



# The Viscount's Curvy Prize (Curves & Cravats)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** He always plays by the rules, but her curves make him want to break them all...

All it took was one drink too many for Benedict, Viscount Seton, to admit his fascination with Miss Emmaline Winters. She was endearingly shy. She was enticingly curvy... She was the daughter of the portrait artist Benedict had hired. She should be safe in his home, but each hour spent in her company makes Benedict want to reach out and take what he wants for once, the consequences be damned.

Emmaline has been painting portraits for her father since his eyes started to fail years ago. Now, she is tasked with taking the likeness of possibly London's most serious Lord. But, why does her famously steady hand shake so when in his presence? Something about the Viscount affects her in ways she has never felt before, a heady thrill that makes her desire things that no proper Miss should want. Of course, a man such as he would never have eyes for a girl of her station, right?

In the wake of a drunken wager to seduce Miss Winters, Benedict tries to fight all his basest urges and do the right thing. Resist the idea at all costs... Breaking the rules only leads to broken hearts, especially when seduction is on the cards

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## CHAPTER ONE

LONDON, 1820

Benedict, the esteemed Viscount Seton, had been staring stonily into space for what felt like hours when suddenly a vision in sensible grey cotton walked into his line of sight. The appearance of this divine apparition sent his heart thudding and a rush of sound to his ears so intense, that Benedict could not hear a word spoken to him.

The unknown woman stood in front of him, her mouth moving as Mr Winters, the wizened old painter Benedict had hired, stood nodding beside her. Benedict sat forward, enthralled, watching perfect rose-pink lips form words that must surely be making sense as the room slowly returned to focus around him.

He shook his head, attempting to clear the spell he had apparently fallen under. The goddess tilted her head, mouth pursed as she placed her hand on what Benedict noted was a particularly generous and curvaceous hip.

Goddess... really? Never had the word even crossed his mind in connection with a female.

“My Lord?” The woman’s voice floated towards him, an edge to the soft dulcet tones.

“ My Lord? ”

Reality crashed into him, and Benedict started, trying to focus on what appeared to be a serious conversation. Mr Winters stepped in front of the woman, and Benedict

gratefully switched his attention away from her distracting presence.

“My Lord, may I introduce my daughter, Miss Emmaline Winters. She will be taking over the painting process for me while I see to an emergency. Emmaline is extremely competent, I assure you.”

Miss Winters executed a very demure curtsy, just low enough that Benedict caught a glimpse of bountiful cleavage, unsuccessfully covered by a light fichu that only drew attention to the mysterious shadow beneath. As she rose, her gaze lifted, running up his body to his face, seemingly observing him just as he did her.

Benedict frowned, confused and unaccountably aroused. He managed to form a question. “The portrait?”

“Will be completed on time, I assure you of that, Lord Seton,” replied the painter hastily, lifting his hands placatingly. “My Emmaline has a talent not often found in those of her sex.”

Benedict stifled a sigh of annoyance, glancing towards Miss Winters’s tormenting person, and then back to her father. “I am sure your daughter is quite proficient if you say it is so. Her being of the feminine sex is of no importance to this conversation.”

With a flourish of his hand, he dismissed the matter. The only thing that mattered was that the portrait was completed without any delay.

As inconvenient as it would be to have Miss Winters take over the painting, Benedict did not agree with the common sentiment that women were inferior to men when it came to talent.

Why, his sister Honora was a woman of many creative gifts and he did not doubt that there were many highly skilled painters hidden amongst the ladies of the ton. After

all, it was a classic woman's pastime, painting. Admittedly, it mostly applied to watercolours and whatnot.

What on earth had happened to his faculties? His brain had obviously stopped working coherently if he was reduced to considering the various merits of feminine handwork.

Mr Winters spluttered an apology, and if Benedict wasn't mistaken, Miss Winters bit back a shy, almost grateful smile at his words. Benedict frowned at the sight, suddenly and inexplicably annoyed by Mr Winters's words.

Miss Winters dipped her head at him, nodded to her father and took herself off to the makeshift studio that had been erected in the corner of the ballroom, busying herself there as Benedict stared after her like a sailor thirsting for water.

"Would you like to take a break, My Lord?" asked the painter, tugging on his beard and then hurrying off to instruct his daughter on the finer details. Clucking over her and gesticulating wildly as she quietly arranged the paints to her satisfaction on the table beside the canvas.

Benedict grimaced, shifting in his chair awkwardly. Thank goodness he was arranged with his legs crossed, or the inconvenient bulge inside his pantaloons would be blatantly on display. He carefully withdrew his pocket watch, making a show of consulting the time as he slowly counted down the seconds. Praying for his excitement to subside without embarrassing him.

When he had himself somewhat in hand, Benedict rose and called for the Hutchins, the butler, ordering tea and an assortment of treats. The errand thought of Miss Winters biting into an iced cake almost had him undone all over again, but he determinedly got himself under control.

While he waited on the refreshments, Benedict strolled aimlessly around the room, stretching stiff legs as he watched the painter and daughter out of the corner of his eye.

How the artist was still able to work was a mystery. Mr Winters was an ancient stick of a man with a tuft of white hair on his head and a gold-rimmed spectacles that fell off his nose almost habitually. However, he was the best portrait artist of the time, and Benedict knew that fashion dictated he should employ him. A pity no one had warned him about the temptation Miss Winters would pose.

Benedict took a deep breath, trying to understand this irrational reaction to the woman.

She was comely, yes, but he had been in the company of many pretty women. Under his employ, it was his duty to protect Miss Winters, not ogle her like the lowest rake in London.

She might not be a lady of his circle, but she was still a woman of quality. Miss Winters deserved his respect and a distant sort of acknowledgement. Nothing more.

Unfortunately, his gaze would not stop straying back to her.

There was something about her presence that intrigued him. It seemed ironic that a woman who should be arranged in all her voluptuous glory as a muse for some artiste in a fashionable salon would be the one holding a paintbrush.

A footman rolled in the tea tray, arranging it neatly beside the dias and providing a welcome distraction from the wicked turn of his thoughts.

Benedict cleared his throat. "Can I interest you in some tea, Mr Winters... Miss Winters?" They both looked up, but politely declined, going back to the work as

Benedict sighed and indicated for the footman to pour. Benedict sipped on his tea as he considered whether he would be able to sit for hours alone with Miss Winters.

Never had Benedict felt such a sudden loss of command. He was a serious man, a member of Parliament. A man of words, and logic, not emotion.

Benedict decided he needed reinforcements, to remind him of his sanity.

Perhaps Silas and Honora. His sister would be the perfect distraction and would surely spend her time nattering away about paint and the like with Miss Winters while Benedict learned how to ignore his reaction.

Benedict needed this painting to cement his election into the Albany Club, a society for polyglots that was notoriously exclusive. It was an elaborate way of securing entry, but a tradition nonetheless. To gain admission, one had to hang a portrait in the hallowed halls of the institution along with the rest of the esteemed members. There were no two ways about it.

Mr Winters clapped his hands, indicating that all was arranged to his satisfaction. “I will leave you now, but I will return and check on Emmaline’s progress in three days.” With that, the man bowed his way out the door, leaving Benedict alone with his daughter.

Miss Winters briskly tied on an apron and positioned herself before the canvas, arranging her skirts neatly as she shifted to the best situation. She glanced up at him as she took up the paintbrush, luminous brown eyes sparkling with something like mischief.

“Now, My Lord, where shall I have you?”

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### CHAPTER TWO

Emmaline stared with fascination at the arresting male specimen before her as the most ridiculous words in all of Christendom fell from her lips.

“Where shall I have you?”

She was innocent but not ignorant, for heaven’s sake.

Heat rose in her cheeks as Emmaline snapped her mouth shut, but it was far too late. Blast her tongue, it was always getting her into trouble of some sort. She had an annoying habit of losing her good sense when she was nervous.

Lord Seton paused mid stride at the words, glancing at her before moving forward again, and Emmaline swore she saw the faintest hint of a smile curve the corner of his sensuously shaped mouth.

No, it must be her imagination. There was no way that a man such as he, with his serious, almost sombre expression, had an iota of humour in that lean, lithe body.

The lord stepped up onto the dais that had been erected and draped elaborately for the portrait, elegantly lowering himself onto the couch and crossing his legs in a nonchalant manner that did funny things to her belly.

Some low, fluttery feeling like a buzzing sensation inside of her that Emmaline was sure she had read about in the illicit novels she smuggled up to her bed chamber.

Her father did not approve of romantic fantasies. Those were for others, people who did not need to worry about putting food on the table.

Shaking herself out of the stupor, Emmaline took a deep breath and surveyed her subject in all his glory.

Squinting slightly, to separate the shadows from the light, she observed the narrow planes of his face, almost wolfish, his blue eyes were hooded but slightly slanted. His wardrobe was pristine black - black superfine jacket, waistcoat, black pantaloons and footwear. It was broken only by the snowy perfection of his shirt and intricately knotted cravat, topped by the fashionably tousled dark blond hair that fell across his brow.

From the light catching the crown of his head to the manicured tips of his fingers Lord Seton was a perfect specimen of male power.

It was one of the many luxuries Emmaline enjoyed about painting portraits, the opportunity to stare unabashedly at people. People, of all kinds and classes, fascinated her. Never was there a face that did not offer some small unique quality that did not cry out for her to sketch it down quickly, gathering faces and features with her pen or charcoal as selfishly as a child hoarding sweet candy.

The lord cleared his throat, then again, more loudly, and Emmaline started on her chair, smiling with embarrassment as her hand started to move across the canvas, the brush tracing wash lines across the surface with light, energetic movements.

She squinted at the lines and tones already laid down, noting the inconsistencies and shaky lines of her father's hand. More and more he was leaving her to do the bulk of the work. They were trading on his name alone at this point, as he had not finished a painting start to finish in more than a year.



Lord Seton looked steadily back at her as she worked, and Emmaline felt herself grow hot under his view. Her gaze flicked up to his on more than one occasion to gauge what she could see there. His eyes were a startling clear blue framed with thick dark lashes, and they flashed with something that made Emmaline squirm in her seat.

She needed to change the atmosphere, it was getting too hard to concentrate, her hand wavering unsteadily as it picked up some fresh paint with the brush.

Her tongue took control once again. “You look like a Puritan, My Lord,” said Emmaline with a daring tilt of her head. “Surely your valet despairs at the austere palette of your dress. He must long for a brightly coloured waistcoat.”

The lord narrowed his gaze and cleared his throat, eyes running from her head to the tips of her toes where her plain calfskin half-boots peeked out from under her hems.

“And you, my dear, look like a sensible young woman. It seems we must both be wrong.”

For a moment they just stared at each other, taking the other’s measure, and then Emmaline began to paint again, tracing the angular line of his jaw slowly with the tip of her brush. “Brummel himself would approve, I suppose, that style of knot is very complex. Your valet must be much sought after.”

“I wouldn’t know, you would have to ask the man. It is what I pay him for.”

“You do not like fashion?” Emmaline could feel two high spots of colour blooming on her cheeks at her boldness to speak in such a manner.

The man seemed almost confused for a moment, blinking at her in a perplexed manner that made Emmaline bite back a smile.

“I have more important things to think about than the colour of my waistcoat,” Lord Seton muttered, adjusting said garment and shifting on his chair.

“Such as?” prompted Emmaline, sitting forward and listening with half an ear as the man finally relaxed and allowed her to see him properly. The natural tilt of his head, the concentration of his gaze and the coiled energy that radiated off him.

And so the conversation finally started, Emmaline offering the odd soft word of encouragement as Lord Seton launched into a discussion about the finer points of popular politics and the crown.

The change in light as the afternoon drew near was her cue to put down her brush, standing up slowly as her feet remembered how to hold her weight.

“Thank you, My Lord,” Emmaline said as she untied her apron, pulling it away from her dress briskly, but taking her fichu with it. As the lacy scrap of fabric floated to the ground, Emmaline gasped and instinctively bent to snatch it up, standing up again with her cheeks flushed and quickly turning and tucking it back around her chest.

When she looked up again, Lord Seton was staring at her in a strained manner. He nodded to her, carefully looking away from her person to rise and stalk out of the room in a brusque manner that belied the pleasant afternoon they had spent together.

Apparently, she had managed to upset the man with her clumsiness. Although that did not feel quite right.

“Well I never,” muttered Emmaline, gathering up her sketchbook and making her way to the hallway.

There was a room assigned to her in this vast house, and after such a trying morning she intended to find it. And order a bath. And food. And sweets, too, purely because

the man had not even said good afternoon before he quit the room.

### CHAPTER THREE

At the end of a second day spent obsessing over Miss Winters, Benedict accepted defeat and reached out to Silas, the Earl of Windham, and his closest friend.

Since Silas had finally admitted his feelings and married Bendict's sister, Honora, he had been annoyingly sensible and steady. Perhaps he would have some valuable advice on avoiding temptation, as he had done so himself for so long.

Benedict called for his carriage and hastily penned a note to Silas asking him to meet him at White's urgently, then donned his coat and beaver hat, telling Hutchins that he would take his dinner at the club.

When he arrived, Benedict skirted a group of lords carrying on about some or other wager and settled in with a bottle of fine brandy to wait on Silas.

After Benedict had finished dinner and almost half the bottle of brandy, Silas finally made an appearance.

"Sorry I am late, Honora needed me to rub her feet, they are swollen with her condition," said Silas with a sheepish grin.

Honora was expecting the couple's first babe and at the excuse, Benedict rolled his eyes and poured his friend a brandy. "Please, keep the details of your marital bliss to yourself. That is my sister."

Silas laughed and took a generous swig of his glass. "Yes, it is bliss," he countered

with a wink.

Benedict shook his head but grinned. It was heartening to see his friend in such good spirits. Silas had suffered periodically from melancholy for many years, with Benedict regularly trying to drag him up out of his misery to no avail.

“Now, tell me what is this emergency that could not wait for the morning.”

Benedict grimaced and dropped his eyes as if he had found something incredibly interesting at the bottom of his glass.

“There is... a woman,” offered Benedict at last.

Silas stared incredulously, then stifled a chuckle at the misery etched over Benedict’s face.

“A woman? Hell's teeth, I never imagined to hear those words from you.”

Benedict frowned and Silas leaned forward with a smile and slapped his knee in commiseration. “Welcome to the club, my friend.”

“This is not a jest, Silas,” grumbled Benedict, finishing his drink and pouring himself another. For a moment the room swayed around him, but he shook his head to clear it and carried on.

Perhaps he should slow down, as he hardly ever drank to excess, but if ever there was a time for brandy, it was now.

“She is the daughter of the painter I hired for the portrait I need for the Albany Club. Miss Winters.”

Silas urged him on with his tale. “And?”

“And she has taken over the painting for her father and now I am stuck in a room with Miss Winters all day with nothing else to look at but her.”

“And you want to look, I gather. You want to more than look?” said Silas as he cocked his head.

Benedict glared at his friend. “Do not speak of her that way. I am not suggesting... anything inappropriate. She is employed in my home.” He fell back in his chair with a huff of frustration.

Silas raised his hands in mock surrender. “Of course, my apologies. But what if she was not employed by you, would that change things?”

Benedict sighed. “How would it change things? We are not in the same circles, and what would I do, court her?” He shook his head. “The idea is ridiculous.”

“Is it?” asked Silas, swirling his drink. “You are thirty-three years old and you have no wife, no heir. No woman in all these years has captured your attention. Just when are you planning to secure your affairs?”

“That is not the issue at hand, Silas. The portrait is the key to my membership of the Albany Club. That is what is at stake here,” said Benedict.

Silas scoffed. “Who cares about a bloody portrait, hmm? What’s so important about it anyway? I know you like to dabble in your clubs, but how many memberships do you truly need?”

“I have been trying to get into the Albany Club for ages, not only for my own interests but also to represent the Home Office. You know they like to recruit for

various foreign diplomatic services.” Benedict scowled, losing his train of thought. “That’s not the point though-”

Silas grinned, eyeing his friend speculatively. “Yes, old chap. That is certainly not the point. But I know what is...”

He cheekily raised his glass in Benedict’s direction and then threw back the contents in one self-satisfied gulp. “You, Lord Seton, have finally succumbed to the allure of a woman. You have been struck down, without a doubt, by Eros. By God, it’s so satisfying to see you brought low. Finally, you walk on the mortal plain with the rest of us lowly beings.”

“There’s no need for that,” grumbled Benedict, frowning in Silas’s direction. “Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t we?”

“Oh ho, not nearly thick enough,” exclaimed Silas with a grin. “I remember too well all the many times you told me to ‘just get over it ’ when I was in deep over my feelings. Now is my time to repay the favour, I think.”

“If it was so simple to put Miss Winters out of my mind, I would surely have done so already,” sighed Benedict, leaning back and bumping his head against the backrest of the chair in frustration.

“I know, and I am going to make it even worse for you,” smirked Silas. “I am here to tell you, in no uncertain terms, that you should make your move.”

“What, are you mad?” exclaimed Benedict, blinking owlshly at his friend. “You know I cannot, she is under my protection, staying under my roof. I could never...”

“No, you would never. But I am here to tell you that you should. Why, how do you know that she doesn’t feel the same about you, have you asked her? What if the Miss

Winters is willing?"

Benedict stuttered an intelligible answer, his cheeks red as he blustered in the face of this alarming idea.

Silas laughed. "Oh yes, and now you will not be able to put that out of your mind even if you tried. The temptation is there, growing stronger every minute." He leaned forward, glancing around the room as if about to deliver a state secret. "Women aren't some precious treasures to be put on a shelf and admired, that is the mistake I made and it cost me so much time. Women have wants, feelings, and desires as well."

With a wink, Silas smiled, while Benedict tried in vain to gather his argument in the face of the onslaught.

"Who are you to know what Miss Winters's feelings are towards you? Benedict, you have spent your whole life doing the right thing, perhaps you should do the wrong thing, just once."

"I came to you for a voice of reason, not to make matters worse," rebuffed Benedict.

"Let us put a wager on it!" exclaimed Silas. "I say it is worth the risk."

"You are in your cups," grumbled Benedict, furious that his friend was treating the subject as a jest.

"Nay, you are chicken, lily-livered, scared. Both that you might win, and that you might lose."

"One does not wager on a lady's virtue," scowled Benedict.

"What's this about a wager?" came a voice from behind, and Benedict turned to find



Lord Branwin swaying slightly on his feet behind his chair.

“None of your concern,” said Silas quickly, but it was too late.

“A wager of seduction is it? Didn’t think you had it in you,” grinned the man, clapping Benedict on his shoulder. “Carry on!” he cried and wandered back to his table.

“Now look what you have done,” said Benedict. “Imagine it was Honora we were discussing now, you would never have allowed her name anywhere near such a conversation. You would have called me out.”

“Branwin won’t even remember this conversation in the morning, I assure you. But you are right, I apologise.” Silas raised his hands placatingly.

But it was too late, Benedict was already storming out of the club in a fury.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Painting Lord Seton had become an exercise in control for Emmaline.

There was just something sensual in the act of tracing his form on the canvas, each slow drag of the brush describing the masculine contours before her in a language only she could understand.

Sometimes they spoke, sometimes they sat the whole day in silence, but always Emmaline was thinking.

For heaven's sake could she please just stop thinking?

Thinking about the tone of his voice, the veins that lined the back of his hands, the way he clenched his jaw when he was deep in contemplation. All the details that one noticed if they spent hours examining a person.

The worst was the feeling that she was growing to know him. That was the most dangerous.

Emmaline had to constantly remind herself that although he might be telling her stories of his boyhood, his sister or details from his day, he was not opening up to her in actual truth.

He was merely bored.

Emmaline had worked on being easy to talk to, she had some practice in making her

clients comfortable. That was all.

Anything to bring her down from the clouds and ground her in reality.

He was a Viscount, a peer of the realm. She was just a lowborn woman who was painting his portrait.

She was working .

Emmaline looked down at her hands and grimaced at the sight. That was a reminder enough of the divide between them. Her hands were calloused from holding the brushes and constant cleaning with turpentine. Her nails were a travesty, and paint was perpetually embedded in her cuticles.

These were not the hands of a gently bred lady. She would never be anything but plain, practical Emmaline.

Just at that moment, a lady walked into the ballroom, a vision in white ruffled muslin. She was blonde and pretty, her cheeks glowing with health and her eyes sparkling with good humour.

The woman waltzed up to Benedict and stepped up to the diaz, bussing his cheek affectionately as she greeted him.

Looking between them Emmaline noticed a resemblance, they must be related.

It was chastening how relieved she felt at the realisation.

Viscount Seton stood up and led the lady over to where Emmaline was seated before the canvas.

Emmaline jumped up and stepped back with a bow of her head, giving them space to view the progress of the work as she tried to inconspicuously clean her hands on an oil-stained rag.

But Lord Seton walked straight past the painting to Emmaline with a smile that almost stole her breath, her hands paused mid-wipe.

“Miss Winters, this is my sister, the Countess of Windham. Honora this is Miss Winters, she is a most accomplished artist.”

Emmaline blushed shyly as she bobbed a curtsy for the lady, quickly hiding her hands behind her skirt and murmuring her greetings and thanks while the pair smiled at her most confusingly.

It felt like she spent most of her days here with her cheeks flushed. It was mortifying.

Lady Windham turned to the painting and exclaimed in delight, gushing over the details to Lord Seton as Emmaline gratefully stepped back from the unusual attention.

After a moment, Benedict excused himself and left the room. Lady Windham turned to Emmaline and engaged her in the finer details of painting technique, surprising Emmaline with her knowledge of the subject.

Within minutes, they were chatting away, and Emmaline was bemused to discover that she rather liked Lady Windham.

“Miss Winters, I am so enjoying your company,” said Lady Windham, running her fingers along the cover of Emmaline’s sketchbook and then impulsively picking it up and flicking through the pages. “Oh, good heavens!” the lady laughed, opening the page to a sketch of Lord Seton’s profile, a stern expression on his face.

“This is just the most perfect depiction of Benedict I have ever seen,” she exclaimed, flicking through all the other sketches Emmaline had done from various angles. “He is always far too serious in any situation. He does not know how to relax at all.”

She leaned close in a conspiratorial manner, checking quickly that they were still alone. “I also like to dabble at portraits, I must show you my sketches of Benedict, especially those in his parliamentary finery. He always carries himself so superior, it's terribly amusing.”

Emmaline smiled at the Lady's good humour, feeling a bit uncertain about her familiarity.

She took Emmaline's hand, squeezing it quickly. “You must call me Honora, I feel like we could be great friends. And I could call you...?”

“Emmaline...” answered Emmaline with surprise. “Of course, you must call me Emmaline.”

“What a lovely name, it suits you perfectly!” Lady Honora put her hand to her stomach, flashing Emmaline a smile that she had only seen on women in a certain condition.

“I am expecting. I know you can't tell quite yet, but I am. Do you think you would be able to do a painting of me for my husband? I know he would love your work.”

“I am sure my father would-”

“Oh, no, I want you to do it, my dear Emmaline. This is something only another woman would truly only be able to capture, and look at your skill. Please?”

Emmaline smiled shyly, bopping a quick curtsy in happiness. “Of course, Lady

Windham. I would be honoured.”

“Honora, my dear,” she said with a delighted clap of her hands.

“Yes, thank you, Lady Honora.”

At that moment Lord Seton strolled back into the room, and Lady Windham called for a chair to be arranged for her beside Emmaline while Lord Seton settled himself for his sitting.

The rest of the morning seemed to pass in a blur as Lady Windham talked Emmaline’s ear off while she painted.

It was such a pleasant time, Emmaline was almost disappointed when it was time to pack up for the day.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Benedict can't believe he even entertained the conversation about the bet, it's been almost a week since the conversation with Silas and he just couldn't get it out of his head.

That is why he started coming into the ballroom at night, hoping to dissuade himself from the crazed idea that he should go ahead with the disastrous scheme.

Maybe he should seduce the woman and get her out of his system. That seemed to be the commonly held solution, and perhaps that would be the only way to purge her from his thoughts. Other men seemed to have an appetite for such affairs, even if Benedict found it a bit distasteful.

If only he had any experience in seduction. Or with the all-encompassing feeling that he had met his match, finally, in a woman.

What was it about Miss Winters that fascinated him beyond all reason?

Unfortunately, over the last few days, she seemed to have taken up residence in the vicinity of his heart as well as inspiring this physical attraction to her.

A distinct feeling in his body, almost like indigestion, came over him whenever she sat herself down to paint.

It was uncanny, Miss Winter's ability to draw him out of his thoughts while she worked diligently away. Benedict had found himself telling her things he had not

thought on for many years, or told to anyone besides Honora and Silas. Like the memories of Christmas with his parents at their house in the country, the way Honora had scared him witless when she went missing, or even the scent of his mother's perfume and the fact that he kept an old bottle of it locked away for safekeeping.

It was as if Miss Winters looked into his very soul sometimes, the way she cocked her head and observed him in complete stillness now and then. Tracking his movements with her curious dark eyes while his heart beat a little faster in his chest.

It was a traitorous organ, indeed.

Every night he came here, when the servants were finally abed, to inspect the progress of her work. Some days it seemed that she made hardly any headway, merely working on the shadows of his hands or the fine details of his dress. On other days she painted furiously, setting his likeness down with bold sure strokes.

Bending the paint to her will as it took on the appearance of the backdrop and atmosphere. Miss Winters was supremely talented.

Benedict found a hint of jealousy burning in his heart sometimes when he considered that she had painted others in this way. Other powerful men, who had most certainly coveted her just as he did.

He took a sip of his drink, setting the decanter haphazardly down on the lip of the dias and hauling himself up to slump down on the settee. Suddenly too tired to take himself to bed and try to sleep this madness off.

For once he understood Silas's old habit of taking to the bottle instead of dealing with problems head on. There was no honourable way for Benedict to resolve his infatuation with Miss Winters.



If he approached her in any way while she worked on the painting, he was taking advantage of her. That was the fact of the matter.

Never mind that he had concluded he would have courted her without hesitation, had they met under different circumstances.

Benedict stared absently at the ceiling, the candlelight glinting off the gilded moulding.

When had he last held a ball in this room?

Many years ago, perhaps for Honora's come out. Benedict pondered his apparent lack of social life with growing perturbation. Why should he waste his time with frivolity when he was engaged in more important work? He had responsibilities to parliament, sometimes even to the Home Office for diplomatic purposes.

His life was rich, in its own way, wasn't it? Even if he did not have a wife.

A wife. Yes, if he had done the usual thing he would have a young wife waiting for him in bed and he would not be sitting here pining like a fool over the painter's comely daughter.

It was not as if Benedict had been short of lovers exactly. There was always a willing widow about town ready to fall into a fleeting tryst or two without much effort on his part.

But although he desired Miss Winters in a carnal manner, he also looked upon her as someone who deserved to be treated with care.

Perhaps if he only kissed her?

No, that way led to madness. Miss Winters was a guest staying under his roof, trusted to be safe here by her father.

Where was the doddering old fool anyway? Only a dullard would leave such a jewel unattended and unchaperoned.

Perhaps that was his plan, to dangle his daughter in front of London's richest men and hope that one took the bait.

Benedict determined that he wanted a word with Mr Winters, even if it was purely to tell him that he took his daughter for granted.

Benedict realised with a snort of self-pity that he really should take himself to bed. He was well into his cups and he needed sleep to clear his mind.

### CHAPTER SIX

Emmaline hummed to herself uncertainly, holding up the flickering candle to assess the angle of the halls.

Which way was the ballroom again? And did the peerage have to have quite so many rooms?

Lifting the hem of her plain linen nightgown, Emmaline hurried down the passage she thought was the right way.

Damn that man for lurking around in her thoughts all evening. Was it not enough that she had thought of Lord Seton all day while she painted him?

The only way to purge him from her mind was to put pencil to paper and draw him away. Hopefully, that would alleviate the unfortunate symptoms Emmaline was ashamed to say only grew stronger with each day spent in his presence.

She was beyond infatuated. There were no two ways about it.

Yes, something like this had happened before, and it had not worked out well for her heart. Frightening to think she was susceptible to such nonsense once again.

That young lord had toyed with her on a whim until he grew bored with the performance. He had flirted shamelessly from the first, and she had been gullible enough then to believe it was genuine. At the time, Emmaline had chalked her state of calf love to age and naivety, hoping that she had learned a valuable lesson and

moving on with her life as if nothing had ever happened.

Emmaline had thought herself immune to such nonsense now at the advanced age of four and twenty, but alas, it seemed that all it had taken was a strong jawline and a set of moody blue eyes to cast the affliction over her.

She sighed and straightened her spine as she padded down the passage, determined to rid herself of this ridiculous fascination. That was all it was, another facet of her creative focus. She was sure of it.

It was quite understandable to immerse oneself completely in the subject of intense artistic study.

Emmaline would never be the type of woman to capture the attention of a man such as Lord Seton. They came from two different worlds, and he probably hardly noticed her beyond the service she was providing. That was just the way of it.

It was shameful to confess that deep in her heart, there was a small wish that things could be different.

Last night, she had tossed and turned in bed, her heart beating, agitated and despairing over her state of singledom.

Reluctantly, she had allowed a daydream to soothe her senses, one where she was born pretty and delicate, like the high-born ladies of the ton, not plump and sensible, more fit for housework than dancing in ballrooms.

In the dream, she was doing just that, circling the room on the arm of one man after another, the strains of some elegant arrangement filling the air until finally, her eyes met his across the room. The connection between them was as strong as the first day she had met him, except now his gaze returned her fever, as he crossed the room with

a single-minded focus towards her and...

And what? Her body did not know, but it wanted something most fervently indeed.

That restless feeling had kept her up tonight until the clock in the hall struck twelve and Emmaline had reluctantly dragged herself from her bed and lit a candle, cursing herself for leaving her sketchpad behind beside the portrait she was very close to finishing now.

Finally, despite her jumbled thoughts, she managed to navigate her way to the entrance of the ballroom. Emmaline pushed the door open and hurried inside, carefully cupping the flame of her candle so that it did not blow out as she scurried across the large, echoing chamber to her easel.

“What cruel dream is this, come to tempt me in my hour of weakness?”

There came a velvety rough voice through the air, like a hand trailing across the back of her neck. Emmaline squeaked and spun around, clutching her nightgown as her heart raced fit to burst from her chest.

There was the source of her agony, reclining on the settee set up on the dias. His face was cast in shadow, lit only by a candle set recklessly on the floor.

How had she not noticed that there was already a light in the room when she came in?

Emmaline cleared her throat and edged nervously towards the door. No good could come of this, her mind reprimanded her primly.

“No, no. Sirens who wander the halls at night like a vision of temptation must be held to account. What are you doing here disturbing my peace?”

“My Lord, this is not like you,” Emmaline managed to whisper. Licking her lips nervously as her palms grew damp where they clutched her sketchbook.

The man cleared his throat, raising a glass to his lips and gulping the contents down. Emmaline watched helplessly, her eyes widening and automatically tracking the masculine line of his throat, exposed by his open collar, the strong lines of his forearm, indecently on display with his cuffs rolled to the elbows.

Oh, of course. He was foxed.

Lord Seton stared into the empty glass for a moment, frowning. “No one is quite themselves at this hour of the night.” He looked up, and the sombre moment seemed to pass.

“Come here.” He beckoned her with a flick of his aristocratic wrist.

Emmalline’s feet were moving before she could register a coherent thought. She had never seen this man without his control firmly in place and she found herself curious as to what he might reveal about himself.

Her toes brushed the edge of the dias, and she hesitated, the impulse to turn and run for her room suddenly strong.

His hand reached out, and Emmaline flinched, but he did not touch her, instead, he gently pried the drawing pad she was clutching from her hands. Emmaline let out the breath she had been holding, but before she could gather her wits, he had reached down again and gathered her up as easily as a basket of linens, plopping her down on his lap where he sprawled elegantly along the length of the settee.

Emmaline slapped at his hands in fright. “My Lord, you are drunk!”

“I might be slightly disguised, but I am not drunk , madam,” the man growled, gripping her waist far too familiarly until she settled, then slowly letting go, his eyes on her face as she tried in vain to get her breath under control.

He blinked, seemingly satisfied that she would not run screaming, and then he opened the sketchpad with a curious expression.

“What is it you do in this notepad all day?” he wondered aloud, turning the pages as if they held a secret inside.

Emmaline blushed, wringing her hands together as she tried to perch on top of him with some of her dignity in place.

“You have been studying me most keenly,” he observed, flipping slowly through the pages. Emmaline shifted nervously, digging her fingers into the folds of her nightgown as he perused the myriad sketches of his profile, his hands, and the fall of his hair, amongst others.

“It is my job, My Lord,” she said finally, in a small voice. Aware with every fibre of her being that the detail and number of the drawings were a direct reflection of her fascination with him.

“Benedict,” he said, glancing at her briefly and then turning a page.

“Excuse me?”

“My name is Benedict,” he replied, raising a brow at the expression on her face.

“It is the middle of the night, my dear. I am in my cups, you are...” He waved his hand over her. “You are dishabille.” A small smile lifted the corner of his mouth, making him even more devastatingly handsome, if possible. “You must call me

Benedict, Miss Winters, under the circumstances.”

Emmaline blinked, her cheeks flaring so hot now that they must look like two red circles. But something brave twisted in her belly. Something that whispered, see, he is not the same as the others. You can trust him.

It was an utterly foolish thought, but she was foolish. Utterly, brazenly, ninny-brained.

“Emmy,” she whispered, ducking her head shyly. She cleared her throat, trying again.

“That is what you can call me. Emmy, or Emmaline.”

“Emmaline,” he repeated back to her as if testing the sound on his tongue. It sent a shiver all down her spine and her belly flipped as if she was falling from a great height.

“That is a very good name for a midnight apparition.”



### CHAPTER SEVEN

The drawings were good, she was good. Talented beyond what was fair, since she was born a woman and could never reach her full potential, as harsh as the world was.

He gave in to temptation with hardly a flicker of his conscience and kissed the tips of those clever fingers, the faint earthy smell of paint lingering on her skin. Then kissed slowly up the line of her soft, elegant arm, pulling her closer with each brush of his lips until he reached the cuff of the ridiculously prim nightgown, which did absolutely nothing to conceal the full extent of her curves.

Emmaline's eyes were clever too, Benedict decided, cupping her cheeks with his hands now and pressing light kisses to her face, forcing her to finally close those wide, doe brown eyes, eyelashes brushing against his cheeks like the kiss of a butterfly.

He should not be doing this, but something was pulling him towards this woman that was too powerful to resist, especially with her literally in his lap.

Emmaline sat as still as a deer about to flee, her hands lightly holding his wrists as if to push him away, but all it did was make him want to feel her hands on other areas. Extremely ungentlemanly places.

Benedict was suddenly stone-cold sober, but intoxicated by the feel and smell of the beautiful woman in his arms.

He allowed his lips to brush the corner of her mouth, teasing them both and drawing a

low whimper from her throat.

“You have spent far too many hours examining me at your leisure,” Benedict drawled, dragging his mouth to the soft skin behind her ear and nibbling there. Savouring the taste of her skin. “I think it only fair that I get to explore your beauty for a change.”

Emmy sucked in a breath at his words, but he silenced her with a real kiss, pressing his lips to hers lightly, then harder, each pass a little deeper, tasting a little more, until she was kissing him back shyly, opening her lips so he could taste her fully, making his blood pound with passion, her fingers digging into his arms now as he dragged her flush against him with a groan of desire.

Benedict let his hands wander as they explored the kiss, appreciating every soft, tempting curve, the feel of her breasts pressed against him, each little whimper in her throat.

He pulled back and looked down, clenching his teeth at the sight of the lush cleavage exposed by the gaping neck of her gown, tugging it down further so he could see even more smooth skin.

His fantasies had not done nearly enough justice to the sensuous reality of her form.

Emmaline was breathless, her eyes huge and luminous, and Benedict wanted to lay at her feet and worship her, like the goddess she appeared.

Impulsively, he shifted, rolling them so that she lay below him on the chaise, her long silky brown hair splayed across the backrest and spilling down to the floor.

A sinful image came to mind, of her hair spread over the pillows of his bed, her legs wrapped tight around him as he fucked her senseless.

Benedict wanted her so badly, but his honour was beating at the door of his conscience, ordering him to stop.

He decided to appease both urges as best he could.

“What-” Gaspd Emmaline, squirming beneath him.

“Shh, amore mio ... If you want me to stop, I will. Merely say the word, or squeeze my arm like this-” whispered Benedict against the base of her throat, taking her hand and returning it to his wrist, wrapping his fingers around hers and applying pressure with her fingers.

He wanted no doubt that she was willing. He wanted nothing that she was not freely giving him.

Benedict never wanted to think that Emmaline had allowed him liberties purely because of his station. It would break him.

But her fingers relaxed when he removed his hand, holding his arm loosely as he carefully dragged his mouth lower, tasting the line of her collar bones, the sweetly scented valley between her full breasts as she started to arch slightly under his attention, her hips restless.

He glanced up as he tongued a dusky nipple through the thin fabric, watching with fascination as her eyes fluttered closed, her mouth parting on a sensuous moan.

She looked like a woman who wanted more.

He realised he wanted her senseless with pleasure, his name on her lips while he showed her just how well he could love her.

Benedict slid to his knees on the floor, kissing his way down her belly as he fitted one plump leg over his shoulder, making space for himself between her thighs.

Emmaline shuddered, her grip on his hand tightening reflexively. He halted, sucking in a deep breath, then when her grip relaxed again, Benedict smoothed a hand over her soft calf, savouring the feel of her skin under his palm.

“What... are...you...doing?” breathed Emmaline, her back arching helplessly as he kissed his way up a delectably round inner thigh, pushing them slowly apart as he advanced.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

It was practically a blur how she had ended up in this position, but there she was, trembling with exhilaration as Lord Seton, no, Benedict, sensuously kissed his way up her legs towards her most private place.

And Emmaline was letting him do it.

She could halt him, he had told her he would stop at any moment.

But she didn't want him to.

Emmaline kept her hand on him anyway, more because she wanted to feel him than because she needed to.

Any good sense remaining had deserted her in the wake of the fire his touch had ignited under her skin, and a voice whispered in the back of her mind to just enjoy herself, just once.

Who will know? Benedict will not say anything, he is a man of honour, and you know that you will never again experience anything like this. Let yourself take pleasure in life for once, stop watching it go by from the corner while you record it, but don't live it.

There had been some initial embarrassment over her figure. Emmaline knew she was more voluptuously sized than what was fashionable, but Benedict had not seemed to mind, if anything, he had looked upon her abundant figure with blatant desire.

It felt so good to be wanted. Even now, he was squeezing the flesh of her thigh, biting wickedly into the plumpness as she shuddered under his touch.

“Bellissimo . Beautiful,” he whispered against her skin, the foreign word slipping from his lips with ease. He spoke more strange things, the language lilting and passionate.

“Open for me,” he ordered, coaxing her thighs apart all the way, hooking her leg over his shoulder as Emmaline tried to remember how to breathe where she lay back on the couch.

Benedict settled himself there and smoothed his hands up the outside of her thighs, raking the nightgown up to her waist and removing the last barrier of her modesty.

The anticipation of the moment almost killed her, but somehow Emmaline survived, and then Benedict brushed his fingers through the tangle of dark curls between her thighs and dipped his head, his breath ghosting across that most tender of flesh.

He started slow, light drags of his tongue, teasing the outer folds of her femininity while her very core tensed and ached, needing something only he could give her.

Her fingers wandered to the golden touse of his hair, touching him with her heart in her throat as his mouth pressed closer, the slight prickle of his evening beard sending a delicious shiver of pleasure all through her.

He did something divine with his mouth, and Emmaline widened her legs wantonly with a gasp, needing him closer, needing more as he licked every inch of her with a hunger that made her feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

Within moments, Emmaline was writhing against him, her legs trembling uncontrollably as he tongued relentlessly over one magical spot that made sparks

burst behind her eyelids. She cried out, unable to keep the rapturous feeling inside any longer.

Benedict growled anamalistically against her flesh, digging his chin into her core as he feasted on her pleasure, flicking his tongue mercilessly, dragging it side to side until Emmaline thought she would explode with bliss.

Her fingers dug desperately into his forearms, trying to anchor herself against the storm of sensation, but he halted immediately, pulling back as Emmaline whimpered with frustration.

“Do you need me to stop?” Benedict asked, his voice rough as he drew away.

“No. No no no- ” Emmaline thrashed her head on the cushion, wrapping her legs urgently across his shoulders as he kissed the crease of her inner thigh with a groan and then dove back in, cupping her bottom with his hands and dragging her down onto his mouth as she moaned in ecstasy.

Once again, he teased her to the height of pleasure, sucking now, in between drags of his tongue, urging her to some unknown pinnacle with his mouth, his body, as Emmaline felt herself come adrift, lost in a sea of sensation that suddenly dropped out from under her.

The cry that ripped from her throat was a vague sound in the distance as Emmaline convulsed with rapture, all thoughts scattered like leaves in the wind as she pulsed with pleasure, every inch of her skin on fire.

Somehow, Emmaline survived, and then she felt herself float back down onto the settee, Benedict stretched out beside her, cradling her as her limbs shook and she desperately attempted to catch her breath.

He was whispering something soft in her ear, but Emmaline could not concentrate on anything, her thoughts still reeling from her first experience of physical pleasure.

“ Ti amo, Bellissima ,” said Benedict, kissing her temple gently as he cradled her close for what seemed an unfairly short amount of time. Then he rose and reached down to help her rise on unsteady feet.

“Come, sweet Emmaline, I will return you to your room.”



### CHAPTER NINE

Benedict was late to the ballroom for their morning painting session the next day.

For an hour Emmaline fretted over his delay, her mind buzzing with all the possible reasons for this unusual change in routine.

He was never late, for anything. It was one of the first things she had noticed about Lord Seton, his punctuality. His need for order and to abide by his schedule had seemed slightly too rigid for someone of his station, who could do what he liked, when he liked.

The world waited on him, and other men like him. Not the other way around. But always, he was checking his timepiece.

Emmaline heard the notes of the hall clock even now, tolling the new hour with a dour, dull chime that sent a wave of dizziness through her.

Feeling faint, Emmaline sat down on the stool, cradling her head in her hands. Caring not if she disturbed the carefully coiled chignon she had taken the time to arrange this morning.

It had felt foolish, choosing her prettiest dress of pale lavender, fixing her hair and pinching colour into her cheeks since she had been pale with nerves. But Emmaline had so wanted to make a good impression in the light of the new day, knowing not what Benedict thought about their midnight tryst.

She would wait for the whole morning if that was what it took. She had no other recourse. This painting was her only purpose for being there.

It had not seemed that way last night, her traitorous inner voice reminded her. When Benedict had told her she was clever, and beautiful and all the other sweet words that she had not even understood.

Was that why he was late? Was he having second thoughts about their late-night liaison?

Emmaline nibbled nervously on a fingernail, staring unseeing across the extravagantly appointed ballroom.

That was surely the reason. He would discard her now, it seemed inevitable.

Her heart raced with panic, palms growing damp as her chest constricted.

She did not want it to be true. Emmaline wanted to believe that the moment they had shared last night had been real. The pleasure, the connection, had felt like more than just physical desire.

She was tired, she told herself sternly. Becoming overwrought.

Taking some long, deep breaths, Emmaline tried to soothe her panic. Instinctively she picked up a brush, choosing a badger hair blender then dipping the bristles into a pool of vermilion pigment and starting to smooth the tones depicting the silk hangings behind the couch.

The man might not be there, but there was a lot of detail lacking in the background of the painting. Highlights and embellishments. She lost herself in the work, letting her hands and talent take charge while her mind thankfully went blank.

Another hour must have passed, for the sound of the clock again interrupted her reverie, growing louder as the door to the room finally opened.

A footman wheeled in a trolley, coming to a stop beside her.

Emmaline blinked at this strange occurrence, then felt her gaze drawn to the door again, where Benedict was finally making his appearance.

He walked into the room looking as pristine as she had ever seen him. His long, lean legs ate up the floor as he strode towards her.

The footman had laid out a tea service and revealed a plate of lemon tea cake, cream and sandwiches on the trolley.

Lord Seton dismissed him with a wave and a nod, standing as still as a statue until the man had closed the door behind him, leaving them alone.

Benedict cleared his throat, running a hand through his hair somewhat agitatedly. He indicated the trolley parked beside her workstation.

“You missed your tea this morning, my apologies. The staff told me this was your favourite.”

Emmaline blinked at the repast in confusion, then up at the man who had touched her with such passion in the dark of the night before.

He thought she wanted tea? The impulsive urge to laugh was so strong, that she had to cover her mouth and avert her eyes.

Was this the same man, had she imagined the whole thing?

“You are late this morning,” she managed to murmur, the unspoken question hanging in the air between them.

Looking at him, she could still feel his kisses on her mouth, his hands on her skin. She burned for him to touch her again, for him to look at her and see her for who she was.

Her very heart hung there too, only Emmaline was the only one who knew that.

Benedict stepped up close, looking down at her as she sat, breathless, staring up at him.

He reached out and picked up her rag, leaning close as he gripped her chin and tilted her face towards him. Taking the cloth, he gently wiped at something on her cheek and Emmaline realised she must have paint smudged there.

She must look like an urchin. A dishevelled, paint-stained raggamuffin not fit to be in his presence.

“And you look beautiful, as you always do,” said Benedict in a low tone, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. His gaze blatantly dropped to her mouth as Emmaline felt her stomach flip with desire, her chest heaving to draw breath past the lump of hope that lodged in her throat.

He still thought her beautiful.

He turned and walked to the dias, stepping up and settling himself on the settee where he had so thoroughly ravished her.

“I am sorry for making you wait, I had to attend to something important. Do you still want to continue with our session?”

“Umm, yes, of course,” Emmaline stammered, seating herself quickly and picking up the paintbrush in confusion.

She hid her face behind the canvas and frowned, utterly confused.

Was this what he wanted, for them to pretend like nothing had happened?

Emmaline sniffed in misery and then raised her chin, steadying herself against the disappointment that flared in her chest.

Very well, she would pretend the same. She could be a professional.

Lord Seton would never know her true feelings, or how much he had hurt them.

### CHAPTER TEN

Benedict exited his carriage at the address he had on file for Mr Winters, taking in the modest townhouse before him on a quiet side street.

Nodding to his driver to wait, Benedict stepped across the cobbles and rapped smartly on the door with the head of his cane.

Slowly approaching footsteps acknowledged his arrival and Benedict glanced at his watch impatiently as he wondered, not for the first time that morning, just what in the blazes he was doing here.

He had got it into his head to find out exactly what was going on with Mr Winters and it seemed he was committed to the course of action now.

An elderly servant cracked open the door, bowing profusely as he waved Benedict into the hallway. Within minutes, Benedict was escorted into a sunny front parlour, finding Mr Winters ensconced at a table near the window, taking tea and peering at a stack of letters with something like annoyance.

“Lord Seton,” exclaimed the man, jumping quite nimbly to his feet for a man of his advanced years and shuffling quickly across the room to usher him in.

Once Benedict was arranged to his satisfaction on a sofa, Mr Winters returned to his seat. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit to my humble home?”

“Hmm, it is rather a strange visit, I confess. But if you will indulge me?” said

Benedict in a mild tone that belied the irritation he felt seeing the man so at his ease.

Here Mr Winters was taking tea and writing letters while his daughter carried out the work Benedict had paid him to do, left alone in a strange house with not even a companion to keep an eye on her.

Mr Winters's brows rose almost imperceptibly, but he nodded, gesturing for Benedict to continue.

"I cannot help but notice that you are not occupied at present with anything that seems remotely like an emergency. Why then, is your daughter seated before your easel, and not yourself?"

Mr Winters blinked owlishly at Benedict, his jaw slack as he took a minute to formulate a reply.

"Erm, yes. Quite so. Nonetheless, my daughter is quite proficient, and of course I will return soon to inspect the work and make any final adjustments that might be needed-"

"That does not answer my question. It has been more than a week since you were last on the property."

For a moment the two men stared at each other with brows furrowed. Then, Mr Winters cleared his throat, adjusting his neckerchief with agitation.

"Well, you see-"

"Cut the bollocks, Mr Winters. Spit it out." Benedict was never one for crass words, but he found himself suddenly irrationally angry at the apparent neglectful attitude of Emmaline's father.

What if she had been taken advantage of, misled, abused in some way?

By God, anything could happen to her. It was surely not the first time she had been left alone in a stranger's home while her father took his leisure in front of the fire.

Never mind that insistent voice in the back of his mind that reminded Benedict he had done just that, taken advantage of her.

"Very well," sighed the man. He opened a box on his desk and took out a small white clay pipe, pursing his lips thoughtfully as he tamped the bowl and lit the tobacco with a few short puffs.

"You see, Emmaline, my daughter, has been the one truly painting my portraits for almost three years now." Mr Winters scowled down into the bowl, his eyes darting to Benedict and then quickly away again. "I am not proud of the manner in which we have deceived you, but I am proud of my daughter's ability. Her skill as a painter has outpaced mine some time ago."

He waved the pipe in the air dejectedly. "It's my eyes, you see? My sight is failing me and I can't paint anymore. Glasses and such are no use, I need to see, dammit."

He cleared his throat, visibly getting a hold of himself.

"It's a matter of necessity, I assure you. We need to live, and Emmaline can do the work. In fact, if she was born a boy, there would be no question of her taking over the studio from me. 'Tis how things are, the master trains the student and so the knowledge is carried down the line."

With that little speech done, Mr Winters leant back in his chair, puffing on his pipe and eyeing Benedict speculatively.



“Come, I would show you something.”

He rose from his chair, indicating that Benedict should follow. Leading them down the passage, Mr Winters took a staircase to a back room. It was large, with nothing but trestle tables and shelves of paint in the centre. The walls were hung from ceiling to floor with a myriad of paintings, salon style.

Mr Winters waved at the room. “These are almost all hers, you see.”

Benedict stared at the room, moving thoughtfully into the space and choosing a wall to examine. The variety and scope of the work on display was astonishing.

Portraits, yes. But also landscapes, park scenes, and street views. There was a sense of movement and vivacity to these that was clearly different to the relatively staid studies of various men and women in formal poses.

Leaning closer, Benedict noted the signature scribbled at the bottom right of each artwork.

“You sign all her work?” Benedict scowled as he threw the question at the old man, who lifted his chin defiantly.

“It is my name that sells the work. That is the way of it.”

Benedict found himself suddenly livid. Why should Emmaline have her work appropriated in such a manner? It was practically exploitation.

“Mr Winters, are you to tell me that you are in the habit of leaving your daughter alone in the homes of strangers for weeks, allowing her to pose as a stand-in for you, while you lounge here at your leisure. Then, when the work is completed, you scamper over and sign the painting, collecting your payment on the way out the

door.”

Mr Winter was scowling now, watching Benedict as he paced the perimeter of the room in agitation.

“It is an honest living. And may I ask, my lord, why exactly does this bother you so?”

“It is outrageous,” replied Benedict. Spreading his arms as if to encompass the whole sordid situation at once.

“What are you planning to do, will you ruin us?” asked the old man in a resigned manner. “I knew this day would come sooner or later, but I confess I am no more prepared than I was when it first started.”

Benedict narrowed his gaze on the man, his mind turning furiously as he considered just what his options were.

As he stared at the artworks, a plan started to form in his mind.

Perhaps he could make things right for Emmaline, and get what he desired most at the same time. It might be the only way to convince her.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Emmaline wiped her moist palms nervously on her dress as she waited for Lord Seton in his study.

The painting was finally finished, and Hutchins had assisted with setting it up for the formal unveiling in the centre of the room.

Her father was notably absent, but he had come by two days ago to approve the final touches. He had seemed pleased with her efforts but distracted, and Emmaline was vaguely worried that there was something he was keeping from her.

No matter, she would have to do the presentation without him. And then she could go home.

An intense feeling of loneliness and disappointment flared at the thought, even though Emmaline knew it was for the best.

She had stopped thinking of Lord Seton as Benedict by pure will over the last few days. Since the day after their interlude in the middle of the night, he had been nothing but polite to her.

And nothing more. That is what stung her heart so.

He had called Emmaline beautiful that morning, then put up a wall between them that never cracked, even a little bit. Yes, he was friendly in manner, always enquiring after her day and talking to her during the session as they had in the past weeks, but it

was not the same.

Thank goodness Lady Honora had been to visit many times over the last week to distract Emmaline from her misery.

Lady Honora was slowly becoming a true friend, and surprisingly, Emmaline's first Patron. In fact, Emmaline had taken Lady Honora to the house to see her portfolio, as she had asked to see more of her work. Together they were planning a salon to show the works, since Lady Honora was an avid collector and she supported many artists this way, showing them off to her high society friends to great success.

Emmaline had no idea how she would tell her father, but she would cross that bridge when she got there.

First, she needed to finish her business with Lord Seton.

The man himself chose that moment to stride through the door, flashing her a charmingly warm smile as he saw her standing in the middle of the room.

What a confusing contradiction he was.

Emmaline dipped into a habitual curtsy, closing her eyes on an exhale as she bowed her head, gathering her strength to get through this one last meeting.

He came forward and took her hand, encouraging her to rise and turn towards the painting.

Emmaline looked down, he still held her hand in his. Why?

She cleared her throat awkwardly. "My Lord, your painting is finished. I hope that it pleases you." With those uninspired words, she pulled back the velvet curtain,

revealing the finished canvas.

It still needed to dry completely, and then a layer of varnish, but it was done.

Emmaline stared at the painting. They always looked different away from the easel, as if they had been hiding their true selves from her all those hours she worked.

Now, she could look at the work not as the artist, but as a viewer, and she was pleased to say it was good. In fact, this might be one of the finest portraits she had ever completed.

“It is magnificent,” said Lord Seton, leaning close to examine the details and squeezing her hand in his. “You have captured my likeness completely.”

He glanced down at her with a smirk. “Although, are you quite sure my nose is that big?”

Emmaline blinked, her mouth already forming a response, and then she realised he was teasing her.

Really? Perhaps big-headed was a more apt description.

She couldn't resist a hint of mischief in response. “It is a noble nose, My Lord. It commands the room for sure.”

Lord Seton chuckled, bringing her hand to his lips and brushing a light kiss across her knuckles. “You have my measure, sweet Emmaline. I will think of that every time I look at the painting.”

He stepped back, crossing his arms to examine the artwork from a distance, nodding appreciatively.

She frowned, confused. “I thought the painting was to be sent to the Albany Club?”

He took a deep breath, blowing it out through his nose as he turned to her with a considering look.

“That was the plan, but I find I cannot part with it. I will hang it in the gallery next to my parents. The Albany Club will have to wait.”

He cocked his head, gaze growing distant. “I think they would have liked you, my parents.”

Emmaline felt her stomach dip, confusion buzzing along her nerves. She sensed something had changed, but the fear of hope made her step away, towards the door.

“Well, if that is all, Lord Seton, I will leave you. Thank you for your hospitality during my stay.”

“No, Miss Winters, that is not all.”

His voice was different. Sure and commanding now. Her feet halted mid-step.

“Excuse me?”

Lord Seton extended a hand towards her, motioning towards the settee in front of the fire.

“Please, sit with me. I want to discuss something with you.”

Emmaline hardened her heart and raised her chin, determined to listen as long as was polite before she made her escape. She needed to be away from this man, she needed to forget him.

Perching herself on the far end of the couch, she waited for him to join her. Keeping her face impassive.

He sat down far too close, and a frisson of excitement flashed through her, despite her determination.

Drat the man.

“Emmaline,” he took her hand in his, drawing it into his lap. “Your work here is finished. You are no longer employed in this household.”

“Yes, that is correct,” she murmured, with no clue where this line of conversation was going.

Lord Seton stared down at their hands, his fingers tracing along the length of hers, testing the calloused tips and drawing circles along her palms, while Emmaline fought the urge to curl her hand, to hide herself from him.

“It’s been so hard to keep my distance, but I hope you can understand, it was the right thing to do.”

“I... What are you saying, My Lord?” Emmaline felt her heart stutter.

“Benedict, remember?” he said, leaning close and brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, his breath ghosting along her neck as her pulse thrummed with agitation.

“Mi sono innamorata. I have fallen for you, Emmaline, my heart is yours.”

Her heart stopped, her mind spinning as the words slowly formed meaning.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

His heart racing, his eyes fixed on hers, Benedict reached into his pocket and held out the ring to Emmaline.

“This was my mother’s ring,” he murmured, turning it slowly so that it caught the light.

He had sent away for it days ago now, and since it arrived it had been burning a hole in his pocket as he waited for this moment.

The gold band supported a large green emerald, ensconced in a circle of pearls. It was slightly old-fashioned now, but he hoped Emmaline would understand.

This was about more than expensive jewellery, this was about his heart. And he was placing it at her feet.

“I want it to be yours now. I want us together, always.”

Emmaline stared at the ring, her eyes wide, and then they flicked up to meet his. But still, she said nothing.

“Amore mio? Do you accept?”

Her fingers curled around his, her colour high as she caught her lip between her teeth and looked down uncertainly. “Do you mean it?” Emmaline asked softly, sending a pang to his heart as he realised she was unsure of his intentions, his feelings.



Benedict never wanted her to feel that again.

“Yes, I am sure. I am sure about everything. I want you, Emmaline.”

She closed her eyes at the words. “Kiss me, please?”

Benedict did not need to be asked twice, he reached out and cupped her precious face in his hands and kissed her as he had longed to do all this time. Soft, tender brushes of his lips as she trembled and pressed close, her mouth just as eager as his.

He pulled back, suddenly desperate to know if she felt the same.

“Do you want me, too?”

Emmaline nodded, her eyes bright with emotion. Looking everywhere but at him.

“I thought you were toying with me, that I meant nothing to you. You just... treated me as if nothing had happened, as if you felt nothing.”

She sucked in a shuddery breath. “Why?”

Emmaline was hurt, he had hurt her with his distance. He was a goddamn fool.

“Sweetheart, I am sorry. I... didn’t want to take advantage of the situation, or make you feel compelled somehow. I am an idiot, please forgive me?”

Emmaline nodded again, leaning towards him and Benedict wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, savouring the warm, earthy scent of her, the way she fit so perfectly against him.

She was meant for him.

He raised her hand and slipped the ring onto her finger, pressing his lips there to seal his promise.

And then they were kissing each other, mouths hungry, no gentleness this time, just passion and relief and want as they devoured each other.

Benedict grabbed Emmaline by the waist and pulled her onto his lap, helping to lift her skirts in a tangle of petticoats so that she could straddle his thighs and kiss him properly.

He needed her close. He wanted to crawl inside her skin and live there next to her heart.

The feel of her heat pressed against the hard ridge of his need was torture, but he could not stop, couldn't tear himself away from her if his life depended on it.

Emmaline moaned against his lips and Benedict wanted her to feel how much he wanted her, needed her to know that she was all he had thought about for weeks, since the first moment he laid eyes on her.

Benedict plucked the offending barrier of the fichu away and let it drift to the floor while kissing the luscious mounds of her breasts, whispering his devotion against her skin. The tight bodice of the dress practically begged him to remove it so he could worship her in all her glory.

“You are perfect, I adore you.”

Emmaline's small hands smoothed over his shoulders and under the sides of his jacket, exploring his body shyly.

“Take this off,” she whispered, tugging at him.

Benedict hurried to comply, throwing his cravat to the floor as well, needing as few barriers between them as possible. Thank goodness the staff knew better than to disturb him in his study.

Her fingers worked on the buttons of his waistcoat, as her lips tentatively kissed the side of his neck, his blood surging hot in his veins at the feel of her mouth on him.

Benedict savoured the smooth, soft feel of Emmaline's skin, cupping the full curve of her bottom under her skirts, running his hands covetously over her thighs where they spread across his hips.

She was enough to bring him to his knees.

Emmaline was rocking herself on Benedict's lap, her unabashed desire making him want things that should wait until their wedding night.

But perhaps he could give her pleasure, at least.

"Can I touch you?" Benedict managed to ask, voice rough as his hands threaded into her hair and tugged her head back, needing to see her eyes when she answered him

"Oh, please," she moaned, reaching for his mouth with hers, brown hair tumbling free from its pins to fall around them as they lost themselves in each other for another endless moment.

His fingers reached between them, finding her soft heat and slipping through the folds with a groan. She bucked under his touch, gasping with need, her hands moving to the flap of his pantaloons and fumbling with the buttons.

"I want to touch you too, can I?" she asked distractedly, her eyelids fluttering as Benedict worked her bundle of nerves with teasing circles.

The thought of her taking him in hand almost undid him, but Benedict managed to reach down and free himself, hissing with satisfaction as he watched her reach out and grip the proud length of his cock, her fingers wrapping around the girth and testing the feel of him in her palm.

“Am I doing it right?” Emmaline asked shyly, flashing her eyes at him as a drop of seed gathered at the tip, smoothing it down over the crown with her thumb.

“Oh, yes, absolutely,” Benedict managed to utter, as she squeezed and stroked his length, threatening to unman him with her touch.

The angle of their bodies made it hard for him to pleasure her as she did him, so he took a chance and pushed her hand away, lifting her and fitting the seam of her sex against the line of his cock, growling with pleasure at the feel of her moist heat riding his flesh.

Emmaline gasped and ground down against him, her cheeks pink with excitement as they explored the feeling of their bodies fitted together.

He rocked her hips in his hands, helping her find a rhythm.

“I... It feels...” she moaned, her eyes closed, and it was perhaps the most erotic sound Benedict had ever heard in his life.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“We should stop,” Emmaline gasped, breasts heaving as her head fell back in delight.

“Yes, we should,” groaned Benedict, licking the curve of her neck and then biting down on the line of her shoulder as her heat rode his length in long, sinuous pulses.

She was so wet, she was soaking him, the dip of her opening sliding past the tip of his cock with every glide so that he thought he would go mad with desire.

As she slipped over him again, Benedict gripped her waist desperately under her skirts, hitching them up and away so that he could glance down at the sight of their bodies tangled together.

“Christ, Emmaline, you are driving me crazy,” he rasped against her skin, kissing her mouth, her jaw, the tops of her breasts. Anywhere her skin was bared, he wanted to taste it.

“Does it feel good for you, sweetheart?”

“It feels so good, Benedict. I want more... Please.” Her breathy plea sent a pulse of seed from his crown, the need to take her surging past the place of no return.

Catching her hips in his hands, he guided her to the tip of his cock, notching himself at her entrance and holding her there as they kissed, panting for breath against each others lips.

“Just let me pretend, then,” Benedict groaned, pressing his forehead to hers. “I won’t breach you.”

She nodded, her eyes half closed with lust, lips swollen from his kisses.

Fuck . He rolled his hips carefully, slipping just inside the sucking heat of her body.

Pleasure kicked him low in the gut, hands shaking where they held her tight against the power of his lust. Fingers digging into her soft skin as he tried to keep a grip on his sanity.

He dipped the head of his cock inside, letting it stretch her slightly, as her thighs shivered against him.

“Oh, oh . It feels...”

“How does it feel?” he whispered, lifting her hips and then pulling her down onto him again, filling her just a little more. Just a little deeper.

She pressed her lips to his, telling him with her kiss, teasing her tongue into his mouth and then biting softly on his lower lip.

Slowly, he worked his way just inside, and then slid back out, letting her glide back along his length once or twice and then teasing his way back inside.

It was madness, it was heaven. It was impossible to stop.

As he slipped inside again, Emmaline canted her hips, urging him deeper, another inch of tight heat yielding around him, making the blood pound in his ears as his release rose and swelled close to the edge of his control.

“Please, let me in, just one stroke. I’ll pull back, we can stop.” Bendict heard the words leave his lips.

“Yes, I want to feel you. We can stop then, we will .” Emmaline dropped her forehead to his, her eyes wide as he flexed his hips under her.

One thrust almost killed him.

That slow, smooth press into her tight channel, until he was seated to the hilt. The perfection of her, the way she parted around him like silky heaven, the smell of her skin where he pressed his face into the curve of her neck.

It was too much, Benedict couldn’t pull back, his cock pulsing inside her heat as he fought the urge to spill himself right there and then.

Instead, he reached down and pressed against her bud with his thumb, rubbing her there as she shuddered and arched in his arms.

“Benedict-” Emmaline sighed, gripping his shoulders, thighs opening wider as she ground down against the base of his cock. Her eyes wide now, locked on his as her hips started to move instinctively.

“That’s good, Emmaline, you are close, I can see it. Just let me make you feel good.”

He circled the crest of her pleasure with more pressure, flicking it, keeping in time to the roll of her hips.

And then Emmaline was crying out, head falling back so that her hair spilled down over his knees, bouncing herself helplessly on him now, sliding up and down his cock as she worked herself towards the pinnacle of her release like the goddess she was.

Her channel was squeezing him so tight, Benedict thought he would expire, sweat beading his forehead as he fought back the urge to spend, to thrust up hard into her scorching depths like an animal.

He wanted her to come first, needed to see her explode around him. He could practically taste her pleasure on his tongue, the moment was so intense.

With a shuddery breath, Emmaline convulsed in his arms, collapsing as she throbbed around him, moaning her way through the peak of her crisis while Benedict held her tight.

At the very last minute, he lifted her, allowing his cock to spring free so that he spent against the soft warmth of her inner thigh, creamy spurts of seed jetting free as his pleasure flared and burnt through him like a fire storm.



### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Emmaline spun in front of the mirror, admiring her new dress. She was ensconced in a guest room at Honora's townhouse, getting ready for her first real foray into polite society on Benedict's arm.

Honora had taken her to a modiste and helped choose a selection of gowns, and this was the first one Emmaline had worn. A breathtaking creation in gold tissue that displayed her figure to perfection, although Emmaline did feel the neckline was a little too revealing.

That was the style for eveningwear, and she trusted Honora's taste, so Emmaline decided she would brazen it out.

Emmaline supposed she would get used to such things, she must, as she would have a lot to manage preparing herself to be a good wife to Benedict.

Lady Seton. The thought of the title resting on her shoulders was terrifying, but she also knew that with Benedict and his family at her side, it would all work itself out. Emmaline would not be alone.

Her father had not seemed surprised when Benedict returned her to their home and announced the engagement. In fact, he had been suspiciously nonplussed at the news.

She suspected that Benedict had approached him beforehand, it was the kind of honourable thing he would do, but she had not had a moment to discuss it with her father. She had been far too busy organising the packing of her paintings and

planning the salon with Honora, who had been ecstatic when she heard the news that Emmaline and her brother were betrothed.

Emmaline could hear the guests milling around in the public rooms below, and she nervously smoothed her hair, examining herself carefully in the mirror and practising her smile.

There came a knock on the door, and Honora's bright voice called out. "Emmaline, dearest, are you ready? It is time."

"Coming," said Emmaline, opening the door and impulsively giving Honora a hug that sent them both into giggles.

"Careful, I have already eaten far too many dainties, don't squeeze me too tight," laughed her friend, stepping back to inspect Emmaline's appearance.

"You look a vision," Honora announced, threading her arm through Emmaline's and leading her down the hallway. "Benedict will fall at your feet when he sees you."

The party was a crush, and Emmaline found herself drawn from one conversation to the next without a moment to catch her breath. Occasionally she found herself back at Benedict's side, and he would catch her hand, press a discreet kiss to her gloved palm and send her back into the frenzy with a smile.

It seemed the whole of London was crammed into the Windham townhouse.

"You are a success," declared Honora, pulling Emmaline into an alcove to catch her breath and pressing a glass of punch into her hands. Honora fanned herself briskly, cupping her belly as she lowered herself onto a bench along the wall.

"You will be inundated with commissions after this, although you need only take

those that please you. You will be a viscountess, after all.”

Emmaline blinked at the idea of not having to work for an income, but purely for the joy of it. She had not thought of that at all.

“Do you think Benedict will be displeased if I continue to paint?” she asked Honora with a flash of anxiety. She did not understand the rules of the ton, and she wanted to do the proper thing.

“La, do you think that he would have helped with arranging this party if he did not support you? Please, do not think on it another minute. You are the daughter of Mr Winters, everyone should know your talents. Just wait, before the end of the night your name will be known across London.”

“I... don’t know if I want to draw that much attention to myself...”

Honora laughed, snapping her fan closed and tapping Emmaline playfully on the arm. “You are delightful, dear Emmaline, but you are marrying Benedict Seton. That will draw attention no matter what you wish. Better to guide the ton with the story you want them to tell, than allow them to pass judgement on you. We will look after you, don’t worry.”

But Emmaline was worried. How naive she had been, she realised, blinded by love and the happiness of imagining her life with Benedict.

She left Honora to rest a bit longer, searching the crowd for Benedict. She needed his presence to steady her.

As she stood near the wall of the drawing room and looked across the crush, she overheard her name in the conversation of the men standing in front of her.

“...Yes, Miss Winters, that’s her name. And a good looking filly at that. I am sure Seton enjoys riding her hard.”

The men laughed, crass guffaws that felt like blows to her gut.

Emmaline felt herself go pale, her stomach knotting with shame. But she continued to listen, morbidly curious.

“I heard Seton take a bet on tugging her, saw him at White’s a few weeks ago. Although he didn’t have to parade his mistress in front of the ton, poor girl. Some jewellery and a townhouse would have sufficed.”

More laughter followed this sordid gem, and Emmaline faded back into the crowd. She had heard enough, far too much in fact.

Benedict had planned on seducing her? No, they had said bet .

Her virtue had been nothing but a wager to him?

Her stomach threatened to turn, and Emmaline took herself to the terrace, desperately in need of air.

She needed to leave, immediately. She needed...

To disappear, to cease to exist.

Dashing tears from her cheeks, Emmaline fought for breath. Why had she imagined that a man like Benedict could love her? She was a fool. A gullible, foolish girl who knew nothing about the world.

She fingered the ring Benedict had given her, mind racing as she tried desperately to

decide what to do.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Benedict spied Honora leaning against the balcony out on the terrace, thankful she was alone. He had spent the whole night allowing the party to have their moment with her, he wanted Emmaline to himself for a while.

“There you are, sweetheart. I have been searching all over for you.” He brushed his hand along the pale line of her shoulder, admiring her profile as she turned towards him.

Benedict frowned, there was something off. Her face was swollen, her eyes glassy.

Someone had hurt her.

“What is it, Emmaline? Did someone upset you? Who was it, I will-”

“It was you,” she said, her voice strangely flat, staring vacantly somewhere in the vicinity of his cravat. “You upset me.”

Benedict paused, his gut telling him something was profoundly wrong. “I don’t understand.”

“I heard them, you see. I heard all about your bet at White’s, your plan to seduce me as if it was all a silly little game to you.” Her eyes flashed up to his, pain flaring hot in their warm brown depths.

Benedict felt his blood run cold.

He vaguely remembered that conversation with Silas. But they had not truly made a bet, it was a manner of speech only. Although it had sparked his courage to act on his feelings.

Lord Branwin. That imbecile.

He must have been running his fool mouth, talking about Emmaline as if she was nothing but a light skirt.

Benedict would kill him. He was a dead man walking.

“Emmaline, I swear to you, there was no wager. This is all a big misunderstanding.”

She frowned up at him, planting her hands on her hips with a defiant tilt of her chin. “Are you saying I imagined what I heard? You were not discussing me with Silas at White’s?”

“Well, no. Yes, but not in that manner-”

Emmaline’s face crumpled. Her sweet, beautiful face was a picture of misery.

“You used me? I was nothing but a diversion for you. Are you happy, now that you have had your taste will you throw me away?”

“No, of course not.” Benedict tried to grasp her hands, but she pulled away as if his touch burnt her skin.

“Emmaline, you know that is not true. Have I not offered for you? Are we not to be wed?”

“I don’t know, are we?” she replied, brushing her cheeks as if to scrub the tears from

her face. “There has been no discussion of posting the banns, or actually planning a wedding. Perhaps this is all some elaborate ploy to keep me as your mistress until you tire of me.”

She turned away, looking out over the balcony with a sudden calmness that was more terrifying than her tears.

“I should have known that a man such as you would never see me as more than a dalliance.”

“Is that what you think of me?” Benedict managed to utter past the lump that was lodged in his throat.

“I don’t know what to think anymore, all I know is that there are strangers in that room who think I am a conquest, a notch in your bedpost, and they are laughing at me.”

With a sniff, Emmaline ripped the ring from her finger, dropping it to the ground as she spun and rushed to the door, losing herself in the crush while Benedict watched, frozen in misery.



### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was the second day since the tragic salon at the Windham townhouse, and Honora was holed up in the studio at her father's house.

She had thought to grind some pigments for mixing paint, but her hands could not start the work. Emmaline had been sitting in the same chair for what felt like hours, just thinking about her life and how it had led her here to this pinnacle of disappointment.

So strange to realise it, but it was never her studio, it would always be only his.

Mr Winters's studio, his house, and his signature at the bottom of every painting.

Emmaline was a ghost in her own home, her only purpose was to support her father, be a good daughter, and play by the rules dictated to her by someone else.

For a brief moment, she had thought there might be a chance for her to take the reigns of her life and make a choice for her happiness, but she had been wrong.

Such a fool. Hope was a dangerous thing indeed.

Now, Emmaline was resigning herself to return to the path that had been laid out for her. Work in her father's name, look after him in his dotage, preserve his legacy and live out the rest of her life as an old maid when he was gone.

Emmaline wanted to cry. But alas, no tears would come. They had all been spent that

night she had learned of Benedict's betrayal.

Honora had come to the house asking to talk, but Emmaline had declined to see her. It was too painful since there could be no relationship between them now. Emmaline had simply sent down a note politely asking for the paintings to be returned to her father's house.

Another eternal minute passed, and Honora decided she would take herself to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

She walked out of the studio and came to a halt, there was some kind of commotion happening downstairs.

Curious, since nothing unusual ever happened in this house, Emmaline moved towards the noise, coming to a halt in the entrance hall as she observed a veritable army of people carrying vases of flowers in the door and through to the parlour.

She stared in surprise as a variety of roses, lilies, hothouse flowers, posies, sweet wildflowers and everything in between marched before her eyes.

Shocked and alarmed, Emmaline hurried into the parlour in search of her father, blinking in shock as she discovered every available surface, and even some parts of the floor covered in a living blanket of blooms.

Perturbed now, wandering vaguely if her father was smothered under a particularly large arrangement of hothouse flowers, Emmaline waded through the jungle towards the window where she peeked through the curtains looking for the source of the commotion.

A carriage was parked outside, two others behind it, and with a sinking feeling, Emmaline recognised the sigil on the door.

It was the Seton crest. Of course, she should have known. Only the nobility would be so extravagant.

Just at that moment, her father walked into the room, hurrying over when he spied her at the window.

“Lord Seton is here to see you,” he muttered, pushing his glasses up his nose and sniffing in distaste. “Will you see him? I do not know what has happened, but if you are here and not with him, it must have been something unforgivable.”

“Why would you say that?” asked Emmaline in amazement.

Her father had not made a single comment when she arrived home from the Windham residence and locked herself in her room. She had not thought he cared.

Mr Winters looked at his daughter and drew himself up, giving her his most serious look. “You are the best daughter, the most sensible and caring young woman a father could ever wish for. If you have put Seton behind you, there must be a reason. I know no one more loyal than you, my Emmaline.”

Emmaline stood there in disbelief.

It was perhaps the only words of sentiment her father had ever uttered to her since her mother passed all those years ago.

“I see I have surprised you,” Mr Winters said, pursing his lips and slipping his glasses from his nose to clean them awkwardly on his handkerchief. “I know I am not one for words, but I will support you in whatever choice you make.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Emmaline with a small sniff, leaning up to press a quick kiss to his grizzled cheek.

She lifted her chin and straightened her skirts as she determined to see this through.

“I will see him.”

“Very well,” said Mr Winters, and he walked from the room, nodding curtly to someone on the other side of the door.

Benedict walked in, and for a long moment they simply stared at each other, then he placed his hand to his chest and bowed as if she was some elegant lady.

Pffft. Emmaline squashed the urge to roll her eyes.

He walked cautiously towards her, pausing when he noticed the expression in her eyes.

“Emmaline-” he started, but she interrupted him.

“What is all this, Benedict? Do you think to soften me with all the flowers in London?”

He waved dismissively at the flowers. “No, of course not. They are not the reason I am here.”

“And why are you here?” Emmaline prompted, drawing herself up and attempting to look down her nose at him. It was rather hard, since he was at least a foot taller than her.

“I am here to beg for a moment to explain myself, to ask you to forgive me.”

“And why should I?” said Emmaline with exasperation, flinging her arms wide at the ridiculous display. “Is there any possibility the facts have changed since we last

spoke?”

Benedict stepped closer, his jaw tight.

“Yes, and no. Yes, Silas and I discussed the fact of my attraction for yes. Yes, he encouraged me to pursue you, knowing as he does that love is something worth taking a risk on. But no, we did not place a wager on my success. I was so angry at the insinuation, that I stormed out. Branwin overheard and misread the situation.”

He held out his hand, inviting her to come to him.

“I have called him out, the bastard fled to the continent yesterday.”

“What?” asked Emmaline, astonished at the thought of the studious Benedict inflicting violence on another.

Then, she recollected her anger, and turned away. “It is no matter, you discussed me as if I was an object, not a thinking, feeling being. And why did you kiss me, touch me like that, if it wasn’t because of the wager?”

“I kissed you that night because I could not help myself. I wanted you from the first moment I saw you-”

Emmaline snorted, glaring at him in disbelief.

Benedict held up his hands, inching closer still. “No, it’s true. But I realised it was wrong to take advantage of you, so I put you at arm’s length until you finished the painting and there would be no barriers between us, no obligation or uncertainty. Just two people who were meant to be together.”

“And how did you know that I wanted that? Do you know how it wounded me when

you acted like nothing had happened the next day, and every day after that? It was awful, having to sit there in your presence and pretend to feel nothing while my heart was breaking.”

Benedict sucked in a heavy breath, running his hand through his hair in that manner he had.

“I tried to make it less difficult, I even brought Honora to meet you. I knew you would enjoy each other’s company, and Honora agreed that we would be perfect for each other...”

“Honora knew? ” asked Emmaline in anguish, anger rising hot and fierce in her heart.

“Well, yes,” replied Benedict in confusion.

“I can’t believe you. Did everyone but me understand what was going on?” Emmaline wanted to hit something, she wanted to pluck each petal from every flower and stomp on them.

“Stop playing these games with me! That is what this whole production is even now. You have been high-handed in your treatment of me from the start, deciding what was best for me without even consulting me on my own life. And now you are trying to buy me with flowers.”

“I am not here to beg your forgiveness with flowers, they are for-”

But Emmaline had no patience to hear him out, her temper was in control now.

“I am not a political game you can win, Benedict. I am a woman who loves you.”

“And I, you-”

“Is this how you treat someone you love? By seducing them, then ignoring them, then again turning your attention on them like the light of the sun until they fall into your arms? Only to find out that even then, you are still playing games? And bringing Honora into it? I thought she was my friend.”

“She is your friend-” stammered Benedict, his cheeks flushed as Emmaline let loose every last thought she had bottled inside.

“But she is your sister first. You planned this with her from the very beginning. You betrayed me.”

“I wanted to protect you-”

“From what?” Emmaline cried, stepping towards him.

“From me,” cried Benedict, his eyes fierce.

They stared at each other, chests heaving, as Emmaline slowly gained control of her emotions.

This was not who she was, she did not want to hold on to this hurt anymore.

“And what of my feelings, my wants?” she asked softly, wrapping her arms around herself in distress. “I have a mind of my own, I can make my own decisions. But you took them away from me.”

“Yes. you are right,” nodded Benedict, stepping close and wrapping his arms around her, holding her even though she stayed rigid in his embrace.

“And I am hoping you will make one of them right now. I am hoping you will choose me, as flawed as I am, knowing that of all the things that have happened, the one

certainty is that I have loved you, I still love you, and I have never had anything but honourable intentions towards you.”

“You love me?” asked Emmaline softly, worrying her lip with her teeth. “But how can you love me, I am nobody.”

“I love everything about you,” said Benedict softly, kissing the top of her head and pulling back to look earnestly into her eyes. “I love your sweet voice, your sharp mind, your talent, your beauty, the way you nibble on the end of a paintbrush when you are concentrating. The way you look at me.”

Emmaline looked down, embarrassed by this speech.

“I want to marry you, sweet Emmaline.”

“But what will they say about me?” she sniffed, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

Benedict frowned, pulling her hand away and holding it tight. “They will say nothing, they will dare not once you are my viscountess, they will have to deal with me.”

He looked back at the room, then dropped to one knee at her feet, looking up at her as he fumbled in his pocket and drew out a sheet of paper, holding it out to her.

“Look, I have posted the notice of our marriage, the priest waits in the carriage with the special license. I am sorry it took so long to arrange. There is a wedding breakfast planned at the house and the staff eagerly wait for you to come home.”

He gestured to the room, to himself.

“I am here on my knees begging you to let me prove my intentions have always been



honest, please marry me.”

“And what if I say no?”

“That is your right, no one will deny that you broke it off, that I was sincere. We will squash the remnants of any rumours with our happiness. Please, let me make you happy, Emmaline. I will do anything.”

The ridiculous sight of him waiting on her decision, the room full of flowers, the thought that he might truly love her - all those things, it was too much for her heart.

Emmaline knew she had never truly been able to say no to him. She had wanted him too, from that very first day.

“Yes, I will be your wife,” she said softly, and Benedict closed his eyes in relief, wrapping his arms around her waist and hugging her tight, before rising and dragging her into his arms for a kiss that made her insides melt with relief.

He searched his pocket and drew out the emerald ring, slipping it onto her finger where it belonged.

She never wanted them to fight again, it had almost torn her apart.

### EPILOGUE

It was midmorning when Benedict found his wife arranged with an easel in front of the lake, painting, of course.

Emmaline had made quite a name for herself in the drawing rooms of the ton over the last year and although she would never have to work for a living again, she had more commissions than she could keep up with. No matter the demand, Emmaline always made time for her own projects. A passion for painting was the only thing that mattered now, and Benedict enjoyed seeing his wife blossom as an artist in her own right.

She glanced up as he walked towards her, then rolled her eyes meaningfully at the veritable pavilion that had been set up around her.

The staff of Oak Ridge House doted on their new Viscountess, and the butler seemed determined to outdo every expectation of comfort for her. Even now, no less than three tables were groaning under the weight of every delicacy she might want, as well as an iced bottle of sweet summer wine, all set out on the thick rugs that had been laid down, with pillows and throws scattered thoughtfully just so to recline upon.

“Good morning, my love,” whispered Benedict into her ear, kissing her cheek tenderly and taking advantage of the pillows. Waving a hovering servant over to pour him some wine while he reclined at her feet and nibbled on a sandwich.

Benedict had gone out early this morning to survey the estate. His steward was excellent of course, but now that he was here for the summer, Benedict wanted to

reacquaint himself with all aspects of his responsibilities. There was much to be done, and he was surprised at how quickly he was coming to enjoy the work. Benedict gazed out over the reflecting lake, losing himself in the perfection of the moment.

Whoever thought this would be his life one day? One of country bliss with a wife waiting for him at home.

His heartbreak over his parent's death had followed him all his adult life, and it was hard sometimes to allow himself to be happy. Benedict never thought he could live up to the man his father had been, and visiting Oak Ridge House had once been a painful reminder of all the things he and Honora had lost so tragically.

But now, here he was. A husband to an amazing, gorgeous woman who had agreed to marry his fool self. And in front of him, a home, where before had stood an empty shell of a building, housing only the ghosts of memories.

All that was missing was the sound of little feet running exuberantly around the halls, laughter ringing out across the gardens...

Benedict looked up at Emmaline, just staring at her in satisfied contentment.

Her brow was furrowed in that adorable way it did when she was concentrating. Her full lower lip caught between her teeth as she leaned close to the canvas and added a touch of white with a tiny brush.

He wondered if she was happy.

Emmaline looked happy, but the adjustment to life as a Viscountess had been difficult at first. She was much more at ease out here away from the pressures of town. Although of course she put on a brave face when they had to be in town for the sitting of parliament and other social events.

Benedict had lost his passion there a bit, he must admit. He felt a newfound sense of purpose here, although Silas teased him mercilessly for rustivating in the country. Strangely, Benedict was starting to see the pressures of town as a distraction from the life they were just starting to build.

“Benedict?”

He started, lost in thought, as Emmaline called him back from his reverie.

“Shall we go in, dear? The light has changed,” Emmaline said, smiling at him in that indulgent way that indicated she knew he had been wool-gathering. She untied her apron, wiping her hands briskly with a cloth. A servant hurried over with a basin and soap, helping her cleanse her hands in a more ladylike fashion while Emmaline rolled her eyes at Benedict again.

He rose with a chuckle and Benedict pulled her hand into the crook of his arm possessively as they walked back around the lake towards the manor. Emmaline glanced up at the motion with a cheeky smile, leaning close.

“I want to show you something in the studio,” said Emmaline as they entered the grand hall, unpinning her bonnet and handing it to the footman with a sweet smile.

“Does that mean I finally get to see what you have been working on all these months?” teased Benedict, trailing after her as she climbed the stairs towards the sunny set of rooms in the East Wing she had appropriated.

“It is an anniversary gift,” she whispered, turning him towards the draped artwork arranged in the centre of the studio and nudging him forward.

Benedict flashed her a surprised grin, then pulled the cloth away dramatically.

He blinked at the painting for a long moment, completely taken aback.

“You do not like it?” asked Emmaline, anxiously peering up into his face.

“On the contrary, my sweeting, I am simply taking a moment to appreciate the sight before me.”

It was a self-portrait of Emmaline, but not one meant for the public rooms.

Oh no , his wife was a surprisingly naughty creature who had painted herself reclining on a richly draped bed in all her naked, voluptuous glory.

“You did say many times that you wish I could be the subject of such a painting,” she murmured shyly, reaching out to trail her finger along one unframed edge.

“This is what you have been doing, all those mornings and nights locked away in here?” asked Benedict, growing impassioned at the scandalous thought of his wife painting away in the nude.

“Yes,” she said with a husky note to her voice, flashing her eyes at him in a sultry manner that sent all the blood in his body straight to his already stiffening cock. “You do have a lot of very useful mirrors lying around the place that I appropriated for my study.”

“Good God, woman,” growled Benedict, “I know what use I would put them to right this minute.”

He glanced around hastily, spying the draped daybed she had used to pose herself for the portrait.

“I want to see you lying there, just as you did for the painting,” he said, taking her by

the shoulders and urging her towards the setup, already working on the tiny buttons on the back of her dress.

Within minutes, he had Emmaline stripped down to demure white stockings, all her gorgeous curves and soft skin on display, and then he pushed her down onto the silk-draped cushions with hungry eyes, arranging her on her side just as in the sensual artwork.

Benedict circled the chaise, prowling around until he found a large framed mirror and arranging it against an easel he placed directly in front of her.

He moved back behind her, half kneeling on the couch as he admired her reflection in the looking glass.

Emmaline looked like an erotic odalisque. A perfect study of feminine beauty and power.

“I wanted you from the very first moment I laid eyes on you,” he said, his voice low and full of need as he stroked a hand down her flank, testing the dip of her waist, the exaggerated curve of her hip and thigh.

“Sei tutto per me. You are everything to me.”

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Benedict's gaze met hers in the mirror, and Emmeline shivered with nerves and anticipation.

Always she desired her husband, but there was something ferocious in his gaze today that she had only seen on rare occasions. It made her insides curl with excitement, her core pulsing with want.

It had taken so much courage to show him the painting she had done for him.

Many times she had looked at it and thought it too much, he would think her too forward, or that she was not attractive enough to deserve such an outrageous depiction of herself immortalised in paint.

But then she had reminded herself that no matter what she thought, Benedict told her daily he loved her, that he thought her beautiful and he had certainly shown her his dedication in and out of the bedroom in the year they had been married.

She needed to believe him.

Needed to trust that their love was a place where she could share her whole self with him and feel nothing but safety and acceptance.

Emmaline took a deep breath and smiled at Benedict's reflection, glancing shyly away when he flashed her a wolfish grin in return.

Benedict kept his eyes on hers as he slowly shucked his jacket, tossing it carelessly to the floor as he started work on his cravat and waistcoat. Dragging the white lawn shirt

over his head, stripping his chest bare for her as Emmaline bit her lip and admired the lean planes of his torso, the fine sheen of hair that trailed down over his belly and disappeared into the waistband of his buckskin breeches.

He looked like a powerful, virile, golden god. And he was all hers.

Soon Benedict was as gloriously naked as she was, and he lay down behind her, working an arm under her shoulder and pulling her possessively back against his chest so he could nibble suggestively on an earlobe as her breath hitched.

Benedict cupped her breasts, palming their weight and squeezing while he admired the look of them in his hands and her core pulsed wantonly in response.

His hard member ground against her bottom and Emmaline's hips shifted to rub against him, the need for him to fill her becoming all-consuming.

Benedict stilled her hips with his hand, fingertips digging decadently into the tender skin as Emmaline reached back to graze her fingers along his jaw.

"I want to see all of you," he whispered against her skin, mouth dragging along her neck as he hitched a thigh up over his hip, wedging his knee between her legs and spreading her body indecently for his gaze.

Emmaline sucked in a breath, relaxing against Benedict as those wicked fingers of his dipped between her thighs and delved into the folds of her sex, dragging slowly through her slick heat while he watched, enthralled.

Emmaline shyly snuck glances at their reflection as Benedict continued to toy with her, his touch light at first, then more demanding, and she began to undulate helplessly against his hand, pale skin flushing pink as arousal washed over her like an incoming tide of sin.



His fingers dipped into her heat with a flash of pleasure, and then he slicked the evidence of her excitement up over her flesh, teasing her nub with scorching circles that made her eyes close tight with bliss.

Benedict brought that hand up and swiped her wetness over one tender nipple, leaning over to taste her arousal there as Emmaline gasped in shock.

“You taste exquisite,” he groaned, taking her mouth with a fierce kiss and Emmaline could taste herself on his lips, her thoughts spinning with the wickedness of their actions.

Panting now, they broke apart, and Benedict fumbled between them, sliding his cock between her thighs and fitting the thick crown to her opening with a moan of need.

“Look at yourself,” he ordered, pulling her tight to his chest and meeting her eyes in the mirror before them. “Look at how goddamn beautiful you are.”

He thrust slowly into her heat, filling her up with short, teasing strokes as her eyes watched the flex of his hips, the way his hand cupped her breast, his eyes devouring her like a man starved as he took possession of her body.

Emmaline felt like her body was on fire with lust for him, yet her modesty sent her gaze glancing over her own form.

But then, she felt the sensual way her leg fitted over his. Saw the sharp curve of her hip and the dip of her waist, so in contrast to the long lines of his more masculine body. The flushed, almost pretty hue of her skin, as desire simmered hot and aching just under the flesh.

Maybe she was beautiful. In this moment, being loved by this man...

She let herself go then, moving sinuously in time to his thrusts, voicing her pleasure

with long, breathy moans as Benedict bit into the skin of her shoulder, shuddering behind her as their pleasure built.

“I’m not going to pull out, not this time, not ever again,” he growled, thrusting deep with a snap of his hips. He cupped the curve of her belly, pulling her hips into his as he angled deep, stroking a spot deep inside that made Emmaline cry out with bliss.

She knew what he wanted. She wanted it too.

“I am going to fill you up with my seed every day until there is a babe in your belly.”

Her eyes fluttered closed at the words, her core clenching tight with excitement at the thought of him spending deep inside of her.

“Your body will be ripe, your breasts heavy with milk, and I... will... worship you.”

“Benedict!” His name was a prayer, pleading with him to give her more.

With a curse he pulled away, flipping Emmaline onto her back and pushing her thighs roughly up towards her chest as he speared back inside of her with a low moan.

Riding her hard, Benedict seemed to have forgotten the mirror, his gaze locked on hers as his weight pressed her into the mattress, his arms caging her in, no escape from their passion.

Suddenly, she shattered, convulsing with ecstasy as he thrust wildly through her crisis, his cry of release joining hers as his cock pulsed inside of her, warmth flooding her core as she came undone again, breath seizing in her lungs at the force of her climax.

Afterwards, they lay entangled in the sheets as their bodies cooled, Benedict cradling Emmaline in his arms as his palm cupped her lower belly.

She wondered if she would ever feel such peace as she did in that moment again, and then he kissed her hair, murmuring something in her ear.

“Ti amo più della mia vita ...I love you more than life itself, my sweet Emmaline.”

THE END