



The Picture of Desire

(Finders Keepers #3)

Author: *Terri Mackenzie*

Category: Historical

Description: Betrayal tore them apart. Blackmail brought them together. Only love can save them.

Nine years ago, Henry Beaumont broke Louisa Picard's heart. Now another man's rich widow, she will do anything to protect her independence. But she harbours a secret that could destroy her reputation, and when a blackmailer threatens to expose her, who should overhear but her former flame and the man she vows to hate?

Henry is haunted by the mistakes of his past. Still hopelessly in love but knowing she will never forgive him, he does his best to make amends by offering his help with her current predicament. But he has problems of his own: a family destined for financial ruin and the expectation that he will marry to save them.

As they work together to thwart her blackmailer, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny their mutual attraction. But although Henry claims that his help—and his feelings—have nothing to do with her fortune, Louisa knows how deep his duty towards his family runs.

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THE PAST

May 1806

At long past midnight, Ryder Street was near empty. Louisa Picard crossed the road to avoid a few drunkards stumbling along the pavement, their arms around each other as they sang a bawdy drinking song. If they noticed her, they gave no indication, for which she was thankful. Only desperation could have prompted her to make such a dangerous journey across London at this time of night.

She searched for the house she knew to be Henry Beaumont's, keeping to the shadows cast by the wayward moon. There were few around to see her, but even so, she tugged her bonnet down still further to hide her face. The hem of her dress dragged in a puddle, and she scooped her skirts a little higher. This was her first time visiting his home, but she trusted he would see her.

If he did, all would be lost.

Finally, she saw it, and slipped down a side alleyway, rapping on the side door reserved for the servants and deliveries. After a few moments of silence, she knocked again. Then again.

Eventually, a sleepy-looking manservant opened the door, a candle in one hand and a scowl on his face. It deepened when he saw her. "What do you want?"

"I wish to speak to Lord Eynsham."

“His lordship is asleep.”

“Then please wake him.” She slipped past him and down the narrow corridor that she could only assume led to the main portion of the house. “Tell him Miss Picard is here to see him,” she said over her shoulder. “He will receive me.”

At least that was something she was confident of.

The servant glowered at her, but she had already escaped into the hallway, and stood with her arms wrapped around herself, looking around the dark house. It was small and shabby, and although she had not been to many bachelors’ houses, she suspected most were more salubrious.

“Remain where you are,” the servant said, and ascended the stairs with a flickering candle in one hand.

“I have nowhere else to go,” she said. The aptness of the words sent a shiver through her. She held her cloak more firmly around herself and tried to think past the fog of hopelessness that had settled over her since her disastrous dinner with Lord Bolton.

Henry would help. He had to. If he did not, all would be lost.

It felt as though hours passed before light made its way back down the stairs, this time accompanied by Henry. He was wearing a robe loosely tied around his waist, and when he approached, she noticed that his eyes were sleepy yet fierce, as though he would defend her against the ills of the world.

Her hope rose, and her heart gave a childish leap. Relief bloomed. She would be all right now.

“Louisa,” he said, holding out his hands. She put hers in them at once. “What brings

you here at this time of night?”

“I need your help,” she told him. “I’m sorry for waking you, but there was nothing for it.”

“How did you escape?”

She gave him a contemptuous look. “I climbed out of my window.”

The hint of a smile touched a dimple in one cheek, and he ran a hand through his messy hair. “Of course you did. What is the matter that couldn’t wait until the morning?”

“It would be too late by then.”

“What happened, Louisa?”

“Bolton,” she said, and his expression tightened.

“He offered for you?”

“Not so directly.” She snorted and moved away, needing the space in which to organise her thoughts. “He arranged the whole with my mother, and has gone as far as procuring a special licence. We are to be married tomorrow.”

A muscle twitched in his cheek. “Tomorrow?”

“Mama will not listen to reason. She thinks that his wealth is the only thing that matters, never mind that he—” She broke off at the angry glint in Henry’s eyes. Probably best that he didn’t know the way Bolton had ogled her as though she were fresh meat, a new delectable flavour he intended to sample. “Well, I have tried

pleading with her to no avail, and you may be sure that she fully intends to drag me to the altar if I do not go willingly.”

A frown tightened his handsome, autocratic face. “In a month, you will reach your majority and be free to marry whomever you choose. If you can—”

“She will not allow me to wait. You must help me, Henry.”

Her words seemed to settle into the very fabric of the house, sinking into silence until the darkened shadows of the hallway seemed to quiver with distress. The first stab of true panic went through her, cold and cruel.

All this time, she believed he would help. Could help. He was a gentleman in his own right, an adult. A man. If he could not help, what else could she do?

“Have you spoken with him?” he asked. “Perhaps you could—”

“He would not listen to reason.”

“But if—”

“No. I have thought it all through. We shall have to go to Gretna Green.”

He swallowed, hard, and she felt it as though he had slapped her. “Louisa,” he said, and his voice cracked. “Gretna Green?”

“What other choice do we have?”

He shook his head. “That isn’t a choice,” he said jerkily. “Surely you understand—how would we get there?”

“You would hire a carriage, of course. A chaise and four.” Anything, so long as she could escape this marriage. “You have to help me, Henry. You promised we would be married when I was of age.”

He stiffened as though she had been the one to strike him now, a flush coming to his cheeks, dark in the gloom. “And I meant it. But I do not have the funds to flee across the country, Louisa. Surely you know—when I said marry, I meant properly, a small wedding in a small church. The Banns read.”

“We could travel post,” she said, desperate now.

“We could,” he said slowly. “But I have no funds for accommodation along the way. And Bolton—if we travelled post, he would be able to find us without trouble. He’d catch us, and then things would be so much worse for you.” He caught her hand, squeezing it with the same desperation she felt. “I don’t have his influence or his wealth or his reach. He is an earl, and a rich one, and I have nothing. I have no way to take you to Gretna Green, and if I were to keep you away somewhere—to hide you—until you came of age, we would both be ruined. Gentlemen do not compromise ladies of quality.”

Tears, terrible and uncontrolled, rose to the back of her nose. “So you would rather I married another?”

“No, of course not!” He reared back and paced the hallway, hands combing through his hair as though he needed something to do with them. “But what would you have me do? You come here expecting the impossible—if I could I would, but where would I get the money in time? You are to be married tomorrow: I could go to a moneylender, but it would be too late. And my father—” He gave a bitter, angry laugh. “Perhaps he has the money, but heaven knows he would not give it to me, even to marry the woman I love.”

“You could apply to him,” she whispered.

“Ever since your father’s death,” he said gently, “I have known how incapable I am of providing for your mother. Or even for you. My family’s disapproval I could weather, but what of yours?”

“I need nothing more than you.” Her hands shook as she clasped them in front of her. “Please, Henry. I would bear it all, all manner of poverty and want, if you would bear it with me.”

“I would if I could, but how?” There was real agony in his voice; he had not stopped pacing until now, when at the other end of the dimly lit hallway he turned to face her. “What would you have me do, Louisa?”

“Anything,” she whispered, “so long as I do not have to marry him.”

“Perhaps . . .” The words were an effort. “Perhaps Bolton is a better choice given your current straitened circumstances. He can provide for you, he wants to marry you—perhaps it won’t be a love match, but you will have everything you need, and your mother will be well provided for.”

She stepped back. “You can’t mean that.”

Shafted moonlight through a tiny window above the front door illuminated the devastation on his face. This was her Henry Beaumont, the man whom she had loved for two years, and he was letting her go.

She could not accept that there was no other solution. Where there was love, and will, there was always another way.

“I would marry you if I had more than a pair of shillings to my name,” he said, voice

edged with frustration. "As it is, I could hardly afford to pay for a wedding. And if there were not your mother to think of, I would risk it anyway. But there is, and we both know that she expects your husband to support her." He dragged an exhausted hand down his face. "Something I cannot do in my present circumstances."

"So you would rather I marry Bolton?"

"I would rather neither of us were in this situation, and I'd rather have more than an instant to make a decision for the rest of our life. But ever since your father's death, I've known how incapable I am of providing for your mother in my current position. Perhaps it would be wise to marry someone whose financial situation is not plagued by debt and uncertainty." His hand fell to his side. "That person is not me, Louisa. Not right now. I wish it were. If I could wrangle control of the estate from my father, I would, but the eyes of the law do not support it, and neither does he. So short of ruining us both, what am I to do?"

He had not seen the way Bolton looked at her and addressed her; he did not know that although it seemed a good match, it would be insupportable. She did not know how to tell him. Not when she had already pleaded for his help, and he had denied her.

She took a step away from him. Away, away. A direction she never thought she'd choose. The anguish settled into her skin, knifelike and vicious. "Then we have nothing more to say to one another. I won't embarrass either of us by begging."

"Don't go like this," he said, and it sounded remarkably as though he was the one to beg. "Please, Louisa. There must be something ."

She fastened the ribbons of her bonnet more firmly around her chin. "Goodbye, Henry."

Though it seemed as though he wished to stop her leaving, he did not, and she exited

the house as silently as she had entered it. For a moment, she considered not returning home, but a destitute girl on the streets was not long for this world.

When she reached her mother's small house, she only hesitated an instant before climbing back up to her bedroom window. The room beyond was cold and dark, and she shivered as she changed into her nightgown and slipped between the chilly sheets.

She did not cry.

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PRESENT DAY

February 1815

Louisa rubbed at the smear of paint on her fingers as she absently made her way to the Blue Room. Her mind was on the painting she had left behind, and she was still thinking of colour and composition when she opened the door after her butler's announcement. Inside, Mr Vincent Knight stood in the middle of the floor, a smile on his face and his hands behind his back.

"Lady Bolton," he said with a bow, and presented her with a bouquet of perfect hothouse roses. "For you."

Irritation scorched her more pleasant thoughts of paint. It had taken her long enough to be able to bear the scent of oils again without feeling ill, and now she had been torn from it to receive a man carrying the most predictable flower known to mankind. Next, no doubt, he would ask for her hand in marriage. That was always how these calls went, and she began to wish she had told Avery not to admit him. Widowhood had given her an agreeable amount of freedom, but it had also left her with a considerable fortune, and no one, not even her mother, could believe that she did not intend to hand it to another.

Independence was precious.

Men, in her experience, were not.

"Thank you," she said, accepting the roses. Up close, their perfection became

uncanny—the closest one to get to unnatural while still being of nature. "Please, sit. Would you like anything to drink?"

"No, I thank you. Don't trouble yourself." He strolled to the sofa and sat down.

The irritation sharpened into anger, although she had been the one to offer him a seat. The fact was, he had been one of her late husband's friends, a man Lord Bolton had sponsored into the ton thanks to Knight's habit of brown-nosing. He might have been a good man—she had never troubled herself to find out—but his association with her husband was unforgiveable. And there was something about his russet hair that made her think of a fox, sly and watchful. Ever since Bolton's death, he had struggled to keep his hold on High Society, and had used his association with her and her late husband to procure invitations where he would otherwise have been denied.

That, too, was something she could not overlook.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" she asked.

"Have I not made my intentions plain?" He viewed her with some amusement. "I would have thought you were aware of my hopes."

Her shoulders stiffened. "I believe I have also been plain."

"Is that so?" His gaze strayed to the painting above the fireplace. The Blue Room was the only one used exclusively for entertaining, and the only space in which she still housed any of Lord Bolton's paintings. If she could have had her way, she would have tossed the unobtrusive landscape into the fire. Unfortunately, the Prince of Wales had taken a liking to Bolton's work and had the habit of dropping in unexpectedly to discuss her late husband's love of art. "What a delightful painting, Lady Bolton. Your husband was very talented."

Her jaw snapped together. Enough of this. “If you came here to offer for me, then I’m afraid you are labouring under a misapprehension.”

“Oh?”

“That I intend to marry again. I do not.”

An expression crossed his face, too fast for her to parse. Not a look of broken-hearted agony, but something closer to panic. Irritation. Frustration. No doubt, like her other suitors, he was more beguiled by Bolton’s fortune than her charms. But as her wealth was the only thing of worth Bolton had left her, she saw no purpose in handing it to another man.

“You are not yet thirty,” he said after a long moment. “You cannot think of spending the rest of your days alone.”

“Can I not?” She raised her brows. “I am perfectly fulfilled.”

“Your mother led me to believe you would welcome my suit.”

Her mother. Teeth firmly gritted to prevent an unwise response, she crossed to the window and looked out. The frost had melted under a merry winter sun, and the city was in full swing. Carriages rattled by, young ladies crossed the street arm in arm, and footmen followed their charges with their arms full of packages. Any other day, it was a sight that would make her smile. Now, all she could think of was the way every person she had the misfortune to meet thought that she would welcome the opportunity to shackle herself to another man.

After a marriage like the one she had endured, she would rather have plunged in front of a bolting horse.

“My mother was mistaken,” she said, raising her gaze to look at the frost still trimming the tiled roof of the house opposite. “Believe me, sir, I have no wish to waste either of our time.”

“This is your final answer?”

“I have no other to give,” she said calmly, turning and observing him. “And I would rather not be obliged to refuse you—for both our sakes. Better you are saved the indignity of asking.”

His nostrils flared and his jaw tightened. Not, she noted, the expression of a man so deep in love he might drown in it.

She had seen that but once.

“I will not change my mind,” she said, keeping her voice even. “And truly, I think you would be happier with another lady. One you hold genuine affection for.”

“Is that what you are saving yourself for? Love?”

“I meant what I said, Mr Knight. I have no intention of marrying again, no matter the provocation, and no matter who offers for me.”

This sentiment, while true, hid the fact that even if she had been tempted to marry again, she would not have chosen one of her husband’s cronies.

He rose to his feet, approaching her with his hat in his hand—the picture of humility, if only she could bring herself to believe it. “Is there nothing I can do to prevail on you to change your mind? To prove the depth of my affection?”

She almost snorted. There was not affection here, unless it was for the size of her

fortune. Admittedly, no debutante this Season had a dowry to match, but she doubted he needed her wealth; few men did. But they were greedy enough to want it.

"There is nothing, sir," she said. "I will not change my mind."

His lips thinned and his eyes roved across her face, grey and cold and angry. For a moment, he hesitated, rocking on his heels as though he was tempted to go in for another round, pitting his will against hers.

He would not succeed.

After a few more seconds, however, he merely clenched his teeth. "I see there is nothing more to do but take my leave."

"I hope your disappointment is of short duration."

He swept her a mocking bow and replaced his hat on his head. "Let no one say I didn't try. Good day, Lady Bolton."

And to think she had changed her dress for this. She rang the bellpull once again. "Goodbye, Mr Knight. Avery will see you out."

Henry Beaumont always rose with the dawn. The war had given him the habit; the crushing weight of his responsibilities back in London had maintained it. And it was during his early breakfast that there was a commotion by the door, a familiar slurred voice telling Jarvis, the butler, that he did not require assistance. Sighing, Henry rose, putting aside his teacup and folding his paper, and went to see what the problem was.

His father squinted at him from the hallway, his hat lopsided and his cane dropped across the floor. Jarvis was keeping an impassive distance as his father pointed a finger at Henry.

“You,” he said.

“Me,” Henry said. “Would you like some coffee? I find it is tolerable this time of the morning.”

“Coffee? Bah!” Spittle flew from his father’s mouth. “In my own home?”

“It is a practice that is becoming increasingly common. Though of course, you may go out to a coffee house if you wish.”

“Damn your impudence. I’m going to bed.”

“How much was it this time?” Henry asked, reaching for the patience he found so little of these days. Perhaps it was his attempt to assimilate back into London society after years fighting a war that had seemed nonsensical at the best of times.

His father regarded him with a crafty eye. “No need to concern yourself, Eynsham. It’ll come back around. You’ll see.”

“We’re late with wages already.”

“The servants can wait. We feed and house them, don’t we?” His father waved an imperious hand and stumbled for the stairs. Rather than let Jarvis watch his father fall, Henry took his arm and hauled him upstairs.

“There are more bills than I can count on your desk,” Henry said. “If you would just allow me to open and address them—”

“Oh, those. Throw them in the fire. I’ve got a few months before it gets bad yet.”

Henry clenched his jaw. He was not yet the earl, and so his power was limited

without his father's consent, which was yet to be forthcoming.

But if they did not turn things around soon, they would be forced to lose the London house. In an attempt to repair some of the damage, Henry had instructed that no fires were to be lit in the parlour, study, or bedrooms. The house was persistently cold, but at least they were saving on coal. Same for candles: no more than ten lit at any one time. He had personally gone without new clothes and boots since the summer, and he had asked his mother to do the same, although she had refused.

At least his sisters were married and out of the house, in successful households of their own. He couldn't like his youngest sister's choice of husband, but there was no denying that Jacob Barrington loved her, no matter his other faults. As for his elder sister's husband, the Duke of Norfolk—he was the only reason Henry could afford to send Oliver to Oxford, much as he hated being beholden. His pride stung, but there was nothing else for it if he was going to allow Oliver an education. And an education Oliver must have.

Henry would sacrifice just about anything to provide for his brother. Once Oliver was settled with an occupation and income of his own, the worst of his worries would be allayed.

"Father," he tried once they were at his bedchamber door. "If you don't give me the means to pay the servants soon, they will leave."

"Jarvis has been in the family for nigh on forty years."

"And this may be his last if he is not treated with respect, sir."

His father turned the doorknob with a decisive snort. "Give me until tomorrow, my lad. It'll turn around, you'll see."

Henry was not a stranger to the gamester's habit of throwing good money after bad, but it had never frustrated him more than then.

"Let me be plain with you," he said, following his father into the room. Daylight strained through the partially pulled curtains. "If you do not change your ways, we will lose this house and our comfortable life."

"You have become so serious, Henry." His father groaned as he dropped into the armchair before the fire. "Why is it so cold?"

"Because I left instructions to not build fires in our rooms unless it's strictly necessary."

The Earl's eyes narrowed. "This is necessary."

"No," Henry said, turning as he left the room, "it is not."

He closed the door firmly on his father before returning downstairs and finishing his breakfast. His mother had yet to rise when he left the house for the bank. Drummond's was open when he walked through the doors at past ten o'clock, although it was clear they had not expected to see a young lord request a meeting. Nevertheless, the request was granted readily enough, and Henry was ushered into a small room with a window overlooking the street, and a well-dressed man whose quiet elegance denoted him as being a man of fashion.

"Mr Pickford, Lord Eynsham," said the man, giving his hand a shake. "Come, sit. What would you like to discuss with me?"

"The state of my father's affairs," Henry said bluntly. "I want to know if we'll lose the house in Grosvenor Square."

Mr Pickford looked at him for a long, assessing moment. “Your father isn’t present.”

“No.”

“I cannot remember the last time your father saw me. Or,” he said carefully, “the last time a viscount came to the bank and did not request a meeting in the convenience of his own home.”

“Suffice to say my own home is not convenient.” And Henry did not believe in the arrogance that led rich men to make demands on the time of those less fortunate. “Can you help me?”

Mr Pickford sat at his desk. “You strike me as a sensible man, if I may say so, my lord.”

“Thank you.”

“If you demonstrate great forbearance and drastically reduce the demands made on your account, you may keep the house.”

But not the servants or the horses , Henry thought bitterly. “And if we do not?”

“Then perhaps you will last until the summer, but there is no doubt about it. If things do not change, you will be obliged to sell. In fact, I recommend that you consider the necessity of your property in Bath.”

Henry’s nostrils flared. When he was younger, his mother had taken them all to Bath over the summer, and it was there he had first met Louisa Picard, although now the world knew her as Lady Bolton.

To sell the Bath house would be to relinquish his last connection to the past. And it

was foolishly sentimental, damn him, but he had no desire to do that.

“I’ll speak with my father,” he said, rising. “Are you certain that we will make it to the summer?”

“Unless something changes, you still have a few months before you must face the worst. But may I suggest in the strongest terms, my lord, that you begin cutting back on your spending?”

Henry gave a grim smile as he rose. “Unfortunately, sir, I am not the one you would have to convince, and the likelihood of that is slim indeed. I shall have to take matters into my own hands.”

Mr Pickford was too polite to ask, but Henry understood his questioning glance.

“Marriage,” he clarified. No matter what his feelings around the prospect of finding a rich wife were, he would have to do so, or they would all be ruined.

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Of all Louisa's friends, her favourite was Caroline, the widow of Lord Augustus Spenser—a lady of voluptuous beauty and dubious reputation. Louisa delighted in the way Caroline toed the line of scandal again and again, entertaining lovers as and when she chose, but the thing that had initially bonded them was their mutual disinclination to marry. Their continued determination to remain widowed despite the pressure on them to enter matrimony's unglamorous fold.

It was Caroline, therefore, to whom Louisa turned when she was still seething from Mr Knight's proposal.

"My mother ," she said as they strolled along the paved walkway of Hyde Park's promenade, the trees bare and stark beside them.

"Having met your mother, I'm hardly surprised," Caroline said, patting her hand. "Although at least she has not near cut you off like mine has."

"Is that a blessing or a curse?"

"Both, I suppose, in equal measure."

Once, Louisa had asked why Caroline's mother had cut her only daughter off, and had been greeted with a wave and a "oh, you know, darling" that was so airy, she had not dared ask again. Caroline had her past, and she had hers.

"Well, I doubt he'll come sniffing around again," Caroline said. "Nothing like a bruised ego to dash a man's ardour."

Louisa cast her friend an amused glance. “It was not his ardour that inspired him to propose.”

“What was it, then?”

“My fortune.”

“Ah, greed. Man’s old companion. But if that were a gentleman’s only motivation, I would have had no offers of marriage. Perhaps he has fallen madly in love with you.”

Despite Louisa’s best attempts, the words reminded her irrevocably of the only man who had ever, to her knowledge, fallen madly in love with her. And the way that had ended.

As usual, a surge of bitterness accompanied the thought. Nine years had not been enough to dampen her hurt, or her anger.

“Like your suitors do with you, you mean?” she asked, doing her best to keep her tone light.

“I do my best to dissuade them, darling, but sometimes all it takes is a good tumble and they’ve decided I might be the next mother of their children.” She wrinkled her nose.

Caroline had not conceived with her late husband, although whether that was due to his failing or hers, Louisa didn’t know. She, too, had thankfully not borne Lord Bolton any children, though that was almost certainly due to her defect; his bastards were scattered across London. That was another reason she disliked the thought of marrying again: either she would be expected to play mother to someone else’s children, or she would be inevitably disappointing a lord who expected offspring from her. Offspring she strictly did not want.

“I would not object to a child of my own if I happened to have married well the first time around,” Caroline was saying, “but I have no interest in someone else’s brats. And despite my age, you know, some gentlemen seem to think the breadth of my hips means I am particularly fertile. A monstrous thought.”

Caroline was five-and-thirty years old, with grey eyes and a delectably plump figure. Her hair was a soft blonde impervious to grey, and she had the perfect little rosebud of a mouth. A positive Venus, as the gentlemen she’d graced with her company had apparently claimed. If Louisa had ever been given to envy, she might have been jealous.

As it was, she was merely amused by Caroline’s exploits.

“If you charmed them less, you might be propositioned less often,” Louisa said, smiling.

Caroline waved a dismissive hand. “And where would be the fun in that? But enough of me—I would much rather talk about your situation.” She squinted ahead of them, though Louisa couldn’t see what she was staring at. “I have it on excellent authority that Lord Eynsham is on the hunt for a wife.”

Louisa almost shivered at the sound of Henry’s title. Once, she had craved the sound of it; now it was like swallowing something bitter. “What has that to do with me?”

“Nothing,” Caroline said in a voice that meant everything . “Only that I know you were betrothed when you were younger.”

Louisa clenched her fingers in her pretty fawn gloves. “Nothing could prevail on me to marry that man, Caroline, and you know it. Besides, it was never an official engagement—it was just an agreement between two children who knew no better.”

“You were twenty,” Caroline reminded her.

“And a fool.”

“All of us in love are fools.”

Louisa glared at her friend. “One day you will fall in love, and then you’ll be sorry.”

“What a dull premonition. Although you are quite right, of course. If I were to fall in love, I would indeed be sorry.” She laughed and snaked her arm through Louisa’s. “But we are talking about you. Have you met him since his return?”

“Only once.” Louisa frowned at the memory. That had been last summer, when she’d been assisting his sister in marrying Lord Sunderland. “It did not . . . We never spoke of the past.”

“Well,” Caroline said brightly, steering Louisa abruptly left, “now is your opportunity.” With a speed Louisa had not hitherto suspected she possessed, she weaved past a large gaggle of young ladies and stopped before two gentlemen deep in conversation, who were obliged to stop and acknowledge them.

One of the gentlemen was Mr Comerford, a dear friend.

The other was Henry Beaumont, Viscount Eynsham, the man who broke her heart.

He looked, irritatingly, just as she remembered him, if a little taller and broader. The war had taken what was already handsome and given it a battle-honed air she could not deny was relentlessly appealing. Crisp and cool as the frost-laden air; stern and unforgiving as the weathered stone of the house. Remote, so remote, except when his gaze landed on her. Then there was a flash of awareness, perhaps even of heat.

He had vowed to wait for his wedding night, and she wondered if he had kept his promise, if he had remained chaste despite the temptations that were no doubt thrown his way.

She hoped he had; she hoped he had not. It ought to have made no difference to her.

Yet as his eyes dropped to her mouth for a heartbeat too long, she felt as though she were a girl again. Utterly under his spell, so in love with him that the sensation was painful in her chest.

He blinked, and the illusion was gone. Her hurt flooded back, her confusion and her anger.

“Lady Bolton,” he said after only the barest hesitation. His throat worked, the lines of it tightening. “I was not expecting to see you here.”

Louisa glared at Caroline, who gave an innocent smile in response.

“Lord Eynsham,” Louisa said, giving him a cold nod before turning to George and smiling. “George!” She used his given name in the hopes it would annoy Henry. “It’s good to see you. May I introduce you to Lady Augustus Spenser.”

"Caroline," she said with her habitual throatiness. "As you are a dear friend of Louisa's." She aimed her words at George, but both men bowed. George with a level of flamboyance that almost hinted at foppishness, and Henry in crisp, clean lines. Every movement he made looked planned in advance and carried out with military precision.

I have it on excellent authority that Lord Eynsham is on the hunt for a wife .

No doubt that, too, had been a pre-thought-out decision.

Which, naturally, did not concern her at all.

George, the devil take him, immediately offered his arm to Caroline. She accepted with a coquettish smile, and Louisa was left to bring up the rear with Henry. He fell into step beside her, hands clasped behind his back.

Silence, thick and heavy, settled over them.

Their encounter nine years ago, when he had refused to flee with her to Gretna Green, played out in vivid detail before her. Her pleas, and his certainty that he could not do it.

Her anger burned in her throat.

“Say it,” he said. “You may as well.”

She glanced at the stern resignation on his face. “Say what? Have you been anticipating this meeting all these months?”

“I would be a fool to think we could both be in London and avoid each other.”

And yet she had hoped for precisely that.

He loomed beside her, his coat cut so sharply across his shoulders that if it were any tighter, the seams might burst. But though he would have been close enough to touch if she'd reached out, he maintained a careful distance between them. Evidently whatever emotions he had once harboured for her were long gone.

“What would you like me to say?” she asked.

“That you hate me. Say it and be done.”

She made a tiny, bitter sound at the back of her throat. “As though it’s as simple as that.”

He turned then, looking down at her with a frown, his eyes a soaring ice-blue, the deepest shade of the winter sky. Just as frozen, just as distant. Yet there was a steadiness within it that grounded her, a sense that he was as immoveable as the sky itself. “Is it not simple?”

Yes.

And yet no.

“Very well,” she said, her throat tight. “I hate you. Are you satisfied now?”

He held her gaze for another long moment, and she felt restless underneath it, as though he was seeing more than she would ever have wanted him to.

“Do you truly think I want you to hate me?” he asked quietly.

Anger rose in her, quick and endless as a rolling wave. “I don’t know, Henry. When I went to you then, I thought I knew you. And yet evidently I was wrong. How should I presume to know you now?”

His mouth pressed into a hard line—his mouth that ought to have been bestowed on an angel or the devil incarnate; a mouth for sin that she had tasted in her youth and never forgotten. “If I had loved you any less, Louisa, I would have taken you to Gretna Green when we were first betrothed and made you my wife.”

Hurt flared, sharp and bright as fireworks. “Then why didn’t you?”

“You know why,” he said, voice low. His eyes were blue flame. “Because I wanted

our union to be honourable.”

“And so you waited until it was too late,” she said. “How convenient for you.”

“What would you rather I had done? Begun our life together in debt and scandal?” He was impassioned now. Henry Beaumont, he of the iron restraint, had his teeth clenched and his jaw tight and his fists balled by his sides. Henry Beaumont, whom she had supposed to have had all passion disciplined out of him by the army, was looking at her with so much heat in his eyes that it was a wonder she was not singed. “I was merely a boy, barely into adulthood, who wanted you so badly I could not tell what was selfishness and what was love. I was not ready for marriage when you first asked me, and so I bid you to wait. Had I known that Bolton intended . . . but I did not know until you came to my home and begged me to run away with you. I had not a penny to my name. What was I to have done? Ruined you? With your mother to support, is it a surprise that I believed—as I did—that Bolton would have been a better match for you?”

Ahead of them, George and Caroline strolled and laughed, oblivious to the scene behind them. Louisa’s chest tightened.

“If it had not been for your mistaken sense of honour,” she said. “If you had just married me when I first desired you to, we might have been happy.”

“We would have been penniless.”

“At least you would have loved me.”

He shook his head. “And how long would love have fed us?”

“Why, have you been starving all these years?”

The look he gave her then surprised her a little; it was devouring, hungry, an expression that truly did speak of starvation and denial. His jaw was tight, but when he spoke, his voice was gentle. “My mother would not have accepted us, at least not for the first several years. We would have been outcasts with no home we could flee to, at least at first. We would have had even less than I had when you came to me—and I had little enough then.”

Her throat burned and her eyes stung, but she forced the emotion back. Henry may have taken her heart, but he would never have her tears. “Understand this,” she said, her voice so low he leant in to hear her. “I would rather weather a thousand scandals, I would rather have lived as your mistress, than marry Bolton again.” A line appeared between his brows and his eyes darkened with consternation. Perhaps even regret. “Comfort yourself with the thought that you did the right thing. Console yourself with talk of duty and honour. But I went to you with my eyes wide open. I knew precisely what it was I was risking, and I was prepared to face the consequences.”

“Knowing what I did then, I thought the consequences of ruin were worse than marrying a man who could provide for you.”

“I had already decided otherwise,” she said, raising her chin to look him in the eyes. “And you dismissed me.”

Her words echoed in the space between them, and his nostrils flared as though her words had been a blow. The unnatural paleness of his face was more acute in the light, the lines drawn more firmly across it.

“I would have risked everything of mine,” he said, his voice low and rough. “Everything, Louisa. But I could never have risked everything of yours.”

“That’s what you don’t understand.” Her voice was sharp, because if it had been anything other than cutting, she might have let him see her hurt. “In abandoning me,

that is exactly what you did.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

THE PAST

August 1803

Louisa scrambled down the grassy hill, her dress the worse the wear for her headlong flight and her bonnet sliding half off her head. After her governess had agreed to escort her to the Bath Vauxhall Gardens, she had planned her escape perfectly, waiting for poor Miss Huxley to be distracted by the delights of the artificial rural scene—clockwork figures moving with mechanical precision—and making a dash for it.

Now, she straightened her bonnet and squared her shoulders. There was only a matter of time before she was caught, and she was sure her mother would send her to her room without supper. But it was worth it for these few moments of freedom.

A warm breeze tickled her cheeks, brushing the few loose curls back from her face with a lover's hand. At seventeen, she had never had so much as a kiss from a lover, but she could imagine he might touch her in much this same way.

Hope swelled in her chest.

One day, perhaps when she was married, she would be able to come to places such as this without fear of repercussions. She would enjoy the feel of sunlight sinking into her skin, the bright bobbing flowers, and the rustle of leaves in the far-away trees without the thought of imminent capture.

She picked up her skirts, passing the bowling green and making her way to the maze.

Perhaps if she was very lucky, Miss Huxley would agree to keep her dash for freedom strictly between them.

Unlikely. But she would endeavour to try.

The maze came into sight. At night, she knew it would be lit with torches, lovers seeking refuge in its anonymity. She had never been to London's Vauxhall Gardens, but Miss Huxley had once been tricked into listing all the dangers a young lady might fall into if she visited without a chaperone.

In Louisa's opinion, those dangers sounded positively delicious.

What young lady didn't want to steal kisses with handsome strangers? So long as no one else was privy to it, her reputation would remain untarnished, and she would have another experience to add to her collection. Experiences, as far as she was concerned, were things to be kept and cultivated, trapped like shiny pebbles in a glass so she could examine them in the future.

A kiss would be a rather spectacularly shiny rock.

A matronly lady gave Louisa a disapproving look, but there was no one else around as she entered the maze, and finally she heaved a sigh of relief. At least now Miss Huxley wouldn't be able to find her; her governess would not be prevailed upon to enter the maze by herself, even if her charge were known to be inside.

As a general rule, she was not especially flighty, but she was in possession of an active imagination, and although it was deeply unlikely she would find a handsome pirate—or, at a pinch, a roguish highwayman—she fancied her luck was higher in the maze than at the Upper Rooms. The young ladies there were all united by their inclination to find a good match, but Louisa had never yearned for a house and children. She longed for adventure. She was not on the hunt for a husband; she would

far rather find herself a lover.

Unfortunately, as she wove her way deeper into the maze, she did not discover anyone at all disreputable. In fact, when she finally stumbled across a young gentleman, he looked respectable to the point of staid, with his cravat neatly but plainly tied and his waistcoat an ordinary blue, its buttons small and undecorated. When he saw her, his expression transformed from surprise to shock to horror, and a flush started on his neck, rising to his cheeks.

Which brought Louisa to his one saving grace: how very startlingly handsome he was. Almost frighteningly so, the chiselled lines of his face and sensual mouth only enhanced by the stern look that clenched his jaw. His eyes were the crisp, cold blue of a frozen sky.

“Hello,” she said cheerfully.

He cleared his throat. “You’re alone.”

“Yes. So are you.”

“Yes,” he said, and the corner of his mouth twitched before he wrestled it back under control. “But I have a feeling you should not be.”

“How fortunate it is that you have found me then.” She grinned at him, and he folded his arms as he looked back at her.

“I’m not your chaperone. And I wouldn’t be a very good one, either.”

“Why is that?”

“Being found with me would be worse for your reputation than if you were merely

found alone.”

“Then we should endeavour not to be found.” She stepped closer, enjoying the way his gaze swung across her face and down her body before returning to her eyes.

“What’s your name?”

“I think perhaps it would be better if we remain strangers,” he said dryly, arms remaining firmly folded.

“Why?”

“So I may maintain plausible deniability.”

She stepped closer still. “You wish to deny meeting me?”

“In this manner? It would be wise.” He didn’t back away as she approached, looking down into her face with another of those half-smiles. It truly was a shame he was not a pirate, but perhaps she could persuade him to kiss her anyway.

“Then it hardly matters what passes between us,” she said. Now there was very little space between them. “What are you doing here all by yourself?”

The pause that followed her question made her think perhaps he would not answer, but then he tilted his head as he looked down at her. “Avoiding my family,” he said with more of that dryness. She suspected he was not without humour, but this statement seemed more to conceal some kind of pain. “They are breakfasting in the gardens.”

That statement intrigued Louisa enough to postpone her thoughts of seduction. “Are they so bad?”

“Perhaps not to a stranger, but suffice it to say that my father and I do not see eye to eye.”

“My father is delightful,” she said with a sympathetic smile. “Truly, the best of men.”

“Then you are very lucky.”

“My mother, however, is a tyrant.”

He coughed, and she suspected it was concealing a laugh. “That is less fortunate. What makes her so disagreeable?”

“Nothing much, save that she has no designs for me other than that I enter Society, find a husband and bear children.”

A flicker of interest sparked in those clear blue eyes. “That is not what you want?”

“I suppose a husband is inevitable eventually, but I’m in no rush. Papa has enough money to support us, and there is so much of the world to see.” She put a finger to her cheek and smiled, forgetting her bid to be flirtatious in her thoughtfulness. “And I should like to paint.”

“Can you not paint now?”

“Watercolours,” she said scornfully. “I should like to paint with oils and become one of the great artists.”

The young man looked at her as though he had never seen a woman before, but although she had half expected to see scorn there, there was merely curiosity. “I have never met anyone with such an ambition.”

Louisa opened her mouth to reply and educate this young man about the things women could be capable of if they were given the opportunity, but voices interrupted them. A giggling lady and a young man murmuring something to her.

She froze. The gentleman opposite looked at her with something approaching dawning panic, and he pressed a finger to his lips. All her ire disappeared as he took her arm and drew her a little further into the maze.

“Stay quiet a moment,” he whispered. “They will soon pass.”

Louisa looked up into his face, lingering on the strong line of his jaw. He could not be more than a year or two older than her, but he was already so tall, dressed as though he had taken his place in Society already.

“Would I ruin your reputation if you are discovered here with me?” she murmured, her heart beating fast as he urged her into the prickling hedge. A branch caught her hair but she made no move to free herself. For all her talk, she did not want to be discovered with a strange gentleman. Especially if, after all that, he was not inclined to kiss her.

He looked down at her again, the concern on his brow dissolving into reluctant amusement. Something about the way he looked at her, as though he wanted to disapprove but found himself unable to, made her oddly eager to break down his walls.

“Indubitably.” His breath gently brushed the curve of her neck. His hand was still on her arm, and although they were not touching in any other place, her skin felt sensitised under her clothes. “My reputation hinges, in fact, on not being seen seducing a young lady of dubious morals.”

“Dubious morals?” Her whisper was almost a shriek.

“Be quiet, or they will hear us.” He leant away, his hand dropping from her arm as though he had not so much as noticed it remained there, and disappointment stung her. “And may I remind you that you were the one who came upon me unchaperoned and, it would seem, on the run from respectability.”

If she had not seen the dimple at the corner of his mouth that bespoke the presence of another near smile, she might have been offended. As it was, she freed herself from the hedge with a disgruntled sigh.

“I had been hoping to come across a hardened rake,” she said, only half teasing, “and instead I came across you, a paragon of propriety.”

He raised an eyebrow as he glanced back at her. “A paragon of propriety would not be hiding in a hedge maze with you.”

“No?” She adjusted her gloves. “Then what are you?”

“Making a mistake,” he muttered, looking once more at where the other couple were now hiding and giggling. “Are we going to have to remain here until they leave?”

The couple’s voices lowered and disappeared completely, replaced instead by the lady’s low moan.

Louisa folded her arms pettishly. “I cannot believe someone else is performing an assignation while I am reduced to hiding.”

The gentleman sent her an incredulous look. “That is your preferred method of spending your time?”

“I imagine it would be if I were given the opportunity to try it.” She pouted. “I don’t suppose you would be so kind?”

There was another long silence as he looked at her. The space between them yawned, but beyond the puzzlement in his face, she was sure she saw a flash of longing that matched her own, deep in her belly.

“You want me to kiss you?” he asked in a low voice that seemed to rumble through her.

“If you would not object.”

He swallowed, throat bobbing. “And if I would object?”

Now she really was offended. “What about me is displeasing?” she snapped under her breath. “Am I not pretty enough for you? Or perhaps you dislike the colour of my dress? My hair?”

A dimple appeared at the opposite corner of his mouth this time. “I daresay you know precisely how pretty you are.”

“Then why will you not kiss me?”

His finger touched her chin, a fleeting pressure that made her insides feel like liquid. “Because,” he said with a solemnity that quelled her flash of hurt, “I intend to only ever kiss my future bride.”

Louisa did not know precisely what she felt, only that he had taken the source of her anger and tugged it free, like removing an embedded thorn from her skin. He was looking at her with a gravity that seemed beyond his years, and beyond her understanding.

“But I cannot conceive why you might want to. From what I understand, kissing is fun .” Another enthusiastic gasp from the party nearby seemed to confirm her claim.

“And your future bride will not mind, I am sure.”

His dimple deepened into a lopsided smile. “Is that so?”

“I know I certainly should not.”

“And yet,” he said gravely, “you have fled your chaperone in order to find a stranger in a maze who might kiss you, and you have aspirations of being a painter. Forgive me for my impertinence, but I do not think you resemble the typical young lady.”

Louisa tossed her head. “I have no wish to resemble a typical young lady.”

“So I am coming to understand.” He hesitated, glancing in the direction of the other couple, who seemed to be increasingly amorous, and beckoned Louisa further into the maze.

“Have you truly never kissed another young lady?” she persisted, following him and wishing she had thought to bring a parasol to shield her from the sun. “Not even a maid?”

“No.”

“When do you intend to marry?”

“Not for some time yet, I would imagine.”

“Hmm.” Louisa pursed her lips at the back of his head. “That is a rather singular decision. Will you be able to resist?”

“I have so far,” he said dryly.

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

That meant he was probably at Oxford or Cambridge. Louisa did not know what occurred at such establishments, but she suspected studying often came second. “I think you are making a mistake.”

“Yes,” he said from ahead. “You are not the only person. But I doubt you can change my mind even if you wanted to.”

Louisa decided then and there that she would charm this young man into giving her a kiss if it was the last thing she did. But before she could act on it, there came a very familiar scream of outrage from behind her.

“Goodness gracious,” Miss Huxley squawked, presumably on discovering the amorous couple. “Have you no shame?”

So her governess had ventured into the maze after all. Wonders would never cease.

A giggle bubbled from Louisa’s lips. “Quick,” she said, taking the gentleman’s arm in hers now and breaking into a run. “That’s my governess. Run for your life or you shall find yourself married long before you ever intended.”

To her delight, he caught her hand in his. “This way,” he said, navigating the maze as though he knew every corner like the lines on his palm. “There is a gap in the hedge. In a pinch, you’ll fit.”

Laughter and breathlessness vied for prominence as she allowed him to sweep her along, but before she squeezed through the narrow gap in the fence, which would utterly ruin her dress and have Mother up in arms about her appearance, she twisted

so she was practically in the young man's arms.

“Before I go,” she panted, “pray tell me your name.”

Blue eyes blazed into hers, and her toes curled in anticipation as he finally said, “Henry. Henry Beaumont.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

PRESENT DAY

February 1815

When Henry entered Lady Huntington's ballroom, his mother on his arm, he knew he should be thinking about the ladies he had come there to court. With the decision to marry thrust upon him, that was his reason for attending.

Instead, all he could see was Louisa's face when she had told him he had risked everything of hers by letting her marry Bolton. Evidently the marriage had been more miserable than he ever could have envisaged. And he was to blame. At two-and-twenty, he had been certain there was nothing he could do; now he was certain he could have thought of something had he not been so aware of his own inadequacies.

He had spent nine years missing her beyond words. Now it seemed he would spend the rest of his life regretting ever turning her away.

He and his mother passed through the double doors into the adjoining rooms, hothouse flowers draped gaily around the pillars. Entire panels of the wall were painted with historical scenes, and everything had been gilded to within an inch of its life. This was a place where ladies captured their husbands, and gentlemen chose their wives the way a farmer might choose his filly: by watching their hair, their teeth, the manner of their walk, and considering what value they might have to bring to his estate.

Henry despised that this was what he was now compelled to do.

“Well!” his mother said, delighted at the sight of bobbing feathers, low-cut dresses and fluttering fans. This was a place in which she thrived.

He wished he could leave.

She tapped his arm with her fan, a slight frown interrupting her smile. “Now you must embrace this opportunity, Henry. None of your usual scowling in a corner. You must dance .”

“I have danced before,” he said wryly, trying not to think about his last partner.

“Not since returning to London you haven’t. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.” She flicked open her fan. “How about Lady Phoebe Willoughby? She is newly out this year.”

He barely spared her a glance, curbing his irritation with difficulty. “I have no interest in a schoolroom miss.”

His mother sighed. “Very well. A lady in her second or third Season, then?”

He grunted his assent, allowing her to guide him through the room. The curtains were thick and velvety, a shade of deep blue that concealed shadows behind, and he thought he could hear giggling from that direction. Back rigid, he turned away.

“There is Miss Rebecca Crowley,” his mother said. “How do you feel about red hair, dear?”

“Indifferent.”

“What do you like, Henry?”

Louisa .

He ground his teeth against the rebellious thought and forced it away again. “I have no need for anything other than indifference, Mother, so long as she will consent to being my wife.”

“Oh, my love.” She patted his arm with an expression that seemed close to pain. “It’s not so bad to fall in love, you know.”

His family was unaware of his history with Louisa, and he had every intention of keeping it that way. “That is not the reason I’m looking to marry,” he said impatiently.

She sighed. “I wish it were.”

“Unfortunately, neither of us have much choice in the matter if we want to continue our current style of living.” He nodded at Miss Rebecca Crowley, who was currently dancing. Her hair was indeed red, and already falling out of its curls. Her freckled face was flushed from exertion. Pretty, if not the current style, but he remained unmoved. “How large is her dowry?”

“Large enough.”

“Mother.”

“Ten thousand.”

Irritation coursed through him, worsened by the indignity of his position. He’d always looked down on fortune hunters, and look what he had become. “That’s not enough.”

“Dearest, I’m certain we could—”

“Anything less than twenty would only scratch the surface.”

His mother withdrew her hand from his arm. “I know your father—”

“We will not discuss the earl here, if you please.”

Her mouth pursed in disapproval, but she merely said, “If your standards are so exacting, you give yourself little choice.” She did not say the rest: that he would be lucky if one of those ladies would consent to marry him. There were richer, more eligible gentlemen available.

“Have we come here in vain, then?”

“I recommend you—”

“Allow me to be the one to decide on this.” He huffed a short, bitter laugh. “Are there no unmarried ladies with a large enough dowry?”

“Well, yes. Most are I think already spoken for. But there is . . .” She sighed. “Miss Venetia Winton.”

“Excellent. Now tell me why you were so reluctant to offer her name.”

“She is . . . her family came into their fortune recently. Her father was a merchant, I believe.” She said the word ‘merchant’ as though it were dirty. “This is her third Season, and she is almost two-and-twenty.”

“You have given me no reason not to consider her.”

His mother gave him a look of pitying outrage. “She has not so much as been granted an Almack’s voucher this Season, despite her mother applying for it not once but twice.”

“Poor girl,” he said with a flash of something approaching sympathy. “All the more reason to consider her.”

“Henry! You are the Earl of Shrewsbury’s eldest son.”

“The destitute Earl of Shrewsbury’s eldest son,” he said with a self-deprecating smile. “Let us not deceive one another. My reasons for marriage are precisely the reasons why other young ladies might be reluctant to entertain my suit.”

“She would be a countess!” His mother sniffed, and rare amusement crossed his face as he watched her. “That is no small honour, I assure you.”

“No doubt my wife, whomever she may be, will not be insensible,” he said, patting her hand with wry fondness. “Now, will you introduce us?”

“I had much rather not,” his mother said, but she accepted his arm and directed him across the ballroom to where a tall, austere young lady stood watching the proceedings, an oddly impassive expression on her face.

Louisa snapped her fan closed as she strode into the ballroom, her head bare and warm air on her neck just above her pearls. Beside her, Caroline plucked a glass of champagne from a footman’s tray and took a healthy sip. “What a squeeze,” she said. “If my constitution were weaker, I would be tempted to faint.”

“You have the constitution of an ox. I don’t believe you’ve fainted in your life.”

“I nearly fainted when my maid told me Augustus was finally dead. I thought he’d

never go.”

“A charming sentiment.”

“I am habitually charming, darling.” Caroline glanced at her. “Are you still angry with me?”

Louisa did not deign to answer, taking a drink of her own and sipping it, the bubbles fizzing the back of her throat.

“You admitted to me yourself that you had barely seen him since he came to England, but the Season is starting up now, you know, and you are bound to see him.” Caroline glanced pointedly at Louisa’s gown. “As you are well aware by the look of that dress.”

Louisa looked down out of habit, though of course she knew what she was wearing. It was burgundy, a daring colour with an equally daring neckline that was on the very verge of scandalous, and she had not worn it because she expected to see Henry. “That’s entirely beside the point.”

“That is the point, darling. Don’t lie to me. Now you’ve expressed how you feel, you want to make him painfully jealous. And what better way to make him wild for you?” She peered across the ballroom. “Is that him? He’s so dreadfully handsome, don’t you think? And oh—he’s conversing with a lady.”

Louisa told herself the lurch in her stomach was nothing more than hatred. Disgust at the thought of sharing a space with him again. Once had been bad enough. “Of course he is,” she said with tolerable calm. “You were the one who told me he intended to marry.”

“Yes, but he is talking with Miss Venetia Winton.”

Louisa received her second unpleasant shock of the evening. There was nothing strictly wrong with Miss Winton, except being on the very edge of the ton , but Venetia was everything Louisa was not. She was quiet, colourless, quite possibly passionless. No doubt she would make a perfectly respectable wife with no aspirations other than to keep his home and bear his children.

The things Louisa had not wanted.

The thought irritated her. She wanted him to burn with frustrated lust for her, to crave her with no hope of satisfaction. Not seek out the very kind of woman she was not.

“Oh,” she said tonelessly when Caroline was still watching her for a response.

“She’s rich,” Caroline continued, evidently enjoying herself immensely. “Although I’ve heard that’s the only thing to recommend her.”

Louisa summoned a flat smile. “You should not be so cruel.”

“Would you like me to lure him away from her? I can put my assets to work.” She gave a wicked, sparkling smile. No wonder she had so many lovers.

“If you think you can succeed, be my guest. But I warn you: not even your charms will be likely to succeed. He took a vow of celibacy. To remain chaste until marriage.”

“Celibacy?” Caroline stared at her as though she had just grown three heads. “In this day and age? Whatever for?”

“Moral reasons, I’d imagine.”

“Is he Puritan?”

“Not unless many things have changed since I last knew him.” Which was, admittedly, distinctly possible.

“And yet you were in love with him?”

“A lamentable lapse in judgement, I assure you.”

“No, what I meant to say is . . . you were in love with him and yet he still maintains his vow of chastity?”

“If you’re asking whether I succeeded in seducing him, the answer is I did not.”

“Did you try?”

“A little,” Louisa confessed. “Not as much as I would have done if I’d known how he would reject me.”

“Well, then,” Caroline said, continuing to peer at him. “My estimation of the man has lowered considerably. Gentleman who care for nothing but their dreary honour are not worth knowing.”

Honesty compelled Louisa to say, “I suspect he had some consideration for my honour, too.”

“Oh, well, what does that matter? You should take another go at seducing him now, darling. Make him regret the day he ever slighted you.”

“Be serious.”

“I am. What better revenge could you conceive? When you were younger, you would not have had the charms you possess now. Nor the experience. The man wouldn’t

stand a chance.”

For a moment, Louisa allowed herself to consider it. Time had beaten the pain of heartbreak into anger, the blacksmith of experience honing the emotion until it was as sharp as a blade. Not only had she been forced to relinquish her claim on Henry, but she had been forced to endure a miserable marriage to a man she detested. Compelled to compromise herself in a way that still horrified her.

She had been forced to compromise her art .

Revenge was certainly tempting. And there was a particular satisfaction that came from the idea of seducing him. And, as she considered it, imagined pushing him against the wall and placing his hands on her, imagined the way his breathing would change and his cock would strain against the material of his breeches, an answering heat bloomed inside her.

No, that was too dangerous an idea. She might hate him now, but her body still remembered what it was to want Henry Beaumont.

Caroline glanced over her shoulder and sighed. “Lord Peter’s approaching,” she said. One of her lovers, the second son of a duke. “I’ll leave you or you’ll be obliged to endure his conversation, which I can assure you is subpar. There is only one benefit to his company, and unfortunately this is not the place for it.”

Louisa raised a hand in farewell and eased her way through the crowd. In her first few Seasons, she had felt less confident in her own company, but time, age, and the benefit of widowhood had blessed her with poise she could not have emulated as a girl. There was something to be said for marriage after all, if only after one’s husband was dead.

As though compelled through thoughts of her husband, her gaze travelled to the large

painting that sat in pride of place above the fireplace.

Several years ago, Lady Huntington had commissioned Lord Bolton to paint a portrait of her. Unbeknownst to poor Lady Bolton, Louisa had been the one to paint it, sat in a tiny room constructed entirely for the purpose of spying on the guests her husband entertained. While Lady Huntington had posed and Lord Bolton postured, Louisa sat in that cramped space and painted.

When it was done, Lord Bolton had delivered it personally, taking full credit.

It had not taken long for rumours of his skill to spread across London; even less time for his portraits to have become that Season's must-haves. Anyone who was anyone wanted a portrait by Lord Bolton.

Louisa had despised her husband with every breath in her body, but his fits of rage had convinced her that the easiest way to a life of harmony would be to acquiesce to his demands. Thus, she had continued to paint. Every few months, she would produce a new painting that the ton would fawn over, and if she ever balked, Lord Bolton would put his hand over her mouth and warn her to keep her silence or he would ruin her in every way he knew how.

He was not a clever man, her husband, but he was a sly one, and cruel, and she doubted not a bit that he would have followed through with his threats.

Bile rose in her throat at the sight of the portrait she had so unwillingly painted, and although she knew it was greatly admired, it appeared to her then as though it had been sketched in blood.

As though a shark scenting her open wound, Mr Knight appeared at her shoulder, a glass of champagne in his hand and a contemplative look in his cold eyes. "Lady Bolton," he said, handing her the glass. "What a delight to see you here."

Evidently he had not been humbled by her rejection. “Mr Knight,” she said, accepting the champagne and looking from him to the golden liquid. “I trust you’re well?”

“Perfectly.” He nodded at the painting. “Admiring your husband’s work?”

“He certainly has a way of making his presence known even beyond the grave,” she said, and turned, looking for Caroline. “Pray excuse me.”

“Wait one moment.” He put a hand on her arm, but although the gesture was casual, the grip in his fingers was not. “I have something I would like to say.”

She glanced down at his hand. “Release me or I will make sure you will never hold a pistol again.”

“And to think Bolton said he never had any trouble with you.” He chuckled, but the sound was devoid of humour. “You know, it’s a shame it’s come to this. I had hoped you would accept my suit.”

He finally released her, and her hand trembled with repressed anger. She could toss the glass of champagne in his face or slap him, but that would mean making a scene, and she would rather not. “You have said nothing that leads me to think I will regret my decision.”

“No? Perhaps not yet. But you will. You see, your husband confided a few things about your marriage.”

Louisa’s heart sank, although she kept her expression blandly contemptuous. Even years after his death, Bolton’s skeletons continued to emerge from his past and chase into her future. “What a place of distinction you must have held,” she mocked.

“Indeed.” Mr Knight gave a cold smile as he leant closer, demanding her attention

with obnoxious insistence. “In particular, he mentioned your talent with a brush. You truly are prolific, Lady Bolton. I must congratulate you on your success.”

Dread lurched in her stomach, but she gave him a disdainful look. “I’m afraid I don’t know your meaning.”

“Oh, I know you do. And I’ve heard the Prince of Wales is particularly taken by a selection of erotic pieces you made.” He tsked under his breath. “What would people say if they knew the things you’d painted under your husband’s name?”

Louisa kept her expression blank, though panic and fury erupted in her chest. For three years, she had been content to let all the awful, degrading things she’d done settle in the past. She had thought that with Bolton’s death, she would be free to escape it.

And now this man, whom she had thought a suitor—and who had attempted to marry her—knew her secret.

“I doubt anyone would believe you,” she said contemptuously. “Now I believe this conversation is over.”

He caught her wrist again, this time a good deal harder. “I was not done talking.”

“Unhand me.”

“Not until I’ve finished.”

She raised her gaze to his face, letting her lip curl with all the derision she felt. “It takes a certain type of man to force his attentions on an unwilling female.”

“It takes a certain type of stubborn, hot-headed female to snub the only man who

knows her secret.” His mouth twisted into a sneer. “We both know how disappointed Prinny would be to hear a mere woman painted some of his favourite pieces. When he discovers you and your husband have been making him look a fool—he will not take that kindly.”

No, he would not. Weak men could never bear to be made to look foolish, and he would go out of his way to ruin her.

Likely he would succeed, too. Perhaps in time the scandal would be forgotten enough that she could return to London, but she would lose her friends, the respect of the ton. No one would want to associate with her again; she would be cast out as a disgrace. All the fortune in the world would not be enough to salvage her reputation.

Bad enough that she was a woman who painted with oils; bad enough that she had deceived everyone who had purchased a painting from Lord Bolton. But she had painted lewd acts. Ones that would shock even the most liberal-minded. She, a woman, whom the Royal Academy did not allow to paint from anatomy, had painted the nude form in a myriad of compromising positions.

Prinny would not let this die. She would have irrevocably made an enemy of the future king.

Long-forgotten fear spiralled through her. For five years of marriage, she had been afraid, and she had vowed never to let fear rule her life again. Yet here she was, her lungs stopping in her chest and cold dread passing through her body.

“You know that would be the reality as well as I do,” Mr Knight said, his breath hot on her cheek, fingers almost painfully tight on her wrist. “This life you had cultivated for yourself would be over with a snap of my fingers. And not all the money in the world could prevent it.”

For a moment, she was twenty-one again and helpless in the face of a man who wanted to control her. Then she blinked, and the illusion was gone. She was a matter of months away from thirty years old, and this was a man desperate enough to threaten her in a public place.

She tilted her head, fear receding enough that she could breathe and regain her calm. He had offered for her, and she had assumed it was for money, but she had never known he would be so very desperate.

I had hoped it would not come to this .

When Bolton had first introduced her to Knight, stating his intention of bringing him into polite Society, she had thought him familiar. And now, as he looked at her with an expression close to resignation, she had that sense again, her memory trying and failing to place him.

She dismissed the thought; now was not the time.

“I presume this is your attempt at blackmail,” she said, and sipped her champagne. Clarity returned, and the panic was a mere dark feeling at the base of her stomach. “You must be in a lot of trouble. Did my husband lead you that far astray?”

“He has no relevance to this, save for the fact he told me about you and gave me the proof I needed.”

“Which is?”

“Letters in his hand confessing to the whole.” Knight glanced at the painting with an expression of indifference. “We were due to enter into a business arrangement together; I requested the letters as collateral. Naturally I had not expected him to die, but I still have them in my possession.”

Of all the hard-headed things for Bolton to do. She clicked her tongue in irritation. No doubt he had thought that Knight, being sponsored by him, would be loyal enough to keep his secret.

A fool. She had been married to a fool.

“I see. Well, what’s your price, Mr Knight? Are you going to demand I marry you after all?”

He frowned, discomfort passing across his face. No doubt he was expecting her to panic, or perhaps succumb to a fit of the vapours. But she was a woman who had survived a marriage designed to break her, and she would not crumble now.

And, now her faculties were returning, it occurred to her that few, if any, would believe that she was the true artist behind the paintings.

“No, not marriage,” he said, regaining his composure. “True, that would have been easier had you not refused me, but you did.” He lifted one shoulder in a lazy shrug. “My terms are this. You have until the end of the summer to pay me fifty thousand pounds. If you fail, I will publish my evidence and destroy your reputation.” He gave a vicious smile. “What say you to that?”

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To Henry's surprise, he found Miss Venetia Winton entirely more tolerable than he had expected. To be sure, she was tall—some would say unnaturally so—and she had very little beauty. But there was rare self-possession about her as she looked at him, and no visible inclination to flutter her fan, giggle, or otherwise make a spectacle of herself.

“Mrs Winton,” his mother said, addressing herself to Miss Winton's grey-haired, matronly mother. There was a hint of frost in his mother's voice, but he could hardly blame her for coldness when he knew that was his entire reputation. “Allow me to introduce my son, Lord Eynsham.”

Mrs Winton understood the assignment immediately, and after a brief, shrewd glance in which he had the impression of being chewed up and spat out, she extended a hand.

“Pleasure to meet you, m'lord. This is my daughter, Miss Venetia Winton, although I expect you already knew that, seeing as that's the reason you made the journey to our corner of the room.”

Miss Winton took her cool grey gaze from him and glanced at her mother. “Mama.”

“Yes, yes. Lady Shrewsbury, shall we take a turn about the room and leave these young people to it? No doubt they will want to dance, and I confess myself partial to the lemonade.”

Lady Shrewsbury, a lady of discerning tastes, could not be said to embrace this suggestion with enthusiasm, but she moved away.

“Miss Winton,” Henry said, accepting her proffered hand and bowing over it. “I’m delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“Are you?” Something flickered in her eyes, and she shook herself, giving a brief, colourless smile. “Yes, no doubt you are. I apologise for my mother.”

He forced a smile of his own. “Not at all. Would you like to dance?”

“Perhaps later. I’m a little warm at present.”

With a glance in the direction of his parent, who looked deep in reluctant conversation with Mrs Winton, Henry offered Venetia his arm and they crossed the room to the double doors, which were flung open to welcome in a little winter air. The wind was cool against his cheek, and he found himself relieved he was not obliged to dance with her just yet.

She was very far from vivacious, lovely, forward Louisa.

She removed her hand from his arm and looked up at him, assessing in a detached way that made him feel a little uncomfortable. It was not often he was made to feel judged, and even less frequently that the conclusion was unflattering.

“I heard you served in France,” she said.

He latched on to this tidbit with unbecoming relief. “Yes, I did. I returned to England this past summer, in fact.”

“Is it true that Napoleon has escaped from exile?”

He glanced sharply down at her head. “How did you hear of that?”

“My father takes a great interest in foreign policies. I daresay he knows everything there is to know about Wellington and Napoleon, and he has been following the news very closely.” She glanced up at him, her eyes finally displaying some small emotion, although he was unable to decipher precisely what it was. “Forgive me if I said anything to make you uncomfortable. I am not a natural conversationalist.”

“Not at all. I am rarely called upon to discuss the war in such elevated company. You merely caught me by surprise.” Sensing that she was not fully appeased by this, he said, “I was not expecting you to be so well informed.”

“My father likes to discuss it.”

An awkward pause followed, during which Henry wondered if he had been mistaken. His initial impression of self-possession did not, evidently, lend itself well to conversation.

“I believe it is true that Napoleon escaped from Elba,” he offered, “but I have no doubt that we shall catch him soon.”

“You are not afraid this will mean another war?”

“No.” He shook his head firmly. “We are safe from that, at least.”

Venetia gave him a long, assessing glance. “My father would approve of you, I think.”

Ah. This was unexpected. “He would?”

“Yes. He likes a military man. Believes it adds distinction.” She sighed, and he thought he saw her shoulders slump. “And you have not attempted to fill the silence with vapid compliments about my beauty. It is always so tiresome.”

“You dislike compliments?”

“I do when they are unfounded and delivered unwillingly.” There was dry humour in her voice, and when she next looked at him, it was with a degree of amusement. “I believe I ought to be direct with you, Lord Eynsham.”

“Please do,” he said, curiosity piqued.

“I understand that my age means a marriage sooner rather than later would be preferable. I also know that my father’s station in life, and my mother’s humble birth, are seen as impediments.” Her chin raised. “Believe me, I am not ignorant of my situation.”

Somewhat lost for words, Henry waited.

“I also know of your situation, Lord Eynsham,” she said. “That is why you approached me.”

Sensing it would not be in his best interests to disseminate, he inclined his head. “That is true. I, too, am not ignorant.”

“Precisely.” Her smile was brief, but it lent her face much-needed character. “That is why I believe we would suit. I am not looking for a love match, but I do want to appease my parents. Can you offer me that?”

Henry was not in the habit of acting rashly, and in the pause that followed, he considered his options very carefully. His father’s flagrant determination to act in the face of prudence was concerning, as was his mother’s distinct lack of concern for their financial plight. The very reason he had approached Venetia was to ascertain if she would be amenable to his suit.

It took him only a few more seconds to decide on his course of action.

“Thank you for your honesty,” he said. “Allow me to be honest in return. I am also not seeking a love match, nor do I expect one. Any wife of mine would have to accept the situation as it stands—I can offer her security and respect, but nothing more.” He paused, examining her expression, which showed no signs of dismay. “I would not like to mislead you.”

She gave a small, crooked smile. “Nor I you. But I hope—I would like to be friends, my lord.”

He thought then, damn him, of Louisa, always so bright, laughing, teasing. She would never, not in a thousand years, have ever accepted mere friendship from him.

He would never have offered it.

“Very well,” he said crisply, putting Louisa from his mind. “Then I believe we have a deal. How soon can we be married?”

“Not immediately, I think. It would be better for us both if you are seen to court me first. Not that anything will quell the rumours that you are marrying me for my dowry, but we should play the part if I am to take my place beside you in society.” She thought, one finger on her chin, and it struck him that although she had taken the lead in this conversation—highly unusual in and of itself—she showed no signs of being inclined to marry.

They were a pair, he thought grimly. Bound by reluctant duty.

“Two months,” she said. “And by the end of that, I am certain Papa would give you the money to purchase a special license so we are married immediately.”

Every part of him balked at the idea. “I am certain we can contrive a way to manage without that.”

“Perhaps, but there is nothing wrong with accepting assistance when it is freely given.” She shrugged, a loose movement of her shoulders. “Do as you please. We should return to the ballroom now.”

Once again, he offered her his arm and led her back inside. The heat of the ballroom swamped him immediately, and he was about to ask Venetia to a reluctant dance when his gaze caught on a figure at the other side of the room. Shock rendered every other sense mute; he stared at her in disbelief, horror. Dismay.

Desire.

Louisa.

In the frigid air of Hyde Park, she had been wearing a pelisse, her cheeks bright from the cold. There, she had been a vision, but here, in a burgundy gown paired with white gloves and gleaming pearls in her chestnut hair, she was frighteningly lovely. Time had done nothing but sweeten her face, giving it an edge of sorrow that made its beauty even more stark. She was late summer, the leaves slowly burnishing into autumn, the sky the sharpest, deepest shade of blue. A devastating sight. He wanted to despise the knowledge, but he found himself drinking her in with a ferocity that terrified him.

Time had twisted everything he had once felt for her into a thousand different knots. She had told him that it was not as simple as hating him, and she had been right. His love for her, stretched thin by the years and his futile attempts to forget her, was tinged by the sombre knowledge that she would never want him again.

He had been the one to ruin that.

His gaze travelled to her companion, a man standing over her. Not towering, precisely, because he did not have the height, but certainly intending to intimidate. His hand was clamped around her wrist.

Henry was not aware that he moved, or even that he had left Venetia behind in his wake. He knew of nothing except the defiant tilt to Louisa's chin, the mutinous anger in her eyes, and the understanding, deep within himself, that he could not let this go.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, his voice as cold as the North Sea, the anger in it biting. "I must insist you release Lady Bolton immediately."

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Louisa had known it was Henry before he had ever spoken. The air had changed as he approached; her heart leapt in her chest, and her stomach flopped in acknowledgement. No matter what she felt, her body remembered the feel of his proximity.

As she glanced at his face, the breath left her lungs at the violence in his eyes. For a suspended moment, a thrill ran through her. The Henry she knew, always in control, never had aspirations of violence. He never hungered for revenge. Even when she had come to him with the news of Bolton's proposal and he had let her go, he had not been angry.

Yet here he was, cold the way ice burned. A shiver ran down her spine.

Mr Knight gave a thin-lipped smile and released her. Given the circumstances, there was nothing else he could do without causing a scene, and it was clear he did not want that. At least not yet—not until she had given in to his demands or made it clear she had no intention of upholding them. Until then, it behoved him to keep a low societal profile.

“Fear not, my lord,” he said with a quick bow to Henry. “I have no aspirations in her direction.” With a mocking glance at her, he departed, cutting through the crowd with unhurried ease.

Louisa turned her glare to Henry, who seemed not to notice as he picked up her arm, examining her glove as though he might find fingerprints there. “Did he hurt you?”

An unfamiliar feeling worked its way through her like a thorn, and she snatched her

hand away. “Do all men consider it their God-given right to lay hands on me?” she demanded. “I decide who is to have that honour, Henry, and you forfeited your claim to it a long time ago.”

Something flickered in the depth of his eyes, but she couldn’t delude herself into thinking it was regret when he said, in an even tone, “I see you’re perfectly well.”

“Oh, stop playing the hero.” She rubbed a hand absently along her arm. Knight’s words played in her head, unable to put aside or ignore. Fifty thousand pounds by the end of the summer. Irritation prickled through her, both at Knight’s presumption and now the lengths she would have to go to quash him before the rumours spread.

Henry watched her, a frown on his otherwise perfect face. Really, the expression was such a permanent one she might as well sketch it into being. Once, perhaps, he had known how to smile, but that time had long since passed if this encounter was anything to go by.

“Was he threatening you?” Henry asked, once again in a voice that promised violence. His gaze swept from her to the painting they stood before. Louisa held her breath as he glanced away, then frowned. Looked back. His eyes narrowed.

Confound it all.

She took hold of his arm and dragged him away from that godforsaken portrait and everything it represented.

“Now who is laying hands on whom?” he asked, but his tone was distracted, clearly still fixated on what he saw. Or what he thought he saw.

Of all the people in England to interfere, it had to be one of the few people left on this earth who could have identified her painting style.

She came to a window at the far end of the drawing room and released him. Outside, it was dark, and the glass reflected their watery likenesses back at them. Her brown hair and burgundy dress, blurred and smudged as though someone had rubbed their thumb across her reflection. She did not look at his.

“So,” he said, returning his gaze to her. “Is this the moment you tell me you had everything under control?”

“Stop it, Henry. You know you had no right to interfere.”

“Naturally. No right whatsoever. No doubt you were on the verge of removing his hands from you when I intervened.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Jealous?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“If he were one of my lovers, what then? Would you revoke your noble attempts to save me?”

She may have been mistaken, but it seemed as though he flinched. “It would not be the first time I’ve encountered one of your lovers,” he said, face impassive once more.

“No doubt you disapprove.”

“Just as I cannot guess your motivations, Louisa, you are not privy to my thoughts.” His mouth pressed into a thin line, and she cursed the stroke of fate that had ever brought him into her life. For someone so unfeeling, he should have been painted in shades of grey. Instead, he had been sketched by a delicate, expert hand, the darkness under his eyes crafted to illuminate their brilliance, the starchy white of his cravat

displaying the robust tan of his skin, his hair a rich brown in the candlelight.

His jaw clenched a fraction as he watched her, and she remembered Caroline's advice.

You should take another go at seducing him now, darling. Make him regret the day he ever slighted you.

Caroline had not doubted Louisa's ability to tempt him into bed, but the truth was, time had altered them. She was a widow, a trail of lovers behind her, and no longer the girl she had been. Regardless of how much he had wanted her then, she could not deceive herself into thinking he wanted her now.

Yet even so— even so— there was an urge inside her to take his face in her hands and press a kiss to his mouth, just to see if he would respond the way he once had.

A little breathless, she glanced down, paying attention to the burnished glow of his waistcoat buttons.

“Why was he threatening you?” he asked.

“That is my concern, not yours.”

He nodded, a sharp gesture that felt like a punctuation, the end of something that had never really begun. He half turned as though to leave, then swung back to her and said, “Was it, by any chance, about the painting?”

Louisa gritted her teeth, narrowly suppressing the urge to do physical violence. “No.”

“I see.” He nodded once more. “I take it our host is unaware of its true artist?”

“Oh for heaven’s sake .” Glancing around, she ushered him further into the corner and behind one of the tall navy curtains, shielding them from view. To her relief, the quartet broke into a lively jig.

Henry looked down at her, his face cast in shadow, and the past reared its head once more, her body remembering what it was to yearn for the feeling of his even before she knew how that might feel. She had wanted him so desperately, she had been half out of her mind.

His eyes glittered as though he remembered, too. It would have been so easy to close the gap between them. Her lips to his; her body against his; her will tangled with his.

If she did that, she would start a war that might never have a victor.

“If you must know, that is one of my husband’s more famous paintings,” she said, hands on her hips.

“Come now, Louisa.” Henry’s voice was low and his gaze didn’t stray from hers. “Do you really expect me to believe that? I’ve seen your paintings.”

“Ten years ago.”

“And in that time, your style has remained the same, if a little more refined. And the way the feet point the same direction no matter where one stands—that is unmistakable.” His nostrils flared as though a thought had just occurred to him. “Did Bolton force you into painting for him?”

“You of all people have no right to ask what my marriage did to me,” she said, matching his intensity with her own.

Agony rippled across his face, though she must have imagined it, because the next

moment, his expression was blank. “Does anyone except your illustrious friend know?”

“You are referring, I presume, to Mr Knight?”

He was silent, waiting for her to continue. The silence tactic was one she frequently employed, and it grated to have someone use it on her.

“No one else knows,” she said through gritted teeth. “Even my mother is oblivious, though given her lack of interest in my talent, that is hardly surprising.” The only thing her mother had done was mourn the lack of children Louisa had borne from her marriage.

“Presumably he is threatening you over it?” Henry sounded as though this was a foregone conclusion, and not a particularly troublesome one. Although there was still the hint of tension in his brow and across the hard line of his jaw, his words were matter-of-fact.

“Will you ?”

“Threaten you?” A hint of puzzlement entered his voice.

“Yes, Henry. Have you any intention of demanding something in exchange for keeping my secret?”

Disgust clouded his eyes. “What sort of man do you take me for?”

“To be frank, I no longer have any idea.” She held his gaze, though it was like gazing into the sun. They breathed in tandem, breath mingling in the space between them. The ball was in full swing just feet away, but tucked away in their corner, she felt as though they existed in a different world, separated by a veil.

Just for a moment, she felt seventeen again, meeting a young man alone for the first time in her life and wondering with breathless anticipation what might happen if he tilted his head.

“Louisa,” Henry said, his voice low, tortured, and she could bear it no longer.

“If you have no intention of threatening me, this conversation is over.” Giving him no time to reply, she wiggled past him, her shoulder brushing his chest and her hand grazing his hip. He made no move to stop her, and she took another glass of champagne on her way past, tossing it back and wishing its effects would hit her immediately. Then she would not have to picture all the different ways that conversation could have gone.

Then she could forget that she had ever loved him, and that she still, despite all odds, wanted him.

If only she could learn to forget. But nine years of remembrance told her it would not be that easy.

Henry breathed through his nose, his head bowed and his back to the room. His body still pulsed with the awareness he had been at pains not to show, and even though she was gone, he could still imagine the faint outline of her in front of him, face upturned, eyes sharp and hard.

They weren’t who they had been when they’d first met, young and foolish and so easy to tip into love. Time had crafted them into something different, and he no longer knew how to navigate this dynamic.

Complication . He had once used that term to describe her, not knowing at the time how true that would come to be. This was indeed a complication, and for more reasons than he could count.

It had been the work of a moment to identify the true hand behind the painting. Even if he had not heard Lord Bolton's name uttered in hushed whispers, he would have recognised Louisa's style from a mile away. She had tried to hide it, but it was alive in everything she did. Art was a living, breathing thing inside her, something he had never been able to understand, no matter what pains he had gone to.

That Bolton had taken advantage of this was his fault. If Henry had ever thought, all those years ago, that relinquishing her would have led to this, he would have acted differently.

The scope of what he had done, the full implications of it, were only now becoming plain. It was vile and he was, indirectly, responsible; he deserved to feel this crushing guilt just as surely as she hadn't deserved any of it.

But assisting in this was one thing he could resolve for her—a way of repaying the hurt he had caused. All he would have to do was exert enough pressure on Mr Knight that he retracted his threat.

Louisa would never have to know.

He had not saved her nine years ago. But perhaps he could save her now.

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THE PAST

April 1804

Louisa scowled at her canvas. Something about it was wrong. She wasn't entirely sure what, but the frustration clawed under her skin, tempting her to snap her paintbrush and hurl the canvas at the wall.

With a great deal of restraint, she refrained, settling for glaring at the otherwise innocuous portrayal of a riverbank. At first glance, there was nothing overtly the matter with it, but the more she looked, the more she could see the perspective was off. The colours weren't right. Her brushstrokes were inaccurate.

"Gah!" She tossed her paintbrush into the jar of water and wiped her fingers on the cloth around her neck. A walk, perhaps, would help her see what she could do to fix this, or maybe even—

"Miss Louisa?" There was a knock at the door. "Your mother sent me to remind you that you will be leaving for Almack's in just over an hour."

Louisa turned her glare to the door.

Two months ago, she had exhibited at the Royal Academy after the Hanging Committee had selected one of her works. Her father had finally recognised her talent, and she had been able to come to an arrangement. He would hire a master to teach her, but only if she attended the balls and arrangements her mother (who did not believe a young lady should do something as unseemly as paint with oils) insisted

upon.

Almack's, having recently opened its doors to the ton, was one of those obligations.

She flung the smeared cloth at the floor and scowled. An hour did not leave her enough time to readdress her painting; she would have to return to it again tomorrow.

It was not as though she disliked balls. Society was a tad overwhelming, but she enjoyed dancing and attention, both of which could be found aplenty at these events. It was just that right now she had rather do nothing else but paint.

"Very well," she called back, knowing a response was required. "I'll be out soon."

"Thank you, miss. I'll be upstairs waiting for you."

Louisa sighed, but began the tedious task of putting everything away and cleaning her brushes with turpentine. Once she was done, she made her way upstairs to be fussed over, changed at top speed, and for her hair to be meticulously curled.

Staring at her reflection in the mirror, she wondered idly whether any man would propose to her, and what she would say when she refused him. No gentleman, she was certain, would allow her painting to continue, and thus she had no intention of marrying any of them. The only thing she did have some interest in, however—being taken somewhere private and kissed—no gentleman had done. Despite being eighteen years of age, she remained firmly unkissed, and she was entirely unsure how to rectify that. Even the most hardened rakes with the worst of reputations had shown no interest in her.

Briefly, she thought of the boy in the maze. He, too (although he had not been a hardened rake) had not kissed her.

It was, frankly, a distinct disappointment.

“There,” her maid said, stepping back. “Your mother is waiting for you.”

Louisa gave her a brief smile. “Thank you, Lucy.”

Lucy nodded, wiping her hands on her skirts, and Louisa paused only to clasp a gold bracelet around her wrist before descending to where her mother was waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

Immediately, her mother scowled, the peacock feather on her turban quivering with disapproval. “Really, Louisa,” she scolded, beckoning Louisa closer with short, sharp movements that reminded her of a bird of prey. “You are barely presentable.”

“I thought this dress looked well on me.” Louisa turned, letting the taffeta rustle. “Do you not agree?”

With a harrumph, her mother guided her to the carriage and they made their way to another dull evening.

If one’s only aspiration was to engage with a gentleman for half an hour of his time, and to swoon over the fleeting touch of his hand, then she understood the appeal of such an engagement. Otherwise, it seemed a lot of energy for little reward.

Certainly no stolen kisses. The Patronesses were bound to be there, watching and judging all, and if there was any place for a little misadventure, it was not under the eagle eyes of the staidest ladies the ton had to offer.

They arrived well before the doors closed at eleven, and Louisa allowed herself to be swept inside. The large ballroom had been awe-inspiring at first, but she was used to the sight by now, and it did little to intimidate her. She merely swept her gaze across

the assembled ladies and gentlemen, searching for a friendly face. If there was one thing she had not done over the course of her Season so far, it was make many friends amongst her peers.

Most of the time, she did not consider it a loss, but when there was no party she felt compelled to join in this large crowd, she felt a little adrift. Her mother's arm was the only thing holding her in place, and even that was a dubious comfort. She wished she was back with her paints. Wished she was in the gardens at Bath, avoiding Miss Huxley and finally savouring what it meant to be free.

Her gaze landed on a face that was familiar yet distant. A stubborn jaw, full lips, sharp cheekbones that seemed to slash down his face. And yes, there, eyes the same shade as the winter sky.

She frowned, trying to place him.

"He's handsome," she said to her mother, nodding at the young man. "Who is he?"

"Who?" Her mother squinted, then sighed, her lip curling. "Oh, that one. Yes, he may be handsome, but he's little more than a boy, and his father is one of the most reckless gentlemen you could meet. I wouldn't be surprised if he were set to inherit very little." She sent Louisa a stern look. "I would not like you to dance with him, Louisa. Do you understand me?"

Her memory finally slotted into place. The boy from the maze.

Oh, she had every intention of dancing with him.

"You should approach her," George Comerford said, nodding to the lady Henry had been pointedly trying to ignore all evening. "Ask her to dance."

Henry sent his friend a scornful look. "As though you would in my position."

Comerford cleared his throat, tucking his hands behind his back. The primary reason they were friends at Oxford was because they were avid students. Comerford, out of a love for studying, and Henry because he knew it to be his duty. They also shared a degree of distaste for the usual activities young men partook in. Comerford, because it disturbed his studies, and Henry because he had spent his life avoiding vice and he disliked it being thrust before his face.

They were not wholly the same; Comerford had entertained several ladies and had even visited a brothel once or twice. But they had never discussed it, and it was doubtful they ever would.

"You noticed her the moment she walked through the doors," Comerford said.

"I notice every lady."

"But you don't watch their progress around the ballroom like a wolf in search of his next meal."

Henry shot Comerford an annoyed glance. "I'm doing no such thing."

"You are." Comerford leant forwards. "Do you know who she is?"

Henry had not confided in his friend about the lady he'd met in Bath. "I believe we met once," he said eventually.

"Ah. And you liked her."

"I did not."

Comerford raised an entirely deserving sceptical eyebrow, because Henry had liked her. He hadn't intended to, hadn't even thought at the time he had, especially, until he had gone home with thoughts of her dominating his every moment. Her smile, her laughter, the utter shamelessness of her antics. She was lovely and unlike any young lady he'd ever met before.

And now here she was, proving that she did indeed know how to behave like a lady, graceful as a swan. Beautiful in her white gown.

He preferred the way she had been in the maze, flushed and breathless, brimming with mischief.

"Just go and talk to her," Comerford said.

Henry glared at him. "I should have known coming to London with you was a mistake."

"You're the one who wanted to speak to your father," Comerford said serenely. "You could have returned to the country to be with your sisters."

Henry hadn't wanted to do that, either. He was a fish out of water: no longer a child, and unwilling to be treated as one; not yet a man in the eyes of the ton. "Anything would be preferable to this tedium."

"Try the card tables."

Henry scowled in their direction. If his father was here, that would be his place of choice. "No thank you."

"Then I have nothing else to suggest, my friend."

Henry sighed, scanning the room. He should not have come. They should not have had Almack's vouchers for the Season at all, especially considering their precarious financial position, but neither of his parents would listen to reason. As far as they were concerned, he was too young, too inexperienced, too incapable of seeing the world for how it truly was.

Frustration burned through him, and for one of the first times in his life, he wished the watery lemonade was something stronger.

"I can see why you like her," Comerford said, watching the Bath lady's progress with avid interest. "She's lovely."

"I've told you, I don't like her."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

"Hmm." Comerford clucked his tongue. "She's coming this way."

"What?" Henry turned so fast his neck cricked, and his friend laughed.

"You see? I was right."

Henry scowled. "She's a complication."

"And you are old before your time," Comerford said. "Live a little, if only for tonight. This is perhaps the safest place to do so."

"Even if we were not in one of the most respectable establishments in London, I would hardly be in danger of dragging her into a secluded room," Henry said dryly,

even if what he recalled of the girl suggested she would not be wholly against the idea.

The thought ought to disgust him.

“She’s coming this way,” Comerford said, gaze behind him.

Henry snorted. “You can hardly deceive me with that twice.”

“Gentlemen,” a disarmingly musical voice said. “Would you object terribly to introducing yourselves? Once we are officially introduced, my mother can have no reason to disapprove.”

Henry turned slowly, willing his expression to remain stern. She was a complication and a temptation, and there was absolutely no reason for him to like her.

In the light of the ballroom, she was pretty in an entirely unholy way, as though she had been crafted to be his very downfall. Wicked hazel eyes that brimmed with mischief, full lips with a soft cupid’s bow, soft curls that hung around her heart-shaped face. And below, a dress that hugged her curves to an almost indecent degree, displaying her figure to magnificent advantage.

A hot, entirely unprecedented emotion surged through him, and for a moment he was incapable of speech, fighting this newfound urge to press closer to her.

She tilted that pretty, pointed chin as she looked at him, and the corner of her luscious mouth curved into a slow, lopsided smile. “Do you know, I believe we have met before.”

There was no reason for her to remember him; he had surely not turned her life upside down the way that one encounter had turned him inside out. Yet she was

regarding him as though she did indeed know who he was.

“This,” Comerford said, stepping forward and clapping Henry on the back, “is Lord Eynsham, my lady.”

“Lord Eynsham,” she repeated, and Henry felt as though another crucial part of him had been delivered into her dubious care. “How charming. I am Miss Louisa Picard. And you, sir?”

“Mr George Comerford,” he said promptly, giving an elegant bow. “Son of a viscount.”

Louisa’s smile widened, and she fluttered her eyelashes at him. “A rich viscount?”

“Rich enough, I think.”

“Ah, then my mother can have no objections to me conversing with you.”

It transpired that watching her engage in a flirtation at close quarters was much more excruciating than knowing she was flirting from a distance.

“You,” she said, swinging her gaze back to Henry, “my mother does not approve of.”

“No?” He raised both eyebrows. “Though I am the son of an earl?”

“An impoverished earl,” she stressed. “My mother has grand plans for me. Which is why you would make an excellent candidate for a dance partner if you would be so good as to ask me.”

The unexpected request jolted through him, but he did his best to hold his ground.

“You are not tempted by the son of a rich viscount?”

She shot Comerford a sidelong glance and leaned in a little closer. “Perhaps I could be.”

Henry knew fine well that he should let it be and allow events to play out as they would. Which was, naturally, why he took her arm and led her out to where couples were assembling. “Must you always be so forward?” he demanded, irritated at himself for commanding her to dance with him; irritated at her for having wanted him to.

Her fingers curled around his, and he hated how much he enjoyed that, too.

“Do you disapprove?” she asked, not sounding at all sorry. Before he knew what was happening, she was opposite him in the country dances, her eyes sparkling like the woodland forests he had so loved as a boy.

She was enchanting.

He was utterly enchanted.

“Yes,” he said, trying to find his sternness. “Of course I do. You are a—a minx.”

She laughed, and he had the impression he had delighted her. “No one has ever called me that before.”

“Just give it time,” he muttered.

She laughed again, and he did his best not to feel any kind of victory. “You gave me your name, Henry Beaumont. Not your title, but your name. That leads me to think you don’t dislike me too much.”

Looking directly at her face was too much like staring into the sun, so he fixed his

gaze over her shoulder. A matronly woman was glaring at them; no doubt she was Miss Picard's mother. "Why did you force me to dance with you?"

"I did not force you."

"And yet here we are."

"Only because you had rather I not dance with your friend," she said smugly. "You did not even ask me before manhandling me across to the dance floor."

Heat rose up his neck, mostly because she was correct, and he was a little horrified at himself for having done it. "If you had resisted in any way, I would have stopped."

"I know." A tiny genuine smile touched her mouth. "You are far too proper for that."

"You make a lot of assumptions."

"Well, I know that you have not danced once since I arrived. You are the son of an earl with no thoughts of immediate marriage, yet you have not retired to the card rooms." She wrinkled her nose at him a little as she smiled. "And you were shocked at finding me alone in the pleasure gardens."

"Is that so surprising?"

"Perhaps not." Her eyes twinkled up at him, and the next time they came together, she lowered her voice and said, "Though I was disappointed you did not kiss me."

He almost jerked back from her. The pressure of her fingers against his felt as though they were skin to skin without the barrier of gloves. The way her lips curled suggested she knew many of the things he was thinking.

“Do you often ask the gentlemen you dance with to kiss you?”

“Only the handsome ones.” She laughed again. “There, I see I have shocked you again.”

“And how often has that tactic succeeded?”

“Shocking you? Every time. Asking gentlemen to kiss me?” She pursed her lips, and he did his best not to look at them. “A lady never tells.”

He doubted many would refuse her if the surroundings were right. In Almack’s, under the watchful eyes of the Patronesses, was not a place where a gentleman could get away with something improper.

“Will you be in London for long, Lord Eynsham?” she asked when the dance next brought them together. “I should like to dance with you more.”

“Why? So you can proposition me again?”

Her lovely face tilted up to his. “Will you accept?”

“No.”

“Pity.” She sighed, then shot a glance at him. “Never mind. I will dance with you anyway, in Bath if nowhere else. Be sure to be there again in the summer, Lord Eynsham.”

“Why?” he asked, wondering if he was going mad and their entire conversation was some kind of punishment, a torment of his will he was utterly unprepared to face. “So you can pique your mother?”

“That is certainly a benefit,” she said, and laughed. “But it is not my primary purpose.”

“Then what is? I will not kiss you, Miss Picard.”

“No? I suppose we shall see.” The dance came to an end and she sank slowly into a curtsy. “Until we meet again, Lord Eynsham.”

PRESENT DAY

February 1815

Louisa swept into Mr Vincent Knight's receiving room with every ounce of dignity she could summon. The carriage—a plain hackney—that had brought her here lingered around the corner from the large house, and she wore a pretty bonnet that had the advantage of concealing her face from view.

It would not do for news of this clandestine visit to reach the ears of the ton .

This would not be the first time she had visited a gentleman's house on her own. But this was not merely a visit of pleasure—after his threats, she needed to determine what proof he had, and how seriously she should take him as an enemy.

He had claimed to possess a letter from her husband that outlined the plan, but although Bolton had not been the cleverest man, he had not been that foolish. After all, his reputation would also have been on the line. Perhaps he had boasted about his scheme while drunk and Knight had merely remembered it. In which case, she would not have to worry about his claims—no one would believe him.

That was the best-case scenario. But given the quiet confidence of his threat, she had the niggling suspicion that he had the means to be believed.

If so, she would have to think very carefully about how to proceed.

One thing was for certain: she would not allow this man to get the better of her.

As the minutes ticked by, she sank into the green-upholstered sofa and produced a pocket book of poetry from her reticule, which she had brought for this very purpose. As a result, she was deep in reading when he finally entered the room.

“Mr Knight,” she said, snapping the book shut. His gaze fell on it and irritation crossed his face. No doubt he had hoped to inconvenience her. “Thank you for meeting with me.”

He bowed. “I had no intention of turning you away. I presume this is about our conversation yesterday?”

“You cannot butter dung, sir,” she said sweetly. “Call it as it is: you threatened me.”

He inclined his head. “As you say.”

“But you are correct. I’m here to discuss the terms.”

He sat in the armchair opposite, a small smile playing on his lips. “I believe I made my terms perfectly clear.”

“Yes, in the event that I agree to them.” She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “You can hardly expect me to proceed on the back of a threat alone.”

“Ah,” he drawled. “You would like to assess the quality of my evidence.”

Well, at least he wasn’t as stupid as Bolton had been. “You mentioned a letter. I must see it.”

“Not just a letter.” His unsettlingly cold gaze landed on her, and she resisted the urge to shiver. A fox indeed, sly and with large teeth. “Although that would be enough to get people talking.”

“Not enough to justify the sum you demanded.”

“Perhaps not,” he admitted. “Fortunately, I have more. Bolton’s letter merely illustrates the how—but I have the ear of your tutor, and he assures me that he would be able to identify your paintings if he were shown them.”

The floor wavered underfoot.

“My tutor?” She kept her voice cool.

“A Mr Thomas Hyatt. Perhaps you might recognise the name.”

“And he’s prepared to support your claims?”

Knight’s smile was unpleasant. “He’s unaware of my claims, but let me just say that he is persuadable, once one knows how best to persuade him.”

More blackmail, she thought distantly. And more compelling than letters, which even if they were in Bolton’s hand could be dismissed as a poorly placed brag. That would have been challenging, but perhaps she would have risked it. Prinny was friends with her , after all, not some upstart like Mr Knight.

But if Thomas Hyatt could be persuaded. If he supported Knight’s claims . . .

“That’s not all,” Knight said, evidently enjoying her discomfort. “I have in my possession two of your paintings.”

“Bolton’s paintings,” she corrected.

“So you might think, but no. One has Bolton’s signature, to be sure, though its subject matter is . . .” He clucked his tongue. “Well, no lady ought to be painting

these things.”

One of her erotic pieces, then. Unfortunate, but she could still claim it was Bolton’s work. After all, who would suspect that a delicately bred lady would ever think to paint the male nude form?

“The other, however, is by a certain Louisa Picard,” he continued. “I had the pleasure of viewing it in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition several years ago, and since purchased it. A distinctive work, I would say. A self-portrait, perhaps.”

It was not a self-portrait, but Louisa knew the one to which he was referring. Domestic Bliss. At the time, it had set the ton talking, and although she had never directly claimed it as her own work, it had a small LP in the bottom corner. Louisa Picard.

She had painted it after her mother once again talked about her duty to her husband, as though the goal of domesticity was all a lady should aspire towards. As though domesticity could only be a woman surrounded by her children in her home. Not, as she had depicted in her painting, an employed lady.

Not once had she imagined that the painting, auctioned off when her father died, could ever have been held against her in this way.

She raised her gaze to Knight’s. “Forgive me, sir, for not taking you on your word alone.”

“You would like to see the paintings with your own eyes?”

“I would.”

He nodded and rose. “Follow me, my lady.” There was a mocking note to his voice,

and she had the thought that she probably should not follow this man into the bowels of his house. It would be so easy for him to overpower her, and she had come here clandestinely; no one knew of her whereabouts.

Then again, if he harmed her, he would not get her money.

She followed him down the corridor to a tired drawing room, the furniture scuffed and almost certainly rented. The receiving room had been well dressed and elegant; everything else in the house felt worn. Her suspicions were correct: he truly was in need of the money.

Then she turned and her thoughts about his furniture left her body. There on the wall were the two paintings he had mentioned, side by side. Like that, the commonalities between them were marked. And she had forgotten in what detail she had painted the sexual acts on the canvas before her. Her face almost heated, but at the last minute she dismissed the shame. Here was evidence of what she had done to survive. If anyone was to be ashamed of it, it should be Lord Bolton.

One of the girls in her second painting had the same face as in Domestic Bliss . An accident, but notable, the same way an author might repeat a phrase between books.

For a moment, she had the wild idea that she might be able to destroy them. Throw herself at them, find flint and steel or a match and set them ablaze. But there was no recourse for that now.

“You see,” Knight said from behind her. “The similarities are unmistakable.”

They were indeed, and it would be easy enough to find proof that she had painted the first and presented it to the Royal Academy.

If the second were connected to her, and if the Prince of Wales was convinced

beyond all doubt that she had been the one to paint it, no respectable person would ever entertain her again. Caroline would no doubt think it all a big joke, but Louisa had built a life here in London. She would have her fortune, but nowhere to spend it.

“Well?” Knight asked. “Do you agree to my terms?”

This was so much worse than she could ever have imagined. And to think the key to her ruin lay in such a grubby house.

“It seems,” she said, never looking away from her first painting, made when she had still been so young and innocent of the world, “that I have no choice.”

Henry had not known it was possible to be so wearied by another person’s company in so short a time. Yet here he was, facing his brother over his desk, two minutes into a conversation he already knew was going to take a toll.

Oliver was not the brother he remembered from nine years ago. Now eighteen, he was accustomed to being the baby of the family, coddled then set free upon university life to do as he wished.

And what he wished was, apparently, to raise all sorts of hell.

Henry was not often made to feel old, but he felt ancient to his bones when he was faced with his fresh-faced baby brother.

“It seems you are failing your classes,” he said.

Oliver shifted, a mutinous expression on his face. “That letter was meant for Father, not you.”

“Better someone read the letter rather than have it languishing on Father’s desk for

three months before he consigns it to the fire,” Henry said shortly. “The Dean also writes that you are the orchestrator of many pranks against your fellow students and tutors. Most recently, you defiled the statue of Queen Mary II.”

Oliver paled a little, his sandy hair falling over his forehead as he ducked his head. No doubt he had been hoping no one would have discovered he was behind that particular act. Henry sighed as he lowered the letter back onto the desk. His brother had always been impulsive; at nine, that had been an endearing trait. As a man, it was considerably less endearing. Oliver was becoming precisely the sort of degenerate their father was known for being, and Henry felt near powerless to stop it.

“I did not send you to Oxford so you could fail to attend your classes,” he said, trying and failing to keep the irritation from his voice.

Oliver scowled. “You did not send me to Oxford. Nathaniel did.”

“Does that give you the right to deface university property?”

“You don’t have the right to lecture me about it.”

“I do when the bill is sent to my door.” Another bill when they were drowning in them. At this rate, even Miss Winton’s dowry would not be enough to repair the damage to the estate. “Neither Nathaniel nor I sent you to Oxford so you could cultivate a drinking problem.”

His younger brother flushed. “I don’t have a drinking problem.”

“So this act of defiance was committed sober?”

There was a notable pause. “It was not,” Oliver muttered. “But if you expect me to do nothing but stay inside and study when—”

“That is all I did.”

“You,” Oliver said, his lip curling. “And because you were staid before your time, you expect me to be, too?”

“At the very least, I expect you not to cause havoc. Your education will be instrumental in finding you an occupation. When you graduate, our father will not be able to support you.”

“How is it I can know more about the world than you?” A scowl marred Oliver’s boyish face. “I am ten years your junior and yet you still do not understand that it is not the quality of my education that matters, merely that I have one.”

“You may not have one if you continue to fail your classes.” Henry planted his hands against the desk and rose. Above all else, he longed to be free of a destitute estate and a family that wished, at all turns, to further sink his hopes of inheriting anything at all. “If all you had wanted to learn was how to be a degenerate, you may as well have stayed home.” The instant the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. It was all very well for him to disapprove of his father’s actions, but he should not have voiced them to Oliver. “Is there anything else you wished to say?”

A mulish expression crossed Oliver’s face. “I wish you had never returned to England.”

“Do you?” Henry said dryly, shuffling through the papers on his desk. Most belonged to his father, but someone should address them. “Well, then, that makes two of us.”

Commotion beyond the door put a stop to any further conversation. Their mother gave a shriek of delight from the hallway, and Henry opened the door to chaos. Oliver slipped away, taking the opportunity to end the interview, but Henry’s attention was arrested by his oldest sister, Theodosia, standing in the hall with a babe

in her arms and her husband, the Duke of Norfolk, standing protectively behind her.

“What are you doing in London?” their mother demanded, kissing Theo on the cheek.

“What if dearest Charles catches a cold?”

In Henry’s opinion, ‘dearest Charles’, who was a chubby, red-faced child with disconcertingly plump hands, looked like the picture of health.

“Henry!” Theo said, approaching him with a wide smile. “I was hoping to catch you. Nate had business in London and I thought I would visit. Mama said you’re getting married?”

“I expect so,” he said, and was immediately horrified when Theo unceremoniously deposited Charles in his arms. “What are you doing?”

“He should know his uncle. And if you’re readying to marry, you should become more accustomed to holding infants.”

Charles was heavy. He also squirmed, and his red face twisted alarmingly, mouth opening. Henry knew by the way the women had cooed over him that he was commonly considered ‘sweet’ and ‘a darling’, but as far as he was concerned, the baby could have been a different species. With tiny, square teeth in his mouth.

“Don’t let him suck on your finger,” Theo advised. “He’s teething and he will think nothing of chewing on you.”

“Take him back before I drop him on his head.”

She sighed in exasperation. “You won’t drop him. Just hold him.”

“I am holding him.” And he would rather not be. The fact his marriage would likely

result in children of his own was a fact he tried to think of as little as possible. The expectation was that he would have, at least, a spare and an heir. If he was lucky, he might achieve that with just two, but he would likely have more.

He would have shuddered at the thought if he was not holding the future Duke of Norfolk.

Theo relented and relieved him of his burden. “You know, you really ought to get used to it.”

It was almost an incentive not to marry.

Charles gurgled, diverting Theo’s attention, and Henry took the opportunity to change the subject, hoping his sister never brought up children again.

THE PAST

August 1804

The moment Louisa arrived in Bath, she had every intention of seeking Henry Beaumont out once again. He had been adamant that he would not kiss her, but she was determined to test his mettle. She was eighteen now, a full Season behind her, and she had learnt the art of flirtation as well as any girl of that age might.

He might attempt to resist her, but she knew well all the tricks of the trade. A hand on his arm, a glance up through her eyelashes, a calculated bite of her lower lip. Her Season had given her the ability to flirt, if nothing else, and she was determined that Henry should feel the full force of her newfound skills.

If someone had asked, she would not have been able to say precisely why she was so hell-bent on persuading him to submit to her charms. She might even, given the nature of his resistance, admit to herself and others that it was not a strictly kind thing to do.

In truth, it was the thrill of the chase that excited her. She was young enough that few things had truly been denied. Marriage, for her, was not something she was contemplating as long as her father allowed her to paint at home. Therefore, she had nothing to entertain herself but flirtations, and persuading Henry to flirt would be the biggest victory of all.

A week passed, then two, without seeing him, and she began to wonder whether he was even in Bath this summer at all. Until finally on an expedition to Wells

Cathedral, she came across his tall, iron-straight figure on his horse.

Her heart gave a little, wholly inexplicable leap when their eyes met across the street. Her friend Beatrice Lacey had organised the event and was waving at everyone from atop her spirited mare. Behind Louisa, her groom (the reason she had been permitted to go on this trip) was perched behind her.

“You may go,” she said imperiously, hoping her tone would be enough to persuade him. “I will collect you on my return.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, miss. Your mother gave me strict orders, and I’d be dismissed if she ever found out.”

Disappointed but unsurprised, Louisa sighed and nodded. “Very well. Don’t ride too close.” Then she squared her shoulders and trotted across to where Henry was waiting. “Good morning, Lord Eynsham,” she said, giving him a smile she had been told on countless occasions was alluring. “What brings you out of the house? I haven’t seen you at a single ball or rout this summer, Lord Eynsham.”

His brows rose. “You were looking for me?”

“Is that so surprising?”

“I would have thought you had more than enough admirers to satisfy you.”

She preened, glorying when the corner of his mouth dimpled like he was attempting to suppress a smile. “Does that mean you count yourself among their ranks, perchance?”

“I would hardly say that,” he said, but he glanced at her before encouraging his horse into a walk after Beatrice Lacey.

“What would you say? Have you been avoiding me?” She caught up and rode by his side again. Their party was sizeable, another reason her mother had agreed she could go, and the other members were too busy talking amongst themselves to listen to her conversation. “Is that why I haven’t seen you?”

“Why would I be avoiding you?”

She fluttered her eyelashes at him in an overwrought gesture calculated to make him laugh. It succeeded, and she felt another flush of victory. “Perhaps because you fear how much you like my company?”

“Is that so,” he said, amused.

“Well, do you have a better reason?”

“How about that I arrived in Bath yesterday,” he said. “Is that reason enough?”

“Yesterday? But you have wasted half the summer.”

The humour left his face and his mouth turned into a hard line. “I was at my family estate.”

Louisa rode beside him in silence, frowning at this new nugget of information he had offered her. “Do you not enjoy it there?” she ventured at last.

“My father and I . . .” He hesitated. “We have a strained relationship.”

“Oh.” Louisa knew little of his father except that he was penniless and her mother did not want an association, but he had mentioned their troublesome relationship once before. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. How has your summer fared?” His mouth tipped up into that half smile she adored so much. “I assume you’ve been tripping over admirers?”

“A lady never tells.” She sent him a coquettish pout. “And you? Do you still hold fast to your vow of chastity and moral superiority?”

“A gentleman never tells,” he returned, and she laughed, turning back to the front. Who would have thought that a young man with such staid and old-fashioned values would have a sense of humour?

“Remind me why you have taken such a vow?” She turned back to him, genuinely curious. “You are not like any other young gentlemen I have met.” All of whom enjoyed drinking, cards, and female company. “You have gained a name for yourself as a man who adheres rigidly to his values, which naturally is admirable, but I simply cannot conceive why.”

His smile was gentle. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“Why? Because I am nothing more than a shallow flirt?” She tossed her head, abruptly irritated. “Don’t treat me like a child.”

There was a silence as they came to the outskirts of the city. Louisa considered cantering ahead to talk with someone else when Henry said, “It’s because I don’t want to be like my father.” His eyes were fixed on his reins as he said it, and she had the feeling he had never confessed this aloud before. “He destroyed our family by doing all the things I’ve vowed not to.” There was a new harshness to his face. “When I marry, my family will not wonder if I will return home. My wife will not be humiliated because I parade my mistresses across town. My children will not be left to wonder if they will have anything left to inherit—or even if they will be granted the chance to live in their house come next year.” He snapped his jaw shut, and

Louisa forgot her irritation in the face of his pain. “It is not something you can understand, Louisa, because you’ve not had to live it.”

For the first time, she saw herself as he must see her: a silly, airheaded girl whose thoughts were of beaux and conquests and flirtations. A girl who repeatedly toyed with him and pushed at his boundaries because they did not align with her own.

“I cannot change his actions,” he said, his voice low, “but this is one thing I can control. And I must control something, Louisa, or I will go mad.”

Henry Beaumont, the man who never, and all because his father was the man who always.

It was an extreme reaction, but she understood it, a little.

“Would moderation hurt?” she asked.

“And if I am not capable of moderation? My father clearly isn’t. Better I never have to find out how low I can sink.”

“Your self-control is admirable,” she murmured.

“It’s a necessity. Survival.” He hesitated as he glanced at her. “I likely will inherit very little, if anything at all. His behaviour won’t be curbed. And I must have something.”

“I understand.” She cocked her head as she observed him, wondering if he would balk at her confession. After all, Society as a whole disapproved—or it would, if it knew. “I am not certain I ever want to marry.”

His brows rose. “Because of your painting?”

“You remembered?”

He glanced at her. “I remember everything,” he said, and the tone of his voice made something warm and liquid erupt in the base of her stomach. “You told me you aspire to become one of the great painters.”

“I’m learning,” she said, struggling to find her ability to speak under the unsettlingly hot weight of his attention. “My father has hired me a tutor, and I am spending all my free time practising. If I were to marry, my husband would control whether I continued to paint, and he would almost certainly disapprove of my oils.”

Henry surveyed her with unwarranted seriousness. “You love it enough to sacrifice marriage for it?”

“How much of a sacrifice truly is marriage? Particularly when I have no interest in it.” She sighed wistfully. “When I have a paintbrush in my hand, I feel as though I am free. What man can grant me freedom?”

His gaze sharpened, and she felt his need to understand as though it were painted onto his skin. “Is that what art is to you? Freedom?”

“Do you not feel it too?” she asked earnestly. “Have you never seen something and been touched by it? Not merely by what it’s representing, but the skill it has taken to reproduce something of that magnitude? It’s one of the lenses through which we view history. It brings the world around us alive through the painter’s eyes. Through my painting, I can convey things I could never explain through words alone. I am more than the sum of my parts. More than I could ever be alone.”

Henry said nothing, and she flushed. Usually, she was so careful to keep her opinions locked safely down, but she had forgotten herself. Something about him made it all too easy to be honest, and honesty was one thing she had learnt one should never

have too much of. The truth was potent, and if she gave too much of it away, it was akin to cutting her soul into pieces and dispensing the remains.

“I’m sorry,” she said, flashing him a brilliant smile. This was why she only ever flirted when she was in public. Talking of serious matters invited in danger. “We can discuss something else. You have a remarkably good seat on your horse, Lord Eynsham. Are you a frequent rider?” She took her bottom lip into her mouth, glancing up at him through her eyelashes. “You will have to teach me one day. I ride but infrequently.”

“No,” he said quietly. “Don’t hide yourself from me, Louisa.”

She took a fortifying breath. “I’m sorry, my lord. I don’t quite understand your meaning.”

“That was beautiful, everything you said.” There was an expression in his eyes she didn’t know how to interpret. None of her other suitors had looked at her like that before, like he had just seen something new and entirely fascinating. “I would like to see some of your artwork sometime, if you would allow me to.”

“I—” She shook her head and frowned. “You wish to see it?”

“How could I not after that impassioned speech?” That crooked smile took her breath away once more. “Please?”

“If you feel the same way when we are both next in London, I will show you.”

“Thank you. I would like that very much.”

“You should be careful,” she said, keeping her tone light and giving him a coquettish smile. “You’re making me believe you mean it.”

He held her gaze, and Louisa was aware, with her artist's brain, that she found something about the juxtaposition of this man inordinately compelling. "I hope you will come to learn," he said, not looking away, "that you can trust everything I tell you."

PRESENT DAY

February 1815

Louisa wasted no time in finding out as much information about Knight as possible. Her man of business, Mr Upperton, was a man of considerable talent and, she suspected, unsavoury connections, and she tasked him with discovering from where Mr Knight had come.

In the meantime, she contemplated all the ways she could deprive him of his evidence against her. Without the pictures or letters, his proof held less weight, and so it was in that direction her thoughts turned. Thomas Hyatt was currently in Italy, which both gave her a modicum of grace—she doubted Knight would act without the corroborating word of an expert—and allowed her to focus her mind in one direction only.

How to break into Knight's home.

Now she knew where the pictures were, she would be able to remove or destroy them easily enough. The letters would be harder, but she trusted she could locate them. What measures would he go to in order to hide the letters in his own home, anyway?

To that end, after some thought, she decided her best method of entry was to bribe one of the members of his household to let her through the door. From there, she trusted she could handle herself.

Infiltrating his household was more difficult than she had anticipated, but eventually

one of her grooms got the ear of a pageboy, and the plan was set. When Mr Knight left the house, the pageboy was to send a note around to say so, and once the rest of the staff had gone to bed, he would leave a candle in one of the downstairs windows to say that the door was unlocked.

From there, Louisa would be on her own.

For several days, she waited on tenterhooks, attending as many engagements as always, but with a note to her servants to summon her immediately if they received word that Mr Knight had gone.

Eventually, on a mild March evening, at around eleven, she received the summons she had been waiting for.

Mr Knight lived on Lombard Street in the commercial district—not a fashionable address, and one where she trusted she would not be recognised. Just in case, however, she dressed in plain clothes lent to her by Lucy, her maid, and hired a hackney to take her a few streets away from the location.

“Wait here, if you please,” she said to the driver, an aged jarvey who looked at her with concern.

“Not sure you should be walking around alone, miss.”

She didn’t bother to correct him. “I’ll be perfectly well, thank you. I hope I won’t be too long—not past half an hour.”

“Yes, ma’am, if you’re sure.”

“Perfectly, thank you.” Composed and confident, she exited the vehicle and walked purposefully along the road until she came to Lombard Street. Many of the houses

still had lights in the windows, and only a few were dark.

It was well past midnight by the time she came to Mr Knight's house, only to find it sadly dark. According to her groom—who had been the only one to meet with the boy—the page had been quite clear: there would be a candle in one of the windows of the first floor. Yet there was nothing.

Perhaps the boy had merely forgotten the candle. She would hope he had not forgotten to unlock the door as he had asked.

Before she could approach the servants' entrance, however, she noticed a figure on the other side of the road. He was tall, cloaked in a greatcoat that was open at the front to reveal a dark, modest coat. For an inexplicable moment, she had the impression it was Henry, and cursed herself for thinking of him when all she truly wanted to do was forget him.

The figure let out a curse and strode towards her, and her shock dissolved into horror.

"Henry," she said as he approached, a scowl on his face. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"What business do you have in Lombard Street?"

He glanced at Knight's redbrick house. "Presumably the same as you, although I cannot imagine what you are doing out here alone."

The idea he might be concerned for her safety made her irrationally still more angry. "You, I am convinced, cannot have any business with Mr Knight."

“As it happens,” Henry said, “he’s not home.”

“Then you might as well leave.”

He cast her a look that was just as scornful as her own. “I had not come here with the intention of seeing him, as you know very well.”

“Then why?”

“Really, Louisa.” He sighed. “Can you not guess?”

“If it is for the reason I suppose, then you are a greater fool than I had already credited you as being. My business is none of your concern.” Her nostrils flared as she attempted to keep her voice low. “Leave.”

“Not until I escort you to safety. It’s not safe on these streets alone, as you well know.” He glanced behind her, to where voices floated along the breeze. Drunken laughter followed. “Come,” he said, gesturing down the street. “Do you have a cab nearby?”

“I am not going anywhere with you,” she hissed. “And I am not sacrificing this opportunity.” Ignoring his outraged splutter, she strode to the side door and tugged at the handle.

Locked.

No. She scanned the houses in case she had made a mistake, but this was definitely the right one—save the lack of candle in the window.

Had her page been discovered? He had sent the note not two hours ago.

Henry, damn him, followed her, a spectre in the darkness. “What were you hoping to achieve?”

“Be quiet while I think.”

He stepped closer, providing a human shield in front of the drunkards merrily making their way home from the tavern. “Are you so inclined to put yourself in danger?” he demanded, his voice low. An unexpected shiver ran through her at his proximity. He smelt just as she remembered, warm and slightly spiced, like winter days and long nights by the fire. Woodsmoke and desire.

Even after all her years of liaisons and pleasure-seeking, nothing had ever made her feel alive as he had.

The knowledge made her hate him all the more, and she shoved at his chest, forcing him back a few steps. “I don’t believe that is any of your concern.”

“You’ve made that perfectly clear.”

“Then why are you here?”

His jaw tightened and he looked back at the house. “You know why.”

“No, I mean why even try and act on my behalf?” After all, when she had come to him for help nine years ago, he had decidedly not helped her. “That’s hardly in your nature.”

His gaze returned to her face, and it was as though he had trailed his fingers across her skin, the path they travelled burning. “And what do you know about my nature?” he asked, an odd note in his voice. Not mockery, precisely, but dry, self-deprecating amusement. Another reminder that these nine years had rendered them strangers.

“I know that you are finally searching to marry.” She folded her arms. “It has only taken you nine years to be ready. Congratulations.”

“Obligation is not worthy of celebration.” His jaw tightened. “Your quest to easily enter the house has failed. Please, Louisa. Return home.”

She was so close to stopping Knight once and for all. Or at least, being far closer to saving her reputation. “You go home, Henry. Leave me to this.”

“No,” he said, and closed his eyes as though he was in pain.

She attempted to slip out past him, but before she could bolt—where she was going, she had no idea—a carriage clattered down the street, coming to a stop on the main street outside Knight’s house. Henry’s hand came pointlessly to her elbow, but she remained where she was, watching as Knight and another man climbed out. The second man was a stranger to Louisa. Certainly he was no member of the ton. Even at this distance, she could tell by the cut of his coat, the way he walked, slouching along the pavement, his shoulders hunched as though he was preparing for a blow at any moment. No gentleman she knew walked like that.

She leaned up, one hand coming to Henry’s arm as she brought her mouth to his ear. “Do you know that man?”

He gave a tiny shake of his head, but she thought his breath stuttered slightly.

“We must get closer.”

Henry’s grip on her tightened, and he turned his face half into hers. “If we approach, they’ll see us. As it is, there’s no assurance that man won’t enter through this door.”

“He would have a hard time doing so, considering it’s locked.”

He made a tiny sound of acknowledgement in the back of his throat, though it sounded more as though he was in pain. She, too, was uncomfortably aware of all the places their bodies were touching. Her hand on the taut muscles of his arm; his fingers around her elbow; his hip pressing against hers. There was nowhere for her to go save the rough brick at her back, and he seemed disinclined to give her more room.

Her heart pounded helplessly, and she despised that even here, even now, even bathed in darkness, she was thinking about all the ways his body had changed since she had last known him. Then, he had still been developing and growing. Now he was full man, broad and muscled.

Ahead, Knight finished his conversation with the man, who set off along the road with that odd slouching, ambling gait.

Whatever the reason, her ploy had failed, and now Knight had returned, she would have no way of entering the house. All she could do was follow this man and see if he held any answers. If nothing else, perhaps she could get a name.

“Louisa,” Henry said, but she had already freed herself and was following the man, keeping to the other side of the road and ducking her head. After a second, Henry caught up with her. “Where are you going?”

“Well, that depends entirely on where he’s going.”

His jaw snapped shut in palpable frustration. “I could follow him for you.”

“Why would you do that?”

“To find a way to prevent Knight from threatening you.” He hesitated before adding, in a low voice, “I know he has demanded something from you.”

“Is that so?” She glanced at him, but the darkness was complete enough she could not see his expression.

“Why else would you be here?”

“To protect my reputation?”

“The scandal would be large at first,” Henry said, extending a hand in front of her so they slowed as the man ahead did. “But it would blow over in time. Is it worth endangering yourself over?”

She scoffed under her breath. “Oh, so now you think scandal is endurable?”

His steps faltered slightly. “That was different. We would have been destitute.”

“Please, tell me again all the reasons you refused to marry me.”

“Louisa,” he said, half annoyance, half frustration. “You already know my reasons.”

She concentrated on keeping her steps light and silent. Although it was unlikely anyone would recognise her here, she did not want to give them the opportunity. “Yes, I believe so.”

He made a sound of irritation. “And you know how deeply I regret the outcome.”

“Do I? How gratifying.”

“Louisa—”

“Admit it. You were afraid of the scandal.”

“On your behalf.”

“Yet I am expected to passively endure ruin. Your double standards astonish me.”

They passed under the flickering light of a lamp. The further they travelled, the less salubrious the neighbourhood, until she wondered if following the man had been a mistake after all.

“Impersonating your husband and deceiving people out of their money will cause some uproar,” he said, “but your talent is undeniable, and you are still a Bolton. How very bad can it be? There have been other female artists.”

Ah, so he was unaware of the whole. Many of the ton were; it was only a few, including the Prince Regent, who had seen her more erotic works.

“If that were merely the situation, I might claim ownership,” she said.

Ahead, the man stopped, drawing a cigar from his pocket, lighting it in a flare of match light. He shook out the light and tossed it to the ground as he continued on.

Henry tensed beside her. “What do you mean ‘if’?” he asked, voice so low she hardly heard it. Vibration more than sound, passing straight through her.

“Do you think Bolton merely left it at that?” she asked. “His tastes were more sordid, and he liked to throw parties that would make you blush.” She could imagine them now. From a purely artistic viewpoint, there had been something inordinately beautiful about the sight, pale skin and sweeping curves against taut lines. Bronze and gold and porcelain. Hooded smiles and gasping laughs and the slow undulation of soft bodies against hard. Candlelight spilling across the scene like the dawning sun.

Debauchery, such debauchery. And she, the lady painter, had been the one to commit

it to a canvas.

Understanding dawned slowly, and Louisa might have been mistaken, but she thought she saw Henry's face redden. "Are you telling me that you painted . . . that?"

"Shocked?" She laughed, though nothing about her situation was funny. "Have I lowered myself in your estimation? Do you renounce me, declare me morally corrupt beyond measure?"

"Not you," he said, teeth clenched. "Bolton."

For an odd reason, his defence of her made her want to push him until finally he behaved the way she had expected him to. "The Prince Regent has several copies," she said, looking up at him. "Believe me when I say this scandal will not be resolved after a small rustication. The future king will have a vendetta against me, and he will not hesitate to make my transgressions known to the world."

His throat worked, and she thought she had finally reached him with the depths of her ruin when he caught her arm, turning her and pushing her against the wall. "Quiet," he said, his knee pressed against her thighs, his hand on her wrist, holding it between them as though it could prevent them from being so close.

Louisa's stomach dropped, the heat in her body rushing south, and as she looked into Henry's darkened face, she wondered if he was thinking the same thing as her. How it would feel if he allowed himself to touch her. Whether he would press his mouth to her in the name of disguise.

"I had not thought you were this sort of gentleman," she murmured, looking up at him. His jaw was sharp and tight, his eyes gleaming, their colour obscured. Yet even though she couldn't see their precise shade, she had never forgotten it.

“If you had not forced my hand, I wouldn’t be.”

If she kissed him now, would his lips taste of the night mists?

“Is he watching?” she whispered, wishing she were not so conscious of the way his knee pressed against her skirts. His body was hot, greatcoat falling open to partially encompass her, and she could feel the trembling from his heartbeat.

Perhaps he no longer cared for her, but he was not immune to this, at least.

He glanced a little to her right and shook his head. “He’s entered a tavern.”

“Then we should—”

“No,” he said firmly, stepping back to give her some much-needed space. The hands that fell to his sides were clenched tight. Her nipples pinched, hardening utterly against her will. “That I draw the line at.”

Perhaps he was right to, but she would not give up so easily.

“You forget,” she said, marching past him, “that you have no power over me.”

When he reached out for her wrist, she dodged him, and entered the tavern. The stench of ale and unwashed bodies hit her, along with the noise. With Bolton, she had been to her fair share of coffee houses and inns, but this was something different. Pockmarked tables gleamed sticky in the light from what might be tallow candles, the stink immediately repulsive. Barmaids perched on patrons’ laps, giggling, their dresses low-cut.

Their target, his gait recognisable even through the crowd, tramped along the straw and spilt ale to a table at the back.

“Now then, pet,” one of the buxom maids said to her, and glanced over at Henry. Her smile widened. “What can I do for you, sir?” Her voice dripped with lasciviousness, and when Louisa looked up at Henry, the red was back in his cheeks.

“Who is that man?” Louisa asked, nodding to their target, whom it transpired had a broken nose. He wasn’t so much as looking at them, too occupied in dealing cards on to the sticky wood of the table. A barmaid bought him a tankard of ale, the pale liquid sloshing over the sides.

“Him?” The girl raised her brows. “What makes you think I know him?”

The ease with which the man had moved across the room told Louisa that this was not his first visit. And she suspected all the maids knew the names of the regulars.

Henry held out a shilling. “Perhaps this might help you remember.”

The girl snatched it from his hand, and it disappeared almost instantly into her stained dress. “Name’s Markham,” she said, flashing him a coquettish smile. “Comes here a lot, likes his ale and his cards. Good to us girls, too, so long as we’re prompt with the drinks.”

Markham. Louisa stored the name inside her.

“Thank you,” she said to the maid, glancing one last time into the corner where Markham was presently occupied. Fun as it might be to watch Henry’s discomfort, it would not be wise to linger for long. She turned, pressing a hand against Henry’s chest, urging him back. “I think we should leave,” she said, smiling despite herself at the flush still on his cheeks.

“Thank heavens,” he muttered, taking her hand and leading her from the tavern.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Henry insisted on accompanying Louisa back to her carriage. Although she evidently thought she could handle herself, he knew the danger that lurked on the streets at night. A lady of quality, no matter how she dressed, would be a target for thieves and beggars. No doubt she had money on her.

If not, she was beautiful, and often that was enough.

He had seen terrible things while at war. Most of them involved death and the dying, but not all.

As they approached her carriage, she let out a sound of relief. “There. Now we may part ways, Lord Eynsham.”

“Let me check the interior first.”

“My coachman has a pistol.”

“He may not have been the only one,” Henry replied flatly. She had nothing to say to this, and they continued in silence until she hailed the coachman, who greeted her with relief. It transpired Henry was not the only one to have doubts about the wisdom of allowing her to roam the streets alone.

Inside the carriage, there was nothing but a lamp burnt low and two threadbare seats. No assailant lurked in wait for the rich lady who had hired this vehicle.

“Out of interest,” he said as he removed his head from the doorway, “what was your plan?”

“I had a man on the inside who said he would leave the door unlocked.”

“So you were going to enter his house and—what?”

“He has evidence. Domestic Bliss among them. I was going to take it.”

Domestic Bliss . He remembered when it had been displayed in the Royal Academy. The first time he had truly come face to face with her talent, the sheer force of her ability. Before then, she had talked to him of her dreams and he had listened, but he hadn’t appreciated how possible it was for them to come true.

That was, until Bolton.

He was doing his best not to think about the other paintings she’d confessed to. Every instinct rebelled against it. He detested that she had been forced into it, and could he have called Bolton out from beyond the grave, he would.

Underneath it all, however, was a darker feeling. One grounded in something he refused to acknowledge.

“And what if you were discovered?” he demanded. “In Knight’s house, stealing his possessions? They would have you arrested.”

“I doubt—”

“If you think for a second that he would balk at sending for constables to lock you up, you are mistaken in the matter.” He gritted his teeth. If she could not comprehend the danger that lay behind her actions, he could. “At best, you would have to wait for someone to pay your bail. At worst, you would be found guilty at trial.”

Her eyelids flickered. “I am a countess. Forgive me, Henry, but I am perfectly

capable of looking after myself. Knight is no match for me.”

“No? Then how were you unable to enter his home?”

“I will find out. Now, will you leave me, or do you wish to argue more in the street?”

Her words recalled him to his sense of propriety, and he stepped back. No doubt the jarvey had been listening to their conversation with avid interest. “Be safe,” he said curtly.

Instead of returning to her carriage, she looked up at him through the folds of darkness between them. “I won’t marry you, you know.”

“Pardon?”

“Just because you are kind to me now, or do me favours, or think to help me.”

He gave a low bark of laughter, unable to help himself. Once, he had dreamed of her marrying him, but not anymore. He knew better than to hope for that now, even if he still preferred her over every single other woman he had met, infuriating habit for endangering herself and all.

“I would not have expected anything else,” he said dryly, and bowed.

“I have a large fortune now, you know. And I’m aware you’re in need of one.”

“Tell me, Louisa, is there anything I could do to induce you to marry me?”

Her chin lifted. “No.”

“As I suspected.” He stepped back, giving them both space. Her face was still

upturned, and he longed to catch it between his hands and kiss her.

But she had made herself perfectly clear: she would never be his wife.

“What did you intend to achieve tonight?” she asked.

“I knew Knight was out and hoped to speak with him privately when he returned.”

“To say what?”

“Merely remind him that you are not friendless.”

Her nostrils flared, and she folded her arms across her chest. “You are not my friend, Henry. And I thank you to steer clear of my business. I don’t need your help.”

“You don’t have to like me to accept my help,” he said.

“I don’t trust your motives in offering it.”

He ground his teeth together. Frustrating, stubborn, infuriating woman. “Then consider it an apology of sorts.” He didn’t say for what, but he saw the way comprehension dawned across her face. He would never be able to articulate his regret that she had suffered at the hands of Bolton, but this, at least, he could do. And he would continue to help her so long as she was under threat.

Then, when he was done, he would marry Miss Winton and this portion of his life would be over.

“Very well,” she said after a long, pregnant pause. “Do as you please. But do not think it will earn my forgiveness.”

He bowed stiffly. “I know.”

She flicked something at him from the window of the carriage and tapped the roof. Henry caught the object reflexively, opening his palm to reveal the silver shilling as the carriage rattled away.

Louisa’s failure to forcibly remove the evidence from Knight’s house convinced her that such an endeavour was useless—at least while he was still living in it. The logical conclusion, therefore, was to remove him from London. If he was suspicious of her, as she suspected he was, she thought it likely that he would take his evidence with him.

The trick would be to provide him with an offer good enough that he would not turn it down. An offer from someone occupying a notable position in the ton. Knight aspired to be fully integrated into high society, and thus would not be able to resist an invitation from a leader of fashion.

What was more, that person had to be separate enough from her that Knight would not suspect her hand in it. Her first thought was Lord Sunderland, who since his marriage last summer had settled down a great deal from his rakish ways. But their names had been connected too many times, and she had even (once) taken him as a lover.

No, it would have to be someone different. One who would agree without asking too many questions. Annabelle, Sunderland’s wife, was now with child—it would be too much of an imposition to ask him.

George Comerford, on the other hand . . .

She had first met him as Henry’s particular friend, over a decade ago—and long before Knight had ever entered Polite Society. After Bolton died, they had rekindled

their friendship, but it was not commonly known. Moreover, George was known for his lavish and extravagant parties, and he was commonly thought to be a leader of fashion.

The final nail in his coffin, so to speak, was that his ancestral home was in Yorkshire, sufficiently far enough from London that Knight could not conveniently travel between the two.

With her plan in mind, she went to call on him, and was immediately ushered into the drawing room. George came to meet her, and pressed her hand in welcome.

“This is a lovely surprise,” he said, leading her to the sofa. “To what do I owe this pleasure? Have you come to ask for my advice about Henry?”

“Henry?” She blinked, displeased. He had been distressingly on her mind after their chance encounter, although she still could not fully understand his motives. He’d had nine years to contend with any guilt he might feel; the fact that he was choosing to do so now suggested he had more on his mind than mere redemption.

Then again, she knew his devotion to what he considered his duty. Perhaps he viewed helping her as his duty, although if that were the case, she despised the thought. She was not his to feel dutiful towards.

More than anything, she disliked him being so much in her thoughts.

“I see I was mistaken,” George said, a dent in his cheek from where she suspected he was biting it to keep from laughing. “Very well. Have out with it.”

“I have a favour to ask.”

“I won’t ask you to marry me,” he said sternly. “No matter how handsome you think I

am.”

She paused partway through removing her gloves and smacked him across the arm with one. “Be serious.”

“Very well. I’m serious as the grave. What’s this favour?”

“I would like you to host a house party and invite Mr Vincent Knight.”

The laughter in his eyes was replaced by confusion. “Knight?”

“Yes. And if possible, I would like the house party to be more than a week.”

For a long moment, he was silent, and she could almost feel the way he turned her request over in his head, debating her reasons, its merits, whether it was within his power to grant.

“Why?”

“Is it not enough that I’ve asked you to?”

“Not in the slightest,” he said crushingly. “Why would I put myself out?”

She smiled despite herself. “You are the son of a rich viscount, a man of thirty, still unwed, with an ill father and a title to inherit. It is within your interests to promote a match, and what better way than to invite all the candidates to your home?”

“Perhaps this has escaped your notice,” Comerford said, “but Knight is not aspiring to my hand.”

“No. That would be my favour.”

“And why,” he said, elbows on his knees as he observed her, “do you want a man on the edge of the ton to be invited to what I assure you will be a legendary party?”

She considered for a moment, weighing her desire to keep her secrets close to her chest against the need for an ally. Henry had already vowed to help her, for better or worse, and George was his closest friend. If they hadn’t already discussed her situation, no doubt they would soon.

“Very well,” she said, making her decision. “But what I tell you is not to leave this room.”

“Naturally.”

“Knight is blackmailing me.” She watched as shock and anger bloomed across his expression. “The details are not important, but he has some proof, which I would like to tempt him to bring with him. If he believes me to be remaining in London, that should be incentive enough.”

“But, I gather, you will not be remaining in London?”

“No. But my entrance will be an unpleasant surprise, no doubt,” she said. “Once there, I’ll search his rooms and relieve him of any evidence he has brought.”

George narrowed his eyes. “That sounds dangerous.”

“Perhaps. But I doubt he would dare do anything to me.”

“He’s already blackmailing you,” he pointed out. “A man desperate enough to do that is perfectly capable of doing more.”

“Then I shall be careful,” she said impatiently.

“I won’t let you put yourself in danger, Louisa.” He pinned her with a sharp gaze, his usually playful expression all seriousness. “If that’s your goal, I won’t have a hand in it.”

“What will it take for you to agree?”

“Take Henry with you.”

Shock flooded her system; her heart gave an unpleasant lurch. “Excuse me?”

“If anyone is going to be capable of protecting you, it’ll be him. And I must invite him. It would be strange if I did not.”

“I won’t marry him.” She held up a warning finger. “If that’s your plan, you can abandon it now. If he wants to marry for a fortune, he’s welcome to Miss Winton’s.”

“And I’m certain if he had any intention of marrying you, he would ask,” George said dryly. “Those are my terms.”

“If I agree to your inviting Henry, you’ll agree?”

“And so long as you don’t attempt anything dangerous on your own.”

“But you’ll do this for me?” she pressed. “Host the house party and invite him?”

“God help me,” he said, and extended a hand. “Let us hope neither of us regret it.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Worthington Hall, Comerford's estate and his father's seat, was in Yorkshire, and Louisa set off in style with Caroline—another potential ally, if occasion demanded. Louisa was not in the habit of offering her secrets fully, but she knew if she confessed the whole to Caroline, she at least would find it uproariously funny and not think the worse of her.

There was a lot to be said for friendships like that.

“Do you know,” Caroline said conversationally, “this is the first house party I've attended since my husband's death, the Lord dispose of his soul.”

“The first in eight years?”

“I'm practically a recluse, darling.”

That wasn't true, but it was true that Caroline hadn't been so lucky as to inherit her husband's fortune; a distant relative had swooped in to claim it, and in addition to being a little tinged by scandal, she was frequently strapped for funds. “Well, you may thank me, if you like,” Louisa said.

“Will it be scandalous, do you suppose?”

“By your standards? Unlikely. Half the ladies invited are unmarried.”

“Oh, that means nothing. I remember when I was an unmarried lady.” Caroline glanced out of the windows at the countryside slowly folding by, grey after a dreary winter. “What of the gentlemen? Who else is invited besides Mr Comerford and your

Lord Eynsham?”

“He is not my anything,” Louisa said, and levelled a finger at Caroline. “And you leave George Comerford alone. He’s looking for a wife.”

“As it happens, I made an exceedingly good wife.”

“A young wife.”

“Oh, you’re no fun.” Caroline pouted. “What of your young man? Still as sober and strict as ever?”

She thought of the way he had pressed her against the wall, breath hot against her skin. The way he’d had some ludicrous intention of confronting Knight in his own home.

The way he had blushed in the tavern.

Her own reaction had been that of a girl unused to intimacy, at once alarmed and compelled. In that moment, she had wanted to kiss him again, to see if he would kiss her back. Wanted to be his undoing, the reason he forgot his morals, the reason he yielded his iron control.

It was a dangerous urge, toeing that line between love and hate with such precision that she hardly knew which side she fell on.

“I imagine he is much as he once was,” she said, reminding herself that he had been a man who’d abandoned her when she had needed him the most. Whatever his reasons, however noble, the end result had been the same. She would be a fool to trust him again, no matter what he claimed his intentions were.

Worthington Hall finally came into view after two full days of travelling, the afternoon sun bathing the pale walls in gold.

“Well, if you take my advice, you’ll get him out of your system or forget about him for good,” Caroline said as they came to a stop before the front door. A footman hurried out to greet them. “It’s unseemly to be pining over a man for this long, darling.”

Knowing it would be fruitless to explain she was not pining over him, she maintained a dignified silence until they were escorted inside the house. Then, as they made their way to the drawing room, she said, “I hope you fall in love one day, Caro.”

Her friend shuddered. “Heaven forbid. What a frightful fate.”

George was the first to see them, leaving the group he had been entertaining and coming to greet them at the doorway. Most if not all of the guests had arrived already, and were gathered in picturesque groups around the large room. In the end, the invitation list numbered an equal amount of ladies and gentlemen.

“Lady Bolton,” George said, mindful of his audience. He lifted her gloved hand to his mouth, and over his shoulder, she saw Knight, finally, his veneer of charm worn away to reveal the malevolence that lay underneath. His grey eyes burned with anger.

Magnificent. He truly had been taken off-guard by her arrival.

“George,” she said affectionately. “Thank you for the last-minute invitation.”

He turned his attention to Caroline, whose smile was secretive and flirtatious in equal measure. Evidently their meeting in the park had gone well, because his eyes lingered on her pretty mouth and then dropped lower to her generous bosom.

Well. They would be occupied for quite some time.

George tore his attention away from Caroline long enough to say, “Henry is here somewhere. Don’t go wandering anywhere without him.” The emphasis on wandering told her that he was referring to Knight’s chambers.

“Fear not,” she said, seeing an acquaintance at the other end of the room and lifting her hand in greeting. “I won’t do anything stupid. Enjoy yourself, you two. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.”

“Oh,” Caroline said in a low purr, “we absolutely shall.”

Henry had often been called cold by his fellow soldiers. Untouched, so they said, by the bloodshed and the death. When faced with adversity, cool calm swallowed his panic and cleared his senses. It was only afterwards that he felt the effects, and never to the degree that he was found vomiting in a ditch. He endured, because that was the only way to survive and keep his men alive. For it, he was called cruel, and he had not minded. If he had ice in his chest instead of a heart, all the better to lead his men with. To fulfil his duty with.

But like all men, he had an Achilles’ heel. A source of weakness.

Louisa laughed lightly from across the room, the centre of a large group the way the earth circled the sun—and just as bright.

An odd burning ache suffused him. This was the first time he had heard that sound in nine years, and it transported him to a different time—an easier, better one, when he had felt as though he could look forward to the future with something other than white-knuckled determination.

According to George, she had accepted his help, reluctantly, but nothing about their

interactions had implied that she welcomed his presence in her life again. If anything, she resented him. He understood it, but he never thought he would be able to look on that fact with equanimity.

Across the other side of the room, Knight watched her with a similar intensity. Of course, he pretended he wasn't, flirting easily with the two girls in front of him, but his attention was always on Louisa; if she shifted, he did too.

There was no chance that he would leave her alone now she had arrived, too. Perhaps he even suspected she had orchestrated the entire event—which, as he understood it, she had—in order to lure him away from his house.

Either way, Henry suspected that he would fight like a cornered rat if it came to it, and he resolved to never let it come to it. Not on his watch. If Knight dared try anything to Louisa, he would find himself with broken bones to contend with.

“My lord?” Miss Winton said at his side. He started, so lost in his observation of potential danger—Knight—that he had been unaware of her presence. A rueful smile tugged at his lips. At his request, George had invited her so he might have a chance to better get to know her, and he should be making the most of that.

“Miss Winton.” He bowed. “I apologise, I was lost in thought.”

“Not at all.” Her smile was the brisk, efficient thing she always brought out in front of him. “I’m happy to see you arrived safely.”

“Yes, indeed. Would you like to sit?” A party had recently vacated the seats by the fire, and he led the way to them, doing his best to ignore the low, smoky way Louisa chuckled now. This movement had brought them closer together, and he was starting to suspect it was a mistake.

In the streets of London at night, when the only recourse was to be together, their proximity made rational sense. He could justify it to himself, a need to be by her side to protect her. But in a room filled with people, she was in no danger. The only person in danger was himself—in danger of remembering too much of how it felt to be on the receiving end of that laughter.

Miss Winton sat opposite him and smoothed her skirts over her lap placidly. “Shall we skip the necessary small talk?” she asked in that disconcertingly blunt way of hers. “I know most ladies are more than happy to discuss the state of the roads and the weather and the latest fashions, but I confess it bores me.”

He raised his brows. “What would you rather talk about?”

“Mama believes that my being here will secure you as a husband.” Her voice was matter-of-fact. “If you’re amenable, once we return to London, you would be free to ask my father’s permission at any time, and he would be certain to grant it to you.”

“I see,” Henry said. Two weeks of courtship in these close quarters was evidently enough. He thought of Oliver and his father, their hopeless mismanagement of their finances. Just that morning, his mother had written to complain that their modiste would not make any more new gowns until the outstanding payments had been addressed. Theo and Nathaniel had stepped in, but this could not continue, and Henry’s stomach gave an angry twist at the thought. The sooner he married, the better. “That seems satisfactory,” he said.

She dipped her head in acknowledgement. “Good.”

“Does that arrangement work for you?”

“It will please my mother,” she said, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. “And I suppose that is my primary objective in marrying.”

Well, he had already known this would not be a joining of passion.

She tilted her head, watching him with that same unnerving stare as before. “How long have you been in love with her?” she asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, is it a secret?” She frowned. “If I know it’s a secret, I assure you I can keep it.”

He pinched his nose. “About whom are you referring?”

“Oh!” She looked surprised, as though this ought to have been obvious. “Lady Bolton, of course.”

“Of course?”

“You were looking at her as though you wanted to sweep her up and carry her out of the room,” Miss Winton said. “But perhaps I misread the signs. I do that sometimes, you know. Misread signs and think people mean something they don’t.” She lapsed back into silence as he stared at her, attempting to marshal his thoughts into some sort of order. The attack had come out of nowhere, and to think that she had observed him for a handful of minutes and come to that conclusion was mortifying.

“Miss Winton,” he began, then stopped, unsure how to continue.

She gave him the most gentle smile she had bestowed on him yet. “It’s quite all right if you are. I won’t be offended.”

“That’s not the—” He was not sure how the conversation had come to this. “I was not . . .” Confound it all. “I’m not in love with anyone, Miss Winton.”

“No? Well then.” She seemed a little surprised, but not overly shocked either way. “If we are to be married, I would like us to be frank with one another.”

Henry had the feeling someone had dunked his head in ice water. “About whether I am in love with someone else?”

“It seems quite unavoidable at some point or other, seeing as you won’t be in love with me,” she said practically. “I suspected either your feelings were already accounted for, or they would be at some point in the future. After all, how can one contrive to only love the person they will marry when there are so many others? The chances of that seem singularly low.”

“I see,” Henry said, hardly knowing what he was saying at all. “And you? Are your affections engaged elsewhere?”

“I am not capable of the tenderer feelings.” She said the words bluntly, without affectation. “And I have no wish for them. I understand this is unusual, but no matter how I try, I simply cannot persuade myself to want it.”

“Ah,” he said, and glanced across to where Knight was still watching Louisa. And Louisa, face wreathed in smiles, seemed utterly oblivious to either of their existences. “Is it likely that in the future . . .” He cleared his throat, looking back at Miss Winton. “That you might, in the future, discover that you are fond of . . . affection?”

“I think it unlikely,” she said, with no trace of embarrassment. “Although I do hope we will be good friends.”

This was precisely the kind of marriage he had been searching for. A wife whose heart would not be broken by his lack of interest in her. An arrangement that was based on mutual convenience and respect.

At some point, he would be grateful that the process had been so easy.

“If I may be frank,” he said, “the situation between Lady Bolton and me is not as you assume it to be.”

“Oh?”

“We are not—there is no affection between us.”

Venetia’s grey eyes were shrewd as they rested on him. “Is that so?”

“She hates me,” he explained. “The situation is untenable.”

“So I had presumed, given your intention to marry me.”

“Therefore there is no further reason to discuss it—it does not pertain to us or our future.”

Her face was alive with interest, the most animated he had ever seen it. “Does she know? Of your feelings for her?”

“There’s nothing to know,” he said, and caught sight of Knight moving across the room towards Louisa. “Excuse me.” He rose from the chair and strode across the room, just catching Miss Winton’s murmured “Of course there is not” as he reached Louisa at the same time as Mr Knight.

THE PAST

September 1804

Louisa watched as Worthington Hall came into view, its imposing golden front illuminated by the autumn sun. Beside her in the carriage, her mother fussed and tittered at the sight of the grand house. The invitation had not been a surprise, especially to Louisa who had done her best to secure it, but naturally, her mother had thought of one thing and one thing only.

Marriage.

As far as her mother was concerned, and to Louisa's disgust, this was merely another opportunity to secure a husband.

"You must be on your best behaviour," Mrs Picard said, smoothing down her skirts for the umpteenth time. "Do you hear me? No talking of your painting. And if a gentleman singles you out, for heaven's sake encourage them."

With no interest in marrying, Louisa had thus far made a habit of flirting only with gentlemen she perceived to be disinterested in marrying her. It was a useful exercise in how to flirt, which she viewed as being of the utmost importance.

Marriage was less so, and precisely for the reasons her mother had outlined.

No talking of your painting.

Thank heavens Henry would be attending. There was a gentleman who spoke to her as an equal, as though her love of painting was not so much unusual as fascinating. She had, tragically, concluded that he would not kiss her, but she found pleasure in conversation. He'd told her about his home in Kent, at his father's seat, and his friendship with the duke's son at the neighbouring estate. In return, she had told him about her childhood and the landscapes that had first inspired her love of art.

"Are you listening to me, Louisa?" her mother demanded.

Her father sighed. "Leave her alone, Margaret. She's only a girl."

"She's eighteen, Harold. When I was her age, we were married."

Louisa toyed with the buttons on her gloves. Why her mother wanted her to engage in the same miserable life choices her parents had made, she didn't know. They had married each other for entirely the wrong reasons: her mother had married him for his wealth and position, and her father had been bewitched by her pretty face. When her mother's beauty had faded and her father had demonstrated all the many ways he disliked being fashionable, there was nothing left but resentment.

"Louisa," her mother snapped. "Take that mulish expression off your face. You know why we are here, and it is not so you can scowl in a corner or conspire to escape the opportunities I have provided for you."

Louisa resisted rolling her eyes with difficulty. If there was one thing she had learnt from eighteen years in her mother's company, it was that it was best to choose the battles she fought. This was not worth the inevitable casualties.

"Margaret," her father said now, wearied patience in his voice. "Leave her be. She will hardly flourish if you deprive her of light and water."

Her mother's mouth twisted viciously. "She is not a plant."

"And yet she may flower just the same if you but gave her an opportunity."

"I give her ample opportunity. If you encouraged her to be a lady instead of indulging her love of oils, she may actually find herself a husband."

"Is my marriage the only virtue you believe me to be capable of?" Louisa demanded.

"What else is there?" her mother asked dismissively. "Consider what you might do for this family if you but put your mind to it. Think of the match you might attract if you used your charms to good effect rather than flirtations."

"Now, Margaret," her father said. "If I recall correctly, you were not averse to a little flirtation in your time, either."

"I did not marry a title," her mother said pointedly, and they lapsed into silence like collapsing earth. Louisa felt as though she might suffocate in it, and the moment they arrived, she escaped into the east drawing room.

Many of the guests had already assembled here, and she took the tableau in at a glance. Most ladies were gathered together, talking, their mothers keeping a watchful eye on them. The gentlemen were in a similar group. Some played cards with the young ladies—it looked like a particularly boisterous game of loo. A few gentlemen, evidently bored with the proceedings, appeared to be reading. And in the corner, two young gentlemen played a game of chess.

They happened to be sitting below the window, and a shaft of early autumn sunshine fell upon them, gilding them and casting them into focus. Henry Beaumont, Viscount Eynsham, and his friend Mr Comerford, son of Viscount Worthington. The two young men appeared entirely captivated by their game and mindless to the chatter

that arose around them.

Louisa felt the breath rush from her lungs even as her mother came to her elbow. “Not that boy,” she said sharply, taking Louisa’s arm and steering her bodily away from the vision in sunlit gold. “I know you have developed a particular liking for him to spite me, but it will not be worth the pain of it, I assure you.”

“I have not developed a taste for any gentleman to spite you, Mama.”

Her mother’s brown eyes, sharp from a lifetime of shrewishness, fixed on her. “You are my daughter, so I will pay you the compliment of not assuming you are stupid. All I ask is you do the same in return.”

Louisa smiled impishly. “I have not developed a taste for any gentleman only to spite you,” she corrected, and her mother’s lips thinned.

Over my dead body,” she said. “And believe me when I say I have no intention of dying just yet.”

Although Henry had known Louisa would be attending—Comerford had persuaded his father to invite the family—it transpired there was a difference between knowing and seeing her enter the room. It was as though her presence sucked the oxygen from the room.

Comerford moved his bishop. “Say the word and I’ll separate her from the pack.”

Henry shook his head. “Her mother doesn’t approve.”

“And? She’s truly lovely—a diamond in a room of quartz.”

“How poetic of you,” Henry said, taking a pawn with his rook.

“Poetic is hardly out of the ordinary for me.” Comerford raised his arms over his head and stretched languidly. “Besides, I was feeling dramatic.”

“That certainly isn’t out of the ordinary.”

Comerford gave him a dry look and took his rook. “Let’s return to the subject of a certain young lady.”

“There’s no point.”

“A harmless flirtation never hurt anyone.”

If that was all it was, then perhaps he would be tempted to agree, but even now, Henry knew there was nothing ‘harmless’ about Louisa. She had infiltrated his thoughts and his peace of mind; she was a temptation he hardly knew how he was going to resist.

Two weeks in Bath of fighting his attraction to her, pretending in public he felt nothing when all he wanted was to see her laugh, had worn him down. The strength of his feelings had taken him utterly by surprise, but underneath this need to secure her happiness were other, entirely more sordid emotions.

It was a good thing she had abandoned her quest of convincing him to kiss her, or he would have inevitably given in.

The thought made his lips pinch.

“You’re looking disagreeable again,” Comerford commented.

“An association with her would be fruitless.” Henry moved his queen. “Check.”

Comerford moved a knight to protect his king. “How so?”

Henry scowled and moved his queen one square to the left. “Do you need a list of reasons? Her mother is eager for her to marry anyone but me—I’m too young and too poor to offer her any meaningful prospect.”

“And the lady?” Comerford took Henry’s remaining bishop with his own. “What are her inclinations?”

“From what I can tell, she has no inclination to marry at all, or at least not soon.” Henry took Comerford’s bishop with a pawn. “And even if she had some inclination towards me, we would still face all the aforementioned issues.”

Comerford shrugged and placed his queen diagonally to Henry’s king. “Men have gone to war for less,” he said. “Checkmate.”

Across the room, Louisa tipped her head back and laughed throatily. Unable to help himself, Henry glanced at her and for a heated moment, their eyes met. Seeing her surrounded by young gentlemen was like swallowing a shard of glass and feeling it lodge in his navel.

He had known, of course, that she was a flirt and popular with other gentlemen, but as he had so recently discovered, there was a difference between knowing and seeing.

If her goal was to be kissed before she found her husband, this would be the perfect place to do it, and no doubt she knew that.

He knocked over his king. “Well played,” he said shortly. “I surrender.”

“Yes,” Comerford said, raising his brows as he glanced at Louisa. “So I can see.”

Henry ignored him as he strode from the room.

He made his way to the gallery, not entirely sure where he was going until he arrived in the long room framed by paintings and polished suits of armour. Comerford had invited him to Worthington several times since they had begun Cambridge together, but he had spent very little time in this room. If he wanted exercise, he did not content himself with pacing along these uneven floorboards. There was an entire estate that stretched out in all directions around them.

Today, however, he felt hot and itchy, as though his skin was too small for everything it contained, pressing too tightly until he wanted to free himself from it. He ran both hands through his hair and wondered what Miss Louisa Picard had done to him to turn him mad like this.

The door opened and without turning around, he knew it was her. Somehow, even when they had met in the Upper Rooms at the Bath Assemblies, he had memorised the light way she walked and the way she smelled, like soap and perfume that reminded him of the lavender bushes in his mother's gardens.

When he turned, she was looking up at one of the paintings—a particularly ugly rendition of a surly man in a large ruff.

He had not intended to speak, but as he approached her, he found himself saying, "It is a great relief to me that we are no longer obliged to wear those things."

For a moment longer, she didn't turn, and he was plagued with all the details he wished he could purge from his mind: a freckle on the slip of bare shoulder that was visible, the soft curls at the back of her neck, the audacious way her chin tilted when he spoke.

"Lord Eynsham," she said, and finally turned, looking up at him. "Anyone would

think you were avoiding me.”

“If I am, it seems I’m doing a spectacularly bad job of it.”

“That is because I am not to be trifled with and has nothing to do with your noble intentions,” she assured him, the corner of her mouth curling. “In fact, I took the way you left as an invitation to follow.”

Her lips were spectacularly red. He was having a hard time looking away. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Was that an insult, Lord Eynsham?”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“Is that so?” She pressed closer, and he stepped back to maintain what little space was between them. “There,” she said, gesturing at the way he moved. “Is that not an insult?”

“What if someone were to walk in?”

“Ah.” That infernal smile curved her lips again. “Now I understand. You’re afraid of me.”

A little, perhaps, but he was more afraid of himself and the way he ached to touch her, to know what her lips felt like against his. The need to know every part of her.

“Afraid?” he asked instead, raising his brows. “No, Louisa. I am not afraid.”

“But you dislike being alone with me,” she mused. “What if I agreed to marry you?”

The words shocked him so fully, he had nothing to say in response. Her face was utterly solemn, gazing up at him as though she had not just turned his world upside down.

“Marry me ?” He shook his head, rolling his shoulders to dislodge the thought from where it clung to the inside of his head like a burr. “That would be a terrible idea.”

“You are very rude, Lord Eynsham.”

He smiled, unable to help himself. “You were the one who told me you had no wish to marry.”

“If I recall correctly, I told you I have no wish to marry a gentleman disinclined to allow me to paint,” she said, walking past him to the window. “And you did not recoil from me in horror when I confessed I painted with oils.”

“It strikes me your standards are appallingly low.”

She gave a bewitching giggle. “Or abominably high. Most gentlemen, you know, would be unaffected by my desire for a lover to kiss me and most shocked by my painting with oils.”

The less he thought about her desire to be kissed, the better. “That hardly means I would make for a good husband. And how would your mother react to our being engaged?”

“Oh, it would be a secret engagement.” She glanced at him, eyes sparkling with delight and mischief and everything he had come to crave and fear in equal measure. “Think how delightful it would be.”

He rather wished he could stop thinking about it. “Absolutely not.”

“Why, does it offend your delicate sensibilities?” She turned, the sunlight framing her as she looked him full in the face. Her smile was infectious, and he pinned his own mouth together so he wouldn’t be tempted to return it. “Or am I not the kind of wife you were hoping for?”

Even just a few months ago, he had dreamt of a dutiful, proper, sensible wife who would uphold his family’s honour and do everything expected of her. Louisa was wild, she was spontaneous, her thoughts and intentions and desired lifestyle bordered on scandalous. She was decidedly not the type of lady he had ever intended to marry.

Yet, when he envisaged matrimony, he could not imagine himself with anyone else, and he wasn’t entirely sure what had changed but the arrival of her .

“Louisa,” he said as gently as he could. “How can you possibly know you want to marry me?”

Her expression took on a mulish cast. “Why should I not?”

“Because I am not certain I will have anything to inherit!” He spat the words, his voice unintentionally harsh, and immediately regretted saying anything. Sympathy softened the stubbornness on her face, and she reached out a hand, sliding it down his arm until her fingers meshed with his.

He ought to push her away and tell her that this was all very improper. They were alone together and she was touching him, her fingers cool and soft. Everything about her was so soft, and he wanted her so badly he could barely breathe.

“I have nothing to offer a wife, Louisa,” he said eventually, hating the pleading note in his voice.

Because no matter how little he wanted to admit it, he wanted to make her his. An

entirely primal, savage desire that he had kept chained up in his chest.

“Henry,” she said, and the sound of his name on her lips sent another bolt of desire through him. “Our parents . . . they might have brought us into the world, but that does not mean we should feel as though their inadequacies are a reflection of our own.” She stepped closer, looking as though she was tempted to pull him into an embrace.

He should not have wanted her to. He was not supposed to want her; she was a complication in a life he needed to be orderly and under his control. She was an escaped firework, a burst of light and joy in his cold, dreary existence.

If she left, she would take the colour with her.

“Dance with me,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

She held up their joint hands. “Dance with me, Lord Eynsham.”

He looked from her hand to her eyes. They were a deeper colour now, a brown that reminded him of soft bark, of a boyhood half spent in the woods to avoid going back home. All he could think about were the perfect proportions of her face, and the realisation that her family would never be satisfied with him, the penniless son of an earl.

“There’s no music,” he said.

“We have no need for music.” She tugged him away from the window and into the middle of the room. There, she curtsied. As if trapped in a dream, he bowed, and her lips moved as she counted. He caught every number as though she were whispering a

secret, and when she moved, he found himself following her lead. Close, then away, their hands clasping, then falling. The country dances had never felt so intimate, and there was nothing as natural as their movements, feet scuffing against the rolling floorboards as they danced underneath the watchful gaze of Comerford's ancestors.

There was no way he could ever go back to how he had been. Even his vow, made in frustration and anger at his father's blatant disrespect and his mother's misery, felt far away. A fog clouded his vision until all he could see was her.

Men have gone to war for less.

For the first time, he thought he could understand why.

PRESENT DAY

March 1815

Louisa should not have been surprised to see Henry arrive at her side like a smartly dressed, disturbingly handsome guard dog the moment Knight showed any interest in her. It was just like Henry to ignore her until the moment she least wanted him.

If Knight was going to make any threats against her, she would rather he did it here than wait for a time they were both alone. That was when she feared he might take revenge, or enact some kind of retribution. In the middle of a drawing room, she was safe.

Henry, it transpired, was unaware of that.

She tamped down on the thrill that his proximity brought her, smothering it until she could convince herself it no longer existed. Instead, she gave him a cool smile, and glanced across at Mr Knight. “Gentlemen,” she said smoothly.

Mr Knight glanced up at Henry and the sneer that lurked just under his smile rose to the fore. “Lady Bolton,” he said. “I see you have not come undefended.”

She held up a hand to prevent Henry from speaking, and his lips pressed tight with the effort of keeping quiet. To her relief, however, he maintained his menacing silence. Heavens, but he really was good at brooding. She suspected it was the severity of his cheekbones—of all his face, softened only by a sinfully soft mouth.

“Mr Knight,” she said, doing her best to pretend that Henry didn’t exist. Unfortunately, the very magnetism of his presence prevented her from doing that. “What a surprise to see you here.”

His eyes narrowed very slightly, though the smile was still on his lips. She had never come across a man so adept at hiding his true feelings behind an expression of bland geniality. If she had not been looking at his eyes, relentlessly cold, she might never have noticed. “Is it, Lady Bolton?”

“Why, yes. What else would it be?”

“Planned by yours truly, of course.” He gave her a small bow as if acknowledging a hand well played. “Are you close with Comerford?”

“That,” Henry said pleasantly, “would be me.”

No, Louisa had been wrong: Knight was not the only gentleman she knew who could hide murder behind a smile. Henry was doing it too, the threat so subtle in his voice that it could have almost passed for warm.

“This doesn’t have to be unpleasant,” she interjected, placing a hand on Henry’s arm in quiet warning. His gaze flicked down to the contact, but he said nothing. “Unless you would like to revoke your claim on my money, Mr Knight, now you see how well connected I am.”

His sneer became rather more fully formed. “Was that your intention? Yes, I know you have no doubt won the hearts of half the gentlemen here, but that is not going to be enough for me to change my mind. As for him”—his gaze flicked to Henry—“I suspect he could benefit from your fortune just as much as me.”

Henry tensed under her fingers, and she tightened them. Not here and not now. That

was Knight's intention, to make them forget themselves and cause a scene. But she would not fall for it, and she certainly would not let Henry make a fool of herself.

"Yes, indeed," Knight said, glancing at the contact. "Put your dog on a leash. I admire the control you have over him."

To her surprise, Henry smiled, showing a few too many white teeth for the expression to be anything other than mildly dangerous. Another thrill ran down Louisa's spine. She had changed, a product of the things she'd had to do to survive, but so had he, and although naturally she still despised him, she could admit that the changes sat well on him.

"You were not a member of the ton the last time I was in London," Henry said. "Newcomers are not often accepted, and easily removed if they are not to taste. You may have a hold over Lady Bolton, but you have none over me. I am the Viscount Eynsham and my father is the Earl of Shrewsbury. Pit yourself against me and see who will win."

"Don't worry," Knight said with deliberate slowness. "I fully intend to."

At the first opportunity, Louisa dragged Henry through Worthington Hall. They were both familiar with the house and their host, and she had no compulsion in leaving them behind. Henry was quiet as she led him through a side door and out onto a lawn.

The sun was misty overhead, small clouds floating past on a soft breeze, and there was still enough of a chill to the air that she wrapped her arms around herself as she made her way towards the small lavender maze. Soon, the purple buds would bloom and the garden would be awash with bees, but winter still held its grip on the countryside, and only the occasional daffodil dared defy it.

It would be a beautiful scene to paint. She had, albeit reluctantly, left her paints at

home, but she had brought her sketchpad. At some point during the proceedings, she would have to come here to sketch. For now, however, she led him through to the maze where they would be concealed from the house.

His eyes lit with wry amusement as he took in their surroundings, so like the first time they had met.

And yet so very different.

“Are you cold?” he asked, and shrugged out of his coat, placing it over her shoulders. She was cold, but the spontaneity of the action, along with the burst of his scent that accompanied the wool, left her momentarily speechless.

She ought to give it back. Instead, she tugged it closer and glared up at him. “When I said I would accept your help, I did not mean I needed you to defend me at every possible moment.”

“Would you have preferred George?” he asked. “He would have joined you if I had not.”

“George—” She was not entirely sure where she had contrived to find such officious and interfering friends.

“From what I understand, he doesn’t know the whole,” Henry continued as though she hadn’t spoken. “I thought I would spare you from the inevitable explanations. Besides, he seemed comfortably ensconced with your friend.”

“Caroline.”

“Quite.”

“Do you disapprove?” she challenged.

“Of Caroline?”

“And George.”

“What business is it of mine?”

“I hardly know, but you have no compunction about involving yourself in my business.” She scowled, disliking the slight feeling of gratification that unfurled in her stomach.

“You are determined to dive headlong into danger. All I’m trying to do is protect you from yourself.” For the first time, he seemed frustrated.

“Do you expect me to thank you?”

“I would not be so deluded,” he muttered.

She pushed away from the hedge at her back and advanced on him until there was nowhere for him to go. A spark lit in his eyes that felt as though it travelled down her spine. “I asked one thing of you nine years ago, and I would never dream of asking anything of you again.”

His chest rose on a single breath, looking down at her as though he was almost afraid of her proximity. The rush of power the thought brought with it was intoxicating.

“I’m not doing this so you’ll thank me,” he said, eyes boring into hers with such ferocity, she half feared he could read her thoughts from the top of her head.

Then again, if he did so, he would probably be scandalised.

“You’re certain?” She lowered her voice and placed her hand on his arm the way she had before, walking her fingers up to the curve of his bicep. “You’re not hoping that I’ll give you my favours?”

He caught her wrist and thrust it away from him, real anger crossing his face. “That would hardly mean what it once did, Louisa.”

“Ah, so you’re jealous. Were you hoping I’d wait for you?”

He shook his head, jaw tight, eyes hooded. “This conversation is over. If you have any intention of going through Knight’s room, let me know and I’ll accompany you.”

“You have no obligation to.”

The winter blue of his eyes had darkened to navy as they travelled across her face. “Perhaps not to you,” he said, “but I have that obligation towards myself.”

“Does it relieve your guilt?” The bitterness in her voice shocked her, and his brows caught together, the anger in his face briefly shattered by agony.

He should not look at her like that.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed, and she did her best not to look at it. No matter what passed between them now, no matter what want still lingered in the space that separated them, the past would always sit there too. A drop of ink in otherwise clear water.

Some hurts were too great to overcome.

But when he looked at her like that, as though he were not indifferent after all, she wished their future could hold something different.

Her breath caught as he came closer, taking her hands in his. "I'm not doing this for your forgiveness," he said, his thumbs skimming across her knuckles. Somehow, despite the fact she had taken men to her bed and bid them farewell the next morning, this felt shockingly intimate. Skin against skin. His fingers, rough and calloused, curling around hers. The ember of desire that she had carried nine years or more shifted, burst into flame. "I know I don't deserve it. I'm doing this because no man should be able to take advantage of someone in a vulnerable position and threaten them without consequence. And because this is the last thing I can do for you."

"Before your marriage?" she whispered.

"Yes." His voice was grim. He was still holding her hands. "If I had accepted you that day, Bolton would never have married you. I carry the weight of that."

Something shifted inside her, an acknowledgement of his regret, the depth of it, the power it held over him.

She had suffered. But perhaps, she thought, she might not have been the only one.

The thought was fleeting, and she pushed it aside, not wanting to give way to it. Everything was easier if she could believe the worst, if she could not acknowledge that he had done his best for her all those years ago.

"But you did not marry me," she said quietly.

"No."

She freed her hands from his and stepped back, giving them much-needed space. After everything, knowing he was to marry someone else should not have been a sting, but she no longer understood her emotions when it came to Henry Beaumont. "I hope you are happy with Miss Winton," she said, and did her best to mean it as she

left him in a maze for the second time in her life.

This time, however, there was no breathless anticipation. He was not an unknown, nothing but a name to place him; he was the man who had ruined her more thoroughly than Bolton ever could, and she could not risk letting him close enough to do it again.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

For two days, Louisa contrived not to be alone with Henry or Knight. She spoke with George, discovering the location of Knight's room, and did her best to allay suspicions by throwing herself into the party games, arranging walks through the expansive gardens, and generally proving herself to be an exemplary guest.

On the morning of the third day, however, she was not so lucky. She arose early, unable to sleep, and when she descended the stairs, she discovered that the breakfast table was already laid and someone was at it, hidden behind a large newspaper.

It was barely sunrise; she had not expected to see another person for hours yet. "Oh," she said in surprise, and the newspaper lowered, revealing Henry's handsome face. Of course. She had never had such opportunity to study his habits as she'd had here, and if she were paying attention, she would have noticed that he was never present to eat breakfast when she was.

At the time, she had been thankful for it, but now she saw it was because he broke his fast several hours earlier than the other guests.

A frown marred his brow. "Louisa." He rose, putting the newspaper to one side. "Would you like me to leave?"

"No." She hesitated in the doorway. "Would you like me to go?"

"Of course not." With a wave of his hand, he gestured for a footman to lay her a place at the table beside him. "I am accustomed to rising early," he explained as she crossed the room to take the seat. "Old army habits die hard."

“Even in polite company?”

“Especially in polite company. This is a rare moment of peace in a house full of people.” He poured himself some tea and when she nodded, also poured her a cup. His voice was measured and polite, no hint of anything he felt underneath it. And no mention of the last time they had met.

Perhaps it was better that they did not speak of it.

She preferred it when he was angry or hurt her. This polite gentleman, always seeing to her comfort, was confusing.

“Are you enjoying the party thus far?” he asked.

“Yes. George is an excellent host.”

Henry’s smile did not touch his eyes. “Yes, he is.”

“Fear not.” She sipped her tea. “I have no intention of marrying him.”

“I’m glad of it,” he said, the smile widening a little. “I think you would eat him alive.”

“How unflattering a sketch of my character,” she said dryly.

He chuckled, and she did her best to hate the sound. “Or of his.”

“That would make you a very disloyal friend.”

“I like to think honesty is not the same as disloyalty,” he said, offering her a plate of eggs. “George has many excellent qualities, but patience is not one of them. That has

no bearing on our friendship.”

She had witnessed George’s lack of patience for herself, and although he was an extremely obliging friend, she had already long ago come to the conclusion they would not suit. Aside from anything else, George was looking for a wife with the intention of providing his line with heirs. She would not be the right lady for that role.

That was, if she had ever intended to marry again.

Which, notably, she did not.

“Is that to say that you think you would better suit me?” she asked. After all, she now had a fortune. All his prior reluctance had no further grounds.

“You certainly thought so once.” He looked at her, eyes dark and hungry, a sense of that half-starved denial she had sensed before. It made her feel a little unsteady, as though instead of sitting, she was floating. Untethered. A boat with no anchor.

“Once,” she said. “That was before you refused to marry me. And left for war.”

A muscle flexed in his jaw as he glanced down at his hands, one of which was clutching a knife. He relaxed his fingers. “I bought a commission because I could not bear to see him parading you around Town.”

“For nine years?”

“I was somewhat occupied in fighting a war.”

She raised a brow. “You could very easily not have been.”

He nodded in acknowledgement. “Very well, it was cowardly of me. Anything else

you would like me to confess, or would you like some jam?”

She blinked, disarmed by his easy acceptance of blame. “You admit it?”

“And I apologise for it. For—well, you know for what else.”

“For refusing to run away with me?”

“For refusing to ruin you beyond all redemption,” he said, and although she didn’t want to admit it, she had to concede the point. Their only hope would have been if Henry had hidden her away until he could procure a special license, something she was now understanding was not so easy as she had once thought it. That, or they would have needed to wait until her birthday passed, but she was wise enough now to know her mother would not have given up so easily.

As a girl, Henry’s refusal to marry her had been a sign of his lack of love and respect. Now, she was coming to understand, it represented the opposite.

“You must know that nine years ago, I thought—” he began, his voice urgent, just as the door opened. Another gentleman entered and Henry broke off, biting back whatever he had been about to say. The moment passed like smoke, in her mouth and nose and lungs, but nowhere to be seen. “Enjoy your breakfast,” he said, inclining his head to her. “If Comerford should ask where I am, tell him I have gone for a walk. Promise me you will not approach Knight until I return.”

She wanted to tell him that she had never aspired towards his help.

She wanted to tell him a great many things.

Instead, she merely nodded, feeling as though he had carved out a portion of her heart and was carrying it away with him now. Silently, she cursed the other gentleman who

bid her a merry good morning, commented on how early it was, and speculated what George would have in store for them today. Her smiles were mechanical in response.

You must know that nine years ago, I thought —

There was nothing he could say to change the past, and their future courses were set. He was to marry Miss Winton and she was going to live out her days as a merry widow, unindebted to another man. Just as she had promised herself when Bolton died. The only thing left for her to do was remind herself of all the reasons not to fall back in love with Henry Beaumont.

By mid-morning, Henry had still not returned, and Louisa was playing the pianoforte in the music room when Knight approached, coming to stand by the side of the piano.

“You are an excellent player,” he commented as she paused between pieces. She glanced up at him, surprised to find his eyes were somewhat reddened, as though he had been awake for many hours of the night.

“Thank you,” she said. “It helps to practise.”

They were far from the only people in the room; two ladies were reclining on the window seats with books in their lap. Another lady was rifling through a pile of music, flicking past handwritten songs to books of Mozart. Louisa began to play again, confident he would not try anything too egregious in full sight of company. After all, she had watched him spend the past two days establishing himself to be a valued member of the party. Those who had at first viewed him with suspicion had warmed to him, and although he would not win any prizes as the most eligible bachelor around, it was clear that his presence was acceptable.

He leaned in, elbows on the lid, as though he was merely engaging her in conversation about her playing.

“I find it odd that you have made no attempts to sell any of Bolton’s properties or procure me the money I have asked for,” he said, and she glanced up to find him watching her, almost gaunt. “Did you think I would have neglected to watch your bank? Drummonds, is it not?”

“These things take time.”

“I find myself growing impatient.” He raised his voice slightly to be heard above the music. “Several of the dowagers here have some doubts about the suitability of Lady Augustus—your dear Caroline—in these exalted circles. Imagine what they would say if they knew what you had painted. It goes against every feminine delicacy.”

“And blackmail goes against every gentlemanly instinct,” she told him sweetly, offering him a saccharine smile. “No doubt they would be fascinated to know that the very man who aspires to be among their ranks has resorted to such base tactics.”

“To reveal me would be to reveal yourself.” His nostrils flared and he looked away. “And there are more important things than my mere aspirations. Reveal me if you wish, but it changes nothing.”

She took another look at him, this time lingering on the very slight air of dishevelment that surrounded him. This was not the same man who had confronted her and Henry the day of her arrival. Something had happened to discompose him.

Debts, perhaps? Thus far she had found very little information about his background or even his debts, but if he was providing for a parent who was unable to pay their dues, then maybe this demand made sense.

“Have the debtors come calling?” she asked.

His brows flew up. “Pardon?”

“Well, I presume something has occurred to make you seek me out in this way.”

“Have you forgotten what’s at stake?” His eyes turned cold, dampening the other emotions in them. One may have been close to panic. “A word from me, and you will be shunned. How will George Comerford react to knowing your transgressions?”

George would probably take it in stride, but publicly siding with her if her paintings were publicised would tarnish his reputation, too. A reputation he had spent years establishing.

“If you say anything now, no one will believe you,” she said, and raised her brows. “Unless you brought your proof with you. Is that the case? A fitting place for a grand reveal, don’t you think?”

If she was correct, he showed no sign of it, merely pushing back from the piano. “This is your last chance to assure me of your cooperation, Lady Bolton.”

She stopped playing altogether, though her fingers still rested on the keys. If she refused and he had the evidence with him as she hoped—or at least, as she suspected—then perhaps he would stage a reveal after all. Ruin her reputation out of revenge, and cast the final blow when they were all in London.

But that, she was certain, was not what he had planned; he had not expected to find her here.

If he needed the money desperately enough, he would merely put the pressure on her.

“I will move slowly,” he said now. “Targeting your friends first. Mr Comerford, our delightful host, will be the first to learn of your indiscretions. Then your other friends.”

“And if I assure you of my cooperation?”

“Then you have until the end of the week to deliver the first five thousand,” he said. “And if you have given me nothing when we return to London, I will meet with Prinny and tell him the whole.”

Five thousand by the end of the week. It could be done—in the scheme of things it was not such a large number, and she could withdraw it easily enough—but she balked at the principle of the thing. Paying her blackmailer—it would not do.

“You said until the end of the summer,” she said, shutting the lid of the pianoforte with more force than strictly necessary.

“Did I?” There was no flicker of sympathy in Knight’s eyes. If ever he had harboured misgivings, they were well and truly gone now. “Then I have changed my mind. Don’t be late, Lady Bolton. I do not make idle threats.”

No, she suspected he did not.

Then again, neither did she.

“You don’t say!” Caroline sat straight up from where she had been sprawled across the sofa in Louisa’s bedroom. Candied nuts spilt onto the floor. “Even the filthy ones?”

Louisa levelled her friend a quelling stare. “Yes, even the filthy ones.”

Caroline cackled. “Oh, my husband would have been shocked to his core to know a lady painted those. Prinny has a collection, you know.”

“I’m aware,” Louisa said dryly. “That’s half the reason this is such a disaster. And

why Knight's threatening to meet with Prinny so soon is forcing my hand."

"What are you going to do? Pay him?"

"That entirely depends on what I find in his room," Louisa said, pacing the floor. "I've sent my men to search through Knight's house while we're certain he's away, but if he is still employing guards, there's a chance they won't succeed. My thought was that he would suspect me of acting against him while he was away and so would take the evidence with him, but if I can't search his room and find it, then I may have to pay him just to keep quiet." She folded her arms across her chest. "The paintings are the biggest problem. Bolton's letter could be forged, Hyatt is still in Italy to the best of my knowledge, but the paintings prove all."

"Do you truly think he would have brought them with him?" Caroline asked, popping a nut into her mouth.

"Perhaps. I hardly know. I expected him to not let them out of his sight—it's his guarantee that I will pay."

"I always knew you had a secret," Caroline said, watching her. "And I knew it would come to light in the end."

"I need an ally."

"Well of course you need one, darling. This is war." Caroline tucked her legs under herself as she considered. Her blonde curls were ever-so-slightly dishevelled, giving her the appearance of having just walked out from a liaison, but although the effect ought to have been sordid, it was charming. "What do you need? All I have is at your disposal. Which," she added with a wink, "is very little more than you see before you. But I am more than free to offer advice."

Louisa regarded her friend. “What would you suggest?”

“Either you extract his evidence from him or find a way to undermine his leverage. What do you know of him?”

“As yet, very little.” Louisa sighed. “He covered his tracks well—whatever his background, I can’t use it against him if I don’t know what it is.”

Caroline nodded sombrely as she considered. “In my experience, there is only one way to extract information.”

“Let me guess,” Louisa said wryly. “Flirtation?”

“Seduction. A naked man is a vulnerable one.”

“Do all your solutions involve seduction?”

“We are women,” Caroline said. “We have limited powers in this world, and it is our responsibility to know how to use them to our best advantage.”

“Is that so,” Louisa said. Part of her wished Henry could be privy to this conversation; she hoped he would be shocked. She hoped he would be jealous .
“Then what, pray, are my powers?”

“As though you aren’t aware of your uncommon beauty.” Caroline scoffed, and returned her attention to the nuts. “And, because you are fussy about which men you bring to bed, you have the advantage of being unobtainable. Men rarely find anything so valuable as that which they cannot have.”

“Then why do you have so many gentlemen queueing to get a glimpse of your bedchamber?”

“Because, my dear, I am old enough to not give much consideration to reputation, and young enough that my assets have not wholly sagged.”

“A charming sentiment.”

“I presume you told me for a purpose?” Caroline asked. “What do you need from me? Would you like me to search his room?”

“No, no, I can do that.” With Henry’s help. In fact, she was surprised he hadn’t done it for her already, and relieved that he had not acted against her, stripping her of the autonomy she had already lost so much of. “But I have no faith that he will have left the evidence in his bedchamber.”

Understanding flared in Caroline’s eyes. “And you would like me to ascertain if he has any papers on him?”

“He won’t be carrying the paintings, but there’s a chance he may have the letters on his person.”

“How very scandalous.” She crunched on another nut as she thought. “Very well, darling, but only because those paintings were deliciously shocking, and I am so difficult to shock in my dotage.”

“If five-and-thirty were a dotage, most of our acquaintance have one foot in the grave.”

“You deprive me of my sense of the dramatic.” Caroline ate another candied nut. “What will you do if you find something?”

“Destroy it,” she said immediately. “If it is merely his word against mine, I have nothing to worry about.”

“Very well,” Caroline said. “But be careful, darling. I would truly hate to see you hurt.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Louisa resolved to act after dinner. George had planned the reenactment of a play he had penned himself, and it was something that not only could Louisa stand to miss, but that Knight would feel obliged to take part in.

Ideally, once he realised that she was missing, he would have no immediate opportunity to follow her. And if he knew that she had searched his room after the event, what did it matter? So long as she had the evidence.

She really hoped there would be something to find. If not, she was at a loss. Having had no news from London, although she accepted she had not been gone long, this was the only avenue she had open to her.

As she passed Henry on the way to the dining room, she pressed in close, ignoring the way her heart fluttered at the proximity. They were here to do a job, nothing more.

“Follow me later,” she murmured, giving him a look that she hoped conveyed its significance.

“Wherever you go,” he replied in a low voice. His hand brushed hers in what might have been a show of solidarity, but that merely made her nerves fire in helpless anticipation. She gave a brusque nod and gave George and Caroline—who were conveniently together, as they had been for the past few days—a similar warning.

“Be careful,” George said before she left. “I mean it. I can’t protect you if he decides to act against you.”

“I’ll have Henry,” she said simply, and his brow cleared.

“Then you’ll be all right,” he said with such confidence that her stomach twisted. It seemed everyone was certain that Henry could—and would—protect her. Whatever their past. But despite herself, all she could think about was the one time he had failed her.

George took the opportunity to stride to the front of the room and take command of the evening’s entertainment. The drawing room was packed, every sofa and cushion and armchair filled, a few young ladies squashed on footstools in front of their mothers; several gentlemen were standing. In the crush, it was easy for Louisa to slip away unnoticed. The house was quiet as she moved to the back stairs, used less frequently by guests.

There was the sound of footsteps behind her, and when she glanced over her shoulder, it was to see Henry’s tall figure, his face unusually grim.

“I doubt we’ll have long,” he said as he caught her up.

“Did Knight see us leave?”

“If he didn’t, he’ll notice you’re gone soon enough. He’s been watching you near constantly since you arrived.”

She had yet to tell him about the confrontation she’d had with Knight by the pianoforte, and she filled him in now, with quick, terse words as they navigated to the second floor of the west wing where the gentlemen’s rooms were situated.

“So something has happened,” Henry mused.

“I believe so. He’s ready to play his hand too early.”

“Then it must be significant pressure. From what I’ve observed, he’s not a foolish

man.”

“No.” Louisa paused outside his bedchamber door. “He’s not. Will you keep watch?”

Henry’s eyes scanned her face before he nodded. “I’ll be in the corridor. Go.”

She needed no other encouragement, pushing the door open and hurrying into the room. Like every other room in the house, it was neatly furnished, comfortable without being extravagant. Knight was not given one of the best rooms, understandably, but given the shabbiness of his own house, this likely felt like luxury. The bed was a four-poster, there were a few books piled neatly on the bedside table, and a leather armchair—distinctly male—sat by the fire. There was a newspaper over the arm. A writing desk, beautifully inlaid, sat before the window, which looked out across the rolling countryside, now dimmed by dusk.

The writing desk seemed the most obvious place to look, and she crossed to it immediately. Evidently he had not anticipated her stealing into his room, and she flicked through the correspondence. Most seemed mundane, although she pocketed them anyway. Two stood out, however. One had been folded and refolded so many times, there was a dark crease through the middle of the page where the ink had smeared.

Arabella , the writer had signed.

The other was from Thomas Hyatt, expressing his intention of being in London by the end of the week.

None were from Bolton.

Not wanting to waste time, she tucked the letters under her arm and continued her search of the room, looking for any hint of a rolled painting. Under the bed, behind

the curtains, in the cushions of the armchair. She had just opened his closet when Henry's voice hissed her name from the hallway.

"Louisa. He's coming."

Henry hardly knew how he moved so fast. A relic from army days, he would have said, but not once had he been required to creep around like a spy. He had been a captain, leading his men. A figure of authority, not one of deception. And yet, when he heard the sound of footsteps, he entered Knight's room, took hold of Louisa's wrist, dragged her out and into his bedroom before his mind caught up with his body.

Beyond a hissed curse—she truly had a foul mouth, and he did his best to hate it—she posed no objection, and then she was pressed against his door, her chest against his, her eyes wide and green and almost fearless. They were both panting, the fear of discovery in both their veins. She clutched a pile of letters in her hands, and they were both aware that when Knight discovered she had been trespassing, he would raise hell.

A gleam of ironic amusement rose in her eyes, even as they both listened to the footsteps, quick and impatient, moving to Knight's room. He'd been right, although he hardly knew how he had known. An inner instinct he'd had little time to examine.

Louisa's chest rose and fell with each breath, and he was suddenly crushingly aware of her proximity. The temptation. She was mesmerising, just as much so now as she had been at twenty; perhaps even more so now, that cynicism having elevated her in a way.

"He is about to discover the letters missing," she breathed, her head tipping up to his.

"Did you find the paintings?"

She shook her head. “And none of the letters directly pertain to the evidence. Either he has the letters on his person, or they’re still in London after all.”

Her perfume rose around him, befuddling his senses. Jasmine. Vanilla. Her hair smelt divine, the delicate curls that fell around her face a provocation. No doubt she was unaware of all the multitude of ways she had tested him over the years. Now, even more so.

He ought to move back, but he could not bring himself to give her the space they both so desperately needed. Her eyes were still locked on his; there was a flush on her cheeks that travelled down her throat, and he had the dizzying urge to kiss it. To feel the skin with his own, to taste her blush.

In the past, he had been convinced there would only be a matter of time before she was his. No urgency, no sense of galloping time, of opportunities slipping through his fingers. He had believed that fortune favoured the patient.

Perhaps it did, but he was under no illusions that it favoured him.

A curse from beyond the door caught his attention, and he raised his head, listening intently. Underneath him, as silently as she could, Louisa turned, so her front was pressed to the door instead of her back, one delicate hand flattened against the wood. He spent a second too long looking at her hand and the shape of it before returning his attention to what was transpiring outside the door.

“I’ll kill her,” Knight was muttering. “Her bedchamber, perhaps. Or—” There was a pregnant pause, and Henry knew instinctively what was coming. Taking Louisa’s elbow, he hauled her across the room to the bed.

“Under it,” he hissed. “Now.”

Her eyes widened and her chest swelled as though she was going to argue, but there was a knock on the door and she did as requested, dropping to the floor. Henry barely gave her time to disappear before striding to the door and opening it, giving Knight his best aristocratic stare. Bored, entitled. Derisive.

“Yes?” he drawled.

For a second, Knight’s rage faltered into confusion. He glanced around the room, evidently confused by the lack of Louisa. The lack of any sign of a lady’s presence at all, in fact. As well there wouldn’t be.

“Where is she?” he barked.

Henry had not often had reason to play a bored gentleman, but he did his best to embody the role. “Excuse me?” he asked coldly.

“Lady Bolton. I know she’s in here somewhere.”

“Do you indeed.” He cast a glance around the room. “Odd. I don’t see her.”

“Why aren’t you downstairs with Mr Comerford playing his ridiculous game?”

Whatever Louisa had taken from his room had evidently made him panic, sharp-edged and frantic. Henry folded his arms. “Do I strike you as a man often given to acting in plays? Comerford is my friend, but that does not mean I’m obliged to take part in everything he does.”

Knight stepped forward, and for the first time, Henry sized the other man up. Years of fighting and marching with the British army had given him a good eye. Knight was not a boxer, most likely—or if he was, not a particularly good one. His stature was on the smaller side, his shoulders subtly padded to give the impression of breadth. The

days of wearing a sword with any regularity had long passed, but Henry was willing to bet the man wasn't a fencer and had little experience with a pistol.

If it came down to it, there wouldn't even be a fight.

"I know you have a fondness for her," Knight said, looking as though he was tempted to force himself into the room. Had he done that, Henry would have wasted no time shoving him away again. Perhaps that was not gentlemanly, but he felt half man, half animal, and it was taking all his restraint not to take his fists to this man's face.

"Lady Bolton?" Henry folded his arms as he leant against the doorjamb.

"Swooping in to defend her at every moment. Does she know you're in love with her?"

Henry heartily wished that Louisa, still under the bed, was rendered temporarily deaf. "I think you must be mistaken," he said coolly.

"Am I? I may not have been born in the same circles, my lord, but I recognise love when I see it." He smirked. "But man to man, I recommend looking elsewhere for a bride."

The more time passed in Knight's company, the more tempting it was to give way to violence. His expression stilled. "I never had any intention of marrying her."

"Forgive me, but I know that to be a lie." Knight's smile widened. "You intended to marry her at least once, did you not? When she was merely Miss Louisa Picard."

The words slammed into Henry's chest, brittle and ice-cold.

So, Knight truly had been doing his homework. Her past was not a secret by any

means, and neither was their connection. She had never gone to any pains to hide her affection, and his had been blatant. When she'd married another man, he had chosen to leave the country rather than face the utter destruction of his hopes.

"Ah, so I am right," Knight continued, his smile spreading but not reaching his eyes, which were grey and cold. He looked like a predator faced with a new meal, but there were shadows under his eyes, and an unusual gauntness to his face, as though the skin clung especially firmly to his bones. Just as Louisa had said, evidently something had occurred.

He folded his arms. "Not in the slightest."

"You did not marry her then, but now . . ." Knight tilted his head. "Now you hope to establish yourself in her affections just as you did before. Is it her fortune? Things are different from when you were children, are they not. She has prospects, and she could save your familial predicament."

"You should be very careful," Henry said, his voice low.

"This is the house of a gentleman and you, too, are a gentleman." Knight's lips twisted—not a smile or a smirk, but something in the direction of both. "You would do nothing to harm me."

"Is that what you truly believe?" Henry asked, raising his brow. "That you are safe from me? Because I ought to tell you that I am a soldier first, gentleman second. And if you endanger anyone I care about, I will have no compunction about acting against you in any way I see fit."

"You would not want to be banished from the country now," Knight said, his lip curling. "After all, what would your family do without you?"

If it weren't for Oliver, Henry could have said with all honesty that he would not have a problem living in another country. At least there he would not have to face the reality of encountering Louisa at every social gathering he attended; he would not have to ignore the tug he felt to be by her side.

"You forget," he said with a carelessness that would have made a rake proud, "that they have been without me for almost nine years. I imagine they could suffer some more."

To his credit, Knight's expression remained unchanged. "You wouldn't be so fast to defend her if you knew what she has done. And if you dare act against me, I will tell the world and she will be ruined."

Henry was silent. Threatening him meant nothing, but . . . Knight was wrong: Henry knew precisely what she had done. And thus he knew how thoroughly she would be expelled from Polite Society if the truth were known.

"If you see her," Knight said with enough emphasis that suggested he expected Henry to come into close contact with her imminently, "be so good as to tell her that if she does not give my letters back by the end of the day, I will write to the Prince Regent personally to inform him of what I know about her."

"It has nothing to do with me," Henry said, though there was hardly any point keeping up the pretence now.

"And you may also tell her that I was not so foolish as to leave my most prized possessions in my home or on my person ready to be discovered. She will have to try harder than that." He waved a hand as he left.

Henry closed the door and turned to find Louisa already dragging herself out from underneath the bed, her hair dishevelled and the letters still clutched in her hands. Her

face was pale, her eyes large and serious as they landed on him, and he felt as though the air had been summarily sucked from the room.

Given Knight's anger, it would be unwise to send her back to her bedchamber alone, but if she remained any longer with him, he would do or say something rash.

She was not his, and by her own admission would never be, but he wanted. He wanted .

Does she know you're in love with her?

When he had returned to England from the war, he had been so certain that his love had died along with his hopes. That now all he felt for her was residual fondness and the desire he had never been able to repress. Now, with Knight's voice ringing in his ears, he wondered if he had ever conquered his affection, or if it had slumbered in his chest, waiting for her to reignite it all over again.

Cruel of fate to compel him to love her twice, and both times to be denied her.

She came closer, the dusty skirts of her dress brushing her legs. The sound of the fabric was the only sound in the silent room, not even the ticking of a clock to interrupt the tension.

"The letters," he said before she could mention what had passed between him and Knight. "Why does he want them so urgently?"

She glanced down at the letters in her hand as though she had forgotten they were there. "Ah yes," she said, and cleared her throat as she unfolded the most worn page and began to read. " My darling brother . Forgive me for not writing as often as I said I would. I never meant to make you worry, although I know you will have done, but the truth is, things are more difficult here than I ever could have imagined. In your

last letter, you described the house you wish to buy for us, and I cannot stop thinking about it. In my darkest moments, I think it is the only thing that keeps me going.

“I wish I could bring you good news, but I miss you terribly and it is so miserable here. I am frightfully hot, and I dare not leave the house, though there is little enough furniture. Mr Roberts—you remember I mentioned him in my last letter; he is in charge of reclaiming Anthony’s debts—is an odious man. Now there is nothing of mine left to sell, he is talking of marrying me off to his son and calling the debt complete. Papa is dead, and even if he were not, England is so very far away.

“You were right when you told me never to marry Anthony. I wish now I had listened to you.

“Please come for me soon, Vin. You said the end of the summer, but I’m afraid I do not have that long. I’m so scared.

“Your loving sister,

“Arabella.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Louisa stared at the letter, the paper along the fold feathered and the ink smudged. This was no doubt what Knight was so desperate she return to his possession. Not because it was evidence against her, but because it was evidence of his weakness.

He had a sister.

All the investigations she had commissioned had never come back with this information. It had been as though he had emerged from nowhere, nothing to his name but enough charm to compel her husband.

Henry caught her elbow as she stepped back, her knees soft as butter. Knight was cruel and cold in so many ways. The method he had gone about securing her money proved that, and he had evidently looked into her past as thoroughly as she had attempted to look into his—with significantly more success. Her past was an open book; she had always been a member of the ton , and many people of the ton had long memories.

Yet now she knew he had a sister, finally a memory tickled the walls of her mind. A bright young lady with laughing eyes and a brother who gave in to her every whim. Not members of the ton , but not so far below it that they could not aspire.

“A sister,” she murmured, regaining her balance. “He has a sister. That is why he wants the money.”

“For her alone?” Henry’s voice was scathing, his hand still at her elbow. “Unlikely. Think, Louisa. That amount of money is unlikely to be all destined for her.”

Perhaps not. But enough of it would be that it explained his sudden urgency, why she could not find any evidence of pressing debts.

She smoothed the paper, reading over the lines again. The girl's handwriting was poor, and there were some splotches that she attributed to tears. Arabella, a girl who had evidently married either because she was compelled, or because she had been seduced by money. Poor, foolish child. It was a wicked thing to be married to a man one could not respect, never mind love. And crueller still to hold a widow accountable for the sins of her husband.

"He must have received this while being here," she murmured, thinking through the timeline. "That would explain why he demanded a portion of the money early."

"It doesn't make what he's doing to you any less heinous."

She glanced up into his face for the first time since reading the letter. His eyes were dark and serious, fixed on hers in a way that made her stomach do something uncomfortably like flutter. "You need not be so concerned for my safety," she said lightly, discomposed by her reaction and the accusations Knight had levelled at Henry.

Does she know you love her?

Now you hope to establish yourself in her affections just as you did before. Is it her fortune? Things are different from when you were children, are they not.

Finally, Henry dropped her arm. "Must we go through this again? You know why."

She did, or at least, she knew his explanations, and they again made her chest tight.

"You have done all you came here to achieve," she said, tapping the letter against her

hand. “I haven’t retrieved the proof, but I have something almost as good.”

“Which is?”

“Leverage.”

He folded his arms, eyes narrowed. “What do you intend to do with this information?”

“Now I know he has a sister named Arabella, who married Anthony, and who is presumably living abroad. She writes that England is so very far away. Once I discover who she is and where she lives, I will have something over Knight in return. Arabella Knight. Perhaps I can search the newspapers for a marriage announcement.”

“You don’t know when she married,” Henry said, striding across the room impatiently, as though he could not bear to be in her vicinity a second longer. “And for all you know, hers was not the type of marriage to be announced in advance.”

Louisa closed her eyes, summoning that flash of familiarity. The bright eyes, the cheerful laugh. “No,” she said slowly. “Think, Henry. Knight has done nothing but aspire to be accepted as a member of the ton. His sister made a foolish marriage that took her somewhere far from home—that must be east to India or west to the West Indies, surely. Only a man intent on making his fortune—or who already has a fortune made there—would make such a journey with a young wife in tow. A lady like that would make a wedding announcement.”

Henry made an impatient gesture, facing her with a tight expression. “Then what? You discover her identity and where she’s living, which could take weeks. Time you do not have.”

“No,” she murmured, lost in thought again. “All I need to have are the relevant

details. Then I can use it against Knight. His sister's wellbeing in exchange for my reputation."

"You would do that? Threaten him with the fate of his sister for your gain?"

"Why?" she asked sarcastically. "Does it offend your delicate sensibilities? Your moral standards? Do I offend you, Henry? Would you like me to leave? Or would you prefer to lecture me?"

His mouth snapped shut, and his eyes gave a dangerous flash. "I'm not helping you in order to deliver a lecture at the end of it."

"No? Then why the judgement?" She tossed the letters on to the low sofa in front of the fire. "I thought you wanted Knight to pay for the things he has done."

"I do."

"Then why are you looking at me as though I have vowed to steal away your first-born?" At the mention of children, he flinched, but she ploughed on. "Am I not the girl you remember? Sweet and innocent?"

His gaze flickered across her face, from the tight slash of her brows to the hardness of her mouth. "No," he said after a moment. "You are no longer that girl."

"I am what I've been made to be. Or did you forget what Lord Bolton made me do?" She made a violent slashing movement with her hand. "Forged steel is stronger for the fire, and I will do anything to preserve my freedom."

"Then let me," he said, just as urgently. "Let me face Knight and be the one to threaten his sister's safety."

She paused, chest rising. She had never intended to hold this Arabella responsible for Knight's wrongs. The girl was not to blame for her brother's misplaced zeal, or the twistedness of his actions. But Henry was prepared to do just that, holding himself out as a sacrifice.

Anger flared inside her at the thought.

"Why?" she demanded, stalking forwards. "Why is it so imperative that you take this on for me? Are you trying to save me, Henry Beaumont? Because let me remind you that it's too late for that. I don't need a knight on a white steed."

He looked down at her, jaw flexing, his eyes black ink. "That isn't the reason."

"Then what? Are you trying to lure me into a marriage for my fortune?"

"Is that truly what you think?" The anger in his voice scraped something free inside her, and a shiver ran over her skin. This was what they had become: sparring partners. Young lovers to adversaries.

"We both know your family situation is unfortunate. Miss Winton's fortune is nothing to mine."

He gave a rough little laugh. "As though I would be so foolish as to think you would agree to marry me now."

"Then what? Why are you trying to shield me from every unpleasantness when we both know I am more than capable of resolving my own problems without your assistance?" She raised her chin. "I have done so for nine years."

"I know that, too," he said, and took her face in his hands, gentle despite the searing heat of his words. "For nine years, I have not been able to help you, and this is my

one chance to do so.”

He deserved no other chances. He had hurt her more than she had ever conceived anyone hurting her. More, even, than Bolton, though the source of the hurt was so very different. For so long, she had done her best to leave him in her past with the same indifference she had condemned Lord Bolton to time’s forgetfulness. She had done her best to forget—or perhaps deny—her ludicrous attraction to him.

Sternness ought not to be so appealing, especially when it was written across his face like pain.

“Until recently, I thought you indifferent to me,” she said, her voice wavering a fraction. That had been a solace, to think he felt nothing, that he would never have loved her anyway. A truth she craved and dreaded in equal measure.

“Indifferent?” His voice was incredulous, and he tipped her chin up to face him. How she had found herself in his arms, she hardly knew, but she couldn’t bring herself to move. “If I was indifferent, would I have spent these past years endeavouring to forget you? If I was indifferent, do you think I would have turned down every offer of intimacy?” His thumb scraped her bottom lip, and heat rose in her, a sudden, urgent flood. “I have not your nature. And even if I had—if I had not sworn myself to celibacy until my wedding night—how could I have entertained a lover when the only person I have wanted for eleven years is you, Louisa?”

Her heart clenched, and she wanted nothing more than to set fire to the chains of his restraint. Let him burn. Let them both burn.

His breath was coming too fast. “Tell me you hate me.”

There was no room for truth between them; she tilted her chin to his and gave herself to the inevitable. “I hate you,” she said, and he finally kissed her.

From the moment Henry had met Louisa, she had awakened something in him that could not be put to sleep. He had destroyed them both a thousand times over, but this felt like redemption. A chance to start anew.

As her mouth claimed his, every reason he had to keep his distance from her turned to ash.

THE PAST

September 1804

By the end of the week-long house party, Louisa had changed her mind. For the entirety of her first Season, she had resolved to marry no gentleman who would not support or encourage her painting.

After a week in Henry's company, she had resolved to marry none but him.

"Tell me more about your art," he said as they walked along the gravel path in the formal gardens. The afternoon was balmy, a burst of unexpected warmth sending most of the young people outside, and Louisa had conspired to escape their escort. "Why do you want to paint with oils?"

She looked up at him now, biting back her amusement. "Why, are you looking for excuses to find me shocking?"

His smile was warm and unguarded. "I don't find you shocking, Louisa."

"Now that, I am certain, is a lie. You were very shocked the first time we met."

"Surprised is not the same as shocked."

"I think you were positively scandalised that I was by myself."

"I think you're imagining things," he said, but there was a charming self-awareness to

his smile, and a hint of redness around his ears.

“If you are a prude, you can admit it to me, you know. I am an antidote to prudish behaviour.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. One cannot be prudish and bear my company.” She shot him a glance from the corner of her eyes. “Once, I went swimming in the lake in nothing but my chemise.”

He made a slight choking sound, and when he met her gaze, even for an instant, there was no denying the flash of heat in his eyes. “Were you caught?”

“No one but you and my maid knows of it,” she said, and was rewarded by a faint blush on his cheekbones. “Now, look at me and say you are not scandalised.”

He glanced at the ground. “That is not precisely the term I would use. What provoked you to swim in the lake in the first place? Were you bored?”

“I am never bored while on the run from propriety.”

That made him give a low, rough laugh. Sometimes she dreamt about that laugh, waking flushed and heated at the thought of it against her skin. “Are you bored now?” he asked.

“Not in the slightest,” she said, and tugged him off the main path. “I have an idea.”

“What is it?”

“Come with me and you’ll see.” She led him to the brick hothouse, glass inserted into the walls and sloping roof and the door ajar. Inside, perfumed heat washed over them,

and she laughed, giddy at the exotic beauty. A bold red flower dangled provocatively over the gravel walkway, and she trailed her fingers along its velvet petals. When she glanced at him, he was watching her with singular focus, as though debating if he should run.

“Why are we here?” he asked her, the caution in his tone helplessly endearing.

“Afraid I’ll attempt to seduce you?” she asked, trailing a finger down his chest.

His blue eyes held hers and his hand wrapped around her wrist, stilling her. “Sometimes,” he said hoarsely, the air between them heating and crackling, “I wonder if there is ever a world where I hold out against you.”

“I hope there is not.” She licked her lips, and his gaze dropped to her mouth for a heartbeat. “And if there is, I pray it is not this one.”

“Why did you bring me here, Louisa?”

There was a pressure in her chest, a sense that she dangled on the very edge of a precipice. This was the point of no return. “Because I love the flowers,” she said. “And because I love the way you look at me when you think there is no one else to see.”

He swallowed, and she was transfixed by the bobbing in his throat. They were close, so close, his hand still fastened around her wrist, her fingers still pressed against his waistcoat. She could almost deceive herself that she felt the pounding of his heart. “How do I look at you?”

“The way the sun gazes at the moon.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up, and a dimple pressed in his cheek, two points of

softness in a stern face she had come to adore. “Very pretty. I might almost have thought you’d read some of Comerford’s poetry.”

“You look at me as though you are starving,” she whispered. Her breath caught in her lungs; her heart hammered. “And I feel it too. The hunger.”

He closed his eyes and groaned. “Louisa—”

“Would you kiss me if I agreed to be your wife?”

His eyes flew open, blue gaze shocked. A line creased between his brows. “You’ve asked me this before.”

“Yes, and then you told me no because you can offer me nothing. But I have a question for you. If you were my husband and I was your wife, if we were married, would you allow me to paint?”

His fingers flexed on her wrist, as though the thought of their marriage was somehow unbearable. “How could I force my wife to relinquish something that brought her so much joy?”

“Then I have nothing to fear by marrying you, and nothing to gain by marrying another. Regardless of wealth.”

His thumb rubbed slowly on her pulse point, but although neither of them had moved—she had not thought either of them had moved—they were coming together. The trajectory of their orbit was inevitable: they would soon collide. She hoped stars would bloom in their wake. “What are you saying?”

“I think you know.”

A disbelieving laugh broke free. "You're asking me to marry you?"

"I'm requesting that you ask me." She tipped her head back to look fully into his face, her arm now trapped between their two bodies, her skirts brushing his legs. "Ask me to marry you, Henry."

"You know all the reasons I can't."

"I know you have not yet graduated from Cambridge. And I know my mother disapproves of you and would not consent to an engagement. But when I am one-and-twenty, I will be free to marry whomever I please."

The line between his brows deepened, and she wished she could reach up and smooth it away. "That's in three years' time, Louisa."

"I won't waver. Will you?"

"That isn't a consideration."

"Then ask me."

"And if you change your mind before you reach your majority?" he asked, which she privately thought was laughable. Evidently he was unaware of the way he moved through the world as though he merely had to command it to obey. At only twenty, his will was stronger than that of gentlemen twice his age.

"What must I do to assure you that my feelings will not change merely because they will be subjected to time's unlawful demands? Do you want me to tell you that I love you?"

He clamped his other hand over her mouth. "Don't."

“Why not?” she tried to ask, but her words were muffled. She flicked her tongue along his palm, tasting salty skin, and his eyes darkened. No longer the summer sky—they were dusk and dawn and stormy grey. His desire was a brand, and she offered her skin to its heat, craving it, savouring the knowledge that right now, as he looked down at her, he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

Slowly, he removed the hand from her mouth, and she licked her lips. “Give me one good reason why I should not tell you how I feel,” she said, her throat tight. “One reason that does not involve me being incapable of knowing my own mind.”

“Because,” he said, the edges of his words fraying, “if you were mine, I don’t think I could bear to lose you.”

“You don’t have to.” She placed her palm flat on his chest, feeling the thunderous pounding of his heart. “I’m yours, Henry. All you have to do is take me.”

He took a sharp breath, and she thought he might step back, putting distance between them. Instead, with a noise that was almost savage, he caught the back of her neck with his free hand and brought his mouth against hers.

The world suspended. His lips were warm and soft despite the roughness of the kiss, and after a second, they settled against hers as though they had found a home there. She had never been kissed before, and she knew he had not either, but it was as though this was an old, familiar dance; they knew the steps. His hand slid to her cheek, fingertips rubbing against the tender skin of her temples and her jaw, tilting her head slightly so her mouth could slide against his.

So this was what it was like to be kissed.

He made a low rumble in his chest, a desperate noise that kicked the need in her belly up a notch. This was not the rigid, stern, controlled Henry Beaumont that she had

come to know. The urgent movement of his mouth was a song, and she rose to meet its melody, arching her back so her chest pressed against his. She dug her hands into his hair, holding him against her. His hand slid down her shoulder, down her arm, and settled on her waist, hauling her closer, his fingers flexing. She could feel every press through the layers she wore.

If someone were to find them now, they would be ruined, but she couldn't bring herself to care. What did reputation matter when she had Henry Beaumont's hands on her? When, second by second, she was unravelling the self-control of the most disciplined person she knew?

A low, involuntary groan rose in his throat as she opened her mouth, inviting his tongue in. Perhaps she groaned, too. Need pounded through her veins in time with her heartbeat. His fingers scraped against her back as though he wished to bring her still closer, but didn't know how.

With a frustrated growl, he moved them both, easing her backwards until her shoulders collided with the wall. And then he was kissing her again, his body lining up with hers. His hips rocked, an involuntary thrust that had her gasping into his mouth. She was melted wax in his hands, soft and malleable. He could unmake her then reform her into something new, and so long as his mouth was on hers, she would let him. She would be whatever he needed her to be, so long as he would not stop kissing her.

He rocked into her again, something hard and firm pressing into her stomach, and this time he was the one to groan. Louisa wrapped her arms around his neck, wishing something could be done about the sensitive weight of her breasts and the liquid throb between her legs, knowing that Henry was the answer but not knowing how. She shifted against him, and his palm slid down her side to her thigh, adjusting her so—

A plant pot fell to the ground, shattering with a crack that cut through the haze of lust

that surrounded them. Henry jerked back from her, breath coming too fast, lips red and swollen, eyes wine-dark and just as drunk.

For a moment, they stared at one another. His hair was dishevelled, looking precisely as though she had been combing her hands through it, and there was a bulge in his breeches that drew her eyes, even though she was certain a proper young lady would not dare look.

“Louisa,” he said, and her gaze returned to his face. His expression was tortured. She touched her mouth, pressing the last of his kiss there like a stain.

“Do not apologise,” she said, feeling the vulnerability in her words as she said them. A silent plea she couldn’t articulate, but that she knew he could hear anyway. She could still feel the pressure of his hands on her and the urgency of his mouth. As though he had been dying and she was the cure, his last grasp on life, his only hope of redemption.

For another moment more, he stared at her with a desperation she understood. Then he shook his head, clearing it of its dazed expression, and the stern lines of his mouth softened into something tender. He brushed his fingers along her jaw. “I wouldn’t know how to go about regretting it,” he told her. “Though perhaps I should regret breaking the plant pot.”

She laughed, and standing on her tiptoes to kiss him again felt like the most natural thing in the world. He caught her about the waist, holding her against him, and the press of his lips was so sweet it made her heart ache.

“Will you marry me?” she asked when he pulled away. “For the sake of the broken plant pot?”

He shook his head, but she could see it was an effort not to smile. “I have very little

to offer you.”

“You have you. And this .” She looked down at him meaningfully. “I would hardly call that ‘very little’.”

The flush that suffused his cheeks made her want to kiss him all over again. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Marry me, I hope.”

“It may be some time before I’m in a position to support a wife.”

“I would marry you even if we had to steal away to Scotland,” she said. “Whether it takes three years or five.”

“No.” He looked at her with unwarranted seriousness. “If I am to risk your future by allowing you to marry me, then I cannot risk your reputation. If and when we marry, we will not invite scandal to our door. Promise me that.”

Her dear, upright, straitlaced Henry. How could she not love him? “Then we will wait,” she said. “Until I am one-and-twenty. But mark my words, Henry. I will have you one way or the other.”

PRESENT DAY

April 1815

So this was what he had been denying himself all these years.

Louisa's mouth opened under his, welcoming his tongue, and he gave himself to her wet heat. Desire kicked through his body, unnervingly potent. After so many years of denial, he had become an expert in frustrated lust; he had thought he knew all there was to know about wanting.

He had been mistaken.

It was almost embarrassing how quickly he hardened at the feel of her lips on his. The longer he kissed her, the longer he wondered why he had ever resisted for this long.

After their first kiss, when he had been terrifyingly close to pushing up her skirts and taking her against the wall, he had known in precise terms what he had been denying himself. But he had been certain, or as certain as a man could be, that she would become his wife.

Then, after that became an impossibility, he had denied himself out of mistaken pride. The very concept of those boundaries, however artificial, had been a relief. A crutch of sorts. His vows had become a demonstration of his control in a life that had been subject to so little of it.

In reality, his restraint had never truly been tested by another woman. Still, he had found relief in the iron rigidity of his vows, as though it was proof of his worth.

And yet some part of him had always known that he would break his vows for her. Not as some twisted form of gratitude, or repayment, but because she wanted this—wanted him—as heartily and unashamedly as he wanted her.

Nothing that felt so right could be wrong.

The nape of her neck was soft against his fingers as he placed his hand there, tilting her face up to his. She made a small noise in the back of her throat, a sound of appreciation that made him twitch helplessly.

Their kiss had not begun gently, but somehow it deepened further still, the urgency of her mouth matching his. Her teeth scraped his bottom lip, and he groaned. He had known how good they would feel together, but he had not known quite how well they would fit. Her curves against his body, her mouth against his, her hands exploring the breadth of his shoulders.

She took his hand and brought it to her breast. The soft weight of it, the hard nub of her nipple. As he swiped his thumb across it, she arched back into his touch. He did it again, and she gasped into his mouth.

Aware of his inexperience, he experimented with how she liked to be touched. Gently or more forcefully, stroking and cupping and squeezing. It was the purest form of heaven to have her in his arms like this; it was the greatest torment.

It was everything he had dreamt about so avidly these past nine years, torturing himself at night while during the day he pretended indifference.

What folly.

He was beyond pretence now. His hips bucked into her of their own accord, and she laughed, a breathy, desperate sound. They moved together, bodies tangled, his leg moving between hers, her hands on his shoulders, holding him to her as she licked his lips. There was still too much space between them, though they were pressed flush.

He had never experienced such hunger.

The back of his knees knocked against the bed and he sat on instinct. Immediately, she was on his lap, hitching her dress up around her legs and inching forward so her breasts pressed against his chest. The air left his body in a rush.

Here, like this, she seemed tiny in his arms. Fragile. So easily breakable—and had he not already broken her? He had not been born to softness, and although when they were young, she had coaxed it from him, he had spent the time apart coating those tenderer feelings in iron and steel. If he was not careful, he might break her again.

If he was not careful, she would shatter him like a brittle sword.

“Louisa,” he said, her name sweet on his tongue like honey.

“No talking.” Her arms wrapped around his neck and she pressed the apex of her thighs against his erection, rocking against him in a way that made his entire body tighten. Then her mouth was back on his and there was no space in his mind for anything but this.

Soft curves. Layers of clothing between them. Her hands skating across his shoulders and down, touching him with a surety that told him she was not unfamiliar with the male form. All things he had known, and that were in many ways a relief to him. Now he would not have to guide her with ignorance; she could lead the way and he would follow, he would gladly learn from her if only it would give her pleasure.

And the final piece of his heart, the part of himself he had saved, would be hers.

Her head lolled back as she broke the kiss, her face glazed with pleasure as she moved against him. Even through his breeches, he could feel the heat and dampness of her arousal. He throbbed, ached, the friction almost unbearable.

This alone would be enough to make him climax. Her tongue was hot and slick, and she was making tiny breathy moans into his mouth, and he was so ludicrously sensitive that it would take very little to bring him to the edge.

“Wait,” he said hoarsely, catching her hips and stilling her. “We should . . .”

Her lips ghosted along his jaw, and she pressed a kiss to the hollow of his ear. It was not a place he would ever have thought to touch, but the sensation sent a shudder through him. “Would you like me to stop?” she whispered.

Yes.

No .

He twitched helplessly against her. The answer was most definitely not—he was on the very edge of a precipice and if they went any further, there would be no turning back.

He wanted her.

But he had never been one to merely accept a night. The revelation that he still loved her had rocked him; this evidence of her desire for him had knocked him still further, and he was half out of his mind for her. He did not just want this once—he wanted everything.

“We should talk about this,” he said, but his hands were at her hips, and she was moving against him again. A needy, urgent noise escaped him.

“There’s nothing to say.”

“On the contrary.” He raised his hand to her breast, the nipple erect even through the layers of fabric. She was so lush and soft and here, and he had wanted her so badly for so long. “Louisa, I—”

“Do you want me?”

He groaned. “I think you know what I want.”

“Then let me.” She arched into his touch. “Not as a transaction, Henry, but as a gift. Because I want to, and so do you.” The rest of the words, unsaid, hung in the air.

Because I love you .

“This was always what I wanted,” she said, and kissed him again. His hands were at her waist, and he could have pushed her away, but he didn’t. Instead, he drew her closer. Closer, closer, until there was no space left between them. He buried his face in her neck and kissed the soft skin there, letting his teeth graze across her throat. She sighed, fingers digging into his hair. Their bodies moved in tandem, seeking friction, relief, their pleasure communicated in gasps and moans.

Eventually he stopped, leaning back so he could look at her. She bore every evidence of a liaison: reddened lips, bright eyes, flushed cheeks. Even her hair had become partially unpinned, although he had no recollection of doing that.

“We should slow down,” he said. His voice was not his own.

Her eyes were soft and green, a frown pinching at them, pushing aside some of the hazy desire. “Why? Have you changed your mind?”

It was too late for that now. “So I don’t embarrass myself,” he said. She tipped her head back and gave a low, throaty laugh. He pinched her hip. “Try not to look so pleased. You well know what you do to me.”

“I do not know,” she said, a seriousness entering her voice. She reached between them to stroke his aching cock through his breeches, her slender fingers curving around him. “This is my first opportunity to find out.”

He twitched against her caress and rested his forehead against hers. “Is that not evidence enough?”

“It is a start,” she acknowledged, and slid back, off his lap. She turned, offering him the laced back of her dress, her intent clear. If ever there was a moment to regain his self-control and stop this madness, this was it. But he didn’t hesitate a moment before unlacing her. They had gone too far, and he had committed too much.

The material slipped from her shoulders and pooled on the floor by her feet, and with that gone, she made quick work of her remaining layers. Chemise, stays, drawers, stockings. She wore no petticoats, to his relief.

Then she was naked before him, and nothing could have prepared him. Sunlight streamed in through the window, bathing her in warmth and light, highlighting the jewelled red tones in her hair and casting her eyes into deep pools of green.

His gaze travelled downwards, taking in every curve, every inch of skin. Her breasts were small enough that he fancied he could fit them perfectly in his palm, rounded and heavy with a dusky nipple. Below, there was the generous flare of her hips. Shapely thighs. And between them, the thatch of dark hair that drew all his attention.

Perhaps he had not been born with softness, but he knew something of loyalty and devotion, of worship. If she gave him the chance, he would show her how much he worshipped her.

“Well?” she asked, but there was a light in her eyes that told him she knew a fraction of what he was thinking.

“I could have endured a thousand years and never lived until this moment.”

“Ah,” she said, stepping closer, so her breasts brushed against his shirt. He had not known it would be so erotic, to have her naked body against his clothed one. “So you are a poet, after all.”

“That wasn’t poetry,” he said. “Merely truth.”

“Poetry is art,” she whispered, leaning closer until her mouth was on his once more. “And art is truth.”

Their next kiss was slow and deep. There was no more caution, no more uncertainty. Her lips demanded from him, and he yielded. It was the kind of kiss that could last forever, and in his more whimsical moments, he wondered if he could exist here for the rest of time. Let the world continue without him.

Let the world burn, so long as he could have her.

His hands found her waist. Soft, smooth skin. He was more animal than man in the way he touched her, possessive and needy, learning her lines, her curves, her edges. A woman’s body held so much softness, and he set about to make that familiar.

“What is your truth?” he asked, and looked down at her. “Honesty, Louisa.”

A smile quirked the corners of her mouth. “Is that what we are? Honest with one another?”

“There is nothing more honest than this.”

“Very well.” She walked past him to the bed and lay on her back there, legs splayed. It was the very picture of desire, branded into his being, and he knew he would not forget it as long as he lived. The erotic swell of her breasts, the dip of her stomach, the jut of her hipbones, the creamy softness of her thighs. And between her legs, a glimpse of pink.

He had never been so aroused; he cupped himself, squeezing hard enough to almost hurt, wishing he could ease the ache and never wanting this moment to end. With Louisa, he was nothing but a contradiction.

“I like the way you look at me,” she said, and when he glanced at her again, she smiled. “Honesty.”

“I like the way you look,” he rasped. “Teach me how to touch you.”

She beckoned with two fingers, and he stretched himself on the bed beside her, the urge to put his hands on her like fire in his blood. Taking his hand in hers, she placed it on her stomach. “Women are not the same as men,” she said. “We require something more to prepare us.” Her eyes remained on his as she guided his hand down, lower, to the soft hair between her legs, then lower still, to the slickness between. She tipped her head back on a soft gasp as he touched her.

“So sensitive,” he said in wonder.

“Yes. You made me that way.”

“I did?”

“Yes. I’m . . . ready because I’m already aroused.” She spoke with no shame, comfortable and confident with the reality of her body and what it meant. He loved that confidence, even as some part of him still wished they could have experienced this together.

She had offered it. He had been the one too foolish to accept.

“Is this good?” he asked.

She took his hand, guiding it to where she wanted him, and he did his best to copy her movements. Touching her brought its own pleasure; knowing that he was pleasing her pleased him, too. He was a man drowning, certain he would never come up for air again. Content in the knowledge that if he must be lost in someone, then at least it was her.

Eyes on him, she brought his other hand to her mouth and kissed his knuckles, then licked them lightly. He twitched, the friction from his trousers alone almost enough to undo him.

“These hands,” she said, lips moving against his skin. “I have thought a great deal about these hands.”

He slid a finger inside her and her back arched. “Do they pass muster?”

“They will . . . suffice.” The heaviness of her breathing belied her words, but before he could become too complacent in the pleasure he was offering her, she opened her mouth and sucked his index finger into its wet heat. There was tenderness there, too, the way she wrapped her slim fingers around his wrist, the way she held his gaze, open and unafraid, letting him into this most sacred part of her life.

She did not do it lightly, he knew.

“How I have wanted you,” he said, the words dark, possessing, and her eyes glazed. She squeezed around his finger, and the sharp stab of need was almost unbearable. He shifted, pressing his aching cock against the bed as her tongue flicked up the length of his finger, and the pressure at the base of his balls tightened. His groan was low and desperate.

“Henry,” she said, and reached for him, running her fingers along the bulge of his breeches before he could stay her hand. She traced the shape of him, and the friction was wonderful, unbearable, so impossibly good. Too much, too far, too close.

He wanted to be inside her. Needed it.

“Kiss me.” Her voice was breathy, a half gasp, a command he would have obeyed if his body had not betrayed him. His body locked, he strained to hold himself back, but to no avail: he tumbled over the edge he had been straddling for so long. White-hot pleasure licked down his spine, and he garbled something—a far cry from the control he had spent so many years mastering. Then again, she had always been the one to brush past the walls he had built; it was no surprise that she had taken over his body, too. Release was mindless, and he lost himself in the feel of her body against his as he spent himself.

His last fractured, foolish thought was that if he could just endeavour to keep her satisfied here with him, she might never leave.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Louisa had never known him to be so gentle.

This was, perhaps, her fault; she did not expect tenderness from her lovers. They were there to achieve a specific aim, and once it was over, there was no need for either of them to linger. There was no moment to hold on to, no emotion to address delicately.

She had been friends with them all, and had coached them on how to best pleasure her, just as she had learnt from them. Bodies were each different, and she had enjoyed the challenge and satisfaction of finding the correct key for each lock, and turning it in her own time.

Henry's blue eyes fluttered open, dazed and soft, and he leant forward, pressing a kiss against her jaw, his fingers regaining the rhythm they had maintained before his release. The hot ball of tension in her belly tightened. Having him not so much as question whether she wanted him to continue his ministrations was arousing in itself, and she bit her lip.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, but she shook her head.

"I liked it."

"Honesty?"

Her breath caught as he rubbed slow circles with his thumb. "Honesty," she said, and it was true. Watching him come apart, helpless in the face of his pleasure, so aroused by such simple things that he couldn't help himself, had been one of the most erotic

experiences of her life.

And she was the only woman who had done that for him. There was more than a little satisfaction there.

Her swell of desire at the thought brought her abruptly to the edge.

“Henry—” Her voice cracked. She took hold of his wrist, holding it there as heat overwhelmed her. The knot of tension erupted in waves, and she drowned under the force of it as he whispered praise into her damp skin. How beautiful she was, how much he wanted her, how he could never have dreamed of this.

The thud of his heartbeat was the last sound that followed her into oblivion.

Late afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows, painting gentle, swaying patterns onto the polished wood floorboards. Sleepy, feeling almost drugged with contentment, Louisa watched the play of dark against light. Dancing leaves. The image was pleasing, and for a few lazy moments, she thought of nothing.

Slowly, the happenings of the past few minutes—hours, perhaps, given the soft fingers of sleep that still clung to her mind—filtered back, and a tight feeling of dread infiltrated her sweet calm.

She had done the thing she had vowed never to: taken Henry as her lover.

His arm was still wrapped around her waist, holding her against him, and by the soft rise and fall of his chest, he had succumbed to the same slumber that had overtaken her. His breath was soft against her hair, and when she closed her eyes, all she could see was the heavy intensity of his gaze on her.

There was no occasion for the pride that rose in her chest at the way she had coaxed

pleasure from him. Perhaps she had been his first, but she would never be his last.

Nor did she want to be.

Although she had to admit there was something pleasing about waking in his arms. She had vowed never to marry again, but this was the closure they had never had.

A distressingly pleasant closure. The assurance that had they married, they would have found satisfaction in this, at least.

Well, it was done now; all she could do was learn to live with her choices, as she always had.

Henry was not to be hers. And time had proven it was for the best—he needed a wife who could provide him with heirs, and she was not the lady for the job. Nor would she, if she had him, allow him to produce heirs elsewhere.

Nor would he even contemplate it for a second. She knew him well enough for that.

Gingerly, she rolled, freeing herself from the heavy weight of his arm, and faced him. The orange tinge in the sunlight helped soften the stern lines of his face, giving him the appearance of long-lost youth.

This, here, was the man she had fallen in love with a decade ago.

A part of her still loved him. There was hardly any point denying it any more, at least to herself. A part of her loved him and a part of her hated him, and she could not reconcile the two. Young Louisa and present-day Louisa, the two sides of who she was and who she wanted to be, vied in her heart for dominance.

She would not allow either to win.

“Goodbye, Henry,” she murmured, rising to leave.

His eyelids fluttered, and with a stab of mortification she realised he had not been asleep as she had thought. His hand flashed out to wrap around her wrist and his eyes slitted open, narrowed from the light. Even after everything, he was the handsomest man she knew.

“Wait,” he said, thumb lazily moving across her wrist.

“For what, pray?”

“We had a truce.” His eyes finally opened fully, and he slid his hand from her wrist and along her palm, fingers linking. Although that same hand had recently been between her legs, this felt more intimate, even if she could not articulate precisely why.

“Did we?”

“Did we not?” he countered, and finally sat up. The sheets fell away from his chest, and she remembered he was still wearing his clothes while she was naked. But although his gaze travelled down her body, heating a little, he made no move to pull her closer. His thumb swiped across the side of her hand.

“They will miss us.”

“Comerford will make our excuses.”

“And what of Knight?” she asked, not drawing her hand away. She ought to end this now before she betrayed more of herself, but she had the feeling that once she left the room, there would be no coming back. And she wasn’t ready for that quite yet. “And the letters?”

His gaze shuttered a little at the reference to Knight's sister—the one she had sworn she would use to get her revenge. But all he said was, “Knight can go hang.”

“I could perhaps make him do so,” she said seriously. “But I won’t.”

“No?”

“If he is doing this over his sister . . . I can understand it.”

Henry's lip curled. “His methods are repugnant.”

“Yes,” she said, and gave in to the calling of her body, crawling back across the bed. He drew her into his arms, settling her on his chest, an arm around her back, playing idly with her hair.

“Are things truly so bad for you?” she asked.

“You mean are we on the brink of ruin? Yes.” His voice was wry. “My father knows no restraint and my brother is following in the same path.”

“Oliver?”

“Yes. I’ve tried remonstrating with him, but to no avail. He seems determined to kick up every lark at Oxford, and heaven forbid he study .”

She rested her chin on her hand as she looked into his face, at the unyielding lines of it even now. The air of youthful innocence had gone, replaced by something that looked a little jaded. She remembered how he had been as a young man, so responsible and dutiful even then. He knew what his father was and determined to steer clear of those temptations, even when it would prove difficult.

But his brother, evidently, did not have his disposition. It would be a rare man who did, she thought.

“Have you spoken to him as a man?” she asked. “Not as your brother, or one you’re responsible for.”

“I’ve spoken to him as honestly as I can.”

“I know there’s some age difference between you. He’s—how old?”

“Eighteen.”

“Yes,” she said, and at his tensing, ran a finger along the collar of his shirt. “A child, still. Younger than you were when we first met.”

“When I was his age—”

“Ah, but he is not you. Did you not say before that I do not have your disposition? Why should your brother? You may find it easy to abstain, but evidently he is conscious of the wishes of his peers. What young man is not?” She propped herself up more firmly, holding his gaze. “You cannot expect him to make the same sacrifices as you. But if you speak to him as a man, as an equal, expressing the reality of your situation, perhaps he will find his own way forward.”

He frowned, but a rueful smile twitched his lips. “It’s hard to consider him a man,” he admitted.

“I think it will be better for you both the moment you do so. Consider how he must feel, constantly belittled and lectured by his brother.”

“If my father—”

“But he does not,” she said gently. When they had first met, and he had first confessed in Bath what his relationship with his father was, she had wished she could have shared her own father with him. Kind-hearted, generous, understanding. A man that all men should aspire to be. But Henry had not had her father, and when her father had died, he had grieved with her, but he had never truly been able to understand the magnitude of her loss, because for him, to lose his parent would be as much relief as sorrow.

Henry’s fingers trailed down her hand to her elbow, as though he wanted to learn how every inch of skin felt against his fingertips. “Can I ask you something?” he said, voice very soft.

“Mm?”

“Are you painting again?”

The question took her by surprise—there was no way for him to have known that for months after Bolton’s death, she had stared at her canvases and felt sick, her throat closing and her stomach roiling. It had taken her years to be able to pick up a pencil and sketch again; still longer before she dared paint with oils. Even now, sometimes the smell made her think of what had been. But she would not let him control her, and this was the future she had always wanted for herself.

“I am,” she said after a beat. “Did you know I’d stopped?”

“I thought you might have done after Bolton forced you to—” He stopped, nostrils flaring. “But I know how much it matters to you, and I hoped very much that you had begun again.”

“Yes, I . . .” She closed her eyes, honesty compelling her to speak, but pride preventing her from seeing Henry’s face as she made her confession. “Before I met

you, all I wanted from my life was the freedom and independence to paint. I wanted to claim my portraits, to brave the scandal that a high-born lady painting in oils would bring to my door, and to leave my name behind in my art when I die.”

“I know.”

“Bolton hasn’t just threatened my reputation,” she said, her voice wavering for the first time. “That I could have lived with. But he has prevented me from ever claiming my paintings. I can never display them again—I will never be able to paint portraits without someone connecting me to Bolton’s work. If we were strangers with similar styles, perhaps . . . But I’m his wife. His widow. And even now he’s dead, he’s standing in the way of the future I always wanted.”

“Louisa,” Henry murmured, rolling and scooping her more firmly against him. Her face pressed against his shoulder, and for the first time in nine years, she allowed herself to cry in front of another person. Bolton did not deserve her tears or her grief—he deserved to be forgotten somewhere small and insignificant—but this was her future and her life, and he had ruined it. Even without Knight. She could paint, yes, but she would never be remembered through her art the way she had dreamed of as a girl.

Henry’s hand cupped the back of her head, and he held her as though she were a gift, something inexpressibly precious to him.

“It was the only thing I ever wanted,” she whispered against the skin of his neck. “And he took it from me.”

Henry leant back, a finger under her chin as he tilted her face to meet his. His eyes were dark, beautiful, the night sky after rain, and that was all the warning she had before he reached forward and kissed her. Sweetly, softly, her tears salty against his lips. The hand on her hip skimmed up her body to her jaw, and he cradled her. Most

of the men who had her naked in their beds were interested in nothing more than what she could offer them—understandable, given the transactional nature of their relationships. But she had missed this, the sense of being special and wanted for more than her soft skin and supple curves.

“You deserved so much better than you received,” he said, pressing kisses to her jaw, her cheek, her forehead, her temple, the tip of her nose. “Forgive me, Louisa.”

It was not wholly his fault.

She could not separate her fate from his rejection.

The conflicting emotions rang through her like a gong. She could not forgive him; she wanted him.

Desire was enough. Would be enough.

“Think of him no more,” she said, and licked his bottom lip. His breath caught. “Think only of me.”

“If you would like to—”

“No.” This, she was certain of. “No more talking.”

His nose nudged along her cheekbone, and he kissed the shell of her ear. “Very well,” he said, voice deeper and rougher now, lust darkening every last shade of him. “Last time, I did not conduct myself admirably. Allow me to acquit myself.”

“You need only take me,” she said in answer, and tugged his cravat free.

They moved as though they were in a dream, as if they could sense time’s

impatience. And yet, as his hands traced her skin once again, callouses scraping, there was a languidness to his movements.

This time, she undressed him. First came his shirt. Then his breeches. She rose, tossing her hair across her shoulder, and crossed the room to the bucket of water that had been left there. Wetting a cloth, she returned to the bed and washed him. His eyes were on her the whole time, watching with heavy-lidded heat, and when she was done, he waited as she lay back and held out her arms for him. Then, he came to her readily, his weight pressing her into the bed.

“We do not have to,” she said, but he silenced her with a kiss.

“I want to.”

“Good,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. He frowned down at her, though the force of holding back seemed to be causing him physical pain.

“Is there something I should do for you? To prepare you?”

Tenderness bloomed in her chest, a feeling that was so akin to love, she might have panicked had she not been feeling so loose and relaxed, so open. Half smiling, she shook her head. “Usually yes, but now—I’m ready for you. I want you.” Reaching a hand between their bodies, she guided him to her entrance. The tight throb of anticipation turned liquid as he pressed, and she opened underneath him.

His eyes fluttered shut, and he groaned, throat working. Louisa stared up at him, marking the play of pleasure across his face, the way his expression turned lax and soft. His body was delightfully hard against hers, the soft hair on his chest the perfect friction against her nipples. She arched her back into him, and he sank the remainder of the way inside her.

Fullness. A sense of completeness. The intensity of it was frightening, joyful, utterly overwhelming. She knew she should not be feeling this way, like a maiden helplessly in love with her seducer. Like an innocent capable of being hurt again.

His head dropped against her shoulder, and she tightened her arms, holding him close, her doubts aside.

“A moment,” he mumbled against her skin, and when she ran her hands along his back, she could feel how tightly wound he was. “I just need—”

“Shh.” She pressed her mouth against his shoulder, almost as dazed and overwhelmed as he was. “It’s all right.”

“I want to—” His teeth grazed her burning skin, and she nodded, understanding.

“It’s like that, sometimes,” she said, even though this hunger, this urge to consume, as though they could dig under each other’s skin to become one, was new for her as well. None of her previous lovers had ever made her feel as though something missing had slotted into place. A sense of rightness thrilled down to her bones, only deepening when he rocked inside her.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” he told her. “I used to dream about touching you when I was at war.” His eyes were glazed above her, and his other hand came to her hip, holding her open for him. She wanted to capture this moment and fold it within herself so she’d never lose it. His mouth was clumsy as it brushed hers, and they both laughed, breathless. “I used to touch myself to the thought of you,” he confessed, as though ashamed.

She closed her eyes, her own confession raw. “When I was with my husband, the only way to make it bearable was to imagine it was you instead.” Then, when he had forced his way inside her, it had felt like less of a violation. Sometimes, though rare,

she had even found her own pleasure from the thought.

His whole body shuddered, and his fingers laced through hers. “I don’t want it to end.”

There had rarely been a more erotic sight, she thought, than his bare back and buttocks in the candlelight. Art in its purest form—a fleeting moment she wished to commit to a canvas.

His hands found the space between their bodies, and although he was a novice, he was a quick learner, listening to her breathing and instructions, and adjusting his technique until she teetered on the edge. They were both there, both strung impossibly tight, both holding on as long as they could.

“Should I—” His words were choppy, and he allowed himself a wry, lopsided grin. Seriousness overcame him again far too quickly. “Should I—where should I . . .?”

Understanding his question, she shook her head. “Where you are.”

“I’m not a—” He huffed an impatient breath, barely moving inside her now. His fingers still circled, and she was so close that her thoughts were sluggish. “We should be careful,” he said.

Usually, she required her lovers to use French letters, or at the very least finish elsewhere, but her thoughts were scattered, her body pliant under his, and she could not separate what she wanted from what was sensible to have. “I won’t get with child,” she said. The closest she had ever come to the true confession: she couldn’t get with child.

He groaned, holding her hip still as she ground against him. She could almost feel the overbearing urgency of his need, but he held himself back. “Are you certain?”

She cupped his face in her hands. “Please.”

That was all it took; he shuddered, cursing, saying her name as though it might offer him salvation. Or perhaps as though he knew he was already cursed. Her heart clenched, her body dissolved into pleasure, and she lost herself in him all over again.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Louisa dressed quickly, not allowing herself to tarry as she found the articles of clothing from where they had been dropped to the floor.

Henry remained in the bed, watching her with hooded eyes. It was nearly time for dinner, which they would both be expected to attend, and she had no time to waste on affection. Already, she had stayed too long.

“That’s it, then?” he asked, rolling and standing. He was not ashamed of his nakedness, she could say that for him, although there was hardly any reason for him to be. His body was magnificent, not overly bulky but finely honed. It was a body accustomed to being used, and for a moment she wondered what it must be like to have returned to England where there was nothing for him to do but hang on Society’s whim.

Her gaze returned to his face, where he was still watching her. His expression was tight, restrained, as though he, too, was wary of showing her too much.

What a pair they were.

For a moment, she ached at the thought of what they had lost.

“Louisa,” he said. His throat worked. “Don’t leave like this.”

“We will be expected for dinner soon,” she said, casting a glance at the window, where the late afternoon sun was barely peeking over the trees. “And I must transcribe the letters and return them.”

He frowned as though he wanted to say something else, but settled for, “Let me return them.”

She huffed impatiently. “How many times must I tell you? I can handle myself.”

“If he finds you in his bedchamber, how will he react? And for you to come here unseen is more of a task than it is for me.” He came closer. “Allow me to do it. What will he do to me? I doubt he has a gun on his person, and if one of us were to be shot, I had rather it was me.”

Doing her best to ignore him, she wiggled into her chemise. This was more like the arrangements she was familiar with; they shared their pleasure and then one party left. The difference was the feeling in her chest, the temptation to stay and kiss him one last time. Make love to him one last time.

Perhaps he had done so willingly, but he had broken her vows for her. And she had deprived Miss Winton of a husband dedicated to waiting for their wedding night. No matter that such a man was a rarity for any lady; she had been the one to take that away.

Her nose stung.

Yet there was no other avenue for them. She had always been determined not to marry after Bolton, and Henry . . . for all she had always been drawn to him, no matter how many times he had touched her heart, there was still the matter of the hurt lying between them.

And her barrenness.

This was for the best.

“You have already helped me enough with Knight,” she said, keeping the emotion from her voice. “I need no more assistance.”

“Don’t be so stubborn, Louisa.” His voice was low and he caught her cheek as she emerged from her chemise, turning her face to his. “And don’t run from me. We should discuss this.”

“There’s nothing to discuss.”

He flinched. “You’re just going to walk out of here with the letters?”

“Yes,” she said, donning her stays next and keeping her face averted. “While, admittedly, there is more two can do in bed, I—”

“You know that’s not what I meant.” He spun her around so she was looking at him again, in all his naked glory.

“Put on a shirt,” she said.

“Marry me,” he said.

“I—” Mouth open, she gazed at him as though waiting for a sign this was all a joke in very bad taste. “That was what this was about?”

“This?”

“You allowed me to seduce you so I would feel obligated to marry you afterwards.” She took a step back from him, too confused to articulate herself properly. “I thought I made myself perfectly plain before this ever begun. I have no intention of marrying.”

“That was before,” he started, but she held up a hand.

“Did you truly think that it changes anything? Have you forgotten what I am?”

His gaze held hers steadily, but there was a flare of hurt there, too, as though he had genuinely imagined that this would have changed things for her. That all ills would have been resolved by a little bedsport. No doubt he believed he could pleasure her into forgiveness.

The hurt was blinding, crushing her lungs. That she could have been so deceived in him; that he had not taken her word at face value.

“My fortune,” she said, understanding coming to her in a lightning bolt. “Is this what this is about?”

His hand moved to the curve of her jaw again, fingers tight and possessive, his thumb on her chin, holding her in place. “I care for you,” he said.

“You cared for me before, if you recall.” She jerked free of his hand. “Tell me something, Henry. If I were poor, if I were as poor as the day I asked you to marry me, would you be asking this now?”

His jaw snapped shut, nostrils flaring. The silence before his next words told her all she needed to know, and she shook her head. As always, his duty towards his family was his primary concern. No doubt his ‘affection’ for her was a mere bonus in addition to her fortune, which was her primary appeal.

As it had been since the day Bolton died.

With every other gentleman who had pursued her for her fortune, it had made no difference. With Henry, it made every difference.

“I told you I have no intention of marrying you,” she said, her voice thick, taking another step away from him. “I am not some innocent you can seduce into marriage, and if you hoped that my guilt over inducing you to break your vow would lead me to matrimony, then you are very much mistaken.” She glanced down at where he was standing beside her discarded dress. “My dress, if you please.”

For the longest time, his gaze held hers, probing, as though he was trying to find the truth behind her words. As though he could not quite believe what he was hearing.

“If I were merely looking for a fortune, I would not have played this game with you,” he said, so low she could barely hear him.

“No? Miss Winton’s dowry is considerable, but it hardly compares. I have forty thousand a year. What do you say to that ? Are you more tempted by me than ever?” She made a dismissive gesture. “My dress, Henry. I would like to leave.”

Eyes still on her, he bent and picked up her dress and came closer, one step at a time. “I chose to be with you because I wanted to,” he told her, fingers brushing hers as he came closer. She snatched the dress from him and stepped in it, drawing it up her body, her hands shaking. “Not because of any ulterior motive.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“And now this proposal—if one can call it that. It has nothing to do with my fortune? Nothing to do with your foolish hope that the intimacy might propel me into your arms? Or perhaps you hoped I would fear talk from our absence all afternoon?” She shook her head and turned her back to him so he could do up her dress. “I am not ruined, Henry. Not by you.”

He gathered her loose hair and moved it over her shoulder. Seconds later, she felt the press of his lips against her neck, and she closed her eyes. “I thought,” he said, the pain in his voice more evident now, “that it might have meant something to you, as it did to me.”

Even now, lost in the anger and resentment that had followed her for nine years, she could admit that he cared for her. But his reasoning, his timing—his assumption that she would be coerced into marriage when she had explicitly said she would not—merely stoked her temper.

Even if she had not been barren, even if she could have made him the perfect little wife, she would not have accepted a proposal such as this, when she had been so very plain about her intentions. He should have known better than to ask.

“Oh,” she said, and gave a hard, angry laugh. “Well, I admit it was satisfying. I would not object if you wished to be my lover. Do you want to keep me as your mistress?”

He was silent behind her, and the next thing she knew, he was lacing up her dress.

Duty had been the cornerstone of Henry’s life from the moment he had understood what he had been born into. He understood the need to uphold it the way the stars understand they cannot outshine the sun.

And yet when he had asked Louisa to marry him, he had not been thinking of his obligation to his family, or her fortune, or of anything but the fact he did not think he could bear to let her go now. Their joining had been a gift and a curse; before, he had wanted without knowing precisely what it was he was being denied, and he had been ignorant of the blessing that was.

The truth was, he had acted on instinct; his body had asked her before his mind had a chance to agree. The proposal was a mistake blurted at the worst possible moment.

And now she hated him all over again, shaking with anger under his fingers as he loosely and poorly laced her dress.

“Louisa,” he said in a desperate attempt to salvage the situation. “When I asked you . . . That was not what I meant.”

“No?” Her brow rose. “How perfectly flattering.”

“For God’s sake.” He strode away from her, needing the space to think. His body was still overwhelmed by the torrent of sensation it had experienced, and it was at odds with the peculiar pain in his heart. “I was speaking of the method, not . . . I have every wish to marry you, but I had not intended to ask you then.”

“You need not explain yourself,” she said, turning to the full-size mirror and applying herself to her hair. “I understand perfectly, but if you were caught up with passion, then time should put that to rights.”

He should have known better than to blurt out a proposal when she was vulnerable, when they were both naked. She was like a nervous horse, liable to bolt from any hint of affection, no matter how much she had shown herself to want it.

Then again, what did he know? Perhaps she was like that with all her lovers, and he had become another name on a long list. The thought was excruciating.

“It was not merely passion,” he said.

Her hands paused. She was delectable, brown hair tumbling about her shoulders despite her attempts to pin it up. Although she was wearing her dress, she looked rumpled, ravished, and so utterly exquisite that he could have pulled her to the bed. Taken her again. His hunger for her was insatiable.

He did not know how he could learn to live without her now he had given her everything.

He drew in a breath. “How could you think I have ever wanted anything else?”

Her green eyes met his, the feeling in his gut a tug like a fish on a hook, before she returned to her appearance. “You should think of Miss Winton,” she said, and the tug in his gut turned into a blow.

Miss Winton.

Over the past few days, he had done his duty in singling her out and making conversation. She was a lovely girl, one whom he could imagine being friends with. If they were to marry, they would have a harmonious, if uninspiring, existence. It was an existence he had been resigned to—until this with Louisa, where she had not so much as crossed his mind.

He was a blackguard.

He could not do it.

“Miss Winton,” he whispered hoarsely.

“I take it you forgot your betrothed while in here with me.” She combed through her tangled curls. “Fear not, Henry. You are not the first.”

His world rocked. Louisa would not have him; he could not have Miss Winton.

“I can’t,” he said, gripping a post on the bed. “I can’t marry her.”

Louisa’s face twisted, and she whirled, the rawness in her expression almost

frightening. “Is that how you think to compel me to agree to marry you? Because you will not succeed, I can assure you of that.”

“I can’t marry her,” he repeated.

She advanced on him now, eyes blazing, her lips twisted in a snarl. “Is that how you intend to treat the poor girl?”

“There’s no formal agreement between us—”

“What of your honour?” she flung at him. “What of the fact that she is a girl in her third or fourth Season whose marriage potential lowers with each year she is out? Do you truly believe she would rather be a spinster than a countess?”

“I had not thought you a proponent of marriage.”

She gave a wild, angry little laugh. “Why, because I would not marry you? I have the luxury of choice, Henry. And I—” She broke off, swallowing whatever words she had been about to say. “I have my freedom and my independence. She has neither. You, too, are a better husband than many.”

He scoffed at that. “Not good enough for you, evidently.”

“I would not make you a proper wife.”

“Is that the reason for your refusal?”

Her eyes sparked, and she gave him a little shove. “You asked me to forgive you for your role in my marriage. And I do not. I cannot. There is your reason.”

He felt the words like claws in his chest. Something tore, and a dull feeling of pain

settled through him. The kind he had felt once before, in a small house on Ryder Street, when he had first known what it was to have his heart broken.

Briefly, he wondered what damage it was doing and if he would ever recover, or if a man could die of it.

“And that is your final answer?” he asked, and he thought he caught a flicker of distress in her eyes, as though she could sense his pain and was sorry for it. Or, perhaps, because it echoed through her body, too.

But she inhaled and the expression vanished. “Yes,” she said. “Marry Miss Winton and forget about me. Whatever it is you feel for me cannot continue forever.”

Perhaps that was true, but it had endured this long. He could not imagine a world in which he did not love her.

“And if it persists?”

She shook her head. “It won’t.”

“But if it does, Louisa. What then?”

“Then you will have to live with it.”

“And you?” he asked, although he already knew the answer; perhaps he had known it the instant he had kissed her, the moment he had pushed inside her, the moment he had held her in his arms after they had made love and felt as though she was slipping through his fingers like sand. “What will you do?”

She gathered her hair into a loose knot at the back of her head and picked her gloves up from the floor, straightening herself as she went. A lady once more.

“I will do what I have always done,” she said. “I will secure my independence by any means possible, and I will endeavour to forget you.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Henry sat alone in his room, perched on the bed that was still rumpled from their lovemaking. Before she had gone, she'd taken the letters, and no doubt now she was working to re-establish her freedom and independence from Knight. Yet another thing she would not let him help her with.

He had made a mess of things. Asking her to marry him the way he had, as though he had planned it from the off instead of realising that he could not bear to see her walk out of the door and away from him again. She had done that once before; he had not thought himself strong enough to bear it again.

Yet she had. And he was now learning the depth of his endurance.

There was only one thing for it: to leave the house party and return to London. But first he would have to explain the situation to Miss Winton and beg for her forgiveness. And to Comerford, who would no doubt brand him the fool he was. Comerford, who had never harboured more than a light-hearted tendre for a girl, and who had never been rejected. At least, not to Henry's knowledge.

After a long time, during which the sun set and Henry had ample time to relive every mistake regarding Louisa he had ever made, he dressed and gave his reflection a cursory glance. Acceptable, though he looked gaunt.

As luck would have it, he encountered Comerford on his way downstairs. The other man started, giving him a once-over. "Good God, man," he said. "You look awful."

"Thank you," Henry said dryly.

“What happened? Your father finally gambled away the clothes on his back?”

At the mention of his father, Henry felt another surge of guilt. Duty dictated that he marry Miss Winton and use her dowry to save the estate before his father gambled the whole thing away. If he did not, everyone would suffer.

The surety he had felt in his bedchamber, Louisa dressed before him, vanished in the candlelit dark. “I hope not,” he said, “but it is always a possibility.”

“Then what?”

“Louisa.”

Comerford glanced around them, then nodded downstairs. “My study. We can talk there without disturbance. And it looks like you need a stiff drink.”

“That’s not—”

“Very well. I need a stiff drink, if you’re about to tell me what I think you are.” He motioned to the hallway. “They can manage without us for a while.”

There was no point arguing, and Henry followed his friend into the study, shutting the door behind him. George lit a candle and sat in the chair behind the desk. It looked as though many of the papers had been pushed to one side in a hurry, leaving a bare expanse of wood, and Henry decided he wanted no more details. He also decided to stand by the window rather than sitting in the only other chair. Just in case.

“So you and Louisa,” Comerford said.

“Yes.”

“I take it the experience didn’t go well?”

“The experience itself went well enough, I think,” Henry said curtly, although he tried not to think too hard about his initial embarrassment. “It was what came after that was the problem.”

Comerford sighed. “What did you do?”

Henry kept his back ramrod straight. “Asked her to marry me.”

“That’ll do it,” Comerford muttered.

“I hadn’t intended to. Not like that, at least. And before we were intimate, I thought for certain she would never . . .” He rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly exhausted. This was precisely what he had feared would happen if he allowed himself to get too close. But being with her had been so explosive, so gentle, so tender, so wonderful, that he had allowed himself to believe she felt the same.

“She’s not a maiden, Henry,” Comerford said gently. “A tumble isn’t going to be enough to—”

“That wasn’t my intention!”

“I know. But perhaps she doesn’t.”

“What indication have I given that I was intending to coerce her into marriage? My helping her was not in the vain hope that she would relent against me. We just . . .” Got carried away . The excuse was as flimsy as it was unfair. He had wanted her; she had told him that it was not to be transactional, that she was not being with him out of gratitude but desire, and he had agreed. Because in that moment, more than anything, he had wanted to know what it would be like to kiss her.

And then, when they had crossed over the threshold of no return, he had understood that he would never want just once.

But at no point had he been with her to manipulate her into marrying him, or even in the belief that the act itself would force her into his life. More that he had believed, foolishly, that the emotional charge of the moment would touch something in her heart.

Comerford poured two brandies and pushed one towards him. “Drink that,” he said, and downed his. “You look like you need it more than I.”

“I can’t stay here.”

“What of Knight?”

“She won’t accept my help. Not now. Especially not now.” Henry accepted the drink and tossed it back, its unfamiliar burn settling in the back of his throat. “I should never have . . . any of it. And she will only wish me gone if I remain. It’s better I go.”

“And Miss Winton?”

He shook his head slowly. “I can’t. Not after—I can’t, George.”

“Damn bad business,” Comerford agreed. “But I can’t say I’m particularly sorry about that. She’d make you a dull wife.”

Henry grimaced. “Don’t be cruel. She’s an admirable lady.”

“Perhaps,” Comerford admitted, “but she can be admirable from a distance, which is precisely where I want to keep her. Unlike you, my friend, I cannot choose to sacrifice myself to a life devoid of warmth and happiness.” He gave an overwrought,

dramatic sight. "I am not so noble."

"Don't be ridiculous. If I were not—if it were not for Louisa, I would be perfectly happy to marry her."

"Have you told her that your interests have changed?"

"No," Henry said, and gave up, slumping into the chair. "Another thing I must do before I leave."

"When do you intend to go?"

"Tomorrow, first light."

Comerford nodded slowly. "Very well. Is there anything else?"

"Where is Caroline?" Henry asked, raising his gaze. "I would like to speak with her."

Caroline stretched across the bed with idle sensuality, not seeming to notice that her bosom spilled over the confines of her dress, or that she was displaying her curves to advantage. A display that was wasted on Louisa.

"I knew it would come to this," Caroline drawled in not insignificant delight. "I knew you would bed him."

"Don't be crude."

"Why, darling? Am I wrong?" Caroline watched her with dancing eyes. "You have not objected to me referring in that way to any of your past lovers."

"You know Henry is different." Louisa stared at her pen and the dashed copies she

had made of Knight's letters. Soon, she would have to return them and decide on her next course of action. Presumably it would involve leaving Worthington Hall for London, especially if she was to catch Thomas Hyatt before Knight had a chance to confront him.

And perhaps talk to Prinny.

"How is Henry different?" Caroline asked, and Louisa's stomach dropped when she recalled the way he had asked her to marry him, then almost as urgently recanted it. The way he had all but admitted he would not have asked her if it were not for her fortune.

She gripped the desk and drew in a long breath. "He proposed."

Caroline gave a delighted gasp. "Directly after the deed?"

"As I was leaving."

"Poor boy. I suppose you rejected him?"

"Naturally," Louisa said, her voice sharp. "The fact he had the gall to ask me after everything—I told him it was not transactional, our coming together. He knows I have not forgiven him."

Have you not? whispered a voice in the back of her head.

She shook it away angrily. If he had just married her as she had asked, as she had begged, then none of this would be happening now. Not Bolton, not Knight, not the obliteration of her dreams.

The anger was harder to hold on to now, however, with Caroline's probing questions

and Henry's shattered expression in the back of her mind.

He ought not to have asked her. Not like that.

"Your fortune may be an advantage," Caroline said, "but I hardly think it is the source of your hold on him."

"My hold on him is that he's experienced no other lady," she said, gathering the ink-smeared paper together. "That is all."

"I've seen the way he looks at you." Caroline shuffled to the edge of the bed and peered at her. "I tell you, no gentleman has ever looked at me like that, even when I'm in nothing but silk."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Did he tell you he loves you?"

The recollection of the anguished way he'd told her that he cared for her played across her mind, and she grimaced. "Not in so many words."

"But he does?"

"Yes."

"And yet you still turned him down?"

She toyed with the truth for a moment, but if there was ever a lady not to judge, it was Caroline. "I have reason," she said carefully, "to believe I am barren."

Caroline blinked. "Oh?"

“And more to the point, I have no desire for children.”

“Ah.”

“Henry is the son of an earl. There are expectations—he, no doubt, will have expectations—that I cannot and do not wish to fill. There are other reasons, too, but that is a consideration. I am not the wife for him, no matter what he thinks. And,” she added matter-of-factly, “it’s a good thing I married Bolton first. As a girl, I never realised, or I would never have asked Henry to marry me in the first place.”

“A little precipitous, don’t you think?” Caroline asked, raising her brows. “Does he know?”

“No, though I doubt that would change anything. He knows his duty, Caroline, and it is not to marry a lady incapable of bearing him children.”

“You should tell him.”

“Why, to torture him more?” She snorted. “I see no reason for it.”

“Well, that’s my recommendation. Take it or leave it.” Caroline gave a one-shouldered shrug. “But if you want to stay single, you have my full support, darling.” Her smile was sultry and heavy-lidded. “And we can kick up a fuss across London together, just like old times.”

Louisa dropped back in her chair in front of the letters. “I’ll finish these before we go down for dinner. No need to wait for me.”

Henry found Caroline on her way down to dinner, and he immediately beckoned her to one side, into the library. With a curious glance at him, she reclined gracefully on a chair. She had a particular way of presenting herself, as though she was conscious of

how she looked to others, and it was of extreme importance that they never found her wanting.

She was not in his style, but he couldn't deny her beauty. Plump and golden, almost angelic, until one got a good look at her grey eyes and saw the knowing gleam there. She had always discomfited Henry a little, largely because she was a worldly woman in ways he had never experienced, and partly because she looked at him as though she would very much like to run her tongue along every part of bare skin she could see.

Today, however, there was nothing but sharp curiosity in her gaze.

"I take it Louisa told you what happened between us," he said.

A brow arched, and her mouth curved into a seductive smile. "She did. May I offer you my congratulations? Thirty is a long time to wait, but if I know Louisa, she made it worth your while."

His jaw tightened. "I would rather not talk about that."

"I will say I think your proposal was poorly thought out," she continued as though she had not heard him. "You have to know how she would take it."

"I had not intended to ask her in that way."

"I see. Transported by delight?" She nodded sagely. "It happens. But a proposal in a rumpled bed does not give quite the right impression."

"I know . Discussing this is not why I brought you here."

"No? I thought you would want to know best how to win her."

“I rather think it will be too late,” he said dryly.

She gave a disconcerting nod, and his heart gave another crack. Soon he would be all disparate pieces. “Yes, you may well be right. What is it, then?”

“Louisa has some letters she took from Knight. Do you know anything about them?”

Caroline frowned. “When I left her, she was transcribing them.”

“She has every intention of delivering them back to Knight’s room herself, but while I have every belief in her capability, I suspect she may well be in danger if she persists. He is volatile, and she is fearless, and—”

“You two are such a pair of fools,” Caroline said, blonde curls bouncing as she almost laughed. “Very well, darling. I will steal back the letters she stole, and I will deliver them into your waiting hands.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you intend to marry Miss Winton?”

He hesitated, but there was little point avoiding the truth. “No.”

“Then you should tell her. When do you leave for London?”

“How do you know I intend to leave?”

“Because if I were you, darling, I would not want to stay.”

Well, she was hardly wrong there. “I think I’ve played my part here. I leave tomorrow morning.”

Caroline gave a luxurious stretch, and although her luscious curves held no appeal for Henry, he could see why Comerford was so captivated. “Very well,” she said in a low, throaty voice. “Out of pity for you and love of my friend, I will bring Miss Winton here so you may speak with her. That’s your intent, is it not?”

Resignation settled over him. “Yes.”

“You may thank me later. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Asking her to persuade Louisa to accept his suit was out of the question; he doubted she would be so inclined. She was another widow with no clear intention of marrying again. No doubt she had already taken him in dislike.

“No,” he said. “Except . . . You must know, Lady—Caroline, that my regard for Louisa is not monetary. Years ago, when I refused her, it was as much for her sake as mine. My family commitments, my lack of ability to provide for her—she knows this.”

Caroline tilted her head. “And yet you come back into her life, make it plain you must marry, and at the first possible moment, you offer her marriage.” She clucked her tongue. “I wash my hands of the two of you.” She rose, brushing down her dress. “Wait here. I’ll bring Miss Winton to you. And, Eynsham, if you don’t mind me saying, you should tell Louisa you love her. Maybe it will achieve nothing. But perhaps . . .” She raised a plump shoulder. “Good luck.”

He was distinctly certain he would need it.

THE PAST

April 1805

Louisa waited on the pavement outside the Royal Academy, praying it didn't rain as her footman maintained a sour silence behind her. According to her mother, she was meeting her friend Beatrice Lacey. Instead, she was waiting for Henry to escort her through the Royal Academy. The footman, Peter, knew as much, but he was also stepping out with Lucy, Louisa's maid, and he knew to keep in her good books, he would have to keep the true nature of this visit a secret.

A cool wind blew the scent of rain with it, and as a few drops splattered her face, she spied Henry striding towards her. Perhaps she was biased, but she thought he was probably the most handsome man in all of London. The deep navy of his waistcoat only highlighted the stern beauty of his face, softened by a mouth that could have made angels weep. Crisp, cool, and very much in control. As always.

He smiled when he saw her, and the tension she had been unaware of holding melted. "Miss Picard," he said, and she held out her hand to him. Eyes on hers, he bent and kissed her fingertips. A shiver ran through her.

She nodded at the doors of the exhibition. "I hope you're prepared."

"You make it sound as though we will be facing something more fearsome than mere art." He tucked her hand into his arm, and she picked up her skirts as they walked through the archways into the New Somerset House where the exhibition was currently being held.

The Summer Exhibition was usually held for a month, and this was the second year running that she'd had a piece accepted. As they walked through the large, open rooms, paintings displayed on all sides, she released a sigh of relief. Being here made her feel at ease all over again, as though she had come home.

"Am I supposed to know which is yours?" he murmured in her ear.

"Not yet. Wait." She came to one. "What do you think of this?"

He stared at the large landscape, capturing distant workers shirtless under the hot sun. A river wound in the foreground, and in the distance there were hills.

"Is this yours?" he asked, looking at the workers.

She laughed. "No. See here how the perspective is wrong? The angle of the river against the men here?"

"I see," he said, although his tone was doubtful. "So you don't think it's good?"

"The brushwork is excellent," she allowed. "And the colours are vivid, if not always accurate. It makes for a striking picture."

"But you don't like it?"

"No."

"Is that because you believe art should exactly replicate its subject?"

She grinned, having hoped he would ask that question. "What is art if not a mirror?" she asked.

“What is art if not truth?” he countered.

“Must truth always be a direct replica of the world? Or is it heart, intention?” She led him along to her favourite bench in Somerset House. “Now, what think you to this?”

He looked at it carefully, head tilted to the side. “It has a particular style to it,” he said at last.

“And what do you think of the style?”

The painting was of a young lady painting the portrait of another. A brush was in her delicate hand, and her eyes were focused on the other lady’s soft, blurred face. It was evident that she had been commissioned for this portrait. A small dog was curled at her feet.

“Domestic Bliss,” Henry read, and frowned.

“All the colours indicate domesticity,” she said, looking up at him. “And see the happiness of the artist?”

“It is a singular view of domesticity.” He glanced at her, the beginnings of a smile quirking his mouth. “I wonder if that is deliberate.”

“I expect so.”

“Tell me, Louisa. Did you paint this?”

“My mother doesn’t know,” she said, looking up at the painting. “Frankly, I’m amazed it was ever accepted. It has, as you might imagine, sparked some dialogue.”

“Yes,” he said dryly. “I can imagine.”

A party of ladies came to stand beside them, and she lowered her voice. "So many people believe a woman's only value is connected to the children she bears." The thought made something rise in her throat. She had given children little thought, save for the fact that she felt nothing when she saw others', but her body rebelled at the idea she was worth nothing more than to be a mother.

"Is that why you brought me here?" he asked, looking up at her painting again.

"Painted by a spinster, no doubt," a lady remarked to one side. "And with a singularly weak hand."

"One cannot but think that if she had married, she would not be obliged to paint." This lady said the words with disdain. "Poor girl. I feel sorry for her. Painting is all very well, of course, but for it to be one's sole source of joy? Well. She clearly hasn't lived."

"No indeed," the first agreed.

Ire rose in Louisa's chest, but Henry's hand closed around her elbow. "You cannot throw a pebble into the ocean and expect the tides to change," he murmured.

There was nothing she could do but simmer in annoyance, and she hated her impotence. Her initials were on the paintings; if one truly tried, they would be able to identify her.

As it was, no one ever looked close enough to care. After all, she was only a woman. Nobody of importance.

The air suddenly felt stifling, and she sucked in a breath. This had felt like a home from home, but although she hated that another's opinion could affect her like this, there was a pit at the base of her stomach.

“Intriguing,” a gentleman said from their other side. His frown deepened as he looked at her painting, and his mouth twisted to one side. “Fortunate, I think, that most do not view domesticity in this way, don’t you agree?” he asked, looking at her.

Louisa tilted her head at him. He was dressed in a cheap suit, and she didn’t recognise him; likely they did not walk in the same circles. “Do you not think she appears happy?”

His nose wrinkled. “I was more thinking for the sake of mankind.”

Henry let out a bark of laughter. “You mean it would be unfortunate for men if their wives wanted something other than marriage?”

“Society would cease to function.”

“Why?” Louisa asked pleasantly, but she could feel that familiar tingle of anger inside her gut. “Do men want nothing more than to marry?”

“Men cannot bear children,” he said.

“Perhaps not,” Louisa said, “but they certainly assist in producing them. You could argue, in fact, that there would not be any children at all if it were not for the work of men.”

The man’s cold grey eyes rested on her for a second, a flicker of interest in their depths. “An interesting perspective, Miss . . .?”

“Miss Louisa Picard,” she said, extending a hand. “And you are?”

“Mr Knight.”

“Well then, Mr Knight. I feel obliged to point out that I have not offered an interesting perspective, but a fact of nature. Do you dispute that men are necessary in the conceiving of children?”

“This is hardly a proper conversation to be having with a stranger,” Henry said in her ear.

Of course he would think so, deeply uncomfortable with the discussion of intimacy as he was. She looked up into his face and saw not just discomfort but genuine concern.

“How enlightening,” Mr Knight said gravely. “And do you consider yourself an expert on the matter?”

“I think anyone with an approximate understanding of human biology would be enough of an expert to state that fact unequivocally,” Henry said, one hand still on her arm. His fingers were tight, and she wondered at his hold until she saw the calculating look in Mr Knight’s eyes.

“Ah,” Mr Knight said, looking at Henry. “I do not believe we’ve met, sir.”

“Lord Eynsham,” Henry said shortly. “Forgive me, but we should really be going. Good day.”

A young lady bounded up to Mr Knight, rosy cheeks aglow and grey eyes dancing with unrestrained mirth. “I told you, Vincent, coming here is not to discuss the merit of art, but to have fun. Do excuse my brother,” she said to them. The first thing that Louisa noticed about her was the freedom of her expression, so different from the carefully blank faces of the ladies in the ton . Her fingers itched to paint her.

“There is nothing to excuse,” she said at once. “He was merely discussing the merits of female domesticity.”

The girl glanced at the painting for a moment, but it was clear she saw nothing to capture her attention. “Yes, it is droll, I suppose, to think domesticity is a painting and a dog,” she said, and dismissed it altogether. “Come, Vincent. I must have you meet my friend. Pray excuse us for leaving so rudely, and forgive my brother for his tactlessness.”

Mr Knight’s calculating expression dissolved into a genuine smile at his sister’s urging, and he tipped his hat to them as he left, dragged away to another party. A somewhat boisterous one, and exceedingly merry.

Henry looked down at her seriously, then back at her controversial painting. “Perhaps, for your standing in Society, you should reconsider telling people your name when you are standing in front of a divisive painting.”

Something sank inside her. “So you disapprove?”

“Of the sentiment?” He glanced at her, and she saw the corner of a small smile. “Not in the slightest. But I would not call myself usual among men. Another gentleman may not feel the same way, and if it comes out that you are the artist, things may become difficult for you.”

Usually, a woman could not be both a lady and an artist; she had to choose one or the other.

“If I want to claim this as my own,” she said, the feeling of uncertainty rising in her chest, a black tide that threatened to swallow her pride. “Would you still want to marry me?”

He took her hand, thumb swiping over her glove. “Louisa, my love.” His voice was warm, but his eyes were solemn, dark-ringed and drawing her to him like a fly to honey. “Nothing could stop me from wanting to marry you.”

PRESENT DAY

April 1815

Henry did not have to wait long for Miss Winton to appear, a candle in one hand and a murmur to someone on the other side of the door. No doubt Caroline, keeping watch for any signs of someone coming to interrupt them.

A kindness that oddly touched him.

Miss Winton's gaze was on his as she advanced. "I hope this is not an assignation," she said in her usual blunt way. "That is not the relationship I have any desire for."

"I know." He dropped into a chair. "Believe me, it is not what I would wish either. I merely wanted to speak to you away from your mother."

Her unsettlingly direct gaze on his face, she placed the candle down. "I see."

"I understand this will come as an unwelcome shock, but—"

"You are ending our arrangement," she said calmly, her arms folded across her chest.

"Yes, but—" He controlled his response with difficulty. "How did you know?"

"You had that look about you. Everyone always does when there's news they don't want to deliver." A flare of pity entered her cool grey eyes. "I take it matters with Lady Bolton have not changed?"

The last thing he wanted was to explain his situation with Louisa again, but he understood that she deserved this much, at least. “Not favourably. But there has been a development.”

Miss Winton took her time to reply, seating herself on one of the sofas by the darkened window. Her hands were folded neatly on her lap. “I suspected as much. There was no other logical reason for you to end our arrangement. We have not spent enough time in one another’s company for you to take me in dislike, I flatter myself.”

“No, no, of course not.” First his proposal, now this: he was making a damnable mess of things. “I would very much like to be friends with you, Miss Winton. I merely . . . I can’t marry you.”

“I see,” she said again.

“I’d thought I could put aside the urgings of my heart, but it’s impossible. When you asked, I said I wasn’t in love with Loui—Lady Bolton, but that was not strictly true.”

Miss Winton viewed him steadily. “You have my condolences.”

“Well I might need them,” he said bitterly. This was the first time in his life he could remember going against the needs of his family. His mother had asked him to marry well, and he was actively turning down the best option he had.

The estate would be ruined.

For a moment, every muscle in his body revolted. His stomach churned, his chest constricted, and he had the vague sensation that all the air had left the room. What folly he was committing.

Yet all this would not have been necessary if his father had showed even a modicum

of restraint.

“I am wholeheartedly sorry,” he said to Miss Winton, recovering himself with difficulty. “I know the impression I must have given, and the assumptions you—everyone—must have made as a result, but—”

She gave a very unladylike shrug. “I don’t care for them.”

“You don’t care about the rumours?”

“Can’t be worse than the ones saying I smell like I’m in trade,” she said serenely. “And they bother my mother more than they bother me. No doubt another gentleman will be seduced by my fortune enough to marry me one of these days. All I need is another penniless lord.”

He stared, unsure if he was horrified or amused. “Quite.”

“You need not be worried I shall give way into hysterics,” she said, retrieving her candle and observing the flame with detached interest. “I find them rather dull, don’t you?”

Amusement won out, and a reluctant smile tugged at his lips. “You are an interesting lady, Miss Winton, and I hope very much that we can be friends.”

“Well, there’s no reason we cannot. Is that everything you have to say to me? My mother will worry if I’m gone too long.”

“I’m going back to London tomorrow morning, first thing. Once there, I expect I will retire to the country for the foreseeable future.” After all, if he could not marry to save his family’s fortune, then the least he could do was find a way to make the estate worth his time and investment.

His father would be unlikely to retire from London, but perhaps he could hold out until the end of the summer.

Then . . . Well, he supposed by then he would find out precisely what his father's excesses would cost them both.

"I'll see you when you return to London, then," she said.

"I hope you are happy, Miss Winton. You deserve to be."

"Happy," she mused, almost wistfully. "Yes, I should like to be, too. Very much. Goodbye, Lord Eynsham. I hope your journey goes well and you find everything you are looking for."

When Louisa returned to her room after dinner, she discovered the letters missing, and Caroline's self-satisfied smile was enough to explain precisely what had happened to them. She didn't bother investigating further, but presumed Henry had played his final role in her affairs.

Fine. If that was how it was to be, then she would learn to accept it with good graces.

The only thing left for her to do now was leave for London. Immediately, if possible. If she stopped for nothing but the occasional meal, she might make it back home by tomorrow evening. In time for her dear friend Thomas Hyatt to return home, and to make enquiries about this Arabella. Surely she would be able to discover something now she had a name and location.

And her memory had not entirely failed her: she had met the girl before. Then, she had been of a marriageable age, perhaps a year or two Louisa's senior. It was likely, therefore, that she had left to go abroad up to five years after that first and last meeting.

Either way, she would have enough information to be able to convince Knight she knew more than she did, and to compel his obedience in the matter.

After explaining her plan to Caroline, she went straight to George's dressing room, knocking and letting herself in. He was sitting before the fire in his robe with a book in one hand and a glass of brandy in the other. Every inch the gentleman, but so engrossed in his novel that he didn't so much as hear her come in until she cleared her throat.

"Louisa," he said, brows rising. "This is an unexpected surprise."

"I imagine it is." She took the chair opposite. "I came to inform you that I'm leaving for London immediately."

"Immediately?"

"Is that not what I said?"

He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "It's almost midnight."

"I'm aware of the time."

He closed his book, one finger between the pages, and rose to ring the bellpull.

"Explain it to me. Is this merely to avoid Eynsham?"

Ah, so he knew after all. She'd suspected he would, either from Henry or Caroline.

"No."

"Then why?" He gave the rope a hearty tug, and when his valet appeared, directed the man to fetch Lord Eynsham.

Louisa pushed out of her chair the instant the man left. “What do you think you’re playing at?”

“If you’re not avoiding Henry, then it makes sense you both travel together. I can spare one coach, but not more.”

“He intends to leave?”

“Were you unaware?” There was a wry note in his voice, and he patted her shoulder on his way back to his chair. “Sit down, my dear, and don’t make a cake out of yourself. I can’t have you travelling post alone without so much as a maid, and you know with this many guests I can spare no one to travel with you.”

Louisa slowly sank back into the armchair, but the injustice still stung. “I’m hardly a girl in my first Season; I can travel without a chaperone.”

“It’s not a matter of age. There are all sorts of cads and rogues on the road, and if they get wind of a lady travelling by herself—”

“Then I will defend myself,” she said sharply. “Do you think me helpless?”

“I think you reckless, my girl, and that’s just as bad.” He tapped his book against the arm of his chair. “If Henry will travel with you, there will be no need for this foolishness.”

“It’s not foolishness to have the expectation of independence. Why, do you think it’s my first time travelling alone?”

His lip curled. “No. But I have no intention of letting you do so from my home.”

“No one will know.”

“I will know.” He tossed back the rest of his brandy. “Drink?”

“For heaven’s sake, George, this is serious.” She eyed his back as he moved to the cabinet on the wall and said, impulsively, “Oh, very well, then. But I mean it when I say I would rather go alone.”

“Why? Because he was fool enough to ask for your hand in marriage?” George gave a bark of laughter and handed her a tumbler of amber liquid. “Rather him than me, I can say that for certain.”

“I’d be offended if I had any desire to marry you,” she said coolly.

“Oh, don’t give me that. There’s no denying he made a mistake, but—” A knock at the door interrupted him and he broke off. “There he is now.”

Louisa steeled herself for the sight of him. This was not a position she was precisely accustomed to. Of course, she had received an offer or two since Bolton died, but she had never felt as though their affections were engaged, and thus seeing them again held no particular awkwardness.

Henry was different. And already the blaze of anger and resentment that had sustained her during their last meeting had slumped, mere embers instead of a flame.

If it were not for her inability to bear children, perhaps she would have embraced the opportunity to have some time alone with him.

As it was, she knew she could not provide him with the things he needed—most importantly, children—and she could not bear for resentment to grow between them once more.

It was better this way.

When he entered the room, however, she caught her breath. There was no way for him to be anything other than startlingly handsome, but it was as though the last few hours had aged him, casting his face in a gaunt, tired light.

To suppose she was the sole cause would be foolishness, and yet she felt a twinge of guilt in her chest.

“Eynsham,” George said, greeting his friend as though he saw nothing amiss. “Come, sit by the fire. Drink? No? Well, I suppose I can’t count myself as surprised.”

Henry’s gaze stuttered across her face, and his expression was confused as he glanced at George and the book lying on his chair. Then fond amusement replaced the confusion. “Reading again?”

“A man must have his vices,” George said, putting the book to one side.

“Why am I here, Comerford?”

“Louisa also wishes to return to London,” he said bluntly, and Louisa scowled. “She intends to travel post alone, and I’ve informed her that would not be sensible for a lady of her station.”

“I could very well hire a chaise at the first inn I see,” she said.

“You could,” George admitted, “but given that Henry also wishes to travel to London, I wish you would travel under his protection.”

Henry’s brows caught together; his throat worked. He looked, for a long time, as though he intended to denounce the entire plan, and she hoped he would. Then, to her disappointment, he nodded slowly. “Are you offering us one of your carriages, Comerford?”

“I am. Do you accept?”

“I do.”

“And you?” he asked Louisa. “Do you accept?”

Louisa drew in a long, steady breath. Her instinct was to refuse the offer and insist on hiring her own coach. But she could hardly ignore the sense in the offer. A travel companion and the offer of a free coach. Money was of no consideration, but convenience was.

“Why are you returning to London?” she asked Henry.

His expression was smoothly impassive, as remote as it had been when they’d first met again. “I have some business there, and then I intend to return to the country.”

“You see?” George clapped his hands together. “It is the perfect scheme. It releases my obligation to see you safe while I am here, and ensures you both return to London at the first possible moment.”

“I had not intended to stop overnight,” she said, raising her chin.

Henry merely inclined his head. “Very well.”

They were in store for a night of discomfort, but without openly admitting she wished to avoid him, there was nothing more she could say. And if it would ease George’s conscience, then it was the least she could do after he had arranged this entire house party for her benefit.

“I’m leaving Caroline here,” she said to George. “Embrace the opportunity while you can.”

“She is a mistake waiting to happen, and I am a fool willing to dive in headfirst.” George’s voice was matter-of-fact, but there was a wry twinkle in his eye. “But I suppose I will do my best to make a proper match when I return to London.”

Louisa kissed his cheek in a burst of sudden affection. “Thank you for all you’ve done.”

“You’re the sister I never had.” He patted her hand. “Be off with you now, and be safe. I’ll instruct the groom to bring the carriage around for you, so come down the moment you’ve packed and I’ll see you off.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

By the time the carriage was drawn around to the front of the house, both Henry and Louisa were ready to go. A few tired footmen strapped their luggage to the roof, and inside the carriage, a lamp burned, sending flickering light across the leather seats.

This would be a journey from hell, he already knew. To have her so close with their last words echoing in the space between them was a torment from which there could be no escape.

And, damn him, he still wanted her. Even now, when there was no hope, he wished he could capture her lips under his and remind himself one last time of how her body felt as he pushed into her.

At his tap on the roof, the groom flicked his whip and the horses started into motion. The carriage rocked, and Henry wished he could put out the light so they would be cast in darkness.

Even so, there would be no chance of sleep.

Minutes ticked by with the silence deepening between them. Their proximity put him at liberty to notice that her eyes looked a little heavier than they had when they'd last met. A little more tired, as though something weighed on her mind as much as it weighed on his.

Unfortunately, that something was more likely to be the blackmail she was fighting to resolve rather than the brief moments of bliss they had shared.

Still more unfortunately, that knowledge did not stop him fantasising, with reckless

abandon, what might have happened if she had said yes to his ill-thought-through proposal.

Perhaps an hour into their journey, her head jerked up and she looked him full in the face. “Are you silent because you have run out of things to say?” she demanded. “Or because you have no wish to say them to me?”

He did his best not to squint, or groan, or drag his hand down his face in exhaustion. “I hardly thought you’d want to speak to me.”

“Well, you are not my first choice for carriage companion.” Her voice was tart. “But I would rather we speak than sit here in this dreadful silence.”

“It’s late,” Henry said, wishing he did not want to kiss her quite so badly. “We could try sleeping.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Will you sleep?”

“No.”

“Neither will I. So.” She laced her fingers and wrapped them over her knees as she drew them underneath her. “How did you persuade Caroline to give you the letters?”

“There was no persuasion necessary. I merely asked.”

“You must have got quite the knack for it since we parted.”

His temper rose. “For that, you would have to ask her.”

“No doubt she had her reasons. Did Knight see you?”

“No.”

“Good. Then at least there’s that.”

Unable to help himself, he leant forward on the seat. “I must ask, Louisa—are you truly going to use the girl against Knight if he refuses to back down?”

“Why?” she asked softly, her eyes luminous despite the dimness of the carriage. “Would you think less of me?”

The word came to his lips as though compelled. “Yes.”

For a moment, he thought she would not answer. Then she shook her head, a small, reluctant smile playing across her lips. “The contrary part of me wishes I could tell you that I will stop at nothing, but . . .”

“Honesty.”

“But I won’t harm her, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He nodded, accepting her answer. It was one thing to threaten Knight with the harm of his sister, one thing for him to believe it; another entirely for her to carry out her threat.

“In fact,” Louisa continued thoughtfully, one finger pressed to her chin, “I may endeavour to bring her back, if I can discover where she is and what her situation is. Not an easy feat, I’ll wager, but it seems cruel that she should suffer for the sins of her husband. Or her brother.”

Henry had not thought it had been possible to love her more; it transpired he was mistaken.

“Why are you returning to London?” she asked.

“I’ve broken things off with Miss Winton. I thought it prudent to leave the vicinity for the time being. I’ll return to my father’s estate and do what I can to fix matters there. Perhaps there’s nothing to be done. But . . .” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I must do what I can.”

“Miss Winton’s fortune would have done much to save your estate,” she said without inflection.

“Perhaps.”

“You would not be the first to marry for convenience’s sake. Nor would you be the last.”

“As touching as your regard for the lady is, drop the subject, Louisa.”

“I’m sorry for her.”

“She’ll fare well enough—she had the goodness to tell me that herself.”

Louisa nodded approvingly. “Then she’s a girl of spirit. Good. I would hate for her to be a ninnyhammer. I hope she has the good sense to find a decent husband who will treat her well.”

It was more likely she would marry a fortune hunter, but then again, had he not been a fortune hunter? Merely one who had balked before securing his prize.

A horrific thought. He could not dismiss it.

“I don’t wish to marry you for your fortune,” he said as the lamp swung and the

wheels rattled underneath them, eating away the miles. “And if you would have me, I would have married you now even if you were as poor as the day you asked me. Even if you had nothing to your name.” He nodded, a full stop at the end of his sentence, a gesture of finality. “I wish I had married you that day. I think about that life often, and what we would have faced. Whether after a decade of hardship, we would have still loved each other.”

“Do you think we would have done?” Her voice was barely audible above the sound of the carriage’s endless movement.

“I would have done.” He made a restless movement. “I seem incapable of not wanting you, no matter how hard I’ve tried.”

She shifted, moving closer, her knee brushing against his. “And have you tried very hard?”

“Every second for nine years.”

Raw agony flashed across her face, a lightning strike there and gone. Then she rose, swaying with the movement of the chaise. He caught her hip without thinking, and she sank onto his lap, moving her skirts out of the way. “When we return to London, we will forget one another and the past.”

His arms encircled her, drawing her closer. “And until then?”

“Until then,” she whispered, “we have tonight.”

He could think of no reason to refuse her, save the pain of parting.

But that was tomorrow’s heartbreak, and if he was taking his future’s joy and spending it now, then so be it.

It was madness, foolishness, but love so rarely trod the path of reason.

“I want you,” he said as her mouth pressed a sweet kiss under his ear. I love you . He would not say it.

“I know.” She shifted eagerly on his lap, her desire a visceral thing between them. A lake he could drown in. “Take me. I am here; I am yours.”

Louisa wrapped her arms around his neck as he pushed inside her. Their movements were frantic, the passing of time marked so notably by the movement of the carriage. In an hour or so, they would need to stop and change their horses, but she would not let herself think of the future. There was only now.

There was only him.

They both groaned as she sank down all the way. His hands were on her hips, and she gathered them in hers, sliding her fingers through his and pinning them to the seat on either side of them.

“You are mine,” she said.

“I always have been. Since the moment in the maze.” His eyes held hers, even when she circled her hips and his breath left his body in a sharp exhalation.

He would not be hers soon, and she knew it would be better for them both if he forgot her, but that was a raw thought, jagged and painful as a thorn.

Instead, she fixed her gaze on his face and watched the play of emotion across it. The taut lines as he held back and let her take control, the way his sensuous mouth found hers. Their mingled breaths in the darkness, as the carriage rumbled and swayed and the lamp swung.

Her peak came too fast and she slowed, experimenting with different movements as his head hung back and his eyes glazed. He was undone, she knew, and by her. Just as she had always wanted. But with the victory came the sting of regret.

She could not have his children—she did not want his children—and she could never marry him. Even if she were prepared to sacrifice her freedom and hand her wealth into a man's hands, she could not so blight his future.

He needed an heir, and a wife both capable and prepared to give him one.

I think of our life often .

No doubt his thoughts, his assumptions, were about the kind of life she could never offer him.

“Louisa,” he said. Just her name. And yet she heard all the unspoken things contained inside it.

Perhaps he would be the one to unravel her. Layer by layer, until she was nothing but bare, beating heart, just as she had been as a girl. Just as she had been when he had first come along and broken it.

It was a frenzied thing, their coupling. His body and hers, still mostly dressed. Clumsy kisses, strangled groans, urgent thrusts and undulations as they brought each other to the brink and backed away at the last moment. Hungry, deep kisses. Shuddering sighs. His fingers were tight around hers, and she bent her head against his shoulder.

“I can't keep doing this,” he said, voice hoarse.

“What?”

He groaned. "I need you."

"I want you," she said against the skin of his neck, all hot breath and grazing teeth and unleashed desire. "I need you."

I'll miss you .

The thought was so sudden that although they were joined in the most intimate of ways, even though hot pleasure pooled deep inside her, a tidal wave ready to unleash at any second, her chest tightened with a sudden stab of pain, and her breathing hitched. Tears stung her eyes, and she released his hands, bringing them to his sides as she pressed her face further into his shoulder.

"Louisa?" He pulled at her shoulders, trying to ease her back and look at her face. "Did I do something to hurt you?"

"No, no." Her words were fractured; her voice broke. "It's nothing."

"Please, let me see your face."

There was only one thing she could do. She moved on him, faster than before, hitting that place deep inside her where her pleasure spooled. And Henry might have been a wonderful man, the best, strongest man she knew, but he was still just a man, and he was helpless against her.

His body stiffened, and she reached a hand between them, touching herself as she rocked against him, and his arms tightened around her as, moments after his pleasure ended, hers began.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Henry stepped inside Beaumont House with the quiet, tired silence of resignation. Jarvis, the butler, gave a rare smile and opened the door wider. “Welcome home, Lord Eynsham,” he said, ushering him inside. “And may I say what a relief it is to have you home, sir.”

Yes, no doubt it was. Henry cracked a smile of his own, though he could sense how poorly it sat on his face. As though his body was merely going through the motions, no intention behind it.

“Is my father at home?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. Although I believe he is still in bed, sir.”

“I see. And my mother?”

“Henry?” His mother, drawn from one of the upstairs rooms like a wraith, descended the stairs dressed in a blue so pale it could almost have been white. Even now, she moved with her habitual grace, breeding not having deserted her. She clasped both his hands with hers. “Thank heavens you are home.”

Outside, though he could not hear it, he imagined the carriage bearing Louisa moving away down the cobbled street.

In the end, it had barely been a goodbye. She had looked at him, eyes sorrowful and luminous, and the silence had said everything they had needed to. He had not proposed again, and she had not said anything that implied she had hoped he would.

Now all he was left with was an aching in his chest and a profound tiredness that went much deeper than muscles or bones.

“I’m sorry I never gave word that I was coming,” he said, letting his mother guide him up the stairs.

“Oh no, no.” She paused to cup a hand to his cheek. “We’re always so grateful to have you home. But I was going to write to you—Oliver arrived home last night.”

Henry barely managed to suppress a groan. “He did? Before the end of term?”

“I believe he’s facing a suspension. And there’s some issue of outstanding debts he’s not in a position to pay. Came home to ask you and your father for help.” She clucked her tongue disapprovingly. “Of course, I don’t like the gambling, but it’s in his blood, dear. Just like his father and your grandfather. There’s nothing to be done.”

“I would beg to differ, ma’am.”

“You can’t be too hard on him,” his mother said anxiously. “Why, he’s not yet nineteen.”

“He should know better than this, when he knows full well that—” Henry broke off. “Never mind that. Where is he?”

“Still in bed, my love. You know, you have arrived really quite early. Half the household is not awake yet.”

“Once he’s washed and breakfasted, send him to the study.” Henry caught his mother’s hands between his. “And don’t worry. All will be well.”

“Has Miss Winton consented to be your wife yet?” she asked, looking up at him with

a crease between her brows. “Only . . . Things do seem to be particularly difficult of late.”

He made a mental note to visit the bank again and see if there had been any major developments. A week was perfectly long enough for his father to have lost a fortune at cards.

“All will be well,” he repeated, and left her to her frown, shutting his bedchamber door behind him and standing in the middle of the room with a pounding head. Moments later, his valet arrived with warm water for washing, and he did so mechanically.

First he would speak with his father, then with Oliver.

“Is the Earl awake yet?” he asked Bootley, his valet.

“I believe so, sir,” Bootley said doubtfully. “But he has not yet left his bed.”

“That doesn’t matter. Inform him that I will see him presently.”

Bootley’s expression cracked the tiniest of amounts, but he inclined his head and moved away again. Henry adjusted his cravat and pushed his damp hair back from his head. Just hours ago, Louisa had kissed his forehead, smoothing away the lines that formed there so often now. Just hours ago, her hands had been on his bare neck and she had whispered words there she’d hoped he wouldn’t hear.

I will miss you, and I wish I would not.

If that was the case, she ought to have married him and have done with it.

His father’s bedchamber door was closed, and Henry rapped the wood with his

knuckles before entering, not so much as waiting for his father's bid to enter. The chamber was dark, the sunlight straining through the heavy green curtains, and his father sitting up in bed and regarding him with a baleful expression.

"So," he said with the hint of a sneer. "You have come back from the country empty-handed, I see."

"Mother told me Oliver arrived home last night."

"Aye, and so he did, the little wretch." His father sounded unconcerned about the entire situation. "He'll be wanting an advance on his allowance."

"And I suppose you told him he could have it?"

His father scrubbed a hand down his face, and Henry noticed that the man looked just as weary and beaten down as he felt. Worse, perhaps, because the ravages of drink had left their mark. "I don't have the patience for one of your lectures today, Henry."

"Do we have the funds, sir?"

His bloodshot eyes narrowed. "That's hardly your concern."

"You say you don't have the patience for my lectures, but I don't have the patience for your prevarications. Do we have the funds?"

"I have already written to Norfolk."

That was a resounding no. Of course, if they could not afford to send Oliver the money, it must be found somewhere—the boy could not default on his debts.

And yet.

And yet .

He sank into the armchair. “When I went to Drummond’s and spoke to Mr Pickford, he led me to think we had until the end of the summer before we risked losing this house.”

“An old bore,” his father said with distaste.

“Nevertheless, he has a certain knowledge of our situation, do you not agree?” Henry folded his arms. “I’ve been gone a week. How do things stand?”

“You cannot take that tone with me.”

“Have you lost a great deal at the table in that time?”

The Earl’s nostrils flared, but his silence was answer enough. Never mind; he would find out the truth from Drummond soon enough.

“I will be addressing myself to the accounts and bills from now on,” he said. “It seems if they are to be handled, I must do it. And if you have any objection, perhaps you should try addressing them yourself.” He rose. “I’ll see myself out.”

It was almost noon when Oliver knocked on the door of the study, by which time Henry had ample time to discover the depths of their ruin.

His father had been to see moneylenders, and the repayments were looming. These were accounts the bank was not aware of, no doubt, as they did not rely on a withdrawal, but it certainly meant they were in a pretty pickle.

His head pounded and his vision swam, and he contemplated all the ways he could think to resolve this disastrous mess they were in.

So far, all he could alight on was to sell their London home.

Oliver's sandy head poked through the door, and he entered the room with a sullen cast to his mouth. He was built along his father's proportions, tall and sulkily handsome, but he had inherited his mother's brown eyes—the only child to not have the Beaumont blue.

“I wasn't expecting to see you,” he said as he took a seat. “Mama said you were in the country.”

“And so I was,” Henry said. “But I returned early.”

Oliver folded his arms. “Of course you did.”

“I'll save you the lecture,” Henry said dryly, recalling Louisa's words. If you speak to him as a man, as an equal, expressing the reality of your situation, perhaps he will find his own way forward. “No doubt you wouldn't attend me anyway.”

“Then what am I in here for? Father said he would see to my debts.”

For the first time, Henry looked at his brother as a fellow adult, albeit one more concerned with others' opinions. He was dressed in the height of fashion, shirt collars high and pointed—a little too much for Henry's taste, but then he had never been a proponent of fashion—and his cravat tied flamboyantly. But there was a serious cast to his merry brown eyes, the hint that one day he would steady down if given the chance.

Henry sincerely hoped he would.

“Let me be frank,” he said, laying all his cards on the table. “The position we are in is close to ruinous. We have more to repay than—oh, than even Miss Winton's dowry

could cover.”

Oliver looked momentarily interested. “Is that the lady you’re going to marry?”

“No,” Henry said shortly. “But until recently I was considering it. How much did you lose?”

The sulkiness returned to Oliver’s expression. “Father already said he would repay it.”

“Father is applying to Nathaniel. I would rather have the sum so I know what numbers we’re dealing with.”

Oliver sent Henry a quick, embarrassed glance. “Play was a good deal deeper than I had realised.”

“Badly dipped, are you?”

“Four thousand.”

With some difficulty, he kept his expression neutral. “I see.”

“Nathaniel can afford to pay it,” Oliver said.

“Perhaps he can, but what about next time?”

“Father said not to worry about a few petty gambling debts, and that when he won again, as he certainly would, he would pay them all off himself.”

Of course he’d said that. His father was all about when he would ‘come about’ again; his life motto was that he would provide for everything when he had a win.

And sometimes he did win, but not often enough. Not nearly often enough.

“It’s not that simple,” Henry said. “This isn’t a case of a few bad losses, Oliver. If it were—do you think I’ve been so hard on you merely because I disapprove of excessive gambling?”

Oliver frowned. “Yes?”

“I’ve been so hard on you because the family suffers ruin if we do not curb our spending. Our father most of all, but what should happen to you if we lose everything, as we are liable to do?” He paused, glancing down to where his hands were curled into fists on the table. “Nathanial can help keep you in Oxford, but if you learn bad habits there, we cannot support you. And Nathanial will not, either. As things currently stand, we will barely be able to furnish you with an allowance—and only then if we sell this house.”

Oliver blanched, pushing back from his chair with unwonted vehemence. “Sell the London house? Are you out of your mind?”

“As things stand, it’s the only way I can see out for us.”

“But it’s been in the family for—well, longer than I’ve been alive.”

And a good deal longer than that. The Shrewsburys had always had a house on Grosvenor Square. Unfortunately, it was an expense they could no longer countenance.

“If our current rate of expenditure does not abate,” Henry said carefully, “then we will face losing the entire Shrewsbury estate.”

“I thought you were going to marry.”

He did his best not to flinch. “As did I, but unfortunately things did not pan out that way.”

Oliver frowned, the last natural merriment dying from his eyes as he rested his elbows on the desk. “Can we not take out a loan against the property?”

“We are already mortgaged to the hilt. There is no room for us to borrow, no funds for us to use, and the sum is far greater than we could ever hope to repay, even if we all began to practice economy.” Which, he knew, they would not. “If we are lucky, I will contrive for us to keep the house, but we will probably have to parcel off some of the land.”

“Then things are very much worse than Father led me to believe,” Oliver said slowly.

“Father has always been highly optimistic—at times I have thought deluded—about our situation and his ability to recoup his losses,” Henry said, “though it pains me to criticise our parents. Mother knows what he is and has made no discernible effort to curb him. She believes gaming to be in his blood, and therefore yours, too. But I have done everything in my power to ensure that is not the case.”

Oliver’s face was pale but resolute. “What can I do?”

“Return to Oxford when they next allow you in. Nathaniel will provide the funds to pay your debts, and endeavour to keep out of trouble for the remainder of the term.”

“And you?”

“I?” Henry scratched at the stubble on his jaw. He had yet to sleep after a night spent wide awake and dreaming. “I will determine if we have to sell the house and make all necessary preparations to leave London.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Louisa allowed herself no time for moping. When she returned, she knew she had at best two days before Knight chased her to the ground, and by then, she needed to be prepared.

Perhaps she may not retrieve the letters and painting by force, but she could compel him to release them into her care. Then she would destroy both, and her life could continue along the path she had set out on all those years ago.

The first thing she did was summon her man of business to the house. He came with alacrity, Louisa being a valued and highly paying patron, and she sat with him in her drawing room, the curtains open to reveal the day.

Mr Upperton, a quiet gentleman of indeterminable age, sat opposite her with his hands loosely clasped in his lap and his sharp eyes on her. "If I may venture to say, ma'am, this is very early for a call."

"Yes," she said, not bothering to explain herself. "I require you to find someone for me."

"Oh?"

"Arabella Knight was her name, but she married, probably five to ten years ago, and since left the country. I suspect for the East or West Indies, although I cannot be certain. Find her. There will likely be a newspaper announcement of their marriage."

The only sign of surprise on Mr Upperton's face was the slow way he blinked. "What information would you like?"

“Merely her direction at present. I may in time wish to extract her from her current precarious position, but for now I only need to know her name and where she is currently residing.” She flicked a speck of dust from her gloves. “Hire as many men as you require to do the job.”

“Of course, my lady. When do you need this information by?”

Louisa smiled, though there was no humour in it. “Yesterday.”

He inclined his head. “I see.”

“See to it, if you please.”

“Yes, ma’am. Is there anything else you require?”

“Yes, as it happens.” She handed him a slip of paper with Knight’s address written on it. “Keep a watch on this house, and when its gentleman lodger returns, be so good as to inform me.”

Mr Upperton accepted the paper and tucked it into his waistcoat pocket. He was a man of resources and a great deal of reserve, which was why she had chosen him. Her past made it likely that some of her dealings would be less than savoury, and so she had hired a man who would not bat an eye at her more outlandish requests. “I shall see to it,” he said in a colourless voice. “Does my lady have any other requests?”

There was a knock at the door. “Your carriage, my lady,” Avery said. If he’d felt any surprise at her sudden arrival home, he had not shown it, merely asking if there was anything he could do for her.

She would never cease to be grateful for the loyalty of her retainers.

“Thank you, Avery,” she said, rising. “That’s everything, Mr Upperton. Avery will see you out.”

Avery held the door open. “This way, sir.”

Mr Upperton bowed and walked out of the room, and Louisa glanced at the window. Once again, she was struck by the thought that if she was particularly lucky, she might see Henry striding along the pavement underneath.

Of course, she did not. He was bound for the country, and she had refused him.

In her weaker moments, such as the one where he had left the carriage, she had almost cracked. If he had not been the son of an earl, she would have given all her freedom up for a life with him.

Absurd how she could have thrown away all her vows so quickly. For a man who had broken her heart once already. But although the bitterness she harboured had not gone fully, the worst of it had been and gone without her noticing.

Avery entered the room again. “Your carriage, my lady?”

“Ah yes, of course.” She gave a grim smile and did her best to put thoughts of Henry from her mind. “Thomas Hyatt.”

Thomas Hyatt lived in the unfashionable neighbourhood of Bayswater—not nearly as exclusive as her own address in Arlington Street—but the house was large enough despite that. Evidently Thomas Hyatt had been doing well for himself.

Any other time, she would be glad.

“Good evening,” Louisa said, stepping inside the house when the maid opened the

door. "Please tell Mr Hyatt that Lady Louisa Bolton, formerly Miss Louisa Picard, is here to see him. He will receive me."

The maid bobbed an awkward curtsy, and after escorting her to a cool, stale parlour, disappeared. Louisa tilted her head up, examining the paintings on the wall. There were many of them, giving her reason to suspect this was the room where he courted new business.

There was no denying he truly was a master.

Not too much time passed before there was a movement by the door, and Thomas Hyatt appeared before her, older than she had last seen him, age a map across his face. Shadows pooled in the hollows under his cheeks. As a painter, he was flawless; as a man, she was old enough now to know he had flaws aplenty.

"Lady Bolton," he said, and by the roughness of his voice, she knew he understood what she was doing here.

"Out of respect for the things you have given me, I will be civil." Her voice was cool, but there was a lake of hurt that lay behind it. Betrayal that she hadn't allowed herself to feel until now, but faced with him, the feeling swelled. He had guided her as a child, taught her how to hold a brush and commit the things she saw to a canvas. He taught her how to convey her world into a medium that others could see and interact with, and he had never once made her feel as though she was lesser for choosing oils despite being a lady.

Even when she had been accepted into the Summer Exhibition with Domestic Bliss , he had not critiqued her choice of subject, merely the faults with her perspective and colour choice.

But now, when faced with an obstacle, he had rather toss her to the metaphorical

wolves than stand up in her defence.

She understood that her father had paid him; she understood that he had not helped her as a matter of real interest but of financial gain. He was her tutor and she was his student, and she knew he had many students.

But this was art, and art had principles.

He bowed his head. "Let me explain, if you will, Lady Bolton."

"I would like very much to hear it." She crossed the room to the chair and sat herself in it, folding her hands neatly on her lap. "And then I would like you to listen."

He chose to remain standing, his face turned to the floor rather than to her, as he spoke. "You may remember that my grandfather is Italian. Shortly after you married, I left for Italy, and—"

She waved a hand, cutting him off. The gesture was imperious, she knew, but it had been a long day and her heart was aching and she had no time for social niceties. "I understand your motivations. Continue."

"Well." He coughed and took the seat opposite. His shoulders were frail, she noticed. Perhaps he was in his sixties now. He certainly had not been young when he had begun his tutorage. "I remained there for a long time ignorant of your activities, or in truth the state of the English art world in general. I worked for several prominent . . ." He caught her expression and stalled, licking his lips in a nervous gesture. "Yes, well, I suppose it hardly matters what I did when I was away. Suffice to say I had plenty to occupy me. A few months ago, a letter arrived from a Mr Knight, asking if I was your tutor and whether you employed a particular style. The note surprised me, but I was happy to convey the peculiarities of your style as I remembered them. I confirmed they were distinctive enough that I believed, as your tutor, I could recognise them."

The corner of his mouth curled in a weary yet pleased smile.

She refused to be gratified that he remembered the quirks of her paintings. “Did he say anything else?”

“He requested that I return to England and vouch to the Prince Regent that some paintings are yours. At first, I refused—the journey is long and I was occupied with painting—” He coughed again. “But, you see, my youngest daughter remained in England. She was at school here—”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“Mr Knight made it plain that . . .” His voice trailed away, but Louisa knew enough of Knight’s methods by now to fill in everything unsaid. No doubt he had threatened Hyatt’s daughter—with ruin, perhaps, or seduction, or some mix of the two—and that had been enough incentive to bring the old painter back to England.

She could hardly blame him. But he had not once thought to inform her of the situation.

Or perhaps he was unaware of the power she now held.

“And so you were willing to destroy my future in order to secure hers,” she said.

He winced. “She’s my daughter.”

“Were you unaware of the fortune Lord Bolton left me on his death?”

By the look on his face, he had been. When he had left for Italy, Lord Bolton had been alive and well. “You might at any time have alerted me. Mr Knight is not a man of means.” She rose, expecting him to rise to meet her. But Mr Hyatt was not Henry;

he did not match her challenge with his own steel. This was an expert in oil and nothing else. A man used to bowing to the whims of the aristocracy.

Pity swamped her, hard and fast, unexpected in its potency.

Yes, she had a right to her anger, but he was surviving the only way he knew how, and she could not fault him too much for that.

She sat. "This is how it will be," she said, gentling her tone. "If you are called upon, you will tell the Prince Regent nothing conclusive. You will give me your daughter's direction and I will write to her and to the school, warning them against admitting Mr Knight. He will have no way to access her; they will not wish to incur the wrath of a countess, I assure you."

Relief broke out like sweat across the man's face, and he bowed his head, revealing a bald patch shining through his hair. "Yes, my lady."

"And if Mr Knight threatens you again, bid him to think of his sister and apply to me. All will be well, I assure you." She gave a grim smile and rose. He did too, looking at her the way he always had when he had given her lessons. For a moment, she was a child of seventeen again, young and eager, filled with respect for a man who had so much talent, and desperate for his approval.

She shook her head and dispelled the image. She was a woman now, desperate for no one's approval but her own, and she would not be beholden to another person for the rest of her days.

When she returned home, she brought out her canvas and began to paint.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

After confirming with his bank that the only way forward was to sell the London house, Henry made the necessary arrangements, and began the process of extracting his family from London. His father, unsurprisingly, was intractable, but when he was presented with the reality of the situation, all he could do was grumble and demand that he be given apartments of his own that he could rent.

Seeing there was no other alternative, Henry agreed.

His mother, however, he intended to remove from London, and Oliver would not be granted apartments in London at this time. Surprisingly, Oliver made no objection.

With everything else in motion, there was one thing left for him to do.

If Knight no longer had the painting in his possession, he could not use it against Louisa. The last of his duty towards her would be discharged, and she would no longer have her freedom and reputation threatened.

With the man himself still being absent from town, Henry did the only thing he could: the day after he returned from Yorkshire, he went out in search of the tavern that he and Louisa had followed the man named Markham to, all those days ago.

The night was cool, as nights were wont to be in April, and he strode through the streets, his greatcoat swirling around his legs and memories of the last time he had walked this particular street invading his mind. Louisa, defiant and proud, refusing to give in to his entreaties to leave. The way her body had pressed against his, and the awakening he had experienced. Bad enough that he had been forced to employ his restraint not to touch her; worse that she would have thrown off any attempt at

affection.

Worse still that he now knew what said affection felt like.

He banished the thought and came to the creaking sign and spooling light of the tavern. Inside, the air was heavy with the scent of ale and cheap wine, candlelight casting as many shadows as it illuminated. Barmaids wound through the crowds of men with large jugs, filling tankards as they went, and giggling every time an errant hand squeezed their backsides.

Henry could only hope they were both inured to and desirous of such treatment, and he averted his eyes, picking a table at the back of the room. He had not long to wait: the man soon entered, ducking through the door and grinning his welcome at a plump maid. Henry kept to his place, accepting a tankard of watery ale (it would be more suspicious if he refused), and pretending to sip it at regular intervals. Markham, just as before, joined his fellows at the other side of the room and they immediately brought out a tattered pack of playing cards.

The minutes slipped by as Henry waited for Markham to drink, which he did with gusto. Eventually, he judged enough time to have passed, and rose, crossing the tavern with an exaggerated stagger and slumping into the only free seat around the table.

Up close and straight on, Markham had a broken nose, possibly as a result of a boxing match, and bloodshot eyes. Those eyes narrowed at Henry. "Who are you?"

"No one you'd know," Henry said, slurring a little.

"Then why are you here?"

"I believe you know my friend, Mr Knight."

“Friend? Hah.” He spat on the floor. “He’s like the rest of you bastards with your titles and your airs and graces.”

Seeing an avenue, Henry rested his elbows on the table, something he would have chastised Oliver for doing. “And they never pay on time,” he said.

“Aye, they’re all promises, you lot.” He frowned at Henry. “Thought you was a friend of ’is?”

“A reluctant acquaintance.”

“Well ain’t that just how it goes. What did he promise you?”

Henry sighed dramatically and waved to one of the barmaids. He had a roll of money in his pocket—the last easy money he had in his possession, in fact—and he gestured for the girl to fill Markham’s tankard. “I’ll pay his tab,” he said, and the girl nodded, giving him an appreciative glance he ignored. To Markham he said, “Promised me a painting.”

“Oh.” Markham took a swig, belched, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and squinted at Henry. “What painting?”

“Of a girl. Called something foolish and whimsical. Said it would give me a chance to get one over its artist, but as always . . .” Henry let the thought trail away and busied himself staring at the dubiously sticky pool in the middle of the table. Ale, he hoped. “What did he promise you?”

“Money,” Markham said, sniffing. “If I protect that painting you talked about. But I ain’t seen hide nor hair of him in days, never mind the money he promised me for trailing that gentry mort.”

Gentry mort , Henry surmised, must refer to Louisa.

“Can’t trust him,” Henry said.

Markham grunted and finished that ale. “Wine,” he decided, pushing the tankard away from him. “This stuff makes your insides rot, take it from me. First time in here, my lord?” He gave an unpleasant smile, displaying two missing teeth. “Come to fleece me?”

If there was one benefit to being the son of an inveterate gambler, it was that Henry had been taught how to play since an early age. His skills were a trifle rusty, not having played since he left for Cambridge, but Markham was visibly drunk and he was sober. And he’d always had a head for numbers.

The odds were in his favour, so long as he did not make a mistake.

“How about a wager?” Henry asked, and brought out his roll of money. “Five hundred in exchange for the picture.”

Markham chewed on his bottom lip, but there was a greedy flare in his eyes that Henry didn’t miss. The man frequented this tavern; it could be assumed he had little by the way of ready cash. “What makes you think I have the painting?” he asked.

“I know you can get it. Mr Knight isn’t yet home.”

“He’d have my skin for it.”

Henry flicked through the bank notes idly. “Believe me when I say he doesn’t have a penny to rub together. Your patron is relying on the success of his blackmail endeavour to have the funds by which to pay you.”

“Can’t without the painting,” Markham pointed out.

“I’m acquainted with the—the gentry mort as you referred to her. She won’t pay up.”

“You’re just saying that.”

Henry shrugged. “You can think so if you want.”

Markham’s gaze returned to the roll of money. “Five hundred,” he repeated. “If I win.”

Henry counted it quickly; the notes were in fifties, so it took very little time. “All this if you win,” he said. “On my honour. And the painting if I win.”

Markham smiled. “On my honour.”

“I’ll have the terms drawn up. What’s your game of choice?”

Markham thought, cracking his scarred knuckles in a show of defiance. “Piquet,” he decided at last. “Does that suit your lordship?”

Piquet and whist were the two games Henry had showed the most aptitude for, but he knew better than to let his relief show. “Very well. Let’s play.”

Markham called for more wine as the terms were set and the cards were dealt. Henry accepted his glass with resignation—no doubt it was too much for Markham to expect him to play sober.

The cards, he was reasonably assured he would win, but he would have a weak head for alcohol, and the more he drank, the less likely he was to find victory.

“Drink up, my lord,” Markham said slyly. “You look thirsty.”

Henry took a sip of the watery, vinegary wine, and set the glass back on the pockmarked table. “My turn to begin.”

The game would end when a player reached 100 points or more, played in a series of parties, with the scores added up at the end of each partie.

Henry’s best chance of victory would be to lure Markham into a false sense of security. If he lost the first two by a slim margin, made basic mistakes, then Markham would think the game already won. By the looks of it, he was more a fighter than a gambler, and an initial show of strength—or weakness—went a long way.

He took another sip of wine and a sense of calm overcame him. Perhaps he was breaking all his rules, but the thought came with a measure of relief. For Louisa, it was worth it.

Besides, what good had his rules done him? His family was already ruined, and not all his restraint could have prevented it.

The game began in earnest.

Henry was the first to play, and he deliberately chose a poor opening gambit. Markham’s face remained impassive, but his middle finger twitched, and Henry marked the movement. Every time Markham thought he had the upper hand, whether he was withholding information during the declaration phase, or if he thought Henry had played badly, his finger twitched. An infinitesimal movement that would be utterly indistinguishable if it were not for Henry’s careful watchfulness.

There was a certain flare to gambling that Henry did not possess: he was not a man for whom the best modes of play were instinct. Instead, he carefully analysed the

probability behind each card being played, and used that in conjunction with what he knew of his opponent's tells.

He lost the first round, but only by a handful of points. Then he lost the second by a higher margin, constantly calculating. The wine muddled his thoughts a trifle, and whenever Markham looked down at his cards, he made a point of slopping a little more wine on the straw-covered floor. Even so, after two hours and four parties, Henry was drunker than he had been for over a decade, perhaps longer. He scratched at the stubble growing in across his jaw, feeling the coarse hair under his nails as though he was distanced from his body.

Markham was still ahead, but the gap between them now was imperceptible.

Henry needed to win soon or he risked not winning at all.

Beads of sweat appeared on Markham's brow, and he wiped them away with the cuffs of his shirt. Henry rolled his shoulders, slumping in a way that went against every engrained habit. His shoulders curved inwards: the posture of a defeated man.

Markham leant forward, elbows on the greasy wood. "What do you want the painting for?"

"Does it matter?" It was entirely too easy to let his voice slur.

"Got a vendetta against Knight or the girl?" A thought appeared to occur to him, and he scratched an eyebrow with a cracked nail. "Or trying to protect her? I heard she's a rich widow. Think she'll marry you if you give her the painting?"

The thought made Henry want to laugh. "Nothing would prevail on her to marry me."

"Aye, she's a knowing one."

Henry reached for his wine, then hesitated, looking into the dregs of the glass. How many had he had now? Too many.

“More wine,” Markham called, waving a clumsy hand. At the woman’s approach—she did not look a day under forty—he slapped her backside with enough force that she slopped ale on the table.

“I’ll bring some glasses over,” she said, giving Henry a flirtatious smile. He was so tired. More wine was the last thing he needed, but he was too late in saying anything, and perhaps it was better he hadn’t. Markham needed to believe he was a drunken fool—and perhaps he was. He felt beyond sharp commands, close to the state of liberal goodwill that his father always found himself face-up in. A sense that the world had righted its injustices just for him, that he could do no wrong and lose nothing. That he was basking in the warmth of fate’s smile.

Fate, in Henry’s experience, had been nothing but fickle and rarely smiling. Still, he did his best to loosen his limbs and slump in his chair.

“Let’s finish this game,” he said.

Henry had not been to Louisa’s house in Arlington Street before, and it was with his head tipped back that he contemplated the elegant Grecian-style front and the steps that led to the front door. The flickering lamps cast indifferent light, and he still felt grimy from the tavern.

He raised his hand and knocked on the door. After a few moments, he knocked again. And again.

Eventually, a bolt was drawn and a portly, bushy-browed butler stood with a lamp in his hand.

“I’m here to speak with Lady Bolton.”

The butler stared him down impassively. “Her ladyship is asleep.”

“Already?” Henry frowned.

“It’s past two in the morning, sir.”

“Ah.” Later than he’d thought. The world swayed alarmingly. Somehow, the cold air had only served to make his inebriation worse. “Then I suppose you won’t grant me entry?”

“No, sir.”

“Very well.” Disappointment curdled in his gut, but he concealed it by thrusting the sealed tube under his arm at the butler. “Would you be so good as to present this to her ladyship when she arises?”

The butler stared down his nose at the offering before accepting it. “Very well, sir. Would you like me to convey a message?”

“Tell her that Lord Eynsham has . . .” There was the oddest lump in his throat. He cleared it and spoke through the obstruction. “Tell her that I came to see her.”

The butler’s face remained utterly impassive. “Is that everything?”

“In fact,” Henry said, finally alighting on an idea. “Perhaps you would like me to write a note? It would be easier than expecting you to remember.”

“My memory is impeccable, sir.”

“Even so, I think it would answer admirably.”

With an expression of great patience and forbearance, the butler stepped back to allow Henry into the house, directing him to a small morning room where there was a bureau containing writing paper and ink. After handing his package carefully to the butler’s care, he bent over the writing desk and dipped the pen in the ink.

Dearest Louisa,

I hope this may bring you a measure of relief, and will convince you of the depth of my affection.

Tomorrow, I leave for the country, and do not expect to return to London for the foreseeable future.

You have, as always, my heart.

Yours,

Henry

He signed with a flourish and stared stupidly at the words for a few moments, wishing they would stay in place rather than spinning so helplessly.

“Have you finished your note, sir?” the butler asked from behind him, and he started, rising from the chair.

“Yes. Indeed yes. Thank you for your time.” Remembering his manners at the last minute, he executed a crisp bow that was only marred by the fact he tripped over his own feet.

The butler blinked. “Would you like me to call a cab for you, my lord?”

“No, no.” Henry rubbed at his forehead. “The walk will do me good, I think. Thank you for your time.”

The butler’s expression cracked enough for Henry to see the shadow of a smile. “Not at all, Lord Eynsham.”

Oliver may have become unexpectedly responsible since learning the true nature of their financial position, but he was still a boy of eighteen, and although it was an ungodly hour when Henry stumbled back into the house, Oliver had just arrived home.

He frowned at the boy, trying to see straight. “What were you doing?”

“Cockfight,” Oliver said, and sniffed. He recoiled. “Good God! Are you drunk?”

Henry was obliged to lean against the ornate post at the bottom of the stairs. It was carved in the shape of a sleeping dragon and he would miss it dearly, just as he would miss everything when they finally left this place.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “I believe I am.”

For a long moment, Oliver merely stared at him. The snub-nosed boy he had been looked distinctly more dangerous in this half-light—a fierce, eagle-eyed adult, freckles disappearing and hair tamed. They looked nothing alike, Henry with his dark hair and Oliver with his blonde. Even their eyes were different. But there was that Beaumont stubbornness, manifested in different ways.

Then he stepped closer. “Have you ever been drunk before, Henry?”

“Once or twice when I was younger,” he said, moving away from the support of his post. The world felt distinctly less stable without it. “This is the first time in—a decade?” He frowned, trying to remember. He’d kept his head more or less when he was playing, but the worst of it had hit when he was walking home, and even the cold air had been insufficient to sober him.

“Here, let me help you upstairs,” Oliver said, finally coming within gripping distance and heaving Henry’s arm—which felt rather too heavy for a mere appendage—over his shoulders. “What brought this on?” he asked, a little timidly. “If you don’t mind saying, that is.”

The answer was that he needed something from Markham, but the truth was more sordid: he had allowed himself to break his careful rules because he no longer cared.

“Because I’m tired,” he said as he stumbled upstairs. “And, quite rightly, no one seems to notice how tired I am.”

“You never let anyone see.”

“Whelp.”

“It’s true,” Oliver protested. “And I’m only saying this now because you won’t remember tomorrow. But how can anyone help if you never let them?”

“Because the person who, for most of my life, should have been the one to help has been the one causing the majority of my problems.” Henry swayed at the top of the stairs, and Oliver steadied him. “That doesn’t endear one to the prospect of asking for help.”

“Not everyone is like Father.”

“Perhaps not,” he admitted. With Oliver guiding him, he made his way to his bedchamber. A cold, stark room lacking most creature comforts. Another sacrifice he had made for the good of his family—and that had gone all but no way towards repairing the damage done to the estate.

“Must we sell the house?” Oliver asked plaintively, ducking out from under Henry’s arm.

Henry put a hand against the door, but it gave way underneath him and he staggered inside. The room was dark, his bed a mere black mass at the other end of the room. Somewhere was his washbasin and nightshirt. He decided he would not attempt to find either.

“No. But it’s none of your concern. You will go to university, and then you will find yourself an occupation.”

Oliver’s smile was small and self-deprecating. “Such as the army? Or perhaps I should find a living?”

“Contemplate your options once you’ve graduated.” He hesitated, his mind turning in slow circles as he turned over what he wanted to say in his head. “Whatever you choose, I will support you to the best of my ability. But no more debts, if you please.” He gave a creaking smile that felt as though it had come from the depths of his past, though it was only before the crisis of their current situation. A few days had turned into years in the sticky honey of his thoughts. “At least, not until we can afford to pay them off.”

THE PAST

February 1806

Louisa sat sightlessly, a handkerchief clutched in one hand, a fistful of her black, scratchy mourning dress in the other. Her chest felt as though it had been callously carved out with a spoon, grief tapping staccato against her ribs.

Her cousin, a man she had never seen before that day, leant towards her, his expression a mask of concern. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Louisa wanted to throw a vase at him. And then she wanted to scream.

Instead, she dragged in a deep breath and forced a smile. “Perfectly, sir.”

It had been a week since her father had fallen from his horse in the middle of St James’s Street and broken his neck. A week since her life had been turned upside down with no recourse.

Mr Joseph Picard, a man twenty years her senior, frowned at her in what seemed to be genuine solicitude. “You look pale,” he said. “Let me call for someone. A physician, perhaps?”

She didn’t need a physician: she needed her father back.

Beside Mr Picard, his wife sat demurely with her gloved hands delicately holding a handkerchief Louisa had yet to see her use. In fact, she had strong reason to believe

Mrs Picard had never, in fact, met her father. And now she was to inherit everything her father had owned, while Louisa was left with next to nothing.

Louisa had never been so tempted to violence as when she had learnt the terms of her father's will. The estate was entailed away, and all she could do was rely on their generosity.

Her cousin, she suspected, would do everything in his power to make sure she was comfortable.

His wife, however, she was less sure of.

"You must know," he said earnestly, a friendly smile on his face, "that I do not begrudge your mother for her grief. It's most understandable, considering what she has lost."

Louisa made no attempt to explain that her mother's grief was less for her father and more for the style of living she had grown so accustomed to.

"Thank you," she said, casting her eyes downwards. "You are very kind."

"My husband," Mrs Angelica Picard said with emphasis, "is the best of men."

"You flatter me, my dear."

"No, not at all, Only consider what you are thinking of offering them. Five hundred a year!" She said the words as though it was an unreasonably large amount. "You are all generosity."

Louisa inhaled slowly. Five hundred a year. They had been accustomed to living on no less than fifteen thousand. All she had left was her indifferent dowry.

Mr Joseph Picard watched her anxiously, looking as though he felt the injustice of his wife's speech, a very little. "And of course you may have anything in the house that you feel any affection for," he told her with another smile. Poor man, to be ruled so utterly by his wife.

Angelica gave a sharp, derisive bark of laughter. "Indeed! You are all generosity, my darling."

"Thank you," Louisa said, barely managing to keep her resentment from slipping out between her teeth.

"And naturally you must remain in the house until you find somewhere to reside," Mr Picard said.

"I shall be more than happy to look for some eligible houses." Angelica dabbed at her dry eyes with her handkerchief. "It's the least I can do."

Of course you will, Louisa thought viciously. Anything to ensure they left the house sooner.

And, with only five hundred a year to their name, they would be forced to forgo the fashionable locations of London, not to mention most of their servants, their horses, their carriages. It was not cheap to stable a horse in London. Her sweet mare would have to be sold—no. Now it belonged to the new Mr and Mrs Picard.

None of this would have mattered if her father had lived the remainder of his natural lifespan. But that was not the case, and at a mere fifty-two years of age, he was gone.

"I should see to my mother," she said, rising and giving a mechanical curtsy. "She likely has not eaten yet today."

“Of course, of course. Don’t let us keep you.” Joseph rose to his feet. “And convey our good wishes to your mother. No doubt she is feeling this very acutely.”

“I have some hartshorn with me,” Angelica said with a saccharine smile. “Allow me to have some taken up.”

Louisa curtsied again. “Thank you, Mrs Picard.”

“Now then, you must call me Angelica. We are cousins, after all.”

“Angelica,” Louisa managed, and fled before she was any more tempted to ruin the very lovely vase her mother kept on the mantelpiece.

True to form, her mother was still abed, and Louisa rapped impatiently on the door. In the week since her father’s death, the only time her mother had left her room was to attend the funeral with a veil over her face and so much loud weeping that Louisa had been embarrassed. Louisa’s sorrow, in public, was a quiet, contained thing. Only when she was alone did she give way to tears.

There was too much for her to do for her to give way to such overwrought displays of sensibility.

“Mama?” she called.

“Go away.”

“Mama, I must speak with you.”

“You can have nothing pleasant to say.”

“That is no excuse not to hear it.” Biting back her impatience, Louisa pushed open

the door and strode to the curtains, yanking them open. From the bed, her mother hissed. "It is midday, Mama. You must rise."

"What for? To wear black and listen to all those insufferable people telling me that they're sorry? What use are their apologies?" She looked at Louisa with that shrewd, hard gaze of hers, unadorned by grief. "Has that boy arrived yet?"

"My cousin Joseph? He is not much younger than you, Mama."

"No doubt he is threatening to turn us out of the house at the first possible opportunity, before your father is cold in his grave."

"I suspect Father is most definitely cold," Louisa said dryly. "And it will not matter if you refuse to go, because he will have ways and means of forcing us out, and it is best that we find something sooner than later. Angelica has offered to help us, and we can want nothing that she has found, I can guarantee it."

Her mother flung an arm over her eyes. "Then there is only one thing for it. You must marry."

"Marry?" Louisa reared back. "Now?"

"There must be a rich gentleman who will have you. Surely that pretty face cannot be for nothing . "

"Mama, we are in mourning."

She sat up, greying hair falling from its braid. "Is there no end to your selfishness? We are desperate, girl. I know how much they expect us to live on, and it cannot be done."

“To be sure it can, and others have lived on less, I daresay,” Louisa retorted. “Dress, and then we shall give a thought to our next house.”

“It must be a quiet wedding, of course, but it will save us.”

Louisa yanked on the bellpull for her mother’s maid, and a bell jangled. “I am not marrying, Mama.”

Her mother’s expression tightened as though she had been slapped. “That is your role. A young lady must know her place in the world or she is setting herself up for disappointment. You think a society ruled by men will bow to you because you have some talent with oils and no money? The only way you can ever have a comfortable life is if you marry and marry well. And now we are being cast out with nothing, the sooner you accept your fate, the better.”

Louisa’s hands curled into fists. “No doubt that is what you did.”

“Naturally. I did my duty, and your father provided for us.”

“And did that make you happy?”

“I would be happier if you knew your duty, Louisa. Your father had no right dying when he did, before you were settled. And he had no right letting you get all sorts of inflated ideas in your head. How will you marry well now? You have dissuaded every young gentleman who has shown you interest.”

“Not every young gentleman.”

Her lip curled. “No, not every one. Are you still pining after that Eynsham boy? He won’t have you when it comes down to it. He needs to marry well too, my dear. And marry rich. The Shrewsbury estates are mortgaged to the hilt and decaying—they are

one mistake from going under, mark my words.”

Henry had never once hidden this from her, but he had also made it plain that once he had an independence, he would marry her, and they would contrive, for better or worse.

Things had changed now—her mother expected some kind of allowance, for one—but not enough for his intentions to falter. She had to believe that; he would not be false to her.

He loved her.

“You must rise, Mama,” she said coldly as the lady’s maid entered the room. “And find somewhere else to go before we are thrown out entirely.”

Downstairs, Angelica was receiving a tour of the kitchens and her cousin was flirting amicably with the maid who had brought him tea. Louisa found she could bear to be with neither of them, but the butler caught her attention.

“Lord Eynsham here to see you,” he said, and cast a significant glance at the drawing room. “I sent him to your painting room, miss.”

“Thank you.” Sending him a grateful smile, she picked up her skirts and fairly ran to the small room she had appropriated. As the butler had promised, Henry was already there, standing in the middle of the room, crisp and sharp in his navy coat. Before she could think too hard about what she was doing, she ran to him, throwing herself in his arms.

“Louisa,” he said, catching her. Then her face was pressed into his coat and he smelt like smoke and rain, the fine wool faintly damp.

“Did you walk here?”

“From my father’s house. It was no way at all.” He held her closer against him. “I came as soon as I heard. I’m so sorry, Louisa.”

“He was a good man.” She heard the catch in her voice, heard the way it broke around the sound, and pressed her face deeper into the comfort of his shoulder. “I wish you could have known him better.”

“So do I.”

“We are to be turned out.” She clung to him, needing his reassurance now, when no one else could offer any to her. “Papa’s brother had a son, and he has inherited everything.”

“Good God.”

She gave a snotty laugh, and he eased her back so he could see her face. “Are you all right?” he asked, the stern lines of his face softened into concern.

“My cousin is offering us an allowance. We are grateful ”—she sneered on the word—“to receive five hundred a year from his generosity.”

“A year?” Henry looked mildly shocked. “Truly?”

“His wife informed me that he is the most generous man alive. We must find somewhere else to live—somewhere in London that is within our paltry budget. I hardly know if it’s possible. We may have to rusticate.” Her smile trembled on her lips. “Mama will not want to agree, but I see no other option for us.”

“Then we’ll think of something,” he said, smoothing his thumbs over her cheeks.

“Don’t cry, don’t cry.”

“I don’t mean to.” More tears tracked down her cheeks and onto the warm skin of his hands. “I just can’t help it.”

“I’m here,” he promised, and she let herself believe that he meant it. Perhaps he would even offer for her as a result of their plight. Though her mother was right about one thing: allying himself with her and her family now was a different beast from allying himself with her when her father was still alive and wealthy.

Her heart hurt. The ways of the world were cruel.

But Henry wasn’t looking at her as though he was weighing her worth against bars of gold. He was looking at her with patient concern and—yes, that was love.

The worst of her fears melted in the face of that look. Whatever they were to face, at least they would do so together.

PRESENT DAY

April 1815

When Louisa rose the next morning, it was to two interesting pieces of intelligence. The first was a note from Mr Upperton to say that Knight had returned to London. That note also included a few key pieces of information: Arabella Knight had become Arabella Princely when she had married Anthony Princely, and she had left for the West Indies a little over six years ago. Approximately a year ago, her husband had perished from the hot climate and one of the diseases prevalent there. Arabella had as yet made no move to return home, though Mr Upperton could give no concrete reason for this. The most likely supposition was that she could not afford to.

He did not have her address, but he could inform her that she was currently residing in Barbados. That, decided Louisa, was enough to be getting along with.

The second was that Lord Eynsham had visited her late last night, and with a special package he had evidently intended to pass directly to her. The moment Avery had delivered it, she had known precisely what it was, and her nose stung as she knelt by the tube, breaking the seal that held it together and unrolling it with almost feverish haste.

There, staring out with timeless serenity, was a young lady with a paintbrush in her hand and her smiling eyes content. Her childish vision of happiness.

Domestic Bliss .

It looked different in her drawing room than it had in Knight's, set beside the debauchery of her other. Despite everything, it remained as familiar to her as the shape and colour of her own eyes. The signature she had so carelessly put in the corner when she was young and in love and thought nothing could stand in her way.

And Henry had been the one to retrieve it.

The fool.

Her heart hurt. Had he not known that she could have handled this on her own?

Then again, he had disapproved of her method of reverse-blackmail, and so he had rendered it utterly unnecessary.

That high-handed, objectionable fool .

“Did he say anything when he brought this around?” she asked, her voice tight.

“He asked to see you.”

“He did?” She looked sharply up at him from where she was kneeling on the floor. “Then why did you not wake me?”

As always. Avery looked utterly untouched by the irritation in her voice. “I judged it best, my lady. The gentleman seemed somewhat inebriated, and as you had retired some hours beforehand, I thought not to wake you.”

“Drunk?” Louisa's brows knitted. “Henry?”

“So it seemed, my lady.”

“Surely not.”

“I can only say what I observed.”

She touched her throat as she thought. What had become of him in the short time since they parted? She had never known him to drink more than a glass, and he often refused even that.

Yet Avery was not to be doubted, and he had seen far more of drunken gentlemen than even she had, no doubt. After all, he had presided over Bolton’s house.

“He left a note, my lady,” Avery said, seeming to her as though he relented. “I have it here. Would you like to read it?”

“Yes, at once.” She snatched the paper from his hands and unfolded it eagerly. The handwriting was somewhat sloppier than she was used to from him, although it still had his distinctively assured letters. “Tomorrow I leave for the country,” she mumbled as she read, and she shook her head, trying to clear it. Although it was not overtly a declaration, it was as close to. And his intentions, no doubt, were honourable. In true Henry fashion, he had sacrificed himself for her sake.

If she didn’t love him so much, she would hate him.

“Avery,” she began, and paused as she heard voices from the front hall. “Is that Mr Knight?”

“If it is, would you like to see him?”

As little as half an hour ago, she would have said there was nothing she wanted more. She had the information that would compel him to retract his claim over her money. It was a battle of wills and resources, and she had won.

But now there was nothing more she wanted than to see Henry. If nothing else, to bring him down a peg or two. Then kiss him.

“He truly has a knack for discovering me at my worst moments,” Louisa muttered. “Very well. Show him to the library and tell him I’ll be with him shortly. And while I’m occupied with him, have the carriage brought around. I must lose no time.”

Avery inclined his head. “Yes, ma’am.”

Alone in the room again, she sank into a chair and gave herself a few seconds to close her eyes and just breathe. She had told herself that she could not marry him, that she would never marry anyone ever again, that their past hurts—her barrenness—were obstacles too great to overcome. Yet despite it all, he had prevailed. Without her so much as noticing, he had banished her hurt, soothing it with the evidence of his love.

He had broken every vow for her.

She loved him.

She could not deny it any more: freedom was no longer enough when she must do it alone.

If he would have her once he learnt the truth, then she would give it all up for a chance at happiness. Heaven knew it had been long enough in the making.

Just as soon as she disposed of Knight.

She rose, brushing down her dress, and walked through the house to the library. Mr Knight was already there, pacing, and when she entered the room, he turned on his heel, his face flushed with anger and his coat creased.

“Where is it?” he demanded.

“Avery,” she said over her shoulder, “be so good as to have some refreshments brought. I think we will need them.”

“Very good, my lady.”

Knight approached, his eyes half-crazed. “I know you were behind it. Sending Eynsham to target Markham.”

The name was familiar, but it was a moment before she placed him as being the man whom they had followed to the tavern. So that was why Henry had been drunk.

She tucked her hands behind her back. “You had better explain everything.”

“I arrived home a few hours ago to discover that your painting was missing, and the very man whom I had tasked with keeping it safe had been the one to gamble it away.”

“Cards?” she asked, interested.

“How should I know? Probably.” He paced in short, sharp circles. “Where is it?”

“You’re mistaken, sir. I did not send Lord Eynsham anywhere; anything he did, he did of his own volition. I had a different method of compelling your obedience.”

He curled a lip. “I will ruin you, my lady, if it’s the last thing I do.”

“I very much doubt you would succeed in your endeavour, however,” Louisa said, smiling at the maid who brought a tray of tea and cakes. “Thank you, Mary.”

Mary bobbed a curtsy and left. Louisa sat, doing her best to maintain an air of calm, and poured herself a cup of tea.

“If you ask me,” she said, “you would do well to hire more reliable retainers. So, you are deprived of the source of your best proof against me. I do hope you haven’t written to the Prince Regent already.” She gave a tight-lipped smile at the white lines forming around his mouth. “Ah, so you have? A shame. Perhaps that gentleman will honour you with a visit, in which case you will have to explain that the proof you offered no longer exists.”

“I still have the letters,” he hissed, hands clenched by his sides. If it were not for the presence of two footmen in the room—Louisa had judged it prudent—she thought it likely he would have already flown at her. “And your erotic work.”

“Peace, Mr Knight, and have some tea. Your lack of breeding is showing.” She took a bite of plum cake. “You may still have the letters and painting, but I’m positive you will find reason to burn them.”

He dropped into the chair beside her, eyes glowing with almost unhinged rage. “I will be showing them to everyone I meet. Your husband was a foolish man; no doubt your acquaintances will believe you to be the true artist after a little persuasion.”

“I’m afraid Thomas Hyatt will not be so obliging as to back your claims,” she said, examining her nails. “I must say, threatening his daughter was a low blow, even for you.”

“Ah, so you’ve visited him, have you?” Knight sneered, tugging at his collar to loosen it. “You’ve been busy.”

“It was a very productive, and may I say illuminating, meeting.” She looked up and favoured him with a cold smile. “But that is not all. You see, I have been doing a

little investigation of my own. The letter your sister sent you was pitiful indeed—I've heard Barbados can be unpleasant. All that heat."

Knight's face paled, blotchy and grey like stale oats. He swallowed and his gaze darted from the window to the door. The anger had left him, replaced by something that looked a little like fear.

When she had first read the letter, she had been certain that she wanted to exact revenge on Knight however possible, and if that involved making him suffer, then so be it.

Now, all she could think about was the lengths Henry had gone to in order to procure her painting.

"You thought I would not make investigations into your sister?" she asked, raising her brows at him. "I supposed her predicament to be your primary motivator, so I acted to remove it. Arabella Princely," she mused. "An imprudent marriage, though she would not be the first. No doubt he would have made his fortune if he had not died."

"I—" He swallowed. "How did you find her?" His knuckles were white around his coat, but his voice was quiet.

"I have many resources at my fingertips. Oh yes, you covered your tracks well, but your sister's marriage was put in the papers." She placed her cup back in its saucer and laced her fingers together. "You do not have the painting. You do not have Hyatt in your pocket. All you have is one of Bolton's current paintings—I assure you that you are not the only one—and a series of letters from my admittedly foolish husband claiming that I am the artist. You see now how these claims will not hold up against scrutiny? Especially when, if I am asked, I am sure to deny it."

He swallowed a few times, his anger quite extinguished.

“Here is how this will happen. You will deliver the letters to my household by the end of the day, and they will be burnt. And you will say nothing of this to anyone. If Prinny responds to your letter, which I doubt, then you will swallow your pride and say that you’re mistaken. If ever you are tempted to exact revenge, you will think of your sister and her wellbeing, and you will resist the urge. Do you understand me?”

His eyes sparked defiance, but his mouth was a flat line, and after a few long seconds, he gave a curt nod.

“I advise you leave London for the time being,” she said. “I have the rather unflattering habit of holding grudges, and believe me when I say it would be unpleasant to be in my bad books. Do not stay unless you would like to know how it feels to have the world turned against you.”

“I was born the son of a tradesman,” he said, grey eyes bitter. “I know rejection well enough—I’ve had to fight for my place here. You were born to it.”

“If you had wanted my pity, Knight, you should have appealed to my better self before you betrayed me.” She took another sip of tea, finding that nothing irritated him so much as that. “You know, if you had applied to my generosity directly, you would not have found yourself disappointed. I’m not unreasonable, and although I can only assume the cost of discharging your sister’s debts and bringing her back to England would not be insignificant, I doubt I would have balked. My fortune, as you have ascertained, is considerable, and I am not extravagant.”

He merely stared at her, his expression, while pale, rigid and carefully blank.

“As it is, you have tried my patience one too many times. You thought that because Bolton had the recourse of brute strength, you could bend me to your will, but that

was an error of judgement. I have fought for my freedom, and I have no intention of being shackled to you or any other.”

His jaw clenched, but he was otherwise silent. At least, she supposed, he knew when he had been beaten.

She also knew that even with the threat of his sister to hand, this would have been a different conversation if he had still possessed the painting. More of a battle.

Perhaps she did not intend to shackle herself to any man, but Henry did not offer her chains: he offered her a different kind of freedom. She had known that for a long time, but it had taken this final act of selflessness to shine a light into the true depth of her feelings. How much she would now sacrifice to be with him.

The past had been bitter, and it had come near to breaking her, but that was a fault she no longer assigned to Henry, ignorant as he had been to Bolton’s true nature. He had done what he could, and everything she had suffered since had been the fault of the man who had compelled her to suffer it.

Not Henry.

She might have needed every second of her nine years to forgive him, but forgive him she had. He would not break her heart again—and for that, she would have to marry him.

Fate was nothing if not fickle.

“Do you have anything to say to me before you leave?” she asked, and Knight glared balefully at her.

“You think you’re so clever,” he said, his voice shaking with suppressed emotion.

“Threatening my sister.”

“Your capability for irony is truly astounding,” she said, waving her hand at one of the footmen to lead her guest away. “Don’t forget those letters.”

He gave her a mocking bow. “You’ve left me with no choice.”

“Excellent. That was wholly my intention.” Leaving the remainder of the cake where it was, she glanced at the other footman. “Is the carriage ready, William?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Something in her chest loosened. “Then I will leave at once.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Henry left London with a remarkable lack of fanfare, and a considerable hangover. He only had the vaguest recollections of what had occurred after he had travelled with Markham to Knight's house, gained entry by the back door thanks to a key Markham had, and walked off with the painting.

After that, however, Henry's memory became a little fuzzy. He suspected he had made a fool of himself in front of Louisa's butler, and considering the amused looks Oliver was directing him, he had made a fool of himself in front of his brother, too.

It was the damndest thing. If he could have, he would have slept the entire day through—a rarity for him—but unfortunately duty called, and as he had arranged for the house to be advertised the moment they vacated, he could not tarry in London.

The pounding in his head was only made worse by the movement of the coach and the grinning, solicitous comments of his brother.

At least it was not a long journey to Kent, and he told himself that the moment he arrived, he would rest. Perhaps even eat something, because his stomach had been roiling ever since he had awoken.

Then was the task of repairing the estate as far as was within his power. Unfortunately, aside from advising his father strongly, as he was not in full control of the estate there was very little he could do in terms of funds. But he could certainly organise things, endeavour for the staff to be paid, and pay visits to the tenants, seeing their quality of life and if there was anything they could all do to work together and improve the outcome of the land.

“Perhaps when we return to London, you will find a wife,” his mother said cajolingly.

“I doubt it,” he said.

“I’ll marry well,” Oliver said. “ And study hard.” He gave his brother a sanctimonious look. “Just like you hoped for me, Henry.”

Henry closed his eyes and wished very much for the journey to be over.

Thankfully, it wasn’t long before they pulled up the gravel avenue to Beaumont Place, and Oliver tumbled out with all the enthusiasm of youth. Nathaniel and Theo were already there, and just as Henry was wishing for peace, they found a way to grant it him.

“You must come and visit us, Mama,” Theo said. “Charles is at home, and it would be a very great shame for you to miss out on seeing him. You know he has a fondness for you. Plus, we asked Cook to have dinner ready for when you arrived. We thought you’d be hungry.”

The very thought of food turned his stomach, but Theo tugged him aside, peering into his face with some concern. “You look haggard,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said dryly.

“Stay here. We’ll entertain Mama and Oliver and send them back later on tonight. I know you will not mind missing Charles.”

His head felt heavy, and his mouth was dry. “It’s not Charles, Theo. I dislike babies in general.”

Instead of teasing him about how he would have to suffer children of his own one

day, she merely patted his arm. "Sleep it off," she advised. "You will feel better for it."

He grunted, saw to it that the servants were unpacking their trunks, and took himself off to the drawing room. He was not such a weakling that he would retire to his room to sleep it off, but a nap on the sofa would do him very well. His last thought as he closed his aching eyes was that the last time he had been in this room, Louisa had been there too, helping him hunt down his sister.

She followed him into his dreams.

When Louisa arrived at the Shrewsbury house in Grosvenor Square, she discovered that it was already being shut up. When she enquired, she was informed that the master of the house was selling and that the family had just departed for the country.

She ground her teeth together in frustration. By the looks of it, she had missed them by a matter of hours. Perhaps less. If Knight had not come to see her, there was a chance she would have discovered the family on the cusp of leaving.

As there was nothing else for it, she sent a note instructing Mr Upperton to purchase the property at full price, and returned home to pack before setting off for Kent.

She had been to his ancestral home once before, although that had been when she was attempting to pair his sister Annabelle with her friend Lord Sunderland. That had been last summer, and the endeavour had been a success, but her sentiments then had been wholly different from her sentiments now.

A year ago—less than that, perhaps as little as ten months ago—she had been prepared to hate Henry for all time. She had thought, even, that it would be easy.

Now she was yet another fool in love. The world did not need another. She didn't

care.

Beaumont Place was a grand Elizabethan manor that was still meticulously cared for—a product of Lady Shrewsbury’s dedication rather than her husband’s, Louisa fancied. The gardens were beginning to bloom as spring deepened its grip on the land and petals unfurled, and the bushes were all neatly trimmed. The sun glinted off tiny, uneven windowpanes as she drew up to the house and allowed her footman to hand her down.

An elderly butler, austere but with a kindly face, opened the door.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “I’m Lady Bolton. I believe the family is at home?”

“Only Lord Eynsham at present, ma’am,” he said, opening the door a little further.

“The rest of the family is dining at Havercroft.”

“Ah yes, where Norfolk lives.” She accepted the invitation and stepped inside. “As it happens, Lord Eynsham is precisely the man I came to see. Lead me to him, if you please.”

The butler looked at her, weighing her appearance. She did not expect him to recognise her as being Miss Picard—and indeed as Miss Picard she had only been invited to dine with the Beaumonts a handful of times—but after a second, a smile played across his mouth and he inclined his head. “As you please, my lady. This way. I believe he is in the drawing room.”

“Thank you. I would like to introduce myself, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, my lady.” He bowed again, and after leading her to the drawing room door, turned away to resume his duties.

Louisa pushed the door open to find the slightly old-fashioned drawing room bathed in light. And there, sprawled across one of the sofas, was Henry, his eyes closed. Shadows played idly across his face, drawing attention to the hollows under his cheeks. Still as handsome as ever. But gaunt to go with it, as though the past days had stripped him of some essence.

No doubt she could not take full blame. But enough could be laid at her door for a frisson of guilt to run through her.

Softly, almost afraid of waking him, she crossed the room to where he slept. Her feet were silent on the thick carpet, and she sank slowly to her knees.

“I am so very sorry,” she whispered, brushing the hair back from his face. Tenderness was a burn in her throat.

His eyelids fluttered open and his eyes fixed on her. She froze, expecting surprise, shock, confusion. Instead, a frown creased between his brows. His pupils were wide, still hazy with sleep.

“Henry,” she began, but he reached out, sliding his hand along her cheek to the back of her neck. As she paused, confused, he drew her clumsily to him and brought her mouth down on his. A lazy, sleepy kiss that had none of the urgency she had expected, given the manner of their last meeting. Even so, it sent an odd shiver down her spine. Every time they had come together, she had been the one to take control. After all, he was a novice compared to her.

Yet here his hands were large, holding her at the angle he wanted, and he felt fully in control as he licked at her bottom lip, encouraging her mouth to open for him. He shifted on the sofa, tugging her up and settling her between his legs, and answering heat spiralled through her with the same lazy intention as his mouth. As though, without a word, he intended to have her here, and she would let him.

This was not the reunion she had envisaged.

“Henry,” she repeated, drawing back and sucking in a sharp breath at the heavy want in his eyes. Already, even through her dress, she could feel he was hard underneath her. “We should talk first.”

“Odd,” he murmured, stroking her face with such gentleness it near broke her heart. “You rarely speak to me.”

“What are you talking about?”

His eyes had none of the sharpness she associated with him. They were still unfocused, looking half through her. “Kiss me, Louisa, and let us forget.”

“Forget what?”

“Everything.”

She sat up on him, taking his wrists so he did not reach for her again. “This is not a dream, Henry.”

He gave a lopsided smile, so relaxed and easy—so different from the man she knew him to be while wakeful and alert. “Of course not.”

“I mean it. Wake up.”

“I would rather kiss you again.”

There was nothing else for it. “I love you,” she told him, and slapped him across the cheek.

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Henry's dream had been by far the best he'd had of her. He tried to hold on to the feeling, but it slipped away as wakefulness, and the remainder of his hangover, crashed back over him. He blinked, eyes gritty, resigned to spending the rest of the day in the study and meeting with the steward.

That was, until he became aware of a weight on his stomach. He blinked again and brought his gaze to focus on the sight in front of him. Louisa was perched on his stomach, knees on either side of his hips, flexing her fingers.

Could it be he was still dreaming?

She raised her brows at him. "Will I be obliged to strike you again?"

Dazedly, he rubbed his cheek where he still felt the lingering sting of her last blow. "I would rather you didn't."

"Then do me the honour of believing I exist this time around." Her words were prim, but there was a dancing, mischievous light in her eyes that made his head spin.

"Did we kiss?" he asked.

"Strictly speaking, you kissed me."

He pushed into a sitting position, but although she slid down his body and into his lap, she made no effort to extricate herself from him. "I think," he said, "I must be dreaming."

“Perfectly real, I assure you.”

“But how did you come to be here?”

She reached up to pinch his cheek, her mouth twitching. “There is a wonderful thing called a carriage—truly a miracle of modern ingenuity—that conveyed me to—”

“Wretch,” he said, taking her hand and bringing it to his mouth before his beleaguered brain thought perhaps she would not want him to. But she was showing no signs of being averse to such treatment: she merely smiled and shuffled a little closer. “Why are you here? Did you receive the painting?”

“And your note.”

His brow wrinkled. “I left a note?”

“Avery was right,” she said with some delight. “You were drunk. Heavens, I thought I would never see the day where you proved beyond doubt that you are human.” Her laugh died as she frowned. “I should begin with an apology.”

“I don’t mind being woken in this way,” he assured her.

“Not about that, although it bodes well for what I’m about to say.” She took a breath. “You did me the honour of asking for my hand in marriage, and I was . . . less than kind in return.” Her smile was oddly, unusually shy, and he thought with dazed certainty that he could have looked at her for the rest of his life and not tired of it. “The problem is, Henry, I made an error in refusing you, and I only realised the extent of it when I saw the lengths you went to in order to retrieve my damn painting.”

“You have a foul mouth,” he said, unable to prevent himself from kissing her jaw.

“Yes. I am in short precisely the sort of woman I cannot conceive you wanting to be with, but I’ve finally come to the conclusion that I don’t care.”

A band around his chest broke away and snapped, and he felt as though he was floating. Or perhaps dreaming. Perhaps while he was sleeping he had imbibed a gallon of wine. “No?” he said.

“No,” she said. “Because, Henry Beaumont, I’m terribly in love with you.”

“Terribly,” he repeated.

“Awfully. Obscenely.” Her smile gained in warmth; her eyes were twin green flames. “Frankly, it is horrific and—”

Something snapped inside him, and he tugged her closer, fisting his hands in her dress as he kissed her. Her lips parted on a gasp, and he took every piece of her that she offered. If this was another figment of his imagination, another dream taking on an eerily realistic form, then he would make the most of every last second.

Her arms closed around his neck, fingers digging into his hair. Her nails scraped against his scalp. His hand was on her back, holding her against him, urgent. Eager. Her body was soft, and as he traced her curves, they were familiar as old songs.

“I had still more to say to you,” she said as he broke away to kiss her neck.

“Wait a while.”

“No, Henry.” Her slim fingers closed around his wrist, stilling him instantly. “I want you to listen to what I have to say before you do something you regret.”

“I have not regretted a single moment with you.”

“I’m going to ask you to marry me.”

He laughed, a little giddy. “What is there to regret in that?”

“I cannot bear children,” she said, the words stark and harsh as though it had taken everything in her to say them. Her hazel eyes were shuttered now, brown more than green. “If we marry, if you consent to marry me, you will not have an heir.”

He frowned, confused. “Louisa—”

“And do not tell me that perhaps things will be different, because they will not. And I warn you, Henry, I will not consent to bring up your bastards as my own.”

He laughed then, to her obvious displeasure. “There will be no bastards.”

“This is serious .”

“My love,” he said gently, sobering when he saw how distressed she was, “why do you think this would have any bearing on my decision?”

“Because you will be the Earl of Shrewsbury one day.”

He brushed an errant curl back from her lovely face. “When I resolved to break things off with Miss Winton, I thought I would never marry,” he said, holding her gaze so she understood how much he meant what he was saying. “I would have had no heirs then.”

“But—”

“I dislike children. Babies in particular, but all children. Even my own siblings, once I was an adult and they were not. After enduring the upbringing my father chose to

give us, I never yearned for a family. My brother can inherit when I die, and if I somehow outlive him, I am certain he will have children.” A thought occurred to him, and his hold on her waist tightened. “But what of you? Do you want a family?”

“No,” she said emphatically. “And you should know that, too. I understand the need to procreate as a species, but it has never been a personal desire of mine.”

“Excellent. Then we will want for nothing.”

She blinked and frowned, as though that was a ludicrous statement. “We? Then you will marry me despite it?”

“If you’ll have me.”

“Truly?”

He laughed, the sound rusty and disused. “I would be a madman and a fool not to marry you now.”

“That,” she said, “was a terrible proposal.” Then she smiled, and touched a finger to the dampness under her eyes. “I think I might be crying.”

He wiped away her tears with his knuckles and brought her close. “Marry me, Louisa,” he whispered. “Marry me and be happy.”

“Better.” She laughed, the sound was a little drunken. “And to think I tried my hardest to hate you.”

He kissed her damp, salty mouth, feeling it curve under his lips. “Then thank heavens there is one thing you put your mind to that you did not achieve.”

Given Henry could not be sure a servant—or worse, a member of his family—would not interrupt them, it wasn't long before they moved upstairs. She followed in his wake, her hand locked in his, gazing at the rambling old house around them with its history and crooked floors. He was certain and unerring in his movements, and she could not fail to recognise the significance of where he led her: his bedchamber.

This was a room, she saw at a glance, that bore all the signs of a child growing up here. There were scratches along the side of the mahogany dresser, as though he had taken a knife to the corner, and the curtains were very slightly ripped at the hem. A hand had been thrown up in the face of time, and here it had stopped.

He closed the door behind her and she looked around, curious about the paintings on the wall. “Are these Thomas Hyatt’s?”

“One. The others are replicas.”

“They’re beautiful.”

He looked directly at her. “So are you.”

The unabashed sincerity in his voice made her blush, a little foolishly, and she strolled to the window, gazing out across the garden and at the glint of ocean in the far distance. “I hadn’t known you were so near the sea here,” she said in surprise.

“Would you like to visit?”

She glanced archly over her shoulder. “Perhaps when we are married.”

“We should probably discuss the details,” he said, stepping forward to wrap his arms around her waist. She leant back into his chest. “I don’t mind telling you that a runaway marriage is off the table.”

“A shame. I was looking forward to fleeing to Gretna Green in the dead of night.”

“I believe you would,” he said wryly.

“If the situation called for it, certainly. But I doubt it will. After all, I’m of age and perfectly able to make my own decisions without the permission of a ridiculous parent.” She twisted in his arms, looking up into his handsome face. “May we marry here?”

“Not London?”

She made a face. “My first marriage was in London.”

“Then I’ll consult with the local reverend. Would you like me to procure a special licence?”

At the thought, her nose wrinkled. Gretna Green, she could have endured, but she had married Bolton by way of special licence. “Have the banns read,” she said. “We can wait three weeks. Unless you intend to abstain before our wedding night, in which case I will overcome my distaste for special licences, and even the prospect of marriage in London if it will make you mine faster.”

He chuckled, the sound low and rumbling. “If I’ve broken my vows once, I hardly see the harm in doing so again.”

“I never properly thanked you for retrieving my painting for me. It must have cost you a great deal.”

“No,” he said, fingertips brushing her face, his eyes searching hers. “It cost me nothing I don’t mind losing.” A slow smile broke across his face. “But if you would like to thank me, I can think of a few ways in which you may.” Without giving her

time to answer, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. Once there, he busied himself with the pins in her hair.

“When will your family return from Havercroft?”

“Not for some hours yet.” He eased her dress aside and kissed the slip of bare shoulder it revealed. “I’ll have you presentable again before then.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” she warned, and tugged at his cravat. She wanted it off, all of it. He retaliated by removing her layers, fumbling a little with the unfamiliar clothing—although if she had her way, it would become familiar soon enough. Before she could return the favour, he seated himself against his pillows and drew her bare back against his clothed chest.

“Henry,” she said, but he shook his head.

“Let me touch you.”

Well, there seemed little to be said to that.

His hand travelled luxuriously down her body, exploring one breast then the next, before the soft curve of her stomach, her hipbone, the flare of her thighs below, then finally between them. She could not help arching her back at his touch, and he made a low noise in the back of his throat at the slick feel of her against his fingers. So often he seemed to forget that as much as he wanted, she was his equal in desire.

She had every intention of being his equal in every way.

“You’re ready for me already,” he said in a low, guttural voice that made her think of a flickering candle, wick burnt low.

Pleasure throbbed deep inside her, even before he slid a finger in.

Her head tipped back against his shoulder, and his other arm came to band across her stomach, holding her in place. Her backside came into contact with his erection, and he sucked in a breath, his arm tightening. Remembering the way he had climaxed helplessly in his breeches the first time they'd come together, she rolled her hips, and it became a competition. Her naked, him clothed; both working to provide the other the most pleasure.

To think, they might have been doing this all along if she had not been such a fool.

The heat coiled in her lower belly, and she knew with a rush of delight and disappointment that he was going to win.

“Have you been practising?” she asked between breaths.

His grip on her squeezed reflexively. “No. Have you?”

She was so close now. “Not since before you.”

“I hated it,” he said, voice a low growl against her ear, finger insistent inside her, thumb stroking her folds in relentless circles. “When I learnt that you'd had lovers beside your husband while I had waited, I hated it.”

Her nails dug into his arm, and ground herself against him, urgently enough that he groaned.

“And now?”

“Now I am incapable of hating anything about you.” He stroked her one more time, and she quivered on the edge. “I want you to teach me all you've learnt. And then I

want to surpass all the men who came before.”

No one else had ever held her the way he had. And she had thought, before Henry had returned to England, that she hadn’t needed it.

He knew his lack of experience made him in need of tutorage; no other man she had been with had ever been so open to learning.

She had never felt so wanted when she was with him.

If she could have had her life play out differently, perhaps she would have done—she would have married him at twenty, and they would have learnt to love the life they had. But given the hand she was dealt, she refused to regret anything. Not her choices, nor the person she had become.

And she felt nothing but relief that he had come to accept it the way she had.

“I love you,” she gasped as pleasure broke over her.

His arm banded across her chest. “I love you too,” he said fiercely, then almost before her climax had ended, she was on her back and he was hovering over her, all taut muscles and unfocused eyes. It was a matter of seconds for him to strip off his waistcoat, shirt and breeches, and then he was inside her with a rush. She raised her legs to better allow him access, encouraging him deeper, and they both made a sound of satisfaction.

“I’m glad I waited for you,” he said, holding her gaze as she tightened around him, so sensitive the feel of him inside her was almost overwhelming, the sensation too much.

“I’m glad too,” she admitted. “I tried not to be.”

“I like that you are.”

She didn't apologise for not waiting for him, and he didn't ask her to. This was who they were, and only by becoming what they had could they ever have found their way back together again.

His body pressed her into the mattress, and she sank her teeth into his shoulder as he found completion inside her. They stayed like that a long while.

June 1815

The beaches in Kent were spectacular.

Louisa had grown up in Melton country, far from the sea, and she luxuriated in the knowledge that her new home was a mere hour away from the coast. The sun was hot on her bare skin, and she closed her eyes at its glare.

They had been married a mere two weeks. After their wedding, rather than the traditional honeymoon, Louisa and Henry had chosen to remain at Beaumont Place, putting her fortune to good work. Perhaps next year, they could go for a belated honeymoon, but this felt enough like a holiday that she had no objections.

In the end, they had opted to marry at the church in the local village, waiting the necessary three weeks for the banns to be read. At the time, she had thought the waiting would be intolerable, but it transpired there were several matters that required her attention. Once Mr Upperton had managed to discover Arabella's address, for example, she had posted to London to meet with him to discuss what should next be done. There, she had also had the pleasure of informing her mother of her upcoming marriage. Their relationship had always been fraught; Louisa now, out of filial duty, provided her mother with an allowance, but that was the end of it.

The meeting was predictably explosive, and resulted in Louisa retracting her mother's invitation to the wedding and vowing not to see her again for the foreseeable future—something she wished she had done a long time ago.

To aid with this goal, Henry had suggested that once they married, they take up

residence in Bolton's seat in Wiltshire. At first, she had been tempted to decline on principle, though she had spent little enough time there when married, and almost no time after his death. But Henry had persuaded her that filling the manor with new memories would be just the thing.

It transpired that he was persuasive, when he put his mind to it.

But for now, they were on a delightfully golden, secluded beach with cliffs rising above her and the waves pounding the sand. Nesting birds cawed and cackled on the sea breeze, and she was almost frightfully happy.

She sat up on her elbows, tossing her hair back from her face. London had been her home for the longest time, and she would eventually yearn to go back, but for now she was enjoying the solitude. Just her and her new husband, alone on the beach.

Conveniently alone, given the fact Henry had divested himself of his clothes and strode into the ocean, and was now swimming about utterly naked. Not for the first time, she had been pleasantly surprised by his comfort with nudity. For a man so upright and straitlaced, she had expected him to be somewhat prudish about his body.

Thankfully, he was not, and she had ample opportunity to appreciate him.

That was the purpose of art, after all.

Henry emerged from the surf like Poseidon, striding towards her with long, careless steps. He extended a dripping hand. "My lady."

"My hair will get all salty," she said, trying not to smile.

"Then you can wash it."

"And what about the cold?"

He grinned. “You’ll grow accustomed to it.”

“This is the army in you,” she said severely, “and it is not very becoming.”

“And I thought the new Lady Eynsham was always up for a bit of fun,” he said, his grin widening. The past few weeks had shown her the man he could have become if only he was shown a little happiness. That was something she intended to spend the rest of her life providing. “Come. After all, it’s not one’s thirtieth birthday every day.”

Scowling, she accepted his hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. “I thought I told you to forget that.”

“Thirty is an excellent age.”

“Not for a bride,” she said, as sternly as she could command. Water glistened across his pale chest and shoulders, and she absently ran her fingers along a scar on his ribs—a token from the war.

“I beg to differ,” he said. Without warning, he scooped her into his arms, plastering her thin shift to his wet, cold body. She shrieked as he turned and strode back towards the sea.

“Henry Beaumont! Put me down at once.”

“This is a necessary rite of passage,” he said. “This is the second day you’ve sat on the shore and watched me swim.”

“I was perfectly content.”

He smiled down at her. “I wasn’t,” he said simply, and although she did her best to maintain her scowl, she found it easing in the face of his artless comment. Being

adored was taking some getting used to, although she distinctly enjoyed it.

Then he dropped her, fully clothed, into the ocean.

She gasped, sinking straight under, a wave closing over her head. After the almost burning warmth of the sun, the water was shockingly cold, briefly stealing her breath. She uncurled, reaching below with her bare toe until she encountered sand. Her head broke the surface, water flicking a perfect arc of droplets that sparkled in the light.

Henry was laughing, one hand against his chest, and she sucked in a breath to scold him before giggles overtook her, too.

She had thought, before her birthday struck, that with age she would grow increasing staid and sensible. Instead, all she had found was that she'd lacked someone to laugh with.

She splashed water into his face. "That was completely unacceptable, my lord."

"Yes," he said, and took hold of her waist, drawing her closer to him. Her lips were dipped with salt, a seagull screeched overhead, and the sun glinted off the waves with reckless, beautiful abandon.

Her life was full to the brim, and she was happy .

His lips brushed her forehead as he eased them further into the waves, until they no longer broke around them. The swell rose from her chest to her chin, then back down.

Horrifically cold, but as he had promised, she was already growing accustomed to it.

"Do you forgive me?" he asked, his hand cupping her buttocks and giving a squeeze. Despite the temperature, she felt him stir against her stomach.

“Perhaps I could be persuaded to,” she said, and he laughed, kissing her again. “Though I am certain my hair is ruined.”

“No more so than mine.”

She sent him a scornful look, where he always kept his hair unfashionably short. “I hardly consider you to be a judge.”

He merely hummed, turning so the swells rose against his back, not hers. Behind his shoulders, she could see the expanse of the ocean, the sky lightening to the ambiguous shade of the horizon, where distant clouds gathered.

“I wish we could stay here forever,” she said.

“You really would get cold then.”

She wrapped her legs around his waist. “Perhaps, but I can think of ways to keep warm.”

“Not forever,” he said firmly, and she laughed.

“I’m expecting Arabella Princely to be back in England next month,” she said, and he glanced down at the sudden change of subject. “I should be in London when that happens.”

“We should be in London.”

“You are interested in meeting her?”

“I’m interested in playing the role of protective husband,” he mused. “Perhaps the novelty will wear off, but it will be a nice change.”

Her hair, long and loose, tangled about them both as a particularly large swell breached her chin. “I suppose I’ll allow it, so long as you keep to your corner of the room and only speak when spoken to.”

He smiled against her mouth. “I would never dream of interfering.”

“Liar.”

His laugh was infectious, as warm as the summer sun. “I would have to be a fool to think you incapable of handling yourself.” He licked her earlobe. “But it would give me great pleasure to scowl from a corner.”

“You are particularly good at scowling.”

“A man must have an occupation.” He brushed the strands of her brown hair off his shoulders. “You know,” he said, a little too casually, “I was thinking that it might be time for you to start painting again.”

“I was painting just this morning.”

“I meant to display in the Royal Academy.” His eyes met hers, serious once more, the same colour as the sea below and the sky above. A hook straight for her heart; it was no wonder she had never been able to resist him. “Perhaps you can no longer paint as Louisa Picard, but that doesn’t mean the world can’t know you under a different name.”

“The risk is—”

“Negligible. No one will for a moment suspect a thing.” He half-smiled. “I would hate to see you give up on your dream just because one man did his best to take it from you.”

Her heart thudded in her chest. This was a thought she'd had on occasion after sending Knight back to the country with his tail between his legs. But she had never been able to decide if that was still her dream.

Until Henry offered it to her on a platter, no strings attached, just an earnest wish to see her happy.

How she loved him—how earnestly, desperately, wholly she loved him. “And what name would you suggest?”

“That choice is yours.”

With him, her choices always had been.

“Beaumont,” she said, and smiled. “Perhaps I could paint as a Beaumont.”