



This Haunted Heart

Author: *S. L. Prater*

Category: Historical

Description: Her heart will never belong to anyone else.

Finley

Twenty years ago, Rynn abandoned me to an abyss without her. Her betrayal haunts me more than any ghost at my manor ever could. Years of grief and suffering have even changed my face.

But now I've found her.

She's hiding in a den of iniquity, working as a courtesan under a false name. She won't recognize me or the scars that her actions caused—not until it's too late. My cage is ready for her inside my haunted estate. Rynn's heart is mine, and I intend to break it.

Rynn

I found a man hiding out in my room. I should have known better than to trust him, but there was a beautiful darkness to him that captivated me. He had the saddest eyes I'd ever seen.

He was just a pretty devil in disguise.

If Finley thinks he can trap me for long inside a cage, even a gilded one, he will rue the day. I always give as good as I get. He can have my heart if he wants it so badly. The organ is nothing but a nuisance.

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Lochlan Finley

Salt Rock, Pennsylvania 1893

A heart shouldn't be able to shatter more than once. Certainly not over the same woman. If only the organ could be reasoned with, I could have spared myself the anguish. No ghost would ever haunt me as much as Rynn's betrayal did.

After years apart I'd finally found her.

Rubbing at my chest where the phantom ache still smarted something dreadful, I waited outside on the front porch of the brothel house for the doors to open to me. The plaque by the entrance labeled it as The Night Lark. A local man in line behind me called it the "Soiled Songbird" then laughed at his own quip.

No one else tried to make conversation with me, which I appreciated. I didn't like a crowd. The queue inside moved efficiently. I removed my felt hat out of habit before crossing the threshold. My common clothing didn't fit my status and was selected to help me blend in here.

A madam wearing a silver evening gown, pearls in her pinned up autumn hair, had me sign my name inside a book—a big book that she had to heft to open. The pages smelled like coffee grounds. I wrote Mr. Dante Malacoda , a pseudonym, onto the thick paper and paid the entry fee rather than detailing what items I planned to offer in trade. I slipped through a hall adorned in fresco paintings and into an expansive parlor, blending in with the newest group of anxious patrons eager to blow off the week's steam.

I'd never visited a cathouse before. Never had reason to until now. The orderliness and the clean, elegant furnishings took me by surprise, but perhaps that was my fault for gaining my knowledge on city life exclusively from the dramatic fiction penned in The Visionary Collective .

I was unaccustomed to buildings being so tall or so close together, unfamiliar with the press of too many bodies squeezed into one room. I felt swallowed up by it all. The ghosts were plenty here, but they were not spirits tethered to me in any fashion and they paid me no notice. A prickle trailed down my neck as they passed around the room, flitting between the heavy brocade drapery and polished wood furniture.

The evening carried on and the "Soiled Songbird" grew busier. I nursed the same beer, waiting impatiently for the nightingale who had crushed my heart twice to show herself.

I wasn't worried that she'd recognize me. We were only eighteen the last time we'd laid eyes on each other. That was twenty years ago, and I was no longer a gawky youth. A shadow of a beard hid most of my face. I had the thick build of a man who spent a great many hours outdoors. The fair complexion of a boy who loved to hide and read had burned away to a ruddy gold, and time had darkened my hair to a shade of walnut she wouldn't know.

A pianist played a cheerful spring tune to fit the season. The scent of barley, tobacco, and lacquer competed in my nose, not unpleasantly. Patrons paired off with companions. Some lingered. Others went upstairs. A few didn't come back down, but most returned within the hour. After which the courtesan would find a different lap to sit upon.

It wasn't looking like my target for the night would show herself at all. Twenty years later, Rynn was still letting me down.

I'd invested a great deal in finding her, and I wouldn't be thwarted easily. I waved over the barkeep. The barrel-chested man with salt and pepper hair scowled at me, irritated that I drank little and occupied one of his stools so long. With some reluctance he came over.

"I'm looking for a beautiful woman who goes by Vieve," I said. It was not her true name, of course, but that was fine. She could keep her fiction.

He sniffed at me. His gaze jumped to the thin scars that cut down my brow and webbed across my left cheek before taking in the rest of my face. Scars "Vieve" had caused but hadn't waited around long enough to witness the making of. They disguised me further.

I unrolled a leather wallet, removing a cigarette and a single bill. The cigarette I tucked behind my ear. The banknote I pinned to the bar under my finger.

"Vieve?" I asked again, tapping on the note until it crinkled.

His grizzled brows lifted.

Money talked. The Visionary Collective got that part right about dens of iniquity. Granted, money talked everywhere, and I had plenty to burn.

He kept his shoulder to me, but his gaze remained locked on the note like he feared it might vanish. His voice dropped to a more conspiratorial volume. "What's it you want with Vieve?"

Vengeance, I thought, but was smart enough not to say. Devotion. Retribution. Heartfelt apologies made on her knees that would do her no good at all.

An obsession to match my own.

Rather than answer him, I fished a larger note out of my wallet, bringing the total closer to a week's wages for someone like him.

His bulky hand came down over mine greedily, but I kept both banknotes trapped there under my finger. "Tell me what I want to know."

"Vieve won't be singing tonight," he said.

"I can see that." With effort I kept the grumble out of my tone, rolling up my wallet and returning it to my pocket one-handed. "Where is she?"

"Upstairs." He jutted his round chin in the direction of the stairwell. "You won't find her down here. She hasn't worked the parlor for several months now. She's got herself a man, and her mister pays handsomely not to share her."

My fingers flexed around the edge of the bar. It took a full minute for me to compose myself enough that I could speak in a manner that wouldn't draw unwanted eyes. "She stays in her room during open hours, then?"

He nodded. "That's right. Unless he wants to show her off."

My teeth came together in a grimace. This mister thought he could buy her, but he couldn't. Her heart would never belong to anyone else. Not after we'd been forged together in the same hellfire.

"Who is he?" I asked gruffly.

The barkeep went tightlipped, tugging at the notes. Finally, I released them. He balled them up and stuffed them into the pocket of his waistcoat, shooting a glance over his shoulder at the other patrons. "He's new money. A blowhard who goes by Utrecht. He's in the coal business, and that's all I know."

“Is he nice to her, this Utrecht?”

The question seemed to surprise him. He regarded me with new eyes. Working his throat, he chose his words more carefully. “Utrecht isn’t nice to anybody.”

I should have known. The worst devils were drawn to her—myself included—like wandering spirits were to wrath.

“Which room belongs to her?” I asked quickly before he could sidle away from me.

“Second door on the left,” he whispered.

I dropped a coin onto the bar to pay for my neglected beer, placed my hat back on my head, then abandoned my stool. I moved through the busy establishment like I belonged amongst them, and no one stopped me. The hall upstairs filled with movement, a patron reluctantly leaving the bedroom of a miss. I made for the nearest nook and pretended to be preparing to smoke, fishing out my lighter and striking the flint.

I waited until the reluctant patron made his final plea for more attention before I shook out the flame. When the hall had gone still, I crept from my corner and headed for the second door on the left. The floorboards creaked under my weight.

My palms were slick with sweat as I gripped the knob. I gave it a twist, not surprised it was locked.

Checking over my shoulder, I pulled out my knife and unfolded the blade, pressing the sharp metal into the crack in the door carefully so as not to scratch up the wood. I used it as a lever to force back the bolt that barred my entrance. The click of it sounded loud in my ears. I checked again behind me, listening for movement. When none came, I let myself in.

It was after midnight, and the hinges needed oil. I closed the creaking door carefully, then took in the suite before me: a plush sofa, floral wallpaper, the back wall lined by a small fortune in books. The elegant sitting room came to a head at an ornate archway. I wished I had the patience to browse, to take in the sights and smells, to learn more of what she'd been up to all these years, but the knowledge of her nearness compelled me forward.

Leaning into her boudoir, I found her at long last. She was asleep on the bed, angelic and peaceful.

Anger turned my vision red-tinged. Nothing about my time these past years had been peaceful. She'd made sure of that, tricking and stealing from me, abandoning me to the wrath of a monster, and she would soon pay the price. Drawn in by my emotions, the prickle of a passing spirit cascaded down the back of my neck.

"Rynn," I breathed her name, and an agony burned in my chest. My pulse pounded in my ears, drowning out the sound of revelry from downstairs.

She'd changed in some ways. Rynn was shapelier than in our youth. Even more beautiful. The cream-colored lace of her shift tangled between her thighs and hugged her ripe hips. A woman capable of so much harm shouldn't have such a lovely form. One glance at her had me questioning the goodness of God.

Light fawn skin contrasted her jet-colored hair. Supple and soft, each strand was full of curls. They sprang across her pillows in tight coils. Her face was turned away from me, but I didn't need to see it to recall the exact shade and shape of her big brown doe eyes.

Even the memory of her mischievous smile was contagious.

She was up to no good. Always plotting and playing games, eager for excitement

whatever the consequences. I was the boy just trying to stay out of trouble, stay hidden, go ignored. She was the girl that made me live.

Furies spare me, how I missed her! The pain of it about opened my chest right there.

She slept with a lantern on. The bronze glow of it called me to her bedroom window. Moving like a burglar, I swiped a smudge off the warm glass with a pad of my thumb because it had been made by her finger.

“I still can’t sleep in the dark either, Rynn,” I whispered to her slumbering form. We’d walked the same hell, endured the same abyss. I kept candles and lanterns burning all night, too.

It was then I noticed the sling draped around her bedpost. It fluttered disjointedly in a breeze from her cracked window, flapping like the broken wing of a satin bird.

Was she injured?

A new fury erupted within me, tightening my stomach. Absolutely no one should be harming this indefensible woman but me. Her left arm lay over her belly, cradled against her body.

The urge to inspect her was overwhelming, but if I moved closer, I would have trouble keeping my hands to myself. I didn’t want to wake her.

Not yet.

Another breeze blew in, cooling my clammy skin, carrying the scent of jasmine from the trellis outside. I removed the cigarette from my ear with fingers that shook. I turned it in my hand, considering it. Then I placed it beside the lantern like an offering, allowing the sweet scent of the tobacco to ride the wind. I wanted to give

her a piece of the land she'd left behind.

I wanted to do a lot of things.

To hold her. Press my lips to hers again.

Wanted to shake her awake and scream at her. I wanted to imprison her in my manor where she belonged, so the ghosts there could haunt her the way she haunted me. If she was a spirit, I'd let her under my skin right then, let her possess me. Why not? In so many ways, she did already.

She'd tricked me, then abandoned me to an abyss without her. She'd let me believe she'd been dead all this time, left me crippled by grief at the loss of her, and that was most unforgivable of all.

But God above, how I'd missed her. Now that I finally had her back, it was almost a shame I had to punish her at all.

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Rynn Mavis

The following evening...

The Night Lark was throwing one of its pleasure parties. I was so close to completing the sale on my room and leaving my eventful life behind that I let myself out to enjoy the city without the usual pang of guilt that accompanied not pitching in what I thought I ought to.

Financially, my dues were paid up through the month, but I'd be out before then. Last week, I'd gifted each of the girls an item of worth from my collection: a silk cushion, a fine chair, velvet curtains . . . The gifts made me feel a little less distressed about my pending departure, and it would help to ensure they kept their lips convincingly shut about where I was going.

Even if Utrecht was the one doing the asking.

The hotel across the way had the most decadent dining service. Nearly year-round, they made hot mincemeat pies worth battling over. An impromptu bare-knuckle match had famously erupted in the street over those pies when they'd had a fruit shortage last year. The manager, Adelbert, loved the business the Lark brought their way almost as much as he loved dramatically retelling the story of that fight.

I couldn't manage a fork and knife with my arm in the sling I hid beneath my shawl. Adelbert cut my food up for me and kept me company, gossiping with me in his native German.

I overindulged until long after the sun had set. Regulars who recognized me bought me drinks and visited my table at intervals.

“You’ll mention us to all of your friends, won’t you, Vieve?” Adelbert asked after I announced my departure. His mustache was thin and subtly curled. He smelled like the mint sauce the kitchen served with the lamb special.

“You know I will. Don’t I always?” I reassured him. Then I kissed both of his cheeks before leaving.

On my return stroll to the Lark, I could still taste the hint of raisins and orange rind on the back of my tongue. The weather was fine. There was only one thing currently hampering my good mood.

One very small thing.

I opened my reticule with some difficulty one-handed and plucked out the strange cigarette I’d found near my windowsill that morning. It seemed innocent enough in my gloved palm, gently illuminated under the bright streetlamps. The scent of the tobacco was hauntingly familiar, and it was the main reason I’d had too much hard cider with dinner. I brushed it under my nose and inhaled the sweet grassy mixture that didn’t belong in Salt Rock.

Snuff was very popular here in the city. The pipe too. I almost never spotted a cigarette on a patron, let alone one with some homegrown broadleaf blend.

This was something I hadn’t smelled since I was eighteen, and it stirred up thoughts I’d pushed down so hard and for so long that the moment they tried to claw back out of me I had no choice but to stop. To do nothing. To stand still and hold my breath and squeeze my eyes shut.

I froze again like I had when I'd found it, right there near the street, halting so suddenly another passerby bumped into me, knocking my shawl from my shoulder. The jolt put an ache in my injured elbow. The gentleman removed his top hat politely and made a rushed apology, taking the blame for the accident I'd caused.

I declined his offer of assistance, and he continued on his way. When I was alone again, I sucked in a slow breath. Then another, trying to will my pulse to calm.

"Where did you come from?" I demanded of the cigarette in a mousy whisper. Trying to convince myself it was real, I squeezed it between my fingers until it crunched lightly.

The sheer will it took to slam that dark door back down on the bottomless pit that was my memories left me feeling like a wrung-out rag discarded in the dirt. Finally, my feet were working again.

I lumbered around to the back of the Lark. Matthew, an attendant who watched the staff door, lifted his hat to me. I waved in greeting, then carried myself wearily up a set of narrow stairs, still fingering the smoke that had spooked me.

Utrecht favored the pipe and occasionally cigars. I'd never seen him with rolling papers. He'd been traveling these past few weeks and couldn't have left it at my window. Surely, I'd have noticed it well before now, especially with how much I'd been going through my things to prepare for relocation.

The party was a successful one, based on the dull roar of conversation and assorted debauchery coming from downstairs. At my door, I struggled to wrangle the key into place, dangling my reticule around the wrist of my injured arm.

I jostled the knob, and the door opened a crack. My heart lurched.

I could have sworn I'd locked my room before I vacated it. A woman only needed to find a lost drunk in her quarters the once to remember that necessity. But I'd been so distracted by the mystery cigarette, I'd probably forgotten.

I listened for a moment for trouble but heard nothing. Banishing my worries, I shouldered my way inside.

"Oh?" I said, surprised to find a man standing amongst my shelves.

Not a drunk. He was sturdy on his feet and appeared to have been reading. He turned to me, holding aloft one of my books. The cloth cover was embroidered with a pirate ship. At some point early in my life, I would have reacted very differently to a stranger in my quarters. But now, after everything I'd seen and endured, even that initial vague sensation of surprise quickly melted away.

My relationship with fear was much more complicated now.

His gaze met mine, and my lungs hitched. He was handsome, with big hands and a strong jaw. Thin scars cut through his brow and left cheek. They were prominent, but rather than disfiguring, they made him more striking. Beneath a mop of dark walnut hair, his eyes were a stunning shade of warm brown, pupils ringed in gold, the irises flecked with bits of bronze.

Though he carried himself upright and assured, his gaze was full of a tangible sadness I could feel. It coated my skin in cold.

"Hello there," I said softly, like he was a skittish colt I didn't want to startle and not a man much larger than me.

He stared back shyly, then closed the book. "Hello," he said, his voice rich and low and full of so much melancholy my heart squeezed.

I had a bad habit of carrying the feelings of others around on my back even when I had no business doing so. A tendency I struggled time and time again to keep in check. Empathy had gotten me all tied up with Utrecht and other serpents just like him. I had a countless number of regrets about all of them. And here I was, about to give in to the same impulse all over again.

But I stood no chance of resisting. Not with this stranger. There was something beautifully dark about him. His sadness hit me like a freight train. I didn't even care why he was in my room. Before I let him out of it again, I was determined to see him smile.

"Was there something you needed?" I asked, shifting in closer to inspect him better.

"I hope I haven't disturbed you." He rubbed one of those big hands I admired down the back of his neck.

"You haven't . . ." I removed my gloves one finger at a time, considering him. "Ah, I see what this is now. You're hiding in here, aren't you? I take it this is your first pleasure party."

He winced. "Are my shortcomings so plain as that?"

"Painfully so, I'm afraid." Chuckling, I moved to deposit my gloves, reticule, and shawl onto the sofa before returning to him.

He was dressed like a man made in the country, in tall riding boots, twill waistcoat, and tan trousers, his white collar heavily starched. It was clear in his expression that city revelry didn't agree with him one iota. It took effort on my part not to tease him further about it.

"I'm not fond of crowded spaces." His gaze darted over me, and his full lips twitched.

He was subtle in his appreciation of my form, but I knew well what a longing look felt like, even the polite ones. “I didn’t see you downstairs earlier. I might have tried harder to enjoy myself if you were.”

“You missed out on a treat,” I said, frowning. “The women I work with are lovely. And very talented.” It wasn’t a line that I was feeding him. I knew from experience how gifted some of them were.

His cheeks went ruddy. He had the warm complexion and broad build of a man who spent plenty of time outdoors, but his boots were much too clean, the leather too fine for him to be a farmer or rancher.

He was a bit of a riddle. I liked riddles, and I had a soft spot for a big man capable of blushing easily.

“I meant no offense to the beautiful women downstairs,” he said earnestly, with a repentant bow of his head.

“Good. I appreciate that you aren’t the sort who assumes incorrectly that I need you to insult the others before complimenting me. Relations are transactions here at the Lark. We’re not rivals.”

“I’m sure they’re as lovely as you say. It’s only that I have a little sister who recently turned nineteen,” he explained, pulling on his ear sheepishly. “Some of the ladies on the floor below are much closer to her age than they are ours.”

“Ah, I see.” I nodded my head. “That is a different thing.”

He shuffled his weight, his posture stiff. “I’m not much for hard drink either. But they say you should always try something at least once . . .”

“They do say that.” I smiled at him in a fashion I hoped he found disarming. “Whatever made you pick this room to hide in?”

He cast a glance around, and the lines near the corners of his eyes crinkled. “Well . . . it helped that it wasn’t downstairs.”

I chuckled again. If one was keeping score, that was twice now in a short period of time. It felt nice to laugh so easily, even with a stranger. I was more determined than ever to see him do the same.

“I like it in here,” he said, taking in a deep breath through his nose that filled his chest. “It smells like books. And it’s very clean.”

“The books I take full credit for, but the cleanliness, I cannot,” I confessed. “We all pitch in for maid services. If we didn’t, you’d have to step over piles of my underthings to reach those shelves.”

His head tipped back, and his laughter was as flavorful and full-bodied as good whisky. A little shiver of pleasure rippled down my spine. His joy had been well worth the effort. It shook through his bulky shoulders and melted away a little of the sorrow I sensed in him.

“I don’t like to tidy up either,” he said amicably. “It’s a time-consuming habit that never ends. One might as well volunteer to help push Sisyphus’s boulder.”

“You’re exactly right.” I made a mental note that he was educated enough to know about Sisyphus. Definitely not a common farmer or rancher, despite his costume. “I served as a kitchen maid as a youth. The family worked me nearly to death and broke me of the cleaning habit for good.”

Surprised I’d told him all that, I bit my lip. I didn’t ever talk about my disastrous

youth. The strange cigarette and too much hard cider were likely to blame for my oversharing.

“Now that you’re here,” he said, gesturing toward my shelves, “you can solve the mystery of your books for me.”

“There’s a mystery?” I moved in beside him until my shoulder brushed against his arm. He had an appealing smell. Like clean linen fresh from the line and a touch of cologne water, something spicy and more complex—black tea brewing near a bed of orchids.

“These here didn’t surprise me,” he said, pointing to the top shelf. “They frequent most libraries: poetry, botany, a book of common French words . . . And yet they seem barely touched. There isn’t a single marker in them.”

“Well, you see,” I said, running a finger along the leather spines, “these books exist for the sole purpose of making me seem sophisticated and smart. I haven’t read them more than the once because they’re painfully dull. Some of them I haven’t finished at all.”

A secret smile tugged at his mouth. “I see.”

“Did it work?”

“Did what work?”

“When you saw them, did you assume I was a sophisticated woman?”

“Yes, well, of course. I assumed you were an advanced intellectual.” His lips quirked. “Though actually, I was more impressed by these down here. They’re Dutch and French. You read in multiple languages. Regretfully, I only speak one fluently.”

“Ah, you’ve picked an excellent novel to browse,” I said of the cloth-covered book in his hand. “De Gevangene Van De Piraat by Vieve Avondrood. I adore her the most.”

“The Pirate’s Captive,” he translated. Many Dutch and German immigrants had settled in the area southeast of Salt Rock. The fact that he was familiar with the language to some degree clued me in further to his origins. “My Dutch is in dull shape. That’s about the only thing I could work out.”

“You’ve gotten it right, though.” I patted his forearm. “Well done.”

“I think you’ve solved the mystery for me. These here by Avondrood have multiple items in them, and some of the markers are quite strange.”

“Oh dear,” I said, covering my mouth to conceal a smirk. “Strange, you say? I don’t recall placing anything strange in my books.”

“Now that we’ve spoken, I hypothesize that the more exceptional and plentiful the markers, the greater your affection is for the story.” He tapped on another novel detailing the exploits of a pirate captain and the maid he’d stolen away to take on adventures. “This one had a feather in it.”

“Useful enough as a bookmark, you must agree.”

“The one beside it has a purchase receipt and a toothpick.” His lopsided smile stretched the broken skin across his battered cheek. It was the kind of smile a person could much too easily fall in love with.

I shrugged. “That’s a little strange, I suppose, but it still gets the job done.”

“This one had a torn piece of mail, a dogeared page, and a nail file. ”

“I’ve already confessed that I’m not very tidy without help. There’s really no need to belabor the point,” I said playfully.

“And this one,” he said, displaying the book in his hand with a flourish, “this one has a stocking in it.”

“It does not,” I gasped, grabbing for it.

He lifted the book over his head, out of my reach, and his grin went wicked. “It does so.”

When I didn’t try for it again, he lowered the novel and proved his words, opening it straight away to a balled-up white stocking. The silk marked one of my favorite passages: a stolen kiss between a pirate lord and his lady captive.

“Oh dear,” I said, touching a hand to my heart. “I do hope it’s at least a clean stocking.”

“Given your record, I wouldn’t bet on it,” he said, voice wobbling.

“Probably I shouldn’t.”

“It could have been worse.”

“Could have been my drawers! How dreadful,” I fretted, glaring accusingly at the other books, certain they would betray me next.

“I haven’t gotten through all of them yet.” He considered me out of the corner of his gaze. I was growing to like the weight of his sad eyes on me. “What do you suppose the chances are of finding something even more unexpected in them?”

“Not good for me. I own a lot of books and have lots and lots of underthings. Let’s not find out, I beg you.” I squeezed his arm pleadingly—then once more appreciatively, the muscles taut beneath the fabric of his crisp shirt.

“I would love to know what other unusual treasures they hold, but if you insist.” He placed the cloth-covered book back on its shelf, scooting it in with great care so the spine lined up evenly with the others.

“I do insist. Come and sit with me, far, far away from there.” Catching him around the elbow with my functioning arm, I dragged him toward the sofa. “You can still smell the books from here. I promise.”

His tawny eyes sparkled with mirth, but gloom still burned in their depths. I was growing increasingly curious about what had caused it and whether I had the power to make it go away—a dangerous combination that often got me into trouble.

I truly hated how addicted I’d become to trouble. If it was a compulsion I could give away, I would. I’d abandon it in a box on a street corner the way people gave away kittens. But the only option for a woman like me, a woman who was alone in this world, was a life of trouble or submission to a master to rule over her.

And I’d much rather endure the trouble.

My stranger came willingly, lowering onto the cushion after I gave him a gentle push. I towered over him from this position, and I used the advantage to take in his striking face. I reached for him, and he let me touch him. My fingers followed the old wounds that tore through his brow.

“You have excellent scars,” I told him.

His haunted eyes fixed on mine, and his mouth pulled up at the corner. “You like

scars?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“I suppose they make me look dangerous. Like one of your pirates.”

“A big handsome pirate with beautiful, sad eyes.”

His brows lifted, and his throat bobbed. “You think I’m sad?” The dark tone of his voice confirmed it .

“I know you are . . .” I touched his cheek, dragging my knuckles across the scars in his warm skin until they scratched through the scruff of his short beard. “And this is usually when I’d tell you in explicit detail all the things I could do to take that awful sadness away for at least a little while.”

He leaned into my touch. “Why don’t you?” Then his eyes flickered down to my sling. “Of course, you’re injured. That’s probably why you weren’t at the party.”

“It’s not that, actually.” I stroked his cheek, finding it difficult to stop touching him. It just seemed right that I should stand close and cup his face in my palm like we were old lovers and not new acquaintances.

I was accustomed to intimacy with strangers, but this—whatever it was between us—felt different. It felt heavy and important and intoxicating.

“Tell me,” he pressed.

“I’ve sold my room here,” I said, sounding regretful, which came as a shock to my own ears. I’d put so much effort into starting a new life. It and all the money I’d saved were supposed to be the thing I wanted the very most. “I’ve retired, and I leave

the Lark at the month's end."

He straightened against the back of the sofa. "Retiring? But you're so young."

"As you pointed out earlier, I'm considerably older than the other women here. I could be a mother to some of them."

"Anyone with functioning eyes could see you are no less desirable," he insisted grumpily.

He seemed so affronted by the idea of anything else, he surprised another quiet laugh out of me. "You're too kind. But that's not the only reason why I'm retiring . . . Let's just say I've lived a very eventful, very full life. In just 38 years, I've had ages worth of adventures. I'm convinced I now deserve to rest. Preferably somewhere near an ocean, in a small house I won't have difficulty keeping clean because there won't be room for any mess after I've squeezed myself and all of my books inside it. Doesn't that sound lovely?"

He fell silent, contemplating my words. Then he squinted at my sling. "Can I ask you what happened to your arm?"

"No, you cannot," I said sweetly.

He scowled at me.

I brushed my lips over the adorable furrow between his brows until it smoothed. When I pulled back, he regarded me with such intensity, such raw smoldering emotion, I simply didn't have a word to describe it adequately. It was too complex to be discernible. Muscles low in my belly quivered.

"I only have to wear the sling one more day," I told him, still close enough to smell

the starch on his collar and his spicy scent. “Doctor’s orders. This is a small thing not worth worrying over. It hardly warrants a mention compared to my other adventures.”

He took my right hand in his and brushed his thumb over my knuckles. “I’ll be in the city a while longer. It would please me greatly to see more of you.”

Uncertain what to say, I nibbled at my lip. “I think I’d enjoy that too, only it’s like I said. I’ve retired. I don’t take on clients anymore.”

“That suits me fine,” he said firmly. “In fact, I’d prefer you didn’t see me as a client at all.”

I blinked at him. “Are you saying . . . but you can’t mean you wish to call upon a retired harlot?”

“If you’d be so kind as to invite me. That’s exactly what I’d like to do.”

“But you don’t even know my name. I don’t even know yours . . . Being untidy and sticking stockings where they don’t belong might not be the worst thing about me. I could be the sort of person who rambles on about dull things like”—I looked to my top shelf of books for inspiration—“French verb conjugations and bad poetry.”

“I signed in here as Dante Malacoda. You could call me that,” he said, unaffected.

“That’s a very ominous name, Mr. Malacoda.”

“Perfect for a pirate.” His grin was infectious and triggered my own. “As for your other concerns, I believe that’s the point of getting acquainted. So one can become more familiar with all the delightful habits of the other.”

He truly was dangerous with a grin like that. His showing of teeth might as well have

been a loaded pistol ready to fire straight through a lovesick heart, destroying it once and for all.

“I’m called Vieve here.”

“Like Vieve Avondrood?” He peeked over at my books.

“Just like that.” I unlaced my fingers from his, toying with the strap of my sling, unsure of myself. It had been an age since anyone had the power to make me feel all fluttery inside, like I’d swallowed a bunch of butterflies whole. He hoped I’d invite him to call at a bordello that clearly made him uncomfortable. How strange. “Did you want me to invite you here?”

“Is there someplace else you’ll be?”

“Well, no. Not yet.”

“Then, yes. Here.” When I didn’t immediately answer, he recaptured my hand and pulled me in closer until my legs brushed against his knees. “Go on. I can see that you want to.”

My stomach swooped. The sensation lingered in my belly like I’d just dived headfirst off a cliff into treacherous seawater and I was still falling and falling.

“Yes,” I panted, coming up for air. “Oh, but wait! What if you’re the type who likes to ramble on about boring poetry and botany?”

He lifted his hand in a mock vow. “I promise you I won’t recite one single poem in your presence. Not a rhyme, not even a haiku.”

“Actually, I like the occasional haiku.”

“Then you’re a difficult woman,” he quipped.

“Better you know that now.”

“As for botany, the closest I’ll get to it is bringing you flowers.”

“Flowers? But I adore flowers. How could I say no to that?” Because it was too difficult to resist, I swiped my thumb once more across the rugged beard that shadowed his jaw. “Please, Mr. Dante Malacoda, will you call on me here? Tomorrow evening, 7 sharp.”

Grief cleared from his eyes like storm clouds rolling away to reveal the sun. The pleasure that remained knocked my breath away.

“I certainly will,” he said, lips quirking. “Good evening, Miss Vieve.”

He unfolded himself from my sofa and ate up the distance to the exit with his long strides. He left, closing the door softly. In his wake, the scent of sweet, grassy country tobacco wafted to my nose. It was possible my rattled brain had conjured the smell. I’d been so haunted by it all day long.

Either that or I’d just made a dreadful mistake inviting that sad, handsome pirate back to my rooms. Worry churned just behind my navel, and I pressed a palm over it .

For me the line between fear and thrill, pleasure and pain, was disastrously thin. As my heart sped, muscles in my stomach clenched. A delicious thumping pulse surged between my thighs. The promise of danger-tinged adventure was a shot of bliss to my system that I chased harder than men with pickaxes and shovels sought silver.

* * *

That night, I had a nightmare, a vision of wandering lost in the mire I used to call home. The dream was instantly familiar. I'd had it many, many times before. Only, it was different in some ways, the images more vivid, the pain they inspired starker. My senses were heightened as I slogged through wet earth. The smell of silt and mud and broadleaf tobacco coated my nose.

A menacing voice shouted at my back, calling me terrible names, and I ran from his anger as fast as I could, afraid the monster would catch me.

Then I heard a melodious voice humming a happy song. The melody drifted to me through the trees, calling me closer.

I came to a clearing surrounded by heavy fog. There, I spotted a strange woman seated at a great loom. The loom itself was made of the drooping branches of the nearby weeping willow trees, pulled together to craft the frame, shuttle, and posts. I knew immediately that she was one of the weaver women, witches of legend like in the old stories from my childhood. Witches who guarded the woods and demanded offerings from travelers.

I sensed that if I stayed close to her, she would keep me safe from the monster, but I didn't know what offering to give her for her help. I had nothing. A feeling of foreboding and ancient wonderment settled over me, as intertwined as the threads in the blanket she was making.

Her dress was dark fog and black smoke. She wore a wicker hat over corn-silk yellow hair. The wide brim shadowed her face. I wanted to give her something, so I sang a silly song for her I'd invented as a child. The song seemed to please the witch. She sang it with me, and I drew nearer.

Her yarn was blood red, and as she wove her magic into the fabric, I realized the crimson wool was being drawn right out of her wrists, straight from her veins.

A scream caught in my throat.

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Lochlan Finley

I visited Rynn's chambers again overnight while she slumbered. Snooping around like a sneak thief, I found a wall safe behind the painting of a pirate ship being tossed in a stormy sea. It hung against the paneling across from her bed.

I tried a variety of combinations: her birthday, important holidays, her favorite number, over and over again, then her second favorite number over and over. I assigned a letter code to the name she'd given to all of the chickens she'd raised, but Daisy wasn't the answer either. I attempted a variety of patterns until I was exhausted, but I couldn't crack it. The lock was high-end and made of heavy iron. She'd spent a pretty penny on the equipment.

Whatever was concealed inside, it likely contained the leverage I'd need to break my nightingale and see her put in the cage I had prepared for her.

Rynn's dreams weren't restful. She thrashed about the bed, mumbling incoherently, and I wondered if my sudden presence in her room had caused her nightmares.

I hoped it did.

Having seen her, laughed with her, I was more troubled than ever before. In my imagination, meeting her again had gone very differently. She should have behaved like the villain she was, not like the vibrant sweetheart of our youth. Her mind always turned to teasing and mischief. It was impossible not to get sucked in by her.

She was a delightful vortex. That's how she'd fooled me before, and here I was

getting swept up all over again.

With a flustered grunt, I gave up on the code. I couldn't crack it, and I needed to get some rest before I returned. I readied another cigarette for her. It was the exact kind we used to sneak when we were young. She'd served as a kitchen maid to the family who had adopted me. Most of the time, my father had treated me just like another domestic rather than a son—sometimes less than that.

When he was particularly unkind to me, she'd steal from him, usually a cigarette or a coin. Theft was a very bad habit of hers—her favorite form of retribution, but I'd admired her for her boldness then. We'd smoke it together after the house had fallen still. In memory of that time, I lit the cigarette and took one long drag, blowing the smoke toward her bed, letting it pass over her like a moving spirit.

Sometimes in my dreams Rynn would come to me as a ghost to ravish me in my sleep. She'd hold me after and sing to me. It was a favorite of mine, one that I often revisited when I was awake, despite how it put a bittersweet ache in my chest.

I snuffed the cigarette out on the window ledge and dropped it there by the lantern for her to find in the morning.

I hoped it brought her terrible visions. Even worse than the ones she'd inspired in me every night for twenty years. In my nightmares she was murdered in the mire again and again. I tried to save her but couldn't get to her. I tried to reach her slain body, but a fog settled between the trees and I couldn't find any trace of her.

I wandered the marshes, searching for her lost ghost, desperate for whatever remained of her. I'd take any token. A bone, a lock of hair, a piece of clothing. I wanted her. I needed her. I begged her ghost to please come to me.

But it had all been a lie. My nightingale was never dead. I'd been tricked. Rynn had

made a mockery of my grief.

* * *

When I came to call the next evening, I brought a bouquet of purple hyacinth and sweet briar roses, and I hid a wrapped present in the double-breasted lapel of my summer sack coat. I was prepared to pay another entry fee, but the madam of the Lark saw the flowers, knew who I was, and told me to head around back.

A gaunt attendant introduced himself as Matthew as he waved me in. After removing my hat, I hung it on a rack by the door. I took a moment to brush fingers through my hair, fixing what my brim had mused.

“The ladies upstairs are a sure thing as long as you’ve got cash in your pocket,” Matthew muttered. “There’s no need to make a fuss.”

I disliked him immediately. I made no response as I headed up the narrow stairs. Locating Rynn’s door, I knocked once before entering.

“Oh no, oh no, you’re not supposed to be here yet!” I caught a flash of her dashing into her bedroom, skirts whipping around her legs.

Chuckling, I balanced her flowers in one arm and checked my pocket watch. “It’s three past seven. You said seven sharp. If anything, I’m a little late. The crowd at the door slowed me.”

Her head popped back out of her boudoir. “Do you know nothing about women? Has no one told you how we keep time differently?” She shot me a smirk that sent a dart through my heart, then she vanished again.

I moved so that I could watch her ready through the archway. She studied herself in a

standing mirror, smoothing her indigo dress down her thighs, fingering her raven curls.

“Four after seven,” I told her playfully.

“All right, all right.” She jogged back out of her bedroom and presented herself to me with a spirited curtsy. Her curls were pinned up in an elegant coiffure that accentuated the column of her throat. She was unchanged from when I’d seen her a moment ago, but she was right: I had in fact met women before and knew that some of their clocks ran on a different time.

Either way, her presentation was well worth waiting on. Already I was falling into her maelstrom of delightfulness, losing sight of my goal.

Smudges shadowed her deep brown eyes, evidence of her tortured sleep. The midnight blue of her dress brought out the sunshine undertones in her fawn skin. She was dressed like a woman who did very well for herself. Her sling matched the silver ribbing that trimmed her long sleeves and low neckline.

“For you,” I said, holding out the bouquet of dark red roses and purple hyacinth.

“*Rosa rubiginosa* and *hyacinthus orientalis*.” She whispered their scientific names fondly, cradling the delicate blooms in her uninjured arm. Rynn carried them to the sofa with her and sat. She pressed the bouquet under her nose, smelling them.

“Careful. That sounded an awful lot like botany.” I followed behind her and lowered myself onto the nearest cushion.

“These are grief blooms,” she said, chuckling. “They’re for mourning.”

“Death flowers? But that won’t do.” I plucked them out of her fingers. She grabbed

for the bouquet, mouth agape, but I was too quick. I tossed them behind the sofa.

Her head went back, and she laughed at the ceiling, clutching at her stomach. “Those poor flowers! I cannot believe you did that to them.”

It was too easy to forget myself around her, too easy to play with her. No one brought this side out in me—no one but Rynn. The fresh wine and citrus scent of the now mashed petals sweetened the air between us.

The smile she inspired stretched my cheeks, tugging at the numb, scarred skin on my face. “I thought they were pretty like you are. I didn’t know they were death flowers.”

“They are pretty. I still like them—I want them.” Coming up on her knees, she bent behind the sofa to retrieve them, reaching with her functioning arm.

She hadn’t presented her backside to me on purpose, but I appreciated the view all the same.

“No, no,” I said, coaxing her into returning to her cushion. “Let the death flowers go. I’ll do better next time.”

“There’s going to be a next time?” She bounced eagerly on her seat. “Are you sure? Even though I’ve already spouted off boring botany facts at you?”

“You’ll never be able to get rid of me,” I said lightly, but I meant my words. Every single syllable. I had plans for her, and no matter how lovely she still was, I wouldn’t be deterred from my path. “I have something else for you. I think I did all right with this one. I’ll let you be the judge, though.”

I removed the present concealed inside my sack coat.

She grabbed it up eagerly. The present was wrapped tightly in brown paper. She placed it in her lap, buzzing with glee. Her pleased expression sent a jolt through me that I immediately felt behind the buttoned seam of my trousers.

She peeled back the paper one-handed, gasping as the book was uncovered. The sound of her contentment warmed me just as pointedly as her pleasure, and I sunk even further down into her whirlpool of delight. Her gift was thick and leather-bound. The paper was fine. It had an excellent smell, like vellum and beeswax and “new book”.

She brought it immediately to her nose and breathed it in the same way she had the flowers.

This time I didn’t take it from her to fling behind the sofa, but I wanted to. My teeth ground together. Her happiness was so overpowering it grated. My heart should have been completely closed to her after all the grief she’d caused me, but once again the organ refused to be reasoned with.

“The Sea Adventures of Captain Van Draak,” she read, cracking open the book and flipping through the pages. “This is perfect.”

“Full of voyages and swashbucklers, and there’s a maid stowaway turned sailor,” I told her. “It kept me up most of the night reading.”

“What a treasure you’ve brought me!” Squeezing the book to her chest, she raised a single brow at me archly. “But is there any kissing?”

“There is one excellent kiss,” I reassured her.

She hugged it tight. “Thank you! I really do love it . . . I don’t think I’ve ever been presented with such a thoughtful gift before. Not from anyone.”

Rynn fell contemplative, torturing her bottom lip between her pearly teeth. I reached over and tugged on her chin, freeing it.

“You’ll hurt yourself doing that,” I said gently.

She’d left it glossy and slightly swollen like she’d been roughly kissed. Heaven above, she looked lovely gently ravaged.

“I apologize,” she said teasingly to her own mouth. Then her eyes flickered up to me. “I confess, I’ve never done any of this before. Never spouted off about botany, never nearly chewed my own lip off, and never been gifted presents without an immediate request for reciprocation . . . I’m not exactly sure what to do with you. You make me a bit nervous.”

I nodded my head sympathetically. “I understand. It’s my pirate-like appearance.”

Her next laugh was breathy and short-lived. “It’s all this calling on me business. I’d feel better if this was a proper transaction. It’s all I know, I suppose.”

“You never spend time with someone just for the pleasure of it?”

“Not really. No,” she said, clenching her teeth in a scowl of regret. “You see, I’m a woman in the rare position of knowing exactly what her time is worth to others. Down to the last dollar.”

The prices of the ladies were listed out by name in the book I’d signed during my first visit, but hers hadn’t been amongst them. “Out of curiosity—”

“Thirty-five dollars,” she interjected, her grin coy.

I whistled sharply. “That’s more than some men make in a month, and you get it all

in one night.”

Her smile widened into something villainous and beguiling. “It’s \$35 for one hour .”

“Good lord, woman,” I said, awe in my voice. Then I fell silent for a moment, contemplating that.

She nudged my arm. “Do you doubt me? You can ask downstairs if you do.”

“I wouldn’t dare doubt you. I’m just rethinking all of my career choices now. Apparently, I went into the wrong business.”

She chuckled at me as I’d meant for her to. Her voice had grown huskier since our youth, but it still wrang with all the radiant mischief I’d fallen hard for. She was an irresistible siren when taken over by mirth.

My chest hurt.

Regaining her composure, she dragged her gaze over me. “What business is it exactly that you’re in?”

“This and that,” I said.

“Come on now.” She nudged my knee. “You know my business. It can’t be more scandalous than what I used to do here.”

“What is it you used to do here?” I asked, feigning innocence. “You’re a librarian, aren’t you?”

She knocked my knee, a gentle admonishment, only this time she left her hand there to linger on my leg, the weight of her palm warm and light. “I used to tell men

exactly what they wanted to hear. My hand to God, I did that more often than any other sort of debauchery you're probably imagining."

"I don't know. I can imagine a great deal. What's the most—"

"Ah!" She said, lifting a finger to my lips to silence me. "That's a question I've learned never to answer when asked by a man. You're a dangerously competitive lot, and as the most scandalous thing I've ever done involved two veteran acrobats and a much, much nimbler version of myself, any attempts to replicate it would injure us both. It is for your own good that I never answer that question, I assure you."

She pulled yet another belly laugh out of me, the vixen. I chortled until my cheeks were hot.

"Now, help me with the mystery of you the way I helped you with my books," she insisted. "It's only fair. I won't even make you show me your stockings or drawers unless you want to."

"I'm a mystery, am I?" The corner of my mouth lifted.

Her fingers spread across my thigh coaxingly. "Why do you wear a costume like you belong out in a field somewhere? But your boots are too clean, and the leather is fine. You can buy expensive flowers and throw them away without a care. A rancher would never do such a thing. Why, he'd have eaten those flowers before he dared toss them. You're very well-groomed—too well-groomed. And then there's your collar. That was the biggest clue."

"My collar?" I rubbed at the starched linen.

"It's not the sort a working man bothers with. It's too tall and perfect and not made of paper. It'd just get mucked up outside in the fields. Especially if the farmer is a

bachelor and has to handle the ironing and starching on his own. You're not young enough to live at home with a mother. Are you married, then? I should warn you now: I won't be some mistress to a married man. Or do you just really love spending your time ironing and grooming yourself?"

"Clever woman. No, I'm not a farm hand, and I'm not married," I confessed. I had to choose my words carefully here. I couldn't exactly tell her that I wore a costume so that I could skulk about the brothel and sneak in and out of her room without drawing extra attention. "I don't mind grooming myself, but that's not how I prefer to spend all of my time. I do have help. Most of what I have I inherited, and I don't like to make a spectacle of myself. Especially if I have far to travel."

"You're old money, then," she said, eyes rounding. "I admit that surprises me. You don't seem like the sort."

"I choose to take that as a compliment." I didn't fit the bill because I was raised like a whipping boy, not a privileged aristocrat.

She trapped her battered bottom lip between her teeth, studying her hand resting on my leg, a faraway look in her eyes.

"Tell me what you're thinking," I prompted. When she didn't answer me right away, I laid my hand over hers and squeezed.

"It's only that I've had this price tag hanging over me for a long time." Her fingers dug gently at my woolen trousers. "I'm always aware of it and immediately uneasy if one or the other isn't getting their due . . . And now you've given me presents and have asked for absolutely nothing in return. And you're apparently some secret, wealthy aristocrat doing God only knows what here calling on me . . ."

"Hm." This was a problem. She was suspicious, but I didn't want her to feel uneasy.

Not yet. My plan was still formulating and unfolding slowly, and I knew this woman well. Rynn was a runner. If I spooked her too much before I had the right cage in place, she'd flee. "If I sat you on my lap right now, like a paying client, would that make you feel better?"

Her doe eyes widened briefly. Then her head cocked to the side and her roughened 'well-kissed' lips turned in a droll twist. "Oddly . . . yes, it would help. Thank you."

I patted my knee, and she slid onto my lap with careful grace. Rynn hooked her arm behind my neck. The other she kept cradled in her sling, against the satin of her evening dress. She was warm. I liked her weight against my chest—too much. Her skirts hiked up over her ankles, revealing dainty feet tucked inside matching silk slippers. The slippers were beaded.

Furies! I was even admiring her goddamn feet.

I'd made an error in judgment. I shouldn't entertain this connection between us, not a moment longer—but then her fingers pushed through my hair and my reason went right behind the sofa with the death flowers.

"Are you all right?" She brushed more strands behind my ear.

I cleared my throat and forced a smile. "'Course I am. I've got you on my lap now, right where I want you."

"You went somewhere else there," she said soothingly, still toying with my hair.

My eyes slid shut. Against my orders, my body leaned into her caresses. I swallowed, feeling powerless against the might of her touch as she raked her fingers tenderly across my scalp.

It was heavenly. And horrible—Dante entering the eighth circle of hell horrible.

I wanted to hold her close and dump her behind the sofa. The conflicting urges canceled each other out in the end. I just froze there, letting her touch me, trying not to feel .

She was careful with her arm in its sling. Seeing it up close, it made me angry all over again. I'd told myself not to bother with it. If she didn't want to discuss her injury, pushing too hard risked my purpose here.

Rynn caught me staring at the sling, and her eyes dropped. I so rarely saw timidity from this woman that it knocked me off my path. My brain seized on the distraction, and I dropped out of character.

“Tell me what happened to your arm,” I said, voice gone to gravel, leaving no room for her impish avoidance.

She waved my words away, but her attempt at casual reluctance fell short. Fear had smothered the cheerful glint in her dark eyes. “I sprained my elbow, is all. It's practically good as new now. It only twinges a bit.”

“Utrecht sprained it.”

She turned swiftly away from me, staring instead at her beaded shoes. “You've been listening to the gossip down in the—”

I captured her chin and forced her gaze to mine. My grip was hard. Too hard. Her hickory-colored eyes brightened, startled, and then she surprised me. Her hand came around my wrist, but she didn't try to pull me off. Her thumb ran down my pulse, the caress feather-light, and her brow softened. She leaned into me until my hand dropped from her chin to her throat.

“He hurts you,” I snapped.

“The matter is . . . complicated,” she whispered.

“What’s complicated about it?”

Her lashes lowered. “I like it when he hurts me.”

Gently, I tightened my grip around her throat, the way her body seemed to crave, digging the pads of my fingers into her soft skin. My growing erection pressed against her hip. “Did you like it when he put your arm in a sling?”

“No,” she panted. “He has a habit of taking things too far. Our working relationship has expired as a result. I ended it. Twice. But he feels differently about the matter.”

“He scares you.”

She scoffed. “My feelings about fear are as complex as my feelings about pain, Mr. Dante. It’s best you don’t try to understand me. I hardly understand myself. But yes, he worries me. I’d be a fool if he didn’t. I was hoping he’d tire of me, as men like him are prone to do. Unfortunately, my unwillingness to see him again reinspired his interest. I plan to be gone before he returns, and I’ve taken precautions to make sure no one gives him a clue about where I’m headed.”

“What precautions?” I dragged her in closer until her nervous breaths puffed against my lips.

She clung to my arm but didn’t try to free herself. “I gave the ladies here expensive gifts and made them vow not to tell Utrecht, should he come asking, that I’m retiring to Texas with family.”

“Are you retiring to Texas?”

Her lips quirked. “No.”

“Attagirl.” I brushed my thumb along her jaw, a gentle reward for her cleverness.

I felt her swallow, soft muscles shifting under my palm. She peered into my gaze, her eyes so dark they seemed bottomless. I wondered what she saw in mine. Were the wounds she caused to my soul as plain as the scars on my face?

For a moment, I thought I caught a flicker of recognition there. Then it was my turn to worry, but my anxiety cooled almost immediately. If she had realized who I was, she would have already sprinted from the room. Then her eyes, big and round and hopeful, begged me to kiss her.

But I didn’t dare. I slid my thumb across that begging bottom lip of hers.

“Sometimes I want to ask you your name, Mr. Dante,” she said tentatively. “Your true one. You make me so curious, I’d take either of them. But then I remember it’s a good thing what we’re doing here, keeping things between us simple. I’ll be going somewhere you’re not soon enough. It’s better this way, isn’t it?”

I bit back a grimace. Rynn wouldn’t be going anywhere I wasn’t. Sensing my unease, she snuggled in closer. Then she lowered her nose to my neck and breathed me in.

Her nuzzling tickled, and silent laughter rumbled in my chest. “What’s this about?”

“Just testing a theory,” she said, inhaling me once more. “You smell exquisite.”

“Thank you.” My hand came to rest on her lower back. Her spine went taut as a bowstring briefly, before relaxing again.

“Do you smoke?” she asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Cigarettes?”

“Usually.”

She stiffened in my arms. Sitting up straight, her tired eyes searched mine. “What sort of cigarettes?”

I feigned a casual shrug. “Whatever’s around. I don’t smoke very often.”

The little taunting presents I’d left on her windowsill had gotten to her. Serves you right, Rynn . Twenty more years of torment, and I’ll consider letting up a little .

She sagged in my lap. “You don’t smell like tobacco at all. I thought I smelled some on you yesterday . . .”

“You might have,” I said breezily. “I do have some with me now, if you’d like to share?”

“Please.” She moved off my lap, allowing me to pull my wallet from my pocket so I could unroll it, her expression hawk-like. When I removed a homemade pipe from my sack coat and the tobacco from its pouch, she frowned.

It wasn’t what she had been expecting. Her angular brows pinched together as she examined the spiral shank and horn stem like I’d pulled a goblin from my pocket, not a pipe.

“The tobacco is called Ambrozijn,” I told her, holding the pouch open for her to

investigate. “It’s excellent for the nerves. The locals where I’m from mix it with weaver-wood to soothe away bad dreams and ugly memories.”

Her gaze snapped to mine. “Does it really work?”

She seemed younger there, hunched over the dark tobacco, breathing deeply of the woodsy scent, desperate for comfort. Rynn was so eager to give me her trust that a pinch of guilt scratched at me, but I shoved it down and readied the pipe. When it was lit, I pretended to smoke while she breathed in long drags. Snuggled close, we took turns reading from her new book as a gray fog gathered above our heads.

Prior to moving in to serve my adoptive family, Rynn had received a poor home school education from her nearly illiterate parents. When we were twelve, she’d begged me to teach her to read properly. Father had insisted an education would do a serving girl like Rynn no good. I loved stories and didn’t believe him, but then Mother claimed reading too much could turn a woman’s mind. Not knowing better, I’d worried for her .

Rynn had eventually persuaded me to teach her with kisses. She was quick and had a horse sense for people and for words. She’d spoken easily with the Dutch workers Father employed. With little direction, she’d picked up their language just by listening to them communicate around the house. Teaching her letters had been simple.

As she read to me now from *The Adventures of Captain Van Draak* , the sitting room disappeared from around us in my mind’s eye. The gaslight dimmed to a weak candle flame in the creaky old attic room where she had been forced to sleep despite the house having plenty of other beds. Rynn was twelve—not thirty-eight. Her raven curls were messy and falling in her face, not pinned up tight.

I was prone on my stomach because Father had taken a riding crop to my back and

thighs. Standing was most tolerable but wasn't an option with the way the roof gabled above us. Even the weight of my nightshirt was too much against the sting of torn flesh. The dusty smell of old things crowded us. Rynn's head bobbed, too exhausted to read more.

I begged her to please carry on a little bit longer— just one more chapter —and she did.

I'd hurt all over, but my nightingale's voice was lovely, and the story made our troubles seem far away.

"I'm sorry I'm so tired," Rynn said, jerking me from my memories. She yawned. "Don't know what's come over me. I'm being a dreadful bore . . ."

I'd added an excessive amount of weaver-wood to the tobacco mixture. It turned the smoke sweet and dark. When ingested, it made the body weary.

Curled up in my lap, listening to me take my turn reading, she fell into a deep slumber. When I was certain she was unconscious, I held the pipe between my teeth, balanced the book on the arm of the sofa, and laid her out across the cushions, careful of her injured arm. I needed to make use of heavier tools if I was going to crack the safe in her bedroom, and I didn't want her waking during the process.

I opened the window and allowed the smoke to waft out on the breeze to prevent it from putting me in a stupor alongside her. Sitting so close, I'd gotten enough in my system that my limbs felt heavy, but the cool spring air renewed me.

I turned out the pipe and sat against the sill a moment, gathering myself. Unable to resist, I watched her sleep. Her chest rose and fell, her breathing deep and slow. Moonlight gave her skin a serene glow. I'd thought about this moment, this piece of my revenge, so often that it was hard to believe that the girl I loved to loathe was

finally really right here, within my reach.

A curiosity overtook me then. Instead of leaving to retrieve my tools, I slipped through the archway to her bedroom and removed the painting of the ship at sea, setting it on the floor. The thought trapped in my head was the most ridiculous romantic notion. A fool's errand.

I shouldn't even bother.

Fingers trembling, I used my own birthdate as the combination. The heavy lock clicked as I spun the large dial to the final number, the year of my birth. I brought the handle down, and it turned easily, metal scraping against metal as the big door swung open.

My birthdate.

Rynn was a wealthy woman now. She kept a sizable fortune in her safe. I searched its contents for the precious thing she had stolen from me, but it wasn't there. It didn't surprise me that she hadn't kept it after all this time. Had she done so, that would have meant something I couldn't ignore. That would have knocked me off my path and forced me to change course.

But it was my birthdate.

Pulse thundering in my ears, I went lightheaded. It felt like I was trying to swallow around my own heart. My vision blurred at the edges. I leaned against the wall, hands balling into fists. It was several long minutes before I'd regained my composure enough to stand on steady legs.

I stalked back into the sitting room. Towering behind the sofa, I bent over the vexing woman's sleeping form.

“When did our love stop being real to you, Rynn?” I demanded, knowing she could not answer me, my voice gone hoarse. My eyes stung. I blinked rapidly to clear them. “When did I become another mark to you instead of the man you wanted to marry?”

I was desperate to know the answer to that question. Here lay the girl who’d sung to me when life was cruel. The girl I’d cared for when she was sick. The girl who’d endured the hell at home by my side.

The girl who’d snuck into my bed every night for a week and cried because she’d read Romeo and Juliet , even though I’d warned her not to. My instruction had only made her more determined. She’d been so devastated by the tragic ending that I’d wondered if her sorrow wasn’t a symptom of a turned mind. Holding her while she shook with tears, I’d made a silent commitment to care for her when she no longer could. It was my burden to bear because I’d been the one to teach her to read.

She’d recovered, but my love for her had not. At eighteen, I asked her to marry me . . . and then it had all gone to hell. I could dwell on it no longer.

My throat burned. The threat of tears turned my next breath into a wheeze. It had been my birthday that she used to seal away everything that she now cherished. To some degree, I haunted her, too.

Cradling her shoulders and the back of her knees, I lifted her into my arms. Her head lolled. With intent, I could wake her. I could shake her and shout the truth at her, tell her who I was, make her look at the scars she’d created, remove my shirt and force her to count all of my wounds. I could demand answers from her.

She’d loved me once. I knew that to be true, had felt it in a way no falsehood could make a mockery of.

Why did she stop? Why had she betrayed me so?

If there was anything other than pain and darkness left inside my flesh, I'd have woken her right then. I would have let go of my vengeance and started down a new road. But my soul was a dry and shriveled husk of a thing. Too much had happened to rip the pieces of me apart like kindling.

Ruthlessly, she'd burned me to ash.

Thinking of the girl who'd cried over Shakespeare, I carried her toward her bed and laid her out over the top of the covers. I crossed her arms gently over her chest like I was prepping her for her funeral pyre. My withered heart ached at the sight of her there.

"With this kiss, I die," I said in my darkest impression of Romeo.

Then I pressed my lips harshly to hers, and I cleaned out her safe.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:48 am

Lochlan Finley

I stayed most of the night in Rynn's rooms, leaving early in the morning to wash, change my clothing, and to see to the movers I'd hired the day before. They would come later that afternoon to transport the rest of Rynn's things by stagecoach along an express mail line that ran through Blackwood County.

They'd pack and cart her things to my summer home in the southeast wetlands, the manor I called Nightingale House.

The train was the most prudent way to travel, but I couldn't trust the rail lines with Rynn. Too congested, too busy. It was unlikely she'd be as cooperative as I wished. I didn't want her slipping away from me in a crowd when she inevitably decided to run again. A trusty old Concord coach would serve me best .

I gave the company man updated instructions to ensure that everyone at the Lark would believe they were taking her belongings to her fictional family in Texas.

Dressed in a coal black morning coat and matching top hat, I returned and found her still asleep. I wasn't surprised. She'd ingested a great deal of the weaver-wood.

I no longer appeared common. The diamond pin in my silk cravat was a touch too much, but it declared the message I wished to impart. I was old money. I was walking, breathing power. I was not to be trifled with. When I headed downstairs to request that a cart of refreshments and breakfast be brought up to her room, I was received by staff with zeal. I caught every eye in each room I entered. Even Matthew was kinder in his interactions with me.

Later, I busied myself in Rynn's sitting room, waiting on her to rise, letting her have her last peaceful moments of rest. She was going to need them. When she stirred, I moved to her bedroom archway. She stretched out her limbs as languidly as a spoiled house cat. Several of her curls had pulled free of their pins in the night to curtain her face.

"Hello you," I said.

She greeted me with a smile more brilliant than the sun through her window. "You're still here. Oh? And don't you look fetching."

The compliment made my cheeks heat. "I'm still here."

Her laugh was thick with sleep. "I truly love it when you blush. Not nearly enough men do that . . . I'm so sorry I fell asleep before our evening concluded."

"There's no need for apologies. Clearly the rest was needed. Did the weaver-wood work its magic? Did you sleep well?"

"I did! Can't remember the last time I slept so peacefully . . . or so late. Dear lord, what time is it? Never mind, don't tell me. I'm happier not knowing." She climbed from the bed and began pulling at the pins in her hair until every last raven ringlet spilled down her back. "It's just not how I imagined our first night together ending, though I'm so glad you've returned."

I propped my shoulder against the archway, feeling pleased with myself. "You thought about our first night together?"

"Only during the waking hours," she said puckishly. She worked off the fastenings of her dress with a flexibility that was astounding, even while favoring her left arm slightly. "Haven't you pictured it? Us together for the night, I mean?"

“I’ve thought about it,” I said, but in my case, I relived the nights we’d already had. We were young lovers, eighteen and new to the world, and we hadn’t been shy with each other once our relationship became intimate. I knew her body well. “Are you going to tell me more about how you imagined the night concluding? Or is it your plan just to tease me?”

“I haven’t decided yet . . .” She undressed down to a white chemise, the lace sheer in all the tempting places I liked best. Rynn peered over at me, one brow raised. “You’re staring.”

“You’re undressing,” I countered.

“Fair enough,” she said, voice wobbling. She pulled a dressing gown over her underclothes and tied it in the front. I moved to the sitting room after she left to tend to her morning habits.

My knee bobbed while I sat on the sofa. The phantom weight of a guillotine blade hovered nearby. The time to let it drop was quickly approaching.

When she returned, my spine pulled up straight as a rail. It took everything in me to remain patient while she ate a boiled egg and drank her tea next to me. I fought not to fidget.

“How did you imagine our first night ending?” she asked me.

“Not fair,” I countered. “You brought it up. You should share first.”

She popped a small purple grape into her mouth, smiling around the fruit. “Very well then. I dreamed of it last night, actually. The images were quite vivid. You carried me in your arms to my bed.”

“That wasn’t a dream,” I told her. “You were in no fit state to get yourself there after you consumed so much weaver-wood.”

She sipped her tea and played with a piece of toast on her plate, mashing it with a finger. Then she discarded the plate onto the cart. “In my dream, after you joined me in bed, you called me by my real name. And I liked that. No one uses my name.”

That was not a dream either, but I remained silent, watching her face carefully. “You’ve told no one here?”

She nodded. “No one ever. Not since I was a girl. I liked it. I liked it on your lips, while your lips were all over me. It was . . . not a vision easily forgotten.”

I scooted closer, crowding her corner of the sofa. “Then tell me your name.”

I already knew her name, of course, but I coveted it at that moment. Stealing this offer of trust for my own would make my betrayal all the more bitter, and I wanted it anyway.

“I’ve gone mad, haven’t I?” Her breathy laugh lacked humor. “Why make our limited acquaintance more tangled and convoluted than it need be? There’s no sense in it. It’s only that sometimes when I look at you . . . I don’t even know what I’m saying. I can’t quantify the feeling. Perhaps I’ve just had to care for myself alone for much too long. Now I’m reaching where I shouldn’t.”

“You should reach where you like,” I said, sliding a hand around the back of her neck coaxingly, fingers lacing in the curls there. “Tell me your name . . . Go on. If you truly want to hear it on my lips, then—”

“Rynn.”

“Attagirl.” I stroked a thumb down the column of her throat, and she shivered. “Such a regal name. Queen Rynn. In your dream, what did I say to you?”

But I’d pushed her too hard.

Her next breath left in a rush. Instead of answering, she climbed up off the sofa, parting from me to pace around the refreshment cart, hugging her arms like she was cold. I’d taken over the center of the sofa. Amused, I watched her fret like a cornered tiger, gracefully turning this way and that.

“Come back and sit,” I told her, but her agitated movements didn’t slow. “Since transactions usually make you feel better, I believe I know just the thing.”

She stopped right in front of me, and her head cocked to the side, sending her curls tumbling. “What’d you have in mind?”

“Sit with me, and I’ll tell you. I’ll even let you pick which side you’d like. My pirate side,” I said playfully, gesturing at my scars before patting the corresponding cushion. “Or the prettier one.”

Always eager to reassure me, she sat on my scarred side and crossed her legs. Her feet were bare. The intimacy of seeing her naked toes was not lost on me.

“What’s this transaction?” she asked.

“You come and summer with me in my home in the southeast. It’s a lovely manor at the heart of Blackwood County I call Nightingale House. I’ve spared it no luxury, and the wetlands are beautiful. Only grant me your presence, and in exchange I’ll pay you handsomely.”

She blinked at me. “But I’m—”

“I know. You’re retired. I thought perhaps more of what you’re used to might help you feel comfortable, like it did the other day.”

“I’ve been invited to stay with clients before, only I never leave the Lark with them. There is an assured safety here that cannot be guaranteed elsewhere. I promise I don’t see you as a client, so please don’t be offended, but—”

“Please, Rynn. It’s lambing season, the goats are birthing their new kids, and the fields need planting. My staff is busy on their farms. My home is big and lonely. I require company, and I prefer yours. If it would assuage your fears, we could take physical intimacies completely off the table in the exchange.”

Rynn’s eyes narrowed to suspicious slits. I knew then that I’d overplayed my hand, made my offer sound too good to be true—because it was. My summer home out in the middle of the forest, nothing but the mire all around, was a trap, the perfect cage for her.

“Oh no,” she said, hiding her apprehension in a lighthearted tone, “I never take physical intimacies off the table.”

I chuckled. “I apologize. We’ll put them right back on the table, then.”

But the damage was done. Her mouth flattened, and her cunning gaze remained dubious. “How much were you wanting to pay me for my chaste company?”

My lips curled up wolfishly as, finally, I sprung my trap. “How about you travel with me to my home today and when we’re finished, I’ll pay you back what I took from your safe. ”

Shock flashed across her beautiful features, rounding her big doe eyes, then her gaze hardened. “What did you just say to me?”

“I think you heard me fine, Rynn.”

She worked her throat. “I think I regret sitting on your pirate side now.”

“I thought you might.”

Her hand went around her own neck and tightened. Her next breath shuddered out of her. “I’d like to switch to the other side.”

“Can’t go back now, I’m afraid. Cat’s out of the bag, as they say.”

Rynn jetted from the sofa, rushing through the archway. I craned so that I could watch her scrambling to the painting of the ship at sea. She ripped it off the wall and let it clatter to the floor. Fingers frantically worked the dial. The lever clanked as she pulled it open.

She froze there, staring into the abyss of her lost livelihood, chest heaving.

Rynn cursed me and the ceiling blue. The oaths flying out of her mouth were creative and so vile, were we anywhere but a cathouse, a lawman would have threatened to arrest her. She’d certainly have been fined. The costly words continued to pour out of her until, spent, she stooped and covered her face with both hands.

“No,” she panted, “no, no, no, no, no . . .”

“Afraid so,” I said. It seemed cruel to grin at her now, but the expression sprang to my lips, as friendly as a wolverine’s.

Spinning on her heels, she made a move toward her bed.

“Don’t bother,” I said, stopping her in her tracks. “I knew you would be less than

pleased with me, and I already removed the small Colt from your nightstand . . . and the one under your bed—and that one too,” I added as she stretched to reach for the loose floorboard beneath her. “My word, how often do you need to shoot at people that you have so many weapons?”

She stormed into the sitting room, hands balled into fighting fists. I was prepared for her to attempt to strike me, but she stopped short. “I could scream. We are not without security here. Give back what’s mine. Do it swiftly and I will not have you roughed up by—”

“Whom? Matthew or the other two rogues I’ve seen near the doors? The grizzled barkeep? I am not intimidated by them or by your threats, Rynn.” I straightened my cufflinks, tugging down my sleeves one at a time. “Scream for them. I’m certain they would make a great show of rushing to your aid, but I would be no more disturbed by their presence in your room than I am right now without them.”

“Then you’re a fool!”

“Call them,” I dared her. “Call them up here so I can offer them a cut of the fortune I gathered from your safe. What assistance would they give you after that, I wonder? You know them better than I. Would any of those rogues help you then?”

Rynn sucked in a sharp breath. “You’re the rogue, you— What did you do to my books?” Her gaze bounced from her shelves to me, and her expression turned from anguished and alarmed to something as murderous as a hellcat.

The change of subject threw me off-kilter. I scratched a hand through my hair. “You took a long time to come around this morning . . .”

“What. Did. You. Do?”

Her categorization system had been an unsightly mess. I'd made it make sense. "I was bored, so I straightened the spines up a bit, then alphabetized them."

"You're a menace!"

"And you're mine now," I said, smiling ferociously. "Get dressed. Pack your things. I need to speak again with the stagecoach company I've hired. I'll be back to claim you within the hour."

She plopped down onto the sofa and did not budge, arms folded stubbornly over her breasts.

I bent low, bringing my nose close to hers. "Unless you would like to say goodbye to your retirement and all of your hard-earned riches right now? I could let you look upon them one final time, let you give them a parting kiss before I haul them out your door for good."

"I should have known you were the devil," she muttered. "Lucifer is always beautiful. I should have known it the second I laid eyes on you. The moment I found you attractive, I—"

"I can't decide whether I'm flattered by this commentary or insulted."

"—should have kicked you right between the legs and shoved you out my window, you serpent!"

"That settles it. I'm insulted, and I'm leaving your room now—but not through any window. You wouldn't stand a chance in a battle with me, Rynn. Banish that idea from your head now. I'm giving you one hour. Sixty minutes only to dress and pack and make your goodbyes. It is a gift," I said forcefully. "Be ready and do not test me."

* * *

I returned for Rynn promptly within the hour.

She was not ready .

I found her lying on the floor, still in her dressing gown, her arm thrown dramatically over her eyes. She groaned when I entered.

“What is this tragedy?” I demanded, stepping over her body. “Are you always so melodramatic?”

“Worry not,” she moaned at me, “I’m only prone to melodrama when my entire life is crumbling around me. That only happens . . . more often to me than it does to anyone else because God hates me.”

“Clearly you require assistance,” I said, not hiding the disapproval in my tone. “Why don’t you dress while I pack.”

“I don’t want you touching any more of my things, you pirate.”

“Then you pack and I’ll dress you!” I snapped.

“That’s . . . nonsense.”

“Look at me, Rynn.”

She did, reluctantly. Her doe eyes were red-rimmed and full of malice. “Just go away!”

“If you do not ready yourself, I will throw you over my shoulder and drag you out of

here as you are. Look and see me. I am no longer in a costume. None of your friends would dare stop me.” I was old money. I was power.

“They . . . might.” Her bountiful bottom lip went between her teeth uncertainly.

“Did they halt Utrecht when he put your arm in a sling? Have they done a thing to stop him from returning to see you here? No, they have not. If they tried to stop me now, they would pay dearly for failing you then.”

Her lungs hitched, and her eyes widened briefly before sharpening again. It was clear she did not know what to make of me. “You would hurt them? ”

“Anyone who tried taking you from my arms, yes. They matter nothing to me. I would hurt them maliciously and without hesitation or restraint. I am the serpent you accused me of being. Get. Dressed. Now.”

Her arm went back over her eyes. The sting of my treachery had her lip quivering.

I hauled her to her feet, careful of her healing arm, and when she struggled, I draped her over my shoulder like she was a sack of flour. A sack that kicked and flailed, as passionate as an angry bobcat, but I would not be deterred.

“All right, all right, all right ,” she chanted as I marched for the door.

I plopped her down onto her backside. “Prepare to depart. Now .”

Sprawled at my feet, lacy nightgown twisted up around her knees, she stared up at me with bottomless eyes full of anguished betrayal. Finally, she relented.

Rynn crawled away, putting distance between us before rising slowly. Her chin trembled as she dressed. She swiped her cheeks and sniffled while packing her

traveling cases and boxing her books—not in alphabetical order but in some method of madness all her own. She pinned up her hair and secured the jet curls away from her face with a silk scarf the color of crow feathers. The frock she wore was charcoal gray.

She looked like she was going to a funeral. I hardened my heart to her sadness. Her pain was nothing compared to the grief that had beat in my breast since her trickery.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:48 am

Rynn Mavis

Mail bags covered both rows of seats in front, forcing me to crowd my pirate in the back of the stagecoach. I was angry with myself more than anything—actually no. I glared over at the rogue who'd robbed, coerced, and then stolen me right out of my bedroom, and corrected that thought.

I was angriest at him unequivocally.

We bumped and swayed over ruts made by wagon wheels in the muddy earth headed due south from Salt Rock. I kept to my side of the seat and didn't try for the door again. The road was narrower, the terrain rougher in these parts, and full of jagged rocks. I didn't want to put my arm back in a sling by leaping out of the cabin in a vain bid for freedom.

"Banish the thought, Rynn," he warned when he caught me eyeing the handle.

"I'm not going to do it. I don't want you to sit on me again," I muttered, thinking of how he'd sat right across my legs the first time I'd had second thoughts about traveling anywhere with him.

And I wanted my money back—needed it. In case of emergencies, I kept a small portion in the bank at Salt Rock, but it was a paltry sum in comparison to what he'd taken. I needed all of it to retire properly.

I was done with the life I'd lived. Tired of the risks. Tired of having to trust people with only parts of me, never the whole thing. Tired of constantly having to move on

and start over. Tired of not being allowed to put down roots, to nest and really live.

I was alone in the world, a fact I'd tolerated better when I was a wealthier woman, before he came along. His betrayal shouted the truth of my singularity louder than any hardship before it ever had.

I looked him over out of the corner of my eye. There were no noticeable bulges in his pockets. I doubted my cash was on his person, and I'd had jewelry in there as well but not much. I'd sold most of it preparing to move.

"I'm not a fool," he said. "I wouldn't carry that kind of money directly on my person."

"Stop that!"

"Stop what?"

"Stop reading my mind. It's unseemly."

"Then stop shooting your thoughts at me like they're bullets."

"Wish they were bullets," I muttered.

"What was that you just said?" He pushed a sagging mail bag roughly away from him .

I ignored him. "Stupid sad eyes," I murmured. "Stupid big hands . . . Stupid handsome son of a—"

"If you don't stop cursing at me," he growled, "I'm going to gag you with your own stockings."

I wanted to call his bluff, but I'd already tried that once when he threatened to sit on me. The situation hadn't ended in my favor.

"How'd you do it?" I grumbled at him.

"Which part?" he grumbled back.

"How'd you get into my safe? How'd you even know it was there?"

He stared ahead like the other side of the coach was more interesting than whatever else I had to say. "It doesn't matter."

Lips pursed, I thought on his words and reconsidered mine. "You're right. It doesn't. You have plenty of money of your own. Why did you get into my safe? Why are you doing this to me? That matters most."

He breathed through his nose, long and slow. I waited. Then waited some more but less patiently, tapping my foot.

"Oh, for the love of God, say something!" I shouted. Then inspiration struck, and I gasped. "Is this about Utrecht?"

The venom in his glower turned my blood cold. "No, this isn't about him."

"If you think he tells me business secrets—"

He shook his head. "I don't care about his damn business."

"Utrecht doesn't tell me anything, I swear it. You can't ransom me or get something in trade. I'm not worth anything. I'm just one of many women he kept. He doesn't care for me. He probably keeps a mistress in every city he frequents. Go on and steal

one of them instead!”

He spun to face me so suddenly I yelped. A muscle in his clenched jaw jumped. “This is not about Utrecht. This is not a bid for information about that foul man or any of his businesses. I am not ransoming you to anyone—ever! In fact, I want the name Utrecht to never touch your lips again. Are we clear?”

I swallowed hard. As he waited impatiently for my answer, his angry breath warmed my face. I could taste him on my tongue: mint and cedar and honey. The spicy scent of black tea and orchids teased my senses. Fear—that wicked little devil—heated my cheeks and pumped thrills of pleasure through my pulse.

My lips parted around my next needy exhale, and I hated myself in that moment.

I hated him too, doubly so. How dare he make me feel this way, now especially.

“Hatred,” he whispered, like he saw it in my eyes and plucked the thought straight out of my mind. “Yes, that’s closer to the truth of things.”

“We hardly know one another. Who do you hate so desperately?” I asked, and my voice shook. My hands too—they shivered as I fisted them in my frock.

Instead of responding, my pirate did an excellent impersonation of a marble statue, as stern and silent as a gargoyle.

Since he would not talk to me, I spoke out loud to myself.

“I hope this is about debauchery. Debauchery I can handle.” I filled the cabin with my forlorn sigh, ready to make a trade I could tolerate. I’d grown accustomed to transactions with serpents over the years. I knew how to talk them down. Usually. “If you’d just tell me something, anything! You mentioned lambing season. For all I

know, you're taking me someplace secluded so you can murder me the way you like, chop me into tiny pieces before you feed me to your sheep . . ."

"I would never do that," he said sternly. "The sheep wouldn't like you," he added, less sternly. "My pigs on the other hand—"

With all my might, I balled my fist and punched him in the mouth. His jaw snapped to the side. When I made to strike him again, he caught my wrist and trapped it against his leg, pinning the side of my body to his.

"I'm not going to kill you, Rynn," he said, chuckling. Frenzied glee lit his tawny eyes; walnut hair mussed and falling across his lashes made him appear perfectly wild. "You're of no use to me dead, and there are enough ghosts in my manor as it is. I've no desire to add another to the mix."

Ghosts? Surely, he meant the metaphorical sort. My fist smarted. It had caught on his teeth, cutting the middle knuckle. Opening and closing my fingers, I tested its functioning and hoped his face hurt worse.

"I'm not going to harm you," he murmured softly, and some of the nerves clenching my stomach settled down at his earnestness. "I'm not like Utrecht, Rynn. I'd never put your arm in a sling. I wouldn't harm a single hair on your beautiful head."

If this devil wanted to bargain for my time, I might be willing, but my price would be steep.

"If you're not going to hurt me, then admit to me what this is about," I begged him, fire flaring in my belly. Fear and a racing heart and the unseemly passion the combination always inspired had me squeezing my thighs together wantonly. "You're not the first man to assume that his desires are his alone and not fit for a crowded city. I couldn't have read you so wrong all this time. I'm certain I've seen lust in your

eyes when you looked upon me. If this is all about a passion you're ashamed of, then say so. I demand to know what's to become of me!"

"Debauchery you can handle," he repeated.

I swallowed hard. "That's right. Whatever it is, it's probably not even as unusual as you assume. I'd wager I've even done it before—would probably enjoy it. This production to ensure your privacy is unnecessary . . . If that's what this is . . ."

He licked his lip. Then he brought my fist up to his mouth. I tried to yank it away, but he reeled me in like I was as light as a bird. His hot tongue flicked across my injured knuckle, lapping up the blood there.

That admittedly, was something I'd never done before. A shiver of liquid pleasure flowed down my spine. I felt the touch of his tongue everywhere all at once, from the roots of my hair to the tips of my feet. My toes curled in my boots, and my fingers, trapped in his, trembled. One little flick of his tongue and he'd invaded me, body and soul.

He did not give my hand back to me, tucking it against his lap like he was going to keep it forevermore.

He didn't answer my questions or confirm my suspicions. I wanted to believe that this shy man was unwilling to explore his passions outside of his own home and needed a captive courtesan to appease him. Perhaps the capture was part of the draw for him.

Perhaps he sought trouble the same way I did and we'd found it in each other.

Or perhaps I could still reason with this pirate. It wouldn't be the first time I'd had to make a trade with a devil to get out of something awful. Oh God, it was just so

disappointing that he was one. All this time I'd wanted desperately to believe he was something different. I had no reason to expect that for myself, aside from longing after it too much, fool that I was.

When you want something that badly, you start seeing it everywhere—especially in all the wrong places.

He left me to stew, as though having me in a panic was his preference. We bumped along in silence, my body pressed to his because he would not release me. His spicy scent was heady in my nose, and his thumb strummed mindlessly over that little injury on my knuckle, inspiring a whirlwind of feelings I longed to banish. It hurt and soothed all at the same time. My nipples pebbled rebelliously against my chemise.

The coach was nearing a small town formed around a long dirt drag and a copse of magnolia trees. A strong wind covered the main road in fallen pink blooms.

“For how long am I to stay with you?” I asked timidly.

He turned his head, cracking his neck and rolling his shoulders as though his body were growing stiff. We'd been riding for at least two hours. The coach was well-sprung, but the terrain was muddy gravel, and I was feeling similarly sore.

“You mentioned summering?” I added, trying to pry a word out of him.

“We'll start there,” he said dubiously.

I scooted closer. “Tell me a date. Offer me something! We could compromise like rational people. I'd be willing to stay a week and give you no trouble. You pay me and return what's mine, and we go our separate ways.”

“We'll see,” he said absently, staring out his window at the nearing stables. The

coach pulled off to the side to allow a larger wagon to drive through. We were off again quickly.

“A month with a fee?” I offered. “That’s overly generous.”

“Through the summer,” he repeated, “then we’ll see. ”

“I’m back to a week now and an even larger fee, since you won’t be reasonable,” I growled.

The bronze of his eyes caught in the sunlight through the window and glistened like a lit spark. “Twenty. Years,” he rumbled. “Then you can have your money back.”

My lungs squeezed like they had a band tied about them. I searched his face, his scars, his familiar eyes, studying him with renewed purpose. “ Who are you?”

He tried to turn back to his window, but I fisted my fingers into his morning coat and jerked, stressing the buttons. “Tell me!” I begged. “A name. Either one. Who are you, and why are you doing this to me?”

The horrors of my past tried to burn through my mind despite my best efforts to shove them down, to refuse to look upon them. Dwelling on any of it always induced a heartache that was too difficult to recover from. I’d be bedridden before I managed it.

“Through the summer,” he said instead, “then we’ll see.”

I shut my eyes against the burn of threatening tears. My past was a dark, decrepit, parasitic bedfellow strung with wrongdoings and woes. Memories whirled behind my lids. I didn’t allow myself to focus on any one of them. My vision blurred. I blinked to clear it, but one tear escaped.

He caught it on my cheek with his thumb and showed it to me. The little drop pooled there on the pad of his finger, small and sparkling instead of inky and rotten like it should have been.

“Finley,” he said to the teardrop, then he made a fist, trapping it in his palm.

I worked my throat. “That’s your name? Truly?”

“It is. ”

If he was lying, he was very good at it. I didn’t know any Finley. I probed his face, his scars, his haunted eyes with another long look. I didn’t know this man. At times there was something in his voice and his gaze that felt recognizable, but I didn’t know anyone by such a name. And, if I was being honest with myself, I’d often mistaken others for a young man from my youth. It happened even when they were the wrong age and the wrong height. Finley was taller and broader, but I was always finding bits and pieces of the one I’d loved in the glances and laughter of strangers, in smells and books . . .

Even in small cigarettes left on my windowsill while a stranger broke into my safe.

No matter how hard I’d tried to get away from all that, my past was always catching up to me. Even in the voice and eyes of this pirate.

As the Concord undulated along, I realized there was something here I did recognize. I knew this farming town: the small shops, the bakery, the Quaker meeting house. It had flourished since the last time I’d come through here two decades ago.

“We’re near Light Lily,” I whispered, reflecting on the mire I’d lived in from ages 10-18 and the horrid land baron whose family I’d been forced to serve by desperate parents who had too many mouths to feed. They’d put me in service the moment I

was old enough to carry a pot of water and knew how to keep a kitchen fire burning. Unbeknownst to them, they'd handed me over to work for a monster.

"Welcome to ghost country," Finley said.

An eerie wind entered the cabin, and the temperature plummeted along with my stomach.

My heart took off at a gallop. I clutched at Finley's arm. "I can't be in Light Lily."

"You already are," he said.

Frantic, I shook my head. "It can't be so."

He turned to me, sliding a firm arm behind my back. "We're just passing through," he said in that somberly soothing way I'd grown accustomed to before he robbed me and showed me his devil side.

My stomach churned. I stared at my lap, refusing to take in the sights and smells of a disastrous youth. "We have to turn back."

His hand slid under my hair, gently squeezing the back of my neck. The pressure was exquisite. "We're not turning back."

"No—"

"Rynn!"

"I cannot go any farther!" I shouted, and my voice broke. I was scared to look out the windows, frightened the monster would appear right there, ready to hurt me again.

"There is a covered bridge through the mire here . . ."

“We’ll be upon it soon,” he said evenly. “It’s the quickest way, then you can put Light Lily behind you.”

“If I even lay eyes on that bridge, I swear to you my heart will stop in my chest!”

“Why?” he demanded.

“Because I’m rotten! I’m a vile woman more serpent than you will ever be! No harpy in hell is worse!” When I opened my mouth to say more, my voice cracked. I wanted to shout my apologies for all my wrongdoings at the sky, but my throat tightened around the words fighting for purchase on my tongue. I could say no more.

I burst into tears .

His gaze narrowed on me, expression hard and unreadable. “Going around the mire instead of through it would add many miles to our travels.” He had to raise his voice to be heard over my weeping. “We’d have to stop at an inn and wait to secure a ride with another stage.”

“Yes! We must!” I croaked. “I’ll behave!”

He scoffed. “I doubt you’re capable.”

“Please, Finley!” I clawed at the lapel of his morning coat, scrambling for something to dig my fingers into. “I promise you! If it is truly not your intention to harm me, then do not take me to that bridge!”

In my mind’s eye, that horrid baron was there, just like in my dreams, waiting to chase me through the mire.

Finley looked at me like I’d gone mad, and in a way, I had. I’d done many things in

my life that I should regret, but there was only the one thing that inspired true remorse. None of my terrible deeds haunted me like the day I fled Light Lily, leaving behind the only person I would always hold dear.

I was a thief, a crook, a charlatan. I was an untrustworthy harlot. Guilt swamped me, and my stomach tied itself into knots. I was everything that evil baron had always said I'd become. But there was one boy who'd believed differently, and I'd abandoned him to take the fall for all of my crimes.

And I was so, so sorry for all of that. If only horrid guilt were enough to undo any of it.

Finley shouted for the driver to halt, and the Concord came to a rumbling stop.

"If I remove us from Light Lily now—"

"I'll do whatever you want!" I vowed. "Please, Finley, you must!"

"You will do strictly as I command you to," he said, his voice gone rugged, inviting no argument.

"I will." I pulled at his coat, and he unwound my fingers from the fabric, trapping them against his leg.

"When we reach the inn, we are Mr. and Mrs. Finley. I will introduce you as my wife. You will act accordingly and make no attempts to contradict the fiction I will create for us to ensure we are tended to swiftly and properly. You will not behave in any fashion that would draw unwanted attention."

"I will do as you say."

“You will not flee from me.”

My lashes lowered, and I worked my throat. One swallow wasn't enough to clear it. I tried again. “I'll go to your summer home with you. You have my word. I won't try to flee.”

I needed out of Light Lily as quickly as possible. I would have agreed to stand on my head in a pit full of weaver snakes if it got us gone from this wicked place. There was an affliction here. It permeated the air like a black fog. Its sticky poison pebbled my skin. It seeped inside me, filling my mind with disquiet and unease.

And memories. So many dark memories.

Gripping my jaw carefully, Finley lifted my chin until my eyes returned to his. Then he produced a silk kerchief from the pocket of his waistcoat and wiped my wet cheeks with surprising gentleness.

“The mire stretches for miles in unexpected ways. I've lost animals to sinking spots in the marshes more than once,” he said, cleaning my chin. “The woods are full of black bears and weaver women. This is dangerous country. Attempting to separate from me will put you at risk of more than my disapproval. It isn't safe to wander here.”

I blinked at him, thinking of my terrible dreams of late. “You believe there are actually witches in the woods?”

“As should you,” he said sharply. “Do we have an accord?”

I nodded, remembering the conflicting old legends about the witches I'd left behind along with everything else here in Light Lily.

He shook me gently. “Use your voice, Rynn. I want to hear the words from your lips. Convince me you mean them.”

“We have an accord,” I said through my teeth.

And fortunately, he believed me.

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Lochlan Finley

I 'd nearly given myself away when I said I'd keep her for twenty years. The retort had sped from my mouth before I could catch it back. I didn't truly know how long I planned to keep her . . .

All I knew was that there were things she had to answer for and consequences I would no longer endure without her. My punishment was hers to share in. My grief was hers to carry.

The reinsman and the conductor seated beside him were not thrilled when I informed them we would need to backtrack at least two miles before taking the road east to a destination out of the way from what we'd discussed. It was a road I'd made myself familiar with because I was not fond of traveling through Light Lily either.

The conductor lifted the curtain that separated his seat from the cabin and poked his head in. His sable coat and mustache had gathered a great deal of traveler's dust. "But the post, sir," he said, glancing forlornly at the mail bags. "They'll be delayed."

The promise of more money ensured he did not question me long. Once we'd cleared the township, we ate a quick meal. The driver slowed the stage so we could walk beside it for a stretch to work the soreness out of our joints without putting us farther behind schedule.

Rynn kept her word, eating when instructed and strolling where I told her to. I was not foolish enough to believe that this compliance would continue indefinitely, and I did not let her out of my sight.

But why had the bridge upset her so?

I wondered over her outburst as we stretched our legs. I could make sense of her resistance to being so close to the old estate we'd grown up in, but why that bridge in particular? It was miles from the old manor. Its significance gnawed at me.

There were so many questions I wanted to demand answers to. It was growing harder to remain patient and careful around her. But knowing who I was would only make transporting her even more difficult. She'd reacted poorly to Light Lily's covered bridge. She'd react even more viscerally to my identity.

Fortunately, I'd cast off my adopted surname as soon as I could. She didn't recognize Finley and knew nothing about the birth mother and sister I'd reconnected with in adulthood.

Gray clouds gathered over our heads like harbingers of doom. It began to shower, so I helped the conductor throw a canvas over our luggage. To avoid getting a stuck wheel, we waited out the worst of it under a collection of thick maple trees. After the rain calmed, we set off again. I found the steady beat of the light drops against the roof comforting. Rynn gnawed on her thumb nail like the opposite was true for her. She flinched at every sound.

Soon the rain ceased and the skies cleared. I filled my lungs with the refreshing scent of renewal that wafted in through the windows, glad the roads remained free of other travelers. We were alone out here, a state I preferred.

As evening began to darken the skies and night loomed closer, we came upon an inn near a small apple orchard and an empty trading post. A hanging sign labeled the collection of workers' cabins behind the large two-story cottage as Drasland.

I frowned at the state of the carriage house. There was a buggy and a simple

buckboard wagon out front already. I'd had enough of being near strangers. It had taken a lot out of me to endure them in the way I had these last few days.

"What's wrong?" Rynn asked, peering out the window beside me.

"It's busy," I grumbled. "I'd rather it wasn't."

She snorted sharply. "This isn't busy."

"Maybe to a city person like you."

Easy for her to say, considering her former lifestyle. Rynn had always liked people. Meanwhile, I spent most of my time with only ghosts for company, and as spirits were not corporeal, they did not crowd and never tried to engage me in tedious conversation.

If they didn't suffer caprices of their own, I'd prefer their company.

"It'll be dark soon," she said, an edge of nervousness in her voice. Her spine pulled up straight.

I was no fan of the dark either, and my shoulders stiffened. "We'll be settled inside long before then."

"Not if you don't climb out of the stage," she said pointedly.

"I'm going . . ."

"No, you're not. You're quite literally just sitting there."

"I'm not in the hurry you apparently are." I slid my top hat onto my head, crossed one

leg over the other, and rested back against the seat cushion.

A malicious amusement lit her hickory eyes. “Are you waiting for the lot of them to go inside first so you don’t have to speak to them? There’s only . . .” Leaning over me, she made a quick count. “Three! There are three people out there, and not a one of them looks particularly intimidating. Especially the petite one with the lace flowers on her dress.”

“I don’t like a crowd. People exhaust me. We can wait until they’re done being overly polite with each other. It won’t hurt either of us to sit a bit longer.”

“Finley, this is not by any stretch of the imagination a ‘crowd’. They could fit inside this stage with us if we were so inclined, and there would be elbow room to spare.”

I shuddered at the mental picture she drew, though she was right. This Concord was built for at least six passengers. “By my definition it’s practically a horde out there.”

Rynn brought her face closer to mine, eyes narrowed to slits in her angriest hellcat expression. “If you thought I behaved dramatically before,” she warned, “just wait until you see what happens when night falls and there aren’t big city streetlamps about to light the way.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Fine then, come on, hellcat,” I said, shoving open the door and climbing out. I’d nearly forgotten that we needed to behave as though we were married. Turning back, I offered her my arm reluctantly .

She frowned at it.

“You’re my wife,” I whispered.

Her lips turned down farther, but she took my arm, plastering a forced smile on her

face that didn't reach her eyes. I helped her climb down, resisting the urge to push her into the nearest mud puddle with every aggravated fiber of my being.

First, I made things right with the driver and stage conductor, adding a generous amount to the total owed.

"You had best not be paying him with my money," Rynn muttered under her breath.

It wasn't her money, but I grinned at her show of irritation, suddenly in a better mood.

The inn was owned by a family of four and their lanky chocolate-coated Great Dane. The husband and wife exchanged a few words in Dutch before the husband, a stocky man with fair skin, spoke with the stage driver and conductor about resting themselves and their horses. Two adolescent boys started on our luggage with my permission, unstrapping my trunk from the roof.

I asked the wife about the cost of a room and travel farther southeast into the heart of Blackwood County, worried we'd have to squat a while before another Concord passed through in this more remote area.

She nodded as she listened to my questions. The top of her blonde head was covered by a lace-and-straw bonnet. "Another stage will pass through here by tomorrow afternoon," she said. "We see at least one every day unless it's the Sabbath. Usually, they're full of mail parcels but sometimes passengers."

"Goodenavond," Rynn said pointedly, with a sideways glare at me because I had not bothered with niceties before getting to business. I was well out of patience with niceties .

"Goodenavond!" the woman said with a friendly smile.

“Ik wil mijn man verrassen. Hij spreekt geen Nederlands. Kunt u hem misschien voor me afleiden,” Rynn said, her tone springy and light.

I was immediately suspicious.

“Oh! Ja, natuurlijk. Ben jij Nederlands?”

Rynn’s lips parted around her next response, but I cut her off, recognizing the last phrase spoken. “She isn’t Dutch, but she’s quite the linguist. I’m not however.” I squeezed Rynn’s arm warningly in mine, reminding her to behave. “She’s going to take pity on her husband now and switch back to English for his sake. Aren’t you, dear?”

She patted my fingers harder than was strictly necessary. “Of course I will, darling,” she said through her teeth.

Instead of being shown to our rooms, the inn owner insisted on a small tour of the grounds in the fading light as the sky turned dusky purple above us.

“What did you do?” I growled at her under my breath.

“Just being friendly,” she growled back.

“Liar.”

“Ask her yourself, then, why don’t you?” she hissed, jerking her arm out of mine so she could cross both of hers over her chest defiantly.

With reluctance, I let the matter drop.

The wife, who introduced herself as Eva, shared the history of the inn and the

planting of the orchard by her husband's family as we walked through short rows of white flowered apple trees, breathing in the tart scent of the blossoms. I made polite noises as needed to encourage her story along faster.

When we came to a small woven wicker basket, I paused. It sat near a gnarled collection of tree roots. A handful of purple heather and lilacs rested on the lid, bound with twine tied into a loose bow.

"Is that a gift for the weaver women?" I asked her.

"That's right," she said, pushing yellow hair that caught in a wet breeze out of her face. "My husband is a little superstitious. He swears their favor brings us wisdom and good fortune. He collects fallen blossoms off the ground and any scraps of fabric lying about the house for them, and I bake them a loaf of bread at least once a week. My boys will leave it in the woods here shortly so it's there before midnight."

"Your husband is a wise man," I told her. It was then I realized Rynn was being inordinately quiet. I turned to see what she was getting up to, and my heart lurched.

She was gone.

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Lochlan Finley

I spun about, scanning distant tree lines and the spaces between the cabins for her familiar form, her charcoal dress and the raven scarf in her hair. It was so close to nightfall. Surely, she wouldn't dare—

“Your wife went inside some time ago,” Eva said gently, her cheeks turning pink. “Probably to check on your room. It should be ready for you. Upstairs, third door on the right.”

I stuffed a hand in my pocket and groaned. My folding knife was missing. The little vixen had picked it right off me, and I hadn't even felt it.

Boots sloshing in the damp grass, I marched for the front door and nearly barreled into the husband in the entryway. He made polite apologies. I ignored him, shouldering by.

“Something the matter?” he called to his wife.

“They're newly married, I think,” Eva replied, chortling knowingly. The rest of their conversation continued in Dutch.

The cottage was a maze of small rooms. I wound up in the dining area before I finally found the stairs. I took them two at a time, hustling for our bedroom. The door was unlocked. I threw it open with enough force it clattered against the opposing wall.

Rynn sat on the edge of a wooden chair, waiting for me, flanked in bright lantern

lights. Twinkling stars and fireflies lit the night sky through the window at her back. My traveling trunk was open, the lock scratched up like a bobcat had taken offense to it before setting dynamite off inside it. Clothing was everywhere.

She'd undressed down to the chemise I enjoyed, boots off and jet hair curling around her shoulders. Her black silk stockings were embroidered in an open design that revealed patterned segments of her fawn skin from ankle to . . . I didn't know how far up the design went, but my mind enjoyed imagining the possibilities. It was an even more alluring sight than when her legs had been completely bare that morning.

She twirled my knife between her fingers.

"You stole from me." Again , I resisted adding.

"Ha. If that isn't the pot calling the kettle black." She tossed the folding blade onto the bed. It disappeared amongst the billowy blankets. "You can have it back. Where's my money?"

I closed the door behind me and locked it. "Not in my trunk."

"Obviously," she snarled.

I threw my hat onto the bed beside my knife, removed my coat, then worked off the buttons of my waistcoat and the fastenings of my suspenders. I felt her eyes on me as I undressed, but I ignored her, eager to get free of my layers to wash the hours of travel from my body .

I trod over my favorite morning coat. Lifting it between my fingers, I inspected the ripped seams and destroyed pockets. "Was this really necessary?"

"Yes," she said. "I had to make sure you hadn't hidden my cash in the lining, didn't

I?”

I held up a pair of shredded drawers next, brows raised.

“That was just spite,” she admitted, her smile smug.

“You’re a menace,” I told her.

“I am. You should give me back what’s mine now and send me on my way before I do worse.”

“Not a chance, hellcat.” Knowing she would enjoy any display of irritation from me, I deprived her of one. Calmly, I ambled over to the pitcher and basin in the corner of the room, stepping over more of my destroyed clothing. I removed my collar and cuffs and rolled my sleeves to the elbows.

She watched me wash my neck and face intently. As I finished rinsing my hair, the water in the basin turned filthy with the dirt of travel.

“It’s easier to do that with your underthings off, you know,” she said.

“If you were hoping for a show, then get used to disappointment,” I told her.

Her returning smile was perfectly villainous. “I see no reason why you’re behaving with decorum now. Not after you’ve been such a pirate. This sudden shyness from you has made me curious, is all.”

Decorum had nothing to do with it. I didn’t take off my shirt because there were scars on my back she’d likely recognize since she’d been the one to dress my wounds, just like I’d been the ones to treat hers. I knew the marks on her body even better than my own .

“I wouldn’t dare let my guard down completely around you,” I said because that was true, too.

When I finished, she brought me a towel to dry with. I eyed it suspiciously.

“It’s not going to bite you,” she said, laughter in her voice. This sudden playful mood from her put me instantly on my guard. Whatever mischief she was up to, I was determined not to get sucked in.

When I didn’t take the terrycloth from her, she dried my face and neck for me, blotting the moisture, bringing her tempting body closer. Her position gave me a perfect view down the front of her chemise—a dangerous view. My eyes lifted from the curves of her ripe breasts to her dark gaze. Hers smoldered with some unknown emotion I couldn’t place.

“I would like to offer you a trade,” she whispered.

“I’m not interested in trading with you. If I want something, I’ll just take it like I did with your money.”

“Debauchery for information,” she said plainly, surprising me.

I squinted at her as she worked the terrycloth behind my ears and through my hair, drying the rest of me. “You’re hoping I’ll tell you where your money is,” I guessed.

“That’s right. You get a release. I get the answer I want.”

I scoffed. “Even if I told you where the cash was, I wouldn’t give it to you.”

She gestured broadly at the mess she’d made. “As it turns out, the information would be very useful anyway, even if you didn’t hand it over.”

My fingers flexed into fists at my sides, and my nostrils flared.

Rynn stepped back from me, wary. “You seem angry. ”

I was angry. Furious. I sensed she was trying to trick me again. “I want to make sure I understand the rules of the game you’ve proposed,” I said, words clipped.

She took another step back and I followed her, closing the distance she’d created with one of my longer strides. She swallowed, and her smoldering eyes went dreamy and heavy-lidded. Her pupils dilated, and her nipples hardened, pressing against the fabric of her chemise. I recalled her earlier confession: she had a complicated relationship with fear.

“It’s a simple enough transaction,” she rasped. “Pleasure for information.”

“A release for one answer?” I confirmed.

“That’s right,” she said, “only it doesn’t look like you like this game. Perhaps I shouldn’t have mentioned it at all.”

In reply, I scooped her up and tossed her onto the bed. She let out a chirp of surprise. Sprawled there, her back against the cushions, her chemise tangled between her lush thighs.

“It’s not your game I object to,” I said, dragging my eyes up her legs to where the open embroidery disappeared beneath her hem. “You think you can manipulate me with your beautiful body like I’m some animal incapable of controlling myself. I take offense to that.”

She started to sit up. I pushed her shoulder down, forcing her to lounge against the pillows.

“You’re an animal because you snuck into my room, broke into my safe, and forced me to go somewhere I had no plans to.” She added more gently, “But you’re not an animal just because you like what you see when you look at me.”

Either she’d made a very good point, or I was too far gone and too easy to coerce. Either way, it was impossible not to stare at her. “I do like what I see . . . Still seems like a terrible idea to make a trade with you.”

“It’s a dreadful idea for both of us. But we should definitely do it anyway.” Her voice had gone breathy.

The nagging feeling of walking into a trap only intensified, which is why I astounded myself when my mouth opened and “Yes,” popped right out of it.

“You agree to my terms? Information for a release?” An attractive blush stained her cheeks and throat.

“I agree,” I said. “Pull up your dress.”

Gripping the hem, she tugged it higher, revealing more of the embroidery I so admired. It stopped mid thigh. I trailed my fingers up the design and watched, entranced, as her lips parted around her next slow exhale. My touch was gentle and thorough as it investigated the pattern down her knee, around her shapely calf, then along the bone of her shin. She shivered.

When her chemise was rucked up around her waist, Rynn reached for the fastenings of her garter belt.

I trapped her hand in mine. “Don’t do that.”

Her throat bobbed delicately. “All right.”

“Does your arm still hurt?”

She shook her head, and her glossy curls bounced. “Hardly. It’s a stiffness from having it in the sling so long. You don’t need to keep worrying after it.”

I didn’t believe her. By her own admission, she told men like me only what they wanted to hear. I snatched one of the pillows and tucked it up against her side, then I laid her arm across it. “This stays right here for now.”

“If that’s what you want,” she said, voice wobbling.

“That’s what I want.”

While I was distracted with the cushion, she grabbed the front of my shirt and jerked me forward. With one kiss, all the breath in my lungs came out of me in a mad rush. My eyes slid shut.

She tasted summer sweet. I could still smell the sunlight and spring rain on her skin and in her hair. Hints of citrus and wine clung to her like she’d rolled in crimson rose petals just moments ago. I wanted to take back control, but when I planted a hand beside her to push away, my body disobeyed me. My fingers fisted into her springy curls. My other hand cupped her hip where it flared and dug in tight. Lost, I pulled her closer.

This was the kiss I had dreamed about for two decades. This was the kiss that had haunted my soul, teased my thoughts, consumed my mind, and driven me to madness. I hated that I wanted her—hated that my heart refused to reject the one who’d poisoned it.

I’d walked knowingly right into her snare, but oh God, what a delicious trap it was. I didn’t want to escape it.

The satiny pillows of her lips were plush and inviting and so unexpectedly warm. Her tongue too—it was curious and light as it licked into my mouth, and I was overcome. My lips surrendered to hers immediately. Conquered without a fight. She nibbled and suckled and teased my tongue like she was just as ravenous for me as I was for her.

But I knew this to be a fiction. This was a game to her, and that thought alone cooled me.

She'd undone the buttons down the seam of my trousers, and I hadn't even felt her nimble hand at work. Furies spare me! My waistband loosened around my hips. She tried to cup my growing erection with those same talented fingers, but I captured her wrist and lowered her back onto the bed.

Her lips were swollen, gently ravaged. A positively breathtaking sight.

"I'd like to kiss you elsewhere," she explained, trying again to reach for the opening she'd made in my trousers, but I held her fast.

The mental image of those beautiful, battered lips around my cock made me so hard, my length stretched aching against the linen of my drawers. I was so sensitive, the pull of the fabric was like sandpaper. I wanted to sink into the silky sweetness of her mouth. It was the only cure for me, but I knew better and wouldn't dare.

This was a game. A manipulation.

A game I would win.

"Oh dear," she said, surprised. "You look even angrier now than when we started. How did a kiss cause that?"

I didn't feel angry anymore. Just overcome. I pushed her legs up until her knees bent

and her feet rested flat beneath her. Then I sat just below them.

“Open for me,” I rasped.

She did, slowly parting her thighs, revealing the split in her drawers, intimate dark curls, and a pink pussy begging to be touched. I found the furrow between her thighs with the pad of my fingers, and I pressed and stroked sweetly sensitive flesh until her lungs hitched.

I knew this body. Knew this pussy. Knew how to please and tease and pleasure it. Knew how to make her pant and beg and scream and come.

This nightingale was mine, and I knew how to make her sing for me.

I spread her open for my inspection, then I rubbed her tenderly, until this most delicate part of her swelled and went taut. Her pupils widened, swallowing up the rich hickory color. Now she was the one conquered. Nothing but a desperate hunger remained. Her desire coated my fingers, and I quickened my pace and the pressure.

I slid a finger inside her. Eyes wide, she strangled a whimper.

“None of that now,” I told her. “I want you to moan for me.”

“We aren’t alone in this house, and this isn’t a brothel,” she whispered.

“It would be a travesty if you kept quiet. An absolute and utter tragedy. Be a very good girl now and moan for me. Be wanton for me, Rynn. Let me see you undone.”

Biting that plump lower lip, she gripped her knee with her right arm, holding herself open to me, and her eyes squeezed shut. I sunk two fingers into her soft heat, making it even more difficult for her to hold back the little hum building in her throat.

My speed increased, pressing inside her deep, then retreating slightly to tease her with my thumb, over and over again. Her breath left her in shallow pants. The vixen tried again to touch my hardened cock. I trapped her hand against the mattress near her hip. Her fingers flexed, still reaching despite their cage.

“I want to touch you.” She spoke so earnestly I almost believed her.

The desperation in her expression, the passionate desire, was so profoundly invigorating, my cock wept in my drawers. Her hips rocked, first gently, then frantically.

“Oh,” she groaned. “Yes! Yes, like that. I need more . . . I want more of you . . .” She gulped at the air, chest heaving.

I leaned down and sucked one pert nipple into my mouth, through her chemise. Sucked hard enough to hurt. Sucked until I dampened the linen, turning it sheer, and her body quivered beneath me.

“I need . . .” she cried.

“I know what you need,” I told her, stroking inside her and rubbing deep circles right where she craved me most. She came around my fingers with a low moan, her body squeezing me tight.

Rynn worked her throat as she fell from her peak, her cheeks flushed. Her lashes fluttered, and muscles flexed in her legs. Her toes curled and uncurled into the blankets.

“You’ve entirely missed the point of this transaction,” she told me languidly. “I can’t make sense of you. If you don’t want to play this game correctly, then why the hell are we playing at all?”

I watched her pleasure drip down my palm, entranced. “The game is growing on me,” I said, voice gone to gravel. Then my gaze lifted to hers. “You owe me an answer.”

She scoffed. “That wasn’t the point of the trade.”

“Matters not. Those were the rules.”

She tried to shift onto her side so she could close her legs, but I kept her open to me.

Rynn rolled her eyes. “What’s your question?”

“Have you ever been in love with someone? Truly in love. Not lust. Not a trade or transaction. The real thing that hurts and haunts you. The kind that aches when they’re away and aches again when they’re near but in an entirely different way.”

She swallowed, and her lashes lowered. “I know what you mean. You need not carry on poetically.”

“Then answer the question.” I waited for her words, air trapped in my lungs.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, I’ve loved a man like that. We grew up together. I loved him truly. He was my first and only. ”

Her words tore through my shriveled heart like shrapnel.

She reached for me, cupping my face, her doe eyes widening. “God above, you’ve never looked so sad.”

I leaned into the comfort she offered, unable to pull myself away from her. My next breath shuddered out of me.

“Why don’t you let me take some of that sad away for a little while,” she said softly, her fingers tracing the scar that cut through my brow. “I could make you feel better. I want to. I have since the very first time I laid eyes on you. Don’t you remember?”

Her honeyed words were temptation itself, the devil in the desert with the only bread and water around.

“If you loved this man so, then why aren’t you still with him?” I kept my tone light, hoping the shadows hid at least some of the telling agony on my face.

Her chin fell. I wanted to make her look at me. I wanted to shake her and shout at her. Rip my shirt off and make her see all the wounds she’d caused, make her sorry . . . I wanted . . . wanted to hurt just a little bit less.

“I answered your question,” she said somberly. “Let me give you the release you so clearly need. Then I can have the information I want.”

“No.”

“No? You misunderstand the whole purpose of this trade. I meet your needs. Then you—”

I laid my body over hers, pinning her to the bed. “No.” I kissed her lips, quick and brisk. “That’s not what I agreed to.” I pressed my lips to her throat. “I agreed to a release for information. That’s the trade.”

She bucked her body under mine, rubbing her heat against my hard length. “Finley—”

Kissing her breasts, I pushed up her chemise until they spilled free of the satin. I filled my palms with them. She tried again to rub herself against the part of me that

ached for her the most, but I shifted my weight so that her heat ground against my thigh instead.

“There it is,” she said softly, studying my face.

“What’s that?” Watching her unravel herself, I longed to know what she saw in me.

“Lust,” she whispered. “Why not just take what you crave, Finley? Clearly you don’t want to want me, but you do, so here we are. Why fight it? You’ve proven your point now. You didn’t care to be manipulated by the wicked harlot, so you manipulated me back. Well done, you. Come and claim your prize.”

I was too busy with her breasts to respond.

“Take what you want,” she groaned.

“You mean, give you what you want,” I corrected her.

“Yes! Goddamn you, yes! What we both want!” Her hips rocked with even more urgency. “Let me touch you. Bury that poor neglected cock deep inside me. Press it between my lips, I beg you. Let me suck you. I want to be full of you. I want—”

Sinking down between her legs, I buried my tongue inside her instead.

Her grunt of frustration and desire was music to my ears. “This isn’t going to work!” she growled. “I can’t come so easily a second time.”

“I’m in no hurry,” I said. Then I sucked on her skin.

“This isn’t the game!” she whimpered. “You aren’t playing it correctly.”

Rynn pulled my hair and tried to buck me off. I held her legs open, tickling the skin of her thighs with my short beard before returning my full attention to her pussy. She tried again to push me away. I bit her thigh playfully, then gave her sensitive flesh one long appreciative lick.

“Hurts,” she whispered.

I lifted my head, resting my chin on her stomach, holding her down while giving her a short reprieve I wasn't convinced she deserved. “You're extra sensitive now after your climax.”

She nodded, eyes heavy. “Hurts so fucking good.”

“Attagirl,” I purred, returning eagerly to her quivering sex.

She pulled my hair, but this time it wasn't to make me stop. Her fingers raked across my scalp. Her back bowed. She worked herself hard against my mouth until every lovely inch of her body gleamed with perspiration.

Rynn forgot herself and tried to cup her breasts with her injured arm.

She winced. I took her hand by the wrist and placed it back on its pillow where it belonged. I squeezed her breasts for her, thumbing the nipples the way she liked. I rolled them and pinched them. I made her hum and moan and beg.

I hurt her.

When she asked me to, I hurt her a little more, nipping at her pussy, then suckling hard, pushing her breasts together.

Hurting her was new. We'd been tender with each other before, but she begged for

my worst now, begged for me to treat her roughly.

My worst turned her feral. She tasted tart and salty sweet on my lips. I fucked her with my fingers and my tongue. Each time she bucked her hips, my cock wept a little more, dampening the front of my drawers.

When she came again, she was not quiet, squeezing her thighs around my head .

She was a vision. Watching her rise then break apart, I felt like I'd touched a bit of heaven with her. Afterward, I laid my cheek against her soft stomach, trapping her legs beneath me, not ready to let her up yet. My cock was so firm I could have punctured the mattress with it.

“Well,” she said mischievously, fingers playing in my hair, “I suppose this place is a brothel now.”

I laughed against her belly.

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Rynn Mavis

It was wishful thinking that after all that, Finley would forget his silly question and let me off the hook. We were both exhausted. I wanted to slip off to sleep on the cloud of bliss he'd ensconced me in. If I blinked too long, I could have done just that.

But then he had to go and ruin it like he did everything.

"You know what I want to know," he said, his voice rumbling against my abdomen. "Why aren't you still with this man you so loved?"

"Why do you care?" I demanded.

He fell quiet. Then he let out a deep breath that heated my skin. "I've had a heartbreak of my own, and I'm trying to make sense of it."

"I have no wisdom to share. I've had no successes in my relationships with men or women. I'm the wrong person to—"

"Just answer the question."

I was silent for a long time, gathering my thoughts, trying to wade through the flood of memories, take what I needed, and harden my mind and heart to the rest of it.

"Lochlan," I whispered like it was a holy offering, a gift to the dark. "Heaven above, I haven't spoken that name in ages . . . It still hurts . . ."

Finley's shoulders stiffened against me. His fingers flexed in the bedding beneath us.
"Tell me what happened."

"It's a long story."

"I still want to hear it," he said stubbornly.

"The family I worked for," I began, throat dry and voice cracking, "the father was a horrid land baron. An absolute monster. The worst sort of man. He possessed the kind of cruelty that delighted in abuse."

"Hm. I can imagine that sort." As he spoke, his short beard scratched gently against my belly. I was growing to like the weight of him there.

"I won't tell you the baron's name. He doesn't deserve to be honored in such a way. I never speak it. All you need to know is he should have smelled like sulfur and had cloven hooves. That's how horrible he was, and he treated poor Loch the worst of anyone."

"That doesn't answer my question at all."

"I'm getting to that," I grumped. "I told you it's a long story." I propped an arm behind my head and peered out the window at the twinkling stars and the blankness between them. "Lochlan had been adopted by the family I served, only he was treated like a domestic, not a son. No matter how bad it got, no matter how cruel the baron was, Lochlan still tried so hard to please that blasted man."

"Seems only natural that a boy would want to please his father," he muttered.

"I suppose you're right, but I had a much younger mind then. I was just eighteen when I left, still practically a girl myself. And I hated that Lochlan loved him so. I felt

betrayed by his loyalty to a man who treated me—and him—so poorly.”

“That’s it, then?” he said, his tone unexpectedly prickly. “He was his father’s boy, so you’re not together anymore?”

“No . . . that’s not it . . .” I swallowed. “I had sticky fingers when I was a youth.”

“You still do.”

“Ha. Your knife hardly counts. At least I gave it back after I stole it. I came by my wealth more honestly eventually . . . mostly. But when I was younger, I took as I pleased. A feeling you can apparently relate to,” I added pointedly.

“Just where you’re concerned,” he said.

I snorted at that, not believing him for a moment. “Am I supposed to feel special now?” Robbing my safe had taken thought, effort, at least a handful of madness, and experience to crack a lock like that. “Anyway, poor Lochlan only had one thing he cared for more than the baron’s approval. It was a ring gifted to his birth mother and passed on to him when she could no longer care for him. It wasn’t worth a great deal, just a simple rose gold band, but it was his fondest possession. His natural father died in the Great Rebellion before he could marry his mother, but he’d sent that ring to her as a promise. It was the only piece of his blood family that Loch had . . . Oh, how he used to dream about them. When the baron was terrible, he’d talk about his father returning suddenly to save us both. He’d describe him riding in on this great horse like a famous gunslinger in a dime novel, still wearing a Union uniform, not dead after all, coming to make everything all right.”

“I’m not following how this all connects,” he pressed.

“I’m getting to that.” My face went hot with shame. I was glad he wasn’t looking

right at me. I wouldn't have been able to bear it. "The baron and his wife tried to have their own children but couldn't. They'd both gotten on in years, and so had we. When we were eighteen, Lochlan was finally pronounced the family heir, and it was all made official by an attorney. That's when I knew there was no future for us. That horrid baron would never tolerate a domestic-nobody like me as a daughter-in-law. It was only a matter of time before Lochlan cast me off just to please his pa . . ."

"Did he tell you that?" Finley grunted, his shoulders going taut. "Did he do something that convinced you—"

"No, no. That's just the way of the world, but Lochlan insisted on looking at everything through a more romantic lens. To him, the books we loved so much were more than fiction and closer to the truth of things, but I knew better," I said. He was staring at me now, his sad, scarred, tawny gaze boring into me, reminding me too much of a different set of sweet, hopeful brown eyes. "I . . . I don't want to talk about this anymore."

Finley lowered his head back onto my belly, this time placing his cheek just above my navel. "You haven't finished answering my question."

I sighed. "He didn't do anything wrong, all right? It's like I told you. I'm more serpent than you. No harpy in hell is worse, remember? "

"I remember." He rubbed a hand soothingly across my stomach, the touch so gentle the muscles there trembled.

As long as he wasn't looking at me, I could finish part of the story at least, or enough to get me out of the trade. I tried to rush to the end, skipping over the horrendous middle, words spilling painfully past my lips. "I tricked Lochlan into teaching me how to open the family safe. He wanted to show me the ring he was going to marry me with. He knew I was insecure about our future together, so he showed me the

band he'd been going on about for years. He was . . . We were . . . What I did next was unforgivable, Finley."

The lump in my throat had become too much. I struggled around it, the words burning on my tongue.

"He showed me his most prized possession to reassure me," I said sadly. "That night while the house slept, I stole it. There were more valuable things in the family safe by far, but I took just ten dollars in cash from the baron—not too terribly much that he'd bother to look for me long—and the ring that was precious to Lochlan. I fled that horrid house, and I left Light Lily behind for good."

For a long while, there was nothing but the sound of cricket song coming in through the window.

Needing the comfort of touch, I laced my fingers through the soft walnut strands of Finley's hair. "Lochlan deserved a whole lot better than me. I didn't have it in me to wait about until he finally figured that out . . . or worse: married me out of duty or pity. He was good enough—he might have done so just to keep his word. At least he got someone more suitable this way."

"How do you know he got better than you?" he asked gruffly.

"I . . . I suppose I don't. But I certainly hope he did."

He peered up at me. "Do you truly hope that?"

It was impossible to lie directly to those sad eyes. "All right. You caught me. I want to wish him well, but even now the thought of him with another person turns my insides to lava. So I'll say instead that I hope his life has been happy and peaceful—and entirely celibate."

His warm laughter chased off some of the somberness that had settled inside me during the retelling. “You hope he’s become a monk?”

“Absolutely. It’s not too far-fetched, actually. If he stumbled upon a library excellent enough, he’d never leave its walls no matter how pretty the face. Can I please go to sleep now?” I begged. “You’ve exhausted me, playing my game completely incorrectly.”

His exhale warmed the skin of my stomach. “I won’t stop you,” he said, settling in as though he planned to remain there, using me like a pillow, my chemise still rucked up under my armpits.

I pulled the hem down over my breasts, then I pushed at his face to dislodge him. But he was already asleep and breathing heavily—or faking it very convincingly.

I’d just finished saying how tired I was, but when I tried to close my eyes, thoughts gnawed at me. A monster made of my guilt clawed at my insides for all the rotten things I’d done.

The night was a cool one. As a breeze picked up through the window, and the lanterns burned their oil down to a lower glow than I preferred, I was soon grateful for Finley’s warm body pressed over mine.

I had just started to drift away when a taunting thump tore through the quiet, and I repressed a groan. It was a hollow sound not unlike the wet beat of a heart, but distant and faint, hiding away in the dark places out of my reach.

I hated that sound. It was a noise that had taunted me since childhood, at times remaining faint enough to ignore, but other moments it pulled me from my sleep, incessant and frightening and always from the dark. The noise drew closer, growing louder in the hallway.

My pulse pumped faster. I reached down, pressing my fingers into Finley's hair, seeking reassurance in the warmth of the strands and the steadiness of his breath. But the sound continued, growing so loud panic trapped the air in my lungs.

The doorknob shook.

"Finley," I squeaked. The air cooled around me, biting at the end of my nose. The lanterns fogged up. Darkness crept in around the edges of the glass globes, fighting its way closer. "Finley!" I gasped, and my fingers tightened in his hair.

"Hm?" he rumbled, lashes blinking open. He lifted his chin.

"The door," I whispered.

The knob turned and the door creaked open. Finley sat upright, shielding my body with his. My heart thundered in my chest, striking my ribs so hard it hurt. My pulse surged in my neck and thighs.

Footsteps dragged across the floorboards, and the wood creaked.

"Oh God . . ." I said, staring in horror at the haunting darkness pushing nearer, certain I would soon see a creature of nightmare.

But nothing was there at all.

Finley turned to me, setting his large palm over my eyes. "Don't stare at it," he rasped.

"Don't stare at what?" I hissed.

"This lost spirit won't harm you if you ignore him," he whispered back. "Don't stare.

Don't speak to him."

"Spirit ? I don't believe in ghosts, Finley!"

"Shh," he soothed.

After that, I could hear nothing over the rush of blood in my ears and the storm of my heart in my chest. My limbs tremored, but Finley's weight remained over me, consistent and sure. I clung to him.

Slowly my pulse calmed, and the thump of footsteps retreated. The door opened and closed once more. The darkness went quiet.

Finley released my eyes. I blinked, adjusting to the glow of the lanterns. The darkness behind him remained still. Had I really heard the door open? Was my mind playing mean tricks on me?

"Ghost country," he reminded me. "There's more of them here in Blackwood County."

I shook my head. "I hear those noises all the time," I insisted. My voice shook, and my skin pebbled like the rest of me doubted my own words. Sounds haunted dark spaces, lying in wait to play with those of us with an overactive imagination. "The noises just don't usually . . ."

"Get so close to you?" he offered. He pressed his palm over my heart, and it surged once more. It beat against his hand, striking madly like the hooves of a galloping horse in flight.

Heat built between us, and the thud of my pulse began to race for a very different reason. His hungry eyes claimed mine. He shifted his weight, and the hard, hot bulge

in his trousers nudged my thigh. A thrill went through me: fear-triggered lust.

Finley worked his throat. “You should go to sleep,” he rasped. “We have a long day of travel ahead of us.”

“So should you.”

We stared at each other for so long, time stopped holding any meaning.

Finally, he settled back over me, using my stomach as a pillow. I was glad for his nearness, for the shield of his broad body against the mysteries of the dark, and I finally joined him in slumber.

* * *

I awoke early the next morning well before Finley stirred. He’d shifted off me in the night, onto his side of the bed. Auburn lashes feathered against his cheeks. Even on his scarred side, he looked significantly less like a wicked serpent. Younger, peaceful, more innocent.

I almost felt bad for slicing up most of his clothing.

Almost.

I gathered my dress and fresh underthings for the day from my valise and laid them over the chair to let the wrinkles settle out of them. Then I pulled on a simple cream dressing gown over my chemise and visited the outhouse. The inn was old and far from the nearest municipality. It didn’t have a lavatory.

The family worked together to get a hot breakfast onto the large dining room table for guests. I took advantage of their distracted state to let myself into the small office off

the parlor, looking for something—anything that could aid me. I found a piece of parchment, a pen, and a small square envelope for correspondence.

I could write a letter and send for help. Perhaps the inn owners would even agree to post it for me after we took our leave. If this were to work, I'd need to speak with them quickly, before Finley woke and caught me conspiring.

But who would I send it to and how would I pay the post? No lawman would care about the woes of a harlot, and I didn't want to have a discussion with the police about all the ways I'd made my fortune. Not every dollar had been earned legally.

I bit my lip. There was only one person who would be angry enough to attempt my rescue—if I could even call it that.

Utrecht would come for me. I shuddered even thinking his name. If I worded things just so, specifically to get under his skin and tug at his pride, he'd come in search of this Nightingale House in Blackwood. I didn't have a way to reach him while he was traveling, but Cynthia, the madam of the brothel where I'd formerly been employed, would hold the letter for him if I sent it to her there.

As much as I was displeased with him, Utrecht was the devil I knew, which was only slightly less intimidating than the devil I was getting to know. If I could get my hands on my cash and incite Utrecht to come after me, perhaps I could evade both serpents at once while they were preoccupied with each other.

It felt like a long shot—a reckless one at that—but I saw no other option. Finley refused to confirm what his game was about, and I would not be anyone's prisoner indefinitely. Even if they had the saddest eyes I'd ever seen and the orgasms were toe-curlingly good. I was no one's helpless captive. Anyone who tried to make me such would regret it.

I scribbled out a quick note, then stuffed the letter into the envelope and addressed it. I searched for postage or a coin to help pay for it, pushing about items on the cluttered desk, opening and closing drawers, but my efforts were fruitless.

Movement in the hall caught my notice. I tucked the letter into my garter belt, then I slipped out the door—right in front of the inn owner.

His blue eyes narrowed suspiciously. He seemed taller there than he had last night, broad and imposing. He folded bulky arms across his chest.

“Oh! Apologies. I needed to borrow a pen,” I told him, lacing my fingers together in front of my waist, the picture of demure innocence. “Hope that was all right.”

The sternness cleared immediately from his expression, the poor trusting fellow. “Of course. Breakfast is ready.”

“Thank you. I’ll let my husband know, and we’ll be right down.”

I headed back toward our room, having second thoughts about my plan to summon Utrecht. The letter remained tucked in my garter, scratching gently against my thigh. Bringing two devils together when I could hardly handle one seemed less and less like a grand idea the higher up the stairs I traveled.

Back in our room, I made quite a bit of noise tending to my hair, fetching a fresh pitcher of water, washing and using toothpowder, but Finley continued to sleep soundly. In my brief absence, he’d flopped onto his back and now hogged the center of the bed, spread out like a starfish.

He’d slept in his shirt and trousers. The button seam was still open, his thick cock pressing against the linen. He’d beaten me at my own game last night by not playing fair, using his strength and my own rules against me . . .

But I was just as capable as he was of playing unfairly.

That gave me an idea. A perfectly rotten one.

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Lochlan Finley

Rynn's retelling of the last day I saw her twenty years ago haunted my heart. I fell asleep, holding her tight, my head heavy with more questions. It caused me to have that dream again, the one where Rynn came to me as a ghost to ravish me in my sleep.

I reached for her in my slumber, trying to pull her closer, afraid she'd vanish the moment I opened my eyes. I tried to hold on to the images my brain had conjured, but they slipped away from me as awareness broke through.

Blearily I blinked awake, taking in the rustic bedroom of the inn. I was still painfully hard, still able to feel the vivid sensations of her lovely lips squeezing my cock.

"Good morning," Rynn said, leaning between my legs.

My brows pinched together. She'd pulled my trousers and undergarment down below my hips. My cock stood up tall, eager for more attention. She kissed the tip with those perfectly plump lips of hers.

"You little pirate," I purred.

My next words were lost in something between a groan and pleasure-filled growl as she reclaimed me with her mouth, running her lips down my length. My hips rolled, delving deeper into that sweet, hot cove.

Her big doe eyes found mine through her lashes as she pleased me, and if I wasn't

already obsessively infatuated and scornfully smitten, I would have fallen hard right then, straight through all nine circles of that hell. She swirled her tongue around the tip before letting my cock pop wetly out of her mouth.

“You look unsure of yourself,” she teased. “Did you want me to stop?”

“You damn well know I don’t want you to stop.” Pushing fingers through her hair, I rolled us onto our sides so that we faced each other. I encouraged her back right where I needed her most, pumping shallowly between her lovely lips.

This was all still a game to her, but by God, it was a game she was an expert at playing. She sucked on my cock like she wanted to separate my soul from my body through that rigid member.

I neared my peak, so close my balls pulled up tight and my cock wept. My little hellcat tugged free with a gasp, lips pink and swollen. My grunt of desperation echoed around the room.

“Trust me,” she soothed, trailing little kisses down the prominent vein on my cock, teasing my balls with her talented fingers. “I’ll get you there. ”

“I feel like I’m going to die,” I told her. I wasn’t even being melodramatic. It truly seemed like I might perish without her.

Her soft laugh teased my tenderest flesh. My skin smoldered, and my throat had never been more parched.

She cured me of my affliction with her lips, swallowing me whole. My climax started in my toes, shot up into my pelvis, and erupted down her throat in warm pulls. To my memory, it was the hardest I’d ever come. Stars sparked in the corners of my vision. For a moment I thought I’d go blind.

Even the climb down from that peak was glorious. I was warm all over and fifty pounds lighter.

“The victorious vixen,” I said, too blissfully relaxed to be bothered by a defeat that didn’t feel like losing at all.

She drained me dry and licked her lips, content as a little kitten. Even with my cock so close to her face, her smile was perfectly demure. She let me hold her there for a while, pushing mussed curls out of her face, ingraining that sultry image into my memory.

I hadn’t realized I’d been frowning until she scooted up the bed and kissed the furrow between my brows away. “You owe me an answer,” she said softly.

“You’ve certainly earned it. Go on and ask me, then.”

She started to speak, then seemed to think better of it, biting down on her lip. Her palm was cool as it caressed my cheek. Her fingers found the scars there and trailed over them.

“Why are you so sad?” she asked. By the look on her face, she’d surprised us both with the question.

I propped my head up on my arm. “That’s what you want? Are you sure?”

She chewed at the inside of her cheek for a moment, still pondering. Then she nodded. “I think I need to know. I’ve been curious since I found you in my rooms.”

I glanced down between our bodies at the mess of blankets and tangled clothing, unsure how to answer her. Then my lips opened, and the words poured out of me without a thought.

“The love of my life broke my heart twice. First, she left me. Then she died,” I told her. It wasn’t the whole truth, but it was the lie I’d lived for nearly two decades. Grief churned in my belly, so harsh and painful it stole my breath.

“Oh no.” Rynn wrapped her arms around my neck and brought my head to her chest, holding me there, her chin resting in my hair. “It’s no wonder, then.”

She smelled like roses and fresh well-water from the basin and like salty pleasure. My scent was all over her: in her hair, on her breath. I would have given up every penny in my vast fortune if I could have just lain there forever, my face cushioned between the soft mounds of her breasts, breathing in the aroma of her and me together, carried on a spring breeze.

The only bother was the gnawing sensation that this couldn’t be real comfort that she was offering me. I wanted so badly for it to be the true sort, the kind she’d once reserved only for me when life was cruel.

And at the same time, I wanted not to want those things. My heart was a shriveled wretch of a thing, and I hated how much it longed for her. The damn organ needed to see reason for once, to stop chasing after the person who’d destroyed it.

“Breakfast is ready downstairs, and it smelled divine,” she told me. “I’m going to go eat before I dress for the day. Are you coming?”

“I’ll follow you down shortly.” With great reluctance, I separated from her, fixing my trousers and rising from the bed.

In a moment of considerable weakness, I stepped over my shredded clothing while crossing to her valise. I picked it up and dug inside, removing the pair of slippers from the bottom where I’d hidden the two hefty stacks of cash I’d stolen from her safe. There were so many bills, they overflowed both shoes. Reclaiming the money, I

tossed the bag beside her on the bed.

She gasped. “You villain. So that’s where you put it. You hid it in my things!”

“I figured you wouldn’t look there.”

“You figured right.” She pouted at me, playing with the blankets beneath her coyly. “I don’t suppose you’d reconsider—”

“Don’t push your luck,” I groused.

Head tipped back, she groaned at the ceiling. “I know the exact amount that was in my safe before you went and pilfered it,” she said, wagging a finger at me. “I had better be getting all of it back! Every last damn dollar, Finley!”

Before she left the room, she blew me a kiss with so much heat in it, it felt more like a threat than her words had.

I attended to my morning habits. When I returned, I took inventory. She’d destroyed so many items from my trunk that I was forced to wear a mismatched outfit: A casual cotton waistcoat, no cuffs or collar, and the more formal black trousers I already had on. At least she’d left me a few clean underthings—or I’d interrupted her before she could get at all of them. That seemed more likely, considering how much attention she’d paid to the drawers currently in tatters.

I reclaimed my folding knife from off the floorboards where it had fallen in the night, and I visited her valise to even the score. Some of her cash I tucked inside an inner pocket in the lapel of my waistcoat, keeping it close in case she needed motivation to behave on the way to Nightingale House. Chances were high she would.

I cut the bottom lining of her valise, just enough to store the remaining bills inside.

Then I sewed it quickly with the patch kit from my trunk. I tended to the items she'd laid out for the day with my knife before I headed downstairs.

Breakfast was served family-style on a large table big enough to fit a regiment. Rynn snorted when she saw how I was dressed. I kept a placid expression throughout the meal, not allowing her the pleasure of my irritation. Seated across from her, I ate grits and dried apples quickly, eager to be back upstairs and finally on the road again.

When she was finished, I followed her to our room.

She headed straight for her clothing draped over the chair as I closed the door behind me. Her sharp intake of breath when she realized what I'd done filled me with smug satisfaction.

"What the devil did you do?" Rynn picked up her dress and gasped anew as it slipped through her fingers in ribbons. She lifted her corset next. I'd cut off the cups.

She hurled it at me. I side-stepped the ruined garment, letting it slap against the wall.

Glaring over her shoulder, she marched to the bed where I'd left her valise. Rynn reached inside and growled like an aggravated lioness, scooping out fistfuls of destroyed satin and taffeta. She threw them into the air in a huff, letting them scatter over the bed like confetti.

"I'm adding the cost of every garment to your bill when we're through," she snapped.

"I don't think so," I said, nudging my foot at an overcoat of mine she'd ruined. It had been made in France and cost double anything else in the room.

"What am I supposed to wear?" she demanded. "Have you gone mad? You didn't leave anything for me!"

“Try to think of it this way,” I said evenly. “Your lovely things will make someone in need very nice, very expensive bandages now.”

“ You’re the one who’s going to need bandages,” she spat. Rounding on me, she pulled a blade from the top of her stocking and unfolded it with a deft flick of her wrist.

My eyes went wide. “How in the hottest hell did you get my knife again?” I was more impressed than concerned as she backed me against the door, shoving the blade under my chin. “Tell me how. I’ve got to know. I didn’t even sit next to you downstairs. Did you steal it under the table with your toes?”

“It’s not your knife,” she said through gritted teeth, pressing the blade to my throat. “Where’s my money?”

My cock twitched. The fact that she was arming herself against me shouldn’t have been arousing in the least. The flush of anger in her cheeks, the sparkle of rage in her eyes, the sting as she pushed the blade in and broke the skin, shouldn’t have been attractive either, and yet, there I was, neck bleeding and cock hard and growing harder, picturing how feral she’d gotten as she’d chased her climax beneath me the night before with that same gleam in her gaze.

“Your money is around here somewhere,” I said, glancing behind her at my trunk to throw her off the scent. When she turned her head to follow my eyes, I captured her knife hand and secured her against the frame of the door using my broader body. The struggle for the blade was short-lived. Rynn was not a frail thing by any means, but it wasn’t a fair fight. I had her in height, weight, muscle, and menace .

I drove the knife point so hard into the wood above her, even I would have a difficult time pulling it free again. She tried to punch me, but I’d pressed so close she couldn’t get a good swing in. The blow glanced off my shoulder.

The elbow she threw into my face was a problem, however. She knocked my teeth together so hard they clattered. Immediately a lopsided grin filled my cheeks. The sight of it made her furious.

Grunting from frustration and effort, she nearly slipped free. I grappled her over to the bed, toppling her flat on the mattress. It was a battle to get her onto her stomach. She kicked and scratched at me like a panicked puma.

“Don’t you dare!” she spat, trying to twist away from me.

I dared. I sat on her again, this time straddling her lower back, pinning her beneath me.

“Get off!” she bellowed, twisting like a fish out of water.

“You still have—” I caught myself. I’d been about to say she still had that same spitfire temper she’d had as a girl. The one that always made her think she was three times bigger than she actually was.

“Still have what?” she shouted, struggling to unseat me.

I chuckled. “Never mind.”

“Don’t laugh at me, you horrid serpent! You devil pirate! You wretch! You fiend!”

Worried she’d have a concerned inn owner pounding at our door soon if I didn’t quiet her, I grabbed up one of the tattered remnants of her dress and stuffed it into her mouth. Her muffled shouts continued around the gag until her face went beet red.

I pressed her cheek into the bedding, further immobilizing her. “Is this really necessary, Rynn?”

She spit out the torn satin. “I hate you! I hate you so fucking much—”

“I hate you too, hellcat,” I said sweetly.

“Get. Off. Me!”

“You know how this works. When you’re still and calm, I’ll consider it,” I said.

She roared at that, a sound more animal than woman.

I covered her mouth with my palm, dampening the volume. “No, no. Don’t you dare bite me.”

It took a while, but eventually my hellcat tuckered herself out. Her squirming slowed. Her hot breath bathed my hand, and her skin, now covered in a sheen of sweat, returned to its usual light fawn shade.

Her breathing calmed to an even pace. She stopped trying to wriggle free. When I released her mouth, she sent a death glare at me that could turn milk, but she didn’t shout. I liked her face when it was glaring but decided against telling her that. No need to set her off.

“I’m going to let you up now,” I said. “Do you understand what will happen if you try to knife me again?”

“You’ll sit on me,” she muttered.

“That’s right.” I plucked a bill from the inner pocket of my waistcoat and showed it to her. It was a ten. “This is yours. The next time you’re uncooperative, I burn one of these. A toll for the inconvenience.” To ensure she knew I meant my word, I displayed my silver lighter and struck the flint.

Her eyes flashed, reflecting the small flame. “I hear you,” she ground out.

I smothered the fire with a snap and dropped the lighter back into my pocket. Touching my neck where it stung, my fingers came away bloody .

I forced Rynn to sit up, resting one hand low on her throat, smearing my blood on her skin. “You cut me.”

“That was the idea,” she rumbled.

“Stand up,” I said. With great reluctance, she obeyed. I needed reassurance that I could take her elsewhere and she’d behave, so I dragged her close. “Kiss it and make it feel better.”

If looks could kill, I’d be cold in the ground. Her eyes narrowed to dagger points. God above and furies below, she was a vision angry.

“I don’t want to,” she ground out.

“Do it anyway,” I said, giving her throat a gentle squeeze.

Nostrils flaring, Rynn rose up on her toes. “You will rue the day,” she hissed in my ear, rekindling my smile. Then her lips brushed my neck. I felt that tiny kiss in every cell of my body.

“Attagirl,” I purred. “Feels better already.”

She rolled her eyes at me.

Her hand in mine, I guided her over to the pitcher and basin and wet a fresh cloth.

She turned to face me when I beckoned her to, chin dropped in defeat. I didn't like seeing her that way. I preferred her with fire in her eyes. Gathering her hair, I scooped it over her shoulder, then brushed the cold cloth along the back of her neck until the tension in her limbs loosened. I wiped the sweat from her nose and cheeks and wet it again to cool her heated skin.

She sagged against me, resting her brow on my chest. "I still hate you," she rumbled.

"I wouldn't have it any other way, hellcat," I said, hugging her to me.

* * *

After lunch I made myself comfortable in the garden with a view of the road so I could watch for the next passing stage. Rynn joined me, still in her dressing gown. I'd brought my trunk down with her valise inside and a bag I had missed that was apparently full of shawls. She wore a floral one tucked around her shoulders, trying to disguise her clothing that was only appropriate for a casual morning spent at home. The trunk was significantly lighter now with most of our things in scraps upstairs. I hadn't needed any help carrying it.

Finally, the rattle of steel wheels and hooves broke the monotony of silence. The Concord that rumbled down the gravel road toward us was pulled by four massive Belgian horses, russet coats gleaming in the afternoon sunlight. But the driver wasn't slowing at all. I leapt up and waved my arms, hailing him.

After the dust settled, Rynn accompanied me to greet the driver. The reinsman had dark umber skin and wore a fashionable derby atop his raven hair. He removed his hat politely for Rynn, introducing himself as Mr. Mazibuko. Rynn stood at my side holding her middle, looking uncharacteristically self-conscious. We made an odd pair, but the driver never commented on our appearance, his smile warm and inviting.

“You keep beautiful animals,” Rynn told him.

“Thank you, ma’am.” He beamed down at her.

“May I have a moment to get acquainted with them?” she asked.

“They would be very disappointed if you didn’t,” he said, climbing down from the driver’s seat to join her beside his horses. “Especially Thando there in the lead. Pet him first, or he’ll be jealous and misbehave.”

I waited impatiently as Rynn pet the horses and learned that Mr. Mazibuko had come to Pennsylvania after following his brother here some years ago to help him work on his ranch. The stagecoach was his, but the horses belonged to the brother.

It was more information than I ever wanted to know about a complete stranger, but that was Rynn. She smiled prettily and made her cute quips, and people opened their hearts and wagged their tongues. I don’t even think she always noticed when she turned on her magic and became a vortex of delight. She just was.

And I hated it.

Hated that I was as much a big sap for it as everyone else—probably the biggest. Hated how it made her such a gifted trickster when she wanted to be.

After all that, Mr. Mazibuko was willing to take us wherever we needed to go and for an overly fair price—a price Rynn’s kindness had likely lowered. I paid the man gladly. There was just one problem.

“That’s an awful lot of packages,” Rynn said as we gathered around the doors of the large stage.

It was big enough to easily fit nine people—ten if they were small—but the seats were stuffed with mail bags and parcels, luggage, and boxes. I was eager to have my nightingale home, however, so when the driver suggested we lay the bags down and sit on them, I immediately agreed to do so.

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Rynn Mavis

It took some maneuvering to spread out the parcels in such a way that I could lounge over them—legs stretched across the seats in front of us—without having the corner of a box prodding my hip. But as the stage rumbled forward, I had to admit it wasn't an uncomfortable way to travel.

Finley watched out the window as the inn grew smaller behind us. "What do you suppose the owners will think when they see what we've done to their room?"

"I've left places in worse shape," I admitted.

The corners of his eyes crinkled. "I bet you have."

I started to grin, then remembered I was still angry with him, and the urge died on my lips. I crossed my arms over my chest. "You owe me \$70.00 for last night and this morning. I've decided to add a surcharge to our trade agreement because you're a jackass."

"Only seventy?" he said, the corner of his mouth tugging upward. "You're a steal."

I glowered at him. My glaring increased as he pulled bills out of the lapel of his waistcoat and made a show of counting out the money.

"Here you are," he said.

"Isn't that my cash?" I grumped.

“It is, but if you don’t want it . . .” He started to tuck it away.

I snatched it from him. Lifting my skirts so they draped strategically, I tucked the bills in my garter belt beside the letter I still had hidden there. The plot I had quickly abandoned at the inn was starting to feel like a decent idea again.

Utrecht and Finley deserved each other.

The first hour passed in near silence. Finley and I snoozed on and off. When I thought he was sleeping soundly, I nudged his foot with mine to test how alert he was. He didn’t move. I found the outline of a holster for a pocket pistol on his ankle.

I reached for the lapel of his waistcoat.

“Don’t even think about it, hellcat,” he murmured, eyes shut, top hat pulled down to shadow his face.

Finley’s trunk came loose on the roof. It wasn’t heavy enough anymore to stay put properly. One of the straps flopped against the side of the coach, alerting us. He called out, and Mr. Mazibuko slowed his team to a halt. The reinsman offered to help, but Finley insisted he could manage the problem quickly.

I let myself out to stretch my legs and chat with Mr. Mazibuko. I wanted to hear more about his cross-country travels.

“Are you all right, Mrs. Finley?” he asked, removing his derby from his head as I rounded the stage.

“Just stretching my legs,” I said.

Mr. Mazibuko leaned down and dropped his voice. “Are you truly all right, ma’am?

Do you need help?”

I peered around the coach to double-check that Finley remained busy with the trunk before turning back to him. “Why do you think I need help, Mr. Mazibuko? Did I say something strange earlier?”

He cleared his throat. “You’re still wearing your dressing gown, ma’am.”

“Ah.” I glanced down at myself and pulled my shawl tighter. “Right . . . That is rather telling, isn’t it?”

“Afraid so. And your husband—I mean no offense—but he only seems regular when he’s looking elsewhere. When Mr. Finley’s eyes are on you, he’s something irregular.”

I frowned. “Irregular how?”

“Like a man possessed,” he said quietly.

I sucked in a breath. I’d caught Finley staring at me more than once with an intensity of emotion that couldn’t be properly quantified. It stirred within me a trouble-addicted thrill-lust I tried hard to smother. “I have some money, if—”

“No, ma’am,” he said softly. “Keep your money. You’re going to need it. Just let me help you.”

I stared up at him in wonder, feeling a little lost. This was a good man. A truly decent soul who had taken the time to stop and look and see that I needed assistance but could not say so.

And he wanted to help me for nothing in return.

Help me .

That was as mythical and majestic a concept to me as a unicorn. There were good men in the world. I knew that conceptually there had to be some out there running about far, far away from the likes of me. I was old enough to know I had courted my own bad luck in that department. When one chases their heart blindly and goes looking for trouble the way I have, one often finds exactly that.

But rarely in my adult life had my troubles brought me, by luck or by grace, to a truly decent man. A person ready and willing to lend a hand without an agenda of their own. I was looking right at him and still had trouble believing he was real.

The backs of my hands started to itch, and I scratched at them anxiously. I lowered my voice. "If I said I needed help, what exactly would you do?"

Mr. Mazibuko tucked up the side of his sack coat, revealing the iron on his hip, a single-action revolver with a long barrel. "You say the word, and I'll see to it that your husband stays right here. He can hoof it wherever he likes, but you'll be free of him. I'll cart you to the next station, or the one after if that's not far enough for you."

I swallowed hard, my mind whirling. I could get my money now and be free.

But I was certain Finley would not back down without a fight. What if they fired at each other? What if I caused harm to this unicorn of a man? Weren't the marks against my soul terrible enough already? And what if . . .

"Stupid sad eyes," I grumbled under my breath.

"What was that, Mrs. Finley?"

"Oh, nothing." I rubbed at my brow, frustrated with myself for not wanting to see

Finley shot after all he'd done to me. Actually, I wouldn't mind seeing him shot as long as I knew he'd survive it. A bullet in the ass would do him some good.

But I could not tolerate the thought of him dead or maimed. And I certainly wouldn't want either fate for Mr. Mazibuko.

And I didn't want my cash set on fire either. I pictured the entire stage going up in flames and could almost smell the acrid smoke, Finley lighting the mail bags with my life's savings inside after everything went wrong. Resolve settled in my gut and stiffened my spine.

"I do not require the sort of help you've proposed, but if you would be so kind as to post a letter for me . . ." I checked again to make sure Finley was still distracted by straps and pulleys, then I fished out the letter and a ten, and I handed both up to him. "I don't have smaller bills at the moment."

He took the letter and waved my cash away. "I'm happy to cover the dime for a stamp. But you're sure this is all you want?"

My throat bobbed. "I'm sure," I said, and the words tasted like ash. I wasn't certain of anything in my life anymore.

* * *

When we reached the wrought iron gates of Nightingale House, the front of which displayed the image of a songbird in flight, the stage could take us no farther. The horses whinnied and stomped their hooves and refused to listen to their reinsman.

They were behaving as though a predator lurked nearby, their tall ears twitching. There were so many trees, I could see only forest, reaching iron peaks, and the blocks of molded sandstone between them. There was no telling what had spooked them. It

was unlikely a beast of any size had made it through those bars.

Mr. Mazibuko made his apologies that he could not take us to the door. We would have to disembark there.

Finley did not seem surprised by the behavior of the horses. He climbed out, unlocked the gates and dragged them wide open. The driver struggled with the reins while Finley untethered the trunk.

We made our goodbyes, and the kind reinsman set off with his team in the opposite direction.

I decided that for now I might catch more flies with honey than vinegar. Perhaps I'd get further with my pirate if I attempted to be kind, so after Finley relocked the gates with us inside, I insisted on helping with the luggage. I hoisted up one end of the trunk, and we hefted it down the earthen drive together.

I was starting to feel winded when we finally came to a bend. Wanting to see the rest without the distraction, I set my end of the trunk down. The trees fell away as I padded forward. Grounds of manicured greenery rolled out like fine carpet before Nightingale House. The massive manor was bathed in fading sunlight, backed by dusky clouds. An involuntary noise of wonder slipped past my lips.

What a hauntingly beautiful place.

Built in the style of a chateau, it was all gray stone and pointed spires and towers that reminded me of a fairytale castle. There was something deeply personal about the ornamentation: the sharp arches that framed the doorways, the elaborate decorative cornices, the sash windows of colorful stained glass. The overall effect was as lovely and melancholy as the owner's eyes.

There was no pinpointing the exact element that displayed grief to me, but that was the emotion the estate immediately inspired. Perhaps it was the weeping willows that flanked the water gardens or the stone entryway that was the color of storm clouds or the set of balconies that made the face of the house appear to be frowning.

This big, beautiful manor felt like a monument to a broken heart.

It was then I realized how intensely Finley was staring at me. He was doing that thing with his eyes that made him appear “irregular,” as Mr. Mazibuko had put it. A man possessed.

“What do you think of it?” Finley asked softly, almost shyly. The way he stood with one big hand sheepishly rubbing at the back of his neck, it reminded me of the first time I’d found him in my room.

I didn’t understand why, but I sensed that my answer was of great importance, and I took a moment to ponder that, chewing on my lip.

“It’s breathtaking,” I told him finally.

“Yes?” His smile stretched wide, crinkling the corners of his eyes. It was so broad it chased the sad right out of his gaze. “Built it myself—I mean, not entirely myself, of course. It took 400 men with more talent than I three years to finish it. You like it truly?”

“I love it. It’s without a doubt the grandest house I’ve ever seen. Honestly, Finley, this is splendor fit for a storybook.” I glanced up and up at it. I had to put a crick in my neck to see it all. “It’s so luxurious, I feel like a poor wretch standing here in comparison. A peasant before a castle.”

“Come on, peasant,” he said playfully, hoisting the trunk up off the ground, eager

now. “I want to show you the rest. There are 50 rooms, so we probably won’t see all of them before Cook has dinner ready, but let’s see how far we get.”

Even empty-handed, I had to jog to keep up with him, he was so spirited. He led me inside to a grand foyer so large it echoed the sound of our footsteps and carried the awed noises I made. Everything was done up in white oak and gilt fixtures. It gleamed and smelled like lacquer and clean wood.

I was not a fan of the dark, and I loved how brightly lit it was with bronze gas chandeliers and torchiers shaped like songbirds.

The grand foyer led to an even grander staircase that split before a central room. Whatever was inside, it seemed to be the focal point of the house. A ballroom perhaps? The two heavy doors secured by a sizable lock immediately drew my curiosity like a beacon.

“What’s in there?” I asked.

Finley set our trunk down in the hall. “We’ll get to that. Stay right here for a moment. I need to check in with Cook.” He started to leave, then he stopped suddenly. “I mean it, Rynn: stay put.”

“All right,” I told him.

I intended to obey, but as soon as he quit the room, wonder wriggled inside me. I made it one more minute before I left to explore the halls.

I found a drawing room with a hutch full of fine silver. It wasn’t even locked. Convinced that Finley had no intention of paying me the money he owed, I helped myself to the pricey presentation flatware, tucking the pieces out of sight in my garters and the tops of my stockings. I picked up two more spoons, weighing them in

my hands. As restitution for all my pain and suffering, I wanted to keep both.

But then I recalled the intensity of the orgasms he'd given me. My skin pebbled and my heart stuttered in my chest.

I put one of the spoons back .

“What are you doing?” Finley said, appearing in the doorway.

“Exactly what it looks like,” I replied, leaning around the hutch door.

He stuck his lip out at me. “I don't care about your pilfering. I told you to stay put because I want to watch you while you experience the manor for the first time. I like that you like my house. I don't often show it to people.”

“Oh?” I didn't know what to say to that. It was such a surprisingly sweet sentiment that I was tempted to put another spoon back.

“Come on, hellcat. Steal from me later,” he said cheerfully, waving me over.

He was hard to resist when he was in this sort of mood. When I crossed to him, he offered me his hand. I stared at it, trying to decide whether I still wanted to catch flies with honey or whether I'd be better serviced if I skipped all that and simply beat them to death with a rolled-up newspaper . . . ?

He took the choice from me—which was his habit—engulfing my hand with his large palm, his skin pleasantly balmy against mine.

Finley guided me all the way up the stairs first. There were three floors. He showed me bedrooms and sitting rooms, a billiard room—even the attic didn't go ignored. On the second floor, he lit a lantern and carried it with us. Darkness had fallen beyond

the windows, and the home relied on gas lighting that was spaced well apart.

He showed me a lavatory so lavish I didn't want to leave it. It was twice the size of my bedroom at the Lark, and it had a fountain in it. The taps were decorated with a copper figure of a naked man stretching his arm out desperately toward the beautiful mermaid below. Her tail wrapped around the faucet. The tub could fit three people, and the floor was a stormy-gray shade of marble.

"You made this house for her, didn't you?" I asked, my voice quiet to fit the somber setting. He didn't answer me right away, so I turned to face him to see what had delayed him. "The woman you loved and lost. You built it for her."

I regretted my words when I saw his face.

The cheerful glint in his gaze was smothered, like rain clouds rolling in to block out the sun. Sadness crept back in. "I built it after she died."

"Why after?" I asked.

"I wanted to bring her back—not from the dead. I know that's not possible." He brushed a hand through his hair, and his lashes lowered. "But if it was perfect enough, I thought it might call her ghost right out of the mire where she'd died. Bring her out of the trees and back to me. I wanted to feel her presence again, wanted her to haunt these halls."

Overtaken by the sentiment, I pressed a hand over my heart. "Finley, that's . . ." My words trailed away. I didn't wish to contribute to his melancholy. "You did well," I said instead, touching his arm. "This is a house worth haunting. It's stunning. She'd love it."

He glanced at my hand, then he peeked up at me through his inky lashes. "You think

so?”

“Absolutely. I would haunt this house. I’d haunt it so enthusiastically no holy man could chase me out. I’d squeeze myself between bookshelves, hide in that gorgeous bathtub, move through the pipes making spooky noises. No one could ever get me to leave. ”

His lips quirked and a bit of sparkle returned to his eyes.

Next, he showed me an office and a small library, but most of the books contained behind the glass doors were about the natural sciences or poetry, so I didn’t linger long in there.

The more I reacted to the splendor around me, the more Finley beamed from the inside out. It made my heart squeeze to see this place so empty, though. Such a home was meant to be enjoyed by many. I imagined the lonely walls craving the sounds of movement, longing to be filled with life, the floorboards hoping for someone to tread upon them, the furniture waiting anxiously to be used, the small library eager for someone to come along and put better books in it.

We didn’t get to everything on the second floor before my stomach growled violently. Finley ended the tour with great reluctance to take me down to the dining room.

I was growing accustomed to the opulence around me, but the sight of so much food still took me by surprise and dragged another gasp out of me. I was a woman who had always eaten well at the Lark, but this was a feast fit for a holiday. A feast that filled the long dining table and overflowed the sideboard.

There was so much food that for a moment I thought he was surprising me with some sort of dinner party, and I panicked, feeling horribly underdressed. But there were

only two place settings, and since my pirate thought three people made a horde, I settled down.

“We’ll have to serve ourselves,” he said, claiming a bowl from the head of the table. The chair there had a taller back than the others and was more ornate, like a throne. “My staff is unavailable. They’ll be here very little and tend to the barest necessities only. It’s unlikely you’ll even see them. If you need something, you’ll need to tell me so. ”

I filled my bowl with creamy oyster stew and helped myself to some spiced cranberries, scalloped potatoes, and roasted duck. Instead of eating it in courses, I plated the food so I could try each dish at once, eager to taste everything. The cook must have spent all day long preparing this meal. There were three types of bread on the table and heaps and heaps of butter. I loved good country butter. It was expensive and very hard to come by in the city.

I sat down with care so as not to jostle the silver I’d stolen where it was hidden against my thighs. As I tucked in, I kept catching Finley watching me instead of eating his own food.

It was clear that this man had suffered a great loss, and for one reason or another, he’d decided I needed to be the one to cure him of his affliction. But I still had no idea what his expectations for his treatment were, and it was past time I found out. My fingers remained firmly crossed that he wanted me to cure him with debauchery. That I could do.

Why else would he capture a retired courtesan?

“Flogging,” I guessed aloud.

Finley blinked at me from across the table. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’m trying to ascertain what you want from me now that you’ve got me here,” I explained.

His brows pinched together. “You think I’ve whisked you away to my summer home so I can flog you in private?”

“Or because you want me to flog you . I would, you know,” I said, adding a touch grumpily, “I’d flog the devil right out of you.”

Laughter burst from him and echoed off the vaulted ceiling. It irritated me that it rang so attractively in my ears. “Bet you’d even do it for free. But no, I didn’t bring you here so you could flog me.”

“Pity.” I tapped my spoon against the side of my bowl, pondering. “Costumes! You want to bed me in a costume, and you’d like me to play a part for you.”

“What? This isn’t the theater.”

“It could be, if you wanted that.” I broke up a buttered bread roll and dipped it in my stew before consuming it. “Or perhaps you’d like to see me in your clothing. I can understand why you’d bring me out here away from civilization for that. I can’t even wear bloomers in Salt Rock without getting harassed.”

“No,” he said, looking puzzled, “I didn’t bring you here so you could wear your bloomers.”

“Then is this about my feet?”

“Hold on.” He shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. “What costumes are you talking about, and what’s wrong with your feet?”

“What I’ve worn for others is none of your business, but I’d put something on for you and play a part as bed sport if that’s what you desired.” Then I gasped in horror, clutching at my heart as a new realization landed heavy on my shoulders. “Oh dear lord, please tell me you’re not some sort of fanatic?”

Mouth full of stew, his forehead wrinkled. He swallowed his last bite down with some difficulty, working his throat. “What do you mean?”

“Did you steal me away because I’m a wicked harlot and you’re going to try to save me with your religion?” It would explain why he seemed so vexed by his attraction to me and why he’d refused to take his own pleasure from me the night before.

He stared back across the table bemused, his next bite frozen midway to his open mouth. He let the spoon drop into his bowl. “What about our time together suggests to you I’m devout?”

I waved his words away. “You’d be surprised by the religious sorts I’ve met. They almost never seem to match the requirements in their holy books, and yet they insist I live up to the impossible standards they themselves can’t.” The topic brought to mind the horrid baron I’d once been forced to serve, and I nearly lost my appetite.

“I wouldn’t be surprised. I’ve met my share of hypocrites, too.” He blew the steam off his next spoonful. “No, I didn’t go to all this trouble to convert you or save your soul or change your ways or any such thing. You were already retiring and leaving the trade. Why would I?”

I sighed, sagging in my seat with relief. “Good. Frankly, I’d rather be flogged.”

Rich, full-bodied laughter shook him. It was a laugh that a person could so easily fall in love with, and with that thought, I finally lost my appetite for good. I watched him eat, pushing my food around with a fork, no longer interested in any of it.

“Are you finished?” he asked me when his bowl and plate were nearly empty.

“I am. Your cook made an excellent meal.”

“I’ll be sure to pass on your compliments.” He rose from his seat, dropping his cloth napkin onto the table. “Take off your boots,” he instructed as he rounded on me.

I turned away from my plate, crossing one leg over the other. “Then this is about your love for feet.”

His brows furrowed. “No. I’m taking away your shoes to discourage you from attempting something foolish and impulsive, like running away.”

“Oh. Well, that’s considerably less fun,” I murmured .

He crooked a finger at me. “Hand them over.”

“I don’t want to.”

I couldn’t read his expression. It was too mixed. There was amusement in his eyes, but his jaw clenched. “Are you going to make me take them from you?”

“I’m considering it . . .” My eyes drifted toward the table knife.

“Banish the thought, hellcat,” he ground out.

“Fine.” Bending forward, I jerked at the laces, loosening my boots, then I slipped my feet out of them. The open air cooled my toes in my stockings. I held the shoes in my lap, caging them in, reluctant to release them.

“Rynn,” he said, the unspoken threat sharpening his voice.

I shoved my boots at him. “Why must you ruin everything? Just as soon as I’m starting to like you again a tiny bit, you go and make existing in your presence execrable.”

He tucked my boots under his arm. “There’s no reason why we can’t continue to enjoy our evening.”

“Yes, there is.” I pushed away from the table, stolen silver clinking against my thighs as I marched for the exit.

“Where are you going, hellcat?”

“Away from you!” I snapped, letting the doors slam behind me.

Rynn Mavis

I took a wrong turn trying to find the kitchen and got lost. Finley said I wouldn't see any staff, but someone had to be around attending to dinner clean-up. I would need a few allies inside Nightingale House—as many as I could get—and so I set off to recruit them. Preferably, I'd find someone willing to lend me shoes when the time came for it, or they'd help smuggle me out through the gates.

I wandered into a sitting room beside an art gallery of sculptures and still-life paintings, and I borrowed a lantern from it. The halls were too dark for my liking.

I spotted a back staircase, one intended for use by staff, then I rounded the corner and entered a hall that smelled like citrus and wine. Two vibrant bouquets of crimson roses flanked a heavy door of ebonized wood. The gaslights on the bronze torchiers flickered. A cold prickle trailed down my neck, and I slowed to a standstill.

The frame of the door was covered in locks. Unlike the central room which had only one lock, this one had two heavy chains, three deadbolts, and a latch secured by a padlock that was bigger than both of my fists put together.

“What the devil is in there?” I wondered. As I padded closer, a sensation not unlike walking through cobwebs coated my skin, lifting the fine hairs on my neck and arms.

I lost track of how long I stood there staring at that locked door and its eerily beautiful flowers.

“Rynn.”

I yelped at the sound of my name. Transfixed, I hadn't heard Finley coming down the hall. He hoisted a glowing lantern of his own. It illuminated the scarred half of his striking face.

"Did you get lost?" he asked.

"I got exactly where I wanted to be." My toes were cold. I folded one over the other to warm them in my stockings, an instant reminder of how unhappy I was with him.

"You got away from me, you mean." His lips quirked.

"Yes, and you've gone and ruined it now. As is your habit," I bit out.

His lashes lowered and he shuffled his feet, looking as close to rueful as I'd ever seen him. "I came to show you to your room."

I pointed at the peculiar door behind us. "Show me that room."

"Absolutely not," he said darkly. "No one goes in that room. Not even I do."

"Why?" My eyes were pulled toward it once more. Everything about it captivated me, from the swirling pattern in the grain of the blackened wood to the salty scent of iron that tinged the air from the heavy locks, the crisp smell of rose petals, the stark contrast of crimson against the ebonized wood.

Though others found it peculiar of me, I had always believed that houses had feelings. This home longed to be filled with something other than melancholy and loneliness. I was sensitive to it like I often was to the emotions of others, carrying them around on my back, picking up on feelings before the people around me did.

The temperature dropped suddenly. I hugged my lantern, absorbing the warmth

through the glass.

Finley sighed, and his breath fogged. “Hear me, Rynn. It’s only natural for the living to be curious about the dead. I’m not surprised you wandered over here, that’s how I found you so quickly. I knew you’d feel the pull. I knew you’d come. You’ll feel it again, but you mustn’t ever try to open those locks. Stay out of that room.”

I glanced between him and the door. A petal dropped from one of the roses, floating delicately toward the ground.

“The dead?” As his words sunk in, I scoffed at him. “Are you trying to tell me there are ghosts in there?”

“There are ghosts all over this house,” he said, lowering his lantern, illuminating his strong jaw and casting the top of his face into foreboding shadow. “What’s in there isn’t to be trifled with. Stay out of that room, Rynn. You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

I didn’t believe in ghosts—especially not ghosts who apparently could be thwarted by a lock and key. Who’d ever heard of a spirit who couldn’t pass through walls? His expression had turned so severe, I didn’t doubt that he believed in them. It wasn’t the metaphorical sort we were talking about here .

Then again, why should I take him at his word? What if he stored the household safe in that room, and he wanted to keep me away with more trickery? Perhaps that was where he planned to hold my fortune.

“My interest in that door isn’t preternatural,” I said, letting out a humorless laugh that misted in the unseasonably cooler air. “You’ve got it covered in locks. Anyone with a predisposition like mine would be curious.”

“You mean anyone with an inclination to steal?” He raised a brow at me archly.

“Or an inclination to retrieve what they’re owed by any means necessary,” I bit out. “I was attempting to retire from theft. It’s not my fault you’ve sent me back to it with your poor treatment.”

He stepped up to me, squaring his shoulders. “You think my treatment of you is poor? Which part? The part where I made you scream while you came on my tongue? Or is it all the luxury you’re being treated to now that’s so egregiously unfair?”

“You know fucking well what you’ve done!” My shouted words bounced off the walls. “You stole from me, you’ve made me a prisoner here, and every word out of your mouth is coercion!” I squeezed my lantern so tightly between my fingers that the globe of glass rattled against the metal base.

A muscle in his cheek jumped. “And your words aren’t coercion? Isn’t that exactly what your trades and transactions are? Just pretty tricks.”

“At least my trades are fair! I give you a say in them. What say have you ever granted me?”

Melancholy shaded his tawny eyes even more heavily than the shadows. “You only pretend to care, pretend you want things you actually don’t, just to leave me guessing. You pretend it’s not a trap with your pretty words and a tempting smile, but that’s exactly what it is. At least I leave no doubt about my intentions.”

“What in hell are you talking about?” I glared up at him, as angry as I was confounded. “I did care about you. I cared about you and your stupid sadness the moment I met you. It’s you that went and ruined things between us with trickery. Not me.”

He snatched the lantern from me, and when I tried to take it back, he raised it over his head, out of my reach. I grabbed for it once, then gave up, refusing to allow him the

satisfaction of another fight I'd lose.

"Come on then," he grumbled. "Let's go see this horrid prison I've readied for you to sleep in, shall we?" He marched off down the hall, taking the illumination with him.

The corridor dimmed and the shadows pressed in around me, and I had no choice but to follow him, casting one last long look at the mystery door.

This was a house that wanted to be lived in. I felt it in every groaning floorboard and creak of wood. Could sense it in each lonely room I entered. Smelled it in the cool citrus scent of the flowers. I didn't believe there were ghosts here, but I was certain that at the end of that hall was a door covered in locks longing to be opened.

* * *

Finley took me up the back staircase and past the small library with the dull books. The bedroom he showed me was brightly lit by candles, and a lantern glowed warmly beside a bed dressed in billowy duvets and pillows. Another bouquet—this one full of pink carnations—sat on the fireplace mantel, letting off a green, earthy scent.

I repressed all the delighted sounds my mouth wanted to make. The decorations reminded me of a secret garden. A padded window seat was strewn with pillows embroidered with bright flowers, the scrollwork around the fireplace resembled ivy crawling up a trellis, and the books on the bookcase looked very promising. The colorful cloth covers begged to be opened to reveal what was hidden within.

"Do you approve of the cell I've selected for you?" Finley rumbled.

I shrugged my shoulders, forcing my expression into something reserved. "It'll do."

Lifting one of his lanterns, he brought it closer to my face. He squinted at me, then

his lip tugged upward. “You love it.”

I fucking loved it! The first second I could I was going to jump on that giant bed like I was thirty years younger. It was still a cage. A gorgeous, gilded cage with bouncy beds and giant bathtubs, but a cage all the same. One I was determined to claw my way out of, kicking and screaming if I had to.

But not tonight. Tonight was for bouncing and rest. Tomorrow would be for plotting.

I waved him off. “I’m too tired to have another row with you. Please go away.”

He ignored the jab entirely. “I’ve added a few of my nightshirts to the dresser over there so you have something clean to sleep in. The rest of your things should arrive soon from Salt Rock. If you need me, I’m just across the hall.”

He handed me back my lantern. The moment my hands were busy, he cupped my cheek in his palm, drawing me closer .

I tried to repress the way my body responded to him, but my heart was not on the same page as the rest of me. It kicked against my ribs. I stared up into his grieving eyes and commanded myself not to feel sorry for him, but the stupid organ in my chest continued to ignore my wishes. The pinch of sympathy was so profound that I discreetly rubbed the sensation away.

My lashes lowered. “I wish I understood exactly what it was you needed from me.”

His breath blew against my cheek, warm and sweet, and I leaned closer on impulse. “I wish I did, too.”

Then he pressed his lips to the furrow between my brows and left.

I set my lantern in the windowsill because I liked the way the glow reflected in the plate glass. One item at a time, I plucked the stolen silver from my garters and hid them under the bed. I hung up my dressing gown beside the door and stripped free of my chemise, changing into one of Finley's nightshirts. It swallowed me up, but it was clean and smelled like his spicy cologne water, and my heart misbehaved again.

I breathed him in, instructing myself to stop caring that he had a scent I wanted to bathe in.

As a distraction, I threw myself onto the bed, sinking into the billowy blankets, and giggles erupted out of me. I bounced on the mattress briefly, just to test its softness, but movement in the hall stilled me.

"Are you jumping on your bed?" Finley called through the door, voice wobbling.

"That must have been the ghosts you heard!" I called back, climbing under the comforter. "This house is haunted, don't you know?"

* * *

I had terrible dreams that night. Dreams of crimson rose petals and locked rooms and angry voices.

In my nightmare, I was twelve years old, and the baron had ordered me to kill a chicken I had raised and grown fond of. The baron would eat her for his dinner because she wasn't laying well, but I believed the hen just needed more time. I knew exactly what it was like to be thought incapable. So I stole her away and hid her in the woods to grant her a second chance.

Though kind Cook had tried to offer him an alternative, the baron guessed what I had done, and he locked me in a pantry as punishment. I hadn't been given enough to

drink, and the darkness was absolute. It pressed down on my chest and toyed with my mind. Air sawed through my dry throat. There were too many competing smells in my nose.

As the hours grew longer, sounds came to me in the dark. Whispers. Footsteps. The thump of an infernal heartbeat. Scritch-scratching against wood. The presence of malicious creatures that shouldn't be real hovered near. I wet myself on the floor.

Lochlan couldn't bear to hear me crying any more. He found the hen in the woods and brought her to his pa. The baron dragged me out of my prison, and he threatened to shut up Lochlan in the pantry next unless I broke the poor hen's neck.

I killed her quickly and was too thirsty to make tears for her.

The baron put Lochlan in the pantry anyway for interfering. I kept close to try to help him stay calm. He could hear voices in there, Lochlan told me. Angry voices in the dark .

"They're hurting me, Rynn," he whispered through the crack below the pantry door.
"They're hurting me again."

I awoke before dawn with a silent scream stuck in my throat.

Lochlan Finley

The next morning, I made sure Rynn found her way to breakfast, then I left her to explore on her own. I longed to go with her, but it was made clear my company wasn't wanted, so I took to the drawing room. I had a stack of newspapers to catch up on, anyway, and correspondence piling up in my office.

As long as she was here in my house, forced to suffer the spirits who walked these halls, same as I was, she could do as she pleased for the most part. I'd had more severe intentions originally, but Rynn had always been very good at destroying my plans. I was finding it harder and harder to treat her with the same cruelty she'd once shown me.

Speaking of the devil, she joined me in the drawing room.

Rynn wore a shirtwaist in green that did pretty things to her eyes—an article of clothing that must have escaped my notice at the inn. No corset. She had on a pair of my brown tweed breeches. On me, the garment was made to be baggy. On her, it hugged her hips and thighs and left nothing of her lush silhouette to the imagination.

"Hm," I said, forgetting momentarily how to string words together into a proper sentence. "You offered to wear my clothes yesterday . . . I see the appeal now."

She tugged at her waistband. "I'm wearing your drawers too," she added, her voice full of silky seduction.

I sat up, wanting to see for myself what she was offering, but she was up to

something, and it was never wise to play her games. Hiding from temptation, I lifted my newspaper to conceal her from my eyes. “No trades.”

“Hear me out.” Rynn pushed the paper down and sat on the arm of my chair, crushing the print between us. “I haven’t been mushroom hunting since I was a girl. There are a good number of ash trees outside. I spotted them from your bedroom while I was pilfering your clothes. I want you to take me mushroom hunting since you know the grounds far better than I.”

We used to hunt morels this time of year when we were young. Fondness warmed my chest at the pleasant memories, but I squashed them, narrowing my eyes at her. “What are you really after?”

“Mushrooms.”

I shook my head. “That’s not it.”

“Well,” she said, her plump lips in a droll twist. She lifted a foot into the air and wriggled her toes in her black stockings. “I’ll need my boots to hike through those trees.”

“There it is,” I said, twice as suspicious as before.

“I’m not going anywhere without my cash, and I haven’t found it yet. Besides, you’ll be right there, and aren’t the gates locked? Where could I go?”

“I wouldn’t dare underestimate you, Rynn. You could pick the lock or recklessly climb the fence, and you could get a lot farther faster in boots.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not if I’ve got you following me about like a bird dog. Come on. I’m tired of being inside. I need to feel the sun on my face. Don’t you want to

show me the grounds?”

I did want to show her the grounds. And every other room in the house she still hadn't seen. Every board and every molding, every ornament, every fixture, every cornice, every book. It had all been built and bought and decorated for her, and I wanted her to see it. To revel in it.

To haunt it with me.

But I wasn't a fool and I knew she was up to something, so I shoved down the impulse and fixed my face.

“No,” I said, freeing the newspaper from between us.

Rynn ripped it out of my hands, rolled it forcefully, and swatted me on the head with it like she was swatting a fly. Before I could wrestle it back from her, she pressed her lips to mine, and my body responded immediately against my wishes. My heart jumped, and my pulse hammered in my throat.

I forgot all about the paper. Forgot how to even read. Forgot letters and their sounds. Forgot how to breathe.

“Please,” she said, against my mouth.

I pulled away from her. “You can kiss me all day, Rynn, if you want.” I dug my fingers into the arms of my chair so they would stay out of her beautiful hair and away from her beckoning body. “I'm not giving you your boots. I'll take you mushroom hunting, but you're doing it in your stockings. ”

She kissed me again, more fervently than before.

“It’s not going to work,” I told her, my hand finding the small of her back and resting there.

We weren’t twelve anymore, and my heart was a withered thing. She couldn’t crack it open with tenderness and attention. Not like she had back then.

* * *

Well, it worked.

We crossed the lawn, headed for the trees. The vixen trailed after me in her boots and a borrowed wide-brimmed hat, ducking low branches as we delved deeper into the forest. I loved hiking. I liked it even more with her beside me, chirping excitedly each time she spotted a mushroom to put in her wicker basket.

In my own basket, I’d brought a cold lunch of assorted berries and cornbread. After an hour of hiking and hunting, we ate it together in the sunlight on a bed of clover, passing a canteen of water between us. Rynn stared off at the house in the distance where it peeked between the canopy of trees, studying it in the afternoon light.

“She must have really been something,” she said softly. “Your woman, I mean.”

It took a while for me to realize she was talking about the woman who I’d told her had broken my heart twice. The woman that was her. She brought her up often since I’d shared my grief. I wondered if the subject just made her curious, or was any part of this jealousy?

I liked her jealous.

“She was something,” I said, repressing a knowing smile. “ She didn’t think so, but she truly was.”

“Ah,” Rynn said contemplatively, eyes scanning the stained-glass windows. “That’s the curse of being a woman. We often don’t see our own worth, and then it’s too easy for others to undervalue us as a result.”

Her words reminded me of our time together at the Lark, when she’d claimed she knew her exact value down to the last dollar. “Do you think you know your worth?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “That depends on who’s asking. There are plenty of people to whom my time would matter very little. Then there are those who would delude themselves into thinking I’m worth a great deal. The truth is somewhere in the middle.”

“Then you don’t know your worth,” I chided.

“To the average man, I’m just a harlot. But then there are people like . . . oh, I don’t know . . . like you, I suppose, who seem to think I’m worth going through an awful lot of trouble for. I’m not, by the way. You’ll regret keeping me here eventually.”

“You mean you’ve never been held prisoner before? Why, I’m shocked,” I teased.

“Ha. You’re the first on that front,” she said. “I’ve had a few offers of marriage from clients, some of which I’m convinced were in earnest. But that’s all.”

“If they were in earnest, why aren’t you married?”

She swatted my words away like she was swatting down bees. “Multiple reasons. Marriage for a woman isn’t much different than a gilded prison, to start. And there was only ever the one client that I was even remotely tempted by. Father Walker was his name.”

My brows lifted. “A priest?” After her concern over religious sorts yesterday, her

answer took me by surprise.

She chuckled at the memory. “He’d developed a reputation for spending time at the music hall I sang in prior to living at the Night Lark. He tried to tempt the patrons away from the sins of the flesh and into his flock. He did so kindly. Father Walker was no fanatic. He requested more time with me to convince me to change my ways. I told him if he paid my fee, he could spend the hour doing whatever he pleased with me. So he paid me, and then he amazed me.”

“Amazed you how?”

“He actually spent the hour trying to convince me to leave that place.” Her laughter was infectious. “After that, he couldn’t afford to keep paying me but was earnest in his desire to comfort and speak with me about his love of God, and so I made a trade with him. I’d listen to his sermonizing for half an hour, in exchange for lessons in Latin for the last half.”

“You’re fond of language, I’ve noticed.”

“Very,” she said. “You can read an awful lot more books that way. Each new language is another fountain of stories unlocked. Anyway, Father Walker used a Latin translation of scripture from the book of Acts to teach me with. He believed there was power in the texts. Power that would change me with study. We went on like that for a time. I grew fluent much quicker than he’d expected, which meant he was running out of opportunities to bring me into his flock, even with his magic scriptures. And then he shocked me again.”

I leaned forward, enchanted by the story, her lovely voice, and the impassioned way she told it.

“He proposed,” she said. “He claimed I was something special and didn’t belong in

that den of iniquity and he wanted to make a home with me. ”

“He was willing to cast aside his entire calling for you. The whole flock.” For a brief moment, I was frustrated at this stranger who had attempted to tie himself to the woman I was mad for, but on second examination, only sympathy remained. He’d been willing to give up everything for her because that’s what Rynn did to people. She ruined their plans.

“He was willing. All to make me honest,” she said, her smile small. “What a fascinating man he was. So much conviction.”

I shook my head at her. “And you think you’re only worth \$35 an hour.”

Her cheeks went pink, and her gaze fell to the grass below her. She tangled her fingers in the greenery. “I told him I could not marry him because I’d given my heart away when I was very young and had never gotten it back, so I’d never be able to give him what he wanted.”

Her words picked at the old scabs on my soul that would never heal. They made my chest warm, and my throat tightened. “Did the father take your refusal well?”

“He accepted it with great dignity. I wouldn’t marry Father Walker, but I did offer to rid him of his virginity if he decided to give one of those sins of the flesh a go.” She winked at me brazenly.

“Did he take you up on that?” I rasped, my throat still tight.

“I’ll never tell.” She tapped the side of her nose, grinning coyly. “That stays between me and Father Walker.”

Rynn returned to hunting mushrooms, weaving between the trees, vanishing for brief

stints before coming back to me to show me her finds. Her enthusiasm was catching, and her story about her heart made me feel lighter. I joined her on her hunt.

“Do you know what else is easy to find near ash trees?” she asked a while later. I could hear her voice but couldn’t see her in all the brush.

“What’s that?” I spotted a mushroom. I plucked up the bulbous blonde fungus, opened my basket . . . and immediately shut it again after spotting the other thing that liked ash trees. “Rynn,” I growled.

She popped out from behind the greenery where she’d been hunting, her own basket tucked under her arm. “Is there a problem?” Based on her villainous expression, it looked very much like she wanted there to be a problem.

“Did you put a weaver snake in my basket?” I ground out.

Her lips curled, and her big doe eyes sparkled with vengeance. “That’s not the only place I put one.”

Bile rising in the back of my throat, I followed her eyes down to my right trouser pocket. With great reluctance, I pulled it open and felt something slither. “Goddamn it . . .”

Pulse pounding, I ripped straight down the seam, cursing the ground blue.

The copper serpent sprang toward the base of the ash tree, shooting around the trunk.

“They’re venomous!” I roared.

“And not one of the serpents bit you. How frustrating.” Her chin lifted in defiance, and her lips quirked. “Perhaps they were reluctant to strike down one of their own.”

A chuckle rumbled out of her at her own quip, but I felt my face hardening. My teeth ground together audibly, and the change in me killed the laughter in her throat. Eyes rounding, Rynn dropped her basket and sprinted off through the trees.

“Oh, you had better run, hellcat,” I said through clenched teeth, rolling up my sleeves one at a time. Unfastening my waistcoat, I shouldered out of it and let it drop on the ground amongst the spilled mushrooms. I gave chase.

It would have been easier to catch her if she’d stayed on the path, but she kept diving behind foliage and changing direction, throwing me off. I jumped over roots and plodded down wild brush. Stray limbs slapped me in the face and caught in my clothing. Her smaller body navigated the thickets more easily than mine. Rynn’s hat was knocked from her head.

I was gaining on her. “Just wait until I get my hands on you!”

“It’s not as though they would have killed you!” she shouted over her shoulder.

“When I catch you, hellcat, oh, just you wait!”

Weaver venom wouldn’t have killed me, but it would have paralyzed me for a good long while, depending on how many times I’d been bitten. I’d have been stuck out in the woods, vulnerable while she stole the keys I kept chained to my pocket, helped herself to the contents of my house, and made her escape.

I’d have been less offended if she’d tried to kill me with a viper. Hurt me, kill me—fine. I’d haunt her heart for the rest of her days.

But how dare she try to leave me.

Just the thought of her abandoning me to the abyss again was enough to fuel my steps

despite the stitch growing in my side. I wasn't just angry; I was in agony, picturing her vanishing from my life. Leaving me to the ghosts and the misery she'd caused. Alone in hellfire once more.

I caught up to her at the gates. She tried to climb them, flinging herself at the wrought iron bars, but she was winded and didn't make it far. Reaching with her sore arm, she wasn't able to climb any higher. I plucked her off easily and forced her to the ground. She kicked at me, but her efforts seemed half-hearted at best. I knocked the blow away, letting it glance off my arm.

Shoving her legs down, I straddled her waist. Her skin was flushed. Her nipples pressed against the fabric of her thin shirtwaist, begging to be touched. She lay there, arms limp over her head in surrender, chest heaving, sweat beading her brow as my cock hardened against her belly.

She glanced at the bulge growing in my trousers, and her smile was ferocious. "After all I've done, you still want me terribly. I bet you hate that, don't you?"

"I hate it," I breathed. "I hate wanting you. I want to ruin you. I want to break your heart and carry around the shattered remains inside my breast pocket forevermore. I don't want to long for your body another moment. It's a baneful way to exist, wanting you. I wish I hated you."

"Well, so do I! I hate wanting you even more," she hissed. "This would all be over if I could just hate you enough to see you dead. Don't you deserve what's coming to you after all you've done to me? But why can't I convince my heart of it? Why can't I end you or let someone else do that and then be free? I can barely bring myself to hurt you, and it torments me so!"

"Hearts can't be reasoned with," I groused. "They chase blindly after the things that break them."

“It’s such a nuisance organ.” Her eyes closed briefly. She flexed her hips, testing the heavy stiffness in my trousers. When her gaze reopened, it was dreamy, the pupils large. “Are you finally going to do something about wanting me so badly?”

“Oh yes,” I said, and I rose up and rolled her under me onto her stomach. Scooting down her body so I could sit my weight on her thighs, I swatted her ass so hard she yelped. “I’m going to do something, all right.”

Rynn chuckled, and her breath stirred the dirt under her face. “If you’re trying to teach me a lesson, you’re going to have to spank me much harder than that.”

I slapped her ass. The crack of it echoed. “That’s for the snake in my basket,” I said. I struck her again. “That’s for the one in my pocket.” My next slap stung my palm and made her moan. I fisted a hand in her hair and pulled, treating her roughly, aching to watch her come apart for me again. “That’s for trying to leave me!”

“You have no idea what this does to me,” she whimpered, arching her back, wriggling her ass at me.

“Tell me again that you don’t have a heart,” I commanded, pleasuring and punishing her body in turns, rubbing between her legs over her clothing.

“I don’t,” she groaned. “I’m heartless.”

“You gave yours away and never got it back,” I reminded her as I jerked down the breeches from her hips and the drawers she’d borrowed. I stripped her—no garters, no stockings. And when I got to her boots, I pulled those off and chucked them aside angrily.

“I gave it away,” she agreed, “but it still manages to order me around somehow. Even from a distance.”

It wasn't at a distance. It was right here with me. And telling her so was on the tip of my tongue, pressing against my lips, trying to escape. She'd stolen from me, and then she hadn't died. It had all been a lie.

How dare she leave me.

But there were things I craved outside of that daunting confrontation, and I swallowed those words that would change everything, swallowed the words so they could not send me down a different path. I would not let go of my anger, my desire for revenge. Not for anyone.

Not even for her.

When she was bare from the waist down, I bent her over my lap and slapped her ass until her skin was a bright tempting pink and she was squirming and mewling and clawing at my clothing, trying to undress me, too. I rubbed out the sting in her skin, fondling her. Her flesh was hot from my attention. When I reached between her legs, she dripped down my fingers.

"Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop," she chanted.

I gave her what she craved while her knees were pressed to the dirt and her feet pedaled at the grass beneath us. I pulled her hair and spanked her raw, made her tell me what a bad girl she was and all the filthy ways she'd make it up to me. I filled her pussy with my fingers and teased her flesh while she promised to crawl for me and suck me, to beg and plead for mercy on her knees, to sit on my cock when I commanded her to like a very good girl, a repentant girl, a feral little sweetheart that would do anything to be full of me.

"Unbutton your shirtwaist, unless you want me to ruin it, too," I warned, opening up my trousers and tugging down my drawers to free myself quickly. I knew by the hum

in her throat and the jerking of her hips that she was close to her peak, and I wanted to feel her come around me. I pressed her flat to the earth, then I entered her prone body from behind and rolled my hips, driving her forward.

Her heat pulsed and squeezed me tight as she came.

“Attagirl,” I said, jaw clenched. Her body was a silken dream, a taste of heaven, the gods’ ambrosia, and I didn’t want it to be over yet. I knew what her pleasure tasted like, and I could taste her then on my tongue just from memory alone.

She worked off the fastenings of her shirt and removed it as I plundered her. Muscles in my shoulders and arms went taut. My pulse surged.

The fawn skin of her back was broken by old gashes and jagged scars, the same ones I’d treated when we were young. Time had turned them a rosy shade. Placing a palm over the marks, I slowed my pace to follow the map of those injuries with the pads of my fingers, learning them anew.

Rynn craned her neck, peering over her shoulder. “See? I’m a pirate, too,” she said softly, sounding sleepy.

I pressed my lips to the worst of her scars and felt her tremble beneath me. Sliding my hands up her belly, I cupped her breasts and held her tight, rocking into her to claim her and to love her, because as much as I hated it, I did love her. I always would. It was not an emotion I could cast from me, hard as I tried, no matter how much it vexed me.

There was such a thing as loving someone too much, and I was proof of that. I loved her in a manner that consumed and destroyed and drove me to madness. Panting and grinding, I let out some of my madness into her with her enthusiastic encouragement, her moans and cries so loud she scared birds out of their nests and squirrels from the

trees. Her fingers dug into the earth beneath her as her body shook with each pump of my hips.

I slowed down again, not wanting it ever to be over. I wanted to live inside this woman. Were I a ghost, I would ravish and possess her always. My heart pounded, a fresh agony in my chest. My pulse was a storm at sea in my ears. I knocked the breath out of her with another slow, hard thrust.

“This is going to take a while,” I warned her, moving my hands to her hips and digging my fingers in.

“Good,” she panted.

“I won’t be gentle,” I promised.

“Even better.”

I turned her onto her back, and she spread her thighs for me, as pretty as a present. “I won’t stop, even if you beg me to,” I rasped.

“I wouldn’t dare.”

I sunk into her, caging her in with my arms, watching her lashes flutter and her lips round in ecstasy at the invasion. She worked herself under me, meeting my hips with hers. Her nails scratched down my back, over my clothing, down scars that matched hers. I buried my face in her hair.

Sucking on the skin of her throat and kissing her breasts, I made her orgasm again, and the sweet satin squeeze of her body proved too much for me. I came deep inside her.

She curled into me as I rolled us onto our sides. She was not a hellcat anymore but a hell kitten, pressing little kisses to my jaw. Chasing her release turned her ferocious, but an orgasm always made her meek and tender. She nuzzled me.

“You look tired,” I said drowsily.

Rynn yawned wide. “You have a gift for exhausting me.”

Cheek pillowed on my chest, she fell sound asleep in my arms.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:49 am

Rynn Mavis

I awoke alone in the grass. The sun had dipped in the sky, and I was no longer pressed against the warm body of a man. My skin was bare to the elements. The drop in temperature as the shadows grew longer pulled me from my slumber.

My God, that had been an excellent fuck. My hips were covered in rounded fingerprint marks. My core ached pleasantly. My ass was still tender. The memories alone were enough to heat my skin all over again.

I hadn't slumbered well at all the night before. It was no wonder I'd fallen so deeply asleep after two overpowering releases. My heart was an erratic mess, beating in a staccato that had to be unhealthy. My body was filthy. I pulled leaves and twigs free of my curls. My shoes were gone. My clothing was nowhere to be found.

My pirate was also gone.

He'd abandoned me out here without a stitch of clothing and no boots. I climbed to my feet, grumbling under my breath. Covering my breasts with my palms, feeling exposed and embarrassed, I marched for Nightingale House, cursing Finley's name every time I stepped on a rock or scraped my foot on a stick.

"You will rue the day, you pirate," I growled. "Rue. The. Day."

My progress was slow, but I finally made it in through the front doors. Finley had left a housecoat hanging from a bronze torchier in the foyer for me. I stared stubbornly at the peace offering for a long moment before I slipped it on. Rolled up on an oaken

chest was a large terry-cloth towel. I took it too, setting off for the lavatory. A bath sounded divine, and based on the filthy footprints I was leaving on the floorboards, it was a necessity.

I was more familiar with the back stairs than I was the main set, so I headed for them, passing the locked central room and the dining hall. As I neared the back stairs, I felt a pull in my gut, a tug of curiosity. I hadn't thought about that strange black door again since I'd found it, but I was getting closer to it, could sense myself drawing near like iron to a lodestone. The temperature cooled, pebbling my skin.

I should have gone straight to the bathroom, but instead I padded down that hall, leaving more dirty footprints on floorboards that longed to be tread upon. The roses that flanked the door had been traded out for an even fresher set. These blooms were a dark shade of purple.

"I'm not curious because of ghosts," I whispered to myself, failing to repress a shiver. "It's all those locks. Not that supernatural nonsense. Who locks a door like that?"

Cold caressed my skin as I moved closer. Reaching out for the heavy padlock, the hairs on my arms rose to unsettling attention. I was inches from touching it when a knock sounded.

The thud was hollow and sudden and seemed to echo from everywhere all at once, surprising a squeal out of me. I sprinted from the hall, turned the corner sharply, and rushed up the stairs.

"It's not haunted, it's not haunted," I chanted to myself, taking the steps two at a time. "Big houses make noises. That's just what they do as they settle. You've let Finley get in your head!"

When I finally made it to the lavatory, I took a steadying breath and convinced

myself to push all spooky nonsense out of my mind. That sound could have been anything.

A figment of my stressed imagination.

Wood beams creaking in a strong wind.

A bird flying into one of the many windows.

I crossed to the copper tub, heeding its call of peace and cleanliness. It was large, with ornate clawed feet and a matching cabinet. I'd heard rumors of baths that had great iron water heaters right beside them but had never partaken in such luxury before. It seemed like something that should belong in a palace. Seated on the side of the tub, I turned on the taps and let the water warm.

Finley had set out a bar of castile soap, a variety of coarse sponges and brushes, a bottle of vinegar, sliced up lemons and oranges, creams and oils and perfumes, all laid out in a neat row across the counter. I found a bottle that smelled like Finley's peppery fragrance, and I added a generous amount to my bath. Inhaling deeply, I stirred the water with my arm, then added the citrus.

Before I hung up his housecoat, I peeked around the room, listening for more strange sounds.

"I don't believe in ghosts," I scolded the walls, "but if this house is haunted, know that it's rude to watch a woman bathe, even if you're dead."

Finley had spilled inside me when he came, so I washed with vinegar first to deter pregnancy. The next time I saw him, I'd give him hell for being so careless.

As I sunk into the giant tub and hot water caressed my skin, my nose filled with that

spicy fragrance, and it grew harder and harder to hold on to my irritation—harder to hold on to anything but a peaceful bliss as my muscles loosened and the dirt and sweat washed away.

I took a sponge and the bar of soap to my body, scrubbing harshly until my skin and nails felt new again. I even took the time to wash and brush my hair, a daunting task because I'd been a bit neglectful of it lately, but I drowned my curls and set to it, showing them much needed love.

I liked the acoustics of the room and found the scenery in the fixtures inspiring, so I began to sing. First quietly, then my voice steadily carried as my confidence grew. It was easy to feel alone in such a giant house, to feel free to do as I pleased.

I fed the lonely walls my soprano, gifted the melancholy floorboards and the neglected furniture a song about springtime and love that feels like it won't ever end. I sang about growth and new friendships. I sang about suffering and a heartache that endures before finally finding its happy ending.

I sang until my throat hurt a little and my hair was starting to dry.

A noise in the hall caught my notice, and I fell quiet to listen.

"Is that you, Finley . . . ? Or the ghosts?" I called.

"It's me," he said somberly through the door, then he let himself in.

"Good that you're here," I said, putting on an aggravated tone I couldn't fully feel in the deliciously hot water. "You were reckless outside. I'm doubling my fee. You now owe me twice what you stole from my safe and—"

"You can have whatever of mine you want," he said, and his voice was so gloomy it

brought me up short. Deep frown lines bracketed his mouth.

He lingered near the threshold, rubbing at some imperfection in the plaster. Sunlight bathed him through the high window. It caught in his hair and lightened it to a shade more auburn than brown. His short beard too had grown so light in the glow that I almost couldn't see it at all.

Then he pressed his cheek to the wall, cooling his face, concealing his scarred side from my view, and recognition hit me like a freight train.

I stopped breathing. My heart leapt into my throat. It was several fleshy thumps later before I could speak at all.

“Loch,” I gasped.

There was no doubt about who he was. There stood the young man I had loved with my whole soul. The one whom I'd given my heart and then betrayed so horrendously.

“Oh my God,” I breathed. “Loch, is that really you?”

He didn't answer me, but he didn't need to. His cheek remained soundlessly pressed to the wall, just like when we were young. Our tears were dangerous things—they brought out the baron's wrath quick as a lightning strike— and so when we needed to hide them, we'd press our hot faces to the wall. The coolness against our skin eased the sting of our misery and helped to smother the evidence of our sadness.

“You were singing,” he rasped, “just like you do in my dreams.”

A sob caught in my throat. I sprang from the tub, splashing the floors with water, and flung his housecoat over myself, still sopping wet.

He put his back to the wall and slid down it all the way to the marble tiles. I tied the housecoat briskly, dropping to my knees at his side. I reached for him with a hand that had gone prune in the bathwater, stopping just short of touching him. It hung there between us, afraid to caress his scars in that casual manner I had before. I was dying inside to heal the thing I'd hurt so badly, dying to grab him up, to hold him, to squeeze him to my chest until I burst.

How could I fix the things I'd clearly broken?

I wanted to help like I had when we were young. That had always been my instinct when his father was cruel. Fix Lochlan. Make it better. Make him smile. I could always make it better if I tried hard enough. I could stopper his tears, heal his pain, clean and fix his injuries. No wonder his sadness had impacted me so profoundly when I'd seen him in my room that day.

I should have known. I should have recognized him. He didn't look anything like he had twenty years ago, but I should have recognized the impact that haunted heart of his always had on me.

I swallowed, still reaching uselessly toward his battered cheek. "Did the baron do this to you after I—"

"Yes," he whispered .

"Because I—"

"Yes." Menace flavored that singular word, and one tear streaked down his face, soaking into his beard.

I wiped the trail of it away with the baggy sleeve of his housecoat. "Saying I'm sorry isn't enough, but I am so sorry. Oh God, Loch, I'm so terribly sorry!" I pushed the

words out of my tightening throat. “I . . . I didn’t know he’d hurt you like this. I didn’t want him to hurt you this way.”

His malicious laugh turned my blood cold. “Did you forget who he was? No, I don’t believe you could have. You and I were the only ones who knew how truly wicked he could be. We were who he took his wrath out on.”

“Of course I didn’t forget! I just thought that once you were his heir officially and we were so much older than when he used to beat us—”

“Did you forget how he used to turn us into his furniture to humiliate us?” His gilded brown eyes lit with a fire that burned through me. “Did you forget the way he made you bend over his knee so he could eat a plate of food off your back? How he turned me into his footstool?”

My nostrils flared. “I didn’t fucking forget!”

“How he’d pretend to be in a decent mood until we dropped our guards? Then he’d surprise us with a horse crop and—”

“I won’t say it again! You heard me the first time!” I shouted. My hands balled into fists that shook. I didn’t know what to do with them, and so I shoved them into my lap and folded in on myself. “Oh, how I’d love to forget him and all of that. But I cannot.”

“You abandoned me to that hell,” he hissed, his voice cracking like a whip, the snap of it as cutting as the baron’s crop had been across our backs and thighs and asses when we’d committed the smallest transgression. “If you did not forget who he was, then you knew he would blame me for what you’d done. You made sure of it!”

I choked on my next breath because he was right. I had made sure of it. That was the

horrible middle I'd left out of the retelling the night he demanded to know about the man I loved. "But I didn't mean for—"

"You didn't mean for it to happen?" he mocked with a laugh that felt like a dagger in my chest. "Why did you leave all those little things you'd stolen from my mother in my room? You knew she was the only person my father felt any kind of tenderness for." His gaze narrowed to slits as he unbuttoned his shirt with brisk movements. "Why? Why'd you agree to marry me and then set me up for all of this?"

He jerked his shirt down and turned to show me his back. The scarred welts that matched mine I had expected, but there was more than that along his spine. There were injuries I couldn't name. Strange burns, blotches that stained his skin.

"Because I'm horrid," I said, turning away, disgusted with myself. "I'm the one who's a serpent . . . a wretch. I did it because I was barely more than a stupid child! I was angry and young and impulsive and hopeless and . . ."

He jerked his shirt back up but left it to hang open in front. There was another burn high on his chest, just under his throat. It disrupted the dusting of auburn hair there. "That's not an answer."

My arms fell open at my sides. I sagged beside him. "What do you want me to say?"

"I want the truth. Why'd you ruin me? Why'd you rip my heart to pieces that day? Why'd you frame me with all those things you'd stolen before abandoning me to that hell house alone? You were the only good thing I had in all the world. Why, Rynn? Why?"

Anger and sadness warred within me. Another breath shuddered past my lips, and my nostrils flared. I felt like I was that girl again. Like I'd lost years of my life, traveled back in time, shrunk to a silly underfed, almost-child. "Because you loved him . You

loved him more than you loved me.” Even my voice sounded younger in my ears.

“That’s not true,” he said slowly, staring off at the wall like he was staring into another time. “There wasn’t anything or anyone I loved more than you.”

“You were my only good thing in the world, too,” I said earnestly. “I swear it.”

Another tear shot down his cheek. A remembered fear stirred in my gut, tightening the muscles in my abdomen to near nausea. We were alone here, I knew that, but his tears made me afraid for him, afraid of what would happen if he were caught crying. Unable to bear the sight of it, I wiped his cheek clean.

I sucked in a sharp inhale but felt no stronger for it. I could have fainted, I was so unsteady. It was a struggle to stay upright, my lungs had constricted so much. “No matter what he did to us, no matter what cruelty he visited upon me right in front of you, you still loved your father. You still wanted to please that devil of a man. I couldn’t bear it. Not a moment longer. I couldn’t stay to watch you turn me away for his approval.”

“That never would have happened. Not ever,” he bit out.

“You had already started to ignore me in his presence. When he was around, you wouldn’t speak to me. I knew that was just the beginning. I . . . I wasn’t convinced you’d keep me. Wasn’t convinced you should keep me. I wasn’t . . . I’ve never been a good girl, Loch . . . I was never going to amount to much.” Tears welled up in my eyes, then spilled over, shooting hotly down my cheeks. “I suppose we can’t know for sure what would have happened now.”

“I’m sure,” he said so forcefully I felt compelled to look back up at him, to see the blaze in his gaze. I was meek and useless as the focus of that fire sharpened once more on me and set me aflame. “I know what would have happened.”

“I saw no future for us because of him and because of me,” I confessed, laying my soul bare to his fire because he deserved that much at least. “And I hated how you loved him. Hated it so much that I . . . I hoped he’d cast you aside or you’d finally stop trying to win him over or . . . I don’t even know. Whatever he did to you, you loved him, and I thought finally , finally I would break you of the habit.” With hands that shook, I touched the scars that marred his wet cheek, caressing them with the pads of my fingers. “But I didn’t want this for you. Not any of it. I would never ever want you harmed!”

His jaw clenched. “Well,” he said, fresh sadness turning his eyes glassy, “your plan worked.”

His melancholy clawed at me, a monster riding on my back, digging in razor-sharp talons to tear me apart from the inside out. And I deserved every moment of its dreadful torture.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:49 am

Lochlan Finley

Making love to her again had been too much for me. As Rynn had slept in my arms after, I'd felt a pain in my chest sharper and more piercing than ever before. It was like my shattered heart was trying to stitch itself back together but it no longer fit inside the cage of my ribs. It was too battered and swollen.

So I'd left her there in the grass, naked and exposed, needing to get far away from the woman who had broken me into too many pieces.

I took her belongings and secured them in my bedroom behind lock and key, and still my haunted heart tried to rip me apart. I felt gutted as I hung the housecoat for her by the entrance and readied the things for her bath. When I returned to the first floor to seek refuge in the drawing room, I felt the prickle of the ghosts responding to my agony, pulling in closer, made curious by the pain that radiated from me.

They filled my ears with their whispers.

I'd sent them all away with a shout. The ones tethered to me had to listen, and they took the others with them. That was my blessing and my curse now.

And then the house stayed quiet for a time.

Eventually, I went looking for her to make sure she made it inside before dark. It was her singing, her sweet soprano carrying down the halls that broke the silence and drew me to her. As she sang, voice echoing in the bathroom, I imagined she was singing just for me. Like in my dreams. She used to sing to me when we were young,

but it was after I lost her, after I'd come to long for her nocturnal visits, that I started to think of her as my nightingale.

Now Rynn was seated next to me on the tile floor, staring at me, finally really seeing me. The knowledge of our past turned down her full lips and made her hickory-colored eyes glossy and dark as volcanic glass. Her chin hung toward her chest like it was too heavy to lift.

"I can make it better," she whispered.

"You can't," I whispered back.

She flung her arms around my neck, and another tear escaped the corner of my stinging gaze. I pushed her away.

"Let me fix it," she sobbed.

"You can't!" I said, baring my teeth at her, vision blurring.

"Just let me try!" She hugged me again, and I let her for a moment, too weak to turn her away a second time. Rynn kissed that tear off my cheek, and a pang shot through my heart. It was too much.

"Stop." I shoved her off .

She caught herself on the tile, my housecoat tangled between her legs. Her positioning reminded me of that moment in her bedroom what felt like ages ago now, when I'd dumped her onto the floor beneath me. But there was only determination in her gaze now, no defeat.

"I can fix it," she insisted, surging back onto her knees. "Let me make it better. Let

me help you just like I used to!”

I tried to push her away, but she clung to me. Rynn’s touch broke down my defenses and shattered me. I felt like a mess of parts there on the floor. Fingers and bones and eyes and ears, hair and teeth, all in a heap. This time she pressed her lips to the burn in my skin, the one just below my throat. My next breath stuttered out of me, stirring her curls. Then my arms disobeyed my mind’s wishes, listening instead to my broken heart. They pulled her closer, right up against my chest where I hurt the most.

She kissed my face, kissed my burning cheeks, kissed my scars until I couldn’t tell which tears were mine and which had fallen from her. Her kisses hurt me so sweetly. Rynn’s hands made fists in the lapels of my shirt, her grip tight enough to turn her knuckles white.

This was what I’d once wanted. Her sorry, her begging to help me feel better, but now I just ached. I felt battered and bruised, like I’d been caught in a stampede and trampled on. Like my old wounds had opened up all at once and were fresh and raw again. Every inch of my skin throbbed.

Unable to withstand her touch any longer, I peeled her fingers off me and stood.

She climbed to her feet beside me, lips trembling. “I want to make it better. I want to help you hurt less . . . I don’t know how yet, but I want to try . . .”

“Banish all thoughts of freedom from your mind now,” I told her, and my cold tone stopped her from reaching for me again.

Her hair hung in damp curls over one shoulder as her gaze dropped to the floor. “I know you’re angry,” she said, wringing the quilted fabric of her borrowed housecoat. “God knows you have every right to be, but eventually this has to end. For your sake as well as mine. We can’t carry on this way forever. You can’t.”

“This will not end. I will not stop, and they will not stop!” I gestured broadly at the room and the ghosts I could feel haunting it. They crowded in, attracted to my growing anger, drawn in by my grief until the room grew so cold I could see my breath mingling with hers, could see the spirits leaving footprints in the wet tiles on the floor around her. The steam that had been curling off the bath water evaporated in an instant.

That’s what I wanted most. Her to grieve with me.

She stood there frowning, oblivious to their movements. “What are you talking about, Loch? Who are they ?”

“Doesn’t matter that you don’t believe in ghosts, Rynn. They’re here, and the spirits won’t stop. God knows I’ve tried to send them away from me, but they never stay gone. Twenty years I’ve been haunted by them because of you. Now it’s your turn.”

Her nose turned red, and her big doe eyes brimmed over. I abandoned her there in the lavatory like she’d abandoned me.

* * *

I didn’t make it very far, pacing the hall, trying to calm my nerves for what felt like ages. Marching down the corridor, I shoved into my bedroom and slammed the door behind me. Then I fell against it, letting it hold up most of my weight. My head was pounding—my heart, too. At my sides, my fingers clenched so hard my nails dug little crescents into my palms.

I slid down my door to squat on the floor. There I remained, stuck in the cage of my mind until the light started to fade beyond my bedroom window. Before it got any darker, I needed to start a fire.

Footsteps in the hall stole my attention.

“Is that you, Rynn, or the ghosts?” I called through the door.

“It’s me,” she said somberly, and she must have carried a lantern with her, because an amber glow lit the edges of the door frame.

She set it on the floor, casting its light through the crack at the bottom, just like we used to when my father would lock us in somewhere as punishment for . . . God only knew what most of the time. A pantry or closet were his prisons of choice. When he was gone, we’d sit beside the door with a lantern to give the other some comfort, and we’d whisper to each other for as long as we were able.

We didn’t dare unlock the door. I tried that once to save Rynn, and Father broke three of my fingers.

Her shadow appeared, disrupting the light as she sat down next to her lantern, leaning against the door opposite me. “I’ve got just one question for you, Loch. I know you’re unhappy with me—as you should be—but I hope you’ll answer it anyway.”

I rested my head back against the wood, flexing my left fingers to chase out the phantom ache the memory had inspired. “What’s your question?”

“When did you get so goddamn big?” She said it in the puckish way that never failed to draw a laugh out of me. “You are not the scrawny young man that I remember.”

I sensed the humor in her words but was too numb to share in it. “Right after my father died, I had a growth spurt. A considerable one. I was a late bloomer, I suppose you could say.”

“Ah,” she said. “It’s like when they cut a big tree down and the little ones nearby

sprout up. They aren't trapped in its shade anymore or choked by the bigger roots. Finally, they can get at the sunlight."

"I suppose it was like that," I said, closing my eyes because I was suddenly so tired. The ghosts had a habit of disturbing my sleep. They gave me nightmares and woke me throughout the night, and the events of the day had added substantially to my exhaustion.

"I lied about something," she said, voice quiet.

"What's that?" I blinked my eyes open, curious what she'd say next.

"I don't have just the one question. I have loads of them."

The urge to smile tugged at my cheeks, but I hadn't the energy for even that small gesture. "You'd better get started then."

"Why'd you tell me your name was Finley?"

"Because it is."

She thought on my answer for a time. "Is that your blood family's name? I can see why you'd want to go back to that one."

"That's right."

"I'm also trying to figure out why you waited twenty years to avenge yourself on me if you were so angry all this time. There were moments early on when I thought someone would come for me, but then . . ." Her words fell away. I could almost hear the gears turning in her brain. "It was because of her, wasn't it? The woman you loved who broke your heart twice. You forgot all about me, but then . . . then she

died, and it was time to settle the score. Am I close?"

There were plenty of reasons it had taken me so long to come and find her. I hadn't known she'd survived fleeing from my father, for one. I thought she had died and been taken out of my reach for good. I didn't have it in me to discuss my reasons with her, though. Not now. Not like this. I was too worn out.

"You're jealous," I accused her instead. The glimmer of glee her envy inspired was enough to put a small smile on my face.

"Of course I'm jealous," she said indignantly. I pictured her pouting that plump bottom lip of hers.

"I like that you're jealous," I confessed. "I could listen to you being jealous all night."

"Well then, settle in," she grumbled. The door rocked as her weight shifted against it, and she let out a forlorn sigh that made me chuckle. "God, I bet she was beautiful. Probably some heiress, too. A truly sophisticated woman with an easy smile. Bet that's where you got so much wealth. I mean, the baron was rich but not like this. This is . . . my word, this house is something else."

"She was beautiful all right," I said through the door. "You got that part correct."

"Ugh. Don't confirm it. You're turning my insides molten. Now I can't pretend she was tolerable in appearance and you just wanted her for her money. Or that you felt sorry for her because she was so plain."

I let out a small laugh, falling into her vortex of delightfulness. The numbness faded.

"That's rich, coming from you. Considering your history, Rynn."

"I was no monk during our time apart," she agreed ruefully. "But there's no one for

you to be jealous of at all. Not even a little.”

“Father Walker,” I teased.

She snorted at that. “He was kind, but he was homely. And his sermons were dull. With his habit of lecturing constantly, we would never have suited. Ugh. How can you even look at me knowing my lengthy history? You’ve got the one . . . I assume just the one . . . You know what, don’t tell me if there’s more than her. I can’t bear it. How do you stand it knowing how I made my living?”

I crossed my arms over my chest, pondering her question. “We weren’t together. Obviously, you didn’t marry me. I’d have quite a bit more to say about it otherwise, of course.”

“Would have locked me up sooner than twenty years, I imagine.”

“Without a doubt.”

It wasn’t that it didn’t bother me entirely. Naturally, it rankled that she’d chosen a life of debauchery and risk over building something with me, but her history didn’t change anything for me. My wounded heart would have pined for her no matter how reckless she’d been while we were apart.

“Still. Just the thought . . .” She made a grieyed noise in her throat. “You with someone else. Touching them, loving them, fucking someone who isn’t me . . .”

Her jealousy was like a balm to my aches and pains. “I pretend that none of your clients mattered to you at all,” I confessed.

“They didn’t!” she said earnestly. “Truly, not a single one made it into my heart. They couldn’t. I’d given it away already to you, so there was no path for them

inside.”

“I tell myself that bedding them was a terrible chore because they were all boorish with tiny cocks—”

“Some of them didn’t even have cocks at all.”

I harumphed at that but not because of her flexible preferences. I’d seen the company of the lovely ladies she kept at the Lark. It made it hard to pretend that all of her prior partners were commonplace. She’d always had elastic tastes. She could find something attractive about most anyone, always looking for the best in people. I was the exact opposite. My preferences were Rynn. Just Rynn.

At thirteen, when I got my hands on my first photo of a scantily clad lady, I’d been curious what all the fuss was about. Rynn had been more interested than I was in the woman seated behind a sheer curtain, showing off her naked legs for the camera.

“I can’t decide if I want to be her or just want to keep looking at her,” she’d told me. But I couldn’t find anything appealing about a person I’d never met before. The woman was just a stranger in a photo to me.

“I like to pretend,” I continued, “that your clients were all tedious and you just needed the money desperately.”

“No client could hold a candle to you, Loch. Not even standing up all together. They don’t compare.”

It was exactly what I wanted to hear. In her own words, wasn’t that just the thing she was best at? Telling men and women what they wanted to hear. The thought soured my mood, stealing the bit of warmth her playfulness had inspired. I climbed up from the floor, rattling the door in the frame with my movements .

“I’m going to bed,” I muttered.

“All right . . . I guess I should, too.”

“You should,” I added firmly.

“Sweet dreams, Loch.”

My dreams were only ever sweet when my nightingale was in them. “Goodnight.”

* * *

The next morning, I started my day with a fresh shave. Rynn’s things arrived from Salt Rock. I went in search of her to let her know, but she wasn’t in her room. I started to panic when I couldn’t find her in the small library or the dining room either.

“Rynn? Rynn !” I shouted, fear fisting around my heart. My hand went to my waistcoat pocket, checking to make sure the house keys were still secured there by the chain I usually used to hold my timepiece. Surely, she wouldn’t have attempted another escape barefoot and without her savings.

Her voice reached me then, calling from the drawing room on the first level, and I let the breath trapped in my lungs out. My heart took longer to calm down its erratic racing. Seeing her helped a little.

Rynn wore an apron over her freshly laundered dressing gown. Dark smudges shadowed her eyes. The hutch was open, and she hunched before a table covered in the presentation silver. Linen cloth in hand, she cleaned the silver with water that gently steamed.

I came to a stop just inside the doorway. Her gaze immediately went to my

cleanshaven chin. She shot me a small smile but didn't say anything. I felt different now after my confrontation with Rynn, changed in a way I couldn't articulate, and so I'd wanted to look different, too.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

She finished drying the spoon in her hand with her apron, then she laid it out beside the others. A deep crease formed between her brows. "Penance, I think?"

"You hate cleaning."

"Wouldn't be penance if I enjoyed it." Rynn rubbed at the back of her neck. "What did you want? I heard you yelling. It sounded serious."

My feet shuffled beneath me, uncertain about this new development. Was all this a trick to put me off-guard? "I just didn't know where you'd gone, and I worried. Your belongings arrived. I had them brought up to your bedroom."

"Oh. Thank you." Her bottom lip went between her teeth. "It'll be nice to have my own clothing again."

I disliked the tension between us, the mountain of words left unsaid. An unspoken question hung there, one I couldn't answer.

Where do we go from here ?

Nothing had turned out the way I'd planned, not from the moment I'd met her in her rooms. Not from the second she'd smiled at me in that way only Rynn could. She was supposed to behave like a villain, a cruel, wretched thing that belonged in a prison, a woman deserving only of punishment for her crimes. She wasn't supposed to be sad and sorry. And what was I to do with her acts of penance?

I hadn't prepared for any of this at all.

Instead of a villain, she behaved like . . . Rynn. Just like the girl I knew. But the Rynn I knew was supposed to be an act, a ruse, at least in part .

"You could still wear my drawers, though, if you wanted," I told her.

At that, some of the light returned to her eyes. She smirked at me. "How magnanimous of you."

The rest of the week continued like that. I'd find Rynn doing some odd chores around the manor, the smudges under her eyes growing darker, fawn skin paler. Dressed in somber clothing, she'd eat with me when I asked her to do so, but otherwise she kept to herself.

She was doing all the punishing for me. And what was I supposed to do with all this love she claimed she still had for me . . . or was all of that reserved exclusively for the young man I'd once been?

Occasionally, she'd hole up in the small library with a copy of *Inferno* by Dante Alighieri, written in the original Italian. She was using it and her knowledge of Latin to teach herself a new language she was not yet fluent in.

Another week came and went, but I felt no closer to figuring out what was to become of us. We developed a new routine together, neither saying what the other had to be thinking.

What now? What now? What now?

Our mornings were spent outdoors, weather willing. She didn't dare ask for her boots again. After dinner she helped in the kitchens, hopeful that she'd catch a staff

member in there, but that wasn't ever going to happen. Not inside the house.

We always concluded our evenings together in the drawing room. I would read in the armchair. Sometimes we'd share a pipe while we listened to music on the gramophone. Rynn had strong opinions about what I played, and she voiced them boisterously to my amusement. Nothing too dull or dreary was allowed. It had to be upbeat and to her tastes. She adored pieces with complicated piano ensembles and a strong bass accompaniment. She'd make herself comfortable on the small sofa after picking the tune. Sometimes she'd sing softly to the music. Those moments were always my favorite. When she seemed to forget I was around at all, forget all that lay between us, and she'd sing.

Rynn still wasn't sleeping well. I often heard her crying in her bedroom through the walls, plagued by all the same demons I was. Her tears brought me back to the question left unspoken.

What now?

Did I still have it in me to punish her when she so clearly punished herself? I certainly couldn't just let her go. I'd never have the strength for that. We were trapped in a limbo of sorts, neither speaking of it. We simply existed around each other and that question.

That evening, she fell asleep on the sofa, trying to read, waiting on me to call it a night. Her book slipped from her fingers, and the spine clattered against the floor.

I planned to carry her up after I finished my chapter, but then Rynn began to stir. She rose up on unsteady legs, sleepwalking. I followed her, curious where she'd go, ready to steer her toward her bed and away from danger as needed. Eventually, she made it to the back staircase and then down the hall, headed for the parlor I kept sealed with locks.

“Rynn,” I said gently, hoping she’d come to at the sound of my voice.

Instead, she went and sniffed the empty vases that flanked the black door, like she was smelling flowers in her dreams.

Her nearness stirred up the spirits shut inside the parlor. They knocked against the door, the thuds hollow and quiet and as insistent as a heartbeat. The hall grew colder.

“Rynn,” I called a bit more forcefully. “Come here, sweetheart.”

She padded toward me then. Her eyes were open but vacant. I took her by the elbow and guided her up to her room. I helped her undress down to her chemise, then I tucked her into bed tightly under the covers to discourage further sleepwalking. I gathered an old antique bell that I kept in my office near the small library, and I hung it around her doorknob. It would wake her and me if she got up again.

* * *

The next morning, our walk was interrupted by a guest. The sound of horse hooves on gravel and rumbling carriage wheels disturbed the quiet of the woods around us.

“What’s that?” Rynn asked.

“I’m not sure.” I was as puzzled as she was because I didn’t get visitors, and I couldn’t see how they’d gotten through the locked gates.

We walked swiftly out of the trees, stopping before the water gardens. I recognized the carriage pulling up to the front beside the sandstone statues of rearing lions, and I grinned.

“Who is that?” Rynn demanded as a copper-haired woman of nineteen climbed down

from the carriage with the help of her driver.

“That’s Josephine. My sister,” I told her. No one visited me, it was true. My birth mother and sister usually left it to me to call upon them because I so frequently traveled between my properties that it was a bother to track me down, and I preferred things that way .

I turned to face Rynn. “If I asked you to stay right here until I sent her away, would you?” I pleaded.

Rynn scoffed. “Not a chance.”

“I was afraid of that.” Resigned to my fate, I stomped across the lawn and waved a half-hearted greeting to my beloved sister.

Rynn, to my surprise, came closer but kept at a respectful distance, stopping on the other side of the water gardens.

The horses whinnied and clomped their hooves uneasily. The driver and his partner battled to calm them.

“Lochlan,” Josephine cried, pulling me into a warm hug. Then she held me at a distance to inspect me. “Are you well? Why were the gates locked? We had to track down your groundskeeper to open them for us. Thankfully Mr. Willoughby recognized me.”

“I’m well,” I said gruffly, pleased to see her but flummoxed all the same. “To what emergency do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

She frowned at me, her golden brows pulling together. “My goodness, you’re already trying to get rid of me. That never happens.”

“It’s not that,” I said, catching her wrist and squeezing it fondly—though technically that truly was my purpose. “I just know that you wouldn’t have put yourself to so much trouble to track me down if it wasn’t important. I simply wish to save us both time.”

She squinted at me, unconvinced. Her blue eyes always saw too much. I admired that about her usually. Today, it was a most inconvenient quality. “In that case,” she said, then she took a steadying breath, and I braced myself for her news. “I came to tell you that I’m in love. ”

I lifted a brow at her archly. “Is that so? Who is she?”

She swatted my arm, a gentle admonishment. “Don’t ask it that way, like you’re about to interrogate me.”

“That’s exactly what I’m about to do.”

Her cheeks filled with a pearly smile, brightened by affection and joy. “Her name is Margaret. She’s the one , Loch.”

My eyes went wide. “You’ve never said that to me before.”

“I’ve never felt that before. This isn’t like the others. Those were silly things not worth dwelling on. Youthful indiscretions.” The wind picked up, and my sister held her small hat over her copper hair.

“Who is this woman?” I asked. “How long have you known her?”

Jo folded her arms defiantly across her chest. “Margaret is a young widow. We met at a house party. She’s the most agreeable woman in all the world, and that’s all you need to know until you meet her. I’ll not be questioned like I don’t know my own

business. Not by anyone. Not even by you!”

“It just all seems so sudden,” I said, scratching at my hair. “You’ve never even mentioned her before.”

“If you came around more, I would have,” she said tartly. “What are you so worried about, brother? Do you honestly think that I, of all people, would ever put myself in a position to be taken advantage of by anyone? Me?”

“I suppose not,” I grumbled.

“And you know how Mother worries needlessly,” she added pointedly. “I convinced you to invest the dowry you set aside for me at sixteen, and now I’m one of the wealthiest young women in Pennsylvania. I will never cease reminding you that it’s because of me you sold off those farms that were bringing you nothing but debt and bought the successful breweries instead, and still , I’m the one Mother wastes her time worrying about.”

“It’s a mother’s job to worry, I suppose,” I said consolingly. “And you are the baby of the family. I don’t think she’ll ever stop doing that, but of course you will have my full support with her, Josephine. If you say this woman is—”

“She is!” she said earnestly, coming up on her toes in her excitement. She grabbed my arm and squeezed it. “She truly is.”

I’d never seen her like this before. “Then Margaret must be the one,” I concluded.

Jo exhaled, and some of the tension in her shoulders eased out of her. “Thank you, brother. Now that’s settled,” she said, nudging me aside so she could draw my attention back across the water gardens, “who, pray tell, is she?” Her grin went wicked.

“ She ,” I drawled, “is none of your damn business. She is also the reason why visiting me unannounced as you have—”

“I tried to announce my visit! You never responded, you cad!” She swatted me on the arm again, and this time it smarted a little.

My cheeks warmed. I rubbed a hand across the back of my neck ruefully. “I’ve been traveling, and I’m a bit behind on my correspondence.” I left out all the coercion and pirating from my story because my little sister could be frightful when she was angry, and I didn’t dare draw out her wrath.

Jo folded her arms stubbornly. “Who is she? She’s beautiful.”

“She is . . . unfortunately,” I growled.

“What does that mean?” Jo’s sharp eyes narrowed.

“It means she’s no one you need to concern yourself with. She is here because there is history between us that needs resolving. She’s no business of yours because we have nothing but reasons to loathe one another.”

“Loathe? My, that’s a strong word.” Jo didn’t sound as if she believed me at all. “Goodness, she’s extremely lovely, though. Have you seen her properly? If I loathed a woman who looked like her . . . well, I probably don’t need to tell you what I’d do with all that.”

“Of course I’ve seen her. And no. Please, baby sister, do not tell me what you would do. I would have to set my ears on fire.”

“So lovely,” she purred.

“You found ‘the one,’” I reminded her sharply. “You’re supposed to be smitten with Margaret.”

Jo fanned herself playfully. “I’m suddenly feeling a little less smitten.”

“Stop staring at her like that, will you?” I grumped. I knew she was having me on, but it bothered me anyway. “She’s going to notice.”

Her face split in a mocking grin. “I’m only teasing you. I just wanted to see what you’d do. Test a theory, if you will, since I knew you’d avoid answering my questions. Must you be so secretive all the time?”

“What theory?” I muttered.

“I won’t trespass upon you further. I’ll leave you alone to figure out this history business,” she said, shuffling back toward her carriage, “but word to the wise, brother: stop telling yourself you loathe her. Clearly you don’t. And—”

“I didn’t ask for your advice. I’m the older sibling. I give the unwanted guidance, not you.”

“—start acting like you love her. Because clearly you do,” she said, continuing as though I’d never spoken at all. “You’ll get much further with her behaving that way—like a fool in love. And write me back, you rude man! Or I’ll drop in unannounced again soon, and you won’t be able to usher me out quickly next time. I’ll stay a whole week just to spite you!”

Her unwelcome advice was simple, and yet it hit me harder than it should have. I saw the carriage off with promises that I would write soon, then I returned to Rynn and our walk. I tried to shake Josephine’s guidance out of my mind, but it hung there stubbornly. A tiny voice of reason amongst the dark, dank parts of me. The sweeter

bits of my person, which I thought had been burned out long ago, rejoiced.

* * *

Three days later, Rynn cleared the table after breakfast, carting the dishes into the kitchen. More penance, she said. It was taking her an inordinately long time to return to me, so I went looking for her.

I found her standing near the cabinetry in the kitchen, staring at the cookstove.

“Rynn?”

She blinked at the handle on the cast iron door, where a floral kitchen towel was tied.

I tried again to get her attention, placing a hand on her shoulder. Rynn turned to me then with a faraway look in her eyes like she’d only just realized I was there.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

She pointed to the towel. “Do you remember the old cook, Martha? I served under her.”

I nodded. “I remember her.”

She squinted at the offending towel. “Martha was getting on in years and she was always forgetting where she set her towel down. When the cookstove had cooled, she’d tie it to the handle in a loose knot just like that to keep herself from walking off with it again and losing another one before she needed it next.”

“All right,” I said, letting her work through her own thoughts.

“Just now, I carried the plates out to scrape them clean, but by the time I was half done and returned for the rest, the others were . . . well, they were already spotless and put away. The sink by the back door is wet. It’s muggy in there like the water heater has been working hard—but I hadn’t turned the taps on yet, Loch! Then I found the towel tied there, even though I’m sure it was folded up on the table before I went out the back.”

She stared at me imploringly, but I offered nothing in response.

“And there’s no one here ,” she stressed. “I checked. And this is not the first time something like this has happened. How do I keep missing your staff? Constantly, it’s like they just left a room I was in, but I can’t find anyone. Unless they’re quiet as mice, impossibly quick, and hiding from me on purpose!”

“Hm,” I said noncommittally. I had an answer for her, but of course it wasn’t one she would like. She didn’t believe in ghosts.

Her throat bobbed. “And I just keep seeing traces of Martha all over this kitchen. That oyster stew, it was her recipe. The lamb, too. This cabinet is organized exactly the way she preferred . . . But she’s much too old now to be serving in a kitchen, surely. Did you hire a relative or someone who worked under her? Someone especially gifted at hide-and-seek? ”

“No. Martha died some time back. About eleven years ago now,” I explained.

“Oh,” Rynn said softly. And then her eyes rounded in horror. “Oh!”

She glanced between me and the towel on the stove handle.

The air warmed around us, and a breeze that couldn’t be a breeze—the windows were shut—sent the towel swaying against the iron door. Rynn gasped and leapt back from

it.

“They like it when you say their names, but they don’t like it when you try to stare at them too long,” I told her gently, studying her reactions, worried about pushing her too hard. It hadn’t been an easy thing for me to comprehend either. When I’d attempted the straightforward approach with her in the past, she’d rejected it. “I don’t always recognize them, but the ones tethered to me, the ones I do know, they seem to like it when I speak to them . . .”

I let the words trail away as her face drained of color.

“Why don’t we go for our morning walk,” I suggested. “You look like you could use the fresh air.”

She stepped away from me, pulling her hands in to wring her fingers together. “I . . . No, thank you . . . not this time.”

Rynn exited the room briskly.

* * *

She avoided me the rest of the day. That night, I awoke to screams.

The screams were usually mine. I shouted myself awake at least weekly, but this time it was coming from outside my room.

“Rynn,” I breathed, and I leapt from my bed .

I rushed to her, shoving through the doors, leaving them open at my back. Rynn tossed in her blankets, spine arched, screaming. The glow from the lantern on her end table cast an ominous shadow of her body contorting onto the ceiling. Palpable pain

reverberated through her muffled cries and sent my stomach into a tumble.

I had to remind myself not to wake her suddenly. It was frightening to be woken like that. We'd been pulling each other from this state since we were young. I knew better.

I crawled into bed with her and hugged her thrashing body against my chest. Pushing fingers through her hair, I made soothing noises in her ear.

"Everything's all right, Rynn," I whispered. "Hush now. Whatever you're seeing, it's gone. It's done. It's not here."

"The baron," she gasped, "he locked me up in the attic, and then I heard those horrible footsteps and a heart beating in my ears!"

"He's gone. He's not here," I told her, pressing a kiss to the side of her head. Her skin tasted of salt and spicy sweat.

"You didn't know where I was." Her chest heaved. I held her under her arm, my palm pressed over her heart. The organ sped against my hand, fluttering as fast as hummingbird wings. "He'd forgotten about me again, and you didn't know I was in the attic. You didn't know to bring me food and water. And there were angry voices in the dark. His voice! He called me terrible names, Loch."

"He's gone," I soothed. "He's dead, and he's never coming back."

Some of the tension relaxed out of her. "He's really dead?"

"Very much so."

"You're certain?"

“I was there when he died. I’m certain.” I pressed closer to her, molding my body to hers, nestling her against my chest. “He’s been gone nearly two decades now. He’s not ever going to hurt you again, Rynn.”

Her ragged breathing blew against her pillow. She swallowed. “You were there?”

“I was.”

Gulping in air, she wrapped her arms around mine. “Did you kill him?” She murmured the question so quietly I almost didn’t hear her.

And when I did understand, when what she was asking sunk into me deep, her words hung there heavy and dark. Her fingers gripped my wrist. She worked her thumb gently down my racing pulse. I sensed no judgement in the inquiry, no shock or horror in her soothing touches. Just that one pressing question.

I rested my chin in her hair. “I murdered him in the mire just outside the house in Light Lily. Killed him with the same two hands I’m holding you with now. It was his fault I’d lost you, and I knew it.”

I’d thought he’d killed her. I’d thought he’d taken her from me for good. Forevermore.

“Good,” she said, and her voice cracked. Her body loosened further, going lax in my arms. “That’s real good, Loch.”

“Mother used to get confused and go wandering. Do you remember?” I felt her hair tickle my chin as she nodded. “I told him she was missing, and he rushed out to go looking for her. I followed him, surprised him, and strangled him until his legs stopped kicking.”

She coughed out a little sob, like it had caught in her throat. I knew without her saying so that the sob was for me, for the hard and horrible thing I'd had to do. Not because I'd shocked or upset her. I sensed it in her comforting touches, in her need to reassure me even as her heart raced faster under my palm.

Once I'd started, the words poured from me freely. "I covered his body in lilacs, wicker, straw, and whatever I had been able to fit in my pockets. And I left his corpse as a gift to the weaver women under a willow tree. He was gone by the next morning. No trace of him. When he never came home, everyone assumed he must have stumbled into a sinking spot in the marsh."

"What happened after that?"

"Then the ghosts came," I said, voice raspy. "Or, they were always there, I should say, filling up the dark places. But I was sure of them now. I could hear them all the time and see them even more clearly—not just when I was trapped in the shadows. I could feel them more crisply, too. They punish me and rightly so. They scream at me and keep me awake. They are my comeuppance. My penance."

"If we left this house," she said, sounding hopeful, "if I took you someplace else, would the spirits leave you alone?"

"For a short time. I've tried. I own several properties, but they always find me again eventually. It's not the house that's haunted, Rynn. It's me. I'm haunted. Because of what I did to Pa."

"I think I might be haunted too," Rynn sniffled. "I know I should be sorry for the part I played in his death, but—"

"Not for that," I told her. "There are many things I'll let you be sorry for. Not him being dead. He doesn't deserve it."

The next quiet that fell between us was thick and sticky with tension, like I'd sunk into a vat of pine sap. I waited in earnest for her to fill the silence, could almost hear her thoughts churning to get out.

“Are you ever going to forgive me?” she asked, her voice so soft it was difficult to hear her over the rush of my pulse. “For the rest of it? Are you ever going to forgive me for leaving you?”

I didn't have an answer for her, so I didn't give her one. I stayed with her that night until her breathing evened and she fell asleep.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:49 am

Rynn Mavis

The next week brought lots of rain. I loved watching it storm from my big cozy window seat, a book in my hands and a warm blanket over my lap. Sometimes Lochlan joined me with tea and coffee and cakes.

We didn't talk much, just watched from my window as the sky bathed the earth.

When the rains finally stopped, we returned to our walking ritual. Two days later, after we concluded our morning routine, I set off looking for where Lochlan was hiding my savings—or so I told myself. Eventually, I wound up in the attic and could no longer pretend that my cash was what interested me most.

I wasn't certain I even wanted my savings anymore. Dreams of retirement and a new life had lost their glimmer the moment I learned who Finley truly was.

I had to know more about her, the woman Lochlan had loved and lost. When I tried to ask him questions during our walks, he laughed at me and quipped about my jealousy. Curiosity burned through me each time he evaded the inquiry. I needed something more. A picture. A name. Had she given him children? Had she been educated? Had they traveled? What had she been like? What had their life together been like?

Why'd she leave him before she died?

How had she died?

She'd gotten to live the life I hadn't, and I was damn near obsessed with learning more about what I'd missed. It was self-torture. In this I was a masochist, chasing my own demise. I knew it, but it didn't make it any easier to stop myself.

My wandering brought me down to the first floor, just past the foyer where the main stairs divided around the locked central room, the one I'd spotted the first time I'd been shown the house.

Lochlan joined me there. He leaned against the banister, observing my progress with amusement.

"Why is this door locked, too?" I tried unsuccessfully to peek through the keyhole in the large set of double doors. "Are there scary ghosts in there as well?"

A secret smile lit up his face. "No scary ones. Granted, there are ghosts everywhere."

"Then can I go in?"

He shrugged his shoulders, pushing off the wall. "You can certainly try," he said, lumbering down the hall toward the drawing room.

That sounded an awful lot like a challenge. A challenge I immediately accepted. I went at the lock with a kitchen knife and a hat pin, but the tumblers were too advanced and my efforts were in vain. I tried every trick in my arsenal, but I didn't have the right tools.

I went on a hunt to find better equipment, but my search took me to a dark set of steps that led into a cellar or cold room of some kind, not far from the kitchen. I fetched a lantern so I could have a better look. The floors and walls were made of stone. The air cooled as I descended the stairs.

My heart leapt up into my throat when I reached the bottom.

Two cells sat side by side with rolling doors sealed shut by fat metal locks. The bars stretched from floor to ceiling. Cobwebs nestled in the corners. Time seemed to stop as I stood there, jaw slack, staring at that small prison. The rush of blood was loud in my ears.

Footsteps on the stairs pulled me out of my stupor.

“What are you doing down here?” Lochlan asked, hefting a large candle to light his way.

Hands shaking, I pointed at the prison. “What in the nine circles of hell is that?”

“Ah.” Lochlan rubbed at his stubble and had the decency to look sheepish. “When I bought this property, there was a smaller manor already on it. I built up from there. It had belonged to a warden, and this was where he kept prisoners waiting on a marshal to come and claim them.”

“Why is it still here?” I demanded, voice strained. His explanation did nothing to calm the prickle of fear growing in my chest or the unease churning in my belly. The smell of rust and mold thickened in my nose.

He met my imploring gaze with a sigh. “It was just an oversight at first. Then there was a time when I thought I wanted to see you behind bars,” he confessed .

“My God, Loch! But it’s much too dark down here!”

He lit the gas scone over his shoulder with the candle, and the stone hall illuminated dully. The cells looked even shabbier in the ochre glow. This was a house that wanted to be lived in, but down here was different. Down here there was nothing but sullen

quiet and the salty scent of iron that reminded me too much of tears.

“I would never leave you in the dark, Rynn,” he said, “but at one time my heart desired only revenge on the villain who’d wronged me, and I wanted to put you in a prison—a proper one.”

“How can you say that?” I glared at him. “How could you even think it?”

He stood stonily, letting candlewax drip over his fingers. “It’s not such a leap to make. The last twenty years have been a torment no circle in hell could ever match.”

“The last twenty years have been a torment for me, too,” I fired back. “I wasn’t dogged by spirits the way you are, but the ghost of you never let me rest. The ghost of the terrible thing I’d done haunts me still.”

He went quiet, his lips pressed into a thin line. “You earned those ghosts the same way I earned mine.”

“How many times did I beg you to run away with me?” The words trembled leaving my lips. “How many times did you insist that we stay, that we’d never make it on our own?”

“I feared what would happen to us. Clearly, I was wrong to be afraid. You behave as though you lived the life you always wanted, one of reckless freedom and—”

“Is that what you think?” My sneer was full of scorn. “That my life has been wonderful without you? Would you have me list out my woes instead? If I told you how cold and empty and frightening the years without you have been, would that assuage you even a little? What if I told you how lonely I’ve been, how lost? How often I’ve been uncertain I’d see tomorrow? How I’ve wished and prayed, begging and pleading with God or the Fates or whoever out there is listening that I could go

back to that night and make you leave with me!”

“I’m not trying to start a battle with you over who has suffered more,” he said, his tone gentling. “I meant only to explain why my mind went to this prison. You stole from me. You set me up for this.” He pointed at his scars.

“You stole from me ,” I fired back. “You drugged me. Tricked me. Forced me here!”

Lochlan stiffened. His nostrils flared and his eyes darkened. “I did, didn’t I? Why don’t you give me back what you took first, since you know damn well that ring meant a great deal to me, and I’ll give you back what I stole, since it means so much to you.”

My fingers tightened around the lantern handle, metal digging into my skin. “I can’t do that.”

“Ah, I see,” he said coldly. “You hocked it as soon as you could.”

“I didn’t hock it,” I ground out. It was with great restraint that I resisted kicking him in the shins for thinking so poorly of me, no matter how I deserved it. “Asking me to marry you meant the world to me. That ring meant the world to me, too.”

“I still remember how you took from everyone after the slightest irritation,” he said, pressing on like he wasn’t hearing me at all. “But you never stole from me. I used to think it meant something.”

“It did!”

“But then you went and took the only possession I cared about. The only proof I had that I’d once had a father who loved me—who could stand the sight of me. My only belonging that was truly mine and not—”

“I was young and foolish!” I fired back. “It shouldn’t have happened, but I fail to see how holding on to your anger for twenty years fixes anything at all! I certainly don’t see how stuffing me in there, even just in your mind, would change anything! It wouldn’t get you your ring back! It won’t heal your scars or chase the ghosts away! It won’t return our lost years together!”

He shook candle wax off his fingers, then squeezed the bridge of his nose. “I wish you’d stop saying you were ‘young’ like it changes anything.”

“Well, it should change something!” I snapped, and my words echoed off the damp stones. “That’s not an excuse you can use now! You’re a grown man!”

“If you weren’t going to marry me, then you had no right to take it,” he growled.

“I know!”

“You could have turned me down!”

“I didn’t want to turn you down!” I roared. “I wanted to wear your ring on my finger every day for the rest of my life, but I knew it wasn’t mine.”

“Then why’d you steal it?” he shouted.

“Because I couldn’t stand the thought of any other woman having it!” I shouted back, gesturing so passionately I nearly sent the lantern’s glass chimney toppling. “And yes, I know how dreadful that makes me. I know I’m the serpent here, but I’m not alone in that, you fucking pirate! Neither of us are innocent.”

“What’d you do with it?” he rumbled .

Tired of this conversation, I attempted to shove past him. He pulled me to a halt, his

large hand swallowing up my shoulder. It was flustering how big he was. I'd stood a chance when we were young but not now.

"Where is it, Rynn? I know it wasn't in your safe. If it was truly something meaningful to you, then what'd you do with it?"

"I buried it."

He scoffed, and the sound shot through me like an arrow. He could have slapped me, and that would have hurt less. "A likely story. Nearly impossible to prove, too."

I shook his hand off. "I'm not listening to this. If you're not even going to believe me anyway . . ."

"I need to know," he said quietly. His sad eyes darkened by shadows pleaded with me. "What'd you do with the ring?"

I bit my lip to keep it from trembling. My throat burned, and it took a full minute for me to recover before I could answer him. "I wrapped it up in the beautiful letters you used to write me, and I buried it at the covered bridge in Light Lily. That's why I can't stand to go there. Being near it again, being back in that place where I behaved so wickedly . . . I just can't . . ."

He stared at me for a long time, like a math equation had appeared on my forehead and he was trying to puzzle it out. "Why there?"

"That's how far I got before I knew I would never be able to look at any of it again. Not without breaking my heart all over. It felt like an anvil in my pocket while I was running away. I had to get rid of all of it."

"You had to get rid of the thing I prized the very most? The only piece of my blood

family I had then?” His tawny eyes went glassy. “You could have sent it back to me. You have no idea how much pain you would have spared me over the years if you’d done me that small courtesy.”

“Leave it alone, Loch,” I begged, feeling like he’d kicked me in the stomach. “My heart was broken when you wouldn’t run away with me, when you chose to be a good son over protecting us. Then you went and stole everything from me too, including my freedom, before you bothered to tell me who you were!”

He exhaled sharply, and the candle flame guttered before righting again. “If I gave you back your freedom, what would you do with it?”

The loaded question weighed on me so heavily I felt like I was being flattened into the ground. “I don’t even know anymore.”

I wanted to make right all of the horrible things I’d done to him, but I was growing more and more worried that such a thing wasn’t possible. Whatever remained of him, I would always love him. But what if I couldn’t ever get him back? Not fully. What if I couldn’t save him from the pain I’d caused?

I had another question of my own, but I was frightened of the answer. More stubborn than scared, I dared to ask anyway. “Does any part of you still want to see me in that cell?”

“Yes,” he said, swift and sure and without a moment’s hesitation.

My heart dropped, my spirits with it. I lowered the lantern until the light shined across the stone floor, igniting the polish of his boots. “Say what you want about what I did, but by your own logic, you belong in that cell right next to me.”

“I’m already there, Rynn,” he said somberly, then he turned on his heels and trudged

back up the stairs, candlelight flickering.

* * *

That night, I dreamt about iron cells and that horrid house in the mire with the steep gables and the lattices full of winding ivy. I dreamt about Lochlan.

I hadn't known the proper way to keep wounds clean back then. Washing wasn't done as thoroughly as it was later in my life. I was only twelve, and that foul baron had taken a switch to Lochlan's back.

"A good thrashing builds character ." That had been the baron's reasoning. He opened up his son's back, then sent him to work with the pigs.

"I don't feel good, Rynn," Lochlan told me days later, nearly delirious with fever.

I'd heard Cook whispering with the maid. If he didn't pull through, he'd be dead by the week's end.

I sang him to sleep so he wouldn't fret while I was gone. I was terrified of the fading light outside, but I was even more afraid of losing Lochlan. I took a lantern that was nearly too big for me to carry and went in search of leeches. Thankfully, they were plentiful in the swamps. I put them on his wounds, let them get fat sucking the pus and poison out of his torn skin.

"You'd better not die, Loch," I whispered to the sleeping boy I loved more than life. "You'd just better not. If that horrid baron killed you, I'm going to kill him back. I'll poison his soup."

Lochlan had stirred then as I'd hoped he would, and my young heart jolted. "Don't kill my pa ," he said drowsily.

“You just better not die then, hadn’t you? Don’t you leave me here all alone,” I said.

He promised he wouldn’t, and he kept that promise. Loch always kept his word. I wasn’t so good at that, though.

* * *

The next week crawled by. I had nightmares most nights, dreams fed by more than my dark past. The stress of wondering how things would end between Lochlan and I, the anxiety of trying to figure out what I wanted from life now that I had him back, kept me restless. But Lochlan always came to pull me out of the worst of them. Sometimes I woke up in the hallway with him beside me, guiding me back into my bedroom.

What should I do now? Did I even want to escape Nightingale House anymore? What I truly craved was a clear path toward fixing things, a solution that would repair what I’d broken, but what if that didn’t exist?

And if it didn’t exist, shouldn’t I try to leave here again?

I no longer cared about retiring. One glimpse at Lochlan’s horrible scars and I knew I didn’t deserve such tranquility.

“Does it ever get easier to live here?” I asked him. I’d woken up in his bed with no memory of how I’d gotten there.

It was disorienting, but his nearness steadied me. We lay facing each other, sharing the same pillow.

“It does,” he promised drowsily, eyes shut. “It’s never perfect, but it gets easier.”

I wanted to believe him, but I wasn't convinced. Within those walls, it felt like I'd never be cheerful again. Not completely. I'd always think of my past. I'd always know what I'd done. Guilt was the monster riding around on my back, reminding me it was there with its sharp talons every moment I dared to distract myself .

Exhausted by a bad dream of that horrid house in the mire, I just didn't go back to sleep. Lochlan tried to coax me into it, but I refused to listen. I needed a break from our history. I found something to read instead.

After dinner the following evening, I returned to my room in a sleep-deprived fog. The scent of roses and talcum powder hung in the air. The combination reminded me of the old maid who'd once served Lochlan's mother. Her name was Gertrude. I'd thought of her often while I spent time in my bedroom. I saw her in the crisp way my clothing was folded, in the smell of sorrel salt on the linens, and in the neat manner in which my boxes of books had been stacked.

I wondered if it was Gertrude who haunted this space, who kept refilling the vase on the fireplace mantel with beautiful roses. She had loved flowers. Collecting bouquets from the gardens had been her favorite chore.

Seated at the vanity, I worked a wooden comb through my curls, and I felt a breeze at my back that couldn't be a breeze. The windows were shut. Something touched me, like the thinnest veil brushing over my back.

"Gertrude?" I whispered. "Is that you?"

The vanity mirror tipped forward an inch, and I jumped in my seat. The room went cold, and the glass fogged up. That horrid thump like a heavy heartbeat followed, and I grit my teeth against the tightening sensation in my chest.

"Why do you stay here, Gertrude?" I asked somberly. All her life she'd served that

horrible baron. Surely, she didn't want to spend her eternity doing more of the same. "Wouldn't you rather go on? Be with your own family? Have peace and rest?"

The thumping stopped. A shadowy figure appeared in the reflective glass. I turned to find the shade hovering near the corner of my bed. I squinted, trying to make sense of the darkness. The subtle lines in the shadows made a shape I couldn't comprehend. They swirled like smoke.

"Gertrude?" I muttered.

The shadow charged at me. An icy weight, a force unlike any I'd ever felt before, gripped my wrist in a band as solid and heavy as an iron shackle.

"Stop!" I begged. I tried to pull away and couldn't. My arms and legs went inert on the seat cushion. "Please stop!" I shouted as shadows bathed me, blocking out the precious light.

The room went cold enough to turn my breath into mist. My legs came back to me then, numb and tingling. I lurched to my feet, leaping away from the darkness. Cradling my injured wrist to my chest, I scrambled for the door.

In the hall, I stepped in a puddle that soaked through my stockings. Wet footprints led off in the direction of the lavatory. Another figure stood there shading the corridor.

I ran from the shadows, screaming. Tripping over my own feet, I caught myself on the railing at the stairs. The skin at my wrist was red and puffy where the spirit had grabbed me. A knocking sound echoed when I hit the bottom of the staircase, an incessant thump coming from that black mystery door full of locks.

My next scream caught in my throat. The thuds resounded, urgent fists striking the wood. I ran for the kitchen, sprinting as fast as my legs would carry me from the

voices at my back and the heavy footsteps that pursued me.

I made it out onto the grass, when the shadows caught up to me. Strong arms encircled my waist and spun me about, back toward the house. I fought and kicked and cursed.

“Let me go! By God, you let me go!” I turned on the figure and struck out at it rapidly, fingers curled like claws.

“Rynn! Rynn it’s me!” the figure said.

It was a while before I realized my nails were digging into fabric and flesh, not an ethereal spirit.

Lost, I blinked up at Lochlan.

“I . . . the ghosts . . . Gertrude . . .” Words failed me. “They were everywhere!”

Dressed in a dark housecoat, Lochlan wrapped an arm around my shoulder and pressed me against his side. I accepted his comfort for a moment, then he tried to guide me back toward the house, and I dug my heels in.

“Absolutely not,” I groaned. “I’m not going back in there!”

“You can’t stay out here, hellcat. It’ll be full dark soon.”

“Oh yes I can!” Every instinct in my body was screaming at me to run. Get away! Flee and never stop running.

I kicked and carried on, but he dragged me inside anyway, the bastard.

Lochlan hefted me up the back stairs, then wrestled me into my room. I put up one hell of a fight, even managed to pull away once, but he won in the end. He picked me up off my feet and tossed me onto the bed. He used his strength to pin me to the mattress on my stomach. Angry, violent heat turned me molten. I bucked and cursed at him, but he sat on me anyway.

“I hate it when you do that,” I hissed, cheek pressed to the bed linens.

“Oh, I know you do,” he said drolly. “But you still have that same spitfire temper you had as a girl, and I don’t want to have the rest of my face scratched off. So I’ll take your wrath for the sake of my remaining skin that isn’t already scarred.”

The reminder of his scars triggered my guilt, but even that monster felt dull and distant, too far away to reach me fully. My rage was like a heavy, prickly blanket that made me hot and irritable and dulled everything else.

“If you don’t want me to scratch you more, then get off !” I clawed at the bedding beneath me.

I continued to fight the cushions, trying to reach him until I exhausted myself. As the desire for violence leaked from my body, the pressure of his weight changed from something aggravating and daunting to something solid and settling. He put a hand on the back of my neck and squeezed, and the pressure was perfect.

He kneaded the tense muscles at my neck until they loosened. Then the guilt monster returned in full force. Its weight was an anvil, pressing me from all sides.

“I can’t stay here anymore,” I moaned. The molten heat inside of me cooled, and my chin trembled. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. We can’t. I want us to go!”

“Yes, you can, hellcat,” he said sadly, brushing fingers through my curls, moving the

tresses out of my face. He rubbed my shoulders with his big hands, and something in my chest gave way a little. “Just give it a minute. You’ll feel better again soon.”

His gentle tone eased the fight from my body.

Lochlan climbed off me to gather supplies from my dresser. He used thick woolen stockings to secure my hands, and I was too spent to battle him further. Another set was used to tie my ankles to the bedpost.

“You’re safe now. Stay put,” he said, then he left me.

I listened for that haunting thump the ghosts made when they were near, but I felt nothing in the room with me. Just the monster on my back.

When he returned, I was hopeful that he’d let me go like he usually did. I wanted to stew in peace. Perched at the foot of the bed, he rolled out a leather pouch that contained a grooming kit, ignoring how I scowled at him. It didn’t look like he intended to untie me at all.

“Is this still necessary?” I demanded, holding up my bound hands.

Lochlan’s tawny eyes narrowed to dagger points. His face was so full of red marks, he looked like he’d lost a fight with an angry bobcat.

“Yes,” he drawled, “it’s necessary.”

He removed a pewter nail file from the kit. Taking my hand in his, he turned it over, pressing his thumb into my palm gently until I opened my hand to him. With care, he worked the course metal gently across my nails one at a time, rubbing the oval ends down to just below the pads of my fingers.

I grumbled at him as he worked, but he continued to ignore me. The mark Gertrude had left on my wrist was starting to fade, but the sting of it lingered.

Inspecting the strange injury, he ran his thumb over what remained of it. “This shouldn’t leave a burn. It’s already starting to disappear.”

“Gertrude attacked me,” I said. “I didn’t mean to upset her . . . She’d surprised me. I was just trying to make sense of what I was looking at.”

“They don’t like it when the living stare through them,” he reminded me, removing the lid on a jar of clear balm that smelled like herbs. He rubbed the mixture into the irritated skin of my wrist just under the knotted stocking. “I don’t think they like anything that reminds them they’re different now. But don’t fret. Grabbing you hurts them as much as it hurts you. It’s a rare angry spirit that would dare it.”

I remembered the strange marks on his body, the blotchy burns. “They hurt you sometimes,” I said solemnly.

“Not anymore. I know how to handle them now, and I know not to stare,” he said. “Now they’re an annoyance. Not a threat. Like house mice, most of the time.”

“I don’t like that they hurt you.” I ground my teeth. It was one thing if I scratched him, but no one else had better. “They’re lucky they’re dead.”

Lochlan chuckled. “You’d like to avenge me, eh?”

“I would,” I grumbled. “They’d best keep their hands to themselves from now on, if touching me hurts them, too. Let that be a warning to any ghost listening. If you grab Loch, I’ll touch you all over!”

A laugh rumbled out of his chest. I didn’t feel Gertrude’s presence in the room at all.

Her talc scent was gone. The vase was empty of flowers.

“She took the roses,” I said.

Lochlan finished filing down my thumbnail, then he glanced over his shoulder at the fireplace. “What roses . . . ? Ah yes. I used to see them around the house sometimes as well.”

I jerked my hand out of his, repressing a shiver. “What do you mean sometimes ? Don’t say it like that.”

“How am I supposed to say it?” He took my hand back, prying open my fingers and resuming his work.

“Goodness’ sake. Flowers are either there or they’re not!”

“Well, in this house, they’re both,” he said ominously.

Gooseflesh broke out across my skin.

Lochlan left briefly to fetch a fingerbowl full of warm water. After he was satisfied that my nails were filed down to a harmless length, properly shaped, and picked clean, he washed my hands in the soapy water. Then he used an ivory tool from his kit to carefully push back my cuticles. With a block, he buffed my nails to a high shine and finished it all off by rubbing almond oil into my skin.

“I was just trying to help you, you know,” he said gently, eyes averted. “You were screaming.”

Guilt stirred in my belly. The monster on my back dug in its cruel talons a little deeper. “I realize that now . . . I’m sorry I scratched you all up. I didn’t know you

were you. I thought you were a ghost.”

“And then when you did realize I was me, what was all that about?” he pried.

I used my shoulder to rub the bottom of my chin. My skin had gone itchy. “I panicked and felt like I needed to flee, but you wouldn’t let me. I’m done with that now though. You can untie me.”

He didn’t untie me.

Strands of walnut hair fell across his lashes while he gave each one of my fingers his undivided attention. If my wrists hadn’t been tied together, I would have pushed those glossy strands behind his ears so I could study him better.

I searched for more signs of the young man I once knew. His beard was gone, strong jaw cleanshaven. Muscles filled out his waistcoat. He had charming crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes, and his skin was a ruddier gold down his nose and across his cheeks where the sun had touched him.

“You look so different now,” I said. “I still have to remind myself that Finley and Lochlan aren’t two completely different people.”

Lips pursed, he rubbed more almond oil into the calluses of my right palm, pressing with his thumbs in a way that made muscles low in my belly clench. “I suppose they are different people in a way.”

“I don’t want that to be true,” I said solemnly.

“Why not?” Studying my hands, a furrow deepened between his brows.

“It would break my heart if you weren’t my Lochlan anymore,” I said quietly. “I

don't want you to be so different that he's all gone."

"Hm." He let my hands go, and they dropped into my lap, suddenly heavy.

If he was gone, that was my fault. I'd done this to him. Though it hadn't been my intention, I'd put those scars on his body. I'd made him kill his pa. I'd brought on the ghosts that haunted his heart. I'd put the sadness in him.

But I couldn't believe all was lost. Lochlan was in there still. I saw him sometimes. He was in his smile. I heard him in his laugh, felt him in his gentleness, found him when his gilded brown eyes went soft. He was hiding somewhere just behind all that melancholy and darkness. I'd give anything to reach deep enough inside him so I could pull him back out. Every dollar of my life's savings. Every precious book. Every stitch of clothing. Every drop of blood in my veins, every gasp in my lungs. Every beat of my heart. I'd trade it all for him.

"I'm sorry," I told him again, this time with great feeling. I meant my words from the bottom of my heart. It wasn't just the scratches I was sorry for. He knew what I meant—I could see it in his eyes, the subtle shift from Finley the pirate back to Lochlan again. "I'll never stop being sorry."

Whatever remained of Lochlan, I'd find it and cherish it. A smile. A laugh. A look. Those were my tokens .

Eventually, he untied my hands and ankles. I opened the jar he had used to treat my injury and sniffed the herbs inside. He let me rub the balm into the worst of his scratch marks, smearing it across his sun-warmed skin with the pad of my thumb.

He stared into my eyes as I did so, like he was trying to read something in them.

"Goodnight, Rynn," he said when I'd finished.

I screwed the lid back onto the jar and returned it to him. “Sweet dreams.”

He packed the supplies back into the kit, then tucked it under his arm. He made it as far as the door before I stopped him.

“Loch?” I didn’t want him to go. Not yet. I hated seeing the back of him.

He turned to look at me, the flecks of bronze in his striking eyes catching in the lantern light. “What is it?”

I swallowed hard. “Will you please stay with me tonight?”

“Stay . . . to sleep?” he asked cautiously. He was quick to comfort me when I had bad dreams, but he hadn’t tried to be with me, hadn’t tried to kiss me or touch me. Not since I learned who he really was.

“Not to sleep.”

His brow wrinkled and then softened again as the depth of my request settled over him. “Sweetheart,” he cooed, “that’s such a bad idea.”

“I know, I know,” I groaned at the ceiling, anticipating his reluctance. I’d wronged him deeply, and he didn’t trust me. But I wanted him to. “Will you please do it anyway? It’s only that I miss my Loch dreadfully. Don’t go.”

He stood there, shifting his weight, chewing on his cheek. Then his gaze crawled over me and his pupils expanded. “How am I supposed to say no to you? Ever? Have you seen you? Do you have any concept what you look like right now?”

My trembling lips managed a small smile. “You’re not supposed to say no to me.”

He set down his kit and supplies on the dresser, then he padded over to my side of the bed. “I know how you like it when I treat you roughly, but your Loch would want to do things very differently.”

A knot of emotion tightened my throat. “I love that about him.”

“He isn’t capable of fucking you just for fun. He’d want to make love to you properly.”

My chin dipped. “I know,” I whispered. “That’s what I want, too.”

His hands came up to cup both sides of my face, capturing my gaze with his. “Do you mean that, Rynn?”

I covered his fingers with mine, hoping he felt my earnestness in the touch. “Of course I do.”

“No tricks?”

“No tricks,” I vowed.

He undressed down to his drawers. I was already in my underthings, so I waited, leaning my weight back against the pillows, enjoying the view. Then Lochlan tossed aside the heavy blankets and crawled under the sheet.

I laughed when he pulled the bedding up over his head. “What are you doing?”

In answer, he caught me around the ankles. I yelped in surprise when he dragged me under. With the linen tented above us, he covered my body with his. I felt his mirth reverberating through my chest .

“I want you all to myself,” he explained. “But is it too dark under here?”

I shook my head. “It’s perfect.”

Gaslight turned the white sheets an amber color, and his weight on top of me made me feel even braver than usual. I reached over his shoulder to stroke the linen, remembering how we’d hidden like this when we were young to muffle the sounds of our laughter.

Then he kissed me, and his kisses felt like renewal, like a hard rain after a long drought. His lips were hot and giving. His tongue teased mine. He rubbed his growing erection against the cradle of my thighs. I lifted my hips to meet his careful thrusts over the thin clothing that separated us. Soon we were both panting.

“Keep looking at me,” he rasped as he shucked his underclothes.

I felt captured by him; I couldn’t turn away from him even if I wanted to. Pushing up the hem of my chemise, he entered me slowly, stretching me inch by inch. Overcome by the intensity of his attention and that delicious feeling of fullness, my gaze slid shut.

“Rynn, show me your eyes,” he purred.

My lashes fluttered back open. A whimper slipped past my lips when he was fully seated. The intimacy of his gaze holding mine had muscles in my belly quivering. The pulse in my thighs jumped.

Slow and deep, he made love to me. He smelled like the almond lotion he’d rubbed tenderly into my skin. His hair was silk between my fingers. I wrapped my legs around his waist and enjoyed the rock of our bodies as his hips met mine.

“Can you come for me, sweetheart?” he asked .

I laced my arms around his neck and tugged him down so I could kiss him. His stubble tickled my chin.

“I don’t think I can tonight, but I don’t want to stop,” I said against his lips, then I peppered his jaw in small kisses. He tipped his head back, and I loved on his throat and the curve of his shoulder, holding him to me. I stroked my hands over his chest and down his arms. My fingers dug into the muscles of his back, brushing over his scars.

With one of his big hands, he cupped my side and helped me find a rhythm I liked best. I ground against him until my hips were bucking with a mind of their own. My release felt far away. I was too emotional, too close to tears for a climax, but I enjoyed every instant of having him inside me. He felt so good. So familiar and warm. He felt like exactly what I needed.

His pace grew more urgent. “Rynn,” he warned me.

“Spend on my stomach,” I told him.

Lochlan pulled out of me and found his release with a gasp and a passionate grimace. It was an image that I would hold in memory behind lock and key. Forever I’d cherish the closeness of that moment under the amber sheets, bodies entwined, his heart in his eyes, no sadness to be seen.

He used a corner of linen to wipe clean my belly and between my legs. With his thumb, he dried a tear on my cheek I hadn’t realized had slipped free. He offered to fill me with his fingers, but I was content. I’d gotten exactly what I wanted, and now I just needed to be close to him.

We climbed out from under the bedding to lounge amongst the pillows. Tucked against his side, we spent most of the night swapping silly stories and fond memories. I fell asleep with nothing in my heart but laughter.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:49 am

Lochlan Finley

Rynn was late coming down to join me for breakfast, so I went looking for her.

Perhaps she wasn't late so much as I was feeling increasingly eager to have her near me again.

I found her in her bedroom, peering out the window. She wore a tea gown in a bright violet shade—her favorite color. A vast improvement on the morning gowns in jet and dingy grays I'd grown accustomed to seeing her in.

"Are you hungry?" I asked her.

She held a wooden comb in her hand, and she used it to gesture down below her, through the window. "I was watching the chopping block there," she said. "The wood was cutting itself in half, and then the geese showed up."

"Geese?" I joined her by the window seat. Sure enough, a massive flock of snow geese littered the grounds. The great birds crowded under the weeping willow trees and filled the water gardens. They landed on the sandstone statues of rearing lions, littering them with white feathers. I chuckled.

"I've never seen so many at once," she said, picking through her curls carefully with the comb.

"Hulda," I said.

“Are we naming the geese?” she teased, separating her tresses into thirds to braid it. “I’m partial to Daisy.”

“It’s a warning to me from Hulda,” I explained. “She’s a weaver woman. Their leader, I think. She wouldn’t approve of how I dragged you into the house the other night. All your screaming must have caught her notice.”

Her brow wrinkled. “Witches sent you geese?”

“The witches protect women from dangerous men,” I told her. There were numerous tales of the witches which had been twisted to scare off American Civil War soldiers from fleeing into the woods. But weaver women had no interest in brothers slaying brothers, as long as they left mothers and daughters out of their violence.

“The weaver women stories I know make them sound like the wicked witches from the Grimm tales,” Rynn said.

“I’ve spent the last twenty years leaving them offerings, and I’ve come to know them in that time,” I said. “There’s nothing wicked about them, though they aren’t necessarily always good either. They’ll share wisdom with those who make an offering and are willing to listen. Gifts too sometimes.”

Rynn drew my attention back to the chopping block. The axe rose in the air, seemingly on its own, and another chunk of wood was cut in half, startling nearby geese into flight.

“Who’s down there?” she asked, knotting her hair in an elegant plait.

“Do you remember Boren?”

Her nose wrinkled. “Unfortunately.”

He'd been a brute, seeming to delight in my father's abuse of us. Boren had learned early on that we were the perfect scapegoats when my father was angry. He'd thrown us to the wolves time and time again to spare himself.

"He wasn't much older than us. I'm surprised he's gone." She pinned her braided hair just above the nape of her neck.

"Tuberculosis claimed him. He was one of the first ghosts to tether himself to me. I tried to make him leave, but then he set to work outside on the grounds. As long as I don't feel him in the house, I let him carry on with his chores."

"Serves him right," Rynn muttered. "But I'm sad for Gertrude and Martha. Surely, they deserve some rest after all these years. I can't imagine living a life of service only to have to continue it after death."

"There's nothing to be done about it. They're doing it to themselves," I said, an irritated edge sharpening my voice.

"How do you mean?" she asked, and that agitated me further. They didn't deserve her protection. None of them did.

"Don't you feel it? You've always been sensitive like me, Rynn. I think we got that from my father. He was sensitive, too. He didn't pass it on with his blood, though. He passed it on with his wrath, with all those horrible things he did to us. Even before the ghosts came in numbers, I sensed them in the dark. I heard them whispering." I had a theory that Father tormented us to distract the ghosts, to keep them away from him. He'd get us upset and then lock us away in the dark like a beacon for the spirits. "You feel them too, don't you?"

She thought about it for a moment, watching the axe split more wood, fingers running absently down the spine of her comb. "Guilt," she said softly. "They feel terribly

guilty.”

“As they should.” My jaw clenched. “We were little. They were grown. They didn’t see everything, but they saw enough. Not once did they lift a finger to stop him. Boren especially. I think he enjoyed making it worse for us.”

“Oh, but . . . that’s not true. Poor Martha always comforted me. On my birthday, she’d make excuses to bake a cake. She told the baron it was because she had extra oil and flour that needed to be used up, but I always knew it was for me. She was lovely.”

“She should have protected you from him,” I said sternly.

Rynn shook her head. “What could she have done? She had no power in that house. And if she lost her job, who would comfort me? Gertude too. When I was little, I’d have accidents in bed after I’d spent too long locked in the dark. She helped me clean up and never said a word about it, even though I was adding to her workload. They were both kind.”

I crossed my arms over my middle, frowning at my faded reflection in the window glass. “Martha told you to keep away from me. Gertrude too.”

Rynn sighed. “They were just looking out for me. They’d seen how relationships between people with means and people with none usually ended.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on,” I said, walking toward the door.

“Where are we going?” she called after me.

“To get your boots. We’re going mushroom hunting.” I stopped in front of the door, my hand resting on the knob. Over my shoulder, I added, “We’ll do it properly this

time. No snakes.”

She grinned at me, the little vixen. “No snakes.”

* * *

Rynn was mildly miffed when I explained that we would not be eating the mushrooms. We were gathering them as a gift to leave for Hulda.

“Will the witches speak to me after?” she asked, plucking a blonde bulb from near the roots of an ash tree.

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “They’re unpredictable.” The ground was littered with white feathers and goose droppings. I could hear the birds splashing in the water gardens, not far from us.

The geese were testy this morning. They hissed and flapped their wings when we got too close. There were so many of them, it was difficult to avoid them entirely.

We gathered a few fistfuls of morels, then I took her to the weeping willow viewable from her bedroom window, and we laid the basket amongst the roots. I pulled out a book I’d tucked inside the lapel of my gray blazer before leaving the house, my copy of *Treasure Island*.

“What’s that for?” she asked me. “Do the witches like to read?”

“I used to bring them things that I thought they wanted: fabric, bread, supplies for their looms, yarn, knitting needles, tools made of bone, beautiful flowers—things of that sort. But over time I learned they like it best when I leave them something that’s of importance to me,” I explained, adding the book to the bottom of the basket, careful not to crush the mushrooms.

She chewed on her lip for a long moment. A breeze stirred her onyx curls, loosening a few strands from the scarf in her braided hair. “Hold on. I want to add one, too,” she said .

She returned several minutes later with an old copy of Hansel and Gretel . Her favorite fairytale. It was the story I’d used to teach her to read. She added it to the small wicker basket beside my book.

“You don’t think they’ll be offended by the foul way they’re represented in that fairytale, do you?” she asked me.

I chortled. “I think as long as it’s important to you, they won’t mind, but we’ll find out soon enough.”

The wind picked up, rustling the willow’s drooping branches around us. Darkening clouds threatened rain overhead.

“What do we do now?” She brushed her hair out of her face.

“Usually, I talk at them for a bit, then I come back in the morning to see if they accepted my offering.”

“Oh.” She went sheepish then, feet shuffling under her skirt. “Could I talk to them . . . alone?”

It made me nervous leaving her outside. Being away from her at all put a pinch in my chest, right between my ribs.

“All right,” I told her, because denying her anything was becoming increasingly difficult, day by day. “I’ll see you inside.”

As I sauntered away, her lovely voice carried on the wind.

“Don’t be too harsh with Loch,” she told the willow tree and the witches who listened. “Last night we had a bit of a misunderstanding. And if anyone deserves to show that man some wrath after all we’ve been through together, it’s me and only me. I wouldn’t appreciate it if you tried to take that from me with geese.”

A laugh rumbled out of my chest. Her words were relatable. I felt the exact same way about her.

* * *

I awoke bright and early the next morning to the sound of the bell tied to Rynn’s door tinkling. I rolled out of bed and pulled on a housecoat. Out in the hall, I caught her descending the stairs, and I hurried after her. She usually walked in her sleep early in the night, but I followed just in case. I didn’t want her to fall.

Weak daylight filtered in through the windows, the sun struggling to rise. I found Rynn in one of my nightshirts, standing in front of the ebonized parlor door, staring at the locks. It pleased me that she still wore my clothing even though she had hers back.

“Rynn?” I called gently.

“I’m awake,” she said, her back to me as she studied the parlor door.

“What are we doing down here?”

“I keep dreaming about this stupid door and that horrid house in Light Lily. I was having dreams about the baron’s angry voice, but then you told me he was gone for good, and I stopped hearing him.” She took a steadying breath. “I think I need to have

a peek inside to make the dreams about this door go away. Just a quick look, and maybe my mind will let it go like it did your father's voice."

"No, Rynn."

Her shoulders slumped. "I was afraid you'd say that."

"Hm." I hated to leave her in this state: curious and anxious and looking hopeless.

"Come on," I told her. When I extended my hand, she took it.

"Where are we going?"

"I have an idea." I removed my housecoat and tossed it over her shoulders, then I guided her through the kitchen and out the back door. We rounded the manor, barefoot, in grass that was dewy. The flocks of snow geese were gone, but they'd left their feathers everywhere. It coated the lawn like a dusting of snow.

It was a cool spring morning. She hugged herself as we made our way to the parlor windows.

I put my back to the house and squatted down, leaning against the gray stone. I patted my knee. "I'll give you a boost. Then you can have a quick look inside."

It took a moment for my plan to register with her. It was still early. We didn't usually rise at this hour, and neither of us liked to do much of anything before we had our coffee.

"All right." She smirked at me, then she placed a damp foot on my bent knee and began to climb. I helped her, holding her hand, then steadying her waist, then her thighs as she stepped onto my shoulder and hoisted herself higher.

“I can see in!” she exclaimed. “It’s . . . it’s just a parlor. And not a particularly exciting one,” she said, sounding deflated.

“Well, yes.” I held as still as I could so I didn’t topple her. “What were you expecting?”

“I don’t even know.” Rynn peered down at me. “What sort of ghosts get themselves trapped inside a boring parlor?”

I grunted as she shifted her weight. Carefully, she climbed down the way she’d come. I waited until she had both feet back on solid ground before I answered her.

“The sort that refuses to believe they’re dead, that’s who. The troublesome kind. They’re ill-tempered and easily confused. They’re trapped in there because they believe they can’t get out. Eventually, they come to accept their lot and walk out through the walls, and I don’t see them again. More come. I order them inside and start the process over.”

“They listen to you?”

“They do. I think they’re so surprised someone is finally speaking to them that they do what I say. But if they don’t, touching them gives them a jolt.”

“They aren’t thwarted by your locks at all, then. Not really,” she surmised.

“Those are to keep out the curious living. Like you.” I leaned my weight against the wall. “Spirits are drawn in by fear and wrath like iron to a lodestone. You remember what Gertrude did. Given the chance, those spirits might try to do worse.”

Above us, the windows fogged, like the glass had been bathed in hot breath. Ghostly fingerprints streaked through the condensation. Rynn shivered at the sight.

Eager to be off, she slipped her hand back in mine and walked me to the weeping willow tree to check on our offering for the weaver women. I lifted the drooping branches so she could slip under them. Bending low, she removed the wicker lid from the basket.

It was full of cream-colored goose eggs. A gift from the witches. Rynn let out a cheer, and her infectious excitement warmed my haunted heart.

Lochlan Finley

The next evening, a great crash of wood resounded from down below, and I abandoned my business correspondence in the office to go and inspect the cause of the commotion. I sensed that the cause had a name and that the name was Rynn.

I climbed down the main staircase, and a chuckle rumbled out of me as I reached the bottom, entering the foyer. Rynn had given up on trying to pick the lock to the central room. She'd removed the hinges instead, and the heavy doors had fallen inward, revealing the great library.

The space had once been a ballroom. A grand piano still sat in the western corner where the floor was marble tile and the wall was one large gilt-framed mirror, but now the back walls were floor-to-ceiling shelves of books. Wheeled ladders were built out from the shelves to roll across gleaming hardwood floors. Plush furniture was situated along massive windows in the east to catch the morning sunlight.

Rynn stood beside a carved writing desk, holding a cold lantern in her hands. Her floral tea gown was so long it draped the floor behind her. She craned her neck, taking in the great room. The domed ceiling was painted to resemble a night sky and included all her favorite constellations, like Cassiopeia and Orion. The central window was a stained-glass image of her favorite fairytale: Hansel and Gretel after they bested the wicked witch. Everything smelled like lacquer and that brilliant book smell. The curtains were a color of violet she loved. There was no denying that this room had been built for one singular purpose.

“There was never another woman,” she said, awe in her hushed voice. Quietly, she

set the lantern down on the desktop as though it had gotten too heavy for her to hold aloft.

“There never was,” I said, stepping fully into the library around the fallen doors. “What a silly notion. Me in love with anyone but you . . . What do you think of your library?”

“It’s exactly like what we used to talk about. Every. Single. Detail. It’s like you reached into my brain and pulled this brilliant room out of it. I’m astonished, Loch.” She turned to face me, brow furrowed. But why’d you tell me your lover had died?”

“Because I thought you had,” I said sadly, still struck by grief at the thought, even though she was right here with me alive and well. “All I knew from that night was that you’d stolen from the safe and fled into the woods. Father gave chase. Then he came back. You didn’t. You never came back.”

“You thought . . .” Horror rounded her eyes .

“I thought he murdered you, Rynn. Everyone did. He didn’t even deny it when I confronted him later, demanding to know what he’d done with you. He was such a proud man, he’d rather people believed he killed you than think some young kitchen maid had bested him at anything.”

She grabbed at the fabric of her floral tea gown, just above her heart, then she cast a glance around the room I had crafted with such intricate care to be a beacon for her lost spirit. “Oh, Loch . . .” she murmured.

“I built all of it for you. Nightingale House is yours,” I confessed.

She squinted at me like she was struggling to make sense of my words. “Because you thought I was dead?”

“Dead and lost. I believed that if this home was perfect enough, I’d draw your soul out of the mire. If it was exactly what you’d always wanted, you’d come to me and haunt this place, haunt this library, haunt my bed.”

She worked her throat. “I would have.”

My mouth tugged up at the corner. “Yes?” I’d loved it when she’d said that the first time in the lavatory. I loved it even more now.

“Yes! Oh, yes,” she said with a contented sigh.

Her words were earnest, but doubt lingered within me, sullyng my joy. “I know that you have a talent for telling men what they want to hear . . .”

Rynn rounded the desk to stand in front of me. She grabbed up my hand in both of hers. Eyes shut, she kissed each of my knuckles one at a time, her lips warm and sincere. “I truly, truly love it. I’m not telling you what you want to hear, Loch. I don’t do that with you. I’ve never seen you as a client, even when I thought you were only Finley. I told you that. Remember?”

Every part of me that was warm, optimistic, and prone to foolishness believed her implicitly. Because I couldn’t help myself, I pressed a light kiss to her brow. “Tell me more. Tell me how much you like your library.”

“It’s perfect.” She bit her lip, stopping it from quivering. Then she squeezed my hand between hers. “I went on and on about wanting a place like this, and you made it for me. I can hardly believe I’m standing here. If I was a ghost, I’d never be able to resist this house. I’d squeeze myself inside every book. Haunt every beautiful corner. I would name every nail and every floorboard.”

“Good, good.” Warmth shot through my chest. “I wanted so much for you to love it.”

“I wouldn’t be like the other ghosts here, though. They clean.” Her lips quirked. “You’d know I was around because I’d leave you messes.”

I chuckled, but the humor in it was bittersweet. My lashes lowered. I shifted forward, hovering closer. “And when I was sad that you were dead, you’d come and sing for me until I felt better, like you do in my dreams. My nightingale.”

“Always.”

“You’d visit my bed to ravish me in my sleep.”

“Every morning and every night.” She leaned in and rested her palm high on my chest. My heart thumped under her touch. “You should have known I couldn’t possibly be dead. Of course I would haunt this place.”

“Father burned your things in a rage after you were gone,” I told her, and she released my hand, eyes wide in shocked sympathy. “That’s the moment I still cannot conquer. That’s the moment all went dark and dead within me. The first time my heart was shattered.”

I’d tried to save what I could when I found Father starting that fire. He’d ignited her clothing and the few paltry things she’d left behind. I’d wanted them all, and he’d beaten me for trying to put out the blaze. He’d broken off a branch from the pyre. It was so hot the end smoked, and he’d struck me wildly, scarring my face.

I hadn’t registered the pain from his attacks. My dear Rynn was dead—that was all I could feel—but a mark had been left on my soul to match my face.

And even though she wasn’t truly, even though I had her here with me now, the grief of that horrid moment had rooted in me devastatingly deep. I couldn’t separate from it. I was drowning in it.

“I refused to believe ill of you,” I said, that old ache clawing at the cage of my ribs, trying to land another blow on my battered heart. “I told myself you took my ring because you planned to marry me. I thought you’d left those stolen things in my room for safekeeping . . . I believed I’d lost you because you’d been taken from me.”

“Oh Loch—”

“One word!” I moaned. “One letter from you could have spared me so much torment.”

“What would I have said?” she argued. “Dear Loch, sorry about all that horrible betrayal business. I managed to escape your terrible father and move to the city. By the way, I’m a whore now. Still want to get married?”

“Yes!” I roared.

“Oh, come on!” Backing away from me, she threw her hands up into the air. “Be reasonable!”

“I’m never reasonable when it comes to you, Rynn. You should know that by now! I still would have married you. Twenty years I searched for your body, for whatever remained of you. I’d have taken anything: A lock of hair. A piece of your clothing. The smallest bone of your tiniest finger.”

“Oh, dear God!” She covered her mouth with her hand, silencing her gasp.

“I was desperate for any token, and I came to know the mire very well looking for you.”

“What you endured is dreadful, Loch. I can’t even imagine it. I have no words.” She buried her face in her hands. “But I didn’t know, I didn’t know, I didn’t know! How

could I have? I thought surely you hated me, not that you thought I was dead! If I had, of course I would have come back for you, whatever the consequences!”

In my mind’s eye, I saw myself hunting the mire. Winter and spring, summer and fall, I searched and scoured every inch for some piece of Rynn.

“I left offerings for the weaver women.” I stared off at the shelves, seeing trees and rain and snow instead of books. “I was afraid they’d collected you that night or that animals had carried you off or that he’d dumped your body in a sinking spot. Twenty years, I begged the witches for some token. Finally, Hulda took pity on me and told me the truth. I had fallen asleep in the parlor the night a black fog rolled over the grounds, and a light snow began to fall even though it was early autumn. She visited me in my dreams. And that’s when you shattered my heart the second time, Rynn,” I said, and her face crumpled. “That’s when I learned that there had never been a dead girl in their woods. That the witches would never have allowed such a thing. The grief and anger I felt was so potent, wrathful spirits flooded the parlor. I called them to me, though I didn’t mean to, straight out of the mire.”

“You locked away the room with the black door, and you came for me,” she said, swiping at her eyes. “Because you still blame me fully. Even for the things that wicked man was responsible for. He was horrid and he let you think he killed me. You came to settle the score. I know that the ring I stole was precious to you and—”

“You took more than that from me!”

“A few dollars—”

“And my heart ,” I growled, clutching at my breast. “You ripped it right out of my chest!”

“Your haunted heart was never stolen,” she said, voice wobbly and hollow with

threatening tears. “You gave me that willingly and took mine in return!”

“When did all of it stop being real for you?” My voice went cold and hard, and my hands balled into fists. Anger was a much sturdier emotion, a thing I could grab at that hurt so much less than the ugly monster still trying to tear at the organ in my chest. “That’s what I still don’t understand.”

She blinked at me, and her jaw set. “I beg your pardon?”

“When did I become a mark to you? A thing to trick and toy with until you had what you wanted so you could run away?”

Her next breath was a shallow rasp. “How dare you say that to me!”

“I want to know!”

“Fuck what you want to know! How dare you! All we endured together,” she said, doe eyes glistening with welling tears, “all that pain and torment . . . I protected you. I cared for you. I loved you! I love you still! I couldn’t stop loving you even if I wanted to. I was never pretending with you. One night, I did a stupid, impulsive, selfish thing. A dreadful thing that I will loathe until I breathe my last. Twenty years you searched for me? Well, for twenty years I’ve carried the shame of that terrible night on my back. It will remain there with me, weighing me down until it finally wins and crushes the life out of me. Is that what you want to hear?”

“The last twenty years were your choice!” I flung at her.

“I know!” she screamed in my face, her hands in fists. “And they were the wrong choice! The wretched one, the worst one! The one that I can’t ever get away from. Can’t run fast enough from. Nothing I do, it doesn’t matter. I won’t ever escape it.”

“When are you going to stop running?” I begged her.

She wrung her hands in her dress, creasing the fabric. “When are you going to stop blaming me and finally, finally, blame the monster who raised you for all of it?”

“I murdered that monster, Rynn!” I rumbled. “I choked the life out of him, I blamed him so.”

“Then why can’t we blame him for all of it?” she shouted. “That’s what I mean! Let all the blame die with him. Instead, you insist on burdening me and Martha and Gertrude and Boren! Everyone but yourself.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets, unsure what to do with them. My heart had cracked open, and I couldn’t stop any of the words from coming out now. “You left me with no warning to face the consequences of what you’d done alone. You left me when one single word from you could have spared me two decades of grief-stricken torment without you.”

“Stop it!” She pressed her palms to her ears. “Just stop! I don’t need your help to feel more wretched than I already do!”

“Only you could have spared me from the most devastating loss of my life, but you lacked the care for even the smallest gesture. My ring, sent back to me in an envelope. That’s all it would have taken!”

“I didn’t know you thought I was dead! And I didn’t know that monster was gone!” she cried. “I didn’t dare come back for you even in my weakest moments when I desperately wanted to because I was certain doing so would . . .”

“Would what?” I demanded.

“I knew you would punish me, and I knew I would deserve it . . .” She licked her lips. “Sometimes I’m certain you want me to love you still.”

“I do,” I breathed, my anger cooling like a hot coal dropped in a bank of snow. “I will always want that.”

“Then sometimes I think you just want to ruin me. You want to break my heart and carry the shattered remains around in your pocket. It feels like you want me to let you punish me forevermore.”

“I want that, too,” I confessed.

She hung her head, and her black curls curtained her face. “But you can’t have both, Loch! You just can’t. Eventually—”

“No,” I said, shaking my head because I already knew what she was going to say.

“Eventually,” she pressed, catching my sleeve and fisting her fingers into it, “you have to forgive me. You have to let what happened go.”

“You mean I have to let you go. You want me to watch you run away from me again. I’ve already endured the loss of you, Rynn. It destroyed me. There’s hardly anything left. I won’t survive more of that.”

She released my shirt, and her shoulders slumped. “I don’t want to run away from you. But I don’t want to be ruined by you either. I’m already ruined. Don’t you see? I lost you. I lost you because I left you, and it ruined me. It destroyed me.”

I knew the thoughts whirling in my head would hurt her, but I needed to let them out of me. “It would be easier to pick between my revenge and your love if I could feel certain you were capable of the emotion.”

Her small intake of breath parted her lips and resounded in my ears. She looked like I'd struck her. "Then it's not that you think I'm lying when I say I love you—when I say I've always loved you," she said, voice full of wintery wrath. "You just think I'm incapable of love altogether?"

"Given the evidence, one can't help but wonder."

We stared each other down, neither flinching. Finally, she buckled. Turning on her heels, she fled from the library with brisk steps.

"There you go again," I groused at her back, dogging her heels, "running away from me once more."

"I'm not running," she said through her teeth, stomping over the fallen doors. "I'm walking away from you because you're being a jackass and I've endured more than enough jackassery for one night."

"I'm not done talking about this," I grumbled, increasing my pace to keep up with hers. My footsteps echoed down the halls. Her stockinged feet remained silent.

She turned sharply into the drawing room. Beyond the front windows, evening filled the skies with dusky clouds. She made it as far as the nearest end table and she leaned over it, resting her weight on her hands. Her chest heaved.

"I don't want to be finished," I said somberly. "Talk to me, Rynn. Please."

She shot me a glare over her shoulder. "You keep pretending like you were innocent of all wrongdoing. Like it was all us and never you, but you're not innocent, Loch. If we aren't going to let the baron carry all the blame, then you must take yours, too."

"I'm not going to keep your blasted savings," I growled at her. "I never was. I just

needed to get you here, and I knew you'd never come willingly. It's sitting in my nightstand beside my bed. It's not even locked. You can go and claim it yourself right now!"

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Her nostrils flared, then her throat bobbed. "The baron would hurt me, he would call me hideous names, and you would tell me not to be angry with him."

My eyes dropped to the rug as memories of those words coming out of my young lips returned to me. Shame burned in my cheeks. "I was—"

"You defended him to me! He humiliated us both. He kept me locked up too long, he whipped me until I couldn't sit down, he called me a crook and a harlot, and there were times that you defended his actions!"

"I shouldn't have. It was wrong. But I was . . ." I searched for the words that might make things better, and my voice trailed away, because there was no justification to be found. I had done those things, and I could still picture her younger face contorting from the betrayal of it.

"But you were a boy?" she offered, one brow lifting toward her hairline. "Young and naïve and new to the world?"

With a sigh, I nodded. "He was the only father I knew. In my eyes, he was this big, strong man whom everyone listened to. I thought he must be right about some things."

She turned to rest her hip against the end table, folding her arms over her breasts. "How come you're allowed to be young and stupid but I'm not?"

She made a fine point, one that landed in my chest like a dart striking true. I

swallowed hard, guilt and anger melding to tighten my gut. “Whatever I’m guilty of, I didn’t leave you. I stayed with you, and I learned to do better. You thought I loved him more, but how could that possibly be true? Just look around you. Every inch of this place is a monument to my love for you.”

“I knew that you loved me . . . I was just worried that you shouldn’t, and I was terrified that he’d turn you against me.” Rynn shook her head. “I couldn’t stay there another minute. I still have nightmares about that house, and you wouldn’t run away with me. How many times had I suggested it by then? Every week since we were ten, at least . . . I don’t know how to convince you that I’m sorry. I don’t know how to fix any of this!”

“I never would have turned you away. I had every intention of marrying you!” My voice rose higher, ringing in the room. “Rynn, there’s no one but you. I’ve been bound to you since the night you crawled into my bed crying about Romeo and Juliet. There is no beauty in the world for me, no grace or sweetness, that could touch yours. Not in art, or the poetry you hate, not in all creation, not even in fiction. There is just you for me. Always you!”

She let out a whimper, then her spine pulled up straight. “It’s easier to believe that now,” she said, matching my volume, “than it was then when we were dependent on that monster and everything felt hopeless!”

“You could have built something with me. You could have built this with me,” I said, gesturing to the elaborately decorated room and choking around the agony of that loss. “Instead, you left me to go off and sell yourself. And so cheaply, too.”

She huffed at that. “There was nothing cheap about the way I sold myself! Don’t be obtuse. I had no family riches of my own. If I wanted to live well and depend on no one, what other choice did I have? I wasn’t ever going to risk serving another man like the baron. Who would hire a runaway like me? Who would teach me a trade? No

one! And don't forget that I was a wealthy woman before you got your hands on it! You've seen it. You know better."

"Not even the smallest bone on your tiniest finger is worth only \$35. Not to me," I bit out. "You are priceless."

"Priceless," she said softly. "Then why won't you forgive me?"

Silence.

She was that and more to me, and yet it wasn't in me to give her the one thing she continued to beg for. I didn't know where to even begin to give her something like that.

"I can't," I whispered.

Her hands went back to her hair, fisting the curls. She made a frustrated noise in her throat. "Goddamn it, Loch!" she shouted. "Do you have any idea how it feels to listen to you tell me that I broke your heart twice ? That I left you and then had the audacity to still be alive after all this time!"

"That's not what I said!"

"That's how it feels! Like you want me to apologize for not being a ghost!" she howled. Tears fell in rivulets down her reddened cheeks.

"Stop crying at me," I begged her, my own gaze clouding with moisture.

"I can't help it," she sobbed, pressing her palms to her eyes. "I'm not doing it to hurt you! My tears aren't weapons!"

“Well, they feel like arrows!” I rubbed my chest and yanked my collar loose. It was strangling me.

Ghosts pressed in around us, attracted to our anger and grief. They chilled the room, frosting the windows. I could see my breath mingling with Rynn’s.

“Get out!” I shouted at them.

“Gladly,” Rynn snapped, marching for the archway.

“Not you.” I caught her arm and swung her around, drawing her deeper into the room. “You stay right where you are.”

The ghosts departed, and the air began to warm once more. A fire caught in the hearth, as it did every evening at this time. Darkness had fallen while we argued, and the lone gaslight wasn’t enough to illuminate the large space by itself.

“Thank you, Gertrude,” I said, then I felt the prickle down my neck as her spirit passed by.

“Yes, thank you, Gertrude,” Rynn said grudgingly.

In silence, we stared at the flames, our own anger finally burned out, leaving us hollow wrecks.

Rynn rubbed a hand down her face. “I’ve got nothing left to say, Loch. Nothing that will make any difference.” She marched for the archway and stopped. “Drat.”

“What’s wrong?”

Rynn stared at the line of shadows that separated the threshold from the lit drawing

room. “I left my lantern back in the library.”

“There’s one in— Oh.” I realized a moment too late that she’d carried the drawing room lantern with her earlier. I moved in as close to that line of darkness as I dared, and I peeked through the doorway down the hall.

A long stretch of night separated us from the dull, distant glow of the torchier in the foyer.

“It’s too dark,” she whispered.

“Too dark and too many ghosts,” I added.

She peered up at me. “Would the spirits tethered to you fetch it for us if you asked?”

I shook my head. “They stick to tasks that became habits for them when they were alive. I have to be careful where I put things. If it’s not where they expect, they can’t use it.”

“That’s a shame.” She nodded absent-mindedly as her arms came up around herself, her whole focus on that gaping dark, and I saw the love of my youth facing the terror years of torture had instilled in her.

I held out my hand. “Rynn.” My throat was hoarse from all the yelling.

Tearing her gaze from the hallway, she looked at my hand as though it were a foreign object. And then she came to me.

I led her to the small sofa, the only one in the whole room. I lay down on it, and she let go my hand to remove her floral tea gown, throwing it over a chair to prevent wrinkles—a wasted effort. It was full of creases already. With a great sigh, she came

to my end of the sofa.

Rynn stretched out over me, laying her cheek on my chest. My heart still hurt, but our battle had dulled the ache. Letting all that out of me had felt good, and her weight was like a warm compress pressed against the parts of me that were wounded and sore. I craned my neck and kissed the top of her head. Her hair smelled like rose water.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered a little later.

“I know,” I whispered back.

“I’ll be sorry forevermore.”

I pressed another, longer kiss into her hair. “Get some sleep. ”

“What if the fire goes out?” she asked softly.

“The scone will stay lit, and I won’t let the fire go out.”

“Promise?”

“I’d never leave you in the dark, Rynn. I promise.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:49 am

Rynn Mavis

I awoke on the sofa before Lochlan did. Weak sunlight filtered in through the eastern windows. The fire continued to burn in the hearth, evidence that a fresh log had been added to it recently. I laid a palm on his chest, my way of thanking him for keeping the darkness at bay. My hand rose and fell with his even breathing.

I re-dressed in the floral tea gown from the previous day, attended to my morning ablutions, then made my way to the kitchen, craving company.

I talked at Martha while she prepared breakfast, and I snacked on yesterday's bread and some cheese. She always made something for herself as well out of habit but never ate it, of course. She couldn't talk back to me, but I sensed she liked my presence there, enjoyed hearing her name on my lips, cherished being remembered. I assisted with a lot of the things I used to when I was a girl in her kitchen.

I wasn't doing it for anyone but myself, so I didn't mind the labor.

I peeled potatoes and boiled eggs. I chopped vegetables. I attended to all the things she sat in front of me.

Before, I'd tried to receive deliveries when they arrived at the back door, but the young boy who made them always behaved strangely. That morning, it was just the same. There was a thunderous knock that nearly startled me out of my stool. The familiar sound of dropping parcels and a hurled newspaper came next, and I opened the back door just in time to catch the young man sprinting away like a startled rabbit.

“Silly boy,” I said to the young man’s retreating back as he streaked across the gardens. “Imagine anyone being afraid of little ole you,” I told Martha.

The room warmed at that. Something brushed across my arm, like a veil against my skin, and I touched that spot on my forearm gingerly, feeling close again to the woman who’d been like a grandmother to me.

Lochlan came into the kitchen then. He hovered by the door. “There you are. What are you doing in here?”

“Just keeping Martha company,” I told him.

His expression hardened. “Oh,” he said.

My stomach plummeted. If Lochlan still couldn’t let go of his anger at poor Martha, of all people, what chance did I have of ever earning his forgiveness? Last night he’d been quick to comfort me. We’d shared that crowded sofa, and he was as gentle with me as he always was, but the glimmer of hope his affection had given me was dashed yet again. The thought soured my appetite completely .

“Your breakfast should be ready soon,” I said gently, rising from my stool at the table.

“Aren’t you going to dine with me?” he asked.

“Not this time. I had some bread and cheese already, and I’m not very hungry . . . See you soon, Martha,” I said, then I brushed by him out of the kitchen, eyes averted.

Considering how soon Lochlan came up to my room thereafter, I doubted he’d had much to eat himself. He gave me enough time to pin up my hair and change into fresh clothing, a dark blue day dress. The skirt was gathered high in the front and hung

long in the back. I had just settled in the window seat with a copy of *Purgatorio* when there was a tentative knock at my door.

“Can I come in?” he called through the wood.

“Of course,” I told him, setting the book down in my lap.

As he entered, the room filled with the scent of talcum powder, and a bouquet of bright pink peonies appeared in the vase on the mantel. *Paeonia lactiflora*, the apology flower. Lochlan moved towards the center of my room but halted when his boots squelched in a puddle on the carpet. He frowned down at it.

Dirty ditchwater began to leak from the ceiling and down the walls, dripping in brown and gray rivulets over the fireplace.

“Not again,” I groaned.

“That ghost is still lingering around here, is he?” Lochlan said.

“I can’t figure out what he wants. The water is harmless—it vanishes away in a moment—but try telling that to my feet after my stockings have been soaked through. And Gertrude doesn’t like him. He keeps messing up things she’s tidied and dripping all over her flowers.”

“I left your boots under your bed,” he told me. “You could put them on to keep your feet dry.”

I acknowledged the peace offering with a warm smile that faltered on my lips after a moment. “I’ll do that.”

I left behind my book and crossed to the bed, avoiding the wet footprints the spirit

insisted on leaving everywhere he went.

“I suspect he drowned nearby,” Lochlan said as I slipped my feet into my boots. “He’s confused obviously. He keeps doing the same things over and over again, like he’s caught in a mill, circling through his patterns, going nowhere. That happens sometimes. They’re not as troublesome as the angry sort, but they don’t seem to fully understand they’re dead either. They sense something is wrong, but they can’t seem to snap out of it.”

“Can you help him move on?” I lifted my feet up onto the bed one at a time to tie my laces.

“I don’t know him. If I knew what he was after, I might be able to do something. Most of the time, I can’t do a thing.”

My lips pursed. “You know Martha,” I said softly.

His jaw clenched. “I told you already. She’s keeping herself here.”

“I don’t think that’s true. It doesn’t feel that way to me.” I stared up at him pleadingly. “Won’t you please try letting her go?”

He rubbed at the back of his neck and loosened his stiff collar. “I don’t have anything to say to her, Rynn.”

“If you found it in yourself to offer her forgiveness . . . I think that’s what she wants. I think that’s what they all want.” That was certainly what I wanted .

His jaw clenched. A muscle in his cheek jumped. “She stood back and watched. They all did.”

I rose from the bed, holding my skirt up to keep it off the damp carpets. “She couldn’t have stopped the baron from hurting you.”

“Not me,” he rumbled, and his hands made fists at his sides. “She stood back and let my father hurt you . She stood there and did nothing.”

I blinked up at him, trying to remember what he was talking about. The baron was certainly violent, but I couldn’t recall a single time Martha had stood by and watched.

It was Lochlan who had stopped fighting in the end. When he had stood up for me, it made things worse, so he quit doing that when his father was cruel—we both did. Afterward, he’d come and comfort me instead. It was safer for us.

I pictured the young scrawny version of him, hair a light auburn, arms folded protectively over his chest, face contorting with the misery of watching as his father brought the crop down across my thighs once more.

He wasn’t that young scrawny youth anymore, but his expression was much the same now. I returned to the window seat, studying his reflection in the glass, wondering if it was himself he was truly so angry with.

“Lochlan . . .” I said pleadingly, determined to relieve him of the burden of his misplaced guilt.

My words were cut off by the sound of a horse and rider cantering loudly up the drive. The gray gelding whinnied in an agitated manner, and the rider—

“Oh no,” I groaned.

Lochlan crossed to the window seat and peered out over me. “Who the devil is that? ”

I rubbed my fingers into my brow, hiding my eyes with my hand. “Utrecht,” I confessed.

His gaze snapped to me and narrowed. “What’s he doing here, of all places? Shouldn’t everyone believe you’re in Texas?”

I reached out and touched his arm. Tension tightened his muscles. “I sent a foolish letter out before I knew you were you .”

His arm loosened under my fingers but only just. “How?”

“Mr. Mazibuko. He posted it for me,” I said, wincing as the chestnut-haired rider below dismounted and fought to calm his anxious horse.

“And yet you failed to mention it after you knew I was me,” he added pointedly.

I let out a sigh, certain I’d just given him yet another reason to hold a grudge for twenty more years. “It’s been weeks. I thought he didn’t care or didn’t ever receive it, and I assumed there was nothing to tell. Then it was out of my mind entirely.”

“What did this letter say?” He stared down his nose at me, one brow arched.

“I told him I was leaving him for a better man.” I grimaced. “I told him my new lover had more wealth and a bigger cock and not to come looking for me at Nightingale House in the heart of Blackwood County. I told him he wasn’t wanted here.”

Lochlan’s lips twitched. “You just had to bring his cock into it.”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?”

He folded his arms over his chest. “What exactly were you planning? In a jealous

rage, he'd come and save you from the pirate Finley, then you'd ride off into the sunset with him and hope he didn't put your arm back in a sling? ”

“Actually no,” I said as below us Utrecht battled to calm his gelding. His light cloak was knocked from his broad shoulders, and he lost his top hat in the struggle. “I was hoping he'd come and pick a fight with Finley. Then while those two serpents had it out, I'd sneak away from the both of them . . . into the sunset with myself and my cash.”

“What a dreadful idea,” Lochlan grumbled.

I shot him a glare. “You didn't leave me a lot of choices, you pirate . . . He's not one of your workers. How'd he even get on the grounds?”

“I unlocked the gates after my sister visited,” he confessed, and my stomach flipped. “The groundskeeper Willoughby lives outside the fence, nearby. He's getting on in years, and making him fuss with those big gates is too much. His young crew only assists him a couple of times a week, but he pops in daily to keep an eye on things. Besides, you were no longer interested in getting away, and I never wanted to be your jailer forever.”

Utrecht tied his horse to a hitching post near the lion statues. He picked his hat up off the gravel and dusted it down. His brows were dark brown and heavy. They drew together in a scowl. He sat his hat back over his hair and sauntered toward the entrance.

Lochlan turned to leave. I caught him, gripping the back of his waistcoat. “Let's not answer the door,” I suggested. When he returned to my side, I hooked my arm through his to keep him there. “Let him get bored and go away.”

We waited and waited. There was pounding at the door, some cursing and shouting,

then a jeered challenge followed by a string of oaths.

“The ghosts won’t let him in, will they?” I asked

“I don’t think so,” Lochlan said, expression pensive. “A real charmer, this one is.” His lip curled at the corner in a half smile.

“I have terrible taste in men,” I said meaningfully.

Lochlan chuckled. “Touché.”

Shattered glass echoed from down below

“What was that?” I gasped.

“That was the sound of a rock being hurled through my window,” he ground out, pulling his arm from mine.

“I don’t want you to get hurt! Loch—”

“We tried it your way,” he said sternly. “Now it’s my turn.”

“Wait! What exactly is your way?” Nerves had my stomach in knots. I reached for him, but he pulled out of my grasp.

“If he’s lucky, I’ll just put both of his arms in slings, then see him out. Here in the middle of the weavers’ woods and in a house full of ghosts, I could do much worse to a man like him.”

“Loch!” I dogged his heels. “I didn’t mean to—”

He stopped at the door and shot me a stern look. “Stay here. You’ve done enough, Rynn.”

His words sent another dart through my chest, more fuel for the monster on my back to torture me with. He left, closing the door behind him with a decisive snap.

I paced the room impatiently, sloshing through puddles and wet footprints, splashing the hem of my skirt. Dirty water began to drip down the walls again.

“Could you please do something more useful?” I grumped at the spirit.

It was then I decided that I would go and do something more useful. I wouldn’t stand there another minute, waiting to see what became of Lochlan. Opening the door carefully, I slipped into the hall. At the top of the stairs, muffled voices reached me from below and I leaned in. My heart thumped against the cage of my ribs, and my palms went clammy.

Determined footsteps came next, then more muffled voices quickly followed by shouted threats and broken furniture, the hollow thud of heavy things being thrown about.

I rushed down the stairs and rounded the hall into the gallery, toward the chorus of chaos. My heart was a war drum in my chest. Breaths left my lips in panicked puffs. Evidence of a battle was everywhere: paintings fallen from walls, a sculpture toppled on its side.

The sounds of fighting brought me sprinting into the hall through the back of the gallery, just as Utrecht came stumbling out of a sitting room. His nose bled, red stained the disheveled collar of his shirt, and he favored his left arm as he threw the door shut, grabbed up a chair from the hall and shoved it under the knob, locking it in place.

Utrecht leaned heavily against the door, his functioning arm holding up his weight, the injured one clutched to his heaving chest.

Blood dripped from his nose, down to his chin. He smiled at me, looking maniacal with crimson on his lips and in his mustache.

“My God, Rynn,” he said as the door vibrated from the force of Lochlan ramming into it from the other side, “you’ve found yourself a madman.”

I stopped a good distance away, relieved Lochlan was in decent enough shape to fight for his freedom as hard as he did. He rammed the door, and the frame rattled.

He was like a man possessed.

“I made a mistake, Utrecht,” I said loud enough to be heard over the commotion. “I never should have sent you that letter. ”

Utrecht’s grin went devilish. “No, you probably shouldn’t have. I almost didn’t come. Then I realized that if you were truly done with me, you’d never have goaded me so.”

“Stay away from her,” Finley bellowed, “or I’ll break both of your arms!”

I stole a steadying breath, regret hardening into a stone in my gut. “I shouldn’t have—”

“You don’t sound like yourself.” Utrecht squinted at me. The door rocked, and the chair legs scraped against the floor. He stood back from it, moving closer to me.

I slid away from him, farther down the hall. He was right. I didn’t sound like myself. The woman he knew didn’t have it in her to admit when she’d made a mistake. Admitting fault was a weakness I didn’t dare show to devils like him.

Utrecht swiped at his nose, staining his kid-skinned gloves red, then he extended his hand to me. “Let’s leave behind the madman before he breaks out of his cage.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you!” Finley roared, and the pounding against the door intensified.

I shook my head. “I’m staying here.”

Utrecht’s expression hardened to cold stone, smile vanishing. It was a look I knew well. If I wanted to fix this, I needed to make him feel like he’d won. That was the only way I ever got what I needed from him.

“I have money . . . for your troubles,” I offered. “If you agree to leave peacefully, I’ll pay you well.”

His lip twitched. “Now you sound more like yourself. Let’s go and get your money, then we’ll leave.”

“That’s not what I’m offering, Utrecht.”

Abruptly, the pounding at the door stopped. “I have money,” Finley said, his voice carrying. “Look around you. If it’s money you desire, take mine. Only leave her here.”

“I think you broke my nose.” Utrecht chuckled, dabbing at the blood drying in his mustache, and the sound of his maniacal mirth turned the blood in my veins to ice. It reminded me of the times he’d fight in the street for sport or just to frighten me into behaving the way he wanted. “Let’s have it then.”

“I keep a safe in my parlor,” Finley said, and I repressed a gasp because I knew what the parlor contained. It wasn’t a safe.

“What’s the combination?” Utrecht spoke casually, like the businessman he was. That’s all I ever was to him. Business. An item to be purchased and played with, which was fine with me to a degree. That had been the bargain after all, but then he’d insisted on ownership of me I’d never granted.

My body could be bought for a time back then, but my heart never could. It would always belong to Lochlan.

“You’ll need the key. It’s in here with me,” Finley said, the threat in his voice not nearly veiled enough.

“Ha,” Utrecht scoffed. “Nice try.”

“I’ll give it to you, just let me out,” Finley insisted.

Utrecht leapt toward me then, catching me by the arm and reeling me in. I yelped, and Finley started at the door again, cursing and knocking against it so violently he nearly dislodged the chair.

“Don’t fuss now,” Utrecht whispered in my ear, his working arm hooking over my shoulder. He gripped my throat, and fear coursed through my veins.

Indeed, I was nothing like the woman Utrecht knew, because there was no thrill in the fear I felt as his hand closed around my neck. This fright was a torment that tasted of bile and ash. It twisted my stomach and brought the ghosts pouring into the room, turning the hall a biting, bitter cold.

“I’ll let you out, madman, but if you try to hurt me, I’ll hurt her,” Utrecht threatened, dragging me against him.

“Don’t. Touch. Her.” Finley barked each word, but his fight against the door ceased.

Utrecht kicked the chair out from under the knob. Finley surged out into the hall, his clothing disheveled, hair a mess across his brow, the bronze in his eyes glowing bright. He was otherwise unharmed, and I let out the air trapped in my lungs, relieved.

Utrecht shook me gently, reminding us both who was in control here. “Put the key in her hand. Don’t leave me waiting . . .”

Finley pulled out the chain attached to his waistcoat, freeing the ring of keys. Then his eyes found mine and softened, and he was my Lochlan again. He removed the key and placed it in my palm, the touch long and lingering.

“You know what to do,” Utrecht hissed in my ear.

I reached back and slipped the key into his pocket.

“That’s it,” Utrecht said, voice patronizing like I was a pet who’d finally gotten the trick right. Then he backed us against the wall. “You lead the way, madman. Try anything and you know what I’ll do.” He gave my neck a squeeze until my breath hitched and I wheezed.

Lochlan’s nostrils flared. Hands in fists, he marched ahead of us. I followed, pushed forward by Utrecht, his hand a leash around my neck. We cut through the gallery, then rounded the back stairs.

Our nearness to that ebonized door covered in locks frenzied the angry ghosts shut up inside. They pounded on the walls and doors so hard the beat of it reverberated under my feet.

Utrecht’s hand slid away from my throat. He stepped around me, eyes locked on the strange door, mouth gone slack. I remembered seeing the ebonized door for the first

time, feeling the haunting pull of it.

“It’s only natural for the living to be curious about the dead,” Lochlan said coolly.

“What’s in there?” Utrecht asked, entranced.

“The greatest treasure of all. Answers,” Lochlan said. He stood casually with his hands in his pockets, like the fight was already over. “The answer to what will happen to you when you die.”

I peered cautiously between them.

“I don’t plan to ever die.” Utrecht stalked closer to the parlor with all the arrogance of a self-made man who’d gained his fortune through the dogged pursuit of things he needed to control. Like me. And now the mystery before him.

“There’s nothing in there you want to trifle with,” Lochlan said. The pounding grew, incessant. “But they certainly want you to try, don’t they? Can you hear them?”

“I hear . . . I’m not sure . . .” Utrecht stepped closer. The knocking grew so loud I felt it behind my breastbone. I muffled the sound with my palms pressed to my ears. Then all at once the pounding stopped.

“It’s the wrath in you,” Lochlan said, voice piercing in the new quiet. “They want at you and all that rage. You’re just like they are.”

Utrecht stared at nothing, not listening at all. “Unlock the doors,” he whispered, fishing the key out of his pocket and pressing it back into Lochlan’s hand. He glanced briefly at the empty vases, and I wondered what his eyes saw there. What message had Gertrude left for him with her flowers?

Lochland returned the large brass key, holding it aloft. “You’ve been warned. I won’t be responsible for your destruction. You can do that to yourself.”

“This house . . .” Utrecht said, and he sounded almost humbled as he spoke—a state I’d never heard him in before. He was not a meek man. “It’s the most unnatural thing I’ve ever come upon. I want to take it all apart and see inside it, down to its bones.”

“It’s not the house that’s unnatural,” Lochlan said, brushing a hand casually over his chest to smooth what was ruffled. “It’s the people in it, and you can’t see my bones, though I welcome you to try. They won’t hang a man who kills in self-defense. Where you’re concerned, I’m eager for the excuse.”

Utrecht swiftly took the key back from him and set to work on the locks, attacking them with vigor, wincing when he had to make use of his injured arm. The ghosts remained eerily quiet. I held my breath as the last chain came loose. Slowly, he gripped the knob and turned it. Then he peeked his head inside, and a small expectant breath rushed past my lips.

Utrecht stepped fully into the room, and the hall went wintry cold.

Lochlan pulled the door shut behind him, threw the latch, and attached the chain, and that’s when the screaming started.

The sound was so oppressive and blood-curdling, my legs were sprinting me away, down the hall past the gallery, before my mind caught up to the rest of me. Get out, get out, get out, my panicked brain shouted.

I didn’t slow down until I was shouldering my way out the front entrance, crunching broken window glass under my boots. The gelding in the drive whinnied and reared, and I slowed my pace, arms lifted.

There was my escape, my chance away from all that frightfulness.

I made soothing noises. My heart thundered in my chest and my hands shook, but the horse stopped rearing. It remained agitated, ears twitching and back hoof stomping. I sang a little song to calm the beast, one that used to help me with the animals when I was a domestic.

When I had the gelding calm and nuzzling my palm, I spared a thought for what I was doing. I'd left the house because the horrid screams had startled me. But where was I going now?

More shattered glass echoed in the distance, and Utrecht's piercing scream rent the air. The horse huffed. I took his reins, untying him from the post, and whispered calmly to him to keep him from rearing again. Utrecht sprinted out from the backside of the manor. His hair had gone completely white. He ran like he had death at his heels, until the woods and the shadows between the trees swallowed him whole.

I patted the horse's neck, my mind whirling.

Should I go back inside to check on Lochlan? What would become of Utrecht now, and did I even care? No, I didn't. The weaver women could have him.

The same thought I'd had that morning that stole my appetite came to visit me again, only it was louder this time. If Lochlan couldn't forgive poor sweet Martha—if he couldn't forgive himself—what chance was there for me? She'd been serving her sentence for eleven years, and my wrongs were so much worse than hers.

I couldn't even forgive myself. How in hell did I expect Lochlan to manage it ?

I didn't. I shouldn't. There was no hope for that at all.

“But I love him,” I whispered to the horse, to the spirits, to the weaver women who might be listening.

I would always love him.

But, oh God, I didn’t want to be one of his ghosts anymore. I didn’t want to be ruined. I didn’t want him to carry around the pieces of my shattered heart in his breast pocket forevermore. I wanted to fix what I had broken—including the things broken about me. I wanted to help him, but it was becoming painfully clear that I wouldn’t be able to make anything right unless I took action, unless I did something.

My savings were inside the house. He’d told me exactly where I could find my cash, but I didn’t go back for it. Lochlan had searched and searched for whatever remained of me for twenty years. I’d spent that same amount of time trapped in guilt, lonely and struggling, earning that fortune. He could keep it. This was my final penance.

“Rynn?” At my back came the sad voice of the man I loved so much my chest hurt. “Please don’t go, Rynn.”

I didn’t look behind me for a long moment. I couldn’t. I knew how much watching me leave would hurt him even if I didn’t intend to stay gone, and I couldn’t bear it. In my mind I could see him crowding the doorway, his expression as broken as the shattered glass he stood in. Those sad eyes . . . I didn’t let myself think about them. I hated every second of causing him pain.

“Utrecht is gone,” he soothed. “You’re safe now.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” I whispered. “This isn’t goodbye.”

“Then why do you look like you’re about to start crying?” he said, a catch in his voice.

I sucked back the threat of tears, sniffing. "Because I don't want to make you sad." I coughed out a sob.

"Then stay !" He took one great step closer and hesitated, like I was the horse he didn't want to make bolt.

"I need to fix it, Loch!" I swiped at my nose. "I can't leave you this way. Look at what I did to you! How can I say I love you and just leave you like this? I promise I'll come back to you, but please let me fix it! Let me make it right again!"

"Rynn." That was all he said. That was all he had to. No plea in all the world would have struck me harder.

"I need you to believe that I'll come back," I said, fighting to get the words out. I swallowed down another sob. "I keep making mistakes. Bringing Utrecht here was yet another. I'm going to fix what I did, find what I stole, and then I'll return here like I should have before. I'll prove that I love you. I promise you, Loch."

"You won't be able to find my ring," he pleaded. "It's been twenty years. Ground shifts. With the rain and the runoff, who knows where it is now? I believe you, all right? I believe you buried it. I know you're sorry. I'd never ever stick you in that horrid cell in the basement. I can barely deny you anything now. Of course I'd never put you down there. Please come away from that horse."

"I'm not worried about that stupid cage. I have to try this! I broke you. I stole from you. I made it impossible for you to forgive me. For the love of God, I have to fix something ! I can't go back in time, but maybe I can do this one thing!"

I mounted the horse with some difficulty in my day dress. Even riding astride, I'd be uncomfortable, though Utrecht had spared no expense on the tack. The leather was fine and buttery soft, but I wasn't wearing the right clothing. That wouldn't deter me,

though. Nothing would deter me from my new purpose.

Run away. Run away until it hurt a little less. That's all I knew how to do. Was that what I was really doing now? Running until I found something else to distract me from the monster on my back and the talons of guilt in my gut, just a little? Just enough.

There was no doubt that when the time came that my body finally failed me, I'd return to this house. I would be one of his ghosts properly until he breathed his last and joined me, but I didn't want us to live our lives that way, too.

"I'll come back to you, Loch, like I should have before, and I'll return what I took," I vowed, and my voice carried. It echoed in my ears alongside the rush of my pulse. Tears blurred my vision as I pushed the gelding into a trot and left Nightingale House—my house—behind me.

* * *

The horse wanted to run, eager to get as far away from that eerie place as he could, but his speed was not comfortable for me. I didn't often ride, and it was a struggle to slow him down.

Three times I nearly turned the gelding back. Leaving Lochlan hurt me so. The wound went as deep as it had that first time all those years ago. I was tired and hungry and parched. My eyes hurt from crying. There was some water in a canteen in the saddlebag, and a moderate amount of cash as well. It would see me to the bank at Salt Rock comfortably.

I could sell the horse. Purchase some equipment to hunt down the ring with. Pay a few extra hands to help me . . .

Or I could claim my emergency funds and begin again. I knew how to start over. I'd perfected that art in the last two decades.

I pushed the latter thought away. It had come to me out of an instinct built from years of surviving alone. I wouldn't do that to Lochlan now. Not again. I had one mission here: save him. Whatever remained of him, he was still mine. I'd search for that damn ring I'd stolen, even if it took me twenty years.

If I thought the ghosts would leave me alone now that I was away from Lochlan and that house, I was wrong. A part of me had guessed that already. I'd been running from my past, hiding from the darkness all my life. I just didn't realize there were spirits in it. But now I did, and they haunted me still.

They were attracted to my grief. The wayward ghosts that traveled the road passed by me and left me sad and cold and sent a prickle down my spine, because my heart was just as haunted as Lochlan's and always had been.

"I don't want to do the wrong thing," I told no one particular. The horse or the spirits perhaps. Or the weaver women if they could hear me from their woods still. "Why does everything I do always feel like the wrong thing?"

Should I go back and reassure him more? Stay the course? Both seemed like the incorrect answer.

I followed the road, unfamiliar with my surroundings. I was faster on my own, and because I didn't need to stop at a station to drop off mail like Mr. Mazibuko did, I made good time back to the inn that I knew.

I was nervous as I spotted the Drasland orchard. We hadn't left our room in good shape. Perhaps the owners would turn me away, but I was hungry. My thighs were sore. It was nearing the lunch hour, which meant there wasn't enough daylight for me

to try to make it all the way back to the city, and the horse would need to rest. I didn't know the animal and didn't dare push him too hard.

I could still make it back to the house, though . . .

Maybe I just needed to sleep on it. Needed a night away to form a stronger plan. Lochlan was right. My chances of finding that tiny ring were slim, and I hadn't buried it very deep. Runoff could have carried it anywhere.

The owner, Eva, was less friendly than before when I pulled up, and she handed the reins off to her boys, but she didn't turn me away. In fact, she also didn't seem surprised I was there as she guided me inside to a sitting room, promising tea while I waited on a meal.

"Rest here," she said just outside the archway, then she departed.

The room was not empty. Lochlan sat in a wingback near the fireplace.

"How?" I demanded, voice rising.

"I knew you'd stick to the road," he said calmly enough, but his fingers told a different story, digging so hard into the leather of his seat that his nails went white. "I cut through the woods on horseback and halved the travel time. I know the mire well."

He knew the mire well because he'd spent years searching the swamps for whatever remained of me. He hadn't said it, but I heard that in his words anyway. The monster on my back sunk its talons into my gut. With great restraint, I resisted doubling over.

I was tired and thirsty and guilty and sad. I stomped over to the sofa seat and collapsed onto it. He poured me a cup of tea, and it steamed invitingly. I didn't

hesitate to bring it to my lips and drink, I was so desperate for comfort. The flow of warmth down my throat soothed my nerves.

Lochlan removed a leather pouch from his pocket and tossed it onto the table. “I thought about being a pirate and putting weaver-wood in the kettle.”

I set my cup down hastily, and he smirked at me.

“I didn’t do it,” he said, lifting the saucer and handing it back.

“That’s an improvement, I suppose,” I murmured, reclaiming the cup. The warmth between my fingers loosened the tension in my belly.

“And I didn’t bring a carriage or a wagon,” he said. “There wasn’t time. It’d be difficult to get you home in a stupor without one.”

I glared at him through the steam. “That’s less of an improvement, Loch.”

His grin went crooked. “I’m unreasonable around you, Rynn, but I am trying to be less of a pirate. Give me that, at least.”

I drank more of my tea, gathering strength from its heat between my fingers. “I need you to try much harder.”

He rubbed at the stubble on his jaw. “What you saw earlier, what happened with Utrecht . . . that had to be frightening. But that would never happen to you, Rynn. You aren’t like him. You’re safe in my house.”

“I think we both know I didn’t leave because of the spirits,” I said, avoiding his eyes. I could hardly stand the weight of them. “I told you what I planned to accomplish.”

“I don’t think that’s why you left.”

“I told you—”

“You’re running again.”

“I’m not!” I insisted, and my heart pinched.

“You are,” he said, reaching out to lay a hand over the teacup that rattled between my fingers. “I heard you all those times you told me you couldn’t stay and that you wanted to take me away. So this time I’m running with you.”

It was a good thing he put his hand over the cup when he did. He caught it when the next sob wracked me and I dropped it. He placed the cup on the table, and he sat back and let me cry. I wept until the image of him was a blur, my eyes were so wet.

“I’m supposed to be trying to fix you, not the other way around,” I said, but I wasn’t certain how much of that was coherent.

Lochlan pulled out a thick envelope from the lapel of his waistcoat, and he set it on the table beside the weaver-wood. I took both the pouch—best not to tempt him—and the envelope. My cash was inside. He hadn’t bothered to put on a coat, he’d been in such a hurry. But he’d made sure he brought me my fortune.

“You forgot that,” he said softly.

“Penance,” I told him, dropping it back on the table between us. It landed hollowly.

He shook his head. “I don’t want your penance.”

“Then what do you want from me, Loch? Because I can’t be one of your ghosts

anymore.”

He didn’t have an immediate answer for me, or it wasn’t one he could articulate.

He watched the fire crackle for a moment, then his lips parted and he sighed somberly. “When I first went looking for you after Hulda told me the truth, I started in Light Lily and retraced your travels. I stopped at a number of music halls in places just outside of Blackwood County until I finally found the Night Lark. I didn’t want to let myself hope, but I couldn’t help noticing that you never traveled very far away from home. Not for someone who wanted to get away. In fact, had you gone far, it might have been impossible to find you.”

“I didn’t go far,” I agreed.

“Is there any chance at all, even in the slightest, that some part of you hoped I’d find you one day?”

A sorrowful moan caught in my throat. “There’s no doubt about it, Loch. Of course I wished for that. I didn’t let myself dwell on it, though. I didn’t dare hope, but I wanted that. I wanted to be wrong about everything. Wanted you to still have it in your heart to love me after all that I’d done. I ruined it, but then I always knew you were better than I deserved. So maybe you would fix what I couldn’t.”

“No part of me ever stopped loving you,” he said, and his breath hitched. “Even when I was my most unforgiving.”

I stared at him for a time, gathering my thoughts. Eventually I pulled my legs up under me, wanting to make myself smaller on the cushion. “I know you don’t think I’m capable of love,” I said softly, “and I understand why. There were even a few moments there when I was thinking on your words and I was scared that you might be right.”

I had his full attention now. His sad eyes glistened in the light from the hearth and the brightness from the windows. Mine stung with threatening tears.

“But I know I’m capable of that most torturous of emotions,” I continued around the knot growing in my throat. “I know I love you by how much I hated the people and things that made me think of you while we were apart. Poetry? I can’t read it. Can’t stomach it anymore because it reminds me of those beautiful, lyrical letters you used to write to me. Shakespeare? Hate him. Can’t enjoy the bard without thinking about the way you comforted me after I read that damn tragedy.”

A fierceness lit his gaze. He looked like a man possessed. There was sadness there, too, but he was all Loch, all mine, because Loch and Finley were one and the same. My pirate.

I was a pirate too, though.

“A few years back,” I continued, wet lashes lowering, “I met a young man in Salt Rock who announced to the bar that he’d just sold all of his belongings so he could head west to seek his fortune. Everything he owned was in his purse. But how dare he look a bit like you used to. I stole that purse, because how dare he make me think of you when I was trying so hard not to. He wasn’t the only one either. Sometimes they smelled like you used to. Sometimes they had your eyes, or I caught them reading one of your favorite books. How dare they. So I stole from them too, and I never once felt bad about it. I just hated them so much for making me remember what I’d lost—what I foolishly gave up.”

“Why are you telling me this, Rynn?” he asked, a scratch in his voice.

“I know I’m not any good at loving you.” My voice cracked. “I’ve not been what you deserve, and I doubt I ever will be because I don’t truly know how to repair all I’ve done. But I do know that I love you. I loved you when you were a boy. Then I loved

you when you were that young man I gave my heart away to. And I love whoever you are now. Finley and Lochlan. No matter what we do to each other, I can't help it. I can't make me stop it and neither can you. I love you, Loch."

"But that doesn't mean you're coming with me right now, does it?" he said, shoulders rolling forward.

"I . . . I don't know. All I'm certain of in this life is that I need loving you to hurt a little less," I confessed. "And I think you need that, too. Maybe getting that ring back is the answer, and if it is, then it's worth the hunt. However long it takes. "

He left his chair and came to the sofa, sliding in next to me. I fell against him, needing his touch to soothe away the ache spreading across my chest.

"I want to forgive you and be forgiven," he said, tears landing in my hair, his arms sturdy and warm as they encircled me. "I want to let it all go. I just don't know how. Tell me how."

"I don't know either." A tear dripped down my nose. Another fell across my lips. "The audacity of me, demanding something I don't even know how to do."

"Pirates are good at finding treasure," he said playfully around the catch in his voice. "Why not take me with you?"

I shook my head. "If there's to be any digging, it's got to be me that does it, I think."

He rocked me gently side to side, the motion calming as the fire warmed my face. "I often think about what it would be like if we could go back in time. What I would change. What if we could do that?"

"I would want to change so many things," I said.

“What if you’d never buried my ring at all? Then no one would have to do any digging.” His voice took on a dreamy quality that soothed me. “What if we pretended you escaped to safety, then sent it back to me. My ring is stored away unharmed. I knew you were alive, and I came for you just like you always wanted me to. What if we pretended that’s what you’re doing here right now? You came to this inn, to meet me again for the first time.”

Turning in his arms, I blinked at him. Searching his face, I found him to be sincere. An excitement brewed inside me that made me feel lighter. “You want to begin again? Here and now?”

“As a start,” he said, squeezing me against him. “If we’d finally found each other right here and right now—no theft, no running away, no coercion, no revenge, no need for forgiveness because it’s all been righted—what would you want to do first?”

The fire consumed the logs with a spark of light and a crackle as I pondered his heavy question. “I don’t know if it’s the right thing . . .”

“Tell me anyway,” he said encouragingly. “Tell me whatever is on your mind. We’ll decide together.”

“I want to return to Light Lily,” I said, surprised by how resolved the words sounded sliding out of my lips. “I think I need to go back to the house one last time. I’m not quite sure why. I just know that when I looked through the window in the parlor, it finally made those dreams about that door stop, and when I learned the baron was really gone, I finally got his voice out of my nightmares. What if we could put that whole house out of our minds for good? Banish it forever ?”

“You think visiting the old house will make us stop dreaming about it?”

“Yes! But I could never go back there alone. I wouldn’t dare. If I’m pretending I met

you here for the first time, if I think about why I'd come to this place over any other, I think that's what I'd be trying to do. Trying to make myself go back there again."

"Come with me." He stood, holding my hand in his. "Cutting through the mire into Light Lily will be quick, but we should hurry while we have the sun. You'll need to keep close to me on your horse. The mire is deceiving. It can appear safe, and then suddenly you're chin-deep in muck."

Lochlan Finley

I hadn't been back to the house of my youth in ages. Not since the waters began to rise as growth in nearby cities doubled, and the marsh flooded. I'd returned just once to make sure my adoptive mother was delivered safely to her sister's home in Ohio, and then I abandoned that horrid place completely.

Nature had reclaimed it. Ivy wound up the steep gables and overwhelmed the lattice. Greenery covered most of the windows. The tree canopy above us had grown so thick, sunlight filtered through in weakened beams.

"It's sinking," Rynn said as I helped her dismount.

It was. As we neared, its unlevel foundation buried in the water became clearer. We left our horses on higher ground between two ash trees .

"The mire will claim it all eventually," I said. The house leaned slightly to the west. There was something satisfying about knowing that it would soon exist no more. I hoped it would take all my dreadful memories with it.

"It's not claiming it fast enough," she said, and I understood immediately what she meant. She wanted it gone, too. Wanted to obliterate it and everything it represented from the earth forevermore.

Rynn hoisted her skirts and marched through the wet.

"The house isn't safe. Especially not on that side where it's sinking," I cautioned, and

nerves had my heart thundering in my chest, but determined as she was, she didn't slow. I raced after her, splashing in the muck that came up over my ankles.

"Do you have your lighter?" she asked when I caught up to her.

"Yes, but—"

"Good. I'm going to burn it down!"

"Rynn," I said, concern diminishing my voice. "He's in there."

She knew immediately who I meant, and she stopped, dropping her skirt into the water. Muck soaked up into the hem, darkening the blue shade to black.

Rynn let out a shuddering breath. "I'm so fucking tired of being afraid of that man . . ." She stuck her hand out, palm up. "Give me your lighter."

"No. I'm going with you," I said, more resolve in my voice than I felt in my soul. I was tired of fearing Father too, though the sentiment did nothing to dull the sensation tightening my chest and pebbling my skin.

Water gushed over the entry steps. We climbed the porch to dry ground. The front doors stuck from disuse but were unlocked. I muscled them open. We were careful where we stepped, avoiding floorboards that were too soft. We moved cautiously out of the entryway, around the main staircase, and into the drawing room where the uneven floors inclined.

The fireplace was piled high with dried logs, crinkled leaves, and ash. A thick layer of dust settled over everything. A single sofa remained, stained with age, abandoned like the rest of the estate.

I pointed to the wide windows. “I saw you for the very first time right through there.”

Rynn came and stood beside me, dress dripping into a puddle beneath her. We peered out of the dingy glass together, seeing what once was: A long drive. Boren, tall and pale, chopping wood near the stables. Gertrude tending to the floors while my mother crocheted on the sofa. Martha creating heavenly smells in the kitchen.

And lovely little raven-haired Rynn, walking up the drive carrying an old potato sack full of her things between her small hands.

“I saw you, too, saw you looking at me, and I hoped you were nice.” She slipped her hand inside mine and gave it a squeeze. “And you were.”

I smirked at her. “Not a pirate?”

“Not at all. Well, not yet.” Her smile was sweet, and it crinkled the corners of her dark eyes.

We set to work then. I pushed the sofa up against the central wall. Then I gathered the logs from the fireplace and built a pyre around the old seat. Rynn ripped down the dusty curtains and added them to the mess.

She opened the closet door, searching for discarded linens. The door clattered against the wall, and Rynn stopped, eyes downcast. I moved to see what had made her pause .

The bottom of the door was scored with scratch marks made by tiny hands—our tiny hands.

I crossed to her, steps echoing in the quiet room, and I moved her aside gently. Age and wear had turned the door brittle. I kicked it apart in two brutal strikes. The boards splintered, raining down broken bits like matchwood. Lip quivering, Rynn helped me

gather the pieces, and we added them to the very top of the pile.

A floorboard creaked overhead, and we both froze. My breath caught. Our gazes drifted to the ceiling, following the sound of groaning wood. Upstairs, a door opened then closed. Another flew wide, smacking against a wall before shutting just as sharply.

Rynn's throat bobbed. "Is that him?"

I nodded. My body had gone inert. For a moment, I couldn't even get my fingers to respond to my orders.

"What's he doing?" she whispered.

I wasn't yet sure. More doors opened. More boards groaned above us. Heavy footsteps clomped down the stairs. Tension gathered in my shoulders, coiling my muscles. A part of me half expected to see him there exactly as I remembered him: the tall man with the big mean hands, a smile that never reached his eyes, and a barbed tongue that could tear me to shreds faster than his whip ever could.

The man who was supposed to be my father.

But there was nothing but a shade of him now. His ghost, a smoky transparent essence, moved solemnly downstairs, peeking into one room before trying the next.

"He's searching for something," I said, then it dawned on me. "He's looking for my mother. She hasn't lived here for fifteen years at least. He's caught in a mill, like the spirit that won't stop making your floor wet. He searches room by room. Then he begins again . . . There he goes now, back upstairs to start over."

Rynn's brows lifted. Then she frowned. "He's been searching for her here for that

long?”

“Yes,” I said resolutely as doors clattered above us. “He’s not even paying any attention to us.”

She sighed. “I hate how much that makes me feel sorry for him.”

I rubbed a hand across my chest, easing the twinge of sympathy building there between my ribs. “I hate it, too.”

“What will happen to him once we burn the house down?”

“He’ll keep searching the mire. He’ll never stop looking. There was no one else he cared about in all the world.” Mother was the only person my father ever showed any affection for, and he couldn’t find her. It had been a while, but I received a letter from her sister from time to time. She’d let me know how my adoptive mother was doing. She would still get confused at times, and in those moments, she always asked after my father, wanting to know when he would come home.

“I’m glad he’s dead,” Rynn said, face crumpling. “I want the house dead and gone too . . . but I don’t need to add to his suffering now. Not in this way.”

“I could help him,” I said, peeking down at the mud on my boots, “but I don’t know if I want to.”

Rynn hooked her arm around mine and laid her head against my shoulder. “It should be whatever you want, Loch. I think you should decide, but it doesn’t have to be right now. We could always come back here, you know? There’s no rule saying it has to be today.”

The freedom to choose felt like the most beautiful gift. With her warmth pressed

against my side, I knew what I wanted: him gone from here, far from us, and this house gone with him. I waited until his form returned to the stairs.

“Pa?” I said gently, and the creaking on the steps ceased.

The shade hovered there, and the house went cold, so cold the windows frosted over, and my breath fogged up. Rynn pressed against me, shivering.

“Don’t you remember, Pa?” I told him. “Mother’s not here. She’s at her sister’s, and she’s expecting you. You’re not going to leave her waiting, are you?”

The shadows darkened to a pitch-black I couldn’t see through, and the temperature dropped further. I hugged Rynn to my chest against the bitter bite of the cold.

“Loch?” Rynn gasped.

A familiar fear gripped my heart, crippling me. I clung to her as the darkness moved to cover us. Rynn buried her head in my waistcoat, and I hid my eyes in her hair. The shadows swallowing us up were absolute.

I felt like a boy again, small and powerless, shrouded in a night that was full of all the same strange sounds I’d come to fear the most. I could hardly breathe. I couldn’t feel anything but the cold and the icy grip of Rynn’s fingers digging into me.

I was drowning in the darkness, in the scritch-scratching against the wood, the eerie creaks and groans of creatures I couldn’t see.

But then Rynn began to sing. The melodious tune grew louder, drowning out those horrid sounds. It wasn’t a song like anything I’d hear in a music hall. It wasn’t sultry or beguiling. It wasn’t haunting like the ballads my nightingale performed in my dreams. It was nothing like the songs she’d sung when I was sick.

This was a silly made-up song little Rynn used to sing just for fun. The joy of it cut straight through the darkness. The urge to laugh warmed my soul, chasing off the brutal cold.

“Pa,” I said, and the darkness faded from an inky black to a light blue like the sky when the sun was rising. His shade loomed there, a foggy presence I stared directly at, daring him to come for me. “You were a shit father.”

“Damn right he was,” Rynn added at my side, and I pushed her behind me. Then a breathy, nervous chortle escaped her before she went back to humming her silly song.

The shade hovered, growing darker, casting a shadow down the staircase that wrapped around the banister. He charged but stopped just in front of me.

I thought I’d be frightened still, but I wasn’t. I couldn’t find even a sliver of fear in me for this loathsome man. I could sense the panic and terror in him, and I was no longer a small boy and no stranger to ghosts. I’d outgrown him. He’d looked like a big strong monster when I was a child, but to my adult eyes, my father was nothing more than a sad, pathetic man, too scared of shadows to face them himself. He’d turned Rynn and me into bait for the spirits that haunted him, and I could think of nothing more pitiful.

He was weak. Too desperate and wretched to hold my fear now.

“But I was wrong before,” I choked, remembering the words I’d used twenty years ago to trick him out into the marsh, away from seeing eyes. Rynn laced her fingers through mine, and I found strength in her touch. “I’m sorry, Father. I was wrong when I told you Mother went wandering in the mire. She’s not lost. She’s not here at all.”

He wasn’t going to hurt us anymore. He couldn’t. Not without me hurting him worse.

He was more afraid of us than we were of him. He was nothing but a shade now. No different than the shadows that once haunted him, as helpless as wrathful ghosts always were and just as lost.

The steps creaked, the floorboards rumbled, and the shadows melted away. The doors flew open, and an eerie wind whistled inside, bringing in the light. The room warmed once more, thawing the windows.

“Is it over?” Rynn asked me.

I pulled out my lighter and struck the flint. The small flame heated my hand.

“Not just yet,” I said, and the turn of my lips felt wild and wolfish.

I followed Rynn into the parlor. She settled in the center of the room, taking in the spartan space. Spiders spun cobwebs between the bar and the wall.

“I fell in love with you in this room,” she said, and the confession brought me up short.

“That so?” I was still emotional from the conversation with Father. Her words made my throat burn. I didn’t resist the tears when they came. Rynn had certainly witnessed me crying often enough that there was no shame in it now.

She pointed at the corner of the room nearest the archway. “My knees hurt and my hands were cramping after scrubbing the floors in the hall. I was hiding in here from more chores, but the baron caught me. He started in with his hollering. You were over there.”

I remembered the moment she described, and I could picture a smaller, scrawnier, twelve-year-old me hiding near the bar—afraid, but not for myself. I was scared he’d

box her ears again or worse. I couldn't stand it when he hit her. Nothing made me feel more useless—or angrier. I hated it most when no one else did anything. The other adults would pretend it hadn't happened at all.

“You broke a glass for me,” she said, and her lips twisted just so with the sweetest hint of a smile. “I knew you'd done it on purpose. I saw you knock it off the bar. He turned on you instead, and I was sure of it then. I knew I loved you. I knew I always would . . . Do you believe me, Loch? Do you believe I love you?”

“I do,” I said urgently. I couldn't form words to express what that meant to me. I could barely swallow for the catch in my throat. Rynn was a runner, but when the one man she'd always feared the absolute most had charged at us just now, she hadn't left me.

She hadn't run.

Rynn gave me my space then. She found an abandoned rocking chair in the parlor, and she threw it against the wall, repeatedly. She giggled gleefully while she shattered it. I made torches out of the broken pieces, wrapping the ends in curtain fabric while Rynn went looking for more things she could smash.

When she was finished, we used the torches to light the shattered remnants of the door first, burning away the evidence of the desperate scratch marks our smaller fingers had made. We stuffed our torches under the sofa, pushing them up against the wood piled there. It didn't take long for it all to catch—everything was so aged and dry—and then we hurried out of the house, back into the marshy wetlands.

It was a slog to reach the horses, but once on dry land, we made a point of watching the thick smoke billow from the windows. The flames came next, burning away the greenery and blackening the glass. The fire roared and crackled as it expanded, carrying our retribution with it.

Rynn threw her hands up and cheered on the flames. I laughed at her exuberance. The walls caught. It was shocking how fast it all spread.

“Houses are supposed to protect people,” she said, as more fire licked up the wooden siding. “You were a shit house!”

I found a stone in the grass, and I hurled it through an attic window. Rynn joined me. We threw rocks until our arms were tired, and I worried we’d lose the light if we didn’t leave soon.

“Where are we going now?” I asked her.

“Home,” she said.

“We won’t make Salt Rock at this hour.”

“Not there.” She shook her head, her smile small and sweet. “I want to go back to my house. The one you built for me.”

* * *

I shared her bed that night, though we were both too exhausted to do more than sleep. When I awoke at sunrise, I found her staring at the ceiling, already alert.

“What do you think happened with Utrecht?” she asked me. “Do you think he’ll bother us again?”

I tucked my arm under my pillow, propping up my head. “I doubt he’ll dare. The weaver women do not tolerate men like him. It’s unlikely he made it through their woods unscathed. If he survived them at all.”

“Good riddance, I suppose,” Rynn said, playing her fingers over the embroidery on the blankets, expression pensive. “Are the witches . . . are all of them dead?”

“They’re ghosts, yes.” I squinted at her, wondering how long she’d been awake, staring at the ceiling, pondering witches and ghosts. “Did you sleep well?”

“No,” she said solemnly, but then she shot me a grin. “But I didn’t dream about that damn house either.”

“An improvement,” I cooed.

She sighed, and her eyelids fluttered closed. “I know I need to get myself out of bed now . . . I just. I don’t know. I just feel rotten inside. I guess I’m disappointed because I was hoping I’d feel better after all of that yesterday. Shouldn’t I feel relieved? Renewed? Forgiven?”

“You are forgiven, but why do you have to get out of bed at all?”

“Oh, you know,” she said, waving my words off. “One shouldn’t wallow and all that.”

“Where is that written?” I asked her.

She snorted. “You know what I mean. It’s time to start the day. Time to shake off the ghosts, the darkness, and all the bad feelings. Time to get dressed, put on a smile, and get on with it.”

“Hm. Not today, I think,” I told her.

She turned onto her side to face me. “What are you suggesting?”

“We make our own rules, Rynn. That’s what I’m suggesting.” I threw off the blankets and popped to my feet. “Stay right there and don’t stop wallowing. I’ll be back.”

Her chuckling followed me out of the room.

I returned with a cart loaded with tea service, a kettle of coffee, and breakfast, including an assortment of boiled goose eggs courtesy of our friends the witches. Because it was her favorite, I brought extra butter and thick warm toast.

We ate breakfast in bed. She insisted on leaving to wash. I let her attend to her morning ablutions so I could visit the lavatory and see to mine, but then I instructed her to put her nightclothes back on. She re-joined me under the covers in the chemise I liked best, the one that was sheer in all the most tempting places and hugged her lush body.

I rolled on top of her, caging her in with my arms and easing between her inviting thighs. “Are we still wallowing?” I asked her.

She stuck her lip out in a pout. “A little.”

“I dare you not to smile,” I said, then I took her bottom lip gently into my mouth, and I sucked on it.

She made a valiant effort, fighting the grin off her face, but she lost eventually. With my fingers, I teased the tender skin of her inner thigh, working my way toward her heat. I found the split in her underthings, and I caressed her until her head went back and her eyes slid shut.

“Oh God,” she purred, “that’s even better than burning a house down!”

“Are you going to come for me this time, sweetheart?”

Her fingers dug into the blankets at her sides. “Definitely,” she panted.

I worked her into a frenzy with my hands, cupping her breasts, stroking her pussy. I made my nightingale sing when she came. She found her release with a moan that was as melodious as music in my ears. The sound made me painfully hard.

As her body relaxed, I cleaned my hands on the bed linens, then grabbed her loosely by the throat. “Breathe,” I instructed her, carefully tightening my grip just enough, just the way she liked.

She did as I bid her, smiling prettily. I knew she liked it when I held her this way, liked the pressure of it, but for what I had planned next, I needed to make sure she could inhale and exhale properly. I rose up onto my knees and pulled her hips against me. Then I entered her in one hard thrust, knocking a gasp out of her.

“I still plan to make love to you,” I warned her once I was fully seated, “but there won’t be anything gentle about it this time.”

She grabbed my forearm in both of her hands, readying herself, pupils widening to swallow up the hickory color of her irises. She locked her legs around my waist, holding me close. “I love the pirate parts of you too, Loch,” she said. “I dare you to show me your worst.”

I kept her in bed the rest of the day. She was very fond of my worst, and as it turns out, it’s hard to wallow naked.

* * *

I hated it when estate business kept me away from Rynn, but I needed to hire more staff, and that required putting out an ad and a great deal of correspondence. I added a letter to Josephine to make her happy. I let her know that Rynn was officially her

business now, and I welcomed a visit so they could be properly introduced.

Late that evening, I retired to the drawing room, but Rynn was slow to join me. Piano music reverberated from the library. I enjoyed the music, but impatient for her company, I went to be near her.

When I rounded into the foyer, I realized it wasn't Rynn playing at all as I had originally suspected. Wet footprints led in through the doorway. More trailed across the floor where the hardwood met the marble tiles. They stopped at the grand piano, which appeared to be playing itself.

Rynn was riding around on the ladder for the bookshelves, letting it carry her side to side. She was having so much fun, she didn't notice when I crossed all the way into the room.

"Ahem," I said finally, disguising a chortle as a cough.

Rynn nearly toppled from her rung. When the ladder came to a halt, she climbed down haphazardly, brushing her black skirts down her thighs, and hurriedly fixed her hair. It was then I noticed how finely she was dressed.

"I was just, um, making sure the ladder worked properly," she said puckishly.

"Of course you were," I teased, dragging my eyes down her body. "You look fetching tonight. Did you change clothing?" I never would have been able to attend to work if she'd worn that to lunch. I'd taken dinner in my office.

Her long sleeves were black lace. They hung off her shoulders, exposing the column of her throat and the swell of her breasts. The skirt was long in the back and high in the front, falling just below her knees to show off her shapely legs. She was wearing absolutely nothing underneath the dress. Her natural form filled out the bodice. She

was dressed like a very, very expensive courtesan.

“I did. I just thought . . . I don’t know, actually. I just like this dress. It makes me happy, and dressing up sometimes helps with the wallowing.” She trapped her bottom lip between her teeth, and her cheeks went pink.

“I like that dress, too. I like it on you a lot,” I told her. Then I gestured at the piano. “Our watery friend has a hobby, it appears.”

She laughed. “I’ve been trying to guess his name because I knew that might help. I still haven’t figured it out, but then I got him to leave the floor at least. He followed me in here, and he’s been playing ever since. That’s an improvement, isn’t it?”

“A considerable improvement,” I agreed.

I made her dance with me. It took little coaxing. She was a lot better at it than I was. I had her sing for me too, like we were in a music hall. Afterward, she sat at the piano bench, and I attempted to play alongside our ghostly guest.

I kept one hand on Rynn’s exposed back while I played because it was impossible not to touch her in that dress.

* * *

That night, the ghosts kept me awake. There was nothing I could do for most of them. They cried at me, shouting confused things that made no sense, then moved on, gone just as quickly as they appeared. I slept in late the next morning. As the lunch hour neared, Rynn came to fetch me.

She ambled into my room and cruelly pulled aside the curtains, blinding me with sunlight.

“I’m having trouble getting out of bed,” I confessed groggily.

“I can see that,” she said, bathed in gilded light that glistened in her dark hair and made her fawn skin glow. “What’s the problem today?”

“Ghosts,” I told her, squinting into the brightness. She was an angel in a cream-colored dressing gown. A fallen one, because that gown was completely see-through in direct sunlight .

Rynn kicked off her slippers and climbed onto the bed. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “There’s nothing really to say. I wish they’d go away. I know they won’t. I wish I could help them. I know I can’t help them all. Most of them have to help themselves. You see the problem?”

Rynn climbed to her feet on the bed and began to jump. She started gingerly, then added so much force she nearly knocked me off the mattress.

A chuckle rumbled in my chest. “What the devil are you doing?”

“I’m helping,” she said, grinning down at me with a smile brighter than the sunlight streaming in through the windows. “Come on and join me. It works! I promise. It’s impossible to wallow when you’re jumping on a bed.”

She reached a hand down, still bouncing like a hare, trying to coax me into being silly with her. I took her offered hand and tugged her down beside me. She hit the mattress and erupted into giggles. I appreciated that she wanted to cheer me up, but I had a few better ideas for how she might do just that.

I pulled her under the blankets with me, lifted her gown, and convinced her to try my

way with my mouth between her thighs.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:49 am

Rynn Mavis

When I awoke the next morning, the vase on my mantle was full of purple sweet pea flowers—*lathyrus odoratus*, the goodbye bloom.

“Oh, Gertrude,” I said, touching a hand to my heart over my nightgown. “I’m glad he’s letting you go. I’m so happy for you.”

The room warmed, and the flowers vanished. Then dirty ditch water began to drip down the walls, catching in the empty vase.

I sighed. “I like it much better when you haunt the piano,” I told the nameless spirit that still got stuck in a pattern in my room every now and again. He’d find his way eventually, I was hopeful, but until then, I had to deal with soggy stockings every now and again.

I dressed and headed into the hall. The carpets were wet there too, so I was careful on the stairs. When Lochlan wasn’t in the dining room, I headed for the kitchen, to spend time with Martha.

Lochlan was there already, chopping vegetables at the table. The room was balmy and fragrant like a hot cake had been taken out of the oven recently.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

“Penance,” he said, and his lips quirked.

As I crossed to him, I felt a light veil brushing over my arm. The tender touch put a bittersweet ache in my chest because that touch hadn't been a greeting. It was a farewell.

"Goodbye, sweet Martha," I whispered. The room warmed like a loving hug, and then I felt her spirit depart.

* * *

Lochlan's talk of penance had me thinking about my fortune again. He didn't want my cash, and so I couldn't decide what to do with it. Frankly, I no longer wanted it either. It felt tainted.

At first, it had felt tainted by the conniving ways in which I had at times earned that money, all the tricks and all my stealing. Then it felt tainted by all it represented, my habit of running away to flee my problems. My betrayal of Loch. The life I'd lived chasing trouble instead of staying with him like I'd truly wanted to. I once believed the only option for a woman like me was a life of trouble or submission to a master to rule over her. Now I knew there was something much superior to either of those things.

I wanted to live a life chasing after hope instead.

If I could show some pity to that horrible baron, then by God, I most certainly could show a little toward myself. And if Lochlan could forgive me, then surely I could forgive myself. Those were my first steps toward chasing hope and getting the monster off my back finally.

I was the one who'd put the guilt there in the first place. Realizing the power I had over it made it a little easier to dig its talons out of me. I saw something different in myself now, but I still couldn't figure out what I wanted to do with all that money.

It felt important to do something worthwhile with it, so I gathered it up and carried it in a wicker basket toward the weeping willow tree near the water gardens. I tucked it in beside the roots, and I sat there on my knees in the grass for a moment.

It was a bright spring morning. The sun warmed the ground and filled the air with that lovely green earthy scent that felt both homey and divine.

“This money used to mean a great deal to me,” I told the witches who listened. “In fact, it used to be the thing that mattered the very most to me. And then I remembered that you look out for women, and although I doubt you’ll have much use for cash yourselves, perhaps you might find a lady who needs it desperately. Maybe you’ll find a girl who can’t seem to catch a break, who can’t seem to stop running, can’t seem to stop finding trouble . . . Wherever she is, she needs this more than I do. If you’ll do that for me, I’ll bring you an offering every week in thanks.”

The sudden wind whipping through the drooping branches above me felt like an accord.

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Lochlan Finley

Nightingale House, 1894

I went looking for the love of my life, carrying a bouquet I'd collected myself of daffodils and daisies. We'd parted ways after our morning walk. Now, rather than finishing my business correspondence with one of my brewery managers, I wanted to know what she was up to. She wasn't in her library, so I continued down the hall, carting the fresh blooms.

I found her in the drawing room, hands full of linen, cleaning something at the table. I left the flowers for her on the armchair, then I moved to join her.

"What's this? Not more penance, I hope." I thought we'd finished with all of that ages ago.

"Not penance," she said, and there was a glow to her I'd never seen before. She hadn't even commented on the flowers, she was so distracted. Her smile glistened. Her hickory eyes were bright. "It's a gift from the weaver women. I've been leaving them offerings every week for a while now, and this morning they left me a present in return."

I crossed to her, waiting expectantly for her to show it to me. She pulled aside the linen in her hands, uncovering the gift.

There sat a simple rose gold band, glistening against the muted tablecloth. I recognized it immediately, and my heart swelled. "My ring."

“That’s right,” she said, a catch in her voice. “I was just making it more presentable. It was still caked in mud. In fact, there was so much mud in the basket, I almost didn’t see their gift at all.”

“Put it on,” I told her.

Rynn sent me a watery smile. “If that’s what you want.”

“Of course, that’s what I want. And don’t ever take it off,” I insisted.

She slid it onto her finger, then held up her hand so I could inspect it. I stalked around the table toward her, wanting a much, much closer look. Rynn leapt back from me.

“What’s the matter?” Grinning, I tried to shift nearer.

She was on to me, and she took another firm step away. “You have that look.”

“What look?” I asked innocently.

“That pirate look,” she said, a secret smile in the corner of her beautiful mouth.

I lunged for her. Rynn let out a playful yelp, dancing out of my reach.

“But I always have a pirate look,” I protested.

She maneuvered to keep the table between us. “Not this kind. I know all of your looks now. This is an I’m-going-to-rip-that-dress-right-off-your-body pirate look.”

“How is that any different than the manner in which I always look at you?” I lunged across the table, grabbing for her, and the quick little vixen dodged me.

“It’s completely different this time!” she objected, lips twisting as she fought back a

smile.

“How?”

“I love this dress!” she shouted, balling up the skirts, pulling them closer to her body for their protection.

It was a pretty dress in a shade of violet I liked. The sleeves hung low from her shoulders, and the neckline showed off her bust, but that wouldn’t save it. Rynn knew it, and she ran for the archway.

“If you hold very still,” I said, mischief coloring my voice, “I won’t have to rip anything.”

“Don’t you dare tear it,” she said, squealing when I cut her off by the doors. She pivoted sharply, then raced behind the small sofa. “If you do, you’re buying me two more just like it—three more!” she shouted when I vaulted the sofa.

I chased my nightingale around the house I’d built just for her. Her laughter echoed off the once lonely walls. My heart fluttered in my chest at the sound of her delight, too full of love to be haunted by anything else.

The End

Thank you for reading!