



THE
FROSTY
DUKE

LOVE & ORDER

LILA DIPASQUA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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PRINT HISTORY

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1

L'Anonyme, London
December, 1885
Well before midnight.

Lewis Joseph Ambrose, ninth Duke of Ansford, stepped out of L'Anonyme, his favorite pleasure club, and shut the door promptly behind him. Sounds of debauchery wafting from within instantly silenced.

Sounds he'd immersed himself in on multiple occasions.

But not this night.

Tilting his head back, he drew the crisp winter air into his lungs. A gentle snow had begun to fall. It was the only thing that brightened the darkened alley where the discreet entrance to the club was located.

Why the hell had he bothered to come here? Not even the enticement of drinking and fucking could rid him of his ill humor tonight. And he knew the reason.

Christmas.

He hated the holiday.

Each year, he made a concerted effort to distract himself, to forget about it. More precisely, to forget about the reasons this time of year had earned his disdain.

He thought he could improve his mood by indulging in the sort of anonymous carnal encounters he'd come to prefer. But he was wrong. He'd walked out within a short time—without enough drink in him to thoroughly soak his brain. And, like a fool, he'd just rejected an attractive, well-warmed, willing woman.

Now he stood in the cold. Alone.

In a fouler disposition than when he'd arrived.

Adjusting his top hat with an impatient jerk of the rim, then his greatcoat, he strode out of the alley in search of his hired cab. His personal carriage awaited him streets away. No one arrived at L'Anonyme in their own transportation. "Anonyme" meant anonymous in French. Anonymity was expected in every regard by members who frequented the club.

He glanced across the street where he'd told the driver to wait. The cab was there, but he didn't see the driver. By the time he reached the other side of the road, he spotted the man racing up the street toward him, clearly having been in conversation with a fellow cab driver.

"Sir, are you ready to depart?" the young man asked as he stopped abruptly before him. He knew nothing about Lewis, as was the intent.

Lewis was already irked enough tonight, and decided to ignore the man's slight dereliction of duty. He just wanted to get home, and any discussion would only prolong that.

"Yes," was his curt response as the door to the cab was immediately opened for him. The four-wheeled cab was more than he needed. But it was all that was available during this *festive* holiday season. He gave him the address to where his personal carriage awaited with his own driver, along with his trusted man Darius Farley. He'd decided to return to his smaller, recently purchased residence in Cadogan Square rather than his stately childhood abode on Camden Hill that had hosted many Christmas celebrations—and that came with the title he'd inherited six years ago. The smaller six-story red brick home was much more comfortable. More welcoming. He'd finish off the night with some of his favorite brandy. The sweet burn of the amber liquid down his throat would be the best part of this abysmal evening.

Settling into the darkened cab, he tossed his hat beside him, rested his head against the velvet seat, and shut his eyes. The cab door closed, followed by a forward jerk and the clattering of horses' hooves on the cobbled roadway.

He was on his way home. *Thank God...* The tension in his shoulders relaxed.

"Sir?" The female voice came from within the cab.

His eyes shot open, only to stare into a black void.

What the bloody hell...?

All the curtains were drawn. The opposite side of the cab was obliterated in the dark.

"I'm sorry to have startled you. There's no reason for alarm." The female voice was calm.

Glancing down, he saw a sliver of light stream in from between the curtains, illuminating a small section of striped skirts for just a moment as they passed one of the gas lanterns on the street. He couldn't tell the exact

color. Nor the fabric. And he certainly couldn't see her face.

How had he missed her there?

"*Who are you? What are you doing in my cab?*" Perhaps he could have conveyed the questions with less of a snarl, but this situation was only adding to his disagreeable temperament.

"I'd rather not say my name at the moment. I did think of an alias to use to make it easier to address me. You may call me Sarah."

She'd plotted whatever she was doing *beforehand*? His initial irritation suddenly turned to concern. While she sounded calm, he was anything but. What the fuck was happening? Was he being kidnapped? Robbed? Was the driver involved? Lewis wasn't a small man, normally standing almost a full head taller than most other men. He was fit, strong.

He'd been in a bare-knuckle brawl a time or two in his life as a youth.

He wouldn't go without a fight.

Lewis leaned forward and shoved the velvet curtains beside her open.

The woman's face stared back at him, now lit by the night's silvery light. A pretty face, from what he could see of it—though half was hidden in shadow. At least he now knew there was just the two of them in the cab.

Opening the rest of the curtains to flood as much light into the confined space as possible, he had a better view of not just the interior, but outside as well. No one seemed to be following them. And thus far, the carriage was going in the expected direction.

He could see her better now. She wore a dark-colored winter hat and cloak, the hood of which rested on her shoulders. And she was even more attractive than he'd first surmised. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Beautiful cheekbones and mouth. That alone made her dangerous to men.

To idiotic men like him—who'd been known in the past to think with his prick.

"What do you want, *Sarah*?" he bit out.

"May I call you *Alfred*?"

"No."

"Then what alias would you like?"

"I don't want an alias. I want to know what the hell you want and whether the driver of this cab is in collusion with you."

"The driver? No, of course not. He doesn't even know I'm in here. And your request to know more is certainly fair." She looked down and rubbed her gloved hands together as a single lock of dark hair escaped her coiffure.

Perhaps she was cold. Though he sensed she was...*nervous*? He wasn't sure. He'd abandoned the notion long ago that he possessed any ability to discern women's emotions or thoughts outside his sexual encounters with them.

She returned her gaze to his. "I'm in need of your assistance. You are in possession of certain...*delicate*...information I desperately need. I know this is all rather surprising and rather unconventional, to say the least. I could pay you for your time. I have a piece of jewelry that I could offer..."

Lewis relaxed a little. She didn't know who he was. She wouldn't be trying to sway him with an item of jewelry if she knew the extent of his wealth.

"I don't know what information you think I have. Whatever scheme you are about, I'm not interested. I'll stop the cab at the station down the street, and you can get out and go about your business." He glanced out each window. Again, there seemed to be no one following them.

"No, wait! Allow me to explain. I have been waiting for you."

"Waiting for *me*? Why?"

"Because you're a man who frequents L'Anonyme. You are clearly a member." She leaned forward and tucked that errant lock of hair behind her ear. In a loud whisper, she said, "I know what sort of club it is and what one does there."

Why was she whispering?

He leaned forward and in a similar loud whisper confirmed bluntly, "One fucks there."

She didn't admonish him nor shrink back at his wording. Instead, she nodded. "Yes, and that is precisely why you're the perfect man to advise me." *Advise*? "I saw you enter, and within a short time, you left. You must be very accomplished at, well...*copulation*, if you can finish it so quickly."

Lewis blinked—suddenly wishing he *was* being kidnapped.

It was better than being unmanned and rendered speechless as she'd just done.

He wasn't about to defend his stamina or sexual prowess to this woman. Nor explain why he'd driven all the way to a pleasure club just to down two brandies and then leave like the imbecile he'd been tonight.

Before he could formulate a response, the cab came to an abrupt stop. He darted his gaze about and saw an empty street—except for his driver and Darius standing near his personal transportation at the end of the road.

Lewis snatched his hat from the seat, threw open the door, and practically

jumped out before the driver could assist. Within moments, the man stood beside him, looking bewildered as to why Lewis hadn't waited, then seemed even more befuddled by the unexpected female passenger poking her head out from inside his cab.

They were both looking up at her, but Lewis was transfixed. The street lantern was right above them. Shadows no longer hid her face. A winter wind blew against her, sending that errant lock of dark hair brushing away from her cheek.

She was bloody *beautiful*...

He simply stood there, hat in hand, admiring the details of the loveliest face he'd ever seen. Big dark eyes, delicate brows, and her mouth...so lush. Just the right fullness. Made for hours of oral bliss. A wave of raw lust licked up his spine. The urge to bite that plump lower lip, to taste that mouth, almost overwhelmed him. He was forced to tame it, stunned by his intense reaction to her.

She held out her hand to him. "Sir, if you will..."

And without a single other thought in his head, he helped her alight from the cab.

That was when he was hit with a second surprise. Standing in front of him, the wind and snow beginning to intensify, she was practically eye to eye with him. Only a few inches shorter. She was far taller than the average woman.

She was incredible to behold.

Pulling her hood on, she looked about, fighting with the wind to keep the thing in place. "Is this where you live?"

Stop gawking at her, for God's sake. The cold temperature was doing nothing to cool his stiffened cock. He slammed his hat onto his head, trapping some of the snow inside it, without giving a single damn.

This is what you get for not partaking as you should have at L'Anonyme, you fool.

"No." Turning to the driver, he said, "Do you see those men at the end of the street?"

"Yes, sir."

"Speak to the taller man for your payment, as well as funds to take this lady wherever she wishes to go." The weather was worsening, and he would dispatch her quickly and see to that brandy awaiting him at home.

"Yes, sir." With that, the driver rushed off to see Darius, the cold

temperature quickening his steps.

“I’m not going with him,” his female tormenter advised. “We have not concluded our discussions. I’m going with you.”

“No, you are not.” Lewis began to walk toward his men and carriage.

Immediately, she was there beside him, matching his pace. “I haven’t explained everything.”

“Explain it to someone else.”

“But you’re knowledgeable. I need to know what a man enjoys when he...well...during bed sport. Also, I need to know what is involved in the art of seduction.”

He stopped his strides. “You jest?”

She let out an exasperated breath. “I do not. I am standing in a winter storm with a complete stranger, having waited outside a pleasure club, and stowed away in a cab—all of which a woman wouldn’t dare do. I have ploughed far past acceptable conduct. Clearly, I am not jesting. Aside from a bit of your time, what would it cost you to aid me?”

“My sanity. It’s already being taxed right now.”

“Sir, as a member of L’Anonyme, there is much you can tell me. I could speak endlessly about geometry”—she gestured theatrically with an extended arm—“but I’ve learned that’s not what a man wants. I am utterly hopeless when it comes to social interactions with men.”

Shocking, that.

“I will be attending a Christmas ball in precisely twenty-one days. I really must have more of an understanding of the intimate acts between lovers by then. You need not concern yourself with my reputation or my making myself unmarriageable. I’m quite beyond that—for many reasons. I have attempted to learn as much as I could on my own. I obtained a book on the matter from one of those so-called ‘scandalous’ bookshops on Holywell Street. I read it thoroughly. I have several questions. I would very much like to arrange a time to meet with you to discuss my questions in depth. I do appreciate that the hour is late. When might you be free? Tomorrow? Where would you like to meet?”

Lewis looked around. His men were busy speaking with the driver of the cab. No one else seemed to be on the street.

“Has someone put you up to this ridiculous ploy?” This *had* to be some sort of prank.

She looked taken aback. “No, and it is not ridiculous. Nor a ploy. Will

you help me?”

“Absolutely not. Go back to the cab, madam. Go home.” He’d get Darius to escort her back to wherever she came from.

“I know how bizarre it must be to be asked to relay intimate information to a complete stranger, but I haven’t anyone else to ask. At least no one with your advanced knowledge to best advise me. If you will but answer some questions, I’ll never bother you again. Perhaps it would make this easier if we were better acquainted. I should tell you a bit about myself...”

Good God, no. Lewis walked away. “Not necessary.” *Not interested.*

“I’m not a virgin,” she exclaimed. For some reason, that stopped him dead in his tracks. He caught the amusement that flashed on Darius’s face, as her announcement had clearly carried down the street to his ear, before he had the good grace to school his features and look away. She quickly caught up to Lewis. “I gave myself to my love, Alfred.”

“His name is Alfred?”

“No, it’s an alias.”

“I thought that was my alias?”

“You didn’t want it.” She frowned, her expression having a tinge of *are you daft?* and *don’t you recall?* in it. “Are you married?”

That inspired his feet to move again, but she kept up with his long strides once more. *Damn her.* “No,” he said curtly.

“A fiancée?”

“No.”

“Any significant female in your life?”

“I had a dog once.”

“Then we have something in common.” She smiled, holding on to her hood. Still keeping pace with him with no difficulty. He tried not to think about how long and gorgeous her legs must be. “I had a lovely dog once too—Thalia. I named her after one of the Greek muses, the patron of comedy. My Thalia was amusing and intelligent. A collie. I do love dogs immensely. I loved Thalia very much.”

“Are you ever going to stop talking?”

Ignoring him, she forged on. “Alfred and I were intimate just one time. I’m in desperate need of your insight to gain a better understanding of men—in an *intimate* setting—and what I can improve upon. I promise not to take up much of your time. I do learn quickly. I have two degrees from the University of London.”

“Really,” he said dryly. It was a statement. Not a question. He had no idea if she’d truly graduated from the university. Or if anything she’d told him thus far was the truth.

He’d grown a general sense of distrust when it came to people—strangers, acquaintances, those who’d once been in his intimate circles, and beautiful women.

Most emphatically that last group.

“Yes, truly. Alfred will be in attendance at the ball on Christmas Eve. I’ve done something wrong and I must remedy that. The probability of a favorable outcome under any circumstance increases when one possesses greater knowledge.”

Lewis let out a sharp breath in frustration and abruptly halted his steps. She took two brisk steps away from him before realizing he’d stopped, then turned around and rushed back, her hand on her head, still fighting the wind that blew stronger the closer they moved to the corner of the street.

She stared at him with those big transfixing eyes.

“If any of this is true, and I do mean any of it, I’m going to be blunt with you,” he said, forced to elevate his voice slightly over the whirling wind. “Did it ever occur to you that perhaps *Alfred* said whatever he had to say, did whatever he had to do, simply to bed you? That you were merely a conquest to him and he has moved on to his next? It may be caddish of him, but not unheard of.”

“Alfred is not a cad,” she countered, that frown returning. And he hated that he found the way her brow crinkled adorable. “He is a brilliant mathematician. He’s published a number of papers with the London Mathematical Society. He’s sensitive, and bashful. I cannot broach the subject with him. I did something incorrectly. I must know what. I truly feel you’ll be able to decipher that for me.”

Lewis clenched his jaw to keep from spewing out the profanity burning up his throat, not just for this ridiculous situation he was in, but for some reason he was annoyed with *Alfred the mathematician*, who sounded like a pompous ass—and was definitely a cad.

His every rakish instinct told him so.

“Stay here.” Stepping around her, he walked straight up to Darius and grabbed his arm. “A private word with you,” he said, pulling him away from the drivers, the horses, and, most importantly, the woman plaguing him.

“Good evening, Your Grace.” Darius, who was a year Lewis’s junior,

gave him his usual smile, taking in stride the sudden yank on his arm and the wintry disturbance awhirl about them. Though almost the same in stature, in contrast to Lewis, Darius had fair hair and blue eyes.

“There’s not one fucking thing that’s good about this evening,” he told him.

“Oh?” Darius cast a glance at Sarah and suggested, “The lovely lady with you seems to be a good thing.”

“That’s because you don’t know her and don’t address me as *Your Grace*. Do not let this—likely mad—woman know who I am. I cannot get rid of her.”

“An attractive woman,” Darius lowered his voice to add, “*who is not a virgin* desires to be in your company. Are you certain you don’t wish to bear that suffering?” His lips twitched as he tried to hide his mirth. The difference in their station didn’t matter a whit to Lewis. Darius was like a brother—and not a subordinate in society. They’d gotten into mischief together since boyhood. Darius’s father had been steward to the late duke, Lewis’s father, for as long as Lewis could remember—until their passing mere weeks apart.

Darius’s father of natural causes.

Lewis’s sire prematurely in a fire.

Darius was the only man on this side of the stars Lewis trusted implicitly. He’d been by Lewis’s side through every trial of his life.

There was a time, years ago, when he’d enjoyed jesting with others. At one time, he’d possessed a more genial disposition. Darius was the only one left in Lewis’s life whom he permitted to rib him this way—which he only ever did in private.

“I’m glad you find this amusing. She waited for me to exit L’Anonyme, having stolen her way into my cab, and wants me to give her advice as to what she did wrong during her amorous encounter with *Alfred the mathematician*.”

“Alfred the mathematician?”

“It’s an alias. Don’t ask about it.”

“Very well.” Darius cast another glance at the woman in question. “She’s well dressed. Has some means. A widow?”

Lewis shook his head. “No. I don’t believe she’s been married.”

Darius gave a nod just as an icy gust assailed them. “The weather worsens, Your Gr...er... How should I address you?”

“Anything but Your Grace. And yes, we’re all about to freeze our

bollocks off if we stand here much longer. The problem is, she won't get back into the cab I've paid for to return her home. This woman is beyond insensible."

"We really must get the horses back. What if you offered to answer a few questions in the carriage, as we take her home?"

Lewis blew out a sharp breath. "It's worth a bloody try."

He walked up to "Sarah." Her eyes widened in anticipation of his next words. She'd switched hands and was now holding her hood in place with her left. Again, he couldn't help but admire her lovely face and the pretty dark curls that rustled wildly in the wind within the hood of her garment. He cleared his throat. "Madam, if you will not get in the cab, may I offer you a ride to your home? I will answer some questions you pose of me—"

"Excellent!" A big, bedazzling smile shone on her face, unbalancing him for a moment. That is until the next words came from her lips. "Will you please remove my trunk and valise and place it on this carriage," she said to the driver of the cab. *Trunk and valise?* "Oh, and I left my muff on the seat. Would you be so kind as to fetch me that as well?" The driver was off to do her bidding before Lewis could object.

She turned back to him. "May I call you *Percival?*"

"No."

"Really? I rather like the name. I think it suits you."

From the corner of his eye, Lewis could detect Darius fighting back a smile.

She stepped around Lewis and stopped at the door to his carriage.

Lewis scrubbed a hand down his face, wet with snow. He needed a moment to wrestle down his impatience. Both drivers were loading her belongings onto his carriage. "Why on earth do you have a trunk and valise with you?"

"I was on my way to the Christmas ball. I'll be happy to discuss it further in the carriage."

"I'd rather not." That made about as much sense as anything else she'd told him this night. "And how did you get them onto—"

"The driver of my cab helped me as yours was indisposed."

Clearly, his cab driver had been far more preoccupied than Lewis first realized. And for far longer.

"Yet again, you feel utterly comfortable entering my carriage alone? What if I'm a crazed murderer?"

Her pretty brows rose. “Are you a crazed murderer?”

“Do you expect crazed murderers to simply admit to it?”

“Probably not. But in seeing your kindness in offering to pay for my cab, to make certain I return home safely, and in having done everything you can to rid yourself of me, I’m confident your intentions are not nefarious. By the by, you should know that I don’t back down easily where men are concerned. I would never have achieved my scholarly aspirations otherwise, nor relent in my support of the suffrage movement. And besides, after what I’ve put you through this eve, if you were indeed a crazed murderer, I should think you would have strangled me by now.” Amusement sparkled in her eyes as she flashed him another dazzling smile before climbing into his carriage unassisted.

Darius choked on his laugh.

2

Ella settled in the carriage, beyond stunned at herself.

Dear God... She'd done it.

Despite the daring and sheer madness of her plan, it had worked. She'd found an expert in the art of pleasure, and knowledgeable of men's wants.

Of all the unorthodox things she'd ever done—and Lord knows there had been plenty—her actions this eve would completely appall her three older sisters. They were all married with “proper, respectable lives.” Without a doubt, her late father, the ninth Earl of Claverton, was rolling in his grave at this very moment.

The sheer number of diatribes she'd endured from him over her desire to pursue a higher education in science and mathematics, before finally wearing him down, were too many to count. He began each one with a sharp reciting of her full name: “*Luella. Elizabeth. Catherine...*” Not a single choice nor decision she'd made in her life hadn't horrified and, dare say, even mortified the lot of them at times.

What's one more?

Her determination to advance her studies in areas “suited to men,” her activism in the suffrage movement for the betterment of women's lives, her decision not to marry—mostly because there had been no offers to reject after several failed seasons—had all received a resounding, collective disapproval and disappointment from her siblings and sire.

She was thankful she at least had her forward-thinking suffragist Aunt Charlotte—her father's “wayward” sister. *Who, incidentally, may have found your rather spontaneous plan tonight a bit much.*

But Ella had stopped apologizing and justifying herself long before her father's passing four years ago. She was very much on the shelf. Free to pursue her passions and fight whatever injustices as she deemed fit.

Only, she'd never imagined she'd have been at the receiving end of a gross deception. One that she simply couldn't let stand.

Octavius Whimple... Her lover. A fellow of the London Mathematical Society. Not overly handsome, but still pleasing to the eye. Just three years her senior, he equaled her height—a physical attribute every man she'd ever

known found vastly unappealing about her, while most women found it mockworthy. Including her petite-sized sisters.

She'd thought Octavius was the perfect man for her.

Ella looked down, rubbed her gloved hands together, and shook her head in dismay. How could she have been so wrong? She'd been an utter fool, allowing him to use her affections against her.

He'd seduced her. Then he'd stolen her work.

The very paper she'd spent many months formulating and writing in the hope of having it published by the LMS and recognized by her peers—*would* be hers again.

By Christmas Eve.

Before Octavius could submit it to the president of the London Mathematical Society as his own at the Christmas ball.

The carriage door was snatched open. A wicked wind sent a sharp chill into the carriage. She shivered.

“Madam, where the hell do you live so we can take you home and get out of this damned blizzard?” Her rather put-upon gentleman had a scratchy disposition. But that wasn't off-putting in the least. She'd known men sterner and far harsher. And despite his saltiness, she rather liked him. She'd put him through an ordeal and yet, here he was, trying to help her to safety.

She gave him the name of the street adjacent to the one she actually resided on with Aunt Charlotte, but not a house number. She could easily walk the short distance home, with her personal belongings in tow, despite the weather. Though her aunt would be surprised to see her. Ella had been on her way to the Scarboroughs' London residence, with her trusted driver, intending to stay there with other invited guests until the culminating event of the Christmas ball on Christmas Eve, as she awaited Octavius's arrival.

That is, until she hatched her brazen plan outside L'Anonyme.

And the gentleman who was now part of that plan cursed and shook his head. He turned to the men outside and barked out one word: “Home!” Then climbed into the carriage, slammed the door shut, and seated himself across from her.

Doffing his hat, he set it down beside him. She watched as he ran a gloved hand through his wet hair. One couldn't help but notice this man was attractive in a way most men weren't, including Octavius. His nose, cheekbones, and jaw were chiseled to perfection. His mouth had captured her interest on more than one instance this eve. And though she couldn't tell the

exact shade of his eyes, they were somehow dark, but light. So captivating.

She quashed her thoughts immediately. *Those sorts of thoughts got you into this mess to begin with.*

“Home?” she repeated, not sure what he meant.

“Yes. We are going to my home because it’s near. The road is treacherous. The weather worsens by the minute. As much as I’d rather you return home, I’ll not risk everyone’s welfare to do so.”

Ella’s brow shot up. “Oh, I wasn’t planning on staying with you.” At best, she’d hoped merely to arrange another meeting for a thorough discussion on seduction and conquest.

“I wasn’t planning on that either. I’m certain you’ll find the guest room comfortable, and if you’re hungry, the cook can prepare you something. I pray in the morning, you can be on your way.”

Not exactly the most hospitable words. He was irritated. But who in the world could blame him? She’d made a sufficient nuisance of herself. Worse, given the inclement weather, she was now forced to impose on him some more. What choice did she have?

Ella gave him a friendly smile. “Thank you. I accept your gracious invitation. I imagine you must be tired. I won’t burden you further. I’ll reserve my questions for tomorrow, before I leave. I’d like to take notes.”

“Notes?”

“Yes, so I may study them later at length.”

He closed his eyes briefly, took in a breath, and let it out slowly, as though he were striving for patience. When he met her gaze again, he studied her in silent scrutiny.

Anxiety began to gnaw at her belly. She prayed she hadn’t just pressed him past his limit. Having come this far, the last thing she wanted was for him to lose his patience and toss her out with her belongings here and now. He certainly didn’t owe her a thing.

“Is this man really worth all this effort?” he asked.

A sharp pain stabbed into her chest, making her wince, his question taking her by surprise. That horrible moment when she’d realized what Octavius had done swamped her mind before she could stop it. Quickly, she blinked back tears that stung her eyes, thankful it was dark in the carriage. Somehow, she managed to maintain her smile and nod, but had to swallow against the knot that had formed in her throat before she said, “More than you know.”

She was going to seduce Octavius in turn and reclaim all her hard work.

There were things he'd taken from her that she'd never get back—her innocence, her trust in him—but her paper wouldn't be one of them. Bad enough she'd been forced to defend him tonight when Octavius was, just as this man astutely surmised, an utter and complete cad.

“Again, I do apologize for all the inconvenience I've caused you. I don't wish to pester you any further. I'd simply like to have a name, any name, that I may call you. I don't think ‘*you there*’ will suffice. By selecting an alias, we can remain anonymous to each other. You never have to know who I am, and I do not need to know who you are.”

“You've given me enough information about yourself to make it possible for me to ascertain your true name,” he said.

Ella shrugged. She'd given some information, but not all about herself or her achievements. “I supposed if you wanted to try hard enough, you might. Though I suspect you'll not think of me again once I leave tomorrow morning, and you have my word that I won't seek you out, nor attempt to learn your identity. So...what shall it be? *Cornelius?*”

“No.”

“Charles? John?”

“No and no.” He crossed his arms and looked out the window.

“What about Joseph?”

That brought his attention back to her. She could have sworn she saw surprise flash in his eyes—even in the dim light.

“Fine,” he bit out tightly.

“Wonderful! Since we'll be discussing matters of an intimate nature, we can dispense with formalities and simply be Sarah and Joseph.”

Tilting his head back against the seat, he closed his eyes. “Sarah?”

“Yes, Joseph?” She smiled.

“Stop talking.” His tone was tinged with fatigue.

“As you wish, Joseph.” She settled back in her seat, feeling hopeful for the first time since this ordeal with Octavius had begun.

It was all thanks to this frosty gentleman.

She couldn't be more grateful she'd crossed his path. By tomorrow, she'd be on her way with all the knowledge she needed. And renewed purpose.

* * *

Lewis made his way down the corridor toward his dining room the next

morning, muttering a soft curse. After the farcical evening he'd had, he hadn't slept well. His dreams had been invaded by a woman with big brown eyes and a bedazzling smile. Tantalizing him.

Calling herself Sarah.

Because it was the worst time of the year, when nothing good ever happened, he was greeted with snow squalls whipping about outside his bedroom window the moment he'd risen from his bed and thrown open the curtains.

That meant the likelihood of his unintended guest leaving this morning, or this day was...nonexistent.

How much longer was he to have the woman in his home? *Until the bloody spring?* He raked a hand through his hair.

Would she be as talkative during the day as she was in the carriage? God help him.

He'd retreated to his more intimate-sized home for solitude and solace. Already, this woman had turned his household upside down. He'd had Darius speak to the staff, and now Lewis's confused employees were addressing him as "my lord" as they'd done before his father's passing. They were also advised not to react in any way in the event they heard "Sarah" address him by his middle name—Joseph. Worse still, when he'd entered his home with her sometime after midnight, he was forced to speak loudly over his butler's salutation so that she wouldn't hear Your Grace. Like some sort of raving madman.

He hadn't missed the curious looks he'd received from the man, knowing he was wondering if Lewis had lost his mind.

Lewis placed his hand on the door handle, having been informed that she awaited him to break the fast. He was hoping she'd opted to eat without him, as his servants had offered. But she'd declined.

Tightening his jaw, dismayed, he opened the door, and entered the room.

She rose from her seat at the end of the long wooden table in an instant, a bright smile lighting up her face. Lighting up the room.

He froze in his tracks.

Her lush dark curls were arranged to perfection, framing a face that was even more beautiful in the light of day. He couldn't stop himself from drinking in every detail—from those tantalizing lips that made his mouth go dry, to those eyes...darker than he'd first supposed. So fathomless.

So completely and dangerously alluring.

Making his blood race. His sac tighten.

His cock pressed against the seam of his trousers.

For a second time, he found himself just standing there before this woman—like a mindless fool—devouring the sight of her, her slender neck, delectable earlobes he wanted to bite, and every mouthwatering curve of her body in her deep-blue dress. Something about her very presence obliterated everything else in the room. This woman had the face of an angel and the body of a goddess. And he was drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

Damn it all to hell. You're not bedding this woman.

It didn't matter that his body was clamoring for her and that his instincts told him it would be so good with her.

He shoved every one of those notions away.

He made it a practice to limit his relationships with the fairer sex to impersonal, sexually recreational encounters at pleasure clubs. He'd sooner take himself in hand or walk through a blizzard all the way back to L'Anonyme before he'd bed someone who had the ability to unbalance him this much.

He'd learned his lesson a long time ago.

“Good morning, Joseph.” She approached him, and he had to root his feet to the floor to keep from retreating from her—and behaving even more ludicrously.

She stopped before him, still with that smile that beckoned him. “You look well. Did you sleep well?” Her dark brows quirked up in that adorable manner she had.

Three unwanted thoughts immediately swamped his mind.

One, he detected the light scent of jasmine. How he loved jasmine on a woman, and Christ help him, on her skin, it was *divine*. He all but nuzzled her neck just to draw the scent in deeply.

Two, he loved how her body was so perfectly proportioned to his. Down to his very marrow, he knew they'd fit together in the most spine-melting way.

And three, she had the sweetest little constellation of freckles on the bridge of her nose. He never even knew he liked freckles.

He liked hers very much.

She's waiting for a response. Say something.

“Thank you. And no. Let's eat.”

He turned on his heel and walked toward his usual seat at the opposite

end of the table. Just as he reached his chair, he heard a clanking of dishes. Looking up, he realized he must have the same expression of surprise as his servant George presently sported on his face. The man stood opposite him, holding out the chair for her. But she wasn't there. Instead, with some of her dishes in hand, she rushed to his end of the lengthy mahogany table, which easily accommodated sixteen diners, and plunked them down beside him, then sat before anyone could assist.

When she looked up at him, her smile returned.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Sitting beside you so we may enjoy our meal together. You don't expect me to shout from down there, do you?" She inclined her head toward her former seat.

Lewis frowned. "Yes. I mean no. What I prefer is to enjoy my meal in silence."

She lifted a brow, her smile still in place. Her expression suggested she doubted the validity of his statement. He clenched his jaw, keeping the oaths rushing up his throat from leaving his mouth, and met George's gaze. The man hadn't moved, confused as to what to do.

"It's all right, George." Lewis sat, then waved a reluctant hand for him to come forward with the remainder of the dishes she'd left behind. Within minutes, her place setting was completed, and George had received a warm thank-you from her before leaving with a bow to return to the kitchen.

She cast her gaze back on Lewis. "I'm sorry you didn't sleep well. Nothing to do with your health, I hope."

"No. I'm fine."

"I'm very pleased to hear that, Joseph. I slept wonderfully. You were correct when you stated the room would be comfortable. It was. And your home..." She glanced about the room, taking in his parents' portraits, the ornately carved hearth with its crackling fire behind the brass fireguard, flanked by large glass-paned windows trimmed in gold-colored velvet curtains on either side. "Your home is lovely."

Before he could respond, the servants entered with steaming platters of food.

He noticed that she glanced out the window multiple times as she was served slices of ham, sausage, and eggs onto her plate.

"Sarah..." Her head was turned yet again, watching the blowing snow.

Of course she isn't responding. It isn't her real name.

Her hand rested on the table. Lewis placed his hand on hers. She startled at the touch, her head snapping around to him.

“Sarah,” he repeated, removing his hand. Liking the feel of her soft skin more than he’d admit. “Given the accumulation of snow, am I safe to assume you haven’t any family or friend you can reach at the moment?”

“You are indeed safe to assume that. The conditions are rather extreme. I may require a few more days in your company...” She appeared somewhat unsettled. Or perhaps worried. He didn’t know which as he was no expert in deciphering women’s emotions. But he did notice that she’d glanced at his mouth. More than once since their meeting in the cab, in fact.

And he knew exactly what that meant.

The very last thing he’d do was dwell on the notion that his attraction to this woman was mutual.

He picked up his fork and forced his gaze to a more neutral sight—his food on his plate—uttering a single word in resignation to the circumstances at hand. “Right.”

* * *

Ella cast yet another glance out the window, a tad unnerved.

It wasn’t her concerns about the weather hindering her departure that was causing her turmoil at the moment. Nor was it that her friend Ernestine might be worried about Ella not having arrived yesterday, as it was likely she believed her departure had been delayed due to the weather.

It was none of those things.

It was the gentleman seated to her right that was having an unsettling effect—in an entirely different way—her skin still tingling where he’d touched her. She wasn’t prone to bouts of giddiness when it came to men, the way her sisters had been prior to their marriages. Never once had she met a man who’d incited any level of fluster and flutter.

Not even Octavius, if truth be told.

Yet, the moment Joseph had entered the room, he’d taken her breath away. He moved with a commanding masculine grace that had her completely riveted.

When she’d approached him, her stomach actually flip-flopped as she found herself gazing into his eyes, finally learning their true color. An unusual shade of gray. Like the summer sky before a storm.

His body was lean, strong. Sculpted by muscle that could be easily

detected under his gray morning suit.

Without question, the night had cloaked much of his captivating good looks. He was the finest-looking man she'd ever seen.

Who knew they made men *this* striking?

His dark hair was slightly mussed and looked as soft as a raven's wing. She'd clasped her hands to keep from brushing a stray lock from his forehead—just to touch it.

Clearly, her lack of sleep had her out of sorts this morning. The truth was, she *hadn't* slept, despite the comforts of the room. She'd spent most of the night pacing, wrestling with serious misgivings about her entire plan to seduce Octavius.

She approached everything with deliberate forethought. Analyzing all aspects. Yet, she'd impetuously halted her cab last eve and gained entry to L'Anonyme—having learned about the club from a conversation she'd overheard at one of the notorious bookshops on Holywell Street days prior. She'd even managed to have a brief conversation with the proprietress of L'Anonyme, Madame Giselle. Who highly approved of Ella's intended seduction, as one would assume she would, given the activities at her establishment.

Madame Giselle had even chosen a particular piece of jewelry, from the club's own private merchandise, normally available exclusively for its members, that she felt would ensure Ella's success. She didn't know exactly how, nor why they would sell ornamental stones or bejeweled items there. But Madame Giselle assured her that whomever she chose to seduce would be delighted by it. Though generally prudent with her funds, despite having a considerable inheritance, she'd purchased the item.

Because she absolutely couldn't risk failure.

Because she needed all the help she could get.

It was then and there that she'd decided she needed more than the jewelry made of jade. Obtaining advice on the art of seduction and pleasure from one of Madame Giselle's own patrons would help cinch her goal. Likely more so than the jewelry—which she'd happily gift to Joseph as a token of her appreciation for his help.

Ella cut a piece of ham on her plate. "I can just imagine how delightfully festive your home will look once you deck the halls. This beautiful home full of garlands, doors adorned with wreaths, and the banisters with holly, ivy, and big bows of red." She smiled. From the looks of his home and its very

address, he was a man of considerable means. She stopped herself from delving any further into his identity. Just as she'd promised him.

"I won't be doing that."

She raised her brows. "Won't be doing what?"

"Decking the halls."

"Oh? Will you be going elsewhere for the holiday?"

"No."

"Then why...?"

"Because I don't care to celebrate it. And I don't care to discuss it."

There was a lot behind those few words. Though she was truly curious why he was so opposed to Christmas, she was going to respect his wishes.

So much for engaging in pleasantries.

Idle conversation had never been her forte, though she'd hoped it would somehow settle her pulse. His effect on her was beyond distracting.

Moving a slice of ham across her plate, having yet to eat a bite, she said, "I see. Whatever your reasons, I'm certain they are fitting and deeply personal. You needn't worry that I will ask questions about it." She glanced back at him and caught the surprise that flashed in his eyes.

Those disarming, unique gray eyes.

"I want you to know," she continued, "how unusual this is. Everything I've done from your cab to this dining room is...well, far outside the norm. Even for me."

He simply tilted his head slightly, and set his gaze on her. Studying her. It almost made her look down. When she'd made sure to always meet a man's gaze squarely. Unwaveringly.

"I appreciate your regard for my privacy on the matter," he said at last, clearly pleased.

She could have sworn that for a brief instant the slightest hint of a smile had whispered across his lips. It made her want to see a full smile on his handsome face.

She shoved that wish away.

He focused on his food.

"Do you have many mistresses?"

He started coughing.

George visibly stiffened as though someone had just pinched him.

Mentally, she groaned. If he didn't have her so off-balance, she would have moved to a different topic with a bit more finesse.

“So much for private matters,” Joseph said dryly.

“My apologies. The change in subject was abrupt, but I didn’t think you’d mind the topic, since we agreed to have”—she glanced at George who was staring intently at an invisible spot on the opposite wall—“*certain* discussions. I didn’t know what else to discuss since you don’t wish to speak of the holiday. I’m not very good at inane chatter.”

“There are an infinite number of topics one could discuss without discussing Christmas. When in doubt, choose silence. Silence is always the right answer.”

She frowned. “It’s impolite to ignore someone you’re dining with. If you don’t wish to say, I’d like to move to the subject of that night with Alfred.”

Joseph quickly set down his fork. “Thank you, George. That will be all.”

The older man gave a quick bow, looking somewhat relieved. “Of course, Your...my lord.” He exited the room.

“Is kissing normal during the act?” She plunged right in. “There wasn’t much. There was quite a bit of labored breathing—on his part. Is that a good thing? I’m certain that providing you with as many details as possible is important—in order for you to aid me.”

“Actually, no—”

“He made odd noises. Does that mean he was enjoying it? Or in distress?”

Joseph took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I see you wish to have this discussion here and now. Didn’t you say you wanted to take notes? You haven’t any writing instruments.”

“We can begin now. I have many questions to ask. I’ll write down everything you tell me when I return to my room. You needn’t worry that I’ll forget. I learn quickly.”

“So you’ve said. All right. Let us get on with it.” He pushed his plate away, then moved hers away, as well. Folding his arms, he rested them on the table and leaned in toward her.

Her heart skipped a beat.

All that male beauty...so very close.

She chastised herself for these thoughts and physical reactions. Getting her work back was paramount. Before Octavius submitted it as his own.

Focus!

“Ask your questions, Sarah. Ask just *one* question at a time.”

She nodded. “I’ll begin with kissing. If one wanted to entice a man, how

important would kissing be to him?” Not knowing what to do with her hands, she folded them on her lap, forcing herself to sit still and not fidget under the regard of those inebriating clear gray eyes. There was an intensity about them that she found far too thrilling.

Inciting her senses in a way no man ever had before.

“That would depend on the man—and his lover.” Now that he was this close, he dropped his voice an octave. It was so rich, so sultry, it sent a tiny shiver swirling down her spine and lancing into her core. She shifted in her seat, unnerved once more by her body’s response. “It is up to the lovers at play to decide what is important or enticing. There is but one goal for lovers to achieve.”

“Oh? What is the goal?” she managed to respond without sounding as breathless as she felt.

“Mind-melting mutual pleasure,” he murmured softly.

Those words reverberated through her entire body. Her sex clenched. Making her realize just how starved her senses were.

He slipped his hand under her chin, capturing it. Her eyes widened. “The lips are highly sensitive...” He lightly stroked her bottom lip. The sensation shot from his touch down to the tips of her breasts. She sucked in a soft breath. “Whether one engages in fucking, or making love, there’s no point to participating unless the pleasure is mutual. Giving pleasure...” He stroked her lip again, inciting the same delicious effect on her nerve endings. It took everything she had not to squirm again—especially when the lightest, most persistent ache was now pulsing between her legs. “...and receiving it. Anyone who offers you anything less than equal pleasure isn’t worth your time. Kissing shouldn’t be limited to a lover’s lips. You can kiss and taste your lover’s body. They should taste yours. Soft sucks of your nipples, or maybe you like a stronger draw. Sucks of that little nub between your legs until it aches so badly...until you’re dying for your release. Maybe even giving it a light, perfect little *bite*.”

She shot to her feet, the chair falling backward to the floor with a thud. “Thank you!” Her cheeks felt hot. Her blood roared in her veins. Worse yet, the very part of her female anatomy he’d just referenced felt slick and now throbbed with need. Quickly, she righted the chair and took a step back.

He was on his feet now, his brow furrowed.

“That...that is excellent information,” she told him, despite being mortified that she’d been rattled by mere words. “I’m going to return to my

room and write every word of it down. Very good information, indeed. So detailed...”

Turning on her heel, she forced herself to keep to a brisk walk and not a full-out run to the dining room door. She’d never run from anything in her life. Yet, she couldn’t get out of there fast enough. There was a knowing look in his eyes that told her he knew exactly what he’d done to her.

He’d undone her. With a handful of sentences.

Undone a woman who was used to being in complete command of her senses.

“Sarah...”

Dear God. His voice still had that sultry quality to it.

Grasping the door latch, she turned to him briefly, forcing herself to meet his eyes and not look away.

“I cannot wait to learn more.” She forced a smile. *Learn more? You’re running out of the room as though you’re on fire.* Which, thanks to him, she was. Her whole body burned with desire. “Thank you again,” she said as she stepped into the hallway.

Then she quickly closed the door before she embarrassed herself any further.

3

“Darius, why on earth are you smiling?” Lewis sat back in his chair in his favorite room in the house, his library, and frowned. Floor-to-ceiling dark oak shelves filled with books made up three of its walls.

Standing on the opposite side of Lewis’s mahogany desk, Darius sported a half smile. He shrugged. “They don’t normally run from you. Quite the opposite, in fact—despite your scratchy disposition.” His smile grew.

Lewis tightened his jaw, keeping his foul words from escaping. He wished Darius hadn’t witnessed Sarah’s hasty departure from the dining room this morning. Difficult for him to miss when she’d collided right into him. Now, he was up to his usual jests.

Lewis glanced out the window. It was dusk and the snow had finally ceased. He hadn’t seen Sarah all day.

She’d sent her apologies, excusing herself from the last two meals, citing a headache.

It was a lie. Quite plainly, the woman was now avoiding him.

Why the hell didn’t that please him?

He should have celebrated the solitude he’d had all day. But he hadn’t. His mind returned to her again and again. Raw desire had all but crackled in the air between them. She’d been as aroused as he’d been this morning during their exchange. He was left with a prick so heavy and hard, he wanted to howl.

Her cheeks had been an adorable shade of pink just before she’d darted from the room. Fantasies of seeing her entire body flush, of plying her with pleasure until she begged him for his cock, had tormented him all damned day. He couldn’t help but imagine the sounds she’d make as he sank his length into her hot, wet sex and drove her to oblivion and back. Taking her to orgasm again. And again.

And again.

Initiating her into the pleasures of complete carnal surrender. Something that buffoon in the bedroom, Alfred, had failed to do.

Just the mention of the woman set Lewis’s body into chaos.

He had no patience at the moment for any of Darius’s antics.

There was a sudden knock at the door. “Enter!” *Christ*. The tension in his body had set him on edge. He didn’t normally bellow at his staff.

To his surprise, Sarah opened the door and walked in. He rose to his feet. She wore a vivid blue and green dress, and she looked so damned good, it made his mouth water. If this kept up, she was going to reduce him to panting for her like a dog.

She glanced at Darius, then at him. “My apologies. I was hoping to speak to you, but if I’m interrupting—”

“No interruption. Darius was leaving.” He’d cooled his tone. Affecting a bland expression, Lewis met Darius’s gaze. By the twitch of Darius’s lips, he could tell he hadn’t fooled him. He was suppressing his smile. Darius knew this woman was affecting him—when he was normally unfazed by women outside a pleasure club.

Darius gave a bow. “Yes, of course, *my lord*.” Then a bow to Sarah. “Miss Sarah.” He exited promptly, quietly closing the door behind him.

Might as well play along with the ruse. “I understand you had a headache...”

She folded her hands in front of her. “I lied.”

That was unexpected. “I know that. I’m surprised—”

“I’ve lied to you quite a lot.” She threw her arms open wide in that theatrical way she’d done yesterday. “There! I’ve said it!” Dropping her arms back down, she began to pace. “I consider myself to be an honest person. It doesn’t sit well with me that I’ve told you many untruths. I’ve become a liar—among other things. I don’t even recognize myself anymore.”

Furrowing his brow, he moved around his desk, then sat on its front edge and folded his arms. A whirl of questions filled his mind. “A liar and *other things*?” he prompted, since all she was doing at the moment was wearing out the rug with her pacing. “Care to elaborate?”

“Not really. It’s all quite humiliating.” Still pacing.

Clearly, this was going to be like pulling teeth. “Are you saying you aren’t a suffragist? You haven’t studied mathematics? You never attended the University of London?”

“No, that’s all very true. I have First and Second Class Honor degrees in science and mathematics. I teach mathematics too.” More pacing.

“Is this about Alfred? Don’t tell me there is no Alfred, your beloved mathematician.”

She stopped dead in her tracks. “Yes...well, no...I mean, *yes*.”

“What—?”

“Yes, he exists. Yes, he is a mathematician. No, he’s not my beloved. In truth, he has never been my beloved—though on the night we shared together, I thought otherwise. I honestly believed he had affection for me. I was acquitted of that *clearly ridiculous* notion when I woke up the next morning. As much as I hate to admit it, your assumption about him was correct. He *is* a cad—though I lied to you and insisted otherwise.” She wrung her hands, clearly distressed.

Lewis ran a hand through his hair. He wasn’t any good with emotional women. Nor was he in the least bit pleased that he’d been right about Alfred.

He knew he hated the man.

“What happened the next morning to change your mind?” he asked, amazed that he cared to know.

Especially since it sounded uncomfortably similar to an event in his own life he never spoke about, nor allowed himself to think of anymore.

She stopped her pacing and turned to face him, her cheeks that pretty shade of pink again. “He absconded with my work, in the middle of the night, right out of my desk. By morning, both he and my paper were gone.”

Fuck. The man wasn’t just a cad, he was a despicable thief. “Bloody bounder...”

“He is indeed,” she concurred. “A good many other disreputable things too. I had been working on that paper for a year with the intention of submitting it for publication to the London Mathematical Society. If accepted, it would be my very first paper published. It is a great honor to be distinguished that way among my peers. Even more so as a woman. We must work five times harder than any man for any recognition by the LMS. Alfred has already had two of his works published. I doubt he’s written a single one of them.” She threw her arms in the air to underscore her outrage. He’d never known a woman to be as expressive with her hands and arms as this one was. It should strike him as bizarre, even annoying. But with her, he found it oddly...endearing. “The president of the LMS, Mr. Hughes, has been in Yorkshire for weeks. Everyone knows he will be at the Christmas ball hosted by the former president, Mr. Scarborough. With all his arrogance, I believe Alfred is going to present him with my paper before the esteemed members of the LMS in attendance, submitting it as his own.”

“Then, you were on your way to the Christmas party to seduce him into returning the work he stole?”

She nodded, then shrugged. “It’s what I was planning...but I have doubts now of my success in such a plan. I’m mortified at what a colossal fool I was. I willingly allowed myself to be vulnerable to him. I willingly gave myself to him...all because...” She glanced over at the crackling fire in the hearth and shook her head.

He couldn’t help but take in her profile, firelight caressing her features with its soft orange hues. This woman was so beautiful, yet she didn’t seem to even know it.

“All because of what?” he asked.

Those big, gorgeous eyes of hers returned to him. There was pain in their depths. And it pained him to see it—when he’d taught himself not to feel anymore.

“I’m too embarrassed to say.”

He rose to his feet and approached her. The tantalizing scent of jasmine snaked through his senses the moment he neared. His cock twitched in response. “We’ve all made mistakes in trusting people who don’t deserve our trust. I am the last person who would ever judge you. If you wish it, you may confide in me. I’ll not break your confidence.” *What the hell are you doing?* That was more than he’d revealed about himself in a very long time. He kept people at a comfortable distance, but he was drawn to this woman.

He had been from the very start.

And he was uncharacteristically allowing himself to be drawn into someone else’s world.

She swallowed, as though the words were stuck in her throat. For a moment, he thought she wouldn’t respond. Finally, she said, “Because...I wanted a love of my own. Maybe even a *great love*. The kind of love written about by poets. Despite what others say, what cutting words they utter, I am no different from any other woman—or any other human on this earth. I wish to be loved too.”

Her words echoed inside him. He promptly quashed that bit of nonsense. This woman was forever surprising him. Her words were raw and real. Honest. Something he wasn’t used to.

“He was my first...”

She wasn’t telling him something he hadn’t already guessed, but hearing it from her lips only increased his loathing of Alfred. Lewis was certainly no saint, but he never toyed with a woman’s affections.

“I should have known better,” she continued. “I am not what men want. I

am too opinionated. My father often said I take the make out of the man. I simply don't understand why a man wouldn't want a woman who expresses herself. Who is authentic to who she is. Perhaps she even enjoys a hardy debate on a number of subjects. Why must they only want those who are docile, with minimal education, and petite? Why is it so undesirable to be otherwise?" There was that adorable crinkle in her brow as she frowned. "Your gender is really rather fragile."

Lewis's brows shot up and instantly felt a smile tug hard at the corners of his mouth. A first in a long while. "I won't argue with that. But tell me, why seduce Alfred? Why not, if you believe he'll have your paper in his possession at the Christmas ball, sneak into his room and retrieve it?"

Tears suddenly glistened in her eyes. She squared her shoulders. "I've learned that he's done this to another woman. A fellow graduate from my university. A friend who confided in me mere days ago. He threatened to expose their single dalliance and ruin her if she told anyone he'd stolen her work and had it published. When confronted, I believe he'll utter the same threat to me—threatening to take everything from me... Even my beloved teaching position." A single tear slipped down her cheek. She impatiently swiped it away. "But I will *not* back down. I'm not going to allow him to take credit for what isn't his, and I will *not* allow him to get away with this disgusting scheme of his—again. I wanted to seduce him. I wasn't going to bed him. Just to let him believe I would and that I was so very in love with him, nothing else mattered. I wanted to teach him a lesson. I wanted to leave him feeling as betrayed as I and my friend felt afterward when he realizes he'd lost the paper. And that my feelings were false." She sighed. "Perhaps it's petty of me..."

Lewis didn't admire many people in his life, but he was in awe of this one woman's spirit. This was a display of untaught courage before him. The easiest thing would be to hold her tongue and let Alfred have the paper, just as her friend had done, and minimize her personal risk. Yet, she was prepared to risk everything, not just to right a grievous wrong for herself, but for others too.

"I disagree. It's human. He took much from you—your innocence, your trust, your work." Her eyes softened at his words, and for a moment, it felt as if warm nectar just poured down his spine. "What if you spoke to the president of the LMS and told him what Alfred did?"

That changed her expression. She was now staring at him as though a

horn had just sprouted out of his forehead. “The disadvantages to women are beyond your comprehension, Joseph. That would be very risky. Alfred is a man. He holds far more credibility.”

He nodded at her well-founded point. “Then seduction it is. Let’s teach good old Alfred a lesson he won’t soon forget.” *The things that are coming out of your mouth tonight...* He wanted to teach the unrepentant scoundrel a lesson or two of his own. One of which involved his fist in the man’s jaw.

“It isn’t going to work. I deluded myself into thinking I can seduce him. He didn’t really want me to begin with. He wanted my work.”

“Is he blind?”

“No.”

“Then he wanted both—you and your work. If I’m going to help you, you’re going to stop making comments like that. Do you want my help to seduce Alfred and get your paper back, or not?”

She glanced over at the fire once more and bit her bottom lip. Lord, how he wanted to do the very same thing to that sweet lip. His groin tightened at the thought. And he tightened his hold on his control. Somewhere along the way, he’d become selfish and self-centered, caring about nothing and no one. For some reason, this woman pulled out a fraction of his old self. He *wanted* to help her right this wrong—if she’d let him.

She then looked him dead in the eye and said, “I do.”

“Good. Come with me.” He grabbed her hand and stalked out of the library.

* * *

Ella entered Joseph’s bedroom.

He released her hand and shut the door behind her. The room was luxurious, much like the rest of his home. Walls covered in blue damask, with a counterpane of a similar hue on his large four-poster bed. The crackling from the lambent flames in the hearth mingled with her heightened breaths. She was alone in the bedroom of the most sinfully seductive man on this side of the stars. It was a heady thought.

He had her hand again. He crossed the room with her in tow, his long legs eating up the space with rapid ease. Stopping before a tall mirror on the wall opposite the hearth, he placed her before him.

The most delectable heat emanated from his muscled body. It whispered through her blood. It had taken the better part of the day to cool the fever

he'd incited in the dining room earlier.

It was spiking again.

She had to fight not to lean back into him.

He dipped his head, his mouth now near her ear. "Confidence is seductive. Confidence in knowing you have what a man wants. That you are what he craves." His warm breath tickled her ear, sending tiny tingles rippling through her body.

"But I am not." The words came out a little breathless.

His fingers wrapped around her wrist, and he pulled her hand behind her, pressing her palm to his trousers. She lost her breath.

"This is what you do to me. Do you feel how hard my cock is?" How could she not? He was hard as stone, his length extending beyond her hand. Without a thought, she wrapped her fingers around him and squeezed through the material, eliciting a soft groan from him. A dizzying thrill shot through her. He pulled her hand away, and she immediately mourned the loss. "What I see in this mirror is a woman who is so damned alluring. With sensuous eyes and a mouth made for pleasure."

She wasn't looking at herself in the mirror. Instead, she was focused on him, his handsome face. His perfect mouth she was dying to kiss. The fire in his eyes.

And he noticed.

He took a step back. "Take off your clothes."

4

“*What...?*” The single word came out of Ella’s mouth on a shallow breath.

“You asked for my help. You stole your way into my cab, insisting on my assistance. *Do it.*”

She remained frozen. Unsure. She’d never been completely naked in front of a man before. *Do it*, a voice inside rioted. He stepped close again, his body all but touching hers. That knee-weakening heat returned, enveloping her, and the bud between her legs now pulsed in time with her quickened heart. He reached around and opened the first button on her bodice.

Then the next, and the next, with practiced ease.

“Do it, Sarah,” he whispered in her ear. “Don’t think about it. Just do it. Show me the beauty that’s hidden beneath all this fabric. Do it with *confidence...*” Another two buttons opened before he removed his hand. “We can stop if you want. Or do you wish to proceed?”

Her long-dormant nerve endings hummed with life. She could run from the room like a coward again. Or she could see this through.

You’re not a coward.

Everything she’d ever accomplished had required bravery and strength. The last thing she’d do was to back down from this exhilarating moment, the likes of which she’d never known. Or might never know again.

She made quick work of the buttons as she began stripping away her clothing with determined purpose. His long expert fingers helped her here and there until she stood in just her chemise.

Her heart thudding wildly in her chest, she met his gaze in the mirror. His eyes had darkened, and she still couldn’t believe she’d stirred the desires of a man like this. A man who could have any female he wanted.

“Ah, now. Don’t lose your courage. Take off the chemise.”

She fisted the material and willed her hands to move. Taking a fortifying breath, she yanked it up and off, tossing the article onto the pile of discarded clothing on the floor. Trembling, she forced her gaze to his. He gave her a slow perusal.

She held her breath, not knowing what he’d say. It took all that she possessed to keep her arms at her sides and not cover herself up.

“Dear God...you’re even more breathtaking than I imagined.” He’d imagined her unclothed? A fresh wave of desire crested over her, moisture pooling between her legs. Reaching around her shoulders, he captured her chin again and turned her face toward her image. “Look at yourself. You are...perfection. Mouthwatering curves, gorgeous breasts with the prettiest pink nipples that I’m sure taste as good as they look. Those long, exquisite legs...” He took a small step back, and tilting his head to the side, took in her backside before returning close behind her and murmuring in her ear, “...the sweetest bottom I’ve ever seen. The stuff of every man’s fantasy.” Her breaths were rapid and raw and impossible to quell. No man had ever made her feel the way this man did. “You are what men want. Everything a man could want and more. Any man who has you is the luckiest of men. Alfred was offered all this and didn’t deserve an inch of you. I can’t believe he didn’t spend hours physically worshiping all this loveliness.”

Her skin felt overly sensitive, and the void in her core ached so badly, yet he’d barely touched her. And it was eroding her sanity. “He never saw me like this.”

He released her chin, looking incredulous. “He merely lifted your skirts?”

She nodded. *Please touch me...*

He shook his head. “The fucking fool.” He gripped her shoulders. Her knees almost buckled at the feel of his hands against her sensitized skin. “You’re going to seduce him with confidence about your appeal. Approach him and tell him you want his cock. You *need* his cock. You haven’t been able to stop thinking about your encounter together. You have to have him again.”

Abruptly, he stepped away, scooped up her chemise, and held it out to her. “Now you know what to do.”

She spun around to fully face him, stunned. He couldn’t be serious! That was *it*? He had her unclothed and he wasn’t going to show her the pleasure he’d talked about earlier? Show her the pleasure Octavius had denied her? Her body was in riot. She could see from the tenting of his trousers that his “interest” was still raised. There was no way she could simply put on her clothing and leave.

He wants you. You want him. That gave her nerve.

His head was turned toward the hearth, his arm still holding out her undergarment. She pulled it out of his hand and waited until he finally returned his gaze to her, and she made sure he saw her toss the chemise back

down onto the pile of her other garments.

She didn't miss the surprise that flashed in his eyes.

"I want you."

He let out a sharp breath. "Sarah, I wanted to show you how highly desirable you are. You're an innocent who was taken advantage of by an unscrupulous individual. I am trying to be noble, and it is killing me. I only fuck anonymous women in pleasure clubs."

His manner of speech should be off-putting, but it wasn't. Perhaps it was his way to push people away, but for her, his blunt language, from his lips alone, only stirred her desire for him more. "Then I qualify, since you don't know my identity." She was all but panting for the man, but he rested his hands on his hips and didn't respond. "Ever since this morning, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you and the things you said. I..." She swallowed. "I want your...cock. I want to feel...you inside me."

"Sarah, I know what you're doing. You must stop. I'm hanging by a thread."

"It's the truth. I want to know real passion and pleasure. Don't let me go back to my lonely bed to spend one more night without having experienced it. I want to know it with you." She tilted her chin up a notch and summoned her final argument with this obstinate man. By turning his words on him. "You wouldn't want to decimate my newfound confidence by turning me away, would you?" If this didn't work, she might have to launch herself at him.

Suddenly, she was shoved up against the wall beside the mirror. She gasped in surprise. He drove his tongue past her parted lips, giving her a kiss with mind-spinning intensity. Gripping his shoulders, she held on. He tasted so good. Every swirl and stroke of his tongue against hers, made her delirious for more.

"You're too clever for your own good," he growled against her mouth and cupped her mound, making her start. "Easy... I'm going to give you what you want." He dipped his head, brushing his lips along her neck, his hand lightly massaging her sex. She whimpered, widening her stance to give him better access. Desperate for more friction. "That's it. Just like that. You've got the softest, silkiest little cunt. So warm and wet." He kissed that sensitive spot beneath her ear. She dug her fingers into his shoulders. His rhythmic strokes over her private flesh were driving her to distraction, decadent sensations flooding her form. Arching her back, she tried to grind herself

against his palm, but he easily evaded her engorged nub. “Not yet...” He bit her earlobe, making her mewl. “We’re going to play before you come for me.” He gave her clitoris a sharp little pinch. She bucked with a cry. “Very nice response.” His fingers were now circling the entrance to her core, around and around, with the lightest, most maddening touch. Making her squirm. Her head fell back against the wall. She squeezed her eyes shut. Her vaginal walls clenching reflexively, desperate to draw his fingers in.

He told her how sensuous she was. How intense her release was going to be. Milking more moisture from her sheath.

His lips brushed against hers.

“Which of these pretty berries should I taste first?”

She opened her eyes. It took her a moment before she realized he meant her nipples. “Either... *Both*...” She could barely speak. Then it happened. A full smile formed on his face. It was the most beautiful thing to behold.

Slowly, he lowered his head toward her breast. Releasing his shoulders, she dropped her hands to her sides and dug her nails into the wall, bracing for the sensation about to swamp her senses. She felt a luscious flick of his tongue across her nipple, leaving her trembling for more. His fingers still tormented her quim. And instead of giving her nipple another stroke of his tongue, he gave it a sensuous little bite. She shot up onto the balls of her feet with a cry, the voluptuous sensation reverberating through her body.

Instantly, he soothed her frenzy, drawing the pebbled tip into his mouth. Each silky suck melted her mind.

The moment she lowered her heels onto the floor, he drove his fingers inside her, and began pumping them in and out. She was lost to the double sensation coiling through her breast and in her core. All she could do was whimper and moan, sounds emanating from her sounding nothing like her own. Her hips were thrusting and straining toward him completely of their own volition.

He released her nipple and met her gaze. A half smile adorned his mouth. “I like your eagerness. And how you’re squeezing my fingers. You’re soaking my hand, beautiful Sarah. You want to come for me, don’t you?”

“YES.” She needed more friction from his fingers. Or die.

“Then let’s focus on that sweet little spot inside you right...*here*.” His buried fingers gave a strong stroke over an ultrasensitive spot inside her vaginal walls. A sharp sensation shot through her sex and vibrated up her spine, snatching the air from her lungs. He struck up a steady rhythm over

that spot. The sensations were so strong, she was writhing wildly, unable to back away.

“Don’t fight it,” he told her. “I know it is intense. Give in to it. It’s worth it, trust me.” Adding his thumb, he massaged her throbbing clitoris, in masterful coordination with his thrusting fingers. His strokes grew stronger, with perfect pressure, building her up to a plateau she’d never known. She threw her arms around him as she barreled toward her release.

Pleasure exploded through her body. She surged up, a scream wrenching from her lungs, euphoria flooding through her system. Her feminine walls contracting around his fingers, clenching and releasing again and again. Squeezing her eyes shut, she rode through her orgasm. Each fierce spasm melting her muscles until she slumped against the wall.

Then his fingers were gone. The wall against her back—gone. And she fell onto the mattress. Opening her eyes, she realized he’d picked her up and tossed her there. He stood at the end of the bed, stripping away his clothing. Discarding it to the floor.

“Spread those gorgeous legs for me. Wide.” There was a gruffness and urgency in his voice as he tossed off the final article.

She didn’t move, not just because her muscles felt heavy and lax, but because she was riveted by the sight before her. Nothing had prepared her for how breathtaking his naked form was. Statues she’d seen of Greek gods were not chiseled as flawlessly.

He gripped his sex and stroked it from head to base. A sobering sight. He was much larger than Octavius, and that encounter had been painful enough.

Almost as though he’d read her thoughts, he spread her legs for her and lowered his body onto hers. “I’m not going to hurt you. There’s no need to tense.” He stroked his sex along her slick folds, coating himself with her essence, then wedged the crest of his cock at her entrance. Slowly, he pressed into her still-quivering core, feeding her his length a sublime inch at a time. She moaned, her body stretching to accommodate him, giving way to the downward pressure, the sensation deliciously inflaming.

He softly cursed. “So snug... Christ, you feel so good.” He dragged his shaft almost completely out. Then drove back in. Her gasp mingled with his groan. He began to plunge into her with deep, solid thrusts, slowly increasing the speed and power of each downward stroke.

Her sex was overly sensitive from her recent release. The sensations were fierce. Engulfing. A fresh wave of hot hunger slammed into her. She couldn’t

believe it was happening again. She couldn't think. Couldn't move. His every skillful stroke driving her bottom into the mattress. Driving her toward another stunning climax.

He grazed his lips along her neck to her ear. "You're going to come for me again," he rasped, his breaths as hard and heavy as her own. Capturing her nipple, he gave it a pinch, holding it captive. Letting the pressure build and build, until a hot pulse shot from her breast down to her sex. She cried out as another shattering release rocked her body.

He growled, thrusting through the glorious spasms rippling along her sex, until the very last one ebbed. He jerked himself out, crushed her to him and buried his face in her neck. With a long, deep groan, he spent himself against her belly, his body shuddering, until he'd drained himself dry.

Ella tightened her arms around him, threading her fingers in his hair, and simply held him, waiting for their breathing to calm. She'd never felt such a sense of bliss. It had permeated down into her very marrow. Looking up at the ceiling, she marveled at her luck. Somehow, the stars had aligned, and she'd actually tasted true passion.

A small miracle, that.

"This is the sort of desire and passion I'd read about," she said softly.

He raised his head. Gone from his eyes was that harder edge he usually had. They were a soft gray. A half smile tilted his mouth. He brushed his lips against hers, which turned into a long, languorous kiss. "You'll have to tell me what books you've been reading." This time with a full smile that made her stomach flutter. "Stay here. I'll be back."

When he returned, his abdomen was clean, and he carried bath linens. Unsure what he was about, she watched in amazement as he sat on the edge of the bed and used the dampened linen to press gently between her legs. She started.

He cocked a brow. "Tender?" he asked, moving to her belly to wipe her stomach clean.

"No. Just a little cool." She'd never been bathed in any fashion by a man. Octavius hadn't cared what mess he'd left behind in the aftermath of their encounter. She was suddenly feeling shy as he dried her with gentle care, when shy was the very last word that would ever describe her. Why was she surprised by his response or actions? He was a considerate lover. In every meaningful way.

This man had set her world ablaze tonight. Lady Luella, awkward,

unmarriageable, ungovernable, undesirable, had been utterly desired this night. She swallowed down an embarrassing squeak of joy that threatened to slip past her lips.

He tossed the linens to the floor and stretched out beside her, propping himself onto his elbow. She turned onto her side and mimicked his pose.

“I think you must be the best lover in all of L’Anonyme.”

Softly, he chuckled. “Thank you. If you wish, please feel free to expand that scope,” he teased with a grin.

She laughed, loving this side of him, and his smile. “Apologies!” She played along. “You are no doubt correct on that count, sir. In fact, they should give you free membership for all the *benefit* you bring to their establishment.” She grinned at his laugh. She barely knew him. Yet, their connection felt so natural, as though she’d known him forever.

She liked who she was around him. She’d very much liked him from the start, this man who not only guarded his privacy, but also the secret of a painful event that had happened to him at Christmas. This duke—a fact his staff had poorly concealed, though they had tried—who could have anyone, wanted no one.

He pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her hair. She closed her eyes and returned his embrace, relishing the feel of being held by him.

Once the weather permitted, she’d leave here. This would become but a cherished memory.

The last thing she could allow herself to do was lose her heart.

5

“See that these are sent out at the first opportunity, when the weather permits.” Lewis handed Darius the pile of correspondence from his desk in his private sitting room off his bedroom.

He was anxious to see Sarah.

Five days had passed since Sarah had arrived. Five days and five nights being in the company of a beautiful, brilliant woman who was passionate. In and out of bed. Five days and nights of mind-melting passion, initiating her into sexual pleasures.

They’d been the most soul-satisfying encounters he’d ever had. Though he didn’t allow himself to dwell deeper on that.

When he wasn’t in the throes of ecstasy, he was drawn into lively debates on numerous subjects she was well versed in. He’d forgotten how much he loved to debate. In his days at Cambridge, where he’d read for his Law Tripos, he and his friends would spend nights in hearty debates.

The more drink available, the more heated they’d become on philosophy, laws, and social norms. Those had been some of the best days of his life.

He’d found a woman who was more skilled and talented at formulating compelling arguments than the majority of his former classmates combined.

She was his equal match of wit and wills. And it was delightful. It was easy being in her company. It would be easy to forget that she was leaving soon.

And that was something he wouldn’t permit himself to do. He had his life in order now. It had taken a considerable amount of time. Years, in fact. He wasn’t going to change things.

“I’ll see to it.”

“Good.” He walked past Darius to the door, eager to leave and join Sarah in his library. He knew he’d likely find her there. She liked the room as much as he did, spending time reading his books. Her reading tastes were so similar to his.

“There’s one matter I’d like to bring to your attention,” Darius said, catching up to him as they moved down the long corridor.

“What is it?”

“There’ve been some odd sounds emanating from your bedroom.”

Without looking at him, he said, “*Darius...*”

“It’s a distinct sound. One I haven’t heard come from your bedroom here ever.”

Darius was clearly up to no good. They both knew Lewis didn’t bring women here. He had no intention of discussing Sarah or any intimacies they’d shared.

That was private.

Between him and a certain mathematical beauty who melted at his touch.

“Darius, behave yourself. What I do in the privacy of my bedroom is no one’s concern. That includes you.”

Darius jumped into his path with a swift, easy motion, halting Lewis’s advance.

“Indeed. But the sound I heard most distinctly was...” He leaned in and said, sotto voce, “your laughter.” He clasped Lewis’s shoulder. “It’s damned good to hear too.”

* * *

The moment Lewis entered the library, he spotted Sarah in front of the bookshelves. Book in hand, she turned to him and smiled. “Good afternoon, Joseph.”

His heart missed a beat. *God, that smile...* It lit up the room. Though he’d broken the fast with her this morning, he’d been busy with his duties and had missed the midday meal with her.

It was ridiculous, but it felt as though he hadn’t seen her in days.

Rather than a mere few hours.

She walked up and pressed her warm, sweet mouth to his, giving him a slow, luscious kiss. Wrapping his arms around her, he deepened the kiss, drawing her tongue into his mouth to give it slow strokes and a soft suck. He liked the sigh she made and the press of her body against his. She was so damned responsive to him. He couldn’t seem to get enough.

Going to sleep and waking up with her by his side, expanding her repertoire of sexual knowledge, had been nothing short of glorious.

She broke the kiss, her smile returning. “I’m glad you’re back. I know I’ve said it already, but I do love this room and your books. I’ve learned something about you.”

“Oh, what is that?”

“That you are a romantic.” She grinned.

He suddenly felt his face warm. *Fuck*. Was he actually *blushing*? Horrified, he protested, “I am not,” annoyed that his words sounded unconvincing.

She gestured at the shelves. “You have an abundance of romantic poetry that are beyond beautiful, and some of the literature too. There’s nothing to be embarrassed of. I think a man who can appreciate the depth of emotion in these books is rare and wonderful. Darius told me that you selected all these volumes yourself.”

“I simply appreciate fine writings. And most of what Darius says should be ignored. There’s a meddling old woman trapped inside his body somewhere that exerts herself often.”

That made her laugh. “I very much like how he cares about you.”

Lewis brushed an errant lock of dark hair from her cheek. Just an excuse to touch her skin.

Briefly, she closed her eyes and leaned into his hand. An endearing gesture that he liked more than he’d comfortably admit. Too much, in fact.

He dropped his hand away.

“I found something in this book.” Opening the volume and flipping several pages, she pulled out a photo and handed it to him.

He recognized it immediately.

“Is this your dog? The one you mentioned?” she asked.

He smiled down at the image of his collie. “Yes, this is Ivy. She was the best dog.” His little shadow, always by his side. Forever missed.

“She was very pretty, and I’m sure quite clever. Dogs are so special. They carve a deep spot into our hearts. Did she die on Christmas? Is that why you don’t care for the—”

“No” was his abrupt response. He hadn’t meant for the word to come out so harshly. He placed the image back into the pages of the book and replaced it on the shelf.

“I’m sorry, Joseph. I’ve clearly upset you, and I’ve promised not to enquire about the matter. I won’t ask again.”

He gave a nod, wanting not to dampen the moment with past pains.

Her brilliant smile returned. “I have something for you. A present. Come with me.”

* * *

Ella led Joseph to the guest bedroom.

Some of her items were still there. Not that she slept there anymore.

After their first night of intimacies, she'd left Joseph's sleeping form to return to her room in the wee morning hours—not knowing the proper protocol between lovers—only to find an adorably disgruntled duke the next morning in the dining room informing her that she didn't have to leave to sleep elsewhere. In fact, he wanted her to stay each night. The whole night.

She couldn't help but smile every time she thought of it. Who could say no to such a decadent offer from *this* man? The only man who'd made her feel desire, and desired. Feminine. Accepted. For the first time ever.

He'd invited her to stay in his home as long as she needed. She'd decided to stay two more weeks. It had begun to weigh on her that her time with him was winding down. There was no talk of the future beyond her departure. Nor did she expect that. He was used to a sophisticated lover who enjoyed sexual dalliances. Without emotional entanglement.

And she would keep it to that.

“For you.” She handed Joseph the black velvet pouch.

He poured the contents into his palm—smooth round beads made of jade, the size of small stones, each connected by a gold chain.

His expression was one of utter surprise. Clearly, he hadn't expected a gift.

“It's something I purchased to, well, aid in my plan with Alfred, but I'd rather you have it. As a token of my gratitude for all you've done for me. It's made of jade and gold.”

Why was he still looking so stunned?

“I don't expect a gift in return...” she added quickly.

“Where did you purchase this?”

“L'Anonyme.”

His brow shot up. “You went inside?”

“Yes. The night we met. I spoke to Madame Giselle. I told her I wanted to seduce a man. She suggested I purchase that to aid in my quest.”

His lips twitched. He was fighting back a smile. Amusement shone in those stormy gray eyes. “Do you know what these are for?”

“No. She said the man I presented them to would know and be most pleased. I don't want to give them to Alfred. I want you to have them.”

* * *

A foreign emotion prickled through Lewis at the thought of Alfred possessing the surprising item in his hand. He tamped the feeling down.

He preferred to focus on the jade beads, the beauty offering them to him.

This woman had wealth. This item was costly. In fact, all items sold for carnal play at L'Anonyme were embellished by luxury materials and gemstones.

It added to the decadence of the pleasure toy.

“I thank you for the gift. But this is something we both can enjoy.” His cock was already straining inside his trousers for her. Ready and eager. “The items sold at L'Anonyme are items made to enhance pleasure. These go”—he dipped his head in order to look straight into her deep, dark eyes—“inside the body. In your case, in either one of those entrances to paradise. That perfect little quim of yours. Or your gorgeous bottom.”

He waited and watched for her reaction. Her eyes widened. No horror or shrinking away. Just surprise, then...contemplation as her gaze moved to the beads in his open palm.

“I hadn't realized...” Her cheeks turned that endearing shade of pink.

His prick jerked in hunger. He'd introduced her to oral pleasures. Receiving and giving. Taught her how to enjoy the intense sensations from that sweet little spot inside her vaginal walls.

And now the thought of enjoying this item with her made his heart race.

He grasped the large ring at the end of the beads and let them dangle before her. “Shall we play, Sarah?”

She looked at the item hanging from his fingers for a moment, then gave him a nod. Pre-come seeped from the crest of his cock.

Suddenly, she stepped back. “But first, I have a request.”

6

Lewis couldn't begin to imagine what else she'd surprise him with.

"I know this time between us is but an interlude of bliss. You have shown me passion beyond my wildest imagination, and I will always treasure my time with you. What I request, what I *really* want is to hear my real name from your lips." Before he could respond, she quickly said, "You don't have to give me your name. Nor any other information about you..."

Oh, he'd wondered about her real name. About a great deal more. But he'd forced himself not to ask—intent to keep a certain distance between them. Especially when he felt a pull to her that was far too fierce. But now, with her offering, he couldn't help himself. Against his better judgment, he asked, "What is your name?"

"Ella, Lady Luella Thorndale, the youngest of four daughters of the former Earl of Claverton. A lost cause, in the opinion of my late father and sisters. I live with my Aunt Charlotte, a suffragist, and according to my father, we were the main source of his digestive issues."

That pulled a small smile from him. He cupped her cheek and brushed his thumb against her soft skin. "*Ella*... It is a beautiful name for a beautiful woman. A woman who wasn't born to be ordinary, but rather extraordinary. A force to be reckoned with." He shouldn't speak to her like this. It could only convolute matters between them by fostering feelings. Ones he wasn't comfortable with and repelled at all cost. But he *wanted* her never to doubt the truth about herself.

Those big fathomless dark eyes softened, and it melted his insides. Every time.

She threw herself against him, giving a heated kiss, her sweet tongue sliding into his mouth. Her hands attacked the buttons on his waistcoat, fingers fumbling in her eagerness. Their breathing already escalating, he tossed the jade beads onto the bed and stripped her clothing away with practiced skill, lending a hand with his until their garments were a pile on the floor. His heart thundered. His cock was already heavy and hard. He'd had her this morning, yet she had him ravenous for her again, as thoughts of what he was going to do with the beads on the bed burned through his mind.

She stopped, her gaze moving down his body, all the way to his aching erection. “You are devastating to behold,” she said.

Before he could respond to that endearing comment, she gripped his cock and gave it slow steady strokes from base to tip, milking another dollop of pre-come from his shaft. Closing his eyes, he groaned, basking in the sensations radiating along his length. He felt the distinct swipe of her tongue stroke across the engorged head of his cock. His eyes flew open, and he found her kneeling before him, her gaze locked with his, awaiting his full attention before she drew him into her hot, wet mouth.

Pulled him out.

Then drew him back in deeper, giving him a spine-weakening suck.

His head fell back, and a hiss slipped past his clenched teeth, his fingers tangling in her hair. “You’re getting too good at this.”

She released him from her mouth and lightly flicked her tongue over the ultrasensitive underside of his cock. He jerked. “I’ve had an excellent teacher. And I learn quickly,” she added, pleased with herself.

He’d never had difficulty moderating himself during any sexual encounter. Always in complete control during carnal play. But with this woman, it was a challenge. He reached down, hauled her up to her feet, and tossed her over his shoulder, garnering a squeak of surprise. He swatted her sweet little bottom, making her squeak again. “We’re not playing like that today. I have other plans for you.”

Stalking over to the bed, he tossed her down onto the mattress. She fell with a bounce, legs sprawled, her gorgeous breasts giving a little jiggle. He could see her quim was wet, inciting his blood to rush faster. Hotter.

He lowered himself between her long, graceful legs, his shoulders keeping them apart, and drove two fingers into her slick core. She whimpered her approval. She was soft and warm, so tightly clasped around his fingers, it was driving him wild. Easily locating that oversensitive spot inside her sex, he curled his buried fingers and pressed. Her hips shot up off the mattress with a sultry cry. Her thighs squeezing against his shoulders and arms.

“Beautiful Ella, surrender to it,” he soothed, pressing a little harder against the textured area, giving it short, rapid strokes. She fisted the counterpane and arched hard again, the sharpness of the sensations tearing more cries from her throat. Each breath sharp and shallow. Similar to his.

Her every sensual reaction fed his fever in a way no woman ever had.

Her sex was pink, glistening with her juices. Her clitoris was so swollen

with need. Lowering his head, desperate for a taste, he gave it a soft suck. Then a light bite just to spike the sensations and make her scream for him. He played with the pressure of his fingers inside her sheath, bringing her to the edge of orgasm—letting it bloom. Then ebb.

He had her writhing and rocking her hips, moans and incoherent words escaping past her throat. He would not relent until he had her dripping wet. Until he felt those delectable little twitches begin to ripple inside her cunt once more, telling him she was on the razor's edge again. In one quick movement, he yanked his fingers out, snatched the jade beads from the bed, and eased them into her core, leaving the large gold ring dangling from the pretty slit of her sex.

He was on his feet in an instant, gripping his cock and with a stroke, coating it with her juices soaking his hand.

A sound burst from her lips in protest. “Now! I need you,” she panted out.

He fucking needed her too. Too damned much. More than his next breath. That perfect quim adorned with the gold ring was more than his sanity could take.

“I know what you need.” He flipped her onto her stomach and rammed a pillow under her hips, tilting them up. Her mouthwatering, pert bottom was now on full display for his viewing pleasure.

She came up onto her elbows, looking over her shoulder at him, unsure what he was about.

“Trust me,” he said, kneeling between her legs. Grasping the ring, he slowly pulled out the beads—now slick from her sex—then breached her puckered little hole with the first bead. She jerked with a gasp and a sharp squirm. “It’s all right, Ella... Just relax.” Reaching down with his free hand, he captured her clitoris between his fingers, giving it gentle pinches and light strokes. Giving her enough sensations to keep her keen, but not enough to let her come. She stilled and mewed into the mattress, allowing him to press the second bead in, then the third, until the final fifth.

He’d never been this hard. His cock had swollen to painful proportions, feeling heavy as lead. Leaning forward, he pressed his palms down on the mattress on either side of her shoulders. “You’re going to take my cock now,” he growled, barely able to speak anymore, unsure she was the only one trembling at the moment. She gave him a shaky nod.

He wedged his cock at the entrance to her sheath, wet heat suddenly surrounding the tip of his prick. He clenched his teeth, knowing she was new

to this, knowing he had to go slow. Fighting against his own feral need that had mounted inside him. He sank in an inch, groaning in bliss. Eclipsing her moan. Steadily, he tunneled in deeper and deeper. Gripping the bed linen with clenched fists, he could feel the beads on the other side of her vaginal wall rippling along the length of his cock in his descent. Suddenly, she dug her knees into the bed and arched hard, sinking the rest of his length into glory.

The sound of pure pleasure shot out of his throat, his eyes practically rolling back in his head.

Christ, she was clasped so tightly around him, he was actually throbbing. He began to thrust, tentative at first. Looking for signs of discomfort. But she was wildly arching, trying to meet his every downstroke. Without missing a stroke, he lowered himself on top of her, driving in deep and hard. Giving her the solid thrusts she wanted. Making sure that each plunge and drag of his cock stroked that extra sensitive spot inside her cunt.

Then it started. Those little spasms inside her core, telling him she was close again.

He gripped her hair and against her ear, murmured, “Come. Come for me right *now*.” He was on the edge of madness. His brain and body torched with desire. The stunning sensations pulsating through his cock were nothing short of mind bending.

Suddenly, she squeezed sharply around him, and screamed out with a shudder as her orgasm slammed into her with force. Her core convulsively clutching and releasing around his thrusting cock. He rode through each sublime spasm. Determined to savor every single one, holding on with dwindling control, until the final contraction ebbed.

His restraint finally snapped. Come shot down his cock. He yanked out just in the nick of time. Pressing his mouth in the crook of her neck, he crushed himself against her back. And roared out his pleasure as he purged his prick. A sense of deep draining relief rolled through his body. Sapping his strength. Leaving him floating in ecstasy.

* * *

Naked, buried under warm bed linens, lying on her side, Ella slipped her hands beneath her cheek and watched the firelight play on Joseph’s handsome face. Propped up on his elbow, he too was on his side, his fingers absently playing with a lock of her hair. She was afraid to read anything into

the soft look in his eyes. The tender touches he gave her. Given her failings with Octavius, she wasn't proficient at deciphering romantic emotions from men.

She'd decided to live in the moment. To bask in the afterglow of yet another exquisite experience with this breathtaking man.

She'd savored every single one they'd shared, every single day she'd spent with him so she could retrieve the memories at will, years from now. And cherish each one. Not just memories of their passion, but of their lively debates that now occurred at every meal. Some on matters of women's suffrage and the need to make amendments to the Matrimonial Causes Act. Others on more frivolous subjects that often dissolved into laughter. She adored that she could make him laugh, and he could do the same to her.

Soft emotions were threatening to take hold. She found herself fighting them harder with each passing day.

"Well, I stand corrected in thinking I was gifting you a jade bracelet of some kind." She smiled at her mistake and enjoyed his chuckle.

"It was the best gift I've ever received." He ran his knuckles down her cheek. "Ella...tell me about your paper."

That took her by surprise. They hadn't discussed anything remotely related to Octavius, or the reason she was there. She raised her brows. "You really want to know?" God, how she loved hearing her name from his lips.

"I really do."

She sat up and tucked her hair behind her ear, so delighted to speak about her work. She explained about the Difference Engine and the Analytical Engine, both created by the late Charles Babbage. They were marvels of engineering invention. The first capable of calculations, while the second was capable of infinite computing possibilities. She told him how the government had withdrawn its funding. How his son, Henry, was still working on the Analytical Engine. She explained intricate details of the machine, and that in her paper, she'd shown how the Analytical Engine was capable of computing the Bernoulli numbers.

"Bernoulli numbers are, in essence, number sequences that are found..." She stopped, realizing she'd spoken for almost ten minutes and was about to delve deeper into her mathematical analysis. "I'm sorry. I do get carried away about my work. I have sufficiently bored you, no doubt." Oddly, he didn't look bored. He seemed to have listened the entire time with rapt attention. Or perhaps that was simply what she wanted to believe. Only others in

mathematics and science were interested in such conversation.

Not to mention a certain insufferable scoundrel who stole the work of others.

“If you are having difficulty sleeping, I could carry on,” she jested and slipped back down under the covers.

“If it hasn’t been made plain, I don’t tolerate conversations I’m not interested in.” Though that was the sort of blunt statement he tended to make, he’d said it with a smile.

And it made her laugh. “That’s true.”

“I’m saddened that there are those in your life who’ve made you believe your work was dull. I find it fascinating. I find the Analytical Engine fascinating. I am in awe of the sheer brilliance of your mind.”

She thanked him. Those tender stirrings welled up inside her again. She shoved them down as quickly as she could and propped herself onto her elbow, mimicking his pose. “Now you must tell me something about yourself.”

He cocked a brow.

“It doesn’t have to be your deepest, darkest secret. Something. Anything. Hopefully something more in depth than *‘I am fond of cheese.’*”

He tossed his head back and laughed. It was infectious and a delight to her ears. “But I do like cheese.”

“Come, now. Tell me something about you I don’t know.”

* * *

Lewis gazed at her sweet face. He’d memorize that adorable constellation of freckles on the bridge of her nose. Every part of her, in fact, was ingrained in his mind. He should have left after each sexual encounter. He should not have asked her to stay in his bed every night.

He always left once the fucking was over.

But he couldn’t seem to deny himself the pleasure of her company, of having her there beside him. Once she left in two weeks, this would become merely a memory, and his perfectly ordered world would return to normal.

A small voice deep inside him whispered to the contrary. He shoved it away.

“I think I may have been a romantic once.” His lips quirked, attempting to hide a smile.

She burst out laughing and fell back against the pillows, drawing a grin

from him. Her reactions were so delightful.

She propped back up onto her elbow and stuck that adorable face of hers into his. “That is *not* something I didn’t know. Tell me something new.”

He took a moment, then, completely out of character, he said, “My father died on Christmas Eve. He was one of the thirty-eight casualties in the Birdwhistle Hall fire at Lord and Lady Chellingworths’ Christmas ball.”

Her smile dissolved. “I’m so sorry. You were close to your father?”

He nodded. “Very. He was a good man. A kind man, loved by everyone. I don’t know a single soul who didn’t care for him.” He could feel a knot forming in his throat, even after all these years. The suspicions and rumors of the fire being deliberately set were something he couldn’t bring himself to ponder. It was less painful to believe that it was a mere horrific accident, and not some demented individual who would purposely commit arson. “As his heir, I pray that I have executed my duties in a manner that would have pleased him. You’ve told me your real name. I’ll give you mine—Lewis Joseph Ambrose, Duke of Ansford.”

She didn’t seem surprised and simply nodded. “I didn’t know part of your name was correct, but I knew you were a duke. Your staff is lovely, and they tried...”

“And failed miserably,” he concurred with a rueful smile.

“I understand now why you dislike the holiday.”

“It’s not just that. The Christmas before my father’s passing, I thought I was in love with a certain lady. I’d made my intentions known to her father. I was going to propose marriage right after Christmas. At a Christmas celebration that year at the Earl of Tessington’s home, I found her with my closest, dearest friend in the drawing room. Her naked breasts were in his greedy palms. I’ve blamed myself for my father’s death for years. I’d refused to attend the Christmas ball the following year at Birdwhistle Hall because Elizabeth and Mark would be there. They were married. They were among those who survived the fire. If I had attended, I might have been able to save my father’s life.”

There was pain in her eyes. Understanding. She could relate to the sense of betrayal and had compassion for his loss.

“*Lewis...*” she said softly, and wrapped her arms around him. For some reason, it felt good to hear his name from her lips. To his surprise, he didn’t pull away. Nor did he regret sharing what had happened those Christmases.

He wrapped his arms around her in turn and held her close.

7

Ella followed George down the corridor, all too aware that the man carried her valise. All morning, she'd had a knot of emotions in her throat.

She was leaving today.

And she was going to be strong and stoic about it, despite the tumult of emotions goring her chest. Two weeks had flown by. More bliss than she ever imagined she'd experience in a lifetime. The weather had become favorable days ago. They'd gone on walks, perused shops, in particular bookshops.

She knew she wasn't leaving the same woman who'd entered his home weeks ago, thanks to him. She liked this new Ella. Now, she knew exactly what to do, solidifying her course of action to best Octavius and get her paper back.

George stopped at the library door. "I will have all your effects placed in the carriage, my lady. His Grace awaits you." Thankfully, there was no more pretending among the staff.

"Thank you." She smiled at the kind man. "Merry Christmas, George." It was just days away. She'd purchased the entire staff each a small gift and left them in the kitchen with George's wife. Saying farewell to each of them was something she didn't think she could get through. Especially since she was about to say goodbye to Lewis.

"Merry Christmas to you as well, my lady." He knocked, then opened the door to the library, gave a short bow, and stepped back.

She took in a quiet fortifying breath and let it out slowly. Affixing a small smile on her face, she walked in and stopped in the middle of the room. Lewis had his back to her, looking out the window. Much of the snow that had accumulated had melted.

He turned to face her before she said a word. He'd schooled his features. She couldn't read his face. It was done on purpose. He didn't want her to know his thoughts.

Not knowing what to do with her hands, desperately trying not to fidget, she folded them in front of her. "My things are being placed in the carriage. I wish to thank you for offering your carriage to take me to Mr. and Mrs. Scarborough's residence."

“My pleasure.” She couldn’t read anything into that.

Ella looked away for a moment, gathering her words. She’d practiced them this morning, but they were caught in her tightened throat. “I want to thank you for these wonderful weeks—and incredible nights.”

“They have been incredible,” he said softly. He was standing so far away.

Say what you’ve come to say... “I understand why you don’t like Christmas, but I do hope that you’ll find joy in it again. I don’t believe your father would want you to diminish your life in any way because of him. You should fill your home with garlands and red bows at Christmas.” She felt tears sting in her eyes and fought them back. “As for Elizabeth, there is no woman in this entire world who’s a greater fool than she. She had your heart and threw it away. You should take the chance on love again. I intend to, because having a great love of your own is worth the risk. I wish you much happiness.” Her voice cracked. Turning on her heel, she walked out and closed the door, knowing that if she kissed him one last time, she might never let go.

After taking a step, she stopped with a sharp breath and marched right back into the library. Surprise was on his handsome face. “I will not leave here with any regrets. I told you I am honest, and I will honestly tell you that I am in love with you. I don’t expect you to return my affection, but I didn’t want to leave without you knowing.”

With that, she left the room.

Then his home.

* * *

Ernestine barged into Ella’s room at the Scarborough residence. “Octavius still hasn’t arrived!” Her dark hair and eyes were similar to Ella’s, yet at the moment, Ernestine’s cheeks were flushed a deep red.

Ella had only just settled into her room, shortly after her arrival, when Marion Scarborough, daughter of her hosts—not to mention a fellow member of the London Mathematical Society—had asked to speak to her privately.

They’d just seated themselves at the pair of matching rosewood chairs.

Ernestine stopped abruptly when she saw Marion. “Oh! Forgive me. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

Ella and Marion both rose. “No intrusion,” Marion said. “If I may, I’d like to speak to you both.” She held a large green velvet pouch. “Won’t you please both sit?” She gestured to the chairs.

Ernestine had been on the lookout for Octavius. She'd been the very friend who'd confided to Ella about Octavius's thievery of her paper as well. Using the same vile tactics.

They sat as Marion opened the pouch and pulled out a number of papers. She held them out to Ella. "These belong to you."

Ella stood, taking them from her hands and immediately recognizing her work. Flipping page after page, she realized they were all there. "Marion, how in the world did you get these?"

"Octavius came to see me and bragged about what he'd done to you and to Ernestine. He told me he had your paper and showed it to me. He'd read and studied it and stated that it was brilliant. When he wasn't looking, I switched your paper for recipes for minced pie, lobster cutlets, anything I had at hand. I put one page of your notes on top so he wouldn't realize the ruse straightaway. That disgusting scoundrel had done the very same thing to me, seducing me, then stealing my work and publishing it as his own. I wasn't going to let him do that to you too, Ella. I'm only sorry I didn't learn of your stolen paper earlier, Ernestine. I would have helped you as well."

Ernestine rose, mouth agape. "I cannot believe he did this to you too. *That vile...* Oh! I hope his member falls off!"

"That is a wish I've harbored too," Marion concurred.

Ella looked down at her paper, incredulous. Her suspicions had been true. Octavius hadn't written a single paper for which he'd taken full credit. She couldn't believe the first publication had been Marion's work. "But, Marion, your father was the president of the LMS at the time of Octavius's first published work."

"Yes, and his threat to bring scandal to my father by making it known what we'd done made me hold my tongue." Marion's coloring was fair, and her blue eyes glistened with pain.

Ella seethed. "The brazenness of this man is breathtaking! He risked embroiling himself in a scandal that could have ruined his own standing."

"He knew I wouldn't allow my family to be harmed by my foolish actions. I wouldn't risk it. I let him have the paper."

"He is an utter blackguard!" Ernestine could barely contain herself.

"He is proficient at duplicity." Ella opened her arms and hugged the two women, their arms encircling each other. "Ladies, we will stop him together. It is not enough to get my work back—though I will be forever grateful to you, Marion. We will ensure he never does this to anyone else again."

* * *

Lewis alighted from his carriage. It was Christmas Eve, and the night sky was a shade of indigo. Looking up briefly at the Scarboroughs' residence in Thurloe Square, he then raced up the stairs two at a time. He'd dragged his damned feet since yesterday.

Now he couldn't get inside fast enough.

The moment he entered, he handed over his greatcoat, hat, and gloves, too busy scanning the crowd in the room beyond the foyer, where guests were enjoying the ball, to even know who'd taken his effects.

"Your Grace!" That yanked his attention to the older woman suddenly before him. From her dark hair with silver streaks, he knew this was Mrs. Scarborough. "My... This is an unexpected pleasure!" She beamed at him.

"Mrs. Scarborough, I thank you for the invitation. I hope you don't mind that I reconsidered at the last minute?" He'd rejected the annual invitation weeks before meeting Ella, just as he'd rejected the pile of Christmas invitations he received each year.

"Not at all, Your Grace. Do come in!" He extended his arm to his hostess, fighting the urge to knock her sideways and run about like a madman until he found the one woman he was looking for. Mrs. Scarborough began her inane chatter. He nodded along, barely listening as they entered the ballroom, stopping just past the threshold. As a waltz sweetened the air, he scoured the twirling dancers, then the throng around the perimeter of the room. All while Mrs. Scarborough continued her blather. She didn't know where her husband was. She'd have him located posthaste. *He'll be delighted to see you, Your Grace...*

Where was she? Had she retrieved her paper? Was she with Alfred? Would she allow him to kiss her? He'd fucking tortured himself with thoughts of her. The urge to come to aid her with Alfred had been suffocating. Even though he knew how independent and capable she was and that she didn't need for him to do any such thing.

He'd never been so overcome with the desire to protect someone as he was toward her.

There was a commotion behind him in the foyer that caught his ear.

"Wh-Who are y-y-you going to believe? M-Me or *them*?" The set of slurred questions made him turn around. The man speaking was about his own age, with short dark hair, a trimmed moustache, and short beard. He was sufficiently inebriated, swaying a little and upset with the two men before

him. One was Scarborough. The other the current president of the LMS, Adam Hughes. Both were older men of similar age.

It was clear a scene was unfolding.

“Dearest, what is happening?” Mrs. Scarborough asked her husband, reentering the foyer in haste, casting nervous glances toward the ballroom.

“Nothing of concern. Mr. Whimple is leaving. Do tend to our guests,” Scarborough ordered his wife.

She excused herself from Lewis’s presence and returned to the ballroom. Lewis closed the large double doors the moment he saw Ella step out from behind the men with two other women by her side. He didn’t want the guests seeing her involved in any unpleasantness.

Ella stepped beside Scarborough. “Mr. Scarborough, you have an unscrupulous fraud here. What Mr. Whimple has done is unconscionable. He stole. He made ugly threats to our reputations based on *lies*. He isn’t someone who should be in the noble field of mathematics, science, or in polite society in general.”

Emotions welled inside him. God, he missed her. He was so damned proud of her.

“Lies?” the drunken man snorted. “They weren’t li—”

Scarborough stepped forward. “Finish that sentence at your own peril, Whimple.” It came out a growled threat. “Don’t you dare utter a single word that would besmirch my daughter or either of these other women’s impeccable characters. In fact, don’t speak another word to me or any member of my family again! President Hughes, Lady Luella is quite correct. He doesn’t belong in the Mathematical Society. His published works must be republished, the matter handled delicately, of course, but my daughter’s and Miss Ernestine’s work must be acknowledged and properly attributed to them.”

“Agreed.” Hughes nodded. “Mr. Whimple, you’ve made a mockery of the Society and all the members in it. You are out.”

Two of the male staff stepped forward at Scarborough’s nod. “Get him out of here.”

Grasping him under the arms, they began to escort the wobbly Mr. Whimple across the foyer, toward the door amidst his slurring protests.

“One moment,” Lewis called out. It was then that the small group noticed him.

“Your Grace!” Scarborough was clearly surprised to see him, but not as

surprised as Ella. Dear God, she looked so beautiful in her royal-purple gown. He walked toward the group and stopped near her. "I'm afraid I didn't see you there. We're in the middle of a private matter..."

"I understand. I wanted to deliver an important message," Lewis informed Scarborough.

"Of course, Your Grace."

He turned to Ella. "Lady Luella, it is good to see you."

She curtsied. "Your Grace."

With a jerk of his chin toward Whimple, he said, "Alfred?"

She nodded. "Yes, Your Grace."

Lewis sauntered over to Whimple, who was still being held up by the two men. "Sir, I have a message for you from Sarah and Joseph."

The man looked confused. "*W-Who? Wh-What* do they want?"

"This." Lewis slammed his fist into the man's jaw, knocking him to the floor. He heard distinct female gasps amidst the satisfying howl of pain he'd garnered from Alfred. "That's the end of the message. Thank you," he told the two men who picked Whimple back up onto his feet and escorted him out. Lewis delighted at the sounds of the man bewailing his outrage and rubbing his injured jaw.

He turned his attention to Hughes, who was looking as shocked as the rest of the group over Lewis's incident with Alfred. "President Hughes, since you are the current LMS's president, I wish to inform you that I will be increasing the annual donation my father began years ago to the Mathematical Society. I will be doing the same for the universities he was committed to that have counted on such contributions."

Hughes smiled. "That's excellent, Your Grace."

"That is *providing that* a written proposal is sent to me outlining how you will encourage more women to participate, study, and publish in the advancement of knowledge and innovation."

His smile slipped a little, but he said, "Yes, of course, Your Grace. I will do just that."

Lewis nodded and finally turned to the woman he'd come to see. "Lady Luella, might I have a word with you?" He offered his arm.

* * *

Standing outside the front door with Lewis, Ella waited for him to speak, riddled with anticipation and battling with various scenarios in her mind to

explain his presence at the Scarborough Christmas ball. A snowflake landed on Ella's cheek.

He pulled her warm cloak more tightly around her with his gloved hands. "Is everything all right, then, with the Alfred situation and your paper?"

She smiled. "Yes. I've formally submitted my work to President Hughes."

"How did you get it back?"

"With help from my brilliant friends. Oh, and some fine brandy that Octavius—also known as Alfred-with-a-sore-jaw—has a great fondness for." That brought a smile to his face and hers. Octavius more than deserved what Lewis had done to him. "We got him to confess his thievery, making sure Scarborough and Hughes overheard. Given what a disreputable individual Octavius has shown himself to be, no one will believe anything he says."

He hadn't bothered to put on his top hat. She watched the winter wind ruffle his hair, wanting so very much to thread her fingers through it. To touch him again.

"Good. I'm very glad." A small smile was on his lips.

"Thank you for what you did in there, Lewis. I don't mean just with Octavius. I mean your support of women and their higher education and recognition. Is that why you came here? You don't attend Christmas parties."

"That's true. I don't." He looked down, and he seemed to be grappling with his words.

Her heart was now pounding. Waiting. Wondering. Tormenting her. Perhaps it was just because he was near, but her entire being clamored for so much more than a generous act of support.

When his lengthy pause got the better of her, she blurted, "Since you're here, I have a gift for you." That grabbed his attention. Heat entered his eyes. It made her insides flutter.

"Oh? I liked your last gift very much."

"This one isn't like that. Though, I believe you will like this one too. I was going to have the gift delivered to you. Two months before I met you, Aunt Charlotte's dog, Sable, gave birth to a litter of three pups. They've become quite a handful, the four of them. I would very much like you to have one. And by one, I mean *two*."

He laughed.

"So, will you take them? One puppy is bonded to his mother. The other two are inseparable. They must stay together. Both female."

He took her hands in his. “Ella, I couldn’t take the dogs unless...”

“Unless?”

“Unless I could give them a duchess. I would like, no, I would be honored if you would be my duchess.”

Her breath was knocked out of her lungs in a sharp gasp. “You’re asking me to *marry you*?”

“Yes, that’s what I mea—”

She ripped her hands out of his, flung her arms around his neck, and began to rain kisses on his face. “Yes! Yes! Did I say *yes*?”

Laughing, he captured her face between his palms. “I want you to pursue whatever vocation your brilliant mind wishes. I want you as my wife...with garlands and red bows at Christmas. I want you to be my great love, and I yours. It took your leaving for me to see how empty my home and life are without you. *Ella...I love you...*” He gave her a long, lush kiss, sealing those words against her lips.

The first snow of Christmas Day began to fall.

A Historical Tidbit

Augusta Ada King, Countess of Lovelace [1815-52] was a brilliant mathematician and writer and possibly the first ever computer programmer (the Analytical Engine).

Sophie Bryant [1850-1922] was a mathematician, writer, activist, and teacher. Like the Countess of Lovelace, Sophie forged a career in mathematics, standing shoulder to shoulder with the learned men of her day. The heroine in this story is a combination of both these accomplished women and their achievements.

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