen an everqsoqsubtle shake of his head.

“No harm done.” Stephen glanced back down at little Stevie. “My Pittle Stevie girl, when will B Ouch; Jonathan, you ‘ust kicked me again;”

“I cannot imagine. -erhaps if we change the conversation, I mean our positions, I shan’t kick you again. Yomprehend?”

“Ah, yes.” Stephen, at last, grasped Jonathan’s intent. “jes, I

should resituate my legs.”

It did not take as long to get to Stephen’s Cuck Horn Oak estate.

“...o you live here?” Pittle Stevie asked -apa as she was looking out the window.

“No, this is not where we will live. I have a house in Town B Ponq don. Town is where we will live. This is one of my country estates.”

As they rode up the lane, three people stood under the portico, awaiting the duke and his newfound daughter. He had written to them in advance of their coming.

“Are you ready to see the house and your very own room?”

Stephen was so animated. He appeared more e" cited than little Stevie was.

“jes, -apa. I B I hope I do everything correctly.” She hesitated. He took her hand and walked with her to the front where the

butler, Mr. Andrews, the footmen, Anthony and -arker, and the cook, !rancisco, were all standing. “I would like to introduce you to my daughter, Pady Stevencia Clackwood.”

Upon seeing her B how beautiful and petite she was q protocol

went right out the window. "It's a delight to Wnally meet you." Mr.

Andrews maintained most of his professional behavior. The rest

swarmed around her. "Oh, you are so beautiful." "Le have a bedq chamber ready 'ust for you." "I have a wide variety of biscuits and meat cakes waiting 'ust for you." "Le will help you with whatever

you need."

"Now, everyone, give the young lady some room." She looked hesitant. "Yome, I will introduce you." Stephen introduced her to all. She said the sweetest things to the staff. They looked at each other and smiled.

"I shall get the luggage, your grace." Anthony walked to the coach.

"I'm afraid there is not much there. jou all know Pord Herbert.

He will stay with us for a while as well."

"Le have his bedchamber prepared as well."

They went inside. -arker escorted Pady Stevencia to her bedq

chamber. He opened the door for her. She looked around the room

in awe. "This is my room?"

"jes, my lady. All yours B only yours. Le hope you like it. The

staff only had a week to prepare it, but from his grace's description,

I think we picked out the right colors. Let's hope you agree."

-arker was probably a little older than Stevencia. He had the

characteristics most owners hope their footmen should have B

strength to do the heavy lifting, poise to serve around a table or

dining room, and looks. Being pleasant to look at is an advantage

since people see the footman often.

The walls were wide striped blue and light beige damask. The

counterpane was beige with blue trim. There was an escritoire with

Duells, foolscap, and standish. There was a Wreplace in the room

with white marble trim. Two overstuffed chairs sat in front of the Wreplace and a chaise lounge was under the window. The walls held portraits of young ladies B one reading a book, one writing at her desk, one playing the pianoforte, one walking through the garden.

They were all beautiful works of art.

"Your dressing chamber, water closet, and bathing room are this

way." -arker opened the door and stood aside for her to enter. She

was dumbfounded. She touched the drying clothes, looked into the

shower bath, turned the water on, giggled, then turned it off. “-apa is truly rich?” She looked up at -arker, waiting for confirmation.

“jes, my lady, he is very rich. If I may be so bold.” -arker’s face turned red. She wondered if it was because he should not have told her.

“He will never know you informed me. Le should be friends. I don’t have any now.”

“jes, my lady. Lell, not in the sense we may spend time together, but I would like you to know B if you ever need anything and are hesitant to ask anyone else, I will always be here for you.” It was the sweetest thing he could have told her.

“I understand, and thank you. I shall remember what you ‘ust said B always.”

“Le apologiFe for not having hired a lady’s maid for you, but Mr.

Andrews felt you might wish to do the hiring yourself.” “Pady’s maid? Lhat for?” She was not sure what a lady’s maid

was or what she did.

“Well, they help you dress and undress, do your hair, prepare your bath, those sorts of things.”

“I know how to do all those things myself.” She looked around the room again. “Must I have a lady’s maid?” She had been dressing herself for as far back as she could remember. She bathed in the ocean Bay except, of course, in the winter. Then they had to boil buckets and buckets of water.

“I will leave you, my lady. If you need anything at all, use the bellpull and someone will come. I believe they are preparing for dinner now. His grace will be expecting you.”

She stood in the middle of the room, watching him close the door as if he were her last and only lifeline. What was she to do in a house like this?

A lady’s maid to help me dress? I own three dresses. All simple. And what about my hair? How do you do it? I have been doing that for years. I

don't think I'm in here at all. Perhaps that is the reason Papa never came
to get me. Because I did not go in.

A little tear trickled down her face as someone knocked, then
opened the door a crack. "Jonathan;"

She ran to him and threw her arms around him. "Jonathan,
please take me back to the school. I don't belong here. Jonathan, I
don't want in. It makes no sense to me. Why do I need a maid? I dress
myself and wash my hair. And at Miss Ryall's, I bathed in the sea. This
is the reason he never came to get me, is it not? It is true. He knew I
would not want in. He should have left me there."

Jonathan stroked her back and rested his chin on the top of her
head. "No, little Stevie, that is not the reason. Your father was de-
graded. He adores you. You could eat off the Koor and he would
think you were precious. If you bathed once a year, he would find you adorable. If
you ran through the house spewing gibberish, he would love you. It was not your
father's fault he could not come for
you. Just believe me."

“-arker told me they waited to hire a lady’s maid because they thought I would want to hire one myself. Pook at this bedchamber. This is the most elegant bedchamber I have ever dreamed of. Honq estly, I was not aware a bedchamber such as this even e"isted. This is too good for me.”

She cried into his topcoat. He kissed the top of her head. “...on’t cry, my sweet. It will work out. jou must give it some time.” He wanted to hold her like this forever.

“I know you have had to e"perience some strange and frightq ening things since you left your school. Things few women e"peq rience, but I promise you, the world you have e"perienced since you left Miss Ryall’s is truly not such a world. Most men are not like Thistlewood or the man from the inn. jou met some very Wne gentlemen when we found you on the pier at Leymouth. ...o you remember them?”

She sniffed and wiped her nose on his topcoat. “I’m sorry. I did

not mean to..." She looked up at him with those sad, blue eyes and he wanted to wrap her up in all the wonderful and happy things.

She was lonely. She lost the closest thing to a mother she ever had in Miss Ryall and met this man who was supposed to be her father she had never met before.

Never even received one letter from him in all her years of writing. Being around wealth is something she had never experienced. This giant estate could have been a prison to her. Her little

Shangri-La was a small secular school on the edge of the ocean. "It is Wne. Here." He lifted one arm and wiped his nose on his

sleeve. "There, you see. It is only a topcoat." His arm surrounded her again, holding her close. "You wash your face, come down to dinner. I have a nice surprise for you if you want it."

She sniffed and looked up at him. "A surprise? I have never had a surprise. They are supposed to be good things, are they not?" "Oh, yes. They are supposed to be the best things." He could not resist kissing the top of her head once more. She smelled like

honeysuckle. “Now, would you like for me to wait and walk down with you?”

“jes, Jonathan. I would like it very much. Thank you.” Jonathan thought it best to wait in the hall, ‘ust outside her door.

He whistled a tune to let her know he was still there as he began to realiFe the full impact of all this on her. He could only imagine. The ton would be difWcult, if not impossible, for her. The beau monde was no place for kindness, innocence, and beauty. He knew she needed more than her father and himself to help her ad‘ust. She needed friends B old and new.

Her door opened. She peeked around to ensure Jonathan stood there. “jou look lovely. I like you in that yellow dress. Makes your eyes stand out.” He spoke the truth. Even if the dress had faded, she would stand out among a ballroom Wlled with debutantes dressed in the Wnest of ballgowns and her in her little, faded yellow dress. He took her hand and tucked it in the crook of his arm. “:nowing your papa as I do, we should be prepared for a grand meal with a lot

of sweet treats for dessert. And I am hungry. Lhat say you, my little Stevie?”

She looked at him with so much admiration. “I think maybe I could eat something. Soup with bread and a biscuit for dessert sounds grand.”

“Pittle Stevie, you may be surprised at the array of food items on the table,” he said while gently stroking her little hand that poked through the crook of his arm. He stroked her little hand poking through the crook of his arm. His gentle attempt to prepare her. “So, -arker, Anthony, !rancisco, and Mr. Andrews shall ‘oin us?

That would be nice.”

“They all work for your papa. The staff never eat at the dining tableV they have a table where the staff eats.” Too much new to absorb.

“At school, Miss Ryall, the teachers, and the students all ate toq gether. I thought it was nice.” He noticed she had slowed her steps.

“I am not very hungry. Yould you give me my surprise now?” She was overwhelmed.

She had no grasp on the lifestyle, or the asinine rules Pondon society lived with. “I think your papa would be most disappointed if you failed to come and dine with him. I’m sure he has planned a special meal for the occasion of your Wrst ofWcial day with him in his home. jour home.”

“Cut this is not his home. -apa said his home is in Pondon town.”

She stopped on the stairs. Yonfused.

“jes, well B your papa has several places where he can stay, such as this house. He resides in Town.”

“Lhy does he need more than one place to live? And is it Pondon town, Pondon, or Town?”

He gave a soulful sigh. “The Clackwood holdings include inherq ited properties that have been passed down to the male heirs for generations.’ He had failed to realiFe how little things like inherited properties and titles for different thing could be so confusing. ’And people from Pondon call it Town. So, it is Town or Pondon.” He

wanted so to reach for her and told her she did not need to do any of this. He would take her somewhere they could live together, safe from the outside. But he knew such could never be B that was a fantasy. “Yome, your papa is going to come looking for you any minute.”

“jes, alright.” He took her hand again. She looked up, trying a smile. “I will try, Jonathan.” She had tears pooling in those aFure eyes.

He could not tolerate this another second. “I know what we will do B let me take you to the stables with Miles and I will return in a matter of minutes. How would you like to visit the stables?” “I think it sounds better, Jonathan.” Lithout a word, he pulled out his kerchief and dabbed her eyes.

“No more tears?” he nodded a type of silent encouragement. “I will try. I like being happy much better.”

He wanted to kiss her. Instead, he gave her a heartfelt chuckle.

“...on’t we all, Pittle Stevie.”

Jonathan walked her out to the stables and told Miles to show her the horses while he went inside for a few minutes. With that done, next, he had to talk to Stephen. He walked into the drawing room to see Stephen, drink in hand, pacing.

He was wearing a well-looking double-breasted dinner top coat with a tan waistcoat and tan breeches. His ascot was a dark brown silk. As Jonathan walked into the room, Stephen halted and looked at him, then around him. "Where is my daughter, Jonathan? She has yet to come down."

"Stephen, on my way down here, I stopped by little Stevie's bedroom chamber. She was crying, Stephen. Her room is too big for her. She has no concept of a lady's maid. She has three dresses, and she has been doing her hair since she was a little girl. Stevie bathed and swam in the ocean. Her dinners consisted of soup, bread, and maybe a biscuit. Stephen, she is not even close to being ready for this." He held his arms out as he looked around the area.

"She does not understand why the servants are not having dinner with us. And I don't think it would be wise to call them servants in front of her."

Stephen ran his hand down his face. Shot his drink down and set the glass on the side table. "Then what the hell am I to do? I hoped by staying here it would be an easier transition. I was wrong." He paced a minute while Jonathan observed. "I suppose you have a suggestion?"

"I have a suggestion. It might work. At least for now." He looked at Stephen. "A picnic."

"A what?" Stephen's face scrunched.

"A picnic. Now have Anthony and Parker bring a very few of the food items and put them either on an outdoor table or on a blanket. Later on wine. And maybe something along with biscuits for dessert."

“Now, you say? Francisco and the kitchen staff have prepared quite an elaborate dinner to celebrate her arrival.”

“Either explain it to them honestly or you will have a daughter who will ask me once again to take her back to her school.”

“She asked you to do to take her back?” Stephen looked incredulous. “Cut why?”

“I have been explaining it to you. She is twenty years old, Stephen. She has never heard of any of the things we take for granted. You must scale it way back if you wish to help her with this transition.”

“Where is she?”

“She is out in the stables with Miles. Horses are one thing I know she loves. Miles said something about the barn cat having a litter. It would be nice to give her one of the kittens. I told her I had a surprise for her before speaking with you, but she was so sad. Silent tears kept falling. I could not stop myself.”

“No, no. I understand. You did the right thing. Everything you said is the right thing for her.” He picked up the decanter, poured a drink, and shot it down. “I guess I better get the “staff” to work on dinner outside.”

“Good. I think it would make her happy.”

“Thank you, Jonathan.” Stephen gave him a quick smile, then a rather large yawn. “I had better get to work.”

“I shall tell you one more disturbing piece of news.”

Stephen stopped and sat down. “Jesus, Jonathan. You already have me worried sick.”

“The reason she was so despondent this morning, the reason I was gone from the breakfast table so long, was to find out if something had happened last night. It had.’ He took in a frustrated breath. ‘I suppose after you fell asleep, little Stevie must have been uneasy. She went outside to look at the stars and was assaulted by some miscreant who had earlier been tossed out of the bar.’ Stephen stood, His face flushed in anger. Jonathan was not fairsing much better at the retelling of this drama. ‘The ostler saved her.’ Stephen went to speak. Jonathan knew what he was going to say. He held his hand up to stop Stephen. ‘I have already rewarded him. The owner’s son went for the magistrate. The wastrel will be in prison for a long while. Which does nothing to ease little Stevie. She cried and begged the ostler to take her home. You know what she meant. She has been through too much in such a short time. You cannot blame her for wanting to return to the peace and regimentation of her little school.” Jonathan began to pass in frustration.

“...amnit. Jonathan. She never said a word. I should beat the hell out of the owner for not telling me.”

“No, no. She cried and begged them not to tell. She was saved, and the oaf was taken away. They did right by her. If some little angel, sobbing, came up to you and begged for anything, what would you do?”

“I do not want to lose my daughter. I will do whatever it takes.”

“She gave you a sweet story of what she so loved about some of her favorite moments. Go from there.” Jonathan gave him a nod and walked back toward the stables. He looked to see Miles walking slowly, telling her about each horse.

She asked all manner of Questions & intelligent Questionsà their ageV how long had her papa owned themV how to tell the male from femaleV what each horse’s ‘ob wasV did they get to be outside their stalls during the dayV what they ateV how much water they neededV and on and on.

“Pittle Stevie? Are you en‘oying your tour?” As he walked to her and Miles.

“Jonathan, I wanted to know where ...esire was, but Mr. Miles has never heard of her.”

He e"plained how they would transport ...esire, and it seemed to calm her. “Lhat did you think of all the other horses?”

“Jonathan, they are all so beautiful and friendly. I love them. Maybe I could take them for walks?” Eyes Wnally bright again.

“Maybe. Now, Miles, where is the surprise I have to show little Stevie?”

Miles put the biggest of smiles on his face. “Right this way, lady Pittle Stevie.”

Cehind the stables was a hay barn. He opened the door for little Stevie and Jonathan to enter. “This way.”

Pittle Stevie was looking up at Jonathan, curious about this. “My surprise is in here?”

“jes, little Stevie. It is.” Jonathan reassured her.

“Le are almost there.” Miles turned to smile at her. “I hope you will like it.”

“I know I will.” She stood up on her toes B she sounded almost giddy. Jonathan hoped this surprise would help B a little.

As they neared an open stall in the back, they could hear several little meowing sounds. Jonathan and Miles both smiled at her, but she only reacted more curiously. John considered perhaps she had never seen an actual cat or kittens before.

“Miles, we need to take her inside for a closer look.” Miles nodq ded, then led them

to the back corner of the stall.

“It is a cat;” she exclaimed. “And those are baby cats;” She giggled at the moment’s excitement. Jonathan almost provided her with the name for baby cats. She seemed to sense his reaction. “No, don’t tell me.” She waved her hand away.

“They are kittens;” She looked so proud. She knelt and spoke softly and sweetly to the mama. “May I pet your children, Mrs. Yat? They are all beautiful, like their mama. You must be so proud to have such beautiful children.”

Jonathan knelt beside her. “Would you like to have one of your very own?”

“Would she be sad?” she asked in all seriousness.

“No. They go on their own after a while. Would you like to have one?” He asked again.

He could see her observing them all. “I would take them all, but I can only have one?”

“I don’t think your papa would want more than one in the house. You could still see the others.” He gave a slight nod and wanted to kiss her.

“See the littlest one, the burnt orange, tiger-striped kitty? It keeps struggling to get closer to Mrs. Yat. The others are edging it out, Jonathan. It is all by itself. I want that one. How can you tell if it is a boy or a girl?”

Miles picked up the kitten and lifted its tail. “It is a boy.” He cradled as he moved his hands toward little Stevie. “Here, hold him for a minute.”

“I will take care of you. You can be my new friend.” Jonathan stood. She never meant to say things to break your heart but she just did.

They heard a loud whistle. Then someone called out. "Time for dinner;" It was Stephen's voice.

Pittle Stevie gave the kitten back to Mr. Miles, thanked him, then looked at Jonathan. "I will try, Jonathan."

He took her hand. "jou might be surprised." They came around to the side of the stables to see Stephen standing thereV his top coat and cravat gone. "Le will be dini B eating over here." He led Jonathan and little Stevie to the portico, where a table was set up with sliced meats, different varieties of breads, some fruit, and many desserts. Stevie put her hands to her mouth as she let out a bit of a delighted scream.

"Yome, my darling girl. Shall we en'oy your Wrst dinner surq rounded by the beauty of nature?"

"Oh, -apa. This is wonderful." Stephen made sure everything they needed would be on the table so there would be no need for a footman. "This is a lot of food, -apa. Lill we be able to give our leftovers to Mr. !rancisco, Anthony, -arker, and Mr. Miles?"

"I will make sure of it. Now, I'm hungry. Shall we start?"

They sat down without servants, served themselves, poured waq ter, and thoroughly en'oyed the e"perience. Stephen en'oyed it so muchV he was determined to have outside dinners more often. "-erq haps tomorrow we might have our noonday meal out here with the leftovers. Lhat say you, my little Stevie?"

"I would love to, very much, -apa, if you would en'oy it." She studied -apa's face to ensure his sincerity.

"I would highly en'oy it, particularly with present company." Stephen's 'aunty, lightqhearted demeanor did appear sincere.

They ate leisurely and talked of the loveliness of the countryside. Stephen asked her many Questions about what she would like to do around the area. -lant Kowers? Go for walks? feed the animals? When there was a lull, she began to sing, Babendar's Wlve.

"Babender's klveP diddle diddle

Babender's greenP

qhen I am YveenP diddle diddle

"ov shall ke Ming.S

She sang three verses and stopped. "jou sing so beautifully, but you stopped. There are many more verses." Stephen encouraged her.

"I never knew there were more verses. Might you have them somewhere? I would love to learn them." She seemed eager to learn more of the song. Stephen started to speak when Jonathan kicked him from under the table.

"Oh; Jonathan damnit. That hurt. Lhy must you B "

Jonathan cut him off. "I think what your -apa was going to say is he knows of no other verses. -erhaps he might Wnd them in Pondon. Yorrect, your grace?"

"I agree. !or fear of more shin bruises, that is e"actly what I was going to say."

Pittle Stevie stood. "I best clear the table now while we still have a little light left." She picked up bowls and dishes when Stephen started to speak. "My darling girl, you B Ouch; Again?" Stephen leaned down and began rubbing his shin.

"Pittle Stevie, your papa keeps hitting his leg on the table. He and I will help clear the

table, correct, your grace?" Jonathan gave him another stern look.

"jes, yes, yes. E"actly what I was planning to say. Shall we?"

After they had all the dishes brought into the kitchen, to the surq prise of the staff, little Stevie thanked !rancisco and the rest of the kitchen, the three went into the library. Stephen poured two whiskies from his decanter and asked little Stevie if she would like an afterqdinner drink. She did not. She searched for a book to read. Jonathan watched as she searched for a book that caught her eye.

"I en'oy a biography or autobiography." Her Wnger ran across the spines of each book. Aware of Jonathan's eyes on her, she turned to him with a book. "Tom Jones. I have never heard of him. ...o you know of this book, Johnathan?"

Lhat the deuce; "No;" RealiFing his reaction. "Lhat I meant to say is the book is not for young ladies. I'm sure there is something more appropriate for you to read within this enormous library."

Stevie wondered what kind of book would be considered so inq appropriate for a lady? She walked to the window. Ceing dark, she looked at the stars through the window, wishing she was lying outq side to better feel the closeness. She could see Jonathan's reKection in the glass. He kept his eyes on her. She watched him walk toward her and even felt him coming near. He reached to touch her, but stopped himself. She wondered why.

"I have another surprise, or shall I call this an idea?" She turned to look at him and could see his eyes light up.

"Lhat is this surprise or idea, Jonathan? ...o you wish to put your arms around me? It would be a wonderful new e"perience."

"I must go collect something, but I shall return;" He announced, arm up and Wnger

pointing to the ceiling. His eyes laughing.

She walked away from the window and waited. Within a few minutes, Jonathan returned with a blanket. "What shall you be doing with the bed covering?" She had a fanciful idea, but surely, he would not be interested in star gazing.

He cocked his head toward the front door, where they had eaten outside. "We are going to go star gazing;"

She knew that was what he wanted them to do. "-apa, will you come and look at the stars with us?"

"Not tonight, my darling girl. You and Jonathan enjoy yourselves. I will join you next time, alright my sweet?"

"yes, -apa." She had a second thought. "You are sure it is alright for me to go?" She would not wish to do something he would disapprove of.

"yes, of course. You need only tell me you wish it." He had stopped reading long enough to answer her.

"Thank you, -apa."

Jonathan walked in front of her, which gave her a chance to appreciate his wide shoulders. Of all the men she met at the dock in Leymouth, even in her distress, she had found him the kindest. It was a few days later she noticed how he moved B so graceful, yet not with the grace seen in ladies, but with masculinity.

When he had put his arms around her in her new bedchamber, she could feel the strength in his arms and his broad and solid chest. She should not have cried, but she knew Jonathan would understand and protect her. It was as if she knew it instinctively. She knew he would make things better and he did.

They walked out past the portico. He shook out the bed covering, and it Koated into the grass. "Yome." He held his hand out for her. She had noticed as he assisted her in and out of coaches how large his hands were B his Wngers long, gentle, yet strong.

She sat down and he sat down beside her. "I think you had been wanting to do this. Lhile a coaching inn in the middle of the night is not a safe place, you can always come out here and rela" or work things out in that head of yours or 'ust count the stars. It always seems to ease one's mind. ...on't you think?" He looked at her as her face was lifted toward the sky. He could not help but admire her B how lovely she was from every angle.

She did not answer. He seemed to know. He laid back. She turned to look down at him. "I can always Wnd the big and little dippers if I locate -olaris." She continued to gaFe into the night sky.

"Ah, yes, the north star. -olaris. If you can Wnd -olaris, it is easier to Wnd others." Jonathan put his hands behind his head and looked so content.

"Ursa Ma'or and Ursa Minor. ...on't you think it odd to call those two constellations the big and little dippers when the word ursa means bear?" She gave a little zha,' as she laid down ne"t to him.

"Honestly, I don't see the bears B never could, but I suppose some Greek astronomer must have." He pulled his right hand from beq hind his head and pointed. "That is Yassiopeia. A strangeqllooking L." Jonathan kept his hand behind his head. His temptation to reach for her was too great.

"She was Andromeda's mother. Yassiopeia, Andromeda's mothq er, bragged so much about her and her daughter's beauty that she was forced to spend half her time in the sky, clinging to her throne. Andromeda was supposed to be sent down into the sea to be eaten by Yetus, but -erseus saved her. Then they got married. Romantic, is it not?" She wondered if he thought so.

“It is interesting. You know so much about the stars and their Greek origins. And, yes, I suppose it is a bit romantic that he saves the girl and then marries her.” He looked at her, thinking he had saved her. Would he marry her?

“They must have certainly been in love, for they had seven sons and one daughter.” She wished he would hold on to her like he had in her huge bedchamber.

‘Good heavens. They stayed busy.’ Unaware their story included so many children. He chuckled.

Jonathan thought it pleasant to lie beneath the stars. The stars removed the sting from the problems and soothed the spirit. Only one thing would have made it better for him to have little Stevie nude. His lips, his mouth on hers with such hunger. He felt an aching desire building inside him as he fondled her breast, wanting a response, which did not take long.

She moaned his name as she ran her fingers through his hair, as dark as the night sky. His heart beat to a staccato rhythm, he could feel it in his ears. He let his tongue stroke her pretty pink nipple as his hand pinched and gently twisted the other. She arched her body to give him better access. He moved down her body, slowly, kissing and caressing as his hands and mouth arrived at the destination of his extreme desire. Her legs were splayed for Jonathan to explore.

Stevie lurched as he ran his tongue along the seams of her beautiful cunny. He wrapped his lips around the core of her pleasure as he stroked his tongue back and forth across it. She came fast. Her body reacted to her orgasm. Jonathan slowly crawled up her body and ravished her mouth.

His tongue asked to gain entry and their tongues performed such an erotic dance he would come before he even gained entry. He reached down between them, placed his cock at her entrance and slowly moved it in, as he kissed her passionately, and whispered filthy things in her ear.

Jonathan's fantasy quickly ended as he felt little Stevie's body roll over to him. She curled herself up with her head resting on his shoulder, her long hair splayed across his arm, and her knees drawn up against his hip.

He could sense her breast pressing against the side of his chest.

He longed for her.

He hoped she found contentment in her sleep. It had been a difficult time for her since she left Miss Ryall's. Now they were at Cuck Horn Oak.

He hoped she would gradually adjust.

He had to continue to remind Stephen, and himself, she needed time. A lot of time. Jonathan got to his knees, wrapped the bed covering around her, and picked her up. She instinctively laid her head on his chest. He carried her into the house and peeked into the library, thinking he might find Stephen. The footman -arker came around the corner to explain his grace had retired to his bedchamber.

Jonathan carried little Stevie up the stairs to her assigned bedroom chamber. Having scanned the room, he walked through the dressing area to the lady's maid's sleeping room. A quarter the size of her bedchamber. She would be happier in this space. Jonathan laid her down on the bed and kept her wrapped in the bedclothes from their stay. He would do nothing about her attire.

He feared when she awoke, she would not know where she was, so he went back into her bedchamber, walked to the escritoire, pulled foolscap and writing utensil, and began a note.

Bittle -tebieP

-inue yov cell asleep vnder the starsP I krovght yov to yovr keduhamer J this room.

It is a smaller uhamker neHt to yovrs. It shovld ke more to yovr liMing.

It will ke ovr seuret.

qe uan go cor a walM in the morning ic yov wish.

Tonathan

He placed the note on the small, round nightstand and looked down at her beautiful face. The moonlight shining through the window accentuated her delicate features and placed a soft, Keetq ing kiss on those luscious lips, and left.

Lalking together is what they did B every morning after they broke their fast. The Wrst week, they stayed on the lane and the gravel road that led them to Cuck Horn Oak. Pater, almost daily, they ventured off into the draught, burnt orange Welds or into wooded areas, in search of adventures. Once or twice a week, -apa would walk with them, but most of the time little Stevie was with Jonathan. :ind. Strong. Handsome. Londerful. Jonathan.

...esire had been delivered. Pittle Stevie wanted to make sure she was being well taken care of. Miles seemed to know what to do for ...esire's hoof to ensure healing. Pittle Stevie would go sit with her during the day and make sure -apa had plenty of apples to feed her for a daily treat. Miles informed little Stevie that her kitty was Wnally weaned. "...o you mean he can come and live with me?"

"It sure does, lady little Stevie. jou must know what to feed him. They are meat eaters. They need plenty of water and if he is going to stay indoors, he needs a special place to do his business." Miles wanted her to be aware of the responsibility that came with owning a cat.

"I will do everything you have told me, Mr. Miles. I can bring him out to see his Mum, too. He would probably like to visit her." She picked the tiger kitty up and

hugged him to her chest. "Le are going to be best friends."

"Lhat you gonna name him, Pady little Stevie?"

"I think I am going to name him Tommy, for Tom Thumb because he is so little."

She talked sweetly to Tommy while they walked through the stables.

-apa was in the study, reviewing ledgers of some sort, when she entered with a handful of a tiny yellow tiger kitten. Stephen never had an afWnity for cats. He would take a dog any day, but he would let them hang him before he would tell his daughter. "Lhat have you got there, daughter of mine?" :nowing full well what she had in her arms.

"It's my surprise present Jonathan got for me. He is so little, like me. It is the reason I picked him. And he is so cute. Pook at his handsome face." She held Tommy out for -apa to see.

'Lell, he is a tiger kitty. eryl handsome, indeed." He could see her happiness. E"actly what he wanted for her. Happiness. Much more happiness. "Have you named the kitty?"

She brought Tommy back into her arms and hugged him to her chest. "I named him Tommy, for Tom Thumb, because he is little, like me."

"Now you have two animals and one -apa to care for." He turned in his chair. "Yome and sit on my lap. Tell me all your plans for Tommy and ...esire."

She walked to him and got on his lap, but needed a bit of help. "I have been going to visit ...esire every day since she arrived. Thank you for ordering the apples for her. She thoroughly en'oyes them." She smiled down at Tommy as her papa smiled B looking at her.

“I’m sorry. It must have been Francisco who ordered them for …esire.” He brushed a tendril away from her face.

“Then I must thank him. …esire looks forward to them. She will sniff around on me until she finds where I have the apple. She is smart. Thank you for saving her life. She has many good years left.”

“And what of your plans for Tommy?” He had a little more concern for her kitten. He was not sure how one cared for an animal of the feline persuasion.

“I am going to take good care of him. He needs meat, so I will ask Francisco to save scraps for him. I will make a little bed for him so he can stay in my bedchamber. I will work with him to go outside when he needs to use the necessary. Is that alright with you? You approve of him, do you not?” She had a sudden look of concern. She had the most piercing eyes. “If you had rather not have Tommy B ”

“Of course, I approve. Whatever makes you happy. All I ever want for you is to be happy. If Tommy makes you happy, you must keep him and care for him. I think it is wonderful.” He hoped the damn thing would take care not to tear up the furniture or piss as he marked his territory, but he would not utter a word of concern. She had been torn from her home of ten and four years. It had to be difficult B strange.

“I’m going to take Tommy with me into the library to get a book, then I had better take him upstairs to my bedchamber. Tommy and I will discuss the house rules.” She gave a little giggle, kissed Papa on the cheek, and with his help, got down and walked toward the library.

Pittle Stevie had done nothing naughty in her life. Well, nothing she could recall. Cut when Jonathan told her the book was not for young ladies, she had to see if it was a book that contained information on the sexual proclivities of adults. She was at a loss as to how that worked. Miss Ryall never taught the girls about reproductive activities in adults.

She wanted to know. What if Jonathan wanted to perform some such activity on her? Could she not need to know what to do? ...id she have a part to play or was the performance something strictly reserved for the man? Maybe the book would have some beneficial information on the subject.

“I can read it to you, Tommy. You would be interested, would you not?” She stroked his head, and he began to make a low humming sound. “Are you trying to tell me something?” She walked straight to where she found the book, pulled it off the shelf, and tucked it underneath Tommy.

...uring Stevie’s walks with Jonathan, she would tell him about ...esire’s progress, and Tommy’s use of water and food bowls. She was learning to let Tommy out after meals to cut down on accidents in the house. So far, -apa had not been awareV not that she was aware of.

Jonathan listened attentivelyV asked Questions and made comments where possible. She loved their walks and felt, from the way he was prompt each morning and reminded her every evening, Jonathan did, too.

If it rained, they opted for games of chess or whist. He won more games of chess, but she got better with every game. They would lie on the floor in the library to play chess, but Jonathan insisted on playing whist at the table. Jonathan tried to compliment her on being such a quick learner. She would beat him in no time, so Jonathan said, but she rather doubted it. Stevie only hoped she was at least getting better at many things. She had so very much to learn.

At night, after she completed her ablution, she would get into bed with Tommy and Com Tones. Stevie considered the behavior of the townspeople to be salacious, but the information she was looking for contributed nothing. ...isappointed, she returned the book and asked what she wanted to know. And who better to ask? The gentleman of her heart’s desire.