



# The Marquess and His Muse (Curves & Cravats)

**Author:** *Lavinia Glen*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** A woman scorned. A man betrayed . When their paths collide, can love save the day, or be their downfall?

Thalia Renier had lost her head. That was the only possible explanation for the reformist lady's involvement with the Murderous Marquess. But when her sister eloped with a known rake, Thalia is desperate to save her from a ruinous marriage, even if it means risking her own reputation—and her heart—at the hands of the brooding marquess.

William Radcliffe, the Marquess of Ashford is a man haunted by betrayal. For years, the widower marquess has spurned London's polite society, taking refuge in the sun-soaked hills of Tuscany to pursue his true passion—sculpting. When word reaches him that his younger brother is on the verge of making a disastrous marital decision, Ashford will do anything to stop the marriage, including joining forces with a delectable muse whose beauty and fire chisels away at the ice encasing his heart.

When Thalia discovers his cold exterior hides an artists soul, falling for him is inevitable, but overcoming her own insecurities to trust his love will prove her biggest challenge. Can Ashford let go of his bitter past to embrace his love for Thalia, or will he let old ghosts destroy their future?

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

# Page 1

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LONDON

April 1867

“What do you mean Artemis has eloped?” Lady Thalia Renier’s shocked exclamation reverberated throughout the cavernous drawing room of her father’s London townhouse.

Her stepmother, who sat on one of the flower-patterned upholstered sofas, took a sip of her tea with exaggerated nonchalance, as if she had not just announced her daughter’s elopement.

“Lower your voice, Thalia. There’s no need to make a fuss about it. Your father and I gave this union our blessing. True, I would have preferred a grand wedding, but the important thing is that the marriage goes through.”

“No need to make a fuss? Have you and my father both lost your wits?” Thalia’s voice increased in volume and pitch the longer this mad conversation continued.

“Well, they were engaged. The announcement has been made and all the contracts signed. Your father is very pleased with the financial arrangements, and everything is in order. Lord Andrew Radcliffe is a great catch.”

“My sister has eloped with a never-do-well rake, and you think this is a capital idea?”

Her stepmother actually smirked. “Well, he might be a rake, but as for never-do-well... I daresay he has done very well for himself indeed. Not only is he the brother

and heir of the Marquess of Ashford, but he has amassed a tidy fortune for himself. Truly, your sister could not have done better.”

“I will find them,” Thalia said, storming out of the drawing room. “I will put a stop to this madness.”

Her stepmother rushed after her. “You will do no such thing. Nobody forced Artemis to elope. She and Lord Andrew are in love. For once, don’t make a fool of yourself.”

Thalia faltered for a moment as she yanked on her gloves and received her cloak from the butler. Her stepmother’s words stung. Was defending those one loved making a fool of oneself? If it was, so be it. But she couldn’t stand by and let her sister ruin her life. Her stepmother cared for nothing but money and status. In her description of Lord Andrew Radcliffe, her sister’s fiancé, those were the only two attributes she mentioned. What about character, integrity, loyalty? Did he love her sister? Would he be faithful?

She would go after her sister. She needed to at least try to stop Artemis from making the same disastrous mistakes she had made. Maybe she would catch her in time to prevent this ill-conceived union.

But where to begin the search? Well, Lord Andrew’s residence would be a start. Her stepmother had said he was the Marquess of Ashford’s brother.

Ashford...the name sounded familiar. Wait! Wasn’t that the man society called the Murderous Marquess after his wife died in mysterious circumstances? Good God! Whatever had possessed her father to allow her sister to marry into that family?

One thing was certain. She would get no help from her own family. If she was to save her sister, she would have to do it by herself.

WILLIAM RADCLIFFE, the Marquess of Ashford, didn't know what to expect upon his return to London after five years, but it certainly wasn't to be accosted in his own home, the very morning of his arrival, by a red-haired spitfire.

As he watched from the balcony above the foyer, the whirlwind of a woman barged past his surprised butler.

"Where is Lord Andrew? I need to see him at once!"

Judging by her irate expression, things would not go well for his scapegrace brother if the fiery lady caught him.

"Excuse me, miss?" he called in his most haughty voice. "May I be of assistance?"

Her gaze snapped up, seeking the source of the voice. Their gazes collided, and he felt a surge of satisfaction as her eyes widened for an instant, before she immediately narrowed them in defiance.

"Are you Lord Andrew?"

"Alas, no. Lord Andrew is my younger brother." He descended the wide marble staircase with an easy stride and came to stand before her. "I'm Lord Ashford, at your service," he said, executing a bow. "And who do I have the pleasure of receiving in my home?"

She blanched, and Liam's temper surged at her reaction. No doubt she had heard the rumors and believed him to be a murderer. And yet...she had dared to come here.

"I'm Lady Renier, Lord Ashford," she replied, sketching the briefest of curtsies.

Liam didn't acknowledge her. He would have had her thrown out, except for two

circumstances. One, he was looking for Andrew himself, and this woman's reason for seeking his brother might be related to his own. And two; he was, quite simply, enthralled by her beauty.

As a sculptor, he was used to seeing the potential in a block of marble. To see the shape of the sculpture in the raw stone. That talent helped him where she was concerned. She wore a frumpy, unbecoming gown that covered her from neck to toe. Done in a strange shade of brown that clashed with her gorgeous coppery curls, the hideous garment had a ruffle around her shoulders. It fell almost to her waist, obscuring her curves. Yet it couldn't hide the alluring dip and flare of her body from his practiced eye.

The structure of her face was a study of bold beauty. Slashing eyebrows, full of character and fire. Big, luminous eyes of a blue-gray hue that seemed to sparkle with inner light. High cheekbones and a wide, luscious mouth. Those lips provoked him almost beyond reason. He wanted to bite them, then soothe them with his tongue. He wanted to conquer them and then invade the warm, moist cavern of her mouth.

With sudden clarity, the perfect block of creamy marble with the most delicate pink undertone that he had been saving for a worthy piece found its purpose. He now knew why he had impulsively bought the three-ton block of stone, then carried it from Tuscany to London, at great expense and inconvenience. He had carried it to sculpt her.

And for that, he needed to further his acquaintance with this unlikely muse.

"I need to see your brother, my lord," she repeated into the awkward silence.

"I am unaware of his whereabouts myself." A dark thought crossed his mind. Surely this could not be the chit who had ensnared his brother. The notion was disturbing for reasons he didn't care to examine. "Has my brother injured you in some way, my

lady?”

“Not me. I don’t even know him. But apparently, he compromised my sister and has now eloped with her.”

“The devil you say!”

His thunderous exclamation had her flinching, but she squared her shoulders and shoved a paper in front of his face. He took it and scanned the note. The good humor his muse had inspired evaporated as he read the few scribbled lines, presumably from his brother’s ‘betrothed’ addressed to her family. The note stated she was eloping with Lord Andrew and would return after the wedding. And urged them not to worry. Ha! The shameless jade.

Hell and damnation! Had he traveled all the way from Tuscany for nothing? Was he too late to help extricate his brother from this trap?

“When did they elope?” he snapped.

“This morning, my lord,” she replied, lifting her chin proudly. “It is fortunate I returned to Town when I did, as my family doesn’t even care enough to pursue them and attempt to stop this travesty.”

“Your aim is to stop them?” Well, that was surprising. Her family’s attitude was more in line with what he would have expected from scheming relatives.

“Absolutely! I find these goings on most suspicious, as my sister had no intention of marrying anyone. In fact, she was only waiting to reach her majority to receive her inheritance and move in with me. She was a month away from achieving that goal. And yet, during these last few weeks, while I was away in the country, my sister not only met but also got engaged and eloped with your brother. I suspect my stepmother

had a hand in this. I won't let her ruin my sister's life as she did with m—"

Her impassioned speech came to a sudden halt as she perhaps realized she was about to reveal too much. Her earnestness was real. His tempting muse could be an ally, for she seemed as determined as he to prevent this disaster of a wedding.

"It seems you and I are of the same mind."

She actually looked him up and down, as if judging and determining they could not possibly agree on anything.

"How so, my lord?"

"You and I both want to stop our siblings from contracting this misbegotten marriage; so I suggest we join forces."

"How do you suggest we go about that?"

"Well, locating the runaway bride and groom would be a good beginning."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THE COURAGE THAT HAD propelled Thalia to storm the home of the Murderous Marquess had deserted her as soon as she encountered the imposing figure of said marquess. She had not expected him to be home. It was common knowledge he had left the country years ago following the scandal of his wife's death.

Yet here he was. And he was even more imposing in person than the dangerous sobriquet led one to believe. Oh, yes. The man looked dangerous. But not in a murderous way. She could not imagine this man killing someone in the shadows. He was more like a conqueror that no one would dare stop.

He stood tall, his commanding presence hinting at undeniable strength. She was tall for a woman, but this man dwarfed her. Next to his muscular frame, she looked almost...dainty. An adjective no one, least of all her, would apply to herself.

Long, silvery hair framed his chiseled, masculine features, giving him an almost ethereal, yet formidable appearance. His sharp, silver eyes had impaled her from the moment she had dared to invade his domain. Piercing and keen, his gaze seemed to miss nothing. It made her feel like a lowly mouse spotted by a falcon.

He was a man who demanded attention and respect, his mere presence enough to dominate a room. And she had walked into his lair.

"I don't know how to find them. I came here hoping to locate them," she admitted.

"You came alone?"

"Yes."



“Has no one told you that you shouldn’t visit the residence of a bachelor unchaperoned?” Now he seemed annoyed.

Thalia gulped. “I am a widow, my lord. I don’t need a chaperone. Coming here might have been a tad reckless, but I saw no other recourse.”

He turned without a word and stalked down the hallway. His movements exuded a quiet confidence as he tossed over his shoulder, “Come along then if you wish, Lady Renier, but I warn you that if your reputation suffers as a result of your visit, I won’t be held responsible.”

Well, she never! Of all the arrogant, condescending things to say... And yet she followed him. As much for his compelling presence as for the need to find out more about her sister’s whereabouts.

He entered a spacious study and sat behind a massive desk. Any other person would have been dwarfed by the desk, but it suited him. She entered behind him, leaving the door open, then hesitated for a second. When he rudely didn’t invite her to sit, she sat in one of the chairs that faced the desk. His eyebrow shot up at her defiance, but she would be damned if she would stand in front of him like a petitioner.

“Do you have any idea where they might have gone? Has your sister left any clues? Mentioned anything?”

“Nothing, my lord. I learned today of my sister’s betrothal to your brother and of their subsequent elopement. Very uncharacteristic, as my sister and I are very close. I would have expected her to write to me about such important news.”

“I see. Well, there’s no help for it then.” He ordered the footman stationed by the door to send his man of business and his brother’s valet to him at once.

When the two other men arrived, Lord Ashford impaled them with a steely gaze.

“It has come to my attention that Lord Andrew has eloped with a young lady. Did you have any notion that my brother planned something like this?” he asked. His voice was no less autocratic for being well modulated and affable.

The man of business spoke first. “He asked me several days ago to apply for a special license. But I didn’t know he planned to elope.”

“Yesterday, he requested I pack a week’s worth of clothing and told me he was traveling. However, I was also unaware of his intention to elope,” the valet added.

“I see.” The marquess studied the two harried servants, a slight frown creasing his brow. “Was there anything else of note? Any mention of a city? A note, a name?”

The two servants looked back wide-eyed, wearing similar expressions of consternation and helplessness. The marquess tapped his fingers on the desk, a staccato march that no doubt added to the tension in the room.

At last, the valet said, “I believe he sent a telegram, my lord.”

The tapping stopped, the marquess’s gaze sharpening. “You wouldn’t have the address he sent it to? Or the name of the addressee?”

“No, my lord. But the footman who sent it might.”

The marquess rang for the butler and inquired about the footman in question. A minute later, a tall young man with intelligent eyes walked in and bowed.

“You sent a telegram at my brother’s request?” the marquess said, more than asked.

“I did, my lord.”

“Do you remember the address or a name?”

“I do, my lord. The recipient was Reverend James Langley of Elvington.”

“Where on earth is Elvington?”

The footman hesitated. “Not sure, my lord. But I had the impression it was in the north. Near York.”

"Oh, for pity's sake!" the marquess exclaimed. "The little whelp couldn't have waited for me in London? I've been traveling for days. Haring off to York was not what I had in mind right after arriving home."

That's it. She had heard enough. She had the information she required to pursue her sister. Apparently, they had made arrangements with this vicar to marry them. She stood to leave.

“Thank you for the information, my lord. I bid you goodbye.”

She found herself the recipient of his piercing gaze. “Where do you think you are going, Lady Renier?”

She strove for a casual tone as she strode towards the door. “Why, to find my sister, of course.”

“On your own?”

The hint of mockery in his tone was exceedingly irritating.

“That is not your concern, my lord.”

“My brother’s fate is certainly my concern.” He was all aristocratic hauteur. “I’ll be going after them myself. May I offer you a ride?”

“That won’t be necessary. Thank you.”

With that, she reached the door, opened it, and walked through. She needed to get away from the disconcerting marquess. The man was not good for her sanity.

## Page 3

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SO THE SPITFIRE THOUGHT to go after her sister and his brother alone? Not bloody likely. He had to make sure he found them before she did. Lest she wanted to create a scandal, despite her protestations, and implicate his brother to demand some sort of reparation. God save all men from scheming women. He frowned. Lady Renier didn't look duplicitous, but then, one could never be sure.

The bang of the front door reverberated through the house, marking the departure of the invading muse. He was about to start rattling orders to coordinate the pursuit of his brother when his study door opened again to admit another invader. This one a good deal more mild-mannered, and yet more menacing. At least to him.

“Ashford! So glad you have returned, my boy,” his diminutive grandmother exclaimed, coming towards him with all the spryness of a girl, instead of the octogenarian he knew her to be.

“Grandmama.” Ashford stood up and then bent to kiss the Dowager Marchioness of Ashford cheek. “I don't even need to inquire about your health because you look younger and better every day.”

“Oh, poppycock! I'm not young. I might die any moment, if you must know. And you haven't visited me for the last five years, you ungrateful whelp.”

He tried to cover his smile. Her grandmother was the only person on this earth who could call him 'whelp' and get away with it.

“As you well know, I've been abroad, Grandmama, but I've written. In any case, it seems you have found a way to drag me back to England,” he mentioned, studying

her face.

“Oh, this business with Drew?” She waved a dismissive hand, as if his brother’s fate was of no import. “I would have done it sooner had I known it would bring you back home. But I needed to find a worthy gel.”

“What did you do?” His tone would have given pause to any person except his grandmother, who instead smiled with satisfaction.

“Oh, I simply gave him a nudge in the right direction. I helped him find his ideal bride.”

“Drew doesn’t need you to play matchmaker for him,” he growled.

“Is that so? Well, he wasn’t doing a great job of finding a wife, so I had to step in if I ever hoped to see the line secure.” Her narrowed eyes focused on him, and a slither of premonition ran down his spine. “As a matter of fact, providing an heir is your duty, not Drew’s. And you are not doing so well in that regard either. I believe you are in need of my assistance as well.”

“Don’t you dare interfere in my affairs.” It came out a little sharper than he had intended, so he added, a bit more calm, “You know I don’t wish to marry again. One disastrous marriage is more than enough for one lifetime.”

His grandmother’s gaze softened with sympathy. “I agree. But what about a non-disastrous one?”

“Oh? And do you have any way to ensure this?”

“Of course not. Nobody does. But it starts with selecting the right woman.”

“No.” The one syllable was definitive, but just to drive the point home, because this was his meddling grandmother, he expounded, “I forbid you to try to matchmake on my behalf. Is that clear?”

“Fine, my boy. I won’t. But I wish to see you happy. You should remarry. What about that nice young lady with whom I just crossed paths when I arrived?”

His lips compressed into a displeased line. It was too much to hope that his grandmother had not seen Lady Renier.

“She came here looking for my brother, who has eloped with her sister. Do you know anything about that, Grandmama?”

He got his answer in her grandmother’s widening eyes. “They have eloped? I knew the youngsters were in love. Even so, eloping seems unnecessary. Their betrothal was going so well. Just a few days ago, I hosted their betrothal ball.”

“And now you see the results of your meddling. If you’ll excuse me, I need to make arrangements to pursue them.

His grandmother’s frail hand landed on his arm, stopping him in his tracks with no need to exert any force. “And what are you planning to do if you find them, Liam?” she asked softly, using the nickname she had called him since he was a little boy.

“Why, stop the marriage, of course!”

“But you can’t. And you mustn’t. Drew is in love with this girl. And she loves him, too. I’ve seen them together. They suit. You should leave them be.”

“Be that as it may, I’d rather see for myself. I must ensure my brother is not making the same mistake I did.”

“And if he isn’t? Would you then consider maybe following in his footsteps and finding yourself a nice woman to marry?”

“Not a chance in hell, Grandmama. If my brother persists on this course, then he can bloody well provide the next heir. Because I certainly won’t.”

With that, he turned and strode from the study. His conscience poked him with red-hot irons at the way he had spoken to his grandmother. She and his brother were the only two people in the world he loved. But talk of marriage always put him in a foul mood. He would apologize later. Now, the most urgent thing was to find his brother before the fiery Lady Renier did.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THALIA STOOD ON THE bustling platform of King's Cross Station. The vast space seemed capable of containing the whole of London within its walls, and judging by the cacophony and the crowd, it looked as if the entire population of London was indeed inside the cavernous space covered by the grand iron and glass roof arching high above.

The station was alive with the clamor of passengers, porters, and the hissing of steam engines. Well-dressed gentlemen and ladies hurried past, while vendors shouted their wares, adding to the racket. The scent of coal stung her nose, while the aroma of baked goods from a nearby stall enticed her.

A whistle blew, and the conductor called for boarding. The train to York awaited her, its polished carriages gleaming under the station's gas lamps. For a moment, her heart hammered with trepidation. She only had a few minutes to board her train, yet the tumult was making it difficult to find her carriage. Clutching her travel bag, she took a deep breath and stepped forward into the throng of travelers.

As she hurried along the platform, a hurried porter jostled her, and she stumbled. Her travel bag slipped from her grasp and spilled its contents onto the stone floor. Flustered, she knelt to gather her belongings, only to have her hat knocked askew by a passing gentleman's umbrella.

Just as she regained her composure and secured her hat, a young child darted past, brushing against her skirts and causing her to lose her balance. Thalia's heart skipped a beat as she teetered on the edge of the platform.

Strong arms circled her, holding her safe against a firm body. She instinctively knew

who it belonged to even before she heard the deep voice rumble in her ear.

“Good God, woman. Be careful.”

The Marquess.

She had regained her footing, but her heart kept racing for an entirely different reason now. She turned, looking up into his eyes.

“Thank you, my lord. What a coincidence, meeting you here.” She instantly wanted to kick herself for the inane comment. His sardonic gaze told her he was thinking the same.

“Hardly a coincidence, Lady Renier. I daresay your destination and mine are the same, and this is the next train out of London today. Small wonder our paths crossed again.”

“Of course, my lord. Now, if you will excuse me, we need to board or risk the train leaving us behind.”

She turned, intending to board the second-class carriage just ahead, but his hand on her arm stopped her.

“I have my private coach hitched to the train. If you’d like to join me, I think you’ll be much more comfortable there.”

He was inviting her to his private train coach? They would be alone together for hours. Her heart stuttered, then took off galloping at the prospect. It was tempting. One glance at the interior of the second-class carriage told her the place was crowded and noisy, the seats hard. She did not relish the idea of hours of travel in such uncomfortable conditions, but... No. She couldn’t accept his offer. It was unthinkable.

“I thank you for the generous offer, my lord. But I can’t accept it. It would be inappropriate for us to be alone in a private carriage.”

The twist of his sculpted lips wasn’t quite a smirk, but it mocked her all the same.

“Were you not the hellion who dared to invade my house this very morning?”

Heat crept up her cheeks at his words and his frank perusal. “I would not call it an invasion, my lord. I merely paid a call...”

“You barged through the front door.”

“I knocked!”

“Browbeat my butler—”

“I did no such thing!”

“Demanded to see my brother—”

“I asked! I asked to see your brother. But how is that relevant to the issue at hand?”

“You were fierce this morning. Don’t turn into a timid little mouse now. Come.”

Her mouth hung open as he extended his arm, as if he expected her to come with him without question. But perhaps the most surprising part was that she obeyed his command. Placing her hand on his arm, she hurried after him as he weaved through the people to bring her into his luxurious carriage. Nobody bumped into him or jostled them. The crowd seemed to part to grant them passage, no doubt dazzled by the sheer power he radiated.

No sooner had they boarded the coach and settled onto plush armchairs, than the train chugged forward, slowly at first, then gaining speed. King's Cross faded into the distance, giving way to the English countryside.

Looking at the handsome man lounging opposite her with all the menacing grace of a lion, she had the sense that she was embarking not on a brief trip, but on a grand adventure that would change the course of her entire life.

ASHFORD OBSERVED HIS unexpected guest from half raised lids and couldn't believe his luck. He would have hours of sitting in her presence, absorbing and capturing every little detail of her face. How fortunate that he never traveled without his modeling kit. He couldn't envision a better way to pass the time than shaping clay into pleasing forms. And the form of the woman sitting across from him was pleasing, indeed.

But first, he should put her at ease. She was sitting ramrod straight, her gaze staring out the window when not skittering around the luxurious interior. Despite the manifold comforts of his coach, which were not limited only to the visible luxuries, but also to a superb spring system that made the ride most smooth, she was decidedly uncomfortable.

"Would you like something to drink, Lady Renier?" He stood from his armchair and wandered over to a cabinet. Opening it, he perused the offerings, reacquainting himself with the contents of the bar. "We have brandy, whisky, port, claret—"

"No, thank you," she replied.

"Perhaps some tea, then?" he insisted.

"Are you able to provide tea inside a train?"

He pointed to the back of the coach. “Through that door, there is a small kitchen. I’m afraid it won’t be able to produce a full meal, but tea and sandwiches are well within its scope.”

“In that case, tea would be lovely, thank you.”

He nodded in response, attempting to look congenial, and went to the door. After giving the order to his servant, he walked to the other end of the carriage and went through the other door into his sleeping berth. From there, he retrieved the sculpting implements he would need to make the clay model. The trip provided the perfect opportunity to start sculpting her, sitting as she would be facing him, a captive audience, or perhaps a captive muse, for several hours. But there was no time to waste.

Returning to the main compartment, he found her in the same position he had left her. Still staring through the window at the passing scenery. The position left her face in profile, and he studied it.

Her face was a thing of beauty. He only hoped he could do her justice. Resuming his seat in the chair across from her, he opened a compartment on the wall and produced a table. When he propped up his armature on top of the table, her eyes focused on it, then a small frown marred her brow.

“What is that?”

“An armature. It is used to give stability to sculptures made of clay or other soft materials.”

“I see.” Her frown intensified. “Actually, no. I don’t see. What are you going to do with that thing?”

“I’m going to sculpt,” he said.

“Here? Now?” And then after a brief pause. “You sculpt?”

He smiled, gratified at having surprised her. There was genuine interest in her tone. Few people outside his family knew of his less-than-aristocratic passion for sculpting. When he’d left the country after the death of his wife, rumors had circulated that he was escaping scandal and prosecution. The idiots. In truth, he had been planning his trip to the land of the Renaissance since before the debacle with his wife. Her inconvenient death and all that came before that had only delayed his already laid plans.

“I do, Lady Renier. It’s one of my passions and the reason I moved to Tuscany. I wanted to improve my art. Tell me, do you have any passions yourself?” he asked with a wicked glint in his eyes while he laid out his instruments, inclined to tease her.

“You mean hobbies?” she replied primly, not raising to the bait. “I suppose I like to sketch.”

“Hmm, and what do you like to sketch?” he asked as he unpacked his roll of clay from its oilcloth wrapping and tested the moistness. It was an idle question, an attempt at small talk, so he was intrigued by the blush that gently flushed her face. This one was more violent than the previous, and her answer was evasive.

“Oh, nothing important. People, animals, landscapes, and such. It’s just a trifling hobby. You, however, seem to take sculpting with all due seriousness.”

“I do. Do you mind if I remove my coat? I find it’s not comfortable to wear while working, and it will only get smudged.”

“Certainly, my lord,” she stammered and then averted her eyes.

He had to bite down a smile while he removed his coat, then hung it on a peg. Her blushes were delicious. And so revealing. The curse of a fair redhead. How far down would those blushes go? Would they tinge the peaks of her bounteous breasts? Hmm, what a delightful prospect to explore.

## Page 5

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THE MARQUESS WENT TO hang his coat on a peg by the opposite wall, giving Thalia the perfect opportunity to feast her eyes on the magnificence of his broad back. Emphasized by the cut of his waistcoat, it was a perfect inverted triangle, tapering from wide shoulders to slim waist and well formed...buttocks. Her face flamed, and she snapped her eyes up. Just in time to avoid getting caught ogling him.

The glint of humor in his silver eyes told her he had an inkling of the effect he had on her. Of course he did. A man like him must be used to provoking such reactions in the female population. Hers would be quite obvious, given away by her blasted blushes.

He was a lot more difficult to read as he unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt and folded back his sleeves, uncovering muscled forearms dusted with golden hair. But when he sat down to mold the clay over the weird wiry structure he called 'armature', she really had trouble tearing her eyes from his hands.

Who knew hands could be so...erotic? But the way his skilled fingers molded, shaped, squeezed and caressed the clay made Thalia's mouth go dry, and another very private place go wet. His hands were big, like the rest of him, tanned, callused, powerful. But there was an innate elegance in their bone structure, the long fingers, the precise way in which they moved over the clay, creating a dip here, smoothing down over there.

The slide of his hands mesmerized her. What would it feel like to have those hands running over her naked body? Caressing her flesh with the same tenderness and skill he was bestowing on an inert piece of clay? A shiver ran through her.

"Are you cold, Lady Renier?" His deep voice, modulated in elegant accents, and



undercut by the barest hint of a growl, poured fuel on the inappropriate conflagration of desire burning inside her.

“No, of course not.” She had to clear her throat. “Your coach is very comfortable, my lord.”

Just at that moment, a servant entered with a tray featuring a tea service for one. Seeing that the marquess’s art and supplies occupied the table between them, he deposited the tray on top of the cabinet and opened a similar table beside her seat, then placed the tea tray on it.

“Would you like anything, my lord?” the servant asked.

“A whisky, please.”

The servant poured a glass, placed it on a corner of the marquess’s working table, then slipped out as silently as he had entered.

The marquess sampled his whisky, and Thalia hid her face behind her teacup to avoid staring at the column of his neck, the way it moved as he swallowed the fiery liquid. She took a bracing sip from her tea. It was excellent. The marquess surrounded himself with the finest things in life.

“So, tell me, Lady Renier, you mentioned you were a widow?”

“I am, my lord.”

“What a pity that such a vibrant lady should be widowed so young.”

“I’m not so young,” she protested. “Nor am I vibrant.”

He cut a quick look at her before shifting his focus once more towards the clay.

“And who was your husband?”

“Sir Phillip Renier.”

“A knight?”

“A baronet.”

“Doesn’t seem like a very advantageous marriage for an earl’s daughter. Was it a love match, then?”

Was he mocking her? She had been a wallflower during her two failed seasons. The chances of her securing a more advantageous marriage, let alone a love match, were few to none.

“My marriage suited me.”

He raised one eyebrow at her odd phrasing, but thankfully refrained from continuing that line of conversation. How rude. Would he like it if she started probing into his past and his wife? Then a chill slithered down her spine as she remembered the circumstances of his wife’s death and the rumors about his involvement.

“How long ago were you widowed?” He continued the interrogation.

“Two years, my lord.”

He grunted, looking pained. “All that ‘my-lording’ me is getting tiresome. Call me Liam.”

“I could not possibly use your given name, Lord Ashford.”

“Why not? What’s the use of a name if people may not use it? What is your given name?”

Was he always this direct and blunt? What about talking about the weather, the tea, the continent? Anything but intrusive questions about her.

“It’s Thalia, my lord.”

His attention snapped to her at that, and his eyes seemed to sparkle with wonder. A slow smile stretched his lips and transformed his austere face to breathtakingly handsome.

“Like the muse. What an appropriate name! I shall call you Thalia from now on.”

She stared. As much dazzled by his smile as humiliated by his mockery.

“There’s no need to mock me, my lord.”

His smile disappeared at once. Replaced by a puzzled frown. “I wasn’t mocking you. I truly think your name suits you. With your permission, I would like to use it. And it would honor me if you use mine.”

He seemed so sincere. His eyes, earnest and direct, softened her resistance. A thought floated unbidden to the forefront of Thalia’s mind: Now here was a man worth losing one’s virtue to. Ridiculous, of course. Not because it wasn’t true, but because someone like him would never be interested in a woman like her. But his flattery felt...nice. Like melted butter on a warm scone.

“I don’t know if I can use your name,” she confessed. It seemed wildly intimate.

“Sure you can.”

“It’s inappropriate.”

“There’s no one here to hear or judge. Practice saying it. Liam.”

“Liam,” she repeated obediently, her voice a little breathless from the mad race her heart had engaged in. But it appeared to please him. His attention fixated on her mouth, his eyes darkening.

“I like the way you say my name, Thalia.” His tongue seemed to caress the syllables of her name.

“I haven’t given you leave to use my name,” she protested, but she couldn’t prevent the smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. Did he think his name sounded good when she said it? Well, her name in his rich baritone was seduction incarnate.

“No? Hmm, I’ll just have to work harder on gaining your trust.” With a smile, he turned his attention again to his sculpture, his fingers sliding with almost indecent sensuality through the pliant clay.

She cleared her throat. “Why would you want to? I thought your only purpose was to extricate your brother from my sister’s clutches and then wash your hands of my family.”

“I thought you wanted the same.”

“I do. But what leads you to believe that my sister is not a suitable bride for your brother? For your information, she is a young lady of excellent character and impeccable breeding.”

“So is my brother,” he replied smoothly.

“Your brother is a rake.”

He tsked. “Don’t be so judgmental, Thalia. My brother is an unattached young man. It’s expected that he would...entertain himself. But he has never compromised an innocent.”

“Until my sister.”

“Is your sister innocent?”

Oh, that galled. Especially coming from him. How dare he impugn her sister’s honor! Her mouth fired before her brain could weigh the consequences.

“Are you, Lord Ashford?”

She immediately regretted her words. His face shuttered, extinguishing the friendly banter and sense of camaraderie between them.

“I am sorry. I shouldn’t have said that,” she stammered.

His hands paused in its caressing of the clay. “It’s quite all right. At least you asked, instead of condemning without question.”

“Still. It was unforgivably rude of me.”

He took a sip of his whisky, studying her. “Do you wish to know the answer?”

She very much did, but the intensity of his gaze disconcerted her. “If you want to tell me.”

His smile was cryptical. “Weirdly enough, I do want to tell you.” He wiped his hands on a rag, grabbed his glass of whisky, and reclined back in his chair. Crossing one long leg over the other, his ankle resting on the opposite knee. “Are you sure you are ready to hear the sordid story, Lady Thalia?”

She gulped. As much for his words, as for his casual display of comfortable masculinity. Ready or not, she found herself riveted. Never had she been so interested in something as she was in the tale of the Murderous Marquess.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

LIAM COULDN'T TELL why he felt compelled to tell this woman he had known for less than a day his side of the story. He had never cared what people thought. Had not said a word to defend himself when society collectively condemned him and speculated about his affairs. Friends, acquaintances, family members, they received no word from him. It proved much simpler to just disregard them. To immerse himself in his passion and leave the country in search of a more congenial society.

Why her, why now? It could have been the direct way she looked at him. He didn't detect fear or condemnation in her eyes, but a genuine interest that was not born out of idle curiosity, but an interest in him as an individual.

Or maybe it was because he didn't want her to regard him as a monster. For some inexplicable reason, her opinion of him mattered.

It was painful to rehash the past. He had spent five years doing his damndest to put it out of his mind. And yet, for her, he would do it. He was about to rip the bandage and lance the wound. Then he'd pray to God that it would finally heal.

"Do you believe I'm a murderer?"

She shook her head. "No. But I don't know you at all, my lord. Most of it happened before my time in society. The year that your wife died, I had my third and last season. That's how I heard about the scandal surrounding her death. And then all this other information became the talk of the town, so it was impossible to ignore it. I learned that you and your wife had been estranged for years."

Well, that turned out to be a brief, yet precise recount of the facts. "That is true. My

marriage was not a happy one, almost right from the start. We had not been married a year when we separated.”

That was an abbreviated version as well. No need to tell Thalia he caught his wife in bed with another man. Or that he had been such a besotted fool, that if she had cried and shown repentance, he would have forgiven her. But his wife had been such a shameless jade that she couldn’t even pretend to be sorry. She took his love and his pride and dragged them through the mud. Until nothing was left of either. If he had not distanced himself from her, she would have destroyed him.

“I gave her a house in Town, and a comfortable pension to live on,” he continued, focusing his attention on the glass of whisky. It proved easier than looking into her eyes. “I knew she flaunted her affairs, but by then, I didn’t care. The only condition I put was that she did not get with child. I could not accept another man’s child as my heir, so I made it very clear to her that if she ever conceived, I would seek a divorce,” he finished, at last looking at her.

Thalia nodded, her eyes not wavering.

“For many years, our arrangement worked. We led separate lives and pursued our own pleasures. But then, a few months before that fateful night, she informed me of her pregnancy. I reminded her of our agreement, and despite her entreaties and protests, sued for divorce. She wasn’t happy about it, of course, but there was nothing she could do to stop me. She had a notorious reputation for her affairs, making it easy to find evidence of her adultery. With the monetary inducement, and the abundance of evidence against her, the divorce progressed rapidly. I even hoped to obtain it before her child was born, so that her lover could marry her if he so wished, and her child would not be a bastard. But then there was a fire in her London house, and both her and her lover died in the fire.”

“I remember,” Thalia said. “How...horrible.”



“Yes, it was. I didn’t love her, or even like her much as a person by that point. But I never wished her dead. And to suggest I would have harmed an unborn child...” he shook his head. “A divorce would have sufficed.”

“Of course.”

“As you can see, I didn’t have a reason to murder her. But people like to speculate and create drama. The papers, in particular, had a field day with the events. They printed headlines such as ‘Ashford to Ashes’ and called her the ‘Marchioness of Ashes’. There were satirical cartoons of me setting a building on fire, while she...copulated with her lover inside, and the flames engulfed them both.”

Thalia gasped. “How positively horrendous.”

“It was. But society loves a good scandal. When the Ton took up the tale and judged and condemned me, I decided I’d had enough.”

“So you left the country,” she said.

“I did. But not for the reason the Ton claimed. I had received an invitation to train with one of the preeminent Italian master sculptors. That’s why I moved to Italy. I’ve spent the last five years there, sculpting and healing. Not only from the scandal, but from the fifteen years of my marriage. But of course, society assumed I was fleeing the country, so I suppose that didn’t help with the rumors.”

“Do you plan to leave again?”

He studied her through half-lidded eyes. “I haven’t decided yet. It’s about time I returned and took care of my responsibilities here. But I enjoy my life in Tuscany as well. I have this beautiful villa up on the hills around Florence. Maybe I will divide my time between London and Florence.”

“With your experience of marriage, it’s no wonder you are concerned about your brother.”

“And what about you, Thalia?” he asked, savoring her name on his tongue. “You already know my tale of woe, but why are you so set against marriage? Was Sir Phillip not a satisfactory husband?”

He took another sip of whisky, knowing he had scored a point when her cheeks flushed and her gaze skittered away.

“My experience with marriage is not the reason I have misgivings about the wisdom of my sister’s marriage to your brother. Rather, his reputation as a rogue, and the utter lack of rights married women have, are.”

“But I already told you he is no rake. He is actually a solid chap. Your sister could do a lot worse.”

“And I have told you my sister is a virtuous woman who would never play your brother false, but you are not willing to take my word for it. Are you?”

Ah, his little muse had teeth. He liked her even more for standing up to him. “I suppose not.”

“What do you intend to do if we find them before they marry?”

“Merely talk to my brother. Try to make him see reason. If he persists in marrying, there’s not much else I can do. My brother is of age and financially independent.”

“But you still worry about him.”

It wasn’t a question, but he answered it, anyway. “I do. Force of habit, I guess. Our

parents died when he was very young, and I became responsible for him.”

“That is the same way I feel about my sister. Her parents are alive, but I am six years older. I have always tried to protect her from danger.”

He admired her for that. Even if her worries were misguided regarding his brother, he liked that she cared enough to worry, to even undertake this journey in order to safeguard her sister from what she considered a catastrophe. A woman like her would be fiercely loyal to those she loved...

Now, where did that thought come from? And what did it matter, anyway? Her qualities of loyalty or otherwise were of no concern to him.

“Even when it means putting yourself in danger for her?”

She frowned. “Am I in danger, Liam?”

Oh, fuck. He was in trouble. The way she said his name, with that mixture of daring and shyness, seasoned with a hint of desire... Well, it did something to him. His cock jumped in his trousers, forcing him to cross his legs to avoid embarrassing himself.

“With me? No. But I shudder to imagine what could have happened to you if you had undertaken this trip all alone.”

“I doubt anything makes you shudder, Liam.”

He could think of several things that would make him shudder. A vivid image of her lips wrapped around his cock flashed through his mind, and he had to suppress a groan. Wrestling his thoughts into a semblance of control, he considered her question. Was she in danger? No, but she certainly was a danger to his sanity.

“Oh, you’d be surprised, Thalia.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

DARKNESS HAD ALREADY fallen when the train entered the city of York. Thalia yawned sleepily and attempted to surreptitiously stretch her back. She was tired, and her shoulders were tense. No doubt the result of hours traveling in an uncomfortable corset. And that occurred despite the plush accommodations of the marquess's luxurious coach. She didn't want to think what condition she would be in if she had traveled in the second-class wagon as she had intended.

She looked at Liam, who was meticulously putting away all his sculpting tools and supplies in preparation for their arrival. When he cleared the table, the servant immediately came to wipe and put the table away. The marquess looked as fresh and rested as when they first started the journey. It seemed incredibly unfair, but the comfort of gentlemen's attire greatly exceeded that of women's clothing! As the day progressed, he kept discarding garments with the casual carelessness of someone accustomed to wearing fewer layers, until he ended up in a tempting state of dishabille.

His necktie was the first to go, followed by his waistcoat. His shirt gaped open at the neck to reveal a sliver of muscled chest dusted with golden hair. At some point, he had also removed his shoes, and now he pranced around in stockinged feet. She had never seen a gentleman in such a state of undress. Not even her husband, who had always appeared dressed for an audience with the queen.

As she had spoken her thoughts aloud, the object of her musings said, "You should have made use of the sleeping berth, as I recommended."

Not a chance. The 'berth' as he called it, proved to be a sumptuous bed fit for a king. She could not possibly lie on it without thinking about its owner just a few feet away,

and imagining all the wicked things they could do in that bed. She really was in a bad state. Had she stooped so low as to salivate over a handsome gentleman as if she were a starving she-wolf? The ridiculous image made her smile despite the unflattering comparison.

“I am perfectly fine, Liam.” God, how she loved saying his name. Despite her initial misgivings, she loved the small intimacy. “Your carriage is very comfortable. Although I’m looking forward to a hot bath and a soft bed tonight.”

Was it her imagination that his eyes darkened and his face took on a predatory look? It was probably just in response to her racy comment about baths and beds. That had been a tad inappropriate. She hadn’t even meant it that way. At least not consciously. Her exhaustion had loosened her tongue. But she couldn’t regret the reaction it had provoked in him.

Was he experiencing the same pull of attraction she was? It seemed impossible, and yet, the glint in his eyes as they roamed her face provided encouragement. It was not the first time she had caught him looking at her surreptitiously during the journey.

What would it be like to lie with him? He looked like he knew his way around a woman’s body. An image of those skilled fingers working the clay had her blushing. Ridiculous, of course. He wouldn’t be interested. But if he made an advance, what would she say?

Yes!

The answer formed, unbidden, in her mind. Did that make her a wanton? And why not? She was a widow. Nobody expected her to be untouched. As long as she was discreet, an affair wouldn’t ruin her. This was probably her one and only chance to experience pleasure in a man’s arms. To enjoy a night of unbridled passion without ties or consequences.

She had resigned herself to be unwanted, to never experience the heady elixir of feeling beautiful and desirable. However, this man's attentions made her want things.

But she was getting way ahead of herself. He had not indicated by deed or word that he was interested in pursuing a liaison with her. Like a pitiful, love-starved widow, she was probably reading too much into his glances. Better rein her low impulses before she made a fool of herself, as her stepmother liked to remind her.

The train decelerated as it approached the station, and she stood to get her gloves and hat. But just as she lifted her arms to affix her hat, the train screeched to a sudden halt. The floor slid from under her. With nothing to grab on to, she took several quick steps, trying to regain her balance, before she lost her footing. And then she was falling through the air, until powerful arms circled her, holding her secure.

She wasn't sure how it happened, but she ended up on the marquess's lap. Their eyes met, the shock of the moment quickly giving way to a simmering desire they had both been denying for hours.

"I'm sorry, my lord," she said, horrified, as she scrambled to get up.

Instead of letting go, his arms tightened around her, preventing her escape.

"Wait. Damn, this feels good." His voice came out as a strangled growl.

"Oh..." She didn't know what else to say while his unyielding body was under her, around her, surrounding her with his strength and warmth.

"I've been wanting to have you on my lap like this since the moment you barged into my house."

The confession sounded gruff, torn from his mouth against his will.

She wriggled, trying to get comfortable, and he grunted as if in pain. His hands descended on her hips to immobilize her.

“Don’t. Move,” he hissed.

“I-I apologize. My weight is probably hurting you—”

Without a word, he pulled her closer, his lips crashing onto hers with ravening hunger. He didn’t ask permission; he didn’t cajole or seduce. He simply possessed, sure of his victory.

Thalia didn’t have time to think, as his kiss robbed her of her sanity. Her hands found their way to his broad shoulders, clutching the fabric of his shirt as if to anchor herself amid the storm created by their shared passion. The kiss was desperate and wild, a raw expression of the longing they had both kept at bay.

The world outside the train ceased to exist; there was only the heat of their bodies, the mingling of their breaths, and the undeniable pull between them. Liam’s kiss deepened, his tongue teasing her lips apart, exploring with a fervor that sent shivers down her spine.

Thalia melted against him, her own hunger matching his. Her fingers tangled in the long silvery locks of his hair, pulling him closer still. Even inexperienced as she was in the ways of passion, she understood the unspoken desires. The pull of a connection that defied reason and propriety.

As the train moved again, the spell broke, but only slightly. They pulled apart just enough to catch their breath, their foreheads resting against each other, hearts pounding in unison. The undeniable truth hung heavy between them: there was no going back from this moment, and neither of them wanted to.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

DAMN, THAT HAD BEEN reckless. But when her sweet, plump bottom had landed on his lap, he had gotten instantly hard. He had been watching her all day. Fighting desire, suppressing his baser instincts. Imagining how it would feel to have her in his arms. And when it finally happened... It was even better than his imagination. It had felt so right. As if she filled a void he didn't even know he had. Kissing her had not been a premeditated action, rather a necessity.

And now? Where did they go from here? He didn't know. Couldn't think with his cock still swollen and achy, pillowed by the mounds of her arse.

"Where are you sleeping tonight?" He heard the raspiness of his voice and cleared his throat. If only he could also clear his brain from the fog of desire.

"I'm not certain. I was planning to proceed to Elvington by coach tonight. And then, after I talked to my sister, find accommodations at the local inn—"

"Do you even know if there's an inn in Elvington?"

"All towns have an inn."

"What if they are full?"

She rolled her eyes. "That's being a bit pessimistic, don't you think?"

"And you are being reckless by pressing on to an unknown town, at night, without even having secured a place to stay."

She humphed, standing up from his lap before he could stop her. He almost wished for another sudden stop that would tumble her onto his lap again, but the train was entering the station now, going so slowly that even when it halted, it was unlikely it would make her lose her balance. She faced him with her hands on her waist.

“And what are your plans?”

“Stay in York tonight, then continue on to Elvington first thing tomorrow.”

“But tomorrow it might already be too late! They could have married by then.”

“If they wanted to marry today, they would have done it as soon as they got to Elvington, and there’s naught to gain by rushing there.”

“Oh... Do you think there’s a chance they are married already?”

Her expression of concern caused a pang of sympathy. She really cared about her sister and genuinely believed that marriage was a mistake. He knew why he was against marriage himself. But why was his muse so set against it? He very much wanted to find out.

“I don’t know, sweetheart. All I know is they would have arrived hours ahead of us. If they wished to marry immediately, and the vicar was amenable, they could have done so by now. If not, the marriage would probably happen tomorrow. It’s highly unlikely the ceremony would take place at night. So either way, there’s no advantage to press on to Elvington today.”

“I see.” She lowered her head and sighed, a frown marred her smooth brow.

The train had already stopped at the station, and passengers were descending. He needed to extend the invitation now.

“I have secured accommodations in the Royal Rose. It’s one of York’s best inns. Stay with me tonight.” That had not come out as smooth as he wished, but blast it, he was out of time and desperate.

She stared at him wide-eyed, mouth agape. Damn. She was going to say no. Of course she would. She was a decent woman. He was too used to dealing with demireps. Society women required more finesse. More wooing. He opened his mouth to amend his botched invitation, but she beat him to it.

“In your room?”

She seemed unsure, but not outraged. It gave him hope.

“If you wish.” He approached her and took her hand. Her still ungloved hand. She didn’t resist, so he brought her hand to his mouth for a kiss, his lips lingering on her fingers. Several emotions flashed through her eyes. Too fast for him to decipher.

“I-I wish,” she stammered.

The joy that slammed through him at her acquiescence was a testament to how much he wanted her.

“There’s only one condition,” she said.

“Yes? Anything you wish.”

“Can you promise me you’d take the utmost care to prevent...unwanted consequences?”

It took him a moment to understand what she meant. And then he mentally kicked himself for not thinking about it.

“Of course. I promise.”

Bloody hell, he didn't have any sheaths with him. It was not as if he was planning on any sexual encounters when he set off on this journey. Still, he would fulfill his promise. If he could not procure some sheaths, he would spend outside. The image that flashed through his mind of emptying on her stomach was so erotic he could get hard again. If only—

“There are these sheaths,” she said, turning bright red. But she soldiered on. “They help prevent conception.”

“I know, Thalia,” he said, amused. “I have used them before.”

“Oh, I didn't mean to imply otherwise. Obviously, you'd know...”

“I just don't have any with me at the moment. Believe it or not, I was not planning a seduction when I embarked on this trip.”

“Of course.” She bit her lip, frowning. “Are you able to acquire some?”

He almost laughed at her persistence but refrained. Pregnancy and disease were not things to take lightly.

“I will do my utmost.” He pulled her hand, bringing her close against him to murmur near her ear. “If I failed to get these prophylactics, does that mean you won't spend the night with me?”

Her gaze flew to his, hesitating, stricken. Damn, she wanted this. Almost as much as he did. But was too wise to trust, to put her fate in his hands.

“I am not sure.”

He couldn't let her slip away. "I'll try my best to acquire the sheaths. But even without them, I can give you pleasure without consequences. We don't have to proceed to intercourse to find ecstasy in each other."

Although he would do his best to find these damn sheaths if he had to visit every fucking apothecary shop in the whole of York.

"All right, then."

Triumph exploded in his chest. That she trusted him enough to take care of her. That she was willing at all to allow him the privilege of sharing their bodies. He would make it so good for her, she would never regret it. Or forget it.

A knock on the carriage door had her jumping away. He opened the door to find the porter.

"Begging your pardon, milord. The train is empty now. Soon we'll need to unhitch your car and put it away."

"Right. We'll be disembarking momentarily. Have they handled our luggage?"

"Yes, milord. Your servant has all the trunks and has secured a coach to take you to the inn."

Mathias was as efficient as ever. Turning away from the porter, he extended his hand to Thalia.

"Are you ready to go, my darling?"

Her smile was dazzling as she responded without hesitation.

“I’m ready, my lord.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

IF THALIA HAD HAD ANY hesitations about the wisdom of pressing on to Elvington tonight, the steady rain that was soaking the city, and no doubt making the roads muddy and treacherous, would have dissuaded her from that course.

The hired carriage rolled its way through slick cobblestoned streets on the way to the inn. She was immensely grateful that Liam had made such efficient arrangements. In her impulsive pursuit of her sister, she had not stopped to think about all the risks she would incur by traveling alone.

What would she have done if Liam had not found her? If he had not offered his company and protection? It galled her independent nature to think that a capable man was useful in these circumstances. Yes, maybe she could have found a cab on her own and secured a room in an inn by herself. But she would have been putting her safety in peril.

As she studied the man seated across from her, studying her intently through half-lidded eyes, a pang of desire slithered through her. It was not only because of his usefulness that she was glad for his company. The promise of pleasure reflecting in his gaze had her emotions swirling in a chaotic dance inside her.

His offer of spending the night together was nothing less than a dream come true. She had fantasized about it. But even after that devastating kiss, she had not believed it would come true. When he invited her to his room, she felt shocked, flattered, and scared. But above all, excited.

At last, she would know about passion. She would enjoy the physical pleasures. Revel in having his magnificent body skin to skin with hers...

Was it hot in here?

“Come here,” he commanded, as if in tune with her desire.

His voice was deep, dark, mysterious, and so sensual it turned her insides to warm honey. She could do nothing but obey it without question. Standing up, she maneuvered her skirts in the tight carriage, intending to sit beside him. But as soon as she was standing up, he grabbed her by the waist and tumbled her onto his waiting lap.

“Hmm, much better now. Here is where you belong,” he growled a moment before his mouth captured her once more with the same urgency as before.

She had not had nearly enough of him, either. Soon she was clutching his lapels, straining against him, basking in the feelings he elicited. Feeling the ridge of his rock-hard arousal pressing into her hip. How she longed to see his member. Encircle it with her fingers. Test to see if it was as hard and as big as it felt.

The coach rolled to a stop, and the shudder of the carriage told her the coachman and Liam’s servant had jumped from their perch to help unload their luggage. Neither of them had packed heavily, but still... She appreciated not having to carry her portmanteau by herself.

“I will procure another room for you, so that there’s no question of impropriety,” he said, his lips brushing her temples. “But you will sleep with me.” His tone was possessive, allowing no argument.

His concern was heartwarming. Even so, she balked at the unnecessary expense.

“I appreciate it, but I’m sure that’s unnecessary. This far from home; we are unlikely to arouse gossip. Nobody here knows me.”



“Better to be safe. You asked me for no consequences. And that includes no scandal.”

“Thank you. I shouldn’t complain, but it seems so wasteful to have an empty room.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry about that. My servant will make use of it and consider himself lucky for the privilege.”

He was so adept at organizing secret liaisons. How many of them had he had over the years? She shouldn’t complain. It would be better for her if he had experience. After all, it’s not as if she wanted to marry him. She just wanted a night of pleasure with a man who knew what he was about. And if his arrangements were any indication, he very much knew.

“Come,” the marquess extended his hand to her, after he descended from the coach.

His servant covered him with an enormous umbrella, but rain soaked the ground, which had turned into a muddy mess. With a sigh of regret for the only shoes she had brought with her, which would get irredeemably wet, she stepped one foot on the step. Only to be swept into the marquess’s arms.

She squealed, grabbing onto his massive shoulders for support, and hopefully to make herself lighter to carry.

“Put me down,” she hissed.

“Your shoes will get dirty,” he replied reasonably as he strode towards the inn’s entrance. It was a short distance away, but seemed so very distant.

“You’ll hurt yourself carrying me,” she whispered.

He looked at her with such affront that she wondered if she had offended him

somehow.

“Do you think I’m so feeble that I can’t carry a woman a few steps?” he asked, his tone full of disbelief and outrage.

“No, I don’t think you are feeble.” He was probably the strongest man she had ever met, if the size of his muscles were any sign. “But I’m too heavy,” she added, humiliated at having to spell it out.

His indignant gaze turned tender as he shouldered his way into the inn and lowered her slowly to the ground.

“You are not too heavy. You are a delightful, proper armful.”

“Please, don’t patronize me. I know—”

He kissed her, hard and swift, interrupting her tirade. “Cease your protests before I carry you all the way upstairs, just to prove that I can,” he threatened.

She glared at him, but it lost its effect when her mouth twitched at the ridiculousness of their argument. “Fine. I’ll shut up now. But next time, give me a warning before you sweep me off my feet.”

“What fun would that be?”

The innkeeper, an older and distinguished-looking gentleman with a white beard and hair, greeted them warmly.

“Would you like to have a seat in the parlor while I arrange for our rooms?”

Thalia agreed with a nod and looked around. The inn’s parlor, with its plush

armchairs and intricately patterned rugs, was just what a weary traveler needed. Warmth enveloped her as the soft glow of gas lamps and the rich scent of polished wood greeted her. The faint aroma of a delicious stew and freshly baked bread conspired to make her stomach grumble and reminded her she had only had one meal today, if the admittedly excellent tea service she'd enjoyed on the train could be called a proper meal.

She settled into a comfortable chair, right by the ornate fireplace that crackled merrily, giving off pleasant warmth on this rainy and cold day. But all too soon, the marquess was calling her.

“Would you join me for dinner, my lady?” he said, bowing and offering his arm. “I’ve arranged for it to be served in a private parlor,” he said. “And then to have baths sent up to our rooms.”

“Dinner and a bath sound marvelous,” she said as she took his arm, and they walked down a hall tastefully adorned with paintings and featuring gleaming brass fixtures.

The private dining room, with its table set with a crisp white tablecloth, sparkling crystal, and gleaming silverware, promised a culinary experience of the highest caliber. Liam led her to a chair and gallantly pulled it for her to take a seat.

Following fast on their heels, the servants entered with trays laden with covered dishes. They set everything up on the dining table and, after ascertaining that everything was satisfactory, departed unobtrusively. The service was as excellent as everything else in the inn.

“Thank you,” she said while removing her gloves and sitting down at the lavishly laid out table.

Liam sat across from her. Together, they uncovered the plates, revealing an array of

sumptuous dishes that promised to satisfy even the most discerning palate.

An oxtail soup, hearty and aromatic, a generous slice of succulent roast beef, accompanied by fluffy Yorkshire puddings, roasted potatoes, and a medley of seasonal vegetables, all drizzled with a rich gravy and no less than three desserts. Everything looked and smelled delicious, and her mouth watered with delight.

Until she spotted Liam staring at her, barely paying attention to the food. She froze, reminding herself not to appear too eager for food. That was extremely unbecoming, especially for someone her size. She smiled, embarrassed, and dipped her spoon in the soup, taking a tentative sip.

The flavor was exquisite, and it tore a reluctant groan from her throat. She closed her eyes to better enjoy the taste, and when she opened them, Liam was pouring her a glass of wine, his gaze never straying from her mouth.

“Aren’t you going to eat your meal?” she asked, discomfited by his attention.

“I will. But it is such a pleasure to watch you enjoy your food. You eat with gusto, savoring the flavors.”

“You are making me self-conscious.” She put down her spoon and frowned at her food.

“You shouldn’t be. The Italians have a saying: *Chi mangia bene, vive bene* . Meaning, that who eats well, lives well. I’ve found it’s true. A person who takes pleasure in food, also knows how to enjoy other life’s pleasures... Such as sex.”

Well, her face was probably flaming, judging by the heat she felt around her ears.

“I haven’t. Enjoyed the pleasures of sex, that is,” she confessed.

As much as she yearned to experience passion in this man's arms, she didn't want to mislead him into thinking she was accomplished in bed. That would lead to severe disappointment on his part and great humiliation for her.

But far from being deterred, his eyes glowed with possessive hunger. "I'm sorry your previous lovers have been such dunces. But if your response to my kisses is any indication, you shall enjoy pleasure tonight."

His words, as much as the wicked promise in his eyes, melted away her apprehension in a surge of heat. She cleared her throat and sipped her wine, attempting to calm her rioting emotions.

"Not unless you can secure the sheaths," she retorted cheekily.

His smile was devilish. "Oh, even without intercourse, I can and will show you pleasure like you have never experienced, my dear."

"Oh." She tried to hide her disappointment. She had rather hoped for the intercourse part.

As if reading her thoughts, the marquess went on, hiding a smirk behind his glass of wine. "But never fret. Mathias is combing the streets at this very moment, looking for an apothecary shop or some such establishment that can provide the sheaths. I have perfect confidence in his abilities. He's a resourceful chap."

Her eyes widened in shock. "You sent your servant out to buy sheaths for you?"

"Yes. And why not? It's not the first time he has fetched them for me. It's part of his duties," he said with a nonchalant shrug.

"But he will know what they are for."

“I sure hope so. The lad doesn’t strike me as naïve.”

“I mean, he’ll know we will...” she trailed off, unable to say it.

“He knows, anyway, dear. He’s the one who will sleep in your room. But don’t worry, he’s loyal to me, and the embodiment of discretion.”

“If you say so,” she muttered, still uncomfortable with the idea. “I hope you don’t ask him to wash your used sheaths as well.”

That produced a big guffaw. “Absolutely not.” He leaned forward as if to impart a big secret. “I never reuse my sheaths.”

THIS DINNER WAS TURNING into one of the most sensual experiences of his life. He couldn’t tear his eyes from her lips, the way she licked them after taking a sip of her wine. Watching her neck ripple when she swallowed had become an obsession. And the rise and fall of her breasts on every sigh of pleasure was almost more than he could endure.

His erection was becoming painful, and if Mathias didn’t return soon with sheaths, he would be reduced to roaming the streets himself to get the damn things. He had meant what he said before. He could show her pleasure without intercourse, but he was afraid his cock would never forgive him. His organ might wither and die of despair if it couldn’t sink into her sweet haven tonight. He chuckled at the melodrama of his thoughts.

“Did I say something humorous, my lord?”

“No. I was just thinking.”

She raised an eyebrow questioningly, but there was no way he could tell her about the

direction of his wayward thoughts. A knock on the door saved him from having to make something up. He called permission to enter, and a maid peeked in.

“Milord, milady, just to inform you that your baths are ready in your rooms when you please.”

“Thank you. We’ll be up soon.”

The meal was almost over, but he wanted to savor the dessert. He was partial to sweets, and the delicious Topsy Cake was one of his favorites. The first bite of the succulent dessert did not disappoint. He was quite looking forward to seeing her lick a trace of custard or whipped cream off her lips, or close her eyes and sigh in ecstasy while the flavors of the sponge cake soaked in sherry exploded in her mouth. Who would have thought dessert could be so tantalizing? He’d be the one to explode in his pants like a callow youth if he didn’t cease these lurid imaginings.

“You should try the dessert,” he told her after washing down the initial mouthful with a sip of sherry. “It’s excellent.”

“No, thank you. I don’t eat dessert.”

Well, that brought this particular fantasy crashing down. “You don’t like dessert?”

“It’s not good for the constitution,” she replied primly.

What balderdash. He had not expected such a ridiculous statement from a woman who so obviously enjoyed the finer things in life.

“Says who? I love desserts, and they have never done any damage to my constitution. Have you ever tried the Topsy Cake?”

“Not since I was little. It was a favorite of my mother’s, and we sometimes indulged together as a treat.” The dreamy, nostalgic gleam in her eyes told him all he needed to know. “But my stepmother banished desserts from the house. My late husband was of the same opinion. I haven’t enjoyed one in years.”

Well, that was sad. And a state of affairs he couldn’t allow to continue.

“Here, try this,” he said, offering a spoonful of cake overflowing with custard and sweet cream. She looked at it hesitantly, but the temptation was evident on her face. “Open your mouth, Thalia.”

She met his eyes and licked her lips in anticipation, making his cock twitch. But when she closed her mouth over the decadent morsel, and hummed in pleasure as the flavors caressed her palate, the rush of lust to his groin almost made him regret offering her the cake. Fuck, but he was in a state. Unless he paced himself, this encounter could turn embarrassing for him.

“That was delicious.”

He used his thumb to wipe a bit of cream from the corner of her lips and brought it to his mouth to lick it off. “You are right. Quite delicious.”



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THE DESIRE BETWEEN them was a palpable thing. Like an arc of electricity. Thalia felt every fiber of her body humming with a mix of anticipation and trepidation. After licking the cream he had wiped from her lips, making her insides melt with the heat in his gaze, Liam had finished the rest of his dessert in silence.

“Are you ready to retire?” he asked. “If you wish, I can escort you to your room now. We wouldn’t want the baths to get cold.”

“Oh! Yes, of course.”

Now that the time had come, old fears came back to war with the desire coursing through her veins. She clutched her napkin. She could do this. This is what she wanted. More than anything.

His hand covered hers over the napkin. Enveloping her in warmth, his rough fingers caressing tenderly, smoothing the tension.

“We don’t need to do anything if you are having second thoughts.”

His manner was neutral, but profound disappointment hit her like a cannonball to the chest, opening a gaping hole for all her fears to rush in. He was backing out.

“You don’t want to?”

She hated the way her voice sounded so timid. Why was she like this? She was an independent and decisive woman in every other aspect of her life, but when it came to relationships, she turned into an insecure, mumbling idiot. This attractive, confident,

powerful man had shown interest in her, and before she even got to fully enjoy his attentions, she had already turned him off.

His sarcastic snort cut through her pity party.

“Thalia, if I wanted you any more, I would have already disgraced myself. It’s not that, sweetheart.”

“Then why do you want to back out?”

“I don’t. At this very moment, my baser instincts are urging me to shut up, drag you upstairs, and ravish you. But a moment ago, you looked so uncertain. Nervous. I don’t want you to feel beholden to me in any way. Or to think you have to go through with it simply because you agreed before. You can change your mind at any moment, for any reason, and I will abide by your wishes.”

The sincerity of his tone, the kindness behind his words, the profound respect for her as a person that he displayed, dissolved her hesitation like the sun dissolves the fog. How could people ever think that this man was capable of murdering his wife? Society didn’t know him at all. He deserved equal sincerity from her.

Turning her hand in his, she interlocked their fingers. “I haven’t changed my mind. I’m nervous because I’ve never done this before. But I want you, too. Now more than ever.”

His smile was radiant. He brought their joined hands to his lips to kiss her fingers.

“In that case, I’m even more honored that you would choose me. Now, let’s not think about this anymore and just feel. Tonight is just for feeling.”

They climbed the stairs hand in hand. When the marquess opened the door to their

room, her eyes were immediately drawn to the enormous bed that dominated the space. Made up with soft, inviting linens, it promised a restful night's sleep. If sleep had been what they had in mind for tonight.

A fire crackled in the marble fireplace, and someone had set a huge copper bath next to it. Steam rose from the surface of the water, carrying with it the aroma of lavender, vanilla, and something darker, more exotic. It was the smell of seduction. Everything was exquisite and of the finest quality. As a widow of limited means, she could never have afforded something so sumptuous.

“Do you need help to get out of your gown?”

“No. Since I was traveling alone, I wore a gown I could manage on my own.”

He nodded and gave her a playful kiss. “My practical muse. That being the case, I’ll leave you to enjoy your bath.”

“You are not coming in?”

His smirk was wicked as he promised. “I’ll come in a little while. I have to see about those sheaths. Lock the door after I leave.”

With a wink, he closed the door behind him. She locked it, then placed a hand over her chest to calm her rioting heart.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU only got one?” Liam asked his servant after the young man returned with the requested item.

“There were no more to be had, milord,” Mathias replied, eyes wide.

“In this entire city?”

“Most apothecary establishments were already closed. I finally found one cantankerous old apothecary who was closing shop for the day and persuaded him to stay open long enough to sell me the sheath. Wasn’t easy either. If you could have seen his expression of disgust as we completed the transaction... But I guess his greed overcame his scruples. Still, he kept muttering the whole time about depravity and sin. He said he only had one left, and he never planned to restock them again. Mentioned an exorbitant price and told me I could take it or leave it.” The servant shrugged. “I figured you’d want me to pay the price and bring you the item as soon as possible, rather than keep searching with no guarantee of finding another open shop. If you want, I could go back out and try to find more.”

The explanation made sense, and yes, Mathias’s judgment was sound.

“No, thank you. That’s fine, Mathias. You did good. Go have some dinner while I take a bath and then you can order a bath for yourself and make use of my room, as I don’t plan on staying there tonight. Good night.”

With that, he turned and marched towards his room to enjoy his bath. He shouldn’t complain. He would rather have one than none. Wouldn’t be nearly enough, he was sure, but perhaps tonight needn’t be the end of their affair. He was of the mind to stay in London for a while. And if he hoped to use Thalia as a model for his sculpture, he would have to keep seeing her. Maybe he could make a more long-term arrangement with his delightful muse.

With a snort, he entered his room and began undressing for his bath. He was in a fine state. He hadn’t even bedded the woman once, and he was already planning a longer arrangement? Not to mention that she was the sister of his brother’s bride. The potential for complications was great. But damn it all to hell; he knew that one night with her wouldn’t be enough to slake the lust she awakened in him.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THALIA STAYED IN THE glorious-smelling bath until the water turned tepid. Not only was the aroma of the bath salts delicious, but the soap provided by the inn was also a delicate rose fragrance that intoxicated the senses. She had never enjoyed such a decadent, luxurious bath.

As she dried herself with the nice soft towel, she looked at the extra shift she had packed for this trip. It was a plain, serviceable white linen garment with no embellishments of any kind. What would the marquess think of it? Of course, there was no way she could have expected this evening when she set out after her sister this morning, but still. Maybe she should forgo the shift and wait for the marquess completely naked in bed?

The image tantalized her for a second, but she wasn't brave enough, or comfortable enough, with her body to await the marquess in the nude.

She was reaching for the shift, which she had draped over the back of a chair by the bath, when a key rattled in the lock and the door swiveled open. She gave a little shriek of surprise as she ineffectively tried to cover her nakedness with the towel.

The marquess walked in, dressed only in a shirt and trousers. His gaze grew intense and focused on her body as he slowly and deliberately locked the door behind him without taking his eyes off her.

"Drop the towel," his deep voice uttered with uncompromising command.

"No! What are you doing here? I'm not ready yet," she hissed, tugging and pulling on the towel, attempting to cover as much of her body as she could.

He didn't stop his advance towards her, his eyes roaming the contours of her body. When he stood in front of her, he put one finger under her chin and lifted her face towards him. The intensity of the desire in his eyes thrilled and scared her at the same time. She licked her lips. His nostrils flared and his gaze focused on her mouth.

"You look ready for me. And I'm more than ready. Drop the towel, Thalia," he repeated while his thumb caressed her lower lip.

A little whimper escaped her at the caress, but her arms clutched the towel more fiercely than ever. "I can't."

"Sure you can. It's easy enough. Just release it."

"But then you'll see me naked," she hissed.

His eyes darkened, and his voice lowered another octave. "That's the idea."

"My body is overabundant," she said, looking down, her face flaming in shame at having to confess.

God, this man was gorgeous. He was a mountain of muscle and a face like a Greek god. How would he feel when he uncovered her doughy roundness?

"Yes, it is," he rasped. His voice sounded strangled, pained. Was he going to back out? She would die.

"S-so you see. It is better if you leave so I can put on a shift. And we should dim the lights," she added desperately.

"Not a fucking chance."

“What?” She had never heard a man swear in her presence. Was he angry? Maybe he felt cheated. Was he already regretting bedding her?

“I want to see every luscious curve. I want to feast my eyes upon you.”

The next instant, his big hands went to the edge of the towel, his gaze holding her captive as he dragged it down. The towel dropped to the floor, revealing her huge breasts and the rest of her. She knew what he would see. A soft, rounded stomach, hips that flared too wide. Thick, dimpled thighs. And that was only from the front. From the back, her arse was grotesquely big. She turned her face to the side and closed her eyes. Too afraid to see his expression.

But when a few seconds ticked by with barely a response, she dared to peek at his face, and what she saw entranced her. There was pure undisguised lust in his eyes. Even as inexperienced as she was, she could identify the emotion.

His big hands cradled her breasts reverently and lifted them. Then he dipped his head and buried his face in the crevice of her décolletage, drowning a groan so feral it made her center go liquid with want. He glided his tongue up the line between her breasts, then rubbed his cheek in the pillowy softness, chafing her delicate skin.

She would have abrasions in the morning. But she didn't mind. She wanted him to mark her. To leave signs of his possession. She might never have another man as magnificent as this one willing to make love to her.

“I love your breasts. I want to kiss them, bite them, suck them until you scream for mercy. Tell me, my muse, how does this feel?” And he closed his lips over her nipple and pulled.

The sensation that shot from that point to her core was so powerful that a shocked moan escaped her mouth. Her knees buckled, and she had to hold on to his shoulders

to keep her balance.

“Oh, you liked that, didn’t you?” he said as his strong arms circled her, supporting her. “I wonder if I can make you come just from sucking your nipples?” he mused. “It would be a fair exchange since I want to fuck your breasts, and I think I could come just from that.”

“What?” She didn’t know what he was talking about, but it sounded naughty. And oddly arousing.

He smiled tenderly. Or as tenderly as this hard, uncompromising man was capable of. “Oh, darling. I’m sorry. You are such an alluring temptress that I keep forgetting how inexperienced you are.”

Was he mocking her? Her ears flamed, and she knew she was turning scarlet.

“I’m sorry that all the men you have met until now were such unmitigated fools that they didn’t appreciate the beauty hidden beneath your frumpy gowns. But I can’t be sorry to be the first one to discover it. I feel like a fucking conqueror arriving in uncharted paradise. My bollocks are about to explode just thinking about all the ways I want to have you.”

She didn’t know how to reply to that. Her vocabulary did not include appropriate responses for the carnality in his voice.

“The things I will do to you...” he went on, as if thinking aloud. “I’ll leave no inch of your body unexplored. I’m going to take you in every single way known to man. I will debauch you so thoroughly, my muse.”

Her mouth had gone dry, and she moistened her lips with her tongue. He groaned.



“Oh, don’t do that.”

He took her mouth in an almost violent kiss. His mouth conquering, claiming, and then plundering hers. She had the urge to do the same. Her teeth closed over his ridiculously lush lower lip, and he groaned, grinding his pelvis into her. The hard ridge of his erection was unmistakable, burning hot, branding her; the fabric of his trousers arousing against her nakedness.

Finally tearing his mouth from hers, he rasped, “You are a tempting minx. Did you know that?”

She shook her head. In all her life, nobody had called her tempting anything.

“You are. And the crazy thing is you don’t know it. You are not even doing it on purpose. God help me if you ever learn to seduce.”

His hands roamed her body, from her shoulders, all the way down her back to cup her overabundant bum. Why had she allowed him to do this? Except, nobody allowed this man to do anything. He just took it. Like a conqueror. Would he let her preserve any modesty?

Apparently not. Taking her hands, he gently pried them away from her body. Revealing her in all her naked imperfection. She closed her eyes in mortification. He was an artist. Used to feminine grace and beauty. The statues she had seen all had lithe bodies and perfect proportions. Unlike her.

Never in her life had she wanted to have a slim, elegant body more than at this moment. She wanted to be perfect for this man. Because his body was perfect. He was perfect. But his next move surprised a squeal out of her.

He went down on one knee and kissed the patch of dark auburn curls at the juncture

of her thighs. Then ran his tongue up the crease between her thighs and her hips. The caress surprised a ticklish chuckle out of her, and he smiled, pleased.

“Oh, my muse. You are magnificent. Your body was made for love. It is a shame to cover such perfection with clothes. I want to sculpt you like this.” The side of his mouth hitched in an amused smile.

“Although, on second thought, displaying you thus would surely cause a riot. And I wouldn’t want any other man to see your naked body. Your beauty is for my eyes only.” He rose smoothly, running his hands possessively over her torso.

“You are teasing me. Nobody is going to riot over me. Nobody ever paid any attention to me, other than to mock me.”

“That, my dear, is about to change.”

He swept her up in his arms in a smooth movement so elegant that it seemed effortless. She tensed, horrified that he had lifted her again. But he carried her to the bed as if she weighed no more than a babe. Depositing her in the soft sheets, he stood back to finish undressing.

Thalia forgot her modesty, the breath catching in her throat as the marquess removed his shirt, revealing a lovingly sculpted torso. Each muscle was defined and firm, from his broad shoulders down to his chiseled abdomen. His skin, kissed by the sun, glowed with a golden hue, contrasting strikingly with the silvery hair that fell around his face. Light and shadow played over his chest, highlighting the mountains and valleys of his physique.

He dropped his hands to the waistband of his trousers, and with eyes fixed on her, started undoing his fly buttons one by one. She couldn’t look away, the expectation building in her almost too much to bear. When he had unbuttoned his trousers, he

pushed them down together with his underwear, revealing the robust tower of his member. It rose straight up towards his belly, ruddy and engorged.

Her mouth hung open in an unflattering gape. She hadn't known it would be that big. In the sculptures she had observed, the member was small and unthreatening. That thing would not fit inside her. It would tear her apart!

Her alarming thoughts must have shown on her face, for he smiled. "Don't worry, I promise I'll be gentle. By the time I put this in you, you'll be ready and begging for it."

Taking his member in his hand, he made a strong fist and stroked, coming towards her. She wanted to run scared. Yet his magnetic pull was so strong that it drew her closer instead. The rhythmic strokes of his hand on his own flesh were weirdly arousing. She rose on an elbow.

"Want to touch?" he asked, holding it towards her.

She did. His anatomy, menacing as it was, held a weird fascination over her. She reached out and brushed her fingers over the flared crown. So smooth. She didn't know such soft skin could exist anywhere in this big, hard man. Encouraged by his grunt of pleasure, her fingers grew bolder. Contouring, tracing, closing over the turgid flesh.

He groaned aloud this time, his hand moving to close over hers, tightening her fist much more than she would have done on her own.

"Yes, that's it. Hold me tight."

"I don't want to hurt you."

“You won’t. Your hand on my cock feels amazing. There, you got it. Keep doing that. You do that so well,” he encouraged, pumping his hips into her fist, then letting go of her hand.

A droplet of milky fluid collected on the slit. Acting on pure instinct, and before she could think it through, she leaned in and lapped it up.

“Oh, good grief!”

His exclamation had her jumping back in alarm, releasing his member. What had she done? Was he angry?

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did that.”

His eyes seemed to warm as he beheld her. “Don’t be sorry, my angel. I’m the one who should apologize. That was incredible, but unexpected. You caught me by surprise and almost made me spend, that’s all.”

“Don’t you want to?” She thought that was the whole point of this.

“Oh, my sweet darling. I do. But not yet. Not until I have worshiped every inch of your gorgeous body and have given you the release at least three times.”

“Three times?”

It was a testament to his effect on her that what caught her attention was that, instead of his absurd flattery. Was she beginning to believe him? His body certainly spoke of unbridled desire.

“At the very minimum,” he said as he climbed onto the bed and pushed her back.

He fell on her breasts like a ravening wolf.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

SHE WAS MORE BEAUTIFUL than even his lurid imagination had visualized. Creamy, unblemished skin dotted with just a few freckles here and there, as if sprinkled with fairy dust. Her breasts, those generous orbs that overflowed his hands, were an erotic masterpiece that almost brought him to his knees with want. Her nipples were pink and swollen like ripe raspberries. He took one in his mouth and caressed it with his tongue, reveling in the delighted mewl of pleasure and the sinuous undulation of her body beneath his. Oh, she liked that, didn't she? He did it again, twirling his tongue around her nipple and gently sucking while plucking the other with his fingers. Her groan was feral this time.

“Yes, my kitten. Roar for me.”

He continued his relentless stimulation until her back arched off the bed, her head flung back with abandon, while her hands gripped his head to keep him attached to her breast. If she only knew, she didn't need to worry. He was going nowhere.

He cradled his aching erection against her hip, focusing only on her, on her pleasure, on her frantic response to his touch. That was the headiest aphrodisiac he had ever tasted. She was fire and passion in his arms. A flame dancing hectically in the wind.

When her fingers tunneled through his hair, grasping and pulling at his head, he knew she was close.

“Liam, I can't,” she sobbed. “It's too much.”

“You can,” he murmured around her nipple. “Open your legs.”

She complied immediately, and he skimmed his hand down her torso, over the dips and swells of her body, marveling over the fine texture of her skin, the rough patch of her womanly hair, parting the curls with his fingers to access her molten center.

Fuuuck! She was so wet. So deliciously slick... He parted her lips to find the swollen bud, grazing it with the pad of his finger. She bucked. Almost dislodging him from her breast in her frantic pleasure. He held on tighter, sucking her nipple with rhythmic motions while his finger echoed the action. He caressed it once, twice, three times...

She exploded. Her head was thrown back, whipping from side to side while incoherent sounds emerged from her throat.

He reveled in her reactions, focusing solely on her as he tried to suppress his own climax, threatening to spill from his cock. His hips pumped helplessly against the sweet cushion of her hip, trying to find surcease to his urgent need. With an appalled groan, he lost the battle with his body, his seed erupting thickly as he ground his cock into her hip.

Damn, he had never lost control like this. Not even as a lad. But she was magnificent. Her hair was a cloud of fire around her face, her cheeks flushed, her lips pink and open, begging for a kiss. He stayed with her during her ecstasy and couldn't refuse the invitation of those parted lips any longer.

Letting go of her breast, he claimed her mouth with an all-consuming kiss that tasted of desire, desperation, and need. Both his and hers. His tongue plundered her mouth, tangling with hers, caressing, mating in a dance that mimicked that of their bodies. He gentled the kiss, bringing her back to earth. He had never seen her this soft, glowing with satisfaction. If he had thought her beautiful before, when she smiled up at him with dreamy eyes, flushed cheeks, and lips swollen by his kisses, she was irresistible.

“You are magnificent,” he announced, raining kisses on her forehead, cheeks, softly biting her chin, tonguing the arch of her ear, before sucking her earlobe into his mouth, making her squirm and giggle. He wanted to devour her. She was more succulent than a strawberry tart with whipped cream.

Her skin, heated with desire, emanated a sweet and seductive fragrance that was driving him mad with desire. He noted with some surprise that his cock was still hard. Even after coming. Bloody hell, this was insanity. With a surreptitious movement, he used a corner of the sheet to wipe the evidence of his climax from her hip. His lack of control over his body appalled him, but he didn’t want this madness to end.

The tip of his tongue traced the faint outline of a vein down her neck, nibbled her shoulder, then continued its journey south. He licked all around the sweet, creamy mounds of her breasts, avoiding for now the sensitive peaks, knowing they would need a respite.

When he got to the little well of her navel, he dipped his tongue in it. She jumped, so he held her immobile with his hands around her waist. She looked down and smiled at him.

“Liam, what are you doing?”

“Exploring you. Worshiping your body.” He slid lower still until he reached the springy auburn curls that protected her core. He nuzzled through them, his tongue insinuating through her closed nether lips to find her nub and lick it. The groan that tore from her mouth was feral. She was so responsive. The nectar of her body was ambrosia, and he was starving.

“Open,” he commanded, desperate for more.

“What?”



“Open your legs, Thalia. Let me drink the sweet nectar of release from your pussy.”

She opened her legs a fraction, clearly not used to this kind of caress. He would have none of it. Before this night was out, he was going to debauch her so thoroughly that she would never dream of denying him when he wanted to pleasure her.

He took hold of her thighs and opened them wide, bringing them up and bending her legs at the knees. When she was spread the way he wanted, he growled against her pussy.

“Stay like that.”

And he settled to feast.

His tongue lapped at her folds, gathering her sweet cream, then probed deeper, mining for more of her sweet release. She didn't stay passive under his ministrations. Her heels dug into the bed, her hips bucking and tilting with every swirl of his tongue.

“Be still, my muse. Let me eat you properly.”

“I can't...be still...” A moan interrupted her words before she continued. “When you do that.”

“Yes, you can.” He grabbed hold of her hips, enfolding the overflowing mounds of her arse in his hands, and bringing her up to his mouth to eat her like a sweet cantaloupe meloni he had once tasted in Italy.

Fuck, she was sweet. And so ready to explode again. It would take almost no effort to push her over the edge, sensitive as she was from her previous climax, her flesh soft and yielding. Her hands fisted on his hair again, and he relished the sharp pulls on his

scalp as her fingers tightened with each swipe of his tongue.

His own cock was hard as iron and demanded attention for itself. While focusing on prolonging her climb to ecstasy, he consoled it by grinding it against the bed. He didn't want to give her a swift release. He wanted to hold her on the razor edge of pleasure, keep her there until she was screaming with the need for culmination. Only then would he allow her to come.

Her moans and whimpers of ecstasy guided him as much as the rhythmic clench of her flesh. He brought his right hand around to insert one finger into her sweet cave. Her walls hugged him greedily. She was so fucking tight. If she gripped his finger like this, her pussy would strangle his cock. It was his turn to groan as his unruly organ grew even harder at the prospect.

She was getting closer. Her exclamations of delight came more frequently, her hips rising faster. He inserted a second finger into her tight passage, and she stilled and clenched at the invasion. He redoubled his efforts with his tongue. Licking her sweet spot, rolling it around with his tongue, before closing his lips around the swollen pearl and sucking softly, rhythmically, relentlessly.

With a choked cry, she exploded, her vagina tightening with such strength around his fingers that his cock wept in anticipation.

Soon, old boy.

“Liam.” She moaned his name like an entreaty, grabbing his head, pulling it up to hers for a kiss.

He gave her everything she craved, and more, allowing his body to lie on top of hers, skin to skin. She locked her legs around his waist in a frenzy of desire.

It would be so easy to sink his aching cock into her well-pleasured pussy now. But they had something to do first.

“Thalia, wait.” He pulled away marginally, unable to relinquish the tight squeeze of her embrace. “The sheath. I need to put on the sheath.”

“Yes, of course.” Her legs fell away, and her arms slid down his flanks, the caress leaving a trail of desire on his skin.

With a supreme effort, he left the sweet haven of her body and reached down to grab the sheath from the pocket of his trousers that lay discarded on the floor. Holding the little bag by the ribbon, he dangled it before her eyes.

“Want to help me put it on?”

That sparked instant interest in her slumberous eyes. “Yes. What should I do?”

Oh, she was so willing. He loved enthusiasm in a bed partner. He went up on his knees, positioning himself by her head.

“Well, you could kiss it and make it wet, so that the sheath slides better.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

KISS IT AND MAKE IT wet.

Oh, with pleasure. His tool had not diminished in size. If anything, it had become larger. But it had ceased to intimidate her. Now she craved it. It looked so strong and manly, like the rest of him.

Her flesh still quivered from the pleasure he had brought forth, feeling empty and instinctively needing him inside. Rising on her elbow, she took hold of his rod with a firm hand, as he had shown her before, then leaned towards him to brush her lips over the tip.

Remembering the pearly droplet she had lapped up before, the strong response it had triggered in him, a sense of feminine power impelled her, banishing doubts. This formidable man desired her. He was fairly buzzing with lust for her. Without hesitation, she opened her lips and enveloped the entire head in her mouth. His hand tightened in her hair, and when she took a bit more and sucked, his groan was feral.

“Oh, fuck, my muse. You’ll be the death of me. That’s it. Take a bit more. Use your tongue... Yes! Now move your hand up and down. You suck my cock so well.”

She followed all his instructions like a conscientious pupil, adding her own twist as instinct took over. He had given her so much pleasure and an even greater gift. Through his eyes, she felt beautiful, feminine, and powerful. She wanted to make him feel as good as he made her feel. Wanted to worship his body with the same reverence he had shown hers and wanted to shatter him with bliss the same way he had done to her.

Propelled by enthusiasm, her caresses became deeper, stronger, more uninhibited. She realized now why he enjoyed pleasuring her this way. There was heady power in bringing ecstasy to your lover. His hips pumped in time with her strokes. He was close, and she was hungry for what he offered.

“Thalia, stop.” His voice was strangled. She heard the command but was having too much fun to obey. His hands cradled her face as he pulled away. “Stop, my little firebrand. You are going to make me spend in your mouth.”

With a last minor act of defiance, she sucked hard, hollowing her cheeks as he popped his member out of her mouth. It bobbed heavily before her face, and she gave it a parting lick. His grunt was somewhere between pain and ecstasy. Maybe a bit of both.

“Oh, you naughty girl. I’m going to make you pay for attempting to make me lose control.”

He grabbed the little bag and took the sheath out. Thalia peered at it with unbridled curiosity. She had seen pictures of it, had read pamphlets about their use and benefits, but had never seen one in person. It looked like a wet and wrinkled stocking with a ribbon at the end. Quite peculiar.

With fingers that had lost its usual dexterity, Liam placed it on the tip of his member and started pulling and rolling it down the length of his shaft, similar in the way one would put on a stocking.

“Here, let me help,” she said, placing her hands on his member.

The sheath was slippery, but that helped to smooth it on once she got the knack of it. When the sheath was halfway up, she made a circle with her thumb and forefinger and smoothed it all the way.

“That’s it, smooth it out.” His voice was low, weighted with desire and dark need. “All the way up, my muse. Pinch a little space at the tip. You are doing so well. I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed putting on a damn sheath so much.”

He looked to be on the last thread of his control. His hips pumping helplessly into her hands. She lifted her eyes to look at him between her lashes.

“I had fun as well,” she confessed, before lowering her eyes once more to tie the ribbon.

Once she examined her handiwork, it looked quite pretty. Like a present with a ribbon around it. The idea was so ridiculous, a giggle escaped her before she could suppress it.

“Oh, you think my cock is funny?”

She shook her head, but another fit of laughter burst out of her before she clapped her hand over her mouth.

“I’ll teach you to laugh at my manhood, you irreverent wench.” But his eyes were dancing with laughter as well as he tumbled her to the bed and covered her body with his.

This was it. The moment she had been waiting for.

Hilarity vanished in a wave of heat. He smoothed the hair off her face, looking deep into her eyes. “Are you ready for me, my muse?”

“Yes,” she answered, nodding for emphasis.

“Guide me into your sweet haven, then.”

With fingers that were not quite steady, she reached down and notched his member at the entrance of her body. She thought he would ram into her, and steeled for it, but he rocked slowly, opening her with shallow thrusts that only breached her a little at a time. It felt so strange. To have this massive intrusion into her flesh. But also deeply erotic.

She relaxed. Her body accepting him, opening for him. She started chasing those thrusts, digging her heels into the bed and lifting in time with him. This wasn't so bad. The friction was quite delicious, as it was the sense of being joined.

His mouth took hers in a deep, possessive kiss. She moaned in ecstasy, relaxing, opening... and he drove home.

Her whimper of pain remained trapped between their mouths as her arms and legs locked about him. They both froze, their gazes clashing. She saw confusion, incomprehension, and disbelief reflected in his eyes.

And her? How did she feel? She didn't dare to breathe, as the burning and stretching sensation still robbed her of speech.

Good God, the pain had been sharper than she had expected. Until that moment, things had been going so well, she actually thought the process would be seamless. But of course, it wasn't. Losing one's virginity was not something that would be easy.

"Thalia? What just happened?"

She shook her head. Unable to articulate a response while her flesh still smarted.

"Fuck." He muttered, drawing back. It intensified the burning sensation. So she tightened her limbs around him.

“Don’t move.”

“I’m going to withdraw so that you can be more comfortable. It’s obvious you are in pain.”

“Don’t go,” she repeated, shaking her head. “It’s better now. Just give me a moment, please.”

He acquiesced. Thank God. His body was a still and protective presence above her, while his mouth rained soft kisses over her brow and cheeks. The sheer tenderness of the gesture brought her to tears. She closed her eyes, not wanting him to see them and misinterpret them. But one lone droplet escaped from the corner of her eye. She felt it running down her temple until his thumb brushed it away.

“What is it, sweetheart? If you want to stop, I’ll stop. Just...talk to me.”

“I don’t want to stop.”

The searing pain she had experienced upon his penetration had receded. Giving way to a dull ache. She took a deep breath, consciously relaxing her internal muscles. And then gave them a tentative squeeze. He grunted but remained immobile. Awaiting her signal.

His patience and tenderness were everything. This man, who looked so large and threatening, whose features seemed carved of the same stone he molded to his will, was a tender soul. A generous lover willing to give pleasure and demand nothing in return. She could not have made a better choice for her first time.

Moved by an overwhelming feeling she dared not analyze, she brought her hands to cradle his jaw, feeling the harsh bristles of a day’s beard shadowing the sculpted angles of his face.



“Kiss me,” she begged.

He complied with alacrity, fusing their mouths in a deep, slow, thorough kiss that liquified her flesh and started another kind of ache in the place where they joined. She was familiar with this ache. It was a need for completion so profound it made her flesh throb. She rocked her hips into it, trying to create friction to ease the need.

His breath caught, but he still did not move, did not take control. He remained as immobile as a rock, steady, firm, secure. Hovering above her, allowing her to set the pace, to take her pleasure in his body.

But she needed more. Encouraged by his support, she ran her hands down the hard ridges of his back to land on his firm buttocks, kneading the flesh there. Only then did he allow himself the slightest of movement.

“Move,” she whispered against his mouth. “Take me, please.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. With a deep growl, his hips started a deep, slow, relentless pumping. His member slid almost completely out before sinking into her yielding flesh in a leisurely caress. Inch by inch in a delicious, wet slide.

He continued this torturous pace for long minutes, until her body adapted and started demanding more, rising into his thrusts with increased urgency. She knew how much it was costing him to keep the slow, steady pace by the beads of sweat collecting on his forehead. She pressed down on his buttocks again.

“Faster,” she whimpered, and he complied, his body an instrument for her pleasure, moving above her, within her, with careful precision. “More!”

She dug her nails into his buttocks, and he broke free. The beast in him taking over. Ramming into her with absolute abandon, creating a maelstrom of desire. She

laughed at the pure delight of it, breaking free herself. Free of inhibitions, free of fear. A creature of carnal delight.

Pleasure-pain coiled with frightening intensity within her. She chased the sensation, blocking everything but the wonderful sight of his harsh face, his lips curled in, revealing his teeth in a feral expression, his eyes, that beheld her with thrilling intensity, and the delicious slide of his body in hers, stroking a place of white-hot pleasure, which was beckoning. Tantalizingly close. She needed just an extra push to get there...

“Liam,” she sobbed his name, hoping he’d know what she needed. He did.

He dipped his head to fasten his mouth around her nipple, pulling savagely, while below, his pelvis rammed into hers in a series of fast, deep thrusts.

And she exploded.

There was no other way to describe it. She might have lost consciousness for a moment. That’s how intense it was. As if through a thick fog, she heard cries of ecstasy mingled with a mighty roar. They seemed distant, their sound muted, but she knew it was them. Him. Her. The deep pulsations of his rod inside her told her he had reached his own climax.

She hoped it was as good as hers. Better, even. She felt mighty generous after the most intense experience of her life.

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LIAM CAME BACK TO EARTH slowly. Having just enough presence of mind to collapse on his side next to her rather than on top of her. His breath still came in gasps, his lungs pumping air as his heart galloped like a wild horse.

What the hell had just happened? He looked down and saw the smears on the sheath. Bloody hell. With a low curse, he flung himself from the bed, went to the washstand and, after removing and discarding the sheath, he took a washcloth, dipped it in the still warm water from the bath and returned to the bed.

Thalia had bundled herself in the sheet, her wide eyes watching him warily.

“Let me wash you.”

Her head shake was vehement. “No, thanks. I’ll do it. Give me the cloth.”

He heaved a great sigh. “Thalia, let me care for you. Please.”

He sat on the bed and lifted the sheet. Sliding his hand under, working by touch rather than sight, he found the apex of her legs. “Open for me, please.”

She complied, at last. Flinging her arm over her face, she parted her legs a fraction. Enough for him to wipe away the blood. So much fucking blood. Jesus! He felt like a barbarian who had just deflowered a maiden.

Well, that’s exactly what he had done, wasn’t it? Even if said maiden had tricked him into it. Even if he had no fucking idea what he was doing. He had never taken anyone’s virginity before. Even his wife had not been a virgin on their wedding night.

He flung the cloth into the washbasin and got in the bed, facing her. She was still covering her eyes, refusing to look at him. Well, that would not do.

“Thalia, look at me, please.”

She lowered her arm and peered at him. “Are you angry?”

“Angry? Not exactly. I’m baffled, confused, hurt that you lied to me—”

“I didn’t lie,” she interrupted. “Maybe I kept some information to myself, but I told no lies.”

“Oh? Did you not say you were a widow? Does Lady Renier even exist? Is Thalia your real name?” He hoped to God it was, because the name was just too perfect for her.

“My name is Thalia. And I am indeed the widowed Lady Renier.”

“Then how in God’s name were you a virgin until a few minutes ago?”

She looked away. “My late husband never consummated the marriage.”

“How is that possible? Did he die before the wedding night?”

“No. We were married for three years.” Her voice was monotone. Containing none of the cheekiness and challenge he had come to expect from her.

He placed a hand on her shoulder and urged her to turn to him.

“Tell me,” he urged her.

Lying side by side, facing each other, there was not much room to evade his eyes. Still, she managed to not look at him while she replied. “There’s not much to tell. It was an arranged marriage. He could never consummate. The few times he visited my bed, he wouldn’t...get stiff. Maybe he was not interested in me. I don’t know. It just never happened. Can we leave it at that?”

Maybe he shouldn’t care. After all, they had agreed only to one night of pleasure. But to hell with it. He was nowhere near ready to part from her. He felt an almost overwhelming need to know all her secrets, claim all of her. Make her his and protect her. Bloody, bloody hell.

“No, we can’t.” The turmoil he was feeling showed in his voice. “Because I don’t understand a thing. I feel duped. What game are you playing?”

“You bloody idiot!” She burst with the first show of passion he had seen from her since this conversation started. He relished it. Anger he could deal with. Her evasive responses he could not. “I’m not playing any games. Is it so hard to understand that a woman of my years, a widow who was left untouched by her husband, would want a night of passion? To at least know what I was missing out on?”

“I get that. But why not tell me beforehand?”

“Why do you care, anyway? Was it painful or difficult for you?”

“Well, no. But still—”

“Would you have gone through with it if I had told you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. But I would have certainly done things differently.”

“I wouldn’t have wanted anything different. It was fine. Now leave it be. Good

night.” With that, she turned away from him and huddled in the blankets.

He almost burst out laughing at her evaluation of their sexual encounter as ‘fine’. Fine did not begin to describe it for him. It had been transcendent. Earth shattering. Amazing. Her responses, her passion... he couldn’t dwell on it, or he would get another cockstand. And right now was not the moment.

He hugged her from behind, cradling her body with his. “Thalia, why don’t you want to share it with me?”

“It’s humiliating,” she replied in a small voice that heralded tears like thunder heralds rain.

“Is anything more humiliating than my tale of how my wife cuckolded me and then the newspapers painted me as a fool and a murderer?” he asked, realizing he had made progress when she went still and silent in his arms.”

“He found me unattractive. So much so that it affected his ability to...perform with me. There. Are we equally humiliated now?”

“It is not my wish to humiliate you, Thalia. I just want to understand. I find that very hard to believe.”

“Well, it’s the truth. And my untouched state until now proves it.”

“Hmm, maybe he was incapable. And he tried to hide it by blaming you.”

“He was not incapable with other women,” she muttered, and the bitterness and pain in her voice were hard to miss.

“He consorted with other women while he was married to you?” The fucking lowlife

bastard.

“Not long after he died, I received a visit from a girl he used to frequent. She was only fifteen and looked even younger. She was tiny and slim and very pretty, like a porcelain doll, with delicate features and adorable blond ringlets around her face. I thought she was a child. In a way, she was, but she was also a prostitute. And she was pregnant. Said the baby was my husband’s. And that the brothel where she worked had kicked her out for being in the family way. She had nowhere to go and was destitute. She had come looking for him out of desperation, and when I told her he had passed away, she looked so desolate. Like someone who had lost her last hope of survival. I took her in. That’s how I learned of my husband’s proclivities.”

His hold tightened around her. Damn, what a sordid tale. He knew of men like her husband. And of awful places that catered to those desires. But that was his shame, not hers.

“I don’t like to speak ill of the dead, but your husband sounds like a depraved bastard. His unwillingness to consummate your marriage is no reflection on your attractiveness, but rather of his devious desires.”

“Well, it’s not as if any other men are knocking at my door, falling at my feet. They rarely give me a second glance.”

“What about me?” he said, giving her a slight nudge with his hardening cock. She caught her breath in surprise. “I gave you a second and a third. Hell and damnation, I can’t keep my eyes off of you, bella . You are so gorgeous. I want to sculpt you. You’ve already made me come twice in swift succession tonight. And I’m ready to go again. I’m a mature man of two and forty, and you have me as randy as a lad of eighteen. How can you possibly think you are not desirable?”

That caught her attention. Thank fuck, because he couldn’t tolerate her despondency.

Turning within his embrace, she insinuated her hand between their bodies and grabbed his cock, making his breath stutter in his throat.

“You want to do it again?” There was surprise, but also delight in her eyes.

“Stop looking at me like that,” he admonished. “You need to recover.”

“I feel fine,” she reassured him, giving his unruly cock a hearty squeeze that tore a groan from his chest.

“Aren’t you sore?”

“Not in the least,” she replied with a cheeky grin.

“I’ll need to wash the sheath,” he grumbled.

The minx had the audacity to laugh at his squeamishness. “Go wash it, then.”

Fuck, she was going to be the death of him. And he would die a fortunate man.



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THALIA AWOKE WHEN THE pearly light of morning filtered through the edges of the closed drapes. She froze, disoriented at the unfamiliar environment. Until the warmth of the body cradling her from behind brought all the memories from the previous day rushing back with a vengeance.

The marquess. Was it really less than twenty-four hours since she had met him? And now she was lying naked in his arms after the most glorious night of unbridled pleasure she had ever experienced.

But it was more than that. A certain camaraderie had formed between them. They had talked about their lives, shared their deepest, most painful experiences. He had allowed her behind his walls, and what she found was not what she had originally expected from the man the Ton called The Murderous Marquess.

What a horrible and thoroughly inappropriate name. He was caring. Protective. Kind. Deliciously naughty at times. A generous lover, always. And if this journey was any indication, deeply devoted to his family.

She had shared with him things she had told no one. Not even her sister. Her husband's absolute rejection had been too humiliating to talk about with anyone. It had been her secret alone until tonight. But somehow his straightforward, accepting manner had her blurting out the ugly tale. Thanks to that, for the first time in years, she felt ready to leave the past behind. As if she had lanced a wound that had festered, and now the healing had begun.

With him, she felt desirable. Pretty. It was impossible to look at the passion in his eyes and not feel that way. Maybe she was inexperienced, but she knew last night had

been extraordinary. Was it over, then? They had agreed to one night with no commitments. Today they would continue their journey to find their siblings and then, whatever happened, they would return to their normal lives. Apart.

She found the prospect unbearably depressing. Chastising herself for craving more than she could have, she turned carefully, wanting to watch him while he slept. He shifted with her to lie on his back, throwing the arm that had been embracing her over his head.

Even in repose, his features were hard. The contours of his face were sharp and uncompromising. Fine lines etched his high forehead and the corners of his eyes. And his body? It was a masterpiece. Fitting that a man who sculpted marble would have a body like that of the Greek gods that the sculptures so often depicted. She lowered her eyes to his broad chest, skimmed her gaze over muscular arms and chiseled abdomen to the edge of the sheet that covered his privates.

With infinite care, she lifted the sheet to feast her eyes on that fascinating part of his anatomy. This part resembled nothing she had seen in Greek statues. It was definitely much bigger. And it kept growing the more she stared at it. Her mouth opened in amazement.

“See something you like?” His voice, raspy from sleep, was a deep growl.

She gasped and dropped the sheet.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ogle you while you slept,” she stammered while her whole face heated at being caught staring.

“Oh, I have no problem with you ogling me all you want. But don’t look at me like that when we’re short on time to indulge properly.”

“How do I look at you?”

“Like you want to eat me.”

“Maybe I am hungry,” she rasped, responding to the desire reflected in his eyes.

“Oh, hell and damnation. Don’t tempt me like that.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “I’m hungry too. But I don’t want a quick fuck. And we don’t have time for anything else right now. It’s already light outside. We need to get dressed and find a coach that will take us to this godforsaken town where hopefully we will find our scapegrace siblings.”

“Oh, of course.”

He had more sense than her. For a moment there, she had forgotten the purpose of this trip.

“Hey, don’t look so crestfallen,” he said while flinging himself from the bed, gloriously naked and sporting a rampant erection. “It’s not what I would prefer, either. As evidenced by my state,” he said, gesturing to his member with a complete lack of modesty. “But alas, needs must. Once we sort this matter out, we can indulge some more.”

That caught her attention. “You wish to see me again?” she asked, awkwardly creeping towards the chair, wrapped in the bedsheets, to retrieve her shift.

His gaze was utterly bewildered as he responded. “Of course I do. Don’t you want that, too? Wasn’t last night as glorious for you as it was for me?”

“You know it was. But I didn’t know if you’d want to continue our liaison. We spoke about one night only.”

“Well, we had our one night. And now I want more. Can we renegotiate the terms of our affair?”

She smiled at his way of phrasing it. “I think I could be persuaded to enter a deal with the right inducement.”

He came to her, took hold of her waist and kissed her full in the mouth, stealing her breath, molding their still-naked bodies together, making her knees buckle and her core melt with desire. But all too soon, the kiss ended. Before it could progress to what they both wanted.

“Was that inducement enough, wench? Or do I need to make a bigger earnest payment?”

“I will take that,” she replied, dazed. “For now.”

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*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THE SUN WAS STILL LOW on the horizon when Thalia and the marquess departed the elegant inn. Despite getting little rest, she felt invigorated as she took Liam's hand to step into the carriage he had hired. At least the rain had stopped, and it promised to be a sunny day.

The journey passed in a blur, the rolling countryside a mere backdrop to Thalia's racing thoughts. Would they find her sister there? Would she be married already? What would they do if their siblings were not there? So many questions...

Liam's hand settled over hers where it rested in her lap.

"Don't fret. I'm sure we will find them soon enough. And if we don't..." Liam shrugged with uncharacteristic nonchalance. "They are adults. I hope to God they know what they are doing."

Upon arrival, they found the rectory bathed in the gentle glow of the morning sun, a picture of serene domesticity. The Rector himself greeted them at the door, his eyebrows rising in curiosity after they performed the introductions and stated their purpose.

"Good morning, Lady Renier, Lord Ashford," he said, his voice warm but questioning. "Lord and Lady Andrew are in the breakfast parlor. If you'd follow me, please."

Lord and Lady Andrew. That could only mean one thing. They were too late.

A quick glance at the marquess's stony face was enough to know he had arrived at

the same conclusion.

They accompanied the rector through winding hallways to the dining room, located in the back of the big and modern house. There, her sister and the marquess's brother were having breakfast, looking fresh and happy and the picture of blissful domesticity. The smell of fresh bread and tea filled the air.

"Tally? What are you doing here, love?"

"Liam! This is unexpected."

Her sister and Lord Andrew both spoke simultaneously upon spotting them. The surprise was evident on their faces at the unexpected visit.

"If you didn't expect me to find you, I daresay you don't know me very well, little brother," the marquess replied, his tone brimming with mockery.

"I came looking for you, Mimi." Thalia said with feeling.

The next moment, a cacophony ensued as they all spoke at the same time, attempting to discern the events that had led to the unlikely event of all four of them meeting here this morning.

The rector's voice, trained to carry through to the last pulpit of the church, rose above their chorus. "My lords, may I suggest we retire to my study and leave the ladies to speak in private?"

Taking the not-so-subtle hint, the marquess and his brother mumbled their excuses and followed the rector out the door. Thalia watched their retreating backs, noticing the similarity in height between the brothers. Although Liam was broader. And while Lord Andrew's hair was dark, Liam's was the palest silver.

Her sister's hand closing over hers yanked her attention from the marquess.

"Now, Tally, please tell me how you came to be here. And in the company of Drew's brother, no less."

Thalia sighed. "It's a long story, Mimi."

"Well, fortunately, there's plenty of tea. Come, have a seat. Join me for breakfast and tell me all about it."

After Thalia had finished recounting the events of the last twenty-four hours, leaving out a few details, of course—no need to mention the night of passion in Liam's arms—her sister was shaking her head in amazement.

"I'm sorry that I caused you such concern, dear. But you shouldn't have worried. As you can see, I'm happy. Andrew and I are in love."

"But how could you do something so rash, Artemis? You couldn't have known him long. Before I went to the country, you had not even met him. Or did you know him already and were hiding it from me?" Thalia asked, not doing a good job hiding the hurt her sister's secret caused her. She had thought they were best friends. Able to confide in each other.

"No! Of course not, Tally. I met him after you left."

"But you didn't write to me about him either," she accused.

Her sister looked sheepish. "My plan was to tell you when you returned. I wanted to do it in person. I knew if I told you in a letter, you would fret and wouldn't understand it, perhaps even oppose it."

“You think I would oppose your happiness?” That struck to the heart.

Her sister grabbed her hand. “Not on purpose, my dear. I know you love me and have my best interests at heart. But given your own experience with marriage, and your ideals, I thought you might be...predisposed against the institution.”

“With good reason! You know that once a woman marries, she becomes her husband’s property. She has fewer rights than a servant. He controls her money, her body. He can dictate her entire life!”

“I know it can be that way in some marriages. But it won’t be like that in mine. Drew respects me. Views me as an equal. When he negotiated the marriage settlements with Papa, he insisted I have my own funds. Even contributed to a trust that is completely at my disposal, so that I never feel financially beholden to him. And did you know he is involved with a group advocating for women’s rights?”

“I didn’t know.”

Her sister went on with her impassioned defense of her new husband. “He is. Not only that, he wrote a pamphlet advocating for a woman’s right to sue for divorce on the same grounds as the men. I read it a few years back and have admired him in secret since then.”

“You’ve known him that long?”

“Oh, I didn’t know him then! He rarely attended the kinds of balls Mama took me to. And on the very few occasions he did, he never noticed me. We met less than a month ago.”

“Then how can you be so sure he is the one? I understand he is handsome, and from what you tell me, also a decent man. But, dear, he also has a reputation as a rake...”



Thalia trailed off, realizing the futility of speaking against her new brother-in-law.

For better or worse, they were married. There was nothing to be gained by sowing doubts in her sister's mind. But Artemis surprised her yet again by smiling and shaking her head.

"That doesn't worry me. Andrew has promised to be faithful, and I believe him. We love each other. I trust him."

"How can you trust?" It wasn't a rhetorical question. She was genuinely curious to learn how to trust someone in a matter like that.

Her sister's gaze was kind and understanding as she answered. "I guess it's a matter of faith. There are no guarantees in life or love. But I believe in his love and his commitment to stay faithful. Tally, dear, I know you've had an awful experience with marriage. And our work in the charity group hasn't painted a pleasant picture of men and marriage in general. But not all marriages are bad. In fact, you need to look no further than our friends in the group committee, Lady Hartfield, Lady Brentworth, the Duchess of Aycliffe. They are very happy in their marriages, and it is plain to see their husbands adore them."

"That is true. But they are the exception, not the norm. And even they had painful experiences in the past before they found happiness with their husbands."

"But the point is that happiness is possible. It's achievable. And maybe a bit more common than you think. Don't close your heart to the possibility. Especially considering that love may call at your door soon."

"What are you talking about? Love calling at my door, indeed! How preposterous."

"Hmm, I don't know. I sensed a certain affinity between you and the marquess. And

if the way he looks at you is any indication, I'd say there's something there for sure."

"You are imagining things," Thalia whispered, but she knew her face was giving her away as the heat climbed up her neck to warm her ears.

Her sister smiled in apparent delight. "I knew it! You sly vixen." Artemis leaned forward with a gleam in her eyes. "Have you shared his bed? Was it good?"

"Artemis!" Thalia choked, outraged at her sister's impudence. "Young lady, that is not a proper subject."

Artemis laughed. "Oh, don't be a stick in the mud, Tally. I'm a married woman now. And you are a widow. Who could fault you if you wanted to...indulge with the marquess? And if he's anything like his brother, you are in for a lot of fun, indeed."

Her ears must be crumbling to cinders right now. That's how hot they were. But she couldn't contain the smug smile of bliss that stretched her lips, just remembering the night. "It was wonderful," she admitted.

Her sister clapped, delighted. "Oh, how splendid! Imagine if you marry the marquess, we would be double sisters!"

"Shh! Don't be silly, Artemis. We are already sisters and will always be. There's no such thing as double sisters. Besides, I'm not going to marry the marquess. I have no desire to get married ever again. Period. No matter how wonderful the...bedsport may be."

"Hmm, we'll see. I think you protest too much."

REVEREND LANGLEY LED Liam and Andrew to a spacious study and departed with the promise to send tea and sandwiches. No sooner had the door closed behind

the rector that Liam turned on his brother.

“What the hell were you thinking, Andrew?”

“And a good morning to you too, brother. How are you? It’s good to see you again after such a long time,” Andrew replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Liam threw him a narrow-eyed glance. “Don’t be impudent.”

“Me? I was just trying to be civil,” Drew said, leaning against the edge of the massive desk and crossing his arms. “I haven’t seen you in what? Five years?”

“You could have visited me in Tuscany. I invited you several times,” Liam muttered.

“I could have. But I haven’t been idle here. With you gone, somebody had to take care of the estates and the family’s business interests.”

“I suppose. Yet you still found time for amorous pursuits, it seems,” Liam retorted with a raised brow.

“You barge in the day after my wedding, and instead of congratulating me, you come close to insulting my wife.”

“I meant no insult, and you know it. I just want to know why you didn’t tell me about your engagement.”

“Precisely to avoid this kind of reaction from you.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have reacted this way if I had heard it from you. Instead, I had to find out about it through a scandal rag that described it in the worst possible light. It made it seem as if you had been ambushed.”

Drew gave him a sardonic glance. “You know better than to believe the scandal rags, brother. But would you have accepted my betrothal if I had told you I’d fallen in love?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. How long have you known this girl?”

“Long enough.”

“Grandmama hinted at some intervention in order to force your hand.”

Andrew laughed. “Oh, they tried. It wouldn’t have worked. But as it turns out, my bride wouldn’t countenance trapping a man into marriage either, so she spiked their guns herself.”

“How do you know she is not a fortune hunter? Or after the title?”

“Ha! That’s rich coming from you, brother, and hypocritical, too, seeing as how you are shacking up with her sister. How do you know the sister is not the fortune hunter? Or after your title? After all, you are the one who holds the title.”

“That’s preposterous. But we are not talking about me.”

“Maybe we should. Since you feel the need to meddle in my life, let me return the favor.”

“I’m just trying to look out for you, Andrew! To keep you from making the same mistakes I made.”

“I hear you, brother. And I appreciate your concern. You know I’ve always heeded your advice. But this time is different. I love this woman. And she loves me. Can you accept that and give us your blessing? Or at least hold your judgment until you know

her. I believe you will like her.”

Liam looked at his brother for the space of a few heartbeats. Something had changed in Andrew. He was so used to seeing him as his younger brother. The scapegrace who needed advice and guidance. But his brother was not a boy any longer, had not been in years, and somehow Liam had failed to notice. And now, maybe because of this girl, Andrew looked mature. Settled. A man ready to take responsibility. Form a family. Have his own household.

“Of course, brother. Have I massively overreacted? I’m sorry for being an overbearing boor. If your bride is anything like her sister, I will indeed like her very much.”

He regretted mentioning Thalia as soon as he saw the speculation in Andrew’s eyes.

“What’s going on between you and Lady Renier, brother?”

“That is none of your business.”

“As a matter of fact, it is. She is now my sister-in-law. Part of my family. Someone very important to my wife, and therefore to me. I need to know what your intentions are towards her.”

Fuck. It only needed this. “Back off, Andrew. She is an adult. An independent widow. She doesn’t need your protection.”

“Meaning you have no plans to marry her.”

“Hell, no. You know where I stand on the subject of marriage.”

“Then you are trifling with her. You’ll break her heart.”

“We have an arrangement that suits us both,” Liam replied through gritted teeth.

“Have you thought of the repercussions that will have within the family?” Andrew persisted.

Damn it all to hell. His brother made it seem like he was debauching an innocent.

That’s exactly what you did last night. You took her virginity. His conscience prodded him.

“If you don’t intend to marry her, leave her alone.”

“No!” The thought of marriage made him break out in a cold sweat, but leaving her was also unbearable.

“No to marrying her, or no to leaving her alone?” Andrew prodded.

Damnation. He had come here to rescue his brother and had ended up being interrogated by him.

“No, to both. And that’s the end of this discussion.”

“As you wish. But for what it’s worth, I think you should marry her. Judging by the possessiveness you are displaying, you are already halfway in love with this woman.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve known her for only a day.”

“Sometimes that’s all it takes. It’s time to leave the past behind, brother. Seize happiness. That’s all I wish for you.”

Leave the past behind. If only he could.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

“WHAT DO YOU THINK OF our siblings’ marriage?” Thalia asked that afternoon as they returned to London in Liam’s luxurious train carriage.

They had left the rectory shortly after breakfast and their respective conversations with their siblings, but then had to cool off their heels in the inn to allow for the carriage to be hitched to the afternoon train departing for London.

“I think they are young and foolishly in love. Only time will tell if they’ll be able to have a happy marriage. That being said, I liked your sister. She is not at all what I expected.”

“Oh? And what did you expect?” Thalia asked, genuinely puzzled.

“I don’t know. A beautiful but empty-headed debutante. Maybe even a little vain and spoiled.”

“Is that where your brother’s taste in women has run to in the past?”

Liam smiled at that. “Not at all. But then again, he had never consorted with young eligible ladies in the past. His tastes ran more to sophisticated older women of dubious reputation.”

“Then why would you think he’d be attracted to stupidity and vanity?”

“Hmm, I don’t know. I guess that’s my opinion of all debutantes.”

“Tsk, so much prejudice, my lord.”

“I admit it.” His eyes were heavy lidded, observing her with undisguised hunger. “Why don’t you come here and teach me a lesson?”

“We don’t have a sheath,” she reminded him, trying to sound stern but failing miserably when she was vibrating with the same need as he. “You threw it away.”

He made a face. “I hate reusing sheaths.”

“Who would have thought you’d be so squeamish?”

“I’m not squeamish about everything. And we could indulge in other activities that don’t involve intercourse. Do you remember how I ate your cunny last night until you came?”

Good Lord, the man was shameless. She stared at him with her mouth open in shock while her core melted with remembered pleasure.

“I want you to get naked and then sit on my face. The better to enjoy you.”

“No.” She shook her head for emphasis. “I couldn’t possibly. Not here! Your servant is right next door.”

“We would retire to the sleeping berth, of course.” So saying, he stood up and grabbed her hand, pulling her up and towards the door of the sleeping compartment.

“He could still hear us.”

“Then you’ll have to be very quiet.”

He ushered her into the sleeping compartment and locked the door. “Now, let’s get you naked.”



She backed away in defiance. No way was she getting naked in broad daylight.

“You first,” she challenged.

His eyes were alight with wicked amusement as he started sliding his necktie off. “As you wish, my dear.”

Some moments later, he presented himself to her, gloriously naked. As naked as the lust in his eyes. From his loose long hair brushing the mountainous terrain of his shoulders, to the inverted triangle that was his torso, leading the eyes down to the apex of his thighs, where his rod stood like a mighty tower. Her mouth watered at the magnificent display of raw masculinity.

“Now is your turn,” he said, taking his rod in his hand and massaging it rhythmically.

The movement was mesmerizing. Arousing for reasons she couldn’t comprehend.

“Not yet.” She swallowed convulsively as he raised a brow at her insubordination. The cabin was cramped. It only took her two steps to reach him. Planting a hand on his chest, she pushed. “Sit on the bed.”

She could not have moved him had he not wanted to be pushed, but he complied, sitting on the bed and then leaning back on his elbows, completely at ease and shameless in his nakedness. A small smirk played around his lips, daring her to continue her game. Maybe he didn’t think she had what it took to drive him insane. Well, she might be inexperienced, but she had some theoretical knowledge and more than enough enthusiasm. There was something that had almost driven him over the edge yesterday.

She licked her lips, sinking to her knees between his widespread legs, and she had the satisfaction of seeing his smirk disappear. In its place, an almost frightening hunger

shone on his face.

“Thalia, what are you doing?”

It was her turn to raise an eyebrow and smirk as she took hold of him with one hand. “Isn’t it obvious? Are you going to allow me to see it through until the end this time?”

His eyes widened and his nostrils flared, while his member jumped in her hand.

“Yes,” he croaked. “Yes, you can do whatever you want. I’m literally in your hands.”

With a smile of pure feminine power, she dipped her head and closed her lips over the flared crown of his manhood, encasing it completely in her mouth and lightly sucking. The groan he emitted was feral. The sound cascaded over her, nurturing her confidence.

He tasted like forbidden fruit and male. His essence was an intoxicating aphrodisiac singing in her veins. She eased back, running her tongue through the ridged contours, exploring the texture and shape. She found a rougher patch at the bottom of the head, where it met the shaft on the underside of his penis and placed the tip of her tongue there.

“Oh, sweet Jesus.” He collapsed back, rubbing his hands over his face.

“You are making an awful lot of noise,” she mock reprimanded him.

“It’s your fault. You drive me to madness.”

“Me? I hardly know what I’m doing. Feel free to instruct me on what you like.”

“I could not bear it if you learn more. I like everything you do. That feels amazing. Yesss!” His words dissolved into a moan as she continued to lick and suck and explore his shaft at her leisure.

“Take a bit more,” he begged, and she complied immediately. “That’s it darling. Oh, fuck, feels so good. Now caress my bollocks. Yes, just like that.”

His praise was like sweet liquor, igniting her own desire. To have this masterful, gorgeous man in her hands, was a feeling of power such like she had never experienced. Every groan she extracted from his throat, every tightening of his hands on the sheets, every helpless pump of his hips straining into her mouth, made her feel like a warrior queen. And his body was the conquered land.

Running her hands up his thighs, she marveled at muscles so hard they seemed carved out of marble. Except for the soft texture of his body hair and the heat and pliancy of his skin under her palms.

“You like that, don’t you? Are you enjoying this, you little minx?”

She nodded yes, unable to form words with the thickness of his rod filling her mouth, and loath to relinquish it for even one second. She sensed he was nearing his breaking point. His breaths came faster, his hips moved more recklessly. One of his hands had come to her head and now grabbed her by the hair, gently guiding her mouth with his hands.

“Oh, darling, I can’t hold off much longer. Let go now if you don’t want me to spill in your mouth.”

She sucked with renewed vigor.

“You want me to come in your mouth?” He seemed surprised. More like stupefied.

She nodded, raising her eyes until their gazes connected. That did him in. “Oh, good heavens.”

The first spurt of his seed hit the back of her throat, and she moaned in surprise, but instinctively swallowed. Taking all he had to give, draining him clean until nothing was left and the tension had left his muscles. She released his member with a pop, and it flopped heavily against his stomach, exhausted, but still magnificent and proud.

Then he was pulling her up by her arms to cradle her against his chest. “Damn, my muse. That was incredible.” As if then realizing she was still fully dressed, he picked at the voluminous sleeve of her gown. “You are wearing too many clothes. I’ll remedy that right away. Just remember that turnaround is fair play.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THEY WERE FAST APPROACHING the London station. This train ride had been like an enchanted bubble. She blushed as she remembered how he had disrobed her, disarming her embarrassment with words of encouragement and praise. Once she had run out of protests, he proceeded to drive her insane with ecstasy, using his mouth and talented hands.

But just like a bubble, it couldn't last long, and it was about to burst. Soon she would be back in her normal life. If she found that the prospect filled her with melancholy, she would never let him know.

She had caught his frown as he helped her don her clothes. Receiving his help had been mortifying, but he had insisted. It had been a mistake to allow him to remove her clothes in the light of day. Candlelight and night were more forgiving, but there was no hiding imperfections in the harsh light of day. A man like him, an artist, would be drawn to beauty and a pleasing form. He must be disappointed at discovering her many flaws.

He had given her a precious gift, and she would appreciate it as such and not wish for more. Nothing worse than a clingy lover. She touched his arm, ready to say goodbye with grace.

“Thank you for your help during this trip, and for...everything.”

He frowned again, looking at her. “You’re welcome, love. But it sounds as if you are saying goodbye, and you won’t get rid of me just yet. I’ll take you home.”

“Oh, that’s unnecessary, my lord. I’ll take a hackney at the station.” No point in

prolonging this goodbye.

“Don’t be silly. I’ll take you to your house and make sure you arrive safely.”

She couldn’t argue anymore without seeming stubborn, so she dropped the matter. What were a few more minutes? She would use them to engrave his image in her mind. Not that she thought it would ever fade.

But when the marquess’s opulent carriage stopped in front of her modest townhouse in Marylebone, instead of saying goodbye, he seized her by the waist and lifted her onto his lap.

“Will you visit me tomorrow?” he asked as he nuzzled her cheek, making her melt for him all over again.

“For what purpose, my lord?”

“You mean besides this?” he said, capturing her mouth in a deep, hard, almost desperate kiss.

It left her breathless, with barely enough wits to reply. “I thought we were through.”

If she thought he had been displeased before, she had been wrong. She had never seen a frown so fierce. “I’m certainly not through with you. Have you had enough of me, my muse?”

“I—No, my lord. Not at all. But we never discussed a long-term arrangement. I won’t become your mistress.”

She didn’t want to let go. Not yet. Perhaps never. But she couldn’t cheapen their relationship with a mercantile agreement, and the longer they stayed involved, the

harder it would be for her to part with him.

“I’m not asking you to be my mistress. We are lovers, and you are my muse. How will I be able to sculpt you if you don’t model for me?”

“You really want me to model for you? I thought you were jesting.”

“My art is something I never joke about. I already started sculpting your face. But I need you in my study to sculpt the rest of you. Come to my home tomorrow, Thalia. I promise I’ll make it worth your while.”

His voice was pure seduction. It trickled down her body like warmed honey. It was impossible for her to refuse. She nodded.

“I’ll be there tomorrow.”

THALIA’S NERVES THRUMMED with anxiety as she knocked on the door of the marquess’s splendid townhouse the following day. She was wearing a veil, afraid of being recognized. When the butler opened, she stammered she was there to see Lord Ashford.

She didn’t know what she had expected. Maybe derision for her shameless conduct of calling on a gentleman for what could only be considered an assignation. But the butler bowed with the utmost courtesy and guided her to the very back of the house to a glass jewel box of a room.

Shaped as an octagon, the sunroom had been transformed into a creative haven. Sunlight streamed through the domed glass ceiling, casting a golden glow across the room. The glass panels, which stretched from floor to ceiling, offered an uninterrupted view of the lush greenery outside. The air carried the earthy scent of clay and the faint, sharp tang of marble dust.

Thalia's mouth hung open as she scanned the magnificent room. Nearby, a large, heavy-duty easel held a clay bust in progress. By the windows, a long, sturdy workbench was filled with the tools of the trade. Chisels, hammers, and mallets lay neatly organized, while in the center of the room, occupying pride of place, a chaise draped in soft, rich fabrics looked like a perfect place for models to pose in the natural light. Would she expect her to lounge there?

“At last, you are here. I’ve been expecting you for hours.”

She whipped around at the sound of the marquess's voice. He had snuck behind her with a stealth that should not be possible for a man his size.

“Excuse me, my lord, but you did not mention when you expected me to arrive. This is the proper time for a morning call.”

“It's afternoon. We are losing daylight.” Without giving her a chance to respond, he turned to the butler. “Send tea and then order the staff not to disturb me for any reason unless it's an emergency.”

“At once, my lord.” The butler withdrew with a bow.

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Are you always this high-handed?”

“Always,” he said, pulling her against his body. “Next time, don't keep me waiting. I've been burning for you.”

With that, he captured her mouth in an incendiary kiss that sent a wave of heat through her body. Her legs gave way, and she grasped at his shoulders while his arm around her waist tightened to help keep her upright. When he had reduced her to the consistency of soft butter, his mouth skated across her face to whisper in her ear.



“I’ve got new sheaths.”

And she melted anew.

The servant bearing the tea tray came in, and he released her slowly while she turned around and tried to cool her flaming cheeks.

“Now, where were we?” he said, coming up and embracing her from behind.

“You were about to sculpt me?” she suggested with a quiver in her voice.

“Hmm, yes. I do need to work you with my chisel.” He punctuated his double entendre by pressing his hardness against the small of her back. “But before that...we need to take care of something.”

There was a tug on her buttons, and her bodice sagged.

“What are you doing?” she hissed and tried to turn around. His hold on her clothes kept her firmly in place.

“Isn’t that obvious? I’m divesting you of these ghastly garments.”

“You can’t undress me here! This room is made of glass.”

“I’m aware. It’s why I selected it as my study. It allows the light in.”

“But it also means that anybody can see in,” she said through her teeth.

“There’s nobody in my garden. I have prohibited access to it while I’m working in my studio.”

“It will feel as if we are naked outside.”

“Mmmm, what a delightful prospect. In Tuscany, I once participated in a naked picnic.”

Her gasp was a mixture of shock and arousal. “With other people?”

His laugh was rich as he kissed down her back, lavishing the skin he had uncovered.

“There was only one other person. A certain signorina. The picnic started as a normal one, but the sun was scalding. We had to remove some clothes to cool off, you see.”

“Of course,” her voice held a hint of sarcasm as she turned around to face him.

“Would you be interested in a picnic au naturel ?” he asked.

She had to laugh at his naughtiness. This man was undoing her. One moment he was all gruff and commanding, and the next playful and naughty.

“What am I to do with you?” she mused.

“Whatever you want. I know several things I’d like to do with you. We can work up the courage to have a naked picnic by practicing in this room.”

“I don’t know if I dare. I’m still afraid someone will see us.”

“No one will see us. But the sense of danger, of being exposed, will add that much more depth to the pleasure.”

“You believe that?”

“I know that,” he said, lifting the loosened gown over her head and working on the laces of her petticoats. “Besides, you might as well get used to being naked. I plan to sculpt you in the nude.”

That drew an outraged gasp from her as her petticoats fell to the floor with a swoosh. “I can’t pose nude!”

“Why not? It’s just for me. And I’ve already seen, kissed, and caressed every inch of your body.”

“But if you sculpt me naked, everyone would be able to see it!”

“Hmm, you are right.” He frowned. “I don’t want anybody else to see this luscious body.”

He pulled her against him, intimately fondling her arse. “I’ll drape you in a sheet, because this is for my eyes only. You are mine. ”

Her only response was a moan of delight as his hand slid lower between her legs and his fingers found her flesh through the slit in her undergarments.

“Fuck, you are so wet. And I’ve barely touched you. You are ready for me, aren’t you, my muse? Do you miss my cock between your thighs? Sinking into your sweet cunny, filling you and giving you the satisfaction you crave?”

“Yes!”

“Will you let me remove all your clothes and take you right here?” His voice was mesmerizing, while his touch inflamed her need to a dangerous level, promising satisfaction, but delaying the delivery.

“Liam, please,” she moaned.

“Please, what?”

“Please, yes. Take me.” She forced the words past her embarrassment.

With a suddenness that left her reeling, he hoisted her in his arms and carried her to the chaise. “Kneel on it and hold on to the back.”

“W-what?”

With a few touches, he positioned her how he wanted her, kneeling on the seat of the chaise, her knees spread, her arms resting over the wide, cushioned backrest. She tried to ignore how her bottom would be on display as he yanked her undergarments off and opened the placket of his trousers. She looked over her shoulder at his cock, angry and red, and her core wept with need.

He caught her looking and palmed himself, tightening his fist around his straining erection. “Stay like that, bella. Don’t move. I wish you could see yourself right now, how gorgeous you look. With your plump delicious arse up in the air, waiting for my pleasure, while your pretty pink pussy weeps with desire.”

Her eyes widened. She could have never imagined how arousing words could be. He took out a sheath and smoothed it over his shaft with fingers that were unsteady with need.

“Do you need me to assist?” she offered.

“No, don’t move. I want to watch you.”

At last, he was able to tie the ribbon. He grabbed hold of his shaft and ran the tip up

and down her center, through her folds, smearing it in her wetness. And arousing her to a dangerous degree. If he didn't enter her soon...

Her thought caught in a gasp as he plunged into her, stretching her flesh with his presence, filling a void she had always had but had never understood until now. Until him.

"Do you want more?" he gritted out.

"Yes!"

He slid almost all the way out, then slammed home again, tearing a scream of pleasure from her.

"More," she begged.

He grabbed her hips, holding her steady while he did it again, and again, until she was sobbing with need.

"Please, Liam."

"Tell me what you want, my muse."

"I want...I need...the release. Give me the release." Her voice was a whimper of need, her eyes scrunched shut, her head thrown back as she strained against him. Shame, embarrassment, and fears forgotten in the face of this unrelenting need.

"I will, darling. I'll give it to you."

One of his hands sneaked around her waist and dipped between her legs, to caress the place where all sensation coalesced. She hid her face in the crook of her arm,

drowning a scream as waves after waves of white-hot pleasure pulsed through her. Her flesh spasmed rhythmically around his rod as she extracted every drop of ecstasy from his hardness.

A moment later, his hands clutched her hips as he let out a roar of pleasure, and he exploded inside her. The pulses of his flesh echoing the cataclysm she had experienced.

In the aftermath of satisfaction, he yanked at the ties of her corset, massaged her breasts as he removed her chemise, rolled down her stockings until she was completely naked. All the while, his gaze devoured her with frank admiration as he uncovered her body.

She had no more will to protest. Couldn't even remember why she wanted to protest. Being naked in his presence felt...right. For the first time in her life, her body was not something to be ashamed of. To be covered, hidden, or constrained with stiff corsets. Every curve she had ever hated, he seemed to adore. The feelings that engendered were empowering, liberating.

When her hair tumbled like a waterfall of fire down her back, she realized he had removed the pins. His long, dexterous fingers tunneled through her tresses, massaging her scalp. If she were a cat, she would have purred under his caresses.

“There. Now I have you the way I want. All soft, pliant, and well pleased, radiating sensuality, with your hair down and your lips swollen from my kisses. Tell me, my muse, am I going to have to seduce you before every session to get you to relax? Because I'd be more than happy to oblige.”

She chuckled at that. “Absolutely. I insist upon it.”

“There you go. Keep smiling at me like that,” he said as he went to his workbench,

grabbed a sketchbook and pencil, and proceeded to draw with fast strokes.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN the attacks would not cease. As Liam sat down for breakfast, he glanced through the pile of newspapers set beside his place at the table. An action he had performed every day for the past two weeks, ever since he had returned from his trip and started sculpting Thalia.

Five long years had passed since his wife's death. Yet as soon as he set foot on English soil again, and the scandal rags had wasted no time to start publishing ghastly caricatures of him and rekindle the old scandal.

Didn't they have something new to latch on to? He would have thought nobody would be interested in his tragedies anymore. But he had been wrong.

He should not care. In fact, he had ignored the poisonous darts five years ago. Why did it bother him so now? Because of her . He didn't want her to see the horrible depictions and read the false descriptions of events.

It didn't matter. He had already told her the truth. She would not care for these falsehoods. She probably wasn't even reading this rubbish. But they still bothered and humiliated him. His dark musings were interrupted when his butler announced.

"Lady Renier is here to see you, my lord," he intoned, guiding Thalia into the breakfast parlor.

He immediately shot to his feet, more out of surprise than polite manners, if truth be told.

"Thalia, you are here earlier today."



“Well, there’s really no pleasing you, is there?” she chided. “If I come in the afternoons, I’m too late. If I come in the mornings, I’m too early. As it happens, I have another commitment this afternoon, so I came earlier.”

“What commitment?” he snapped without thinking, more provoked by the minute.

What the fuck was he doing questioning her life? But it bothered him in the extreme that she had somewhere to be that did not include him.

“You may not be aware of this, my lord. But I have a life and obligations beyond posing for you.” She took a seat, and one of the footmen immediately filled her cup with tea.

“Out, the lot of you,” he snapped to the servants. “We’ll serve ourselves.”

“My, but you are grouchy this morning,” she said as she took a delicate sip of her tea. “Anything I can do to help?”

Images of her spread naked on top of the table, her legs open for him to feast on her sweet pussy, or her bent over the table while he took her from behind flashed through his mind. That would certainly improve his mood. His cock leaped to attention. But...no. He was not a barbarian. And he had been acting like one with her. He had gone through more sheaths in the past two weeks than in the past year. But when it came to her, he had no self-control. The look she threw him under her lashes confirmed she knew where his thoughts had wandered.

“No. In fact, let’s go to the studio. If you are so busy this afternoon, we might as well start already.” Anything to keep her from seeing the conspicuous stack of newspapers on the table.

“WHAT IS THIS?” SHE looked up in surprise from the large box he had placed in

front of her. The first delivery had arrived yesterday, but she had already left by then. For the past three days, she had been coming early and leaving by noon. He was not happy with this state of affairs but could hardly demand more of her time. The nature of their relationship did not entitle him to possessiveness.

“It’s a gift for you. Open it.”

Looking bemused, she pulled the ribbon and lifted the top off the box, then pushed aside the thin cloth that protected the contents inside. Her gasp of amazement told him she was impressed.

As she should be. The dress she lifted from the box was exquisite. Deep blue velvet bodice embroidered in a silver thread that would hug her torso and accent her gorgeous breasts. The sleeves were mere froths of material. They would expose her shoulders and beg his mouth to rain kisses and bites upon them. The skirt was made of yards of translucent organza, in all the colors of the sea. It would shift and catch the light as she walked, bringing attention to the mouthwatering swells of her hips. The modiste had outdone herself. This dress would showcase her beauty like the perfect frame did for a masterful work of art.

“It is beautiful, Liam,” she breathed, her hand caressing the fabric. “I don’t think I’ve ever owned a gown so magnificent.”

“I’m glad.”

Thalia’s expression made the chore of searching for the best modiste in town, bribing her with an exorbitant amount to get her to make a whole new wardrobe in short notice, and then convincing her to work from a clay form and trusting his measurements instead of obtaining her own, worthwhile. He couldn’t wait to see his muse wearing this gown. He preferred her in nothing at all, but if she had to be clothed sometimes, it had better be in something that did justice to her beauty.

“Here, let’s get you out of those drab clothes and into the gown.”

“Oh! I-I don’t think it will fit.” But there was wishfulness in her eyes.

“Of course it will. I took the measurements myself. Remember?” he replied impatiently as he went to her back and started undoing the row of tiny buttons.

She always wore these high-necked gowns with a million buttons down her back. And after more than two weeks of divesting her of the offensive garments, he had become very adept at undoing buttons.

“Is that why you insisted on measuring me?”

“No. I needed to take your measurements for the statue. But they came in handy when ordering the gowns.”

Her ugly gown out of the way, he lifted the new gown over her head and dropped it softly onto her. She giggled.

“You are better than a lady’s maid. At least your height helps when lifting a gown over my head. My maid has to stand on a stool.”

He just grunted a response and closed the buttons on her back. The gown fit her perfectly, hugging her curves as if it had been sewn onto her body. He smiled with satisfaction as he dragged her to stand in front of the full-length mirror he used to see his models from the back.

She gasped when she saw her reflection, her hand coming to her mouth in wonder. “Oh, Liam. This doesn’t even look like me.”

“Of course it’s you,” he said as he took pins out of her hair, allowing half of her

tresses to fall down her back. They bounced and curled around her shoulders, highlighting the creaminess of her skin.

“This gown has performed a miracle,” she exclaimed while grabbing handfuls of the fabric and turning this way and that, observing the shifting colors of the multilayered skirt.

“No miracle. You have always been beautiful. This gown merely shows it. Now you need new undergarments to go with the new gowns. This dreadful chemise is peeking through,” He tucked a corner in.

“I’ll get new undergarments.”

“Already did. They just haven’t been delivered yet.”

“You bought undergarments for me?”

He grinned impishly. “Couldn’t help myself. It was even more fun than ordering the gowns. I kept imagining you wearing the racy lingerie as I chose the styles and fabrics and trims.”

“You are incorrigible,” she chastised but with a big smile.

“Always. Now, let’s get the gown off you for the time being. As good as it looks, I prefer you when you are wearing nothing at all.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

SHE COULD NOT MEET Liam today, Thalia thought with regret as she readied herself for the day. She donned one of the beautiful gowns that had kept arriving throughout the week. It bothered her to accept so many gifts from Liam, worrying their relationship had started to resemble that of a protector and a mistress. But he would not accept no for an answer, and in all honesty, the gowns made her feel so pretty that she didn't have the fortitude to reject them.

This one was a more sedate day gown in deep rose silk with green embroidery that caused her skin to glow and hugged her curves like a second skin. She turned this way and that in front of the mirror. Watching the fluid movement of the skirt. The gowns were comfortable as well. That had been a pleasant surprise. She would have thought such form-fitting gowns would be restrictive of movement. But the cut and fit of the bodice was flawless, and that, coupled with comfortable yet pretty undergarments, made all the difference.

She was looking forward to the Ladies' Lair meeting this week. The society, founded by Lady Harfield, Lady Brentworth, and the Duchess of Aycliffe, aimed to rescue and protect women and children in abusive or dangerous situations.

Meeting with the ladies was always a pleasure, for they were smart women who were unfailingly kind, generous, and sympathetic. They had become her closest friends. But she had always felt like a hen among swans with them, for they were beautiful and stylish women. While she... Well, she was a frumpy widow whose own husband had not deigned to touch. But not today.

She took one last look in the mirror after scribbling a note to Liam, informing him that she wouldn't be able to see him today but would be in his house the next

morning. She would miss him, for their daily encounters had become a delightful habit, but it was only a day. It would not do to become too attached.

His clay model was almost done. After he finished that, he wouldn't need her to pose anymore. Would he end their relationship then? He seemed happy to have her around and was always enthusiastic in their amorous activities, but he had never indicated by action or word that he wanted a permanent relationship.

And neither did she. The only sort of socially acceptable relationship between a man and a woman was marriage. And she valued her independence too much. Putting herself under a man's control once again was not something she relished. A little voice in her head piped that her lady friends were all happily married and yet still retained their independence and freedom. Yes, but that was because their husbands allowed it. Even if she were to look past her own unfortunate experience with marriage, in their charity work, she had seen plenty of women in terrible relationships.

When she entered the elegant Mayfair townhouse of the Countess of Hartfield, the other ladies were already there, talking animatedly while they drank tea. Besides the countesses and the duchess, Mrs Wang and her daughter, Lady Elizabeth, were also there. They all stopped their conversations and turned to stare as she entered.

"Thalia!" Abigail, Lady Harfield, was the first to greet her. "Come in, dear. You look fantastic!"

"Thank you, my lady. But it's you who is positively radiant." It was true. The countess was a beautiful brunette, and pregnancy seemed to make her glow with happiness.

"Oh, balderdash. I'm swollen and ungainly," Abigail replied, kissing her cheek.

“I agree with Abigail, Thalia. You look gorgeous,” Hannah, Lady Brentworth, interjected. “That dress compliments your skin and brings color to your cheeks.”

“Or maybe something...or someone else is responsible for her flushed state,” the duchess suggested with a wicked glint in her eye, making Thalia blush even harder.

“If I am blushing, it is because of your praise. But enough about me. I don’t want to distract us from the important matters.”

“Oh, no,” Elizabeth, the youngest and only unmarried lady of the group, interjected. “I want to know what brought about this change. And also the name of your modiste, because that gown is a work of art.”

“Elizabeth, stop pestering Thalia,” Mrs. Wang came to her rescue.

And a good thing she did, because it would sound very odd if she had to confess she didn’t know who the modiste was. No way to tell these ladies the dresses were a gift from her lover.

“At least tell us this. Does your new look mean you are considering remarrying?” Elizabeth went on, irrepressibly. She was about the same age as Artemis and full of energy and vivaciousness.

“Oh, no. Nothing like that,” she assured them promptly.

“I thought that now that Artemis married, you would be more amenable to the idea,” Elizabeth said.

“I’m happy for Artemis but have no plans of contracting matrimony myself.”

“Hmm, it’s a pity, my dear. You’re too young and vibrant to give up on love

altogether,” Abigail told her, as she brought Thalia to sit next to her. “Trust me, I know. For many years, I avoided marriage like the plague. But with the right man, it can be wonderful.”

The rest of the women nodded and expressed their agreement.

“And I daresay, whoever brought those roses to your cheeks deserves some consideration,” Hannah piped in with a smile.

Thalia shook her head again. “I assure you, he’s not interested in matri—” Realizing what she had admitted to, she brought her hand to her mouth and looked wide-eyed at her friends, who burst out laughing.

“I knew it! Thalia has a suitor,” Elizabeth said.

“Don’t worry, my dear. Your secret is safe with us,” Abigail assured her. “You know we only wish you the best. And if this man of yours makes you feel lovely and desired, I say good for you. Just... keep an open heart to the possibility of marriage.”

“Thank you,” Thalia said, squeezing Abigail’s hand.

“Now, show us your sketches, to decide which one we shall publish in the papers next.”

Grateful for the change of subject, Thalia laid out all the caricatures she had created during the past week.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

WHERE THE HELL WAS she? Hadn't they agreed yesterday to meet this morning? He racked his brain trying to think but couldn't come up with a definitive answer. Who could remember such details when consumed with lust and the obsessive compulsion of committing her beauty to stone?

"Samson!" he called his butler, and his servant appeared with his usual aplomb. "Did Lady Renier say what time she would come in today?"

"She did not, my lord."

"Has she sent word?"

"I have not checked the correspondence today, my lord."

"Well, go check it. And if there's a message from her, bring it at once."

His harried butler departed, and a minute later returned with a note.

"She had indeed sent a message, my lord," his butler intoned.

With a ferocious frown that failed to intimidate his unflappable butler, he ripped the paper from the man's hands, reading the words several times, as if their meaning could change. Not that there was much to read. She only said she could not come today and that she would call the following day. That's it. No explanation. No reason why she couldn't come. This was unacceptable.

"Have my carriage readied," he said as he strode from the study.

Five minutes later, he was entering his coach and directing his coachman to take him to Thalia's house. How dare she cancel their standing agreement? She had committed to him! They had an arrangement, and she could not cancel their sessions at random. What could she possibly have to do that was more important than their meetings?

He drowned the tiny voice in the back of his head, reminding him he was being unreasonable. He was not the master of her time. In fact, he couldn't demand anything from her at all. She had a life that did not include him, and he had to accept that.

The thought only made his mood plummet further and his scowl turn more ferocious. When he rapped on her door, a timid little maid answered. The woman took one look at him, and her eyes practically popped out of her face.

"I'm looking for your mistress, Lady Renier."

"Sh-she's not home at the moment, my lord."

"What time is she expected back?"

"I-I don't know, my lord."

"I'll just have to wait for her then."

"My lord?" The little maid looked sufficiently intimidated but still hesitated to invite him in. She would not stop him, though.

"Well?" he said, imbuing the word with all the aristocratic hauteur he was capable of.

"Direct me to the drawing room. I'll wait for her there."

"Yes, my lord. Of course." With that, she stepped back, and after taking his overcoat

and hat, led him to the drawing room, a quaint little room right off the foyer.

He looked around, taking in the space. Looking for traces of Thalia in the decor. Had she selected the furniture? The chairs and settee were comfortable and well worn, upholstered in a faded rose fabric. Though not expansive, the room was thoughtfully arranged to maximize both comfort and charm.

The intricately carved fireplace served as the focal point, its mantle adorned with a few keepsakes and a modest collection of well-loved books. He read the titles on the spine and smiled. Austen, Gaskell, the Bronte sisters. His little muse liked romantic novels.

A small writing desk in the corner caught his eye next. It was topped with a vase of fresh flowers and an array of drawing supplies. Graphite pencils, charcoal sticks, and pastels were all arranged in little containers. He was familiar with the materials, for he used them himself in his work.

A sketchbook was lying open on the surface of the desk. He got closer to examine the drawing. It was a sketch of ladies having tea in a garden. The subject was not particularly original, but the technique was good. Thalia was much more talented than she let on.

Smiling, he turned the page to another sketch. This one of a young lady that resembled her sister. It was an excellent likeness, but unfinished. Then he flipped to the next page and his blood froze, the smile fading from his face.

It was a grotesque caricature of a man who looked like Viscount Greaves perversely leering at two small girls. The man was disreputable, for sure, but this caricature suggested a more devious crime.

He turned to the next page. And found another caricature. Another gentleman, by the

looks of his clothes. He couldn't recognize this man, but he was fat, and the drawing depicted him being serviced by two prostitutes while holding a leg of mutton in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other.

With sinking horror, he kept turning the pages, only to find similarly grotesque caricatures. Caricatures like the ones that had circulated about him. Caricatures mocking people. Implying heinous crimes or debauched behavior. Demeaning, dehumanizing. Was this her work? Maybe she had not created them. Maybe this sketchbook belonged to someone else.

Was it possible that the innocent girl with clear eyes and the artless giggle was also the one creating such ghastly drawings? No. He refused to believe it. It would be akin to admitting he had been duped once again by a devious woman.

Thalia, his muse... a despicable cartoonist? God, this hurt even worse than when he'd discovered his wife being unfaithful. He had thought himself older, wiser, incapable of falling for duplicitous women. It appeared he was the same fool he had always been.

He had been concerned about her seeing the caricatures of him, when she could be the one drawing them! Could her deceit extend that far? He flipped through the whole sketchbook, bracing himself for the pain if he found a caricature of himself. Thankfully, he didn't find any. But that didn't mean she hadn't produced them.

Pushed beyond reason by hurt, he started opening the drawers of her desk, looking for more sketches. Needing to find proof of her perfidy. Afraid of it.

"Liam? What are you doing here?" Her voice had him whipping around. Her tone suggested confusion and...did he detect a bit of joy as well? Or was that wishful thinking on his part?

There she stood in the doorway. Looking beautiful and innocent in the pretty rose dress. She had always been beautiful to him, but since she had started wearing the gowns he'd ordered for her, her beauty was on display. Easy for all to see. Even by the morons who never looked beyond the surface.

He gulped. Steadying his voice to reply.

“Thalia. I came to find you when you didn't show up for our appointment today.”

“I told you yesterday I had another engagement today. And I sent you a note. Didn't you get it?”

“I did. But it told me nothing. What engagement took precedence over our meeting?”

He shook his head. “Forget that. It doesn't signify anymore. We have more pressing matters at the moment. What the hell is this?”

He saw the blood drain from her face. Her eyes widened in horror, and he had his answer even before she spoke.

“That's my sketchbook.”

A dagger to the heart would've hurt less.

“Indeed? Are these the landscapes, flowers, and animals you said you liked to sketch?” he asked bitinglly as he opened the sketchbook to an obnoxious sketch and shoved it directly before her eyes.

“I... That's for a different project. Why are you flipping through my sketchbook?”

“I was waiting for you! The sketchbook was open on your desk. The first few images were innocent enough. I was looking through it, admiring your work, when I found

this.” His mouth curled in disgust.

“I can explain. Please don’t be angry. I understand the subject matter is...controversial, but it surprises me to see you react with so much rage.”

“Oh, you think my reaction is exaggerated? Did I not tell you how the scandal rags attacked me after my wife’s death? How they mocked me and condemned me and turned society’s opinion against me?”

“I remember now that you mentioned it. But this is different. This has nothing to do with you. These individuals depicted in my sketches have committed heinous acts, and they deserve to be exposed. In some cases, even brought to justice.”

“Oh? And what are you? Constable, jury, and executioner? I was accused of a heinous act. Murder is widely regarded as a pretty serious crime. The fact that I was innocent didn’t stop people like you from dragging my name through the mud.”

He realized he was yelling when he saw her jump and take a step back. God, he was acting like an ogre. He took a deep breath. Forced himself to draw air in and out of his lungs. Even in his rage, he couldn’t bear the thought of frightening her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You did not deserve that. But I promise you I’ve never drawn a caricature of you. Or any innocent person. I wouldn’t. These other people you see in my drawings, their crimes have been proven.”

He didn’t want to hear it. “I want you to promise me you’ll stop making these caricatures.”

She looked stricken. “Stop making them? At all? No exceptions?”

“Absolutely not. Whatever it is you are doing, whatever cause you are involved with,

must stop. I don't want you to mock people in this way."

"I can't do that."

"You refuse to comply with this simple request?"

"It is not a simple request!" she exploded, her own temper igniting, feeding his own rage. "This work is important to me, and you haven't even given me the chance to explain myself!"

"I have. And I don't care about your explanations. Either you cease this completely, or we part ways."

Her gaze snapped to his. Their eyes met, held, and her eyes became moist with unshed tears. It seemed as if both of them held their breath, suspended in this moment of pain and loss. But her answer, when it came, sounded clear and sure.

"I guess we'll part ways, then. Goodbye, my lord." She turned sideways and gestured towards the door.

He stared for a couple of heartbeats. His mind felt dazed while his heart cracked in his chest.

Then he stormed out of her house, slamming the door in his wake.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THE CRASH OF THE DOOR sounded like cannon fire, shattering her illusions and obliterating feelings that until this moment she didn't know she had.

Thalia sank into the nearest seat, numb with shock. It was a momentary reprieve, but she was grateful for it. Because she knew a wave of pain was approaching, and it would come crashing down on her soon enough.

What had just happened? A few minutes ago, she was laughing and talking with her friends. They had encouraged her to pursue this relationship, and she had felt...happy and lighthearted. Happy to have met him, to have given in to their desire. And hopeful. For what, she didn't know. She certainly had not expected a proposal. But this confrontation and the sudden death of their incipient relationship were even more unexpected.

A drop of moisture fell on her arm, making her aware that she was crying. Exasperated, she brushed the tears from her eyes. She would not cry. She would not fall apart. It was absurd. She had only known Liam—no, Lord Ashford—for a few weeks. So what if they had been the most glorious, significant weeks of her life?

They had seen each other every single day. She had bared her body and soul to him. They had talked about their most intimate secrets, laughed and made love. Her first reaction upon finding him in her sitting room had been pure joy, for she had missed him today and was looking forward to meeting him tomorrow.

And then he had looked at her with wrath in his eyes, and her joy had died. She wouldn't see him tomorrow. Or any other day. They had broken it off, whatever was between them. Parted, as he had said. A sob broke free, and only then did she notice



she had been holding her breath for too long. More sobs followed the first; ugly sobs that distorted her face and made her gasp for air.

She battled them furiously. It didn't matter. No one could become that important in such a short period. She would go on with her life. She would find something else to occupy her days. Maybe even take a new lover? Now that her inconvenient virginity had been taken care of, nothing kept her from finding more congenial company. She cringed at the thought.

Maybe if she kept repeating that to herself, she would eventually believe it.

THE NEXT MORNING DAWNED gray and dreary, which perfectly suited her mood. After a restless night, she awoke listless and tired. The prospect of dressing and going about her day failed to excite her, so she had a cup of hot chocolate in bed and was considering going back to sleep, for lack of a more exciting activity, when Artemis burst through her bedroom door like a fairy whirlwind.

"Artemis! I didn't know you were back from your honeymoon." Thalia groaned inside. She didn't have the energy to deal with her sister now.

"Andrew and I returned last night, and I couldn't wait a moment longer to come visit you."

"I would think that with a handsome husband at home, you'd have better things to do with your mornings than waking up early to visit your sister."

"I did not wake up early. Or rather, I did, but didn't leave bed until almost midday," Artemis added with a sly smile. "And for your information, it's not morning anymore."

"It isn't?" Confound it. Where had time gone?

“No, and I’m wondering why you are still abed and looking like death warmed over.”

Thalia frowned. “That’s not very nice of you to say. Not everyone is a radiant bride with roses on her cheeks. If you must know, I slept poorly last night and feel a bit under the weather this morning.”

She hoped Artemis would accept that, and not probe. She was not ready to talk about her shattered dreams and her failed relationship, if one could even call it that.

But her sister was too shrewd and knew her too well. “No. I don’t buy it. What’s going on, Thalia?”

“Nothing at all. I’ll be fine tomorrow.”

“It’s the marquess, isn’t it? What did he do? Has he been unkind to you?”

“No. Nothing like that. Why would you assume my condition has any relation to him?”

Artemis just gave her a look, coming over to sit on the bed. “Please, Tally. Don’t patronize me. I know there was something between the marquess and you. It was plain to see. Has the affair soured?”

Recognizing the futility of trying to hide it from her perceptive little sister, she nodded. “You could say that. A more appropriate term would be that it has ended.”

“Oh no, Tally.” Her sister’s heartfelt and impulsive hug broke the dam of her barely contained tears. “I shall ask Drew to have a talk with his brother—”

“No.” She grabbed her sister’s hand. “You shall do nothing of the sort, Mimi. You and your husband should not concern yourself with my misbegotten affair. I would

never forgive myself if this were to drive a wedge in your marriage.”

“It won’t. But I need to do something. I can’t stand seeing you so downtrodden.”

“It will pass. You just caught me at a bad time. We parted ways yesterday. I’m sure I’ll be better by tomorrow.”

“I know what we shall do! We will get you a whole new wardrobe, and don’t quibble about the cost,” her sister warned when she opened her mouth. “Thanks to my husband’s progressive ideas, I have more than enough money to spend.”

“I wasn’t going to complain about the cost, my dear. I was just going to say that I already have quite a few new gowns. The marquess gave them to me. They are beautiful, too.”

“Oh, he really went to great lengths for you, didn’t he? Do you mind my asking why you two ended the affair?”

Thalia looked down. The memory of the argument clouding her eyes with pain. “He found out about the caricatures I draw and...took exception to it. You see, the press maligned him in much the same manner, and he’s sensitive to the subject.”

“Oh, I see. But didn’t you explain what we do?”

“I tried. He wouldn’t let me. He gave me an ultimatum. Either I stop sketching or we were finished. I didn’t give in,” Thalia finished with a small shrug.

“Oh, Tally. Are you sure? You don’t need to draw those caricatures. We can do something else, find some other method to expose those bastards.”

Thalia glared at her sister. “No. You know that because of my reduced financial

circumstances, I can't contribute monetarily as much as the other ladies. My main contribution is my talent for drawing. What I do may seem insignificant, but it gives me purpose. Besides, I can't let him dictate to me or give me ultimatums without even listening to my side."

"I understand, dear," her sister said, giving her hand a little squeeze. "In my opinion, I think he might come around." I only hope he doesn't take too long to do it."

Thalia shook her head. "He won't. If you had seen the fury in his eyes... No. Besides, he never wanted anything permanent with me. The faster I accept it's over, the better I'll be."

"In that case, he is being a complete and unmitigated fool. Tell you what. Let me see these new gowns of yours. We are going to a ball tonight."

"Mimi, I really don't feel—"

"Of course you don't. But that's exactly why you should do it. You can't sit here at home moping about for him." So saying, Artemis threw open her wardrobe and gasped at the gowns inside. "Tally, these gowns are beautiful! You'll don one of these tonight, we'll attend a ball, and you'll have every man in attendance fawning over you. We'll make the marquess regret the moment he let you go."

Thalia doubted that a change of gown would suddenly have men flocking to her, or that Liam would care. But if nothing else, attending a ball might distract her from crying her eyes out.

“YOU ARE BEING AN IDIOT .”

“Shut up, Drew.”

His brother had taken it upon himself to invade his study, his one refuge from the world, to pester him.

As if he needed his brother’s constant harassment to add to his misery. It had been a week since he had parted ways with Thalia, and in all that time, he had not stopped thinking about her for even one minute. She had become an obsession in his blood. He couldn’t sleep, couldn’t work, couldn’t breathe with the need for her.

Every morning, he would come to his study, telling himself he would either work on the damned sculpture, or he would destroy what he had created and begin anew. And every day he could do neither. So he ended up staring at the clay mold he had made, grabbing the chisel, pressing it to the marble block, and then not moving. He just stared at the stone as if it could come to life and give him the comfort he needed.

There was no point in finishing the sculpture now. He had lost the motivation now that he had lost his muse. But neither could he destroy it, nor abandon it. So he was stuck. His work was in the same state as his feelings. Unable to let her go, but unable to forgive her.

“If you don’t snap out of your doldrums soon, you’ll lose her forever.”

As an answer, he glowered at his brother. “How’s your search for a home going?” he asked, hoping to distract his brother.

Andrew and his new wife had been living in a hotel since their return from their honeymoon.

“We found a townhouse that Artemis likes not far from here. We hope to finalize the purchase soon. But don’t change the subject. My affairs are not the issue here. Yours are.”

“My affairs are none of your concern.”

“Oh, but they are. You see, it pains me to see you so miserable. And her sister’s heartache likewise affects my wife. So your affairs are impacting my happiness, whether you want it or not.”

“You are acting as if I was at fault here. She is the one who engaged in inappropriate activities. And refused to give them up when I gave her the chance. She chose those loathsome caricatures over me.”

His voice rose with his temper, kindled by the pain of her betrayal. He hated the display of vulnerability. The evidence that her behavior affected him. After the shame his wife caused him, he had vowed never to be a fool for a woman again. Yet here he was. Would he never learn?

“Have you wondered why she does that?”

“Maybe she has a vendetta against those men? Or she might do it for money. I don’t know, and I don’t care. It’s a contemptible activity, and she refused to stop when I asked her. So it’s clear I don’t matter to her.”

“From what I heard, you didn’t ask her. You gave her an ultimatum.”

“I gave her a choice. She chose that.”

“Stop for a moment and try to use your reason, Liam. I know this is a sensitive subject for you, because you have been mocked in caricatures before. But think about it, if you had been tried and condemned as an innocent, would you conclude the entire judicial system is wrong and therefore, all people who are part of it are corrupt?”

“Probably.”

Drew rolled his eyes. “And I suppose that because you have been maligned by some newspapers, all written press should be consigned to rubbish?”

“Absolutely.”

“Don’t be a dolt.”

“If you are going to insult me, you might as well leave.”

“Did you know she is part of a group of ladies who are fighting to help women and children in disadvantaged and often dangerous situations?”

Liam shrugged. “A lot of ladies are involved in charity. What does that have to do with caricatures?”

“There are many ways to contribute. She is not wealthy, so she can’t contribute as much money as the other ladies, so she does the caricatures. All those drawings you saw...the content is not from hearsay and rumors. It comes directly from women they have helped. Some of those characters are deviants who prey on children, some beat their wives. Others neglect their families to spend all their money on vice. The caricatures are popular, and they help to expose their contemptible behavior. To bring them to justice. They have helped women and children from all stations in life.”

“She mentioned nothing about that.”

“Did you give her the chance?”

“Well, not when I found the drawings. But we spent weeks together before that. Seeing each other every fucking day. Talking about everything, or so I assumed. Why didn’t she say anything? Why did she keep such an important part of her life from me?”

“I don’t know Liam. You ask yourself that question. Perhaps she didn’t think you’d be interested or that you would support her.”

The thought was like acid in his stomach. He thought they were close. He had opened himself to her, told her things he didn’t discuss with anyone. She had spoken about her late husband’s proclivities, but only the bare minimum and only after he had discovered her virginity. Before, she had tried to hide it. The conclusion was inescapable. She didn’t trust him.

Was it because she didn’t care about him? He thought of her passion, her artless response to his caresses, the way she had given herself to him, and he couldn’t believe that.

What did he have to do to earn her trust? Hadn’t he been caring, loving, and protective? Yes, and also high-handed, dictatorial, and controlling. He had offered her nothing more than sexual pleasure. Mind-blowing pleasure, yes, but nothing permanent. He had given her no place in his life, other than that of a paramour. And then he had dared to show up at her house uninvited, accuse her of misdeeds, and give her ultimatums. God, he had acted like an oaf. It would be a miracle if she forgave him at all. Let alone trust him.

“I need to go talk to her.”



“She’s not home right now.”

Liam had never noticed how annoying Andrew could be. “Then where the hell is she, and why do you know of her whereabouts so well?”

“She is with my wife at the moment, attending a tea party.”

“Then I’ll visit her later.”

“I’m escorting them to a ball later.”

“Stop being a jackanapes and tell me where the fucking ball is.”

To his infinite annoyance, his brother just laughed and tossed over his shoulder as he stood to leave the room.

“It’s the Duchess of Aycliffe’s ball. Oh, and, Liam?”

“Yes?”

“Be there early if you want to have a chance of securing a dance with your lady-love. She’s mighty popular among the male population.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THALIA ENTERED THE grand ballroom of the Duchess of Aycliffe's London mansion, and her breath caught at the sheer opulence that greeted her. Everything was exquisite. The room was a dazzling display of wealth and taste, with crystal chandeliers casting a soft, golden glow over the sea of elegant guests. Rich velvet drapes in deep burgundy adorned the walls, and gilt mirrors reflected the light, making the room seem even larger and more resplendent.

Conversation filled the air, punctuated by the strains of an orchestra playing a waltz. Even though several hundred guests filled the vast ballroom, the space didn't feel cramped. Ladies in shimmering silks and satins twirled across the floor in the arms of gentlemen handsomely dressed in their black and white evening attire.

Thalia could almost taste the extravagance in the air. The scent of jasmine and roses mingled with the rich aroma of champagne and the decadent feast laid out on long, linen-covered tables. There were towering confections, platters of game and fresh fruit, and crystal bowls filled with punch. The sight was enough to make anyone feel intoxicated by the sheer abundance.

Yet, amid all this splendor, Thalia couldn't shake the melancholy that plagued her. The grandeur, though breathtaking, felt overwhelming. She would rather be in her cozy sitting room reading a book and nursing her broken heart.

Her brother-in-law had swept her sister into a dance immediately upon entering. They made a handsome couple twirling across the floor while gazing at each other with adoring eyes. Her opinion of Lord Andrew had improved tremendously in the weeks since his marriage to her sister. It was obvious he loved Artemis and would do anything to make her happy. She thought back to the time when she had embarked on

a journey across the country to stop their marriage and felt absolutely ridiculous. And then immediately cut that thought, as that led to memories of the marquess.

She would not think of him. She might never forget him, but she would not indulge in useless reminiscences. Tonight, she would put her social mask on and would navigate this gilded maze, poised and confident. A gentleman she had met previously, but whose name escaped her, approached her and asked her to dance. With a gracious nod, she accepted.

The attention she kept garnering never ceased to surprise her. She had just changed the way she dressed and her hairstyle. Underneath, she was the same person. Yet she had gone from wallflower to seductress in the span of a week? It would be amusing if she were not too broken-hearted to appreciate the irony.

Her dance partner was an accomplished dancer, although he kept taking surreptitious glances at her bosom whenever he thought she wasn't looking. He was not the first to do so. She fixed a polite smile on her face and allowed herself to be swept away in the music.

How would it feel to dance in Liam's arms? She had never danced with him. Their affair had been so short-lived they had not even had time to experience that. She gave her head a shake to dislodge the intrusive thought. One day, she would be able to enjoy a dance, a conversation, a walk in the park, a liaison even, without comparing it with how it would feel with Liam. But that day was not today. Alas.

The dance ended, and her partner returned her to the side of the dancefloor, only to be besieged by a bevy of gentlemen wanting to claim a spot on her dance card and offering champagne or punch.

Her smile had become a frozen rictus she hoped didn't look as forced as it felt. It was difficult to smile when your heart was weeping. Coming here tonight had been a

mistake. She raised her eyes, looking for her sister, and instead her gaze clashed with the object of her obsession. He stood alone in the crowd, not talking to anyone. In fact, people moved around him, as if an invisible force surrounded him in a protective circle.

His intense eyes pinned her, and a wave of heat swamped her. Breaking the stare, she accepted a glass of champagne from one gentleman and took a sip, willing her heart to calm and her blood to cool.

This was bound to happen at some point. Since they moved in the same circles, they would meet at a ball or other event. But not yet. She wasn't ready yet. Leaving this ball became urgent. She would claim not feeling well...

“Good evening, Lady Thalia. I believe this dance is mine.”

How had he approached her so stealthily? Her group of admirers had parted for him like soldiers to allow their general through. He extended his hand, holding her gaze. She studied his beloved features. His wild hair was perfectly combed back tonight and tied at his nape with a leather strip. His suit was impeccable. It hugged his Greek god torso with an elegance that spoke of flawless design. He was clean shaven. She would have missed that rugged stubble that had sometimes abraded her skin, except that his jawline and chin were a study of chiseled male beauty. They deserved to be exposed for all to admire.

He was lethally, devastatingly handsome, and her knees grew weak, remembering how those perfectly shaped lips had possessed hers. How his mouth had commanded and enthralled, while those muscular arms held her tight against a chest made of unyielding rock. He captured her eyes, a corner of his mouth lifted, and a sparkle lit his eyes. As if he could read her thoughts and was daring her to call his bluff and refuse him.

She would have, except she saw something behind the arrogance of his bearing. A vulnerability. A...yearning? She placed her hand in his, and he led her to the dance floor where, with a smooth maneuver, he swept her into the twirling couples.

Was it only a few minutes ago that she wondered how he danced? The same way he did everything else. Flawlessly. Masterfully. She was floating in his arms, weightless and free. His arms held her secure and protected as he swirled her through a turn, her skirts floating behind her like banners in the wind. She laughed with the sheer exhilaration of the moment, and his eyes warmed, crinkling at the corners as he beheld her.

She instantly sobered. Remembering herself. The circumstances. A dance meant nothing. He couldn't just sweep in and make her forget herself.

“What are you doing here, Lord Ashford?”

His face tightened at her use of his title, and he held her closer. “I’m dancing with the most beautiful woman in this ball.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere. You know what I mean. Why did you seek me out in the middle of the ball? I thought you wanted nothing more to do with me.”

“No. That’s not true. I want everything with you. I was just an obstinate prick. Would you allow me to redeem myself?”

There was sincerity in his tone and true longing. It soothed her bleeding heart.

“If you are trying to apologize for the events of the other day, my lord, I accept your apology.”

“That’s not all I want. I want you back. In my life and in my bed. I need you, Thalia.”

The raw declaration went straight to her heart. Even so, that didn't mean they belonged together. He had no desire to marry, and she refused to be controlled or dictated to.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss you." His arm around her waist tightened at her declaration. "But I don't think there's a way forward for us, my lord."

"Don't say that. We need to talk. If we both want it, there must be a way. Let's get out of here. Come home with me, please."

"I can't leave the ball with you. Quite the scandal that would create. Especially after the scene you caused, alienating everyone to claim a dance you had not requested."

"To hell with that. All your dances are mine. You are mine."

"I don't belong to anyone, my lord. I believe that's the crux of our problems."

Just then, the music ended, and they stopped. But he didn't release her, just stood there in the middle of the ballroom, still holding her by the waist, her hand trapped in his.

"Release me. You're creating a scene," she hissed.

Her next dance partner arrived. An amiable gentleman from the north called Mr Granville.

"Lady Thalia, I believe this is my dance."

"No, it's not. Go away," Liam almost snarled at the man.

"Excuse me, my lord?"

“Lord Ashford is joking, Mr Granville. The next dance is, indeed, yours.” She turned to Liam. “You’re welcome to pencil in your name for my next available set, my lord.”

Their eyes met, clashing in a battle of wills. He was trying to dictate to her once again. Take control of her life and her choices. She would not allow it.

“I’d be honored, Lady Thalia,” he said at last, taking the pencil and dancing card hanging from her wrist to write his name with forceful, almost angry, strokes.

And then he turned and marched off the dance floor. Leaving her with Mr Granville, who smiled congenially and offered his arm to lead her into the next dance.

She danced five more dances before it was Liam’s turn again. He had watched her the entire time from the edges of the room. Standing all by himself, no one talked to him, and he seemed not to care. He’d just stood there, looking at her with a possessive gaze. But when he came to claim his dance, instead of dancing, he offered her his arm and led her out of the ballroom. She didn’t object, for she was happy for the respite.

“If your aim is to make amends, this is the exact opposite of what you should do. You are behaving like a boor.”

He took a deep sigh as he led her onto the balcony. “I’m sorry, Thalia. It drives me crazy to see you dance with other men. To watch them put their covetous hands on you. They all want you, but none of them deserves you.”

“And you do?” she asked with a raised brow.

“Maybe not. But I saw you first,” he growled.

“Excuse me, but I’m not a prize to be claimed by the first to arrive.”

“What I meant is that I saw you. The real you, before any of these fools. They had you right before their eyes for years, and none of them could see past your ghastly gowns. Much less perceive the beauty of your soul.”

“And you did?” This time, the question was soft. Breathless.

He snorted, looking into her eyes. “I saw your external beauty at once. And got a glimpse into your heart during our first conversation.”

“Oh.” Why had he never told her that?

“Let’s go talk in private, please,” he asked as other couples spilled onto the lamp-lit balcony. “Otherwise, I may do something rash, like kissing you here, in front of people.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Wouldn’t I?” he asked softly, his gaze focusing on her lips. They throbbed with the memory of his kisses, as if he were touching them now. “I’m desperate for you, my muse. Let’s go home together, please. Put me out of my misery.”

“I’m not going home with you,” she said firmly, resisting the desire to melt into him. They had things to resolve, and this conversation was too important to allow it to be clouded by passion. “But I guess we can take a stroll in the gardens.”



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

THANK GOODNESS SHE had agreed to come out into the gardens with him. As soon as they were out of sight of the glittering ballroom, he pulled her into his arms and crushed her mouth with his. He had spoken the truth. He was desperate for her. The days since he last saw her had been a hell of deprivation.

Her lips were life giving. How had he ever thought he could live without her? He deepened the kiss, probing deep into her mouth. Quenching a thirst that went deeper than physical. But all too soon, she tore her mouth away.

“Liam, wait. We are not acting wisely. We need to talk.”

“I know. I owe you an explanation. And an apology.”

“I already forgave you. But we can’t continue to see each other.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t approve of my activities, and I won’t be controlled.”

“I now know why you do the caricatures. And I know about the charitable organization you belong to. I won’t try to stop you ever again. I’ll even help you in any way I can,” he explained when her eyes widened in surprise.

His hands came up to cradle her face. “Thalia, I’m not an ogre. I am just an imperfect human being. If I seem hard and rough, it’s because I’ve been hurt and ridiculed in the past. My late wife dragged my honor through the mud, and then the newspapers stomped all over it with ghastly caricatures. When I saw those... Not to justify my

actions, but my mind clouded, and I couldn't think straight."

She looked up at him, those sparkling blue-gray eyes clear and honest. "I would never dishonor you or betray you. If you don't know that—"

"I do," he said, pulling her close against him, enfolding her in his embrace.

She felt so good. Soft and warm and everything he had ever needed and didn't know was missing in his life. His lips sought her temple, kissing around her hairline, his mouth sliding to her ear. He wanted to bite her, lick her. Eat her. He was hungry for her...

But she pushed against him. He released her, his arms feeling empty and bereft.

"Liam, I still don't think it's a good idea for us to continue our affair."

His heart cried out in protest at her refusal, but he remained silent. Stoic.

"I know many widows engage in casual affairs, but I think I lack the constitution for these endeavors. This falling out has made me realize how much my feelings are already involved," she said quietly. "It would only get worse the longer we stay together, and when we eventually part ways, it would destroy me. I... I can't do that."

"Who says we have to part ways?"

"All affairs must end at some point."

"Not ours. I don't want only an affair. Thalia, I'm in love with you."

Her mouth fell open in surprise, and he had to fist his hands to prevent himself from reaching for her again.

“I was going to wait to say this, because I know it’s premature, and you probably won’t believe I’m in earnest, but I am. I love you, Thalia. Without even realizing it, I had become this empty shell of a man, but you came into my life unexpectedly and filled all the empty spaces. And now I can’t bear the emptiness without you. If this week showed me anything, it is that I can’t live without you. I want you with me always. Forever.”

Her eyes, wide and full of wonder, never strayed from his as she took a step closer and placed her hand on his chest, right over his heart. “Liam, what are you saying?”

He took a deep breath, drawing her towards him. “What I’m saying is I want you to marry me. The prospect may not appeal to you now. I know I’m too old for you and too hardheaded. I’m sometimes rough and domineering, and you don’t want that. But I’ll prove to you that I can change. If I have to spend the rest of my life convincing you, I will.”

He finished his bungled proposal, knowing he had not made an elegant speech. But he couldn’t take it back. He had spoken from his heart and had meant every word.

“You love me?” There was wonder in her tone. It offered a little hope.

“With all of my heart.”

“And you want to marry me?”

“I do. It’s what I want most in the world. I’ll never seek to control you or take away your independence. And I’ll always take your wishes to heart.”

“Does that include making love to me any time I wish?” Her voice had become husky with desire, and it ignited a dangerous need in him that was never far from the surface when she was near.

“Always,” he rasped.

“Then take me, Liam. Here and now. Persuade me. Make me yours.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:06 am*

BEFORE SHE HAD EVEN finished her sentence, he had lifted her in his arms and walked a few steps to a marble bench set in a niche against the garden wall. It was covered in ivy and roses and hidden from view from the house.

He sat and arranged her so her legs straddled his lap, her voluminous skirts blooming around them. She experimentally moved her hips, and her flesh grazed the hard ridge in his trousers. He groaned, his hands diving under the froths of her skirts and petticoats to find the bare skin of her thighs. He squeezed, while his hands circled higher up the leg of her drawers, until his fingers were teasing the crease at the juncture of her legs, tearing a low moan of need from her.

He captured her lips while his skilled fingers sought and found the molten center of her. She went a little mad with want. Her hips thrusting and straining against his touch, while her hands clawed into his hair, dislodging the leather band that kept his long hair tied at the back, and then grabbing onto his locks for purchase.

It wasn't enough. She needed more. She needed the taste of his skin under her lips. Her mouth skated along the hard line of his jaw while his fingers kept playing with her, intensifying her need, propelling her further into madness.

Thalia tore at the knot in his necktie, unwinding it and discarding it. The collar of his shirt fell open, allowing her access to the strong column of his neck. She ran her tongue up and down it, savoring his salty, male essence, drawing a gasp of pleasure from him.

“My muse, you are killing me with want,” he panted before inserting one long finger into her.

Her muscles closed greedily against the invasion, wanting more. Needing a fullness his digits couldn't provide.

Her hands left his hair to slide down his torso until she found what she sought, the buttons of his trousers, and started undoing them with frantic movements that spoke of her desperation.

"Thalia, no. Wait. Don't—" His warning dissolved into a groan as her fingers closed over his hard flesh. She squeezed, pumping slowly, touching him the way he had taught her, and was gratified when his thick member grew even thicker and bigger in her hands.

"Fuuuck..." He buried the agonized groan in her chest, nuzzling the tops of her breasts, exposed by the low décolletage of her gown.

"I want it in me," she confided in his ear, and his fingers seemed to falter as they spasmed inside her.

"I don't have a sheath," he whispered in a pained tone.

"It doesn't matter. Take me, Liam. Give me what I need."

His eyes met hers, lambent with need. As desperate as she must look.

"You trust me not to get you with child?"

She shook her head. "I don't care if you do. We are getting married, aren't we?"

His whole body stilled, the only movement his eyes searching hers with incipient hope.

"Is that a yes to my proposal, then?"

“Yes. Yes! Did you ever doubt it for a second?”

Her hands roved over his shoulders, closing on his hair, holding him still for a hungry kiss. She bit his lower lip, frantic with her need. His groan was feral as he withdrew his fingers from her cunny and repositioned her, notching his rod at her entrance.

“Take me, then, my muse.”

She didn’t have to be asked twice. With a mewl of delight, she sank down onto his length until he was buried to the hilt and filled her completely. The growl that tore from his throat was primal as he sank his teeth into her shoulder, then soothed it with his tongue.

“Bloody hell, my muse. It feels incredible without the sheath. I can feel your heat, your wetness, every pulsation of your flesh. It’s so fucking delicious. I’m trying my hardest not to release too soon.”

“I want to make you lose control,” she replied, rocking her hips relentlessly against him, driving both of them insane with need.

“Not before you,” he rasped.

“Make me, then,” she challenged against his lips.

It was like setting kindling to flame. Holding her hips steady, he moved under her, his hips pounding into her relentlessly. She reveled in every forceful thrust, in the firm grasp of his hands that would surely leave finger imprints upon her flesh. She delighted in his rough possession, in his absolute lack of self-control.

The climax, when it came, broke upon them at the same time. They buried their simultaneous moans and groans of pleasure in each other’s mouths.

Both of them lost to the passion of the moment.

Both of them won.

THANK YOU FOR READING this story!