

The background of the cover features three people in 19th-century attire. In the center is a woman wearing a vibrant green, short-sleeved dress with puffed shoulders and a pearl necklace. To her left is a man in a dark blue jacket and a white cravat, holding a silver pistol. To her right is another man in a red vest and white cravat. The title 'ALCOTT HALL' is printed in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the woman's chest.

# ALCOTT HALL

*Second Sons Book Three*

*Lady Madeline's  
Story*

**EMILY RATH**

# ALCOTT HALL

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# SECOND SONS BOOK THREE

# EMILY RATH

EMILY RATH BOOKS



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Rath, Emily

ALCOTT HALL


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*To Lady Chatterley, you fine ass, classy bitch.  
You walked so Madeline could run.*

## BOOK BLURB

### **The Lady has an offer. The Vicar has a confession.**

When her late aunt leaves her a generous fortune, socially awkward Lady Madeline Blaire believes she's finally found a way out of the high society husband hunt. There's only one problem. To claim it, Madeline must marry by New Year's Eve...which is now only three weeks away!

Determined to claim her financial freedom, Madeline slips away from her overbearing family and races off to Alcott Hall. Madeline needs a husband. *Now*. She will be generous, providing him with a comfortable living. All he has to do is agree never to claim his rights as her husband.

Three years ago, Charles Bray left Finchley and never looked back. It was too painful to dwell in the past. So, when duty calls him home, he returns, heart heavy, to a town full of ghosts. Seeking any distraction, he sparks an unlikely friendship with a quiet young lady who makes him a surprising offer too good to refuse.

*ALCOTT HALL is a standalone, spicy Regency romance set three years after the events of the Second Sons duology. For the best reader experience, I recommend reading BEAUTIFUL THINGS and HIS GRACE, THE DUKE first.*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello again, beautiful readers! Are you ready to go back to Alcott Hall? This is the third book in the SECOND SONS series. Book one is BEAUTIFUL THINGS and book two is HIS GRACE, THE DUKE. Both are available on KU, Kindle, and paperback.

This book is set *three years* after the end of HGTD. The following is going to **\*\*SPOIL\*\*** the first two books for you, so proceed with caution. Here's what happened:

### **BEAUTIFUL THINGS:**

Rosalie Harrow, a young, penniless woman, travels to Alcott Hall to spend the summer as the guest of the Dowager Duchess of Norland. She arrives to find herself thrust in the middle of a high society husband hunt. While she avoids the drama of the ladies chasing after the duke (who does *not* want to be chased), Rosalie develops friendships with three gentlemen:

- **-Lord James Corbin, Viscount Finchley**, the duke's younger brother
- **-Mr. Horatio Burke**, a bastard son of the former duke's steward
- **-First Lieutenant Tom Renley**, a childhood friend of James and Burke

Shenanigans ensue. Lady Madeline Blaire is one of the ladies being hurled at George (much against her will). She becomes close with Rosalie. By the end of book one, Rosalie

has a relationship budding with Mr. Burke and Lieutenant Renley.

At the Michaelmas Ball, the proverbial shit hits the feathered fan. The Dowager Duchess demands that George marry a lady named Piety Nash. Then she forces Mr. Burke into an engagement with the insufferable Lady Olivia Rutledge. Renley's ex reappears, telling Rosalie they're engaged. In a panic spiral, Rosalie and James take off together for London...and don't tell anyone.

### **HIS GRACE, THE DUKE:**

Rosalie and James are followed to London by Burke and Tom. Burke confesses his love (again) and commits to her, even without marriage. We learn Tom's ex lied and he's *not* engaged. He's also in love with Rosalie...and Burke. James loves her too, obvs, but he's a dramatic pain in the arse, and he'll hold out on us pretty much all book. Don't hate him. When he comes around he...he comes. It's all good. We forgive him.

Anyway, the fearsome foursome work tirelessly to unravel the messes made by the Dowager Duchess, including getting Burke unengaged to Lady Olivia, and helping George find his inner light. We meet new characters, we have looots of sex, and it's a pretty great time.

By the end of HGTD, Rosalie is fully committed to being with her men and they want to be with her...and each other. Yep, this is a full polyam pretzel. Everyone is with everyone, and it's swoony and romantic and hot as hell.

Rosalie marries James and becomes the Duchess of Norland. Burke and Tom commit to living with them at Alcott Hall, and they will be a blissfully happy foursome.

The book ends with two epilogues. In the first, we learn Rosalie is pregnant with her first child, and Tom is being recalled to his ship. The second flashes forward five years. I want us to hit pause three years in. That's where Madeline's story starts.

Are you ready to go back to ALCOTT HALL? Grab your smelling salts, and get ready to clutch those pearls!

XO,

Emily

## TROPES, TAGS, & CONTENT WARNINGS

### **TROPES:**

Regency romance, Marriage of convenience, forbidden romance, second chance romance

### **TAGS:**

MM, MF, MMF, cabin in the woods, show me, wow that escalated quickly, virgin's say the darnedest things, it's a love triangle until its not, that moment in Bridgerton when the Duke of Hastings asks Daphne if she ever touches herself...as a novel, Lady Chatterley wishes

### **CONTENT WARNINGS:**

This book deals with themes that may be distressing to some readers including illness and death of a parental figure (depicted); traumatic childbirth (depicted); Regency era sexism and class consciousness; Regency era socialized homophobia. A character grapples with questions as to whether his sexual attraction to another man is a sin. The romance in this book involves detailed sex scenes, to include degradation, voyeurism, light impact play, and primal.

### **STAR SIGNS:**

- **Lady Madeline Blaire:** Capricorn (earth): reserved, ambitious, troublemaker
- **Mr. Charles Bray:** Aquarius (air): intellectual, altruistic, free-spirited
- **Mr. John Warren:** Scorpio (water): passionate, controlling, loyal



# ALCOTT HALL



The carriage rolled to yet another stop, wheels rattling on the cobblestones. London traffic was always busy this time of day, but this was getting ridiculous. A trip that should have taken all of fifteen minutes had now stretched for well over thirty. Something about an overturned hay cart.

At this point, it would have been faster to simply walk, but Lady Diana Blaire, Viscountess of Raleigh, would never sanction an act so pedestrian as walking to one's destination. As she so often said, walking to a social function ought to be reserved for prostitutes and Catholics on pilgrimage.

Her daughter Madeline sat across from her, shivering under the weight of a thick wool blanket. The winter chill was brutal this morning, forcing Madeline to bury her nose deeper inside her fur muffler. She resented having to leave the warmth and comfort of her favorite reading nook, especially for a task as arduous—and ultimately pointless—as taking tea at her aunt's house.

“Don't slouch, Madeline.”

Madeline huffed, the warm air moist on her lips inside the muffler. “Mama, it is just we two here,” she replied. “And it's freezing—”

“It's undignified,” her mother snapped. “Besides, you could pull a muscle. Now sit up straight, before you give me a headache.”



Biting back her retort, Madeline shifted her hips and rolled her shoulders back until she was in a more dignified seated position. Of all the fights she felt like picking with her mother today, her posture was low on the list.

The carriage rattled back into motion and both ladies gave little sighs of relief. The city bustled with life all around them as other carts and carriages passed by. The sounds of the horses shod hooves were sharp and metallic on the crisp winter air.

Her mother leaned forward, nestling her hands under her own thick fur muff. “Now, as I was saying, Aunt Judith wrote this morning just before breakfast to say she thinks Lord Everton will be at today’s tea. You remember him, dear? From the Cabot’s party?”

Madeline just nodded, already intuiting the instructions her mother was about to give her. They were the same every week: corner the gentleman currently at the top of her mother’s ‘most eligible’ list, two light touches and three polite questions within the first ten minutes, and don’t forget to smile.

Lord Bryson Everton was the current favorite in the race for Madeline’s hand. Only, after three years out in society, it was no longer a race so much as it was a leisurely stroll through the back garden.

“Now, when Lord Everton arrives, you’re to draw his attention to you straight away,” her mother ordered. “I know Judith has her eye on him for Mary, but they’re not well suited. And frankly, she shouldn’t even be out yet,” she said with a wave of her gloved hand. “She’s far too young. A flighty little frippet if you ask me.”

Madeline pursed her lips, glad her mother couldn’t see her incredulous look behind her muffler. “She’s a year older than me when I came out, Mama.”

Her mother scoffed. “Much good it did you. Three seasons out, and still unmarried. Your father is losing patience, you know. You cannot rely on his beneficence forever, Madeline. You have a duty to take this seriously.”

“I know, Mama,” she replied, swallowing down the nerves that were already mounting. She couldn’t help that she was frightfully awkward in social settings. She’d never mastered the ability to be at ease in a crowd. It didn’t help that the sharks of the *ton* loved to prey on weakness. Debilitating shyness in a lady was akin to bleeding straight into the water. The sharks were ravenous for her. After three years, Madeline was all but a social outcast, teased and wholly dismissed as a suitable candidate for marriage.

And yet, her mother persisted, much to everyone’s chagrin, especially Madeline’s.

Her mother leaned forward; eyes alight. There was nothing she loved better than the thrill of matchmaking. “I’ve had it from Lady Spencer that Lord Everton is a fan of horse racing, so that should be your opener. You could discuss the races we attended this summer.”

*Talking point number one. Thank you, Mama.*

“Oh, and remember we went with your cousin Bertie to those horse trials at Windsor? There was a chestnut we liked the look of very much. I think it was bought by the Duke of Devonshire—”

*Chestnut horse at Windsor. Talking point number two.*

“And perhaps you could invite him to come by our stables,” her mother went on. “We may have a champion in the making, our own diamond in the rough. I’m sure His Lordship would be pleased to take Lord Everton on a tour—”

*Come see my father’s stables. Talking point number three.*

“Yes, Mama. Thank you—”

“And don’t forget to offer the occasional warm look or touch,” her mother added. “Just because the weather is frigid, it doesn’t mean you must be too. Men like a little playfulness, Madeline. You’re always so serious. There’s demure and then there’s, well...you.”

Of all the expectations that came with courting, Madeline found touching strangers to be the most off-putting. For some, the dance was an act almost carnal in its level of sensuality.

For Madeline, it was an exercise in patience as she fought to keep her body from flinching as strange men rubbed their calloused hands on her shoulders, her waist, her back, gripping her fingers too tight and stepping on her toes. She hardly tolerated intimate touches from her own family, let alone these endless strings of bumbling suitors. The only form of touch she enjoyed was the thrill of a hit when she landed a strike with her foil in fencing practice.

“I will do my best, Mama—”

“And for heaven’s sake, smile,” her mother urged, throwing her another pleading look.

*There it is.*

“I swear, the Lord cursed you with that pale skin and those big doe eyes. You simply *must* smile more. When you don’t, you look like a ghostly apparition.”

“Yes, Mama—”

“And this weather does nothing to help your complexion, dear. Your winter pallor makes you look almost ill. Be sure to pinch your cheeks a few times to rosy them up, and just keep smiling.”

Madeline let out a steadying breath, trying to find her courage. She couldn’t think about Lord Everton or his love of horse racing. She’d been alone with her mother for half the morning now, and she still hadn’t managed to ask the one question eating her alive.

She blamed Patrick. Her cousin always made a habit of sticking his nose into her business. They were barely a month apart in age, and so similar in size and coloring, that they were often confused for twins. He’s said something last night that had her mind spinning like a top. She’d hardly slept. She wanted to confront her mother about it, but the viscountess could be slippery as an eel when she wanted to be.

Her mother leaned over and tugged the curtain aside, glancing out the window. “Oh, thank heavens, we’re nearly there. I’m sure Judith will be sick with worry. She’ll think we were taken in by carriage robbers.”

Almost there, meaning it was now or never.

“Mama...” Madeline sat forward, tugging down gently on her muffler to uncover the lower half of her face.

Her mother was still looking out the window. “Hmm?”

“Do you know anything about Great Aunt Maude’s will?”

The lady stilled, one gloved hand still on the pretty yellow velvet curtain. “Her will? Whatever can you mean, dearest?”

The truth was in the way her voice had suddenly raised an octave, her hands dropping to her lap as she sat straight and still. Madeline’s heart sank. Her mother was a terrible liar, and even worse at subterfuge. “Did she mention me, Mama? In the will?”

Her mother pursed her lips. “You know I’m not involved in any legal matters. You’ll have to talk to your papa when we get home.”

“But—”

“Put it from your mind, Madeline,” her mother ordered. “You have more important matters at hand today. Lord Everton is a fine prize, worthy of all your most sincere attention. If you can snap him up now, we could have you married in the spring. Oh, how I’d just *love* to finally rub a wedding in Judith’s face! She’s always been determined to show me up. Five daughters and three already married. Madeline, if you let even little Mary find a husband before you, I don’t know that I could ever forgive you.”

Madeline blinked away the tears of frustration stinging her eyes. How was it possible that the whole of her life’s worth was going to be weighed, measured, and found wanting based on her inability to find a man willing to marry her?

Before she could argue the point further, the carriage rattled yet again to a stop. Only this time, the driver thumped his fist twice on the top, and the footman hopped off the back, coming quickly around to lower the step and open the door. They’d arrived at last at Aunt Judith’s new townhouse.

Her mother rounded on her, eyes narrowed in determination. “Now, what are you going to do?”

Madeline balled her hands into tiny fists. “I’m going to corner Lord Everton—”

“*Charm*, Madeline,” her mother corrected with an exasperated huff. “You’re going to charm Lord Everton. And?”

“And I will ask him at least three interesting questions about horses.”

Her mother nodded. “Very good. And?”

Madeline sighed, losing all her will to fight as she readied herself for yet another round in the social arena. “And I’m going to smile.”

The viscountess beamed at her. But Madeline couldn’t miss the way her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. It never reached her eyes when directed at Madeline, and it hadn’t for a very long time. “Wonderful. Lord Everton is going to fall in love with you, dearest. I can just *feel* it.



Lord Everton was, in fact, *not* ready to fall in love with Madeline. That would be impossible, for Bryson Everton, second son of the Marquess of Ely, already fancied himself very much in love with a bay racing filly named Turkish Delight.

It had to be love, right? What else did you call it when a man could talk for twenty-six minutes without taking a breath about every facet of a horse's form, fitness, and family pedigree. Poets had less to say about the wonders of love than Lord Everton did about his filly's well-shaped stifles.

In a way, it made things easier for Madeline. She could keep one eye on the clock and use her cup of tea as a shield, brandishing it between her and the lord. Whenever it sounded like he was about to run out of things to say about Turkish Delight, Madeline made a little *hmm* sound in her throat as she brought her cup to her lips. That was all the encouragement he needed to keep going.

"We meant to start her under saddle when she turned two, but my trainer said we ought to give her another year entire. You can ruin a horse by starting them too soon. Some fillies need the extra year, you know, to gain much needed muscle mass."

Madeline offered him a weak smile and a nod. "And where do you intend to race her, sir?"

Taking a deep breath, he launched into a one-sided discussion comparing the merits of dirt tracks to turf. Each

time he paused to take a bite of cranberry scone, little crumbs dusted down onto the lapels of his coat. With his full chops and bushy mustache, he put Madeline very much in mind of a well-dressed squirrel.

Her mother's choice for 'most eligible bachelor' may have been a bit more eccentric of late, but Lord Everton went beyond the pale. In what world did Lady Raleigh really consider him the most eligible match in England? Was Madeline truly such a hopeless case?

*Yes*, came the easy answer in her mind. It used the same shrill, calculating voice as her mother.

Madeline couldn't help her mind from wandering as he droned on. She was seated in the corner of her aunt's cozy drawing room, near to the fire. That, at least, was a blessed relief. After nearly forty-five minutes in the freezing cold, she was only just starting to feel completely thawed out. The fire crackled and hissed in the grate, working overtime to heat the chilly room.

All around her, the other guests sat on chairs and poufs, the ladies gaily chatting with their own eager suitors. Her cousin Charlotte even sported a fan, fluttering it before her face in a way Madeline assumed must be seductive, only it was December, and this room was bitterly cold. Madeline fought the urge to smirk. Lord Tewksworth hardly seemed to notice, lost in the dazzle of Charlotte's smile.

On the sofa opposite Madeline, even her youngest cousin Mary was making good progress with the Earl of Lindsey's son. Just as Lady Raleigh feared, the little frippet seemed poised to land herself a match by year's end. Madeline smiled. Mary wasn't a frippet, in fact she was highly clever and emotionally sensitive. She was just better at this game than Madeline, which annoyed the viscountess to no end. It wasn't about Mary's success. It was always only ever about Madeline's repeated failure.

The handsome young lord let out a loud chortle at something Mary said, leaning forward to snag a biscuit off her

plate. She swatted at him playfully. “Oh, Lord Allen, you are a thief! Mama, Lord Allen has stolen my last biscuit!”

There was a flurry of squeals and laughter across the room as Mary launched from the sofa, determined to replace her biscuit. Lord Allen hurried after her, nearly tripping on the carpet as he gave eager chase.

Madeline had to clutch her cup and saucer to herself, pressing back against the cushions to avoid the whip of his coattails. Next to her, Lord Everton sighed, checking his pocket watch for the third time. He was bored of her. She didn’t blame him. She’d contributed all her useful knowledge about horse racing twenty-one minutes ago.

But it was finally her turn to lead the conversation, and her mind was blank. What could she possibly say at this man that he would want to hear? What were her mother’s talking points again? How did Madeline bring one up naturally?

It suddenly felt as if the whole room were spying on her, ready to watch her fail. She felt the prickle of eyes on the back of her head. Oh yes, how entertaining to watch Mu-muttering Madeline make a fool of herself yet again.

She dared a glance across the room to where her mother sat, pretending to be in conversation with Aunt Judith. Lady Raleigh was such a stately woman—tall where Madeline was short, poised where Madeline was tense, verbose where Madeline was silent. Not for the first time, Madeline felt envious of her mother. The only thing they shared was their coloring, fair blonde hair and sky-blue eyes.

She didn’t miss the pointed look the viscountess gave her, those narrowed eyes darting from her to Lord Everton and back. “Say something,” she mouthed.

Madeline cleared her throat, her finger curling tighter around the handle of her teacup. Why did she make this so difficult for herself? What was wrong with her that she couldn’t just say one of the thousand and one thoughts currently rolling around inside her head? The pressure to perform felt overwhelming, even when the stakes were as low as failing to impress Lord Bryson Everton. But she had to try.



She had to set her confounded shyness aside. She had to say *something!*

“So...do you...umm...”

That’s it. That’s as far as she got with a coherent thought.

The fire crackled and popped, the hiss of the flames loud in her ears. Atop the mantle, the handsome carriage clock went *tick, tick, tick, tick*, counting up the seconds of Madeline’s mortification. All around her, the other ladies laughed and chattered, easily letting words pour forth like so many musical fountains. While, across the room, she could practically hear the silent groan her mother suppressed.

“Stables,” she blurted, feeling as if the word had been squeezed from her throat.

“Pardon?” said Lord Everton, his mouth full of his fourth scone.

She took a breath. “My father’s stables are very grand.” She winced at the unnecessary superlative. They were, in fact, rather average. Lord Raleigh wasn’t much of a horseman. “We could see them,” she went on. “Or you could. I mean, that is to say, would you *like* to see them?”

God, she really was hopeless. She bit her bottom lip, waiting for his rejection.

He pursed his lips, glancing down to finally notice the spray of crumbs dusting his jacket. He brushed the off with a lazy wave of his hand, setting aside his empty plate. “Actually, I had rather hoped to ask about the stables at Leary House. I was curious as to their condition.”

Madeline stilled, her cup raised halfway to her lips. All the sounds in the room were suddenly muted. There was only a faint humming in her ears. This wasn’t possible. Could it be a coincidence?

No, Madeline didn’t believe in coincidences.

She rattled her cup onto the saucer and sat forward, eyes narrowed. “What did you just say?”

He slurped his coffee, his hands appearing overly large clutching the dainty, floral patterned china cup. “I said I was curious to know the conditions of the Leary stables. Are they in proper working order? Renovations are a chore, and the price of lumber has never been higher. I don’t want to be making a poor investment.”

Madeline’s heart was racing. Further proof. She could hardly draw breath. Her eye darted from Lord Everton to the place where her mother watched. She set aside her cup of tea with a soft clatter. “And why would that be a thing that came of your mouth?” she pressed.

He raised a confused brow, clearly off-put by her sudden rudeness. “I beg your pardon?”

She leaned forward, hands clutched tightly in her lap. “Why are you asking me about Leary House?”

His lips pursed under that thick mustache. “Well, because of the inheritance. It is part of your dowry now, no?” At her look of confusion he sighed. “Look, you’re a lovely girl, Lady Madeline. But if the Leary fortune isn’t part of your dowry, tell me now. I don’t like feeling as though I’ve wasted my time.”

She gasped, sinking back as if struck. “I...”

Without thinking, she was on her feet. Lord Everton nearly tumbled his plate off his lap in his rush to stand as well. “Lady Madeline—”

“I thank you, Lord Everton,” she said on a breath. “It’s been a pleasure, but I must go.” She didn’t even wait for his response. Feeling the eyes of the room on her, she rushed towards the door. Her cousins all called after her, polite words or worry and concern. But she didn’t stop. She *couldn’t* stop.

“Madeline?” her mother called. “Madeline, wait—”

But Madeline was already out of the drawing room, rushing away down the hall towards the front door.

“Madeline, what on earth are you doing?” her mother cried, hot on her heels. “Go back in at once, and apologize to Lord Everton. He came here expressly to see you—”

“No, he didn’t,” Madeline huffed, snatching her pale blue pelisse off the hook by the door. “He came here to see if my dowry had improved. He doesn’t want me, Mama. He only wants the money—”

“Lower your voice,” she hissed, stepping closer, one eye looking warily over her shoulder. “Do you want him to hear you?”

Madeline just shook her head, fingers fumbling as she buttoned her pelisse. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Do what? Madeline, what are you doing? Take that off at once, and go back to the drawing room,” her mother ordered.

“I can’t stay here. I have to go.”

“Where are you going?”

“Away.”

Her mother huffed an empty laugh. “You will go when I say you can go. Now, stop being petulant, and go apologize to Lord Everton. Then I think you should lie down for a quarter of an hour in Mary’s room. You’re clearly ill.”

Madeline paused, her fingers frozen on the last button of her pelisse. “Were you ever going to tell me?” She didn’t dare turn around. She didn’t want to watch her mother lie to her face.

“Tell you what? Madeline, this behavior is unpardonably rude—”

Madeline spun around. “The *will*, Mama! Were you going to tell me about Great Aunt Maude’s will?”

Lady Raleigh sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes darting to take in Madeline’s face. “Oh, this again? What are you on about?”

Madeline squared her shoulders at the woman who towered over her. “Your game is up. I know the truth, Mama.”

Her mother’s eyes narrowed. “How—*oh!*” She hissed like an angry cat. “When I see that shameless excuse for a law

clerk again, I will ring his neck myself. How *dare* he upset you like this!”

“Patrick told me the truth, Mama,” Madeline cried. “Which is more than I can say for *you*. How long have you known she wrote me into her will?”

Her mother crossed her arms, still glancing over her shoulder towards the open drawing room doors. “What did your cousin tell you?”

“Enough,” Madeline replied.

That was a lie. Patrick only mentioned the will last night in passing. He’d meant it as a joke, voicing his surprise that she wasn’t making more of an effort to claim her new inheritance. When it became clear she had no idea what he was talking about, he’d gone slightly red in the face and scampered before they could finish their game of chess.

“Are you going to tell me about my inheritance? Or did you plan to keep trying to force me into a match with the likes of Lord Everton, a man so impossibly dull he makes watching the seconds tick by on a clock more thrilling than opening night at the theatre!”

“Madeline!” her mother gasped, one hand flying to cover her dainty mouth.

Madeline said that last loud enough to be heard down the hall, she was sure of it.

*Good. I want this bridge burned.*

“Just tell me the truth,” she pleaded. “Could this all be over?” She waved a hand, gesturing down the hall towards the drawing room. “Did Aunt Maude leave me money in her will? Could I be free of this hell at last?”

To her surprise, Lady Raleigh didn’t respond with anger. In fact, her eyes went glassy, and she sniffed back tears. “Oh, Madeline.” She gave her head a gentle shake. “No.”

Madeline blinked, fighting back her own tears now. “Mama, please,” she murmured. “Please, if you love me at all, just tell me.”



Madeline waited, watching as her mother sniffed again.

Lady Raleigh held her head high. “Your father’s aunt wrote you into her will, it’s true,” she admitted. “The family only found out about it last week. Maude left everything to you, Madeline.”

It was Madeline’s turn to suck in a gasping breath.

*What? Could this be possible?*

Lady Maude Blaire (née Leary) was the last living Leary, an old line of Irish earls. The title died out generations ago when the male line failed, but the Leary fortune had been passed down through the eldest female Leary, ending with Maude.

In her youth, Maude married Madeline’s great uncle, Archibald Blaire. They lived unhappily until his early death, and then Maude lived alone in her beautiful London townhouse. She rarely ventured out into society. In the last years of her life, Madeline was one of the few relations to visit her.

Madeline liked the odd bird. She appreciated silence as much as Madeline and boasted a fantastic library. She let her borrow as many books as she wanted on whatever topic. It was thanks to Maude and her fantastic linguistics collection that Madeline was learning German.

It broke a little piece of Madeline's heart when they got the news two months ago that Maude had died quietly in her sleep. The family that had ignored her for half a century all turned up for her funeral. Most of them even wore black for a month. Madeline had asked her father more than once what was going to happen to Leary House, and he'd merely replied with, "It's complicated, my dove."

After her questions went unanswered, she let it drop until Patrick brought it up last night.

"I don't understand," she murmured. "What can you mean she left me everything?"

Her mother huffed. "I mean to say she left you everything, Madeline. The whole of the Leary fortune. She left you Leary House, the hunting lodge in Kerry, half shares in two profitable tin mines, and an annual income of three thousand pounds per annum."

"Oh, god—" Madeline couldn't breathe. Why was she still standing? Surely, one must sit to receive this kind of news. She glanced around, her hand waving awkwardly as if it could fashion a chair in thin air. She panted, turning and sinking her weight against the wall against the rest of the coats. "I—can't—what does this mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything, because you cannot claim it," her mother replied, her tone clipped. "Which is why it was beastly of Patrick to mention it to you at all."

Madeline shook her head. This didn't make sense. "Why can't I claim it? I *want* to claim it. What must I do? Does Uncle Rodney have the will? Surely, he can help—"

"You cannot meet the conditions set forth in the will," her mother snapped. "It is impossible, Madeline. Once the will is contested, your unclaimed assets will revert to the oldest of the Blaire children."

Madeline blinked twice. "But...papa is the oldest." An odd feeling of hope and foreboding mingled in her chest. "If I cannot claim my inheritance, the money will go to my father?"

Her mother gave a curt nod.

Madeline felt her sense of hope blooming. “Well, then surely, if I can’t claim it directly, he can claim it and give it to me as it was intended—”

“Oh, be sensible, Madeline,” her mother huffed. “What would a girl of twenty know about claiming such a fortune? You are a child. A sweet, ignorant fool. Best leave this to your father. He will take care of you, as he always has.”

Madeline reeled back as if slapped, her hope bursting inside her chest like a soap bubble. They meant to keep it from her. Whatever the conditions set forth in the will, they meant to keep her in the dark. Surely there must be a timing aspect to it. They were waiting out the clock. Madeline was about to lose her chance at a fortune she never even knew was hers, and the person ready to take it from her was none other than her own father. And her mother was in on the subterfuge.

“Who else knows?” She pushed herself off from the wall. “Papa? You? Uncle Rodney? I’m sure he’s told all the boys if Patrick knows. Even Lord Everton seems to know something. He asked me about it just now.”

“Lower your voice—”

“I will *not* lower my voice!” Madeline hissed, tears burning in her eyes. “All my life, you’ve been telling me I must speak up. You cannot now wish me to stay silent, Mama!”

“Diana? Is everything alright, dear?”

Madeline’s mother spun around, plastering that fake smile on her face, as Aunt Judith emerged from the drawing room. “We’re fine, dear,” she called back, her voice all false cheerfulness. “Madeline is feeling unwell. I think we’ll retire a bit early.”

“Of course, go home and rest yourselves,” cooed Aunt Judith. “Lord Everton bade me tell you that he’ll be hosting a dinner tomorrow night, and you’re all invited.”

Madeline groaned as her mother replied, “How lovely.”

Her heart was racing out of control. Madeline never lost her temper. She never raised her voice. It felt freeing. She

wanted to do something else to chase this feeling. She wanted to be bold. Not waiting for her mother to turn around, she snatched her bonnet off its hook, and lunged for the front door, not looking back as she darted out into the street, followed by the sounds of her mother's startled shriek.





Thirty minutes later, Madeline burst through the door of her cousin's cramped little office. "Tell me about the will."

"*Christ—Madeline—*" Patrick cried, dropping his quill and upsetting his pot of ink. "What the hell are you doing here? Did you—" His gaze trailed from her sodden skirts up to her flyaway hair. "Did you *walk* here all the way from Mayfair?"

"Walked and ran," she said, panting for breath.

There was hardly any room within this glorified closet for more than a desk and chair. Even standing at the door, Madeline was all but in her cousin's lap.

His mouth opened and closed like a confused cod. "Walked—it's—Madeline, it's *freezing* outside! Are you mad? You'll catch your death!" Even as he spoke, he was on the move, slipping off his chair. He tugged a little folded bit of tartan off the back of the chair and wrapped it around her shivering shoulders. "Christ, you're frozen solid," he muttered, giving her shoulders a little rub.

"Patrick, please, just tell me the truth. Did Maude leave me her fortune?"

He groaned, leaning back against the opposite wall. The only light came from a narrow, dusty-paned window, and a three-pronged candelabra with half-melted waxes. A little coal

brazier sat in the corner, letting off just enough warmth to keep the cramped space habitable.

“M, I really can’t get involved—”

“Stop it,” she rasped. “Mama just confessed. I know there’s a will, and I *know* I’m in it. I need someone to start telling me the bloody truth!”

Patrick blinked in surprise at her forcefulness. In a way, looking at him was like looking in a sort of mirror. He had the same fair blonde hair, the same big blue eyes, freckles dotting his cheeks and nose, a pointed chin. Even his frame was petite like hers.

The main difference between them was that Patrick was always at least a little bit disheveled. Even now, he had a blot of ink marring the side of his nose. Madeline could just imagine him sitting hunched over this rickety desk, scratching an itch with his quill tip, blithely unaware of the stain he’d left behind.

Well, perhaps today wasn’t right for making that distinction. She glanced down, taking in the state of her ruined skirts. She could feel an icy squelch between her toes. Her petticoats hung wet and heavy, slicked to her stockings. She shifted uncomfortably. “Patrick,” she murmured. “Please...”

He sighed again. “It’s not like this has been easy for me, M. But you’re asking me to defy Uncle Richard, a man who could squash me like a bug.”

Madeline’s sense of righteous anger flared at the sound of her father’s name. That was the knife that cut the deepest. How cruel to feel like now his love of money might eclipse his love of her.

She crossed her arms too, mirroring his stance. “You profess yourself to be a law clerk, do you not? Well, how is it *legal* to keep someone in the dark about their own affairs? How is it moral? How is it Christian? Please, Patrick, where is your heart—”

“Alright, *fine*,” he cried, throwing up a hand. “Stop looking at me with those doleful eyes, and I’ll tell you. Just...”

sit down.” He gestured at his chair.

“I don’t want to sit,” she snapped, holding herself tighter.

“Sit down.”

“No.”

“Goddamn it, M. *Sit*, or I’m leaving!”

With a huff she sat. Now he towered over her, the light casting odd shadows on his face. “Well? I’m sitting.”

He nodded, unfolding his arms to tuck them in his pockets. “You’re in the will, alright? You’re the sole claimant.”

She didn’t even realize she’d been holding her breath. “You’ve seen it?”

“Aye, I think we’ve all seen it at this point.”

Irritation burned inside her at that. “And?”

“And nothing. You won’t be able to actually claim the money. No one told you about it because there wasn’t any point—”

“But *why* can’t I claim it?” she cried.

“Well, because Aunt Maude put a condition on you earning the money, M.”

“What condition?”

He sighed, “You have to be married to claim it.”

Her heart dropped out of her chest. “What?”

“To claim the inheritance, you have to prove that you’re married by the end of your twentieth year.”

“But that’s *three* weeks away!”

“So, you see the problem.”

She positively quivered with indignation as all the pieces of the last two months fell together in her mind like some cruel puzzle. “Oh god,” she murmured. “Oh god, *god!*” She shot out of the chair, desperate to pace. But there was nowhere to go in this glorified broom cupboard. She turned at the door, pressing her weight against it. “Is that it then? Is that why my father has

been so distant these last few months? Casually planning a trip to Cadiz, knowing he'll soon have the money to pay for it? *My money!*"

Patrick winced but said nothing.

"And my mother," she murmured. "I thought she'd finally given up all hope. Why else would she demand I waste my time courting men like Lord Everton and Barnaby Smythe? She's been setting me up to fail! Only Lord Everton seems ready to make me an offer. But he's suffering under the illusion that the Leary fortune is now part of my dowry. He thinks *he* can claim it!"

"Yeah, you can blame Rory for that," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck with a tired sigh.

She blinked. "What does your brother have to do with any of this?"

Patrick just shrugged. "He was going off about it at White's the other night."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Well, isn't that just perfect. So now, Lord Everton thinks he can have my twenty thousand pounds *and* the hunting lodge in Kerry. He's ready to move his damn horses into the stables at Leary House!"

"We can set him straight, M—"

"That is *not* the point," she cried. "All my life, I've done *everything* they've ever asked of me. I've twisted myself into knots, becoming a version of myself I neither recognize nor like. And I have done nothing but fail over and *over* again!"

She was sobbing now. "I've watched their esteem of me flicker and die, like the wick of an utterly spent candle. I have tolerated the ridicule of the entire *ton*. Poor little Madeline. Sweet little Madeline. Mu-mu-muttering Madeline!"

"M, stop—"

"I *can't* stop," she cried. "Don't you understand, Patrick? I don't know how to stop. For weeks, you've all known this was hanging over me, and not one of you said a word. You all

didn't just expect me to fail, you *wanted* me to fail. And I don't know that I can ever forgive you."

Patrick's eyes were glassy now as he reached for her. "M, please—"

"No," she cried, rattling back against the door. "Don't touch me. Don't offer your sympathy now."

"What was I supposed to do? What were *any* of us supposed to do? How did you expect to get yourself married in two months when you've—" He fell silent immediately, biting his lip with a groan.

She raised a brow at him. "When I haven't managed it for three years?"

"Madeline, don't do this to yourself—"

"Is that what you were about to say? When I'm such a hopeless case? Well, thanks to all of you, I haven't even been given the chance to try!"

He stepped forward, grabbing her shoulders. "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it. How can I help you through this?"

She looked around wildly, praying the answer might be written somewhere on the blank walls of this dimly lit office. "I don't know," she admitted. "What *can* I do?"

He loosened his hold on her shoulders. "You want the money? You want to put Uncle Richard in his place at last?"

She nodded, feeling her resolve strengthen. "I do. Patrick, for once in my life, I want to win. I—I want this."

"Then you need to fulfill the conditions of Maude's will," he replied. "You need to marry by the end of the year. Prove you're married, and the Leary fortune is yours."

"As if it's so easy."

"You've got three weeks," he said. "What are your options? Do you have a suitor in mind?"

"Of course, I don't," she said with a roll of her eyes.

“Well, all you need is someone kind, good humored... someone who won’t be a leech,” he said, letting her go and dropping into the chair at his desk. He shifted over the ruined page drenched in drying ink. Using the bottom of the next piece of parchment, he picked up his quill and scratched out a few words.

“And heaven help you, M, but don’t pick a gambler,” he added. “No horses, no boxing, and no wild speculations. I may be a lowly clerk, but just trust me on this.”

She nodded, peering over his shoulder as he kept scratching away.

“You need someone who will accept the dowry and leave you in peace,” he went on. “That’s what you want right? A business arrangement? A marriage of convenience?”

She nodded again. What other possible kind of marriage could she hope to expect?

He scratched out a few more lines on the paper before tearing it away from the ruined top. Then he handed it to her. Madeline glanced down and read the list of attributes for her future husband:

***Kind***

***No leeches***

***No gamblers***

***Dowry-chasers acceptable***

***No intimacy***

***Affairs should be kept quiet***

***No renegotiating for new terms***

“Patrick, I...*affairs should be kept quiet?*” She raised a brow at him.

He chuckled. “You can’t expect a man to marry you and then join a monastery, M. If you’ll not be fulfilling your wifely duties, you can hardly expect him to not look elsewhere.”

Heavens, she hadn't thought of that. Could she be married to a man knowing he was being unfaithful to her? Her knowledge on the subject of married life could fill a thimble, so she supposed she could accept what she didn't know.

Patrick leaned forward. "And by the same token, any of your affairs should probably be kept quiet—"

"My affairs," she cried, eyes wide.

Now he really was laughing at her. "Don't write off romance so easily, M. You're a pretty girl. You're my cousin, so excuse me if I don't wax poetic beyond that, but you could easily turn a man's head if you'd work on the whole...you know..."

"Debilitating social anxiety?" she finished for him.

He just gave her a gentle smile. "Well?" He reached over and tapped at the paper. "Thoughts? Who fits the bill?"

She looked down at the list again. Kind. Not a leech. Not a gambler. No expectations of intimacy. Slowly, she felt a little kernel of hope bloom in her chest. She raised her eyes from the paper, settling her gaze on her cousin. Was it possible the answer was standing right before her?

He quirked a brow at her. "What? What is that face?"

"You could do it," she murmured.

His smile fell. "What?"

She stepped forward, tartan slipping off her shoulders as she reached for his arm. "Oh, Patrick, will *you* marry me?"



“*W*hat?” Patrick squawked, jerking out of her grasp as if her touch burned him. “Madeline, you’re mad—”

“Why is it mad?” She chased him as he took the three bumbling steps backwards, his shoulders hitting the opposite wall of the tiny office.

He held up both hands as if he meant to ward her off. “Madeline, we are cousins. *First* cousins!”

“When has that ever stopped the aristocracy before?” she replied with an indifferent shrug. “It’s not as if I would ever expect to share your bed—”

“*Christ*, Madeline.” He dragged a hand through his messy golden locks. “I beg you, don’t put that image in my head. And *don’t* ask me again. It would be like marrying my sister,” he finished with a strangled groan.

She had to concede that point. With Patrick’s own brothers being so much older than him, Madeline was more of a sibling to him than ever they were. But that didn’t bother her in the slightest. Society could think what they want. So long as she and Patrick were safe and happy, what care she for the approval of the vultures of the *ton*?

“Just think on it before you say no—”

“No.”

“What are your prospects otherwise?” she challenged. “You are the youngest son of a baronet, and Rory is already



married with three sons of his own. The next two eldest are married as well, with pregnant wives both. You will never inherit Blaire Lodge—”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Patrick snapped, his eyes narrowed in annoyance.

“Imagine it,” she went on. “We could live happily together at Leary House. We already get on so well. You could live your life and I mine. And I’d never resent you for looking elsewhere or for-for having affairs—”

“Madeline, I *beg* you,” Patrick groaned again. “I cannot discuss such matters with you. Not now. Not *ever*.”

She flapped her arms helplessly, tears stinging her eyes again. “Well, then what am I supposed to do? My only chance at making this work is to marry someone I already know. I don’t trust this plan otherwise. I refuse to tie myself into a marriage with a stranger.”

“Well, I cannot possibly be your only unmarried male acquaintance,” he snapped. “Because hell will freeze over first, Madeline. I am off limits!”

She wrapped her arms back around her middle, trying very hard not to pout. It would have been so easy to marry Patrick! The matter could be settled tomorrow by teatime.

“Hey!” Patrick snapped his fingers. “What about that sea captain friend of yours? What’s his name? Wesley-something...”

Madeline stilled, her gaze drifting slowly back over to her cousin. “Captain Renley?”

“That’s it,” he replied, grin growing. “Captain Renley is a very eligible bachelor, M. And you get on well. None of your usual awkwardness. I’ve even seen you dance together at the odd thing. I daresay a man as handsome as the captain may even have you rethinking your commitment to celibacy,” he added with a wink.

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. Captain Tom Renley *was* a good friend. She’d never considered him as a possible match because, well, it was complicated. They first met three years

ago when she and her mother were guests at the Duke of Norland's summer house party. Three years ago, the Duke of Norland was George Corbin. It was Madeline's first season out, and her mother had been on the misguided mission to get her married to him. Thank heavens her plans were foiled, for there were no two people less suited for marriage than Madeline Blaire and George Corbin. Not only did the duke *not* get married that summer, he disclaimed all rights to his title, passing the dukedom to his younger brother, James.

James Corbin was named duke by the queen herself on the day that should have celebrated his elder brother's wedding. He returned to Alcott Hall with his two closest friends in tow, Captain Tom Renley, and Mr. Horatio Burke, whom the duke immediately named as his new steward.

Within a fortnight of his investiture, the duke surprised the *ton* twice over by walking to the little church in Finchley and marrying Miss Rosalie Harrow, a woman of no birth, family, or wealth. Madeline remembered the morning the news hit the society papers. Her mother had shrieked, nearly tipping her tea into her lap.

Madeline never said anything at the time, but she was secretly thrilled, for she considered Rosalie a friend. Rosalie Harrow was one of the first ladies who made Madeline feel like herself. She didn't care that Madeline was reserved. She sat in silence with her, sketching or watching the flowers in the garden. She never laughed at Madeline's awkwardness or tried to finish her sentences. She just let Madeline be.

Over the last three years, they'd maintained their friendship, writing letters almost monthly, and seeing each other whenever the duchess was in town. But Rosalie preferred to stay in the countryside. Madeline could easily understand why. She may be a duchess now, but the *ton* was never going to let her forget who she was before the duke raised her out of the gutter.

Madeline didn't care about her lack of status. Rosalie had a kind heart and a loyal soul. So Madeline had kept all her many suspicions to herself as she observed the way Rosalie interacted with her husband and his two best friends. It didn't

escape her notice the way Rosalie could finish Mr. Burke's sentences, or the way the captain always seemed ready with a joke to make her laugh.

Madeline didn't have the words to describe her suspicions, but she was fairly sure Rosalie's marriage to the duke was unique. Knowing what she knew, Captain Renley didn't seem like a viable candidate for her future husband. But she wasn't about to tell Patrick any of this.

"M? Well, what do you think?" said Patrick, brows raised in curiosity.

"Maybe," she replied.

"He'll be at Alcott Hall, will he not?"

She nodded. In Rosalie's last letter, she'd remarked on the excitement she shared with the duke that Captain Renley would soon return after a twelve-month at sea.

"Well, fancy a trip south?"

His words effectively pulled her from her muddled thoughts. "What?"

"You need a husband. Captain Renley is available. Go to him, and make your case," Patrick reasoned.

"But—I can't—Patrick, that's mad," she cried, taking a step back and nearly tripping over his office chair.

He laughed. "What's mad about it? You can't possibly write this in a letter, M. It's too...much," he added. "This is the kind of request that demands an in-person conversation. If Captain Renley is at Alcott Hall, that's where you need to go."

She shook her head. "Mama will never approve. She won't let me just drag her off to Alcott with a plan to propose to a sea captain."

Patrick's smile turned positively devious as he folded his arms across his chest and leaned back. "Who says you need to tell her?"

She blinked. "What?"

He reached a hand in his waistcoat pocket, tugging out his watch by the chain, his smile spreading. “It’s nearly noon, M. Do you know what passes by at noon not one block away from here?”

A nervous fluttering took over her stomach as she followed his point to its logical conclusion. She couldn’t help the smile that spread across her lips. “Patrick, I can’t—”

“You want to really give Uncle Richard a run for his money?” he pressed, stepping forward to snatch up his coat off the hook by her head. “Take all the notes I have here in my pocket, board that noon coach, and ride off for Alcott Hall. Bag yourself a husband before Lord Raleigh even realizes you’re gone. You can write him a note while you’re on your honeymoon.”

Her heart was racing. This was reckless. Stupid and selfish and a hundred other terrible things. And nothing was going to stop Madeline from doing it.

Patrick handed her a small wad of folded pounds. It was as if a stranger reached out with her hand, taking them and slipping them into her own pocket.

“What if he says no?” she murmured.

He was going to say no. Why wouldn’t he say no? There was not a man worth having willing to say yes to Lady Madeline Blaire.

Patrick shrugged. “Well, then you’ll be no worse off than you are now. In fact, this might be better.”

“How so?”

He laughed, scooping the tartan off the floor and wrapping it back around her narrow shoulders. “For three years, you’ve been playing this game following Aunt Diana’s rules. If you go to Alcott and ask the captain and he says no...well, you’ll still have the duchess in your corner. Is she not a close friend?”

Madeline nodded.

“Just imagine how well Her Grace must be able to play the marriage game,” he mused. “Did she not bag herself a duke in

under a month? Surely, she can help you bag a peer able to put his boots on the right feet.”

Madeline snorted. It was highly unladylike, but she couldn't help it. This was complete and utter madness. Madeline had never gone anywhere without her mother as a chaperone. “They will come for me. They'll be so mad, Patrick. I'm sure my father will never speak to me again.”

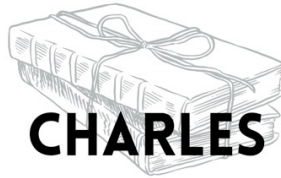
“They won't know where to find you,” he replied. “Write a note to Aunt Diana now saying that you're staying at Blaire Lodge for a few days. By the time your dear mama realizes you've lied, you'll be safely hidden away at Alcott.”

Madeline's nervous smile spread. “Oh, Patrick, you're a villain.”

“Please, this is the least I can do,” he said with a wave of his hand. “Now, hurry up, and jot down the note for your mama. We'll send it off on our way to the coach.” He slipped past her for the door.

“Wait—where are you going?”

He took her in from head to toe. “We've got to do something about your outfit, M. Alcott Hall is six hours away in good weather, and there's a storm rolling in. In that silly getup, you'll freeze to death before you've even reached Greenwich.”



The coach rattled to a stop, and the occupants within groaned with relief. Charles bounced his knee in anticipation as he waited for the footman to drop the step and open the door. He had to get out. *Now*. If he didn't get some relief, he was going to go stark raving mad.

Four hours trapped inside a coach seated next to a young woman and a teething infant was enough to fray his every last nerve. The woman had apologized profusely, growing increasingly red in the face and teary as the poor little lad squirmed and cried, miserable in his confinement and sore in the mouth.

Charles and the two gentlemen on the opposite bench did their best to be polite, but inside he felt as ready to scream as the baby. The last hour took the longest, and he was quite ready to climb out the window and hold onto the side, even in this bitter cold.

The footman rapped twice on the side of the coach and barked out, "Finchley! All out for Finchley!" Then he jerked open the door.

Charles all but stumbled out, letting the piercing cold hit his face. He took a grateful breath that burned his lungs, even as it chilled. Flipping the collar of his great coat up, he turned quickly and helped the young lady and her baby out of the coach.

"Thank you, sir," she murmured, the baby squalling in the cold. "So sorry."

“Think nothing of it,” he replied, his patience restored now that he knew he was moments away from freedom. “Do you require assistance? I can help you to your door.”

“No need, sir. My mother is—*mama*—” The young woman all but sobbed as a lady in a fur-trimmed cape came bustling forward, arms outstretched.

“Darling, Mary!” The woman wrapped the mother and child in her arms, and they both took to speaking at once, coos of delight and moans of relief at being reunited.

Charles left them to it, stepping around the back of the coach to retrieve his traveling case. Damn, but this wind was bitter. He reached in the side pocket of his great coat, extracting a knit wool scarf, and wrapped it twice around his face, a little more protection against the chill. He now wished he’d opted to wear his fur-lined gloves, rather than the plain black leather. His knuckles felt stiff as stone. He was desperate to get home and thaw himself by the fire.

“Need any help there, sir?” called the footman.

“I can manage,” he replied, hefting his case by the leather strap. The coach had parked but a stone’s throw from the parsonage. Finchley Church loomed just beyond, the modest bell tower peeking up above the grey stone walls. He would be inside and warm in moments.

Steps from the front gate of the parsonage, Charles paused, glancing up and down Finchley high street. It was a busy afternoon, even in this miserable cold. The *tink tink* of a blacksmith’s hammer came from the smithy across the way. Charles was sure Mr. Forbes was hard at work within. A few loaded carts rolled down the street, heavy with produce or stacked high with hay. Children darted about—young lads throwing snowballs, a pair of village girls chasing a bleating sheep that slipped loose of its pen.

Watching the pastoral scene, Charles felt an ache somewhere just above his left ribs. It twinged so distinctly that he raised an absent hand, rubbing the spot. He swallowed down the ball of emotion sitting heavy in his throat. He’d missed this place. The quiet of it, the unhurried comfort of a

small life. This village was as much a home to him as any place could be, and he missed it like a piece of his heart had been torn away. Now that he was back, his heartbeat felt more regular. He could breathe again.

*Home is where the heart finds rest.*

How often had his uncle said those words? Charles had never given them credence before. It had been five years since he called Finchley home. Three years since his last visit. He was sure he would find much changed, for life never stood still, but the essential things remained the same. A blacksmith wielded his hammer, farmers carted hay, and boys threw snowballs much too forcefully for the comfort of old Mrs. Tibbets.

Charles smiled behind his scarf as he watched the old lady come bustling out of her shop, wielding a broom. She brandished it at the boys, shrieking about the threat to her windows. Charles turned away with a soft chuckle, using one hand to lift the latch on the old blue gate that led through into the front garden of the parsonage.

A fine dusting of snow covered all the boxwoods planted along the high stone walls. His favorite bench was hidden under the drifts too. A decade of memories flooded him in a breath—reading on that bench in warm summers, climbing atop it with other village boys as they played crusaders, secret whispers in the dark, his back pressed against the hard stone—

*Enough.*

He took a shaky breath, dropping his gaze to his boots. Only the little cobblestone path from the gate to the front door had been cleared of snow. His boots crunched on the salt that protected against ice as he approached the door.

Setting his case down, he raised a gloved hand and grasped for the large brass door knocker. He rapped three times, hearing the echo of it around the eerily quiet garden. Snow always had that effect. It warped the senses, making every sound both too quiet and too loud.



He heard the latch lift moments before the door swung inward.

“Oh, my heavens,” Molly gasped, one hand over her mouth. Tears sprung instantly to her grey eyes.

Charles smiled down at his uncle’s loyal housemaid. The woman had served him for nigh on thirty years. She may be all of five feet in her tallest booted heels, but she was mightier than a hurricane. Frizzy grey curls framed her face under her pristine white mop cap. “Hello, Molly,” he murmured with all the warmth of feeling he could muster.

She lowered her hand from her mouth, blinking back her tears. “You came.”

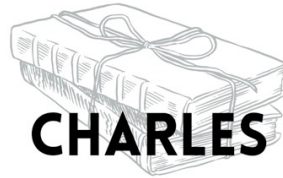
“Did you doubt I would?”

This woman had raised him as much as Uncle Selby. She was his surrogate mother in all but name. He felt the sting of her sharp appraisal as she took him in from his top hat down to his boots. “I did,” she admitted, not unkindly. Damn, but this woman knew him better than he knew himself. “He’ll be that pleased to see you,” she added.

Charles let out a sharp breath. Relief flooded him that he wasn’t too late. “He still lives then?”

Molly stepped back to let him enter. “Aye, he lives. Heaven knows it would be a kindness unmatched if the Lord would see fit to bring him home. But until he does, we’re doing what we can for his comfort. Come, get yourself in. You can bring him his tea.”

Heart in his throat, Charles stepped over the threshold into his uncle’s house, knowing with an aching sense of surety that it would probably be for the last time. And he very much doubted Uncle Selby would be happy to see him again, as it was his uncle who demanded he leave and never come back.



Charles pushed on the door of his uncle's study with his back, keeping the tea tray balanced in his hands. From within the room, his uncle called out in a weak voice.

“Ah, Molly. Just in time. I—”

Charles gazed upon his beloved uncle's face for the first time in three years. *Christ Almighty*. Charles couldn't breathe. He took a deep breath, forcing a smile. “Hello, Uncle.”

Mr. Thomas Selby, curate of Finchley, was once a virile man; tall and broad shouldered, with a full head of walnut brown hair. That's how Charles saw him in his mind. The man sitting in his uncle's favorite reading chair was a ghost. Pale and balding, frail, watery-eyed. Damn, but the cancers eating away at him were working fast.

Uncle Selby cracked a weak smile. “Charles? Oh, my dear boy. My sweet, Charles. Are you really here?” He tried to rise from his chair, his glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose.

“Don't get up,” Charles said, quickly crossing the room. “Let me come to you, sir.”

His heart pounded, praying his uncle would accept this visit for what it was and not pester him about the past. Charles had put it resolutely behind him. He only wanted to focus on the here and now, on his uncle's comfort in his dying days.

Uncle Selby sank back with a heavy sigh. “Oh, Charles. Whyever are you here?”

Charles set the tea tray down on the table nearest his uncle's chair, fighting his anxiety. "I came to see you, sir. I finally had time to get away as I'm between postings."

"Yes, I got your last letter," Uncle Selby replied. "Vicar of Bredbury. That's quite an honor. You'll do well there, I'm sure."

Charles sat in the empty chair next to him, handing his uncle a cup of tea.

Uncle Selby took it with shaking hands and a murmured 'thank you.'

The two men sat in silence and Charles let his eyes rove about the room. It was exactly as he remembered it—the crisp white walls, the peaked windows with their foggy glass, his uncle's massive writing desk, two walls of shelves thick with books. A happy blaze crackled in the hearth, warming the space.

"Your brother is doing well?" Uncle Selby said at last.

Charles set his cup back on its saucer. His elder brother David left Finchley as soon as he was able. He was a military man and had been stationed in the East Indies for the last seven years. "I wouldn't know, sir," Charles replied. "David was never one much for writing home. If you've heard from him in the last two years, you will know more than I."

"He wrote a fine note just this summer," Uncle Selby replied, glancing around at the tidy stacks of letters and sermon notes that always littered his sitting area. "I have it here somewhere. Oh, damn—" His shaky hands fumbled the cup, and he nearly tipped the contents into his lap.

Charles shot out a hand. A few drops of hot tea splashed onto his fingers. "Easy on, sir."

Uncle Selby chuckled, setting the cup aside. Before he could speak again, the door creaked open, and Molly entered with another tray.

"Wasn't this a nice surprise?" she called, bustling forward to serve them warm, buttered toast with blackberry jam. "Master Charles nearly gave me a fright appearing on our

doorstep and—heavens,” she laughed. “Just listen to me. ‘Master Charles’ and all. You’re fine Mr. Bray now, aren’t you, sir,” she said with a fond smile. “I do know my manners. Don’t let Mr. Selby tell you otherwise. But old habits die hard.”

Charles returned her smile. “You may call me ‘Master Charles’ if it suits you, Molly.”

“But you are Mr. Bray now and have been since the moment you left for Cambridge,” she replied. “It will take some getting used to, but I’ll manage it in the end.”

Uncle Selby surveyed her over his wire-rimmed glasses. “Ahh...I see. *You* wrote to him.”

Molly straightened from adding logs to the fire. She turned, hands on her hips. “Are you accusing me of meddling, sir? Tis not my place to write to young gentlemen, ordering them about the country.”

Uncle Selby chuckled. “My dear Molly, you could teach the Fates something of meddling.”

She huffed. “And if I did, sir? I would have done nothing wrong. You missed Master Charles, and it is your right to have family close at a time like this. I’ll not apologize for calling him home.”

“I wanted to come, Uncle,” Charles added. “This visit was long overdue. I was glad of Molly’s letter, and I am glad to be here now.” He reached over, taking his uncle’s hand.

“See?” Molly said with a huff. “And it’s Christmas, sir. Master Charles ought to be home where he belongs at Christmas. I did nothing wrong.”

Uncle Selby gave her a warm smile. “I don’t deserve you, Molly Evans.”

She blinked, her bottom lip quivering as her gaze fell on the hand that held tight to Charles. “Well then...I’ll just be in the kitchen.” She bustled away, shutting the door behind her.

The men sank back into the silence, Charles still holding tight to his uncle’s hand.

“I never thought to see you again,” Uncle Selby murmured. “Not in this place. Not so long as...” He quieted, leaving the rest unspoken.

Charles stiffened, his breathing shallow. His uncle knew everything about his past. There was not a single secret kept between them—not from a lack of trying on Charles’s part. His uncle just *saw* him.

Charles and David lost both their parents in the same year. The war took their father, and a flu took their mother six months later. At ten and twelve years old, they were dropped at Uncle Selby’s door. As their mother’s only brother, he was their nearest relation. He took the boys in, making his meager allowance as a curate stretch to cover two more mouths.

The Corbin’s had been heaven sent, covering officer training for David and Cambridge for Charles. He’d graduated with his divinity degree three years ago, which was the last time he’d set foot in Finchley. Since then, he’d served as a curate in churches from Cornwall to Manchester.

Not that Charles had any great connection to the Church, or a strong calling to evangelize. In fact, speaking from the pulpit was his least favorite part of the job. But a man must have a profession. The late Duke of Norland gave him a path out of poverty, and he was happy to take it.

Charles found ways to enjoy his work. He liked to help people, he liked to be of service. There was something Christlike in that, surely, modeling one’s life after being of help to others. He could do without all the talk of fire and brimstone and the oppressive sense of moralizing. Instead, he wrote pretty sermons about ‘love thy neighbor’ and he worked for the support of his community. If they never noticed the way he weaved in Keats and Byron to his sermons, so much the better.

“How long will you stay?” Uncle Selby murmured.

Charles still watched the fire. “Until the end.”

Uncle Selby gave his hand a soft squeeze. “I am not frightened, you know. I’ve had a long while to prepare. And I

am tired of feeling my body fail me. So bloody tired. I'm quite ready, Charles. I am at peace."

Charles sniffed, tears burning his eyes once more. "Nothing has ever scared you, sir. You are a force of nature. Goliath incarnate." His mouth quirked into a sad smile.

Uncle Selby held his gaze, seeing him in that way only a trusted mentor can. "*You* scare me, Charles," he admitted. "Your wild heart. Your unbridled nature."

Charles looked quickly away, dropping his uncle's hand. So, they were not to go even an hour without facing this head-on. Charles was a fool to think otherwise. His uncle had always been singularly focused on reforming Charles from his passionate, wild ways.

"I am so grateful that you came to see me," Uncle Selby went on. "How happy I would be to have you here unto the very end."

Tears fell freely down Charles's cheeks now. Regret, shame, frustration, anger. Each emotion wove itself in thick braid, a rope tied tight around his heart, squeezing until he was gasping for breath. "But?"

Uncle Selby sighed. "But Finchley is not safe for you, my darling boy."

Charles turned sharply. "I will not repeat the same mistakes again."

Why could his uncle not believe him? Why could he not trust him?

Uncle Selby shook his head. "You are still a young man, Charles. Your spirit is as untamed as the starlings that fly in the sky."

"*I want* to be here," Charles pressed, dropping to one knee at his uncle's side and taking his hand with both of his own. "I want to be here for *you*. Only you have brought me home. You are the only one who matters to me."

Uncle Selby still shook his head, his frown deepening. "He matters more. He is the one that calls you home."

His uncle said the words so quietly, Charles could have imagined it, but he saw the old curate's lips move. Pain lanced through his chest. He closed his eyes, shaking his head. "No," he whispered. "No, never again. I am reformed. I have moved on, I *swear* it to you, sir—"

"No one ever moves beyond their first love, Charles." Uncle Selby leaned forward, cupping his cheek with a cold hand. "If you stay, he will draw you in again. And I cannot protect you once I am gone. Please, Charles. I told you once to go. Do not make me do so again."

"He means nothing to me, Uncle," Charles rasped, begging his own heart to hear the words and believe them.

The old man stroked a hand through his curls. Charles leaned into the touch, eyes shut tight as his heart raced.

"You were always a terrible liar," his uncle replied, his voice impossibly gentle. "But this isn't about stealing a pie or pushing your brother into the river. This is you choosing to go down a path that will only lead to loss. Turn away from him. Turn away from here. Leave, Charles."

"I cannot leave you," Charles murmured. "Not like this."

"You have come, and I am so very glad. But now, it is my dying wish that you go, and I *am* dying," he added. "Your staying to watch it will change nothing."

Charles took a shaky breath, glancing around the close confines of his uncle's study. His resolve hardened. He would not be turned out of his own home again. He could resist. He could be here for his uncle and no one else.

He let out a breath through his pursed lips. "A fortnight," he said. "I will stay a fortnight with you here. We will celebrate Christmas together, and I will help Molly get all your affairs in order. Besides, how much trouble can I really get into in two weeks?" he added, trying and failing to lighten the mood.

Uncle Selby sighed, leaning back in his chair, his shoulder drooping with fatigue. "Two weeks then," he replied. "And then you will go."

Charles nodded. “And then I will go.”





Patrick's idea of proper travel attire for Madeline turned out to be a collection of outerwear he stole from the other clerks' offices. Overtop her ruined dress, she wore her pale blue pelisse, a man's morning coat that smelled faintly of pipe smoke, and a different man's great coat that was so large she had to roll up the sleeves and lift the hem when she walked.

She had Patrick's tragic little scrap of tartan wrapped around her shoulders and tucked into the top of the great coat, the collar popped against the chill. She completed the odd look with a pair of wool mitts and her winter bonnet that did little to keep the cold off her ears.

With each stop the coach made on the journey south, Madeline's anxiety grew. This was madness. Why did she let Patrick talk her into this? Impetuous. Childish. Irresponsible. Dangerous. She ought to turn around. What would Rosalie say where she appeared on her doorstep? What would her mother say when she realized Madeline was gone?

It didn't help that a journey that should have taken six hours instead took nearly eight. The weather was terrible—sleeting rain on slippery roads. They changed out the horses twice as often due to the harsh conditions and freezing temperatures.

Those two extra hours did nothing to quell Madeline's growing anxiety. By the time she stepped out of the coach in

Finchley, she was physically and emotionally exhausted. But there was no turning back now.

She stumbled her way into the Blue Lady, the little inn at the corner of the high street. She'd seen the inn in passing before, but never ventured inside. It felt daring to do so now without a chaperone. Daring, and necessary, for if she stayed outside in this chill, she would likely freeze solid.

The inn had a little front room scattered with a few tables. Only one was occupied with two men playing a game of cribbage. They hardly even glanced her way as she entered. Their table sat closest to the crackling fire. A haze of sweetly floral pipe smoke floated above their heads.

At the far end of the room, a long bar was built into the wall. A woman stood behind it, wiping bottles down with a rag. Madeline had to assume she was the innkeeper. She stepped forward, clearing her throat. "Um...excuse me? I think I may need a little assistance."

The innkeeper pursed her lips, surveying Madeline with keen eyes, no doubt taking in her strange attire. "More than a little, I'd say, miss. You lost?"

"I...not lost, no," Madeline admitted, her voice breathy and weak with fatigue. "I just came in on the London coach and I need to get to Alcott Hall."

She eyed her too-large coat and fuzzy grey mitts. "They expecting you up at the great house then?"

"I...no," she murmured. "But I know the duchess," she added lamely.

The innkeeper hmph'd under her breath. "Everyone knows the duchess 'round here. I dare say everyone in England knows her."

"She's a friend," said Madeline. "I am her friend. She knows me well. Please, if someone could take me to the house, you'd see I am known there."

The innkeeper's frown deepened. "You got two legs, don't ya? It's not even a mile up the road," she added with a jut of her chin in the direction of the house.

Madeline bit down on her bottom lip, fighting the urge to cry. Of course, she ought to walk. It was ridiculous to think she could travel eight hours on her own and not manage the last three quarters of a mile. And she knew the way well enough. She'd walked it many times in the summer she spent here.

How this old innkeeper would laugh when she heard the truth. Madeline didn't want to walk because she was afraid of the dark. She'd never walked outside at night before. Not alone, certainly. And *never* outside the bounds of a well-lit garden. Now she was expected to confidently stride through the dark forest like Robin of the Hood? It was unthinkable.

She should have thought this through. She should have never left home. Damn Patrick and his harebrained schemes! Why was she *always* letting him drag her into trouble? Never again. Madeline was resolved. Patrick Blaire would never trick her into a foolhardy scheme again.

As if her inner turmoil were a book with open pages, the innkeeper read her and sighed. "Fine. Wait here, miss." Slapping down her rag, she walked the length of the bar and disappeared through a side door. Within minutes, she came back with an elderly man in tow. "This is Harry, miss. He'll bring you up to Alcott in his hay cart, so long as you don't mind sharing a seat."

Madeline shook her head. "No, I—that's fine." She fought her blush as she added, "I can't pay you, sir." The trip south had taken all the money Patrick gave her. She'd be showing up at Alcott Hall in the dark of night with empty pockets... pockets that weren't even hers.

"Tis no trouble, miss," the man replied with a toothy smile. "Give me a min to finish hookin' up the gals, and we'll be on our way. Meet me 'round the back."

Madeline watched the old man's hitched gate as he hobbled off through a side door.

"Harry is good folk," said the innkeeper. "He'll see you get up there safe and sound. You have any luggage?"

Madeline shook her head, suppressing a shiver as a gust of wintery wind blew in through the open door. The men playing cribbage were taking their leave.

“Best head on ‘round back then,” said the innkeeper.

Madeline murmured her thanks, following the point of the lady’s hand towards a dimly lit corner of the room. She moved quickly, giving the door a tug. It inched open on squeaky hinges, revealing a narrow little hall stacked high with various foodstuffs and barrels. There was no light, only the flickering of a torch through the partially open back door.

Madeline did her best not to disturb anything, feeling with one hand while the other lifted the hem of the monstrously oversized great coat. She made it all the way to the back door before tripping on a wicker basket. Her coat snagged and she all but tumbled out into the back yard, trying to catch herself with a shriek.

“Easy there, young miss,” said Harry, reaching out a bony but strong arm to help steady her.

She blinked in the harsh torchlight, letting her eyes adjust to the new scene. The back of the inn had a little courtyard, built in on three sides with storage buildings. Across the way, a large set of double doors were flung open, leading into a barn. A pair of torches burned, casting flickering light and long shadows over everything.

The shadows were made worse by the looming presence of a massive hay cart. Well, perhaps the cart itself was of perfectly average size. But the towering pile of hay strapped down with a tarp stretched nearly as high as the roof of the barn. Out front of the cart, a pair of large draft horses stood in their harnesses. They were a beautiful caramel color, with fluffy white feet that stomped and squelched in the slick mud.

There was an odd sort of poetry to a day starting and ending with a hay cart.

“Watch yer step, missy,” said Harry, offering out his arm. “Hope yeh don’t mind a bit of squash up.”

She kept hold of her coat with one hand, linking her arm in with his as he led her through the mud towards the front of the cart.

“Old Jane says yeh got no boxes wi’ ye?”

“No,” she murmured, her jaw tight to stop her teeth from chattering.

He raised a fuzzy white brow at her. “Were yeh robbed by highwaymen?”

Madeline fought a groan., trying to think of a suitable excuse. “I...my...my effects are forthcoming.”

“Forthcoming?”

She nodded, following his lead as he gestured for her to climb onto the high cart seat. “Yes, I traveled ahead of my luggage,” she said, spinning the lie as she clambered up, careful not to snag her coat. “My trunks arrive tomorrow direct to Alcott.”

“Well then,” was his only response.

He waited a moment down in the mud while Madeline settled herself on the rickety cart seat. It was little more than a pair of roughhewn boards nailed together. She snatched for her coat tails, wrapping them around her legs to make as much room for the farmer as possible.

In moments, Harry was scrambling up with the energy of a much younger man.

Had she ever been alone with a man outside members of her family? She worried her bottom lip thinking on it as old Harry settled next to her, unwrapping the thick leather reins from their tie down. The pair of draft horses were already shifting in their harnesses.

“Get up,” he called with a soft slap of the reins.

The cart jerked into motion and Madeline gasped, gripping to the seat with one hand as the tower of swaying hay behind them rustled. The sound of heavy hooves, turning wheels, and rattling harnesses broke the stillness of the night.

“Hold up there, Harry!” called a deep voice.

Madeline nearly jumped out of her skin as the massive form of a man emerged from the darkness on her other side. She cried out, pressing back against Harry as the stranger tried to catch himself, all but falling on top of her.

“Damn—*shit*—who the bloody hell is this?” he grunted in that deep voice, using the seat’s back to push himself away from her.

Harry barked a laugh. “I thought yeh weren’t comin’.”

“Changed my mind,” the man replied, eyes still only for Madeline. “Harry, who *is* this?”



The strange man was looking at her, his face inches from hers as he hung off the side of the rattling hay cart. “You got a name, lovely?”

Madeline gasped as she realized she was still pressed tightly against Harry’s side like a frightened little girl and not a twenty-year-old woman off on her first great adventure. But she couldn’t help herself. The man who had just leapt onto a moving cart was a giant—dark hair and eyes, piercing in their intensity. Broad shoulders made thicker by the weight of his winter coat. And tall, so very tall. He towered over her.

“We hadn’t gotten ‘round to names yet,” Harry replied for her. “Who are yeh then, darlin’?”

“I—”

“Here, budge over. Give Warren some room.”

Before she could react, Harry had a wiry arm wrapped around her, dragging her closer until they were touching from shoulder to knee. Her whole body went stiff at the intrusiveness. How had she gone from a lifetime of never being within feet of a man not her relative to being wedged between two strangers in the dark of a hay cart?

To her astonishment, the giant tucked his arm around her as well, helping himself to the six inches of board left on the seat.

She couldn’t think. Couldn’t breathe.

“There, that’s cozy, eh?” said Harry. “Warmer this way too. Christ wept, but this winter has my bones quaking.”

Madeline responded with a kind of strangled *hmm* sound. Her brain was frozen with shock.

“You taking in strays now, Harry?”

Madeline tipped her head back, trying to decipher more features of the giant’s face in the weak moonlight. His dark hair was straight and long, falling past his shoulder. He had it tied messily with a leather strap. That deep voice spoke of age—gravely and strong, experienced. But his face was still youthful, even under the dusting of dark facial hair.

There was a rugged sort of beauty to him. Not classically beautiful, surely. Especially since his face was marred by a rather impressive scar. It started low on his right cheek and made a sort of deep, “v” pattern, stretching over the apple of his cheek, across the bridge of his nose, and up, cutting through his left brow. Gracious, the man was lucky to still have use of his eye—

“Have you looked your fill, miss?” he said, a frown pulling at the corner of his mouth. “Never seen a man with a scar before?”

She sucked in a breath, her gaze falling immediately down to her hands folded tight in her lap.

“I imagine wherever you come from, all the dandies have baby soft faces,” he teased. “But some men work for a living. Sometimes they get cut up doing it.”

On her other side, Harry chuckled. “Yer a handsome man too, Warren. Make no mistake.”

The man named Warren was still sitting so uncomfortably close. “So, what’s your story, lovely? What’s a lady like you doing mixed up with the likes of Harry Tram?”

Harry took no offense, letting out a guffaw of a laugh as he clicked to the horses and wiggled the reins.

“I—I needed a ride—to Alcott,” she stammered out. Why did her infernal nervousness have to strike now? Sometimes it



got so bad she couldn't hardly speak at all. This sudden closeness to two strangers was twisting her up, sending her anxieties soaring cloud high.

"She came in on the last coach," Harry offered. "No trunks, no cases, not even a hat box in hand. Yeh believe that, Warren?"

The dark-haired giant frowned, his eyes narrowed in suspicion as he took her in from head to toe. She had to fight the urge to shrink under his punishing gaze. "The look of a lady. The voice of one too. But you're dressed oddly, and you have no belongings. Who are you then? Solve the riddle before Harry starts guessing."

"I'm...nobody really," she replied. And weirdly, she felt the truth of those words down to her bones.

Warren huffed a laugh. "Ahh, yes, Miss Nobody. Surely you must be of the Nobody's from Nowhere," he teased. "They have some very fine property up in Kent, don't they, Har?"

"Oh, aye, Lord and Lady Nowhere keep a grand estate," Harry chortled, easily falling into the bigger man's game.

"Nice try, Miss Nobody," said Warren, his face lowering until his voice was a low growl in her ear. "Shall we trade names, then? I'm John Warren. That's Harry Tram."

Both men glanced at her, waiting.

"This is the part where you say your name," he added, his breath warm against her ear.

She stiffened. His arm was still wrapped around her shoulders, drowning her in the feel of him, the smell of him—all musty hay and masculine, spiced sweetness.

He grunted, shifting next to her. "Damn, this seat is gonna cut my arse in half," he grumbled. "Budge over some more, Har."

"If I budge anymore, I'll be trottin' 'longside Blossom," Harry replied.

The giant grunted "Fine—here, lass—"

Madeline shrieked as Warren grabbed her. He curled his arms around her waist and tugged her up onto his lap, stealing her portion of the seat at the same time. She could hardly believe it as he tucked her sideways across his knees like a child, keeping his arms draped around her.

“Unhand me, sir,” she cried, not knowing what else to say. She slapped at him, kicking her legs.

“Whoa, steady on,” said Harry. “He’s takin’ no liberties, miss.”

“Easier this way,” Warren added. “Now we all have a full seat. Warmer too,” he added.

“Mr. Warren, unhand me at once. This is highly irregular,” she huffed, still squirming in his hold.

Harry chuckled. “Irregular, she says. You never shared a seat before then, Miss Nobody? And ‘ere we are, doin’ *you* the favor.”

“Unless you want me climbing atop the hay, you’ll sit still,” added Mr. Warren with a teasing grin. “I don’t mind being your seat, lovely. Let me warm you up right nice.”

“I am plenty warm, sir.”

He leaned in again, his mouth now at the perfect angle to speak right in her ear. His hot breath sent a shiver down her arms that had nothing to do with the cold. “Lovely, if your teeth chatter any harder, they’re gonna fall out. And you’re far too pretty to have a mouth like Harry’s.”

Harry roared with laughter as she clamped down on her jaw, hating that he was right. She was freezing, and this new seating arrangement *was* helping. His warmth was already soaking through her thighs, and the arms around her waist were not as disagreeable as she imagined they might be. They were firm but supple, letting her body sway with the movement of the hay cart.

“Nearly there,” said Harry.

Madeline turned her face away from the handsy giant, eyes going wide as the turn in the lane offered her first view of

Alcott Hall in over a year. The stately country home was beautiful, nestled in the rolling forested hills that surrounded it. In the dark, the hills weren't visible, but the house still glowed like a beacon, several lights across two of the three floors making it shine out across the vast expanse of manicured lawn.

"We'll park the cart 'round back, and Warren can walk you up to the house," said Harry.

"Why don't *you* walk her up, and I'll start unloading," Warren countered. "You know I'll get it done in half the time."

"Let's not go sayin' things that'll 'ave the lady questioning my prowess. I'm the hay man in Finchley." Harry directed this last at her, jabbing a gloved thumb towards his chest with pride. "Warren is just a gamekeeper lookin' fer a free ride."

"I'm perfectly able to walk myself from the stables to the house," she replied with a little sniff of indignation.

"They know you're coming then, Miss Nobody?" asked Warren.

She worried her bottom lip. How could she possibly explain her true purpose to Rosalie, let alone these strangers? Could she really sit on this man's lap and expose the mortifying truth?

*My name is Lady Madeline Blaire, only daughter of the Viscount Raleigh, and I'm here to beg a man to marry me.*

She'd rather eat glass. No, a change of subject was in order.

Both men were now watching her with curious looks, waiting for her to speak.

*New subject, Madeline. Any subject.*

Harry cleared his throat with a gravelly cough.

*Speak words, you silly fool!*

"How did you get it?" she blurted out.

Warren blinked. "Get what?"

“The scar,” she added.

He barked a laugh in her ear as he shifted his legs under her. “Not a chance, you slippery little thing. You won’t even tell us your name, you don’t want to share the seat, and yet you expect me to spill all my dark secrets on our first meeting?”

Heat bloomed in her cheeks as she fought her rising embarrassment. He was right. It was a completely inappropriate question to ask. Why was she feeling so tongue-tied? “I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “Mr. Warren, I’m—”

“It’s fine,” he said, casting Harry a smirk. “I’ll tell you how I got my scar, miss. Lean in closer.” His arms tightened around her waist, drawing her a little tighter against his chest.

She felt this closeness down to her bones. She’d never been held like this by a man. He seemed so comfortable too, as if he must hold strange ladies on his lap all the time. For some reason, picturing it made her stomach churn. She tried to look away, but one giant hand uncurled from her waist and tipped her chin up to meet his gaze.

“It was a French solider with a deadly rapier,” he said, voice low and intense. “Nasty, brute of a man. I cut him down with my sword.”

Madeline’s heart skipped a beat as she had a sudden mental image of it. But she didn’t miss the way Harry pursed his lips in amusement. She schooled her emotions, meeting the giant stare for stare. “I don’t believe you, sir.”

Harry howled with laughter. “Oooo, little Miss Nobody has you pegged, Warren.” He leaned over, cuffing Warren’s shoulder. “Don’t buy any of his nonsense, miss. Warren never battled the French unless you count a pub brawl. Finchley born and bred, that one.”

“You misrepresent me to the lady,” Warren replied, feigning offense. His gaze hardened slightly as he took her in. She fought the urge to squirm under his inspection. “So...what are you wearing then? This your husband’s coat?”

She looked down at the thick, charcoal great coat that hung off her in folds. “No.”

“Your brother’s?”

“No.”

“Father’s?”

She could practically hear the smile in his voice. He liked teasing then. Liked prodding. He wanted a reaction from her. He wanted to unravel her. Patrick was much the same, especially when he was in his cups. What would she say if Patrick were here?

“I stole it.”

Harry all but fell off the seat with laughter as Warren’s mouth opened slightly with surprise. Something flashed in his eyes, but he carefully schooled it. “Watch your pockets, Harry. We’ve got a thief in our midst.”

“That is the great joke, sir,” she replied. “I have this enormous coat with enough pockets to secret a ham, and yet my pockets are empty.”

He chuckled. “What, empty? Nothing at all?”

She shook her head, suddenly fighting the urge to smile.

“Not even a handkerchief?”

“Not a scrap, sir,” she replied.

“Well, this we have to fix,” he said, his voice ringing with determination. “Isn’t it unlucky to have empty pockets?”

“Aye, invite’s the devil’s mischief in,” Harry intoned.

With one arm still around her, Warren started shifting, reaching into his pockets with his free hand. “You caught me on a bad night, lovely. I don’t think I have even a shilling in these pockets. And I’m sure you don’t want to touch my handkerchief,” he added with a deep laugh.

She scrunched up her nose, her entire body revolting at the idea of a strange man thrusting his used handkerchief into her hand.

“Aha!” cried Harry with a grin. “I got a button ‘ere.” He opened his palm, showing Madeline the shiny black button. “Take it, darlin’.”

She couldn’t help the feeling of warmth spreading in her chest. Why were these men being so nice to her? “I can’t take your button, Mr. Tram.”

“Oooo, ‘Mr. Tram,’ she says,” he laughed. “I like the sound of that very much,” he said around her at Warren.

“You can’t have empty pockets, Miss Nobody,” Warren said, his voice warm against her ear. “Slip it in, before you call calamity down on us.”

Fighting her smile, she tugged off her large grey mitt and took the button, stuffing it into the deep front pocket of the great coat.

“There, no more empty pockets,” Warren said, settling his back against the wooden bench seat.

In all their chatter, she hardly realized where she was. She glanced forward just as they rounded the end of the lane, turning into the large stable yard. The house loomed a few hundred feet away. Madeline knew the path well that led from the yard to the back garden door.

Harry guided the horses around, parking them in the middle of the cobbled square.

“Don’t do all the work without me,” Warren directed at him. “Let’s get you up to the house before you freeze to death,” he added for her.

The house. Alcott Hall. Home to the Duke and Duchess of Norland. And Madeline had arrived without an invitation.

Which door ought she to use? Surely the front door, right? She was a guest, but a guest who had not yet earned her welcome. So, did she just...knock? How had she gone twenty years and never knocked on a door? Every door in her life thus far had been opened for her. She had been expected, invited.

“Ready, lovely?” said Warren, his hands shifting to her waist.

She nodded, swallowing down her nerves. “Yes. I’m ready.”



Now that they were in the light of the stable yard, Warren could get a proper look at the lady perched on his lap. Christ, but she was pretty. All smooth, perfect skin and bright blue eyes. The apples of her cheeks bloomed red, both from the bitter chill and her frayed nerves. She was practically shivering in his lap, and it wasn't all from the cold. He wanted to keep holding her, keep making her blush. But Harry had to go and ruin it.

“Well, Miss Nobody, tis been a pleasure,” he said, flashing her a toothy grin. The man never stopped smiling. “You get along inside now, and warm yerself up.”

“Thank you, Mr. Tram,” she said. Her voice was delicate and sweet, like marzipan. “I’m ever so grateful to you,” she added.

Harry’s grin spread wider. “Did yeh ‘ear her, Warren? I like this one.” He poked a thumb at her. “Darlin’ you keep callin’ me Mr. Tram all proper like, and my hay cart’ll be yer chariot from ‘ere to Aberdeen. Yeh just say the word.”

She stifled a giggle, the soft vibration fluttering against Warren’s chest.

Harry hopped down off the cart. “I’ll go find Young Jim,” he called.

Warren shifted the young lady off his lap and she gasped in surprise, the sound catching in her throat.



“Sorry,” he found himself saying. “Didn’t mean to startle you. Let me just climb down first.”

He slipped over the side of the hay cart, his feet landing on the cobblestones, and turned around, offering out both hands to her. “Come on then, lovely.”

He was taking liberties by calling her that, but he was in too deep to stop now. It slipped out the first time, but the way her cheeks bloomed pink just did something for him. As long as she kept blushing, he was going to keep saying it.

She slid to the edge of the narrow, wooden seat, inspecting the edge of the cart and the ground. He could practically see the gears in her mind working out the problem. Could she get down without him? Did she want to try?

“I’ll not let you fall,” he offered, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

She took a deep breath. “Right then.” She bent down, both her arms outstretched towards him. Her hands were wrapped in a pair of ridiculously fuzzy grey mittens. They didn’t suit her prim and proper style at all.

*Most likely also pilfered*, he mused.

What the hell happened to this young lady? Where did she come from? Why was she here? And why was she dressed in a man’s overcoat? He could see the fine cut of her fashionable hat and the blue satin of her dress beneath the coat. She was moneyed to be sure. Who was she running from then? And why did Warren have a growing feeling of protection against her getting caught?

He sighed, pushing down all his questions. Whatever the identity of Miss Nobody from Nowhere, she was far and away outside his sphere, that was for damn sure.

*Not your business. Leave well enough alone.*

But then she was placing her hands on his shoulders and dropping from the cart, those fuzzy mitts wrapping around his neck as she slid down his body. To hold her on his lap was one thing, but to feel her pressed against him was another entirely.

She murmured her thanks, her feet settling on the cobblestones. His hands were still firmly at her waist and hers stayed on his shoulders. He towered over her, the top of her head barely reaching his sternum. He tilted his gaze down, surprised to see she was looking up at him. Questions danced in her eyes too. She traced his scar again. There was something about the way she did it that didn't make him bristle. There was a question in her eyes, but no pity, no revulsion. Just quiet curiosity.

He hardly noticed that his thumbs were brushing over her hip bones, feeling how delicate she was, even through the layers of her coats. She stilled as she felt it too, her lips parted on a soft breath.

*Goddamn it.*

Lowering his face, Warren cupped her cheek with a calloused hand and kissed her, catching her little squeak of surprise with his mouth. She stiffened immediately. He expected it. But she didn't pull away. She stood still, like a fawn lying low in the grass, waiting to see if the danger might pass.

He was gentle, his lips teasing her.

*God, just one more taste of this sweet fruit. My own Eve. Pure. Forbidden.*

His thoughts ran wild.

And then she shocked the hell out of him. Trembling in his arms, her lips parted, and she was kissing him back.

He knew without asking that she'd never been kissed. Some primal part of him crowed, knowing he was taking this, knowing she was giving it. He'd be her first. Let her marry some puffed up dandy with gold in his pockets and a limp cock. In this moment, she was *his*. She belonged to *him*. Until this kiss ended, he would own her, possess her. Let this kiss be the kiss she kissed for the rest of her days.

He pressed her back against the cart, his mouth opening as he dared her to join him. She whimpered, her tongue flicking against his, and he was gone. Cock hardening, his hands slid

up her sides, desperate to feel out the shape of her breasts through her bulky clothes. Would they be little plums, ripe and firm in his hand? Her frame was so slight, they had to be small. Fuck, he imagined taking a pink nipple between his teeth, teasing her until she squirmed. A mouthful was just enough to cherish. He had to know, had to feel—

“We should back it up first!”

Young Jim came running across the stable yard, forcing Warren to break their kiss. He muttered a curse, stepping quickly away, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, eyes darting left to take in Jim. The lad didn't come fully around the cart. He stopped at the back, working on the knots of the tarp, calling something over at Harry.

Warren's eye darted back to his prize. Miss Nobody looked at him with those wide eyes, her lush pink lips parted, still glossy with his kiss. He couldn't help himself. Stepping forward, he raised a hand, brushing his thumb over that bottom lip, rubbing his essence into her skin.

*Never forget that kiss,* he said without words.

Holding his gaze, he saw her unspoken answer. *I won't.*

“Why did you do that?” she murmured, the tremor in her voice belying her trembling. But this little fawn wasn't cold anymore. She was on fire. Alive. She was inching closer.

But the real world was too damn close. Jim was steps away. Warren could hear Harry on the other side of the cart. They needed to move. He needed to get her inside. “Because you looked like you needed it,” he replied honestly.

He wasn't interested in investigating how good it felt for him, or how much he may have needed it too. Right now, he needed to put some distance between them. “Besides, now your lips aren't cold,” he added with a cocky grin. “Let's get you in and warm the rest of you.”

Stepping back, he gestured for her to walk ahead of him. Recovering her senses, she darted away from him. His little fawn was ready to flee.

He caught up easily, taking one long stride to every three of hers. “So...are you ever going to tell me your name?”

“No,” she replied, leading the way down the lane that led to the back of the house.

*Whoever she is, she knows where she's going.*

That should give him pause.

“Why not?” he asked.

She didn't look his way when she replied. “Because I like the way you're treating me now. And when you learn my name, you will only see me for what I am, not who I am.”

Damn, he wasn't expecting that answer. Her honesty nearly stopped him in his tracks. Recovering, he caught up to her retreating form. “Fine,” he said, trying to keep his walls in place. “Miss Nobody it is.”

“It's Lady Nobody, if you please,” she replied, a smile in her tone.

He relaxed. So, she was a skittish little fawn, but not a terrified one. Good. “Her Royal Highness, the Princess of Nowhere.”

She let loose a girlish giggle and the sound pierced him in the chest. Her innocence broke him. He was a scoundrel for kissing her. He should apologize. Drop to his knees and kiss her boots. He should demand that the duchess lash him in the stable yard.

“And you are Mr. Warren,” she said. “John Warren.”

Why did she always speak to him without meeting his gaze? It was a little maddening. Did he have to earn it? How? “Aye, but you can call me Warren,” he replied.

She glanced his way, those large blue eyes piercing in their honesty. “Surely, if you feel forward enough to kiss me unasked, I can be forward enough to call you John—”

“No,” he growled, his steps coming up short. Well, this was a goddamn surprise, and not a pleasant one. He wasn't expecting her teasing request to hit him quite so hard. Hearing

this pretty girl say his Christian name was making his cock twitch, but it also felt like a smack to the head.

She noticed his frustration and it was clear she was blaming herself; he could see it in her eyes. She was retreating, closing off, chewing that bottom lip. He wanted to step forward and jerk it loose with his thumb, claiming it for himself. No one was going to bite that lip but him.

*Fucking hell—*

He dragged a hand through his long hair, messy after an exhausting day of work. This was going sideways fast. “I prefer Warren,” he said lamely, offering a weak smile to help smooth it over.

She let go of that bottom lip at least. His cock thanked her for it. She gave him a little nod and then turned away, continuing her walk toward the side door. She definitely knew where she was going. When was she here last? He was about to ask, when she halted, and he nearly bowled her over.

She stared up at the wide expanse of the wooden door.

He watched her look at the door, a smirk growing on his face. “Are we just going to stand here and look at it?”

She spun around. “I wasn’t invited,” she blurted.

“What?”

“I wasn’t invited,” she repeated, covering her face with those ridiculous fuzzy mitts. “Oh god, they don’t know I’m coming. No one knows I’m here, and I don’t know what to do. I don’t know—”

“Hey, hey—” He stepped forward, putting both hands back on her shoulders. “Easy, just take a breath.”

She tried to comply, lowering her hands, and breathing in through her parted lips.

“I know,” he said gently.

Those eyes went impossibly wide. “What? How can you know?”

He laughed. “Because you showed up here with no trunks. What lady travels into the countryside without a caravan of trunks? Dresses for every occasion, hat boxes, a maid carrying a case of her best jewels. No one was ready to receive you in the village, and no one is looking for you now. You’re some kind of runaway, of that, I’m sure.”

That let all the wind out of her sails. Her shoulders sagged. “I’ve never knocked on a door before,” she murmured.

“What? You mean...*never*?”

“Never,” she replied.

“Christ.” He dragged a hand through his hair again. He knew this young lady was sheltered, but this was...what kind of life did she lead that she never had occasion to knock on a door? “Well, surely you understand the mechanics of the act, right? Raise fist, knock on wood?”

She scowled at him, knowing she was being teased.

“Come, we’ll do it together.” He grabbed her by the wrist, tugging her forward.

“Mr. Warren, please—”

“One more first for you tonight,” he said, pulling her right up to the door. He dropped her wrist, smirking down at her. “Go on then. Raise fist, tap wood. Or, if you like, grab the big brass ring there and give it a few swings. Save your sweet little fist a good bruising.”

“I’m not a complete dunderhead,” she huffed. “I *have* knocked on a door, sir. You mistook my meaning.”

“What did you mean then? Because you seemed to imply that every door in your life has opened for you. That you breeze through life without obstacle, happy and carefree.”

That earned him the reaction he was craving. Fire. Frustration. Damn, she looked beautiful incensed. “You do not know me, Mr. Warren.”

Stepping past him, she raised her hand wrapped in the silly mitten and tapped three times with the brass knocker. Sinking

back to stand at Warren's side, they waited for the door to open.



They only waited a few moments before the latch was turning and the door swung inward, revealing a tired footman dressed in the house livery. Warren recognized him immediately. Geoffrey Cole. *Damn*. Bad luck. The man was a fop and a gossip.

Geoffrey's eyes narrowed on Warren. He puffed out his chest, ready to ream him for putting on airs. Men like Warren were not permitted inside the house unless on special occasions, like the Christmas ball. He was strictly outside staff. Christ, even the hunting dogs were granted more comfort than him.

But then the young lady stepped fully into the light. "Good evening, Geoffrey," she murmured.

*Shit...she knows his name?*

Geoffrey's eyes went wide. "Lady Madeline?" He looked around confused, his neck craning to see past Warren into the yard. "How—"

Warren couldn't focus on his antics.

*Madeline. That's her name.*

He wanted to say it aloud, to taste the music in it for himself. A name as lovely as her face, as her taste.

"Can I come in?" she asked, her fatigue finally showing.

Geoffrey all but stumbled back in his rush to let the lady in.



The lady. That's what he called her. Lady Madeline.

*You are in so much trouble.*

He should leave. She was safely inside. His job was done. And yet, too curious for his own good, he locked in step right behind her, following her into the house before Geoffrey could shut the door on him.

The footman stared daggers at him, closing the door with a grimace. He turned back to Madeline. "Are you in need of assistance, my lady?"

"I..."

Warren didn't need to see her face to know she was blushing. He could tell from the set of her shoulders, the way she was making herself smaller. She put him in mind of a songbird, afraid to come into his hand to earn a little seed. He felt protective of her, ready to step in and defend her from Geoffrey's questions. He stepped up closer to her back, willing her to feel his unspoken support.

Her back straightened at his closeness and her voice rang out. "I...umm...please let the duchess know I am here. It's urgent that I see her."

"Of course, my lady. Would you like to wait here?" Geoffrey gestured with his gloved hand to a settee. "Or I could show you to the drawing room and sit you down by the fire."

She glanced over her shoulder, her bright blue eyes finding Warren. She was afraid. She wasn't yet ready to part with his company. He was bringing her comfort. Something inside him warmed at the notion. He liked that she trusted him. He liked the way she was looking at him, like his opinion mattered. Like *he* mattered.

"We'll wait here for the duchess," he said for her.

Her eyes flashed in gratefulness, relieved not to have to make the decision.

But stupid Geoffrey scowled at him. "I'm sorry, but why are you here, Warren? Don't you have a rabbit to skin somewhere?"

Warren bristled, fighting his resentment at so easily being dismissed by this footman. Of course, the arse would try to put him in his place in front of the lady. To his surprise, Madeline bristled too. He imagined if he tugged her silly mitts off, her hands would be balled into tiny fists. He smirked at this fierce little squirrel, guarding her acorn.

“Mr. Warren did me a good turn tonight. I am in his debt. I would like the duchess to know the service he rendered me.” She took off her winter bonnet, handing it over to Geoffrey. As she pulled it off, a few golden tendrils tumbled loose from her messy bun.

Goddamn it, of course her hair was as golden as a sunrise. Warren stifled a groan. It reminded him of sunshine glistening off the tops of the barley, blowing in a fine westerly wind. He wanted to reach out and touch it, feel that silken texture. He wanted it draped across his chest—

*Damn. Shit. Fuck.*

He clenched his fists tight. Touching her again would be unthinkable. Dangerous. It made his head spin to think how quickly he'd lose his place at Alcott if he was caught being handsy with the lady for a second time.

Madeline was still in her standoff with Geoffrey.

The footman folded like a house of cards, taking her hat with, “But of course, my lady.” Before he could set the hat aside, a voice cried out from the stairs.

“Madeline?”

All three of them turned to see the duchess standing at the top, one hand on the banister. She was a beautiful woman—dark curls and chocolatey eyes, with curves in all the right places. Perhaps a few too many curves now, for she was heavy with child. Her great belly hung low. She braced it with one hand as she raced down the stairs.

“What on earth?” she cried, sweeping across the black and white tiled floor. “Madeline, what are you doing here?”

“Rosalie.” Madeline's voice was almost a sob.

*Shit...were they on first name terms?*

“Oh, my dear. Are you hurt?” the duchess said, folding Madeline into the circle of her arms. She was clearly ready to go to war for the girl. “Heavens, you’re freezing. What happened? How are you here?”

“I am unharmed,” Madeline murmured.

The duchess missed nothing, her gaze sweeping over Madeline’s shoulder to take in Warren and the footman.

“Mr. Warren?” she said, eyes wide. “You brought her here?”

“I did, Your Grace.” His voice sounded odd in this place. It echoed deep and loud.

Her eyes narrowed. “Explain, sir.”

He cleared his throat. “She was in the village, Your Grace. Said she needed a ride up to the house. Mr. Tram and I brought her up in the hay cart.”

“A hay cart?” she cried, giving Madeline’s back another rub. “Oh, my Madeline. Well, you’re here now. Where are your things, dear?” She looks around the empty entry hall, her gaze landing back on Warren. She raised one brow in question.

“I...umm...” came Madeline’s non answer.

“Never mind,” the duchess soothed. “Just come. Let’s get you upstairs and into a warm bath. Geoffrey, tell Mrs. Davies we’ll need a room made ready. The Blue Room.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” he said with a curt nod.

“And thank you, Warren,” she added. “Thank you for bringing her to us safely. Pass my thanks to Mr. Tram as well.” Without another word, the duchess led Madeline away towards the stairs.

Warren watched them both leave, his eyes snared by the glinting gold of Madeline’s hair in the flickering candlelight.

At the base of the stairs, she paused and turned, glancing over her shoulder. “Thank you, Mr. Warren,” she called in that soft voice. Not waiting for his reply, she followed the duchess.

“Who is she?” he muttered, watching the tail end of her muddy coat trail across each step.

Geoffrey scoffed, all his sniveling airs forgotten now that his mistress was out of earshot. “You really don’t know?”

Warren’s curiosity outweighed his pride. “If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking.”

“Her name is Lady Madeline Blaire,” the footman replied.

“Blaire,” he repeated, trying to place it.

Geoffrey just couldn’t resist saying aloud what they were both thinking. “Of course, why would a gamekeeper know the name of one of the oldest noble families in England?”

Warren rounded on him, flexing his shoulders back. “You’re pretty cocksure for a man who opens doors for a living. You know they already do that all on their own, right? You just push.”

Geoffrey matched him glare for glare. “Lady Madeline Blaire, you ignorant *swine*, is the daughter of Lord Richard Blaire, the Right Honorable Viscount Raleigh, who was one of the fifth duke’s oldest friends. And Lady Madeline herself is one of the duchess’s closest confidants.”

“Shit.” This time, Warren made the mistake of saying it out loud, instead of merely thinking it.

Geoffrey’s smirk vanished as his eyes widened. “Oh... Warren, what did you do?”

“Nothing,” he replied quickly. And because he couldn’t help himself, he added, “Yet.”



One of the best things about Rosalie Corbin was her innate sense of timing. She knew how to read a room, and she knew the benefit of waiting to get what she wanted. In this case, Madeline knew her friend was nearly fit to burst with queries. And yet, the duchess patiently helped Madeline up the stairs to the guest wing on the second floor, asking no questions. She moved with quiet dignity, directing the housekeeper and the maids, who all flurried about.

“Lady Madeline is here?” they murmured, eyes darting to each other with excitement.

“Where did she come from?”

“How did she get here?”

“But...where are her things?”

She did her best to ignore the pointed looks of the maids, sitting quietly on a chair near the crackling fire in the corner of the Blue Room. It was a simple room, almost utilitarian. A four-poster bed sat along one wall, the fireplace along the other. The room was decorated with a pretty, floral patterned wallpaper dotted with yellow songbirds and creeping vines. A bay window stacked with pillows for reading was now concealed behind heavy, blue velvet curtains, giving the room its name. Aside from a little dressing table by the door, the room was empty.

Within thirty minutes of stepping foot inside Alcott Hall, Madeline went from being freezing and disheveled, wrapped

in a pair of pilfered men's coats, to soaking in the deep expanse of a copper bathing tub. Steam spiraled off the top of the rose oil scented water. She let out a little groan of delight as the heat of the water coiled deep under her skin, thawing her frozen bones.

"Thank you," she murmured, her eyelids heavy with fatigue and relief at being warm again.

"Say nothing of it," Rosalie replied. She sat in the chair next to the tub, her hands folded over her rounded stomach. She looked just as beautiful as always—rich, walnut curls framing her heart-shaped face, pouty pink lips, and dark eyes framed with thick lashes. By anyone's standards she was stunning. But she also looked tired tonight.

"*Ahh*," Rosalie let out a little hiss, shifting one of her hands to rub at a spot on her side.

Madeline sat forward in the tub, eyes wide. "Are you unwell?"

"M'fine," she muttered. "This little devil is just part mule. She kicks like anything." After a moment she resumed her relaxed pose.

Madeline never knew quite what to do or say around pregnant women, even a friend. The condition was shrouded in such an air of mystery...and fear...and tragedy. Madeline shoved that last emotion deep down. She refused to dwell on that reality, not when Rosalie had given her no cause for concern. She already had one healthy baby; a lovely little girl named Georgina.

"When are you due?" she asked.

"A few weeks yet," Rosalie replied. "Perhaps sometime early in the new year."

Madeline played with the bar of lavender-scented soap. "And...is His Grace happy that an heir may yet be forthcoming?"

Rosalie smiled. "He was convinced Little G would be a boy and was proved wrong. I think now he's content to sit

back and wait. Whatever comes will come. We shall love it either way...but I have a feeling it's another girl."

"What kind of feeling?"

Rosalie shrugged. "Just a feeling. It's hard to explain."

The only maid left in the room set out a towel, a clean chemise, and dressing gown. "Anything else, Your Grace?"

"No, thank you, Hannah. It's late. You may go to bed."

The pretty little maid blinked, glancing from Rosalie to Madeline. "But—"

"I'm perfectly capable of helping Lady Madeline out of the tub," the duchess replied with a kind smile. "I'll call if you're needed again, but I think we can manage. Right, dear?"

Madeline just nodded, grateful to be alone with Rosalie at last. As soon as the maid closed the door, Madeline knew her period of grace was over. She didn't meet Rosalie's eye, instead running the bar of soap up and down her bare arm. Not for the first time tonight, her mind wandered back outside to that stable yard, to that kiss.

Oh heavens, she was kissed tonight. She could hardly believe it. She was sure, if someone spoke the words aloud, she'd roundly deny it.

Madeline. Lady Madeline Blaire. Mu-mu-muttering Madeline. Kissed by a man. A beautiful, virile, bear of a scoundrel that manhandled her and laughed at her and took liberties that would see him shot if her father ever found out.

Why did he do it? And why on earth did she kiss him back?

She should have slapped him. She should have screamed. Instead, she—oh gracious! She bit her bottom lip, remembering the queer feeling of his lips moving against hers. It was different from what she expected. Softer...and wet. She never expected a kiss to be wet, but when he stepped back his lips were glistening and so were hers.

She remembered too that flare of heat, blooming in her chest and then sinking deeper, deeper, so deep inside her, until

it lit something up, some fire she could still feel. He teased her when he said her lips were warm. Her entire body was a living flame. She'd never felt so *alive*.

“Madeline...”

She sucked in a breath, dropping the bar of soap. It thunked to the bottom of the copper tub. Ducking down, she hid her blushing face against the water's surface, reaching for the soap. Hopefully any redness in her cheeks could be excused by the heat of the water.

“There's only so much longer we can delay this, my dear,” Rosalie added. “I have questions.”

“I know,” she murmured.

“I need to know—”

“I know,” she repeated, daring to glance over the edge of the tub towards her friend.

“What happened?” Rosalie asked, leaning forward with interest.

“Much,” she murmured, her gaze falling to the tips of her toes peeking out from the water at the opposite end of the tub.

Rosalie let out a heavy sigh. “You know, if you were speaking to James in this moment, that answer may suffice. But most unfortunately, you are speaking to his duchess, and I will require a proper explanation. Madeline, did you run away from home?”

“No,” Madeline said quickly. She sat up, making some of the water slosh over the sides of the tub. “I didn't.”

Rosalie narrowed her dark eye at her, lips pursed. “Madeline?”

“I didn't,” she pressed. “I...not exactly. That is to say, I suppose I *did* run away, but not with the intention to...be away,” she finished lamely. She knew she wasn't making any sense. This was so impetuous. She was going to murder Patrick for suggesting it.



“Heaven help me,” Rosalie groaned. “Start at the beginning.”

So, Madeline did. Sitting in the tub, the hot water warming her from the outside in, Madeline told her friend everything about the last Earl of Leary and the fortune he entailed on his daughter. She told Rosalie about the three generations of Leary women who inherited it and kept it safe, ending with Aunt Maude. She told Rosalie all about the will and the conditions set upon Madeline for receiving her new inheritance.

She cried as she told the duchess about her father’s duplicity, keeping the knowledge of the will from her, hoping she’d fail. She railed as she spoke of her mother’s scheming, setting her up with the likes of Lord Everton, knowing Madeline would never accept him as a suitable match.

The duchess listened intently to every word. It was easy to talk to Rosalie; it always had been. When Rosalie looked at her, she didn’t see the viscount’s daughter or the lady worth twenty thousand pounds. She just saw Madeline. She never cared about her awkwardness or her silences. She was patient. She treated Madeline as an equal.

*So does Mr. Warren.*

The thought came unbidden, but it was true. It seemed she couldn’t keep her thoughts from the man. She kept picturing him, feeling the strength of his hands around her. Mr. Warren saw her too. All of her. She felt unmade when he looked at her, burrowing under her shell to the heart of her, making her laugh, teasing her, protecting her from the pompous footman. And she’d been so natural with him. She hardly noticed it in the moment. No muttering, no awkward pauses.

Warren. John Warren. She liked his name. It suited him. How was it that she felt more herself in the company of a hay man and a gamekeeper than she did her own family?

“So, what happens now?” said Rosalie, ready to dive right to the heart of the matter.

Madeline sighed. “So now, I have a little less than three weeks remaining before I will have to prove to the solicitors

that I am married if I want to claim my inheritance,” she said. “And if I don’t marry by the end of the year, *they* will claim it for themselves.”

“Heavens,” Rosalie murmured, leaning back in her chair. She was quiet for a moment, considering all Madeline had to say. “Where does Alcott fit in?” she asked. “Why have you come?”

“Because I couldn’t think what else to do. If I stayed in town, I’d be trapped in Blaire House. My parents *want* me to fail, Rosalie. They have no faith in me. They lost all faith when I couldn’t bag a husband my first season out.”

“Well, that was hardly your fault,” Rosalie replied, crossing her arms over top her stomach. “They forced you on George, after all. Could they truly expect any less?”

Madeline didn’t miss the humor in the duchess’s tone. She knew Rosalie harbored a fondness for her brother-in-law. The former duke was a mercurial figure, to say the least. He was one of the oddest people in Madeline’s acquaintance, if she could really claim to have an acquaintance with the man.

Three years ago, he renounced his titles and took off for the continent, making James the duke and Rosalie a duchess. He returned occasionally, usually at Rosalie’s insistence. The last time Madeline saw him was at the christening for little Georgina, his namesake. He doted on the baby, gifting her a beautiful crystal mobile for her nursery.

Rosalie shifted on her chair, rubbing a spot on her side again, breathing through some sudden pain. “And your family doesn’t know you’re here, right? You took off after the disastrous tea at your aunt’s?”

Madeline nodded. “Mama thinks I’m staying at Blaire Lodge for a few days. I wrote her a note to that effect just before I left.”

Rosalie pursed her lips. “Well, she’ll quickly see through that ruse, and then what? How soon will they come to drag you off again? Does anyone in your family know you’ve come here to me?”

“My cousin, Patrick,” she replied. “It was his idea. He thinks you can help me. Please, Rosalie, I do. I need your help.”

Rosalie raised a dark brow. “What can I possibly do to help? Do you want James to look at the will? Perhaps try to break the marriage condition—”

“No.” Madeline shook her head. “No, it’s quite unbreakable. Trust me, half the Blaire’s are solicitors. We know our way around a legal document.”

“Then what?”

“Rosalie, I need you to help me find a husband...in less than three weeks.”



*M*adeline woke with a start, bolting upright in the bed. She'd been having the most strange and wonderful dream. It involved a mountain of a man with surprisingly tender hands kissing her under the shade of her favorite willow tree. There was no bitter chill, no wind, no layers of pilfered coats. She wore only a thin silk dress over her chemise and stays. His fingers trailed up her bare arm.

“More,” she murmured against his lips, pulling him closer. It was so daring and romantic. And, oh, but he gave her more. Laying her back in the grass, his hands wandered from her face, down her shoulders, and down...

But then a clock chimed, waking her. She held onto the fraying threads of the dream; her eyes shut tight. She wanted to see his face in the light of day. She wanted just one more kiss. But the dream was gone. She was alone in a bed not her own.

She raised a shaky hand to her mouth, fingers brushing over her parted lips. The ghost of Warren's kiss felt so real. She rubbed her eyes with shaking hands and glanced around. The curtains on the bay window were cracked open, letting a stream of light stretch across the end of her bed. She slipped out from under the covers, regretting it instantly as she shivered in the cold. Her fire was burned down to coals, which meant no hall girl came in to stoke it in the early morning. Rosalie must have told the staff to leave her be.

She glanced at the clock over the mantle and nearly gasped.

*Ten o'clock.*

Last night, after her bath, Rosalie made her go straight to bed with a hug and a murmured, "We'll make a plan in the morning." Madeline fought it at first, feeling too anxious to sleep, but once her head hit the pillow, she gave in to her fatigue. She couldn't remember the last time she'd ever slept past seven in the morning.

She picked up the dressing robe off the end of the bed and slipped it on, padding over to the window on stockinged feet. It was too long, nearly making her trip. She peeled back the curtain, blinking in the sharp winter sunlight. It was her first glimpse of the sun in days. The southern English countryside surrounding Alcott Hall glittered under a blanket of frost. It dazzled like so many diamonds—the sweep of rolling, manicured grass, the shapely boxwoods, the skeletal trees standing in a line.

As she stood at the window, a trio of hunting dogs darted out of the trees, barking and jumping, chasing each other in their race to get back to the house. Moments later, a pair of dark figures emerged from the trees. Two gentlemen, walking side by side.

She narrowed her eyes, knowing the first figure. It was Mr. Burke, steward of Alcott Hall, best friend of the duke. She would know that tall frame anywhere. Even from here, she could see he was telling an animated story, gesturing with a hand that braced a catch of pheasants. He held a shotgun in his other gloved hand.

Her heart skipped as she took in his companion. "Oh god," she murmured, placing a hand on the cold glass. The chill sank through her palm, cooling the fire in her blood. It was Mr. Warren. He was taller than Mr. Burke by a few inches. Wider set in the shoulders too. She didn't recognize him at first, concealed as he was under a brimmed hat, with a thick scarf wrapped around his face. But it was definitely him.

What was he telling Mr. Burke? Were they laughing at her expense? Could she trust to his discretion? She should have said something last night, begged for his silence.

A soft knock at her door nearly made her jump out of her skin. She spun away from the window, clutching the top of her robe closed over her too-large chemise. “Yes?” she called.

Her door swung open, revealing Rosalie dressed in a lovely mulberry dress. The duchess wore a fashionable knit wool shawl in dark green draped over her shoulders. A matching pair of fingerless wool gloves stretched up her arms, warding away the winter chill.

“Good morning, dear,” she said with a faint smile. She looked tired, one hand bracing the side of her heavy stomach. “I’m glad to see you awake. Did you sleep well?”

Madeline nodded. “I’m sorry to have slept so late.”

“You needed it,” Rosalie replied. “May I call a maid in to stoke your fire? It’s chilly in here.”

She nodded again. “Thank you, Rosalie...for everything.”

“Offering you a place to sleep hardly counts. These rooms all stand empty most of the year anyway.”

Madeline suppressed a shiver and Rosalie pursed her lips.

“Come get warm on the bed until the maid stokes the fire,” she directed, helping herself to the other side. She sat down with a sigh, clearly uncomfortable.

Madeline crossed the carpet on her stockinged feet over to the bed, slipping gratefully back under the covers. “I saw Mr. Burke just now...out my window.” She left out the part about seeing Mr. Warren.

“Oh, good,” Rosalie sighed, stretching back on the bed. “He’s been gone the last three days. James too. I’ve been all by my lonesome here...until your surprise arrival,” she added with a quirked smile.

“Where did they go?” Madeline asked, grabbing one of the pillows and holding it closer for warmth.

Rosalie turned serious, one hand absently massaging her side. “There was a fire in Carrington. It was awful. It took down a whole row of houses.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” Madeline replied automatically.

“Several of the houses were split to home two families,” Rosalie explained. “It was something like thirteen in the row, but it housed over twenty families. James was beside himself. He takes everything so personally, as if the chimney fire was his fault.”

“But he’s not responsible.”

“Try telling him that,” Rosalie replied with a sigh. “He and Burke have been overseeing rehoming the families. He means to begin the rebuild before the new year.”

“My timing is perfectly terrible,” Madeline muttered, feeling like she should pack her things right now and leave. *You don’t have any things*. She groaned, burying her face in her hands.

“Nonsense.” Rosalie gave her shoulder a pat. “I’m glad of the company.”

Before Madeline could reply, there was a knock at the door. Rosalie called for them to enter. Within minutes, her room was bustling with activity. A hall boy knelt over the fire, rebuilding it with fresh wood. The housekeeper herself brought in a breakfast tray as a pair of maids hurried around the room, laying out an array of clothes—dresses in a rainbow of colors, pelisses, petticoats.

Madeline looked wide-eyed at the duchess.

Rosalie just shrugged again. “I can’t wear them in my current state. And James has a weakness for smothering me with gifts. I have more dresses than I could wear in two lifetimes.”

“I couldn’t possibly—” Madeline began, but Rosalie held up her hand.

“You can and you will. Lydia here will see to the fittings.” She gestured at the taller of the two maids. “Besides, you can

hardly wander around Alcott in your underthings. Not when we have the curate coming for dinner tonight.”

The maids exchanged a pair of grins that had Madeline ready to crawl under the covers.



WITHIN THE HOUR, she was standing on a little tailor’s box in front of her roaring fire, listening to Rosalie fill her in on all the details of the dukedom, while Lydia pinned the hem and sleeves of each dress. Rosalie was several inches taller than Madeline, and broader across the shoulders too, so they would all need to be taken in if they were to fit.

Madeline felt ridiculous having to rely on the duchess’s charity. She had a perfectly good wardrobe waiting for her at Blaire House. Part of her wanted to send a note to her family’s housekeeper, Mrs. Reeves, and have some of her things sent here, but then her parents would know exactly where to find her.

As if Rosalie could sense her thoughts, she let out a sigh, setting her cup of tea aside. “Madeline, we need a plan.”

Madeline tensed, her gaze dropping to the floor.

“I’ve directed Mrs. Davies to remind the staff that in this house we favor discretion above all else,” Rosalie went on. “No one will mention that you are here. Not if they expect to keep their positions,” she added, letting her eye fall on Lydia. She stood, stepping around the tailor’s box to hold Madeline’s gaze. “You’ve had a night to think on it. The excitement of your daring travel has waned. So, tell me now: is this still truly what you want?”

“Yes,” Madeline breathed.

Rosalie pursed her lips, crossing her arms atop her rounded belly. “Don’t be hasty, Madeline. You said you wanted to marry George once too, do you remember?”

“I never wanted to marry him,” she said quickly. “You knew before I did,” she added. “You helped me all those years



ago. You made me feel like I had a choice.”

“You still do.” Rosalie stepped forward, taking her hand with both of her own. “Madeline, even without the money, you still have a fine dowry. Twenty thousand pounds is—”

“Is not mine,” she replied, jerking her hand free of Rosalie’s gentle grip. “My dowry will go from my father’s hands to my husband’s. I will never touch a shilling. But Aunt Maude’s money *is* mine.”

Rosalie sighed, stepping away.

“What would you do in my position?” she called after her.

The duchess stood at the window, looking out upon her grand estate.

“You were lucky,” Madeline murmured. “You got to marry for love.”

Rosalie stiffened, not turning around.

“That will not be my fate. I’m not suited for it. I’m... well...me,” she finished with a shrug.

“I don’t like to hear you talk so,” said Rosalie, turning back around. “You’re a lovely girl, Madeline. Any man would be a fool not to see it. You are a prize.”

“But that’s just the thing,” she replied, stepping off the tailor’s box and moving to Rosalie’s side. “I don’t want to be another man’s prize. I don’t want to be caught in some gentleman’s snare. Rosalie, I could be *free*. I could marry someone who could help me be free. Will you help me find such a man?”

Rosalie sighed, glancing back out at the lawn.

Madeline peered around her to see that Mr. Burke and Mr. Warren were still standing in the field. Two more men were with them, the hunting dogs trotting around.

Rosalie turned to face her, one hand on her shoulder. “If you truly mean to do this, if you mean to marry by the end of the year—”

“I do,” Madeline said with a determined nod.

“Then we’ll need help,” Rosalie replied. “And there’s only one person I trust.”



Madeline followed in Rosalie's wake as the duchess swept down the dimly lit hall towards the drawing room. Both ladies were dressed for dinner, Rosalie in a very fine gown of sapphire, trimmed in gold thread, and cut to accommodate her growing size. Madeline wore Rosalie's emerald gown with the square cut bodice that was cut a little too low for Madeline's comfort.

"Are you sure about this?" Madeline murmured.

"Absolutely," Rosalie replied, smiling at a passing maid. "No one is so capable as Burke at assisting with an intrigue."

"I'd hate to bother him with my troubles."

"Nonsense," she said with a laugh. "He'll be thrilled. The man lives to meddle in other people's lives."

Madeline didn't doubt it. Horatio Burke was an enigma. He fit into any room, and he knew *everyone*. She shuddered to imagine the secrets lurking behind those stormy grey eyes.

A pair of footmen opened the doors to the drawing room, letting the ladies enter. It was a beautiful room, comfortable and well proportioned, with a blaze of a fire and several candelabras offering warmth against the winter chill.

"Well, this is a surprise," called Mr. Burke. "You're never down this early." He was on his feet, a wide smile on his face, eyes only for the duchess. Heavens, but he was handsome. Tall and broad shouldered, with a full head of inky black hair and those striking grey eyes. They narrowed under dark brows as

his gaze fell to Madeline. “Ahh, so it *is* true. Madeline, how wonderful to see you again.”

“Mr. Burke, good evening,” she replied, dipping into a slight curtsy.

Mr. Burke pursed his lips in annoyance. “How many times must I ask you to drop the formalities and call me Burke?”

She couldn't help her smile. It had always been his way to be overly informal with everyone. “At least once more, Mr. Burke.”

“The house is positively abuzz with gossip,” he said, coming around the sofa with a hand outstretched towards Rosalie. “The footmen were telling such a tale. Lady Madeline Blaire arrived from London unexpected and unchaperoned. I had to see it to believe.”

Madeline stilled. Who was gossiping about her? Mr. Warren? Could the staff really be trusted to keep the gossip within the boundaries of the estate? Oh, this was a disaster. The gossip would surely spread back to London like a wildfire. How many days did she have before her father descended in a red rage, determined to drag her off.

Rosalie took Mr. Burke's hand, and he led her to a chair. “Don't tease her, Burke. It's been a trying time.”

Madeline sat on the sofa opposite them.

Mr. Burke glanced from Madeline back to the duchess, dragging a hand through his hair in that practiced way of confident men. “Well, I can tell by your faces that this is serious. So, tell me, are we getting Madeline *into* trouble or out of it? Either way, you have my help.”

Rosalie flashed him a warm smile. “We knew we could count on you.” She turned to Madeline. “Why don't you fill him in.”

Madeline swallowed her groan of frustration. How many times was she going to have to recount this drama? “I suppose the long and short of it is that I need to get married as soon as possible.”

Mr. Burke let out a soft chortle. “Well, that’s hardly news. What unmarried lady doesn’t seek a proper match?” He glanced over at Rosalie and winked. “Apart from you, of course, Your Grace.”

“You’re not listening,” Rosalie replied. “She needs to be married as soon as possible, Burke. We cannot delay.”

He sat forward, glancing at Madeline again. “Legally married?”

Rosalie huffed. “Of course, legally, Burke.”

He was quiet for a moment, his brows lowering. Suddenly, they shot up. “*Ohh*, so are you...” He let his gaze point to Rosalie’s hands folded demurely over her ample middle.

Madeline gasped. “I am *not* with child, sir,” she cried, heat blooming in her cheeks.

“There are other reasons for marriage, Burke,” Rosalie added.

“Sorry,” he replied, raising his hands. “I’m just trying to puzzle it out.” He glanced back at Madeline. “So, you need to marry. Does it need to last?”

Madeline blinked. “What can you mean, sir?”

“I’m assuming, with such a short time frame, and no impending happy announcement, that there is some other more urgent business attached to the being married,” he explained. “Why must it happen now? What will you escape or stand to gain?”

She glanced at Rosalie and the duchess gave her a little nod.

“An inheritance,” she replied. “My late aunt left me her fortune. To claim it, I must be married before the end of my twentieth year. So, I need a husband,” she finished with a shrug. “Now.”

Gracious, when she said it aloud, it made her feel no better than any of the dozens of men who sniffed about her in search of a dowry. But this money was hers by right, and that made all the difference. Aunt Maude *wanted* her to have it. The men

of the *ton* were constantly chasing after money that wasn't theirs. How ludicrous that she lived in a society where a law could force her to marry in order to claim a fortune legally left to her!

"Damn," he muttered. "That's...well, if you expect the banns to be read you only have..." He did the mental math, his frown deepening.

"Today," Rosalie replied for him. "The banns would need to be read today to make it by the end of the year."

Madeline groaned again, pressing the palm of her hand to her forehead. "Oh, this is impossible, isn't it? I'm mad, aren't I? There's no way we can find a man in less than three weeks. Not a man of mind sound enough to ever consider *me!*"

Rosalie and Mr. Burke were both quiet, which was not a comfort.

She dropped her hand to her lap, glancing from one to the other. "Please say something."

Mr. Burke cleared his throat. "I think this calls for a drink," he announced, getting to his feet.

The ladies watched as he sauntered over to the sideboard. He snatched up a carafe and three glasses. He handed the first off to Madeline, pouring a measure of Madeira into her glass. Not waiting for the others, she brought the glass to her lips and took a deep sip. The fruity notes were teased with spiciness.

Before he sat, Mr. Burke topped off her glass with a wink. He shifted back in his chair, crossing his ankle over his opposite knee. "So, you intend to get yourself married in under three weeks, and you've come to me to seek out a list of eligible suitors? You want a man's opinion on which bachelors of the *ton* might consider such a rushed affair?"

"Precisely," the duchess replied. "You're far more connected than James. He can't be trusted to know who the truly intolerable candidates might be. If this were a land deal, then yes. But this is about Madeline's future happiness, her safety and comfort. We need you, Burke."

He frowned, taking a sip of his wine. “But the timing doesn’t quite work out. Not with the banns—”

“Banns are not necessarily needed,” Rosalie cut in, clearly trying to bolster Madeline’s hope. “A special license could be obtained. And if he’s not a peer, it’s not necessary at all. They could marry on the morrow without batting an eye.”

Mr. Burke huffed into his glass. “I hardly imagine Viscount Raleigh will be pleased to see his only daughter marry outside the peerage.”

“My father can’t know about this,” Madeline replied quickly. “He—he would not—” She fell silent, not quite ready to admit to the cruel truth that her own father was in competition with her. He wanted to see her fail. The pain of that truth was still too raw. “I am here on my own,” she murmured. “I’m...I do this on my own. I will do what I must to earn this chance at freedom. If you know of a man, I ask you to tell me. Please, Burke—”

The man was utterly solemn. It was such a strange look on him. He usually overflowed with charm and wit and ready smiles. His eyes looked shadowed as he glanced from Rosalie back to Madeline.

“She would need just the right kind of suitor,” Rosalie explained. “One who can understand her predicament...”

He narrowed his eyes at Madeline. “Well, do you have anyone in mind? Anyone you fancy? If we can manage a love match, that would be—”

“No,” she said quickly. “I’m not—that is to say—I’m not the type to go about fancying men. I’ve hardly spoken to a man outside my family, and never without a chaperone present,” she added.

“Hmm, that complicates things,” he admitted. “This would be easier if you had someone in mind.”

She swallowed down her nerves. It was now or never. “My cousin Patrick had a thought.”

They leaned forward with interest.

“Tell us,” said Rosalie.

Biting her lip, Madeline dove in. “Well...he suggested that I ask...Captain Renley.”

Rosalie’s dark eyes widened while Mr. Burke’s grey ones narrowed.

“Renley as in Tom?” he asked. “*Our* Captain Renley?”

Madeline shrugged, already sensing the direction this was going. If she was perfectly honest with herself, she’d been more curious to test the theory than she had been seriously considering him as a suitor. “Yes, well, he’s always been kind to me. And as a naval officer, he would understand the nature of a business arrangement such as this. We could help each other. My dowry could pay for a commission and—”

“No,” came Rosalie’s sharp denial.

At the same time, Mr. Burke huffed and said, “It’s completely out of the question.”

Madeline sank into silence. After a moment she murmured, “What is so ridiculous about the notion?” She dared to glance at Rosalie.

But Mr. Burke spoke first. “Tom is not an option, Madeline. Besides, he’s not even here. How are you to marry a man without him being present for the saying of the vows?”

She glanced sharply at Rosalie. “He’s not? But I thought —”

“His ship was waylaid,” Rosalie explained, her voice soft. “He was meant to be here already, but now it may be another three months. We’re not sure. His correspondence has been so irregular.”

Madeline’s heart broke for her friend. It hadn’t escaped her notice the tone of longing in Rosalie’s last letter as she talked of his return. At the same time, Madeline felt what little hope she had kindled inside her snuff out. “He isn’t here,” she repeated.

“And even if he *were*,” Mr. Burke went on, “He will never marry...not even to help out a friend as lovely as you,” he



added a little more gently.

Madeline sniffed, fighting the sharp sting in her eyes. This was ridiculous. It wasn't as if she wanted to marry the captain. She didn't want to marry *anyone*. He was perhaps just the most appealing of her limited options.

"But I do think Madeline's judgement is sound," Rosalie offered, glancing over at Mr. Burke. "Someone like Tom would be ideal. Kind and courteous, willing to accept whatever terms she sets."

He raised that dark brow again. "And what are Madeline's terms?"

Rosalie turned to her expectantly.

Madeline glanced between them and stifled another groan. How was she supposed to talk to a man like Mr. Burke about such a topic? "Well, the money from my dowry would go to my husband, obviously," she said. "But the money from Aunt Maude would remain in my control. He would have to agree never to seek ownership of the Leary Fortune. A woman has served as caretaker for four generations. I mean to be my own mistress."

Burke beamed at her. "Well, look at you."

"And I...I don't..." She fell into silence, her blush burning in her cheeks. She couldn't possibly say these words aloud.

"She doesn't want to offer marital services," Rosalie supplied.

Mr. Burke's lips parted slightly as his stormy eyes flashed, his proud smile falling. "What *never*? You expect to marry a man and never fulfill your marital duties? Not even on the wedding night?"

"Burke," Rosalie warned, drawing his attention with a shake of her head.

But he slapped his glass down. His eyes narrowed on Madeline as if he were trying to see down to her deeper truths. "What do you know of sex, Madeline?"

Madeline gasped, immediately thinking of her dream, as Rosalie rounded on him. “Burke, that’s enough.”

“It’s hardly enough,” he countered. “She’s asking me for help, and I can’t give it without holding all the facts. She says she must marry within a fortnight. Fine, I know plenty of eligible bachelors,” he said with a wave of his hand. “She says she will offer up her dowry but retain control of her own fortune. Still manageable. For what peer would fail to understand that marriage can be a sound business arrangement? It’s unusual, but not unheard of, surely.” He leaned forward in his chair. “But now she says she will *never* fulfill her martial duty, which implies to me either that she is deformed in that area—”

“*Burke*,” Rosalie snapped.

“I am not deformed, sir,” Madeline cried, not quite believing the turn of this conversation.

“Then I am left to believe that these are the words of a virgin girl, rooted in fear,” he went on. “So, I will ask you again: what do you know of the thing you so roundly shun? Have you ever even been kissed?”

“I...” She blushed furiously, unable to make her mouth make words. What on earth did Warren say to him? “I don’t...”

He gave her a knowing look. “You don’t know anything do you?” When she merely spluttered some more, he nodded. “Yes, I thought as much. Madeline, as a friend, I cannot in good conscience let you make this decision without having all the facts. Now, is it my place to educate you on the matter? Of course not—”

“Too true,” Rosalie growled, clutching tight to her glass of wine.

“So, the duchess must do it,” he went on, gesturing at her with a nod.

Madeline’s eyes went wide as Rosalie spun on him. “I will do no such thing! Her mother would murder me if she knew we were even having this conversation.”

Burke grunted and got to his feet. “Utter madness.” He stomped off to pace before the fire. “How is it possible that this is the way of things? A bright young woman, forced to make a decision that will affect the rest of her life, and she has no idea what she’s even deciding. What is so wrong about discussing sex with young ladies? Why must the truth be veiled from them? I’ve never understood it.”

The duchess sighed. “Burke, it is not—”

He rounded on her. “If you’re about to say ‘proper,’ I swear to god, I will eat my own hat.”

“Well, it’s not,” Rosalie charged.

“How can you say such a thing? You, who sits before us now, round with child. Another babe sleeps upstairs, the product of the passion you share with *your* husband. Will you really help Madeline bind herself in a sexless marriage before she’s ever even had a chance to know that’s truly what she wants?”

Madeline’s eye darted between the two of them. How had their conversation taken such a scandalous turn? She’d never seen a man and woman discuss sex so casually.

Scratch that. She’d *never* witnessed a men and woman discuss sex. Period.

But something in Burke’s anger was soothing Madeline’s anxiety. He was angry on her behalf. He cared. For the first time since she found out about the inheritance, she didn’t feel so alone.

Meanwhile, Rosalie crossed her arms. “What exactly are you suggesting? You expect me to pull out a sketch book? Perhaps you mean for me to demonstrate—”

“Lord, no,” he said with a laugh. But then he stilled. “I mean...well...maybe.” He grinned. “Not the demonstrations, surely, but you’re a fine artist. And you can certainly paint a vivid picture with words. Enough to explain the mechanics to the girl.”

“Burke, you are mad,” Rosalie declared. “This conversation has gone so far off the beaten path. We are lost in

the dark woods, and I must beg that we return to the light.”

But Mr. Burke seemed to like wandering in the dark, for the next words out of his mouth were, “You know, if I were you Madeline, knowing my financial future was all but secured the moment I said, ‘I do,’ I wouldn’t seek out a kind, sexless man to hitch to my plow.”

She found herself leaning forward. “What would you do?”

“Don’t encourage this, Madeline,” Rosalie warned.

But Mr. Burke leaned against the mantle and flashed her a devious smile. “I’d throw caution to the wind and have a torrid affair—”

“Burke, for the love of god,” Rosalie cried, throwing up her hands in frustration.

Lost in the storm of his eyes, Madeline whispered, “An affair?”

“Yes, with *multiple* men,” he replied, grinning wider now. “I’d let them ravage me and teach me the secrets of pleasure. And whichever ravaged me best, *that’s* the one I’d marry.”

“Burke, you are impossible,” Rosalie cried. “We came to you for honest help—”

“And how am I not helping? As I see it, I’m the only one helping. *You* want to keep her in the dark. Honestly, I’m surprised at you, Rosalie.”

“I am just trying to forge a path that will keep her safe, while giving her what she wants. And thrusting her into the world with ideas of torrid affairs is a terrible idea—”

“It’s a brilliant idea! Set for life with a fortune all her own and a husband giving her boundless pleasure?” He huffed another laugh. “She would be a goddess among mere mortals, her own Aphrodite.”

Madeline’s heart was racing out of her chest. This was madness. This wasn’t done. She couldn’t even comprehend what he was saying.

“Madeline, you will leave this to me,” Rosalie directed. “I will find you someone suitable if it’s the last thing I do. I’ll ask James—”

“Oh yes, ask James,” Mr. Burke snorted. “He’s sure to have just the idea for a boring, sexless man willing to be Madeline’s paper husband.”

The duchess and Mr. Burke exchanged a few more barbed retorts as Madeline’s mind spun wildly. Had she been looking at this all wrong? Ought she to consider a man who could be more to her than a business partner? A man of passion and power. Someone to help her run free. Someone to unleash her...

*Someone to make you feel the way Warren does.*

Bees buzzed in her chest at the thought. She couldn’t possibly. Lady Madeline Blaire was quiet and controlled. She was patient, reserved. She was—

*NO!*

The word screamed through her. Those were all the traits her family wanted her to have. Demure. Sweet. Submissive. A proper lady always dresses her best—face clean, hair curled, cheeks the perfect shade of blush. A proper lady keeps her opinions to herself. A proper lady is witty and obliging. A proper lady does not question her role.

But Madeline was tired of doing the proper thing. Her mind filled with images of Mr. Warren pressing himself against her, his lips on her lips, making her ache with some unspoken need. But she had to push him away. He was a stranger. A laborer. Completely off limits.

But still, she must marry. What might it be like to pick some strong and passionate, yet still kind...someone clever and entertaining...someone handsome beyond words...

She rose to her feet, eyes only for the black-haired devil that spoke with such confidence about pleasure. He was still bickering with the duchess, both heated, hands gesturing.

Madeline stepped forward. “Mr. Burke...”

He raised a dark brow. “What?”

Squaring her shoulders, she held his stormy gaze. “Marry me.”



Charles studied the chess board perched on the table, his fingers steeped under his chin. Of the three of them, his brother David was the best player, as much as Charles hated to admit it. David was ruthless, always on the offense. Uncle Selby was a thinker. He took his time, reevaluating his strategy as the board changed. But Charles was certain he could have this match ended in as little as four moves.

It had been a busy day. Charles woke early and ran several errands on his uncle's behalf. He made a few house calls with the sickest and the most attentive of Finchley's parishioners. There was old lady Cole, who suffered cruelly from a weak heart, but always served the most divine apple cinnamon scones. She hugged Charles tight and talked at him for over an hour before he made his escape.

Then he stopped by the Parker's and the Trent's, staying a mere quarter of an hour with each family, praying over the ill and giving a few comforting words to the family.

Uncle Selby tried to join him, but it was out of the question. Molly railed at the very idea. Apparently, mornings were when he was at his weakest. Charles saw the way his hands shook as he tried to tie his own cravat. Molly tisked at him, batting his hands away as she did it herself.

"It is your turn, sir," he said gently, his eyes leaving the board to glance up at Uncle Selby.

"Hmm," was his uncle's only reply, his lips pursed as he studied the board. He slowly reached forward, trying to reach

for a black knight. As he lifted it, his hand wobbled, toppling the pawns to either side. “Oh, damn—”

“It’s okay,” Charles murmured, reaching to right the pieces.

“I’ve got it.” But he didn’t. He set the knight down and that knocked over the white bishop. “Damn—”

Charles sat back, fighting his sudden tears, watching as the ailing old man tried to right the chess pieces with shaking hands. The clock on the mantle dinged and Charles glanced over. Five o’clock already. “Do you still eat supper at six, sir?”

“It’s Thursday,” Uncle Selby grunted, carefully righting the last piece on the board.

“And?” Charles replied with a raised brow. “Oh, right,” he said with a soft laugh. “Thursdays you dine at the great house. Are you feeling well enough to attend?”

“Not hardly,” Uncle Selby replied with a wistful sigh. “Though, your timing is perfect. You’ll go in my stead and make my apologies to the duchess.”

Charles leaned back in his chair. “I couldn’t possibly—”

“Of course, you will,” Uncle Selby countered with a wave. “No finer dining in the country. And you know how fond they all are of you. I dare say your company will be a welcome relief compared with this tired old bag of bones.”

Frustration churned in Charles’s gut. Not that he had anything against the Duke of Norland or his family. Quite the contrary, in fact. Charles met the new duchess a few years ago when he was last home. That was before she was married. He thought her kind, and pretty as a picture. If his memory served, she was like him—no birth, no connections, and not two shillings to rub together.

The duke must have been truly besotted to run off and marry her. When Charles heard the news, Lord James had grown in his estimation (not that the man didn’t still frighten him). Lord James—*His Grace* now—had always been a man of such action and intensity. He was a few years older than Charles. Even as a lad, he never sat still, always hunting,



fishing, and riding out. His opinions were as strong as his gaze. Charles always had a feeling of being scolded when the man set his eyes on him. It was strange to think of a free spirit like Rosalie Harrow marrying such a man, but that was her own business.

Regardless, the Corbin's were decidedly *not* the reason he was reluctant to dine at the great house. Charles turned his attention back to his uncle. "I don't wish to dine at Alcott, Uncle. I have come home to see *you*—"

"And so you have," his uncle said with a soft laugh. "Now, be off with you and change yourself. You know they always dress smart for dinner."

It appeared that even in his weakened state, Uncle Selby could still be a bully. He was determined to have his way in this. Charles would just have to suffer through it. If he was careful, he could avoid any unnecessary complications.

With a groan, he stood. "I will go, sir, but I will check in on you when I return," he added, voice stern. "I mean to be a dutiful nephew while I'm here."

Uncle Selby nodded, holding his gaze over his wire-rimmed glasses. "A word of caution?"

Charles raised a brow in silent question, waiting, knowing what was coming.

Selby looked through him in that way of his, seeing down to the depths of him. "Best to avoid wandering the park at this time of night, eh? There and back again is safest."

Charles tried very hard to control his features. He gave his waistcoat a little tug. "Yes, sir."

"Good lad. Now, off you go."



Burke's mouth fell open in surprise, as next to him, Rosalie shrank back. "Oh, Madeline," she murmured, her tone almost sympathetic.

Recovering his senses, Burke barked out a laugh as he glanced at the duchess. "Oh my god, can you even imagine?"

Madeline deflated instantly, shoulders slumping in embarrassment.

"Burke, don't be cruel," Rosalie chastised.

"I'm sorry." He stepped forward, daring to reach out and place a firm hand on Madeline's shoulder. She stiffened under the weight of it. "Madeline, I am. I'm truly sorry, but no."

"Why not?" she murmured, tears stinging her eyes. "You are unmarried."

He stifled another laugh. "And is that your only prerequisite?"

"You could take my dowry and make it your own," she urged. "I'd never question you on that score. And if I am not...if you don't...we would never have to be intimate," she forced out, her thoughts still buzzing with the memories of Mr. Warren. "But if you demanded it, I would—I trust you, Burke —"

"Oh god," he groaned, dropping his hand away.

"Do you see what you've done?" Rosalie snapped at him. "You thought you were so clever spouting your nonsense

about ravenous affairs.”

He looked instantly penitent. “Madeline...” His hand raised and lowered back to his side as he watched her shrink away from his touch. “You honor me with your proposal, but I cannot accept. Frankly, I can’t imagine two people more poorly matched for matrimony than you and I. Perhaps George and I,” he added under his breath. “But seeing as that match is illegal, I consider myself more than safe.”

Madeline took a step back. “Do you never wish to marry then?”

He tensed, his gaze darting to the duchess. “It’s not a question of whether I *want* to marry—”

“But you could set the terms,” she urged. “We would never have to see each other again after we said the vows, if you preferred it. You could be free of me. A paper husband, as you said. And I would never fault you for seeking your pleasure elsewhere if you never wish to be with me in that way—”

“Madeline, stop,” he urged. “This conversation cannot continue. It would be impossible to marry you, as I consider myself already married.”

Those words had the effect of a cannon blast, splintering the walls of the drawing room, rattling in Madeline’s chest.

*Mr. Burke is married?*

Rosalie sighed, stepping away to snatch up her glass of Madeira, turning her back to the pair of them.

Madeline tried to read the expression on his face. “Married? But...when?”

He shrugged. “It’s not official or anything, and never can be,” he said with a wave of his hand. “But I consider myself married, and so I am. Thus, I cannot marry you...lovely though you may be,” he finished gently.

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“It is not for you to understand,” he replied. “I have made my choices, and I am beyond content in my current situation. I will not leave Alcott Hall. I will not abandon my post as

steward. The Corbin's are my family. I belong here. I can be your friend, Madeline. Your devoted friend," he added with a kind smile. "I will help you in any way I can, but I cannot marry you."

She nodded, biting her lower lip. It was madness anyway. What would a man like Mr. Burke ever see in her?

Her shoulders slowly relaxed and, before she knew it, she was smiling. Mr. Burke took a step back in surprise as her pained smile turned into a laugh. Rosalie turned, her own eyes wide as Madeline lost herself to a fit of laughter.

In moments, the other two were both smiling. When the first laugh left Burke's mouth, Madeline bent over, gasping for breath, a tear slipping down her cheek. "Did—did I just ask you to marry me?" she said through her gasps.

"Aye, you did," he replied, his face stretched into a grin. "And I turned you down flat."

They doubled their laughter and Rosalie stepped forward, one hand on her stomach. "And he wasn't even your first choice," she added, tears in her eyes. "You were after Tom when you first sat down."

"Holy god, I nearly forgot about Tom," Burke howled, wiping a finger under his eye. "Rosalie, please, when he comes home, can we tell him he's engaged? Oh god, his face. I can't—" He turned away, snatching up his glass of Madeira and draining it.

Madeline clutched at her sides, trying to settle her breathing as Burke turned back to face her.

"Now that we've gotten all the truly terrible ideas out of the way, why don't we see who is left and go from there?" he teased.

Before she could reply, there was a knock at the door, and a tall footman entered.

"Ah, Jeremy," Burke called. "Just the man we wanted to see. You're unmarried, right?"

The footman blinked as Madeline's smile fell. "Yes, sir," he replied.

"Wonderful, have you met Lady Madeline?" He waved a gallant hand towards her.

Madeline gasped.

Rosalie stepped forward and gave Burke's chest a light slap. "That is enough out of you," she ordered. "I don't want to hear you speak another word about this for the rest of the night."

"Run, Jeremy," he called around her. "Before you're next to be caught in the matrimonial snare!"

Madeline groaned, turning away.

"*Ignore* him, Jeremy," the duchess countered. "Mr. Burke is confused—"

"Mr. Burke is hungry," he retorted, still all smiles.

"Dinner is ready, Your Grace," the footman announced, his tone wary as he kept himself glued to the doorframe.

"Is His Grace back from Carrington?" Rosalie called.

"Yes, Your Grace. Only just. He's changing now and said to begin without him."

"Very well." Rosalie sighed, glancing over her shoulder at Madeline. "We don't stand on much formality here, I'm afraid. The fire has upset our sense of normal. We even have a few families staying here in the servants' hall and outbuildings. We're hosting a dinner for a few of them tomorrow. I hope you don't mind."

"Not in the least," Madeline replied. "It is kind of His Grace to show such care."

"That's James," Rosalie said with a loving smile. "He carries the weight of it all."

"Yes, thank providence he has such broad shoulders," Mr. Burke teased, waiting for them at the door.

“I don’t mean to lay all the credit at his feet,” Rosalie replied, taking his offered arm. “You’ve been indispensable too, Burke.”

He smiled, placing his hand over hers as he led her forward. “I wasn’t searching for a compliment. I just like ruminating on the broadness of His Grace’s shoulders.”

“Incorrigible,” Rosalie muttered with a shake of her head.

“Utterly irredeemable,” he replied with a wink.

Madeline watched their verbal sparring with a sense of awe. They flowed together like birds in flight, wordlessly following a pattern only they knew.

“Oh, and we’ve had word from the parsonage, Your Grace,” the footman called.

Rosalie and Mr. Burke both paused and turned. “Yes?” she replied.

“Mr. Selby sends his regrets he cannot attend dinner tonight, but he offers the company of his nephew in his stead.”

Rosalie and Mr. Burke exchanged a glance. “His nephew?” Rosalie asked with a raised brow, clearly unsure of the gentleman’s identity.

A sudden change came over Mr. Burke as his smile fell. He glanced sharply from Rosalie to Madeline. “Oh, goddamn it.”



“*B*urke? What’s wrong?” Rosalie asked, her hand clutching a little tighter to his clenched arm.

“Nothing,” he muttered. “Let’s just get this over with.” He led her on through the open doors.

Madeline followed Rosalie and Burke into the grand Alcott dining room. The table was vast enough to seat thirty people. Madeline had spent more than one night in this room with the table so full. She felt almost helplessly small seeing it now, stretched before her with only the three of them to sit at it.

Thankfully, the table was modestly set at only one end. The grates to either side of the room blazed with a warm fire, and the near end of the table was set with candelabras and a winter arrangement of pine boughs and cones with some hothouse flowers adding pops of red. It was intimate, almost romantic.

Burke showed Rosalie around the table to take the right-hand seat at the head and promptly sat next to her, leaving a footman to pull out Madeline’s chair.

“But who is Mr. Selby’s nephew?” Rosalie asked again. “Have we met him?”

Burke shot her a scathing look. “You know you have.”

“I can’t recall. I—” She went quiet, her eyes narrowing with realization. She turned slowly to glare at Mr. Burke. “Really? You’re still holding onto that?”

“Til the day I die,” he muttered, reaching for his napkin and snapping it open rather more forcefully than was required.

“You will be on your best behavior, or so help me, Burke,” she warned.

“I do know how to comport myself in company,” he replied.

“I’m missing something,” said Madeline, her gaze darting from one to the other. “Who is the gentleman?”

“You met him too,” Rosalie replied. “Do you remember Mr. Bray? Nephew to the curate of Finchley? It was ages ago, *before* I was married,” she added with a pointed look at Burke.

Madeline’s vision filled with memories of the man. Mr. Charles Bray, nephew to Mr. Selby, curate of Finchley. He was also a man of the church. They first met the week of the Michaelmas Ball three years ago. She remembered his kind eyes and the easy way they conversed at dinner. He even danced with her at the ball, though he was a bit clumsy and stepped on her foot. But Madeline didn’t mind, for she was clumsy too.

“Oh, heavens,” Rosalie gasped, setting her glass down with a sharp *clink*. She glanced from Burke to Madeline, a smile stretching across her beautiful face. Before she could continue, there was a knock at the door and a footman entered.

“Mr. Charles Bray, Your Grace,” he announced, stepping back to let the gentleman into the room.

Rosalie stood with a slight sigh, one hand on her heavy middle as she moved around her side of the table. Burke was immediately on his feet too. Madeline craned her neck to look around her chair as the gentleman entered the room.

Gracious, how were his eyes the only feature she could recall? Charles Bray was so handsome, just not in quite the same rugged way as Mr. Burke. No, Bray’s was a softer beauty, like Bernini’s Apollo to Michelangelo’s David. He had a head of caramel-colored curls and amber eyes to match. He was clean-shaven, his chops trimmed back high at the ear. It gave him a youthful look, though she knew him to be older



than her by at least a few years. He was closer in age to Rosalie.

“Mr. Bray, how lovely to see you again,” Rosalie called, still all smiles.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” he said with a bow. “I’m terribly sorry for putting you out like this. My uncle insisted that I come in his stead.”

“Nonsense.” She stepped forward, offering her hand out to him, like he was an old friend instead of a passing acquaintance. “Any member of the Selby family is welcome in this house day or night. Our door is always open.”

Madeline didn’t miss the way Burke’s brows narrowed. Nor the way his lips curled into a snarl. He quickly schooled his features, recovering as Mr. Bray shook the hand the duchess offered. “Bray,” he said with a curt nod, stepping up behind the duchess until his shadow loomed over her.

“Mr. Burke,” the gentleman replied with a polite smile. “Good to see you, sir.”

“Is it?” Burke retorted under his breath as he headed back around the table.

Mr. Bray raised a brow in confusion but said nothing. Of course, the gentlemen knew each other well. Burke grew up here at Alcott. And from what Madeline could remember, Mr. Bray did too, or near enough in Finchley.

Rosalie brushed past the awkward moment. “Come, Mr. Bray. We only just sat down. We’re a small party tonight. My husband comes presently, and we’ve been graced with the company of my dear friend. I believe you’ve met.” She stood at the head of the table, waving a hand at Madeline. “Mr. Bray, surely you remember Lady Madeline Blaire.”

Madeline offered him a breathless smile as he stepped fully into the light of the table.

The smile on his face spread. “Of course. Lady Madeline, a pleasure to see you again.”

“Good evening, Mr. Bray,” she murmured, clutching the napkin in her lap.

He was the kind of person who looked at you with his whole body, not just his eyes. His attention was all or nothing. She fought the urge to curl away from it.

“You’re here, sir.” Rosalie gestured to the empty chair by Madeline.

Burke was already back on the other side of the table, waiting to take his seat. Mr. Bray nodded, resting his hands on the back of his chair while he waited for Rosalie to resume her seat. Only once the duchess was seated did the gentlemen sit.

“How long have you been in the country, sir?” Rosalie asked, leading the conversation.

“Yesterday, on the afternoon coach,” Mr. Bray replied, waiting as the footman filled his wine glass. “It was supposed to arrive at noon, but we were delayed two hours.”

“This weather is just terrible,” Rosalie replied, giving the footmen a nod to begin serving the first course. “I can’t believe you both braved a journey with the roads in such a state.”

“Did you arrive yesterday as well, Lady Madeline?” he asked.

She nodded, bringing her glass to her lips. At a sharp look from Rosalie, she cleared her throat and added a lame, “I did, sir.”

“She was nearly frozen by the time she arrived,” Rosalie said with a laugh. “I dunked her in a hot bath to warm her up. And tonight, we shall wrap you in feathers and furs,” she added, flashing Madeline a smile.

There was something odd about Rosalie’s behavior. Burke noticed too because his gaze kept darting to her. And Madeline was quite sure if his brows stayed lowered like that, the look would become permanent.

“What brings you to Finchley?” Rosalie asked, leaning back as a footman served her the first course. Madeline waited

mere moments before a footman swept behind her, setting down a steaming bowl of rabbit soup spiced with fennel and dolloped with cream.

Mr. Bray cleared his throat, reaching for his spoon. “Um... my uncle. His health.”

“Oh...” Rosalie’s gay tone disappeared as her smile fell. “Oh, of course. I’m so sorry, Charles. I was distracted. I didn’t even think to ask why you came in his stead. How is he then?”

His smile fell as he focused on his bowl of soup. “Nearing the end, I think,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry, Bray,” Burke offered, and Madeline could hear in his tone that he meant it. “Selby is a good man. We all pray for him that his pain will soon ease.”

Madeline sat back, glancing about the table. She had a vague memory of the curate. “What ails him?” she asked, her voice quiet.

Mr. Bray faced her again. “Doctor Rivers says it is a pernicious cancer of his organs. He has some internal pains and...well, it’s not polite conversation for a dinner table, I suppose. Forgive me, Your Grace,” he said, casting Rosalie an apologetic look.

“We asked the question,” she replied kindly. “We all care about Mr. Selby. He’s been such a dear friend to our family. As Burke says, we pray for him.”

Before Mr. Bray could reply, the door opened, and the duke swept in. “Christ, but I’m famished. Sorry, I’m so late, angel. I—” He paused in the doorway, eyes wide as he took in the scene.

Mr. Bray shot out of his chair, coming to attention for the duke. Across the table, Burke remained seated, as did Rosalie. Madeline leaned back in her chair to glance around Mr. Bray, catching the duke’s eye. Gracious, but he always had the ability to make her stomach flip. He was all hard edges. His fierce green eyes blazed with an inner fire. There was no man born with more tenacity of purpose than James Corbin, seventh Duke of Norland.

His gaze settled on Madeline and Mr. Bray as he cleared his throat. "I see we have company."

"Yes, my love," Rosalie replied. "Madeline arrived late last night. And you remember Mr. Bray?"

"Of course," he said, coming forward to shake the gentleman's hand. "Bray, how are you? How is Selby?"

"Holding on, Your Grace," Mr. Bray replied. "He speaks nothing but praise of you, sir."

James nodded, jaw tight. "Aye, he's a good friend." His gaze turned to her. "Lady Madeline, you're well?"

"Perfectly so, Your Grace," she replied.

"Well then..." He stood there for a moment, recovering his thoughts before he swept around the top of the table. Madeline expected him to sit, but he walked right past his chair and moved to Rosalie's side. He dropped to one knee, his hand immediately going up to brush featherlight over her stomach. Rosalie's hand slipped absently from the table, covering his as he murmured a few private words to her. She nodded, replying quietly. It was such an intimate moment. There was nothing sensual in the act, and yet it was such a clear signal of possession, of love and devotion. Madeline was surprised the duke wanted his guests privy to it.

She couldn't help letting her gaze drift over to Burke. He seemed wholly unfazed by their intimate moment, casually eating his soup without waiting for the duke to sit. Following his lead, Madeline busied herself with reaching for her spoon. Next to her, Charles adjusted his chair, also doing his best to look away.

In moments, the duke had kissed Rosalie's brow and took his chair, gesturing for the footman to bring him the first course. The entire energy of the table shifted to make him the center of attention. James Corbin simply could not be denied. "How long are you in town then, Bray?"

Mr. Bray cleared his throat. "I'm not exactly sure, Your Grace. I'm due in Bredbury soon after the new year, but I

wanted to be here for my uncle. I'd like to stay until..." He fell quiet, his meaning clear.

He wanted to stay until his uncle passed. Madeline's heart broke for him. He must be close with the gentleman. She had a faint memory of Mr. Selby joining them at lunches and dinners during the summer she spent here.

"Of course," James replied. "He talks of you often. I know how he's missed you."

"Thank you, Your Grace" he replied stiffly, his gaze lowered to his bowl.

"While you're here, I wonder if I can't put you to work?" James went on.

"Certainly, Your Grace," Mr. Bray replied.

At the same time, Burke called down the table, "Oh, leave the man in peace, James."

"Ordinarily, I would," James replied. "But we've had something of a crisis here. A fire," he explained to the curate.

Mr. Bray leaned forward, setting his spoon aside. "Oh god, where?"

"Carrington. Ten houses on the row burned to the ground."

"Behind the mill?" said Mr. Bray.

James nodded, reaching for his glass of wine. "The very same."

"I hadn't heard," Mr. Bray replied with a sad shake of his head. "I only got in late yesterday. And the casualties, sir?"

"None, thank god. But nothing is salvageable. Total ruination. I've resettled the families for now, and reconstruction is set to begin next week," James explained. "But I know it would ease minds to have a visit from another curate. Hoxley is running about like a mad man, but what with Selby as ill as he is..."

"Of course, sir," Mr. Bray said immediately. "I'd be more than happy to help however I'm able. I can write a note to Hoxley at once."

James flashed him a grateful smile. “Good man. Why not come by in the morning so we can have a proper meeting? I have something else I would put to you as well.”

Mr. Bray reached for his wine glass with a nod. “I am at your disposal, sir.”

“Excellent. Come by at ten.”

“And that’s enough of business tonight, my love,” Rosalie said, placing her hand over his and giving it a squeeze. “We don’t want Madeline to feel neglected.”

“I notice Madeline is here alone,” James replied, his gaze drifting pointedly over to her.

Madeline sucked in a breath, grateful when Rosalie spoke for her. “Yes, her parents are preparing for a grand adventure in Spain. They intend to leave poor Madeline alone, and at Christmastime too. I simply had to have her here with me.”

James cast Rosalie a knowing glance. “Curious that you spoke nothing of it, wife.”

“Did I not?” she replied absently, buttering her roll. “I’m sure I must have. Perhaps I mentioned it to Burke.”

“Or perhaps you simply weren’t listening,” said Burke.

James shot him a glare.

“It was sudden, Your Grace,” Madeline admitted, speaking up at last. “And I would certainly never wish to intrude—”

“Nonsense,” said Rosalie. “We’re more than happy to have you here. You’re always welcome at Alcott, Madeline. Stay as long as you like. Certainly, you’ll stay through the new year,” she added.

“Whatever you wish,” James said at Rosalie before turning his attention back to Mr. Bray. “So, what calls you all the way to Bredbury?”

Madeline wanted to listen to Mr. Bray’s response but was distracted by the look Rosalie shot her across the table. Madeline narrowed her eyes, trying to read the subtle

movement of Rosalie's lips as she surreptitiously gestured at Mr. Bray.

*What?* Madeline mouthed, her eyes darting from Mr. Bray back to the duchess.

*Him*, Rosalie whispered again, a smile quirking her lips.

Madeline shook her head and shrugged.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Burke muttered. "Bray, are you married?" he called over James.

Both men paused, their gazes shooting down the table to Burke.

"Excuse me?" said Mr. Bray.

"You're not married, right?" Burke repeated.

Rosalie cleared her throat as she reached for her glass of wine, making a noise that sounded decidedly like the word "don't."

Madeline wanted to crawl under the table and hide.

If Mr. Bray heard the duchess, he didn't let on. "No, I'm not married," he replied.

"But you have nothing against the institution, right?" Burke pressed. "Surely, you don't think poorly of marriage. You're a curate, after all."

"He's just been made vicar," James chastised. "And you accuse *me* of not listening."

"So, you must want to get married," Burke said, ignoring the duke's admonishment. "Given the right lady comes along, of course."

Mr. Bray blinked, glancing from Burke to Rosalie. "I—"

"Burke, what the hell are you doing?" James muttered. "Why are you asking the man such questions?"

"What is strange about asking a man of the cloth his thoughts on marriage?" Burke said with a shrug. "Is he not licensed to sanction the act? Does he not counsel families on

the rite as part of his profession? Surely, he must have a ready opinion.”

James’ scowl was enough to have Madeline desperate to burst into flame. On Burke, it had absolutely no affect. “We are in mixed company. Save your interrogation for the brandy room.”

“Does marriage not affect the fairer sex?” Burke replied. “I imagine the ladies are just as interested as I to know why a man as handsome and witty as Charles Bray is yet unmarried.”

Madeline watched the men parry words across the table like they were holding foils. Mr. Bray easily held his own.

“You sound like you’re interested in me for yourself, sir,” he said through a tight smile. “Can I soon expect an offer?”

“Hardly,” Burke replied, taking a sip of his wine. “Lifelong bachelor, me.”

“Ahh, so you do not ask to hear my answer then, sir,” Mr. Bray countered. “You ask to debate my position. If I say I am for it, you mean to counter me with claims against it, as any self-professed bachelor would.”

“You mistake me, Bray. I have nothing but the highest opinion of marriage,” Burke replied. “I will sing its praises to the end of my days.”

Mr. Bray narrowed his eyes. “Your bachelor days?”

Burke raised his glass in salutation. “Exactly.”

“Burke, that’s enough,” called James. “You don’t have to answer his question, Bray,” he added at the gentleman.

“I don’t mind, Your Grace,” Mr. Bray replied. “And to answer you, Burke, yes. I too have a high opinion of marriage.”

“And what is required to make a good marriage?” Burke pressed.

“Jesus, Burke,” James muttered, reaching for his wine.

“I’m curious too,” Rosalie admitted, earning her a sharp stare from James.



Mr. Bray cleared his throat. “Well...I suppose a marriage of like minds is ideal.”

“So, a marriage of two people with similar tastes,” Rosalie offered. “Perhaps liking the same books and music.” She flashed Madeline a knowing smile.

Oh god, this was a disaster. Madeline felt ready to be sick into her napkin. She fought the urge to sink down in her chair, shifting away from Mr. Bray. Rosalie and Burke clearly wanted her to set her cap at him.

She took a deep breath, trying to center her swirling emotions. It was one thing to imagine marrying a man when the idea had no substance. So far, she’d only pictured a faceless sort of presence. Her *husband*. He had no identity. But in the span of moments, her clouded idea was torn to shreds, and in its place, Rosalie and Burke had tacked up a handsome portrait of the soon-to-be-vicar.

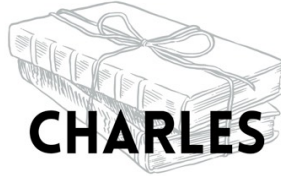
Madeline snatched for her wine glass, nearly missing it. She fumbled her fingers around it, bringing it to her lips.

“Certainly, sharing interests is preferred,” Mr. Bray conceded, sparing her a quick glance as she righted her wine glass before it spilled.

“And temperament,” Burke prodded. “What sort of temperament is best in a wife?”

“Are you ill?” James growled down the table. At the same time, Mr. Bray said, “Well, I suppose that depends entirely on the husband.”

“Take yourself as the husband,” said Burke. “What kind of temperament would *you* look for in a wife?”



*W* hat the hell is going on?

When Charles entered this dining room, the last thing he expected was to become the center of attention, debating the merits of marriage with Horatio Burke. He had to have an angle; Charles just didn't know what it was.

"You're asking me, sir, the temperament I'm looking for in a wife? Do you have someone in mind?"

Burke smirked. "I might. Depends on how you answer."

This was ridiculous. He cast a wild glance across the table at the duchess, hoping she'd agree. But she just waited, watching with quiet interest. He glanced to his left, noting the way Lady Madeline kept her gaze on her bowl of soup. She looked mortified, struck speechless by Burke's odd behavior.

Charles had to put a stop to this. "I'm not looking for a wife," he admitted. "I could hardly expect to court someone when I am due to start a new position in a month. My job must come first, sir."

"And what if you didn't have to work?" Burke pressed.

"What the hell are you on about now?" said the duke.

"I'm saying what if Bray could marry up? What if he married a lady...say with a dowry. A good one," Burke added. "Enough that he could live as a proper gentleman instead."

Charles snorted, sharing an incredulous look with James. "I'm sorry, but in what world would that ever be the case?"

“Don’t sell yourself short, Mr. Bray,” said the duchess.

“I am merely realistic, Your Grace,” he replied. “I have absolutely nothing to offer a lady. I have no name, no title, and hardly a shilling to my name. His Grace paid for my education, or at least his family did,” he added at the duke.

“We were happy to do it,” James replied. “You’re a bright man. You and David both. I know my father was happy to give you both your start.”

“And we are grateful,” Charles replied, meaning every word. “I owe my current profession to your father’s magnanimity. And any living I earn comes from the grace of the Church. It will never be enough to turn the head of a proper lady. Besides, I like to work. I like to be useful.”

“Not all ladies are as fastidious as you might think,” Burke replied. “Given the right provocation, I imagine a lady of standing would be eager to snap you up. And if you wanted to keep working that would be amenable to her, I’d imagine. What say you, Madeline?” he called down the table, making the lady jolt. “Would you condone a husband’s desire to keep working, even if his wife’s fortune could raise him in status to a gentleman?”

“I—don’t know, sir.” The poor girl’s cheeks were crimson as she clutched to her wine glass like it was a lifeline.

“Well, think on it,” Burke replied. “Best to know where you stand on such issues. What say you, Your Grace?”

The duchess nodded serenely. “I think to see a man working is always commendable and preferable to a life of kept idleness.”

“There you have it, Bray,” echoed Burke. “You could have it all—a wife, a fortune, and you could still make pretty little sermons to your heart’s content. What say you? Interested?”

Charles could do nothing but blink his astonishment. He was fighting the urge to leave the table and reenter the room, certain that he was caught in some kind of dream or spell.

*What the bloody hell is happening?*

“I...find I don't quite know what to say to that, sir,” he admitted at last.

Burke leaned forward. “But suppose—”

“No,” James called, slapping down his spoon. “We're done with this line of questioning. Burke, change the topic of conversation, or leave the table at once.”

Before Burke could argue, the footmen stepped forward, ready to change out the first course. Charles glanced down at his plate, wistfully wishing he'd been able to eat more than two bites of the delicious rabbit soup. He watched the footman take it away, exchanging it for the fish course. Not daring to hope the interrogation was over, he snatched up his fork, determined to eat at least a few bites of this decadent meal.

With his mouth full of cod, he nearly choked when Burke leaned down the table and said, “A man and woman having carnal relations before marriage...is it a sin, yes or no?”

The duke slammed down his fork. “Goddamn it, Burke. Leave!”

*What the bloody fucking hell is going on?*



Madeline could hardly see straight as she watched Mr. Bray take his leave. After Burke's painful interrogation at dinner, Mr. Bray was in no mood to stay past dessert, even when Rosalie offered. He made his excuses, citing a need to check on his uncle, so the quartet saw him out. As the front doors opened, a gust of wintry wind blew inside, raising goosebumps down Madeline's arms; a final frozen chill to end this disaster of an evening.

Rosalie stood between the duke and Burke, her lips set in a thin line, watching the vicar don his hat and step out into the cold. Madeline stood a little off to the side, waiting for the moment the door would shut. She wasn't disappointed. As soon as the door clicked and the footmen stepped back, the duke and his duchess rounded on Burke.

"Oh, Burke, I cannot *believe* you," Rosalie cried. "You scared him off!"

"If he scares that easily, Madeline's well shot of him," Burke replied with an indifferent shrug.

But Madeline could see the stiffness in the shoulders, the way he held his chin in the air. His defiance belied the truth. He wasn't indifferent at all. Quite the opposite. What did he have against Mr. Bray? Should it give her pause in considering him as a suitor?

The duke crossed his arms. "Is someone going to tell me what's going on? Why the hell was Bray even here tonight? Why is Madeline really here?"

But the others were too distracted by glowering at each other to notice.

“You just don’t like him,” Rosalie countered at Burke, hands perched on her hips, ignoring her husband’s queries. “You still suffer from the deluded notion that I flirted with him *once*, and now you carry that chip on your shoulder like a man carries his musket into battle!”

“You *did* flirt with him, you little minx,” Burke growled, lowering his face closer to hers. “I wish you would just admit it so we can all move on!”

“Whoa...what the hell is he talking about?” said James, turning Rosalie to face him.

“Oh, relax,” she soothed, placing her hand over his as she darted her gaze back over her shoulder at Burke. “I wasn’t even married then, and I *wasn’t* flirting—”

Burke barked an empty laugh. “Please, you don’t think I know flirting when I see it?”

The duke glanced at Madeline and his scowl deepened. “This is hardly the place—”

“Oh, don’t ‘hardly the place’ me,” said Burke. “This is my bloody house too, and Rosalie is—”

“Burke, will you shut up!” James barked. “We’re not going to fight in front of the staff. In front of *company*.”

As if the other two suddenly remembered her presence, Burke and Rosalie spun to face Madeline.

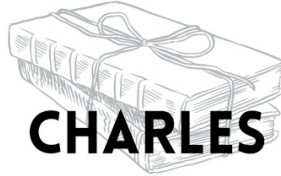
“Oh, Madeline. Oh, I’m *so* sorry,” Rosalie cried, stepping forward to wrap her arms around her. “We’ve made such a mess of things tonight. Here we are just trying to help, and instead we make everything worse.”

“If someone doesn’t tell me what the bloody hell is going on,” James growled, brows lowered over those fierce green eyes. “What’s wrong with Madeline? Why is she here, and why does she need our help?”

Rosalie pulled back, her hands on Madeline’s shoulders. She glanced at the duke and then back at Madeline. “I don’t

keep secrets from my husband,” she said gently.

Madeline knew what was coming. She didn't let herself feel the pang of discomfort when Rosalie asked, “Will you tell him your dilemma, or shall I?”



“So, how was dinner last night?” asked Uncle Selby. The man sat nestled in his bed, perched atop a pile of down pillows, surrounded by creature comforts. He had a little tray across his lap stacked with correspondence, his favorite daily devotional book, and a plate of half-eaten breakfast.

Charles sent up a little prayer of relief to see his uncle so well-tended. It eased him to know that, even as Selby suffered in body, he was contented in spirit. Charles would have to pay special attention to finding something nice for Molly as a Christmas gift.

“Dinner was...odd,” he admitted, setting aside his tea.

Uncle Selby peered over his glasses at him. “Odd? How so?”

As soon as he said the words aloud, Charles regretted opening the door to this conversation. He didn’t feel much like talking about it. But now he’d said it and Uncle Selby was looking at him in that way. “Mr. Burke was odd,” he explained. “I don’t think the man likes me very much.”

“Tosh. Everyone likes you,” Uncle Selby replied. “You’re a likable boy. Always so friendly and obliging. What cause should Burke have to dislike you?”

Charles just shrugged. “I haven’t the foggiest idea. But it seemed as though he was angry with me.” He cleared his throat. “At least Norland was obliging. And the duchess, of



course.” A smile quirked his lips. “It feels strange to call him ‘Norland’ now.”

Uncle Selby echoed his smile. “Seasons come, and seasons go,” he intoned. “He’ll make a good Duke of Norland. Redoubtable. Strong.”

Charles nodded. *Redoubtable*. Such an excellent word to describe James Corbin. “He told me about the fire.”

“Yes, such a terrible business,” his uncle replied with a tisk. “Chimney fire. It took down a whole row. At least thirteen families. The Carter’s and the Brandt’s...the poor Millson’s. And Paul Millson was already suffering from that broken leg from last season. I don’t know how they’ll manage now.” He gave a sad shake of his head.

“Norland asked me to see the families while I’m here. Would you mind? I don’t want to encroach on you or Mr. Hoxley—”

Uncle Selby sat forward. “Oh, but it’s a wonderful idea,” he replied. “I’m only ashamed I didn’t think of it myself. Hoxley has been that pressed for help. Oh, Charles, will you? It would mean that much to the poor families to hear some kind words. You could work with Molly to whip up some baskets and take them round to the families that were resettled nearer to Finchley, save Hoxley a trip out from Carrington. I’m sure Her Grace would assist you. I wish I was feeling stout enough to take them myself. I ought to—”

“You ought to *rest*,” Charles countered. “No one expects you to go trudging around in the depths of winter delivering baskets. Leave it to me to spend a morning freezing my cock off.”

Uncle Selby chuckled, but the sound died quickly as he turned his tired gaze to glance warily out the window. “This winter has been terrible indeed. I can scarce remember feeling a sharper chill in the air. Molly says we’ll get snow again tonight. Her mother says we’re to expect a blizzard any day now.”

Charles smirked. “And you take the word of Molly’s mother?”

Uncle Selby leveled his gaze at him over his wire-rimmed glasses. “The talents of Constance Evans to predict the weather run positively occult, my boy. If she says to ready for snow, then we shall stack our wood, place the candles, and prepare to nestle in.”

Charles set aside his cup of tea. “I’ll ask Molly what I might do to help with preparations.”

“If you could see to the baskets before the snow falls, that would ease my mind so greatly,” Uncle Selby replied. “All those poor families made homeless. And at Christmas too.”

“I’ll speak to the duke about it directly.”

He raised a curious brow. “You will?”

“Aye, he asked me to call again this morning,” Charles explained, getting to his feet. “Said he had more to discuss with me.”

Uncle Selby sat back with a wide grin. “Well, look at you. Off to a meeting with the Duke of Norland, casual as you like.”

Charles rolled his eyes, leaning down to adjust the blanket folded over his uncle’s socked feet. “He may wear the title now, but at the end of the day, he is still the same James who used to team up with David to flick walnuts at me in church.”

“Ahh, yes. I remember.” Uncle Selby leaned back. “If my memory serves, it was a young Master Burke who came to your aid, did he not?”

Charles huffed a laugh. “He did at that. He always kept an eye out for me. He and Warren chased them with sticks ‘round the cemetery. Told them to pick on someone their own size—”

They both sank into a sharp silence as the name that ought to have remained unspoken echoed louder than a bell. Charles chewed his bottom lip, not daring to look up.

After a moment, Uncle Selby cleared his throat, shuffling the stack of correspondence on his tray. “And here was you

saying Mr. Burke disliked you, when we both remember how well he looked after you in those early days.”

Charles let out a breath. Was it possible Uncle Selby was choosing to move past it without comment? “That was many years ago now, sir,” he replied, tidying up his place and adding his used tea things to the tray for Molly. “If I’ve done something to offend, I’ll put it right with him.”

“Good. There’s nothing Norland likes worse than an atmosphere.”

Charles nodded, checking the time on the mantle clock. He needed to be on his way to meet the duke by ten o’clock. “I imagine I’ll be back in time for lunch,” he said. “Perhaps we can play another round of chess this afternoon?”

“I’d like that.” Uncle Selby nestled himself back against his pillows with a tired sigh.

Charles made it all the way to the door before his uncle’s soft voice called out.

“He’s going to come for you.”

Charles stilled, one hand on the knob of the door. He didn’t dare turn around.

“I half expected him to barge his way in here already, running to your side the moment he heard you were back in town.”

Charles could scarcely draw breath. This was the risk he ran in coming home again. He’d managed to stay away for three years at his uncle’s behest. Three long, lonely years. He’d suffered, true enough. He missed his life in Finchley. He missed his friends, the sense of community and history he felt in this place. And poor Uncle Selby suffered right along with him. No visits home. No birthdays or Christmases. Not for three years.

And it was all for the sake of avoiding *him*. The boy who stole Charles’s young heart away. The man who squeezed until it shattered, leaving nothing behind but broken shards.

Charles didn't turn around. He couldn't bear to see the fear written on his uncle's face, the disappointment, the worry. Poor Selby had enough to deal with. He didn't need to be worried about Charles too.

"He won't come here," he said, his voice gruff. "There is nothing between us now. It's been three years of silence, sir. Not one letter exchanged, not one glance. I told you I could cut him out, and I did." He couldn't help himself. He glanced over his shoulder, meeting his uncle's tired gaze. God damn the man, he had tears in his eyes. Charles sucked in a shaky breath. "Uncle, please..."

"He will come," Uncle Selby murmured. "He always comes for you. The heart knows no passing of time. But he is your Eurydice. He exists to be your temptation, Charles. Turn away. Do not let him lure you back down into the darkness, back to the world of carnal sin."

With his breath held tight in his chest, Charles gave a curt nod and fled his uncle's bedroom. Shutting the door with a soft snap, he slid along it until he reached the wall. In the quiet of the hallway, he closed his eyes and let out his breath through pursed lips.

"I will not be tempted," he murmured to himself, repeating the words in a quiet chant as he descended the back stairs.

He passed Molly and the young maid in the kitchen, giving them a nod as he helped himself to his great coat, hat, scarf, and fur-lined gloves.

"Be back in time for luncheon," Molly called. "I'm making ham tarts!"

He gave a muffled response, wrapping the thick wool scarf twice around his neck. Flipping the collar of his great coat up against the wind, he snatched up his walking stick and slipped out the back door. A gust of wintry wind pierced his cheeks and brow like so many little needles. Ready to brave the cold, he curled his hands into tight fists, striding out across the back garden.

He didn't make it three steps before he stilled like a rabbit caught in a snare. His heart stopped, then it all but burst, hammering so fast he had to take a literal gasp of air. His hand clenched tight around the top of his walking stick as he blinked twice, his eyes watering in the sharp cold.

But there was no mistaking what his eyes saw. John Warren was standing at the back gate.



“Give me one good reason why Madeline *shouldn't* propose to Charles Bray.” Rosalie stood at Madeline’s side in the back garden, a fur-trimmed cape pulled up around her face, framing her dark curls and rosy cheeks in a halo of purest white. She pulled her cape tighter around herself, staring daggers at Burke and James.

It was Madeline’s idea to take a walk in the back garden before breakfast. She needed air. She needed...*escape*.

But she now regretted the idea immensely.

As soon as Rosalie agreed to it, the men began to protest, arguing that the ground was too icy, and Rosalie was in too delicate a state. This merely incensed the duchess, who stormed off with mutterings about feathers and nests, dragging Madeline along behind her. Now Madeline stood freezing in her borrowed clothes, a matching cape with a silver fur hood pulled up around her face.

The back gardens glistened, with all the hedges encased in a layer of frost. The smell of looming snow hung heavy in the air. Both the gentlemen demanded to join them on their walk, boxing Rosalie in on either side. Madeline thought it was sweet to see how well they cared for her. It made her all the more aware of how very alone she was, standing off to the side, watching Rosalie be treated like a crystal vase.

“Well?” the duchess pressed, glancing from James to Burke.

“He’s not a peer,” the duke replied at once. “Lord Raleigh would surely be apoplectic at the mere idea of his only daughter marrying a lowly curate.”

“Remember, he’s a vicar now,” Burke said. “Christ, she’ll likely have a miserable life listening to him practice his sermons at dinner every night. Are you sure you want that, Madeline?” he said her.

Before she could reply, James huffed and crossed his arms over his chest, the bottom half of his face tucked inside a scarf, muffling his voice. “He has no social connections of note outside of our family. He’ll bring her nothing in the marriage. If anything, he’ll bring her down. Doors won’t open, Madeline,” he said directly at her. “They’ll only close if you pursue this match.”

Madeline’s heart raced. Both men spoke sense, and she trusted their opinions absolutely. They had nothing to gain from lying to her. In fact, their every action so far convinced her of their loyalty and friendship.

If James Corbin and Horatio Burke said Mr. Bray wasn’t a suitable match for her, she had to believe them, right? In her heart, she knew it to be true. At least by her parent’s exacting standards, by society’s standards, Mr. Bray was not an option.

But Rosalie was having none of it. She popped her hands on her hips, glancing between the men with her chin upturned. Her dark eyes blazed. “Madeline doesn’t need a landed peer with vast social connections and a key to open all of London’s doors. She needs a kind man, Burke. A *good* man.”

“Lord, here she goes,” Burke muttered, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, here I go,” she replied, meeting his scorn with fierce determination. “When I met Mr. Bray three years ago, I thought he was a fine man. There is no avarice in him, no need to dominate or control. Madeline can trust him,” she pressed. “Not just with her money, but with herself.”

Madeline nodded, knowing Rosalie’s assessment to be true. She’d seen it for herself. Charles Bray was a good

person. He was kind and gentle, he listened when a lady talked. Perhaps it wasn't the worst idea...

"And breeding is hardly the only measure of a man," Rosalie went on. "Certainly, in Madeline's case, with a dowry and a fortune at play, she can afford to make a somewhat surprising choice. If she can live with the potential social ramifications, who are we to stand in her way?"

"But you must consider how Lord Raleigh may react when he finds out," urged James. "He could deny Bray the dowry out of spite. He could make it so that Bray gets nothing." He turned to Madeline, those green eyes piercing in their intensity. "What will you do then? Will you share your fortune with him? If your father uses his influence to shut every social door against Bray, will you fund a living for him?"

A chill settled in Madeline's chest. She hadn't thought of that. It was clear by the slight dip in Rosalie's shoulders that she hadn't considered it either.

"Nothing is ever certain," James pressed. "If you make Bray an offer of marriage, promising him use of a dowry, you better know you can deliver on that promise."

Rosalie turned to face her. "Would Lord Raleigh be so vindictive?"

Madeline chewed her bottom lip, glancing around at the three faces waiting for her to speak aloud the truth that had slowly unraveled her over the past two days. Who was her father? Did she even know? What would he do to get his way, even against his own daughter? "I...I don't know," she murmured, tears stinging her. "I think...I think perhaps he might, yes."

"Might what?" Burke urged.

"He might punish me for this," she replied. "He will...he'll punish me. And he'll never accept Mr. Bray as a son-in-law."

"But he cannot touch your fortune?" James pressed.

Madeline shook her head. "The money is mine. Aunt Maude was careful. If I meet her condition, no one else can touch it but me."



“So, you have to decide which matters more to you,” James reasoned. “Do you want to find a peer who will meet your father’s expectations and turn over your dowry to him, settling into a marriage of convenience? Or do you want to marry a man like Bray, a man who will be kind and careful and considerate...but likely reliant on you for support?”

“You would be mistress of the house,” said Burke. “Bray would be your kept man,” he added with a smirk. “But at least he seems content to keep working. His vicar’s salary will be a tidy sum, enough to cover your yearly expenses for tea and biscuits.”

Madeline glanced to Rosalie, eyes wide.

But the duchess just shook her head. “I cannot possibly decide this for you. This must be your choice, Madeline. You will be the one who must live with it.”

Madeline glanced out over the sweeping expanse of the Alcott gardens towards the little village of Finchley. Mr. Bray was somewhere there. What would he think of such an arrangement? Could he ever agree to her terms?

It felt impossible to have to make this decision now, but if she didn’t marry within the next three weeks, she would miss this chance entirely.

*And then my father wins.*

She stiffened, tears she refused to shed stinging her eyes.

It all came down to a roll of the dice. The great gamble. She could propose, they could marry, and a life she never thought possible would unfold before her eyes. It would be a whirlwind courtship, with no time for a proper engagement. No, they must marry at once. Then they would settle into a new life, learning together what it meant to be husband and wife as they stumbled along, yoked to one another by holy vows.

Where would they live? He wanted to work, he said. Would she be expected to move to Bredbury? Heaven, forbid. If all the gossip was to be believed, the north of England held

absolutely no charms to recommend it. One had to pass by York entirely and journey on to Scotland.

Perhaps he'd be willing to live with her at Leary House and take up some position in Town. Or what if he wanted to go on to Bredbury without her? They could live their lives separately, as she'd originally intended.

Why then did the idea suddenly feel like it had lost a bit of its luster? What was this feeling churning in her gut? Discomfort? Did it bother her to think of living worlds away from him?

James cleared his throat, drawing her back to the present. "We can do nothing more until you've spoken with Bray," he said. "Luckily for you, he'll be here at ten."

"Why did you want to speak with him?" Rosalie said with a raised brow.

"I have a question to put to him," James replied. "It may help, actually. If Lord Raleigh is determined to be vindictive, Bray will need someone of rank in his corner. They both will."

Burke stilled. "Oh, James," he groaned. "Really? Bray?"

"He's perfect," James replied.

"Well, when you finish with him, send him to speak to Madeline," said Rosalie.

Madeline glanced sharply between them. "I must speak with him *now*? This morning?"

"No time like the present," Burke replied with a shrug.

Now her heart really was racing. How was she supposed to discuss such a thing with him? What did she even say?

As if the duchess could read her thoughts, Rosalie wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Just be yourself, Madeline. You do have a little time, you know. You need not propose to him at this first meeting. Let us arrange a private meeting for the two of you and just...talk to each other," she said gently. "Get to know him without the pressure of our prying eyes watching you."

Behind her, Burke nodded.

*Just talk.*

They made it sound so easy.



So, it was true. Charles Bray was back in Finchley. When the lads mentioned seeing him in the high street yesterday, Warren could hardly believe it. Charles was done with Finchley. Done with him. There was no way the proud, principled Charles Bray would come crawling back here. Not after three long years of a silence colder than the grave.

But Warren couldn't focus on why Charles left. Not now when he was standing here before him. Warren took that pain, all that resentment and hurt, and he boxed it up tight, shoving it into the darkest corner of his mind.

For the first time in three impossibly long years, his heart could beat again.

"Charles," he murmured, his lips barely moving.

God *damn*, but the man was still so beautiful. Even covered as he was in his winter trappings, Warren could still see the amber in his eyes, the slant of his cheekbones, the freckles dotting his nose. Warren would know this man in the dark. He felt that hum between them, like a finger plucking the string of a heart's thread. Two souls inexplicably intertwined.

Charles's panicked gaze swept him from head to toe. He wasn't expecting Warren to come then. How could he ever doubt it? When had Warren ever been able to stay away? Did Charles think three years was long enough for Warren to forget about their decade of shared memories?

*Impossible.*

He blindly reached for the latch of the garden gate, a smile curling his lips as he watched Charles take a hesitant step back, his boot crunching in the snow.

“No,” Charles whispered, his voice muffled by the thickly woven scarf wrapped around his neck. He glanced hesitantly around. “You can’t be here.”

*Fuck that.*

There was nowhere else Warren could be, not knowing Charles was here. He stepped around the gate, leaving it open as he approached. His heart hammered in his chest. He tugged off his gloves as he walked, feeling the sting of the winter air on his fingertips.

Charles stiffened. “Warren, I’m late. I can’t do this now.”

Always excuses. Always denials.

Warren crossed the distance between them, feeling that thread wind up tight, reeling him in. “I wondered when you’d come back,” he said, his voice gravelly. “I had to know.”

He stopped within arm’s reach of Charles, keeping his hands firmly down at his sides. Standing so close, their height difference was more pronounced. Charles was of average height, but Warren was a bear of a man. He towered head and shoulders above him. As children, they’d always been comparable in size. Once they turned sixteen, Charles had merely filled out, like a sturdy sapling. But Warren doubled in size like a mighty oak.

As a gamekeeper, his size was useful—hunting, trapping, wrangling unruly animals. And Warren wouldn’t deny how he thrilled at the feeling of Charles nestled in his arms, smooth and lean and so goddamn soft. Apparently, he liked delicate things. His mind flashed with images of the young lady pressed against him, her lips moving with his. Lady Madeline was soft too.

His cock twitched just thinking about her, even standing here in front of Charles. Fuck, he was a mess.

“Know what?” said Charles, pulling him from his thoughts.

Warren narrowed his eyes at him. “Whether your love for Selby eclipsed your hatred of me,” he replied honestly.

Charles took another step back, tears springing to his eyes. “I don’t hate you,” he murmured.

It was all the opening Warren needed. He stepped forward, raising a hand to brush his fingers over the only piece of Charles he could claim—his rosy cheek. Charles’s skin was like cold marble, chilled by the wind. Warren’s calloused fingers reverently stroked the line of his cheek towards his mouth.

Charles gasped at the touch, eyes shutting tight. “We cannot do this here. We can’t—”

*Here*, he said. Meaning there was somewhere this *could* happen. Warren meant to find that place and tie Charles down, never to leave him again. He took a step closer, and Charles stepped back. They continued their dance, Warren’s smile spreading. “We need to talk—”

“We *don’t* need to talk.” Charles glanced over his shoulder, always afraid someone was watching them, judging them. As if two old friends couldn’t have a conversation in the garden of the parsonage without raising suspicions. “We don’t need to do anything,” Charles added. “I cannot be here for you. I can’t—I’m here for my uncle.”

“How long will you stay?” he murmured. “Tell me how long my heart gets to beat this time.”

“I’m not—*damn* it—” Charles groaned, spinning away. He crossed around the corner of the parsonage, flinging open the door to the old potting shed. It was a narrow, flimsy structure, home to little more than a roughhewn worktable and the curate’s supply of gardening tools. One dirty window with a broken pane let in the morning light.

Warren was well familiar with this place. This wasn’t the first time he’d followed behind Charles to sneak away. He snapped the door shut, pulling Charles to him with both hands.

Charles’s hands shot up to press against his chest. He shoved at him. “Get off me.”

But Warren held fast, his hands banded around Charles's arms.

"Don't fucking touch me," Charles cried, slapping at him.

"We're going to talk if I have to take that scarf around your neck and tie you to the table," he growled.

"Don't be a brute. Let me go!" His gloved fingers curled into fists as he gripped the lapels of Warren's coat, pushing at him even as he pulled him closer. "We can't," he said on a breath. "Warren, *please*—"

Warren wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him closer. With his other hand, he tugged down on Charles's thickly wrapped scarf, exposing those perfect, bowed lips. They were parted, his warm breath escaping in a little cloud.

Warren's cock was thickening, desperate to feel this man's closeness. The heat of his gentle touch. The glide of that clever tongue, swallowing him deep. After three long years, he was all but feral with need. He groaned, lowering his face, eager to taste that perfect mouth.

"I can't," Charles panted, still pushing at his chest. Useless. Warren was a rooted tree. "We can't—"

There was a slight whimper in his voice now. Charles was holding on so tightly to that goddamned self-control. Warren wanted to see him fray and snap. Charles had always been so wild at heart. He was all passion and fire and purpose. Warren had felt it. He'd held it with his two hands. This man seemed born to fight him, fight himself. Hell, Charles was determined to fight the whole world rather than be true to himself.

But Warren was used to handling wild things. He could be tender too. He could be patient. Charles deserved no less. In the end, all wild things crave a firm guiding hand. Warren was that firm hand.

He pressed in with his hips, suppressing a growl as he felt the hardness in Charles's pants brush against his own. He dropped his face lower, tracing his nose along Charles's jaw, breathing him in with a low groan. Damn, the man always

smelled so delicious—like a fine leather wax, buttery and sweet.

“Charles...” He put everything he felt into the word. All his unspoken pain and hope and desire. All his bone-breaking need.

Charles whimpered, his body bending to Warren’s voice and his will. This was always their way. Charles liked the fight. He liked to be overpowered, liked to be claimed. “God damn you,” he said on a sharp breath. Even as he cursed, he pressed forward with his hips, letting the hard ridge of their cocks slide against each other through their many layers of clothes.

“Fuck,” Warren panted.

Both men were all but shaking with need.

“I cannot get swept under again,” Charles murmured, eyes shut tight. “Trapped in your current. In your pull—I cannot—”

“Charles,” he said again. What else was there to be said? He unraveled the scarf from around Charles’s neck, tipping his hat off in the process. Those perfect curls flopped forward onto his forehead. Warren had to touch them. Had to feel. He raised his left hand, dragging his fingers through Charles’s curls from forehead to nape.

The effect was instant. Charles whimpered again, his hands sliding up Warren’s broad chest to wrap around his neck. “Oh, god, I lied—” He lifted on his toes, pressing himself closer.

“Lied?” Warren was too distracted by undoing the buttons of his great coat.

“I *do* hate you,” Charles replied. “I must. It’s the only way I can be free of you. It’s the only way I can leave and not feel my soul rending in two. Warren, please, try to understand—”

Warren growled deep, snatching Charles at the hips, and shoving him against the rickety table. Charles hissed, both of his gloved hands reaching behind him to grip the rough wood. It was perfect. It opened him up fully to Warren’s greedy hands.



He tugged the last button of Charles's coat loose and jerked the coat open. His left hand snatched Charles by the jaw, squeezing tight. His right went straight for the fall of Charles's breeches. In moments, both men were panting, Warren's large hand sliding inside to grip Charles's hard cock.

"Oh—*fuck*—" Charles hissed, slamming his hips back against the table, rattling the contents of the tabletop. "Fuck, your hand is cold." Even so, his cock twitched with eagerness in Warren's hand.

Warren just smiled, giving him a few slow strokes. "It'll be warm in a moment." He grazed his palm over the tip, smoothing Charles's come down his shaft.

Charles groaned, sinking back against the table. It creaked under their weight as Warren pressed forward. "God—*please* —"

Warren's teeth clenched as he swallowed his growl. "Your god isn't here, Charles. It's just me with my fist 'round your cock, claiming you in the way only I can."

Charles moaned, lifting his hips. "Warren..."

He lowered his face, his lips brushing against Charles's ear as he rasped, "Say it."

Charles bit his lip with a stifled moan, those amber eyes heated with raw need. One hand fisted tight to Warren's lapel, the other still gripped the table. They both needed this. They needed him to break.

Warren gave his shaft another tight squeeze. "*Say it.*"

"Ah—*fuck—John,*" Charles said on a breath, clutching to him with both hands now. "Johnnie." He panted the words out in time with each stroke of Warren's tight fist around his cock. "John. My John. Only mine."

Warren's hand stilled as he savored the whine that slipped from Charles's lips.

"Please, Johnnie. I'm dying—" The man was begging now. Needy and desperate. Tamed.

*He wants me.*

Relief flooded through him. Relief and that most rare and precious of feelings: hope.

Whatever horse shit lies Charles had to tell himself to leave the way he did, here in this potting shed, the truth won out. He was as ravenous for Warren as Warren would always be for him.

Warren crowed. There was nothing he loved better than to see Charles submit. He leaned down, holding Charles's gaze. "You said you hate me."

"I do," he replied, eyes flashing with raw hunger. "God, but I do—"

Warren brought his face down, smashing their lips together as he claimed all his air. Their kiss was frantic, a clashing of tongues and teeth, as both men were desperate to drown in the taste of the other. Warren hadn't bothered shaving in a few days, so his dark stubble rasped against Charles's perfectly smooth skin.

This kiss was so different than the soft, seeking one he shared with Lady Madeline. He didn't have to be gentle with Charles. He could bite, claim, dominate. Charles may be wild, but Warren was bloody feral. He bowed the man back, plunging in with his tongue, ravenous for more.

Charles fumbled to get his gloves off, then he jerked Warren's wool cap off with both hands, dragging his fingers through his long, dark hair. He tugged at his nape, earning a hiss from Warren. In retaliation, Warren bit down on his lip, sucking it between his teeth. Charles moaned, sinking deeper into Warren's embrace.

Warren broke their kiss, gasping for air. "Show me," he growled, pulling his hand out of Charles's breeches. "Show me how much you hate me."

Charles let out a heavy breath, his need etched on every line of his beautiful face. Both his hands dropped to the top of Warren's breeches. It was the work of moments to have Warren out in his hand. Then Charles was dropping to his

knees, sinking that hot mouth around his length, taking him to the back of his throat.

Warren groaned, both hands fisting tight in his curls. Charles was ravenous, sucking him deep, his head bobbing. Warren's grip tightened as he felt that exquisite coiling low in his spine. He was so close. There'd be no making this last. Not when he was so hungry for even a look at this man who was his every obsession.

His grip tightened as he took charge, moving his hips against Charles's eager mouth. "I missed you," he admitted, drawing another exquisite moan from Charles throat. The sound vibrated around his cock, and he twitched, ready to unload.

Charles popped off him, his lips glistening, as he gazed up at him through those long lashes. "I missed you too," he replied, his warm breath ghosting over the tip of Warren's cock.

A muscle ticked in Warren's jaw, but he just nodded, swallowing down his pain and anger. "Good," he said, voice gruff. "Now, get your sweet mouth back on my cock and finish me."

With a smile, Charles did as he was told. His tongue was so soft, his mouth warm and wet.

*Heaven. This is heaven.*

Warren gentled his touch, stroking his fingers through Charles's hair. "Take your cock in your hand," he muttered. "Finish with me."

Not needing to be told twice, Charles dove inside his breeches and stroked himself. Warren savored each of his sounds, his own cock twitching as he felt Charles losing control. With a few last thrusts of his hips, Warren let go, spilling himself into Charles's mouth. The sweet man at his feet drank him down with a greedy sigh, his shoulders hitching as he let loose into his own hand.

Taking a few deep breaths, Warren gently pushed Charles off his cock. With his free hand, he pulled him to his feet.

Charles swayed, eyes glassy as he took his own panting breaths. Warren slid his hand down, wrapping it around Charles's wrist. He tugged his hand free, glancing down to see the glistening come Charles tried to catch in his palm. With a groan, Warren raised his hand higher, bending to drag the tip of his tongue across the warm mess.

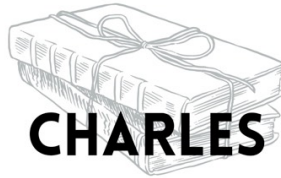
Charles hissed, fingers twitching. "Oh, Christ—"

Warren closed his eyes with a sigh, savoring the taste of his lover. His soul warmed with aching need. He always wanted more of Charles Bray. Never enough. There was no enough.

But when he opened his eyes, he saw that god forsaken look of shame on his face. Charles bit his bottom lip, glancing over his shoulder as if he expected to see a host of angels watching them, shaking their heads in disappointment. It made Warren furious. There was nothing wrong with finding pleasure in each other. But just try telling that to a curate. If the gossip was to be believed, Charles recently earned himself a promotion.

Warren fought the urge to laugh. How had he ended up right back here again? As if all the work he did to move on over the last three years had just been reduced to ash. Charles was home for one day, and Warren was already standing in a garden shed with his cock out, his hands on a vicar who still had his come glistening on his lips.

Nothing in Warren's life had ever been fucking fair. Least of all was the fact that he was in love with a man who was resolutely determined to believe loving him back was a sin.



Charles righted his clothes. His embarrassment and self-loathing warred with his desperate desire to stay.

One day. He lasted one goddamn day. The moment Warren was before him again, he'd lasted all of one minute. He was weak, pathetic. The soon-to-be-curate who just couldn't stop sucking his best friend's perfect cock.

They'd tried to keep things platonic. God, but they'd tried. Charles had to prove to himself that he could fulfill his calling, that he could resist temptation. He'd spent countless hours hearing from Uncle Selby how it was a sin, how they were damned, how the only way out was for Charles to flee from Finchley like Lot fleeing Sodom and Gomorrah.

When Charles was with Warren, everything felt...right. He breathed easier, he was happier, calmer. Christ, even his mind that always seemed to spin like a top could find a moment's rest. Warren brought him peace. In Warren's arms, he knew true contentment.

But it was impossible to live within the cage of another man's arms. And the second his hold on Warren snapped, the chaos warred around him—broken thoughts, anxiety, debilitating fear. Who was Charles without Warren to ground him? He'd spent three long years trying to figure that out, and here was his easy answer.

*Nothing.* Charles was nothing without Warren.

And yet, what could two men ever share together? What kind of future could they possibly make? That was a bigger unanswerable question. It haunted him. It drove him to endless sleepless nights, lying alone in his bed, cock hard and aching for his dearest friend.

All these thoughts churned as Warren stood inches away, watching him, claiming all his air. The man's presence was undeniable. He was all confidence and broad shoulders and that masculine, forest fresh scent that made Charles weak.

"Come to me tonight," Warren said, breaking their silence.

Charles stilled, his hands on his scarf. Now that the heat of the moment was over, he was feeling the chill in the air, as well as that anxious urge to hide himself away.

*There it is*, he thought bitterly. That goddamn broken feeling. It crept in the moment Warren pulled away. And Warren always pulled away first—with his words, his actions. He was always keeping Charles at arms-length.

*Can you really blame him?*

He shrugged himself into his scarf, not replying to Warren or the voice.

"Charles," Warren said again.

He shook his head, biting his bottom lip to keep from speaking.

Warren reached forward, brushing his calloused thumb over his mouth. "Don't do that," he growled.

The sound pierced Charles in the chest and made his cock twitch with eagerness. He loved the way Warren handled him, always giving him orders and expecting them to be obeyed. He glanced up, meeting Warren's gaze.

"Come to me," Warren said again.

Charles swallowed, slipping on his gloves last. Their moment was over. Reality was creeping in with every second Charles stood not in Warren's arms. "I'm late," he muttered. "I—the duke is waiting."

Warren's dark eyes burrowed down to the heart of him, seeing him like no other person ever had. Slowly, he stepped back.

*Yes, please god, pull away. Leave me to my misery.*

Warren jerked the door open. "Well, we can't keep His Grace waiting. Can we?"



CHARLES FOLLOWED the footman down the long hall towards the door he knew led into the duke's office. He'd been here once or twice before for the odd thing—tagging along with Uncle Selby on a house call, borrowing a book from the late duke.

Well, not George. How did one refer to a duke who was no longer a duke? James was His Grace now. Charles supposed that dropped George down to Lord George. Perhaps he was still a viscount or a baronet. Charles made it a point to ask.

The footman opened the door, gesturing him inside.

"Bray, thank you for coming," James called from behind his desk.

"Good morning, Your Grace," he said, offering a perfunctory head tilt.

"None of that," James muttered, his eyes on a piece of parchment as he finished off something. Setting the quill aside, he glanced up again. Charles tried to stand up a little taller under his sudden scrutiny.

James was a handsome man. He had the same energy as Warren—all confidence and steely purpose. But the duke lived the life of an aristocrat. No garish scars marred his face. And the only callouses on his hands came from long years of riding on the hunt and drafting important letters of business. It felt strange to stand before him now, remembering him as a lad of fifteen who threw walnuts and broke fences by recklessly jumping his father's horses.

As if the duke was thinking the same thoughts, he smiled. “We grew up together, Bray. Just a pair of boys from Finchley. But look at us now.” He gestured at the empty chair across from him.

“You and Mr. Burke were always quite a few years older,” Charles replied, sitting in the offered chair. “David was closer in age to yourself, I believe.”

“Right. And how is David? Where is he now? India?”

“Seven years,” Charles replied. “The late duke paid for his officer’s commission.”

“I remember.” James nodded toward the door.

Charles glanced over his shoulder to see a footman approaching with a tray. Charles reached for a cup of tea with a murmur of thanks.

“And do you keep in touch?” said James, reaching for his own cup.

“We were never all that close,” he admitted. “He keeps in touch with my uncle enough to satisfy us both.”

“I know the feeling,” James replied. “If my brother wasn’t so fond of my wife, I’d never know if he was dead or alive. She’s the only one who can get a letter out of him. My mother has quite given up trying.”

“Where is he now, sir?”

James sighed, setting his tea aside. “France maybe...or Switzerland. Rosalie would know best, but even she only hears from him once a quarter if she’s lucky.”

They settled into a quiet as Charles waited for the duke to state his purpose.

“I’m sorry about last night,” James said at last.

“Wholly unnecessary—”

“It *is* necessary,” James replied. “Burke was being...well, Burke.”



Charles grinned. "I'm aware of his tendencies. Please believe me when I say I was not offended. Burke will have to try harder than that to put me off."

"Good. Because I would hate for you to feel unwelcome here," James replied. "In fact, that's what I wanted to speak to you about."

Charles sat forward, his tea forgotten.

"You said last night you've been offered a new position. Vicar of Bredbury, was it?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

James nodded, his brows narrowing in determination. "What if I could offer you a different position?"

"A different position?"

"Aye. We both know your uncle's current state of health. He's not fit enough to fulfill his duties. I've been lenient, and I will continue to be so," he added gently. "Hoxley is covering most of your uncle's sermons, but that's not all a curate's responsibilities. And now with the fire in Carrington, he's needed there more than ever."

Charles waited, heart in his throat.

"I'm hoping you might be interested in taking over your uncle's position," James said at last. "We can ease him into retirement now, and you can take over. I know Finchley is nothing near so grand as Bredbury," he added. "But this is your home, Bray. You are known here. You're respected here. That matters in your line of work. People show loyalty to insiders."

Charles felt like his heart might race out of his chest. Return to Finchley permanently? Become curate? Live in his uncle's house?

His uncle.

*Goddamn it.*

The only thing Uncle Selby had ever asked of him in the last fifteen years was that he leave and not come back. He was

trying to protect Charles. And it helped, in a way, removing the choice. So long as Warren was in Finchley, he was a threat to Charles. A millstone. A temptation. Selby's words, not Charles's. Would he really risk staying now? Knowing it took Warren all of one minute to break his resolve and have him on his knees?

"I cannot accept, sir." The words were out of his mouth before he realized he'd said them.

James narrowed his eyes at him. "Perhaps take some time to consider—"

"I don't need time," he replied, getting to his feet. No, this wasn't happening. This couldn't happen. Charles couldn't accept a position to head the church in a town where Warren lived, where Warren would always be within easy reach.

The duke didn't bother hiding his disappointment. "Can I dare ask why?"

Charles fidgeted, his gaze darting for the door. He'd not been excused. It was unpardonably rude that he was standing in the duke's presence. "I...Bredbury is offering me a vicarage, sir. Here in Finchley, I would remain a curate. It is not a sound career move. Surely, you understand."

*There, good. That was a reasonable excuse. Perfectly acceptable.*

"That's easily remedied," James replied. "A note from me sent to the archbishop with an offer of sponsorship would fix it. He won't deny my request. Not if I'm offering to foot the bill. I should have done it already," he added. "It's a shame we won't manage it in time for your uncle to claim the title."

*Well, shit.*

His mind spun as he tried to come up with a new and better reason, even as his heart sang with excitement. He didn't want to go to Bredbury. He was only going because the position was offered. Charles was far happier here in the south. He loved the pastoral nature of the southern English countryside. The slow living, the peace and quiet. And he loved Finchley. He wanted to stay.

But that was impossible...not unless he could somehow convince Warren to leave.

The duke waited for his response.

He cleared his throat. "That is a very generous offer, sir. I'm not sure I'm deserving..."

"You're a good man, Bray," James replied. "And I like good men. I need them around me. Now that I'm the duke, I have a vision for the future. I'm trying to surround myself with people who I can trust, people I can share this vision with, people who have the forward motion to pull *with* me, rather than against me. I see the same visionary thinking in you, Bray."

How was it possible that Charles now felt even worse? The duke was being far too generous. If he knew the truth, if he knew *why* Charles had to refuse him, Charles would lose his good favor forever. He shifted in his chair. "I thank you, sir."

James waited for him to say more, his mouth tipping into a deeper frown. "You thank me...but your answer is still no? I'm offering to make you a vicar here in Finchley. I'm asking you to serve with me for the good of the community that raised us both...and you refuse?"

Charles wanted to be anywhere else. He wanted to be *anyone* else. "I'm sorry, Your Grace."

James sighed, getting to his feet. "We will say no more about it now. Take some time to think about the offer. Perhaps my timing was off. You have enough on your plate with Selby. We can discuss this again soon."

"I'm so grateful to you, James. Truly, I—" He stuttered over himself. "I'm sorry, Norland—I didn't—I meant 'Your Grace'—"

"Please." James held up a hand. "Call me James. I never stand on ceremony with friends. In fact, I prefer it."

*Oh, goddamn it.*

Now he was calling Charles a friend. Charles fought the urge to groan with self-loathing.

“And whatever you decide, we will not fall out over this,” James added. “But take some time. Perhaps discuss it with your uncle. Seek his counsel.”

Mentioning Uncle Selby brought Charles to his senses. “Oh, that reminds me, sir. He’s asked that I assist with the families unhomed by the fire. He’d like me to take round some baskets. He said that perhaps the duchess might wish to assist...”

“Yes, I daresay she will,” James replied, following him around the desk towards the door. “Perhaps, given Her Grace’s current condition, would you consent to Lady Madeline’s help instead?”

Charles was still reeling from the duke’s offer. Hell, he was still reeling from Warren. Less than an hour ago he was on his knees for the man. Now here was the Duke of Norland, casually discussing the delivery of baskets. “I—of course, Your Grace.”

“Tell Mrs. Davies what you need, and she’ll see it done,” James replied.

The footman already had the door open, standing back to let Charles pass through.

“I *will* think about the offer,” Charles said, turning in the doorway. “I’m...things have been chaotic for me of late. But I’m that grateful that you would seek me out for this opportunity.”

James gave him a piercing look, as if he could peel back the layers and see down to the heart of him. Christ, it was unnerving. Warren had just the same uncanny ability to see him with more than eyes. Uncle Selby too. It made Charles feel like an open book—or more like a closed book forcibly opened by a pair of strong hands.

“My door is always open, Charles,” said James. “If you need someone to talk to...if you need a friend. I’ll ask you to keep an open mind and just mull it over. Besides, I have a feeling my offer will not be the last you receive.”

On that curious note, he gave Charles a nod, dismissing him.



“*T*his is ridiculous,” Madeline rasped.

“Shush.” Rosalie craned her neck, peeking around the corner of the hall leading to the duke’s office. “We need to time this just right.”

Madeline fought the urge to groan. Rosalie said Burke was the one who liked an intrigue, but here she was hiding in her own house, trying to catch poor Mr. Bray unaware.

Rosalie had stripped out of her heavy outer clothes, but she insisted Madeline keep hers on, so Madeline stood at the duchess’s side wearing her thick fur-trimmed cape over a winter weight pelisse. The boots on her feet were Rosalie’s and were easily two sizes too big. But that was all part of Rosalie’s ridiculous plan.

The door at the end of the hall opened and Rosalie hissed, “Get ready.”

Madeline sighed, knowing there’d be no stopping her. They heard the deep, muffled voices of James and Mr. Bray, and then Mr. Bray was on the move, being led down the hall by the tall footman.

“Now,” Rosalie murmured, giving Madeline’s arm a tug. She swept forward, her arm looped with Madeline’s.

Madeline had no choice but to let herself be dragged into this flimsy charade.

Rosalie called out with a bright smile, feigning surprise, “Oh, good morning, Mr. Bray.”

“Good morning, Your Grace,” he replied with a slight bow. “Lady Madeline.”

“I trust you had a productive meeting with my husband?”

“I did, Your Grace.”

His tone was polite, but Madeline didn't miss the tense set of his shoulders or the veiled look in his eyes. He was upset. He was masking it well, but Madeline lived a life of quietly watching others and knew well the signs of a hastily crafted mask.

Madeline took in the simple cut of his morning clothes—tan breeches and boots, a burgundy wool coat with a brown waistcoat. The knot of his cravat sat a bit askew. But he was still handsome. He wasn't a tall man, nearly the same height as Rosalie, but that still made him a few inches taller than Madeline. It seemed everyone towered over her.

He gave her a warm smile, his amber eyes catching the bright light through the open window. “His Grace gave me leave to mention to you that I will be taking baskets ‘round to the families affected by the Carrington fire. He thought perhaps you'd be willing to assist me, Your Grace. I was hoping to get it done tomorrow before the snows set in.”

“Oh, that's a wonderful idea,” Rosalie replied. “I would be happy to help. Perhaps Madeline could join us as we deliver them. You'd like that, wouldn't you, dear?” she said, nudging Madeline.

Before Madeline could reply, Mr. Bray cleared his throat. “Actually, His Grace already suggested that Lady Madeline be the one to assist me given your...condition,” he finished with a faint blush. He very pointedly avoided looking at her stomach.

Rosalie stilled, her smile slipping. “Did he now? So, His Grace believes I am incapable of delivering baskets to my own tenants? That is beyond my skill level?”

“I...he didn't say it quite like that, no,” said Mr. Bray.

“Because I'll have you know I am perfectly capable—”

“It’s fine,” Madeline soothed, breaking her silence at last. “Rosalie, I am happy to go in your stead. Please, let me go.”

“I am not an invalid,” the duchess huffed. “Honestly, with the way they all carry on, you’d think I was missing limbs or within an inch of death. I’m simply having a baby. Every woman has been where I am now and has managed to deliver baskets just fine.”

“He cares for your comfort,” Madeline replied. “It is a loving gesture. Do not fault him for it.”

Mr. Bray gave her a curious look before saying, “I quite agree. And I would be happy to have your company, Lady Madeline.”

As if she suddenly remembered her plan, Rosalie snapped out of her irritation, turning to Mr. Bray. “Oh, perhaps you can do us a favor now,” she cooed.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mr. Bray replied, turning his gaze to her.

Rosalie smiled wider. “If you’re walking back into Finchley, I’ll ask you to take Madeline’s arm and escort her to the tailor’s shop.”

He glanced back at her, and Madeline felt sure that he would somehow see through this ruse. “But of course,” he replied. “I am also happy to go in her stead if there is something that must be delivered or retrieved. The wind is quite sharp this morning.”

“Nonsense,” Rosalie replied. “Madeline loves a brisk morning walk, and we’ve bundled her up nice and warm.”

This was a lie. Madeline detested long walks, especially while wearing a pair of shoes that didn’t fit. She’d also already ventured out of doors once this morning and knew she was, in fact, *not* bundled up nice and warm. But she said nothing.

“If you go now, Madeline, I’m sure luncheon will be ready by the time you return,” said Rosalie. “I’ll set Mrs. Davies to making the baskets. Mr. Bray, I expect you back here tonight for dinner, and we’ll arrange all the plans for delivery.”



Clearly pleased that her plan was set so perfectly in motion, the duchess gave Mr. Bray a nod before leaning in to murmur in Madeline's ear, "Just be yourself." Then she turned and left, leaving Madeline alone with the gentleman who the whole house had decided would be her future husband.

*Be myself. Right...easy.*



Madeline waited for Mr. Bray in the grand entry hall, watching as a footman helped him don his great coat, hat, and scarf. She did a slight turn, taking in the magnanimity of the space. There was a sweeping, triple staircase that led up to the top floor of the house. Art collected by seven generations of Corbin's adorned the walls, stretching up to the domed ceiling.

With her head craned back, she didn't notice at first that Mr. Bray was ready and waiting for her. "Shall we?" he said, gesturing towards the door.

Madeline nodded, flipping up the hood of Rosalie's old cape, feeling the tickle of the silver rabbit fur under her chin. Geoffrey, the same footman from the night before, opened the door, ushering them out into the bitter cold. As she stepped through the door, she felt Mr. Bray's hand settle at the small of her back. It was a simple gesture, but it had her body going stiff. Not for the first time, she was reacting to his closeness.

In all the husband-hunting discussions, Madeline had left out one critical detail. It was a truth she'd worked hard to conceal, even from herself. It was too difficult to admit this truth, not when it would most likely end in further disappoint. But it was getting harder to deny the fact that Madeline harbored a secret fondness for Mr. Bray.

They first met in this house during that fateful summer she spent being forced to court George Corbin. That was the same summer she met Rosalie. Madeline had never fallen so easy

into conversation with a man as she had Mr. Bray. He had such a calming manner, and she appreciated the way he seemed to listen with his whole body. They talked of books and music. He made no secret of his love for gothic romance. Rosalie had even darted to the library after dinner, determined to pick up a book that Madeline could give to him.

Did he remember her the way she remembered him? Did he ever think of her? It was dangerous to consider him for this proposition. Life would be so much easier if she picked a man to whom she had no attachments. A man the fickle *ton* would more readily accept.

*But attachments can feel so good*, came the quiet voice in her head. She blushed, knowing it wasn't the cold, as her mind filled with the memories of another man. She remembered how Mr. Warren had teased her. He challenged her and bullied her and made her laugh all at once. He was so completely different from the kind, unassuming Mr. Bray.

The strange truth was that she felt at ease with Warren too, disarmed by his wholly unassuming manner. He didn't care for social rules and conventions. He lived his life out loud, leaping off hay carts and dragging damsels onto his lap.

And his *kiss*, so claiming and fierce. She'd felt it through her whole body. It echoed now, leaving her tingling. It was all she could do not to raise her fingers to her lips and brush them over the ghost of his kiss.

She glanced to her left, using the brim of her hat as a shield as she took in Mr. Bray's stately profile. Unlike Mr. Warren, the kind curate *did* follow society's rules. He knew all the right words, the genteel looks. Certainly, *he* would never drag her onto his lap or kiss her senseless behind a hay cart. He would court her like they do in poetry—walks through a twilight garden, whispered words in a crowded room.

Why did the thought not stir her? She didn't want polite drawing room chatter. She didn't want Mr. Bray's hand to brush her shoulder in a dance. She'd had enough of that style of courting to last three lifetimes. And where had it gotten her? Nowhere.

Maybe Mr. Warren had the right idea. He saw what he wanted, and he took it. Could Madeline ever dare be so bold? She glanced over again. What might Mr. Bray's kisses feel like? Would he be kind and gentlemanly, or would he seek to ravage and claim like the bold gamekeeper? His hands at least must surely be softer—

“Lord, how I would love to know your thoughts at this moment.”

She blinked. “I’m sorry?”

Mr. Bray laughed, his walking stick clicking against the fine gravel of the drive. “I asked what business brings you to Finchley,” he replied. “And when you did not answer, I asked if the cold had frozen your ears.”

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Bray,” she stammered. “I was...”

“Distracted,” he replied with another soft laugh. “Enjoyably so from the fine blush on your cheeks...or perhaps that is merely the cold.”

“It is the cold,” she said quickly.

“I remember you, you know,” he went on. “We met at the Michaelmas Ball, did we not? It was a few years ago now.”

“Yes.” She was fighting to control the racing of her heart, her mind still flashing to thoughts of Mr. Bray kissing her as soundly as the gamekeeper.

“You are a fan of Ann Radcliffe, if I remember.”

Literature! Thank heavens for easy distractions. She let out a breath, forcing all thoughts of kissing from her head. “Yes, sir.”

“And have you read *The Castle of Wolfenbach*?”

“I have, sir,” she replied. “Though, I preferred *The Orphan of the Rhine*. And my new love is poetry...Shelley and Coleridge come to mind.”

“Ah, yes. ‘In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree,’” he recited. “Coleridge’s recent work is unmatched, you’re quite right. I wish I could remember more.”

Madeline chewed her lip before reciting softly, “Where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea.”

He smiled. “That’s very good. I was hoping the first line might be enough to impress you.”

She couldn’t help but lean away, too nervous at feeling him so close. The last time she let a man get close, she found herself wrapped around him like bark on a tree. Heavens, there’s a reason she ought to be chaperoned. She cleared her throat. “Do you memorize poems to impress people then? What if I said my favorite poet was Lord Byron?”

Mr. Bray’s smile widened. “Then I would say, ‘She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies.’”

“And how does it go on, sir?”

“I told you, I only memorize the first lines,” he replied. “That is enough to impress most people. But I am sure Lady Madeline Blaire can finish it for me,” he added, leaning his face close enough that his warm breath ghosted over her cheek.

She pursed her lips, torn between wanting to play the game and being careful not to appear too well-versed. Her mother’s voice rattled in her head. *Men do not like a well-read wife, Madeline. Put that book down and do something useful!*

Luckily for Madeline, her mother wasn’t here. She cleared her throat. “I believe it goes on to say, ‘And all that’s best of dark and bright meet in the aspect of her eyes.’”

Mr. Bray positively beamed at her. “I’m sure you must be right.” They walked quietly for a few yards before he added, “I like this game. Shall we do a little Shelley next?”

“I—Mr. Bray, can I ask...” She had to just get this done. “Would you consider me a friend?”

He paused in his steps, glancing down at her. “Pardon?”

He didn’t understand her. How could he? She spoke the words in one muttered exhale. She wrapped her arms tighter

around herself, pulling the edges of her cape close. "I...um... are we friends?"

He was quiet for a moment. "Well, our acquaintance has been a short one," he replied honestly. "But anyone who has read as widely as you must surely be considered a friend worth having."

She glanced around. They hadn't quite reached the edge of the manicured lawn. Just beyond the trees sat the little village of Finchley. A gazebo sat at the tree line offering a place to rest in the heat of summer. Madeline had sat there many times before with Rosalie or the Swindon sisters. Now it was empty, slicked with a thin layer of frost.

"Can I put something to you, Mr. Bray...as a friend?"

"Of course," he replied. "Though, if we are friends, I wish you'd call me Charles. If a duke lets me call him James, it feels only right that you should enjoy the same right."

Her mind rushed with memories of two nights ago, when Mr. Warren so forcefully shut her down, determined that she not use his Christian name. Why were men so mercurial? How was she supposed to make sense of them when each one was so very different?

But they were friends. Charles Bray was her friend. Surely, that had to be a better start than marrying the likes of Lord Everton. Madeline could do this. She could marry a friend. Whatever else came of the match, they could begin there.

*Oh god.*

Was she doing this now?

She glanced around. Surely, she couldn't do it *here*. Not out in the open in the middle of the road. No, she needed privacy. No wandering eyes. No listening ears. Heavens, she could just imagine Rosalie standing at the window watching her, fingers crossed in anticipation.

Before he could stop her, Madeline veered off the manicured path, marching towards the Grecian gazebo.

“Uhh...Lady Madeline?” he called, following after her. “What are you doing? We need to get you into the village before you freeze to solid ice.”

She marched right up the marble steps, not pausing until she reached the opposite edge of the dais, her arms wrapped tightly around her inside her wooly cape. She could scarcely catch her breath. There had to be a right way to do this. How was a lady expected to propose to a gentleman?

Oh god—was she proposing to him right now? No, Rosalie said to *talk*. Only talk. But what good was talking when she had such a limited window of opportunity?

“Lady Madeline, are you unwell?” he called after her.

She turned sharply around, heart thundering in her chest, lips parted on a breath as she took in his startled gaze. He was so handsome—his caramel curls flipping out beneath the brim of his hat, his amber eyes wide with concern.

Not waiting a second longer, she blurted out, “Mr. Bray, will you marry me?”



Charles nearly stumbled up the last step of the gazebo, his eyes wide as he took in the face of the beautiful young lady standing before him. Lady Madeline looked like an ethereal being, her delicate features framed by her fur-lined cape dyed deepest blue. It brought out the color in her eyes... eyes that were now wide and trained on him, waiting expectantly for him to speak.

He gripped tighter to the top of his walking stick. “Madeline, I... what did you say?” He had to be certain.

“I asked you to marry me,” she repeated.

*Fucking hell.* He glanced over his shoulder, sure this must be some prank. Any moment Burke would leap from the bushes and smack the hat off his head. “My Lady, you are too generous—”

“Wait,” she murmured, raising a shaking hand with tears in her eyes. “Please—before you turn me down—before you—just let me say this...”

He waited for her to speak.

She opened her mouth once, twice, but no words came out. All the while, her cheeks grew impossibly pink. She was so nervous she was shaking. He stepped forward on instinct, readying for her imminent collapse. She shied away from him, backing up until she ran into a marble column. She braced against it, eyes wide like an animal caught in a trap.



But that didn't make sense, for it was *she* who sprung this snare on *him*. Perhaps he ought to be clinging to a pillar too.

“Lady Madeline—”

“I have a fortune,” she blurted, biting her lip as soon as the words were spoken. “I...just inherited it.”

He wasn't sure how he was meant to respond. “Oh...well, that is...congratulations.”

She shook her head with a little groan. “I'm sorry, I'm doing this all wrong. I never seem to know the right words to say. I think them, but I cannot get them to come out in the right order.”

He nodded, knowing full well her meaning. He too suffered from a nervous disposition. Serving in the clergy had all but cured it, for his job forced him to make public sermons. He had a sudden image of Madeline standing at the pulpit, toppling over in a fainting fit.

“Take your time,” he said, trying to offer her a reassuring smile.

“My great aunt left me a fortune in her will,” she explained. “But to claim it, I must be married. Mr. Bray, I must marry by year's end. If you're willing, I'd like to marry you.”

He shifted uncomfortably, feeling the bitter chill biting through his many layers. “Lady Madeline, you are too generous,” he began again, but she held up a hand.

“Wait—I have a list, sir.” She pulled out a crumpled paper from the pocket of her pelisse, holding it out towards him.

Too curious by half, Charles crossed the space separating them. He took the paper, not missing the way she all but flinched away from him. He glanced down at the scrap of parchment. It was stained heavily at the top by spilled ink. He let his eye quickly scan the page:

***Kind***

***No leeches***

***No gamblers***

*Dowry-chasers acceptable*

*No intimacy*

*Affairs should be kept quiet*

*No renegotiating for new terms*

Charles pursed his lips, reading through the list again. “What is this?”

“A set of requirements for my future husband,” she replied on a breath.

He glanced down at it again. “No leeches?”

“Yes...my cousin thought it a good idea. Patrick—he thought—well, *we* thought—that is to say, I can’t have a man who would take too much from me,” she replied, talking fast. “You know...a man who must always demand more.”

He looked at the list again. “Why does it say ‘no intimacy,’ and yet the next line talks of affairs?” She looked truly flustered now, so he answered for her. “I suppose you mean that you want a husband in name only. A man you will not share intimacies with. Does this mean you would expect me to look the other way as you court other men?”

“Mr. Bray, I—” But she was too flustered to do more than shake her head.

He clutched the paper tight between his gloved fingers. “Oh god...is *that* what was happening last night with Burke’s absurd line of questioning? Was he vetting me for this list?” He shook the paper in his fist, unable to contain his scowl.

“Burke thought he was helping me,” Madeline murmured. “I didn’t know how to stop him once he started,” she added with a helpless shrug.

“And the duchess? She’s in on this too, I imagine.” He huffed a dry laugh. “What am I saying? Of course, she is. Why else would she show me such polite attention?”

“She likes you, Mr. Bray,” the lady said, inching forward. “They all do.”

He raised a brow. “And you, Lady Madeline? You hardly know me, and yet you would make me this offer? How can you be sure I am not a gambler or a leech?”

“You’re not,” she replied softly. “You are kind and considerate, Mr. Bray. Loyal to your family, to your uncle. And you’re not afraid of hard work,” she added. “You’ve only just arrived, and yet you’ve already taken it upon yourself to have baskets made for all the families caught up in the fire, and you mean to deliver them in person.”

“That’s my job,” he replied. He didn’t know why he was feeling so defensive.

“Please, Mr. Bray—I—this wouldn’t have to be a proper marriage,” said Madeline, stumbling over her words. “What I mean to say is that this could be a beneficial arrangement for us both. If you agree to marry me, I can compensate you. And if it be your wish, we need never live as husband and wife. I would never...your life could be your own. You could go to Bredbury and perform your duties as vicar. I could remain in Town at Leary House. I wouldn’t have to inconvenience you or impose in any way.”

Now he was the one fighting a blush. Of course, she didn’t want *him*. She wanted a man who was malleable. A man she wouldn’t have to fight with for dominance in a marriage. Christ, did even meek Lady Madeline Blaire see through him so easily? Warren had always been able to dominate him, bending him to his iron will.

That had to be her reason, for it was impossible to consider that this beautiful young lady would ever show any genuine interest in him. And she was right to dismiss him out of hand. His guilt swarmed him as he considered how he’d spent his morning. Hell, he still had the scent of Warren clinging to his skin. What would Madeline think if she knew his secrets? How fast would she rescind her offer?

“You can’t possibly want to marry me,” he said. “You deserve someone better. Someone more suited to your station. Surely there is a lord—”

He fell quiet as she spun away, unable to contain her sob.

*Fucking hell, Charles. Now you've made her cry.*

He stepped forward, reaching for her. “Madeline, I’m sorry.” He put his hand on her shoulder and she tensed. “You surprised me,” he murmured, stepping in behind her, his voice low. “I am not a polished gentleman, armed with the right words. I...no lady has ever expressed such an interest in me. Any interest really,” he added. “I hardly know what to think, let alone say. I don’t...I can’t understand it.”

Standing so close to her, he could smell faint floral notes. Roses? Perhaps it was her hair, or the soap of her clothes. It was so different from the heavy spiciness of Warren, but by no means unpleasant. In fact, he found himself leaning closer.

“Madeline, please speak to me.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Please don’t shut me out. I just want to understand.”

She spun around, her chest brushing against his. He was standing too close, and she had nowhere to go in this small space. He peered down into those pale blue eyes, her face framed by that handsome fur cape. She looked like a princess or a frost fae. Lady Madeline Blaire was a viscount’s daughter, a lady worth a fortune. She was best friends with a duchess. She was completely and utterly out of his sphere.

And yet she was proposing to him. She wanted to marry him.

No, she wanted to marry *someone*. Charles was just conveniently available.

He’d never really thought of marrying before. He certainly had nothing to recommend him—no money, no name, certainly no title. Sure, at a few of his postings eager mamas had thrust their daughters under his nose, hoping to catch his eye. But he’d never been interested in adding the complication of a wife and children to his life. He saw himself like Uncle Selby, married to his work, quietly doing good for the community.

Madeline’s sort may view marriage only as a business arrangement, the clever moving of pieces on a chess board. But Charles was a simpler man. In truth, he was a hopeless

romantic. The idea of marrying a person and never earning a tender touch was odious to him. It was unthinkable.

He lowered his gaze to look at her. Her beauty was arresting, so sweet and softly feminine. Nothing like the hard edges and raw masculinity Warren exuded.

She glanced up at him through her long lashes. "Please... tell me what you're thinking," she murmured.

He sighed, raising a gloved hand to brush down one of her flyaway blonde curls. "I suppose I'm thinking...why me?"

She was quiet for a moment before she replied. "Because you will not hurt me."

Her words were spoken so softly, so fragile in their honesty. His gaze narrowed on her as his heart raced. "And some other man may? Is that what you fear, Madeline? You fear marrying a man who will take from you and use you and hurt you?"

A tear slipped down her cheek and his heart broke in two. She bit her lip, dropping her gaze to his cravat before saying, "I am not the sort of lady that men fall in love with, sir. I am shy and awkward. I am quiet. I keep to myself. Men see me and they see weakness. They see someone they can control... someone they can bully."

She said the word with such clear pain in her voice. What harms had been done to this fragile flower? Charles found himself itching with irritation, desperate to know who had hurt her. He would take her list of names and exact vengeance on her behalf. He wanted to wrap her in his arms. He wanted to soothe her and pet her and keep her safe.

"To marry a man in this society is to become his property. In the eyes of the laws of England, I would belong to him." She raised her gaze, another tear slipping down her cheek. It was all he could do not to raise his hand and wipe it away. "If I must belong to a man in order to claim my freedom, I need him to be the sort of man who will not bully me. And I am so frightened, Charles," she added, her voice breaking on his

name. “I am so terribly afraid. Would you hurt me? Would you take what I did not want to give?”

He pressed forward, cupping her face. “Madeline, *no*,” he said with desperate feeling, brushing at her tears with his thumbs. “Never. I would *never* harm you. My sweet girl, how could you think so?”

She raised her hands, wrapping them around his wrists, her body wracked with sobs. She was clinging to him, and he was lost to her. This precious thing. She needed protecting, cherishing. Before he knew it, he was lowering his face to hers, kissing the wet spot on her cheek.

She stilled, her hands tight around his wrists.

He was gentle, his hands cupping her jaw as he kissed her other cheek, her tears wet and salty on his lips. She leaned into him, tipping her chin up, eyes closed behind wet lashes.

Oh god—did she—was it possible? Did she want him to kiss her?

This was madness. He should stop. He should *run*. She was a lady and he a gentleman and this was not done. So why wasn't that stopping him? Why was he pulling off his glove?

She stiffened, but she didn't pull away. He brushed her frozen cheek with his bare thumb, his fingertips feeling the flaxen softness of her golden curls.

“I would never harm you, Madeline,” he murmured. “You are safe with me. Always.”

His heart hammered in his chest. He'd never been so close to a woman. She smelled divine, all flowers and feminine sweetness. Why wasn't she pulling away?

He brushed his thumb over her lips, and they parted on a sharp breath. Her eyes went impossibly wide, head tilting back. He said the words sitting heavy in his heart. “You say you cannot be loved, but you are wrong. You are all sweetness and purity. How could any man look at you and not see your beauty?”

“Charles,” she said on a breath, her pink lips parted as she held his gaze.

“Do you really think I could take you for my wife and promptly turn the other way? You think I could abandon you? Leave you to the wolves in London whilst I go on my merry way north? Impossible.”

Her breath caught in her throat.

He was ensnared by her beauty, by the innocence in her hopeful look. “There would be no turning away from a woman as beautiful as you. If you ever become my wife, Madeline Blaire, you would be *mine*.”

Abandoning all rational thought, he gave in to the teasing tilt of her chin and pressed his lips to hers. He’d never kissed a woman before. He’d never kissed anyone but Warren. The sensation was so wholly different. In Warren’s arms, he felt small and breakable. It was Warren who dominated. Warren pressed and opened, guiding him towards his pleasure.

Now here he stood, caressing the line of Madeline’s jaw, luxuriating in the gentle press of her soft lips. She was shaking in his arms, but she still wasn’t pulling away. She made a sighing sound of surprise in her throat, then she was up on her toes, kissing him back.

He groaned, loving the feel of her hands coming up to brace at his elbows. He stroked her cheeks, tilting his face to deepen their kiss. Just as he felt her lips part, timidly seeking more, something heavy clamped down on his shoulder, jerking him backwards.

“Get the hell off of her!”



Madeline gasped, pressing back as she took in the domineering presence of Mr. Warren. He was standing behind Charles, one gloved hand on his shoulder. He jerked the gentleman back, his dark eyes blazing with intensity. The scar on his cheek crinkled as he scowled.

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?” he growled. “Do you have any idea who she is?”

Madeline’s heart fluttered wildly. This was a disaster. How had she gone from suffering through the attentions of men for the last three years, never having her head turned by anyone, to being so besotted she was kissing two men in the span of the same day?

The same two men who now stood before her, glaring at each other.

“I know who she is,” said Charles, jerking himself loose of Warren’s grip.

“You should return to the house,” Warren said, now staring daggers at her.

Desperate to flee, Madeline tried to dart around Charles, but he reached out a hand and snagged her arm.

“We need to finish our conversation,” he urged, voice low.

*Oh, god—the conversation where I asked him to marry me!*



“The conversation *is* finished,” Warren snapped. “The lady is returning to the great house where she belongs. I will take her myself.” He reached around Charles, tugging on Madeline’s arm. His grip was firm as stone. There’d be no escaping him. He jerked her to his side, turning her away from Charles.

Before she could protest, she could feel Charles at her back. “There’s no need to manhandle her. The lady is in my charge. I’m to bring her into Finchley—”

“Your charge is finished. Go home, Charles.”

Madeline sucked in a sharp breath, looking between the men. “You know each other,” she murmured, breaking her silence.

Dark intensity simmered off Warren. He stood with her in his grip, like a dragon guarding a clutch of eggs. Did that make Charles the daring knight? It was an odd picture for a man who was gentle and kind and liked games of poetry recitation. But before Warren’s fiery stare, he wasn’t backing down.

They looked to be about the same age, though Warren was so much more imposing in form, his voice deeper, his presence more menacing. Her only solace came from the fact that none of his current anger was directed at her. She felt safe with his hand on her. In fact, she found herself fighting the urge to lean into his touch.

She was most definitely going mad. Rosalie would have to call for Doctor Rivers, for Madeline was surely possessed by some corrupting occult force. What else could explain her attraction to these men? What could explain away the fact that she’d kissed *both* of them?

And Warren knew her shame. He was the only one besides herself who knew about both kisses. Was he angry? Gentlemen often got jealous. It was a source of pride for men to be able to lay sole claim to a lady’s affections. Did he want to claim her affections? Surely not. He was just teasing her—

“Madeline, you don’t have to go with him,” Charles said gently.

“The lady is clearly not safe with you,” countered Warren. “Go home, Charles, and be done with it. Just be thankful I don’t inform His Grace.”

At last, Madeline found her voice. “Oh, Mr. Warren, you wouldn’t. Please, don’t tell anyone. *Please.*” She reached out with her free hand, pressing it to his chest.

“He would deserve it,” Warren growled.

Her fingers splayed gently over his chest before she dropped her hand away. “You would risk his place in the village? His friendship with the duke? You are cruel, sir.” Taking a breath she added, “Besides, your announcement would do far more harm to *my* reputation than Mr. Bray’s. Men never suffer the same as women in these matters. So, unless you intend to drag me down too, I will beg for your silence.”

He considered her for a moment before looking over her shoulder at Charles. “Leave now, and you will both be assured of my silence.”

Charles pulled his gaze slowly from Warren, those amber eyes settling back on her as he reached out his hand. At first, she thought he expected her to take it, as if he meant to drag her away, damn the consequences! But then she saw the slip of ink-stained parchment he held pinched between his finger and thumb. Not daring to look at Warren, she took the paper and clutched it tight in her free hand.

“We will speak again soon.” With a nod, he took his leave.

Madeline watched him go. He continued on his way towards Finchley, not daring to look back. Behind her, Warren remained still and silent. After two dozen yards, Charles was lost to the turning of the path that led into the trees. The moment he was gone, Warren let go of her arm.

She rounded on him. “How *dare* you, sir. That was such a beastly thing to do, threatening Mr. Bray like that, when you

know I could lay the same charge at *your* door. One word to the duchess, and I could have you dismissed from Alcott—”

She didn't get another word out because he promptly silenced her with his mouth. This wasn't a kiss; it was a claiming. He wrapped himself around her, consuming her. Lifting her off her feet, he pressed her back against the cold marble of the column. She gasped, her arms going around his broad shoulders.

His strong thigh pressed between her legs, holding her in place as he ravaged her, replacing all the gentle presses of Charles's lips with bruising kisses. She whimpered, fighting for breath, even as she melted into him.

Just as soon as she felt recovered enough to kiss him back, he pulled away, his face a mask of pain and rage. “Charles is not yours,” he growled. “You will not marry him. Swear it to me.”

“I—don't—” She couldn't think clearly. He was still so impossibly close. His large hands were on her hips, holding her pinned against the column. She was about to agree, not even sure what she was agreeing to, but then she registered his full meaning. “What—*oh*—you heard?” Embarrassment flared as she tried to push away from him. “Were you eavesdropping, sir?”

“Don't flatter yourself,” he muttered, letting her pull away. “I work the estate, remember? It is my job to be in these woods. I heard voices and I came to investigate.”

She immediately felt the loss of his presence, his firm hands. She was reeling. From the kiss—well, *kisses*. From her conversation with Charles. Heavens, she just proposed to a man. And apparently, Warren had been listening all along!

“Aren't well-born ladies supposed to have propriety?” he snarled. “If anyone else had come along, I imagine you'd be in hot water with the duchess. She can't have her guests kissing every man in the village.”

Her cheeks burned red hot as she stammered out a retort. “I—you—you are a *beast*, sir! I never asked for your

attentions. And unless you've quite forgotten, *you* kissed *me*! Twice! What is your malady that you go around kissing young ladies wholly without provocation?"

"And what is *your* malady that you go around proposing to men below your station? Is Charles your first? Have there been others? If he says no, should Harry expect an offer next?"

"I—"

"What do you want with Charles anyway?" he pressed. "You don't want a husband, you said so yourself. You want a man you can keep as a pet. Anything with a cock will do, so long as you can cart him out for dinner parties. Are you so desperate to secure a fourth for your whist table?"

He dared to mock her? She wanted to cry...or scream... and perhaps bat him about the head with something heavy. She settled for more stammering, too distraught to string words together. "You—I don't have to explain myself—"

"If any man will do, why him? You're the daughter of a viscount. You could have anyone—"

"Ha!" She tipped her chin up in challenge towards this obstinate gamekeeper. "Is that what you think of me, sir? You think I traipse through life, kissing men left and right, keeping them as pets? Oh yes, it must be so easy to flirt and court and marry. I'm a lady, after all."

"Well, what's the problem?" he said with a shrug. "You've got the looks. The charm might need a bit of work, but gentlemen in your sphere are never too fastidious about that. So go marry one of them, and leave Charles well enough alone. He doesn't need to get dragged into your schemes."

She stepped back as if hit. "My *schemes*?" Her heart was pounding so hard she felt the pulsing of it in her ears, it roared like the ocean. She couldn't remember ever being madder than she was at this moment. Who was this man to challenge her? To judge her so harshly? "You think it's so easy being me?"

"Of course, it is!" he bellowed. "You're a pampered young lady who has never even knocked on a door!"

She groaned with frustration, stamping her foot. “You’re taking my words out of context again! I *have* knocked on a door before, Mr. Warren. I knock on doors all the time—”

“This isn’t about doors,” he barked, cutting her off. “This is about *you* waltzing in from town with all your loveliness and charm and your empty pockets, daring to make a man like Charles Bray such a cruel offer.”

She reeled back. “I am hardly being cruel—”

“Aye, you *are* cruel, my lady. Did you not stop and think for one moment of the implications of what you’re asking? How could he ever face his congregation? How could he tell them that his wife, the beautiful, perfect Lady Madeline Blaire, wants nothing to do with him and actually keeps a separate house?”

He was inches away, his dark eyes sparkling with malice. “Not to mention the dishonor you do him by saying you’ll marry him and then abandon him.”

She shook her head, tears stinging her eyes. “I never meant —”

“Charles deserves a wife who would stand boldly at his side and declare him theirs against all odds. He doesn’t deserve to be shunted aside so you can make way for your high society life.”

Her righteous anger fizzled, as if she’d been suddenly doused with a bucket of icy water. “I...hadn’t thought—”

“People of your station never think about consequences. They just take and take, never mind who they hurt,” he spat.

“I am not like that.” Another tear slipped free as she stepped back. She wrapped her arms around herself, shaking her head. “I never wanted to hurt him or cause him pain. Neither do I seek to abandon him. I want to *help* him. Only help. Please, believe me, Warren.”

If she thought he might thaw at her admittance, she was wrong. He was as surly as ever, glaring down at her. The cut in his brow made him look menacing, like a pirate.

“I need help too,” she went on, setting the remains of her broken pride aside. “It has not been easy for me, sir. For the last three years, I have been out, and my mother has guaranteed that my every waking moment is consumed with finding a husband. I have failed, Mr. Warren. Over and over again, I fail. For I am awkward and-and fumbling...and I don’t like cards or parlor games. I don’t like making a spectacle of myself. And I *really* don’t like having men talk at me about insurance cost increases or the training status of their latest racing fillies.”

“And that is all they ever do is talk *at* a lady,” she added. “They’re never actually talking *to* me. In fact, I often wonder if they even see me at all. All the men of my sphere see when they look at me is my father’s influence and my dowry of twenty thousand pounds. I don’t exist.”

When Warren made no comment, she went on. “So, I went to Mr. Bray. I went to him because he is the kind of man who *sees* a lady when she talks. What is more, he listens. He is good and kind. I think he may be my friend, and I don’t have many of those, Mr. Warren. I’m in a dire situation, and I swear it to you now, I didn’t ask him to do him harm. I need his help.”

He stomped away to the other side of the gazebo, showing her his back. After a moment he muttered, “I believe you.”

He was clearly in turmoil, though she couldn’t understand why. Who was Charles Bray to Warren that he would be so ready to fight his corner? And it sat at odds with the start of their encounter, where Warren pulled Charles back in a fury, threatening to expose him to the duke for kissing her. She couldn’t make sense of it.

“How long will you give him to decide?” Warren asked.

“I...I don’t have much time,” she admitted, mulling over her options. If Charles denied her, what would she do? Was it possible Rosalie or Burke would know of someone else? Someone better suited to such a plan than Charles? The idea terrified her. Now that he was standing before her as a candidate, the thought of marrying some stranger felt

abhorrent, no matter if he was vouched for by Mr. Burke. "I... I really must know as soon as possible. I could perhaps wait a fortnight. But no longer," she added quickly.

"His uncle probably won't last that long," said Warren, his tone thoughtful. "Selby is already one foot in the grave. It will take Charles exceptionally hard to lose him. Both his parents are long dead. His brother is in India. Selby is all the family he has left."

"You know him well," she murmured.

He didn't bother replying. "If Burke's suspicions are correct, the duke will be offering him his uncle's position here in Finchley," he added. "Charles met with the duke this morning. Perhaps the offer is already on the table."

"Curate of Finchley? But his current offer is for a post as vicar, is it not?"

Warren shrugged. "The duke can fix that easily, so Burke says."

Her eyes widened. When she saw Burke emerge from the trees with Warren, she assumed they were merely hunting together. Apparently, they were more. They were friends. "You know all the gentlemen well, sir."

His frown deepened. "And I suppose that surprises you? Because I am a lowly gamekeeper, I can't be friends with the duke's steward?"

"I never said that," she replied, refusing to rise once more to his baiting. He used anger as a weapon, preferring to lure it out of others. In fencing, it was a clever strategy. Baiting others into making foolhardy parries was an easy way to earn points. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. At least not *again*.

Instead, she mirrored his behavior and gave him a shrug. "Horatio Burke is a friend to all. I do not doubt that he was drawn to your intelligence and stamina. I'm sure you make him a fine friend." And because she couldn't help herself, she added, "It must gall him to no end that you are more handsome. He likes to be the center of attention."

She had to control her smile at the confused look of surprise he gave her. He wanted her to fight back, to parry him blow for blow. But this was exceptionally more fun. Heavens, was that a blush she spied, or merely the cold?

“He may enjoy your friendship, but it’s clear you think very little of me, sir. So I ask you—what would you have me do?” She gazed into his dark eyes.

“He’s going to agree,” he replied, voice low. “Charles has always had a soft spot for charity cases. His uncle needs all the charity he can get right now. The poor villagers of Carrington afflicted by the fire, the beleaguered duke, desperate for assistance as the holiday draws near...and now there’s you. He will agree, even though it won’t be what he wants. He’ll agree because it’s the right thing to do, the gentlemanly thing, the Christian thing.”

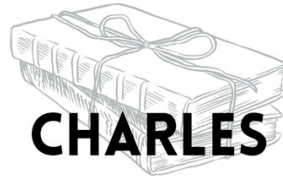
Madeline didn’t like being listed amongst Charles’s charity cases. Would marrying her be one more act of service? “What would you have me do, Mr. Warren?”

He held her gaze. “Don’t let him say yes.”

She sucked in a breath, surprised by his words, by the sincerity in his voice.

“Unless you mean to give him a real chance...unless you will let him be your husband in fact, I’m asking you to let him go. Choose someone else. He doesn’t have much heart left to break, Madeline. Make him whole in the way only a wife can...or leave him be.”





Charles stomped through the dark grounds towards Alcott Hall. He was deeply regretting agreeing to come to dinner again. Did he not learn anything from the last time? The odd behavior of Burke and the duchess now made perfect sense. Lady Madeline Blaire, daughter of the Viscount Raleigh, needed a husband. And for some inexplicable reason, she'd asked Charles.

And then Warren had to go and catch them kissing. God, what was Charles thinking, kissing Madeline like that? Warren *should* inform the duchess. It was reckless and shameful. Charles had compromised the lady's honor. That was an unpardonable sin all on its own. But he'd also hurt Warren. He couldn't bear to see the hurt in his eyes, hurt *he* put there.

Warren was going to find him. Tomorrow or the next day, once his temper cooled, he'd come searching for answers. And Charles didn't know what he was going to say. He didn't know why he did it.

*I just wanted to know what she tasted like...*

Christ, it was foolish enough to think the words, he didn't dare speak them aloud. But that was the only truth he knew. In that moment, with a beautiful young lady standing before him, cheeks pink from the cold, lips parted, golden curls brushing against her neck, he wanted to taste her. Hell, he wanted to devour her.

Madeline Blaire was sweet and delicate. She was the opposite of Warren in every particular, and Charles felt

inexplicably drawn to her. She said she was the type of lady no man could love, and he found himself wanting to test her theory. How could she think that? What wasn't to like? The way she gently recited poetry, her voice musical in its softness. He wanted to trace her lips with his thumb, with his tongue, with his—

*Enough.*

He groaned, passing out of the shadows into the golden light of the house. He was in no fit condition to see her again so soon, not with his emotions all jumbled. He would have written a note of excuse, but after the way Warren barked and scared her, he had to make sure she was okay—

“Charles.”

He flinched, turning towards that deep voice that was already so close. The man ought to wear a bell. “Christ, a bit more warning would be nice.”

Warren stepped forward, towering over him. His shoulders looked even thicker in his heavy wool jacket and fur-lined vest. “We need to talk.”

“I can't talk now,” he muttered. “I can't be late.”

“You can spare me five minutes. They won't ring the gong for another twenty at least.”

Charles groaned, glancing around the park. The smell of snow hung heavy in the air. “It's freezing out here, John. Come by my uncle's house tomorrow morning—”

“No. Now.” Warren's hand clamped around Charles's arm, dragging him forward.

“Don't be a brute. I'm able to walk—”

“I'll not let you slip my net. Not until I've said my piece.”

“What happened when I left?” he said at Warren's back. “What did you say to her?”

Warren growled low, his grip tightening as he led Charles through the dark along the side of the house.

“Did you hurt her?”

Warren slid to a stop and spun around with a glare. “*Hurt* her? You can’t be serious, Charles. She makes a fool of you, offering you a sham of a proposal, telling you she’ll not consider you as a proper husband, and you’re worried if I offended *her* delicate sensibilities?”

“She was flustered—”

He huffed, pulling him forward. “And now you take her side.”

“You shouldn’t have been listening, John. A gentleman would have turned around and walked the other way.”

Warren rounded on him again, grabbing him by the shoulders and shoving him up against the stone wall of the house. He lowered his face, his breath hot on Charles’s mouth. “Well, unfortunately for you both, I am no gentleman.”

Charles couldn’t say who moved first. After three years, he was as starved for Warren as the man apparently was for him. He barely had time to pull air into his lungs before they were kissing, their hands clinging to each other like sailors adrift on a perilous sea.

Warren pressed him against the wall, moaning into his mouth as they tasted each other. Charles was weak and desperate, and he needed Warren to give him everything. But at his whimper, Warren broke their kiss.

“Fuck—not here,” he growled, glancing around, his eyes narrowing as if they could pierce the darkness. “Sometimes the lads wander about the place. Come.” He gave Charles another tug and they were on the move.

Charles knew the house well enough to know where Warren was likely taking him. They turned the corner and the looming figure of the hothouse emerged from the shadows. The interior was dark, the walls of glass dusted in frost that shone silver in the waxing moonlight.

“Surely it’s locked,” Charles murmured.

“I have a key.”

It was the work of moments for Warren to jangle in his pocket for his keys. Then he was pushing his way through the side door, pulling Charles along with him.

The warmth of the hothouse wrapped around Charles like a blanket, as did the intoxicating scent of lush flowers and damp earth. He took a deep breath, filling his senses with the memory of summer. It chased away all thoughts of the bitter cold.

And then Warren was behind him, hands on his shoulders, unwinding his scarf. Warren wove a hand into the hair at his nape, giving it a tug, exposing his neck. Then he latched on, teasing with his tongue, grazing with his teeth. “Do you know what you do to me?” he groaned, his lips against his skin. “Do you have any idea?”

Charles moaned, sinking back against Warren’s comforting strength. God, he’d missed this. He’d missed John Warren like a piece of his soul had been ripped out of his chest. And Charles had been the one to do the ripping.

They couldn’t just dive back into this. They needed to talk. Charles needed to explain, to apologize. How could they just resume as if nothing cataclysmic had happened between them? Warren should be furious. He shouldn’t be kissing Charles, he should be beating him about the head, denying him his love. Charles left Finchley, left Warren. He didn’t even leave a note; didn’t say goodbye. Uncle Selby bought him a seat on the morning coach on a Thursday morning and Charles took it, not looking back.

Surely, Warren had some thought on his sudden return, some expression of anger he needed to release. Charles could take it. He needed this noxious air around them cleared. He needed Warren to rant and yell and sock him in the jaw. He had a feeling they’d both feel better once a little blood was spilled.

But Warren wasn’t in a soul-bearing mood tonight, or a sparring mood. He kissed Charles soundly, dragging his tongue up the length of his neck to nip his ear. He brought a hand around, smoothing it down Charles’s front until he was

cupping his cock over his white dress pants. Charles pressed forward with his hips like a wanton creature, hungry for more.

Warren spoke then, his breath hot against his ear. “I am going to bend you over and fill this sweet arse with my cock.”

Charles stifled a groan. *Yes. Please, god.*

“Three years I’ve waited for you. Three years of this never-ending purgatory.” As he spoke, Warren slipped his hand inside Charles’s pants, his calloused fingers wrapping around his achingly hard cock.

“Johnnie, please—”

“Please what?” he growled, nipping his neck. “What does my greedy little whore want?”

Charles whimpered, feeling his cock twitch in Warren’s hand. “I want you.”

Warren gripped his jaw, forcing his head to turn. “No, you don’t,” he spat. “You want nothing to do with me. You left me here. You left without a backward glance. You don’t want my heart or my hearth. You don’t want my friendship, my love—”

“I do,” he begged, trying to cling to him.

“Horse shit. You only want one thing from me. Name it and it’s yours.” He slowed his hand on his cock, waiting for Charles to speak.

Charles could hardly think when Warren held him like this. He certainly couldn’t respond rationally to Warren’s wounded confession. “John, I’m sorry—*ahh*—”

Warren dropped his hand down, cupping his balls and giving them a sharp tug. “Don’t you dare fucking apologize to me,” he growled. “You made your choices and we both live with them now. And you seem set to make another choice that would see me firmly uprooted from your life, cast aside forever.”

Charles groaned, knowing full well what he meant.

*Madeline.*

Oh god, how could he stand here in this man's arms and think of the woman who may become his wife? He didn't deserve her. How could he when he was clearly so desperate for Warren's every look and touch?

"Will you marry her, Charles?" Warren's voice carried a deep ache as he brushed his lips against Charles's jaw. He rested his forehead on Charles's shoulder, working his cock one-handed. "Will you marry her?"

Letting out a breath, Charles admitted his truth. "I don't know."

"Will you accept the duke's offer then? Will you move back here and take up residence in the parsonage?"

Charles groaned. How the hell did he know? Warren's abilities at spy craft were unmatched. It helped that he knew absolutely everyone in the village. And he had a way of making friends with anyone, no matter their station. Warren was the only gamekeeper Charles knew who regularly got invited to Mr. Burke's weekly billiards game.

"I can't," he panted. "You know I can't."

"Because of me," Warren rasped in his ear. "Because you like getting fucked by me too much. You can't live in this town and take your place at the pulpit every Sunday morning knowing that by Monday night you'll be speared on my cock again. That's why you left without a fucking word, right?"

"John—"

"Because you're a filthy little sinner. That's what you tell yourself, don't you, Charles? And I'm the devil incarnate, sent to tempt you."

He gave in to his teasing. "John, please. Tempt me, ruin me—"

Warren groaned, turning Charles in his arms, claiming his mouth. Charles opened eagerly, letting him taste, tongues flicking. Charles was starved for this man. He'd never get enough.

Warren broke their kiss, panting for breath as he glanced around. Eyes narrowing, he grabbed Charles by the hand. “Come.”

Charles stumbled after him. “What are you doing?”

There was a metal table set with two chairs. Warren dragged a chair back and pushed Charles forward. Charles hit the table with his hips as Warren’s firm hand pressed down on his shoulder.

“John, what—”

“Enough talk. I’m taking what’s mine. Your pretty little wife can’t fuck your arse like I can.” He pulled at Charles’s pants with one hand, flipping the tails of his evening coat up with the other.

“John, we can’t. Not here—”

“Yes, here,” he growled, spitting onto his fingers before he wet Charles’s hole.

At that first touch, Charles was lost. He bit his lip, pressing back with his hips.

“Look at you,” Warren crowed. “My perfect, needy slut. You want to sin with me, don’t you? You want me to fill you with my come.”

God, he loved the way Warren talked. It was degrading and awful, and it made him hard as fucking stone. He needed more.

“Tonight, you’ll go sit at a duke’s table, and you’ll feel my hot seed burning in your arse,” Warren teased, his breath hot in his ear as he pressed a large finger at his hole. “I want you twitching with it, Charles. I want you to feel it leaking out of you as you make small talk with your future wife. She doesn’t need to know that I took you first. She doesn’t need to know that I fucking *own* you. This body is mine. This arse is mine. This fucking cock is mine. *I* was here first, Charles. *Me.*”

“Johnnie—*god*—”

“Mention him again, and I stop,” Warren growled, two fingers now pressed inside his arse.

Charles whimpered, biting his lip harder to keep silent. Warren scissored his fingers, stretching him out. Christ, it had been so long. No one had ever touched him there but Warren. Only Warren.

*My Warren.*

“Take me, Johnnie. Do it.”

“Tell me what you want.”

“I want your cock. Fuck—god—*no*, I didn’t mean it,” he whimpered as Warren pulled his fingers out, leaving him empty. “Don’t stop.” He reached around to hold Warren in place.

“Say it again.”

“I want your cock,” he begged, incoherent with need. “I want your cock so goddamn much. Fuck me and fill me. No one else. Only you. John, there is only you.”

Warren rewarded him, sliding his fingers back inside. Charles quivered with anticipation. Warren leaned over him again, kissing the back of his neck as he worked to free himself from his breeches one-handed.

Charles almost didn’t notice when he went still as stone, Warren’s body coiled tight above him. Charles gripped the table. “John, what—”

“Quiet,” he rasped. “Someone’s in here.”

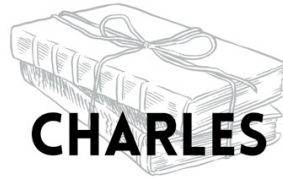
Charles’s heart dropped through his chest as he tried to scramble upright, his clothes a disheveled mess.

From the darkness came a tired voice. “No need to stop on my account.”

Charles gasped, feeling the weight of the world come crashing down around them.

The Duke of Norland was standing not ten feet away, watching as Warren pulled his fingers free of Charles’s arse.





Charles couldn't breathe. There was no way to spin the truth of what they were about to do—what they were *already* doing. He cleared his throat, finger's fumbling to right his clothes. Behind him, Warren was doing the same. "Your Grace, I—"

"You mustn't mind me, truly," said James. "I only came in to retrieve a pineapple." He stepped past them both, needing no light as he wandered a few feet away towards a dark spray of spiky plants.

Charles could feel his blood pulsing in his ears. What the hell was happening? What was James doing in here? Why wasn't he angry? Why didn't he yell or curse in disgust?

Casual as can be, James called over his shoulder, "My wife is not having an easy time with the babe. Pain and discomfort day and night. If I could take away her pains, lord knows I would. But I can't, I'm afraid."

Finding the right plant, he lowered himself down to one knee. "In lieu of curing all her ailments, Rosalie gets whatever she wants from me whenever she wants it. And what she wants tonight is a pineapple. So here I am, wandering my hothouse in the dark, desperate to fetch one for her. It makes me feel useful, you see, to do it myself."

He fished something from his pocket as he spoke. "I could send a man, but then I'd still feel so...helpless. Fetching a pineapple may be the work of a gardener, but it is honest work." There was a clipping sound, and then James was back

on his feet, brandishing a freshly cut pineapple. “They’re a bit small, don’t you think, Warren?”

Behind him, Warren stiffened. “Aye, Your Grace. Not yet ripe.”

James held the little fruit up to the light, turning it. “Well...I’ll have them add sugar to sweeten it. Hopefully she’ll accept my offering, meager as it is.”

Charles couldn’t understand what was happening. The duke caught him with his pants down, riding Warren’s fingers in his arse, and James only wanted to talk about a damn pineapple?

“Your Grace—”

The duke silenced him with a look, still brandishing the fruit. “Warren, do me a favor, and bring this to the kitchen. Ask the cook to sprinkle some sugar on it before he serves it to the duchess.”

Warren took the pineapple. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Excellent. Bray and I will be along soon.”

Charles wanted to crawl under the pineapple bushes and die of mortification.

Warren moved so silently for someone his size. He left Charles standing in the dark hothouse, alone with the Duke of Norland. Charles couldn’t bear the awkward silence. He cleared his throat. “Your Grace, I—”

“Do you have the time, Bray?”

Charles fell silent, patting absently at his vest pocket. “I... my pocket watch is being repaired, sir.”

“Never mind, I have one,” he said, reaching into the pocket of his vest. “I just can’t see the bloody thing in this light. My eyes aren’t what they used to be, I’m afraid. Too many long nights spent pouring over accounting sheets.”

He tugged the pocket watch free and held it flat in his palm, extending his hand out towards Charles.

Charles stepped forward, closing the space between them until he could read the watch's face. "It is a quarter to seven, sir."

"Perfect." James slipped the watch back in his pocket. "We have just enough time for a drink."

Charles took a deep breath, readying himself to follow the duke back into the house. But then James surprised him yet again. "Have a seat, Bray. I think I have something here that will suit."

To his utter astonishment, the Duke of Norland started walking circles over the flagstones, giving the stones a little stomp with his heel here and there. He looked...well, mad.

"Can I assist you, sir?" Charles asked hesitantly.

James just chuckled. "Only if you can recall for me where a pair of sixteen-year-old lads would hide a whisky bottle—*aha*—" He dropped down to one knee again, prying at a stone with both hands. In moments, he had the flagstone tipped up and balance in one hand while he searched the cavity beneath the stone with the other.

Charles couldn't help but smile as James pulled out a perfectly intact bottle of whisky. "It's a bit of an odd place to store your spirits, Your Grace."

"Aye, well, Burke and I had something of a drinking problem in our misspent youth. Or at least, that was my father's opinion. But then he didn't touch a drop in the last several years of his life." He stepped forward, dropping down onto one of the metal chairs. "There are bottles hidden all over the estate. You know, I once found a case of gin tied up in the boughs of a tree. Burke swore it wasn't his doing, so it must have been my brother's work." He gestured towards the empty chair.

Charles sat stiffly across from him.

"This is a lovely single malt from Vauxhall," James went on, tugging the stopper loose and giving the contents a sniff. He took a sip. "Still good." With a smile, he leaned across the table, setting the bottle before Charles.

“What, no glasses hidden in the flowerpots?”

“Not that I know of,” James replied.

Charles snatched up the bottle, his thumb brushing over the dusty label as he brought it to his lips. He took a swig, waiting for the spicy kick to hit the back of his throat. He wasn't disappointed. It was sweet and smooth. He slid the bottle back across at James.

The duke took it, lifting it to his lips. “Tell me about you and Warren,” he said as he took a drink.

Charles tensed. “There's nothing to tell,” he lied.

James held his gaze, lowering the bottle to the table. Those green eyes narrowed under studious brows. “You know...it is very rare in my marriage that I get to say the words ‘I told you so.’ I typically cherish those moments because it means that, for once, I get to be right. But this is one moment where I do not feel that same rush of righteous vindication. This is a hollow victory, and I hate hollow victories.”

“I don't understand.”

James offered him the bottle again.

Charles shook his head.

“I mean to say that I knew something was amiss,” the duke explained. “Why else would you take off and leave your dying uncle alone here? You're not a cruel man, Bray. Something had you on the run. And why, when I made you such a reasonable offer, did you refuse me?”

“James, I'm sorry,” he said quickly, shame bubbling in his gut. “I never meant to offend you.”

“No offense was taken,” James replied. “It merely made me curious. But then Rosalie and Burke all but cornered me two nights ago, telling me in no uncertain terms how I was not to interfere in Madeline's scheme to bag herself a husband. They picked you as the ideal candidate...but I admit I had my doubts.”

Charles fought the urge to hang his head in shame. So, it was true. They were all in on the plan, but the duke had tried

to stop it from moving forward. He didn't want Madeline setting her cap at Charles. He knew Charles could never deserve her.

“Do you love him, Bray?”

“I...you ask a difficult question,” he replied noncommittally.

“Let me rephrase. How long have you loved John Warren?”

Charles sighed, his shoulders slumping under the weight of this exposed truth. “I hardly know,” he admitted with a shrug. “It started as friendship...”

“And grew naturally into more,” James finished for him. He was quiet for a minute, taking another sip of the whisky. “I always knew you held a deep fondness for each other. You were each other's shadows as lads. Selby took him in for a while when he had difficulties with his family, did he not?”

Difficulties with his family? Charles fought the urge to scoff. Is that what you called having a snarling bitch of a stepmother who forced your own father to disown you, kicking you out at twelve and leaving you to fend for yourself? Because that was the difficulty that shadowed Warren's young life.

He showed up at the back door of the parsonage, tears streaming down his face, a bundle of clothes under his arm. Charles took one look at him that night and claimed him for his own. They were inseparable until the day Selby forced him out.

“Sure,” he muttered, snatching for the whiskey bottle and taking a swig. “We'll call it difficulties.”

The duke pursed his lips. “But then you left Finchley to attend Cambridge, sponsored by my father. Why did you not come back? Not for summers...not for holidays...”

He sighed, setting the bottle aside. “Warren and I...we were intemperate in our youth. My uncle found us one night. He scared me with talk of fire and brimstone. He buried me in shame and suffocating feelings of disloyalty. I convinced

myself it was nothing more than lust and loneliness. I thought if I left, I could forget him. I could move on. For how can I serve the Church with the weight of this truth between us?"

James steepled his fingers under his chin, elbows on the arms of his chair. "So, you chose God over Warren. You chose career. And how did Warren take that?"

Charles groaned, dragging a hand through his tousled curls. "As you see."

"He's in love with you."

The words, spoken so softly by the Duke of Norland, pierced through all Charles's armor. It rattled down the shields he kept around his heart. He sucked in a sharp breath, holding the duke's gaze. "He sees me as a possession, nothing more."

But James shook his head. "He is *possessive*," he corrected. "John Warren is covetous by nature, clever and competitive. He is a hunter by trade and by choice. But you are not his possession, Charles. You are his *prize*. The harder you seek to evade him, the more desperately he will fight for you. He quite literally cannot help himself."

The idea thrilled Charles as much as it terrified him. He didn't want to keep hurting Warren. He couldn't stand it. But he could never be what Warren needed either. He glanced across the little table at the duke. "How do you know the man so well, sir?"

James huffed a laugh, taking another swig from the whisky bottle. "I don't know Warren hardly at all."

Charles blinked. "But then—"

"I know Burke," he added. "I know him perhaps better than I know myself. And he and Warren are cut from the same cloth. Quite literally. Both bastards, unwanted by their fathers and despised by their stepmothers. Both running about the countryside utterly wild. Both constantly courting the rules of society, bending them within an inch of breaking. It's no wonder they've long been thick as thieves. Why, it's almost enough to make me quite jealous."

"Jealous, sir?"

James held his gaze, overwhelming Charles with his quiet intensity. “I am covetous too, Bray...though in a different way. If Burke ever gave me cause to question his loyalty, I might see my way to blaming your charismatic Mr. Warren.”

Charles could hardly believe what he was hearing. He leaned forward, elbow the table. “Are...are you and Burke—”

“Careful, Bray,” James warned. “I like you well enough, but I wasn’t the one who was just caught with another man’s fingers in my arse. My relationship with Burke is not up for discussion. And I will not tolerate anyone questioning my fidelity to my wife. Understood?”

A chill sank down his back as Charles nodded. “Yes, sir.”

James held his gaze for another moment. “Good. Right, well we must deal with the matter at hand.”

“The matter, sir?”

“Aye, my wife is convinced that you would make Madeline an ideal match. She wants to see Madeline married and settled by the end of the year. And, as I’ve already told you, my darling wife will get whatever she wants.”

Charles wasn’t quite sure what to say to that.

“Did Madeline make you her offer?”

He cleared his throat. “I...umm...in a roundabout sort of way, yes. I was hoping to speak to her tonight to discuss more of the...particulars.”

*Like how she doesn’t want to share your bed or your house or your life,* taunted the dark voice in his mind.

“I feel as though I am standing on a precipice with you, Charles. Your choice here will affect the lives of many, beyond just yourself and the lady in question. You cannot accept my offer to become the Vicar of Finchley because you worry you cannot avoid Warren’s pull. Do you resist Madeline’s offer for the same reason?”

“I...” Charles shook his head, shoulders slumping. “How can I trap her in a lie? How can I risk her reputation? How can

I dare drag her down to my level? I am not a suitable match, no matter what the duchess may think.”

James nodded, lips pursed in contemplation. “I love my wife, Bray. But she can be rather short-sighted...and bull-headed. Her opinions, once made, are nearly impossible to alter. And she thinks you *are* an ideal match for Madeline. So, I must put the question to you, and forgive me if it comes off as indelicate but...do you like women?”

Charles blinked, his mind flashing with the memory of kissing Madeline under the gazebo, feeling her lips move against his. “I...”

“Have you ever been with a woman?” James pressed. “Or perhaps I should ask *could* you ever be with a woman? Or is it only men you fancy?”

“Of course, I like women,” Charles blustered, feeling heat burn in his cheeks. “I like women, James. Jesus.”

“Could you ever see your way round to liking Madeline? I know she comes off as shy. Lord knows she can bring a conversation to a screeching halt with those awkward stares. And her looks leave a bit to be desired. To me she always looks startled—”

“She is lovely,” Charles growled, feeling his defenses rise to hear the duke speak of her so dismissively. “She is only shy and awkward when faced with bullies who talk over her or talk down to her. In my experience, she is witty and engaging, and I’ll not hear a harsh word about her. If she *does* become my wife, I will strike the man who talks ill of her, never mind if he’s a duke.”

James held his gaze, his mouth quirking into a smile. “Good.” He reached for the whisky bottle, replacing the stopper. “And what about Warren?”

Charles was still spinning. “What about him?”

“Does Warren like women too...women like Madeline? Specifically Madeline,” he corrected. “That point will be rather important.”



His eyes went wide as the thread of the duke's unspoken argument pulled taught, tugging at Charles's mind. "I...I don't know, sir."

James nodded, rising from his chair. "Right, well you should ask him. Do it soon."

"Why would I need to know if Warren likes Madeline?" he asked, mirroring the duke as he stood.

James stepped forward, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "I want you to think very hard before you make any decisions, Bray. About the vicarage, about Madeline. I want you to sit with it all and I want you to open your mind to one idea. I call it: the possibility of more."

Charles blinked, confused. "The possibility of more?"

James gave his shoulder a squeeze. "That's it exactly. Think on it. Mull it. Perhaps even put it into practice. You'll never know if you like the possibility of more so long as you continue accepting the reality of less." He dropped his hand away. "Now, come. We're late for dinner."



Warren delivered the pineapple to the busy kitchen, his stomach twisting in knots at the smell of the glorious feast—roasted pheasants, boiled potatoes, tureens of vegetable soup. All that waited for him at home was a few slices of cold ham and a wedge of cheese.

He lingered for a moment, exchanging a few words with the maids. When he saw his chance, he snatched a couple egg tarts off a tray, quick stuffing them in his pocket. Taking his leave, he ducked out the main door that led into the house. Surely no one would mind if he cut through this way.

As he walked down the long hall, he slipped his hand in his pocket, pulling out the first egg tart. He stuffed it in his mouth with a groan. It was still warm; savory and salty. He ate it in two bites. He was about to eat the second tart when a deep voice called behind him.

“Warren? Are you lost?”

He turned around to see Burke’s teasing grin. He was dressed for dinner, his dark hair slicked back behind his ears. Burke closed the distance between them, slipping both his hands in his pockets as he walked.

“Just cutting through,” Warren replied. “I’m on my way home.”

Burke nodded, his eyes tracing him. “What’s in your pocket?”

Warren stiffened. “Nothing.”

Burke sighed. "Either tell me, or I'll wrestle you to the floor and check for myself."

He smirked. "You could try. You haven't been able to take me since we were lads. I'd hate to damage that pretty face."

Burke smiled, but it quickly fell. "Why don't you join us for dinner?"

Warren bristled, wearing his pride like armor. "No."

"You're my friend, Warren. I'd like you to join us."

"There's no place for the likes of me at a duke's dinner table," he countered. "And I'm nobody's charity case."

"I never said you were. We have some of the families from the fire joining us tonight. A duke's dining room can be intimidating for the average man. It would put them at ease to see another friendly face at the table."

He huffed. "I've never heard my face called friendly. Frightening, maybe."

"Oh, don't start. You know the ladies all love a man with scars."

Warren just rolled his eyes.

"Say, you're friendly with Mr. Bray, right?"

He stiffened. "Why?"

"Well, it's strange," Burke replied. "James made him an offer to take over for Selby at the parsonage. He means to make Bray Vicar of Finchley. But the ungrateful wretch turned him down flat. I can't make sense of it. What man in his right mind would prefer a position in Bredbury over a posting here? Hell on earth if you ask me."

"I couldn't say."

"Hmm...well, he's here for dinner again tonight. Perhaps you could talk to him, help us try to make sense of it."

"I doubt I can be helpful," he replied. "If he's made up his mind, he's made up his mind."

Burke nodded. “Yeah, but I’d like you to try all the same. If nothing else, help us shed light on why he’s so dead set against us.”

Warren groaned. “Fine.”

“Excellent.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “Now, let’s go. I’m starving. And unlike you, I don’t have biscuits stuffed in my pockets.”



IF THERE EVER WAS A TRUE hell on earth, it would be suffering through the pacing of dinner at a duke’s table. Why were the portions so bloody small? And why so many courses? Warren ate the fish course in four bites and was forced to sit there, watching as the rest of the table nibbled and chattered.

This was only the third course. If the menu card resting above his plate was to be believed, there would be four more. He groaned, snatching up his glass of wine, draining it. In moments, a footman appeared at his side. The man reached over him, refilling his glass with pursed lips.

Warren smirked. It was Geoffrey. How it must gall the man to have to wait on him. If nothing else, Geoffrey’s jealousy made this insufferable night worth the torture.

He was seated between Burke and one of the men from the Carrington fire. Burke knew enough to leave him be, turning his attention to the duke and duchess instead. Warren felt the duke’s eyes on him, but he did his best to keep his eyes on his plate. He wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of knowing he was uncomfortable.

And he didn’t miss the way the duchess’ gaze kept darting down the table. It was all he could do to avoid doing the same, for Charles was seated next to Madeline. They sat there, stiff as statues, cheeks flushed pink, as they attempted the smallest of talk. Warren was too far away to hear what they were saying, which annoyed him to no end. Were they settling matters? Planning the wedding? Their shared awkwardness was almost endearing.

“Oh, Mr. Bray,” the duchess called down the table. “Mrs. Davies has everything prepared. Did you still want to deliver the baskets tomorrow?”

Charles gave a nervous jump at being addressed directly by the duchess, which had Warren smirking into his wine glass. “Yes, Your Grace. I am happy to be of service.”

“Wonderful,” she said with a warm smile. “And Madeline, you’ll go in my stead?”

Warren stiffened as he watched Madeline nod. So, they were going on a little adventure together now? Wandering through the winter wood, arm in arm, delivering baskets to the needy families. What a perfect scene of domesticity: the vicar and his wife, nobly doing their duty to the community.

He didn’t even realize he was squeezing his wine glass until Burke hissed. “Christ man, steady on.”

Warren blinked, looking down at the broken pieces of glass, the red wine pooling like blood on the white tablecloth. Then there was the actual blood. His palm was filling with it.

“Oh, goodness. Mr. Warren are you alright?” said the duchess, eyes wide.

He dropped his bloody hand to his lap, wrapping it in his napkin. ““Scuse me,” he muttered, pushing his chair back with a loud squeak. The whole table watched him get up and walk towards the door.

Geoffrey, the arse, just shook his head. Warren wanted to punch him in the stupid face. Geoffrey opened the door for him, and Warren stomped out. He moved quickly across the hall into the empty drawing room. He’d only been in this room a few times before. The family always opened the house at Christmas for a ball to which all the staff and the villagers were invited. He’d sat at the corner table, playing whist with Burke and the duke.

He shuffled over to the fireplace, lifting the napkin away to look at the carnage of his hand. It was a bloody mess. He dabbed at it with the napkin, wincing as he plucked free a piece of broken glass and dropped it into the flames.

“What the hell just happened in there?”

He stiffened not turning around to face Burke. “Nothing.”

Burke crossed the room towards him. “Right...nothing. Except that James can’t stop looking at you. Bray can’t stop looking at you. Even Madeline can’t stop. What the hell has them so curious?”

“I wouldn’t know,” he muttered, keeping his back turned.

“You need to wash that out. And it might need stitches.”

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t be a brute, Warren.”

He spun around, shoulders squared. “I don’t need your help. Go back and join the dinner.”

Burke raised a dark brow. “Giving me orders in my own house? My, we are in a mood tonight.”

“It’s not your house, Burke. You’re a guest here, same as me. Soon as the duchess tires of having something pretty to look at, you’ll be out on your arse.”

“Unlikely,” Burke replied, wholly unfazed by Warren’s unpardonable rudeness. “But then I didn’t follow you out here to talk about me.”

He lifted the napkin off his hand, checking the cuts.

“Jesus,” Burke muttered. “Here, let me help you.”

“I don’t—”

“I know, I know. You don’t need my help. You don’t need anybody’s help. You are an island. A man alone. A man apart. Spare me.” Burke stomped over to the sideboard and snatched up a bottle of gin. “Give me your damn hand.”

With a grimace, Warren lifted the napkin away and held out his bleeding hand.

Burke popped the stopper out of the bottle and grabbed his wrist. “This is going to hurt.”

“I don’t—”

Burke clamped tight to his wrist, holding him still as he poured gin over the cuts.

“Shit—damn—” he cursed, fingers shaking. The clear liquid washed the blood away, dripping down onto the white marble of the hearth. The alcohol pooled towards the flames, making the fire hiss and pop.

“Once more,” Burke murmured, his touch gentling.

Warren nodded and Burke doused his hand with more gin. Warren clenched his teeth tight, letting the alcohol clean his hand. Burke let go of his wrist, setting the bottle aside.

“Looks worse than it is,” Burke assessed. “I don’t think you need stitches.”

They stood there together, quietly looking down at his tattered hand.

“I can’t go back in there,” he muttered.

“I know,” Burke replied. “Can you tell me why?”

He sighed, lowering his hand to his side.

“James will tell me his side of it as soon as I ask, but the man is notoriously ill informed. If there is a puzzle here, James is sure to have a box of missing pieces. And you know I can’t stop once I’ve started,” he added with a smirk. “I’ll hound you to the ends of the earth.”

“Christ, you’re relentless,” he muttered.

“I am,” Burke replied with a satisfied smile. “And there is nothing I hate more than thinking James is privy to an intrigue without me. So, spill already.”

Warren groaned, turning to face the flames. “He caught me tonight...just before dinner.”

“Caught you? What, stealing food from the kitchen? That’s hardly worth—”

“No. That’s not...no,” he said with a shake of his head.

“I’m listening.”

Warren grimaced. “Look, I’m only telling you this because I know you and the duke are thick as thieves, and I know he’s going to tell you anyway.”

Burke’s grin widened. “Now I’m definitely listening.”

Throwing caution to the wind, Warren let his truth spill forth. “The duke caught me with Bray in the hothouse.”

Burke blinked, his smile falling. “James caught you with Bray?”

“Yes.”

“In the hothouse?”

“Yes.”

“He caught you with Bray in the hothouse?”

“God damn it, did I not just say as much?” he barked, rounding on him.

“I’m sorry, I’m just trying to catch up here,” Burke replied, taking a step back with his hands raised. “You’re so, well... *you*,” he added with a shrug. “I’m struggling to picture it. You and Bray. Bray and you.”

“You’ll stop picturing it right now if you want to keep all those pretty teeth in your mouth,” he growled.

Burke bristled. “You know, I boxed all through Oxford. Keep threatening to punch me, and I might just take a few swings of my own.”

Warren scoffed, raising himself up to his full height. He had easily three inches on Burke, and well over twenty extra pounds of muscle. “The day you land a punch on me, pretty man, will be the day the angels sing.”

Burke met him stare for stare, his frown slowly turning back into a grin. “I believe you. And, as you say, my worth here is all down to my handsome face. Can’t go having you mess it up.”

Warren sighed, shoulders relaxing as he turned away.

“So, James caught you with Bray. How bad was it?”



“Bad enough,” he muttered.

Burke let loose a laugh. “Oh god, please tell me how he responded. What did he do when he realized?”

“He gave me a pineapple.”

Burke blinked. “He...what?”

“He came to fetch a pineapple for the duchess and found us together. He gave me the pineapple and made me bring it to the kitchen. That’s when you found me and dragged me to dinner.”

“Wait...so, we’re all running around trying to fix Bray with Madeline. Meanwhile, Bray is off with you doing Lord knows what and—” He spun around, his smile falling. “Oh, goddamn it. Oh, Rosalie is going to be furious.”

“Why?”

“Because James was right,” he muttered. “Damn, I *hate* when James is right,” he grunted, punching his palm with his fist. “At least we didn’t wager anything this time.”

“Right about what?”

“About Bray. He knew something was off. He told us not to push the issue. Bray leaving the way he did. Bray turning down his offer. And if their awkwardness tonight is any indication, Madeline proposed, poor thing. I’m sure he turned her down too.”

“He didn’t,” he replied.

Burke spun to face him, eyes wide. “What?”

“He just hasn’t given her an answer,” he said with a shrug.

“Well, he’s going to turn her down, right?” Burke pressed. “If he’s in love with you? The man is far too principled to say yes to Madeline if he’s already given his heart to another.”

Warren stiffened. “He doesn’t love me. He uses me. He’ll soon leave, and we’ll not see him again.”

Burke gave him a measured look. “You really think that?”

“I’m not comfortable talking about Charles with you.”

Burke's eyes went wide. "Ooooh, now I see it! That's why he won't stay...because he's in love with you. I can only imagine his position as a vicar has something to do with his inner turmoil, eh? Let me guess, he sees being with you as a sin? Does he blame you for luring him in? Does he pretend to fight it? I imagine you take the lead in your dalliances. You don't strike me as much of a receiver—"

Warren growled, turning away. "Drop it, or I'll start throwing those punches."

"And how does Madeline fit in?" Burke asked, ignoring his threat. "Rosalie told me you were the one who brought her up to the house the other night. She sensed a chemistry between you. I believe the word she used was 'magnetic.'"

"Nothing happened," he muttered, shoulders stiffening.

"Oh shit...which means something definitely happened there too. My god, Warren. It's been all of three bloody days. What the hell did you do?"

Warren groaned. "I kissed her."

"You didn't."

"I did. Twice."

Burke shook his head in disbelief. "Does Bray know?"

"No."

"Are you going to tell him?"

He bristled, casting the man a glare. "Why should I? What the hell does it matter? It didn't mean anything. And I'm not beholden to him...or her...or *you*. I'm only answering your questions because I see you as a friend."

"And I thank you for that" Burke replied, lowering his mask of charm. "You've been a good friend to me too these long years," he added, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "You know I'll not say a word outside of James, right?"

"I know," he replied, his gaze lost to the crackling fire.

Burke nodded, his gaze drifting to the fire too. They both stood there for a few moments, their profiles framed by the

dancing flames.

Slowly, Burke turned, his hand still on his shoulder. “Warren, what if I told you there was a way you could *all* get exactly what you wanted...and perhaps more than you could have ever dreamed?”



For the third time in as many days, Madeline found herself bundled up from head to toe, ready to brave the harsh wintry wind. Outside the Alcott kitchens, a cart was stacked with thirty or so baskets full of foodstuffs for the displaced families—fresh bread and cheese, cured ham, a dressed goose, strawberry jam, coffee and tea, and some chocolates and sweets for the children.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Davies, had also looked out some bolts of cloth and an assortment of other useful items—candles, sewing kits, even a few spare chamber pots. The cart was loaded down with all the plunder, ready to be pulled by a tired looking draft mare, aided by a wiry stable hand named Ramsay.

“Stay warm,” said Rosalie at her side. “And when you return, we’ll have hot cocoa by the fire.”

Madeline nodded, raising the hood of her thick wool cape up over her head.

“Don’t fret,” Rosalie murmured. “All you can do is be honest with him and with yourself.”

Madeline nodded again. She’d had a late night with Rosalie, the two of them locking themselves away in her room to discuss all that had happened over the last several days. She told Rosalie everything—her surprise kiss with Warren, her fumbling proposal to Charles, Warren’s warning.

Rosalie listened, offering little commentary at first. When she finally did speak, her advice was simple. “You have to tell him, Madeline. You can’t build a new relationship on a lie. If you’re meant to marry Bray, you must do so with a clean conscience...and encourage him to do the same,” she added with a knowing look.

So here was Madeline, ready to set out on a mission to deliver baskets to the needy. And while she did, she had to find a way to tell the man she still hoped to marry that she’d accidentally found herself kissing the gamekeeper not once but twice.

Ramsay gave a cluck to the mare and the cart rattled off, the wheels creaking against the courtyard cobblestones. Madeline gave one last anxious look to Rosalie before she followed along beside it, the skirts of her too-long petticoat and dress swishing around her legs as she walked.



CHARLES MET them just outside the village, his face bundled behind his scarf. “Good morning, my lady,” he said in greeting.

“Good morning,” she replied. It felt impossible to be so formal with a man she’d proposed to, a man she’d kissed for heaven’s sake!

Dinner last night was painfully awkward—even by Madeline’s standards—as they both tried to avoid speaking about anything of consequence. He tried to speak to her of poetry, but she was too nervous to recite properly. And then there was the horrid display of Warren’s with the broken glass. They’d both settled into silence after that, waiting desperately for the dinner to end. Madeline couldn’t leave the table fast enough.

“I trust you slept well,” he said.

“I did. Thank you, sir.”

*Perfect. If our talk gets any smaller, it will slip through the holes of a thimble.*

He glanced up at the sky, adjusting his hat. "I believe the storm is almost upon us. I hope we don't get caught out."

She looked up too, noting the heaviness of the grey clouds. There was a quiet on the air, a promise of things to come. "We should get this done quickly," she murmured.

"Aye. Not a moment to delay."



THE FIRST ROUND of baskets were delivered without incident. Several of the families had been rehomed in some of the outbuildings on the edge of the Alcott grounds. It was less than a fifteen-minute walk to reach them. All the families were appreciative, repeating their thanks as they made offers of tea and meat pies, more than willing to share what little they had.

Madeline watched with quiet surprise as Charles transformed before her eyes. Gone was the awkwardness he reserved for her. He was charming and bright, quick to laugh. He even knew the names of some of the men, patting their backs and shaking their hands. He led everyone in a round of prayer, thanking the Lord for good friends and bountiful harvests.

All the while, Madeline felt adrift. She glanced around, noting the conditions the people were living in. These buildings were meant to house tools and grain, not children. The furniture was all roughhewn, the blankets on the narrow beds threadbare. She even spied a mouse skittering in the corner, a hungry cat in hot pursuit.

In sharp contrast, Madeline floated through life, drifting between the finest Mayfair drawing rooms. Sugar with every cup of tea. Blazing fires. Men on staff to open doors and fetch and carry for her. Yet here she was delivering baskets as if she had any authority to offer these people her help. She didn't make anything in them. She wouldn't know how. She'd never made a thing of use in the whole of her life.

By the time Charles put a hand on her arm, gently extracting her from the women's gossip circle, she felt desperate to escape. She all but clung to him, letting him lead her away back towards the cart.

"Are you alright?" he murmured, giving another wave over his shoulder at the assembled group.

"I'm fine," she replied, fighting back her tears. "Let's just go. Please, can we go?"

He nodded, keeping ahold of her arm as they walked. She settled next to him. He stayed quiet, the only sound the rattle of the cart and Ramsay's low, melodic whistle.

"It's a grim reality," he said at last. "To see people living in such a state."

She sniffed, dabbing at her eyes.

"But it won't be forever," he added. "The duke has already begun the rebuilding. With any luck, they'll all be back on the row by the spring."

"Only if they survive the winter," she murmured. "Some of those children looked ill. And it was so cold, Charles. They don't have enough blankets, enough wood."

He nodded, his expression solemn. "I'll speak to James today. I'm sure there's more that can be done. The church can help too. We could host a bazaar in Finchley. I could write to a few friends to do the same in their parishes."

"I just hate feeling so helpless," she admitted. "There has to be more I can do."

"You're not to blame for any of this, Madeline. And it's not your problem to solve."

"But I *could* solve it," she pressed, pulling him to a halt. "Charles, with my aunt's money, I could help those people now. I could give them all they require to survive the winter—blankets and food, proper shelter, warm clothes. You and I could do it together—"

"Madeline," he groaned, stepping away.

Angry tears burned her eyes. “I don’t understand why you won’t even consider it. Am I so disagreeable? Is there no world in which you could ever see your way to marrying me?”

“Please, stop.” He kept walking away, shoulders stiff.

“Just tell me why,” she called after him. “You must have a reason why. What is so wrong with me?”

“There is nothing wrong with you, Madeline. You’re beautiful and lovely and a prize worth having for any man,” he called over his shoulder.

“Then why—”

Charles spun around. “Because there is another!”

She slid to a halt.

At her look of surprise, he groaned, dragging a gloved hand over his face.

She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling impossibly small. “Another?”

“Yes,” he admitted, voice low. “I am in love with someone else. I have been for a long time.”

Madeline nodded, fighting the urge to run down the lane back towards the house. “And does she love you? Will you marry her, sir?”

“I...it’s complicated,” he replied. “We cannot marry. There are...impediments. But the truth remains that I do not feel free to marry you when my heart still belongs to another. It wouldn’t be proper, Madeline. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

Her mind was spinning. There had to be a way through this. There was still hope, right? Please god, let there still be hope. She couldn’t bear the thought of returning to London, utterly defeated. The moment she did, her father would lock her up and throw away the key.

She lifted her eyes to meet his gaze. “But you say you cannot marry her. Surely you are not content to be alone forever?”



His frown deepened. “We cannot all get what we want, Madeline.”

“I told you we could make this marriage whatever we want,” she urged.

“You don’t know what you’re saying.” He turned away again.

But she wasn’t ready to give up so easily. “So, you have a lover,” she called after him. “So long as you are discrete, I don’t see why it should matter.”

He slid to a halt, spinning around. “What did you say?”

She shrugged. “Well, if gossip is to be believed, most men of the *ton* keep a lover, do they not? Who am I to demand your fidelity when it is you who would be doing me the favor? Charles, I already said that I would never resent you for living a life separate from mine. Give me one good reason why we cannot still marry just because you have a lover—”

“Because it is not done! Madeline, you should never have to demean yourself by accepting such a condition from a man. Such a man would be wholly without honor. Marriage is between a man and a woman, not—” He fell silent with a groan, biting his bottom lip.

“Who says marriage can only be between a man and woman?”

“Everyone!” he bellowed. “Quite literally everyone agrees that the sanctity of marriage is reserved for one man and one woman. Not a man, a woman, and the man’s secret lover! Christ—” he dragged a gloved hand over his face again. “Why does this not revolt you? Why are you not running from me?”

She blinked, lips parted on a breath. “What?”

“Madeline, I’m telling you I am impure in thought, word, and deed. I am a man of the cloth who has taken no vows of marriage, and yet I have enjoyed carnal relations. I have known another’s flesh. Do you understand?”

She crossed her arms inside her cape. “Of course, I understand. I’m not a complete simpleton.”

“Good. So, then you should run. You should rescind your offer, for I am the least deserving of men.”

“Why should I rescind? I’m only asking for a favor, Charles. As a friend—”

“You are *asking* to be my wife,” he growled, closing the space between them, grabbing her arms. “You’re asking me to irrevocably bind my life with yours, to share with you all my worldly possessions, to care for you in sickness and health. Christ, you’re asking me to give you my very name.”

“Charles—”

“And I am not one of your Mayfair gentleman callers who will be content to enter a marriage of convenience, never seeing you above holidays and the occasional garden party,” he went on. “This would not be a business arrangement, and I would not merely be helping a friend in need. And believe me, there would be no separate bedrooms,” he added. “I’m a passionate man, Madeline. If I ever marry, that woman will stay in my bed every night, in *my* arms. I would claim you so fully, so completely—”

He leaned in, and she was so sure he was about to kiss her. But then he dropped her arms as if she burned him. “To ask me to marry you, and not let me be *married* to you, is an offense to my sensibilities, Madeline. My wife will be mine in every way.”

Madeline whimpered, feeling something inside her heat. It spread like fire, warming her from her chest down to her fingertips. “Charles, please...”

“Please what? What do you want from me?” When she didn’t respond, he pulled her closer. “*Tell* me.”

“Kiss me.”

The words were hardly spoken, and he was pressing his lips to hers. Her body went limp, bending to his will as he poured his passion into her. His hand wrapped around her waist, pulling her close, as the other cupped her cheek. He slanted his mouth over hers, teasing with his tongue.

She opened to him, holding tight to the lapels of his coat.

As soon as it started, he was pulling away with a muttered, “Damn it.”

She stood there, raising a shaking hand to touch her lips. Her entire body felt aflame. “You love another,” she murmured. “But you feel something for me too, Charles.”

He said nothing, shoulders stiff as he stayed facing away from her.

“I have another proposition for you,” she called.

Slowly he turned, one brow raised in silent question.

“Give me two weeks.”

He frowned. “Two weeks to what?”

“To court you,” she replied. “To convince you I would make you a good wife.”

His eyes went wide but he recovered quickly, stepping forward. “Madeline—”

“Two weeks,” she repeated. “You won’t marry me unless I can convince you that our marriage can be real. Well, I don’t know what a *real* marriage ought to look like, sir. I know nothing of what happens between a man and a woman behind closed doors. But you could teach me.”

“Fucking hell,” he muttered.

“We could find our way together, Charles. Starting now, you will teach me. If, at the end of two weeks, you still wish to walk away, you may do so. And we will say nothing of the other...complication,” she added. “Whoever she is, so long as you are willing to say you’ll consider my offer, she will be nothing to me.”

He shook his head. “I don’t deserve you, Madeline.”

“That’s for me to decide, not you.”

He held her gaze. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“My eyes are wide open, Charles. You’ve been honest, and I can’t ask for more than that. For my part, I promise the same. Honesty first, honesty always.”

“Yes...honesty,” he muttered.

Fighting all her instincts, she inched forward. “In the name of honesty, there is something I must tell you now before we take things any farther.”

He raised a wary brow, those amber eyes locked on her. “What is it?”

“I kissed Mr. Warren.”



Charles went still as stone, his expression flashing quickly before he hid it behind a pale mask. But his eyes gave him away. He was angry. His jaw ticked as he stood there, feet apart from her. “You kissed him?”

She nodded.

“When?”

“I...just after you left us in the gazebo,” she replied. “I should say *he* kissed *me*, but I didn’t stop him.”

His jaw clenched tighter. “He watched me kiss you, then he took my place?”

She nodded again, biting her lip before adding, “And that wasn’t our first kiss.”

With a curse, he spun away, stomping down the path after the cart.

She watched him leave, heart in her throat. Then her legs moved on their own and she was running after him. “Charles, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you, but I couldn’t not tell you. It felt important that you know.”

“And now I know.”

“He was just teasing me. It meant nothing. But I know you are friends so—”

“Friends,” he scoffed. “Right.”

“I don’t want it to come between you. Or us,” she added. “And it will *never* happen again, I assure you. Charles, please, it meant nothing—”

He rounded on her. “Stop saying my name.”

She slid to a halt. “Why?”

“Because to my great surprise, I find myself mad with jealousy, and when you say my name, I forget that I’m meant to have manners.” He pointed down the lane. “Walk, Madeline.”

She panted, righting the hood over her hair. “But—so you can say my name, but I can’t say yours? That hardly seems fair.”

He groaned low in his throat. “Christ, Madeline. Walk. And we will speak no more about this.” He spun away first, taking off after the cart.

“But we *must* speak of it,” she called. “You’ve still not given me your answer!”

“I need to think!”

“Mr. Bray!”

“Damn it, that’s worse than you calling me Charles,” he muttered.

She shrugged in frustrated defeat, glancing around at the wintry woods. “Well, then what am I to call you? Sir?”

He spun around and stomped back towards her, his amber eyes fierce and wild, shadowed by the brim of his hat as he leaned closer. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

They stood there in the lane staring at each other, Madeline’s heart racing. She gasped, glancing around, as the first snowflakes started to fall. Charles stiffened too. The flakes danced through the air, landing on his shoulders, the brim of his hat. Yet still he stood there, taking her in.

“What say you, sir? Are you still willing to consider a trial of sorts? A practice marriage?”

“I need more time,” he admitted. “Give me more time to think on it. I shall give you an answer when we’ve finished with the baskets.”

She nodded. What else could she do?



BY THE TIME they delivered half the baskets, it was snowing in earnest. What started as a good excuse to stretch her legs was turning into a tiring chore. The longer they were out in the elements, the bottom of Madeline’s dress and pelisse got soaked by the melting snow, making her skirts heavy and her feet cold. Her toes squished inside her stockings, all but numb. She should have worn a second layer, or at least a thicker wool.

Charles was quiet, not speaking until they were amongst the parishioners. Once again, he was all charm and friendliness, offering supportive words and easy touches. He pulled her into a few conversations, his hand at the small of her back as he encouraged her to take the lead, asking her questions that required more than one-word answers. It felt easier to talk to these people. She hardly stammered and they didn’t seem to notice or care when she did.

They left the third group and Madeline was shivering. Her feet felt like ice. But she wasn’t going to complain. She knew the warm welcome she’d receive once she returned to Alcott. These people had no warm welcome waiting for them except for what they could find around their meager fires, so she trudged along, wet skirts trailing behind her.

“It’s comin’ down now,” called Ramsay from the cart seat. “We might want to think about turning in for the day. Families won’t wanna be out in all this.”

Charles groaned. “He’s right.”

“Oh, but we’re nearly finished,” Madeline said though chattering teeth.

“It’ll be another thirty minutes to reach the next houses, and your lips are nearly blue,” he replied, still not looking at her. “I can finish on my own tomorrow.”

She bristled at his coldness. “This is my mission now as much as yours. I want to help—”

“Madeline, you’re freezing.”

“I’ll be warm again soon. I want to stay,” she said at his back.

“No, he’s right. It’s not fair to drag the families out in this weather. We’ll finish tomorrow.” He called over to the stable hand, “Ramsay, we’ll head back!”

“Right you are, sir.” He gave a tug to the reins, starting the horse on a half-circle to turn around. “You’ll get the miss back faster if you cut across on the deer path,” he called back. “The cart can’t fit, but you two surely can. ‘Less you both wanna budge up in the back ‘ere,” he added, pointing to the cluttered back of the tiny cart with his thumb.

The idea of bouncing along in the back of a cart wedged on top of Charles did not sound inviting. She’d already had enough of cart rides for one visit. She gazed out towards the trees instead. “Deer path?”

“It’s a walking trail,” he explained, coming to stand at her side. “Too narrow for carts. We call it the deer path. It leads back towards Alcott.”

She sighed, already dreaming of warm baths and crackling fires.

“Come on,” he muttered. “We’ll go that way.”

She followed him, tripping over her sodden skirts.

The path was exactly that—little more than a meandering trail, well-trod by dozens of feet over countless years. It was the kind of trail you read about in a story book. If Madeline were in a more creative mood, she might just feel enchanted. She imagined each new season brought out a different personality to the path. In spring, it would be dotted with wildflowers—yellow buttercups and white daffodils. Perhaps a



curious bunny would hop along the way. Now the trees were bare as they carried the weight of the falling snow. Everything was being washed clean by a blanket of purest white.

There was a hush on the air to match the chill. The only sound her panting breath as she followed the dark silhouette of Charles. There was no sun to be seen today, but it was surely setting somewhere behind the thick storm clouds. The sky was changing from a pale grey to a twilight charcoal. It had to be after four o'clock. She'd certainly missed afternoon tea. With any luck, she'd still be back in time for dinner.

Charles set a grueling pace, marching through the fine layer of white snow as if he were being chased.

Before long, Madeline was wincing, clutching at her side, face flushed. "I can't keep up with you, Charles," she admitted. "I can't walk so fast in these clothes."

With a grumble, he slowed his pace, still staying a few feet ahead of her. The snow was deeper here, nearly reaching her shins, and more was still falling. The flakes were thicker than before, fluffy and white, dusting her clothes and melting on her face. She tried to lift her skirts, making it easier to piece her way over the uneven ground. More than once, Charles paused to glance over his shoulder, making sure she was still following.

As they wove through the darkening trees, she spied a set of glowing lights in the near distance. "What is that?" she called over the wintry quiet.

"It's a cabin," he replied, his tone clipped.

She tried to control the chattering of her teeth. "It's an odd place for a cabin. Who lives there?"

"We're on the edge of the Alcott grounds," he explained. "There are several cabins placed throughout the woods for the use of the gamekeepers."

She stilled, already knowing the answer before she spoke. "Who lives in *that* cabin?"

"Mr. Warren."

“Mr. *ahh*—” She cried out. One moment she was stumbling along behind Charles, the next her toe was snagging on a hidden root, and she was flailing, arms windmilling in the fluttering snow, as she fell to her hands and knees with a sharp cry.

Charles doubled back at a run. “Madeline, are you hurt?”

She panted, pushing up with her hands to rock back onto her heels. Pain in her left ankle lanced at the movement. Her cloak was snagged under her knee, momentarily trapping her. She groaned, giving the cloak a tug, which promptly choked her at the neck. Tears of frustration stung her eyes. “‘M’fine,” she garbled, stumbling to her feet. She winced with her first step and Charles was there, one hand firmly holding her elbow.

“You’re not fine. Did you sprain your ankle? Why weren’t you watching where you were going?”

Her cheeks flamed. “I was distracted. I didn’t mean to do it.”

“Distracted?”

“Yes,” she rasped, taking another step and wincing.

“By what?”

“By *you*, obviously,” she huffed, jerking her arm free of his grip. “By your coldness and your anger at me over something that is *not* my fault. Besides, you said yourself that you’ve sampled the delights of the flesh. How do your own experiences compare, sir? Shall you be casting the first stone?”

“Madeline—”

She shrugged away, taking another hobbling step. “I didn’t ask for Mr. Warren’s attention. But even if I had, there is no agreement between us. And so long as you reject my proposal, I don’t see that there’s anything wrong with kissing all the men in England!”

“Oh, you think so?” he called after her.

“I do, sir!”

He grabbed her by the shoulders, halting her steps. Then he was pressing in, his body flush against her back as she felt his hot breath fanning over her ear. “If you *do* become my wife, Madeline, that will be the first thing to change. You won’t kiss another man. You won’t bloody *look* at another man,” he growled, his gloved hand inching from her shoulder to gently circle her throat as he pressed closer.

She whimpered, her chin tilting back as she offered her neck.

“You won’t *need* another man,” he added, his lips all but brushing her ear. “Because I will satisfy your every want and desire...even the ones you don’t yet know you have.”

They panted, their warm breath fanning each other’s faces. His amber eyes were narrowed on her. A beast awoke inside her, uncurling like a serpent. She wanted to rise to his challenge. She wanted to be bold.

“Prove it,” she murmured, secretly loving the feel of his hand at her throat. Was it strange to admit it was oddly calming? It felt like her spiraling anxiety suddenly had a center, an anchor point. She could feel as chaotic as she wanted because Charles Bray was holding her steady. He was in control—

But then he was cursing and letting her go as if her touch burned him. He took a step back, leaving her reeling, sensing spinning.

Sucking in another breath of icy air, she limped away. She clenched her teeth with each step, trying to ignore the pain in her left ankle. All the while, the snow fell thick and heavy.

“Madeline, stop.”

“No.”

“You can’t walk another half mile on a twisted ankle!”

“Watch me!”

“Obstinate, headstrong girl,” he muttered. “Will you *stop* walking!”

“I can’t stop,” she cried, tears in her eyes. “I have to go back to Alcott. I can’t stay here another second. Your coldness and your indecision are worse than this storm and I cannot bear it!”

“Just—*god*—let me take you to Warren’s,” he called. “We’ll rest for a quarter of an hour. You can put that ankle up. Maybe the snows will stop.”

“Or maybe they’ll get worse,” she countered.

“If I bring you back looking like this, the duchess will flay me. *Please*, Madeline. I like my skin where it is. If you go to Warren’s, I can run on ahead to Alcott and get a horse. Then at least you’ll be out of the thick of the snow. You can ride back and be warm again by dinnertime.”

She raised a wary brow. “And you won’t punish him like you’re punishing me?”

“Just...come with me. Please.” He held out a gloved hand, willing her to take it.

After a moment’s hesitation, she placed her hand in his, and he led them off the walking path towards the glowing lights of Warren’s snow-covered cabin.



Madeline held on to Charles's arm as he knocked on the door of Warren's cabin. It couldn't be larger than a single room, surely. Two windows framed the door. Beneath the windows on the narrow porch, chopped wood was evenly stacked, kept safely away from the falling snow.

She was about to peer inside the partially shuttered window when the door creaked open. Warren stood there in his shirtsleeves, silhouetted by the glowing fire within. He filled the doorframe, his presence instantly piercing her like an arrow.

"Charles—what—" His dark eyes went wide as he took in Madeline on his arm. He was immediately on alert. "What happened?"

"She tripped on the path and may have twisted an ankle. Let us in," Charles muttered.

Warren stood back, pulling the door open wider. Charles led the way inside, taking Madeline by the hand. Her gaze darted around, memorizing the details of the one-room cabin. It was cozy. A narrow bed sat along the back wall, and there was room enough for a table and chairs near the large stone hearth. A kind of kitchen took up the other corner of the room, and there was a wash basin lined with freshly laundered clothes. Herbs hung suspended over the table, giving the entire room an earthy, spiced aroma. A pot of soup simmered on a chain over the fire, making Madeline's stomach growl.

It was a comfortable space, she decided, even if it was far and away removed from her own lived experience.

Charles took off his gloves. Then he unwound his scarf and shrugged out of his heavy great coat, hanging it all on a pair of hooks by the door. Madeline stilled as he stepped up behind her, his hands brushing her shoulders. Warren watched as Charles unbuckled the clasp of her heavy wool cape, his chilled fingers brushing the underside of her chin. He slipped the cape off her shoulders, her golden curls spilling loose.

“Thank you,” she murmured, her eyes lost to the intensity of Warren’s heated gaze. He took in her disheveled state, and she fought the urge to turn away or hide behind her hands. At the very least she attempted to smooth her numb fingers through her curls, working out the tangles as she tugged her long tresses over one shoulder.

Charles ignored the other man, hanging her cape next to his coat and ushering her to a chair. He dragged it closer to the fire. “Sit down and let me see that foot.”

“I’m fine,” she said, teeth still chattering.

“I’ll not let up until I know the extent of the injury.”

“What happened?” said Warren from his place by the door.

“My toe just caught a root and I fell,” she explained. “It was barely an incident. Mr. Bray is just being over-protective.”

She could feel Warren frowning, even with her back turned. “Why were you out in this weather? It’s supposed to storm all night.”

Madeline sank down onto the wooden chair.

“We were delivering the baskets,” Charles replied, dropping to one knee by her side.

“In this weather?”

“Christ, enough questions. Be useful and get her something warm to drink. She’s nearly frozen.”

In moments, Madeline heard clanking and rustling form behind her, but she couldn’t turn away from the flames, not as

the fire worked its magic, warming her up from the outside in.

“May I?” Charles murmured, tapping her knee.

She glanced down, eyes wide. “I...yes, alright.”

He was methodical, lifting her sodden skirts only high enough to expose her left ankle. Then he was undoing the laces of her leather half-boot. As he slipped it off, she winced.

“Your foot is like ice,” he said, massaging her ankle with gentle fingers. “Why didn’t you say anything sooner?”

“It’s fine,” she murmured. “We were nearly finished.”

“She should take the stockings off,” came Warren’s voice. “Dry them by the fire.”

She stiffened. “Oh no, I couldn’t possibly. We don’t want to intrude. We’ll be on our way again soon.”

But Charles was already reaching up under her skirts, searching for the top of her stocking.

She hissed, slapping at his hands. “I will do that, sir.”

He sat back on his heels, letting her push his hands away. His expression was still unreadable. Was he angry? Annoyed?

Face aflame, she tried to keep her skirts lowered as she peeled the wet stocking down her leg. She was mortified as she handed it over to Charles, who handed it directly to Warren. He placed it on a drying rack by the fire’s edge.

“Now the other one,” Charles directed.

“That foot is fine. I only twisted the left one—”

“Take it off.”

The tone of his voice had her reaching for the laces, but he beat her to it, carefully tugging the knot free and loosening the top of the boot enough to slip it off. He waited for her to peel off the other stocking, which he handed to Warren.

And then she was sitting before Warren’s hearth, her dress up around her knees, her stockings and boots perched at the fire’s edge to dry. At least from this angle, the men could

hardly see anything. She wiggled her frozen toes, the heat almost painful.

“Here.” Warren tried to hand her a steaming cup of tea, but Charles stood, snatching it from his hands.

“I will do that.” He turned his back on Warren, offering it to her himself, his face still that same mask of frustration and pain.

She sighed, accepting the tea with a murmur of thanks.

“What happened?” Warren said for a third time.

Madeline glanced between the men, her anxiety rising. Did he suspect what she did? Would he be angry with her too? “We told you...we were delivering baskets to those caught in the Carrington fire—”

“I’m not asking what you were doing,” he said gruffly. “I mean what happened. Between the two of you, what happened?”

She stiffened, turning away to face the fire, the cup of tea warming her frozen fingers.

“Leave it alone,” Charles muttered.

Warren folded his thick arms across his broad chest. “You’re in *my* house. I get to ask questions in my own house, Charles.”

“Leave it, John,” he repeated, his voice little more than a growl.

She could feel Warren’s eyes on her. She could always feel him. In the span of three days, he’d burrowed beneath her skin. She took a sip of the tea, avoiding his gaze. It was strong. An odd brew, both peppery and herbal. And there was a natural sweetness to it too...mallow root perhaps?

“Ahh,” he said from behind her, and Madeline knew she was caught. “She told you then. I figured she would, what with a proposal on the table.”

Charles launched to his feet. “God damn it, John. I said leave it.”



“In my defense, the first kiss happened before I knew you were back.” Warren sounded almost amused. Just as she thought, it was all a tease. It didn’t mean anything to him. She was a fool to ever think otherwise.

“And it will not happen again,” Charles challenged.

“She’s not your wife yet. Until she is, I think the lady gets to make her own decisions,” Warren countered. “Besides, perhaps seeing her in *my* arms will light a fire beneath you to make up your damn mind.”

“Don’t bloody test me, John.”

“Then don’t be a damned fool.”

She spun around on her chair, setting the cup of tea aside as she took in their angry postures. “Mr. Warren just likes to tease,” she tried to soothe. “It meant nothing. Just ask him.”

Charles couldn’t tear his eyes away from the burly gamekeeper. “Is that true? Kissing the woman who has offered me her hand meant nothing to you? Just one more game?”

Warren shrugged. “Sure, we’ll go with that. I’m just a tease. Nothing I say or do ever means anything.”

But Charles wasn’t backing down. “Then explain the first kiss, John.”

Warren met him stare for stare, dark eyes meeting golden brown.

Ever so slowly, Charles’s shoulders sagged, and he shook his head. “John...”

“Stop,” the gamekeeper growled, his dark gaze darting to Madeline and back to the vicar.

Both men stiffened. A thousand unspoken words seemed to pass between them with a look.

Madeline felt an odd sort of tingling. It started in her chest and spiraled outward. It was a sense of knowing something before one actually knew it...a nervous sort of stumbling upon the truth. She leaned back, eyes wide, taking in the pained expressions on both men’s faces.

“Oh god,” she murmured, her gaze settling on Warren.  
“It’s you.”



Warren slowly turned to face her; his scarred brow raised in question. “What about me?”

She glanced from Charles back to the gamekeeper, her pulse racing. “I...it’s you. You’re the one he loves. The reason he won’t give me an answer. It’s you.”

Charles stepped forward anxiously. “Madeline, please—”

She stood on her bare feet, inching away from him until she could put the chair between them. She clung to the top of the curved wood, her gaze darting between the men. Slowly, she shook her head, her mind spinning like a top. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s not what you think,” he reasoned.

“Well how can you know that, unless you actually know what she thinks,” said Warren, leaning against his doorframe.

Charles groaned. “For once, will you stop trying to be so damn clever?”

“Sure. Let me just sit here quietly and drum my fingers whilst the two of you have a conversation about me...*without* me,” Warren snarled.

“Don’t be a martyr either—”

“Oh, there’s the pot calling the kettle black, seeing as you’re the self-proclaimed Prince of Martyrdom—”

“Just *talk* to me,” she called over their bickering. “This doesn’t...I don’t...make it make sense,” she said with a

helpless shrug.

Warren narrowed his dark eyes. “What doesn’t make sense to you?”

“Well...I don’t...how does that even work? Can a man love another man? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

He scoffed. “You’ve never heard of such a thing because you are the kind of well-bred lady who never even bothers with opening her own doors. Your family has kept you in the dark about the reality of a man loving another man. It’s hardly polite conversation for a viscount’s drawing room.”

“And now you’re teasing me again,” she replied. “Which is wholly unfair, as I’m only trying to understand.” She turned to Charles. “You told me you loved another but that you could never marry. You said you couldn’t marry me with this other person still in your heart. It’s Mr. Warren...isn’t it? He’s the reason you won’t marry me.”

Warren went still, his eyes locked on the vicar. Meanwhile, Charles groaned, dragging a hand through his tousled curls. They carefully avoided looking at her.

Did they both really think her so oblivious? Madeline had made a profession out of studying other people. She lived her life on the edges of drawing rooms, watching the other debutantes successfully court the men of the *ton*. Madeline saw it all playing before her like an intricately staged drama. She knew how to read looks and gestures. She knew what it meant when a man gazed at your throat overlong. She’d watched more than one acquaintance be lured into a dark garden by the promise of a twinkling eye.

But all those little plays at courting were between a man and a woman. She’d never once looked to spot the same between two men. Now that she adjusted her expectations, she felt a fool. The truth was right before her. In fact, they were rather terrible at hiding it.

“What makes you think I was referring to Warren in any way?” said Charles, daring to sound nonchalant.

“Aside from the way you are both looking at each other now?” she replied, gesturing between them. “He said he doesn’t like being called ‘John.’ Only when *you* do it, his face lights up. He catches us kissing under the gazebo and he’s furious. I thought his jealousy was aimed at you...that *he* wanted to be the one kissing me. Now I think it leaned the other way. I think he was jealous of me for kissing *you*. And your inability to marry makes sense if your lover is a man, for is that not...unnatural?”

“There is *nothing* unnatural about love,” Warren said, arms crossed over his chest. “His Church and your *ton* like to make up rules the rest of us are expected to follow, but the world is not so black and white.”

She nodded. “I know...or I can admit at the very least that I’ve long assumed there is much about the world that has been kept from me. I have no first-hand knowledge, as I’ve warned you both already. I may understand the world of courting in a theoretical sense, but I know nothing about the realities of marriage or love or-or intimacy,” she added, all but stumbling over the word.

“Then you’re not...” Charles cleared his throat, glancing from Warren back to her. “Are you not disgusted by the idea? Are you not appalled?”

She blinked, heart racing as she took in the fear in his eyes, the worry and anxiety. Did he truly care for her opinion? She glanced back to Warren, who was wearing his emotions behind much thicker armor. He looked almost bored, the golden light of the fire dancing across the sharp planes of his face. It made his scars glow almost red. She wanted to trace them with her fingers. She wanted to know how he got them. Would he ever tell her?

But like Charles he just stood there, waiting for her to speak.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

Both sets of their shoulders deflated a little as they shared a quick glance.

“What could you do that would make me so disgusted?” she added, genuinely interested in hearing their answer. “As Mr. Warren says, love is natural. If the poets are to be believed, it comes in infinite varieties—familial love, romantic love, unrequited love, love of God, love of nature. I may only know love in the poetic sense, but are not all these forms valid?”

Charles huffed, pacing away towards the window. “It is one thing to speak of love like the poets do, Madeline. It is quite another to be faced with it, to know without doubt that it is real.” He spun at the wall, facing them both. “You cannot hide from the truth once you know it, once you’ve seen it with your own eyes. And if you saw...if you knew...surely you must hate us.”

She worried her bottom lip, glancing from the stoic gamekeeper back to the anxious vicar. “I...do you hate *yourself*? For loving him, I mean,” she added.

He stiffened, turning away again.

Warren uncrossed his arms, shoving his hands in the deep pockets of his trousers. “Answer her, Charles.”

He spun back around. “This isn’t as easy for me as it has been for you, John. We’re not all so fearless. And you know my position. You know what the Church teaches, what *I’m* supposed to teach. And it’s not just a sin, it’s a *crime*. Social stigma is one thing, religious persecution is quite another. But being locked in a jail cell is my limit! I cannot bring that shame down on us, on my uncle—”

“We’ve been discreet, Charles,” Warren tried to soothe. “We’re always discreet—”

“So discreet that Madeline knows,” he countered with a frustrated wave of his hand. “James caught us last night too, or had you forgotten? I have no doubt he told the duchess everything. And he tells Burke everything too. My uncle knows. He’s always known—”

“Wait—” Madeline stepped around the chair, her gaze still darting from one to the other. “James caught you? Where?”

How?”

Charles groaned, pacing away, both hands in his hair. It was Warren who turned to her and muttered, “In the hothouse. Just before dinner. And Burke knows,” he added.

Charles cursed under his breath. “How can you be sure?”

“Because I told him.”

Madeline and Charles shared a confused look before he was launching forward. “Christ’s sake, Warren. Why the hell would you do that?”

“As you say, the duke was already going to tell him. And he’s my friend, Charles. He gave good advice on the matter, in fact,” he added, that smirk playing at his lips again.

“Oh, I’m sure Horatio Burke was full of brilliant ideas,” he scoffed. “The man is an arrogant showman, John. And what works for him could easily see *us* pilloried in the village square! We don’t all have a duke in our back pocket to bail us out. Burke could commit murder or high treason and the right words from James would wash it all away!”

“He won’t say anything. None of them will.”

Charles solemnly shook his head. “You don’t know that.”

“They don’t want the heat of this scandal any more than we do. Which is why you should consider the duke’s offer—”

“Which is why I should leave!”

Madeline glanced between them. Rosalie told her about the offer James made. If Charles was willing to consider it, they could live here in the shadow of Alcott. They could make their home in Finchley. If his heart belonged to Warren, did it not make sense for him to live in the place where Warren could be nearest? Why was he so determined to go? Was he really so afraid of the love they shared?

Looking at him now, she saw the truth in his eyes. *Yes*. Charles Bray was afraid to let himself love Warren. Madeline’s heart broke for him, for them both.

Meanwhile Warren just grimaced. “Fine. Take the coward’s way if you wish. You have before.” He stomped past them both, dropping to one knee at the edge of the hearth. The soup pot had been steadily boiling over. He took it off the flames and removed the lid, the smell of the savory broth filling the cabin.

Charles watched him with narrowed eyes. He wore such a look of longing, a look of need.

Madeline’s own gaze continued to dart between them. Her every feeling revolted at the idea of these two men being vilified or otherwise harmed for daring to do something as vital to the human condition as love each other. What kind of world did they live in where they had to hide what there was between them?

It made her ill to think of the extravagant displays put forth by the *ton* every season. All the bacchanalian balls, the teas, the ostentatious garden parties—they were all themed around true love and finding the perfect match. She’d been pushed and prodded into openly pretending to feel love for a man as boring as Lord Everton, when she could dare summon up a feeling stronger than mild irritation.

And yet, all this was acceptable. Nay, it was encouraged. Ladies and gentlemen ought to show more than they feel. She’d heard the word ‘love’ bandied about so often, it had started to lose any real meaning.

Now she stood here in the quiet of a gamekeeper’s cabin with two tortured souls, feeling the frayed and tattered edges of a forbidden love that was tearing them both apart. And somehow, she’d stumbled her way into the very middle of it, throwing herself at Charles without a care for his past or his present hesitation.

Her heart thrummed as she felt a burning sense of guilt. Warren was right; she’d been selfish. She’d been cruel. She was adding needlessly to their suffering by putting Charles in a position of having to choose between them. The harsh reality was that he’d already chosen. Over and over again, his heart



cried out for John Warren. He just couldn't ever have what he truly wanted. None of them could.

She shook her head, refocusing her attention. "What happened?" she repeated. "With James, I mean."

"We were not discrete," Warren replied, balancing the soup before him.

Charles stepped back, letting Warren place it on the table.

"What did you do?" she asked again. "What did he see that has you both so very concerned?"

Warren raised that scarred brow, his lips turned into a smirk. "You can't be serious."

"Why not?"

"We can't just—it's not something to be talked of in front of a lady," added Charles.

She crossed her arms, chin lifted in the same way she'd seen Rosalie do so many times before. "You mean the lady you have both kissed...*twice*? The lady who proposed to you, Charles...*twice*!"

"Did you now," Warren muttered, his gaze darkening. "You kissed her again too? My, you have been busy."

Charles groaned, pacing away.

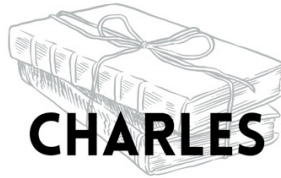
"You say you need more time to consider my proposal," she called after him. "Well now I need *this*. I'm a visual person, Charles. I need to see things to understand them, I need to experience it. If I can hear a piece of music first, I can recreate it far easier than merely seeing the sheet music. Same with art. Don't give me book on light, *show* me a Gainsborough. I believe this too is a puzzle I can help solve, but I must understand first."

Slowly, Charles turned, amber eyes wide, lips parted slightly.

"What are you asking us?" Warren said for them both.

"Well, I cannot have an opinion on something unless I know what it is I'm to have an opinion about," she replied.

“You both seem to think that your shared expression of love will revolt and repel me. You believe you must hide away, even from me. But we can never know unless you show me. So...*show* me.”



“*Y*ou’re mad,” Warren muttered, shaking his head. He sounded almost amused.

“Why is it mad?” she countered. “Mr. Bray loves you. Even knowing he can’t have you, he still won’t consider marrying me.”

Charles groaned again, his heart feeling shredded by sharp claws. Why did she have to so easily say the words that always choked the air out of him?

“He loves you against all adversity. Our strict society, the exacting rules of the Church, the very laws of England are against you both,” she went on. “And yet still I see the way he looks for you, the way he waits for you and watches you. He loves you, Warren. I want to see what it is you share. I want to understand.”

“Why?” he challenged.

She shrank a little under his stare. “How can I ever hope to mirror for him what you offer, if I am kept wholly in the dark?”

Charles froze, pulse pounding. “Wait—what are you saying? You can’t mean...”

“I think she’s saying she’s still interested in marrying you, Charles,” Warren teased.

“But...*why*?” he muttered, wholly flabbergasted.

She glanced between them again. “Well, you can’t possibly marry him,” she said, gesturing at the gamekeeper. “But I’d hate to think of you both being miserable and alone forever. And I’ve told you again and again that we can make this marriage whatever *we* want it to be,” she added.

He shook his head. “Madeline—”

“You keep saying a marriage is between a man and a woman,” she said over him. “Well, I am not convinced. If my long experience as a wallflower has taught me anything, it is that a marriage with one man being faithful to one lady is the exception, not the rule. Why must our marriage be any different?”

“You move in a circle wholly apart from ours,” Charles replied with a shake of his head. “That style of living may work in London, but I am a lowly curate. Soon to be a vicar. My world is small, Madeline. I am held to a different standard than your godless lords of the *ton*. A higher standard. If there was even a whiff of impropriety—”

“But surely, a marriage to *me* would safeguard your relationship with Warren,” she countered. “What the people would see is a loving marriage between a vicar and his wife. We would play our roles, Charles. And what care would they have if your childhood friend was often over for dinner or joining you on walks to visit your parishioners? You could live out in the open, safe in the knowledge that you had a wife who would shield you both from unkind gossip.”

As she spoke, her vision of their shared future became clearer and clearer in his mind. This was sensible, and more than fair. He was doing her a favor that would offer her financial freedom. Additionally, their marriage would save her from the infernal pressures of the high society husband hunt. And she was offering him the chance to have everything he’d ever dreamed of but never thought possible.

*More.* The words of the duke floated through his mind. *The possibility of more.*

Oh Christ, this couldn’t possibly be what he meant...was it? How could James Corbin ever imply such an arrangement?

But still, the thought nagged at him. He could be with Warren knowing his wife was entering the marriage with her eyes wide open. He could love Warren, grow old with Warren. And he could have a wife too. Madeline was sweet and kind, she was lovely as a painting. And if she truly wanted to embark on such an arrangement with them, she must be fearless too.

So why did he hesitate?

“I won’t pretend I know anything about what a marriage ought to look like,” she went on. “But would it not be better to craft a marriage that works for all of us, regardless of whether it is the right kind of marriage for someone else?” she reasoned. “We are the ones who will have to live with this,” she finished with a shrug.

“And what is *this*?” Charles challenged.

“Well, I don’t rightly know,” she replied innocently. “But if you would only *show* me—”

“Madeline, we cannot possibly—”

“Charles, just shut up and kiss me.” Warren pushed himself off the table and closed the narrow space between them, grabbing hold of his coat. With a fierce tug, he pulled him forward.

“John, we can’t—”

But he wasn’t stopping. Warren kissed him, molding their lips together with an eager groan. In moments, his tongue was tracing Charles’s full bottom lip, seeking entry into his mouth. Warren teased, cupping the nape of his neck, his fingers digging into his curls.

Charles was always helpless once he had that first taste of Warren on his lips. He tasted like salt and honey, his coarsely shaved chin chafing against his skin. The man just did something to him, turning his mind to scrambled eggs with a curl of his finger. He sighed into the kiss, his own hands gripping Warren at the waist.

Too soon it was over, and Warren was pulling back. Charles’s head swam as he blinked his eyes open, suddenly

remembering where he was and why. He spun around in Warren's grip, ready to see Madeline's look of confusion and disgust.

But she didn't look disgusted or even the slightest bit upset. She looked *alive*. Invigorated. Her cheeks were flushed apple red, and her blue eyes were glassy. Her tousled blonde curls framed her narrow face.

Charles had a sudden image of her in his bed, those blonde curls fanned out across white sheets. Her naked skin would press against his, so soft and supple compared to Warren's hard planes. He would lay against her, feeling those slender curves mold to him. Behind him, Warren would press in closer, cupping her breast and tweaking her pert nipple as his other hand stroked Charles's bare cock.

He was getting hard just thinking about it. God, he wanted it. What the hell was happening to him? Is that why he hesitated? Was he going to hold out for a version of this future where Warren was not just his, but theirs to share, theirs to love?

His heart twisted in his chest at the thought. He was jealous by nature. He knew Warren was more worldly than him. As lads, Warren was always tipping maids into the hay. More than once, he'd caught him with a girl, his cock in her mouth. It had made him green with envy. He couldn't bear the idea of sharing Warren with anyone. Not a look, not a touch.

So why did the idea of Madeline kissing him make his cock hard? Why was he secretly thrilled at the feel of her watching them kiss?

*Fucking hell—*

The truth set in. He wouldn't merely be sharing Warren with Madeline. He'd be sharing Madeline with Warren too. That was the *more* he craved. Which made him a monster. He couldn't possibly ask her to consider a marriage to them both. It wasn't done. And she was a proper lady; a viscount's daughter. She deserved a proper marriage.

He should turn her down. She should run from them before they corrupted her further.

“Well?” Warren said in that same teasing tone. “Is it what you expected, my lady?”

“I hardly know,” she replied, her pink lips still parted.

Charles fought a groan, desperate to cross the room and place his thumb between those parted lips. He wanted to feel the warmth of her tongue. But he had to stop.

Warren still stood there with one arm around him. “Would you like more of a demonstration, lovely?”

“I...how is it different?” she murmured, her eyes on Charles.

He glanced between them, heart stopping. “What do you mean?”

She took a step closer, her bare feet soundless on Warren’s planked wooden floor. “I mean kissing Warren and kissing me. It must be different for you. How so?”

Warren’s hold on him relaxed as he glanced down with that calm, satisfied look on his face. “Perhaps you need to refresh your memory,” Warren said in his ear, giving his hip a squeeze.

Now it was Charles who felt his cheeks heating. Was it possible they both wanted this too? Why else would Warren encourage this? He was more possessive than Charles. “I...”

Warren dropped his hand away in open invitation. “Kiss her, Charles.”

*Oh god—*

Charles stepped forward, his mind emptying of all logical thought as he closed the space between himself and Madeline. She was so petite. So delicate. And she’d admitted to being bullied in her past. The urge to be her protector flooded him. He wanted his hands on her, wanted to warm her, and keep her safe.

One word screamed through him, licking down his spine, hot like molten fire.

*Mine.*

He raised both hands, taking a light hold of her upper arms. She stilled, her chin tipping up towards his. She had the prettiest spray of soft freckles across her cheeks and over her nose. The firelight flickered across the planes of her face.

“Our size is different, obviously,” she murmured.

“Obviously,” he replied, his gaze darting to where his hands held her. His thumbs brushed the soft fabric of her ruby red pelisse.

She shifted on her feet, her own hands rising to brace softly at his sides. The touch was so featherlight, he may have imagined it. “You can tell me if I’m doing it wrong,” she stammered. “If I—it’s alright, you can—”

“Madeline,” he murmured, raising a hand to cup that pointed chin.

She bit her bottom lip, eyes wide as she looked up at him. “You don’t have to—”

“Stop talking so I can kiss you,” he teased, letting himself take what he wanted.

If he was going to hell for this, he didn’t care. He kissed her for the third time in as many days, this time letting himself dig his fingers into her loose hair. She let out the most perfect sound low in her throat, so feminine and sweet.

He took his time, kissing her gently, exploring her reactions. She wanted to know what was different, so he analyzed. With Warren, he was always the one feeling breathless. Warren moved them like one body, claiming Charles in whatever way he wanted. And Charles let him. He needed Warren to take control; he craved it.

Kissing Madeline felt entirely different. He felt more grounded in her arms, more aware of himself and her. If he placed his fingers to the pulse at her throat, he’d feel the way she was wild for him. Heaven help him, the idea was making



him so hard. He had to know. He slipped his hand from her chin, down the column of her throat, pressing two fingers to her fluttering pulse. It thrummed, sure and strong.

She may be a small thing, but she was fiery. And her fire was burning for *him*. He needed to taste it. Dropping his mouth away from hers, he pulled gently on the curls at her nape, bending her neck until he could latch on to her neck, flicking and teasing with his lips.

Christ, her skin was so soft. With a sharp inhale, he filled his senses with that perfect soft scent of rose oil and groaned, needing more. He dragged his tongue over her pulse, and she jolted in his arms, holding tight to his elbows.

“Ohmygod,” she gasped, her body wracked with a sharp shiver.

“She’s so responsive,” came Warren’s deep voice from just behind him.

He stilled, loosening his hold on her, his nose brushing the collar of her pelisse.

She trembled in his arms, trying to lean away. “Was that... I mean...” Madeline’s eyes were glowing with awakened desire and her lips were still glossy with his kisses.

Unable to help himself, he lifted a hand and brushed his thumb over her lips. “You kiss like a goddess, Madeline,” he told her. “Venus herself should take note.”

Her eyes darted from him to Warren and back and she looked suddenly worried.

“What’s the matter?”

“Warren did that,” she murmured. “He-he kissed me and touched my lip with his thumb. He—you—” She closed her eyes, shaking her head, unable to say more.

Charles glanced at Warren, surprised to find that the jealousy which had been eating him alive all afternoon was now all but gone. Warren’s presence surrounded them both. Not content to watch them kiss from the corner, he’d crossed the room and was now close enough that he could wrap them

both in his arms. And Charles had seen that look on his face enough times before. Warren was hungry...and not for the soup sitting on his table.

Heart hammering in his chest, Madeline still folded in his arms, Charles held Warren's gaze. If he was destined for the fiery pit, he was ready to burn. "Show me."



Warren smirked, not tearing his eyes from Charles. His cock was hard as iron. Watching Charles kiss Madeline again, knowing she was asking for it, knowing they both knew he was there, it unlocked something in his mind, something wild and hungry.

Her words hammered through his head. Could this be real? Could this lady truly be considering an arrangement with them both? It was unthinkable. And yet, Burke's words last night still spun through his mind. There was a way to have Charles. There was a way to have *more* than Charles if Warren wanted it. If he could accept the sacrifices that might come...

In this moment, it didn't feel like he was being asked to sacrifice a damn thing.

"Are you asking me to kiss your wife, Charles?" he teased, still not quite ready to believe Charles was so perfectly at ease with this situation either.

"She's not my wife," Charles replied, and Warren saw the way Madeline tensed. "You've made me no promises yet," he added more gently. "Madeline, you said in the woods there is no agreement between us. You can kiss any man in England. Those were your words."

Warren stiffened, fighting his rising sense of rejection. "Any man, you say? Shall I go fetch Porter the pigman? Or perhaps you'd like to feel the brush of Harry's thick mustache against your lips."

“No—” She turned in Charles’s arms. “I only want *you*. I want both of you,” she added, her fingers brushing down the lapel of Charles’s coat. “If you will teach me...if you will show me what this can be, I’m willing to learn. I am not so willing to give up on Charles as a suitable husband just because of the minor impediment of his already having a lover. Not when the man in question is, well...you,” she finished awkwardly, her cheeks flaming red at her admittance.

Christ, this girl was in for it.

Warren stepped forward, wrapping an arm around her narrow shoulders, ready to silence whatever ridiculous and poignant thing was about to slip from her lips next. He claimed her mouth, pressing himself between her and Charles, not caring how close Charles chose to stay. With one hand in her curls, he dropped the other to the buttons of her pelisse.

She gasped, tearing her lips away. “Warren—what—”

“Easy, lovely,” he soothed. “Nothing else needs to come off. But it’s still soaking wet up to your knees. Give it to Charles to dry by the fire. Besides, then we can more easily kiss this pretty neck,” he added, trailing a calloused finger from her jaw, down the line of her neck, ending at her sternal notch.

She shivered and he already wanted to break his promise. This girl was so sensitive, so easy to please. It was going to be fun to tease her, to hold her at the edge of release until she was squirming on his tongue.

She stood before him now wearing only her pretty little walking dress. It was one he’d seen the duchess wear before, styled in a pattern of stripes and pink flowers. The bodice was a bit loose and cut too wide for her slender frame. It let him see the sweet rise of her breasts with each breath.

“Lesson number one in kissing a man,” he said. “Don’t be afraid to take what you want. Let your hands move as they see fit. Your lips too—”

“I want to touch your hair,” she blurted, covering her mouth with a small hand.

Next to her, Charles huffed a soft laugh.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I—it’s just that I’ve already felt his hair, and it’s lovely, and I’ve never felt yours and—”

“Stop apologizing. That’s going to drive me crazy. In this place, between the three of us, there’s no need for it. Understood? Take what you want. Hold nothing back.”

She nodded, biting that bottom lip as she reached out with both hands, her thin fingers dragging through his hair. He had it tied back at his nape, the end’s falling between his shoulders. She surprised him when her deft fingers worked the leather tie. She tossed it aside, her fingers going back to his hair.

He glanced at Charles, who just shrugged, a smirk playing at his lips.

She flipped his hair in two pieces over either shoulder. “You know, long hair isn’t very fashionable.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” he muttered.

“I’m not disappointed,” she replied, studying it with a gentle touch. “I like it on you. Not all men could look so handsome with such long hair. Perhaps your scars add to the effect or your general size or—”

“Madeline?” He raised both his hands, gently cuffing her wrists, holding her still.

She glanced up at him, those blue eyes like deep pools of spring water.

“You don’t have to say every single thing you’re thinking out loud,” he soothed. “You’re nervous, and that’s fine. Be nervous. But you said you wanted a lesson in kissing, and yet here we are, three people not kissing.”

She perked up. “Can three people do that?” Immediately she bit that damn lip again, trying to tug her wrists away. “I’m sorry. You just said not to say everything I’m thinking and I—oh, *no*—and I just apologized again too. I’m not good at this. I just—”

“No,” he laughed. “That was a good one, because it was actually about kissing.” He glanced over at Charles, surprised

he could go so long with his cock so hard without a single thing being done about it. “What do you think, Charles? You’re the Cambridge educated one amongst us. Can three people kiss?”

His eyes went wide. “I...”

Warren laughed. Christ, he loved this nonsensical man. “Get in here and kiss us, Charles. The lady has a theory to test.” He wrapped a firm arm around Charles, pulling him closer.

Charles came willingly, his own hand snaking around Madeline’s back to rest atop the one Warren already had there. “I’ve never...”

“Neither have I,” Madeline admitted, her eyes brightening, as if relieved to know she wasn’t alone.

It gave Warren an idea. “Well, if we’re all making confessions, then I suppose I should say I’ve never kissed two people at once either. But you two seem nice—even if you did shove your way in, interrupting my dinner. Now, start kissing, or it’s back in the snow you go.”

Madeline let out a soft laugh that set Charles at ease and Warren knew they were ready, they just needed someone to lead them. Warren was more than ready to be their guide down the path towards depravity. If it meant more kissing, he’d lead them with bells on his shoes.

He tipped Madeline’s face back and kissed her soundly, teasing her with his tongue. She tasted faintly of his peppermint and mallow root tea. The moment she let her own tongue flick against his lips, he pulled back. He raised his hand from Charles’s back to his nape. “Kiss her, Charles. Taste how sweet.”

Charles pressed in, moving his mouth against hers in a way that had Warren’s cock twitching with need. He may be a novice at kissing women, but he certainly wasn’t a novice at kissing. He’d had more than enough practice with Warren over the years. He led boldly, taking what he wanted from her lips, dominating her in the way Warren liked to dominate him.

Madeline was less tentative now too. She had her hands raised, clutching to Warren's shirt and Charles's coat lapel. As she kissed Charles, Warren took her hand, loosening her hold on his shirt. He helped her flatten her hand against his chest. Taking her wrist, he dragged her hand across his chest, and she shivered, her fingers clenching.

He smiled, letting her go, and her hand moved on its own, tracing over his chest, up his neck, back into his hair. Christ, she was a quick study. He wanted to teach her more. Hell, he'd teach her everything.

When she gave a little tug, he groaned, dropping his face until he was pressing in around them both. He gave Charles's nape a soft tug, just enough to pull him away from Madeline's mouth, enough to let Warren flick with his tongue. Charles groaned, quickly learning the game. It was messy and strange, but Warren fucking loved it. They kissed as one, their mouths moving without pattern, their tongues teasing. Madeline whimpered and they fought each other to be the one to taste it first.

He tightened his hold on both their napes, loving the near-immediate surrender they offered him, bending to his will, to the firmness of his hands. He could get drunk off this feeling of power. Charles had always been his to use and cherish. Would Madeline be so willing to play the same games?

He pulled out of the kiss first, dropping his mouth to taste that same spot on her neck that Charles had teased minutes before. She broke the kiss with a gasp. "Oh my—*oh*—it feels so good. I don't—I don't know what's happening to me," she whimpered.

"Are you soaking wet, lovely?" he teased. "Are you aching for us?"

Charles dropped his mouth to kiss the other side of her neck and she shivered.

"I don't—wet?" She sounded confused.

"Between your legs, pretty girl," he murmured. "It's okay to admit that you're wet for us. One touch and you'd know the

way Charles and I are aching for you too. No shame, remember?”

“I-I don’t know.”

Warren stilled, pulling away. He looked down into her half-closed eyes. Christ, he had to know what they were dealing with here. “Madeline, tell me what you feel right now. As Charles kisses you, what do you feel? Charles, don’t stop,” he directed at him.

Charles teased with his lips and tongue, slowly moving his hands, and she squirmed.

“Talk to me, lovely,” he said again. “You usually like talking. Explain it to me.”

She licked her lips. “I...I feel hot all over.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere,” she whimpered.

“What else do you feel?”

She slid her hands through Charles’s caramel curls, bending to the press of his hands. “I—*god*—I feel a-a fluttering.”

“Where?” he pressed.

“In my stomach,” she replied. “I—I’ve never felt it like this before.”

Charles let her go, panting for breath. He looked dazed, starved.

Warren put a hand on his shoulder, stopping him from diving back in. He had eyes only for the sweet girl in their arms. He had to know. “Madeline, have you ever touched yourself?”

She blinked up at him, breathing hard. “Touch myself? I-I don’t understand.”

“Which is answer enough,” he muttered. He looked pleadingly at Charles.

“What?” Charles murmured. “What’s wrong?”



He stepped back, shaking his head and taking a deep breath. *Not now. Not like this.* They had to slow down. He didn't want any regrets. He needed to think, needed to plan this out.

“Right, here's what we're going to do.” He slowly pulled Charles away from her. “Madeline, get dressed. Charles is going to take you back to Alcott.”

Her expression fell. “But—”

“Before the duchess sends out a search party and raids my house,” he added. “The last thing we need is an angry duchess finding you here without your stockings on.”

Charles checked the time on Warren's wall clock. “Christ, it's already after five.”

“Oh no,” Madeline gasped, spinning around to reach for her things.

“Not so fast,” Warren said with a laugh, grabbing her wrist. “We're letting you go for now, but you have a job to do for us.”

She stilled. “A job?”

Charles crossed his arms. “Warren, what are you—”

“Aye, a job,” he repeated, giving Charles a knowing look. He turned his attention back to Madeline, placing his hands on her shoulders. “You want us to teach you? Here is your second lesson: self-pleasure. You will go home. And when you're alone tonight, lying in your bed, I want you to touch yourself.”

She huffed. “You keep saying that. I touch myself all the time, Warren. Look—touch, touch.” She touched her arms, her cheeks.

It was so endearing he wanted to stroke her cheek...or fuck her 'til she screamed. God, how he wanted to be the first to touch that sweet cunt. But she had to take this first step alone. He shook his head. “Stop arguing and *listen*. Tonight, while you're lying warm and snug in your bed, you're going to lift your chemise, and you're going to touch yourself between your legs.”

Her eyes went wide. “Between my legs?”

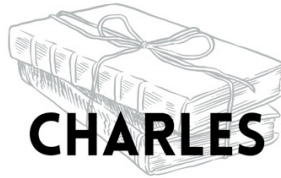
“Aye, between your legs...and perhaps give those pretty pink nipples a tweak too.”

She gasped, her arm going up reflexively to cover her chest, as if she'd forgotten she was fully clothed. “Mr. Warren!”

“Yes, that's perfect. Think of me as you do it. Think of Charles kissing your neck. Say our names and then just...see what happens, alright?”

She just blinked, biting that bottom lip. Warren would have to deal with breaking her of that habit later. If he didn't let them go now, he was going to have them both naked and moaning beneath him.

“Good. Get yourselves ready then. I'm going to fetch more wood.” Not waiting for either of them to speak, he grabbed his coat and scarf off the hook and left, closing the door with a sharp rattle.



Madeline sighed with relief as she and Charles broke through the dark trees. The snow was still falling, but not nearly as hard as before. The massive frame of Alcott Hall glowed like a beacon at the far end of the park. Half the lights of the great house were glowing, and a series of bobbing lantern lights floated about the grounds.

People were shouting, relaying back to each other. The voices echoed across the fresh blanket of snow. Something was wrong.

“Oh Charles, are they looking for me?” Madeline murmured.

He stiffened, his arm wrapped around her, helping to support her weight. “I think so.”

As if in confirmation, a lantern bobbed to their right.

“Madeline? Bray, is that you?” called a deep voice, lantern held high on a pole. Burke was wrapped up warm in layers of black. A smaller figure trotted at his side.

“Madeline! Oh, thank god,” came another familiar voice, floating across the quiet of the snowy park.

“Goddamn it, Rosalie, I said go back,” Burke shouted. “You’re in no fit condition—”

“Oh, Burke, but she’s hurt!” the duchess cried, daring to cross the space. Another lad with a lantern trotted at her side.

Madeline dropped Charles's arm, rushing forward. "Rosalie!"

Charles let her go, sure her guilt was probably eating her alive. He followed quickly behind, watching how she limped through the snow with a groan. He needed to take better care of her. He should have come for a horse, like he said he would. She deserved better than to hobble around the countryside.

"Thomas, run back and tell everyone we found her," Burke ordered.

The lad at his side darted off, cupping his hands, and calling across the snow.

"Madeline! Are you hurt?" the duchess called again.

Burke stopped moving the light towards them, too intent on seeing that the duchess wasn't left alone. He waited with one arm around her, the other holding up the lantern pole. "Bray, what the hell happened?" he barked. "Ramsay was back nearly *two* hours ago!"

"It was my fault," Madeline called. "I fell on the path and twisted my ankle."

"Oh, you poor thing." The duchess reached out with her free hand.

Madeline collapsed against her. "I'm sorry I had you worried. I'm *so* sorry!"

Charles could hear the sincerity in her voice and his own guilt ate at him. He stiffened as he watched Burke put a protective hand on her shoulder, leaning down to cup her cheek and murmur words he couldn't hear. He fought the urge to smack his hand away.

Burke gave her shoulder another squeeze. Then his gaze was back on Charles. "What happened, Bray?"

The duchess was busy giving Madeline a once-over, her hands cupping her face, her arms.

"It's as Lady Madeline said," he replied, unable to pull his eye from the man's hand on Madeline's shoulder. "She twisted

her ankle. We were near Mr. Warren's cabin, so he took us in, and we checked her ankle for injury."

Burke's scowl deepened. "Why didn't you come ahead? Why not warn us? We could have come for her." As he asked the questions, he shifted his weight, pulling Madeline closer to him.

Charles was now physically stopping himself from stepping forward. "I..."

"I asked him to stay," Madeline said, placing a soothing hand on Burke's chest. "I don't know Mr. Warren well and-and I was uncomfortable with Charles leaving. And Mr. Warren had just sat down to dinner," she added quickly. "He shared what little he had with us, and then we returned." She spun back to the duchess. "Rosalie, I'd like to thank him. He was ever so generous."

"I'm sure he was," Burke muttered, his eyes still on Charles.

Charles did his best to hold his gaze. Both men relayed the truth with their eyes.

*James told me everything,* said Burke.

*I know,* was Charles's defiant reply. What else could be said?

"Of course," the duchess soothed, turning away with Madeline on her arm. "Come, let's get you inside and off that foot. That's all that matters now. And we'll call for Doctor Rivers—"

"No," Madeline urged. "That's not necessary. Rest is all I need."

"Then you shall have it. And that's quite enough of you walking out of doors. Come. Home and bed and rest." She started leading the way back.

Madeline followed dutifully at her side.

"Come, Bray," Burke added. "James wanted to speak to you about the day's events."

Charles stifled a groan, adjusting his hat. “I should really get back to the parsonage. I need to check on my uncle. Can you tell James I’ll stop by first thing in the morning?”

Burke glared at him, glancing over his shoulder to track the progress of Rosalie and Madeline across the snow. The ladies had already been joined by two more lads toting lantern poles. He dared to close the distance between them, his boots crunching in the snow. He stopped a few feet away, the lantern casting ominous shadows over his cowed face.

“We know she proposed to you,” he said. “We know you haven’t given her an answer. And we know about you and Warren.”

Charles stiffened, meeting the man’s steely-eyed glare. “And I assume you have a warning for me?”

“Aye, I do. That girl is the closest thing Rosalie has to family,” he said, pointing with a thumb over his shoulder. “And Rosalie is *my* family. So, know that when I speak, I speak for her.”

Charles sighed. “Just say what you need to say, Burke.”

“Right, here’s the threat then: break Madeline’s heart, and I’ll break your goddamn legs. And my vengeance will be a blessing compared to what would happen to you if Tom were home. He dotes on that girl like his own sister. In his eyes, she’s a little china doll that Rosalie gets to pet and care for and love.”

Charles bristled, still fighting the urge to punch the man for putting his hands on her. “And you think I won’t care for her?”

“I’m sure you will, Bray,” Burke countered. “But I know John Warren as well as I know myself. And *he* doesn’t play with china dolls. He fucks them. Keep letting your wife-to-be get closer to him and watch what happens. You don’t seem like the sharing type.”

Charles made a sound low in his throat. “I’ll ask you not to use that kind of language in reference to Lady Madeline again. If she *does* become my wife—”

“If he says,” Burke huffed. “So, you still haven’t decided then? You’re a goddamn fool. Well, you better decide before Warren takes your choice away. And I have to say this: marriage to a penniless vicar will be a hard sell to the *ton*. But Rosalie and Madeline are determined to have you, Bray.”

He groaned, shaking his head. “I know.” He glanced hopelessly at the steward. “Can you not dissuade them? Can you not...redirect them?”

Burke huffed a laugh. “Would that I could. But when the duchess makes up her mind, there’s no changing it. Madeline is nearly as bad,” he added under his breath.

“I know,” he muttered. He may not know the lady well, but her tenacity was already an old friend.

“Madeline takes a serious risk in marrying you, Bray. But Marriage to a gamekeeper will see her cast out in the cold forever. Is that really the future you want for her?”

“You’re mad,” Charles said with a laugh that was utterly devoid of mirth.

“Am I?” he challenged with a raised brow. “So, there’s no reality, then, where you could see Warren swooping in and wooing her out from under you? He doesn’t share either, and Rosalie says they have quite the chemistry.” Burke let that sentiment hang in the quiet air between them.

Was that true? If anyone had asked Charles that same question one day ago, he would have laughed them off. No, John Warren did not share his lovers. He was possessive and domineering. He liked to own, to control.

So why then was he content to stand back and watch Charles bury his tongue in Madeline’s sweet mouth?

Fuck, if he didn’t clear his mind, he was going to get a cockstand before Mr. Burke.

“Nothing happened,” he said quickly. “Warren was... nothing happened between them.”

“Yeah, well, keep wandering down certain snowy paths, and nothing will quickly turn into *something*.”

Charles bristled. “You think so little of our honor, sir?”

*You’re a goddamn hypocrite. A godless heathen.*

He ignored the voice.

“Do whatever you want with your honor,” Burke said with a wave of his hand. “And do what you want with Madeline too.”

Charles narrowed his eyes. “You’re an odd kind of chaperone, sir.”

Burke just laughed. “Don’t mistake me, Bray. I’m not her father nor her brother. And I’m certainly not a fastidious member of your order who thinks one ought to wait until marriage to enjoy carnal relations. If the partner enthusiastically consents, that’s all that matters to me. But by all the gods, be more discreet. And don’t you dare ride that girl without a letter, Bray,” he added, leveling a finger in his face. “Get her pregnant before you wed, and I will drag you down the aisle myself. And you’ll have to be dragged because—”

“I know, I know. You’ll break my goddamn legs,” Charles said, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. But Burke outranked him and, well, he was quite a bit larger too.

Burke smirked. “By George, I think he’s got it.”

“Are we finished here? My feet are bloody freezing.”

Burke nodded. “We’re finished. But do come see James tomorrow. He really does want to know about the status of the families.”

Charles returned his nod. “I’ll come early. Just after breakfast.”

As he turned to leave, Burke called out.

“And Bray...”

He glanced back over his shoulder.

“See me too before you go, after you see James. I have an idea to put to you.”

He laughed. “You can’t just tell me now?”



“No,” Burke replied, already turning away. “I want to leave you in suspense,” he called over his shoulder. “And I want to get back inside before my damn cock freezes off!”

The sound of their shared laughter floated across the snow as they parted ways.



“*M*adeline Diana Louise, don’t you *dare* tell me nothing happened tonight!” Rosalie cried. The duchess stood with her hands on her hips at the end of Madeline’s bed, glaring at her.

Returning to Alcott had been just as tempestuous as the night of her first arrival. Madeline was ushered upstairs and fretted over by a trio of maids before being plopped into a hot bath. Rosalie brought in Mrs. Davies to check over her ankle and within the hour she was propped up in bed with a stack of pillows under her ankle, more pillows fluted behind her head, and a cup of hot cocoa in her hands.

“What do you want me to tell you?” she murmured. If she was lucky, Rosalie might assume her blush was from the heat of her bath.

Rosalie swept around the end of the bed, dropping into the empty chair beside her. “I want you to tell me the truth. You proposed to Charles Bray, and then spent the entire day with him. Then you disappeared with him for *two* hours! Are you really going to tell me that nothing happened? Has he still given you no answer?”

“Fine,” Madeline cried. “I—we—there was a kiss—kisses—we kissed.” She buried her face in her hands, waiting for Rosalie to admonish her, but the admonishment didn’t come.

“And...how was it?”

Madeline peeked through her fingers. “It was a little strange. And wonderful,” she added with a smile.

“Yes, the first few times can feel a bit odd. But you liked it? He was kind to you?”

Madeline nodded, grateful Rosalie was using a pronoun that wouldn’t force her to clarify. Remembering her mission from Warren, she leaned forward, setting her cup of cocoa aside. “Rosalie, I had a strange feeling inside me while it happened...*here*.” She placed a hand low over her stomach.

Rosalie stilled. “Oh, yes?”

“Yes, and it was a feeling I’ve never felt before. At least—I mean—I’m fairly certain I’ve never felt it before, and it made me feel...odd.”

A smile flashed over Rosalie’s face. “Yes, I’m sure it did.”

“Have you ever felt something similar? With the duke? Like a warm fluttering of bird’s wings trapped low...but also empty, like a vase. I probably sound silly,” she said, shifting back against the pillows.

“You’re not silly, Madeline,” the duchess murmured. “And perhaps you shouldn’t run from that feeling. In fact, if you really think Mr. Bray is the one, you should chase that feeling.”

“Chase it?”

Rosalie smiled, reaching forward to take her hand. “It’s the feeling of attraction, dear. Of the beginnings of a love that is rooted in lust.”

Madeline fought the urge to smile. *Lust*. She was feeling lust for Charles and Warren. And unless she was very much mistaken, Warren had implied that they felt the same for her.

“You and I grew up in very different circles Madeline,” Rosalie continued. “I know how you’ve been shielded from such realities as carnal lust. But feeling passion for the man you’ve asked to marry you is a good thing. It means there’s hope that the relationship could be more than a marriage of convenience. It could be...” She fell silent.

“It could be what?” Madeline urged.

Rosalie placed her free hand over her stomach. “Well, to start with, it can be ever so much fun,” she said with a laugh.

Madeline found herself laughing too.

“Intimacy with someone you love, someone you trust... well, it’s the best feeling in the world,” Rosalie went on. “It’s freedom and safety. It’s pleasure and comfort.”

“I’ve only ever been taught that marital intimacy is meant for procreation,” Madeline said with a shrug. “But more and more I get the feeling that perhaps that isn’t entirely accurate.”

Rosalie snorted. “Well, let me put it to you this way. I have been with child only twice in my life. And yet I have enjoyed ‘marital intimacy’ with my husband more than twice in this week alone.”

Madeline’s eyes went wide. “You can do that? You can be intimate and not get with child?”

“Well, when one is already with child, the risks are not quite the same,” she replied. “Until this one comes out, I am perfectly safe.”

“But—”

“I know what you meant,” she added. “You’re wondering if there are ways to enjoy intimacy without the risk of getting with child.”

Madeline nodded, feeling the heat rush to her cheeks.

Rosalie pursed her lips. “You know, if your mother even suspected that we were having this conversation, she’d try to have me exiled from the country.”

“Oh, Rosalie, *please*. For the whole of my life, I’ve been kept in the dark. The only thing I’ve been taught about marriage is that a wife’s role is to give her husband children, and that the act of marital union brings forth those children... but no one ever explains the how or the why. It’s infuriating! And now you’re telling me that you perform the act all the time and you’ve only had two children and—”

Rosalie was laughing again. “Heavens, Madeline. I wouldn’t say I perform it *all* the time. I do the work of a duchess too, you know. And one’s interest in performing certain acts can wane when you are as heavy with child as I am.”

“Certain acts?”

Rosalie groaned. “Heavens, I see I’ve opened something of a Pandora’s Box.”

“Please, Rosalie. *Please*, tell me something.”

“Alright, fine. But I am not here to be your teacher in all things carnal lusts and appetites,” she added. “I firmly believe that part of the fun of new love is discovering what you like together.”

“I’ll not ask you for anything you don’t want to tell me.”

Rosalie sighed. “Fine, ask your questions.”

Madeline sat back, her mind spinning as she played with the braided end of her hair over her shoulder. “I...do you ever touch yourself? Between your legs, I mean?”

Rosalie considered for a moment before replying. “Do you?”

Madeline shook her head. “No, of course not. Not unless... I mean I go to the privy. But I imagine it must mean something else. It must have to do with pleasure, right?”

“Oh, Madeline,” Rosalie murmured, rising to her feet. “Pandora’s Box is indeed open, and feminine pleasure has slipped the lid. I am going to leave now, dearest.” She leaned over the bed, giving Madeline’s forehead a quick brush with her lips. “I’m glad you’re back safe.”

“But—”

“Not a word,” she said, raising a finger to her lips. “Don’t speak. I don’t think I can do this if you say anything.”

“Do what—”

“*Ah*. Not a word.” Rosalie jerked on the ties that secured her bed curtains. With a little tug, she closed Madeline in on

one side. She moved around to the end of the bed, closing those curtains too. Only one side of the bed remained open, giving Madeline a view of the crackling flames.

Rosalie stood in the open space, one hand on the bed poster. “Right, listen to me now. The source of your feminine pleasure lies between your legs. When you get aroused, your sex prepares the way for your lover. Things will start to feel like they build. You might even start to ache or burn. All the above. Those feelings sit low in your belly and spread outwards.”

Madeline stilled on the bed, eyes wide. Aching? Burning? That didn’t sound pleasurable at all.

“A good lover knows how to tease your body to make it reach a sort of pinnacle,” Rosalie went on. “The feeling will spread until it reaches your very toes. Sometimes it may feel so powerful that you feel like you’re flying and falling in one.”

“But how—”

“*Ah*. No speaking,” Rosalie said with a shake of her head. “I’m going to leave you now. And if you’re curious, then explore. Start with slow touches—your breasts, your stomach. And let your mind wander. Think of your stolen kisses with Bray. If you let your instincts take over, you’ll find your way all on your own. For that is our power, Madeline.”

“Our power?”

Rosalie nodded. “The Church likes to teach us that sexual pleasure can only be achieved in our husband’s arms for the sole purpose of procreation. That is a lie. No woman has *ever* needed a man to give her pleasure. We own our pleasure, Madeline. They are guests at our temple, and *we* are the goddesses. It will be your choice to decide who you let worship at your alter. Just make sure he’s worth it.”

With that, the duchess left, closing the door softly behind her.

Madeline was alone, stretched out on the comfortable bed. The only sound was the soft crackling of the fire in her hearth. The words of Rosalie and Warren rioted in her mind. She had

a new puzzle to solve, and the puzzle was *her*. Lying back, she closed her eyes, placing both hands gently on her stomach. Slowly she brushed them up her sides, over her breasts.

“Oh,” she whispered into the quiet.

In her twenty years, she’d most certainly touched her own breasts before, in the bath or getting dressed. And she’d seen herself naked in mirrors. She’d just never thought anything of it.

But now her breasts felt different. Heavier. Was that possible? She brushed a hand over each one and shivered. Glancing down, she watched as her nipples peaked under her chemise.

*I want to see.*

She stuffed her hands under the covers, grabbing for the hem of her chemise. She pulled it off, tossing it next to her on the bed. Then she glanced down at the small, curved mounds of her breasts. Her skin glowed golden in the firelight, her nipples a dusky pink. Swallowing her nerves, she put her hands back on her body, letting them explore.

*Give those pretty pink nipples a tweak,* came Warren’s voice in her ear.

Biting her bottom lip, she took her nipples between her thumb and forefinger and pinched.

“*Ah—*”

She bowed off the bed, dropping her hands away as she panted. The sensation shot from the tips of her nipples straight to her core. She did it again, smiling as she chased that breathless feeling. Then her hands were moving, looking for the other places that might give her that same shock of delight. She trailed a hand down her stomach, letting it brush over her golden thatch of curls. Spreading her legs a bit, she let a finger slide back and—

“*Oh—*”

She smiled, nestling herself back against the pillows.

Warren was right. She was wet.



“*B*ut surely, with all this damned snow—to say nothing of your condition—we have to consider the possibility that we may need to defer the Christmas ball until next year,” James said over the folded half of his newspaper.

“Especially if the dowager won’t be here to help you plan,” Burke added.

“*Ugh*, if I never hear either of you say the word ‘condition’ again in my life, it will be too soon,” Rosalie replied with a huff. “I am with child. *Your* child, Your Grace,” she added at James. “To always speak of me as having a condition makes me fear that I suffer from fainting fits or the sugar sickness.”

Madeline was sitting next to Rosalie at the breakfast table in the morning room, which was a far more comfortable space than the ostentatious Alcott dining room. She liked taking meals in here. They dined *en famille*, which meant the footmen typically took their leave and everyone felt more natural and relaxed.

“So, she’s really not coming?” Madeline murmured, letting her eye fall to the letter sitting by Rosalie’s plate. “Not even to celebrate Christmas with her family?”

“No,” Rosalie replied, handing the letter across the table to James, who took it without reading it and added it to his own stack. “Apparently she’s become indispensable to Lady Beresford, the late general’s wife,” Rosalie explained. “She’s been invited to stay at their estate in Spring Hill through the end of January, and she feels she’s better needed there.”



“Well, she’s not wrong,” Burke muttered through a bite of buttered toast.

“Except that there’s a Christmas ball to plan, and Rosalie is due any day,” James replied, eyes still on his paper.

“A ball we only started hosting at *her* insistence,” said Rosalie. “She dares to say she will not come, but still includes in her letter *three* new recipes for dishes she thinks I ought to serve. It’s madness.” She clattered down her cup of tea, pushing it away.

Burke shrugged. “Well, then cancel.”

“You want me to *cancel* Christmas on the villagers—on the staff?! Every year, they tell me what fun they have. How they enjoy the reels and the canapés and the decorations—”

“But you’ll take too much upon yourself,” Burke warned.

“So, either appoint a new co-host, or *I’m* cancelling it,” added James, finally looking up over his paper.

Madeline set her own cup of tea aside. “But are you not the cohost, sir?”

He huffed a laugh, turning his paper over. “Oh, it’s my house. But I’ve been told in no uncertain terms that I am to have no opinions on decorations.”

Burke chuckled as Rosalie added, “He suggested tulips for G’s christening...in *July*.”

Madeline gave her a sympathetic grimace.

“Why doesn’t Madeline do it?” offered Burke. “Will you be with us until New Year’s Eve?”

“Oh yes, Madeline you must,” said Rosalie, turning in her chair to take her hand.

“I can’t,” Madeline said on a breath. “I couldn’t possibly host a ball! I’d have to...to...host!”

Her mind suddenly filled with images of every ball she’d ever attended, watching as the hostess gaily greeted all the guests, laughing and floating from room to room, opening the

dancing with a waltz or a quadrille. It was Madeline's worst nightmare come to life.

"But you wouldn't have to do anything on the day," Rosalie urged. "You could help me with everything behind the scenes. Much like I did for the dowager for the Michaelmas ball all those years ago—"

Before more could be said on the matter, the door to the morning room opened admitting the nursemaid. Bundled up in her arms was a wiggling baby. "Good morning, Your Graces," she said brightly.

"Good morning, Felicity," Rosalie replied, all her irritation utterly forgotten. She had eyes only for the babe. "And good morning to you, my little dove."

Madeline stilled, her cup of tea halfway to her lips. *Little dove*. That was the nickname her father used for her. She fought down her pain and resentment. Had she ever really been loved the way Rosalie loved this little girl?

"I'll take her," said Burke, getting to his feet. "Her Grace is not quite finished with breakfast." He swept around the table, greedily snatching the baby out of the nursemaid's arms. He walked a few steps away towards the windows, murmuring softly. Little Georgina cooed, letting out a few bursts of giggles as Burke bounced and tickled her.

"You do dote on her so well, Mr. Burke," said the nursemaid.

"Burke loves children," James replied, now halfway through his stack of correspondence.

"Especially clever little imps with sharp teeth," Burke teased, giving the baby his finger to chew in her gummy mouth.

"Is she still feeling pain?" Rosalie asked, her breakfast forgotten.

"She's a bit sore, Your Grace," the nursemaid replied. "It's worse when she's tired. But the new teeth are nearly through now. That'll give her some relief."

Rosalie nodded, rising from her chair to join Burke by the window.

Madeline watched them together. Rosalie didn't take the baby from him, and Burke didn't offer. She watched the way Rosalie placed a hand on his arm, her head bent to kiss the baby's chestnut curls. A thought clicked into place inside her mind as Burke's head bowed forward, whispering something to Rosalie that had them both laughing. The duchess glanced up at him, a loving smile in her eyes.

"Oh—" Madeline murmured, setting her cup down with a clatter.

Across the table, James was looking at her. "Thank you, Felicity," he called. "You may go. Her Grace will call when you're needed again."

"Yes, Your Grace," the nursemaid replied, promptly taking her leave.

Madeline busied herself with the napkin in her lap, fighting the sudden rushing of her tumultuous thoughts.

"Madeline..." came the duke's voice.

She shook her head, not daring to look up.

Once again, a truth stood right before her, waving like a standard on a pole. A truth she knew. A truth she'd *always* known. And yet, she'd somehow tricked her eyes into not seeing what her mind knew.

Burke said the words himself the other night, and she'd just dismissed them. He was married. Like Charles and Warren, it was a marriage he could never claim, but real all the same. Burke and Rosalie moved through life like a pair of starlings. Their gestures, their moods, the way they all but finished each other's sentences. They wove together through the air like a mated pair.

Like lovers.

Like husband and wife.

In that moment, Madeline knew beyond a shadow of a doubt: Horatio Burke considered himself married to Rosalie

Corbin, his best friend's wife.

The same friend who was looking at her now.

"Madeline..." James said again.

Slowly, Madeline lifted her gaze to meet the duke's. His green eyes were warm, even if still edged with a fierce dominance.

"You will say nothing of what you suspect to anyone," came James's sharp order, spoken too softly for the others to hear. "Nod that you agree."

Before Madeline could nod, there was another sharp knock at the door.

James cursed under his breath. "Enter!"

The butler was already opening the door, pausing once inside. "Your Grace, there is a constable at the front door. He asks for an audience."

At the window, Rosalie and Burke turned.

"A constable?" Rosalie called, eyes wide.

"What does he want, Lawson?" said James, rising to his feet.

The butler cleared his throat, his pale gaze darting from the duke to Madeline and her heart sank. "He's here to ask about the whereabouts of Lady Madeline."



“Please, James. For Madeline’s sake—” Rosalie urged.

“Absolutely not.” His arms were crossed, his expression murderous.

She placed a hand on his arm, Burke standing just behind, still holding the baby. “But her parents will come and take her away. She’ll lose her chance—”

“And I am very sorry for Madeline, but I will not lie to a constable.”

“I would never ask you to,” said Madeline, rising to her feet. “Rosalie, I can’t ask for more help than you’ve already given me. My parents were bound to find me eventually. It was foolish to think this plan would ever work.”

“Quite right,” James muttered. “You know, this is what comes from acting before you think, which is a personality trait all *three* of you apparently hold in common. We can only hope our precious G will take after me.”

Burke snorted. “Don’t hold your breath. If Tom has his way, she’ll be a swashbuckling pirate like Anne Bonny.”

“You’re not helping,” replied James.

“Do I ever?” Burke parried, content to jiggle Little G until she cooed again.

Rosalie ignored their banter, eyes still only for James. “But if you make her go now, her parents won’t let her see Bray again. They’ll not let her marry him. She needs more time,

James. A day. An afternoon.” She spun around. “Go to him now, Madeline. Go to the parsonage and tell him he must decide.”

She shook her head, heart racing. “I’ve already made him my offer,” she replied. “He said he needs more time—”

“But he cannot accept if your parents drag you off and lock you away inside Blaire House,” Rosalie countered. “Even I will not be able to get you out again. It is quite literally now or never!”

From the doorway, the butler cleared his throat.

All four of them turned to face him.

“What is it, Lawson?” James called.

“Your Grace, I believe the constable is merely here to *inquire* as to her whereabouts. The duchess was clear that none in this house were to speak of her presence to anyone beyond these walls.”

“So, he doesn’t know she’s here,” Rosalie said on a breath, dark eyes wide with excitement.

“The only two people with the authority to speak definitively about any guest staying at Alcott Hall are in this room, Your Grace,” Lawson replied with a nod.

“Oh, goddamn it,” James muttered under his breath.

At the same time, Rosalie spun back to him, clinging to his arm. “James, *please*. I’ll never ask you for anything again.”

“Don’t you dare try to make that kind of oath with me. You’ll not hold to it past lunch.”

“I’ll cancel the Christmas ball.”

“I was canceling that anyway,” he replied, pulling away from her.

“I will...let you skip the next three luncheons of the Royal Philharmonic Society.”

“Not good enough,” he growled, stepping around her.

“*Four* luncheons!”

He kept walking.

“Damn it, James. I...I’ll take down the painting of the ugly knight with the uglier horse!” she called after his retreating form.

James stilled as Burke laughed. “Oh, she’s playing to win now, James.”

Madeline’s gaze darted between the three of them, barely able to keep up.

James spun around, a sharp finger pointed at his wife. “If this is a bloody trick. If you go back on this—”

“I won’t,” Rosalie said, her expression utterly solemn.

“I hate that goddamn painting.”

“I know.”

“I have to see it every fucking morning the moment I leave our room.”

“I know.”

He raised a doubting brow. “You will break George’s heart?”

“Yes.”

“He loves that painting. Loves how much I hate it.”

“Which is why I will put it in a place of honor above his bed in the east wing, where it belongs,” she replied. “I’ve enjoyed teasing you with it for long enough. Down it goes. Only, help Madeline first.”

With a growl he turned away again, dragging both hands through his hair.

Rosalie took a step forward. “James—”

But the duke spun around. “Right. Madeline, come. Burke, give us your coat.”

Madeline gasped, carried away by the strength of the duke’s hand on her arm. He pulled her towards the window. Behind her, Burke handed the baby off to Rosalie, asking no questions as he slipped out of his handsome brown morning

coat trimmed with black velvet lapels. He followed them to the window, handing it off to Madeline.

She panted, watching the duke unlatch the window. “James, what—”

“You have to go,” he said. “Put Burke’s coat on. It’s quite cold out.”

She shrugged into the massive coat without a second thought. Beneath the coat she was dressed in nothing but a thin pair of wool stockings and a butter yellow dress trimmed with white lace. She slipped a hand under her long blonde tresses, pulling them free of the coat. “I don’t understand.”

Rosalie stepped forward with the baby nestled in her arms. “James, is this really necessary?”

“Yes, it bloody well is necessary,” he barked. “Madeline, you need to get out. Stay hidden.”

She gasped. “Out? But—”

“Run to the stables and lock yourself in a stall,” he ordered. “You’ll stay plenty warm there. Speak to no one, understand? Burke will come find you when the coast is clear.”

“But why?” called Rosalie.

James rounded on her. “Because I am about to go speak to a constable who will ask me on behalf of a pair of worried parents if I have any information as to the whereabouts of their missing child. And I need my conscience to be at least a little bit clear when I say that, to the best of my knowledge, Lady Madeline Blaire is *not* in this house!”

With that, the Duke of Norland unceremoniously shoved Madeline out the window into a fresh bank of snow.





“*Ugh*,” Madeline cried, trudging through the side of the house, her skirts lifted around her knees. Her teeth were already chattering in the cold as Burke’s massive coat hung open on her slender frame. “I ha-hate snow!”

She moved quickly in the direction of the stables, fighting her nerves as she was sure each pass in front of a window would expose her to the eyes of a curious constable. She would never be able to repay the Corbin’s for this. Not if she tried for a thousand lifetimes. Rosalie was ready to break the law to help her, and now she was dragging James fully into their schemes.

On the run from her own family, and now the law. Possibly engaged to a vicar, who already had a lover... a man no less. Indebted to a duke and duchess. Thrust from a window into the snow.

Madeline’s life had officially become the stuff of novels. Rather than be put off by it, she found herself smiling. The rush of excitement warmed her, helping her fight the winter chill as she marched her way down the cobbled path towards the stables.

The stable yard was quiet, thank heavens, and she was able to slip in a side door. It smell of horses, a thick mustiness of hay and manure. Madeline may not be much of a horse rider, but she’d always appreciated the beauty of the animal.

She moved down the row of stalls, her satin slippers utterly ruined by the snow and now the straw and dirt. She buttoned

Mr. Burke's coat with fumbling fingers, flipping the collar up against the cold. She looked for an empty stall to hide away in as the duke ordered her to do.

The call of deep voices just outside had her jumping into action. She slipped through the first open door, content to find it some sort of tack room. The sweet smell of lemon and beeswax filled her senses.

The room was dark and narrow. Row after row of beautiful leather tack hung gleaming on hooks—bridles and hacks, breast collars, harnesses. A few saddles sat perched on stands. All the leather was polished to shine, studded with silver and brass.

Stepping over to the first saddle stand, she slipped the cover off the top, intent on using it as a makeshift blanket. On frozen feet, she tiptoed over to a handsome tack box, ready to climb atop it.

*Slam.*

She spun around with a soft squeak. A man stood in the doorway, his hands full of leather.

“Mr. Warren,” she gasped, knowing him by his silhouette, by that warm feeling he sparked in her.

“Madeline, what the bloody hell are you doing in here?” he growled, his gaze darting around the dark space. “What are you wearing?”

“I—”

He stepped fully into the narrow room, dropping the saddle down on an empty stand. He stood there, bridle over his shoulder, glaring at her. “Are you bloody incapable of dressing appropriately for the weather? Where are your proper shoes? Where is your coat? Whose damn coat is *that*?” he added, pointing at her.

“I didn't have time to change. I was sort of...thrust out, you see,” she added, fighting the urge to giggle. It really was too ludicrous for words.

“You were thrust—”

“Out a window, yes. By the duke,” she added.

Warren was bristling with anger now. “The Duke of Norland thrust you out a window in your goddamn slippers? Why?”

“Well, I...I’m in hiding.”

“In hiding?”

“Yes, from the constable.”

She didn’t think it possible, but Madeline had just managed to shock the confident, teasing gamekeeper into silence. He stared at her, those dark eyes narrowing. “Oh, you are a little troublemaker, aren’t you.”

That deep voice warmed her through like she was made of honey. She fought the urge to whimper as he stepped towards her, slipping the bridle off his shoulder as he walked.

“Go on, then. Tell me why you’re hiding from a constable,” he urged, his presence blinding her to all else.

She met him stare for stare. “Because I am on the run from my family.”

“Why?”

“Because they mean to control me.”

“And you will not be controlled, will you,” he murmured, his hand raising to brush her cheek. “You perfect, wild thing.”

Slowly, she leaned her cheek into his touch, and he smiled.

“But you need someone who can break you, don’t you.” His thumb brushed over her lips again. “You need a strong hand that knows how to guide you, how to harness your recklessness. A strong hand to tease you...worship you,” he added, his hand brushing down her neck until it was slipping inside Burke’s coat.

She gasped as he closed it around her breast, giving it a gentle squeeze. Her body erupted in fire, her stomach flipping in knots. “Warren...”

“Fucking perfect,” he groaned, stepping closer, his other hand brushing her curls off her shoulder.

She melted into the weight of his hand, pressing forward. “Warren, please...”

He tipped her chin up, his eyes searching hers. She followed that thick scar with her eyes, tracing it from his cheek over the bridge of his nose.

“Did you touch yourself last night?” he murmured.

Her heart skipped a beat as she nodded.

“Good girl. And?”

She licked her lips, unable to think as he kneaded her breast with such a tender caress. “I...I was wet,” she whispered.

He dropped his face to breath her in. “Of course, you were, you needy thing. You’re so damn responsive to us. So eager to learn. Did you make yourself come?”

“I don’t know. I don’t—I—” She felt like she was unraveling, crumbling to pieces. Rosalie never described a feeling of unraveling, of being wholly unmade.

He peppered her jaw with light kisses. “Say the word, and I’ll have you coming on my fingers right here, right now. You need never question again whether you’ve come, lovely. I will tease this cunt until you soak my hand.” As he spoke, he dropped his hand away from her breast, cupping between her legs.

“Oh, god,” she whimpered, her knees all but buckling as he rubbed between her legs with strong fingers. She fumbled forward, gripping him with both hands. “Warren, *please—*”

He swallowed her plea, kissing her breathless as he worked between her legs. She wrapped her arms around his neck, seeking more closeness, clinging to him as he teased her.

“Warren,” she whimpered, apparently unable to recall any other word.

“What do you need, wild thing? Tell me what you want. Own this moment,” he said, his lips brushing against hers.

“I want more,” she whispered. “Need to feel more.”

He leaned back, holding her chin again as he met her gaze. “Do you trust me? Do you trust that I’ll not hurt you?”

Slowly, she nodded, feeling the truth of her unspoken statement marrow deep. She trusted this man. She trusted John Warren.

“Tell me what you want then,” he urged again. “Use your words.”

“I want to feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“The...the feeling. Flying and falling.”

He smiled. “You want to come. You want me to fuck this perfect cunt with my fingers, with my mouth, until you’re coming apart. You think you’re wet now, but you don’t know the meaning of the word. I will worship this cunt. And in blessing, you will make me drown, understood?”

She had no idea what he was saying, but she heard the words ‘worship’ and ‘blessing’ and that sounded good enough. Her body was a temple. She was a goddess. She wanted this. She nodded. “Do it, Warren. Make me come.”



“*D*o it,” she said again. “Please, god, don’t stop now.” She pulled on his massive shoulders, trying to bring him closer.

He came to her all too willingly, doing that and more, lifting her off her feet until she felt her back pressed up against the wall. From this position, no one could walk in and see them directly. It was too dark, and she was all but hidden behind a double stand of saddles.

Her heart softened for him. Even in their recklessness, he was protecting her, tending to her. Her hands softened, smoothing through his hair. “Kiss me. Please—”

He obliged, burying his tongue in her mouth, even as both his hands pulled up on the hem of her skirts. The freezing air hit her legs. Her thin wool stockings were no armor against the cold. And yet she didn’t feel cold at all, not in his arms. She was buzzing, floating. She was—

“*Ah!*”

“Shhh,” Warren said again, his massive hand coming up to cover her mouth, stifling her cry. His other hand was between her legs, his fingers delving into her wetness.

She shivered, back pressed against the wall, as his fingers dragged across her sex.

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” he groaned in appreciation. “Look at you, drenched for me. Part your legs a bit. I’ve got big hands.”

Legs shaking, she did her best to widen her stance, which felt like a mistake when he inched back with his fingers, burying himself in her heat. She moaned into the hand over her mouth as he pressed in with one finger.

“God, you’re perfect,” he murmured. “So tight for me. You’d strangle my cock so beautifully.” Her eyes went wide, and he grinned. “Not today, lovely. No, this is all about you. Take the pleasure I give you. Feel it everywhere.”

She sank into the feel of him, letting her muscles relax as he pressed in with a second thick finger. He lifted up, the palm of his hand pressing against her sex with the most wonderful friction. She couldn’t contain her whimper.

He let her sink back down, pulling his fingers free. He found that little spot at the apex of her legs. She’d found it last night and nearly passed out from the sensations it brought her. That was nothing compared to feeling his hand there. He pressed down with his thumb and her whole body erupted in gooseflesh.

“Warren, please,” she whimpered, the words muffled by his hand.

“I need this hand for what comes next,” he teased. “Can you promise you’ll be good? Cry out too loudly, and you’ll call the stable hands down on us. I’m a possessive man, Madeline. I’m not sharing these sounds with anyone else. Understand?”

She nodded.

“Good girl.” He lifted his hand away from between her legs, raising it up between them. With his eyes on her, he curled his finger into his mouth, sucking the tip. “God, you taste like heaven. Taste,” he ordered, lifting his other finger to her lips.

She leaned back, eyes wide. “I—”

“You are a gift of creation,” he said, leaning closer. “Taste your sweetness. Know who you are.”

She nodded, feeling strange opening her mouth. He pressed in with the tip of his finger, brushing her slickness

along her tongue. She closed her lips around him, tasting herself. It was an odd flavor, musty and sweet.

He pulled his finger free, kissing her deep, replacing that finger with his seeking tongue. But the kiss was over in seconds, and he was dropping to his knees, both hands back at her skirts. She gasped, nearly losing her balance as he exposed her to the hips.

“Hold this,” he said, his breath hot on her thighs.

Her hands dropped automatically, replacing his on her hips to hold up her skirts. Even on his knees, the man was massive. He had to crouch down.

“Warren,” she rasped, stifling her words as she really did topple. For he’d just grabbed one of her legs and slung it over his huge shoulder. “What are you—ohmygod—”

This was a sensation unlike anything she’d ever felt. John Warren was on his knees before her, his mouth sucking and teasing between her legs. It was too much to take in at once—his searching hands, his quick tongue, his hot breath. She was strangling on wordless sounds, her whole body strung tighter than a bow string, as he feasted. There was no other word for it. He was eating her, devouring her.

And she couldn’t get enough.

Heart hammering out of her chest, breath choked in her throat, she sank back against the wall, giving over to the feel of this powerful man swallowing her whole, daring to suck the essence of her spirit out through her legs.

The burning in her core was spreading outwards, tangling up her limbs, replacing her bones with something utterly new. She didn’t even realize it when her hands burrowed into his hair, holding on for dear life as he sucked and licked.

When he added his fingers, she understood Rosalie’s full meaning. *Shatter*. She was going to shatter. Like a crystal vase teetering on a table’s edge, she could see her fate looming before her—a great drop, a rush of flying, and then...nothing.

Only it wasn’t nothing. Warren shoved in hard with two fingers, curling them forward against the walls of her sex. At



the same time, his mouth closed over that bud, his tongue flicking hard against it as he sucked.

And then she was shattering into...*everything*.

She bit hard into her bottom lip, head tipped back against the wall of the tack room. Without the ability to scream her pleasure, she broke so beautifully instead. Every part of herself shattered like so many pieces of fragile glass. And after the breaking, there was a rush of release. It flooded out of her, drenching her. Warren groaned in satisfaction, his sounds turning obscene as he all but drank from her.

*We are goddesses*, came Rosalie's words.

*I will worship you*, Warren promised.

*I would bury myself in you*, Charles warned.

Panting, Warren pulled back, his eyes wild, his lips glossy with her release.

Her hands on his shoulders, Madeline bent down, kissing his lips, stealing her taste. "Show me," she ordered through her broken breaths. "I want you and Charles to show me everything."



She hunger in Warren's eyes set Madeline aflame.

“Warren! Hey, Waaaarren! You back here?”

Warren shoved away from her, snatching up the bridle he dropped and crossing the room in two strides. “In here!” he called out, just as a stable hand ducked his head inside.

“Hey, there you are. I—*whoa*—milady, I...” He was a lanky, red-haired lad of around seventeen. He doffed his wool cap when he took in Madeline standing in the dark. “What are you...”

His gaze darted between them, but Warren didn't turn around, too busy hanging up the tack. “She was looking for Hugh,” he supplied. “The duchess said she could come see the new colt.”

The redhead seemed to relax, his face bursting into a freckled smile. “Oh, he's a real beauty, milady,” he said, replacing his hat. “Mr. Burke is that pleased with him. Born only just this morning, eh Warren?” He stepped out of the doorway, gesturing for her to follow him. “Warren here helped deliver the little chap.”

Madeline glanced at Warren's back, wishing he would turn around, needing to see his face. When he didn't turn, she followed the stable hand out of the tack stall.

“He's right down here,” he called in a false whisper, pointing over the door of a stall.

Madeline tipped up on her toes to peer over the door. “Oh, my—” She raised a hand over her mouth, gazing in at the most precious chestnut colt, standing on wobbly legs next to his snow-white mother. “Oh, he’s gorgeous,” she cooed.

And he really was—tall and leggy, with a wide blaze of white down his face and four white stockings reaching high above each knee.

“Will he turn white too?” she asked.

“Hmm, hard to say,” said the lad. “Warren what do you think?”

She stilled as she felt Warren press in close behind her. “I doubt it,” he replied. “The stallion is a chestnut too.”

“You helped deliver him?” She dared to look over her shoulder, needing to see...something. A gesture, an expression.

Warren was looking down at her, his mask of indifference firmly set in place. But not the eyes. Thank heavens, he let his eyes say what his mouth couldn’t. He was burning, same as her. He was a living flame.

She let out a relieved breath and his hand brushed ever so lightly against her side.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Warren is a natural,” said the stable lad. “He’s delivered all sorts. Sheep and horses, even the pigs.”

“They get twisted up sometimes,” Warren muttered. “The lads sometimes need a strong extra hand to help pull them out.”

Madeline tried not to picture it. There was nothing she liked less than imagining Warren’s beautiful hands pulling a baby horse forth out of its mother’s womb. She blinked the thought away, turning her attention back to the happy little miracle.

“I see you’ve found my newest champion!” Burke called down the aisle.

She jolted, not missing the way Warren inched away from her. She glanced over her shoulder at the gentleman. He'd obviously found a different morning coat to wear. He was sporting a heavy great coat now too, and he carried one for her.

Madeline put her own mask back in place. "Yes," she called back. "The gentlemen were just showing me. He's so lovely, Burke."

Burke was on them in a few strides, holding out the bright pink pelisse and a fur stole dyed peacock blue. She shrugged into the clothes gratefully, wrapping the fur around her shoulders. She didn't miss the way Warren's dark eyes narrowed as Burke smoothed his hands over her shoulders, giving them a squeeze. She dropped her gaze to the ground.

"His father is as fine a hunt horse as they come," said Burke. "I'm hoping that in a few years he could be ready for the hunt himself. Maybe by the time he's ten or so, and Little G is ready to start training for the hunt, they'll be a finely matched pair."

"You would let her ride?" she replied.

"Course," he said with a laugh. "All good country ladies should know how to ride and hunt and shoot. Did the viscount never teach you?"

Madeline shook her head, avoiding Warren's inquisitive look. "No. He umm...he didn't think it proper," she admitted quietly. "My life was all but restricted to Town." It felt strange to admit that fact to these men. "Up until I left, my life was lived within the four walls of London's best drawing rooms. Occasionally, I walked a back garden."

"Sounds nice," said the young stable hand, forcing a smile.

"It was awful, actually," she replied, keeping her eyes on the pretty little colt now nursing from his tired mama. "Being told what to wear, how to sit, what to eat, how to occupy my own time. Repeating this every single hour of every day for the whole of my life."

Next to her, Warren was impossibly still. While behind her, Burke cleared his throat. “Well, we’re certainly glad to have you, Madeline. Speaking of, I’ve been given strict instructions to return you to the house. Rosalie is adamant that the two of you sketch this morning while James takes his meeting with Bray.”

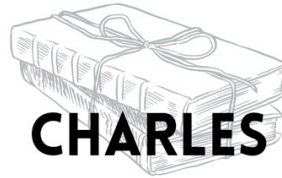
Madeline spun around. “Mr. Bray is here?”

Why did she suddenly feel guilty? What she did with Warren wasn’t wrong, right? She needed to see Charles again. She needed to see them both. They needed to talk about this and come to some kind of arrangement at last. She couldn’t stand this not knowing. If Warren’s current stiffness was any indication, he was feeling the same.

“Aye, he arrived shortly after the constable,” Burke replied. “Gave James the perfect excuse to speed that meeting along,” he added with a laugh. “Come, I’ll lead you back. Warren, Mathers, a good morning to you both.”

Madeline found she had no choice but to take the arm Burke offered and let him lead her away from Warren.

And Warren had no choice but to stand there and let him.



Charles emerged from his meeting with James well satisfied. Based on his reports, James was going to double the foodstuffs delivered to the fire victims. He'd also approved Charles's plan to host a charity bazar in Finchley for the following Sunday.

Charles spent the morning penning letters to three other friends from Cambridge, asking them to do the same in their parishes. If nothing else, he was sure the gentlemen could be relied upon to send along a little something, even if it came from their own coffers. But Charles wasn't above begging or accepting charity—not when it was all going to a good cause.

“I was told to find Mr. Burke before I take my leave,” he told the footman.

“Right this way then, sir,” the man replied. Charles was fairly certain his name was Geoffrey.

The footman led the way to the library, which was easily Charles's favorite room in the house. It was a massive space, with vaulted ceilings and shelves that stretched around three walls. The shelves were fit to burst with books, including a very fine collection of hand drawn atlases that were a particular favorite of Charles's as a boy.

The fourth wall was floor-to-ceiling windows of the finest imported glass, framed in deep blue curtains, which flooded the space with dazzling winter sunlight.

“Mr. Bray, Your Grace,” the footman announced to the room.

“Good morning, Mr. Bray,” the duchess called in greeting from the far side of the room. She was seated in a large, wing-backed chair near the windows. Mr. Burke sat in a matching chair. And the third chair surely must be claimed by—

“Madeline was just teaching Burke a few important lessons in backgammon,” the duchess teased. “Come join us, sir.”

Charles crossed the room towards them, feeling a phantom kind of tug under his left ribs at being close to Madeline again so soon. He’d hardly slept, recalling everything that happened over the last several days. His thoughts were in constant turmoil, his heart warring with his head.

And then there was Uncle Selby’s declining health. The man was getting so weak, he could hardly sit up in bed, let alone make the trek to his favorite reading chair a floor below stairs. As soon as Charles was done here, he meant to go and sit with him. Perhaps he’d ask the duchess to borrow a spare backgammon set. It’d been years since he’d played.

“I believe it is your turn, Madeline,” said the duchess, leaning back in her chair with both hands balanced over her rounded stomach.

Charles came to the table’s edge, finally able to see around the wingback to spy Madeline. Christ, she’d looked beautiful this morning. Her golden hair was down and curled, a wild spray of sunlight around her shoulders. Her dress was of the softest yellow, the perfect tone to make her skin look white as a pearl. He still wanted to count those freckles dusted over her cheeks.

“Good morning, Lady Madeline,” he murmured.

“Good morning, Charles—Bray—I mean, Mr. Bray,” she corrected, nearly dropping her cup of dice on the board. It was so awkward and endearing he wanted to lean down right now and kiss the tip of her freckled nose.

She huffed, shaking the cup to rattle the dice and tip them out onto the board. With slender fingers she picked up a white counter and clicked it around the board, knocking one of Burke's pieces off.

"Damn," Burke muttered.

"She's better than you at this game, admit it," the duchess teased.

"She's had a few lucky rolls of the dice," Burke countered, gritting his teeth as he counted his remaining pieces in play. "And backgammon is hardly a game of skill."

"You were the one to suggest it, sir," Madeline replied. "I was happy to play chess or cribbage...or nothing at all. It does seem a waste, seeing as this is a library, for not one of us to be reading a book."

"I told you to come down at any time, day or night," said the duchess. "The house is yours so long as you're here, Madeline. If you want a book, take one. Take five. Take ten. Horde them in your room like a greedy little dragon."

"Pull up a chair, Bray," said Burke, rattling his dice in his cup. "You can play the winner."

Charles stifled a groan, checking the time on his pocket watch. "I'm afraid I don't have much time this morning. I'm due back for tea with my uncle."

The duchess perked up. "Oh?"

He didn't miss the way her gaze darted from him to Madeline and back. Christ, how much did she know? Between what James knew, what Burke most definitely knew, and what Madeline may have told her...well, he had to assume that Rosalie Corbin knew everything. Or enough of most things to paint a full picture.

"Did James dispense with the constable then?" she asked, her gaze on Burke.

"Aye. Constable Coates is well away and satisfied for now."



Madeline stiffened, her hand freezing as she reached for her dice.

Charles glanced between them all. “A constable was here? Is there a problem?” he asked.

Madeline snatched up her dice, rattling her cup.

He took in the stiff set of her shoulders, the way she wouldn’t look at him. “What am I missing?”

Burke groaned as she bumped another of his pieces off the board. “The constable was here for Madeline.”

Fear lanced Charles’s chest like an arrow. “What? *Why?*”

“Obviously, because her parents are looking for her,” Burke replied. “A girl worth twenty thousand pounds doesn’t get to just waltz away whenever she wants.”

“Oh, yes she can,” the duchess replied defensively. “And Madeline’s worth is not tied to the price of her dowry, Burke.”

“You’re quite right,” Burke replied. “If anything, we are selling her short, seeing as the Leary fortune she will inherit at marriage is worth easily three times the sum of her dowry. What do you say to that, Bray? Would you let a lady worth over eighty thousand pounds slip away?”

Charles stilled, glancing down at Madeline. He needed to speak with her alone.

“Burke, don’t push,” the duchess muttered.

“I never meant to be such a nuisance,” said Madeline, her voice soft.

“It was no trouble,” Burke replied. He glanced up at Charles with an impatient look. “James met with the constable and told her she wasn’t in the house. Which, at the time, she wasn’t,” he added with a wink.

“I was with Warren,” she blurted, snatching her dice off the board. “Mr. Warren,” she added too late. “In the stables. That’s where I was while the constable was in the house.”

Charles’s stomach clenched tight as he had a sudden mental image of Madeline tipped back in the hay like another

of Warren's many conquests, Warren rutting between her legs. He blinked, clearing his throat. "Well..."

Their awkward moment was not missed by the duchess and Burke, who were both looking supremely uncomfortable.

"Yes..." Burke added. "Yes, she went down to see the new colt. Just born this morning. A fine little chestnut fellow—"

"*Ahh*—" the duchess cried out, slapping a hand over her rounded stomach, and doubling over. "Oh no, I'm feeling strange pains."

Madeline reached out a hand. "Rosalie, are you alright?"

"Oh, I'm sure she's fine," said Burke, taking his turn with a roll of the dice. They rattled in the cup, landing with a clatter on the board. "Breathe it out, Your Grace."

"No, no," said the duchess, rubbing the spot on her side. "I think I need to go and have a lie down. This is a particular pain," she added, scrunching up her brow. "Burke, will you assist me?"

Burke scooped his dice back into his cup. Glancing between Charles and Madeline, back to the duchess. "Seriously?"

"Yes," she added with a fervent nod. "I need to lie down now. I'm so sorry to cut your game short, Madeline."

"I can take you," Madeline urged, getting to her feet.

"No, Burke can do it," the duchess repeated. "He's stronger. He'll catch me if I faint."

"Don't bet on it," Burke muttered as he got to his feet. But he dutifully stepped around the back of Madeline's chair, helping the duchess to her feet.

Charles fought the urge to roll his eyes. The duchess was being painfully obvious with her intentions. But he could only feel grateful because he was now desperate to talk to Madeline.

"Do take care, Rosalie, and rest," Madeline called after her.

“You’re unbelievable,” said Burke as he placed an arm around the duchess’s waist, helping her shuffle away.

“I know, right?” she said with a grin. “Now, shush, and help me.”

They bickered softly to each other as they crossed the room towards the door.

“I guess I’ll be taking the duchess upstairs now!” Burke called back across the library in the height of melodramatic fashion. “It will probably take me at least a quarter of an hour. And then I’ll be back to resume our game!”

Not waiting for Madeline’s response, he showed the duchess out and shut the door with a snap.

Charles didn’t bother to watch them go, his eyes already back on Madeline. She stood next to the duchess’s abandoned chair, worrying her bottom lip in a way that would make Warren feral if he were here. Why was he suddenly nervous now that he was alone with her?

“So...are you alright? The constable being here didn’t frighten you?” he asked.

She wrapped her arms tight around her middle, flashing him a veiled look before she focused her eyes back on the door.

“Madeline—”

“Of course, it frightened me,” she snapped. “I’m frightened, Charles. This is what frightened looks like,” she added, waving a hand erratically across her person.

“Madeline, I—”

“My parents think I’m missing. At this moment, they are scouring the whole of England looking for me. But I can’t tell them where I am, because the moment I do, they’ll come for me. They’ll lock me away for good, and they’ll throw away the key!” She spun away with a soft sob.

“That’s not going to happen,” he growled, his anger bristling as he stepped forward, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“You couldn’t stop them,” she replied. “Even Rosalie has admitted she can’t stop them. If a duchess is powerless, what does that make you?”

He said nothing, his jaw tight.

“So long as I am seen as my father’s property, I belong to him, Charles,” she went on, spinning around to face him again. “I belong to the Blaire family. They don’t care that I am their daughter. They only care that I am worth a fortune. You heard Burke just now; my dowry alone is twenty thousand pounds. But since I did this horrible thing in running away, James believes my father will deny me my dowry rights,” she said with a shake of her head. “The only money I can offer you must come from the Leary fortune. But it is significant, Charles. A townhouse in London, mine shares, land in Ireland. I could give you a full accounting if you wish—”

“Christ, I don’t care about the money,” he said. “Of all the many things I am considering with this proposal, the money is least among them.”

“But you *must* consider it,” she pressed. “You’d be foolish not to. You could be rich beyond your wildest dreams! Even without the dowry, we’d want for nothing.”

“Madeline, I don’t care about the money—”

“Then why do you hesitate?” she cried, tears once again stinging her eyes.

His hand dropped away from her shoulder. He hated that he was hurting her. “I...don’t know,” he lied.

“First you said it was because you loved another. But surely, we are past all that now. I would never come between you and Warren. You do not have to give him up, Charles.”

He groaned, dragging a hand through his curls. “Madeline, do you even hear yourself? You are asking me to make a vow of marriage knowing I don’t intend to keep it. You really intend to marry me, support me, *and* keep my lover in your home so I can be with him whenever I wish? Do you not see how mad that sounds?”

She squared her shoulders at him. “Perhaps that would have been the arrangement at first,” she replied, holding his gaze. “But Charles, you know how things are...changing... between *us*, I mean,” she added, inching forward. “Between the three of us. I don’t know what to call this. I’m not sure there’s even a word for it. Three people in a marriage is not the common practice, I grant you. But why should we sacrifice our own happiness for the sake of a set of rules that only sometimes apply?”

He raised a brow. “What can you mean?”

She shrugged. “I mean that all marriages are a farce. Show me a good marriage where a man is loyal to his wife, and I will show you ten more that are held together with little more than habit and spite. My own parents are like oil and water. They make each other miserable. For those rare few like Rosalie and the duke who stumble into a love match, maybe there can be fidelity. But most of the people in my circle are in arranged marriages. It is a business deal, Charles. Nothing more.”

“That is not the case in *my* circle,” he replied. “We lowly commoners must live by the rules, Madeline. And I am doubly confined by my position. As a man of the Church, I cannot be seen with Warren. There can be no hint of impropriety. It would ruin us both. It could land us in jail, or worse. I may love him, but I must love him from afar. And I cannot think of dragging you into the middle. I would never do you the dishonor or put you in such danger.”

She huffed, crossing her arms. “You know, at some point in my life, I’d like to think that I could be the mistress of my *own* fate. I must tell you that there is nothing I hate worse than having all my decisions made for me, Charles.”

He blinked, surprised by the sudden strength in her tone. “I’m only trying to protect you—”

“You are trying to *control* me,” she countered. “And I get enough of that from my father and his brothers, my mother, my governess, my tutors, my fencing instructor. Every *single*

person in my life tells me what I should want and how I should behave. I am sick to death of it!”

“So, you expect me to just step back and stay silent? As your husband I would have no say in our life or the living of it? You want total control?”

“No,” she cried, her voice almost a groan. “Ugh, I want to be *free*, Charles! I have lived all my life in a physical cage. The four walls of a drawing room have been my bars. I am kept quiet and confined. I am fed and petted and given pretty things to look at, but I am trapped! I cannot *breathe* but know that someone is looking over my shoulder, ready to tell me I am doing it wrong!”

He shook his head, her pain striking him like a lance to the chest. “Madeline, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, be *free* with me,” she begged, sweeping forward to take his hands in hers. “Do you know what I see when I look in your eyes?” She gazed up at him, those beautiful blue orbs open and wide, luring him in.

“What?” he murmured, desperate to see himself through her careful gaze.

“I see a like soul, trapped inside another cage,” she murmured.

He sucked in a breath, his hands going stiff in her grip.

“But your cage is of your own making, Charles. For you are a man. You could do and be anything in this life. You have only to try for it, to dare to believe it could be yours, and it *can* be!”

“You make it sound so easy,” he muttered, dropping his hands away from her.

“You simply must get out of your own way. For that is where we are different. I am in a cage and others hold the key. Even you stand before me now with a key, Charles. You could free me. And if you will only let me, I could free you too. You don’t have to live trapped inside your mind, inside your fear. You don’t have to push Warren away anymore. If you trust me, if you let me in, you can be together. I can protect you both.

My wealth, my position, they will be our sword and shield. We could all be together—”

“*Please* stop,” he groaned, shrugging away from her.

It was too much. Hope was such a rare and fragile thing. Charles had lived a life watching all his hopes and dreams dashed upon sharp rocks. Again and again, his candle was utterly snuffed out. His parents dying young, leaving him and his brother with nothing. His uncle barely making enough to feed them all. He took the offer of the late duke to go to Cambridge, not because he wanted to be a curate, but because he had no other options.

And Charles had never been strong. He was too easily pushed by the whims and wills of others. Too easily led away from his own desires. He let Uncle Selby pull him away from Warren. He let his mentor push him towards accepting a position in Bredbury. He didn’t want to go to Bredbury! He wanted to stay here. James Corbin offered him a position in Finchley, and he was too damn afraid of other’s opinions to take it. Afraid to want something, try for it, and not get it. Again.

And now here was Madeline. Sweet, honest Madeline. She was so lovely, so kind. How easy it would be to let himself be pulled by her too, led down the garden path into her bright future of a perfect forever, Warren at their side. It was impossible. What she was saying was impossible. There was no reality in which he could have them both. It was not done.

He didn’t even realize he was shaking his head.

Madeline looked so utterly crestfallen. “I see you are determined not to believe me,” she murmured. “This is your answer then? You’re saying no?”

Was he? Had the words yet passed his lips? He knew he ought to say no to her. Such a precious flower deserved better, more. “I—don’t want to ruin your life,” he muttered, letting his truth slip free at last.

Her gaze darted up, blue eyes deep and wide. “What can you mean? You wouldn’t be ruining my life; you would be

*saving* it. Have I not just said—”

But he shook his head, letting her have all his fears. “You said it yourself, I am a powerless man. I am a lowly vicar, Madeline. I have no wealth, no connections. I cannot fight for you, nor can I protect you. Not from the censure of the *ton*. I fear I cannot risk making you my wife, not if I will make you a social outcast in the same day, a joke told at teas and luncheons to which you no longer receive an invitation—”

“But I don’t *want* those invitations—”

“You say that now, but you haven’t yet felt the full sting of society’s hatred,” he shouted at her, watching her shrink back. “You are insulated here at Alcott. Were we to join your family for Christmas, do you think their usual set would rejoice at your new inferior connections? Would they even shake my hand?”

“I—”

“And what of Warren?” he added, feeling fiercely protective of his dearest friend.

She blinked, lip quivering. “What of him?”

“Do you expect to drag him into this mess too? You would parade him around London drawing rooms as...what? Your handsome laborer? Would you watch as the feathered peacocks sipped their brandy and asked him about his scars? Would you watch them try to bed him as part of a bet? ‘Who can claim a wild night with Madeline Bray’s kept man?’ You know they will try it,” he added, eyes narrowed at her.

“I will bite the hand of any lady who dares to touch him,” she said, her voice quivering. “He is *ours*, Charles.”

His heart raced at the words. *Ours*. Christ, it sounded so good. He wanted it to be true.

“Not that he needs any protecting from us,” she added. “But if it came down to it, I *would* use my wealth to keep us safe. We could leave London, Charles. Leave England. The three of us, we could travel. Our life would be ours alone. And I care not what the *ton* thinks of me. I will give not a fig for



what they think of you or Warren either. I have never sought their good opinions. Why start now?"

He sighed a deep breath, dragging his hand through his hair once more. "You seem so determined," he muttered. "How can you have such strong convictions? How can you see in me what I clearly cannot see in myself?"

She shrugged. "I have spent my life watching others. I am no great entertainer or orator. I am not the center of anything. I live quietly and reservedly. And I see people. I see through their armor and their veils. You are no great mystery to me... or to Warren," she added. "We see you just as you are. You are a good man. A strong and capable man. A kind one. An honest one."

How could that be true? He didn't feel like any of those traits applied to him on his best day.

She took one of his hands in both of hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I will only say these next words one more time, so please listen." She held his gaze, her openness overwhelming him. "Charles, I need to marry now, and I want to marry *you*—no, please—don't say anything," she said quickly, raising a hand to his lips to stifle his words.

He groaned, trying to ignore how good it felt to feel her fingers brushing his lips.

"Please—just—let me get this out," she stuttered. "My pride cannot take asking you again. But I am offering you all that I have, Charles Bray. And I mean to take you both, if Warren will have me. I will be a wife to you both. But you must marry me. And soon. Free me from my cage, and I will do everything in my power to free you from yours too. I will help you learn to see yourself the way we see you."

Tipping up on her toes, she brushed her lips featherlight against his. "There, I have said my piece. Please do not answer now. This cannot be rushed, and I will not have you appeasing me out of pity or obligation. You must want this too. Do not speak a word about it until you are ready to say either yes or no."

The clock on the mantle chimed and Charles groaned, knowing his uncle waited for him even now. He glanced back at her, desperate to do something—*anything*—to say without words how strongly he was coming to care for her. How badly he wanted to hand her the key to free him from his self-torment.

In the end, he raised her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles, taking a moment to breath in her sweetly floral scent. “Can I come again tomorrow?” he murmured against her skin.

She nodded and pulled her hand away, dismissing him with a nod.

He turned for the door and stilled, glancing over his shoulder. “This morning with Warren...you didn’t just look at a horse...did you?”

She pursed her lips, crossing her arms around her middle. “No.”

He groaned, turning away. “And did you...”

Silence hung between them as she made him wait, made him wonder.

“Warren takes what he wants,” she called in a soft voice. “And I think I mean to follow his example...wherever it leads.”



Three days. It had been three long days since Warren tasted Madeline in the tack room. He felt like he was crawling out of his skin. He hadn't felt this out of sorts since the first time he leaned across the bench in the curate's garden and kissed Charles square on the lips. They'd been lads of fifteen at the time, both nervous and fumbling, all thumbs. Their explorations started out as awkward and short-lived. It took a while to get to good. And great had only come near the end.

And then Charles left.

With Madeline, things felt entirely different. She was a virgin in every particular, and yet she took to sex like a fish to water. Warren felt addicted to her. One taste, one feel of her in his arms, and all other women suddenly paled in comparison. There were no other women. There was only Madeline. And he needed more.

But she'd been kept hidden away at the great house, not even emerging for a casual walk in the garden. And his own work was keeping him busier than usual for this time of year. The duke had tasked him and two other keepers with hunting additional braces of pheasants, ducks, and rabbits to be delivered to the families of the Carrington fires.

Each time he made his way to the stables to borrow a horse to see the game delivered, he hoped to stumble upon her. Any piece of her would be enough. He'd settled for a glimpse of

that golden hair through a window as she practiced the piano forte.

Did she play the piano? All ladies of her station played, right? He made it a point to ask.

“Goddamn it,” he muttered, jerking his knife across his whetstone with more force than was necessary, nearly skinning his knuckle.

What he needed to do was calm down. He was in way too deep over his head with this woman. She was so far above him. A proper lady, a viscount’s daughter, bosom friends with the duchess. And at no point did she make him a promise of any kind. Charles was the one she wanted. Charles was the one she proposed to, that she waited for. Idiot that he was, he still hadn’t given her his answer.

Even Charles was avoiding him, it seemed. He was too busy with his uncle.

“I’m going to hell,” he muttered, slamming his knife down.

Who was he to resent a dying man? And Selby had been good to him. He took him in and fed him more times than Warren liked to count. Selby offered shelter when Warren’s stepmother kicked him out. Even when he knew his relationship with Charles had taken a turn, he still extended the hand of Christian charity. Warren was a monster to resent him now.

And yet, here Warren sat, alone in his small cabin. Charles had Selby, for how little time was left. Madeline had a whole house of friends and staff to wait on her hand and foot. And Warren had...

“Nothing.”

A deep, aching hollowness filled him. He’d never had a single thing to call his own. Even this house was given in gift by the estate. The moment he was dismissed, he’d be expected to pack his belongings and clear out. He had nothing. No family. No wife. Certainly, no husband. He was alone in the

world, ignored by the people he most wanted to care for him, to put him first—

*Knock. Knock.*

He stilled, glancing sharply at the door, his hand curling around his knife. “What kind of hour do you call this to go a’callin?!”

“Open the damn door. It’s freezing out here,” came Charles’s impatient voice.

Warren rattled his chair back, dropping the knife with a clatter. He crossed over to the door in two strides, pulling back the peg and lifting the latch.

Charles stood on his doorstep, a little lantern in hand. “Christ, it’s cold,” he muttered, shifting past him into the cabin.

Warren shut the door, sliding the latch back into place.

Charles went directly to the table to set the lantern down. Then he tugged off his hat and gloves, unwinding his scarf.

“What are you doing?” Warren muttered, still ready to wear his rejection like armor.

“Here, take this.” Charles stuffed his outer clothes at him. “Can we put some tea on? Do you still make that blend with the raspberry leaves?”

Warren hung the scarf and coat on a hook. “Charles—”

“Christ, I’ve just realized I was so distracted today that I skipped dinner. Would you mind terribly if I had a crust of bread?” Charles helped himself to a chair and was already working his way out of his boots.

“Charles, what are you doing?” Warren repeated, still standing at his door.

“I’m taking off my boots,” he muttered, bent over in the chair, and giving his boots a tug.

“You should be home. You should be with Selby.”

He stilled, his hands unmoving on the laces. “No.”

Panic sank into the pit of his stomach, followed quickly by the hollow feeling of grief. “Oh god. Selby—”

“He’s alive,” Charles assured him, brushing a hand down his arm as he moved past him towards the hearth. “Sick as ever, but holding on. We played chess this morning. He won all three games. I saw him put to bed before I left.”

Warren took a breath, sending out a little prayer to whoever was listening that Selby remain with them as long as possible. It was a selfish prayer, but a prayer, nonetheless. For Selby was Charles’s only tether to Finchley now. Without him, Charles would have no reason to stay. And, fool that he was, Warren wasn’t ready to let him go again.

Charles helped himself to Warren’s things, fishing through the tins until he found the tea, and setting the kettle back on its chain over the fire. “Did you eat tonight?” he called over his shoulder. “Shall I toast a piece for you?”

“Charles, why the hell are you here?” Warren said again, needing to hear his answer like he needed air.

Charles turned, knife in one hand, bread loaf in the other. He gave Warren a helpless shrug. “Because I can’t not be.” Turning back around, he prepped two slices of the bread and set them to toasting with the tongs.

Within fifteen minutes, they were sat at the table with a steaming cup of tea each and a piece of buttered toast spread with Molly Evans’s blackberry rhubarb jam.

“How is she?” Warren murmured, taking a bite of his toast.

“I’ve haven’t seen her,” Charles replied. “I’ve been so busy dealing with the bazar for the fire victims, and with my uncle—covering his sermons and making calls, writing his correspondence.”

Warren narrowed his eyes. Charles had always been so easy to read. He couldn’t lie to save his own life. Which is why Warren had taken the lead on every nefarious act of their misspent youth. Charles couldn’t steal a pie from the kitchen because he’d look too guilty when cornered by Molly. It was

always Warren stealing food and scaling walls. It was always Warren taking risks.

Even now, his tells were obvious. Charles blushed when he was lying. Not much, just a faint pinking of the highest point of his cheek. And he didn't make eye contact. He sat across the table, eyes on his mug of tea, that damned blush rising in his cheeks as he cleared his throat, taking a sip of his herbal tea.

"You're avoiding her," Warren surmised. "Have you still not given her an answer then?"

"Not yet."

"You're a damned fool, Charles. Why do you delay? And why do you deny the duke his offer too? It's a good offer—"

"I didn't come here to fight," he muttered, setting his cup of tea aside. "I came to—I just wanted to...fuck, I don't know what I want." He groaned, dragging both his hands through his hair, elbows hitting the table.

Warren huffed, arms crossed over his chest. "That's the problem with you, Charles. Always has been."

Charles met his gaze, glaring at him. "Go on, enlighten me then."

"You know exactly what you want," he growled, pointing a finger at him. "You're just too afraid to stand up and take it. You've always been a damned coward."

Charles bristled. "Oh, *I'm* too afraid? Is that why you hide out here then?" he said, gesturing around. "You're one of the smartest men I've ever met, and yet you are content to do nothing with your life. You let your own father bully you and belittle you, denying you an inheritance—"

"I am a bastard, Charles," he growled. "My father did not want me. At no point has he *ever* wished to claim me. He gave me life and he gave me his name, and that is all," he said with a sharp cut of his hand. "I don't let him bully me anymore. I haven't since I was twelve. He is *nothing* to me."

“How can you say that when he still lives here?” Charles countered. “I saw him in town just yesterday. He said your brother died. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Warren stiffened and shrugged, taking a sip of his tea. “What does it matter? Hugh Warren is dead. He was nothing to me either. His mother made sure there was never any warmth of feeling between us.”

“Yes, but now your father has no living heir and Hugh never married,” Charles replied. “There are no children. You are the rightful heir to his estate.”

“I have no right to anything,” he muttered, shoving his tea aside. “Bastards cannot inherit.”

“They can if they are claimed—”

“God *damn* it, Charles, enough,” he barked, slamming his fist down on the table. “That life was finished for me before it began. I will never be a baronet. He could knock on my door this minute with a will in hand and I would *burn* it. I don’t want his title or his money or his land. I make my own way in this world. I am a gamekeeper and that is enough. I have food, shelter, a good job. I have friends. *You* want greatness for me, Charles. I simply want to live my life on my terms. And I do!”

“But don’t you see how things are changed now?” Charles pressed. “You could inherit and be worthy of Madeline in a way I never could be. She has all her attention on me because she doesn’t know *you* are the greater prize. Christ, I was crawling out my skin the other day, listening to her throw herself at me. I wanted to tell her the truth about us, about our positions. I nearly did. It was on the tip of my tongue, but I knew you would never forgive me if I did. It is not my truth to tell.”

“You’re damn right, it’s not,” he growled.

“But don’t you see? I am not worthy of her, John! She deserves someone of her sphere, not a lowly vicar.”

Warren laughed, but the sound was hollow. He hated the way Charles was dragging all this to the surface once more. “You don’t get to run scared for this, Charles. You don’t get to



shove us at each other just so you can be the long-suffering martyr once more.”

“Go to your father,” he went on. “Tell him about Madeline. Tell him that she is ready to make you an offer of marriage. Sir John might see his way to naming you his heir if you are married to a viscount’s daughter. Then your match could be one of equals—”

“No.” Warren shook his head, heart thundering in his chest.

“Have you even told her it’s on the table? Does she know who you really are?”

“I am exactly the man who sits before you,” he replied. “She wants me as I am, Charles. I don’t need to put on airs to win her, to make her mine. If you’d stop being such a damned fool, she could be yours. She could be *ours*.”

Charles just shook his head. “But you could be so much more.”

Warren huffed, his irritation simmering. It wouldn’t take much to have him boiling over. “Classic Charles. I point out a flaw in you, and you run scared again, turning it all around on me.”

“Fine, say what it is you’re so desperate to say! Tell me your great truths!”

“Goddamn it, you *work* for Christ, you’re not the man incarnate!”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means stop hanging yourself on all these bloody crosses! You are the most tortured soul I’ve ever met, but *you* are your own tormentor. It’s maddening. We are not damned, and this is not a sin,” he said, gesturing between them. “If you would get that through your thick skull, then all the other pieces of your life could fall neatly into place!”

“What pieces?”

“You would marry Madeline for one,” he argued, pointing a finger at him again. “She’s beautiful and kind and perfect for

you—for *us*!”

Charles shook his head. “We don’t—I can’t drag her down. I can’t ruin her life—”

“She doesn’t *want* that life! How many times in how many ways must she say it? She doesn’t want to marry a lord. I could not hope to lure her interest by claiming myself as Sir John’s bastard son. If anything, I think it would push her away, for she is *done* with that life. She wants you, Charles. That’s all she wants. She wants *me* to fuck her. She wants *you* to marry her.”

“And you’re content with that arrangement?” he said incredulously.

Warren just shrugged, burying his true emotions deep. Did it hurt to always come up second? To always be the afterthought? Did it hurt when Charles left without a backwards glance?

Is there a word in English for such pain?

“I take what I can get,” he muttered. “I’ve always taken whatever I can get.”

“John—”

“And you need to accept the duke’s offer,” he urged, pointing a finger at him. “I know you’d rather chew glass than move up to Bredbury. Take up the position here in Finchley. You *belong* here, Charles. You deserve to make a life surrounded by the people who love you—people you love in return. And I don’t just mean me,” he added quickly. “You grew up with these families, Charles. They know you. They *trust* you. That goes a long way—”

“And what, move Madeline into the parsonage?” He scoffed. “The vicar and the viscount’s daughter. We’ll have Molly serve us our breakfast in bed, I suppose. And where shall you be in that little picture, our bastard baronet’s son? Curled up on the floor before the fire?”

But Warren just smirked, seeing through his falsity. “I’m telling you right now that if I’m in this picture, I’ll be in the bed too, curled up around *you* with my hand on your cock.”

Charles groaned, closing his eyes. “Stop.”

“I’m only saying what you’re already picturing,” he needled. “You could have it all, Charles. Stop being a martyr, and take what is being offered. I have been yours since that first kiss in the garden. I will never stray from you. Hurt me, leave me, cut me down, I am lost to you.”

Charles groaned, dragging a hand through his hair, “John —”

But he didn’t want his apologies. Not now. Not when he was feeling so on edge. He hated talking of his father, of his past. Charles knew that. Warren wanted to see him squirm too. “Madeline’s offer sits before you now. Can you really mean to turn her down? You could slide your cock between her legs every night, burying yourself to the hilt in that sweet cunt. Meanwhile, I’ll take you from behind. My every thrust will sheath you in her until she’s crying out both our names—”

“Oh, fuck,” Charles whimpered, pushing away from the table.

“Is *that* what you came here for, Charles?” he growled, punching the table again. “You still think I’ll play the game where I call you a dirty whore and fuck you senseless? Rut you until you forget it’s a sin? Until you forget your own damn name? Only now you’re hoping I’ll add *her* to the fantasy too, right?”

Charles shook his head, turning away.

“That game is finished for me,” Warren called. “You *left* me, Charles. You ripped my fucking heart out, leaving me broken and bleeding on the goddamn floor. I will not play your games anymore. I will not be the man who fucks you quietly in the night, milking your passion from you as you pretend to fight me. There’s only one thing I want now. And unlike you, I’m not afraid to say it out loud, to own it with my whole damn chest.”

Charles turned, a glimmer of hope flickering in his amber gaze. “What, John? What do you want now?”

He squared his shoulders at him. “Well, to quote Madeline: I want everything.”

Before Charles could voice a reply, there was a second knock on the door.



“Please, oh please,” Madeline murmured, knocking on the door again.

She had to be stark raving mad. Only madness would explain why she snuck downstairs in the dark of the night and slipped out the same window James thrust her out of all those days ago.

Only madness explained why she would hike nearly a mile through the snow in the dark to find this little cabin in the woods. Only madness explained what she hoped to achieve this night.

The door jerked open and then she was looking up into Warren’s surprised face. “Madeline, what—”

“Please, let me in,” she panted. “Please, John.”

He swung the door open, reaching out an arm to scoop her inside. She buried herself against his chest, pressing her face into the rough fabric of his shirt, taking a deep inhale. Almost at once, the madness that drove her to such a reckless act seemed to subside, eased by the overwhelming presence of John Warren.

“Madeline? What the hell is going on?”

She turned her face to see Charles standing near the hearth.

“Oh, thank god,” she murmured, grateful beyond measure that he was also here.

“Did you walk here all on your own?” he called.

“Without a light,” Warren growled, his arms still banded around her at shoulders and waist. “You could have fallen in a ditch—”

“Or twisted another damn ankle,” added Charles.

Warren pulled back, both his large hands on her shoulders. “How did you even get out of the house?”

She flashed a sheepish smile, focusing on the open point of his shirt that exposed a soft thatch of dark chest hair. “I... climbed out the window.”

“Goddamn it,” he muttered, locking his elbows in place.

As if that was going to stop her from taking what she wanted. Her smile widened.

“What are you doing here, Madeline?” Charles pressed.

Heart in her throat, she glanced from Charles to Warren. “I cannot wait any longer. I’ve lived in fear every day that a constable will return, or my father himself will appear and carry me off. My freedom is so close at hand, I can taste it. This waiting, this not knowing, it is driving me mad,” she said, pausing to take a gasping breath. “So, I came here to...I came to be with you. I want to...be *with* you. Both of you,” she added. “You want a full marriage, Charles. That’s what you said.”

He groaned. “Madeline, I didn’t mean—”

Unbuckling the clasp of her cloak, she let it fall to the floor, revealing that she wore nothing but her dressing robe and chemise.

“Shit,” Warren muttered, dropping his hands, and stepping away.

As soon as he let go of her, she pulled loose the knot of her dressing robe, shedding that too. “Someone left these in my room last night.” She held up a pair of thin paper sachets. “I think they meant for me to use them. I took it as a sign... perhaps not from your god, Charles, for he teaches the virtues of chastity.”

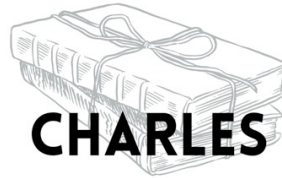
Both Warren and Charles's eyes narrowed as they tried to identify the items.

“The note says they're called ‘French letters,’” she added. “They allow for the marital act to be performed without the risk of children. Do you know how to use them?”

Charles all but whimpered as he looked to Warren. “John, I \_\_\_”

“Yes,” Warren replied, his tone calm and even.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Good.” Not waiting another second, she tugged on the tie at the front of her chemise. Loosening it, she let it drop to the floor, revealing her nakedness. “Then show me.”



Charles was dead. He had to be. He was dead, and this was heaven. Nothing else explained why Lady Madeline Blaire was standing naked in the middle of Warren’s cabin, holding a pair of French letters, saying ‘show me.’

Warren was closer, damn the man. And he didn’t hesitate. He never hesitated to take what he wanted, did he not just say as much? As soon as that chemise hit the floor, he had her in his arms, his massive hands splaying wide across her perfect skin, memorizing her proportions.

She panted and whimpered and made all the perfect sounds that had Charles’s cock twitching in his breeches. She seemed just as ravenous as Warren, her hands moving over his chest, his shoulders, into his long, walnut brown hair.

Warren cupped her breasts. They were barely enough for a handful, but Charles didn’t care. He’d never really been attracted to breasts before. But seeing her breasts in Warren’s hands was making him ache with the need to touch, to taste. He crossed the room, stepping next to them just as Warren broke their kiss, dropping his mouth down to claim one. He sucked on her tit until she was quivering, her back arching into him.

“Oh god—don’t stop,” she panted. “Charles—”

With his name on her lips, he was undone. He dropped his pride to the floor, letting it shatter like glass. Then he was pressing forward, claiming her mouth while Warren teased her nipples.



“Need you both,” she murmured. “Need to feel what you share.”

“I know,” he groaned, loving the way she tasted—so sweet and pure, so delicate. “God, I know. I need you both too. Need to see you with him. Need to know what this could be.”

And then the words of the duke rushed through him, nearly taking his breath away. *More*. Charles wanted to explore the possibility of more with Madeline and Warren. He wanted them both, more than he’d ever wanted anything in his life.

But this was reckless and dangerous. Warren was too impulsive to put a stop to this, and Madeline too naïve. It fell to Charles to be the voice of reason, the arbiter of caution. A lady’s honor was at stake, not to mention his position in the community and Warren’s livelihood. If word ever got out, if she was seen coming here...

So why couldn’t he stop kissing her?

Warren pulled his mouth from her tit, his height dwarfing them as he joined their kiss. It was messy and strange and perfect. Warren pulled back, his chest heaving. “Taste her, Charles. Tease her nipples while I ready her cunt.”

He groaned again, his self-control nearly unraveling at the look of open need in Madeline’s eyes. He’d never touched a woman’s cunt before. He knew the general theory of what happened and where everything was supposed to go, but he was glad to have Warren here to lead them.

Madeline dug her fingers through his curls, pulling his head down towards her breasts and he was a lamb happy to be led. Her breasts swelled high and tight, her pink nipples rosy and wet from Warren’s attention. He used his hands first, touching them both, weighing them.

She shivered as he smoothed his thumbs over her nipples.

“How does it feel?” he murmured.

“So good,” she replied on a breath. “Like nothing I’ve ever—nothing compares. It feels like my body is on fire. Kiss them, Charles. Need your lips on me too.”

He dropped his mouth, sucking her pointed tip into his mouth. Her skin was so velvety smooth. She arched into him, and he sucked harder.

“Oh, god—yes—please, Warren,” she whimpered.

Charles pulled back, eager to watch as Warren slid his hand between her legs.

Her whole body spasmed, and she clung to them both, parting her legs to make room for him.

“You’re so goddamn wet. So lovely,” Warren growled. “Are you going to be this wet for us every time?”

“Yes,” she panted. “I can’t get myself there—*ah*—I’ve tried. I—the last three nights, I’ve tried, and it’s not the same,” she stammered. “I want you, Warren. Need you.” She kissed him again, lavishing him with her tongue before pulling away and dragging Charles closer.

Christ, this woman was every dream he never knew he had. She was fearless. “Madeline, tell us what you want,” he begged, needing to know how far this could go.

“I want all of it,” she said on a breath. “I want to see your cocks. They go inside me, right? They go between my legs? I want them in. Please, *god*, put them in me. Need to feel it—need to know—I’m going mad with the not knowing.”

Both men were groaning now, sharing a look of wonder mixed with apprehension.

Charles gave Warren a pleading look. He couldn’t possibly make this decision for them. He needed Warren to take the lead.

Warren nodded, turning his attention back to Madeline. “Right, lovely. Here’s how it will be. You’ll take Charles first. I’ll show him what to do. We’ll make it good for you both, I swear.”

“But I want you too,” she whined.

He pulled his face away, cupping her jaw to hold her still. “You’ll have me, make no mistake. But I’m much larger than Charles, and we don’t want to hurt you. Charles goes first.”

She nodded, taking a few shallow breaths.

Warren let out a breath too, glancing around. “Right, let me just...lets get organized here. Help Charles get undressed.”

Charles waited, eyes wide, as Madeline turned to him. This is when he stopped it. This was the moment he sent her home. A gentleman wouldn't let this go any farther. Christ, a respectable curate would never even be in this position at all!

Was everything Uncle Selby said true? He was a wild starling, spirited and free. He was passion and fire, longing and desire. *That* was the true Charles. Warren saw it. He'd always been able to coax it out of him, challenging him to climb higher in trees, race faster on horses. He secretly loved the thrill of taking risks, of standing on the edge of precipice and daring to lean forward. That was freedom. That was living.

But Charles spent his days play-acting, filling the role of a man of the Church. Buttoned up, respectable, wholly responsible. That was the Charles Bray the world saw. A man of quiet opinions and perfect manners who made pretty, uncomplicated sermons.

Madeline was right, Charles lived in a cage of his own making—duty to family, responsibility to profession, loyalty to his oaths. Warren had always been his secret key. Only Warren could unlock the door and step inside the cage for a while, forcing Charles to rattle against the bars.

Now this beautiful, young woman stood naked in his arms, and for the first time in his life, he couldn't even feel the bars. Her every look and touch were dissolving them. His heart raced—was this excitement or panic? He couldn't tell. After living for so long inside his cage, it felt impossible to be without it.

“Do you want me, Charles?” Madeline murmured, her crystalline gaze full of so much fragile hope.

He groaned again, dragging a hand through his curls. He had to remember that she lived her life in a cage too. But unlike Charles, who typically found the bars of his cage a

comfort, she was trying to break free. She'd come to them in the dark of night, heart in hand, daring to make them this proposition. This posh, unmarried lady was naked in a groundskeeper's cabin with two men, offering up her virtue in the name of exploring their shared sexual chemistry, all for the sake of proving a point that Charles ought to set all his emotional baggage aside and marry her.

It was madness.

It was ruinous for all of them.

So why wasn't that stopping him? Why were his hands smoothing down her naked arms? Why was he pulling her closer?

*Are you so broken that you're willing to break her too?*

"Charles," she said again, hope now flickering in her eyes like a sputtering candle. "Could any small part of you ever learn to want me?"

*Christ.*

His resolve was in tattered shreds. A proper gentleman would have escorted her home the moment she arrived on Warren's threshold. A better man would walk away now, leaving most of her impeachable honor intact. Apparently, Charles was no gentleman, or even the better man. He was the desperate man. The craven man. The starving man. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his chest. "Yes, you wildcat. I want you so much, I feel like I'll die if I leave this room."

She sagged against him with clear relief, and he let his hands trail down her back to cup the small globes of her arse. Pressed together as they were, there was no way she couldn't feel the evidence of his own arousal. It was aching hard in his breeches.

"Is that...can I touch it?" she murmured, lifting her head off his chest.

Why not? He was already going to hell. He nodded, taking her hand with his and rubbing her palm along his shaft from

root to tip. He stifled his groan, biting his bottom lip as she did it again on her own.

“I want to see it,” she whispered. “I’ve never seen one before...except in paintings and sculptures. I drew one once, modeling it after a sketchbook sample. But when my mother found it, she burned the book, and my sketch.”

He chuckled, loving how she prattled when she was nervous. “Well, I can’t guarantee this one is a work of art...”

“It is,” Warren called from across the room. “You’ll love it, Madeline. Have no fear of that.”

“Show me,” she murmured, her gaze trailing down his chest.

Taking a deep breath, Charles nodded. There was only ever one way this night was going to end. The sooner he let go of the notion of honor, the sooner he would know her taste on his tongue.

They began, Madeline flashing him a nervous smile. He’d already shed his coat when he and Warren sat down to tea, but he still wore his vest. That was the first to go. Then he worked the knot of his cravat, untying the fabric and unwinding it from his neck. He handed it to Madeline, and she set it aside.

“Men’s clothes always look so complicated. So many layers. More than we are ever afforded, heaven knows,” she murmured, helping him with the small buttons of his shirt.

He laughed, working the buttons at his wrists. She stepped forward, pressing her lips to the open “v” at his chest and he groaned, his cock twitching with need. Desperate to feel her skin against his, he shrugged his braces off his shoulders and tugged his shirt loose from his breeches, pulling it off over his head.

She stepped back, eyes wide as she took him in. He wanted to feel self-conscious, but her gaze was wholly disarming. She was appreciating him, her lips quirking into a little smile.

“He’s beautiful, no?” Warren called.

“No,” she breathed. “I mean—yes—no. Yes, you are,” she added with a blush, raising her hands to smooth them over his chest. His skin pebbled at her touch. Her hands were so soft compared to Warren’s. “Can I kiss you here?” she murmured, clearly relaxing a little now that she had her hands on him again.

“Kiss me anywhere.”

She brushed her hands across his chest, peppering him with soft kisses. “You smell good. Like books, leather and parchment...and something citrus.”

He stilled, surprised she could sense so much. “It’s lemons. Molly makes a lemon lavender soap.”

She kissed him again, stepping close enough that her breasts brushed against him. He groaned, digging his fingers in her hair. Tipping her head back, he kissed her again, fighting a shiver as her hands fanned down his stomach and landed at the top of his breeches.

“Give yourself to me, Charles,” she murmured, her lips brushing his. “Yourself—your soul—in pity give me all, withhold no atom’s atom or I die.”

He groaned. The wildcat was quoting Keats while naked in his arms. He was utterly, and irrevocably lost to her.

“Bring her over here, Charles.”

Warren’s voice brought him back to himself. He blinked, glancing over his shoulder to see that Warren had stripped the narrow bed, making a sort of makeshift pallet on the floor before the hearth. There was certainly more room for them all on the floor.

He took her hand, leading her forward. She dropped to her knees on the blankets, inching forward to kiss Warren. Charles got to watch her back arch, that pert little arse facing him as she drank of Warren’s lips.

Warren broke the kiss, giving her face a gentle stroke. “Lie on your back, lovely. We’re going to show Charles how to make you come.”

She nodded, flipping onto her bottom, her hands splayed on the dark blankets. The fire crackled and popped, dancing across her features, making her look like an ethereal goddess, a Venus come to life. Her golden curls tumbled around her.

“Charles, come,” Warren directed.

Charles was already dropping to his knees at the edge of the blankets, heart in his throat.

Warren held his gaze. “Do you want to watch me first, or do you want to taste her for yourself?”

Christ, both options had their appeal, but Charles felt too starved, too needy. “Taste. Tell me what to do.”

“Spread your legs, lovely,” Warren murmured, laying on his side next to her, still fully clothed. “Show our Charles that perfect cunt. Yours is the first he’s ever seen.” He brushed his large fingers down her chest, between her breasts, to her stomach. “You will ruin him for all other women. Such is your power over us.”

Her heart raced at his words. Charles could see the rapid rise and fall of her chest. She whimpered as Warren hooked a hand around her knee, opening her wide. The lips of her sex parted, and Charles saw his first glimpse of her pretty pink center. It glistened and he knew he had to taste.

“Take your time,” Warren directed, voice low. “Use your tongue, your lips. Suck on her until she’s writhing in my hold.”

Charles dropped forward with a groan, loving the way she trembled with anticipation, held captive by Warren’s firm hands. Warren’s other hand brushed the curls off her forehead. He kissed her brow, murmuring to her things that had her shivering in his hold.

But Charles was too distracted to pay attention. He crawled between her legs, peppering her flushed skin with eager kisses, teasing with his tongue as he got closer to her heat. Lord help him, he could feel it. She was so wet, so warm. He didn’t bother with using his fingers first. He let his mouth lead the way, licking a firm swipe through her wetness.

“Ahh—” she cried out, jerking in Warren’s hold.

He did it again. And again. Each time savoring her tangy taste, claiming each quivering sound. His cock protested at being so unceremoniously pressed into the floor. But he had to wait. Her pleasure must come first.

Warren let her leg go. Parting her folds with two thick fingers, he exposed what was hidden under her thatch of soft golden curls. “Feel here,” he murmured. “Use your fingers and your tongue and learn this spot. Her bud is the key to unlocking her pleasure.”

She whimpered again as Charles teased with his tongue, flicking against that little bud until she was shaking. “Charles, please,” she panted.

“Here is her center,” Warren added, slipping his fingers down until he pressed them inside her.

“Oh, please,” she begged, arching into his touch.

But he quickly pulled his fingers out. “Tease her until you feel her clenching around your fingers. Make her come, Charles. You’re not putting your cock in her until she comes on your tongue.”

Charles set to work, learning her. He pushed her other leg wide, spearing her with his tongue until he felt her clenching. Fuck, what a sight to look up her body, over the little dip of her stomach, to see Warren’s mouth latched onto her nipple, helping Charles drive her to the edge.

Charles pressed forward, sinking inside her with two fingers as he licked at that sensitive bud. Her channel was wet and warm and tight. He groaned, imagining how good it would feel wrapped around his cock.

“Oh god, I can feel it,” she panted, her core clenching around his stroking fingers. “I’m going to come. I’m—*ahh*—”

Charles shoved a third finger in, sucking on that bud until she screamed. Warren swallowed her cries and she writhed between them. Charles watched, eyes open wide, as Madeline came apart beneath him.



He sat back on a gasping breath, pulling his fingers from her fluttering sex.

“Let me taste,” Warren ordered, grabbing Charles by the wrist. He sank down, wrapping his lips around all three of Charles’s soaking wet fingers, dragging Madeline’s essence into his mouth with a hungry groan. If Charles had to wait much longer to touch his cock, he was going to die.

Warren let him go, flashing him a satisfied smile. “Well?”

Charles was at a loss, eyes wide. “That was...”

“Just wait,” he teased. “Get your breeches off. You’re going to fuck her properly. Our sweet girl is desperate for our cocks.”

Madeline sagged beneath them, her legs limp as she caught her breath. But still she nodded, reaching out to stroke Warren’s face. “More,” she breathed. “I want more.”

Charles didn’t hesitate. The time for that passed the moment he chose to leave his uncle’s house. Rising to his knees, he quickly worked the fall of his breeches, opening them until he could slide the breeches down his hips.

His cock sprung free, hard and ready, and he fought the sudden urge to shrink back. Warren and Madeline were both looking at him, unveiled hunger in their eyes. He stood, feeling powerful under their gazes, and slid his breeches down his legs. His wool stockings were the last to go, and then he was standing naked as a babe before them.

“Get back down here,” Warren muttered. “You’re not posing for a portrait.”

With a blushing grin, he dropped back to his knees, crawling forward.

Madeline still had her eyes on his cock. “Will it fit do you think?” she murmured, glancing up at Warren.

He chuckled. “Oh, he’ll fit just fine. You were made to take us. You’ll make him a nice home between your legs.” He handed a letter out to Charles. “Put this on.”

Charles fumbled with the packet, trying to open it, when Warren said, “Wait. Lovely, do you want to taste him first?”

“Can I do that?” she asked, eyes wide.

Warren smiled. “Oh, yes. Take him in your mouth like this.”

Surprising them both, Warren leaned forward, wrapping his mouth around Charles’s cock, sinking around him to the hilt.

“Oh—fucking Christ—” Charles panted, gripping tight to Warren’s hair. Warren rarely ever took him to mouth. Charles wasn’t ready for the heat, the wetness.

Warren pulled back, giving his tip a teasing flick with his tongue as he sat back, dark eyes twinkling with mischief. “Try it,” he directed at Madeline.

Madeline scooted forward, gazing up at him so innocently through her golden lashes as her warm breath fanned over the tip of his aching cock.

“Oh, Jesus,” he muttered, watching her tongue flick out to tease him.

She pulled back and a pearl of come glistened on his tip.

“Taste him, Madeline. Charles is aching for you,” Warren ordered.

She opened her mouth wider, her sweet, pink lips wrapping around his shaft. She whimpered, sliding along his length, quickly popping off again. “It’s so odd,” she murmured. “So unlike anything I’ve ever done before.”

“But do you like it?” Charles found himself saying.

She glanced up again, those blue eyes deep pools of honesty. “I like anything that brings you both pleasure. For that is the point of physical love, is it not?”

“Aye, it is,” Warren agreed, kissing her brow. “We will make a vow here and now. We each will only do what brings the others pleasure. There is nothing that cannot be shared between us, so long as pleasure is the outcome. Agreed?”

She nodded. “Agreed.”

They both glanced up at Charles, waiting for him.

Slowly, he nodded too. “Agreed.”



Madeline laid back against the little pile of pillows, heart fluttering as she gazed up at Warren and Charles. They were so beautiful. Warren's was a rugged beauty, like watching a wild stag wandering a dark forest. Charles had the more classic beauty, the kind an artist might sculpt into stone.

And they were with her now, eager and hungry to give her pleasure. She would never forget this night. Even if this is all she got, she would cherish it—every kiss, every caress.

“Charles, make love to me,” she murmured, spreading her legs to give him room.

Charles groaned, already busy slipping the French letter on over his proud cock. She watched, eager to understand all the processes involved. He dropped on all fours before her, crawling over her to claim her lips in a fevered kiss.

“Take your time,” said Warren. “Sink into the cradle of her hips, and use your hand to guide yourself inside her. Go slow at first. Let her adjust to the fullness.”

Charles was doing his best to hold his weight off her, but she wanted more. She wanted to feel him everywhere. Her core was aching to be filled. She shifted her hips, feeling his hardness pressing between her legs. She broke their kiss, falling back, her hands on his naked hips, as she moved against him. “Charles, please,” she whimpered. “I want you inside me. Need to feel you.”

He pressed up with his hips as she tipped hers forward and she felt his prodding tip at her entrance.

“There—” she panted, lifting her hips to help him slide in another inch. It felt so different compared to when they used their fingers or their tongues.

“Holy god,” he groaned, his body tighter than a bow string as he met the press of her hips with his own.

“Nice and easy,” Warren intoned.

“I feel you, Charles,” she breathed, heart in her throat. The fullness was exquisite. A bit of pain, a pinch of discomfort, but nothing compared to the aching feeling of perfect fullness. “Give me more.”

“Fuck, you have to stop saying all the right things,” he groaned, his breath hot in her ear. “I will rut you senseless if you keep asking for more.”

She stilled, biting her lip as he inched in further, pressing forward with his hips.

“Nearly there,” Warren murmured. “Press in, Charles. Bury yourself to the hilt. Claim her as yours.”

Charles lifted up on his hands, gazing down into her eyes as he sank all the way in, stealing all her air on a silent gasp. “God, help me,” he groaned.

“How does she feel?”

“So tight. So warm. I need to move, John,” Charles muttered.

Warren dropped down, brushing kisses over her sweaty brow. “Are you good, lovely? You have Charles inside you to the hilt. He’s yours now. Do you want him to move?”

She nodded, trying to keep the thousand tiny pieces of herself from breaking apart. “Please,” she murmured. “Show me what to do.”

“Lie back and feel him moving inside you,” Warren coached. “Breathe. Do whatever feels natural while he claims your cunt until he comes.”

She licked her lips, not daring to close her eyes.

And then Charles was moving, his hips slamming against her. It was the oddest sensation, nothing like the feel of their tongues or fingers. With each press of his hips, she felt a burning heat low in her core spark brighter and brighter. The feeling was slowly spiraling outward, until she felt hot all over, like she was sinking into a warm bath.

She arched her hips to meet him, breathing through parted lips, as Charles groaned on top of her, his eyes shut tight as he chased his ecstasy.

“Slow down,” Warren cautioned. “You want her to come with you. Take your hand and work between her legs. Don’t come until you feel her strangle your cock. Ride her release with your own.”

Charles groaned, dropping down to one arm, which brought him closer to her. She crowed with happiness, wrapping her arms around his neck, kissing whatever she could reach. He snaked a hand between them, his fingers rubbing little circles between her thighs. She arched off the pillows.

“Oh, my—*ahh*—”

Now she was an inferno. Her insides burning as hot as her fevered skin. She was shaking, clawing at his shoulders, lifting her hips to meet his every thrust. Then she was unraveling. With one sharp tug at her heart, she was unmade, crying out as she felt her core flutter and squeeze around him.

He cried out too, all but falling on top of her as he went stiff, his hips kicking into her. They both lay there, their sweat mingling on their fevered skin, as they recovered their breath. She licked her lips, her hands fluttering, arms pinned.

“Let her up, Charles,” Warren soothed. “Let her breathe.”

Charles groaned, shifting until his cock slipped out of her. She felt relieved and saddened at once. He rolled to his side, peppering her shoulder with kisses, one arm slung over her middle.

She felt boneless, like a molded jelly.

“How was that, lovely?” asked Warren, stretched on her other side. He raised a large hand and traced a finger in a soft circle around her nipple, giving her a tip a gentle flick.

She shivered with a smile. “So good,” she murmured. “If every married couple in Mayfair knows of this pleasure, I wonder how they ever leave their rooms.”

Both men snorted, with Charles’s turning into a groan as he flopped an arm over his face, still breathing heavy.

She rolled on her side. “Was it good for you? Did you like it?”

He lifted his arm enough to dart one eye her direction, his mouth tipping into a frown. “Do you really have to ask me that?”

She shrugged. “I have no frame of reference.”

He smirked. “And my sole frame of reference is sitting right behind you. I must say that the experience of fucking is quite different from being fucked.”

“Being fucked?” she repeated. “How does a man be fucked?”

Both men snorted again, and she fought the urge to blush at her ignorance.

It was Warren who leaned in, his calloused hand brushing over the curve of her bottom. “We take each other here, lovely,” he murmured, pressing his finger between her cheeks.

“And...does it feel good?” she asked, fighting the urge to squirm away.

Charles nodded. “Aye, it feels like...like there was a piece of me that was missing, and Warren makes it whole. There’s an emptiness inside us all, and physical intimacy can fill it... even if only temporarily.”

She pursed her lips, thoughtful as she considered his words. “I suppose that is where romantic love must fill the gaps.”

“Hmm?” said Warren, who was now brushing his fingers over her ribs.

“Physical love is a fleeting thing,” she went on, luxuriating in his gentle touch. “For we must all perform the duties of our lives. So, when there cannot be physical love, romantic love sustains us. It keeps the emptiness at bay...until we can find each other again...until we can touch.”

To either side of her, the men were utterly silent. Had she said the wrong thing? She glanced at Charles first, surprised to find tears in his eyes. “Charles? I’m sorry, I—”

He silenced her with a kiss, owning her mouth as easily as he did between her legs. She sank into his kiss, letting her fingers weave into his soft curls.

Behind her, Warren sat up, stripping his shirt off at last.

She broke her kiss with Charles her hand still on his jaw as she glanced over her shoulder, eyes wide. Warren was devastating; broad and well-muscled. While Charles had a few soft curls dusting his chest, Warren had a full thatch of dark hair, with more trailing down his stomach to the top of his breeches.

His long hair was all but loose around his shoulders. He sat back in a half-curl, undoing his breeches. He slid them down his legs, and Madeline nearly choked. His hard cock was on full display.

“I...don’t...” Her eyes were wide, locked on the proud member that Warren held with one hand, giving it a few lazy strokes. He was easily twice as large as Charles, longer too.

He shifted into a sitting position, his legs outstretched, as he leaned back against the side of his narrow bed. His heated gaze landed on her. “You want to keep the emptiness at bay, princess?”

Her mind screamed ‘no,’ but her curious core panted out a desperate ‘yes.’ Unable to speak actual words, she merely nodded.

He held out a hand to her. “Well then come here, and sit on my cock.”





As Madeline scrambled forward, Warren pulled out the other French letter, working it down his impressive length. She wasn't sure what to do, but he had no patience for her hesitancy. He grabbed her by the hips and hauled her across his lap until her legs were straddling him. He seated her right before his cock, so it was all but wedged between her parted folds.

It only took a little pressure and a lift of his hips, and he was sliding his massive cock along her sensitive bud, making her arms break out in gooseflesh as she shivered.

“Look at me, lovely,” he murmured, tipping her face up with a gentle hand. “Do you want this? Do you want more?”

She nodded, biting her bottom lip as she ran her hands through the soft hair of his chest. His own fingers tweaked her nipples and she hissed.

“Keep biting that lip, and see what happens,” he growled, claiming her lips in a kiss.

She felt impossibly small in his arms, wrapping her own around his neck and pulling him closer until her breasts were brushing against his fevered skin.

Then Charles was behind her, straddling Warren's legs too to kiss her exposed neck. She cried out, arching into him as she teased Warren with her tongue. Warren broke the kiss with her, holding her close, as he reached for Charles, pulling him flush with her back to kiss him too.

She whimpered, loving the feeling of being pressed so tightly between them. But then Warren was letting him go, and Charles was slipping back, leaving her in Warren's possessive hands.

"You're going to ride me," Warren ordered, flexing his hips to move his cock against her wet core. "You take as much of me as you want, then stop. Ease into it."

She nodded, her gaze dropping between them. "How do I..."

"You just sit down, princess," he teased, nipping her chin as he slid his hands down to brace her hips. "Put me between your legs and sit until it feels too full. I'll help you."

She nodded again, arching up a bit until she could angle the tip of his cock between her legs.

He held still as she wrapped a hand around him, moving him. "Feel me there? At your center? Feel that pressure?"

"Yes," she said on a breath, her core aching with a sudden sharp pain as she sank down an inch. "Ow, ow," she whimpered, even as her heart raced out of control. A deep hum in her core begged for more.

"Don't hurt her," came Charles's sharp order, his hands smoothing down her back.

"Does it hurt?" Warren echoed, his dark gaze locked on her.

She shook her head, biting her lip as she sank down further, feeling the sting and the stretch.

"Fuck, you're so tight," he growled. "But you need to answer us, Madeline. Does it hurt? Use your words, or I stop." As if to prove his point, his firm hands held her still.

"Pressure," she said on a breath. "It's pressure more than pain now. Warren, I feel so full. I—you—it's a good hurt."

She didn't know if her words made sense, but they were the only coherent thoughts she could make as she sank down another inch, breathing out through her mouth. There was no room for air in her lungs. There was only Warren.

“What a good girl,” he soothed, his hands still bracing her hips. His dark gaze trailed down her body, focusing on their point of connection. “Look at how well you take my cock, princess. Next time you sneak off without a chaperone, I’m going to let Charles bury himself in this cunt while I fuck your arse.”

She gasped, her core clenching around.

“You said you want to know what it is between us,” he went on. “You want us to show you?”

Her hands gripped tight to his shoulders as she sank down on him. “I do,” she whimpered.

“That’s because you’re a perfect goddess who needs two men to please her,” he growled, claiming her lips in a ravenous kiss that left her breathless. He bit down on her bottom lip as he pulled away, pulling a gasp from her.

“Oh god,” she cried out, testing the movements of her hips, sliding along his thickness.

“You want us to fuck you the way we fuck each other?” he muttered, digging one hand into her curls to tip her head back.

She held his gaze, her eyes taking in the whole picture—the beauty, the scars, all his hard edges. “Yes.”

“That means we take your arse, and we press in deep,” he growled, his lips brushing hers. “And at least in your arse we get to come. We’ll have you so full, Madeline. You’ll go back to your friend the duchess with us dripping down your legs. We’ll make a sticky, perfect mess out of you. Let any man try and claim what is so thoroughly ours.”

She could hardly think. The mental images his words conjured had her ready to shatter. She could feel her core squeezing him tight.

He grunted, shifting his hips, sinking her down another inch. “You like when I talk to you,” he teased. “You like when I explain things.”

“Yes,” she panted.

“Good girl. Then use your legs and slide up and down my cock. This cock is yours, Madeline. *I* am yours, just as Charles was yours a moment ago. You own us, princess. Now, fuck me like a queen.” He sat back, lifting his hands away from her hips and tucking them behind his head. He smiled down at her, waiting for her to follow his instructions.

Hesitantly, she lifted up, feeling the slide of his cock inside her. Then she sank back down. A shuddering heat pulled through her and they both stiffened.

“Again,” he muttered. “Don’t stop.”

She did it a few more times, testing how much of him she could take before the pain felt too sharp. Her core clenched him tight as she looked down, seeing the way her breasts moved with each thrust of her hips. He was watching too, his hungry eyes locked on her breasts.

“Come watch, Charles,” he murmured, his lips barely moving. “Come watch how prettily she rides me. Look at our goddess.”

Charles shifted behind her, coming around to sit next to Warren.

Warren put an arm around him, kissing up his neck, murmuring softly in his ear something that had Charles reaching out, wrapping a hand around the base of Warren’s cock.

“I think you can take more of me,” Warren murmured. “Sink down until you reach his hand.”

Adjusting the spread of her legs, Madeline eased down, moaning through her feelings of pressure and fullness until she felt the brush of Charles’s knuckles.

“Good girl,” Warren praised. “You’ll soon be taking all of me. All the way to the hilt.”

“I want to,” she replied, losing herself in the strange feeling of bouncing on a man’s cock. The fullness felt so good. She couldn’t imagine how they expected her to take two at once, but surely it must be done. She had to believe them.

It was getting easier now. Her core was so wet, it was making slick sucking sounds as she sank down on him.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” he muttered. “Don’t stop.” His hands dropped to her hips again as he helped her, moving in rhythm with her. But then he was groaning and pulling her off.

She lost all that exquisite fullness at once and cried out. “No! Warren, *please*—”

“Easy, princess. We can’t have Charles sitting here with nothing to do. Turn around and get back on.”

Eyes wide, she tried to do as he said. “Help me,” she whimpered, unsure of how to make it work.

He grabbed her hips, shifting her right up against his chest. Her legs were now all but behind him as he notched her on his cock and helped her sink back down. Her entire body erupted in shivers as the new angle of his cock set her core on fire. “Oh—Warren—”

“Charles, get between my legs,” he directed, his breath coming short and fast. “Suck that perfect cunt until she screams. Madeline, ride me. Ride Charles’s mouth. Take everything from us.”

Charles scrambled between his spread legs, his caramel curls flopping over his brow as he dropped his mouth to the point where Madeline and Warren were joined. Looking down, she got to watch as he cherished her with his tongue, latching onto her wet sex. The joint sensation of Warren’s cock and Charles’s mouth had her moaning and shivering.

“Move,” Warren growled in her ear.

She braced her arms against his thick thighs, pumping herself down on top of him with abandon, chasing the feeling of building pressure. Charles followed her movements, his tongue swiping at her wetness, sucking her bud until she had one hand on Warren’s thigh and one hand digging into Charles’s curls.

Arching her back, she took a deep breath and sank all the way down, burying Warren inside her as Charles sucked her bud, flicking it mercilessly with his tongue. She threw her

arms back, digging them into Warren's hair and jerking him forward, his hands wrapping around to cup her breasts, as her whole body stilled.

There was no beginning or end to the feelings washing over her. There was just...everything, and all at once. Closing her eyes, she came completely and utterly apart.



Madeline was faintly aware that she was lying on her side. Warren's fire danced before her eyes, the flames red-gold and glorious, warming her naked skin. Charles was curled in close behind her, one arm wrapped around her waist.

Surely, her thoughts ought to be tumultuous at a time like this. Her mind was typically a hive, buzzing with so many curious bees. After something as momentous as sharing carnal relations with *two* men at once, she should be quivering with nervous excitement and confusion.

But she wasn't. She felt empty, carved out. More than that, she felt...serene. Her mind was a placid lake. There was only the flames, the feeling of Charles's warm breath at her neck, the dull throbbing ache in her core.

This *had* been momentous. She could already feel herself changed by it. The eagerness with which they shared her, the easy way they all flowed together. She'd seen it only once before. She saw it in the way Rosalie lived and breathe in perfect rhythm with Burke and the duke.

Madeline had to believe they shared this too. Nothing else made sense. Nothing else could bring three people so close together that they almost shared one spirit. If it worked for Rosalie, then maybe...just maybe...

"Madeline..."

She glanced up, following the sound of Warren's deep voice. He was dressed again, even down to his boots.

He dropped to one knee, glancing at Charles's sleeping form before he brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I'm sorry, lovely, but you can't stay here. I need to get you back now."

She winced as she sat up, curling her legs underneath herself. Charles's hand slipped off her, but he didn't wake. Her golden tresses tumbled around her naked shoulders, a mess of tangles and curls. She looked into the flames, feeling a sense of loss sink into her gut.

"I'd give anything to have you stay, believe me," Warren added. "But the house staff are all early risers, particularly the outside staff. If we delay much longer, I won't be able to get you back inside unseen. And if the house wakes to find you missing—"

"I know," she murmured, tucking her hair back behind her ears. "I must go."

"But you can come back...if you want." He looked so quietly hopeful. The feeling all but pained him, she could tell.

"I would like that," she murmured, tipping forward on her knees to brush her lips against his.



THE FOREST WAS bright with winter moonlight as Warren led Madeline down the path back towards Alcott. Everything was glazed in frost and a thin layer of snow, with the silvery full moon peeking through the skeletal trees. The air was sharply chilled, burning Madeline's lungs with each breath.

She had her chemise and dressing robe back on under her winter cape. And Warren gave her the added warmth of a blanket stripped from his bed. The thick quilt hung around her shoulders, smelling like him—all spiced forest and hearth fire.

He walked with one arm casually draped around her shoulders. His touch calmed her, making her feel safe and



protected. But she could tell he was currently the opposite of calm. Something was on his mind. He was stiff and quiet, his features shuttered.

“Is something wrong?” she murmured.

“No,” he said quickly, shifting his hold from her shoulder down to her waist. The move had her inching closer to him, their hips all but touching as they walked down the frosty forest path.

“You can confide in me, you know. I want to know you, Warren. But you’re difficult for me to read. You keep everything buried so deep.”

He groaned, pulling her to a halt. “Madeline, I must tell you something. It is upsetting Charles for you to not know and I fear his delay in giving you an answer is down to me. You deserve to have all the facts.”

She went impossibly still in his hold, trying to control the racing of her heart. “You can tell me anything,” she replied, readying herself to hear the worst.

He dropped his arm off her hip, walking a few steps away. “I am a bastard second son. My mother was a housemaid. She died giving birth to me, and I have no contact with my father.”

She let out a relieved breath. Of all the dark truths she imagined him sharing, that was nowhere on the list. “Oh... well that is...do you *want* contact with him?”

“No,” he said quickly. “No, he’s an insufferable arse, cruel and controlling. And his wife hates the very idea of me. She let me know every day what an inconvenience I was and how badly she wished the earth would miraculously open and swallow me whole.”

“Oh, Warren...” She stepped forward, placing a gentle hand on his arm.

He turned slowly, glancing down at her over his shoulder. His face was a cold mask of stone.

“That’s awful. I’m so sorry.”

He stiffened under her hand. “I don’t tell you to earn your pity,” he muttered. “I left when I turned twelve and never went back. Selby took me in when he could...when Charles twisted his arm hard enough,” he added. “And I found piece work that offered food and shelter. It was Selby who got me the position as an Alcott gamekeeper under the current duke’s father.”

Her heart twisted as she thought of a young Warren alone in this world with only Charles to fight his corner. “Charles loves you so very much,” she murmured. “I should let you both you go.” She shook her head, closing her eyes to fight back her tears. “It’s cruel of me to try to force my way between you—”

“No.” He cupped her cheek with his warm hand. “Look at me, Madeline.”

Slowly, she lifted her gaze to his.

“You are like a fresh breath of air in my lungs,” he said. “Charles left, and for three years I’ve been drowning on dry land. Then I climbed onto that hay cart and saw you...and I breathed again.”

Her heart squeezed tight as the tension between her shoulders eased.

“I feel such a connection with you,” he went on. “I can’t explain it. Would that I could. I just feel like I know you already.”

“Yes, exactly,” she replied, placing her hand over his on her cheek. “You feel like an old friend, not a new one. I am quite beside myself with confusion over it too. I am typically so reserved, you see. And I’ve never liked being touched. My own mother can hug me and it’s like I turn to stone. But with you...with Charles...I feel like myself. I feel like I can just... *be*. Does that make any sense?”

He nodded, bending down to brush his lips against her forehead. Then he pulled back with a sigh. “Madeline, my father is a baronet. Sir John Warren of Ramsby Hall. Charles has long said I ought to fight my corner, that I deserve to be made a legitimate claimant to his estate. I was never

interested. My elder half-brother would inherit anyway. But then he died about seven months ago.”

She sucked in a breath. “Oh, I—”

“No,” he raised a hand to quiet her. “Don’t. I had no connection with him, thanks to his mother. He was all but a stranger to me. He is dead now, and Charles wishes me to fight for my full inheritance rights. Sir John has no other children, you see,” he explained. “If he would but claim me, I would be his sole living heir.”

Madeline gazed up at the man before her, considering the implications. The truth sank in her chest, and she sighed. “And Charles believes if I make my offer of marriage to you, then your father will be more likely to claim you...am I right?”

He nodded.

She chewed her bottom lip. “And...is that what you want? Do you want to be the heir to a title? Do you want to be a baronet?”

Warren groaned low in his throat, his face flashing with anger. “Listen to me now.” He grabbed her by the shoulders. “I would rather climb to the top of Alcott Hall and leap from the roof. Do you understand? I want nothing from that man. *Ever*. Charles is indignant on my behalf, but his anger is misplaced. I am happy as I am, Madeline. It may be difficult for people to understand, but I make my own way in this world. I live my life on my terms. Yes, I am poor, but I am free.”

*Free*. Heavens, it sounded too good to be true.

“I do not pity you, Warren,” she replied. “I envy you. All I want is to experience that same freedom for myself.”

“I know,” he said with a nod, tucking a loose curl behind her ear, his fingers brushing along her jaw.

“But could you be happy with us?” she whispered, desperate to get to this truth. “Could you be happy if Charles and I marry? He was yours first, I know that,” she added. “He will be yours always in your hearts. I can’t bear to think I would relegate you to a life in the shadows. It would be a life

being labeled as our friend and nothing more...at least nothing more where other eyes might see.”

“I have always lived in the shadows where Charles is concerned,” he replied with a shrug. “I know well how to play the game, Madeline.”

“And...me? I cannot pursue this with Charles without your consent, John. I need to know that you will not see me as standing between you but *with* you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, the move crinkling his brow scar. “And my revelation?”

She huffed a little laugh. “What, that you have disagreeable relations you’d rather not claim? I know the feeling, I’m afraid. My cousin Rory is an angry brute too. Cruel and vindictive. He pulled my hair once just to see me cry. And my own father plots against me, trying to steal my inheritance. We both have family we’d rather not claim, John.”

He still watched her, looking for some evidence of disinterest. “Will you think less of me if I never rise above the station of a lowly gamekeeper?”

“Does our profession define us then, sir?” she replied. “Heavens, I hope not. For I have no profession at all. I *cannot* have a profession. Society won’t allow it. Who am I to the world without that hook to hang my hat on?”

Warren cupped her cheek, his frown turning slowly into a smile.

Her cheeks flamed with warmth. “What? Why do you smile at me, sir?”

His smile widened and he let out a soft laugh. “I have a feeling that when this all works out in our favor, Charles will never get another night of peaceful sleep.”

She smiled too, letting it quickly fall as she spoke her truth to Warren and to the universe. “He has to marry us first, John. And the stubborn man has yet to say yes.”

Warren’s smile fell too. “He will. If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to see us both married to Charles Bray.”

“I believe you,” she murmured, cupping his cheek with a cold hand.

He leaned into her touch, turning his face to kiss her palm. Raising a hand, he cuffed her wrist. “And if for some reason he doesn’t agree, if we can’t bring him ‘round to our way of seeing things...well, I’m still here. And I’m not going anywhere.”

Her heart skipped a beat. Was this a proposal? She waited for him to say more, but he didn’t, taking her by the hand and leading her down the path back towards Alcott Hall.



The road from Carrington to Finchley was always a hazard this time of year. Standing pools of melted snow led to water freezing over, which meant ice. And a carriage hitting a patch of ice at too fast a speed meant accidents. Which is how Charles found himself arriving back to Finchley well over three hours later than anticipated.

He'd been in Carrington all morning, assisting the curate there, Mr. Hoxley, with distributing food packages to the fire victims. On his return journey, a slick patch of ice had spelled disaster for a hired coach carrying a family of six north for the Christmas holiday. The carriage toppled and two of the horses were injured. Charles found himself doubling back to Carrington to help find the poor family an alternative means of transportation.

By the time the soft lights of Finchley came into view, it was full dark, and Charles was exhausted. He couldn't wait to return to the parsonage and soak his aching bones in the big brass tub.

Memories of the previous night flashed through his mind, distracting him from the wind and cold. When he woke to find both Warren and Madeline gone, he'd been disoriented. It wasn't long before Warren returned, having taken her back to the great house. Charles couldn't believe he'd been so foolish as to fall asleep. Thank god for Warren.

He pursed his lips, giving his old mare another tap with his crop. She grunted at him, reluctantly picking up her pace.

His thoughts were in turmoil. What passed between them all had been...what was the proper word for something that so shook the foundations of your being that you felt unmade and remade into something entirely new? Revolutionary? Cataclysmic?

When Warren returned, he'd merely sat at the end of his narrow bed, looking down at Charles. They didn't speak. They didn't need to. Charles could tell Warren was just as changed by it all.

And now it all fell to him, this next choice. There was the life he was expected to want that led down a sunlit path with absolutely no pitfalls or dangers. It was the path he was already on, and the destination was the vicarage at Bredbury.

Or there was a new path, an uncharted path that led through a dark and mysterious forest. And Charles would not be alone on this path. He would become responsible for the lives of two people who were looking to him to provide them all a way out. This path was mired in obstacles—slick patches of ice, ruts, sudden turns. And all the while, there would be people lying in wait, watching them, ready to throw rocks and sticks at every turn.

Charles was as adventurous as the next young person, but to march down this second path didn't feel adventurous so much as dangerous, reckless even. If only he could be assured that there *was* indeed a way through. If only he knew such a path had been followed by others before and actually led to happiness for the merry adventurers.

Because there was nothing more daunting in his mind than the idea of taking Madeline and Warren and breaking them, ruining their lives through loving him. If that happened, he felt sure he'd never forgive himself.

He left the borrowed mare at the smithy and crossed the high street towards the parsonage. The village was quiet at this time of night, all the busy workers tucked away, eagerly enjoying dinnertime around warm fires. He too wanted nothing more than a glass of brandy and a quiet fire, for he had much to think about.

He passed through the front gate of the parsonage and stilled. Something was wrong. He could see shadows moving in the windows and was that...music? Hurrying his footsteps, he opened the front door to a surprising display.

The coat tree was hung with half a dozen hats and coats. Inside, the house smelled like...Christmas. There was no other word to describe the tapestry of scents that conjured up for Charles fond memories of Christmas feasts eaten in this house—roasted venison, sizzling pork, the savory notes of rosemary and thyme, baked fruit pies spiced with nutmeg and clove.

And then there was the music. From the modest drawing room came the cheery sounds of a piano and violin playing *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. Deep laughter echoed out over the music.

Charles hurriedly took off his outwear, his back turned, when Molly cried out, “Oh, gracious! Master Charles, home at last. We were about to send out a search party to search the roads for your frozen corpse! I was that sure you must have taken a tumble.” She bustled forward, her hand full of a tray of festive drinks. “You naughty boy, where have you been then?”

“I—”

“Never mind, come in, come in! And be sure to thank Mr. Burke for his overwhelming generosity.”

Charles paused. “Mr. Burke?”

“Yes, yes, come,” she huffed, the tray rattling in her grip. She turned the corner into the drawing room with a shrill call of, “He’s heere!”

The music stopped as he turned the corner, standing in the doorway to see a wholly unexpected sight. The room had been decorated top to bottom with Christmas decorations—colorful paper garlands were strung down the walls and the mantle was festooned with pine boughs and ribbons. And the room was full to the brim with...well...everyone.

The duchess herself sat at the piano, a wide smile of welcome on her face. Behind her stood Madeline, holding the violin. Uncle Selby was bundled up warm in his favorite chair



by the fire, James at his side. Other prominent townspeople dotted the narrow room—Doctor Rivers, the milliner Mr. Ford and his wife, Sir and Lady Havens, Mrs. Jane Pilcock, owner of the Blue Lady Inn. Nearest to him was Mr. Burke, standing with a glass of mulled wine in hand. He stood with Warren and Mr. Trammel, who ran the post office.

“Surprise!”

“Merry Christmas, Charles!”

“Happy Christmas, Mr. Bray!”

The group welcomed him warmly and he glanced around wide-eyed, as Molly bustled forward and shoved a glass of mulled wine in his hand.

“Is this not ever a good surprise, Master Charles? Mr. Burke arranged everything,” she cooed, her eyes filled with so much love for the man that Charles was sure she was picking out curtains in her mind. It was a comical thought, seeing as Molly Evans had always been of a firm mind that Horatio Burke was an irredeemable scoundrel.

“Molly exaggerates,” Burke replied. “The nugget of the idea may have been mine, but the execution was all Rosalie and Madeline. And I would have told you, but you’ve been slippery as an eel these past few days.”

The duchess stepped up at his side. “Well, we had to cancel our grand Christmas do, and when Burke mentioned his fear that Mr. Selby may not be well enough to attend our family dinner, we knew we had to bring Christmas to him. I hope you don’t mind, Mr. Bray,” she added with a hand on his arm.

“I don’t mind, Your Grace,” he murmured.

In fact, Charles was touched beyond anything to see the way his uncle sat so peacefully by the fire, surrounded by all the townspeople who knew and loved him best. He glanced over and his breath caught in his throat.

Madeline knelt beside Uncle Selby, offering him a fresh cup of tea. Her hair was up tonight, her golden curls a halo around her face. She and the duchess sported festive holly

berry garlands on their heads like crowns. She wore a dress of emerald silk, with long white gloves. A single strand of pearls sat at her throat.

Uncle Selby leaned down, his weathered face cracked into an enchanted smile as she adjusted the blanket on his lap, murmuring something that had him and James sharing a laugh. She gave his knee an affectionate pat before rising, her back still turned to him.

“He’s smitten, I think,” the duchess murmured, still standing with her hand on his arm. “She’s been most attentive to him.”

He glanced over at the duchess, whose lips were pursed into a knowing smile. “I thank you for your kindness,” he replied, taking a sip of the mulled wine in his hand.

“There is no thanks needed, Mr. Bray,” she replied. “You are family to us—you and Mr. Selby—and we take care of our own.” She gave his hand a squeeze and walked away, calling out to the room what carol they should like to hear next.

Burke shifted away too, following Mr. Trammel into the dining room, where all the delicious food had apparently been set. That left Charles alone in the corner with Warren.

“Burke made me come,” he muttered, clearly the least comfortable person in the room.

“As well you should,” Charles replied. “It’s Christmas, John.”

“Selby doesn’t want me here.” His dark eyes darted across the room towards the curate.

With a sigh, Charles grabbed his elbow, dragging him out of the corner towards the two empty chairs by Uncle Selby and the duke.

“Charles, you’re home safe,” Uncle Selby called. “I’m ever so relieved.”

“Sorry, uncle. The roads were quite icy. I had to aid an overturned carriage,” he replied, taking the first empty seat.

Warren sat stiffly in the second.

“You remember Warren, surely, uncle,” he added.

“Of course, I remember our dashing Mr. Warren,” Uncle Selby replied. “He all but lived in my back garden for half a decade. Sit yourself down, sir. Sit down there.”

“He’s been indispensable in providing help to the Carrington fire victims,” Charles went on. “Without him, they wouldn’t be so happily situated with game enough to see them through the new year.”

“Oh?” was his uncle’s reply, his gaze darting between them with a knowing look.

Charles could let himself feel awkward about it, but he was too tired to do so tonight. Let Uncle Selby think whatever he wanted. Charles was weary and anxious, and he wanted Warren close at hand.

“Warren is one of the best gamekeepers I have,” James added.

Warren stiffened, unused to being the center of attention. “It’s all just a lot of point and shoot,” he muttered.

“He was always such a charismatic young man,” Uncle Selby sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Ah, Charles, and you must remember this delightful angel. Lady Madeline surprised the duke and duchess with a visit. Just in time for Christmas too. She’s been here half the afternoon preparing everything with Molly. I made her pause for tea, and she obliged me to a sporting round of chess.”

“And did you win, sir?” asked James.

“Stuff and nonsense, Norland,” Uncle Selby said with a wheezing laugh. “The lady is a shark. She bested me in under twenty moves.”

Charles glanced over his shoulder to see Madeline standing there, one hand on the back of his chair. “Good evening, Madeline,” he said on a breath, for she’d taken all of his air.

“Good evening, sir. Happy Christmas,” she replied with a soft smile.

“I may have made an unforgivable transgression, nephew,” said Uncle Selby.

Charles pulled his eyes from Madeline, looking back at his uncle. “Oh? How so, sir?”

“Lady Madeline distracted me whilst playing. She wanted to hear stories about you and David as boys,” he replied. “I may have told her the one about the box of bees.”

Charles groaned, as the others laughed, even Warren.

“He still doesn’t care much for honey,” Warren muttered, taking a sip of his wine.

“I believe somewhere in my repressed memories is a similar story,” teased the duke. “Only mine involves Tom Renley wielding a cricket bat.”

They all laughed again, Charles joining in, while Warren shifted out of his seat. “Here, my lady.” He gestured to the chair.

“Oh, no. I am happy to stand,” she replied with a wave of her gloved hand.

“Sit,” he urged, stepping in behind her.

She flushed, murmuring her thanks before taking his offered seat at Charles’s side.

“Can you believe this beauty is yet unmarried?” said Uncle Selby, stirring a lump of sugar into his tea with a shaky hand. “I asked some questions of my own whilst she beat the stuffing out of me with her roving rooks. She speaks Italian and German, Charles. And she plays violin.”

Charles cleared his throat, unable to meet her eye. Was his uncle really daring to play matchmaker with Warren and the duke watching?

“She’s a voracious reader too,” added the duke. “I’m told she’s borrowed all manner of books during her short stay with us. She burns through them faster than the candle waxes.”

“And she rides prodigiously well,” Warren muttered, his eyes on his drink.

Charles stilled, his mind flashing with images of her speared on Warren's cock, his own mouth trying to devour them both as she bounced, those perfect tits glowing in the firelight—

*Fucking hell.* He sucked in a breath, knowing Madeline was thinking the same by the set of her shoulders and the red blooming in her apple cheeks. It was all Charles could do not to lean over and take a bite.

“You are too generous,” she murmured.

“No such thing,” the duke replied with a wave of his hand. “You are the height of accomplishment, Madeline. Accept the compliments.”

“Come you lot!” Mr. Burke called from the doorway. “James! Bray, come! It's time to play Snapdragon!”

A few of the other guests cooed with delight. Charles stood, offering an arm to Madeline. She took it, flashing him a soft smile. Warren held his arm out to Uncle Selby, but the man buffeted him away with a wave and a laugh.

“You young people go and play your game. I'm perfectly happy here by my fire with Doctor Rivers for company.”

The doctor was already crossing over, a plate of mince meat pies in hand.

With a curt nod, Warren followed behind Charles and Madeline.

They crossed the narrow hall into the dark dining room. All the candles had been removed and the hearth was little more than hot coals. The feast was set up like a buffet, with the long table turned and pressed against the back wall beneath the windows. In the middle of the room, the smaller table from the drawing room had been set with six chairs around it.

The duchess was already seated in one chair, her hands folded over her stomach. Burke plopped into the chair next to her and the duke took the one on her right. Charles pulled out the chair next to the duke, helping Madeline to sit. Before he could claim the chair next to her, Warren was sitting. That left

one chair open next to Burke. Some of the other guests filtered in behind, standing around them.

“Here we are then,” called Molly, sweeping in with a tray.

“I haven’t played this in ages,” said the duchess with a laugh, helping Molly center the shallow bowl in the middle of the table.

“We used to play it every year, eh James?” said Burke, tossing the raisins into the bowl. “Though our games usually devolved into just drinking the brandy.”

James and a few of the other men laughed.

Molly poured a measure of warm brand into the bowl and handed the duke a taper. “Do us the honors, Your Grace.”

James lit the taper’s end on the nearest candle while a very red-faced Jane Pilcock threw an arm around Lady Havens and the pair started singing a warbled version of *Here We Come a Wassailing*.

The group at the table drummed their fingers while the others cheered, and then James set the taper to the surface of the warm brandy. The room burst with an eerie light as the brandy burned bright blue.

The ladies all cooed, watching the flames. Across from Charles, James and Madeline’s faces were bathed in the curious blue light.

“You first then, Rosalie,” said Burke.

The duchess leaned over, eyes bright, and snatched for a raisin. “Oh—I missed—”

“Quick,” Burke laughed.

“Move fast, or you’ll singe your silk,” added James.

“Got it,” she crowed, popping the little morsel in her mouth to the cheers of the room.

“Well done, Your Grace!”

“Now Madeline,” said Burke. “Careful there.”

Madeline leaned forward, looking not at all like her usual, nervous self. She looked happy, at peace. He could only pray he had something to do with it. Too short to reach while seated, she stood, one hand on Warren's shoulder as she bent over the table, snatching out a flaming raisin with nimble fingers. She popped it in her mouth to the cheers of the room and Charles found himself wishing he was that raisin.

Burke was already on the move, snatching a raisin for himself. "Get in here, Bray. Lady Havens, you're next!"

The crowd was shifting as those who had tasted a raisin moved back to make room for the others. Charles left his chair, gesturing a grinning Molly forward.

"Imagine my surprise," called a deep voice. "Returning home after a twelve-month, only to find that my home is empty!"

Every head in the room turned with gasps of surprise. Standing in the doorway, looking as dashing as ever, was none other than Captain Tom Renley.



“Tom!”

“Captain Renley!”

“Happy Christmas!”

The room erupted in excitement as Rosalie, the duke, and Burke rushed forward. Captain Renley was already being hugged and exclaimed over by those closest to the door, but they all made way for the duke and duchess.

Madeline slipped out of her chair, inching back away from the table.

“Thank Christ,” James muttered, wrapping the captain in a tight hug.

Captain Renley was all smiles, his hair a halo of golden curls. He was the broadest of the three gentlemen, even if Burke was the tallest. He had massive shoulders, not unlike Warren’s, and a thick chest that filled out his naval uniform.

“In case you forgot how to count, a proper twelve-month would have seen you home in October,” Burke chastised.

Captain Renley laughed, his arms wrapping around Burke next. But he let him go quickly, eyes now only for Rosalie. Madeline watched, curious as he took her in.

The duchess stood with her hands on her rounded stomach, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. “Welcome home, Tom. Happy Christmas.”



“Good Lord...you look devastating, Your Grace,” he said at last. “Motherhood suits you.” With a gallant smile, he bowed low to her, kissing her gloved hand.

Madeline didn't miss the way Rosalie leaned into his touch. Luckily, the rest of the group was distracted by the game of Snapdragon that they'd continued with renewed gusto. All the distraction gave Rosalie and the gentlemen a few moments to confer softly in the corner, their words too low for Madeline to hear.

In the dark, it was easy to miss the way their hands moved. Burke's hand on Tom's shoulder, brushing lightly down his arm. Tom's hand reaching across to snatch the duke's drink away. Rosalie leaning against the arm James placed possessively around her waist.

Seeing them reunited, Madeline was surer than she'd ever been: they were together. All of them. In the same way she now wanted to be with Charles and Warren, Rosalie was with her duke, the steward, and the sea captain. Madeline's heart raced, her gaze darting about the room as if she was sure everyone else could see what she now so clearly saw.

But the rest of the merry party was wholly enchanted by Snapdragon. Mr. Trammel had taken over the bass to Mrs. Pilcock's alto and Lady Haven's off-key soprano. Together they sang *The Twelve Days of Christmas* while Molly, Charles, and Mr. and Mrs. Ford fished for raisins.

Warren stepped in beside her. “You're staring,” he muttered. “Look away.”

She sucked in a breath and dropped her eyes away. She turned her body, brushing against Warren's stomach. He used the dark to run a possessive hand down her arm and she shivered. “You know?” she murmured, saying nothing else.

He nodded.

“Does Charles know?”

“We've never discussed it,” he replied, voice low. “I've kept my suspicions to myself. They're doing a terrible job of hiding it now.”

Before she could reply, Mr. Burke called out with a devilish smile.

“And Madeline is here, of course. Madeline, come over here!” He clapped Captain Renley on the shoulder. “Come spare a kiss for your dashing fiancé, home at last from the sea.”

Behind her, Warren went still as stone, while at the table, Charles nearly toppled the game of Snapdragon. Captain Renley’s face went from a mask of delight to one of confusion as he locked eyes with her across the room.

“What?” he muttered.

“Oh, right,” teased Mr. Burke. “You don’t know yet. While you were gone, James made arrangements on your behalf. You’re now engaged to Lady Madeline.”

Captain Renley’s mask fell from one of confusion to one of horror as all those around the room gasped.

You could have heard a pin drop. And in that echoing silence, Madeline was going to *murder* Horatio Burke!



Warren was faintly aware that his hands were shaking, he slipped them in his pockets, pressing his back against the wall as an anchor. Without one, he might just lunge across this room and pummel the dashing sea captain into the floor. And Burke for good measure.

*Fiancé?*

Warren wasn't the only one confused. Charles had nearly set his coat sleeve alight, gaping at the pair of them. Around the room the group was gasping out their surprise and offering rushed congratulations. Captain Renley still looked like he'd just been struck upside the head.

In fact, the only two people who weren't confused about Burke's declaration were Burke...and Madeline. Why wasn't she crying out in dismay? Where was her indignation?

She was frozen for all of a moment before she rushed forward. He breathed a sigh of relief. She would tell him off. She would deny it.

"Ahh, here she comes, your blushing bride," Mr. Burke teased, grabbing the captain by the shoulders, and shoving him forward. When he dared to glance across the room and wink at Charles, Warren knew he was going to bloody his hands tonight.

Charles flinched as if struck, and then Madeline was on him.

“Mr. Burke, may I speak with you,” she said in that quiet voice.

No denial. No sharp denouncement.

Warren curled his hands into fists.

Burke laughed. “Isn’t it Tom you wish to speak with—”

“Now,” she cried, grabbing him by the coat collar and all but dragging him from the room to the rest of the group’s confused laughter and murmuring.

“What the bloody hell just happened?” the captain muttered, peering out through the open doorway.

“We’ll explain when we get home,” said the duchess.

Warren was seeing red.

*Why is no one denying this?*

Why wasn’t the duchess laughing it off? Why wasn’t the duke calling Burke out? Had something possibly happened in the span of a single day since Madeline was naked in his arms? Since they’d shared a moment of truth? Was she already tired of waiting for Charles to make his choice?

Burke came back in moments, still wearing that wolfish grin. But Madeline didn’t return. Did he make her cry? Warren was going to kill him.

“You look done in, angel,” said the duke, a protective hand around his wife. “Shall we return to the house?”

“Yes,” she replied, suddenly feigning exhaustion when moments before she’d been the life of the party.

Warren pursed his lips. They weren’t fooling anybody.

Well...actually, they were rather adeptly fooling *everyone*.

Everyone except him and Madeline.

Where was she? Warren had to find her. He slipped along the wall, moving towards the doorway, as the duke and duchess took their leave of the other guests.

“Warren,” Charles called behind him.

He didn't stop. He was finding Madeline. Charles could follow if he wished. Just as he slipped into the hallway, the front door shut. His gaze whipped down the hall as he spied the rack of coats. Madeline's ruby red pelisse and fur-trimmed cape were gone.

"Goddamn it." He snatched up his own coat, shoving his arms inside it, as he jerked open the front door.

"Let her go, Warren."

He spun around, coming face to face with Burke. At last, the man seemed to have misplaced his smile. "What the hell did you do? Why did you embarrass her like that?"

"She already took me to task for it," he replied. "And I apologized."

"Not good enough," he growled.

"She was the hurt party," Burke countered with a raised brow. "I apologized and she accepted. What else can it possibly be to you, sir?"

He ignored his pointed jab. "Is it true?"

Burke stoically held his gaze. "Is what true?"

"Is she engaged to the captain?"

"That's hardly your business—"

He lunged forward, grabbing the man by the cravat. "Goddamn it, Burke. I like you well enough, but I am in no mood for your endless games tonight. Answer me, before I make you choke on all your pretty teeth. Just try sucking your Renley's cock with a broken jaw."

Burke raised both his hands in surrender, but he didn't pull away. "Warren, look at me," he murmured.

Dark eyes met steely grey.

"She is not yours."

The words chilled the air between them, sinking deep in Warren's gut. Of course, she wasn't his. Nothing ever

belonged to Warren. He was wholly undeserving, unloved, unwanted—

*No.*

He groaned, hand loosening on Burke's cravat as he tried to silence the voices of his past.

But then Burke had to lean in and say, "Regardless of whether she is Tom's or Bray's...she will *never* be yours. Not publicly," he added, almost under his breath.

Warren tensed, his gaze dropping to the hand at Burke's throat.

"Feel that?" Burke murmured, his storm eyes narrowing under dark brows. "That feeling of helplessness you have now? That feeling of knowing that you would burn the world for her...if only she would let you?"

Warren stiffened. Of course, he felt it. The feeling took hold somewhere under his left ribs from that very first night. He held her in his arms, feeling the way she trembled. She was so delicate, and yet so strong, daring to make her life her own. Like Warren, she wanted to be free. He wanted to fly with her. Birds of a feather.

But only in the dark of night. Only when there were no others around to see them fly.

"*That's* the game, Warren," Burke said, giving him a knowing look. "Go down the path you've chosen, and you will have to live with this feeling forever. Are you strong enough? Are you strong enough in the light of day to pretend that she's not yours?"

Warren was still as stone, his mind racing as his heart pounded.

"Because if you are not," Burke hedged. "Then you need to take off that coat and go rejoin the party." He raised a hand and wrapped it around his wrist. "But if you can accept now that in society's eyes she will always belong to another man, you can be free of the pain that it brings you."

He stiffened. "I don't know what you're trying to imply."

Burke just gave him a knowing look. “She may walk in daylight on his arm,” he murmured. “But in the dark of night, she always comes running back to *you*. They both do.”

Warren let out the breath, his grip easing on Burke’s cravat. “Is that the great secret to your devil may care attitude? Placid acceptance that your wife belongs to another man?”

“Not quite,” he replied, the storm brewing brighter in those grey eyes.

“Well?”

His smile widened. “We have a rather strict rule in our house,” he replied. “She can belong to him and he to her...but they all belong to *me*. See, it’s easy to think she is the center, as the shared object of our affection. Or perhaps James, as the one with the highest rank and power. But *I* am the true center, Warren. They are *mine*,” he growled. “It does not matter that I cannot say it out loud, that I cannot show the world. They know they belong to me.”

Warren inched back, his mouth curled down in a grimace. “Why are you telling me all this?”

Burke just shrugged. “Because you and I are second sons, Warren. More than that, we’re bastards. But we deserve happy endings too. We deserve to *win*...in our way.”

Warren huffed a surprised laugh as the truth all but slapped him in the face. “You gave her the letters, didn’t you?”

Burke shook his head, lips pursed. “I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He leaned forward, giving Warren’s wrist a tap. “Now, if you’ll let me go, I must tend to my wife. I think if you check outside, you’ll find yours is waiting in the carriage.”

Warren blinked, letting go of Burke’s cravat. Not waiting for one more smart word to slip from the man’s lips, he turned and bolted out the front door.

He jogged across the dark front garden, already spying the outline of the duke’s carriage waiting at the end of the lane. The footman stood in his livery, his cheeks pink from the cold.

“Madeline,” he called, jerking open the garden gate. His boots crunched in the snow. “Madeline—”

“She’s not within,” said the footman.

Warren slid to a stop. “What?”

“She said that the carriage was too full now that Captain Renley was back,” he replied. “She said she’d rather walk—”

“And you just let her go?” he growled, still itching to punching something bloody.

The young footman’s eyes went wide. “She-she said she liked to walk. Said she wanted the exercise—”

“God *damn* it, you fool. It’s nearly a mile back to Alcott, and it is dark outside!”

“She said she knew the way—”

Warren shoved past him, hearing his yelp of surprise as the lad tumbled into a snowbank. But Warren was already on the move, jogging down the lane in the direction of the house.





“**S**tupid, reckless, foolish,” Madeline panted, her lungs burning in the freezing air. With the fur-lined hood of her cape pulled up around her ears, everything was muffled. It helped calm her panic to have the only sound be her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

She stomped through the snow, her body buzzing with nerves. In less than a fortnight, she’d gone from being a pampered young lady who never strayed as far as a well-lit back garden without a chaperone, to traipsing all around the wilds of the English countryside in the dark of the night.

The only problem was that all this adventuring had done nothing to cure her of her fear of the dark. The only thing that got her to Warren’s cabin in one piece was the overwhelming need to see them, to leap into her greater fear of not having them. But now she was alone again, with only her frustration and resentment to keep her warm.

She trudged through the dark, every crack and snap in the trees making her shiver with fright. But walking was the only option. She couldn’t possibly share a carriage with Rosalie and her *three* devoted lovers. It would be too painful to watch them all pretend for her sake that there was nothing between them except friendship.

Their hidden joy at being reunited only made her own reality starker. After nearly a fortnight at Alcott Hall, and ten days since she’d asked Charles to marry her, he’d *still* not given her an answer. Her time was running out. More than her

time running out, his delays were breaking her heart. What was so wrong with her? Why this hesitancy? Why could he not just—

“God *damn* it, Madeline. Stop walking!”

She let out a silent scream as a large hand closed around her arm, pulling her back. Her knees buckled, heart racing out of her chest, as she gave in to her overwhelming panic.

“Madeline, what—”

She scrambled in Warren’s hold, but he lifted her back on her feet as if she weighed no more than a leaf. “What are you *doing?*” she cried, slapping at his chest. “You scared me half to death!”

“I called your name *twice*,” he growled. “You’re not even paying attention. A carriage could have rattled past and bowled you over!”

“I was distracted,” she panted, raising both hands to press them against her racing heart.

“Distracted,” he scoffed.

“I was thinking!”

“About what?”

“About...everything,” she replied, turning away from him and marching up the path. With her little stride, it was nothing to him to keep pace.

“Are you engaged to Tom Renley?”

She slid to a halt and spun to face him, eyes wide. “You would ask me that?”

“Burke said—”

“Burke is a consummate joker,” she huffed, pacing away again. “The day a serious word passes his lips will be the day I sprout wings and fly!”

Behind her, Warren grunted in irritation. “Why did it not surprise you!”

She stopped again, glancing over her shoulder. “What?”

He came right up behind her. Heavens, why was he so tall? She had to crane her neck to hold his gaze. “When he said the words, everyone in the room responded with shock and confusion, but not you. I want to know why.”

She dropped her gaze to the hastily tied knot of his cravat. “He was only teasing me.” She turned away again, marching down the snowy lane.

“Madeline, goddamn it, you’re going to talk to me,” he called after her. “Is the money really all you care about? Charles is dragging his feet, so you’re done with both of us now? You got what you wanted. A quick fuck, a few passionate kisses. Now it’s on to the next man, right?”

“I’m glad to know you think so highly of me,” she said, irritation rising as she stomped through the snow.

“Did you ask Tom Renley to marry you?”

“No!” she cried, still not stopping.

“But you wanted to,” he called. “Didn’t you.”

She stopped.

“That’s why you really came to Alcott. You came for Renley.” He marched up behind her, grabbing her shoulders to hold her captive. His face lowered until his warm breath fanned over her ear. “How many men did you ask before Charles?”

“Warren—”

“Did he even make your list? Is that the paper you showed him in the gazebo?”

She sucked in a breath. So, Warren really had watched their entire exchange. “That was a private conversation—”

“*Nothing* is private,” he growled in her ear. “Not between the three of us. Tell me the truth, *Lady* Madeline. How many men did you propose to before Charles? Who else made your list?”

“It doesn’t matter—”

“Renley, obviously,” he went on, pulling at her shoulders to turn her around. He gripped her chin in a firm hand, tipping her face up. “What about Burke? Did you propose to him?”

Tears stung her eyes and she tried to blink them away. “Warren, please—”

“Oh, Christ,” he muttered, dropping his hands away from her.

She sagged without the strength of his arms holding her up.

“You did. You proposed to Burke. *He* made your list too,” he growled, dragging a hand through his long, dark hair. “And after Burke shot you down, you what? You ran to Charles? Is he your consolation prize? A last-minute addition to the list?”

She turned away. “I don’t have to explain myself to you —”

“Aye, but you *do*, Madeline! For, until you do, I’ll never know how truly worthless I am in your eyes. So, let’s get it all out there now.”

She stumbled back as if slapped. Searching his anguished face, she traced that jagged scar. “Warren, what can you mean?”

“I mean that I am most definitely *not* on your list!” he bellowed. “I am nothing. No one. A lowly gamekeeper not fit to be anything but fucked.”

Her heart dropped out of her chest. Is that truly the way he saw himself?

“You run around all of England, proposing to anyone who will sit still for five minutes together—”

“That’s not fair—”

“Only thinking about your great fortune—”

“I’m *not*—”

“And yet, when I attempt to say the words, when I tell you that I will marry you, that I want to make your list, you silence me!”

She gasped, glancing around, lost in the thicket of his delusions. “You *never* said you wanted to marry me! Our conversations have always centered Charles. *He* is the one you would marry in your heart, not me. You see me as a friend and nothing more. You’ve talked several times of friendship, of knowing me like an old friend, needing me as a friend.”

“Aye, and so have you!” he bellowed. “And what is a marriage without friendship first? Even without Charles, you have what you say you’ve always wanted, Madeline. A man who—” He swallowed back his words, spinning away.

The truth of his declaration pierced her heart like arrows. “A man who what?” she whispered, placing a hand on his back.

He shrugged her off, striding away towards the woods.

“Warren! Don’t you *dare* say those cruel things and then walk away from me!” She stumbled after him, using his footprints to ease her way, hopping like a bunny from print to print, with her layers of skirts twisted in her hands. “Warren —”

“Go back, Madeline! Back to Alcott where you belong.”

“I’m not going back! I’ll follow you all night if I must. Warren!” She chased after the giant, his strides easily outpacing hers. “I *never* wanted to marry Tom Renley! I never even asked him. I considered it, but that is all. And yes, I proposed to Burke. But it was a-a moment of desperation. It was panic!”

He paused, swinging around, and she nearly crashed into him. He caught her easily, his firm hands holding her upright. “And Charles? Was he a moment of desperation too?”

She held his gaze, chest heaving. “Yes,” she admitted. “And no,” she added quickly.

But he’d already dropped her like a hot coal and was back on his way, marching into the trees.

“You have to understand the pressure I was under—*am* under!” she called after him, trying again to keep pace. “You have no idea what it is to be a woman in this world, Warren.

You have no idea the fear we live with, the constant debilitating terror that our fathers or our brothers will turn into cruel men. That they'll marry us off to crueler men—”

Warren slowed his pace, but he didn't stop.

“My whole life has led me to the singular moment of becoming a man's wife,” she went on. “I would pass from being my father's property to my husband's. So yes, in desperation, I asked Charles to marry me. Not only to give me use of my aunt's fortune, but to free me from my fear. I wanted to choose my own fate, Warren, like you do yours. Every day you get a choice. I wanted a kind man. A man who wouldn't ignore me and dismiss me. A man who wouldn't hurt me.”

Warren stopped again, turning to face her. A muscle ticked in his jaw as he glared down at her, saying nothing and giving nothing away in his expression.

She tipped her head back, holding his dark gaze. “It was desperation, yes. We women are all desperate creatures, Warren. But I also *wanted* to ask him. I wanted to ask him for me. I think we could do well together. I think he could make me happy, and that is a reality I never once envisioned for my future. I *want* to marry him, Warren.”

Slowly, he raised a hand, cupping her cheek. His calloused thumb brushed the tear away from under her eye. “If any man ever dares raise a hand to you, I will cut out his heart and burn it before his eyes.”

She lifted her hand, placing it over his on her cheek. “I believe you,” she murmured.

“You still want to marry Charles.”

She nodded, turning her face to kiss his palm.

“Where does that leave me?”

She let out a soft breath through parted lips. Tipping up on her toes, she mirrored his gesture, cupping his face, her thumb brushing lightly over the “v” of his scar. “My being with you is in no way contingent on also being with Charles. If he wants us, he will know what to do.”

“Speak plainly, Madeline. I’m just a lowly gamekeeper.”

“I—Warren, I think I might love you,” she said on a breath.

He went impossibly still, saying nothing.

“I know it’s mad to say it out loud,” she admitted. “We’ve only known each other a short time, but there it is. I feel like a part of me has always known you. It doesn’t feel like I found you that night in the dark. It feels like I found you again.”

“I know,” he murmured, his thumb brushing her cheek. “From the moment I met you, it’s felt like there’s a piece of me walking outside my skin.”

“Yes, exactly,” she echoed, inching closer. “All my life, I’ve been so frightened of everything. But with you, I’m not afraid. And I’m sorry if this ruins all your grand plans, but I don’t intend to be without you. I want Charles for Charles, but I want you for *you*.”

He pulled her closer, his hands smoothing down her shoulders to brace her hips.

“You think you haven’t made my list,” she murmured, brushing two fingers over his bowed lips. “John Warren, you *are* my list.”

He lowered his face, claiming her lips in a fierce kiss, and it felt like coming home. She met him eagerly, wrapping her arms around his neck and letting him lift her off the ground. The hood of her cape tipped back, the silver fur ticking under her chin, as she opened for him, tasting the man that made her heart calm.

He dropped her back to her feet, breaking the kiss with both of his large hands cupping her face. “Madeline, I—”

*CRACK.*

Madeline shrieked, climbing Warren like a tree, as she tried to spin around at the same time to face the crashing snapping sound.

“Whoa,” he soothed. “It’s just a falling branch. Too heavy with snow.”

She groaned, dragging a hand through her hair, which caused her little holly crown to tumble down to the snow. She quite forgot she'd been wearing it.

“What—are you alright?” he murmured, his hands back on her shoulders. “Madeline—”

“I can't,” she whimpered. “Warren, please take me back. I—I know I said I'm not afraid, but I meant that in a more metaphysical sense, like of the future,” she mumbled. “But I am afraid. I—it's—I'm frightened out here. I—the noises and the—”

He tipped her face up, holding her still. “Madeline...are you afraid of being outside?”

“Not outside, necessarily. I like the outdoors as much as the next person. I—”

His face split into a grin. “You're afraid of the dark.”

“Don't mock me. Plenty of people are afraid of the dark. It's—there could be bears!”

He chuckled. “There hasn't been a bear spotted in this part of England since the time of William the Conqueror.”

“There could be wolves.”

“Never seen one in my life.”

“Boars, then.”

“Unlikely. At this time of night and this time of year, they'll be nestled in tight in their thickets. They want naught to do with us, lovely.”

“But—”

He pressed two fingers to her lips. “I have been gamekeeper here for nigh on a decade. I know these woods like the back of my hand. You are safe.”

“But—”

“Madeline, the only thing you need to fear in these woods is *me*.”



She gasped, eyes going wide. Her heart was racing for an entirely new reason as she took in the heat of his gaze. “What are you—”

“I hunt these woods, they do not hunt me. Do I look afraid to you?”

She shook her head, heat unfurling deep in her core.

“Then here is what we will do.” He turned her bodily away, his hands still on her shoulders. “You are already set on a path. Do you see it? It opens at the side of the park.” He pointed over her shoulder, his finger tracing a clear line in the moonlight through the trampled snow. “Do you see it? Speak.”

She nodded at first, forgetting herself until she murmured out a ‘yes.’

“Good girl. Now, listen to me. People are not afraid of the dark. They are afraid of what is *in* the dark. Do you understand? I am telling you now that the only thing in here is me. Are you still afraid?”

Her heart was racing. Why was he using that gravelly voice. Why was he holding her quite so tight? She couldn’t help herself. She panted out her answer. “Yes.”

“Good. Because I want you to run.”

“Warren—”

He let her shoulders go, giving her the slightest push forward. “Run, Madeline. And know that if I catch you, I am going to fuck you against a tree until you scream. Now, *run*.”



*M*adeline Blaire is the only woman for me. The thought crossed Warren's mind as he watched her flash him a daring smile, turn tail, and run like a rabbit.

"Christ," he muttered, clenching his hands into tight fists. His cock sprang to life as his senses narrowed on her. Nothing else existed. There was only Madeline.

Using the hunter's instincts he'd honed through a lifetime of shooting and trapping in these woods, he took a step. Then another, following her easy trail. For Christ's sake, he could still see her. She was making the classic mistake of inexperienced prey. She was running in a straight line.

It would take nothing to catch her. And when he did, he was never letting her go.



Madeline raced down the path, feet crunching in the snow as her cape billowed out behind her. She filled her lungs with the crisp winter air, her skirts clutched tight in her fists. She had them raised up above the knee, freeing her legs to move.

She sensed Warren behind her, but she was too afraid to look back, afraid it would spoil the illusion to see him smiling or laughing. He wanted this from her. Needed this. There had to be a reason.

She loved him. She loved John Warren, gamekeeper of Alcott Hall. She had no idea what path her life was taking, but she wanted him at her side as she went.

Or in the present case, trailing close behind.

She couldn't stand the not knowing. She darted a look over her shoulder, nearly tripping on a root at the same time. She gasped, taking a stumbling a step.

"Careful, little rabbit," he called.

Her core clenched tight, aching with need. He was so much closer than she thought.

This was a game to him. He was teasing her again. He could outrun her easily. If he really wanted her, she'd be caught already. So, what was this about?

"Come here," he growled, his feet pounding behind her as he snatched for her arms.

Squealing with excitement, she darted quickly to the left, stumbling through the deeper snow out of his grip. She glanced over her shoulder now, seeing the gleam in his dark eyes reflected by the wintry moonlight, so bright against the snow.

*He wins if he catches me*, she thought, dancing around a tree. And John Warren likes to win. Likes to dominate.

*And how do I win?*

Surely, to win meant beating him to the edge of the woods. It meant seeking safety on the Alcott grounds. She gasped as the truth blasted through her mind with the fury of musket fire.

*He wants to catch me...do I want to get caught?*

*Yes*, came the panting voice in her mind.

That's how she won this little game, by giving up, by letting him win. She smiled, running a few more paces before darting sharply right.

"Where are you going, little rabbit?" came his deep voice, so close at hand. He was stalking her, protecting her. There was nothing in this forest to fear except him, and Madeline was not afraid of John Warren. Thus, there was nothing to fear.

She quivered with excitement, darting through the trees. Triumph pulsed through her, warming her against the chill. She spied a thick trunked tree, a lovely, patterned birch. She ran for it, collapsing against it with both hands as she turned, panting for breath.

Warren growled, boxing her in with one hand pressing to the tree above her shoulder, the other circling her throat and holding her tight. "You stopped running."

She arched her neck, lifting her chin to hold his gaze. Their breath came out in little clouds, mixing in the freezing air. "You caught me, sir."

"You stopped running."

"If I run again, will you give chase?"

"Yes."

“And if I stop?”

“Then I’ll fuck you,” he growled. “That’s the game.”

She raised her hands to his shoulders, linking them around his neck. “This isn’t a game to me, John. I’m not running, and I’m not afraid. Now, are you going to catch me or not?”

As she jumped into his arms, he groaned low, his arms wrapping around her bottom. He pressed her hard against the tree, his lips claiming hers in a fevered hiss. They were both ravenous, using teeth and tongues in a way that had her whimpering. He teased her back, his hands holding her tight as he ground against her with his hips.

She gasped, feeling his thick length rubbing between her spread legs. “More,” she panted. “John, please, more—”

He set her back on her feet, shoving her hips against the tree, dropping to his knees in one motion.

“Yes—” She helped him ruck up her skirts, not caring about the bite of the cold on her thighs as his fingers found her soft thatch of curls. Warren was freedom and feeling. Heat and passion.

He delved between her legs, his fingers sliding through her warmth. “Always so wet,” he groaned. “Such a good fucking girl. You want my tongue, Madeline?”

“Yes,” she said on a breath, trying to spread her legs wider for him.

He took charge, grabbing her leg and flipping it up onto his shoulder as he ducked down, his hot breath on her thighs. The first swipe of his tongue had her shivering with want. There was nothing to hold onto but him, so she placed her hands on his head, fingers digging into his long, brown hair.

He was aggressive, pushing and teasing. His tongue worked quick, and his fingers buried themselves deep inside her, lifting her up on her toes with the force of his thrusts.

“Oh god, John—” she cried out, loving the feeling of being dominated by him, of taking her body and making it his temple to worship as he chose.

“Come for me,” he ordered, his breath hot between her legs. “Come.”

He asked, and she wanted to answer. She wanted to come for him. She’d do anything for him. Clinging to his hair, she tipped her head back and gave in to the sensations swirling inside her. The unraveling started slow, like a pulsing heat. Then it spread faster, burning through her—up her arms, across her chest, down her legs, weakening her knees.

And then she was coming. White spots danced in her vision as she trembled, her core clenching again and again around his thick fingers. His hands were the only thing holding her up as he sank back, his mouth glistening with her release.

He was back on his feet in moments, flipping her around. He took her hands with both of his, lacing their fingers together as he lifted them, placing them on the tree above her head. Their fingers unlaced and he pressed down, flattening her palms against the smooth bark.

“Stay,” he growled, sliding his hands down her arms to her shoulders, her back, her hips. He jerked her hips back, pressing on her shoulder at the same time, leaving her in an arched position. “Kick your legs wider,” he ordered.

She could feel him working loose the fall of his pants and she waited, his hands brushing against her back. Then he was around her, his arms enveloping her, his hands cupping her breasts, his mouth at her ear.

“I’m going to take what’s mine. Going to claim her, fill her cunt, rut her senseless. She belongs to *me*. Say it.”

She whimpered, her core aching with the need to be filled. “Yes, John. Yours. I’m yours.”

He shifted her skirts, exposing her backside. Then his hand was delving between her legs, his fingers spearing her again, lifting her up on her toes.

“*Ahh—*”

“Shh,” he soothed. “In the light of day, she wanders the woods, such a prim young lady. No one can know she comes to me in the night. No one can know that it’s my cock she

claims. For she is Artemis. She is Selene. She *owns* me, the lonely hunter in her woods. Say it.”

She pressed back with her hips, near wild with need. “You’re mine, John Warren. You will never touch another woman.”

“Never,” he growled, shifting her hips as he pressed forward with the tip of his cock.

“You will never look at another woman,” she panted, bending her legs to open for him, feeling his cock notch into place.

“Never. May the Furies strike me down. There is only you. My goddess. My soul. We are one.” And then he was plunging in deep, sinking inside her with a powerful thrust.

“*Ah—*”

His hand came around and covered her mouth, silencing her wanton screams. His other wrapped around her waist, holding her in place as he rutted into her, sinking himself deep. Her whole body shivered as she gripped to the tree. The aching sense of fullness was everywhere. He was in her mind, in her heart, filling her up. She breathed him in, pulling his essence deeper too.

“You love being fucked,” he grunted in her ear. “Love being speared by my cock.”

She moaned her agreement.

“Words, Madeline.”

“*Ah—*yes, I love your cock—” She was too lost to her pleasure to make any sense. “You ruin me. I’m lost. I’m found in you. Only you, John. Never stop—”

“I’ll never stop,” he panted, slamming into her until she felt it in her teeth.

Her whole body shook with the force of his thrusts. It was powerful and animal. She felt used and worshiped in one. He was pouring his strength into her, shoring her up, making her whole.

“So fucking perfect. My sweet girl. Mine. Only mine.”

“Only yours.”

They echoed their threats and their oaths as they climbed a steep hill together and leapt off the edge. Madeline came first, her entire body spasming until it was all Warren could do to keep her upright, helping her to sink forward against the tree. She strangled his cock, her cunt a thing of its own as it pulsed and fluttered.

He groaned, jerking himself free of her and then she felt wet heat on her backside as he poured himself out sliding his length between her cheeks. “Fuck, you’re so damn tight. So small. I’m afraid I’ll break you,” he murmured against her ear, his hand brushing her mess of curls back.

She turned her face, her body sagged against the tree. “I’m stronger than I look.”

He kissed her forehead, her temple.

She reached blindly for his hand, curling his arm around her front between her breasts, entwining their fingers and holding him to her chest. “Feel my heart,” she murmured.

He flattened his palm with hers, his body pressed close to her, protecting her. “I feel it.”

“It’s yours, John. Do you doubt it still?”

He kissed her temple again. “No.”

“If this love were enough, we could run away together now,” she murmured. “We could go to London or Gretna Green. We would marry and be happy together. We’d have my aunt’s money. We’d be happy, John.”

He nodded, nuzzling her, his breath warm on her cheek. “But?”

She turned in his arms, brushing the mess of his long hair back with shaking fingers. “But you need more,” she whispered, suddenly feeling the cold again. “You need Charles. You *love* Charles.”



“I do,” he replied, flipping her hood back up, sensing her need for more warmth. “I’ve loved him since I was twelve years old. I thought I’d never truly care for another person... until I met you.”

“And how did you get this?” she murmured, tracing her finger over his scar.

His eyes flickered with amusement. “So curious, little rabbit. That’s how you get caught in a snare, you know.” His hands roved down her sides to cup her bottom. “Had you already forgotten? Do you need another demonstration so soon?”

She pushed on his chest to no avail. The man was a tree. “Answer me.”

“Pirates,” he replied. “A nasty band of them. I fought my way out with tooth and nail. Kept this as a trophy,” he added, pointing with one hand at the scars.

She giggled. “You lie, sir.”

“Yeah, of course I do. I get seasick in a rowboat on the lake.”

“Warren,” she laughed, slapping his chest.

“Oh, so it’s Warren again? Not John?”

She bit her lip, hesitant. “You told me not to call you John when we first met, do you remember?”

He made a sound of assent, lowering his face to kiss her neck.

“You only like it when Charles calls you that.”

“I am a man reformed,” he replied between kisses.

“So, you don’t mind then? I can call you John?”

He pulled back, holding her gaze, his hand brushing her cheek. “Do you want to call me John?”

She smiled, brushing her thumb over his lips. “I want to call you mine. My John.”

“My Madeline.”

“*Yes*,” she breathed, eyes shutting tight as he leaned in again, tasting her skin with soft kisses.

“Mine. My Madeline. My Artemis. Goddess of moonlight, wife of everlasting night.”

“But our fearless hunter needs his Apollo too,” she murmured, trailing her fingers through his hair. “Sun and moon. Man and woman. I want you to have everything, John. Everything you need. Help me make him ours.”



“*M*aster Charles!” Molly shuffled into the study, her face stricken and her mop cap askew.

Charles was already on edge from the tone in her voice. He snapped his book shut, glancing over the span of his uncle’s desk.

“He’s asking for you,” she said, tears in her eyes. “You better come.”

He scrambled out of the chair. “Doctor Rivers—”

“Jackson already went to fetch him,” she replied, leading the way.

Charles all but stumbled up the stairs after Molly. It had been two days since the impromptu Christmas party, and Uncle Selby’s health had taken a sudden turn for the worse. Doctor Rivers said his kidneys were failing and that there was no stopping them. They were nearing the end. All he would supply was laudanum to keep Uncle Selby comfortable.

Charles hurried into his uncle’s room to see the man stretched out on the bed, his pallor pale and sickly against the white of his sheets. He could hardly lift his head off the pillow. Charles sat in the chair by the bedside, quickly taking his uncle’s hand and pressing a kiss to it.

“I’m here, uncle,” he said, raising one hand to stroke the older man’s hair. “Uncle, it’s Charles. I’m here.”

Uncle Selby stirred. “Charles...”

“Yes, uncle.”

“I’m so tired.”

Charles felt his chest opening like a great yawning pit, his heart teetering on the edge, ready to plummet. He nodded, giving his uncle’s hand a squeeze. “You rest as long as you like, sir,” he murmured, tears stinging his eyes.

“So much left unfinished, left unsaid—”

“Would you like me to pray with you, sir?” He reached with his free hand for his uncle’s favorite Bible.

“No,” Uncle Selby groaned. “No more praying. I am finished with prayer. I meet my maker today, Charles. I can feel it.”

Charles let out a shaky breath. “If that is your wish, sir. You may stay or go.”

“I need you, Charles.”

“I’m right here.” He leaned forward to kiss his uncle’s brow. “I’ll not leave you now.”

“You must,” Uncle Selby sighed. “You promised...you promised me. Two weeks, you said. He is a poison. He is your temptation...”

Charles closed his eyes tight, shaking his head as he tried to shield his heart and his mind from the sting of his uncle’s words.

“He will hold you back, Charles. Turn away from him. Do not waste your life as I have wasted mine.”

Charles opened his eyes, glancing down at their joined hands. “You have not wasted your life, sir. You’ve lived a beautiful life of purpose—to your family, to your community, to God—”

“Wasted.” He turned his face into the pillows. “I wasted all my best years. Never married. Never fathered a child.”

“You were a father, sir. To me and to David...even Warren,” he added. “You were kind to him when few others could be bothered. You vouched for him to the late duke.”

“And he repays me by stealing all your light,” Uncle Selby replied with a groan. “You were supposed to have more than me, Charles. A wife, a family, a full life lived out in the open.”

Charles sucked in a breath. He could tell him this, surely. Here at the end of things, he could bring the man some peace. He leaned forward, elbow on his knee. “Sir...your fears are unfounded. I am to marry Lady Madeline.”

Uncle Selby blinked up at him. “What?”

“Lady Madeline Blaire. I am to marry her,” he repeated. “She asked for my hand, and I intend to say yes. I will be married, sir. I will live the life you always dreamed for me.”

Tears welled in the man’s tired eyes as he tried to sit up. “Oh, Charles...oh, can you mean it? But—how? When?”

“That doesn’t matter now,” he soothed, trying to help the man back into a restful position. “I wanted you to know, sir. I will marry her.”

“She is so lovely,” he murmured, his head resting on the pillow. “Don’t let her beat you at chess. She plays to her corners. Watch her rooks.”

Charles nodded with a soft smile, adjusting Uncle Selby’s blankets. “Noted, sir.”

“And you will leave Warren behind? You will leave him in the past where he belongs? Do not sully this chance, Charles. Look to the future. Only the future.”

“Yes, sir. I will look to the future,” he replied, leaning away, his heart in turmoil. He wanted a future with both of them. Did that make him selfish? It certainly made him a liar to a dying man.

“Charles, you must do something for me.”

“Anything, sir,” he replied, desperate to have something to distract himself. “Name it.”

Uncle Selby sighed, as if he carried the weight of the world. “I need you go to my office.”

Charles leaned forward. “Your office, sir?”

“Yes. Up on the shelf near the Martin Luther biography, the pretty one with the foiled edges, you’ll find a stack of letters. Please, Charles. Molly can’t find them. No one can.”

Charles stilled, his gaze leveled on his uncle. “Of course, sir. What would you have me do with them?”

A tear slipped down his uncle’s pale cheek as he considered. “Burn them.”

A quiet moment passed between them.

“Can I know—”

“No,” Uncle Selby breathed. “Do not read them. Promise me, Charles. Don’t let anyone read them. Just burn them. Go, my boy.” He tugged feebly at Charles’s hand, trying to loosen his grip.

“What, now?”

“No better time.”

“Surely, I can go later, sir,” Charles pressed. “The letters will keep. I’d rather be here with you.”

“No,” his uncle groaned again. “No, I cannot rest until it is done. I should have done it myself. I thought I had more time. Why do we always think we will have more time?” He huffed a weak little laugh.

Charles sighed, leaning down to kiss his brow again. “I’ll be right back, sir. Wait for me.”

Uncle Selby nodded. “I will wait here.”

Charles excused himself from the room, taking a moment in the hallway to catch his breath before he continued down the stairs. He took them two at a time, turning the corner and letting himself into the back room that served as his uncle’s office.

He paced down the longest wall of shelves, eyes set on his prize—a large, leather-bound tome of reddish-brown leather with gold foil edging. It was a very pretty biography of Martin Luther that the late duke presented to Uncle Selby several Christmases ago.

The shelves were a cluttered mess of Selby's making—a reflection of his mental state as his health began to suffer. Bits of paper and journals were stuffed in amongst ledgers. It was going to take ages to organize it all once—

He groaned, stopping that thought in its tracks.

Spying the biography, he scanned the rest of the shelf. Perched next to the thick book was a nondescript, hinged wooden box. Charles pulled it down, flipping open the lid. Inside the box was a neat stack of letters. There had to be over two dozen.

Charles slipped the letters out of the box, setting the box on one of the lower shelves. The fire in the hearth was all but embers. He'd have to stoke it a bit to get a good flame. He set the letters aside, adding a few fresh pieces of wood to the stack and shifting it with the fire poker.

He rocked back on his heels, setting the fire poker aside and reaching once more for the letters. He flipped them over, noting the name of the writer:

**Reverend M. Fields**

**All Saints Church**

**Devonshire**

His senses tingled as he held onto the stack of letters. Before him, the fire crackled, growing stronger. The blaze was more than high enough to catch this stack alight.

But why was Uncle Selby adamant that Charles burn a bunch of letters from a reverend? Why was he afraid to risk Molly seeing them? He glanced down again, noting the age of some of them, the ink fading. The parchment was thin and fading at the creases, as if Uncle Selby had returned to the messages again and again, wearing out the folds.

Unable to help himself, Charles glanced at the door before slipping the topmost letter off the stack. He carefully unfolded it, reading the first few lines:

*My Dear Thomas,*

*Dearest Thomas. For dear you have always been to me. It is June fifth today. The bees are buzzing in my orchard as I sit under the shade of my favorite apple tree. Another June come and gone, and you are not here with me. How I long for you, my dear, sweet Thomas—*

Charles sucked in a breath, dropping his eyes away from the letter. Not just any letter. A love letter. Charles flipped the inner paper over, reading the closing:

*Yours,*

*Martin*

Reverend M. Fields. Martin Fields. Charles couldn't believe it. He was holding a love letter written to his uncle by a fellow man of the cloth. This letter was dated 1812. He set it aside, unfolding the next letter in the stack dated 1811.

*My Dearest Thomas,*

*How sweet the singing birds of summer. Oh, that I could share this symphony with you, my beloved—*

Charles stopped reading, rushing to open the next letter. In minutes, he'd poured over a dozen. One letter per year, almost always written and posted in June. One letter, each full of the most lyrical and romantic poetry and prose. Martin talked to Uncle Selby as if they were married, as if they had just spoken the previous morning. He mentioned jokes they had in common. He responded to questions Uncle Selby must have asked in his previous letter. But only one a year.

Part of Charles considered the idea that Uncle Selby only kept one letter for each year of correspondence. But something warned him away from that theory. This felt too deliberate. Thomas Selby had a lover, a fellow curate, and they only permitted themselves to write each other a letter once a year.

He hardly even realized he was crying—tears of grief, of frustration, and so much anger. Was this it then? The great secret? Did Thomas Selby never marry because he was in love with a man? Did he warn Charles away from Warren because he could never make his own relationship work, too afraid to give into the fantasy of a love requited more than once a year?



He snatched up the stack of letters, determined to ask his uncle of their meaning. Marching from the office, he took the stairs two at a time, rounded the corner into Uncle Selby's bedroom.

Doctor Rivers was there, sitting in the chair Charles had vacated not minutes before. Molly stood in the corner, her arm around a sobbing Jackson. The poor lad was all of twelve, and deeply attached to the curate.

"Oh, Charles," Molly murmured, her face stricken. "It happened that quick."

Charles took in the scene, his pulse thundering in his ears. Doctor Rivers was bent over Uncle Selby's still form, his fingers pinching the pulse in his wrist, eyes closed. Charles's heart dropped from his chest as he watched the doctor set his hand down, folding it across his chest.

Doctor Rivers glanced over his shoulder, his own eyes glistening with tears. The men had been friends for nearly twenty years, after all. "He's gone," he said solemnly. "Charles, I'm so very sorry for your loss."

"No..." His response was all but drowned out by the heart-wrenching sobs of Molly and young Jackson. "No...no!" He pushed forward, dropping to his knees at his uncle's bedside, the letters fluttering in a pile like so many feathers to the floor. "No—sir! Don't go. Not yet...please, god. Not yet."

He snatched up his uncle's limp hand, kissing the knuckles.

Doctor River's gentle hand rested on his shoulder. "He went peacefully, Charles. We can take comfort in that."

*Peacefully.*

Yes, Uncle Selby was at peace. But he left Charles behind. No mother. No father. And now the Lord saw fit to take his surrogate father too. All that remained was a deep, aching sense of loneliness, confusion, and so many questions.

Questions that would never get an answer.



*W*arren raised the axe over his shoulder, taking a deep exhale as he swung, cracking the piece of wood clean through with a loud *thunk*. It was snowing, the forest around his cabin hazy white as the thick flakes fell. This storm was going to be brutal; he could already smell it thick on the air. It felt like a blanket was hanging low and heavy, quieting the forest to the sound of his breathing and the dull chopping of his blade.

He readied the next piece of wood on the stump, shifting the axe to one hand. Then he took up his position, swinging back with the axe. He brought it down with a *thwack*, splitting the wood in two.

*Bang, bang, bang.*

He jerked upright, clutching tighter to his axe handle. Someone was pounding on the front door of his cabin. “Back here!” he called.

He waited, swinging the axe into the stump.

Charles stumbled around the corner of the cabin, clutching to the wall with one hand as he shuffled forward. Christ, was the man drunk? It was barely mid-afternoon. Was that...

Warren narrowed his eyes. Charles was clutching a bottle of what looked like brandy in his ungloved hand, his knuckles red with cold. Charles raised his red-rimmed eyes, stumbling to a halt in the snow, the bottle slipping from his fingers and

dropping at his feet. Warren knew what was wrong without him saying a word.

“John...”

And then Warren was on the move, crossing the clearing to wrap Charles in his arms. “I’m sorry, Charles. I’m so sorry.”

Charles sank against him with a sob. “He’s dead.”

“I know,” Warren murmured, rubbing his back with a gloved hand. “Come inside.”

“I wasn’t there,” he cried, his face pressed into Warren’s fur-lined leather vest. “He sent me away. One minute he was talking to me and the next...the next—”

“I know,” he soothed, tucking him under his arm and leading him to the cabin. He left the bottle of brandy in the snow.

Warren rattled his door open, pulling Charles inside with him. The cabin was warm and smelled of the duck he had sizzling on a spit over the fire. A pot of potatoes and carrots boiled on the chain.

He helped Charles out of his scarf and jacket. The poor man swayed on his feet, drunk on brandy and grief. “Come,” he murmured, pulling Charles forward and sitting him on the bed. “Are you hungry? Let’s get some food in your stomach. Soak up some of the brandy.”

He got to work, removing the duck from the fire, and serving up two bowls of the potato and carrot mash. He took Charles by the shoulders, leading him over to the table. Charles sank down, snatching for the wooden spoon, but he didn’t eat. Warren was hungry enough for the both of them, digging into the food as Charles sat quietly, staring down at the steaming plate of food.

“Was it peaceful?” Warren asked, not knowing what else to say.

Charles nodded. “Grasby’s already came,” he muttered, moving the boiled potatoes around on his plate. “They’re so efficient. I blinked and he was gone. He’s just...gone.”

“Well...at least he had time to ready his affairs,” Warren said with a shrug. He stilled, eyes wide as he stared across the table.

Charles was laughing. It started small, a low chuckle. But it grew. In moments, he was wheezing, one hand on his side.

Warren set his fork aside. “Charles, what—”

“Affairs,” Charles repeated, his mirth dying as he wiped at his eyes. Then he was reaching inside his waistcoat, pulling out a stack of letters wrapped in a red ribbon. He set them on the table between them and leaned back, as if the letters were a venomous snake that may strike. “Do you know what those are?”

Warren said nothing, waiting for Charles to get to his point.

“They’re love letters. My uncle’s love letters.”

Warren wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but he wasn’t expecting that. He’d always assumed Mr. Selby was a lifelong bachelor by choice. A lot of men of the cloth chose that path. It was odd to think of the man having a love affair with some seamstress or married lady.

“In his dying moments, he bade me go to his study and find them...burn them,” Charles muttered, his eyes still fixed on the offensive stack. “He wanted this evidence destroyed. I missed his passing because I could not help myself, Warren. I read them. He told me not to, but it couldn’t be helped. He died while I read them...while I broke the last request he ever gave me.”

“Charles—”

“I’m glad I read them,” he growled, raising his eyes to hold Warren’s gaze. His energy was impossible to read—angry, sad, confused. “They’re all from the same person,” he went on.

Warren reached across the table for his hand. “Charles—”

“A Reverend Martin Fields of Devonshire.”

He stilled. “A reverend wrote him love letters? A reverend as in a man?”

Charles nodded. “They were in love. They wrote a single letter a year, pouring out all their loving sentiments. Reverend Fields is quite the poet” he spat.

Warren closed his hand around Charles’s, but Charles jerked away. “And now you are angry—”

Charles launched from his chair, the spoon clattering to the table. “Of course, I’m bloody fucking angry! He *lied* to me, John. All my life, he’s been lying.”

Warren sighed, leaning back in his chair. “He was afraid.”

Charles shook his head. “He warned me away from you so many times. He bade me leave, John. I came to be at his dying bed, and he told me to go, too afraid I would see *you* again, that I would be lured into your depravity.” He groaned, dragging both hands through his hair. “All the while...”

Warren got to his feet, moving around the table. He placed two firm hands on Charles’s shoulders. “He loved you, Charles. He was protecting you—”

“He was protecting himself,” he spat, shrugging away. “And he was hiding the truth. He loved this M. Fields. He loved him in the shadows for over twenty years. He loved him the way I love you!”

“And he does not want the same fate for you,” Warren reasoned. “He knows the reality of loving another man, of hiding all that this is,” he added, gesturing between them. “Do not let this truth sully your memories of him, Charles—”

“He should have told me,” Charles spat.

Warren sighed again. Never in his life did he imagine himself taking the part of Thomas Selby. But Charles needed a good dose of reason. “How could he tell you?” he replied. “How would a young Charles have responded knowing his uncle also had a great, secret love? You’re too romantic for your own good. His admission would have driven you further into my arms, not away.”

Charles shook his head, crossing his arms tight around himself. He looked so tender, so perfectly broken.

Warren reached out a hand again, brushing the back of his knuckles down his arm. “I hate that this revelation has come at this time. You deserve the chance to mourn him for the man he was. He was your father—”

“He was my guilty conscience. He made me believe—” He spun away with a groan.

“Believe what?”

Charles stilled, his hands clasped behind his neck as he took a shaking breath. “I never believed what we shared is a sin, John. Love is...love cannot *ever* be a sin.” He turned slowly, a fresh tear slipping down his cheek. “But shame is real...shame and disloyalty. Uncle Selby made me believe I should be ashamed of what we share. He told me again and again it was wrong. I was not afraid of you for the sin of it...I was afraid for the disloyalty to my uncle.”

“Why?”

Charles shrugged. “The man gave me everything, John. He took us in. He cared for me when no one else...” He fell into silence with another pained groan, turning away.

Warren gave him a moment to collect himself. “What do you need?”

Charles turned, eyes still shut tight. Slowly, he let out a shaking breath through pursed lips and opened his eyes. He settled his amber gaze on Warren, a pleading question reaching out through their bond. “John...please.”

Warren stayed still. “You’re drunk.”

“Not so very,” he replied, closing the space between them, his hands going to the buttons of Warren’s vest.

Warren closed his large hands around Charles’s wrists. “You’re grieving.”

Charles stilled, his shoulders suppressing a sob. “John, please,” he murmured, tipping up on his toes to kiss Warren’s

jaw. “Please, Johnnie. Just...just hold me. Make it go away. Make it stop. Just for a moment. Please—”

Warren wrapped him in his arms, pressing his face to Charles’s neck and breathing him in. Charles’s hands moved, stripping him out of his vest and immediately working on his cravat. Warren couldn’t help but respond, having Charles in his arms. He stood still, letting Charles have his way at first, stripping Warren down to his shirtsleeves and kissing all across his broad chest, his hands slipping inside the top of Warren’s breeches.

“Please,” Charles begged again, his face nuzzled in at Warren’s neck. “Please, hold me.”

Setting his reserve aside, Warren got to work, stripping Charles out of his clothes until they were both standing shirtless, breeches open, hands seeking for their hard lengths. Warren went slowly, peppering Charles with kisses, teasing him and bringing him to the edge, his hand stroking along his shaft and cupping his balls.

Charles groaned, leaning into his every touch. “More,” he pleaded, his own hand stroking Warren from root to tip. “I need you, Johnnie. Been so long. Please god, make me yours.”

Warren groaned, letting himself sink fully into character. He turned Charles around in his embrace, pulling him by the hips until Charles was nestled against his hard cock. Charles whimpered, tipping his head back to expose his neck. Warren obliged him, lavishing his neck with hot kisses.

“Tell me what you want,” he breathed against Charles’s ear, nipping the lobe. “Do you want it rough? Want me to make it hurt? You’ve always liked a little pain with your pleasure.”

Charles sighed, his cock twitching in Warren’s firm grip.

“Do you want to be my good little pet?” he teased, fighting his own discomfort. He didn’t want to play this game anymore, but in this moment, he’d do whatever Charles needed. “Do you need to get on your knees and suck me

before I fuck your tight hole? I'll make you beg for it. Make you crawl."

Charles shifted in his grip, his cock achingly hard, but he turned, his arms going up to wrap around Warren's shoulders. "No games, Johnnie. We don't need them. You're more than just a quick fuck to me. Don't always sell yourself so short. Please, just—" He swallowed his words and Warren soothed a hand on his cheek.

"Tell me."

Charles tipped up his chin, holding his gaze. "Will you just...love me?"

The question settled between them, stealing all their air.

"Because I love you so much. It's always been you, John. And I'm so—" His breath caught. "I'm sorry. I left you without a word, and I'm so sorry. It broke my heart to do it. Selby bade me go and I—I wanted back the moment I'd gone. Please believe me, John. There wasn't a day I didn't long for you. Three years of misery—" Charles buried his face against his chest, letting out a soft sob as he clung to him. "I missed you so goddamn much," he said against his shoulder. "I can't breathe without your air in my lungs. Can't smile but that I see you smiling too. And I can't give Madeline an answer when I feel how you still hate me."

Warren stiffened, heart racing. "I could never hate you," he murmured, wrapping his arms around Charles.

Charles tipped his face back to gaze up at him. "But you've not forgiven me either. How could you when I've done nothing to earn it? I was selfish and scared and stupid. I let myself be lead away from you. But how can you understand? You're so strong, John. You've always been so strong. You would never be persuaded to walk away from someone you loved."

"And I never did," he said softly, cupping Charles's face, his heart overflowing with need.

Charles blinked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"I followed you," he admitted.



Charles sucked in a breath. “What?”

Warren shrugged. “Each time I caught wind of you, I went to where you were. London, Manchester. I had to know you were safe. Protected. I couldn’t live with the not knowing.”

Fresh tears filled his eyes. “You came for me?”

“Three times,” he replied, his memory flooding with the image of Charles crossing a busy street, a bundle of books under his arm. “I saw you once. In London. I was sure you saw me too. But then you turned away—”

“I didn’t,” Charles panted, clinging to his shoulders. “Oh John, I didn’t see you. If you would have made yourself known, I would have fallen at your feet. I would have begged you never to leave me again. I will do so now. I will beg you to forgive me. For I am a broken man, and it is only fitting that I atone.”

He slipped from Warren’s grip dropping to his knees, his hands on Warren’s hips.

“Stand up, Charles,” he muttered, pulling on his arms.

“*No*—I must fix this between us,” he panted, jerking himself loose. “I broke your heart, John. Worse, I left you in the same way everyone else has. Believe me, no one hates me more than myself for playing into your worst fears the way that I did.”

Warren groaned, trying to keep the pieces of his wounded heart from breaking open again.

“But I didn’t leave for a lack of loving you,” Charles said ardently. “I loved you *too* much. I always have. It consumes me, it blinds me to reason. Selby was afraid and he made me afraid too. But I’m not afraid anymore.”

Warren narrowed his eyes at him. “And why not?”

“Madeline,” he said on a breath.

Warren stilled.

“Seeing you together opened my eyes to what a fool I’d been, what a coward. She thinks she’s meek, a drab little

wallflower, but she's not."

"No," Warren replied, unable to suppress his smile at the thought of her. "She's not."

"She is the viola that blooms brightest in winter," Charles went on. "She is fierce and bold, claiming what she wants, withstanding the frost of a life lived in the cold. And she loves you, John. Like you, she is stalwart. She will not shift. *God—*" He dragged a hand through his hair. "I think I'm falling more in love with her every day, but I envy her too. I envy the way she loves you so innocently so freely. You both say I am in a cage, so help me." He gripped him by the hips again, gazing up at him from the floor. "Tear down these bars and let me love you the way I've always wanted to, the way *she* does. Without condition or reservation or fear."

Warren pursed his lips, thinking of the pink in her cheeks, the gold of her hair. "You cannot cross this line with us again unless you mean it, Charles. She is determined to have us both, to heal us and plant herself between us."

"But we cannot make space for her in our hearts while this rot festers," Charles urged. "So, tell me what to do, John. Tell me how I may atone. What must I do to earn back your love and your trust?"

Warren sighed, running a hand over Charles's curls.

Charles leaned into his hand, chasing his touch with a soft whimper.

"Stand up," he ordered, tugging on his arms again.

Charles stood, his legs a little wobbly from too much drink and emotional exhaustion. "Please," he murmured, pouring all his hope and need into the word.

Warren felt it through his whole body. He cupped Charles's face with both hands, brushing his thumb over his parted lips. "Do you love me?"

Charles exhaled against his thumb, leaning into him. "So much. John, I cannot bear this distance a moment longer. I need to be with you, claimed by you. Please, my love—"

Warren sighed with relief before kissing him deep and slow. Charles sank into his kiss, lowering all his walls to the floor. He clung to him, giving him everything.

“Please,” Charles murmured.

Warren worked Charles’s breeches down his hips and did the same to himself. Bending his knees, he wrapped a large hand around both their cocks, stroking them together.

Both men shivered with need.

“I want you so badly,” Charles begged, his arms around his neck as he pressed closer with his hips, grinding their cocks together with perfect pressure. “Need you inside me.”

With a groan, Warren walked him over to the bed, pushing on his shoulders to sit him down. At that new angle, Charles was at the perfect height to—

“Fuck—” Warren dug his fingers into Charles’s hair as Charles sank his mouth around his length, dragging his soft tongue over the tip with a little sucking sound. Warren moved his hips with the motion of Charles’s mouth, feeling that exquisite coiling low in his back. The heat spread outward, hardening his cock, as Charles hummed with pleasure. “So good,” he muttered, giving Charles a loving stroke with his hand.

Charles looked up at him, gaze soft, his mouth wrapped around him. Warren had to have him. He needed more. It had been too goddamn long. He cupped Charles’s face with both hands, gently pulling him off his cock. “Lie down.”

Charles whimpered with relief, slipping his breeches the rest of the way off his legs, his stockings too, until he was fully naked. As Warren did the same, he also reached for the small bottle of oil.

“Hands and knees,” he directed. “Relax for me.”

Charles was already obliging him, rolling onto his knees, spreading them slightly to expose himself. Warren climbed onto the bed behind him, reaching between Charles’s legs to stroke his cock as he lowered his mouth. He spit on Charles’s

hole, watching it clench tight, before he teased it with his tongue.

“Oh god,” Charles groaned, his face dropping to his folded arms as he pressed his arse against Warren’s hot mouth. Warren traced from his balls and back up, working him until he was writhing. “Do it, John. I can’t stand it—”

Pausing a moment, Warren poured a measure of the oil into his hand, working his first finger slowly inside Charles. He loved the feel of him clenching tight around him. “If you expect to take my cock, you need to relax.”

Charles squirmed, his hips wriggling as he pushed himself harder onto Warren’s fingers.

“So eager,” Warren teased. “Are you desperate to be filled? Do you want this cock so deep you feel it in your chest?”

“Yes,” Charles breathed. “Need you.”

Warren added more oil to his fingers, working a third one in, slowly stretching Charles out.

“Do it,” Charles begged. “I’m ready, John. Take me.”

Warren pulled his fingers free, positioning himself between Charles’s legs. He slathered his cock with oil, taking the tip in his hand and lining it up with Charles’s hole. “Deep breaths. Get ready to push.”

Charles groaned, his body relaxing the moment Warren worked the tip of his cock inside him. “More.”

“Breathe. Take me, Charles. All of me...that’s it,” he coaxed, feeling the pressure of that inner ring of muscle like a vice as he pushed past, burying himself inside his dearest friend.

“Oh, god...so good,” Charles moaned, already trying to move his hips.

“Nearly there.” Warren worked his hips, pressing himself deeper, so deep he sank in to the hilt.

Both men shivered again, feeling that perfect moment of blessed union as their bodies connected.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured, stroking his hands over Charles’s bare hips, loving the way he looked from this angle, speared on his cock, so sweet and vulnerable. Warren shifted his hips, holding Charles still as he rocked into him.

They didn’t typically take things so slow. Charles liked a little pain and Warren usually got off on degrading him, making him crawl, making him beg. This was different. It was tender and loving. Warren liked this too. It surprised him to admit it, but in this moment, he couldn’t imagine having Charles any other way.

He rocked deeper into him, loving the way Charles clamped tight around him, groaning out his pleasure.

“Johnnie, please. I need—”

“What do you need?” He replied, folding himself around him to kiss his shoulder, his neck, all the while pumping his hips in a slow and steady rhythm.

Before Charles could respond, there was a sharp knock at the door. Two loud raps. And then the door was swinging open.



Madeline stood on the threshold of Warren's cabin, weak sunlight pooling in behind her. Her cape was a flurry of snowflakes, for the winter storm was starting in earnest. She took in the glorious sight of the men together on the bed. They were both naked, their beautiful bodies glistening in the light of the fire. Several candles burned on the table, chasing away more of the darkness.

They stilled at the sight of her, their eyes going wide at being discovered in the throes of passion. Perhaps she should have waited until one of them opened the door, but she was too anxious to see Charles, to know if he was alright. Recovering her senses, she hurried inside and shut the door, latching it behind her.

“Madeline...” came Warren's warning tone.

She just shed her outer layers, hanging her cape and pelisse on a hook. When she turned around, Charles was still on his hands and knees. Warren wrapped an arm around Charles's chest, pulling him upright until they were both on their knees. The sudden change in position had Charles gasping, eyes shutting tight.

Warren was more in control of himself. “Madeline, what —”

“I heard,” was all she said, moving over to the bed, eyes only for Charles. “I heard what happened. I came to see you, Charles—I had to see you.”

At her words, tears filled his eyes. Then he was reaching for her. “Madeline...”

She went to him, wrapping her arms around him, even as he remained held by Warren too. He buried his face in the curve of her neck, breathing her in. His shoulders wracked with a sob as he all but collapsed against her.

“Do you want her too?” Warren murmured, peppering his shoulder with kisses.

Charles clung to her, his hard cock pressed between them. “I don’t deserve either of you. I’m terrified that I’ll lose you. I’ll push you away. I’ll ruin this.”

“We are here, Charles,” Madeline urged, leaning back to cup his face. “We are right here beside you. If you but hold out your hand, we will take it. Please, Charles—”

He silenced her with a kiss, his mouth desperate and seeking. Behind him, Warren moved his hips, burying himself deeper inside. Charles groaned against her lips.

“Help me,” said Warren, his hand draping around Charles’s shoulder to brush Madeline’s cheek. “Help me tend to him. He needs us.”

She nodded, getting to her feet. Heart in her throat, she worked the front clasps of her dress, letting it drop to her feet. She stepped out of it, her core tightened in anticipation. She undid the fastenings of her half-stays as well, shrugging out of them until she was in only her loose chemise. “What do I do? Tell me how to...”

“Lie down here beneath him,” Warren directed, his hand working Charles’s cock as he kissed his neck, his ear.

Charles tipped his head back as Warren lavished him with attention.

Madeline crawled awkwardly onto the end of the bed, facing them. She shimmied down onto her back, the chemise slipping up around her hips. She parted her legs to either side of them, fighting her momentary hesitation as both men looked down at her, gazing between her parted legs.

“Touch yourself while I touch him,” Warren ordered. “Make yourself ready for him.”

Madeline gave a little nod, reaching her hand tentatively between her parted legs. “Like this?”

Charles watched her every move. “How do you feel?”

She sighed, settling back against the pillows. “I feel... anxious,” she admitted, stroking two fingers over her sex. “Things have been madness at the house, what with Renley’s return. And with your sad news, I—”

“No,” Warren said over her. “Leave all that at the door. You are here with us now, lovely. And Charles is about to claim your sweet cunt while I fuck his arse. Tell us how you *feel*.”

She gasped, her chest rising with each breath. “I feel... warm,” she admitted. “And safe...and like I never want to be anywhere else but with you. Both of you.”

Charles groaned, dropping forward over her. His hands braced to either side as he kissed her breasts over her chemise, biting at her nipples until she was gasping, arching into him.

“Yes,” she breathed, one hand going to his hair.

Charles used one hand to jerk her chemise down over one shoulder, exposing one of her little breasts. He closed his mouth around it, flicking her tip with his clever tongue. He paused, glancing over his shoulder. “Shit—I don’t have the letter. Warren, I—”

“Pull out,” Warren replied. “Don’t come inside her. Can you do it?”

“Fuck, we need to start using her arse,” Charles murmured. “All I want is to come inside you,” he added at her, making her stomach flip. The way these men talked to her had her in pieces. Charles kissed her soundly, his tongue tracing her lips as he added, “Fill you up, make you mine.”

“Do it,” she replied.

Behind Charles, Warren groaned. “Another day, lovely. This time, Charles will take that sweet cunt. Now, spread those



legs, and show him how well we mean to love him.”

She smiled, her arms around Charles’s shoulders as she arched her hips, eagerly waiting as Warren pressed forward with his hips. The motion had Charles’s cock sliding through her wetness, placing soft pressure on her bud until she shivered. She pulled on his shoulders, bringing him closer. “Take me, Charles. I want to feel you in me.”

Charles notched himself at her entrance and she lifted her hips again, taking him in an inch.

“Oh, fucking hell,” he panted.

“Are you ready, lovely?” Warren teased, holding her gaze over Charles’s shoulder.

She nodded, her hands braced on Charles’s hips.

Warren surged forward, the motion of his hips sinking Charles’s cock deep inside her. Both she and Charles cried out. She didn’t have time to adjust to the piercing ache of the fullness before Warren was slamming away with his hips. His cock made slick sucking sounds as he buried himself inside Charles again and again. And each thrust had Charles burying himself in her.

She was a quivering mess, clinging to Charles, brushing his neck and shoulder with feathered kisses as he all but fell atop her, their bodies pressing together as Warren hammered him.

Her core fluttered around Charles’s cock, clenching him until he was gripping tight to her hair, arching her head back and stealing all her air with a savage kiss.

“I’m—John—” Charles said in a panic.

Then Warren was hauling Charles off her, his hand wrapping around Charles’s cock and stroking him tight until Charles let loose his release, the warm seed spilling all over Madeline’s chemise. She lay there, legs spread, watching Charles be held by Warren, both men sharing their passion together.

She wanted them. Fiercely. Desperately. She wanted them to be hers.

Warren pulled out of Charles, sinking back against the far edge of the bed as he shoved Charles forward. “Finish our girl. Drink of her. Now.”

Charles didn't need telling twice. He stretched out on his chest between Madeline's knees. He used his hands to spread her wider, then he was on her, burying his face in her cunt. He was vicious and exacting, his tongue both petal soft and firm as iron as he devoured her.

Her mild-mannered Charles was a beast, a hungry animal. His fingers dug into her thighs as he grabbed at her, arching her hips up as he speared her on his tongue, sucking all her essence into his mouth.

She was on the edge, climbing to the top of that great height, the teetering crystal vase. She wanted to fall. In their arms, it felt safe to fall. Shutting out all the noise in her mind, she focused only on the feel of Charles between her legs. He touched and teased, showering her with his affection.

One hand on his head, she dug her fingers into his curls, pulling him tight against her cunt. With his groan of pleasure ringing in her ears, she came blissfully apart.



“Tom, will you stop your infernal pacing?” James muttered, his face behind his paper. “You’ll wear out all the rugs.”

Captain Renley groaned, halting before the wide-open window. “If only this snow would stop. Three days home, and I’ve been trapped indoors for all of them. I feel like a caged animal. How can you all stand it?”

“You are simply bored,” called Burke from his place by the fire, lounging on the sofa with a book in hand. “Occupy yourself, and you’ll find the peculiar sensation will soon cease.”

Captain Renley just grumbled, resuming his pacing.

They were all gathered in the morning room. Madeline and Rosalie sat at the table, needlework in hand. Madeline had never cared for embroidery. It was more to have something to do with her hands. She felt the same as Captain Renley, unfocused and unsettled.

Yesterday was the funeral for Mr. Selby. Madeline was forced to watch from across the room as Charles accepted the well-wishes of the whole of Finchley. Everyone came to pay their respects, from Doctor Rivers to tradesmen and pig farmers. Even several of the fire victims were in attendance, dutifully shaking Charles’s hand and offering their condolences.

The duke and duchess hosted a wake at the assembly room, providing a hot meal for anyone who passed through. It was a long affair. At the end, Charles had looked so defeated, so lost. Madeline wanted to take him in her arms and hold him tight. She didn't have the words to condole him, having never lost a parent, but she ought to be able to do...*something*.

As it was, Renley took her arm and escorted her out, back to Alcott. The snows were falling so thick and heavy, she feared she wouldn't be able to venture out the window again tonight. And she needed to see Charles again. She needed things settled between them at last.

"There has to be two feet of snow at least," Renley muttered. "And more is still falling."

"I think it looks pretty as a picture," said Rosalie, gazing wistfully out the windows to watch the flurries. "Perhaps we could sketch it, Madeline. It's been too long since I practiced my watercolors."

Renley groaned again, flopping down onto the sofa across from Burke, one arm thrown over his eyes. "Please, do not ask me to watch you paint snowscapes. I shall climb the walls."

"No one is asking you to do anything," Rosalie replied, her lips pursed into a quiet smile.

"Yes, but you're going to," he countered. "And I refuse. Let James sit and admire your brushstrokes. I have no patience for it."

"My, but someone is feeling irritable this morning," she replied.

"He's bored," Burke said again.

Renley sat up, his eyes narrowed at Burke. "You try going from a life of constant movement, feeling the sway of the sea beneath you, to sitting idly on a couch," he replied. "And Christ, must all the clocks in this house tick so loudly?"

The room quieted and Madeline had to suppress her own smile. For in the quiet, the subtle *tick, tick, tick* of the mantle clock echoed like a shotgun blast. She glanced at Rosalie, the two of them exchanging a grin.

Captain Renley launched to his feet again. “Right, that’s it. Up, you lot. I can’t sit still for another minute.”

“You’d have to be still for a minute first, before you can claim another,” James muttered from behind his paper.

“What do you expect us to do?” said Burke, snapping his book shut, clearly more willing to be distracted.

“I don’t know...something,” said Renley. “Anything. Let’s play a game. Blind man’s bluff?”

“I’m not blindfolding my pregnant wife and having her stumble about the room knocking into furniture,” James replied, turning the page of his paper.

“And we are not twelve years old,” Burke added.

“Bowls, then,” said Renley. “We can set it up in the hallway.”

“That contest is over before it begins,” Burke said with a laugh, sitting forward. “James is rubbishing at bowls.”

“Who said I was playing?” came the duke’s rebuttal.

“You should play a round of fencing,” called Rosalie, flashing Madeline a smile. “I’m sure Madeline will be happy to be your fourth.”

All three men turned their gazes to her.

“Do you know how to fence?” said Mr. Burke, grey eyes alight with interest.

She glanced at Rosalie before giving him a curt nod. “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t let her be modest,” said Rosalie. “I’m sure she’ll give you a run for your money, Burke.”

Captain Renley was already on the move. “Right, excellent. Fencing it is then. James, put that paper away and join the fun, or I’ll stuff your breeches with snow!”



IN THE SPAN of twenty minutes, the men had commandeered use of the main gallery, which was wide enough and long enough to be used as a rudimentary piste. Madeline took a seat next to Rosalie, watching as Captain Renley and the duke donned vests and masks.

Burke tossed them each a foil. “First to five, eh? And, James, play fair! We may not be in Haymarket, but Angelo’s rules still apply.”

“I’m the one you’re concerned about?” James replied, shrugging the mask on over his head. “Tom is a dirty cheat.”

“I take offense,” Tom exclaimed, lowering his own mask. “I am an officer in His Majesty’s Royal Navy!”

“You’re a dirty pirate, Tom, and you know it,” said Burke with a laugh. “Now, *en garde!*”

“And we’re supposed to assume they all like each other?” Madeline murmured to a smiling Rosalie.

“Teasing is their love language,” she replied, leaning back in her chair as she watched the captain take the first lunge, chasing the duke down the piste with his foil slashing through the air.

It was over quickly, with Captain Renley making short work of the duke. James had flawless footwork, but he was slow to attack, and he didn’t guard his left shoulder. Meanwhile, the captain was a hurricane—cutting and slicing away, always keeping James on his back foot.

“Well done,” James said with a panting breath, lifting his mask.

“Again,” Renley taunted.

The duke shook his head. “Let me catch my breath.”

“And it is Madeline’s turn,” Rosalie called.

Madeline stifled a groan. She’d never actually thought Rosalie was serious. She assumed the men would enjoy their sport and take it in turns between them. But Renley was already stripping out of his gear, handing it over to Burke.

“Can she fence in a dress?” the duke said with a raised brow.

Madeline felt her ire rise.

Next to her, Rosalie huffed in indignation. “Honestly, James. We women are more capable than you think.”

“Well...how can she lunge?” he said with shrug.

Madeline bolted to her feet, holding out her hand. “Give me the foil, sir, and I’ll show you a thing or two about lunging.”

Behind him, Burke and Renley broke into twin grins, their murmured conversation cut short. “Yeah, sit down, James,” Burke teased. “Let us both show you how it’s done.”

The duke made quick work of shedding his vest and handing it over to Madeline. It was two sizes too big, but she shrugged it on over her powder blue silk dress. Then she tugged on the glove and snatched for the mask. It felt good to be in the gear again. The moment he handed her the foil and she wrapped her fingers around it, she took a calming breath.

“Right then, Madeline,” Burke called. “Let’s give this lot a show.”

Captain Renley sank down onto the chair next to Rosalie, murmuring something in her ear that had her smiling. James leaned against the wall, accepting a glass of wine from a waiting footman.

Madeline took up her position, sizing up Mr. Burke through the mesh wire of her mask. He was nearly three times bigger than her. He’d use his size to intimidate her. She’d have to use her speed.

“*En garde!*” called Captain Renley.

Madeline and Burke both saluted with their foils and then Burke was inching forward, giving her foil a teasing tap. One, two, three quick parries. He was going easy on her. There was nothing she liked less than a man thinking it was his duty to take it easy on the fairer sex.

With a burst of speed, she lunged forward, feeling the tug of her skirts at her knee, but it was enough to land the point of her foil clear on Mr. Burke's chest.

"A hit," he called. "Acknowledged."

"Well done, Madeline!" cried Rosalie as the other two clapped.

They took up their positions and restarted, Burke barreling down on her with speed and stamina. She used her smaller size and sank low, darting to the left as she swung to the side, her foil poking him low on the ribs.

"That's a hit!" called the captain, almost giddy with excitement at watching Madeline gain another point.

"Are you even trying, Burke?" James teased.

"I like you this way, Madeline," said Renley. "The little bee can sting, eh Burke?"

Madeline couldn't help but smile inside her mask.

"Again," Burke barked.

Madeline's nerves began to grow. She was upsetting him. Horatio Burke was a competitive man. He liked to win as much as she did. She readied herself, trying to guess his attack. The duke called *en garde* and Burke charged.

He held his own this time, clearly done giving her any points she didn't earn. He danced down the gallery, his footwork fast and his parries vicious. She nearly tripped on the hem of her dress, taking a stumbling step to the right. She used her sudden change in weight to her advantage, swinging left with her hand, the tip of her foil just barely tapping him above the hip.

"God *damn* it!"

"You do know you're supposed to hit me with that, right?" she teased, earning a growl from the gentleman as the others howled with laughter.

"Again!" He was already marching off back to their starting point.



“Three-nil to Madeline,” called the duke.

“I know the bloody score,” Burke grumbled.

“Don’t be a sore loser, Burke,” said Rosalie. “It is not your fault you underestimated her.”

“Would you like a few pointers now, Burke?” teased the captain.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Careful, Madeline,” called the duke. “He’s out for blood now. He’s going to aim small for the point just above your shoulder—”

“James, will you shut up!”

Madeline still smiled. She took up her position, floating on the balls of her feet, her foil at the ready. “Hit me if you can, sir. I should warn you, I do not intend to lose this match.”

He grumbled, crouching low as he took up his stance. “Just get on with it.”

As Burke readied to lunge, a footman came sweeping around the corner, moving towards them with Charles in tow. He wore his mourning clothes—a somber back coat and black cravat. He saw her, eyes wide as he slid to a stop. She was distracted just long enough for Burke to lunge forward, viciously stabbing with his foil right in the center of her chest.

“Hit!” crowed Burke.

She gasped, nearly stumbling back.

“Oh, well done,” Renley teased. “You got a point. Now you’re only *two* behind—”

“Again,” said Burke, riding the thrill of his won point.

Madeline just stood there, wrapped in her vest and mask, watching Charles approach.

“Your Grace,” called the footman. “Mr. Charles Bray is here.”

The rest of the group turned, welcoming him with greetings and smiles. Rosalie got to her feet, wincing with one

hand braced on the side of her stomach. “Good morning, Mr. Bray.”

“Join us, Bray,” called the duke, stepping forward. “We’re just watching Madeline demolish Burke in a round of fencing.”

“I—” Charles glanced from Madeline back to the duke and her heart skipped a beat. He wanted to talk to her, she was sure of it. He wanted to get her alone.

*Oh god, he’s finally going to give me his answer!*

“Yes, alright,” he said, moving away from her towards the duke, who offered out his hand.

Madeline stepped forward, her foil lowering to her side. She caught Rosalie’s eye. The duchess wore a worried expression. Suddenly, she gripped her side, wincing.

“Ahh,” she hissed. “I—something’s wrong—”

Burke laughed, tugging his mask up to uncover his face. “Seriously? Not this ploy again. Charles isn’t here to speak to James or to watch us fence. He’s here to finally give Madeline an answer, thank all the gods. Let us not pretend otherwise and let us not keep her waiting in suspense.”

James groaned, giving Charles an apologetic look.

But Madeline had eyes only for Rosalie. “Are you well?” She tipped her mask back, reaching for Rosalie with her free hand.

Rosalie groaned, both hands now holding her stomach. “Mmmph...no. I think...I need to lie down. I—oh no—” She stepped back, her gaze darting down to the little puddle at her feet.

“Oh my goodness,” Madeline murmured, her foil clattering to the floor as she hurried to Rosalie’s side.

“What is it?” said James, noticing Rosalie’s odd behavior.

Rosalie panted, her gaze darting from Madeline to her husband. “I believe I am having your baby,” she replied, both hands on her stomach. “Now.”



In the blink of an eye, Madeline went from fencing with Mr. Burke in the grand gallery to helping Rosalie up the stairs to her bedchamber. She cast an apologetic look over her shoulder at Charles and he just nodded, making it clear he meant to wait for her below.

The maids did their best to make Rosalie comfortable, turning down her sheets, changing her out of her dress and stays into only a chemise and dressing robe, and offering her cool cloths for the back of her neck.

Madeline just tried to stay out of the way.

Rosalie panted, pacing beside the bed as she rubbed her stomach. “And Doctor Rivers is coming? You’re absolutely sure?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” replied Mrs. Davies. “His Grace and Captain Renley went directly to Finchley to collect him.”

“And Little G—”

“Perfectly content with the nanny, Your Grace,” Mrs. Davies soothed, rubbing her back with a gentle hand. “Your only care is to bring this new little one into the world. Should you like to lie down, Your Grace?”

“No,” she panted. “Not yet, I—this doesn’t—I want Doctor Rivers.”

“He will be here soon,” said Madeline. “James will not return without him.”

“This feels so different from the last time,” she admitted, breathing out sharply through pursed lips. She glanced between Madeline and the housekeeper. “Say nothing to the gentlemen. I don’t want to alarm them.”

Madeline’s heart skipped a beat. “What feels different?”

Rosalie shook her head, still pacing. “I feel strange. And the baby feels...hard. I noticed it a few days ago.”

Madeline tried to control the direction of her racing thoughts. What she knew about birthing and babies would fit inside a thimble. “Hard?”

“Yes,” Rosalie groaned, pausing at the end of the bed, one arm wrapping around the post as she leaned forward, panting through a new pain. “Come feel.” She reached out a hand for Madeline.

Nervously, Madeline stepped forward, letting Rosalie take her hand and place it on the side of her belly.

“Feel this?”

Madeline pressed down ever so lightly, moving her hand left then right. Yes, something certainly felt hard.

“Feel here.” Rosalie moved her hand around to the other side, pressing down. “What do you feel?”

Madeline smoothed her hand over Rosalie’s side, gasping as she felt a series of little ridges. “Is that...”

“Feet,” Rosalie murmured. “Oh, Madeline, I think it’s the baby’s feet. I think it’s turned the wrong way. No, I’m sure it is.”

“And is that dangerous?” said Madeline, holding her friend’s gaze.

Rosalie glanced from Madeline to Mrs. Davies, who now looked stricken. “I am no expert, but I believe...” She took a deep breath, pushing it out. “I think the baby cannot be born this way.”

“I don’t understand,” Madeline murmured. “Surely, it can come out. It must come out—”

Rosalie shook her head, eyes shut as a tear slipped down her cheek. “It can’t. Not if it’s turned the wrong way.”

Madeline’s heart dropped through her chest. “But I don’t —”

“That is why I *need* Doctor Rivers,” Rosalie pressed, pacing away. “He will advise me. He’ll know what to do.” She turned at the wall, her gaze fierce. “You will say nothing to any of the men. Not James. Surely not Burke or Tom. They will only needlessly worry. Doctor Rivers will come, and he’ll have a plan. Agreed?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mrs. Davies replied instantly.

Rosalie turned to Madeline, waiting for her answer.

Madeline worried her bottom lip before nodding. “Alright, fine, yes. Agreed.”

“Let me just go and check on His Grace’s progress,” said the housekeeper, taking her leave in a jangle of keys.

As soon as the door shut, Rosalie sighed, sinking back into her anxious pacing. “I’m so sorry about the timing of all this, Madeline.”

“Think nothing of it,” she replied, desperate to busy herself with something. She walked over to Rosalie’s dressing table and began sprucing the flowers in the vase.

“But Mr. Bray had come at last,” said Rosalie. “That look in his eye was so determined. Did he come to settle things between you?”

Madeline just shook her head. “I hardly know. He’s been through so much these last several days, what with his uncle’s death, the funeral. And my proposal came from so far out of the blue...”

“Don’t despair,” Rosalie said, breathing through her pain as she subtly kneaded her side. “He loves you, Madeline. Or if he’s not there yet, he’s well on his way. He cannot keep his eyes off you. Even at the funeral, you were all he could see.”

Madeline shook her head with a soft laugh. “Stop playing matchmaker, Rosalie. You have much more important matters

to attend to at the moment than my love life.”

“But *is* there a love life to speak of?” Rosalie pressed. “Has Burke’s meddling proved fruitful?”

Madeline gasped, holding the duchess’s gaze. “Burke’s meddling? What on earth has he done?”

Rosalie scoffed, pacing away. “I told you there is nothing he loves more than an intrigue. He’s made it his mission these last two weeks to help hurry things along for you. I’m sure even I don’t know all the layers of his machinations.”

“Well, surely you must know *one* layer,” Madeline pressed.

Rosalie just shrugged, clearly trying to hide the extent of her present discomfort. “I may know a few. I know he spoke to Charles alone...and Mr. Warren...and he planned the Christmas party for Mr. Selby. I think he hoped that by winning over Selby, you could more quickly win over Bray.”

Madeline gasped. “You know about Mr. Warren then?”

“What, that he’s the bastard son of a lord and he refuses to claim his inheritance? Or that you’ve been besotted with him from the moment you arrived at Alcott? Or do you mean to imply that he’s been in love with your Mr. Bray for nigh on a decade...or perhaps you mean to question whether I knew that James caught them coupling in my hothouse.”

Madeline groaned, turning away.

“You’ll find there is little I do not know,” Rosalie called after her.

Madeline was mortified. She’d never learned how to have these kinds of conversations with another person. Her mother taught her to feel nothing but shame and self-loathing for romantic or impure thoughts. It felt so completely strange to have a person with which she could be open at last.

She glanced over her shoulder, watching Rosalie pace. “Do you...have you ever been shared...you know, by two of the men at once?”

Oh god, the words were out of her mouth before she'd even had a chance to fully think them.

“What?”

Leaving her pride and hesitation at her feet, Madeline stormed ahead. “Have you ever been taken the way the men take each other? In the...you know...” She let her words die, realizing that she'd never actually spoken aloud the word ‘arse’ in the whole of her life.

“Heavens, Madeline, what a change of conversation,” Rosalie said on a breath. “You could knock me down with a feather—”

“I want to try it,” Madeline went on. “I want to but...does it hurt? And can a woman really take two cocks at once because it seems highly unlikely, not to mention painful—”

“Ohmygod.” Rosalie paced away again. “If Burke were here, he'd burst into a cloud of dust,” she muttered, shaking her head.

“But Burke is not here, and neither are Charles or Warren,” said Madeline. “It's just you and me, Rosalie, and I'm asking you. I quite literally have no one else to turn to,” she added with a helpless shrug.

Rosalie sighed, facing her with both hands bracing her belly. “No...it doesn't hurt. Perhaps if they rush, or don't prepare you first, it *can* hurt. But in my experience, it feels... divine. And to be filled twice over is a thrill like none other. It is akin to a religious experience.”

Madeline smiled. “My body is a temple, you said.”

Rosalie mirrored her smile. “So let them dutifully worship. Only take care,” she added. “Too much dutiful worship without the aid of a letter will get you your own Little G...or my little sideways babe here.” She smoothed her hand over her stomach.

Before Madeline could reply, the door to Rosalie's room opened. A pretty, freckled-faced maid popped her head inside the room. “Umm...Lady Madeline, you're needed downstairs.”

Madeline shared a look with Rosalie. “Tell Mr. Bray I will be down as soon as the duchess no longer has need of me.”

“Go, Madeline,” Rosalie urged. “There is little enough you can do here but wait and watch. I will wait for Doctor Rivers, and then all will be well.”

“But—”

“Go,” she said, forcing joviality as she swayed slightly on her feet. “James will be back soon. Go, get your answers. Let our dashing vicar sweep you off your feet at last.”

Giving Rosalie one last look, Madeline followed the maid out into the hallway.

“Oh, my lady,” rasped the maid as soon as the door was shut. “You must come. The duke is beside himself.”

Madeline’s heart dropped out. “Why—what’s happened?”

“He couldn’t find Doctor Rivers.”





*M*adeline hurried down the stairs to the drawing room where she found the men assembled, the duke and Captain Renley still in their great coats and hats. “What has happened?”

All the men spun around, their heated conversation halting.

“How is she?” said the duke, all but stumbling forward.

“Is the babe well?” asked Mr. Burke.

She blinked, eyes wide. “Well, I’m not a doctor, am I?”

All three men groaned in frustration.

“She was in good spirits,” she added quickly. “And she awaits Doctor Rivers. Where is he?”

“We went to his house, but he’d been called away,” said James.

“But the maid gave us a conflicting report as to his present whereabouts,” said Renley. “She knows he was called to Carrington earlier this morning to make a house call—”

“But that was hours ago,” added Burke.

“So, the man could be anywhere,” finished Renley. “And the bloody storm is only getting worse. Snow thick as anything. James and I ran on foot to the village. We’d need horses to get to Carrington,” he said at James. “A carriage would be better—”

“I’m not risking overturning a carriage with the doctor inside. Not when Rosalie has need of him,” said James, his tone firm.

“Maybe she won’t really have need of him,” Burke soothed, placing one hand on the duke’s shoulder. “Remember with Little G, her labor lasted hardly half a day and her delivery was smooth as you like. She was up and walking the following morning.”

Madeline stiffened, heart racing. Her promise to Rosalie warred with this new information. Rosalie told her not to tell them, not to worry them. But the desire to protect her friend won out. “I, umm...you should really go find him,” she murmured. “Now.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to stare at her.

The duke saw right through her mumbling. “What are you saying, Madeline? Speak plainly.”

She shifted on her feet. “You should...she needs the doctor, Your Grace. We cannot delay. You should not delay.”

“Oh shit, something’s wrong,” said Burke, his grey eyes stormy as he stepped forward, grabbing Madeline’s hand. “Tell us. What’s wrong? Oh god, we need to go to her.” He turned to leave but James put a hand on his shoulder.

“Hold, Burke. We *need* to go find Rivers and get him here,” he ordered. “Rosalie needs the doctor, winter storm be damned. That must be our priority now.”

“I will ride to Carrington,” said Renley. “I cannot possibly sit here doing nothing. I’ll go mad. I have to help her. I’ll go now, without delay.”

“And if he’s not in Carrington?” asked the duke.

Burke bristled. “Well, I’m not going—”

“Burke—” growled the duke.

“I’m not leaving her,” he barked. “She needs at least one of us by her side, James. If there’s something wrong, she needs us. She can’t do this alone. I can’t let her be alone.”

James groaned. “Fine, then I will go. We can’t be sure he’s still in Carrington. We’ll double our chances by splitting up.”

“You should both stay with her,” said Renley. “I can send young Jim along the road to New Market. Or Hayes or Tram —”

“Let me go, sir.”

They all turned to see Charles standing in the open doorway.

Madeline gave him a relieved smile. But the duke shook his head. “Bray, you don’t have to—”

“I want to, sir,” said Charles, stepping fully into the room. “James, let me do this for you. I’m a good rider. I know the county same as you. Let me take the road to New Market. You are needed here. I can circle south as Captain Renley rides north. We’ll find him, James. We’ll find Rivers.”

James breathed a sigh of relief before nodding. “Thank you, Bray.”

Captain Renley was already on the move. “Come, Bray. Let us to horse. I’ll send Jim with you in any case. And I’ll take Tram with me. The way will be slow, and we cannot waste time.”

Charles gave Madeline a curt nod as he turned to follow.

“Be careful, Mr. Bray,” she called after his retreating form.

“Come, James,” said Burke, moving towards the door. “Let us go check on Rosalie. Madeline, will you come?”

She blinked up at him, seeing the anxiety etched across every line of his handsome face. Stepping forward, she put a hand on his arm. “Of course, I will, sir. Lead the way.”



WHAT MADELINE KNEW about childbirth would fit inside a thimble. Up until the last year, she didn’t even know how babies came to be. It wasn’t until being with Charles and

Warren and seeing them release, that she understood fully the mechanics. All her mother's veiled metaphors about sowing seeds in fallow fields finally made sense.

Aside from knowing how babies were conceived, all Madeline knew of the actual birthing process was that it was long and dangerous. Women died all the time. Madeline's own dear cousin Louisa had died just last year.

She was Patrick's older sister, and the only other cousin who treated Madeline with a modicum of interest or affection. She'd been pretty as a painting—all golden curls and green eyes. She'd been the diamond of her season, winning the hand of a wealthy earl's son. And then ten months later, Madeline was standing at her grave, her stillborn child buried with her. The worst part was that no one ever talked of it. Louisa went upstairs to give birth and she never came down, and no one mentioned the horrible things that must have happened behind that closed door.

Now Madeline knew why she was kept in the dark: childbirth was terrifying.

Poor Rosalie suffered greatly, her stomach spasming as she doubled over, panting through her pains. Her body was slicked in sweat, her chemise stained between her legs by blood and discharge. She paced the room, Burke or James providing an arm for support. When she felt too tired, she lied down on her side, but the pain soon had her on her feet again.

Two hours into her labor and the gentlemen were still not back with the doctor.

"I cannot keep fighting this urge to push," she cried, tears of frustration slipping down her cheeks.

"So then push," said Burke. "Is that not the natural order of things?"

Madeline stilled as Rosalie closed her eyes tight, shaking her head.

"What?" said James. "What are we missing?" His gaze darted between Madeline and Rosalie. "Someone had better speak!"

“It is nothing, dearest,” said Rosalie. “We shall just wait for Doctor Rivers.”

But the duke wasn't letting this go. He narrowed his eyes at Madeline. “You know something. What did she tell you that she is keeping from us?”

Madeline shook her head, biting into her bottom lip. “I can't—”

“*Tell* me,” he said, his voice laced with command.

“James, don't bully her,” came Rosalie's weak protest.

“What the hell is wrong?” said Burke, his gaze darting between them.

Before Madeline could reply, there came a knock at the door. Mrs. Davies entered, her eyes wide. “Your Grace, I—you're needed downstairs.”

“I'm not needed anywhere but here,” he countered. “Whatever it is, handle it, Mrs. Davies. Or see that Lawson handles it.”

“Ordinarily we would, sir,” she replied gently. “But a guest has just arrived. He waits for you below—”

“We are not receiving visitors!” he barked. “Christ's sake, there is a storm, and my wife is in labor. Turn them away at once,” he added with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Who is it, Mrs. Davies?” called Burke.

The housekeeper's gaze darted from Madeline back to the duke and Madeline felt her heart drop through her chest, through the floor, beneath the snow, and into the cold hard ground. She knew *exactly* who had come to call.

*No, this can't be happening. This cannot be happening. Not now.*

“It's the Viscount Raleigh, Your Grace,” said Mrs. Davies. “He says he has come for Lady Madeline...and to challenge Your Grace to a duel.”



Madeline went still as stone, eyes wide. Her father was *here*. He'd traveled through a winter storm to rip her from the house and challenge the Duke of Norland to a duel.

"I cannot possibly deal with this now," James muttered, turning his attention back to his wife.

"James, you have to go," Rosalie said, her voice weak. "You have to say something. Calm him down."

"My place is here," he replied, smoothing a hand through her dark hair. "I'm not leaving you, angel. Not until Doctor Rivers arrives and assures us all is well."

"What shall I do with him then, Your Grace?" asked the housekeeper.

"Tell him to get bloody lost," growled Mr. Burke.

"No," Rosalie cried. "Please, don't make this any worse. One of you must go. For Madeline—you must call him down —"

"I will go," Madeline murmured, finding her voice at last.

They all turned to face her.

Rosalie gave her a knowing look. "Madeline, you don't have to let him bully you."

"You are our guest," James added. "He is not. Handle him however you see fit. Mrs. Davies, see that she has all she requires."

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Madeline followed Mrs. Davies out of the duchess’ room and into the hallway.

“Oh, Lady Madeline, your father is ever so angry,” the housekeeper murmured. “He’s been calling curses down on the house.”

Madeline stiffened, lifting in chin in quiet defiance. “Yes, I can imagine.”

“And there’s a young man with him.”

Madeline halted. “What?”

“A young gentleman traveled with him from town. I didn’t get his name, but they both wait below. The poor man seems afraid of the viscount—”

“Patrick,” Madeline said on a breath, rushing towards the stairs.

Oh, what had she done? She’d been so reckless to think of leaving, not caring for what might happen to Patrick after she left. She hurried to the front of the house, where the main entryway opened up from top to bottom, the stairs spiraling down to the black and white marble floor below. Generations of Corbin’s adorned the walls in gilded frames, stacking up to the very top of the domed ceiling.

As she reached the railing’s edge, she heard him.

“Norland! Get down here, you bastard! You bloody coward! Bring me my daughter!”

The sound of her father’s ire had Madeline’s stomach twisting in knots. She’d spent a lifetime trying to avoid hearing that tone in his voice—never stepping a toe out of line, never talking back or disagreeing with him. So long as he got what he wanted, he was charm itself, all friendliness and ease. But this was the Viscount Raleigh when he did *not* get his way. He became like a decidedly angry bull in a china shop.

She placed her hands on the rail, gazing down. Her father paced across the marble floor, calling up more insults. He was a big man—not unlike Mr. Burke in height and width of the

shoulder—but he was not nearly so fit as Mr. Burke. Perhaps when he was a younger man. Now he had a stomach stretched tight under a waistcoat and jacket. His hair was grey, with long chops framing his face.

Steeling herself, she called down. “Father!”

His gaze darted up to her. “Madeline! Get the hell down here right now, you wretched creature! Come to me at once!”

A shadow moved in the corner and Patrick stepped forward, his tousled blonde hair as messy as ever as he gazed up at her. From here, she couldn’t quite make out the expression on his face.

“And where the hell is Norland? I mean to call the blackguard out!” her father shouted.

Madeline pushed back from the rail, glancing over at Mrs. Davies. The housekeeper gave her a sympathetic nod. Taking a deep breath, Madeline began her descent down the stairs. Her hand slid across the top of the stone banister as she descended into the lion’s den. She took the last set of stairs, facing her father with every step, inching closer to him. She stopped three from the bottom.

“Father...”

He stormed forward, his light blue eyes flashing with malice. “Do you have any idea the expense you’ve cost me? Hunting you down across all corners of England...to say nothing of the mortification you’ve put your mother through! The scandal, the shame!”

She stiffened, trying to summon all her courage.

“Well? *Speak!*” he barked. “What excuse can you possibly give?”

Before she could reply, Patrick stepped forward out of the shadows. He looked like a kicked dog, his expression solemn, his blonde hair a spiky mess. And then there was his eye...

Madeline gasped. “Oh...Patrick!” His left eye was black and blue, the bottom swollen. She spun to face her father, her



fear of him evaporating and quickly being replaced with righteous anger. “Did *you* do that to him? Did you hurt him?”

The viscount huffed. “The little weasel is lucky it’s not worse.”

Tears burned her eyes as Patrick shrugged helplessly. “Father, how could you—”

“Because he *lied* to me,” her father bellowed. “He lied to his father, his brothers, your mother, a constable.”

“Rory did it,” Patrick muttered, and Madeline felt a renewed surge of loathing for her eldest cousin.

“He merely beat me to it,” her father replied. “You both acted in a manner so duplicitous, I can hardly stand to call you family. And Madeline, god help me, you will tell me why!”

“Because I wanted a chance,” she cried.

“A chance? A chance to do *what*?”

“A chance to *live*,” she replied, surprising herself with the honesty of her answer.

He huffed. “What are you on about?”

“All my life, I’ve been your perfect doll,” she shouted. “A creature entirely of your making. I never learned to ride because *you* said it was unladylike. I-I learned French instead of German. I dance and embroider cushions and-and play the violin,” she went on, trying to control the nervous stammer in her voice. “I have done everything you’ve ever asked me to do! Never once have I done a single thing for myself and—”

He surged forward. “You *dare* show yourself so ungrateful? Why...because we pampered you? Because we polished you and gave you *every* advantage in life—”

“You *caged* me,” she countered. “You beat me down with harsh words and looks and battered me. You kept me in a box! So, I escaped. I came here to Alcott so that for *once* in my life I could feel free!”

“This is all the duchess’s doing,” he muttered, his voice dripping with disdain. “I told your mother it was wrong to

indulge your friendship with that trumped up gutter snipe,” he added, wagging a thick finger in her face.

“She is my friend—”

“She is not good company to keep! Well, it ends now. Madeline, go and pack your things at once. We’re leaving. With any luck you will *never* see this Corbin filth again!”

Madeline’s heart sank as she glanced around the grand entryway. She didn’t want to leave. Not yet, not with everything so unsettled. She couldn’t leave Rosalie. She couldn’t leave Charles and Warren. She belonged here in a way she’d never belonged anywhere else in her life. If Madeline had it her way, she would never leave Alcott Hall again.

And then the lovely truth sank into her bones: she didn’t have to leave. She glanced over at the housekeeper, who stayed to hear this entire horrid exchange. A pair of footmen stood sentry by the door.

She lifted her chin, seeking out the deepest reserves of her courage. “Father,” she declared, her chin raised in defiance. “Rosalie Corbin is my dearest friend in all the world. And you showing up like this to demean her is most unwelcome.”

He blustered, stepping forward. “You—”

She inched back a step, raising herself above him. “Her lying in has begun, and she needs peace in her house. Calm and order. You are upsetting her, sir, and that I cannot allow.”

“I am not leaving without you—”

“You cannot make me go!” She held tighter to the banister. “I am a guest of Alcott Hall, and *I* will decide when I go—”

“You selfish, cruel, unfeeling girl—”

“Uncle, stop!” called Patrick, stepping forward at last.

Her father spun around on him. “You stay out of this, nephew. Or I’ll teach you another lesson in respecting your elders.”

“She didn’t do anything wrong! And neither did the duke —”

“Nothing wrong? He stole my daughter away! I am going to knock his teeth in! Norland is a man without honor. I have never been so humiliated in my life. I sent a constable here, and the man told a bold-faced lie—”

“No, he didn’t,” Madeline countered, hands on her hips.

Her father rounded back on her. “I heard from the constable myself. He asked the duke if you were here, and the villain denied it. I twisted the arm of your pathetic excuse for a cousin and finally got to the truth. Norland lied, and I mean to have my honor satisfied!”

“He did *not* lie,” she said again. “The constable asked for my whereabouts and the duke said that, to the best of his knowledge, I was not in the house. Which, at the time, I wasn’t!”

“Then where the bloody hell were you?” he bellowed.

Madeline shrank back, fighting the urge to bite her bottom lip. “I was...well, I was outside. So *technically* I was not in the house. It was no word of a lie!”

Her father processed the logic, his nostrils flaring. “Scheming snake in my garden! Honor-less lout!”

“That is quite enough, sir,” she cried. “I am a guest of His Grace, the Duke of Norland, and I will not stand here and listen to you abuse him in his own house.”

“But—”

“The duke is indisposed, sir,” she said over him. “That is all I came down here to say. His place is at his wife’s side. He will not be coming down. You can bellow the pictures out of their frames, but you will not get the satisfaction you seek.”

Her father’s face went—if possible—an even deeper shade of red. “I will call the man out. I will not let this go unremarked!”

She crossed her arms. “And what will you do? You are but a viscount. James Corbin is a duke. He outranks you, sir. Call

him whatever manner of names you wish. Renounce him in the papers, mock him in your infernal club. He can weather your storm with ease.”

“You think I will leave here without you?”

“I neither know, nor care,” she replied, tears in her eyes. “My friend is having a baby and—and there are complications,” she admitted, her bottom lip quivering. “I cannot leave her without support. The storm has waylaid the doctor, and we are all frightened for her. She needs someone with knowledge of childbirth to help her. Someone who knows what to do when a baby is turned—”

She froze, her words dying on her lips.

*Oh, god...oh, god!*

Why hadn’t she thought of him sooner? She darted around her father calling for the footman. “Geoffrey, you need to go get Mr. Warren. *Now.*”

“Madeline,” her father growled, chasing after her.

The footman’s eyes went wide. “My lady?”

“You need to have Mr. Warren fetched here immediately. There’s not a moment to lose, do you understand? The duchess’s life hangs in the balance, Geoffrey. Go now. *Go!*”

Spinning on his heel, the footman rushed away.

“Madeline, what the bloody hell is going on?” her father asked.

She spun around, heart thundering in her chest. “I think I know of a way to help the duchess...at least until the doctor gets here. Father, I have to go. I have to be with her.” She rushed past him, heading back for the stairs.

“You expect me to just wait here for you?” he bellowed after her.

She had her skirts fisted, taking the stairs as fast as she could. “Mrs. Davies, please see that the viscount and my cousin are given rooms for the night,” she called over her shoulder.

“What the—you do not give orders here!” her father called after her. “It’s not your bloody house!”

She smiled as she heard the housekeeper’s voice from below. “If you’d like to follow me, sirs, I’ll show you to a comfortable room where you might take your rest.”



*W*arren raced across the back gardens of Alcott. His panting breath was the only sound he heard over the eerie quiet of the winter storm. Thick flakes of snow fell all around him, landing on his brows, his cheeks.

But he didn't care. Madeline needed him. Life or death, the lad from the kitchen said. He left the lad on his front porch, barely pausing to grab his coat before he was running at full speed towards the great house.

The bottom half glowed, all the lights flickering in warm welcome. And yet tonight it didn't feel welcoming. It felt ominous, like a siren song luring him in. Something was wrong. The fine hairs on his neck pricked with it.

He raced to the kitchen entrance, shoving his way inside, nearly scaring a trio of kitchen maids half to death. One was a woman he knew.

"Mr. Warren," she shrieked. "Whatever are you—"

"Lady Madeline sent for me," he said, breathless as he rushed past them. "Where is she?"

The ladies shared confused glances. "But, sir—"

"Where is Lady Madeline?" he bellowed.

"Upstairs," squeaked the little one with strawberry braids. "With the duchess."

He turned on his heel, racing towards the door.

"But Mr. Warren, you can't go up there!"

He didn't listen. He didn't stop. He raced down the back hall towards the front of the house, crossing down the grand gallery. A footman spied it. Goddamn it...it was Geoffrey. He didn't have time for this pompous arse now.

"Out of my way, Geoffrey," he muttered.

"Lady Madeline is asking for you," he said, halting Warren in his tracks.

He turned. "You know?"

The footman gave a curt nod. "I sent Oliver to fetch you."

"Where is she?"

"Upstairs in the duchess's bedchamber," he replied, "There's been a complication with her lying in."

Warren blinked. What the hell was he to do about it? He wasn't a doctor. But Madeline needed him. "Show me the way."

Surprisingly, Geoffrey didn't fight him.

He followed the footman through the house, up to the third floor. In almost a decade of living on the grounds and working for the family, he'd never ascended the stairs before. His head was on a swivel, taking in everything from the suits of armor to the tapestries, the paintings, the fine vases full of hothouse flowers. Everything was opulence and excess. He's never been more aware of his simple, homespun cotton shirt or his worn wool trousers.

This was Madeline's world. This was the style of living to which she was accustomed, not life snug in a parsonage or—worse still—crammed inside his little cabin. Feelings of inadequacy gnawed at him.

"Wait here," Geoffrey muttered, pausing him outside a door. He knocked and slipped inside, leaving Warren alone in the hall. There was a pall over the mood, as if even the furniture knew something was wrong. It set Warren's teeth on edge.

He wasn't waiting more than a minute before the door opened and Madeline slipped out with the footman. She

wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in his chest.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “Thank you for coming.”

His arms went around her automatically, ignoring the startled looks from Geoffrey.

She pulled away slightly, taking him by the hand. “Come, there’s not a moment to lose. She’s—oh *god*—John, I really think she’s dying.”

Warren let himself be pulled into the duchess’s bedchamber. His nerves were instantly on edge as he took in the scene. Burke was on his knees by the side of the bed, holding the duchess’s limp hand in both of his. The duke stood just behind, holding a wet cloth to her forehead.

The duchess was stretched out on the bed, panting heavily, her free hand on her distended stomach. Her body was slicked with sweat and there was a smell of blood and birth in the room that Warren knew well.

“What the hell is he doing in here?” the duke muttered, his shoulders squaring off at him as if he meant to fight him bodily from the room.

Madeline stepped in front of him. “So long as Doctor Rivers is delayed, we *need* someone here that can help her—”

“Warren is not a doctor,” Burke challenged.

Warren felt his shoulders squaring right back at them.

But Madeline was faster, fighting his corner like the fierce little thing she was. “He assists with births all the time,” she countered. “Your new chestnut colt is alive because of *him*, Burke. And he’s birthed sheep too, he told me so. Can either of you compete with that level of experience? Because I know I can’t.”

Both men stayed silent, their stares sharp enough to cut like glass.

“Then let him at least try to help,” she pleaded. “If we don’t do something, James, she *will* die. Please—”



“Do it,” the duke muttered, dropping his hand away from his wife and stepping back.

Taking a sharp breath, Warren shrugged out of his coat, handing it to Madeline. “I’ve never in my life worked on a woman,” he admitted.

“That’s alright,” Madeline soothed, her hand on his arm leading him gently forward. “The essential things must surely be the same, right?”

“What’s wrong with her?” he asked.

“The babe is turned,” Burke muttered, still gazing hopelessly up at the duchess. “She’s laboring for nothing so long as we can’t get it turned the right way.”

“She’s weakening,” the duke added. “She’s...she doesn’t have much fight left.”

“Well, then turn it,” Warren suggested.

Both Burke and the duke stared daggers at him. “We don’t know how,” the duke admitted.

“And we’re terrified of doing more harm than good,” Madeline added. “She has such pains and spasms.”

Warren came to the edge of the bed, gazing down at the laboring duchess. She looked utterly defeated. Her eyes were half closed as she breathed through her labor pains. He leaned over her. “Your Grace, can you hear me? It’s Warren.”

“Warren?” she murmured, her attention pulled to his voice. “The gamekeeper?”

He nodded. “Aye, I’m here to help you.”

She gave a soft smile. “So kind...such a kind man... Madeline loves you so very much.”

“Christ,” Burke muttered, leaning back. “Don’t you dare start your bedside confessions. No spilling all your secrets. You’re not dying tonight, do you hear me?”

She nodded weakly, her body spasming with another contraction.

“Your Grace, I’m going to touch you now,” Warren said gently, placing his hands on her stomach. He felt out the size and shape of her babe. “It’s definitely turned the wrong way,” he assessed. “The head is just here.” He placed his large hand over the firm lump above the duchess’s right hip. “And the feet are up here,” he added, his other hand feeling the odd lumps. He pressed down ever so lightly, and the little feet kicked back. “Proper birthing position should be head down.”

“Can you turn the babe?” asked the duke. “Have you ever done that before?”

Warren shook his head. “No, with an animal like a horse, it’s quite different. You’ve got more room to work with, you understand? I’ve reached in and done a bit of tugging to get the legs started. But I very much doubt you want me reaching up inside the duchess,” he added.

“I’ll kill you,” growled the duke. “You’ll not hurt her, do you understand? We want her life saved over the babe’s. There can always be more children.”

“Never,” said Burke. “We are never putting her through this again.”

Warren glanced between them, surprised that they were being so obvious.

Madeline wasn’t paying attention. She had eyes only for the duchess. “Please, John,” she murmured. “Try turning the babe without putting your hands inside. We could just...move it...could we not? Shift it into the proper position so she can push...”

“We could try,” he admitted. “Will you give me leave to try, Your Grace?” he asked, glancing over at the despondent duke.

The duke shared a glance with Burke before both men nodded. “Do it,” he said. “I’ll do anything to save her life.”

“Step back then,” Warren directed. “Give me space, Burke. If you want to help, move ‘round to the other side and take hold of her arms. You too, Your Grace. We need to hold her still.”

The men got into position, taking her arms.

“Wha—what are you doing?” she whimpered, all but slipping out of consciousness.

“We’re going to try to move the babe, angel,” said the duke. “Lie very still. Tell us if it hurts too much and we’ll stop.”

Her whimpering got louder, and she turned her face towards him, her breath coming in sharp pants.

“Go gently,” Madeline cautioned. She’d moved to the other side of the bed next to Burke.

Warren reached out with both hands, placing them to either side of the babe. Ever so slowly, he started applying pressure, pushing with his hands as he did so, his left on the babe’s head and his right on its feet, willing it to move off her hip and down towards the birth canal.

He felt a bit of moment. Good lord, could this actually work?

“Breathe, Your Grace,” he murmured.

She groaned, squirming away from his touch. “It hurts—”

“I know,” he soothed. “Just a bit more.” He palpated again, pushing a little harder this time on the babe. He had to get the head past the hip and angled down without hurting the babe or the duchess.

He gave another push with his hands and the duchess cried out, spasming forward.

“Stop, *stop*,” ordered the duke.

“You’re hurting her,” Burke added, all but ready to climb over the bed and strangle him.

Warren dropped his hands away from her. It could work. He’d gotten some small movement from the babe. They had to give him leave to try again.

“Enough now,” said the duke, as Burke dropped down to his elbows, trying to soothe the weeping duchess. “We’ll wait a little longer for the doctor. Tom will not fail us. He’ll bring

him here. Rivers is coming.” He dropped down too, murmuring in the duchess’s ear, kissing her brow as he repeated, “Hold on, angel. Rivers is coming. He’ll know what to do. Rivers will be here soon.”

Warren lifted his gaze, meeting Madeline’s across the bed. Her expression told him that she already knew what he was also thinking. By the time Rivers arrived, the duchess and her baby would be dead.



Madeline could scarcely draw breath, watching Rosalie suffer like this. And Warren had the right idea, if only James would give him leave to try again! They had to understand that Rosalie wasn't getting out of this without a little pain. Her baby had to be forced into the correct position or they would both die.

She glanced at Warren again and he shrugged, clearly aware of the same reality.

But they had Burke and James to contend with, and the men would clearly rather die than see their duchess come to any undue harm. However, the truth was clear as day: Rosalie was dying. With each minute that passed where she labored to no success, she was weakening, fading. It wouldn't be long before all the fight in her was utterly spent.

Burke moved back around to the other side of the bed, dropping into the empty chair at her bedside. "Rosalie, please love," he murmured, his shaking fingers brushing the sweat-slicked curls from her brow. "Please, keep fighting. Don't give up. Rivers is coming, do you hear me?"

She whimpered, her body limp as she panted, not really hearing him.

He groaned, sinking back on his heels as he dragged both hands through his inky black hair. "This is all my fault. God *damn* it!"

"What can you mean?" Madeline asked, eyes wide.

His expression was haggard as his eyes trailed down Rosalie's tired frame, his gaze landing on her distended belly. He gently reached out a hand, placing it on her. "It's mine," he whispered. "This one is mine."

"Burke," James growled. "You're delirious."

"You know it's true," Burke said, his voice so pained it made Madeline's heart want to break. "We all know it's true. You were in town for a month in the spring. Tom was out of the country. It's mine. It can only be mine."

Madeline sucked in a breath of surprise. Not surprise that her suspicions were correct, but surprise that Burke would admit it before her, before Warren. She glanced over at Warren. He looked solemn, his dark gaze darting from the duke to the steward to the dying duchess.

"Burke, that's enough." James reached for his friend with both hands.

"This baby is mine, and it's killing her," Burke said on a breath. "Oh god—I'm killing her." He sobbed, falling forward, reaching for Rosalie with both hands. "Rosalie. Love, please fight. I can't—can't live without you—"

James grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him back. "Burke, enough."

"James, please *god*," Burke groaned, turning towards his touch. "I'm so sorry. I can't lose you both. I can't live with your hate. If we lose her, and it's my fault, you'll never forgive me. So, kill me—"

"I said *enough*," James barked, gripping tight to Burke's jaw, tipping his face up to hold his gaze. "Pull yourself together, goddamn it."

Madeline's heart broke for him, tears trailing down her cheeks.

"When she's gone, send me with her," Burke went on, all but delirious in his grief. "Tom won't do it. Please don't make him do it. It must be you. Only you. Send me with her, James —"

The duke glared at Warren, daring him to speak, but Warren remained stoic, passing no judgement.

“Put me out of my misery,” Burke moaned, his hands clinging to James like he was a man drowning at sea. “I can’t live without your love. And if I’ve killed her, if it’s my fault she’s gone—” His words broke as he sobbed, his face buried in his hands.

James dropped to his knees, all but ignoring the presence of Madeline and Warren in the room. “Oh, Burke...Burke, look at me,” he soothed, one hand holding the man’s jaw as the other brushed over his brow, sweeping back his inky black hair. “Look at me, my love. Look in my eyes.”

Drawn to the duke’s soothing tone, Burke let his gaze trail upwards, settling on James. A thousand years of misery were etched on his beautiful, anguished face.

“Never,” James murmured, still moving his hands along Burke’s jaw, in his hair. They were lover’s touches, and Burke drank them in like a man dying of thirst. “I would *never* hate you,” James said softly. He leaned in, pressing kisses to Burke’s brow. “Would never...could never—”

“But it’s my fault,” Burke groaned. “I’ve done this to her.”

“Pregnancy is always a risk,” James countered. “We all decided together. Rosalie wanted this. She wanted another baby, Burke. No matter what happens here tonight, you will live—”

“No,” Burke panted, his eyes darting back over to her. “Not without her—”

“You *must*,” James ordered, his grip pulling him back. “You would leave Tom and I alone in our grief? You would have us raise our daughter without you? Are you so goddamn selfish?”

“James, I’m dying,” Burke moaned. “I’m dying of this pain—”

“*No.*” His grip tightened on Burke’s jaw. “I forbid it. Do you hear me? You say I am the air in your lungs, and I demand that you keep breathing. Fight while she can’t. Live when she

won't. *Stay* with me. You cannot leave me. You can't—" His voice broke as he dropped his forehead to Burke's and the men wrapped each other in their arms.

Their love was overwhelming. Madeline could hardly breathe through the swell of it, stealing all her air. She glanced back over at Warren, touched to see him no less affected. The man had tears in his eyes, even if his face remained stoic as ever.

Sucking a sharp breath into her lungs, Madeline held his gaze. "Let's try again," she whispered.

Warren's eyes flashed as he glanced from the duke to his dying duchess. "Madeline..."

"I want to try again. All we can do is try. Please, John..."

He let out a sharp exhale, moving back into his position, his massive hands settling over Rosalie's stomach. He worked quickly, massaging with his hands, willing the baby to turn in the womb.

Rosalie cried out, her hands lifting feebly to try and bat him away.

James and Burke recovered, both of them launching to their feet. "Don't hurt her," Burke growled as James said, "Get off her!"

"Both of you *shut up*," Warren barked, taking them aback with his forcefulness. "It's working. No one touch her. No one bloody stop me."

Madeline prayed harder than she'd ever prayed in her life, watching Warren work.

"Oh god, please," Burke groaned, one arm around James's waist as he leaned into him, his eyes on Rosalie.

"Madeline, come here," Warren murmured, his hands still gently palpating.

She could see the effect it was having, see how the baby was moving. She moved around the bed to his side. "What do you need?"



“Wash your hands. You’re going to feel for the head, help guide it down.”

She gasped, heart racing. “What? I can’t—”

“You want her to die?” he growled, his hands never ceasing in their gentle coaxing.

She shook her head, tears in her eyes.

“All our hands are too bloody large. You’ve got dainty hands. You’ll not hurt her. Wash them good and get over here. Do it now.”

She nodded, not even bothering to see if James was okay with this. She moved to the corner, washing her hands with the bar of soap, and drying them. She rushed back to his side. “I did it. I washed my hands.”

“Good girl,” he murmured. “Your Grace, hold her leg open so Madeline can reach in.”

James didn’t hesitate. He worked his way around to the other side of the bed and crawled on top, the mattress sinking with his weight. He took Rosalie’s chemise and gently raised it up, revealing the bloody mess between her legs.

Madeline whimpered, fighting her fear.

James lifted her leg gently, spreading her wider.

“Go gently now,” Warren murmured. “I’ve all but got it in position.”

“What am I to do?”

“Guide the head. We want it to drop into the birth canal so she can push.”

Her heart raced. “But what do I—”

“Christ, just shove your hand up her cunt and stop when you feel a baby’s head,” he growled. “I’m sorry, Your Grace,” he added quickly.

“No apology necessary,” the duke muttered. “Madeline, please—”

And it was the duke's broken plea that had her moving. She placed herself wedged in close with Warren, reaching between Rosalie's legs with a shaky hand. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she murmured, feeling the utterly strange sensation of working first her fingers, then her hand inside Rosalie's body. She ignored the blood and the slick, wet feeling. She had to, otherwise she didn't know how she'd continue.

"Go gently," Warren muttered.

"How is this possible?" she asked, thinking about her only other experiences of things going inside a person. Then everything was so tight. But this was...

"The body adjusts to make way for the baby," Warren explained. "She'll go back to normal after the birth. Quick now. The babe is all but turned."

Rosalie groaned in pain as Madeline felt for anything that might be a head. "Oh—oh god," she whispered. "I think...yes, I think I feel it. Oh, Warren, you did it!"

"She needs to push" he replied. "The baby has been in distress for a long time. It might already be too late. She needs to get it out," he urged.

"What do we do?" said James.

"Wake her up," he replied. "Get her to push. She needs to fight now, Your Grace. She's got a chance at life for her and the babe. Help her take it."

James looked around wildly. "How do we—"

"Smelling salts!" Madeline said on a gasp. "Burke, fetch us smelling salts, quick as you can. James, let's try to get her sitting up a bit."

Burke was already rushing away, calling for the housekeeper.

"Wake up, angel," said James, brushing Rosalie's dark, sweat-slicked hair back from her face. "Rosalie, you need to wake. Come on, darling."

Rosalie groaned, not putting up a fight as James and Madeline tried to get her sitting up. The door burst open, and

Burke came storming in, Mrs. Davies, Renley, and Doctor Rivers hot on his heels. Two maids followed close behind.

“Oh, thank god,” Madeline cried, tears falling as the doctor crossed the room.

“What happened?” he said, already shrugging out of his coat and rolling up his shirtsleeves.

“The babe was turned sideways,” said James, his arm around her, supporting her limp form. “She’s been laboring for hours to no end.”

“I turned the babe,” Warren added. “It’s in the right position now. She just needs to push.”

The doctor paused, glancing up at Warren. “*You* turned it, sir? You could have done real damage, you know.”

“He was brilliant,” Madeline said, coming to his defense. “And the babe is ready. Give her some smelling salts. Make her push—”

“And are you a medical professional, miss?” he questioned with a raised brow.

She crossed her arms, not wishing to rise to his baiting. All she wanted was Rosalie and the babe to live. He could do or say whatever he wanted to her, so long as he helped Rosalie.

“Right, there are too many people in here,” the doctor said. “Her Grace needs room to breathe. Give me leave to work and I swear to you, Your Grace, I will save her if I can.”

Madeline and Warren stepped back, along with Mrs. Davies and the maids, leaving the doctor with more room to work.

“Is Mr. Bray not back yet?” she said at Captain Renley.

“I could not say,” he replied, stripping out of his coat. “I found Rivers and we raced back. Likely, he’s still out there searching.” He moved away towards the bed.

“He’s out there in this storm?” growled Warren, narrowing his eyes at her.

She nodded. "He volunteered to go. He wanted to help Captain Renley find the doctor. He'll be alright," she added, gently placing a hand on his arm. She saw the way it upset him to think of Charles riding alone through a snowstorm. It worried her too. But they had to have hope. They had to believe it was not done in vain.

Rosalie Corbin was going to live.

Madeline watched as the doctor got to work. Captain Renley joined the others by the bed, putting an arm around Burke and pulling him away. As she watched, the captain tugged him until they were standing behind the doctor. With the doctor's back turned, Renley smoothed Burke's hair back from his face, murmuring soft words. Burke clung to him, his knuckles white.

It was as if Captain Renley knew without words what had just happened, how greatly Burke needed him. Madeline's heart twisted tight to see their love on private display. An invisible string tied them all together. As they moved, James did too, their spirits pulling on each other, offering each other quiet strength.

If Madeline doubted it before, she had no doubts now. Rosalie Corbin was not just married to three men. The gentlemen were clearly married to each other.

The doctor rattled around in his case, pulling out a glass vial. He unstopped it, waving it under Rosalie's nose. With a sharp gasp, Rosalie jolted, eyes blinking open.

"Welcome back, Your Grace," he said, stoppering the vial. "It is time to push."

"I can't," she whimpered, tears slipping down her cheeks.

Madeline was just relieved to hear her speaking again, to see her dark eyes open and alert.

"You can, and you will," said James, his arm around her shoulder. "You are strong enough for this, angel. Show us now."

Renley sank down on her other side. "Come on, Rose. The worst is behind you now. Push for us."

Doctor Rivers dutifully prepared, calling orders to the maids. One rushed past, nearly dropping the stack of sheets bundled in her arms. When Madeline reached out her hands to catch it, she gasped. Her hand was still bloody.

She spun towards the corner with a shaky sob. Rushing forward, she dunked her hand in the basin of warm water on the washstand, scrubbing her friend's blood away.

Then Warren was at her shoulder, one hand brushing her waist. "Come," he murmured. "Come away now." He handed her a towel to dry her hands.

"I can't leave her," she replied, tears still falling. She turned back, watching as Rosalie began to push.

His hand on her shoulder was firm. "You've done enough. We both have."

She shook her head.

"You're all but dead on your feet," he added gently. "Come away, and we'll go down and wait for Charles."

She let her gaze sweep the faces of Rosalie and her men. With a little nod, she let Warren lead her out of the room.



As soon as Madeline and Warren entered the hallway, she slid to a stop. “Oh, god—” She spun to face him, placing a hand on his arm. “My father is here.”

He gazed down at her, his dark brows lowered. “What?”

“My father,” she repeated. “Viscount Raleigh. He found out I was here. He came all the way from Town, dragging my poor cousin with him. He traveled through the storm to take me away, John. He’s here in the house. I can’t—I don’t know what to do—”

“Easy,” he soothed, cupping her cheek. “Do you want to leave with him?”

She shook her head. “No, but I fear I’ll have no choice. Charles won’t—he hasn’t—”

“He *will*,” he replied, his voice firm. “He loves you, Madeline. When he gets back, we’ll settle this once and for all.”

They made their way downstairs to the small library off the drawing room. Warren settled her on the end of the sofa before the fire, stoking the flames and adding wood until they had a happy blaze. He brought her a glass of whiskey, all but placing it in her hand as she gave in to her exhaustion.

He brushed his hand over her shoulder, his fingers catching on her hair to gently rub her golden curls. “When is the last time you ate?”

Her mind felt muddled. She took a sip of the whiskey, savoring the smooth, spicy taste. “I hardly know. This morning perhaps?”

He leaned down, placing a soft kiss on her brow. “I’ll go scrounge up something from the kitchen.”

The man moved so silently for someone his size. She hardly heard the door shut. And then she was alone. The fire warmed her face, the flames casting out a bright golden light that danced on the walls and across the rich blue carpet.

She wasn’t alone for more than five minutes before there came a soft knock at the door. It opened and Patrick peeked his head inside.

“M?”

“Oh, Patrick,” she said on a sigh, setting her glass aside.

“The footman said you were in here.” He slipped into the room, stripped down to his shirtsleeves and braces. “I’m so sorry, M. I *had* to tell him where you were. They were starting to talk about declaring you dead.”

She rose to her feet, holding out her arms. He hurried to her, wrapping her in an embrace. It felt so natural to hug him, though they rarely indulged in the act. They were of such a similar size, she could actually place her chin above his shoulder. With Warren and Charles, it was always more of a press against their warm chests.

Patrick smelled so different from them too. He’d taken a bath, washing the long hours of travel away. Now he smelled like her rose oil soap, his hair still slightly damp.

She pulled back, placing a gentle hand beneath his black eye. “I am so sorry for this, Patrick.”

He raised his hand, covering hers. “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Rory did this to you?”

He nodded with a grimace. “He didn’t have to be quite so gleeful about it. Uncle Richard didn’t even tell him to do it.

They were questioning me, and he decided I needed more motivation.”

“He’s a bully,” Madeline muttered. “I cannot bear a bully.”

“Well, he learned from the best,” he said with a shrug. “Our fathers are quite the pair of unpardonable bullies.”

She nodded, dropping her hand to his shoulder. It felt good to stand here so close, feeling his comforting presence after the harrowing events of the day.

“Well?” he said, a smile quirking his lips.

She blinked up at him. “Well, what?”

“Was our mission successful? Are you engaged to the captain? I asked a footman, and he said Renley is here. He arrived back a few days ago—”

“No, Patrick,” she said with a soft laugh. “I am not engaged to Captain Renley.”

“Not *yet*—”

“Not *ever*,” she said, slapping his chest. “He is quite content in his bachelor life. And I am convinced we are better as friends,” she added softly.

“Well, I am sorry for it,” he replied. “You only have a few days left. Is there no one else?”

Madeline stilled, focusing her gaze on the open “v” at his throat.

“Madeline...”

She pursed her lips, shaking her head.

“There *is*,” he said on a gasp. “You wily little minx, you found someone else. Look at the way you blush. Who is it then? Mr. Burke—”

“No,” she cried. “You are incorrigible.”

“And you are evasive,” he countered, gripping her by the elbows as he lowered his face before hers. “Tell me, you little she-devil. Who is the lucky man I will soon call my cousin? Is



he a peer? A tradesman? Don't tell me you've found yourself a pirate or a highwayman."

"Patrick," she said on a laugh, trying to tug free of his grip.

That just encouraged him to tease her harder. His hands dropped to her sides as he dug in with his fingers, tickling her. "Tell me, M. You know I'll wrinkle it out of you!"

"Stop," she gasped, slapping his hands down as she laughed.

"Tell me—"

"No!"

"What the hell is going on?"

Madeline gasped, turning towards the door, eyes wide. Charles stood there, his eyes narrowed at her. She suddenly had an image of what he must be seeing. She stood in Patrick's arms, his hands at her waist. She slapped them down and he let them fall but didn't step back.

Charles pressed his way into the room, his caramel curls a wild mess, slicked with sweat at his brow, and his cheeks burning red from the cold. "Madeline, who is this?" he growled, the possessiveness in his tone doing unspeakable things to her fluttering core. Was it wrong to admit that it felt good to see mild-mannered Charles Bray discomfited?

"I—"

Behind her, she could all but feel Patrick's grin. He was worse than a dog on the hunt when it came to teasing out an intrigue. The devil put his hands back on her waist. "And who is this dashing gentleman, M?" he cooed in her ear.

Madeline followed Charles's gaze as he focused on the placement of Patrick's hands at her waist. She gasped again, slapping at her cousin. "Will you *stop*?" she hissed.

He had the audacity to laugh, slinging his arm around her shoulder instead.

"Madeline," Charles said again, closing the space between them.

“Won’t you introduce us, dear?” Patrick teased.

“Will you get *off* me,” she huffed, shrugging his arm off. She spun back to Charles. “He is my cousin,” she blurted out. “Mr. Charles Bray, this is my fool of a cousin, Patrick Blaire.”

Charles paused, his gaze softening somewhat. “Your cousin?”

She nodded.

“Yes, I am indeed her cousin,” said Patrick. “But more than that, I am her confident, her safe harbor, her dearest and oldest friend. We are more siblings than cousins, really. Twin flames. So, when I say the following, please know that I do not mean to be indecorous, sir, but who the hell are *you*?”

Madeline stifled a groan. This was so not how she envisioned this meeting going.

Charles narrowed his eyes again. “I am—”

“He is Mr. Bray,” she repeated. “As I’ve already *told* you, Patrick. He is a curate. But soon he takes up a position as vicar in Bredbury.”

“A vicar, eh?” said Patrick. “And is he the one then?”

Madeline’s cheeks flamed with heat. She was sure they must be as crimson as Charles’s weather-battered face. “Will you *hush*,” she hissed, poking him in the ribs.

But it was too late. Charles raised a brow at them. “The one?”

“Aye, the one my cousin is so clearly mad about,” Patrick went on with a grin. It looked garish with his blackened eye. “Strictly speaking, M is not the sort to form any kind of attachment on a man. But the moment I started questioning her on the identity of her mystery beau, her eyes positively lit up. If it is you who enlivens such a passion in her, you are to be commended, sir. For there is no finer catch in all of England than my dearest cousin.”

“I will end you,” she hissed, jabbing him again.

He laughed, inching away from her. “So, tell me, Mr. Bray. Is it you who has stolen her heart away? Will you sweep her off her feet with a romantic proposal of marriage?”

“Like bloody hell he will!”

All three of them spun around. Madeline’s eyes went wide, taking in the furious face of her father.



Charles took in the new gentleman standing in the open doorway. He was familiar in the way one of two dozen faces in a ballroom might ring a bell. He'd certainly seen the man before. Given the lines of fury etched across his face—and the fact that Madeline's cousin was also here—Charles had a pretty good idea as to his identity.

“Father, please,” said Madeline, immediately confirming his suspicions.

“Who are you, sir, that you are speaking to my daughter without a chaperone?” growled the viscount, his steely gaze leveled at Charles.

“Umm...I am standing just here, uncle,” her cousin protested.

“I meant a *proper* chaperone, you miserable lout,” the viscount replied. “It is clear you cannot be trusted to protect our family honor. I will personally never trust you to safeguard so much as an umbrella.”

The young man deflated somewhat under his uncle's fury, but Madeline was having none of it. She placed herself slightly in front of her cousin, always quick to guard those she thought who needed protecting.

Her rebellion made Charles feel bold. He turned back to the viscount. “My name is Charles Bray, my lord.”

The viscount narrowed his eyes at him. “Bray? I don't know the name.”

“Yes, well you wouldn’t,” he replied with a shrug. “We have no page in *Debrett’s*. I am a working man, sir. A curate. Soon to be a vicar.”

“And why was my idiot nephew talking of a proposal?”

Charles took a deep breath, glancing quickly at Madeline. Her eyes glistened with tears as she looked down, clearly embarrassed. There was surely a better way to do this, but Charles was quite literally up against it. “He was talking of the fact that Madeline and I are engaged.”

Behind him, her cousin gasped, while the viscount spluttered. “That is preposterous! When my daughter is engaged, her mother or I will inform her of the matter. You don’t even know her—”

“I do, my lord,” he countered. “We first met three years ago, and even then, I appreciated her kindness and cleverness, her creativity. We met again a fortnight ago and renewed our friendship. That friendship has grown into so much more. We *are* engaged, sir. I am in love with your daughter, and I mean to marry her just as soon as it can be arranged.”

Madeline positively bloomed to life at his words, his viola in winter seeking the first signs of the sun. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her senseless, but her father was barreling down towards him.

“Who are you to *dare* propose to my daughter, sir? You would steal her away from her family without so much as a word to her father first? Where is your honor?”

“I was not aware I needed your permission, sir, seeing as it is *Madeline* I intend to marry—”

“You were not aware because you are not a peer!” the viscount bellowed. “If you had any manners, you would not dare be so flippant, proposing to ladies above your station without the permission of their families,” he huffed. “It is unheard of. It is—it’s—it’s ungentlemanly!”

“We clearly have very different definitions for the word,” he replied, his expression stoic.

“I imagine you must be a fortune hunter then,” the lord countered. “If you think I’ll be giving you a shilling of her dowry to squander on gambling or drink—”

“Careful, sir,” he called over him, channeling Warren’s tenacity. “I will accept one insult to my character, but not two. I am *no* fortune hunter. I am no great drinker, and I certainly never gamble. I care nothing for her dowry. You may keep every pence.”

“Well, then how do you expect to care for her, sir? How will you provide a living?”

“As I said, my lord, I am a curate. Soon I will be vicar. It comes with a house, a modest living—”

“Unthinkable,” the viscount cried. “You would so reduce my daughter’s circumstances? You expect to keep her on a curate’s meager wage?”

“Well, if you deny me use of her dowry, you are leaving me with little choice, are you not?” he countered, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Aha! So you *are* a fortune hunter!”

“I am merely stating the obvious. If you wish to keep your daughter living in her current standard of comfort, you will guarantee she gets her dowry. For I am just a lowly working man. And when Madeline and I wed, I will continue to work. I will provide for her in my way—”

“Like hell you will! No daughter of mine will marry a working man. She’ll marry a proper gentleman.”

Charles shook his head. “You may look down your nose and sneer at the working man, but I cannot change who I am. I *will* work.”

“And I *want* him to work,” said Madeline, coming to stand at his side, taking his hand. “Father, Charles is a brilliant curate. He’ll make a wonderful vicar too. He’s kind and innovative, and the people care for him so. He’s been offered a position here in Finchley.”

“Finchley?” Her father laughed. “That little rabbit hutch of a village we passed through? You cannot possibly mean to quit London for village life. Madeline, what are you thinking, you foolish girl?”

“That I *love* it here!” she cried. “I am thinking that I have never felt more myself. More-more settled. We will live here in the parsonage.”

“A parsonage,” her father muttered, shaking his head.

“And we both know Charles and I will want for nothing,” she added, her chin raised in defiance. “Not once Aunt Maude’s fortune is transferred to me. We will be set for life. Charles will work, and his income can be used for the good of the village. Every pound can be put back into helping the people here. We will not need it.”

Her father scoffed. “You think you’ll still get any of that money, ungrateful wretch?”

“There is absolutely nothing that will preclude me from claiming it once I marry,” she countered. “And I can have a signed marriage license for you as soon as the morning, sir. You may take it back to London when you go.”

“Preposterous,” he muttered. “It takes time to plan a wedding. The banns must be read.”

“Not for a commoner,” Madeline countered. “And Charles is as common as they come, sir.”

She said the words in such a way that Charles felt his chest puff out with pride. She was proud of him, of his work. She was proud and excited to become a lowly vicar’s wife.

“Unless you marry a peer, you cannot claim the money,” her father barked.

“That’s a boldfaced lie,” said her cousin from behind them. “I know the details as well as you, uncle. If she marries before the year ends, she *will* claim the Leary fortune. Nothing we do can stop her. Nothing in the will says she must marry a peer.”

To Charles’s surprise, the viscount’s shoulders seemed to slump as the man let out a heavy exhale. He looked sadly at

his daughter, shaking his head. “This is never what I wanted for you. I had such high hopes.”

Charles squeezed her hand, hating to see the tears in her eyes.

“I was always going to disappoint you, sir,” she murmured, her bottom lip quivering. “I cannot be who you want me to be. I am not that grand lady. I cannot command ballrooms or host elegant soirees. I am a vicar’s wife.” She flashed a little smile up at Charles and he felt his heart burst with affection for her.

“I will live quietly in the countryside,” she went on. “And I will have a marriage full of love and tenderness with a man who truly cares for me. It will not be the grand business partnership of a society match, and I will be all the happier for it. I hope you can find it in your heart to be happy for me too.”

A muscle twitched in the man’s jaw as his eyes seemed to grow a little misty. “If you do this, I’m warning you Madeline.” He raised a finger, wagging it in her face. “Cross me in this, refuse to oblige me, and I will cut you off without a penny. You cannot expect I will give this grasping vicar any of our family’s hard-earned money. There will be no dowry for you. No support. And I will not bail you out when he has spent every last shilling of your fortune.”

Charles simmered with rage against this man, so willing to cut off his only daughter for daring to do something as innocent as fall in love. He saw the way his words cut at Madeline’s strength. She’d been holding out hope, Charles could see it in her eyes. Hope that her father might just prove to be a noble person and accept her choice of husband.

Clearly, her hope was in vain.

Charles bristled, determined to protect her. If Warren were here, he’d have already socked the man in the jaw.

The viscount sucked in a breath, claiming his second wind. “And if you think—”

“*Enough!*” Charles barked, one arm wrapping around Madeline’s shoulder.

The viscount glared at him.



“You have said quite enough, sir. I must now ask you to leave.” He pointed at the partially open door.

Viscount Raleigh huffed. “You cannot issue commands in this house, you shameless little—”

“I cannot order you out,” he called over his insults. “But I am younger than you, fitter than you, and most certainly faster than you. So, mark me, sir. If you *ever* speak to my wife again in the manner you have just done, I shall rend you to pieces. And we common folk do not need the help of our hunting dogs, my lord. I shall use my bare fucking hands.”

From behind them, Madeline’s cousin let out a little gasp. “Madeline, if you don’t marry him, I will.”



*H*er father stormed out of the room and Madeline felt her knees begin to buckle. In moments, Charles's arm was around her waist, and he was seeing her to a chair.

"Christ Almighty, M, that was amazing!" cried Patrick, rushing forward. "You stood up to Uncle Richard! How did you learn to do that? Where—*when* did you learn to do that?"

Charles snatched up to her long-forgotten glass of whiskey, pressing it into her hand. "I'm so sorry," he murmured, cupping her cheek. "I'm sorry it happened like that. I never meant to do it quite so brazenly."

"Do what?" said Patrick, leaning over the end of the sofa towards them. "What did you do?"

Madeline closed her eyes, shaking her head.

"Oh lord..." Patrick sucked in a breath. "Oh, you sneaky devils! You weren't engaged yet, were you?! You just said that for the first time before Uncle Richard!" He gaped at them.

"Patrick, please," she murmured. "Can you give us a moment?"

He blinked at her. "You want me to give you a moment unchaperoned with your intended? After Uncle Richard just reamed me about not being fit to look after an umbrella? I don't think so, Miss M. I'm not going anywhere." He snatched the glass of whiskey from her hand, draining it in two gulps and smacking his lips. "So..." He leveled his gaze at Charles. "Tell me about yourself, Mr. Bray."

Charles was still on one knee before Madeline, his hand on the arm of her chair. “Excuse me?”

Madeline groaned. “Patrick...”

Charles glanced up at her. “Do you want him gone?”

“Hey,” Patrick huffed.

Madeline nodded.

“That’s not very familial of you,” Patrick warned.

But Charles wasn’t listening. To her surprise, he pressed himself between her legs, cupping her face with both hands. Pulling her closer, he kissed her with all his pent-up passion. Her breath caught, her hands going to his shoulders, then up his neck to weave into the soft curls at this nape.

“Oh, god—” Patrick said on a strangled groan, all but stumbling off the couch. “Can neither of you play bloody fair?”

Charles broke their kiss with a smile, calling over his shoulder at Patrick’s retreating form. “Go find an umbrella in need of your services!”

Madeline giggled, pulling him closer. “Don’t be cruel to him. He will be our only ally in the family.”

“I’ll apologize tomorrow,” he murmured, going in for another kiss. “I’m so sorry I just blurted it out like that. I’m sorry—”

She pulled back, moving her hands to cup his face. “But did you mean it, Charles?”

He nodded, his own hands sliding down the silk of her sleeves. “Every word. I should have said ‘yes’ the moment you asked me. I’ve been so...*god*, I’ve been such a mess. Returning to Finchley has not been easy for me. Dealing with my uncle, with seeing Warren again, the duke’s offer, then yours. I’ve felt like a spinning top.”

She smoothed her hands through his hair. “I didn’t do the proposal very well,” she admitted. “I was so nervous, so

caught up in my own misery. I was careless with my words, and for that I cannot forgive myself.”

“You were honest,” he replied.

“I was selfish and scared, and you deserved better, Charles. I made the proposal about me. Even if all we ever were was friends, I should have considered your feelings better than I did.”

He smiled, leaning in to brush his lips against hers again. “Let us redo it now. You proposed to me in a rush of nerves, scared for what your future held. I just lied to your father and said I proposed to you when I had not. We have both erred.”

She nodded, tears in her eyes.

He took her hands, kissing each. Then he was gazing up at her with those beautiful amber eyes. “Madeline Blaire, I am in love with you—your passion, your rebellious spirit, your unfailing loyalty and kindness to your friends. I love you. More than that, I *want* you. I came in here to propose and then I saw you with your cousin. I was mad with jealousy. I was going to tear him apart because *I* want you. I want to love you, to possess you. I want you to be mine and no one else’s.”

Her breath caught as she worried her lip, meeting his gaze. “No one else’s...except Warren’s?” She raised a brow in hopefulness. “Charles, I love you, but I love him too. I want us all to be together. But if that’s not what you want—”

He silenced her, placing two fingers over her lips. “I want him too. He is as much a part of me as my own two lungs. You are *both* mine, Madeline. I will marry you both and love you both and *never* be parted from you again.”

She sighed with relief, nodding as she leaned forward, pressing her forehead to his. They held each other, breathing in sync.

“Marry me,” he murmured, his hand brushing along her cheek. “Marry me, Madeline.”

She nodded again, tears in her eyes. “Yes. I will marry you, Charles. I want to be yours too. Marry me, and never let me go.”

They wrapped each other in their arms, their mouths finding each other as they kissed, trading smiles and soft murmurs of 'I love you'. They hardly noticed when the door opened and Warren came in balancing a tray.

He paused, gazing down at them both. "The duchess was delivered of a little girl. They both live."

Madeline sagged into Charles. "Oh, thank god, thank *god!*" She wrapped her arms around him, her shoulders wracked with sobs.

Charles held her as Warren crossed the room, setting down the tray of soup and bread. "Is the house busy?"

"No, the staff is all but in bed now," Warren replied. "The doctor is being settled in a room down the hall from the duchess. It's all quiet for now."

"Good. John, lock the damn door," Charles called. "We'll have no more surprises or unwelcome visitors tonight."

Warren moved back to the door, turning the latch. "What surprises? What visitors?"

Madeline pulled away, wiping at her eyes. "Umm...my cousin was here...and my father. He and Charles had a bit of a row."

"He's an arse," Charles muttered.

Warren glanced between them again, "What happened?"

Madeline smiled, one hand still on Charles's shoulder. "My father did not take kindly to the news that we are engaged."

Warren stilled, his expression suddenly unreadable. "What did he do?"

"He accused Charles of being a gambler and a drunk, and a fortune hunter, I think...worst of all, he turned up his nose at Charles being a working man," she replied.

"And then I may have threatened him with physical violence," Charles said with a shrug.

“May have?” she cried. “You threatened to rend him into pieces.”

“You didn’t,” Warren said on a laugh.

“Aye, I did,” he replied. “It’s what you would have done,” he added with another shrug. “Actually, you would have done the violence. I merely made a threat.”

Warren shook his head. “And that all happened in the thirty minutes I was gone?”

Madeline nodded, waiting for him to say something... *anything*.

But the insufferable man just moved over to the fire, adding a log to the flames.

With a huff, Madeline slipped past Charles, rising to her feet. “You have no comment then, sir? Nothing to say at learning that Charles and I are engaged?”

“I am very happy for you both,” he replied, not turning around.

Behind her, Charles huffed, rising to his feet as well. “Now who is the bloody martyr?”

Warren turned, glaring at him.

“Don’t do this,” Charles warned. “Don’t ruin this now.”

“I don’t understand,” Madeline murmured, tears in her eyes as she glanced between the men, her gaze landing on Warren. “You wanted this. I thought you—*we* wanted this... did we not?” She stepped forward, watching him flinch. “We discussed it, John. You want your freedom. You don’t want to step into your father’s title or his money. You don’t want any of the pressure being a baronet brings. So, I must marry Charles.” She reached for him, hating the way he stiffened. “But to marry him is to marry *you* too. Can you now so suddenly have changed your mind?”

It was then that the harsh truth hit her with all the force of a slap to the face. She stumbled back. “Oh god...you don’t—you’ve never said it.” She shook her head, her mind racing back to their every encounter. “Not once. You...do you not

feel the same for me? Is Charles the only one you want then? Am I coming between you rather than joining you?"

Warren growled, moving forward. He snatched her by the shoulders. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Tears filled her eyes as she gazed up at him, memorizing that jagged scar. "I...you've never said you love me. You've never even said you want to marry me. You said, 'I'm still here.'"

He groaned, dragging a hand through his hair. "Madeline..."

"Is it because I'm a viscount's daughter? A prim lady who never opens her own doors? You think we are too poorly suited—"

"You think I hesitate because you're a viscount's spoiled rotten daughter? You think I am reluctant to throw myself into this ménage because you don't open enough doors?"

"Well, if that's not it, then what—"

"I have nothing to offer you!" The words clearly came out without his permission because his groan and the shutting of his dark eyes made it clear he wanted them unsaid.

She shook her head. "I don't understand—"

He laughed, dragging a hand through his long hair. "What can you possibly not understand about this? I have nothing to offer you, Madeline. Or you, Charles. I am utterly worthless, my pocket's empty. What can I contribute?" He shook his head. "No, you are both better off without me. It was madness to think otherwise. You should marry and move to London, move into your grand townhouse. Leave Finchley and forget about me."

Madeline sighed, shaking her head. Why were men so impossible?

But Charles was having none of it. He stepped forward, arms crossed. "Well, unfortunately for you, we intend to do the opposite. Tomorrow morning, I will marry Madeline, and you will be there as our witness. After breakfast, I will tell the

duke that I accept his offer to become the Vicar of Finchley. Madeline and I will move into the parsonage. After a respectable number of weeks have passed, you will move in too, for we have decided to rent you a room. Seeing as you are such a longtime friend, and you've lived in the parsonage before, no one should bat an eye...especially when an accident befalls your cabin, and it tragically burns down."

Madeline gasped, her gaze darting to Charles. "What—that's brilliant, Charles."

Charles smiled at her. "Yes, I thought it was rather good. It may take some twisting of the duke's arm to delay with rebuilding."

"Leave that to me," she replied. "Burke owes us favors for the rest of his natural life. He will help us smooth this over, I'm sure of it. They all will. Their acceptance of our situation will assuage the rest of the village. They can protect us, just as we can protect them." She turned back to Warren, waiting for him to speak.

He crossed his arms, his mouth set in a grimace. "So, you've both settled everything then? You just expect me to come when called, sleep in the guest room, and watch you be happily married?"

She sighed. "No, you frustrating man. I expect you to come when called, sleep in my bed every night, and watch as the *three* of us are happy together. And if you're so concerned about joining this marriage with empty pockets, then here—"

She reached into her own pocket, pulling out the button she habitually carried since her first night with Mr. Tram. She opened her palm, showing him the button. "Consider it a wedding present. It's all the dowry I have, thanks to my father's wounded pride."

He shook his head, gazing down at the officious offering.

She huffed, closing her fingers around the button, and stuffing it back in her pocket. "Then what is it? Let's have it all out now. Why else do you suddenly delay?"

He stalked off, muttering under his breath.



“He’s fighting his feelings,” Charles muttered.

“Quiet,” Warren snapped at him.

“He’s not in control. He hates not being in control.”

“Shut up, Charles,” Warren growled, stomping forward.

Charles wasn’t cowed by his domineering presence. He tipped his head back, holding his gaze stare for stare. “He’s wearing his pride as armor, and it’s all my fault. I hurt him, and he’s terrified of being hurt again. He’ll push us both away now.”

Her heart raced in her chest. “John, please—”

Warren spun away, stalking off towards the corner muttering under his breath.

“Tell me what I must do to assuage your fears,” she called after him.

He spun around with a groan, looking desperately about the small library before pointing a finger at her. “You’re too anxious,” he muttered. “Hell, it makes *me* anxious. I’ll be sweating through my shirt and not know why, it’s bloody maddening.”

She blinked, taken aback. “I...yes, I am. But I’m working on that—”

“And you’re too meek,” he added. “It’s not enough for you to have opinions. You need to say them, own them with your whole chest.”

She pursed her lips. “Well, you can help set the example for me. I will follow your lead and learn to better speak how I feel without hesitation.”

“And you’re too...small.” He narrowed his eyes on her, his gaze tracing her from head to toe. “You need to eat more.”

She was fighting her smile now. This man was determined to fight being wanted. He didn’t know how to let someone love him, let alone two people. He was afraid to believe it, afraid to trust it. So, she just nodded. “You’re perfectly right. I

shall add a second scone to my morning tea routine. Anything else?”

He rolled his eyes, his mouth set in a scowl. “Well...you kiss like a goddess, and you ride my cock like a queen on her throne, so at least you have that going for you.”

She crossed over to her, stopping herself right before him. “And now you need to say it.”

His jaw clenched tight, his dark eyes burning with need as he gazed down at her. He opened his mouth, only to shut it with a groan.

She reached out, placing a gentle hand on his arm. “John, say it.”

A moment stretched between them, the only sound the crackling of the fire in the hearth.

Slowly, his gaze softened, and he was lifting a hand, brushing his fingers along her jaw. “I love you, Madeline.”

She sighed, eyes shutting tight as she nodded.

“I love you so much...it scares me,” he admitted. “I can’t love someone else like I love Charles. I lost him once. To think of losing him twice over...I will not survive it. I need you both like I need air—”

She stepped into his embrace, cupping his face. “John, I love you. You consume me. My thoughts never turn from you. From the moment we met, I was struck through the heart with love for you. It has spread throughout my whole being.” She stroked with her thumb, brushing it over the bottom edge of his scarred cheek. “There is no losing me, for I cannot dream of losing you. I am yours, John Warren, body and soul. Loving Charles feels utterly incomplete without loving you. Be with us. Be our husband.”

Warren glanced over at Charles, a question in his eyes.

Charles came to them, one hand going to each of their shoulders as he pressed in. He had eyes only for Warren. “You know I’m sorry. I could say it every day for the rest of our lives, and it would still never be enough. I will commit myself

to showing you that I love you, proving myself with thought, word, and deed. I will take the position here in Finchley. I will marry Madeline. I will move heaven and earth to have you with us, John. And if the people here cannot accept us, I vow to find a place in this world where we can live in peace together. The three of us. Please say yes, John. Please be with us. Love us and marry us.”

Warren gazed down at him, tears in his eyes. Slowly he swallowed, sharing his darkest truth. “You cannot abandon me again.”

“Never,” Charles murmured, inching forward to kiss his lips. “Oh god, I swear it. Never again. You’re it for me, Johnnie. Let me back into your heart, and I will never stray again. Free me from the torment of not being yours. I’ll do anything.”

Warren narrowed his eyes, his large hand gripping Charles by the hair and giving him a sharp tug. A smile played at his lips as he murmured, “Show me.”

Without hesitation, Charles dropped to his knees.



Madeline gasped, inching back to watch as Charles rubbed his hand over Warren's crotch. Warren gripped his hair, his shoulders relaxing as Charles began working loose the buttons at the fall of his breeches.

"Kiss me," Warren ordered, his eyes on her.

Drawn by his command, she all but stumbled forward and tipped up on her toes, tasting his lips with teasing kisses. He kissed her back, his warm mouth moving against hers, setting a fire in her core. When he groaned against her lips, she couldn't help herself, she looked down.

Charles had his mouth around Warren's cock, teasing him to hardness with gentle sucks. Warren soothed his hand through his hair. It was thrilling to watch them together, but she wanted more. She needed to be part of what they shared. Dropping to her knees, she inched her way in next to Charles, dragging her tongue up Warren's shaft.

"Oh, Christ—" Warren grabbed her by the hair, holding both their heads as they teased him together. "Touch him," he ordered. "Touch Charles."

Madeline reached out with her hand, cupping it over Charles's hard cock. He pressed his hips into her with a soft groan, moving with her as she stroked him through his breeches.

"Take him out and suck him while he sucks me," came Warren's gravelly command.

She panted for breath, her core aching with need for these men. She did as she was told, working the fall of Charles's breeches until she could reach a hand inside, stroking his hard cock.

Charles groaned again, pressing into her hand.

She crouched down low, using one hand to hold up his shirt, as she sank her mouth around him, sucking him to the back of her throat.

"God, help me," he said, popping off Warren's cock.

She teased him, still not quite used to the action. It wasn't unpleasant by any means. In fact, she thrilled at the feeling of giving him pleasure. And the salty taste of his release on her tongue gave her a kind of pride that she felt down to her toes.

He tensed, pushing her off. "Darling, you're going to make me come, and we're only just beginning," he said, giving her cheek a gentle stroke.

"Get her clothes off," said Warren. "We're taking our wife tonight. She's ours. We're claiming all her holes."

Madeline whimpered with need, letting Charles pull her to her feet. They worked together, stripping her out of her silk gown. It fluttered to the floor and Charles's hands were already on her stays. She tried to help, but Warren distracted her, all but bending her backwards with his kisses.

The stays slipped from her shoulders, and she shivered. Warren's calloused hand slipped inside the hem of her chemise, cupping her breast, and tweaking her nipple.

"Oh please," she murmured, arching into his touch. She never imagined her body could feel so responsive to human touch. She felt ravenous, larger than life, a goddess in her temple.

While Warren teased her, Charles stripped out of his clothes, not joining her until he was naked, his hot skin pressing against her. She ran her hands over his shoulders, down his back. He was all lean muscle. His own hands roved, cupping between her legs and rubbing until he pulled a gasp from her lips.

“Are you wet, darling?” he asked, nipping her jaw. “Are you desperate for us the way we are for you?”

She nodded. Hiking up her chemise with one hand, she grabbed his wrist with the other and took what she wanted, sliding his fingers through her wetness.

“Look how she takes from us,” said Warren, a note of pride in his tone. “What else do you want, my queen? How can we serve you?”

She panted, turning her gaze to her half-naked Warren. “I want your tongue in my cunt,” she replied, loving the way his gaze heated at her words. She turned to Charles. “And then I want your cock.”

Warren led her over to the sofa, pushing down on her shoulder. “Sit.”

She sat down and Warren dropped to his knees, spreading her apart without ceremony. She leaned back against the cushions with a gasp as he descended, his mouth hot and needy as he devoured her. She bit back her moan, her eyes shutting as he worked her over, first with his mouth, then adding his fingers.

In no time at all, she felt the tight spiraling inside of her. “Yes, don’t stop,” she begged. “Don’t stop, I—*ah*—”

He sucked on her bud, three fingers buried deep, and she was a wave breaking on rocks, coming apart with a low, shaky moan. He rode her waves, her core pulsing around his fingers. Once it ebbed, he pulled out, his gaze still hot and hungry.

“Turn over,” he directed. “On your knees and hold the back of the sofa.”

She complied, trying desperately to catch her breath. Her body already had the odd, boneless feeling to it. But she wanted more.

“Fuck her cunt while I take her mouth,” he said at Charles.

She exhaled, her lips curling into a smile as Charles came up behind her. “Are you ready for me, beautiful?”

She nodded, turning her face to kiss his lips. His hands smoothed over her hips, one hand dipping between her legs until his fingers buried deep in her core. She gasped, pressing into his hand.

“That’s my good girl,” Charles murmured. “So ready for us, so desperate to be claimed. The world will never see this side of you. This passion, this fire. This is *ours*. Only ours. Understood?”

She nodded again. “Yes. Only yours. Take me, Charles. Fill me. Need you—”

“Do as she says,” Warren teased, moving around the back of the sofa. He was tall enough that she could easily bend over the back and reach his hardness. He gave himself a few lazy strokes, watching as Charles pressed in behind her.

Charles notched the tip of his cock at her opening and pressed in. She shivered, adjusting to the feeling of such fullness. She bent her legs, sinking back against him.

“Fuck, you feel like heaven,” he groaned. “So perfect. Our own angel.”

“Your goddess,” she panted, her hands gripping to the back of the sofa.

“Come here, goddess.” Warren grabbed her by the hair, pulling her face forward.

She pressed herself against the back of the couch, reaching eagerly for his length with her mouth. He eased his way in, pushing with his hips until she felt like she might gag. He pulled back, his hips moving in time with her tongue.

Behind her, Charles fucked into her, his movements slow and deliberate, his roving hands teasing her hips and bottom before they cupped her breasts. He tweaked both her nipples at once as her core clenched around him.

“She’s gonna strangle me,” he groaned. “John, I need you too. Need to feel you in our wife.”

Warren pulled back, leaving her feeling empty and panting for breath. When Charles pulled out too, she wanted to cry

with frustration and longing. She needed more.

“Lie down, Charles,” Warren directed.

Charles laid out her chemise before the fire and sat down, his lean muscles gleaming in the firelight. He held out a hand to Madeline. “Come here, darling. Get on my cock.”

She smiled, remembering how good it felt to take Warren that way. She knelt, straddling his legs. Arching up, she notched his cock at her entrance and slowly sank down. Charles groaned, his chest muscles twitching as he held tight to her hips.

She settled with a shaky breath, taking him to the hilt.

“How does he feel?” Warren teased from behind her, his hands on her shoulders.

“So good,” she replied with a soft smile. “I love you, Charles.”

Charles smiled up at her. “As I love you.”

She bent over, claiming him with a kiss. Their hands roved, spiking their passion higher as they moved together, Madeline rocking atop him, feeling him so deep inside her.

Then Warren was behind her, trailing something wet and cold down between her cheeks. She gasped, sitting up.

“Easy,” he teased. “Just a bit of oil.”

Charles snorted. “You had it in your pocket?”

“Now that fucking you both is on the table, I’ll always be prepared,” he replied.

Madeline’s skin pricked with goose flesh as Warren leaned over her.

“Is this what you want, lovely? Do you want your husbands to fill you with their cocks? Want us to come inside you until you’re dripping?”

She nodded, her core clenching tight around Charles. “Yes,” she begged. “John, I need you. Need you both.”



“Then you need to relax,” he soothed. “I’m going to work my fingers in first. Breathe and relax.”

She waited, breath in her throat, as Warren pressed in with the tip of one finger, the oil slick and warm now that he was stroking her. She gasped; the feeling was so odd.

He pressed in, wiggling his finger. “You’re doing so well, lovely. Bend over a bit more and kiss our Charles while I make you ready for me.”

She all but fell forward, bracing with her hands as she sought out Charles’s lips. He rocked his hips against hers, chasing her tongue, giving her teasing nips with his teeth that had her core clenching again.

Warren worked a second finger insider her. “So beautiful,” he said, kissing her shoulder.

Beneath her, Charles groaned. “I can feel you, John. You’re making her tighter.”

Warren laughed. “Just wait, my loves. My cock will end you both. You’ll never know pleasure like what I can give you.”

By the time he was done teasing her with his fingers, Madeline felt ready to come apart again. Then he was pressing her down against Charles, the tip of his cock prodding at her hole.

“Breathe now, lovely. Push back against me, take me in.”

She tried to relax as she felt him press against her. Her body wanted to fight, but she focused on the feel of their hands soothing her, calming her down.

“That’s it,” Charles murmured. “You’re doing so well. Take him in deep as you can. Feel him everywhere.”

“I feel you both,” she whimpered. “Oh, god—it’s too much —”

Behind her, Warren stilled. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No,” she cried. “It’s a good too much. Don’t you dare stop.”

Warren pressed in, settling himself to the hilt. Madeline let out an exhale, feeling him sink against her hips. She'd never felt so full in her life. It was impossible to be this filled.

“God help me,” Charles groaned. “Warren, please move, love. Need you to fuck us both.”

“Are you ready, lovely?” Warren murmured in her ear.

She nodded, hands bracing on the carpet as both her men began to move. In moments, her whole body shook as they found a rhythm, moving in tandem until all three of them were whimpering, writhing messes.

“I'm gonna die,” said Charles, arching forward to suck on her neck, pulling her closer.

That changed their angles, and she cried out, her core clenching around Charles as Warren slammed into her from behind.

“It feels amazing,” Charles muttered, eyes closed in bliss as he sank back. “I can feel you inside her, feel you moving against me. You're fucking her and you're fucking me, and I never want it to stop.”

When Warren's hand wrapped around to tease her bud, she was done. The moment she felt the pressure of his fingers, she was strangling Charles. He cried out, arching his hips into her, burying himself as deep as he could go.

“Hold her there,” Warren ordered, his fingers working furiously over her bud as he pounded into her from behind, their bodies making the crudest sounds as their skin slapped together. When he curled two fingers inside her core alongside Charles's cock, she came apart on a silent scream, Charles joining her as her core ached and fluttered around him and Warren's fingers.

As soon as they settled, Warren pressed her forward and rode out his own finish, the warm heat of his release filling her. The sensation was so strange and wonderful, it set off a kind of echoing release, her core fluttering yet again as she sank boneless atop Charles, her sweaty cheek pressed against his chest.

Warren pressed forward, not dropping all his weight, but it was enough to have her feeling beautifully and wonderfully surrounded. Their hearts beat against her ribs to front and back, their warm breath fanning over her skin.

“I love you,” she murmured, tears of gratitude in her eyes. “I love you both.”

They echoed their ‘I love you’s, Warren pulling out first and flopping down next to Charles on the carpeted floor. He threw an arm over his eyes, taking deep breaths. She stayed perched over Charles’s hips, his cock softening inside her. He didn’t seem to mind, content to stroke her arms with light touches.

She gazed down at the pair of them. “Will we really marry in the morning?”

“Yes,” Charles replied, turning his face to kiss Warren’s shoulder. “I wish there was a way we could all legally marry,” he murmured. “I hate having to choose between you.”

“Only an ordained priest can make it official,” Warren muttered, running his large fingers through his hair. “And your Church has quite a bit to say about men marrying men, my love.”

Madeline stilled, the nugget of an idea dancing just out of sight in her mind, fleeting as a shadow. “What if there was a way...”

They both glanced up at her. “A way to what?” said Charles.

“A way to marry...all three of us, I mean. It wouldn’t be quite legal, I don’t think...but it would still be official.” She couldn’t hide her smile.

Warren narrowed his dark gaze at her. “What is going on inside that head?”

She shook her head, biting her bottom lip. “I’ll not say anything more about it until I’ve checked something first. But if it works...” Her gaze darted between them. “If I can arrange it, will you *both* marry me tomorrow?”

Warren smiled, “Lovely, I don’t need a priest or a lord or the King of bloody England to tell me what I already know. You’re *both* mine. I’m already married. As far as I’m concerned, this was our wedding night. Just as soon as I recover myself, I’ll be consummating you both again.”

Charles smirked, gazing up at her. “I have no idea what kind of plan you’re hatching, but my answer is yes too.”

Madeline smiled. *Yes*. Their answers were yes. Her heart warmed at the thought. Things were looking decidedly up for Mu-mu-Muttering Madeline Blaire. While the rest of the ladies of the *ton* settled for one husband they could barely tolerate, Madeline now had two...and she intended to love them to pieces from now until forever.



Madeline stood outside the door, waiting as the footman knocked and opened it a crack. From the end of the hall, the long set of windows allowed moving sunlight to stream in. The winter storm was over at last, and the whole world was white. The sky, the trees, the ground. It sat thick and perfect, like a blank canvas. It felt fitting for this morning. The world held limitless potential.

“Lady Madeline is here, Your Grace,” the footman called into the room.

“Let her come,” came the duke’s voice from within.

The footman swung the door open, admitting Madeline into Rosalie’s bedchamber. She sighed with relief as she saw Rosalie sitting upright in the bed. Well, she was propped up more than anything, her body framed with pillows, but she was alert and smiling.

“Oh, Your Grace, I am so happy to see you awake,” she murmured.

Rosalie held out her hand and Madeline rushed to her side, sinking down into the chair by her side.

“They told me what you did,” Rosalie said, tears in her eyes.

“I did nothing,” Madeline replied, shaking her head.

“You had the foresight to call for Warren,” said James. “Doctor Rivers reluctantly admitted that he likely saved her life. Her and the babe.”

Madeline smiled. "Oh, I'm that glad." She glanced around. "Where is the baby?"

"Burke took her to change her," Rosalie replied, too tired to do more than turn her head in the direction of the open door that led deeper into her suite. "You look happy," she murmured, seeing through Madeline in that way few others could. "Are things finally settled then?"

"Nearly," she replied. "Charles has agreed to marry me."

Tears filled Rosalie's eyes. "Oh, that's so wonderful. James, isn't it wonderful?"

James nodded, reaching down to fluff her pillows. He seemed closed off, quiet and distant. Madeline could only imagine his thoughts and feelings having watched his wife nearly die, taking their unborn babe with her. She could still sense his protectiveness. She imagined if she leaned forward and gave Rosalie a pinch, he would tear her limb from limb.

In moments, Burke returned, a tiny bundle nestled in his arms. He smiled as he saw Madeline. "There she is," he called. "We missed you last night."

She returned his smile. "I had rather a lot to deal with downstairs, sir."

"Yes, we heard about the row with your father in the entry hall," James muttered. "Apparently, I have been called to a duel, angel. The honor of Alcott is now at stake."

"You will do no such thing," Rosalie huffed. "The viscount is only lucky I did not make him sleep in the stable last night. If I'd been in my right mind, he would have been kicked out at once."

Madeline grimaced, grateful she'd spared Rosalie the indignity of turning away an unruly guest.

"As it is, his behavior on the night of your lying in means that we have the upper hand," said Burke. "No one can fault James for tending to his dying wife if Lord Raleigh dares to make more of a fuss over this."

“What happened after you dispensed with the viscount?” asked James, those green eyes narrowed on her.

She fought her blush. “I umm...waited for Mr. Bray to return. I was worried about the storm.”

“Hmm, and I imagine Warren waited with you?” said Burke with a grin.

Madeline dropped her gaze to the carpet. She still wasn't comfortable discussing either of the men in company.

“Do not tease her,” Rosalie called softly. “She is on our side, Burke. Mr. Warren and Mr. Bray too. From what James told me this morning, they know everything. If I were you, I'd make nice with the gentlemen.”

“Oh, I imagine Madeline has already made nice with them,” he teased.

Madeline smiled. In truth, she'd ended the night with both men in her bed. The three of them snuck through the house, locking themselves away in her room. They'd fucked and slept and relished in each other's closeness all night, Charles and Warren sneaking out before the dawn. If last night was a promise of things to come, Madeline was going to have to invest in a bigger bed.

Burke came to her side, swaying slightly with the bundle in his arms. “Would you like to hold her?”

Madeline's smile widened. “She looks more than content in your arms...but I will see her, if I may,” she added, leaning closer to him to gaze down at the sleeping babe. She looked like a little angel—all rosy cheeks and pale skin.

“She's so beautiful,” Madeline murmured, brushing a hand over her soft black hair. “Have you given her a name yet?”

“We have,” Rosalie replied, a tired smile on her face.

Madeline looked over. “Well?”

A sudden tension in the room had her heart fluttering. Her gaze darted from Rosalie to Burke and back. “What is it?”

A tear slipped down Rosalie's cheek as she smiled. "We named her Madeline."

Madeline gasped, tears welling in her eyes. "Really?"

Rosalie nodded, too overcome to speak.

Burke cleared his throat, still swaying with the babe. "Her full name will be Madeline Joanna Charlotte Corbin."

And now Madeline was crying. "John and Charles too?"

"You three helped save my life," Rosalie said through her own tears. "You saved *her* life. You saved...everything," she said, glancing from Madeline to James to the babe.

James stepped forward, placing a hand on her shoulder, and offering her a handkerchief. "We'd like to ask the three of you to be her godparents. There'll be a christening in a few weeks in London. Only when Rosalie feels more fully recovered and well enough to travel."

Madeline dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief. "Of course, Your Grace. I'm not sure I can speak for Warren," she added with a soft smile. "I'm not sure he'll know quite what to make of being godfather to a duke's daughter. But Charles will surely be delighted."

"And when do you make an honest man of him?" said Burke, moving over towards the bed to transfer the babe to Rosalie's waiting arms.

Madeline smiled. "I um...we only have a few days left to claim my aunt's money. We were thinking of riding over to Carrington today. We can bring Warren as a witness."

James grinned. "Reminds me of our wedding. We woke up on a Thursday morning and walked into Finchley with Burke and Tom to witness. Selby married us."

"And then we went home and had lunch, casual as you like," Rosalie added, opening the side of her dressing robe to let the baby nurse.

Burke laughed, his gaze full of such loving warmth as he watched the baby settle in Rosalie's arms. "And then you were a duchess."



“And you were named steward,” Rosalie added, sinking back against the pillows as she brushed the baby’s dark hair.

“We all end up where we’re meant to be, I think,” said Madeline.

James stepped forward. “Speaking of...how soon will I lose Mr. Warren to the pleasures of a new life in London?”

Madeline pursed her lips. “Actually, I think we’d rather decided on staying. I shouldn’t steal Charles’s thunder but—”

“Oh, thank god,” James said on a sigh.

“He will accept the offer?” said Rosalie, sitting forward with the nursing babe in her arms. “He will be Vicar of Finchley?”

“Yes,” Madeline replied. “That way Warren can continue to work and so can Charles. And I hate London life...besides I think it might be a good idea to give my family time to cool off. I only just convinced father to leave me here.”

“And you love Alcott Hall,” added Burke with his characteristic grin.

Madeline let herself take a moment to feel profoundly grateful before adding, “Yes, and I love Alcott Hall.”

“Good,” Rosalie replied. “Because we love having you here. You belong with us, here in our little corner of the world. Help us make it a tolerant and loving place? For our children and their children to come,” she added, brushing her baby’s velvety cheek.

Madeline nodded. A quiet life in the country with her husbands, surrounded by the love and happiness of their dearest friends, sounded like a dream.

There was only one thing that could make this day of new beginnings truly perfect.

She glanced at the duke. “I wonder if I could ask a favor...”

James narrowed his eyes at her. “Madeline, you saved my wife’s life last night. And my child’s. You get a limitless

number of favors from the Corbin's from now until forever.”

She smiled. “Well, this is only one favor...and I think it must come from Captain Renley.”



“This is ridiculous,” Warren muttered. “There’s no way this is legal or binding in any way.”

“Well, we can’t exactly go running around saying it is, but we’ll have witnesses,” Madeline added. “I don’t want you thinking for one second that you’re not an equal partner in this.”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” said Charles from her other side.

They were all bundled up in their winter clothes, trudging through the deep snow to the edge of the lake. Madeline still wore Rosalie’s borrowed clothes, her hands in the fuzzy mittens she stole on her daring escape to Alcott Hall. The hood of her thick wool cape was pulled up around her face, the rabbit-fur lining tickling her cheeks and chin.

“All ready!” Renley called with a wave.

“The lake is frozen over,” Warren grunted. “This is beyond pointless.”

“Hush,” Madeline replied. “You’re making an honest woman of me if it’s the last thing I do.”

She couldn’t contain her smile as she took in the ridiculous scene. Burke and Captain Renley had managed to drag a little rowboat out onto the lake. The only problem was that it was frozen, so the boat sat awkwardly on its side atop the ice.

“You’re not even sure it has to be in a boat,” Warren said, unable to hide his grin as Burke lost his balance and nearly

topped out.

“Yes, but Renley wasn’t sure either,” she replied. “What we *do* know is that, as a sea captain and a justice of the peace, he can marry us.”

Charles pursed his lips in amusement. “So...we’re going to stand in a rowboat *on top* of the ice and let Tom Renley marry the three of us together?”

“Exactly,” she replied, still all smiles. “Come on then. Hurry up!”

She fisted her skirts in her mittened hands, marching through the snow towards the spot where James and Burke waited. Rosalie was still too weak to leave her bed and the men wouldn’t hear of her coming out in the cold. She promised to watch from her window with Little G and the babe.

“There’s no way this is legal,” James muttered, loud enough for Madeline to hear.

“I think it’s romantic,” Burke replied. “You’re just jealous you never thought of it,” he added, jabbing James in the ribs with his elbow.

James rolled his eyes. “An officiant can’t marry himself. How was Tom supposed to marry us and perform the ceremony?”

“Well, we’ve got a vicar here,” Burke teased. “What say we pop in the boat after they’re done and you can vow your undying love to me, eh?”

Charles laughed. “Unlike the good sea captain, I don’t need the boat.”

“I’m not entirely sure I do either,” called Renley. “But we’ve gone too far now. Right, in you lot. Let’s do this before my cock freezes off. Madeline, do watch the ice.”

Warren and Charles took her by the arms, helping her cross the little patch of ice until she climbed awkwardly into the rowboat. She was nearly toppled back out again once Warren

and Charles climbed in too. It was so ridiculous that they were soon all laughing.

“If anyone walks by, they’ll think we’ve gone completely ‘round the twist,” said Charles.

Warren nodded.

Madeline ignored them. “We’re ready, sir,” she said, her attention on Renley.

James and Burke waited on the shore in the snow, just a few feet behind them.

Renley flipped off his coat with a flourish, revealing himself in his captain’s uniform.

Madeline snorted, covering her mouth with a fuzzy mitten.

“Is that really necessary?” Warren muttered.

Renley smirked. “I’ve never actually married anyone before. I figured we better make a show of it in case God is watching and decides to smite me for overstepping. This is perfectly legal,” he shouted to the heavens. “I’m a sea captain, and we’re in a boat on the water!”

“Just get on with it,” Warren replied, one arm around Madeline’s waist.

“Right then,” said the captain. “I’m sure there are correct words to do this, but I’m just going to say what I feel, agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Madeline through chattering teeth.

“Agreed,” the men echoed.

“Very well then.” Captain Renley cleared his throat. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God, and in the face of these witnesses, to join together this man and this woman,” he said, gesturing at Charles and Madeline. “And this man and this woman,” he added, pointing to Warren. “And...this man and this man.”

Madeline’s smile widened, her chill utterly forgotten.

“Marriage is an honorable estate,” Renley went on. “Instituted by God in the time of man’s great innocence... there’s more there, I believe,” he muttered, breaking character. “Something about a ‘mystical union,’” he said, glancing at Charles.

“It’s fine,” said Charles with a waved of his gloved hand.

“Skip to the vows before we all freeze to death!” called James.

“Right...umm...do you Charles...damn, what’s your full name, Bray?”

Madeline giggled as Warren sighed.

“Charles Anthony Bray,” Charles provided.

“Right. Do you take...” Renley looked to Madeline.

“Madeline Diana Louise Blaire,” she said.

“Do you take each other for man and wife?”

Madeline glanced up at Charles, her heart overflowing with nervous excitement. “I do,” she murmured.

“I do,” Charles echoed.

Renley beamed at them. “Right. And do you...”

“John Delaney Warren,” said Warren. “And yes, I take them both,” he added, his arm tightening around Madeline’s waist.

Renley smirked. “And do you two take Warren to be your husband?”

“I do,” Madeline said again.

“Of course, I do,” Charles repeated.

“Excellent.” Renley clapped his gloved hands together. “Well, by the power vested in me by the laws of England, apparently I’m allowed to say that I’ve married you. James, Burke, take notice, these three are married now. Agreed?”

“Yes, very well done,” called James impatiently, rubbing his hands together. “Can we all go back in now? I’m bloody freezing.”

“Rosalie is having tea and cake served upstairs,” added Burke. “Congratulations, you three. Many happy returns.”

Renley hopped out of the boat onto the ice, skidding and sliding the few feet back to the shore. Slinging an arm around Burke’s shoulders, the three of them began the walk back towards Alcott Hall.

Madeline glanced up from Charles to Warren, unable to hide her smile. “Well? We’re married now. How do you feel?”

Warren just huffed, but she saw the smile in his eyes, the warmth and love. He was happy, and that was all that mattered.

“You know we’ll have to go into town and do a proper church wedding,” said Charles. “We need the documentation to give to your solicitors.”

“I know,” she replied. “But *this* is the wedding that mattered to me. And I think it was perfect.”

Warren climbed out of the rowboat first, offering out a hand to help the other two pass over the ice back onto the thick snow.

They started their own walk back towards the great house.

“You know...I’m not all that hungry for cake,” said Warren, his steps slowing.

Madeline turned. “Oh, yes? Shall we go into Carrington now then and get the other ceremony over with?”

“We could,” he replied, a smile tipping his lips.

Charles smiled too. “Or?”

“Or we could go to the cabin and sate an entirely different kind of hunger,” Warren offered.

Madeline glanced at Charles before looking back at Warren. “Only if you tell me something first,” she replied, hands on her hips. “Now that we’re married, I’ll have no secrets between us.”

He raised a brow at her. “What, lovely? Ask me anything.”

She pursed her lips. “How did you get the scars?”

Charles chuckled. “Christ, did he tell you it was pirates?”

“Yes, and a French solider,” she replied.

Warren groaned and spun around, marching away.

It didn’t escape her notice that he marched off in the direction of his cabin. Clearly, they were not having cake. Madeline chased after him. “Why won’t you just *tell* me?”

“Why can’t a man have any mystery?”

She glanced over her shoulder at Charles. “Do *you* know what happened?”

“Of course, I do. I was there for the whole thing,” he said with a shrug.

She huffed in irritation, calling after Warren. “Well, it’s not fair if he knows and I don’t! Warren!”

But the man was still marching away.

“Come on, beautiful,” Charles said with a laugh, slinging his arm around her shoulders. “I can think of more than a few ways to get him to talk.”

“*You* could just tell me,” she countered.

But he shook his head. “Not a chance. Now that I know he doesn’t want to tell you, nothing will make me happier than helping you break his resolve. Between the two of us, he’ll be spilling every detail of that story before teatime.”

“What strategy do you suggest?”

“That’s easy,” he replied. “You have something he wants.”

Madeline’s cheeks heated. “Are you suggesting a trade, sir?”

Charles leaned down; his breath hot in her ear. “I’m suggesting that we fuck like rabbits in front of him and don’t let him join us until he tells you what you want to know.”

She grinned up at him. “Oh, you are devious, Mr. Bray.”



His own smile widened as he leaned down and kissed her temple. “And you love it, Mrs. Bray. Now, hurry up. We can’t have him starting without us.”

## EPILOGUE

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### *Two Months Later*

The carriage rattled to a stop and Madeline jolted awake. She was curled under Warren's arm, her face pressed against the warm wool of his great coat. Charles sat across from them, his nose buried in a book. He's been reading for the whole six-hour journey from Finchley to London. Madeline tried to read as well, but she was too distracted.

This was her first time back in London since her daring escape two months ago. Now she was returning married, her husband and their secret husband in tow. The news broke just after Christmas, splashed across every society paper. Madeline knew because her mother meticulously cut out and sent each one.

### **'Lady Madeline Blaire Weds Curate'**

Not only did the papers fail to get his title right, most of them also misprinted his name. She saw a Charlie Bray, a Chauncey Bray, even a Charoo Braley. One magazine included a rather unflattering sketch of Charles that had Warren snorting with laughter for two days. That they kept, framing it and placing it on a shelf in the study.

Life at the parsonage was good. Better than good. The village adjusted seamlessly to Charles in his new role. He worked well with James, and Warren worked well with Burke. The duke had promoted him after the tragic fire that claimed his cottage. They barely made it two weeks without him before

that little act of duplicity had become necessary. Madeline lit the torch herself with no regrets.

“And you’re quite sure you want us both there tomorrow night?” muttered Warren.

She sighed. He’d been trying to get out of dinner with her parents since they first received her mother’s letter a week ago.

“They just want to be seen as being in with the Corbin’s again,” said Charles, closing his book with a soft snap.

Madeline was sure he was right. Aside from her mother’s news clippings, she’d heard not a word from her parents about her marriage, the dowry, or her new fortune.

And yet, the moment it made the papers that Lady Madeline Corbin, daughter of the Duke of Norland, was to be christened, and that Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bray and Mr. John Warren were named godparents, her mother couldn’t write fast enough, inviting them all to dinner.

Apparently, the whole *ton* was trying to get invited to the christening. Even now, Rosalie and her gentlemen rode with the children and their nannies in another pair of carriages. They would stay at Corbin House. Meanwhile, Madeline was going home...her *new* home.

Leary House.

The carriage was moving again, the wheels creaking as they rolled over the cobblestones. That sound was imprinted in her memory. How often had she traversed these Mayfair streets? How many hours spent being shipped from this party to that, readying herself for yet another night of slow torture? How many times had she all but run, fleeing a glittering party, desperate to escape?

She closed her eyes, leaning back against the velvet seat.

“Alright there, lovely?” Warren brushed his gloved finger against her cheek.

She nodded, keeping her eyes closed. “Please, let’s not stay an hour longer than we need to.”

He huffed. “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

“Of course,” Charles replied. “As soon as the christening is over, we will go home.”

She let out a breath, opening her eyes. Glancing from Charles to Warren, she leaned forward, reaching for their hands. She gave each a quick kiss across the knuckles, not caring that they wore gloves. “You are my home,” she replied. “Wherever we three are together, that is home for me.”



“WELL...SHIT,” Warren muttered, his neck craning as he gazed up at the high ceiling, turning in a small circle. “This is Leary House then?”

Madeline, smiled, watching both men take in the drawing room. It was nothing near so grand as the opulence of Alcott Hall, but it was still imposing. Leary House was all ornately polished dark wood and black marble fireplaces. The paintings leaned towards landscapes over portraits, which Madeline had always appreciated. There was nothing more discomfiting than sitting in a room and feeling a dozen pairs of dead eyes watching you eat your breakfast and tie your laces.

“Just wait until you see the library,” she said at Charles, who was busy inspecting a colorful set of butterflies on mounted display. They sat in glass cases on a table stretched along the back of the sofa.

“Of course, the staff will have to be rebuilt, my lady,” said Mrs. Henkins, the wizened old housekeeper who was currently pouring them all tea. “Lady Maude made do with little more than a cook, a housekeeper, two maids, and a footman. Now that you and Mr. Bray will be in residence, you’ll need additional staff.”

Madeline turned quickly away from the window, tossing an anxious look at Charles before saying, “I’m afraid we will not be in residence long, Mrs. Henkins. Mr. Bray and I mean to make our primary home the parsonage in Finchley. I do not imagine we will be here more than a few times a year.”

“Oh...well, that is...I guess I just assumed that you would take up residence here,” the housekeeper replied.

Madeline couldn't miss the almost hopeful tone of her voice. She could only imagine how much more interesting life was for a house staff when the family was actually in residence to wait on. She gave Charles a pleading look.

With a sigh, he stepped forward, accepting his cup of tea. “Our plans are not yet firmly settled, Mrs. Henkins.”

“Are they not?” Warren muttered, glancing over his shoulder from his spot by the bookshelf.

Charles shot him a warning look, turning back to the housekeeper. “It may be that work will call us to London far more than anticipated. We may not grow the staff any larger, but we shall expect the house to be in readiness all the same.”

“Of course, sir,” Mrs. Henkins replied. “Just as soon as you are done with your tea, I can take you all on a tour of the house. And I'll show you to your room, Mr. Warren. We've put him in the bachelor's suite, my lady,” she said at Madeline. “I hope that is acceptable.”

Madeline stiffened, her cup of tea halfway to her lips. “Yes,” she murmured, taking a sip. “Yes, I'm sure that will be perfectly acceptable. Thank you, Mrs. Henkins.”

It was not acceptable. It was unthinkable. Warren was their husband, and he slept in their bed.

At the parsonage it was easy, for none of the staff actually lived in the house. Even dear Molly lived with her ailing mother a five-minute walk down the lane. Warren kept the appearance of a separate room, but as soon as the last servant left for the night, they were blissfully alone.

And Charles had quickly set a rule for the staff saying no one was to come above stairs before eight in the morning. Even this was unnecessary, as Warren was an early riser and was typically out the door before seven. They made a habit of dismissing the staff as soon as dinner was served, meaning they lived half of their lives enjoying only each other's company. It was bliss.

Madeline had no idea how to manage a similar situation with live-in staff. There must be a way, for Rosalie managed it with three men and a staff ten times that of Leary House. She glanced over at Charles, but he just shook his head. They obviously couldn't discuss it now. One more reason for them to quit London as soon as possible.



“YOU’RE WORRYING,” Charles muttered. “I can feel your mind humming from here.”

Madeline glanced up, meeting his eyes in the reflection of the mirror on her dressing table. It was late, the only light in the room coming from the crackling fire. She sat perched on a little pouf, dragging a boar’s hair brush through her long curls.

“I’ve reread the same page twice now,” he added. He was sprawled out on the bed wearing nothing but his shirt, the buttons undone at cuffs and collar. A book sat open on his lap, a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles perched on his nose. “Can you tell me what’s bothering you? Is it just the dinner with your parents?”

She glanced around the room. It was a cozy space, the dark wood-paneled walls accented with handsome pops of green in the curtains and chairs and cheery yellow in the cushions. “I... I don’t know what I expected in coming here,” she admitted. “I fought for it. I wanted it so badly.”

His mouth quirked into a smile. “Yes, I know...seeing as it was I with whom you fought.”

“We never really fought,” she replied, setting the brush aside and turning on her pouf to face him. “But I wanted this place to be mine. I imagined a whole life here. Reading by the hour in the library, walking my gardens, taking tea in my solarium. I have a solarium now, Charles.”

He set his book aside. “I know. I saw it this afternoon on our exceptionally long house tour.” He narrowed his eyes, slipping his glasses off his nose. “Is that what bothers you? That you have a solarium?”

She sighed, getting up from the dressing table. Slipping the robe from her shoulders, she crawled in her side of the bed, feeling that first perfect chill as she slid her bare legs between the sheets. She settled back against the pillows, stretching a hand out towards him. He took it, turning it over and tracing mindless patterns up and down the soft skin of her forearm. She relaxed into his touch.

“Talk to me, my darling,” he murmured.

“I think I was so determined to escape one cage, that I had no idea I was dreaming of another,” she replied.

His hand stilled on her arm. “Go on...”

She let out another heavy sigh. “I was dreaming of this place like it was to be my sanctuary. But, in reality, it is just one more cage. It is just another house I could lock myself away within. Four walls would be replaced with four more... does that make any sense?”

He nodded. “It does. And now?”

“Now...” She glanced about the room. *Her* room. In her fine London townhouse. “Now I fear that dream is utterly spoiled for me. I cannot be free here, Charles, not with a staff watching our every move. Not with the whole of London pressing outside our door. We will go to a dinner tomorrow and they will all be polite. They will simper and smirk and all the while they will mock us when our backs turn. They hate us, for they know we don’t belong—”

Charles scooted closer, tipping her face up to meet his. “Do not think on it, my darling. Do not pay them any mind. I don’t care what they say about me. Let them mock me. Let them jeer. Let them say I am beneath you.”

She shook her head, placing her hand around his wrist. “*We* are beneath them,” she corrected. “I was always a pariah, Charles. Now I am utterly insignificant...and I am *happy* this way,” she added, leaning forward to kiss the tip of his nose. “It took coming here and being inside this house to know with a surety marrow deep that I cannot live this life anymore. I cannot live in this house, making calls and going to dinners. I

am a vicar's wife," she said with a smile. "I belong with you and John in the country. I want a quiet life amongst our own set of people. To own the truth, if I never step foot in London again, it will be too soon."

He sighed, leaning back. "So, what would you like to do? We could keep this house and let it out. We could use the income to fund a passion project, perhaps build a girl's school in the village...or we could sell it."

She stiffened. "But Leary House is part of the Leary fortune."

"Yes, but it is only *part*," he added. "And if it pains you so, perhaps you would be better off with it gone. Remove all temptation, as they say."

Before she could reply, the door rattled open and Warren entered, a snubbed little candle on a stand in his hand. His hair was down and wild about his shoulders. He wore a dark dressing robe open over his black evening pants and white dress shirt. It was all part of the new wardrobe she'd insisted he get for town.

"Did anyone see you?" Charles called, sitting up. "We don't know this staff. We can't trust their discretion."

Warren glared at him. "Are you kicking me out?"

"No," Charles said on a breath. "We just...must be careful here."

Muttering something under his breath, Warren locked the door.

Madeline watched him slap the candle down and begin stripping out of his clothes. "Is your room comfortable?"

"No." He tossed the dressing robe aside. Then he jerked his shirt off over his head, his thick muscles flexing in the firelight.

Madeline sat forward with interest, not missing the way Charles did the same. Warren was so beautiful.

He turned to face them, his scar crinkling over his eye as he glared at them. "A man just tried to wash me."



Madeline blinked while Charles spluttered. “What?” she cried.

“I was sat in the tub taking a bath, and a man came in and tried to *wash* me! I nearly knocked him flat out.”

Charles choked laughter into his hand as Madeline tried to school her features. “Was it the footman? Perhaps he was just trying to help—”

“He offered to wash my hair! *Christ!*” His hands shook as he dropped them to his sides. He stood at the end of the bed, chest heaving as his gaze focused on a spot between Madeline and Charles.

She inched forward. “John—”

“I cannot stay here,” he blurted. “I thought I could, but I can’t. I cannot be housed *miles* away from you on a separate floor, waiting for some ponce in a wig to try and rub my hair with oil!”

“John,” Charles echoed in warning.

“This house it too big, the rooms are too drafty, and why the *hell* is everything green?” he barked. “Pick another color!”

Madeline crawled to the end of the bed, holding out her arms to him.

He stiffened, not yet ready to be touched. “And I cannot have my husband’s first comment on seeing me again that I should go away.”

Charles groaned. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I’m sorry,” she added. “I didn’t think it would be quite like this. I’m miserable too.”

Warren shook his head. “This is your world, Madeline. It is not mine. I said I would try. I will keep trying, but—”

“It is not mine either,” she replied. “Not anymore. I said in the carriage, my home is *you*. My home is wherever you are. Both of you. And if both of you cannot safely be here, then this is not my home. *Please*, John—”

He hesitated for a moment before stepping into her arms, his body stiff.

“We will stay for the christening because we made a promise to the Corbin’s. But the moment it is over, we will go.” She pulled back slightly, brushing her fingers through his long hair. “And Charles had an idea that we could let this house. We could use the money however we wished. We could build a school or buy some land of our own.”

He shook his head. “This house is your dream.”

“*Was* my dream,” she corrected. “You are my dream now, John. You and Charles.”

He sighed, relaxing slightly in her arms.

She inched closer, peppering his jaw with gentle kisses. “Let me show you what you mean to me,” she whispered against his skin. Taking his hand with both of hers, she laid his palm flat against her chest, sliding it down between her breasts, down her stomach, resting between her legs. He cupped her with a soft groan, his eyes hooding with want. “Come find your home in me,” she murmured. “In us. As long as we have each other, we will never want for anything else.”

With one hand cupped between her legs, he grabbed her hair with the other, fisting his fingers in her curls. He jerked her head back. She hissed at the pain, loving the feel of it echoing in her core, a sharp unraveling as she readied herself for what was coming.

She loved when he was rough, when he spanked and teased. She loved crawling for him, sucking him with Charles, both of them on their knees. This man owned her, body and soul. And he gave as good as he got, worshipping her and Charles into the early hours of the morning. She loved watching his tenderness, the way he met their needs without asking. He was rough, but attentive, angry but loving.

“John, please,” she murmured, knowing how much he loved hearing them both beg. “We need you. This house is not our home. *You* are. Be with us.”

Charles had slipped off the side of the bed and came around, pressing in at Warren's side. "I'm sorry, Johnnie. Let's all forget this horrible place exists. There is only us now. Come to bed, my darlings." He kissed them both, taking them each by the hand and giving them a pull.

Warren growled, jerking his hand loose as he dropped it to the waist of his pants. "I'm too on edge to be gentle tonight."

"Good," Charles replied.

But Madeline had an idea. "Lie on the bed, John."

Both men blinked at her. "What?" he replied, brows lowered over those dark eyes.

She lifted her chin to hold his gaze. "I said, lie on the bed. You are not in control in this house. This house is *mine*. I make the rules tonight, and I say you will lie on the bed and let us worship you."

The corner of his mouth twitched, belying the smile he tried to hide. "And what do you expect me to do?"

She glanced at Charles, heart racing. "I rather think I'd like to watch Charles ride your cock while I sit on your face. If Charles is very good, I'll suck him while he rides you. Would you like that?" she said at Charles.

The poor man could barely contain his groan. He turned to Warren. "Get on the fucking bed, John."

Madeline smiled, watching Warren drop his pants to the floor and crawl on the bed. His powerful body danced with golden light as he turned, stretching out on his back, his cock hardening before their eyes.

She slipped off her chemise as, next to her, Charles tugged off his shirt. That's all it took to have the three of them naked. She and Charles crawled up either side of the bed alongside Warren. They both dropped to their elbows at his hips, smiling at each other before they took him to mouth, licking and teasing him to full hardness.

He grabbed their hair, holding their heads as they worked him. Madeline sucked on his tip, hollowing her cheeks, as

Charles licked his shaft, one hand smoothing over his thigh.

Warren groaned, tugging on their hair. “Fuck—enough—”

Madeline smiled, popping off his tip. “Have you had enough, dearest?”

He scowled at her. “We’re just getting started. Charles, get on my cock while I make our wife scream.”

Her core ached as she watched Charles slip off the bed. He was back in moments handing Warren the little vial of oil.

“Come here, lovely,” Warren directed, offering it to her.

She looked down at it. “What—”

“You’re going to prep Charles for me.”

She gasped, glancing sharply over at Charles. “Would—do you want that?”

He nodded, leaning over Warren to kiss her. “Yes,” he said against her lips. “My darling, yes. Anything. Everything. Do anything to me. I’m yours.”

Her heart raced as she glanced between them. “Tell me what to do.”

“Come over here,” said Warren, patting the side of the bed next to him. “Charles, get your mouth back on my cock.”

Charles groaned, flipping up to his hands and knees as he obliged.

Madeline crawled on the bed next to him, looking hesitantly at Warren. This devilish man just couldn’t resist taking charge, but Madeline found she didn’t mind in the least.

“Put some of the oil on your fingers and work them in, adding one at a time. You want to stretch him out, love. Add more oil to make it easier for him to take my cock.”

She nodded, focusing on the task at hand. She sat up on her knees, pouring some of the oil onto her right hand, bracing Charles by the hip with her left.

He groaned at her touch. “Oh please,” he murmured, his breath fanning the tip of Warren’s cock.

She took a breath, trailing her oiled finger down his arse. He groaned again. Pressing into her touch.

Behind her, Warren watched, his hand stroking the back of her thigh. “Do it.”

Not waiting another second, she worked her first finger in, loving the tightness as Charles pressed back against her.

“That’s it,” Warren muttered, his other hand clutching Charles’s curls, controlling the speed of his mouth on his cock. “Fuck, you’re such a good girl. And he’s being so good for you. Do you like feeling our wife in your arse, Charles?” When he didn’t reply, Warren tugged him off by the hair. “Speak.”

Charles groaned. “Yes—*god*—I need more. Please, Madeline.”

She pressed a second finger in, and he shuddered.

“Stretch him out,” Warren directed. “Move your fingers apart.”

She did as he said, working in a third finger that had Charles moving his hips against her hand. She smoothed her other hand across his lower back, increasing the speed of her thrusts.

*Smack.*

She gasped, her whole body shuddering as she recovered from the sting of Warren’s slap to her bottom. She looked over her shoulder at him, cheeks burning with warmth as her core clenched tight with need. “John—”

“Spread your legs, lovely.”

As she did, his hand was already moving between her legs, curling up to sink two fingers inside her heat. She shivered with satisfaction, sinking down to ride his hand as she worked Charles open.

They were all groaning, chasing their pleasure. But she wanted more. She pulled her fingers free of Charles, clamping her legs tight around Warren’s hand, stilling his movement.

“Charles, take our husband. Own him. We don’t stop until he begs.”

Charles smiled, kissing her, as behind them Warren laughed. “I don’t beg, lovely.”

She smiled back, not saying the words in her heart. *Tonight, you will.*

She watched as Charles straddled him, oiling his cock and tossing the vial aside. Warren gripped him behind the knees as Charles used one hand to hold his cock steady, sinking down on it with a shuddering breath. They teased each other, Warren shifting his hips as Charles squeezed him.

“So fucking perfect,” Warren muttered. “Look at you speared on my cock. Who owns you?”

Charles groaned, sinking down to take Warren to the hilt. “*Ah—you do—*”

“Ride me, Charles. Ruin yourself on me.”

Charles was already moving, his lean muscles tight as he tipped his head back, eyes closed.

Madeline inched forward, lowering her face until she could claim his cock with her mouth.

Charles cried out, his hand fisting her hair as he worked himself on Warren and Madeline on his cock. She thrilled at the feel of him in her mouth, knowing what pleasure she gave him.

“Look at you both,” said Warren, watching them together, his hand smoothing up Madeline’s leg. “You’re mine. Every inch of this skin. Every beat of your hearts.”

Heart racing, she scooted away from Warren’s touch, leaving him with nothing to do but watch. He growled, grabbing for her hip. She swatted his hand away.

“I think she wants you to work for it,” Charles panted, his thrusts slowing as he chased his release.

Before she could reply, she was gasping, her mouth popping off Charles as Warren curled forward, grabbing her by

the hips. He clamped on tight, dragging her backwards, flipping her over until she straddled his chest facing Charles. “Sit on my face, lovely.”

She smiled, glancing over her shoulder at him. “What do you say?”

He groaned, both hands going to her breasts to tweak her nipples. She shivered, moving her hips on reflex against his chest, but then she stilled.

Charles watched them with a smile, his hand snaking around to cup Warren’s balls. He gave a little squeeze. “What do you say, John? Ask our wife nicely.”

“You’re both in so much trouble,” he muttered, his hands sliding down to her hips, one moving between her legs to flick her bud.

She whimpered, desperate for more, but she remained still on principle. Charles stopped too, panting for breath, his brow slicked in sweat.

“Don’t you dare fucking stop,” Warren ordered, pressing his hips up against Charles.

But Charles was on her side tonight. “One little word, John, and we will worship you over and over. The sun will rise, and still we will shower you with our love. We’ll give you everything, if you but only ask.”

Warren groaned. “I’m gonna spank both your arses raw.”

Madeline grinned, wiggling her hips against his chest. “Promises.”

Charles laughed, sliding himself off Warren’s length, waiting.

“Ah—*fuck*—fine,” Warren barked. “Please. God help me, I’m saying please. Madeline, get your cunt on my face and make me drown. I want you choking on our husband’s cock when he shatters. And Charles, don’t you dare stop until I’ve filled your arse with come.”

Madeline smiled, leaning forward to meet Charles in a kiss. He was grinning too, his hips already moving again.

Taking a deep breath, she inched back, her body coiling tight at the first swipe of Warren's tongue between her legs.

As she took boundless pleasure with her husbands, one word echoed in her mind and in her heart. *Free*. Madeline Bray was free.

**THE END**



## THANK YOU

Well? Did we enjoy Madeline's story? As soon as she appeared on the page in BEAUTIFUL THINGS, I knew I wanted to explore her more. It's always the quiet ones!

I'm grateful to my agent, Susan Velazquez Colmant, for encouraging me to pitch a third book. And thank you to Tantor Media for giving Madeline and her boys their chance to shine.

As always, thank you to Ashley, my alpha reader. You were so patient as I beat my head against the desk with early drafts. Thank you to my beta readers: Katie, Alex, Amanda, Nikki, Rachel, Lauren, and Michelle.

I am so humbled by the way my ARC Team continues to show up for each project. I have so much planned for the EMILYVERSE, and I can't wait to have you all along for the ride.

XO,

**Emily**

## LEAVE A REVIEW

If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review! No matter where you feel most comfortable (TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) your honest review means everything to me.

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## SNEAK PEEK: THAT ONE NIGHT



### Chapter One

“Have you ever been to a yacht race, beautiful?”

The Chad McBoatface hogging all the air next to me hasn't stopped talking for ten minutes. This walking Patagonia model must not be able to read, because I've got 'FUCK OFF' all but stamped across my forehead.

God, I just want to be alone to wallow in self-pity. Is that too much to ask?

I swirl what's left of the ice in my Old Fashioned, watching the cherry spin at the bottom of the glass. I'm sitting alone in this swanky hotel bar...well, I *wish* I was alone. It's all dark-paneled walls with a sophisticated nautical theme. Perfect for Chad. I snort into my glass. He doesn't notice. Am I being too hard on him?

*Oh god, definitely not.*

Chad's the kind of guy that talks *at* you, not *to* you. Sure, he's got the smile and the blonde curls you could run your fingers through, but he also keeps checking over his shoulder, winking at the rest of his group. They're sitting over in the corner, a great view of the Seattle skyline framed behind them. It's nearly three o'clock, and their late brunch is almost finished. They keep flashing us jeering smiles.

Wasn't he one stool over like two minutes ago? Damn it, I'm gonna have to take this pity party back to my room.

I drop my gaze to my phone and click on my inbox, tapping the top email. I must have a degradation kink, because I've reread the first three lines of this email fifty times in the last hour. It's the reason I left my own brunch early.

It's a form email, because of course. I wasted a year of my life applying to something and getting my hopes up, only to get a form email where the bot can't even spell my fucking name right.

*Dear Dr. Rachum Price,*

*Thank you for your interest in the Barkley Fellowship, the nation's premiere partner in advanced sports medicine. We were overwhelmed by the number of truly exceptional candidates this year. The selection committee has given careful consideration to your application. Unfortunately—*

I don't keep reading. I click the side of my phone and the screen turns black.

That's why I'm stuck here with Chad and not at my brother's wedding brunch. Call me selfish, but I couldn't bear to lose it in front of Harrison and his new husband and the whole extended family. So I slipped away, ordered a taxi, and came back here to wallow.

It's not like I'm missing the actual wedding. That was yesterday. The brunch today is just for those people who didn't have early flights out. I played my part all weekend long, smiling through all the events. I gave my proud sister speech at the rehearsal dinner, and danced like a loon at the reception last night.

I'm happy for him, really. He and Somchai are the definition of persevering love. But I'm sad for me too. Harrison will understand; it's a twin thing.

My flight home leaves first thing tomorrow morning. Knowing Som, he'll martial a small army of Thai aunties to bring me food for the next week to try and cheer me up. He and Harrison are both big-name chefs. They're slowly building out an empire. I can't complain when it means my fridge is always bursting with amazing free food.

Losing out on this fellowship sucks, but life moves on. For now, I need to go home. I'll let myself wallow for a day or two. My roommate will cry with me. She's basically an empath. Tess cries when actors on TV cry. She cries when cartoon animals cry. Meanwhile, I'm an emotionally unavailable, closed-off clam (her words, not mine).

So, I guess I'll give crying a try. But then I need a plan. I need to start phase two. I need—

*Fucking hell.*

I need Chad to scoot the fuck back right the fuck now!

He's leaning in my space, batting those blonde lashes at me. Is this his smolder? Am I meant to be swooning? How can one man fail to read every single sign a woman is giving him? I'm falling off my stool as he leans in even closer, giving my hair an exaggerated sniff.

I freeze.

"Mmm, you smell good," he murmurs. "Is that Chanel No. 9?"

Yeah, this is my absolute limit. It's time to yeet Chad back to his table. I take a deep breath, shoving Dragon Rachel back inside her cage. There's no reason to make a scene. I'll just turn him down with my big girl words.

But then the fucker dares to reach out and brush his fingers down my spine. This jumpsuit is backless, so he's grazing my bare skin.

I smack my drink onto the bar, and swivel on my stool, breaking our contact. "Get your hands off me," I hiss. "It's time to go."

Chad dares to look all wide-eyed at me as he stands. "Whoa—hey, easy. What's with the attitude? We're just having a nice chat."

My nostrils flare. "Nice chat?" I say, utterly incredulous.

He huffs a laugh. "Listen—"

"Amy!" a deep voice calls. "Amy, what the hell?"

Chad glances over my shoulder, eyes narrowed towards the voice.

“I’ve been waiting for you for like twenty minutes. I thought we were meeting downstairs.”

I spin on my stool to see a man striding towards the bar.

*Holy shit, do they put something in the water here?*

This guy is gorgeous too. His chocolate brown hair sweeps down over his brow as he hooks me with those hazel eyes. He’s got the perfect amount of stubble covering that chiseled jaw. Not to mention the way his chest and arms fill out his too-tight t-shirt.

He’s a pro athlete, I’d bet money on it. I’ve spent too long in the industry not to know a player when I see one. I’m guessing football. Defense. It’s not just the body, it’s the confidence, the look of luxury, the sucks-all-the-air-out-of-the-room effortless swagger.

Oh, and he’s swaggering now, right up to Chad. He’s got easily five inches on him and fifty pounds of muscle. “Is this guy bothering you, Amy? Are you bothering my sister, asshole?”

I suck in a breath. *Sister?* Am I that drunk? This isn’t Harrison, I—*ohhh*, we’re acting. He’s offering me an out. I slip into character. “It’s fine. He was just—”

“I wasn’t doing anything.” Chad confidently squares off against his new competition.

New guy folds his arms across his broad chest. “Well, from over there it looked like you were touching my sister, and she didn’t seem to like it. You want a broken hand?”

“No—”

“Cause *no one* touches my sister unless she asks for it first,” he growls.

I reflexively reach out, putting a hand on his arm. “I can take care of myself,” I warn. “And he was just leaving.” I stare daggers at Chad. “Weren’t you?”



Chad flashes me another smile. “Yeah...yeah, I gotta get going. But hey, let me give you my number—”

“Nah, she’s good.” My new friend glances at me. It’s quick, but the look is there, the genuine concern, the unspoken question. *Are you okay?*

I give him a curt nod.

“Hey man, I can give her my number,” huffs Chad. He’s letting his fear of embarrassment outweigh his survival instincts. I’m not surprised, seeing as his jerky friends are sitting across the bar laughing at us. “I’m in town for the rest of the week, and there’s the regatta I was telling you about—”

“Look, I don’t mean to be a major cock block, but I didn’t fly across the country to watch my sister flirt with some Cabela’s model.” He drops his gaze to me, his entire mood shifting from surly to puppy dog. “Come on, Amy,” he whines, his voice softer now. “Please don’t do this. Not again. No more random bar hookups while we’re on vacation. You promised we’d go see the Space Needle. And I want to watch them throw fish at the wharf.”

I’m fighting my laughter now. This guy is too much. “Okay, yeah,” I reply. “We can do the Space Needle. And how about I get you a dragon fruit tea from the original Starbucks?”

“Awesome.” He wedges himself between me and Chad, forcing him to take another step back.

“Well, I’ll just...go,” Chad mutters.

But my new seat mate is totally ignoring him. He’s scanning the menu QR code with his phone. “Hey, did you see they have mozzarella sticks?” he says, his tone falsely bright and cheery. “I’m ordering some. You wanna share? Oh, shit—you’re allergic to dairy. Well, I’m still ordering them.”

I’m smiling now. I can’t help it. This guy has effectively neutralized my Chad problem without me having to be a bitch and make a scene. And now the bartender is taking his order—craft beer, mozzarella sticks, and a basket of fries with blue cheese dressing instead of ketchup.

Chad snatches his Macallan neat off the bar and returns to his table. They welcome him with hoots and jeers.

“Assholes,” new guy mutters, accepting the beer the bartender slides his way.

I settle back on my stool, unable to deny the sudden shift in energy. Why do I feel nervous? This guy’s presence is undeniable. It’s like he’s a magnet, and I’m being pulled closer against my will.

*Great, now I’m the creep.*

I sigh, draining the last of my Old Fashioned, and flag the bartender down. I order a hot tea instead. No more booze for Rachel.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped,” he says. “I swear I wasn’t trying to be a dick, you just looked like you needed the save.”

“It’s fine,” I reply, accepting my hot tea. I squeeze a wedge of lemon into the cup adding, “It was entertaining.”

He smirks at me, those hazel eyes flashing with amusement, but they quickly fade back to sad. I want to know what this beautiful man has to be sad about. A moment ago, he was like a puppy wagging his tail, now he’s a puppy sitting alone in a puddle.

“And don’t worry,” he adds, glancing over his shoulder towards the rowdy brunch table. “I’ll sit here just to keep up appearances, but I promise I won’t bug you. I know you wanna be left alone.”

I pause, the cup of tea raised halfway to my lips. “What makes you think I want to be left alone?”

He snorts, taking a sip of his beer. “You mean aside from the big ‘FUCK YOU’ you’ve got tattooed on your forehead?” He gestures at my face with his hand.

I purse my lips. “Oh, so you *can* see it. Good. For a minute there, I thought it must have washed off in the shower.”

“Nope. You were giving that guy all the signs to fuck right off. Not to mention you were practically falling off your stool

to get away. Then I saw him touch you,” he mutters, his mood shifting from sad to mad. “I saw you flinch.”

I stiffen, feeling the ghost of that unwanted touch between my shoulders.

“I hate guys like that,” he says, taking another sip of his beer.

“Like what?”

“Guys that think they can take whatever they want from a woman. I was serious,” he adds, turning slightly to face me, those hazel eyes holding me captive. “My sister, Amy...she hasn’t always had the best luck with guys,” he explains. “I see a woman who is clearly uncomfortable, and I sorta see red. She’d call me a protective alpha hole. Maybe you will too. But you know, whatever. Chicks always say nothing will get better until the good guys stand up and set the bad ones straight. If it keeps my Amy safe, I’ll be the jerk. And maybe guys like Douche McYachtclub over there will mind their manners next time.”

I gasp, setting my tea down with a rattle. “Ohmygod, shut up.”

He raises a dark brow in confusion. “What? That guy was being a total douche.”

I grin, brushing my hand along his arm, as I lean in with a laugh. “I’ve been calling him Chad McBoatface in my head this whole time.”

He glances back over his shoulder and snorts with laughter too. “Yeah...yeah, that guy is a total Chad.”

I settle back on my stool. We both gaze up at the TVs. There’s a baseball game on next to the soccer game. The bartender brings over two steaming baskets of fried food.

The mozzarella sticks smell amazing. And I’m not *actually* lactose intolerant. If my knight in shining grey cotton offers to share, I’m not saying no. Besides, a fried stick of cheese might help soak up some of the bourbon currently sitting in my empty stomach.

“Want some of this?” he asks, sliding me a sharing plate.

I smile, reaching for a mozzarella stick. “Sure, thanks.”

He picks at the food, checking his phone.

As soon as a commercial starts on both the TV screens, I clear my throat. “So...what brings you to Seattle?”



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Emily Rath** is a romance and fantasy author. A university professor by day, she lives in Florida with her husband, son, and cat. They regularly comb the local beaches looking for shark teeth.

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