



*A*  
*Gentleman's*  
*Wish*

V. KAHANY

# A GENTLEMAN'S WISH

---

V. KAHANY

# CONTENTS

## FREE EBOOK

### A GENTLEMAN'S WISH

#### Part I

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

#### Part II

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

#### Part III

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

## EPILOGUE

SUBSCRIPTION

FROM THE AUTHOR

ALSO BY THIS AUTHOR

STAY IN TOUCH!

**FREE EBOOK**

SUBSCRIBE TO V. KAHANY'S NEWSLETTER AND GET A FREE  
EBOOK!

**SUBSCRIBE HERE**

## **A GENTLEMAN'S WISH**



A VICTORIAN ROMANCE

**V. KAHANY**

## A GENTLEMAN'S WISH

Copyright © 2021 Vlad Kahany

All rights reserved. This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except as provided by United States of America copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, or events is entirely coincidental.

✿ Created with Vellum

# PART I

---

“*T*omorrow, ladies, your maidenhead will be auctioned off. At tonight’s dinner, your mission is to ensure that tomorrow, men are willing to pay a fortune for it.”

Mrs. Sharke and Mrs. Hilderbog appraised the two young ladies in front of them with the utmost attention. The dazzling Mrs. Sharke ran the Belle House, a luxury house of pleasure on Piccadilly. Mrs. Hilderbog was dressed in black head to toe, her pointy nose and small piercing eyes like that of a crow. She was in charge of the “School for Ladies,” as Mrs. Sharke liked to call her less-known establishment.

“The lords are always willing,” said one of the two girls with a contempt smile. Rebecca, the eighteen-year-old brunette, was known for her clever tongue and immediately drew Mrs. Hilderbog’s glare.

Mrs. Sharke, the madam, only assessed her coldly, circling the two girls slowly, like a predator. “Then make sure that the debut night is not the last time they want to see you, Miss Rebecca. Soon, you will learn to use your smart mouth in more refined ways.”

But Mrs. Sharke’s attention was on Miss June Aveling, the other girl of the same age. If Rebecca’s beauty was sharp and at once striking, June looked like a fairy who had just walked off a classical painting. Her beauty was subdued but more refined and, one might say, angelic. The long luscious hair the color of gold framed the face with big blue eyes, sensual lips,

and a soft gaze. She was destined to fetch the highest bid, the madam was sure.

Mrs. Sharke was pleased. All the school debutantes were well-mannered and educated in a way so as to make the best future companions for the wealthiest gentlemen in London. But rarely had she had two such striking beauties at one auction.

The brightly lit up upstairs parlor they were in was on the upper floor of the large two-storied mansion on Baker Street. The house was the living quarters for the girls aged fifteen to eighteen who were taken care of, educated, and turned into proper ladies. Then, when they reached the appropriate age, their virginity was auctioned off at the “Belle Flower” party, attended by the wealthiest of London. The biannual event was a hushed affair but rumored about plenty.

One wondered why wealthy lords would pay an outrageous amount for a virgin when they could find one much cheaper. But it wasn't about the maidenhood per se, but rather about what happened to the girls afterwards. They became the ladies of the Belle House, the house of pleasure whose reputation stretched far beyond England. And since the courtesans of the Belle House found their way into the lives of the most powerful lords, being the first man to introduce them into the world of pleasure was an honor.

“There is a degree of vanity in priming the woman who could potentially be the future mistress of a French prince,” Sir Henry Boldon once said after the lady of the Belle House, who he had deflowered only a year before, was summoned to France on the request of the said prince.

Such stories were numerous and increased the reputation of the “Belle Flower Auction,” as well as fueled the imagination of the girls groomed for the business of pleasure. The business at Baker Street wasn't very profitable but had potential. Mrs. Sharke thought that she was saving the girls from awful fates and promised them a decent future. The favor, naturally, had to be repaid.

Most girls awaited with anticipation for their debut. If some outsiders condoned and despised such business, the girls entered into it of their own free will.

“One of the previous girls fetched as high as two hundred fifty pounds,” Mrs. Sharke now lectured to the two young beauties who stood with their hands clasped at the front, their eyes cast down. “Such sum could pay off at once your balance for the residence and education at this establishment. Not to mention that, if you play it right, your benefactor could potentially put you up in a flat and ensure your comfortable living as long as you keep his interest. It happened to Miss Emma just last year.”

“Miss Emma then ran away with an American,” chimed in Rebecca, without taking her eyes off the floor.

Mrs. Hildeborg cleared her throat and glared at Rebecca as Mrs. Sharke narrowed her eyes.

The two girls were like night and day.

Rebecca had long dark hair, now neatly tied in a bun at the back of her head. Her striking, sharp features and pitch-black eyes that shot arrows at anything she cast her eyes on were those of a gypsy. Her manners were practiced and elegant, almost in a theatrical way, her chin lifted proudly, her mouth as witty as it could be harsh and offensive. She possessed a temper of a not-yet trained young mare. Fond of silk, gold, and all things pricey, for months she'd been making a list of the clients of the Belle House, noting down the clients' occupations, tastes, and wealth—all the information gathered from the courtesans she'd visited quite often and without Mrs. Hildegard's knowledge. Mrs. Sharke knew of it, of course, but admired the dedication of the young girl.

June was the complete opposite. Her golden hair was combed back, pinned, and cascaded down her back in one beautiful wave. Her features were soft, her eyebrows and eyelashes light in color, bringing out her intense blue eyes, the color of azure waters. She talked softly, walked elegantly, and smiled with restraint but never expressed interest in men per se. Mrs. Hildeborg often said that *her type* was trouble. Too

shameful during the lectures in sexual pleasure. Too timid when talking about men. Too quiet around men, however seldom that happened.

“There are plenty of clients that like that,” Mrs. Sharke retorted during such discussions. The madam knew the business well.

And so it was. If Rebecca was like rapid of a river, then June was a calm lake. What brought them together was a mystery to the madam.

She studied the girls who stood in their creme silk dresses with short sleeves. Their skirts and bodices were expensive yet simple, accentuating their figures, skin soft and glowing from the oils and cremes applied for days, preparing them for the auction. They knew plenty about fashion, yet weren't allowed to own fancy gowns, couldn't afford one, and didn't have any until the day after the auction—their debut at the Belle House.

“We have twelve gentlemen who are gathering for dinner tonight to be introduced to you,” Mrs. Sharke went on as she strolled in front of the girls. Her lavish silk skirt whispered the tale of wealth and success, for her garments cost more than the entire parlor's decor. “Some of them you know from the previous dinners. Ten other girls will be in attendance. But you understand that all attention will be on you. *Should* be on you. Yes?”

Mrs. Sharke raised her cold eyes at the girls and flashed an equally cold smile. Mrs. Hilderbog nodded as if she were the one addressed.

“It won't be a problem, will it?” Mrs. Sharke took a step closer to the girls. Rebecca looked at her proudly and smiled, but Mrs. Sharke's eyes were on June. “Miss June?”

June raised her eyes to the madam. Her calm gaze didn't seem to have any emotions.

Mrs. Sharke stretched her hand and gently took June's chin between her fingers.

“June.” Her cold eyes softened as she gazed at the girl. “It is a very important evening, my dear girl,” she said softer but

with authority. “If you had any reservations, you had time to change your mind and leave. But now you are about to start a very important part of your life. Tonight and tomorrow night will be your exam. More importantly—it will set the tone to your future.”

“Understood, ma’am,” said June softly.

Nothing seemed to change in her expression. She was always agreeable, yet Mrs. Sharke felt there was more to her character than this quiet submission. She hoped the girl wouldn’t sabotage the auction.

“I am sure our balance will be paid off tomorrow night,” said Rebecca cockily.

Mrs. Sharke let go of June and turned her gaze at Rebecca. The girl reminded her of her own youth and determination. She was as admiring as she was dangerous. With such qualities came trouble. Though an experienced businesswoman like Mrs. Sharke knew that trouble often came not from the ones like Rebecca but the calm and seemingly reserved ones. The ones like June.

The madam stayed silent for some time, lost in her own thoughts as the girls glanced at her expectantly.

Trouble, excitement, pangs of love, the art of lust—they all attracted the richest men in London to the courtesans of the Belle House. And nothing was more alluring than the beautiful maidens who were soon to become proper mistresses.

“Well,” Mrs. Sharke said abruptly, snapping out of trance, and turned on her heel. “Make sure they eat and drink plenty of tea before the dinner,” she ordered the principal as she walked out of the room, leaving behind a faint scent of powder and expensive perfume.

She had to take care of the last arrangements before dinner and carefully go through the list of benefactors one more time.

Contrary to what one thought—the benefactors as well as the naive girls—Mrs. Sharke played out the bids carefully, knew who was willing to bid how much, what women the benefactors preferred, and researched the new attendees. A



hefty non-refundable fee was paid by every bidder, and if their income and wealth were often a secret to the public or even their spouses, Mrs. Sharke was one of the secret-keepers, knowing everyone's worth.

She knew precisely who would bid for Rebecca and who would be infatuated with June's calm demeanor.

There was Archer Bellington, a dandy and a woman-lover, but with too much show and no-go. Too greedy unless the price was what he was willing to cough up.

Sir Henry Marsh liked girls much younger, hence wasn't a Belle House client but won the Belle Flower Auction several times. June was just what he preferred.

There were Mr. Kopf and Mr. Lee, who were gamblers but only once each won the auction, and that was when the highest bidders couldn't attend.

Several others would try to win a bid for its thrill and engage with Rebecca's feisty attitude.

There was an industrialist, referred to Mrs. Sharke by Baron Carlile, who was attending for the first time. His wealth could buy all the Belle Flowers on Baker Street *and* the ladies of the Belle House. He could be one of the winners.

Lord and Lady Dekker were almost certainly to win June if she was to their liking.

And then there was Lord James Volchen. He'd won the auction three times, throwing money like it was nothing. With his wealth, he could afford to groom his own house of virgins. But he was a peculiar man. If he didn't like what he saw at dinner, he would not show up the next day. Mrs. Sharke had to make sure he was interested in June, just like several other high bidders, for it would ensure a good price.

She'd been doing this for several decades. She was a businesswoman. And she liked to have things go as planned.

Except even Mrs. Sharke didn't know that one thing that couldn't be planned was a man's sudden infatuation.

Marriage and intimacy had become a frequent topic of discussion between June and Rebecca in the last two years. The two girls had been friends for years. Becky had come from a poor family where only a man with money could make a difference. June had become an orphan at the age of fifteen, and marriage had seemed like the only thing that could save her from becoming homeless.

Becky had become the great debater on the subject.

June had just lost her father and turned sixteen when Mr. Peckenweck, a bank manager in his thirties with a balding head and stinky breath, came to see her and proposed to her.

“It seems like the only option for you, my dear,” he said as his fat purple lips stretched in a smile and exposed chipped brown teeth. June had noticed his leers before, but imagining him next to her made her nauseous.

Rebecca, of course, almost threw up at hearing the news.

“June, can you imagine screwing a hog?” June wrinkled her nose in disgust as she stared at her friend. “Yes, my sentiments exactly. If you want to marry Mr. Peckenweck.”

The next day, another man showed up on the steps of June’s house. Mr. Patmore was in his forties and owned a stationery shop around the corner, where June used to buy her drawing supplies. A friend of her father’s, he said it was his duty to take care of June.

Her heart fluttered with hope until he explained. “It would only be right if I married you and provided you with a more or less comfortable living. My shop is in need of an assistant, and you are old enough.”

Mr. Patmore kept talking while June felt like the floor had dropped down from under her feet. He was a short, lean man in a cheap but new suit, with a twitchy mouth and a habit of blowing his nose too loudly into his handkerchief. He had always been quiet and on good terms with her father. He was a pleasant man, sure.

“For a toad who is trying to romance a butterfly,” said Becky with a snort as she consoled June that very evening. “I would rather shred my fingers to bare bones doing what I do for the rest of my life than marry someone like him. There is of course, William Brick who had always had an eye for you. But you have no dowry. He has no money either. So if you are willing to scrub floors for the rest of your life and give William a couple of pretty brats who would do the same, I shall ask mama to talk to him.”

“I am not very fond of him,” said June grimly, disheartened by Becky’s harsh talks.

“There are other options,” said Rebecca and blew a strand of hair off her face with a mischievous smile that June knew too well.

It was Rebecca who had worked briefly in the kitchen of the Belle House. How she learned about the mansion on Baker Street was a mystery to June. Becky was too quick, too nosy, not educated enough but ready to learn. It was Becky who explained to June what went on in the house on Baker Street and what the girls were groomed for.

“A prostitute,” June echoed as the two of them walked down Piccadilly one day. June felt miserable. What little money she had left after her father’s death was barely enough to pay for the flat for the next month.

Becky was chirping away and ogling the pretty ladies and fancy carriages. Her hand was wrapped around June’s arm, as

if they were fancy ladies themselves, walking down the street during an afternoon.

Becky cocked an eyebrow.

“I don’t like the word *prostitute*. But in all honesty, what woman doesn’t sell herself at some point of her life?”

“Becky, you don’t know what you are talking about. You haven’t been with a man.”

“Thank Lord! Or I wouldn’t be able to get into the house on Baker Street.”

“So you want to sell yourself to men?”

Becky whipped around and stood right in front of June. Her hands on her waist, she cocked her head to one side as if in reproach.

“Unlike you, June, I’ve never had options in my life. And after your papa’s death, neither do you. If you can tell me how you can possibly make it all better—please, enlighten me!”

June pursed her lips and looked around, trying to hold the tears and avoiding looking at Becky. Despair had become her constant companion since her father’s passing.

“Would you rather wear a maid’s uniform or an expensive silk dress?” Rebecca asked.

June shook her head, refusing to answer or look at her friend.

Rebecca didn’t give up. “Would you prefer to ride around London in a fancy carriage or cover every foot of the servant quarters on your knees, scrubbing floors?”

“At least I wouldn’t sell myself to others,” June interjected softly.

“So you would rather hate your life forever than hate a moment or two and enjoy the majority of it?”

June thought about it, and when she returned her eyes to Becky, her friend stood in a triumphant pose, her arms crossed at her chest, her foot tapping the cobblestone.

“The way I see it”—Becky wrapped her hand around June’s arms and resumed walking—“we are free to do what we want. Your father said we are like butterflies—meant to fly free and enjoy life. Well, I’ve seen plenty of butterflies flit from blossom to blossom, basking in the sunlight. I’ve never seen butterflies scrubbing the filthy floors.”

Despite her sulky mood, June burst out in laughter. “That’s not what my father meant, silly.”

“Sure. But think about it. Fancy dresses, jewelry, all the attention. Men, wealthy, noble, and nice.”

“But you have to serve them! How do you not understand, Becky?” June exclaimed.

“Ugh.” Becky rolled her eyes and threw her head backward in frustration, almost losing her bonnet. “Why do you always have to be so serious? You have a choice. Look at it this way.” Becky stopped and looked around, searching for something. “There!” She leaned in closer to June and pointed at the worker who unloaded the barrels from a carriage. Sweat soaked his grey shirt and trousers, his face was smudged with dirt. He was rough in appearance and three times as big as June. “Can you imagine him being your husband?”

“What? No!” exclaimed June. “Nonsense.”

“What about him?” Becky pointed at an older man who feasted on pastries outside the baker’s shop, grease and powder on his gloves. “Can you imagine marrying him and sharing a bed?”

June turned to resume walking. “You are awful.”

Becky’s hand gripped her tighter, stopping her, as her lips came close to June’s ear with a sinister whisper, “His bad breath next to you every night of your life.”

“No!” exclaimed June, appalled, though a smile was forming on her lips.

“Or taking Mr. Peckenweck’s pecker in your mouth when he feels like it because you are his wife.”

“Becky, stop!” June shook her head and huffed. “You can be such an awful creature!” She turned around, hoping Becky wouldn’t see her blush scarlet.

“Or his hands on you,” Becky growled, narrowing her eyes on June playfully, “touching you everywhere. For eternity. Until you die! And you will probably die of sadness!”

“Cut it out, Becky!”

June shook off her friend’s hands and started marching away.

Becky caught up with her and jerked her to a stop. She stood for a moment gazing at June without a trace of a smile until she finally spoke again.

“At least when you are a courtesan,” she said with determination, “you can endure a man for a night and be done with it. No one can tell you what to do with your spare time. No one *owns* you. And there are plenty of others—dukes, lords, artists. It’s the Belle House, not Covent Garden. We’ll be around the noblest of men. See?”

She nodded at something at a distance. A fancy carriage stopped at the curb, and a dashing young man promptly jumped out and stretched his elegantly gloved hand to help a young lady in a luscious blue dress and fur cape to step out.

“One day,” Becky continued, observing the scene with eyes full of admiration but no trace of a smile, “you might fall in love. One day, June, a noble, wealthy man might fall in love with you.”

“It’s a fairy tale, Becky,” June said with a sad smile.

Becky shrugged her shoulders. “At least it’s an option. Shall we get some pastries? I am paying because, well, pastries are the only things that me scrubbing the dirty floors can afford right now.”

She winked cheerfully at June.

And that was how just over a year go, June and Rebecca were selected to reside at the mansion on Baker Street.



*The time has come.*

The phrase that sounded like a doomsday flickered in June's mind all through the morning. Tonight they were to attend the dinner arranged for the benefactors.

A week ago, Rebecca and June had gone through the "beauty ritual" in preparation for the auction. One of them was a tradition to bare the intimate parts.

"As if we are mares who are selected for breeding," June had complained to Becky then.

The hair around their sex was removed to the minimum, barely covering the most intimate part.

"Men like to see the details," Mrs. Hilderbog lectured as June laid on a leather banquette, her legs wide apart, her privates embarrassingly on full display for the young woman who expertly plucked her pubic hairs as if June were a chicken. The woman's face was so close to June's sex that June's face turned scarlet.

Pluck.

June winced, her face flaming hot from embarrassment.

"The sight spurs men's fantasies," Mrs. Hilderborg continued.

Pluck.

"You don't think that men pay an outrageous amount just to stick their cock in you. No. They want a different experience."

June bit her lip and closed her eyes, thinking with disgust that all this was done for a man—*one* man—who would spend a fortune on her. She already hated that one person.

And then there would be many...

After the awful procedure, she stormed into her room only to see Becky standing in front of the mirror, frowning, her

skirt lifted at the front, as she studied her bare privates in the mirror.

“Ugh. Stop that, please!” June exclaimed and flung herself onto the bed.

Becky cocked her head, not taking her eyes off the reflection. “I look like a little girl. Is that what men like?”

“I don’t care,” June retorted.

“You’ll have to care soon enough.” Becky scrutinized the sight of her legs in the mirror. She pressed them close together, one knee slightly over the other, and studied herself scrupulously. “I do have to admit it looks...quite sexual.”

She turned to look at June who theatrically covered her face with both hands, grunting, “Oh, Lord. We will all burn in hell.”

Becky burst out with laughter.

Now, a week later, the day had come. But June was far from being cheerful.

June was nervous.

They had taken a bath earlier today and had been dressed by the maids into simple creme-colored silk gowns that left their necks and arms bare. June liked what she saw in the mirror. The problem was of a different kind. What if she didn’t like even a single benefactor?

No matter what she did, how she tried to distract herself, her mind conjured the images of men. Their leers. Their fingers, stretching toward her to touch her. Their suggestive smiles, tongues licking the dry lips that were thirsty for young blood.

She’d had plenty of bad dreams. The repulsive Mr. Peckenweck, the man who had offered to marry her when she was barely sixteen and an orphan, was in them.

What if one of the gentlemen at the auction was just like him? She would die of disgust.



Now, back in her room that she shared with Becky and three other girls, she kept visualizing a man's sex—the way she'd seen it in pictures drawn in details, from different angles, different shapes and sizes. It all had been shown to them by teachers and courtesans who came to the house to school the future women of pleasure. Why in the world these images had stuck in June's mind right now, on this day of all times, was a mystery.

Her heart started beating wildly. This would soon be her reality. As soon as tomorrow. The bids would be made, and she would be sold to the highest bidder.

Becky was giddy with excitement like a young puppy. June—in a bad mood.

That was to be her life—serving men.

She'd chosen it.

Had she?

While Becky got ready for the dinner as if it were the dinner at the royal court, June felt even worse than she had in the previous days.

Smoking a cigar and sipping brandy, Lord James Volchen sat in the armchair in his sitting room.

A man barely in his thirties, he was extremely wealthy and possessed an air of an older man. The wealth had come partially from his inheritance, then was multiplied through successful businesses, too many to name. This allowed him to establish himself among the London elite as a man of grand power. His seeming arrogance and disregard for the high society rules gave him a reputation as an immoral man. The word most often used by the ladies of the ton was “a brute.” His pitch-black hair and equally dark eyes gave him a devilish look, and the harsh words that often came out of his mouth in public made others gape in shock.

It made his friend, Desmon Shaw, smile. The younger man sat across from Volchen, almost mirroring his position, cigar and brandy in his hand. Quite for some time, they sat in comfortable silence that could only be between two people who’d known each other for two decades.

Desmon thought about his business back in Kent. He missed his estate already—the picturesque landscapes that possessed serenity that the dirty, noisy city lacked. He didn’t visit London often. And when he did, Volchen whom he’d known since childhood, was his trusted friend.

Volchen had lost his wife soon after the marriage. The *love* marriage, which was even a bigger tragedy. Desmon could see why Volchen had become who he was—reserved, harsh, vain,

using women as per his needs, playing with money and people's fates. Behind this facade was sadness and disappointment in life. But that was hidden from most people.

Desmon himself was a strongly-built young man in his mid-twenties. His dark, messy hair and sideburns, sharp features, and smoldering black eyes made him a handsome man and caught plenty of admiring stares from the ladies. But he could never easily trust a woman. Not after his fiancée had run away with another man. Out of all places—to Paris, away from “the boredom of the country life” as the gossip had later said.

That wasn't to say that Desmon had stayed away from women. Quite the contrary. After the heartbreak several years ago, he'd dived head in into the life of partying and carnal pleasures. Actresses, divorcees, courtesans—several years ago, London had been his main destination, and he'd chased every pleasure that could take his mind off his humiliating betrothal. But in the last couple of years, his flat on Cecil Street had been empty, except for a visit every now and then, mostly for business.

Desmon's arrival at Volchen's townhouse was a surprise.

“How unexpected!” exclaimed Volchen. “You just arrived today! And without notice! I have no choice but to look at it as a sign.”

Desmon laughed. He knew his friend's peculiar philosophy. There were no coincidences. Everything was a sign of some predestination.

This time, Volchen surprised Desmon in return. “We are going to the auction, then,” he announced.

“I don't remember you being interested in such events.”

“Quite of a different kind. A virgin auction.”

Desmon, taken aback by such news, raised his eyebrows. “Explain?” he said with unease.

“The house on Baker Street is the sister-establishment of the Belle House.”

Desmon, of course, knew of the luxury brothel on Piccadilly and had even spent a night or two there after his failed betrothal years ago. Expensive courtesans had briefly taken his mind off his miseries, and with what chic!

“Go on,” said Desmon, giving in to curiosity.

Volchen puffed a cloud of cigar smoke into the air, prolonging the silence. Finally, he rose and walked to the table to refill his glass with brandy.

“Mrs. Sharke, the madam of the Belle House, acquires girl from...”—he shrugged his shoulders—“here and there. To be honest, I still don’t know how she gets her hands on the virgins.” He raised his forefinger in the air. “And of decent background, who”—Volchen paused for emphasis—“and that’s important, so don’t you cringe at the idea—*willingly* become the residents of the house on Baker Street. For a year or two they are educated in proper etiquette and knowledge in all things peculiar.” A half-smile touched Volchen’s lips. “All that in exchange for their virginity to be auctioned off to the crème of the London elite. A brilliant idea, if you ask me.” Volchen took a seat in his armchair, graciously crossing one leg over the other and giving Desmon a meaningful stare.

“S-s-so...” Desmon took a sip of brandy without taking his eyes off his friend. “You are planning on acquiring a virgin for a night, I take it? It is one night, correct?”

Volchen nodded.

Desmon smirked. “What is the average price for such *exquisite*”—he chuckled—“entertainment?”

Volchen shrugged his shoulders. “The bids start at fifty pounds and go up to...well, the highest it had ever gone was three hundred.”

Desmon whistled in surprise. Where he was from, one could acquire ten acres of land for that much money. Desmon had an estate of thousands of acres. He’d gotten into training horses for racing and spent more than that on a good colt. But he never threw money around.

“Personally,” he said, “I don’t see why one would pay so much for something as trivial as maidenhead. But then, what do I know?”

“Dear Desmon, you don’t understand. The girls then go to reside and work at the Belle House. With the selective clientele and all that. You understand it’s a hierarchy of reputation. For men, mostly. You’d be surprised how a man is judged in certain circles by what courtesan he is associated with. You’ve never met Eva Bernal. She frequently accompanies the Duke of Cleveland on his international trips. That means you, my friend, do not have a chance to bed her regardless of money. As ridiculous as it sounds, some courtesans are too noble for an average nobleman.”

Desmon chuckled.

“And if you were the one to win a Belle Flower,” Volchen continued, “and she ends up with, say, the French Prince of Benevento, which was the case several years back, well, who cares what you paid for her maidenhead if even the French prince is getting seconds.”

“That’s an awful way to put it, Volchen.”

“It is true.”

“And since when do you care?”

“I don’t, my friend. It’s mere entertainment.”

“Nu-huh. I know you, Volchen. A mare, a woman, a carriage, an antique—it’s all the same to you. But maidens—it’s a power game, isn’t it?”

“Whatever it is, I enjoy it.”

“Well, I shall pass. I am not into that kind of entertainment.”

“Not so fast, my friend.” Volchen’s lips curled in a mischievous smile. “I would like you to make me company.”

Desmon burst out in laughter. “Since when do you need advice?”

“I don’t.”

“Then?”

“One doesn’t need company in a theatre, or an opera house. But the more, the merrier. It will be quite entertaining, I assure you. I will get it sorted with the madam. Two debutantes—”

“Quite an interesting word for a future courtesan.”

“All women are debutantes at one time or another. And many get to be courtesans. It’s a matter of a connotation, of course.”

Desmon nodded, remembering his fiancée and looking away from his friend to hide his bitterness.

“So it’s settled then. Tonight,” said Volchen with a proud smile.

“Tonight? I just got into town, and you are already seducing me into dubious entertainment, you serpent!”

Volchen smiled. “Sometimes the best things come most unexpectedly.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t exaggerate. You bringing a friend won’t be a problem?”

“There is never a problem with me and the mighty of this world.” Volchen chuckled vainly.

“Let me guess.” Desmon narrowed his eyes at his friend. “It was you who had placed the highest bid ever at the auction.”

“Let’s just say I like to indulge in innocent things,” Volchen said and winked.

Rebecca didn't stop talking about the benefactors—who they might be, what they were like, whether any of them were young and handsome and fall for her charms immediately.

Rebecca was a natural. And though June was a tiny bit curious to see the men who would gather for the introductory dinner, she felt uneasy. She'd been preparing for over a year for this event and, with time, had come to terms with it. After all, Rebecca was right—June could carry on with her favorite things—entomology and art. And when required—she would entertain men. One always had to choose what to sacrifice.

June sat on her bed and studied the drawing that she'd finished the day before. It was the lifeless body of a Glanville Fritillary butterfly, attacked by a spider and surrounded by ants. The butterfly with bright speckled coloring, orange, yellow, white and black, was the most common in London. June had observed the scene in one of Hyde Park's gardens a month ago. As soon as she'd gotten home, she had sketched it from memory. The beautiful dry wings flat on the ground. The spider's fangs sinking into its thorax. The predator's body hovering over it. The ants, sprinkled on the white space around, already picking apart the abdomen and the legs.

June had used watercolors for background and ink for outlines. The rest was done by graphite, with added details in ink and more opaque gouache for accented colors. She'd used the fixative to seal her drawings, just like she always had. The cheap alternative to the proper fixatives made the ink stand out

and turned the paper yellowish with time. Some of her older drawings had acquired a sepia tint with years. But June couldn't afford expensive drawing materials anymore, and she was grateful for even that much. She'd inherited her love for butterflies from her papa who had been an entomologist. That and her drawing skills were all that'd been left from her previous life.

"It's...disturbing," was Becky's opinion on that particular drawing. "In a beautiful sort of way. My God, June, how do such horrific scenes take place in this beautiful head of yours!"

Now Becky walked up to June, who gloated over her own artwork. She pulled the sketchbook out of her friend's hands, took her hands into hers, and stared at her for a minute.

"We will be all right, June." These moments of Becky's reassurance were rare, making them so much more dear to June. "It's the start of a new life, and it will be fabulous."

She smiled brightly, and June wished she had as much enthusiasm about men as her friend.

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Sharke walked in, all burgundy silk, emeralds glinting around her neck and wrists and ears. Her hair was done up and lavishly twisted with flowers. The scent of her expensive perfume floated through the room.

Mrs. Sharke had been a courtesan once, June knew. Right now, the madam who was in her mid-forties looked like a lady from the high society, and June couldn't help but admire her beauty. Several dresses awaited June at the Belle House in the room prepared for her. Soon, in a couple of days, June would look like a dazzling lady herself.

She smiled softly at the madam who assessed both girls one more time.

"You've heard this before, but I need you to pay special attention to everyone. No favorites, ladies." Mrs. Sharke raised an eyebrow at Rebecca. "You can't afford a small bid because some gentlemen feel unwanted and refuse to take part." Her gaze shifted to June. "I am not worried about Miss Rebecca,



but you, Miss June.” She paused for emphasis. “Keep your eyes on the clients, not down on the floor. And *talk*.” Mrs. Sharke paused and cocked her head. “Your voice is magnetic, Miss June. So are your eyes. These eyes should be telling men you want them so that the night before the auction they think only of you and the next day are ready to spend however much is required to place the winning bid.”



That was how they entered the parlor downstairs—the two girls in cream dresses on each side of dazzling Mrs. Sharke. Rebecca sashayed with a proud half-smile, her eyes shooting a curious glance at the men who stopped talking to other girls and went quiet, craning their necks at the debutantes. June walked with a soft calm gaze, nodding gracefully to open stares but careful not to stare too long.

A small orchestra played in one corner of the parlor. Violins set the tone of the evening—calm and noble as if it were a dinner gathering of the ton. White and red flowers in baskets decorated the room’s perimeter, and the giant chandelier was lit up, sparkling with dozens of lights. This had turned the usually very simple parlor into a living room of a wealthy house. The parlor sank in the scent of freshly cut flowers and burning wax. The girls selected to be present were dressed modestly in beige, in soft contrast to the cream dresses of the debutantes.

June couldn’t get rid of the sense of some bizarre celebration, though presented with exquisite taste and wealth but with hushed voices of the benefactors who studied both June and Rebecca at all times. Graceful bows. Polite smiles. Inquiring gazes as the two slowly made their way around the room.

Enough wine was served for the guests to soon resume the cheerful if not excited manner. The food looked delicious, though the two debutantes barely touched anything when they sat at the table next to Mrs. Sharke and Mrs. Hilderbog, who looked more like a guard or a school principal in her dark-

brown gown that covered every inch of her body except for her face and hands. June felt at ease as several gentlemen started joking, and soon, a heated conversation broke out and was joined by other girls.

Many guests seemed to know each other. But though their discussions were of business and current gossips, June often caught their glances on herself.

After dinner, they moved to the part of the parlor with armchairs and sofas.

Rebecca took up most of the attention with her cleverly manipulated trills of laughter and excitement.

June tried to smile, though failed to properly engage in any conversations.

Wine and brandy fueled the gentlemen's courage and curiosity.

Gentlemen... Despite the air of reservation and propriety, they were here for one reason.

June and Rebecca were properly introduced to every benefactor. June studied their appearances, voice, tone, the way they moved and what they said. For a moment, she forgot that many of them would place a bid to spend a night with her. She tried to imagine being married to them—the game that Becky had taught her so many times. It sent her heart, already beating fast from nervousness, into a panic.

“Your beauty is exquisite,” said Mr. Lee, a gallant elderly gentleman, his pointy mustache moving in a funny way at every word.

Mr. Kopf was old, bald, and drunk but charming.

Two younger gentlemen who were dressed almost identically were indifferent to June's smiles. All their attention was on Becky, who at some point had them on each side of her.

She found out that Sir Henry was an industrialist who'd come from a titled but poor family and made his fortune on his own.

Lord and Lady Dekker approached her. A couple in their fifties, they dripped with wealth which bought their way through numerous scandals. The way they lustfully talked about the Belle House made June uneasy.

“You must be excited, dear,” said Lady Dekker, whose eyes studied June hungrily, with a mischievous sparkle. The thought that women got involved in such auctions was appalling to June. “It would be a pleasure to make your intimate acquaintance,” the lady said, and June felt like throwing up at the thought of what the woman could possibly do to her.

Archer Bellington caught both Rebecca’s and June’s attention. Young and handsome, he laughed loudly, smiled widely, and bowed to them constantly as if they were royals.

When talking to June alone, his eyes lingered on her longer than was appropriate.

“It would be my pleasure to share tomorrow’s evening with you, Miss June,” he said softly, his unblinkingly eyes on her.

June felt butterflies in her stomach. This was it! This was the man she would’ve liked to place the winning bid on her! He was a fine man, and when June played Becky’s marriage game in her head, she knew that if a man like Archer asked June to marry her, she would be the happiest girl.

Until he talked to Becky...

June couldn’t help noticing that his gestures were the same, his gaze on Becky was as intense as it was on June. When he kissed Rebecca’s hand, Rebecca batted her eyelashes at him and smiled, biting her lip, in the way that was so familiar to June—her friend was infatuated.

June’s heart sank.

She saw Mrs. Sharke waltz gracefully toward her, her hand gripping her by the arm inconspicuously but too tight.

“I need you to talk to Lord James Volchen,” the madam whispered, and there was an unpleasant hiss in her voice.

Lord James was an impressive man, his figure tall and intimidating, his features too stern, his black hair unusually too long and tied in the back, his eyes studying June with their coldness. She'd noticed him before dinner but looked away, intimidated.

Now as Mrs. Sharke introduced them, he nodded with a smile that didn't reach his eyes, which June found odd and unsettling.

And then there was his companion, Mr. Desmon Shaw.

"He is here for company only," Mrs. Sharke whispered to her. "I need you to focus on Lord Volchen."

June had noticed Desmon Shaw before. She had caught his stares in her direction. Another hungry bidder, she'd thought, surprised to learn that he wasn't, after all.

It made it easier to be around him. Though she smiled to the lord, her eyes often shifted to Mr. Shaw. He was young and quite handsome if it weren't for a too-obvious uneasiness that gave his expression a tad of hostility. Now that June knew he wasn't one of the benefactors, she dared to look at him with more attention, relieved that at least someone wasn't appraising her.

"I hear you have come to keep your friend company," she said to him with a reserved smile.

"Indeed." His eyes shifted to her too quickly, as if she had surprised him. "I am from the country, so I am afraid my tastes in choosing how to spend my spare time are not as refined as those of the Londoners."

A smile flickered on his face. His eyes lingered on June for just a moment before he blinked away.

June stalled for a moment. His gaze was kind but avoiding hers. Yet, in the short time that he looked at her, his eyes seemed to draw her in completely.

James Volchen only smirked, studying his friend and returning his gaze to June. "It is not the taste that brings one here to this establishment but rather a search for a better

future. Whether it is for one day or a lifetime,” he said. “Wouldn’t you agree, Miss June?”

She chuckled at the words, studying him with curiosity. The man was positively clever. There was a strange chemistry between the two friends, and June wondered why one would even agree to come to a party like this if it wasn’t to one’s taste.

“You might be overestimating the nature of humans,” she retorted with a soft smile. “We are but animals. What we do is of pure instinct. Whether self-preservation or survival. Except for certain types of entertainment. But this one”—she motioned to the room around her—“is definitely not one of them.”

“Oh, Miss June, you might be underestimating us, humans. We always look for higher purposes.”

“Was that what brought you here, my lord?” She chuckled.

She felt Mrs. Sharke’s elbow sharply nudge her on the side. She ignored it, for Volchen seemed only more entertained by the remark.

“Curiously, Miss June, it was, indeed, what brought *me* here tonight. Definitely not Mr. Shaw.” He turned to give his friend a condescending smile.

“I am lost, my lord. Would you care to explain what higher purpose might be in attending...our humble gathering?”

It was Volchen’s turn to chuckle.

“Oh, sure!” Volchen didn’t take his eyes off June. Mrs. Sharke must’ve noticed, for her sharp elbow left June’s side. “You see, we are often guided by instincts in our lives. Just as you said, Miss June. But here is a curious occurrence. Those instincts lead us into certain situations that might give us higher value, satisfaction. We know it. Everything we do has a subconscious strive for something beyond just sustaining our bodies to survive. Something of higher value. A reward, if you may.”

“Which is?”

“The simple human values.” He raised his eyebrows in surprise as if it were so obvious. “Friendship. Love. Happiness. Compassion.” Volchen took a sip of brandy. “To name a few.”

June motioned to the room full of people and returned her questioning gaze to Volchen.

He nodded with a smile. “Yes. Even here. *Especially* here. A man doesn’t need a choice of highly educated beautiful women to satisfy basic needs that he can do perfectly well on his own.” He chuckled as June blushed at the insinuation. “Mr. Shaw doesn’t believe in why philosophy either. But he will learn.”

June looked at Desmon Shaw, who only shook his head, not meeting her eyes. June lowered her gaze.

“My lord, your philosophy is surely self-accommodating if not a bit out there. But...quite interesting.”

“My lord,” Mrs. Sharke smiled politely, “I am afraid I must steal Miss June for a moment. Will you please excuse us?”

“You need to converse with Sir Henry. Right now,” Mrs. Sharke whispered to June as she led her across the room. “But well done, my dear. For a second, I thought you were going to fail this evening with your unnecessary wit. But Volchen seemed to be fond of the conversation. I only wish his companion was one of the bidders, for he sure couldn’t take his eyes off you.”

June didn’t care for the lord. The conversation was entertaining and quite refreshing, making her forget the purpose of them even having one. But June prayed he wasn’t the highest bidder. In fact she prayed something horrible happened tomorrow that would postpone the auction.

She was led toward Sir Henry Marsh, a balding man in his forties who talked in an unpleasant nasal voice.

It was then that June turned to look at the men they had just stepped away from. And when her eyes stopped on Volchen’s companion across the parlor, Desmon Shaw was

looking straight at her. Her heart jolted for a reason unknown, and for just a brief moment that she barely registered in her mind, she wished that he were one of the bidders.

“*W*hat do you think?” Volchen asked as he and Desmon settled in the armchairs in Volchen’s sitting room.

Desmon slumped and spread his arms that dangled off the sides as if he’d just returned from an exhausting trip. It had been an interesting experience, yet he was glad to be away from all the flowers and lustful men and fake smiles and back in the dim sitting room where the candlelight created the intimacy and serenity he so much preferred.

“The dark-haired one, Rebecca,” he said. “She already has the attitude of a courtesan. She will do well.”

“What is that attitude you speak of?” Volchen feigned curiosity, though Desmon knew perfectly well that his friend knew things before they left Desmon’s mouth. That was Volchen’s power, that of a psychic.

The room was dim, and the shadows from the candles flickered on the walls. Desmon was glad to be back. The food at dinner was delicious, but that was all he was interested in. The farce of *getting acquainted*, as the madam put it, wasn’t to his taste. In fact, he loathed the idea that all those men gathered together to fight for the two young women.

Except...

Yes, the women. One specifically.

He couldn’t get the image of June Aveling out of his mind. Sure, she was beautiful. Sure, she was intelligent. Not many



women were able to capture Volchen's attention and hold a coherent conversation.

But there was something else.

He felt like the first time he'd met Catherine—his betrothed seven years ago who had jilted him at the altar. The most humiliating experience had been caused by the person he'd cherished the most. When he'd met Catherine, he had felt excitement jolt through his body. The mere sight of her had captivated him.

He'd felt a similar way when he'd seen June Aveling step into the parlor. Following the over-dressed madam, the young woman looked like an angel that stepped into a den of wolves.

*She shouldn't be here*, was the thought that had flickered in his mind back then.

Her golden hair, her creamy skin, her soft features and sensual mouth—she was a classic beauty that looked like she'd just stepped off a painting.

*The virgin and the wolves*, he'd thought back then. It seemed like forever ago, but it was only hours, and her image was still etched in his mind.

“Shaw?” Volchen's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. “What land are you lost in, my friend?” His mouth stretched in a mischievous smile as if he knew what Desmon thought about.

“Rebecca likes attention,” Desmon continued, trying to get rid of June Aveling's face in his mind. “She is ready to please men. She *likes* men. She will be at their service in no time and will use them, too.”

“They both will. The Belle Flowers are educated for that specific profession.”

“Well, some are naturals. And Rebecca is sure one.”

“And the other girl?” Volchen cocked his head as if he were genuinely interested in Desmon's opinion. Thought Desmon always thought that Volchen was like a teacher who

checked his students to make sure they had the right line of thought.

“No.” Desmon shook his head. “June is not timid, per se, but she is not too keen on entertaining men.”

“A lot of them are not. Not at the start. Just like anything—the profession acquires experience.”

Desmon snorted. “She looks like she won’t be enthusiastic no matter the experience.”

“Oh, are we the true experts in human souls?”

“You can tell by the look of her. You know it, James—you could see it too. Some men can’t, for all they see is an outer shell, but she is...intelligent. And her way with men is that of an equal rather than a courtesan.”

“Oh, you are an expert now.” But his sarcasm was lost on Desmon, who was becoming enthusiastic on the topic.

“I’ve dealt with women like Rebecca before. They all have the same trait—predatory. The trait of a man. June is different. It’s in her gestures that are too reserved. Her body doesn’t get close to men. Her lips try to keep a smile that is not genuine. Her shoulders are too relaxed as if she doesn’t really care. Her blue eyes look around but don’t try to see too deep as if afraid to see too much. She is not cut out for the job.”

“Quite poetic, my friend. So you like June.”

“I didn’t go there to *like* anyone.”

“But you would choose her if it were your choice.”

“I don’t need to *choose*.” Desmon waved him off with irritation. “I simply tell you my observation.”

“And your observation of women usually includes such details as the movement of their lips, the slant of their shoulders, and the color of their eyes?” Volchen’s lips stretched in a smile as he stared mockingly at his friend.

Desmon rolled his eyes. “I’ve had enough of this for tonight. I shall see you tomorrow. But I will not take part in

your little entertainments.” He rose from his seat and downed the rest of the brandy in his glass in one gulp.

“You seem agitated.” Volchen’s smile didn’t change as he watched his friend put on his jacket and hat. “Is something bothering you?” He cocked his head, studying Desmon’s irritated movements.

Desmon slowly raised his eyes at his friend. “Don’t start...” He turned and walked toward the door. “Goodbye, James.”

“Don’t think too much about her, mate!” Volchen said loudly as Desmon walked out the door, shaking his head in annoyance. “Sweet dreams!”

And as the door closed behind Desmon, Volchen chuckled, and his eyes narrowed at nothing in particular as he contemplated the evening.

Desmon was indeed agitated. He walked out into the stuffy summer night and, instead of taking a carriage, walked the dark streets of London to his flat. It was a brisk walk as he stared down at the ground the whole way, passing the late-night pedestrians, the carriages that clacked softly against the ground, the dogs that skirted the buildings.

His thoughts were about June Aveling, just like Volchen had intended. Desmon replayed the events of the evening in his head—the conversations, other men’s admiring stares, the Dekkers and their leers, the girls who were present at dinner.

But his thoughts always came back to June.

He got to his flat, dismissed the butler, and, finding himself in his dark bedroom, opened the window to let the night breeze in. He undressed down to his trousers and flung himself onto the bed. He stared for some time at the open window that let the moonlight in, then closed his eyes.

There she was again—June Aveling—her graceful gestures, the wave of her thick hair, her lips rosy and soft, her eyes that stopped on him just for a glance. The memory of her gaze burnt him to the core, spreading arousal through his body. It was a mere fantasy that one often conjured about a person of

interest, an innocent or explicit scenario that one played out in one's mind.

He imagined June taking her dress off for him.

*Oh, hell...*

There was no stopping his fantasies now.

The images flooded his mind—her creamy skin, her slender figure, her nakedness, her legs opening up for him.

Desmon grunted, feeling his hardened cock strain his trousers. He unbuttoned them, slid the trousers and drawers down, and kicked them off. And when his hand slipped to his erection, it was June Aveling who stroked it in his mind. Her grip was tight but gentle, going up and down his hardness, stroking him just right. She pressed against him. She whispered the words that were too open and dirty for an innocent girl like her. And as she whispered the words, the grip around his cock tightened, the movements increased the speed.

“I wanted you the minute I saw you,” she whispered in his mind, and when he imagined her blue eyes on him, he climaxed with a loud grunt, gripping his cock and feeling the semen spill down the back of his hand.

He exhaled loudly. When he opened his eyes, there was dark emptiness around. Only the moonlight shone on the side of the bed where he'd just imagined June Aveling.

He cleaned himself up and stretched on the sheets. But as he was falling asleep, it was June Aveling whose warm naked body curled up in his arms.

June was strangely calm on the day of the auction. “Just play the game,” Becky said when they sat on her bed in the morning and held hands, discussing the auction. “Imagine that it’s your husband. Do you remember the picture of Lady Anabelle Gwenton in the Gazette? Do you remember her husband that we spotted at the Hyde Park?” Becky arched a brow. “Yes. Don’t roll your eyes, June. Can you imagine she had to bed that werewolf? Their first night must have been a nightmare. Every gentleman at the auction is better-looking than him. So there. And, well, the gentlemen probably wouldn’t dare do any dirty tricks tonight.”

“Tricks!” June exclaimed. “My goodness, Becky! Why do you always have to slip in some awful references?”

But June regained her calm demeanor quickly enough.

The maids came to do their hair, taking the front strands and pinning them at the back while letting the rest of it loose in a classic fashion.

June felt like a doll as she looked at herself in the mirror—a slender figure in a tiny silk slip. She stood and placed her hands on the bureau as the maid tightened the laces of her corset. When the maid helped her with the bodice, the petticoat, the light-pink gown, June stared blankly into space, thinking that one man would get to take this all off, piece by piece. And then there would be many. Every night.

When the pearl earrings were put in her ears and she finally walked up to the mirror again, she gasped. She’d never

looked so dazzling in her life. Like a bride. For an unknown husband and only for one night.

For a moment, June tried to figure out if she were about to cry at the thought, but strangely, she felt indifferent.

She didn't feel a thing when she was escorted downstairs and stood outside the door of the parlor.

No dinner. No other girls.

Just Rebecca and her.

And twelve men.

June tried not to look around as she was led into the parlor, gasps and murmurs following her every step.

The scent of wine and cologne saturated the air hazy with the curling tobacco smoke. The excitement of the men was palpable. She could feel their stares that licked her head to toe, though June didn't care about any of them. Even the bid amount wasn't of importance as she slipped into a state of utmost indifference.

She finally raised her eyes. They skimmed the room in the precise way Mrs. Hilderbog had taught her—without favoring anyone—until one gaze stopped her in her tracks.

June forgot where she was as despite the instructions she couldn't look away from the man.

Desmon Shaw.

Their eyes locked for longer than appropriate, longer than any two strangers dared to look at each other.

And for a moment, the sadness in his gaze made June think that he felt as hopeless as she.



“The bids start at fifty pounds and go up by thirty-pound increments,” Volchen explained to Desmon as they sat at the back of the three rows of armchairs occupied by the bidders. The chairs were arranged in a half-circle around the stage, or

pedestal of sorts, on which stood June Aveling. “It’s not a quick affair. There is no rush. After all, there are twelve bidders.”

Desmon wondered what insanity had made him come back to Volchen’s townhouse earlier today. But he had had a sudden desire to go to the auction, to see June Aveling again, if only from a distance. And Volchen knew it perfectly well when Desmon had arrived.

Why would Desmon go through witnessing a human auction was beyond his understanding.

Until June Aveling was led into the parlor.

June.

Aveling.

Even her name sounded like one out of a fairytale.

The rest of the people in the room looked like predators. A sophisticated bunch of noblemen that played with human lives as they drank cocktails and smoked cigars.

Mrs. Sharke made a speech—the one she’d made dozens of times before. The men clapped. Someone joked, making the bidders laugh. She explained the rules, and when the reserve price was announced, Desmon felt his stomach turn.

In the bright light of the candles, in her pink dress like that of a bride, June looked like an innocent lamb brought out for slaughter. Only then did he realize that if buying someone’s affection wasn’t against his morals, he would’ve paid the ridiculous price just to have her company.

His heart thudded heavily as he was lost in his thoughts while June Aveling stood in a submissive pose and tried to smile. He vaguely heard the price announced. Someone’s hand went up. Then another. Someone joked again as if there was something funny in this affair.

Only when Volchen next to him shifted and said something did Desmon snap out of his grim thoughts.

“Are you all right?” Volchen asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

But he wasn’t. And not when Volchen—lazily, as if he didn’t care who was sold or bought and for how much—raised his forefinger.

“Two hundred!” Mrs. Sharke announced and nodded with a smile.

“You are bidding?” Desmon said with shock.

“Why, is there any other reason we are here?” Volchen snorted.

Desmon felt uneasy but evidently not as awkward as the beautiful young woman who stood on the pedestal as if she were an art piece. She tried to look courageous, but her fingers that she kept clasped at the front were too fidgety. Her eyes flew up toward Archer Bellington, who placed a bid. She wanted that schmuck to be her buyer, and it sickened Desmon. The entire affair did, in fact.

“You can’t be serious, Volchen,” said Desmon in a low, irritated voice.

“Is something bothering you, my friend?” Volchen smiled and narrowed his eyes on Desmon. “I recall *you* showed up at my doorsteps this afternoon. And *you* didn’t mind much when I asked you to join me again. You seem too sensitive about this whole deal. Do you like the girl?”

“It’s not that. It bothers me to picture her with you.”

“Don’t. Spare yourself the graphic details. Could you imagine her with yourself?”

Desmon shook his head, looking away in irritation.

“What is it? You already have. Last night, haven’t you?” Volchen narrowed his eyes on his friend. “It’s only natural, you know. Our fantasies are much more diverse and exciting than our lives, and those who deny that are only liars. Would you rather she went off with Mr. Bellington than me? He is a clown. A dandy but without basic respect for women. Or would you rather she was sold off to the Dekkers?”



“Oh, Lord. Why did I come?” Desmon said, feeling his insides tighten.

“Why *did* you, indeed?” Volchen echoed mockingly.

Desmon couldn't picture June with anyone. Neither with Archer—the young man seemed like he was the type to keep count of the number of women he bedded and then tell the entire city. Nor the Dekkers—God knows what that couple was into. Nor the industrialist who apparently had a wife at home and a daughter older than the debutantes.

And definitely not with Volchen.

“Women shouldn't be submitted to this,” Desmon muttered under his nose.

“You are too sentimental, my friend. You must have developed an attraction to the girl.” Volchen studied Desmon with interest.

“Two hundred and thirty!” Mrs. Sharke announced—Sir Henry had placed a bit.

“You see, life is a curious thing,” Volchen said to Desmon.

“Two hundred and sixty!”

“More often than not, it depends on pure chance,” Volchen continued. “Or luck. Or one's simple whim.”

“Two hundred and ninety!” the madam announced as the Dekkers stared around with a satisfied smile.

Desmon felt his face heat up. This was too much, too scandalous, and he felt angry. Angry at the people, at the wealthy who played their games with the less fortunate, at the fate that was so...whimsical.

“Chance, opportunity—whatever you want to call it.” Desmon heard Volchen's voice through the humming and the chuckles of the benefactors.

“Two hundred and ninety—one!”

“You either take it or let it go,” Volchen said.

“Two hundred and ninety—two!”

“And if you *do* let it go, my friend,” Volchen’s voice was that of a devil, “you will never find out what might have been.”

“Two hundred and ninety—three!”

And Volchen raised his finger in the air.

“Oh!” Mrs. Sharke exclaimed in surprise. “We have a bid! Lord James Volchen! Three hundred and twenty pounds!”

Someone applauded.

“That is a record,” someone whispered.

Lord and Lady Dekker turned their heads in his direction and nodded with contempt.

Mrs. Sharke repeated the price three times as Volchen stared at Desmon, whose lips were pressed so tightly together that they turned pale.

“Very well!” Mrs. Sharke announced. “And tonight’s prize goes to Lord James Volchen! Congratulations, my lord! Thank you, ladies and gentlemen!”

The room burst in applause and the words of encouragement as if it were some kind of performance. Volchen leaned over to Desmon.

“This”—he nodded toward June Aveling, who stood with a weak smile on the pedestal—“is my gift to you, Desmon. She is yours.”

And his lips stretched in a mischievous smile.



Mrs. Shark floated to Volchen and Desmon with the grace of a swan and the sweetest smile.

“Congratulations, my lord.” Her smile grew into a grin bearing a set of perfect white teeth. “It is, I believe, a record.”

“Well, thank you.” Volchen rose and bowed to her. “Though I should inform you that there was a slight change of

plans. Or hands, if you will.” He chuckled.

“Oh?”

“The young lady will be spending the evening with my dear friend, Mr. Desmon Shaw.”

Desmon felt himself blush. He felt the blood rush to his ears, deafening him for a moment. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt like a schoolboy in front of a master.

“I believe this is a mistake,” he muttered, frowning at Volchen and still in shock.

“And I believe you are breaking the rules, my lord.” Mrs. Sharke’s smile didn’t disappear but had gotten positively strained as she stared at Volchen.

“And *I* believe that money dictates the rules,” retorted Volchen. “With all due respect, the bid was set, the gentleman was present both days, and the girl in question would not care one way or another.”

“This is not—” Desmon exhaled in frustration.

“It’s done,” Volchen said. “The price is paid, my friend. If you are prejudiced, well, you can take the girl for dinner. Your choice. You can do anything your heart desires. As per the rules, of course. I am not interested in the prize. If you are not either—well, then the Dekkers would be delighted to receive such an unexpected gift. Or”—Volchen arched a brow—“she will be primed at the Belle House tomorrow. And someone else would enjoy *the gift*. Is this correct, Mrs. Sharke?” He turned his cold smile to the madam.

The madam fixed her inquiring eyes on Desmon.

*The devil!*

Desmon didn’t understand his feelings. He was angry at the spectacle that he hadn’t enjoyed. He was overwhelmed, observing the girl who tried to keep her composure and was too submissive and too serious unlike Rebecca, who was about to be presented to the bidders. His mind reeled as his eyes moved from Volchen to Mrs. Sharke, back and forth, both of them waiting for his reply.

He turned his eyes to June again. The golden-haired beauty, graceful and awaiting her fate, stood in the distance talking to the Dekkers. She'd invaded his dreams already. And amidst this inglorious setting, the most unlikely thought jolted through Desmon's mind.

She was his...

He peeled his eyes off the girl and turned to look at Volchen. "This is your most shameless trick yet."

"Oh, this is no trick, believe me. Just pure chance." Volchen stared at him without a smile now. "This is settled then?"

Desmon scanned the room, stretching time. He could leave, of course, and curse Volchen for days to come. But if he did, the girl could end up with the Dekkers. It could become the most awful night for her.

On the other hand, he thought, he didn't have to take advantage of the girl. He could merely spend an evening dining and talking to her. But no matter what options his reeling mind was trying to conjure, the idea that the girl was his for tonight sent his blood rushing in excitement.

"I suppose," he finally said barely audibly.

Mrs. Sharke placed her elegant gloved hand on his forearm. "Mr. Shaw, I don't need to explain the rules, I hope."

He shook his head. He knew the rules—no violence unless agreed upon, no pressure, no deviant behavior, or anything that the girl would not consent to.

"Splendid!" Mrs. Sharke exclaimed.

She turned to summon June from across the room, and as the girl walked gracefully toward them, her gaze on Volchen was intense yet sad.

Desmon felt his heart beat violently like a drum. He stiffened as the girl approached. He could feel the air shift as she stopped. Her scent penetrated the smell of the madam's expensive perfume and powder and tobacco smoke in the air.

"My lord," June raised her eyes calmly at Volchen.

“Miss June.” The madam smiled sweetly. “Let me introduce you to your benefactor.”

June smiled meekly.

Mrs. Sharke pointed her open palm toward Desmon.

“Please, meet Mr. Desmon Shaw.”

The girl’s eyes flew up at him in surprise, then at the madam, and back at Desmon, not understanding.

Mrs. Sharke nodded. “I hope you have a wonderful time tonight.”

And as June’s lips slightly parted in shock, Desmon felt fire burst through his veins under the gaze of the beautiful blue eyes on him.

As June and her benefactor rode down Baker Street, the silence in the carriage was so thick that one could slice it with a knife. But despite it being August, despite the suffocating heat outside, June finally felt like she could breathe.

Mr. Shaw had requested to take June to his flat. It wasn't common, but June was glad. She wanted to be out of the house still full of gentlemen, smoke, and discussions of the previous auctions. She was just a number. A statistics.

She was still confused at what had happened.

Mr. Desmon Shaw.

How?

Volchen's silent companion was intimidating. Though he was calm on the surface and seemingly indifferent, his gaze said otherwise. And now she was given to him for the night.

She hadn't hoped for any particular winner, except, perhaps, for Archer. But the least of it—the dark-haired stranger with the intense gaze. He wasn't one of the bidders. Yet, fate had played a strange trick.

June turned to look at him.

He was almost a head taller than her, strong and muscular as far as she could tell. His black disheveled hair and thick eyebrows matched the inky color of his eyes. He was a handsome man. Perhaps, less delicate than many noblemen, with features more brutal than refined. But she liked the

overly-manly look. It matched his scent—masculine, cologne and cigars and something else that she hadn't ever noticed in city men. It was alluring—the smell of a man. The man she would spend a night with. She pictured him naked and felt nervousness clutch her stomach.

“Is this your first time?” she asked softly to break the silence.

Desmon turned to look at her with surprise.

“I mean, at the auction,” she corrected herself with a quick smile and saw his lips stretching in a smile too.

They chuckled in unison, and this silly pun eased the tension immediately.

“Yes.” He answered softly. “I...I wasn't supposed to be there, you see. It is not my type of entertainment.”

“Yes. You made it quite clear yesterday.”

“Nothing like that,” he quickly corrected himself. “But I was to merely keep company to my friend. And then...”

“And then you got me...” June chuckled again and lowered her eyes.

Perhaps, he didn't want her. Yet, she couldn't help noticing his frequent glances at her. She felt strangely comfortable around him, considering the circumstances. That was until his eyes met hers. And then she felt utterly vulnerable as if he were about to take a lot more than her body—her mind, her heart, her peace...

“Miss June,” she heard him say in a soft voice. It was the first time he'd spoken her name, and already it made their acquaintance more intimate.

She turned to look at him.

“June. You can call me June. It's only appropriate under the current circumstances.”

“Then you should call me Desmon. It's only appropriate...”

He didn't finish.

Their eyes locked, and June felt a surge of emotions overtake her. Nervousness? Panic? She couldn't say. But she didn't want to look away.

His eyes were mesmerizing. Reflecting the dim light of the oil lamp inside the carriage, they seemed to burn with soft flames.

She swallowed hard. He was handsome—positively and splendidly handsome—and she suddenly felt grateful that it was he who was to spend a night with her. She wasn't scared of what was to come. Still nervous around the man who had wealth and power and handsome looks, she suddenly felt curious at what he would be like naked. It was a strange thought—not like her at all—and it surprised her.

“I know you were hoping it would be someone else,” he said, not looking away. “Mr. Bellington, perhaps. But you won't be disappointed.”

June blushed at the words. Was it so obvious that she was hoping for someone in particular? She felt a flush of embarrassment and looked away, trying to hide her momentary feelings.

“It is *I* who is supposed to make sure you are not disappointed,” she said quietly.

She felt his slow movement, the rustling of his jacket, and his fingers on her chin, pulling it so she faced him.

His touch was warm and soft and sent pleasant shivers down her spine. It was the first time a man had touched her like this.

She'd seen dozens of most scandalous images, heard hundreds of intimate stories, saw a man naked, in all details, was taught how, when and how long.

In theory, of course.

In reality, not a single man had touched her yet.

Until now.

And now, the touch of the stranger felt surprisingly tender and intimate. She couldn't look away from him. Something in



his eyes hypnotized her. The air between them burned with the realization of what was to come, and it filled her body with arousal—soft, sweet, its soft flames lapping at her core.

This very moment she wished he leaned over and kissed her. He didn't, his fingers suddenly letting go. But what he said made her timid thoughts turn into a blaze.

“You don't have to worry, June. I will make sure you enjoy this night.”



Oh, hell, his body had a mind of its own.

*Make sure she enjoyed it?*

How in the world was he going to do *that* when all he wanted was to strip her naked and take her?

Desmon couldn't help but marvel at the fact that back on Baker Street, he was uneasy, if not appalled at Volchen's trick. He'd promised himself that he would have an evening of chatter with June Aveling and that was it.

But the closer June was to him, the more those beautiful blue eyes gazed at him—the stronger lust burned every cell of his body, wanting for her to be even closer.

Oh, he had been lying to himself. He wanted her naked, in his arms, doing the things he'd imagined last night. The truth was that if he didn't do what this night had been intended for, someone else would.

The minute he'd made up his mind, heat rose through his body. He felt it gather in the lower part of his abdomen and prayed he didn't spend in his trousers just by touching her.

She walked around the dim sitting room examining the bookcase and the artworks on the wall, and he realized that she looked even more delicate. He studied her modest dress and wondered what she looked like without it. He looked at her lips and wondered if she would kiss him back. Would she be

timid? Would she climax or remain cold? Would she answer to his caresses?

He'd had an urge to touch her ever since they'd gotten into the carriage, and when he had, unable to restrain himself, she hadn't even flinched. When the carriage had stopped at his flat and he had held her gloved hand, helping her out of the carriage, he wondered what the touch of her bare fingers would be like.

"Are you hungry?" he asked when he'd exchanged words with the butler.

June shot a hesitant look at him.

"For food is what I meant," he explained, making her chuckle. He chuckled in response.

"I am all right. Thank you." She couldn't hide a smile even if she tried. The thought that her smiles with him were sincere and cheerful put him at ease.

"Drinks, then?" he offered.

The butler started hustling around, ready to light more candles, but Desmon dismissed him for the night.

June asked for brandy and removed her hat and gloves.

"Is this *your* flat?" she asked, looking around his residence with curiosity. The dimness of the room was intimate, so was her voice, soft and sweet.

"It is. Though I rarely visit. I live in Kent, where I see fewer people in months than I saw at the auction today."

"Oh! Kent!" Her face lit up with cheerfulness. "Where the Duke of Burgundy resides," she said with a smile.

Desmon frowned, pouring brandy in two glasses. He needed an entire bottle just to calm his arousal. "I am not sure I've heard of him. The Duke of what?"

"Oh, it's a butterfly." June chuckled softly.

"A butterfly..." Still confused, Desmon walked up and passed her a glass.

She nodded with a smile—another one without pretense, and it delighted Desmon.

“It’s a butterfly species,” she explained. “*Hamearis lucina*. It was nicknamed for its unusual checkered pattern, and Kent is known for having the largest population in England.”

“A butterfly,” Desmon echoed, a smile freezing on his lips.

*How random*, he thought and studied every inch of her face.

“Do you like butterflies?” he inquired, taking a step closer.

“You might say so, yes.” She lowered her eyes with a smile. “I’m being silly. Forgive me. It is just a random interest of mine.” She chuckled nervously.

She was different from any woman he’d met. He didn’t even know her, and already she mesmerized him with off-topic comments, her graceful behavior, her openness that made her face lit up when she let go of her nervousness and shyness. In any other circumstances, he would’ve continued the conversation to try to know her better, uncover that mysterious world that every person hid inside.

But right now, her closeness was intoxicating. She drew him closer without doing much, and all he wanted was to take her in his arms. He hadn’t had a woman in more than a year, but this hunger for intimacy wasn’t what drew him to her. There was something else, and he couldn’t yet pinpoint it.

“I must confess, this arrangement is something I...” He couldn’t choose the words to describe what they were about to do. The sudden change of topic made his heart beat louder.

There was so much calmness in her gaze when she looked at him that Desmon wondered if he was perhaps more awkward about this than she was.

She smiled softly, blinking down. “We both knew what this would be about. No need to worry about the etiquette or...”

She didn’t finish and bit her lip.

“The etiquette...” he echoed with a smile.

She glanced at him playfully. “It is the most proper word to describe it, yes?”

“I am afraid I am not aware of an etiquette. If there is such one.”

The silence became awkward. Two feet between them burnt with the words that were improper but very true to the nature of this meeting.

“Have you ever kissed a man?” Desmon asked softly.

June’s eyes flew up to his. She blushed. Even in the dim light of the candelabrum, he could see momentary panic in her eyes. Was she scared?

“No.” She shook her head but didn’t look away this time.

Her eyes looked brighter now. Whether it was the light of the candles or the brandy—they sparkled like precious gems, like the azure waters of the ocean on a sunny day but darker, with a greenish tint.

Desmon took a step closer.

He wanted her, and nothing could change that—neither the prejudice that he’d blabbered about to Volchen, nor the respect for womanhood, nor the previous intention to be as courteous as possible.

Her sweet scent seemed to draw him closer. He stretched his hand and stroked her cheek, her skin silky soft against the back of his fingers.

She didn’t look away. Desmon felt as if they had traded places—he felt intimidated at the closeness of this beauty. And when her lips parted just a tiny bit, he couldn’t restrain himself any longer. He leaned in slowly and pressed his lips to hers in a gentle kiss.

Her lips were warm and soft. He drew back just a tiny bit, then kissed her again. And when he repeated the kiss the third time, she pressed herself closer, and he wrapped his arms around her.

How perfectly she fit in his embrace! As if her body had been designed smaller to a perfect degree to fit into his like a

key in the lock. He parted her lips with his, sliding his tongue in. She didn't respond right away, but when he repeated his soft tongue invasion, she mimicked his movement. First timidly, then venturing further, deeper, and in a moment, their mouths fused in a deep, most sensual kiss Desmon had ever experienced.

She was perfect. She kissed perfectly. Her hands rested on his shoulders as if she were a proper lady posing for a perfect kiss. He would do this slowly, he thought, though his manhood was already straining his trousers. Once she got used to him, he would take it one step further and do what he wanted and how he wanted.

But for now, her sweet lips and tongue were all he needed to break the awkwardness, to get the first taste of her. He pulled away slowly, studied her eyes that now shone brightly at him, and kissed her again.

She tasted like brandy. But no exquisite drink was as satisfying as her mouth fusing with his, her tongue exploring his, its movements not forced or mechanical but sensual and natural as if she were kissing a lover.

Could it be that one could get to know another person through kissing?

This very moment, Desmon was sure that she was what every man was looking for in a woman. His hand slid up her back and to the nape of her neck, grasping it and pulling her closer as if he could coax a deeper kiss out of her. His other hand pressed her flush against him, so tight that he felt the satisfaction of his erection in his trousers pressing against her.

She moaned. The sound was barely audible, but it spurred his arousal. There was no mistake—she liked it. She pressed closer to him. Her hands gripped his arms tighter. She took him in with passion, slow but intense.

He didn't know how long the kiss lasted, though it was positively the longest kiss with anyone in his life. When he pulled away again and met her eyes, there was something new in them—the realization that they had taken the first step, that they liked it, that there was so much more to come.

He wanted to ask if she had enjoyed it. She would lie if she wanted, but her flushed cheeks and twinkling eyes told him all he needed to know. If she were an expert lover, he would've guided her to her knees and made her take his cock. A wave of arousal flushed through his body at the thought. Volchen had spent a fortune for her to do what he, Desmon, pleased. But she was so delicate in her purity that the thought of pleasing *her* instead aroused him even more.

Desmon took her by her hand and led her to the sofa. He took off his waistcoat and took a seat, then looked up at her as she stood watching him in hesitation and felt he could not wait any longer.

He patted his lap. "Will you join me?"

There were so many emotions going through June this very moment!

She felt awkward as she perched herself on Desmon's lap. She gasped with surprise as his arms went around her back and under her knees, swinging her legs onto the sofa and shifting her closer. The position suddenly became much more comfortable, as if he knew exactly how to hold a woman. His arm was wrapped behind her back, cradling her. And his hand caressed her face.

Who would've known that it could be so sensual—someone's fingers tracing her eyebrows, the line of her nose, her lips? The movements so soft and sensual that she felt a pleasing weakness overtake her entire body. Desmon's face was so close that she felt herself leaning closer. And closer. His eyes drawing her in. Until her lips timidly touched his in a soft kiss.

"I want you to enjoy this, June," he said as he pulled away only an inch apart. "We are not doing anything...serious yet," he kept talking in a low voice, teasing her with soft kisses, "so don't be nervous. Right now, I want to show you what pleasure is."

He kissed her again. She pulled away and dared to cup his face. "I am supposed to be pleasing *you*."

Another soft kiss. "You are supposed to do what I want, June." His eyes glinted with mischief for a second. "I make the rules. And I want you to enjoy this." He kissed her and held

her lips with his a second longer. "I am pretty sure I can make this happen."

His lips were full and soft. She could feel his warm breath on her skin, his voice low and hypnotizing as he spoke, calming her nervousness but stirring something else deep inside her.

"I have never bedded a virgin," he said, his fingers gently pushing the sleeves of her bodice off her shoulders, his gaze burning every inch of her exposed skin. "Nor have I bedded a woman who didn't want me." His eye returned to hers with an apologetic smile.

"I didn't say I didn't want you," she murmured, melting under his caresses.

"You had no choice." He kissed her again.

By God, if someone gave her an option to leave right now, she wouldn't. She couldn't.

"I am glad it's you," she answered and leaned over for another kiss.

Desmon unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his bare torso, strong and muscled. He took her one hand and pressed it gently toward his chest, where his heart was.

"I want you to touch me, June."

He gently kissed her shoulder as she slid her palm across his chest. She did it awkwardly, wishing she knew more tricks how to please a man so they were on par. In theory, she knew quite a bit. Reality was intimidating.

But she could never be on par with the man who had probably bedded more women than the number of men that had bid for her at the auction. The man whose lips were so soft on her skin right now. Whose fingers were slowly pulling down her bodice, exposing her breasts. Whose lips kissed her breasts so tenderly that it made her gasp. The gasp made her chest rise and push the nipples toward him. And when his lips closed around one of her nipples, the erotic sight made her tremble.



Oh, God. She was melting. His kisses were so soothing. His caresses so gentle. His fingers brushing against her breasts, his fingertips tracing the shape of her nipples so wickedly erotic. The longing in her low belly was unbearable.

He raised his face to her and stroked the loose golden strand of her hair that had fallen onto her face.

“They say desire is contagious. So is lust. Have you known it first-hand?”

His voice was low and soft, matching his caresses.

June shook her head. “No,” she said quietly, feeling desire building up in her as he spoke the words.

He smiled and brushed his thumb against her bottom lip. “I hope tonight you will.”

The light from the candles made for an intimate setting, creating the appearance of a dream. June was overcome with sensations. She thought a man’s body would feel alien, invasive. But Desmon’s was hypnotic, his touch soothing, his lips on her skin soft and arousing.

Desmon’s hand slipped under her skirt, slowly made its way up her legs and past her stockings. When it reached her thighs, June gasped at the feeling of his fingers on her flesh where no other man’s hand had been before. She had no drawers on, and when Desmon’s hand slid further up—to where it should feel invasive—June trembled at the pleasing sensation of it. Her core burnt with a need that she’d never felt before. Answering his soft kisses, she nudged her hips forward, wanting the hand where she craved the release. And when his fingers touched the sensitive flesh between her legs, she moaned and immediately felt embarrassed at the sign of her weakness.

But Desmon seemed to be spurred by her reaction. His hand stroked her cunny, kneading it and exploring her flesh. Her own hand moved across his chest, found a nipple, and aimlessly stroked its hardness. The world started to dissipate. It became all kisses, mouths, tongues. Desmon’s fingers

caressed her yielding flesh, applying just the right pressure, finding every sensitive spot between her legs.

“Did anyone touch you like this?” he muttered the words that she was barely aware of, her eyes half-closed in pleasure.

“No,” she exhaled.

“Did you touch yourself?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“Did you bring yourself to climax?”

She felt her cheeks heat up, but her body was already on fire at his touch. This was an embarrassing conversation, and with a man at that. Moreover, she was half-naked, sitting on his lap, his mouth taking hers, then shifting lower to kiss her breasts, then trailing up her shoulder and neck back to her lips. His hand—between her legs that were now shamelessly wide open, the flesh even more sensitive bare of the hair. This was the exact image that had always symbolized a courtesan in her mind, and now she was the embodiment of it.

“June?” he repeated, kissing her.

“Yes,” she replied with a gasp as his fingers stroked the sensitive nub between her cunny lips, coaxing a meek moan out of her.

She didn’t understand what was happening to her body. His gentle caresses made her body react with the unknown before desire. She didn’t want him to stop.

Was it this easy?

His fingers slid deeper into her folds, and she moaned and nudged her hips against his hand.

“Do you like this, June?”

“Yes,” she whispered, dazed with pleasure.

Her mind was possessed by lust, some biological mating instinct. At this moment, she wanted to see his sex, touch it, hold it in her hand.

“I should be pleasing you,” she whispered, her mouth answering his kisses that were becoming deeper, hungrier.

“It’s all right for now.” He grunted, applying more pressure to her sex.

“But I want to,” she insisted and pulled away to meet his eyes.

His caresses stopped as he answered her gaze. His eyes were mesmerizing, sparkling with desire, searching hers as if making sure that was what she wanted.

She regretted immediately that he stopped, her sex wanting his hand again. But her attention was taken by his fumbling with his trouser that he unbuttoned slowly, not taking his eyes off her. She nudged away to let him lift his hips just enough to push the trousers and drawers down. And when his erection sprung free—before her mind could process the sight—her body reacted as her core contracted with a dull ache and her fingers stretched toward his sex.

She studied it for a moment. It was long and thick, one of the bigger specimens she’d seen in books. She wished there was more light so she could see it properly. For the first time, a man’s sex was right next to her. It was a bit frightening, too intimate, yet there was animalistic magnetism in it.

She gave it a soft stroke and heard a soft grunt escape Desmon’s throat. He covered her hand with his, wrapping it around his cock, and started stroking it.

She raised her eyes to him as her hand moved up and down his shaft.

He grunted, blinking slowly but not taking his eyes off her.

His sex was warm and smooth and much harder than what she’d thought it would be. Bigger than what they’d shown in classes. She wondered if it would hurt a lot when he took her. But all these thoughts were wiped away as his hand left hers and slid under her skirt and between her legs.

“Do you like this?” she whispered, losing the sense of where she was. All that mattered was his sex in her hand, and

his hand spreading her cunny lips and finding that sensitive spot that ached for his touch.

“Don’t stop,” he had grunted before his lips crashed into hers for a deep kiss.

There was no trace of the playful teasing as before. He wasn’t slow when his caresses resumed. His touch was more forceful, charged with intensity. And just how she wanted it, mimicking the pressure of his fingers with her own, sliding up and down his cock.

She was falling—deeply, in a spiral, her mind dizzy with want, her body melting with desire. She opened her legs wider, feeling the pleasure intensify as she pushed against his hand. Gone was the awkwardness of being naked. The sensations overtook her body. They existed in two places—her mouth, invaded by his, and her sex swelling under his fingers, pushing toward him.

“Faster,” he whispered between the kisses.

June felt a jolt of pleasure just from knowing he was enjoying her touch. But as her hand started moving faster, her fingers squeezing, gliding over the head of his erection, so did her hips—rolling, pushing into his hand with desperation.

She felt the pleasure coming and moaned into his mouth, caught his grunt with her lips, and plunged her tongue into his mouth with unknown before lust. Their bodies moved in the frenzy that came from knowing they were almost there, approaching the peak that made them press closer to each other. Their hands worked faster, squeezing each other’s flesh, moaning and grunting and panting in unison. They climaxed together, June with a loud moan, hiding her face in the crook of his neck, Desmon with a grunt, burying his face in her soft hair, his arm around her waist, pulling her tight against him as if for reinforcement.

For a moment, they stayed like this, his hand still caressing her sex as if soothing it, hers—covered with his semen, on his member that was losing its strength.

“How was that for a first experience?” he asked in a low voice, raising his face toward her.

She only smiled, studying him and wondering how she could let go so completely with a man who had paid for her.

Her body felt boneless, overcome with sudden fatigue. Her mind reeled, but this time instead of being too aware of her body on Desmon’s lap, and her hand still on his sex, and her breasts pressed against his chest, she was trying to make sense of the sensations that she’d just experienced.

She’d never expected it to feel so good. She’d never thought she would enjoy the intimacy. This shared experience had erased some invisible boundaries between them and wiped out the outside world where only hours ago they had been complete strangers.

June wanted more. She wanted to do it again to make sure it was that easy for her body to accept a man. And she wanted Desmon naked, too.

He picked up the bottom of his shirt and cleaned her hands. She smiled and studied him with utmost wonder. She lifted her hand to stroke the side of his face—the move too brave for her.

She felt like it.

She felt like pleasing him.

She felt like stroking his dark hair and kissing his thick eyebrows.

His eyes burnt her with more desire. His scent seemed stronger. It was all around her. And laced with it was one of herself—the scent of pleasure.

Desmon stroked the loose strand of her hair, studying her.

“Should we go to the bedroom?” he asked with a soft smile.



He carried June to the bedroom and laid her on the bed.

She was like a fairy—beautiful, raw in her half-nakedness. Her golden hair was now disheveled—the sign of their intimacy that stirred him again. Her bodice was tugged down, exposing her breasts—this sight of unfinished business of undressing even more arousing.

“Turn around,” he ordered softly and helped her get rid of her corset and dress. Off went her garters and stockings, and last but not least, a tiny silk slip that he pulled off over her head.

She was left naked but void of the shyness that had been there only an hour ago. She half-lay on the bed. He’d thought their night would be awkward, the intimacy mechanical like it had been with a few women.

It had taken him by surprise—how much he wanted her, how quickly she’d forgotten herself, how well she’d responded to his touch and how perfect it had felt to have her in his arms.

The candles lit the bedroom with a soft yellow glow. The bedroom was even darker than the sitting room and even more intimate. June was splayed out on the sheets, the shadows hiding the part of her body that Desmon wanted to see so much. She was perfect indeed. Her hair acquired a subtle glow. Her creamy skin seemed flawless in the dim light. The shadows hid her sex.

He’d felt her flesh under his fingers, and it had surprised him—she didn’t have much hair. It aroused him, and now he studied her with interest, her eyes pausing on her bare cunny.

“They do this for the debut night,” June explained softly, noticing him studying her intimate parts. She nudged her slender legs just a bit apart—a move graceful and erotic—exposing her bare flesh. “They say, men like the sight of it. Do you?”

He couldn’t get enough of it—the sight so clean and unusual that he wanted to lean over and lick it to know how her bare cunny felt under his tongue. The thought of being

inside her sent a hot flash to his groin, making his cock strain in his trousers.

He undressed slowly. June watched. When he was finally naked, standing at the foot of the bed in all his glory, his cock hard as an iron rod, she studied him head to toe, curiosity in her eyes sparkling with the reflection of the candlelight.

Desmon joined her and crouched on top of her.

“Are you still nervous?” he asked, softly kissing her shoulders and her neck.

“No,” she answered simply.

He wondered whether he’d gotten too much alcohol tonight, or perhaps, something else had affected his mind. He had never felt so connected to a woman, so comfortable around one, so full of craving for her body yet finding bliss in just lying like this pressed against her.

June’s hands weren’t as timid anymore when they caressed his back, then slid down to his thighs, and cupped his buttocks.

*Dammit!*

This woman had cast a spell on him.

Her scent drowned his sense of reality.

Her touch aroused him more than the most expert courtesans had ever done.

Her lips took his. As they kissed, his desire grew stronger. His hand roamed along her body, caressing her breasts, her thighs, sliding between her legs and finding her smooth flesh.

She moaned. She couldn’t be expert enough to pretend, he knew.

“Do you like it when I touch you there?” he asked as his fingers slowly slid up and down the split between her legs. “Tell me to stop if you don’t. It’s all right.”

“No. Please,” she answered too quickly. “Don’t stop.”

Her mouth was on him as if kissing was the most essential part of their intimacy. He’d never kissed a woman so much.

Not Catherine. Not any harlot. It was peculiar. Making love with their mouths seemed to bring them closer than any other act.

And it made his body burn with desire.

He wanted to please her, but his cock demanded to be inside her, to seek another release. The thought of penetrating her sent a jolt of powerful excitement through his body.

“Raise your knees, June,” he said softly.

He took his cock in his hand and pressed the tip of it to her entrance.

“Relax,” he said in a low voice, his face inches from hers, their eyes locked.

He slid the tip of his cock up and down her sex, caressing it in this way, pressing harder, as if getting her ready for the final act.

She didn't look away. Her eyes were focused on his with expectation. But the more he teased her cunny with his cock, the more he could see in her face that she was getting aroused again. He felt her hips buck at him.

“It feels so good,” she whispered, blinking slowly, her eyes dilated with pleasure.

“It does, doesn't it,” he whispered back, pressing his lips to hers but not kissing, just staying like this, feeling her warm breath, guiding his cock up and down her wet sex, eventually stopping at her entrance and gently pushing in.

She gasped when he thrust in just a bit and stopped.

“It's all right. We will do it slowly,” he comforted her. His hand went up and stroked her face.

He pushed in a little deeper.

She gasped and held her breath, her hands squeezing his back.

He felt her hips rolling, surprised that she tried to help him instead of resisting. And when he thrust even deeper, she



bucked her hips at him, taking him in, as he broke the invisible barrier.

Her fingers digging into his back, she moaned. He thrust all the way in, feeling her warm core close around his cock.

“Are you all right?” he whispered, though *he* wasn’t. At the sensation of being inside her, the desire coiled in him with so much force that he had to pause and calm himself.

Her lips caught his in a kiss. She rolled her hips, indicating that she wanted him.

*Oh, God...*

He started kissing her, deeply and slowly. His hips started moving in the same rhythm. It felt wonderful to be inside her.

“Desmon,” she whispered, her hands sliding up his back and neck and into his hair. “It feels wonderful.”

A wave of desire washed over him. He kissed her passionately, not being able to restrain himself as he started thrusting faster.

He’d never cared much how a woman felt being intimate with him. He’d never *considered* pleasing a woman, and when he had, it was returning a favor or trying to see how good his skills were. He had always been selfish in his pursuit of pleasure.

But this was different. This was not just about a release. He felt a connection to her. As if this intimate moment was some holy ritual.

He moved on top of June, forgetting who he was and what had brought them together. What mattered was the sensation of utmost bliss at being with another person in the most perfect moment of intimacy.

June’s moans were quiet at first—timid gasps that were oh-so-arousing. She nudged her hips at him. Her hands started pulling him tighter against her. Seconds later, her moans grew deeper and louder.

She had let go.

Again.

So naturally and easily, it made Desmon's body melt into hers as he thrust deeper. Her mouth found his skin and kissed his shoulder, then licked it, then bit softly into it as she moaned. He cupped her face and found her mouth with his, licking her back, catching her bites as she rubbed against him.

She climaxed loudly, her arms wrapped tightly around him. Just as her last moans subsided, his own climax approached—with a stiffened moan, his teeth closed gently on the crook of her neck, his tongue licking her skin just like she had done it to him. He pulled out just on time, and as his hand gripped his cock, he reached his peak and exploded in a powerful climax.

The noises of the night street seeped into the silence of the bedroom as June and Desmon lay splayed out on the sheets. In the dimness, his hand found hers and held it. This was not him—this gentleness, this need for one's closeness. But something about June made him too aware of what he did around her.

Some time had passed when Desmon turned his head to look at June.

He was in utmost shock. He'd thought this would be a new experience for June, yet he himself felt ravished, spent to exhaustion and... delighted.

A smile flickered on his lips as June turned her head toward him and met his smiling gaze.

"It wasn't bad, was it?" he asked, knowing that nothing before had ever compared to this night.

June bit her lip, trying to suppress a smile but gazing at him awe-struck.

"It wasn't what I expected. It... It felt amazing," she finished softly.

“Well?”

Volchen sat in the armchair in Desmon’s sitting room as Desmon walked around, smoking a cigar and trying to act indifferent.

“Well *what?*” Desmon snapped back.

Volchen spread his arms—his question was loud and clear, yet Desmon was avoiding the topic.

“How did it go?” Volchen asked.

“Fine. Doesn’t it always?”

“Fine?” Volchen chuckled. “Oh my. That’s the worst ever feedback on the three hundred and twenty pounds I spent.”

Desmon cocked his head in reproach. “It was your idea.”

“True. But truly, Desmon. Just fine? Nothing special? No juicy memories? Nothing that pulls your mind back to that night? No desire to see her again?”

“She is a beautiful girl.”

“This is it?” Volchen raised his eyebrows in disappointment.

Desmon strolled around slowly, trying to avoid looking at Volchen. His friend had an unexplainable talent for reading people’s minds. And, oh, was Desmon’s mind full of all sorts of thoughts! He wanted to take a seat on the sofa, yet even the

sight of it burnt him with the memories of what he'd done on it the night before.

“Well”—Volchen rose from his chair and walked to the bar cabinet to pour himself a drink—“be it. At least I took you by surprise. And the girl—well, she will have a fill of men within a week or so. I am sure there will be a lineup to get under her skirt, her being fresh off the Flower Auction and all that.”

“Stop, Volchen, I beg you!”

Desmon waved him off with irritation and, exhaling loudly, flung himself onto the sofa. He used his friend's last name, and that was already a sign of trouble. Desmon knew it. So did Volchen, who, with a drink in his hand, walked nonchalantly toward his seat.

“If the girl didn't catch your attention or even a second thought, then perhaps other men tonight—”

“Don't!” Desmon exclaimed. “Just don't,” he whispered and closed his eyes. “You always do this. You always dig into people's minds. And you always stir something that probably should stay hidden.” He opened his eyes and gave Volchen a meaningful stare.

Volchen narrowed his eyes at Desmon. “Sometimes, that *something* deep inside that you talk about is the only thing worth stirring.”

“All right! All right! She was great!” Desmon exhaled in frustration. He hadn't stopped thinking about June since he'd taken her back to Baker Street only to come back to his empty flat and wish she were still here. “There is this...” Desmon paused and sighed, thinking it over. “A sense of possessiveness, if you will, about the person who only had an intimate experience with you and no other man.” Desmon rubbed his forehead. “I have a hard time about the fact that she would be entertaining others tonight. God, what a word! Entertaining. Yet! Yes, Volchen, you are right! Don't look at me like this. Wipe that smirk off your face. You knew it all along. Yes. I would like to see her again. I am *dying* to see her again. But I can't... I am afraid I won't feel the same about her after she'd been with others. I won't be able to feel the same

about *myself* after I'd bedded her and let her go to the Belle House for the first time."

"Oh, pity? Is that what you feel? Are you sure?" Volchen's gaze wasn't sarcastic or mocking anymore. He was like a teacher who guided his student on the right path.

"No." Desmon shook his head.

"Possessiveness? Is that all?"

"No," Desmon answered and reluctantly added, "there is something else."

"Are you falling for the harlot?" Volchen chuckled, his cold eyes burrowing at his friend.

"No. No. But she is...she is different. The way she talks, the way she understands life." The truth was, they'd only talked for a little bit before falling asleep, yet everything about June Aveling seemed different.

"Oh, that's refreshing! You spent your time talking to a harlot about life!"

"Stop calling her that. She is not a harlot yet. Well, not until tonight."

"So, then?"

"Then what?"

"What are your torments? Because here is the thing, my friend." Volchen shifted in his seat as if getting ready for a long lecture. "You can reason all you want—pity, possessiveness, admiration. Sure. But when you meet the right person, there is always something that strikes you right away. You either know it the first time you see that person or not. If you never saw a girl again—would you regret it? And if yes, then what keeps you from seeing her again? My advice—go see her. Better even—take her to your flat again—for a day or two. Or a week! Have your fill of her. Play that amorous game you've never gotten to play with your Catherine." Desmon flinched at the mention of his runaway bride. "Yes. Don't glare at me. You have enough money to do as you wish. And you have an opportunity to find out what it feels like to be with a

woman you fancy. She is not a harlot yet—you are right about that. Yet she thinks she is and is for sale. There is no shame in buying things you can afford. Especially when they bring you pleasure. She might enjoy it too.”

Volchen took a slow sip of brandy as he studied his friend.

Desmon stared at him in silence. He knew Volchen was right. But he didn't understand why Volchen had started this game in the first place.

“What's in it for you, James? Why are you doing this? Why are you playing games again? You like it, I know. But you put too much thought into it. As if a trivial thing like this somehow matters in the course of life.”

Volchen smiled mysteriously. “Let's just say I am a *mystique*. And there isn't a more mystical thing than fate and chance. I've told you. When you arrived in London the day of the dinner, and only for a couple of days, I thought that was no coincidence. Life is not random, my friend. Have you heard of the power of a butterfly? It's a strange story, a myth, really. It has to do with Lord Hemlon, who led the Scots against the English in the battle at Bramston Moor centuries ago. His army stood waiting for a peace treaty as the enemy stood across the field. Lord Hemlon sat on his horse, exchanging words with his wife, who'd followed him to the battlefield, when a butterfly flitted by. His wife exclaimed in surprise, spooking the horse who reared, standing up in its hind legs, spooking the Lord's horse that ran out in front of the battalion. The enemy across the field thought it was the beginning of a cunning attack and pushed their men forward. Were Lord Hemlon and his men prepared for another fight, they would've won. But you see, this unexpected attack took him and his exhausted men by surprise and they were defeated. For the longest time, the battle was considered one of the first significant victories during the War of the League of Cambrai. The truth is much less glorious. It was the swing of the butterfly wings that changed the course of history.”

The mention of a butterfly made Desmon's heart lurch at the memory of June. Only the night before, she had stood in

this very sitting room telling him something about the Duke of Burgundy.

“And what does this have to do with me?” he asked, pretending not to care though his friend’s words stirred him greatly.

“It’s the small things that can set in motion an unexpected chain of events, Desmon. Sometimes, you need to give them a chance. I feel like you need to change things up.” He smiled mysteriously.

“With a butterfly.” Desmon chuckled.

Volchen shrugged his shoulders. “With a butterfly. Sure. Why not?”

“It’s ridiculous,” Desmon snorted.

“Is it, though?”



June’s lips still tingled from Desmon’s kisses. The flesh between her legs still throbbed from his penetration. Her mind was still reeling at the memories of his whispers, his caresses, his strong body under her hands, his dark gaze on her.

*Madness!*

June couldn’t get rid of the memories that crowded her head like a swarm of moths. All she thought about was Desmon Shaw while she was supposed to be entertaining other men.

The thought scared her. She was going to take another man to her bed tonight.

*Oh, God...*

She looked around in despair, a smile, like a mask, frozen on her lips.

The Grand Parlor of the Belle House was full of clients and ladies of the House. The mirrors multiplied the figures and hundreds of lights flickering around, making the room look

like a cheerful party. The smell of wine and flowers, expensive colognes and perfumes, laughter, and chatter created the atmosphere of utmost festivities.

Yet, June was far from being cheerful.

Gentlemen studied her, threw occasional glances in her direction, and whispered to each other. Mrs. Sharke, of course, had informed that this was June and Rebecca's first night in the Belle House. June had already spotted the gentlemen from the auction. If they couldn't go first, they would go second. Or third. Or fourth. Yesterday, she'd had her first client. Today was her first night at the Belle House. Then there would be the first man who would do something outrageous to her. How many firsts?

Client!

Oh, how she hated the word! Groomed for just that, June now felt complete desperation from not being able to escape the men.

Rebecca, on the other hand, felt at ease. She laughed and seemed to enjoy the lustful stares of men. Her femininity was her power that she flaunted around. To June, this was a treasure to protect. Except, both of them were now for sale.

Mr. Kopf's voice turned her around. "Miss June, would you join us here for a glass of brandy?"

The gentlemen at the small low table nodded with smiles.

"You've broken a record, Miss June," an older gentleman commented. "This alone had started rumors amongst the most avid women-lovers. You will have a lot of attention."

Men nodded with approval as if June had won some precious prize. All those men would try to get a piece of her—their first time with her. A city full of firsts!

She felt dizzy. Was she supposed to choose one of them? Was it *her* choice? In the Belle House, the price was set for the new ladies. Would they fight for her again? Or did they have an unspoken code among them that would give one of them the priority in being her first? And then there would be a line to have her company.



Every. Day. Of. Her. Life.

“Are you all right, miss?” someone inquired.

She nodded, murmuring, “Grand,” excused herself, and walked up to the piano just to be alone for a moment.

She thought of Desmon again. Among these men, the memory of him felt so distant and so...sweet.

The night had left her with a strange feeling of admiration and connection to the man she barely knew. It had taken her by surprise. The memory of his gaze hadn't left her since she'd come to the Belle House. He was like a dear lover who had abandoned her. Would she think of every man she bedded with so much attachment?

She caught one of the servants, grabbed a glass of brandy from the tray, and gulped it in one go. Then another. She stood with her eyes closed, feeling the liquid burn her throat, feeling the loud voices starting to dissipate, wondering if she could get drunk and go through the night not remembering anything.

“There you are,” she heard the familiar cheerful voice and opened her eyes to see Archer Bellington.

He was handsome, but today, June didn't feel attracted to him. She felt like she belonged to the man she'd spent a night with, her mind invaded by his images. Everything else fell flat.

Archer smiled. “Yesterday, I was hoping to win the auction,” he said in an overly sweet manner, bowing gracefully, though now June realized that this was an empty talk. “I was hoping to have the privilege to be your first man.” His smile grew bigger, and June knew that his smile was the same, almost permanent, no matter who he addressed.

She didn't bother smiling in return and searched the room for Rebecca. Her friend chatted to a tall young gentleman across the room, though her eyes were on Archer and June, flicking away with disappointment.

“But what is past is past. Am I right, Miss June?” Archer kept talking as his eyes skimmed over her dress. “You look marvelous, by the way. The Belle House is changing you

already.” His eyebrows flicked up and down in a suggestive way.

Revulsion was creeping into June’s heart at his every word.

How had she not seen it before? She’d thought Archer would be her preferred winner of the auction.

*This* man? The one who thought that the Belle House was a great influence on a young lady?

She would’ve laughed if it weren’t for the lump in her throat.

“I do have to tell you, Miss June,” he continued, his forefinger tapping the glass in his hand as if he were doing a countdown to his next conquest. “I am a proud man, but you have caught my attention. I don’t mind being second. It would be an honor just as much.”

The feeling of disgust that suddenly washed over June was so strong that she had to make an effort not to spit in Archer’s face.

“I know you have a lot of gentlemen interested in you tonight, Miss June,” he continued, his voice becoming distant as her head spun. “But I can assure you, we can have a great time together.”

Everything else he said escaped her, for she felt it was hard to breathe. June tried to manage a smile, but her hands were starting to tremble, her face felt like it was on fire, and her chest was heavy with despair. She gulped the brandy she held in her hand and scanned the room—a collection of faces, smiles, and cigar smoke.

She would have more brandy, she decided, and maybe she would faint, and some lord would take her unconscious, so she would not have a recollection of it the next morning.

This very moment, a servant approached.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Mrs. Sharke would like to have a word with you in her parlor upstairs.”

June nodded frantically and, leaving Archer Bellington, flitted out of the Grand Parlor and into the cooler hallway, gasping for air as if she had been held underwater for too long.

She ran upstairs and prayed that the conversation with Mrs. Sharke was long so it could delay her return downstairs. But as she swung Mrs. Shark's parlor door open, the very first face she saw was so unexpected and so familiar that she thought she would cry.

Her silk emerald-colored dress, golden jewelry with diamonds that sparkled like stars, the way her hair was pinned at the back of her head and cascaded in long waves down her back made her look like a different woman altogether.

Desmon felt a jolt of excitement at seeing June again, only hours after he'd parted with her.

June looked enchanting. Her natural beauty, accentuated by silks and precious stones, was dazzling. Under different circumstances, she could be a lady, attending balls and dinners and attracting admiring glances of the wealthy men.

Yet something marred her beautiful face—there was distress in it, a desperation that was obvious as her beautiful blue eyes darted between him and Mrs. Sharke.

“Miss June,” Mrs. Sharke said loudly, strolling over to the girl. “How is everything downstairs?”

June tried to manage a smile that flickered away quickly. “It's fine.”

“It's fine,” echoed the madam and studied her. “Well, tonight is another unexpected turn of events. That is if you choose to accept what Mr. Shaw here has to offer.”

Desmon's heart thudded loudly in his chest. He hadn't even considered a possibility that June might deny him. The whole ordeal was ridiculous. Scandalous! To someone like

Volchen, it was a silly game. But Desmon's life was a lot more structured. There were rules. Morals. Were there?

June's eyes darted to Desmon, and he felt the familiar tension that burnt the air between them.

He didn't look away as the madam of the Belle House said, "Mr. Shaw would like to have your company again."

June didn't take her eyes off him as Mrs. Sharke continued, "He would like to take you away if you agree."

His heart was beating wildly as he saw a smile forming in the corners of June's lips at the madam's words, "He is willing to pay a sum to have your company with him for ten days."

June's face rendered in shock as she turned to stare at Mrs. Sharke. "Ten days..." Her words sounded like an echo.

Desmon felt his own heart thud like a thousand-pound drum. He gazed at June without blinking. Was there a chance she would decline? His decision was spontaneous and probably the wildest thing he'd done. Yet, he prayed to God and willed her to say the right words as if her response was about to change his life.

"Miss June?" Mrs. Sharke arched an eyebrow.

"Yes," said June quickly. "Yes!" she exhaled as if a weight had lifted off her chest, and Desmon thought his heart would explode.

The arrangement was discussed for some time, but neither Desmon nor June listened much to Mrs. Sharke's instructions. They gazed only at each other.

Desmon had forgotten the unease of being in the lavish parlor with its plush carpet and over-the-top furniture and mirrors from floor to ceiling. He'd been to plenty of brothels. But never before had he been willing to spend so much money for the company of a woman who was paid for her services. He was embarrassed, no mistake. Yet, the thought that he soon would have June all to himself made his heart beat in exhilaration.

When they left, the madam of the Belle House smiled to herself. She understood what was happening. Mr. Shaw wanted more of the girl. Like many men before him, he was infatuated with a courtesan.

But she felt there was something else in the suppressed smiles of the two young people. Perhaps, this was another game of fate. She was glad the money from the new arrival was coming so easily. She only hoped that this arrangement didn't lead to trouble. Even more so, and it had happened before—to tragedy.



June's trunk was loaded onto Desmon's carriage, and they were finally on their way.

Desmon felt giddy, like a young boy who was setting out for a wild adventure. This arrangement was peculiar, scandalous, for the lack of a better word, yet Desmon felt unusually happy.

June, in her turn, was quiet. Desmon could see her agitation—in the way she picked the fabric of her gloves, or cast her eyes down and looked around aimlessly, or shifted in her seat next to him.

“June, are you all right?”

She nodded, murmured, “Yes,” though she kept her eyes away from him.

The carriage drove quietly along the night streets of London. The silence was awkward, the noises of the city still full of life at this time of night.

Desmon suddenly felt uneasy. Was this a mistake? Had he misread her behavior this morning?

“I hope I didn't impose with my proposal,” he spoke again as if there was something to apologize for, “or disappoint you. If you, perhaps, have changed your mind, we can—”

“No!” she exclaimed, turning toward him. She attempted to smile but looked away again, hiding her eyes and shaking her head. “It’s great, truly.”

He watched the side of her face and how she looked down at her hands too often and bit her lip. Something was wrong, he knew. He shifted closer to her and took her chin between his fingers, turning her face toward him.

He froze in shock.

June’s eyes were full of tears. The desperation in them was so obvious that he felt his heart clutch with tenderness.

“What is it, June?” He frowned, not understanding. “Do you want to go back?”

“No! No!” June swallowed hard and bit her lip again, her eyes glistening with the tears that swelled in them. “I didn’t want to be there,” she said quietly, her lips twitching from trying to manage a smile and stop herself from crying at the same time. “I *couldn’t* be there, Desmon. Not tonight. Not after yesterday. Not...”

She gasped and bit her lip again, her blue eyes twinkling with tears.

“Shhh,” he whispered, his heart beating heavily as if her pain was contagious. “It’s all right.”

She was so beautiful even in her distress that he wanted to kiss her madly, take away her frustration, or anything else that was the cause of such a state. He wanted to undress her and please her endlessly so that in the state of ecstasy she forgot about all her worries.

“June,” he said softly, dismissing his lustful thoughts, “it will be all right.” He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. “You will be fine.”

She nodded with a weak smile.

He planted a soft kiss on her lips and, pulling away, smiled back.

And suddenly, she flung her arms around his neck in a tight embrace. She hid her face in the crook of his neck, and he

felt her body shake.

“Thank you,” she whispered, gripping him tightly. “Thank you,” she repeated.

He held her tightly and closed his eyes, inhaling her so familiar scent.

Nothing in a long time had brought him as much comfort as the woman in his arms.



The sight of June in his flat was so familiar that Desmon smiled at that peculiar thought.

“Deja vu,” he said as they walked into the sitting room.

June laughed happily, and he was glad she felt better.

“We should eat,” he said, giving orders to serve supper, meanwhile studying June.

She had taken off her hat and gloves and perched on the edge of the sofa. She was on the *very sofa* where last night he held her...

He stopped himself and, suppressing a smile, walked to the bar cabinet to pour them brandy.

June looked calmer now, looking around with ease.

“We have ten days,” he said, coming back to her and passing her a drink.

She nodded with a smile.

“There is no rush for anything,” he continued. “I will not force you to do what you don’t want. I hope, of course, that you enjoy my company as much as I enjoy yours. But I would like us to spend time together and—”

She nodded again. “I would like that too.”

“I felt like we’ve parted too soon,” he said, feeling slightly embarrassed at the wording and blinked away. “I don’t know if I am saying the right words. But... I wanted to see you again.”



He returned his eyes to her. “As soon as you left, in fact.” He chuckled.

“I’m glad.”

“And I would like to know you better. Why—I don’t know. I can’t explain the reason but I am... I want to be around you. In fact, I felt this way since the day we met.”

*To know you better...*

Oh, he was such a liar! Desmon cringed at his own words. His mind was obsessed with the thoughts about June. He wanted her every minute of the time she was next to him—back in the madam’s parlor, in the carriage, and especially now, when she was in his flat again, and there was no one to stop him from doing what he pleased. He wanted her naked in his arms, moaning like she did the night before, pleasing him with her gentle hands, learning how to take this gentleness and turn it into passion.

But the thought of ten days made him burn with sweet longing. Tonight was not the night to take advantage of her. He would give her more time. He wanted to find out what she was like, where she’d come from. And meanwhile, he would show her what pleasure was about so that hopefully, she would be willing to do anything he wanted her to.

They made small talk. Mostly about London and weather and Desmon’s new venture with horse races.

They had supper of baked oysters and cheese and bacon rolls and drank more wine. Soon, the conversation was at ease, and Desmon thought it was unbelievable that they talked like two people who’d known each other for a long time.

“Rebecca has been my best friend for ten years,” June said when Desmon had brought up the auction. “But she has a different idea about our profession. You probably noticed.” She chuckled.

He could tell it was much easier for her to talk about the Belle House now. Away from it, knowing that she wouldn’t be back for ten days made her more relaxed. Listening to her soft voice, her chuckles, her excitement when she talked about her

friend calmed Desmon, too. Her scent was permanently around, as well as his state of arousal. How could he not want her when her graceful movements, her elegant gestures, the whispering of her garments—all this surrounded by the glimmering of the candles—sank Desmon into a surreal state of sweet longing for her touch. He wanted to kiss her sensual lips, taste her warm tongue, run his hand through her golden hair.

Yet, he was respectful and remained a quiet observer.

“Do you come to London often?” she asked.

“More often than I wish.” He chuckled.

“Do you not like it?”

“I prefer the countryside. I like land. Horses. Nature.”

“I think I would like that too,” she said, raising her smiling blue eyes at him. “But I’ve never spent enough time in the country, except for occasional trips with my father.”

“Well, I hope you get to enjoy it, for that is what I intend to do.”

Surprise flickered in her eyes. “Pardon me?”

“We are leaving for Kent tomorrow.”

“Oh!” Her face lit up with delight that only made Desmon smile with satisfaction. “I would be delighted to visit Kent. That would be...marvelous.”

She grinned broadly and cast her eyes down.

“That would make me very happy.” Desmon couldn’t help smiling, and couldn’t help not staring at her lips that he craved again. “And maybe you get a chance to introduce me to the Duke of Burgundy.”

Her laughter was the most contagious one he’d ever heard. Desmon chuckled.

She shook her head, gazing at him with a grin. “I can’t believe you remembered that.”

“I remember every detail,” he answered, not knowing what made him say that.

She batted her eyelashes at him—the gesture innocent yet playful—and he wanted to grab her and kiss her until she couldn’t breathe.

“Perhaps, I can tell you more about butterflies later,” she said shyly, interrupting his lustful thoughts. “Kent is abundant with many species.”

“How would you know that?” he asked with amusement.

“It’s my specialty. My father’s actually. *Was*,” she corrected herself, her smile fading.

“I would like to know more then.”

It was almost midnight when their talk subsided. Desmon didn’t want to force himself on her, and June hadn’t given a sign that she wanted more intimacy. Perhaps, she was still upset. Whatever the cause, Desmon decided to be a gentleman. At least tonight.

He hadn’t asked the servants to prepare the guest room. She was a courtesan. *Was* to be soon. Was she supposed to stay in his bed like she had last night? He cursed himself for not asking Volchen.

“I think tonight we should just rest. Tomorrow is a long trip,” he said, rising from the sofa. “But...”

She glanced at him inquiringly, the corner of her lips rising in a smile. “What is it?”

“I will take the guest room so you can have mine.”

He had intended to look away, but her blue eyes still held his with that magnetic intensity.

“Would you like to stay in the same room?” she asked softly.

He swallowed.

She shrugged her shoulders and pursed her lips but didn’t look away. “Considering last night and all.”



Despite their last night, the awkwardness was almost tangible. The sounds were too loud as they got undressed, shedding their garments in complete darkness.

June undressed quickly, down to her chemise, not daring to open the trunk and put on one of her proper nightgowns. She was too aware of herself, avoiding looking at Desmon.

Desmon was too aware of the erection that ached with need at the mere presence of June in his bedroom again. This night was different, he felt. As if they were in a relationship that of the shy honeymooners, or an arranged marriage, though Desmon didn't know what it was like.

It was a strange imitation of a usual routine of a man and a woman, though Desmon didn't know what *that* was like either.

When they lay down next to each other, on their backs, they said goodnights and lay in utter silence. June—trying not to move and holding her breath in the nervousness that had come back. Desmon—with his leg raised at the knee, the pose that concealed his erection. It was unbearable, but he'd decided he would wait till morning. June would be rested and have forgotten her ordeal at the Belle House.

He felt ridiculous. With a pretty woman he had paid for who was now in his bed, going to sleep instead of fulfilling his fantasies, his body almost in physical pain from want.

June shifted and turned to her side, her back toward him, and he exhaled in relief.

He didn't know how much time had passed, but he was nowhere close to falling asleep. If anything, June's scent drove him insane, and the thought of caressing her made his erection almost painful. The street light shining from the window cast a soft glow into the room.

As quietly as possible, Desmon pulled the sheet off himself and turned to his side toward June.

She was asleep. Her body in the soft light from the window rose steadily up and down. He studied her silhouette, the golden hair that spilled onto the pillow and now looked almost silver. He desperately wanted to touch her and caress her skin. Instead, his hand undid the ties of his drawers and slid inside to his swollen cock.

He exhaled in relief as his hand wrapped around his shaft. It felt good. Stroking it up and down, he tried to be as discreet as possible. He imagined kissing June's lips, drawing his cock along her creamy skin, and suppressed a grunt. His hand moved faster. This was torture—having her only a foot away and not being able to do what he wanted. He cupped his balls, grunting quietly from the sweet pressure, and closed his eyes, imagining June's hand on his cock.

He heard June shift, and when he opened his eyes, she was on her back, her face turned toward him, her eyes wide open and fixed on him.

*Dammit.*

He felt like a schoolboy caught misbehaving.

A jolt of panic ran through his body, and he froze. She was his, and there shouldn't have been a sense of embarrassment of having his hand on his cock. Yet, she wouldn't expect him to be that filthy when he'd said they should rest.

What he didn't expect was her hand to slide toward him. He held his breath as he felt her hand slide under the sheet, follow the path of his own hand, and reach inside his drawers.

He thought he would spend at her touch. Her hand gently pushed his away and took his cock.

He grunted, almost moaned from the sweet sensation of being in her hand.

"June," he whispered and grunted again, unable to endure the teasing. Her fingers were too soft, her touch too gentle, the sweet ache of wanting the release too strong.

"Sweetheart," he whispered. "I am sorry I woke you."

Her hand started smoothly sliding up and down his shaft, making him hold his breath so as not to grunt.

“And I want *you*,” she said quietly. “I want you to touch me.”

Oh, those were the sweetest words a man could hear from a woman he wanted!

He cupped her face and pulled her toward him. His mouth found hers and took it with greed, plunging his tongue between her lips and coaxing hers to do the same.

The sweet thing didn't know how much he had to hold back. She could not possibly comprehend how much he wanted her. And he couldn't understand how she possibly gathered the courage so as to rise and shift to straddle. Her warm thighs straddled his hips. Her kisses grew more passionate. Her hand in his drawers cupped his balls just like he had done it to himself, and he almost bit her, kissing her feverishly, blind with the sensation that overtook his body.

His hand made its way between her thighs and found her cunny dripping with honey. She moaned at his touch, pushed into his hand, rubbed her smooth bare flesh on it without a trace of shyness.

“I want you,” she murmured between the kisses. “I want you to take me, Desmon.”

There was no hesitation when, in one smooth movement, Desmon wrapped his arms around her and flipped her onto her back. He jerked her chemise up and over her head, exposing her nakedness. He helped her as she pushed his drawers down his legs.

He kissed her neck and shoulders and bare breasts, sucking on her nipples, his hands roaming her body, grabbing and squeezing and pulling, hers—equally hungry for him. He pushed her legs wider with his knees, and without consideration, without asking how she wanted it, without thinking whether he would hurt her again or not, he thrust into her in one forceful movement.

She cried out, and he paused, catching her lips in a kiss.

“Sorry,” he murmured.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered.

And when her legs wrapped around his hips, there was no stopping Desmon Shawn in his slow descent into insanity.

He was mad with want.

His body craved hers.

This passion took him by storm, and the storm was unleashing onto June, his thrusts becoming deep and forceful.

What he didn’t realize, blind to everything in this moment of passion, was that her mouth was equally greedy, her hands squeezing and pulling him, her fingers digging into his skin. Her hips bucked at him with as much force as his did at her, her moans as loud as his grunts.

And when they reached their peaks in the exact same moment—in a matter of a minute—it was as if a tornado had gone through, leaving them ravaged and out of breath.

“It’s unbearable how much I want you,” he said in a low voice, still on top of her, his face buried in her hair as he inhaled her scent.

She stroked his hair. “Will you believe me if I tell you all I thought about since morning was you?” she asked softly.

It was too dark, and he couldn’t read her face when he pulled away and gazed at her. But it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter who he or she was or what had brought them together. Desmon was happy. He only hoped he could have enough of her so that this madness boiling inside him went away.

They fell asleep naked, in each other’s arms, with one thought in both their heads—they had ten days of each other.

# PART II

---



June had never known her mother, having lost her to consumption at an early age. Her father was a brilliant entomologist who studied insects, and more specifically, butterflies. He liked to be called an *aurelian*, which June had always thought sounded mystical.

Her father was an extraordinary man. He never had much money but always found time to teach her what he knew, bought her books and art supplies, and explained the intricate science of insects. His collection wasn't big, but among dozens of spectacular species were some of the rarest butterflies that had ever made it to the English shore.

If she closed her eyes, June could still see them lined up on the shelves in the cabinet with glass doors. The one in the sitting room that was also a study and a workplace.

An Island Marble butterfly from the west coast of America—a creamy-white species with a mottled pattern of greenish-yellow on the underwings.

A male Chimaera from New Guinea—its body half-black, half-yellow, the wings edged with ink-black and veined in the same color, but the underwings and the outer colors stark green with golden spots.

An Amber Phantom butterfly from Amazonia, one of June's favorite—moth-looking with fading translucent wings. Seemingly plain, the trick was to use the background that under the proper lighting would shine through the butterfly's

wings. The case was such that with tweezers, one could easily remove the metal pin that held the dry butterfly in place and change the background. June liked to imagine what the beautiful insect would look like in real life, flitting among the flowers and absorbing the colors of the world around.

There was a partial wing of Queen Alexandra Birdwing, the largest butterfly ever found, its open wings spanning eleven inches.

There was a Zebra Longing whose wing coloring was reflected by its name.

There was a Woolly Legs from Africa that had—it always made June laugh—wooly legs. But one had to use a magnifying glass to see it, for the butterfly was one of the smallest in the world with a wingspan of less than an inch.

There was an even smaller one, Cramer's Mesene, of bright orange-red color that looked like a drop of blood.

June remembered them in their precise order that never changed. She looked at them every day for years, clapped her hands in excitement at every new addition, read relentlessly about every new project her father picked up.

June's father had spent years putting together a catalog for a certain Henry Byrdwing, who collected and bred rare species of butterflies.

"There will be a time when our work will be rewarded, my dear," her father always said.

Most of his savings were spent on finding the rarest butterflies around the world. And though June knew that often they needed better clothes or even food, the warmest memories were of her father bringing another display box home. He unwrapped the brown paper around it slowly, looking at June apologetically, but his eyes burning with excitement. And June had always burnt with anticipation, for with a new butterfly came a new story, a tale of another creature of nature that had come across the world to start its life in their small flat.

The most treasured of them all, her father's prized possession that he'd spent a fortune on, was Bhutan Glory from the Himalayas. It was, undoubtedly, the strangest looking in their collection. Her father had bribed the man he knew who sailed on frequent trips to India. If the man knew how much the butterfly cost at an auction, he would've sold it to someone who could pay ten times the price. Instead, it took all of June's father's savings.

It was worth it. The upper wings were elongated, the bottom ones smaller and rounder. The butterfly was black with white veins that started at the thorax and spread in striations like washed-out paint. The inside of the bottom wings had large disc-shaped patches. Starting with bright scarlet, then growing into black and then into bright yellow, they looked like giant eyes placed on the otherwise black body. The bottom wings had several sharp tails—black, long like claws, or weapons, perhaps, that stretched outward.

"It looks like he has eyes," ten-year-old June said when she sat next to her father as he unwrapped the glass case and told June the story of the butterfly. She was afraid to breathe, so mesmerized was she by the insect.

Then she frowned. "It looks scary."

Her father laughed. He called it the Beauty. June felt like the butterfly stared at her anywhere she went around the room. Mr. Ogle was what she named it and soon greeted the butterfly every morning and said goodnight before going to bed.

Often, in the summertime, they took trips to the forests and fields outside London to collect larvae, or moths, or whatever else her father needed for his projects. Those were the happiest times. That and the days when June sat with graphites and watercolors and inks and paper and drew the butterflies and moths that she'd found in glass cases of her father's collection.

"You are a talented artist," he often said and marveled at the amount of detail in her sketches. He'd bought her more paper and inks and a magnifying glass. He told her stories of insects' interactions in nature and made her draw out those intricate scenes. Larvae, cocoons, spiders and ants, mosquitos

and moths. The bugs of all sizes and shapes! They had become her world. By the age of twelve, June's skills became of such precision that her father often wondered whether it was his biased opinion or his daughter's art indeed had a quality of the master painters.

"I talked to Mr. Byrdwing and showed him your sketches," her father had said one day. "He wants to use them for his future catalogs, June. It's wonderful news, my dear girl!"

Fifteen-year-old June had lit up with pride! She had a dream that one day she would be an artist and hopefully as knowledgeable in entomology as her father!

Perhaps if one knew how fragile life could be, June's father would have done a better job securing her future.

He passed away unexpectedly. Sixteen-year-old June found herself alone and with no prospects and skills. The dreams suddenly seemed naive and silly. The stacks of her drawings couldn't bring her father back. Neither could all the books in their small sitting-room.

June located Mr. Byrdwing. It brought June all the way to the Entomological Society in the British Museum. The man was out of town. His assistant took her information and message, and two days later, a man showed up and bought her father's entire collection of butterflies. All that was left of her previous life was a trunk with her father's writings, her own drawings, and the only glass display that June hadn't sold—the *Bhutan glory* her father had treasured the most.



"I am sorry for your loss," said Desmon.

They had left London before noon. Having spent most of the ride chatting, they only had an hour left till Desmon's estate.

"I didn't mean to tell you my story to ask for pity," June answered. "My life is much better than that of many others."

"You have a positive outlook, then."

Indeed.

This trip was already taking her mind off the Belle House. As soon as the houses on the outskirts of London had been left behind, she had felt unusual freedom, as if she were going into a new direction in her life.

Silly, of course.

The Belle House was behind, but the night with Desmon wasn't. The fit of passion the night before had remained in her mind still. The desire had swelled in her again in the morning when she'd studied Desmon's strong form that only hours before had taken her with so much passion.

She hadn't expected to like the intimacy with a man. The first night was a surprise. She was attracted to Desmon, sure. He'd made her feel good before he'd taken her.

But the climax, the mysterious heights that many women in school had said would take some time to master and mostly with the men one liked—it had happened that night. June had thought it had been a one-off. But last night she had lost her mind with lust. The presence of Desmon in her bed, his scent, his warmth had soaked her with the need that was too physical.

Even now, during the carriage ride, glancing at Desmon often and without shyness, June admired his form, his bulging muscles under his shirt, the way he gestured, how he smiled at her, and his dark eyes that lingered on her.

She melted under his gaze. If before, it had intimidated her, now it stirred in her the sensations that were new and unusual. Was she lucky? Was she perhaps one of the women who were fortunate to enjoy the basic mating just like men did? It would certainly make her job easier in the future.

The thought shocked her.

Was it perhaps as easy as closing one's eyes, and your body did the rest—got aroused, opened up to a male, and responded with a wonderful sensation?

She could be like Kat Wilde, the most famous and insatiable courtesan at the Belle House—having men for

breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and enjoying it tremendously.

*No. No. No.*

June pushed the thought away.

Desmon was the cause of this new experience—intimacy, this trip, the countryside. June wore a new dress—one of the three that had been made for her debut in the Belle House. It felt new and out of place. She felt different inside. Like a wife. Though thoughts like these were false. She knew it too well, though still let herself dream.

“We should always look for positive in our lives,” she said, contemplating his previous comment. “Though there are plenty of people that have everything, yet satisfied with nothing. Rebecca taught me that. She’d come from not so well-off family, and to her, the acceptance to the ‘School for Ladies’ was the happiest thing that happened.”

“She is something.” Desmon chuckled.

“Everything is in comparison.”

“That is true. Though not many of us compare to the worst that can happen. Mostly, we compare to the happiest times, thinking that everything else is dull. I used to think I was destined for misery and was the most unhappy man. When my fiancée jilted me at the altar, that is.”

“Oh...” June turned to look at him in surprise.

“I didn’t tell you that to ask for pity,” he repeated her words with a smile.

“Did she not love you?” June asked softly.

It was an intruding question, but she was curious. Naturally, she couldn’t imagine that a woman could betray and leave a man like Desmon Shaw. June studied him every chance she got, stealing glances here and there. Who in their right mind would deny a life with him? He was wealthy, handsome, kind, attentive, gentle, tender, passionate...

She had to stop herself. She was getting carried away. Arousal was starting to creep up her thighs, making her feminine core throb with want.

“It wasn’t about love,” Desmon said quietly, gazing out the window. “It was a matched marriage, which was more in her interest than mine. But I was infatuated with her, yes. And she fell under someone else’s spell.” He turned to look at June with a smile. “A woman must be desperate and madly in love to so abruptly abandon everything that she knows and change her life in a different direction. Disregarding public shaming.”

“That is a subjective view,” June said. “You are talking to a person who agreed to the most shameful profession as per public opinion.”

“There is a difference.”

“Is there?” She raised her eyebrows with interest. “By no means has your fiancée done anything more scandalous than what I am doing. But every social class has its own idea of shame. Hurting others is no excuse. And her hurting you—whatever the circumstances were—was wrong. Yet, as Becky would say, if one has the courage to live for oneself, one has a chance to be happy.”

Desmon chuckled. “Your Becky is full of interesting thoughts.”

“Someone else said it before. But I believe it’s true. If I wanted to settle and make my ends meet, I would’ve married. But I’ve seen men who wanted to marry me.” June smirked. “They are no better than those who come to the auctions to buy a Belle Flower.” She blushed, too quickly realizing what she’d said, and raised her eyes at Desmon. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean it in that way.”

He studied her with curiosity. “It’s all right. You are right, perhaps.”

“Is she happy?” June asked, trying to change the topic.

“Who?”

“The woman who was to be your wife.”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged his shoulders in deliberate indifference that wasn’t genuine. “I’ve tried to track her down. Back then, years ago, when I was mad with revenge and spite. Then I let go. It happened at once. And now...” He took a

deep breath as if trying to make up his mind. “I haven’t thought about it for a while. Perhaps it was for the better. We could’ve ended up in misery together, years after the marriage. Except…”

He looked away, and June waited patiently, observing his stern expression and tightly pressed lips.

“Except she wrote to me not so long ago.”

“Oh.”

“Right. Oh.” Desmon snorted. “She apologized. She tried to explain. She presented an excuse.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Triumphant.” He turned to look at June. “Bitter, more so. The old feelings that I thought were gone came back. Spite. And then gloating of sorts. I tried to shoo it away, but it came back again and again. I felt that it served her right. Her husband passed away, you see. And”—he smirked—“he wasn’t a nice person after all. That’s what she said in the letter. So somehow, that made me feel better about my own years of misery.”

June studied him with interest. “Did your infatuation come back too?”

It was a daring question. She was probably losing the sense of what was proper, but in her position, straightforward questions were the least of her worries.

June found it easy to talk to Desmon. The shared intimacy had too quickly broken the barrier of awkwardness between them. It was peculiar and delightful at the same time.

Desmon averted his eyes. “I haven’t seen her in years, you understand. I realized I would like to. I would like her to explain face to face what made her betray someone and renounce her status. I want to tell her how I felt back then, at the altar. I… I suppose, there is some sort of nostalgia for what I felt for her, too.”

“Did you see her then?”

“No.”



They sat in silence for a moment until June spoke again. “Perhaps, if you did, you could fall in love with her again?”

“I was never in love. I don’t think so. But it’s not that.”

“You can’t forgive her for being with another man?”

“Not even that.” Desmon shook his head. “One can forgive infidelity when—how do I put it mildly—when there is no connection, when you are in a loveless match, when your family life is a mere contract. But it is much harder to overlook someone’s capacity to take your heart full of feelings and throw it away, stomp your dignity and run away without giving an explanation.”

“I see.”

“I’ve replied to her letter, yes. It was easier than I thought. Easier than I thought several years ago.”

“And?”

“And perhaps one day I will meet her. There is certain curiosity as to what she is like now.”

Some time passed in silence. June felt slightly jealous. There was a woman who had had a chance to be Desmon’s wife, and she had thrown that chance away. Yet, Desmon could probably still take her back. She, June, was meant for other things. No man would look at her and see a future wife.

She surpassed the bitter thought and turned to look at Desmon. “Are you not afraid to fall into the same predicament that you did years ago?”

Desmon turned to meet her gaze and held it for some time.

God, who could have left such a man with the kindest eyes?

“You are very straightforward, June,” he said softly, and his lips stretched in a smile. “I didn’t see it when I first met you. Well, not that we had time to get to know each other.”

“To get to know each other’s personalities, you mean,” she added and blinked away with a smile.

He laughed. “Right.”

She returned her eyes to him. He was studying her as if she'd revealed something to him he hadn't known before. She felt it was hard to talk when he looked at her like this. She wanted to stretch her hand and stroke his hair, then cup his face and kiss him, kiss him, kiss him some more.

He spoke again. "I believe in fate and the fact that it knows what's best. My friend taught me that. And though the statement is often hard to believe, it almost always proves itself right."

"Hmm." June turned away and looked outside the window, thinking that she could not possibly find the reason for her fate being right. The death of her father, the "School for Ladies," the auction, the Belle House. Fate was a witch.

The only part that made her feel lucky so far was the man who sat next to her.

Desmon Shaw.

The man whose gaze made her tremble. Whose voice made her forget all the worries. Whose touch made her melt.

The man who had bought her...

June didn't know what to expect. She hadn't been to manors or mansions before. The one trip to the Belle House had given her a glimpse of what luxury was. But then, the Belle House with its brightly lit parlors, exotic rooms, thick carpets, rose-wood furniture, mirrors that seemed to line up all the walls and chandeliers the size of the horse carriage that sparkled like thousands of gemstones was a house of pleasure. The mansion on Baker Street was a simple dwelling, despite its size.

The Dambridge Manor was hidden by the gardens, rows of tall oaks and thick chestnut trees. It was hard to estimate its size as it looked like it grew out of the forests. It made June gawk in wonder, for she'd forgotten what it was like to be in the country, a manor at that.

"Thirteen bedrooms, two studies, a library, a music room, a dining hall," the housekeeper explained as she led June through the marble-floored entrance hall of the estate.

June already loved the vast garden that surrounded the building, the colorful flower beds and the neat rows of trees. There was more greenery around the manor than she had seen in Hyde Park. Kent was a beautiful county. The memories of the few trips that she and her father had made into the country were distant. The drive to the mansion had evoked the nostalgia of the time of her life that was happy and innocent.

Desmon watched June as they walked across the main hall.

“I trust you settle well into my humble home,” he said with a smile that bore a hint of pride. He gave the servants and the housekeeper orders and disappeared with his butler to take care of the estate business.

Mrs. Fogg, the housekeeper, was a short slender woman in her fifties. Dressed in dark uniform, her silver hair pinned tightly under her cap, she bore the same sense of authority and self-discipline as Mrs. Hilderbog. But she seemed calmer, her barely noticeable smile friendly when she led June upstairs, pointing to the giant portraits of Desmon and his parents on the walls. Her eyes stayed on June a bit longer at times, as if getting acquainted, but her gaze was kind.

“This is your room, Miss June, as per master’s orders,” she explained, leading June into a large sunny room on the upper floor.

White curtains, beige carpet, modest but tasteful furniture, and the bed the size of three beds on Baker Street.

“Your luggage is being brought up as we speak. Susie is your maid and will be handy at all times. But if you have any requests or anything else, please don’t hesitate to ring for me.”

It was only then that June finally looked at the young maid who had followed them upstairs. Just a little older than June, she was slender and plain. But her gaze lingered on June with the too-obvious curiosity that made June feel uneasy. The maid’s eyes skirted June’s dress, and her lips pressed in a firm line with a tiny trace of contempt.

Or had June imagined it?

The footmen brought in June’s trunk and stood secretly gawking at her from under their eyebrows.

“Are you done staring?” Mrs. Fogg barked at them with contempt. “Forgive them, ma’am.” She turned to June. “We haven’t had guests for quite a while. In fact, we rarely ever have guests since Mr. Shaw acquired the manor.”

The footmen departed with Mrs. Fogg, leaving June to rest before dinner.

“Should I start unpacking your trunk before the rest of the luggage arrives?” the maid asked in an overly polite voice.

“There won’t be any more luggage,” June answered, walking around the room, studying it with curiosity. Compared to her living arrangements back in London, this was too lavish, and she was trying to get accustomed to the thought of spending ten days here.

“Is this all?” A genuine surprise reflected in the maid’s face, but June didn’t answer. “How long will you be staying, ma’am? If I may ask.”

“Ten days,” June answered.

“I see. I will start unpacking your trunk, ma’am,” the maid said, making a move toward it, but June stopped her with the raised hand.

“That’s all right,” she said. “I will do it myself.”

The maid paused, and so did her eyes on June, piercing her with their coldness that didn’t match the smile on her thin lips.

“Your room is adjoined to the Master’s. There is a door,” the maid said, pointing with her hand. “It is peculiar that master didn’t assign the room in the guest part of the mansion. I hope you don’t mind, ma’am.”

The remark burnt June like a lit coal.

So they had adjoining rooms!

June had wondered about that on their way here. Their contract was an arrangement of a peculiar kind. She had supposed Desmon would adhere to the proper etiquette. He didn’t, then. But something in the way the maid had commented on it made June uneasy.

June wasn’t naive. She knew perfectly well that by the end of her short stay here, the staff would be well aware of the nature of her relationship with Desmon. This was something to come to terms with. Yet the maid said it in a tone June didn’t like a tiny bit.

This was one luxury that the girls were allowed in the “School for Ladies.” They had servants and ladies’ maids. In

fact, there was a class that taught specific etiquette on handling the staff. The girls didn't own fancy dresses or jewelry or carriages, yet they were taught how to live with the constant presence of the staff. They were groomed in modesty yet trained to be ladies.

But the servants in the mansion on Baker Street never allowed themselves to talk in such a frivolous way to the girls of the mansion. Yet here, in Dambridge, the maid seemed too nosy and too talkative. June didn't need to see the maid's too intense stare to know that it followed her every move.

"You may go, Susie," June dismissed the maid softly.

"Would you like me to bring some hot water to freshen up?"

"Yes. That would be lovely."

The maid curtsied. Even when she was leaving, closing the door too slowly, June could see the maid's piercing stare in the crack of the closing door.

Finally, alone, June walked up to the window and looked out. The windows overlooked the back of the estate, the garden stretching far into the distance, greener and less manicured than those in London, encompassing the stables to the left and blending into the vast fields some distance away.

The sense of novelty overwhelmed June. She felt restless, but with it came the vague feeling of excitement. She stepped away from the window when her eyes paused on the door that connected her room to Desmon's.

*Master...*

The words echoed in her mind.

In a sense, he was her master, too. The thought should've made June feel inferior but instead made her heart beat faster. The memories of their nights together flickered in her mind and sent a tingle of pleasure through her body.

A smile touched her lips as she gazed at the adjoining door.

They had ten days...



Desmon went through the paperwork with the butler and discussed the progress with the new horses he'd acquired several weeks ago. But his mind was preoccupied with one thought.

June Aveling was in Dambridge Manor. *His* manor.

The realization was bewildering. It wasn't so much the fact that there was a young unwed woman staying as a guest. It was the fact that it was June—the woman he'd bought, bedded, and contracted for ten days.

He must be going insane, he thought, though Volchen would argue that Desmon merely lived like any other bachelor—catering to his own whims.

Desmon couldn't hide a smile for several hours. He retired to his chambers and got changed into a fresh pair of trousers, a shirt, and a waistcoat. He couldn't wait to wear riding breeches and boots and a loose shirt. His life at the manor was away from strangers' eyes, and he felt liberated at not having to abide by the rules of fashion or current trends.

Before leaving his room, he paused and listened to any noise from the adjoining room. There was silence. Yet, he suspected that June was there, probably, taking her time in getting used to the new residence.

He smiled again.

At the thought of her, his desire spiked higher. Just several seconds of imagining her taking her clothes off made his cock stir to life.

He grunted, adjusted the erection in his trousers, and exhaled loudly, trying to calm himself. He would have to ride this out, for lately—or, to be exact, in the last three days—his body acted like that of a young man who'd just gotten his first taste of a woman.



June was already downstairs, walking around the hallway and studying the paintings. Her hair was twisted in multiple braids at the front and away from her face and lusciously tumbled down her back.

She met Desmon with a smile and that same burning in her eyes that made their blue color a shade lighter and twinkling as they reflected the chandelier lights. Desmon's gaze slid just a bit lower to her sensual lips and... *Oh, hell*. He wanted to kiss them again. It would be harder to restrain himself around her, he realized. Not that he needed to restrain himself. But she wasn't a toy to play with. She was a woman who had chosen a particular profession, which meant he could take advantage of it, take her body when he wanted, spend days with her in bed and...

*S-s-s-stop*, he willed himself, cleared his throat and smiled at her.

He ordered the maid to bring them wine. As they walked around the manor, he explained to June the relations on the paintings, pointed to the artworks that stood in the corners and in display cases, and told her a bit about his family.

The dinner was a roast and potatoes, fresh garden salad with capers and bacon, freshly baked French bread, cheese, minced liver rolls with goat cheese, beef roulette.

"It is simple, forgive us. We weren't ready for guests," the butler apologized, making June almost choke. She'd never had a lavish meal like this in her entire life.

Desmon only smiled. He couldn't help noticing that June tried to mind her table manners. But as they talked and servants brought more food and poured more wine, June became more at ease, laughed cheerfully at Desmon's jokes, ate with eagerness, tried every dish, and drank more wine.

He watched her all through the dinner. Even her eating habits were graceful. He'd never paid attention to others' eating, but June was beautiful even when chewing, or taking



sips of wine, or wiping her mouth with a napkin. He stole glances at her hands that held the utensils, her shoulders that shrugged slightly when she laughed, her eyes that stayed on his a bit longer the more she drank.

This was becoming an obsession, Desmon thought. And this was only their first night at the mansion.

“Do you enjoy riding?” he asked to distract himself from the lustful thoughts. “Horses,” he added and smiled in response to her tipsy chuckle.

“Unfortunately, I’ve never had an opportunity,” she answered, her eyes widening with curiosity as she gazed at him. They always did when he brought up something new as if any novelty in her life was the source of utmost excitement.

He took a gulp of wine that didn’t subdue his lustful thoughts but only made them stronger and narrowed his eyes at her. “Would you like to try?”

She grinned, then pursed her lips to hide her smile as if embarrassed at her own eagerness, then smiled again. “I would love to. If it’s no inconvenience.”

His smile faded. “June,” he said softly. “We both know why you are here. And though these ten days are meant for certain activities that, unlike you, I am extremely excited about”—he paused and smiled, staring at the wine glass that he swirled in his hand—“I would like to make this time enjoyable for you.” He raised his eyes at her. “We will explore new things.” He went quiet, realizing that his wording was suggestive. “I mean...” He stalled again. “I didn’t mean...” He felt himself blush. *What the hell!* He cleared his throat with a smile. “I meant, horse riding and things like that.”

June chuckled at seeing his confusion, and he rolled his eyes and raked his hand through his hair.

“Yes, Desmon,” she said with a short trill of laughter. “I would love to go horse-riding.”

They both looked down at their plates and sat for a while in silence.

Desmon raised his eyes at her finally and...

*Damnit.*

One glance and lust barreled through him again.

He couldn't possibly take her to bed again. He'd never asked her if he'd hurt her last night, hadn't even inquired whether she had recovered from the first night. Did women need recovery? He didn't know. Could've asked Volchen, for the devil knew everything, yet the question seemed too embarrassing.

He cut the evening short, knowing that June was probably exhausted from the long day and the novelty of being in a new place.

"There is a library downstairs that you can use and take any books you want," he explained on the way to the room. "I am not sure what else to offer for entertainment, for I don't know your tastes."

"We will figure it out, won't we?" June turned to smile at him as they walked down the hallway. "Our tastes," she added.

And damn if the words didn't stir him again.

He stopped at the door to her room.

"I have some papers to go through, so I will leave you now," he said. *Lies*. How he wanted for her to invite him in! "I hope you had a good day, June. It was a pleasure to be in your company. Tomorrow would be more eventful."

She gazed at him with her big blue eyes that drew him closer.

"I suppose it will," she said quietly, and her gaze slid down to his lips.

Oh, if he couldn't have her tonight, he would definitely kiss her. He leaned in and brought his mouth down to hers.

It was a gentle kiss. A test. A question. They'd kissed before in different manners. Yet, tonight she was in his home, at his mercy, his guest. He didn't want to assert his power but rather wanted her to yield to him at her own pace.

His lips nudged hers open, his tongue touched hers, and she answered so willingly that when his arms wrapped around her waist and pressed her closer, the erection in his trousers was already begging for release.

She was warm and soft, pressing against him. Her hands slowly raked through his hair. Her mouth molded with his. His impulse was to pick her up, storm into the room, and throw her on the bed. The bed that was meant for making love to a woman, his future wife. And now... Now all he wanted was June Aveling on that bed so he could ravish her body.

The kiss grew hot and sweet. Yet, there was so much restraint on his side that it was almost painful. Desmon didn't want to stop. He was lost in the sweet longing of being close to her yet not being able to get closer, feel her hot skin, feel her naked body rub against his.

He could stay like this forever, drowning in the slow desire.

But June slowly pulled away. It was a sign from her. And if it wasn't, he still needed to stop.

He smiled, cocked his head and leaned onto the doorframe, studying her flushed face as he tried to calm himself.

“Why is it that every time I kiss you, I feel like doing the most scandalous things to you?” he asked, immediately regretting his bluntness. “It is so ungentlemanlike of me. Forgive me. You possess some power over me, June. It turns everything I know upside down.”

Still holding her in his arms, he stroked her hair. It seemed to have become a curse. If he couldn't have her, he kissed her. If he couldn't kiss her, he needed to touch her.

Her hands rested on his shoulders, and this moment was the most intimate so far. Just two of them. In the dimness of the hallway. With the knowledge of intimacy.

Yet, there was something else that was starting between them, and Desmon couldn't quite figure it out. He couldn't think properly when he was around this woman. She was

magic. She was something he'd never had before, and it was a mystery.

"Rest tonight," he said, though that was the last thing he wanted to let her do. "Tomorrow, we are going horse-riding."

She smiled. "It will be my first."

"I have a feeling we will both have plenty of those in the next ten days."

The words burnt the air between them. He had to leave before he invited himself into her room and took her without asking.

He pushed off the doorframe and pulled away from her softly. Even letting her hands fall away from him felt like he was back in the cold world. The world devoid of her touch.

"Till tomorrow then." He turned around and walked down the hallway, feeling his chest tighten with disappointment at hearing the door close behind her.

He went to the study and poured himself a whiskey. The taste of the hot liquid somewhat overshadowed the burning lust inside him.

This was madness. Maybe he should've taken her to bed. Several minutes and he would've relieved himself of this need that tormented him. But he already knew that several minutes wouldn't be enough. One night hadn't been. Now they had ten...

Desmon called for the housekeeper.

Mrs. Fogg had been with him since he had acquired the property for his future family. It was supposed to be him, Catherine, their children, and all the happy times they would share in the new house. Who could've known back then that the massive estate would be a reminder of the broken dreams?

Mrs. Fogg had been in the mansion with the previous owners. A reserved woman of very few words, she'd taken to Desmon right away. With his parents in America for several years now, the housekeeper was the only person by his side every day of his life at the manor.

She'd met him when he was at his happiest and soon saw him at his worst. Being jilted at the altar had been, undoubtedly, the most humiliating experience in Desmon's life. And no one had witnessed him at his lowest except his best friend, Volchen, and...

Yes. Mrs. Fogg.

He'd formed a sense of closeness with the older woman who, in his drunken months and fits of rage, had played a mother and an adviser. She was the one who had offered him the words of wisdom.

"Noble women can do the most unspeakable things. And the women of the worst reputation can prove to be the most reliable companions," she'd said one night.

It was weeks after his bride had run away, when Desmon got drunk on gin, got into a fight with farmers, broke his hand, took a horse for a ride, and fell drunk off the said horse. Mrs. Fogg was the one by his side, nursing him back to sanity. There was an admirable dedication in the way she dismissed maids and the butler and took it upon herself to take care of Desmon when he was in his most tormented states.

To say Desmon trusted his housekeeper was to say nothing.

So when he summoned her to his study after dinner, it was to have a discreet talk.

"What do you think of our new guest?" he inquired, half-sitting on the desk and with a glass of whiskey.

"Miss June is very amiable, sir," Mrs. Fogg answered with a nod.

*Amiable...*

Desmon knew how June came across, but that wasn't what he'd asked. If only he could explain to Mrs. Fogg what was really going on. Instead, it would take days until his arrangement with June would be obvious.

"The adjoining rooms are what I am asking about," he said and shifted his gaze to the woman.

The room had once been meant for his future wife. Now, he had a guest staying in it. A female guest. A young unmarried female guest. A young woman of exquisite beauty who'd come without a maid or a chaperone. This was a scandalous situation to say the least.

"Yes, I understand, sir." The woman nodded. "It's definitely a peculiar arrangement." Mrs. Fogg looked at him without much emotion on her face.

Desmon didn't stir. Nor did he take his eyes from the housekeeper long enough for her to break the silence.

"The staff is already talking," she finally said, keeping her eyes locked on him. "But they always do. It doesn't help that Miss June is stunningly beautiful. But master's business is none of theirs. I am sure you are not concerned about their gossiping."

Desmon wasn't. He wasn't sure what he was concerned about except for making June feel as comfortable as he could.

"I want her to feel welcome and respected," he said. "I want every person in this house to treat her like the most cherished guest this house has ever had. In fact, there is nothing closer to the truth. She is a very special person."

*Special. That's rich.*

Desmon felt bitter at his choice of words. He was definitely going out of his mind. First, he'd taken part in the most scandalous auction London had to offer, except for the East End, where slavery still existed. Now, he had brought a mistress into his house.

He pushed off the desk and walked to the bar cabinet to pour himself another drink. He needed several just to come to terms with what he'd done. Sure, his adventures in London were one thing. He'd done plenty in the past in London that could make noble society gasp in reproach.

But this was the home built for his future family. And he'd brought a woman for his entertainment.

Correction.

He'd *bought* a woman, brought her here, and then put her up in the room once upon a time intended for his future wife.

The insanity of his actions in the last several days was incomprehensible. He rolled his eyes at himself.

And yet.

And yet...

Knowing that June was upstairs in the room next to his made him giddy with excitement. He took a gulp of his freshly poured drink and turned to the housekeeper who still stood motionless, studying him.

"Mrs. Fogg," he said, and a smile of a madman stretched his lips. "You've been with me for quite a while and through the most turbulent times."

She nodded in agreement. "Yes, sir."

"But this..." He vaguely waved around with the glass in his hand. "This situation"—his smile widened—"It is hard to choose the words, I am afraid"—he chuckled—"might be the most daring thing I've done in my life. And Miss June is part of it."

He could tell by the shift in Mrs. Fogg's gaze that she had questions and perhaps already assessed the *situation* yet didn't dare ask more.

"So I would like you to warn the servants to be at their best."

He grinned, took another gulp of his whiskey, then downed the rest in one go, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

He chuckled, and the chuckle slowly grew into laughter.

Mrs. Fogg watched him without blinking, her hands clasped at the front, her eyes narrowing on her master.

"The strange times are upon us, Mrs. Fogg," Desmon said when his laughter subsided. "You may go."

When the door softly closed behind the woman, his thoughts returned to June.

It would be tough to fall asleep, knowing June was next door. No matter how he tried to be reserved in his thoughts, his fantasies took such a wild course that he exhaled in frustration.

He wanted her madly. Just the image of her golden hair and her sensual lips made his entire body ache with the need to kiss her again, touch her, feel her warm body against his, slide under her sheet and invade her most intimate posts.

He would.

He would do everything he'd fantasized about.

He would spend their time at the mansion fulfilling every need that his male body had burned with.

Then he would finally be at peace.

Then he would be able to let her go...



The stables were only a short walk from behind the mansion. The day was new—the sun not up yet but already its rays poking from behind the horizon. The grass was wet with dew. The birds chirped away.

“I don’t remember ever being up so early,” June said gleefully, skipping like a kid, as Desmon and she walked toward the stables.

She wore the simple beige linen dress that she used to wear in school.

“I don’t have a proper riding habit,” she explained, “so I hope this will do.”

She would’ve looked great in burlap, Desmon thought as they greeted the stable master, Mr. Jefferson.

Last night, he’d decided to let her rest. He was still hesitant about voicing his desires. But knowing she was in the next room made him restless, made him toss and turn, made his cock swell with the fantasies of taking her until he serviced himself with his own hand and fell asleep with the determination that today things would change.

“Miss June, we are happy to have you,” said Mr. Jefferson with a smile and bowed to her like she was the queen herself gracing them with her presence.

Desmon had noticed that since day one. The staff, who usually minded their business, constantly stole glances of June. She was stunning, of course. But she radiated

humbleness that shone onto everyone around, making servants constantly bow and maids hustle even harder. The stable master now walked in front of them, explaining to June the stable business and gesturing exaggeratedly.

“We have twelve horses here,” Desmon explained, guiding June through the large clean building that smelled of hay and leather. “Three are for my personal use. One is not yet broken in.” Desmon pointed toward the stable that had a horse head poke out toward them. “The pastures and paddocks stretch for miles. I breed horses, you see. For auctions and horse racing. It’s one of my hobbies if you will. Though it brings a substantial amount of money, too.” He smiled softly as June studied him more than the stables around. He went on, “They say, one is lucky if one can do what one loves and make money with it. Not that I need money.”

June nodded. “You are blessed.”

“Well, at least in this way.”

“Horses like treats,” Desmon explained. “It’s quite a human trait. Bribing is essential in getting someone to do what you want.”

June laughed in response.

“They like apples, of course. And carrots. Anything with sugar, really. But Jefferson conjured a special recipe. The horses go mad for it. So when you really need to get what you want, you give them these.”

Desmon took a small pouch from the stable master, took June’s hand, and shook several square-shaped treats onto it.

She brought her hand to her nose and smelled them, then raised her eyes in question to Desmon.

“Wheat and sugar?” she guessed as they walked toward one of the stable doors. As if sensing the treats right away, several horse heads poked from above the doors.

“Oats, bran, flower, salt, and molasses,” Jefferson explained as Desmon took a small square from June’s hand.

“Here. Watch your fingers. Hold your palm flat, pressing fingers together.” Desmon showed her exactly what to do as he stretched his palm toward one of the horses. The square disappeared in seconds. The horse snorted and flared its nostrils, reaching toward June.

“The horses love it.” Desmon smiled. “Here. Try it.”

He watched June with a sense of deep satisfaction as she fed the horse, giggling at the touch of the animal’s big lips on her hand. He led her along the row, and she fed more treats to the other horses that stuck their heads out.

She laughed. He couldn’t remember the last time a woman’s laughter made him lit up with joy. She was truly something. A dazzling lady in a silk gown and a sensual humble young woman in her simple beige dress. She would look great at a fancy ball or in the stables or riding horses with him, Desmon. She seemed to enjoy the one thing that made Desmon the happiest—being around horses.



“No saddle, Jefferson.” Desmon smiled and winked at June. “We are riding double.”

They stood next to the white stinky horse.

“Lady White,” Desmon introduced the mare, patting her neck. “Very inappropriate, I know.” He snorted.

He grabbed the horse’s mane just above its withers and mounted the horse in one smooth movement.

June laughed in delight. There was nothing special in mounting a horse. But everything that Desmon did captivated her. His every movement was graceful. The quickness of his muscled body was fascinating. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from him when they’d walked out of their rooms this morning.

He wore polished black riding boots and dark-brown breeches that hugged his buttocks and muscled legs perfectly. The shirt wasn’t a crisp white with a cravat and a tight waistcoat, but instead a loose linen garment unbuttoned at the

neck. He looked even more handsome and somehow more approachable.

Now, mounting his horse, he held the reins and patted the animal with so much ease as if he were raised in the stables. His dark hair disheveled, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up, he radiated true masculinity and power, and June held her breath, unable to take her eyes away. She loved every inch of him.

“June?” He smiled at her, pulling her out of her thoughts. “Are you all right?”

She looked in hesitation at Jefferson, who put the wooden mounting block next to the horse. “Ma’am.” He bowed, stretching his hand to help her up.

She stepped up and turned with her back to the horse, halting and unsure how to proceed. That very moment Desmon bent over, scooped her with his arm by her waist, lifting her, and, in one swift movement, as if she were a feather, placed her next to him.

She exclaimed at the unexpectedness of it and blushed. She now sat on her side, with her legs pressed tightly against Desmon’s left thigh and his arms on each side of her as he held the reins.

“That was”—she chuckled nervously, fixing her dress—“quick.”

“Splendid,” Desmon said with a smile. “Are you ready for your first ride?”

June was ready for anything that had to do with Desmon. When he was so close to her, his hands on each side of her, holding the reins and occasionally brushing against her, she was ready to ride across the country.

They proceeded slowly at first, making their way out of the paddock through the open gate.

“We won’t go far this time,” Desmon said as they rode along the path that wound from behind the stables and along the lawns. “Lady White is an older horse, calmer, and not minding the extra weight. She is very enduring.”

His voice was calm as he explained to June the basics of riding. He taught her how to guide the horse and gave her the reins. His moves were easy and confident as if he were born on horseback. His eyes when she turned around to face him—burning her with pride.

They made a slow stride along the field that was surrounded by the forests. She could see the bigger paddock now behind them in the distance and the horse fence stretching along the field as far as one could see.

“Looks like awfully lot of people there,” June said, squinting at the bigger paddock and the horse riders in the distance.

“Those are our competition horses.” Desmon nodded toward it. “We’ll go there after the ride.”

He sent the horse into trotting, and June grinned with joy.

But besides the excitement of the ride and this new experience, there was Desmon’s body behind her. She was aware of it pressed tightly against hers. She liked it. She’d longed for his closeness since they’d left London. Yet he hadn’t asked her, and it was disappointing.

Her eyes shifted to his strong hands that held the reins on each side of her. She remembered how they felt on her body and felt the heat rise in her. She could lean back just a tiny bit and rest against him, just like she did in his bed. It was some witchery, for his every touch and gaze evoked in her the sensations that were beyond physical. She felt blissful—a feeling of utmost peace when she was around him.

Except now he was picking up speed, and her heart was starting to race.

She placed her hands over his and turned to look at him. “Can we go slow again?”

He smiled, his face so close to hers that if she leaned, she could kiss him.

“We can go as slow as you want,” he answered softly, slowed the horse down, then stopped completely. “Or we can take a rest.”

June looked up at him again, and her gaze slid to his lips. She'd been burning with desire to kiss him, and now she couldn't help but stare at his lips that moved as he said, "I like when you tell me what you want," and his mouth came down on hers.

The horse moved slowly in one spot and trembled. And June trembled with want. The kiss wasn't long enough. It only fired up the desire that had been slowly searing inside her. She felt disappointed when Desmon pulled away and nudged the horse into walking.

"Do you think we will see the Duke of Burgundy?" he asked.

June laughed. "There are so many species here! But we have to take a walk in order to see them."

"Then we should do it soon."

They rode for another half an hour.

"There is a lake up ahead behind that patch of wood," Desmon explained as they made their way along the edge of the forest and were coming back toward the stables. "We can ride there some time if you wish."

He seemed to press closer to June now, his hands touching her more often. And, oh, did she wish they touched her more. She didn't want to go back. She wanted to be around Desmon only. She'd thought about exploring the forest in search of butterfly species, yet now her mind was completely taken over by Desmon.

But they were already approaching the larger paddock and, after dismounting, walked along the fence.

The boys riding the three horses were younger than June, one of them an adolescent.

"I didn't realize you had so many stable boys."

"Actually, they are apprentices to Mr. Denton, the trainer. They are potential jockeys. And they all come from the nearby villages."

June had never heard of such a thing—taking village boys and turning them into jockeys. She thought the art of riding was usually in the family of jockeys or at least in someone who grew up with horses. But then, she knew very little about horse riding.

“Everyone has potential,” said Desmon after she’d voiced her thoughts.

They stopped. Desmon set the heel of his boot on the lower plank of the fence and his forearms on the top one. He leaned over and studied the paddock.

“The boys are given a chance, you see. Some of them already have experience in taking care of horses. Often, the art of riding is not about the techniques but about how the person feels the animal. Some are naturals. Like Wooly who is riding Storm.”

He gave a backward nod to the short stalky boy around fifteen who had saluted Desmon from the distance as he trotted on a beautiful dark-grey stallion. Desmon rose his hand in the air and motioned for the boy to come up, which the boy did with grace and dismounted in less than a second as if he moved in the air.

The boy was even shorter than June thought—a head shorter than her—with attentive eyes that stayed longer on Desmon than on her.

“Wooly, this is my guest, Miss June,” Desmon introduced them as the boy bowed to her. “Wooly is only fourteen, but he is the best jockey around.”

The boy bowed again yet didn’t say a word. As Desmon told her about Wooly’s background, the boy only shifted his eyes from her to Desmon and back to her and eventually smiled.

“Have you raced yet?” June asked curiously.

The boy shook his head.

“How do you feel about racing for the first time?” June was fascinated with such talented youth.

The boy didn't answer. His eyes shifted to Desmon, and the boy's hands moved upward as his fingers moved in the air in intricate gestured.

June stalled for a moment. Her heart thudded in surprise. She'd heard of the sign language yet never witnessed it first-hand.

"He is excited," Desmon answered for the boy. "He says he will come at least in second place."

June chuckled and nodded. "Ambitious. Well, I hope you take London by storm." She grinned, and Desmon laughed good-heartedly.

"He is mute," Desmon explained as they strolled back toward their horse.

"And you know the sign language?" June couldn't hide her surprise.

"Well, he is my best jokey. And he doesn't need his tongue to ride like a devil. And I surely can learn sign language to make life easier for him and for me. At least I try. But I made the rest of the stable staff and jockeys learn it too."

He laughed so wickedly that June couldn't help but laugh with him.

She admired him. And she couldn't help staring at him.

He noticed and stared back, his eyes glistening seductively as they walked up to Lady White. He never broke eye contact. And when he looked at her like this, all June wanted was to pull his face down to hers and kiss him.



This was surely some sort of wicked illness. An unhealthy obsession, Desmon thought as he guided Lady White toward the stables, June next to him.

What would she say if she knew that that kiss as they rode the horse gave him an instant erection? In fact, the dull aching in his groin was still there. He was aware of it the entire ride as



well as of June's closeness. Her golden hair shone beautifully in the morning sun. Her cheeks were of pretty rosy color from the fresh air. Her lips... Hell, her lips had been doing unspeakable things to his body all through the night. Only in his dreams, of course. For now...

But every time he looked at her, he wanted to slide his hands into her golden mane, pull her face closer and devour those lips until she was breathless.

And then...

He felt his cock stiffen again.

This desire that coiled in him almost constantly was unbearable. Desmon couldn't explain the fact that he'd been with dozens of women, and not a single one had ever had such an effect on him as June.

He passed the reins to Jefferson and guided June to the end of the long stables.

"Where are we going?" she asked him as he took her hand and turned the corner behind the last stable to take her to the second row, almost empty, quiet, and dark. He pulled her into one of the stalls, pushed her against the wall, and took her mouth in a kiss.

The desire in him spiked tenfold. He pressed his body into her smaller frame, feeling the erection in his breeches press against her. The scalding ache in his groin grew. The smell of hay was stronger here, and her scent mixed with it tickled his nostrils.

*At last*, his mind whispered as his mouth took hers with a hot wet kiss, deep and hungry. The relief of finally having her body tight against his was so great that he had to restrain himself from moaning.

He pulled away only inches apart.

"I can't stay away from you, June," he growled. "God, I want you," the words broke off his lips.

"Then what took you so long?" she muttered, her eyes meeting his.

Her reply sent a burst of fire through his blood.

Her fingers curled in his hair. She pulled him to her and took his mouth with another greedy kiss.

There was no turning back. Not now. Not when she'd admitted she'd been aching for him too. Not when she mewled like a kitten as her tongue greedily lapped at his. Not when she bucked her hips, rubbing herself on him, on his hardness.

Desmon picked her up, lay her on the heap of straw, and threw himself on top of her, his hands already hauling up her skirts.

"I tried to hold back," he panted, his mouth kissing her neck, his legs pushing hers apart.

"Why?" she muttered, her hand sliding toward the erection in his breeches and cupping it.

He groaned and bucked his hips at her, pressing himself into her hand, his hand squeezing her buttocks, his mouth finding hers and taking it with a kiss, again and again.

"Should we..." she tried to talk, but he silenced her with another kiss, his hands roaming her body in search of her bare skin. "Should we not do it here?"

"No one will see us," he whispered.

He couldn't wait. He could not possibly go through the torture of having to pull away from her. Not right now. Not when his hand slid through the slit in her undergarment and found her cunny, smooth like silk and drenched.

A moan broke out of her as soon as his fingers touched her folds. She stifled another one as he pressed harder on the little nub between her cunny lips.

"Desmon," she whispered into his mouth as her hands found the buttons of his breeches and undid them with so much haste as if her life depended on it. "Oh, God..."

Her hand curled around his throbbing cock.

"Argh," he grunted in reply, knowing that if he didn't stop, he would only last a minute.

“Take me,” he whispered, his fingers on her cunny rubbing ferociously. “Right now, June,” he grunted again. And when she pressed the tip of his erection to her entrance, he thrust inside in one forceful movement.

She cried out, the cry muffled by his shoulder that she bit into. But as he pulled out and thrust into her again, her legs opened wider, inviting him in, her hips rolled, taking in his cock, and if someone had told him to stop this very second, he wouldn't have shied away from murder to get what he wanted.

Desmon was blind with lust. It was a fast plunge into insanity. The world around dissipated, and there was only her touch, her scent, her lips, and her cunny tight around his cock.

He slammed into her again and again. No consideration. All the rules he'd made for himself of being a gentleman were forgotten as he drove his cock into her with wild need. He was vaguely aware that he held her head in both his hands. That his lips hovered over hers but not kissing. Instead, his mind was dizzy with the sensation of being inside her, fucking her, taking that sweet release as her cunny clenched around his cock.

He wasn't aware of her increased breathing, her whimpering, her hips bucking and hitting his until her mouth opened wide in a silent cry of ecstasy. Her hands came up and clutched his head just like he did to her. She arched her back and finally whimpered in the last traces of her climax as he slammed into her, again and again, in mad lust, until the world blew up in his mind, blinding him and sending him into a blissful abyss.

They lay in each other's arms for some time, calming their breathing. June's perfume, mixed with the smell of hay, was an exotic combination of the so-familiar home and this new experience that burnt through him.

Her body was soft under him. His withering sex was still inside her. And he tried to hold on to these last moments of being joined with her in this tender embrace that followed the moment of mad passion.

“I should apologize,” he finally said quietly, kissing the side of her face and rising on his elbows to take a look at her. “It was inconsiderate of me.”

She traced his jawline with her forefinger as she smiled. “It was inconsiderate of you to make us hold off for so long.”

He chuckled.

“Will you tell me?” she asked. He frowned, not understanding. “Will you tell me when you want me?” Her eyes searched his for a response. “It is not just about the contract. But I would like to be with you more often. And if you would like that too, then...”

She didn’t finish. She caressed his face and gazed at him with so much tenderness that he felt the urge to take her again.

“And if I want you all the time?” he asked quietly.

“We can work something out, can’t we?” She smiled.

He smiled back and kissed her.

If he could describe one perfect moment of his life, it was this—the golden-haired lover in his arms, her delicate hands cupping his face, her soft lips melting with his in a kiss. Not in a ballroom or a fancy bedroom.

Here.

In his stables.

June had never thought she would find so much comfort in being with a man. Never had she thought she would become so infatuated with one. So shamelessly needy for his touch that she opened her legs as soon as he gave her a sign he wanted her.

She was no better than an animal fulfilling its needs.

June exhaled as she stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom and picked pieces of hay off her dress.

And she was definitely nowhere close to a lady, letting a man take her in the stables. In a heap of hay. When the stable master could probably hear the sounds of their mating session.

“You will learn that men’s needs can be sudden and uncontrollable, making them lustful in the most inappropriate moments and places,” Mrs. Hilderbog had once said.

Indeed.

Except June’s lust was even more so unexplainable. She wasn’t sure whether it was Desmon or her who was trying to take advantage of their arrangement.

It was confusing. It went against all odds and what she’d been taught. Desmon was a client, wasn’t he? Then how was it possible that she melted at his every glance, trembled with want at his every touch, and all she could think at night was Desmon. At the dining table. On the horse. In his study. In his bed...

The maid came in, announcing that the bathing chamber was ready.

Desmon had ordered a bathtub prepared in the upstairs parlor. They had bathtubs on Baker Street—a large room designated to just that. The Belle House on Piccadilly had a luxury bath parlor, and Mrs. Hilderborg had said that the bathing chamber was another great setting for pleasure.

But whilst the room on Baker Street was shared by all the girls, here, in Dambridge, June was all alone with servants and maids waiting on her. This was probably what Becky had dreamt of—luxury and comfort. And as June lay in the bathtub some time later, she felt like a lady. One could definitely get used to this.

She relaxed in the hot water for some time with her eyes closed. The soothing water caressed her skin and the parts of the body that were slightly sore from Desmon's invasion.

She smiled. God, she was a wretched creature! Despite all the rationalizing, her every thought came back to Desmon.

The maid's voice pulled June out of her sweet thoughts.

She couldn't help but notice Susie's glances at her body. All servants stared at her at all times. They kept their heads low, but when June looked at them in the mirror, she noticed them glancing. The young girls smiled and looked at her in fascination, the older servants with curiosity, trying to figure out what her position in this manor was. Mrs. Fogg usually looked indifferent, though June was certain that the housekeeper's opinion was more important to Desmon than anyone else's.

And Susie...

Well, something was up with the maid. She'd helped June several times to dress and undress. And now, as June lay in the tub dressed only in a shift that was soaked and clung to her naked body, she couldn't help noticing the maid's glances like those of a thief.

Nakedness was something that was worshipped at the "School for Ladies." After all, the future courtesans didn't

have the luxury of being shy about their bodies.

But Susie's glances were appraising. June felt uneasy. The maid's comments in the mornings, her glances at the adjoining door to Desmon's room, the little half-smile half-smirk that seemed almost permanent on her face made June want to never see the maid's face again. June was a woman for hire. And somehow, the maid knew it.

June changed into a new dress—blue silks and yellow laces, the colors that accentuated her hair and brought out her eyes.

Desmon studied her with surprise when he came to her room.

“Do you like it?” June asked with a soft smile.

She loved his eyes on her. They made her feel wanted and admired.

“I have a feeling you will look good in anything,” he responded with a soft smile.

“I have never worn dresses like this. It's one of four that were made for the Belle House. And though it's a bit lavish for me, it's quite splendid.” June looked down, assessing herself.

She shouldn't have brought up the Belle House. The mention of her profession—or what would be one soon—resonated with bitterness inside her. She'd coached herself to get used to the idea. A year of self-persuasion, yet it still didn't sit well with her.

Desmon didn't answer, but his eyes glided up and down her figure with awe.



He told June about his parents, who had left for America years ago and had a business there, promising to come back. Desmon missed them, of course. They exchanged letters. Occasionally, Desmon had a desire to take a trip across the ocean to see them. But his business had kept him busy, and the

new venture with horses had taken him over completely in the last two years.

“My father has always been a busy man,” he said as he stood by the window, looking out as if searching for the memories out there. “I always felt jealous of everything that has taken his attention from me. And here I am. I could take a year off and go to America to visit my parents, yet my business is taking all my time. We tend to judge our parents, yet become just like them.”

“I’ve never judged my father,” June replied. “But then, he always involved me in everything he did. I’ve dreamt of becoming as knowledgeable as him. And my art—it was another dream lost in a blink of an eye.”

She went quiet.

“Do you still sketch?” Desmon asked.

She was surprised that he was even remotely interested in her past time.

“Well, yes.”

“I would like to see it.”

June felt her heart flutter at the words. One thing was to show it to people who barely cared about her. Another—to show it to Desmon, who she cared for more than anyone. If he didn’t like what he saw, what would he think of her?

June opened her trunk with hesitation. She didn’t know why she had brought all her art with her here to Dambridge. But having her father’s journals and her art preserved the sense of belonging somewhere, even if to the past.

“I feel I might overwhelm you with my conversations about insects. I tend to get carried away,” June said shyly, pulling the first sketchpad out of the trunk. “These always remind me of my father.” She passed the sketches to Desmon, who sat on the banquette next to the trunk. “And, well, I like art. It is calming and takes my mind of everything else.”

She talked quietly as if trying to occupy Desmon while he started flipping through her drawings that had been done



several years ago, still in her adolescence.

“It’s nothing special, I am afraid,” June said in hesitation, awkward in Desmon’s silence. “I was fifteen when I did them and—”

“They are spectacular, June,” Desmon interrupted her.

She raised her eyes at him and only now saw that his face was rendered with amazement. His dark eyes burnt with an intensity that she’d seen only in the minutes of passion and on that fateful night of the auction. Her heart skipped a bit.

He shifted the drawing of a *Chimarea* butterfly for her to see as if it wasn’t hers. “You can’t possibly pretend that this is something average,” he said, not taking his eyes from her, the corner of his lips curled in a smile. “It’s brilliant!”

June felt herself blush. She chuckled nervously. Sure, she’d heard praise before. From her father, then from the girls on Baker Street. Rebecca always asked June to tell them more stories about insects.

But Desmon was a wealthy gentleman who’d seen more exquisite things than June ever would. There was awe in his dark gaze that focused on her as if he’d just seen her for the first time. There, in front of her, sat the man who was handsome, kind-hearted, a businessman, and he was giving compliments to *her*.

June smiled shyly and passed him another sketchpad. “These are the later ones. I use graphite and ink, sometimes charcoal. Then add watercolors and gouache for color and accents.”

“The details! My goodness!” Desmon gaped at one of the drawings.

“Ah! The Duke of Burgundy!” June chuckled.

“This is it?”

“Indeed!”

“The coloring!”

“Yes. The wings of butterflies are made up of tiny scales that, like tiles, create the coloring of the wings. One might say it’s makeup,” she explained as she passed Desmon more sketchpads. “They use their appearance to attract mates. The art of seduction, if you will. Most of the species’ lives are short, and their purpose is to procreate.”

Desmon’s smiling eyes flickered at her. “So they are the creatures of love.”

“Not always. Sometimes you see several of them, their wings moving violently as they flit around in fast intricate trajectories. That usually means war.”

“Huh.”

“They fight for territory.”

Desmon answered without looking at her, completely absorbed by the drawings. “So in every elegant creature, there is a will to fight when it comes to survival.”

“Survival instincts are different. Sometimes, it’s an ability to fight. Sometimes—to blend in and stay quiet. For some, it’s to play dead.”

“Whoa,” Desmon gasped as he picked up the drawing of a closeup of a spider.

“A peacock spider,” June explained.

“And the balloon?” He pointed to a large round body behind it that was of exotic colors and pattern that was striking.

“The males have a flap-like extension on their abdomen. They have an ability to raise the hairs on that part when they are ready to mate.”

“Sounds familiar.” Desmon chuckled and raised his eyes at her.

“Sometimes they change colors. I use a magnifying glass to study the details. That’s another thing I kept. It seems like the only things I have from my previous life are the ones I can’t use in my current one.”

She blushed deeper under Desmon's intense gaze.

"Show me more," he ordered.

And she did, explaining to him the species, their habits, habitat, and where they came from.

Desmon went from one sketchpad to another, turning the pages that contained more complex drawings—the scenes of insects feeding, flying, nesting.

June kept talking, and Desmon kept flipping, occasionally murmuring, "Splendid," "Amazing," and glancing at her in fascination.

"My father had a big collection," June explained. "From all over the world. So I would sit for days and recreate the insects with every tiny detail. Butterflies are more complex than what they seem from a distance."

"There are so many of them around here," Desmon said.

June nodded. "I would like to show you some of them. When we get a chance." She smiled shyly, then added, "If you'd like, of course."

"Did you really sell all of his collection?" asked Desmon, bringing one of the drawings closer to his eyes to study the intricate details. He remembered the story—a fascinating account of the world of entomology that before meeting June he hadn't known anything about.

"Yes." June's smile faded. "To pay for the flat and, well, I didn't have a job or a profession. So, yes. All of it, except this."

She pulled a glass case out of the trunk.

There it was—the Bhutan Glory—the only butterfly she kept and cherished as if it were the greatest treasure.

"Mr. Ogle," Desmon said, the corner of his mouth hitched in a smile.

June laughed happily. "Mr. Ogle, indeed."

She glanced at Desmon, her heart filling with warmth at the thought that he remembered her story. She explained how

the sailors had to pay the local children in the villages in the Himalayas to catch the butterflies of different kinds, then mounted them in boxes and delivered them thousands of miles away across the ocean, preserving them from water and humidity.

“June.” Desmon passed her back the glass case and looked around at the sketchpads that now were scattered on the banquette, on the floor around him, on his lap. “You are talented. You have an eye for detail and a marvelous sense of color. You don’t understand how rare your skills are. Why haven’t you done anything with it?”

“Mr. Byrdwing had been interested in my drawings,” she explained. “But he never turned up after my father had passed. That, perhaps, was more of a fairytale idea, a dream—that I could use my skills for something useful.” June waved it off with a flick of her wrist.

“Mr. Byrdwing?” Desmon frowned, his mind already trying to figure out if anyone he knew in London had a connection to the science men. “Never heard of him.”

“He is a member of the Entomological Society of London. He was a generous patron of my father’s obsession. Perhaps, that was all it was, for no one wanted my father’s journals. I still have them. As Becky said, when changes come, you need to abandon old dreams and find new ones. So I think this”—she waved around at the drawings scattered everywhere—“is an old dream.”

June forced a smile to encourage herself and turned her eyes to Desmon.

He was strangely quiet.

“I think this time, your Becky is very wrong,” he said, and there was a mysterious look on his face.

*M*rs. Fogg came in to ask when they would like the lunch to be served when Desmon's face lit up with an idea.

"Let's do what you want, June. There is not much around to show unless I take you to the village. But we can do what *you* like."

"Which is?" June raised her eyebrows in slight confusion.

"Let's do a picnic!"

"Oh!" This was a bit different from what she thought he wanted to hear.

"Yes. Somewhere close for now. In the garden? Closer to the woods? We can walk up to the fields or into the forests afterward. We can do what you and your father used to do—hunt the butterflies."

June's face lit up with so much glee that Desmon wanted to kiss every inch of it.

She turned wide-eyed to the housekeeper. "Can we?"

Desmon chuckled, amused. "You don't have to ask. Mrs. Fogg, will you please tell George to pack lunch and blankets and set it up in the far-east corner of the garden, by the hydrangea shrubs."

"That would be splendid!" June clapped her hands in delight. "Oh! Maybe we could find some interesting

butterflies. And I could draw them.” She paused, gazing at Desmon with admiration. “For you.”

*For you...*

Desmon couldn't remember the last time someone had offered to do something for him. Let alone a woman.

His heart sang as the two of them walked through the garden some time later. He watched June skip and grin like a child. She danced, fanning her arms and touching the blossoms as they passed the abelia bushes, and bumped into him, giggling. He caught her in his arms and, lifting her up off the ground, kissed her.

They pulled away in some time, and their locked gazes burnt with so much emotion that Desmon thought his heart would jump out of his chest.

The servants had already laid out the blankets and made a spread of breads and cheeses and smoked meats and fruits.

The two of them had lunch talking and joking and afterward left the garden and took a path behind the stables toward the woods.

And in the middle of the conversation, they finally saw what they wanted.

“There! There! Des!” June grabbed him by the hand so forcefully that his heart jolted in a momentary panic that something was wrong. “There!” she said, stepping slowly like a thief toward something in the distance. “Do you see that butterfly? The darkish one, with the upper side of its wings marked in a checkered pattern.”

It took Desmon a while until he saw it and smiled, amazed again at June's excitement. She turned to give him a curtsy. “Mr. Desmon Shaw,” she said with feigned seriousness, “I present to you the Duke of Burgundy.”

“A-a-ah!” Desmon exhaled and grinned. “I see. So that's it.”

“That's it.” She turned away and gazed at the butterflies, several of them that flitted from flower to flower.

But as June watched the butterflies, Desmon watched *her*. The memory of the morning in the stables flooded his mind. He remembered her soft skin under his fingertips, her whisper, “*What took you so long,*” her straightforwardness as she cupped his face and said, “*I would like to be with you more often.*”

Desmon took a step closer and wrapped his arms around June’s waist, pressing himself closer, her back to him.

She didn’t turn or move. Her hands slipped and rested on top of his as if they were eternal lovers and had done this a hundred times.

He couldn’t help himself and kissed her cheek gently. Then kissed it again, inhaling her scent. Then planted feather-like kisses down her neck, and when she turned her head, he cupped it with his hand and pressed her mouth to hers.

She was summer. She was the breeze. She was the smell of blooming flowers and fresh-cut grass. She was the feeling of bliss that one could only find on the bright warm days when one stood in the middle of the field, basking under the summer sun.

“Do you remember the first time you told me about the Duke of Burgundy?” he murmured between the kisses. Her mouth was so soft, her tongue so slick, that he felt his cock stiffen in his trousers. “It was our first night together.”

Oh, hell. How was it that he got aroused any time he touched her? His cock flared to life at every kiss. And when she answered with so much eagerness, all he wanted was to tumble her into the tall grass and take her.

He pulled away. It was most inconsiderate to try to seduce her only hours after he’d made love to her.

Instead, he stood gazing at her for a moment, trying to make sense of the twinkling in her eyes that gazed back at him.

“I apologize,” he said, his face suddenly too serious.

“For what?” her eyebrows rose in slight surprise.

“I must apologize to the Duke. I’ve taken your attention from his grace. It is utterly disrespectful.”

She burst out in laughter and playfully pushed him away.

“You are so silly.” She whirled around as she resumed the walk, then turned to walk backward so she could look at him. “Desmon, how did you turn from a grim silent man I first saw into this amiable amazing person who rides horses and jokes and...kisses so well?”

*Indeed*, he thought, his lips stretching in a smile as he followed her down the path.

How had they gone from being complete strangers to becoming the most passionate lovers in a span of several days?

How had he come across a woman who made him flare up like a virgin at her every touch, made him walk around with an erection in his breeches and have to do breathing exercises to get rid of it?

They talked more, walked about the woods, and June told him more stories about the life of insects.

How could one person know that much, he wondered? And how was it possible that someone with so much knowledge and talent was about to sell herself to the house of pleasure?

They walked onto a clearing in the forest. June spread her arms and whirled around, her face lifted to the sky. Her blue dress was the color of the sky, her golden hair—the sun.

“You look like a butterfly,” he said, smiling. “If you flapped your arms, you could probably fly, too.”

June only chuckled. “Butterflies don’t flap their wings up and down.”

He frowned, not believing her. “Why, of course, they do.”

She shook her head with a smile.

“There was this gentleman, a physicist, actually.” She came over and wrapped her hand around his arm as they resumed their walking and she told him the story. “His lover



was an entomologist. Theirs is a forbidden love story.” She laughed happily. “My father attended one of their lectures years ago. Well, the two scientists made an observation. It took them months and many species to propose a theory that butterflies let the air do all the work. They contract their bodies and at the same time move their wings in eight-shaped movements. The contractions somehow pull the air, and that air force is what makes their wings vibrate and move rapidly, which is how they fly.”

Desmon only shook his head. “By God, June, I have never met anyone as fascinating as you. You could tell me stories for months.”

“A thousand and one night, perhaps,” she said and winked at him playfully, but almost right away blushed and turned away.

They spent more time exploring nature. June picked up a stick and poked around like a kid. She looked down on the ground, up at the trees, pointed at the bugs on the barks of the trees that Desmon otherwise wouldn’t have paid attention to. She found several dead butterflies and put them in the pouch tied around her waist. Different flowers followed. She came over and showed him a dead bee in her palm.

“It is probably a male. Male bees die after mating.”

He only laughed.

Every find was accompanied by a story—the world so new and fascinating to Desmon that he couldn’t wrap his head around it no matter how he tried.

Instead of returning to the manor in the afternoon, they roamed around till twilight. Exhausted, they went up to their rooms, and Desmon requested for supper to be served upstairs.

“I like it much better this way. It feels...homey,” June said as they sat by the open window in his room and drank wine after supper.

There was no wind. The flames of the candles, the only source of light, stood still, flickering only occasionally as they spoke. The red wine was delicious and made June feel dreamy.

“This was one of the best days I’ve had in months,” she said. “Thank you.”

Desmon wanted to say it was he who felt thankful. The sense of peace that had taken over him was the most profound in years. In fact, he’d never felt this content since he’d met Catherine years ago. And this was all because of the woman with golden hair he had set his eyes on at the most scandalous auction in London.

They had spent an entire day together, yet Desmon wanted to have more of June, more of the conversations, more of her kisses, and everything else that could follow.

“Would you stay in my room tonight?” he asked softly. “I would like that very much. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want—”

“Yes,” she interrupted him. “I would like that. Yes. And I would like you to kiss me. It has been too long.”

He didn’t respond, wondering whether she was being nice to him or truly wanted him.

“Am I being too straightforward? Forgive me.” She chuckled nervously. “This might be too much wine talking.” She cast her eyes down.

But Desmon was already rising, stretching his hand toward her to help her up.

“I wish you asked me that more often,” he said in a low voice as he pulled her into his arms. “Except now, there is nowhere for you to escape.”

His lips found hers, and he felt there was no escape from this feeling of burning with desire for June every time he touched her.

They kissed for the longest time. And when the need became unbearable, when the clothes felt as if it were taking too much room between them, when their skin burnt for the feel of the other’s, they took each other’s garments off. Slowly. One by one.

The candles were put out. The windows were open. The loud buzzing of the cicadas seeped in with the scent of the blooming flowers.

They lay naked on the bed, side by side, and kissed. Like the lovers who'd exhausted themselves and only wanted to feel each other's warmth. There was no hurry. There was deliberate slowness as they knew they had an entire night. And though need burnt through them, they let time stretch as their hands slowly roamed each other's skin, exploring the curves, sliding into the warmest spots. They found each other's hardness and softness and coaxed more need with slow caresses. Their mouths caught each other's moans.

When she couldn't hold the moans, when her flesh yielded toward him with insistence, he drew her closer, pulled her leg over his thigh, and slid his straining erection inside her burning flesh.

If he could describe the moment of utmost satisfaction, it wasn't the climax or the sweetest ecstasy he'd ever known. No. It was the moment when their overpowering need collided in this gentle fusion of flesh.

He thrust into her slowly. His hand found her sex and caressed it as his cock penetrated her again and again. They came together, forgetting the precautions or the need to restrain their moans. In complete darkness, they caressed each other some more, their mouths tasting each other's skin until the night began to feel like a dream. They fell asleep like this—their bodies pressed closely together, their limbs entangled, breathing each other in.

Desmon had imagined so many things he would do to June. But falling into the deep sleep, all he wanted was to bask in the feeling of having her next to him.

He wished she was his.

Not just for now, but forever.

June woke up to the warmth of Desmon's body next to her. She was with her back to him, his arm on top of her, cradling her protectively. She caressed it and inhaled deeply. The smell was becoming familiar. Desmon's scent, masculine, strong—the scent that reminded her of their love-making. It mixed with the scent of the linen sheets that here in the country smelled different—fresh and earthy like summer greenery. It bore a trace of blossoms and cut grass. Unlike anyone in the city, Desmon liked to sleep with the windows open.

“I used to sleep in the stables when I was a boy,” he'd told her the other day. “Because I wanted to wake up when horses do and take them out riding at the first light of dawn.”

June leaned toward his arm and kissed it gently.

He stirred and drew her closer. “I like waking up to this,” he murmured.

June felt his warm mouth on her neck. How could it possibly feel so divine to be with a man?

“Are we getting up?” he asked, though June knew that the question was of a different kind. Rather, *should we make love again?*

His body, pressed tightly against hers, did its wicked magic. She was ready to take him again, her feminine core already pulsing, her nipples aching for his touch. She nudged her buttocks against his groin and felt his hardness.

“We should stay for a moment, don’t you think?” she answered, already wet, her hand slipping under the sheet to find his erection. She guided it toward her core, but Desmon slid his arm under her knees and shifted her to face him, her legs over his hip, her cunny against his cock.

“I want to see your face,” he whispered and only then sheathed inside her.

They had been together fewer times than she would have expected by now. Yet, every time was perfection. She *wanted* this. She *craved* this. Her body flooded with honey at the thought of him.

His arms pulled her closer, but he didn’t kiss her. He thrust into her with rhythmical movements, his cock sliding in and out, slowly, deeply.

He studied her face. A smile flickered on his lips as she gasped, feeling his cock reach her utmost depth.

“I want you to look at me when you climax,” he said.

She wanted to look at him all the time. The strands of his hair fell over his forehead and eyebrows. His eyes seemed almost ink-black, half-closed in pleasure. She wanted to draw him and frame the drawing, so she could have it with her forever.

He moved his hand to stroke her face, studying her as if he were an artist.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered, stroking her lips with his thumb.

She felt the tension building up in her. She licked his thumb, then took it between her lips, feeling its shape a much smaller version of his sex that thrust into her.

He filled her mouth and her feminine core, and she climaxed at the thought that he was inside her in more ways than one. And just as she did, he pulled out, his hand disappeared under the sheet, and his mouth opened in a silent grunt.

He didn't close his eyes, didn't flinch, just gazed at her as his body trembled in the last remnants of his climax.

The noise from her bedroom made June glance at the adjoining door that was slightly ajar.

"The maid is there." June gave Desmon a reproaching look.

"Who cares?" He stroked her hair dreamily. "The maid's job is to serve you. What you do is none of her business."

A minute later, when the door in the bedroom closed and June thought the room was empty, she finally got up, threw the silk slip over her body, and padded into her room.

The voice almost made her jump.

"Good morning, ma'am." The maid's smile was polite, but her stare was that of a predator as she stood by the wash basin staring at June. "Did you have a good night?"

June felt her heart thud heavily.

Susie reminded June of a spider. Weaving intricate webs with their silk was only one of the ways to capture the prey. The arachnids were known for their diverse hunting strategies. Some used venom and glue to spit at their target in less than a second. Some created sticky lures that attracted insects. Some species wove nets between their front legs and were capable of throwing them over the prey that was too close, like fishermen casting nets for fish.

The maid was like a spider that would go still for minutes or hours, stalking its prey. Despite their seemingly small and delicate form, some spiders were capable of handling a creature much surpassing it in size—a tadpole, a snake, or even a small bird.

Susie's immobile smile was still on her face as she stood in her submissive pose, staring at June.

"Yes, I had a good night. Thank you," June answered.

She couldn't quite pinpoint what bothered her about the maid. But the girl's presence made her uneasy. It was precisely

that—not seeing the spider, but knowing it was in your bed and it would strike.

June turned her eyes from the maid to the wash basin and the pitcher of warm water there.

“You may go,” she said, walking toward the beauty bureau and aware of the maid’s stare on her.

“I can stay and help—”

“You may go,” June repeated louder, not turning around until the door closed behind the maid.

Was it jealousy? Envy? Hatred?

June didn’t know what else could set the maid against her.

But she was sure the spider would strike.



The butler approached June after breakfast. June had been away for less than a week, and already she received a letter from Becky. This had come as a surprise.

“Your friend is concerned about you. That’s admirable,” Desmon said with a smile as he went through his own correspondence.

Suddenly, his heart jolted with such force that he felt dizzy for a moment as his eyes paused on one letter in particular.

“Is everything all right?” June inquired, glancing at the letter and back at Desmon.

*Is it?*

Was the blast from the past a good thing? Was it about to ruin his peace?

The day suddenly seemed too hot. Scorching hot, in fact, burning Desmon’s face that felt like it was in flames.

“I will let you read your letter,” he said, touching June’s shoulder. “I will be in the study.”

But as he left June in the dining room and turned into the hallway, his steps quickened.

His mind was spinning faster every second.

Because the sender's name was the one he had stopped thinking about. The name that had brought the happiness and the biggest hurt in his life.

The name of his runaway bride.

Catherine Coles.



June had noticed the change in Desmon but put the thought aside as her fingers hurriedly ripped the seal on Becky's letter and her eyes excitedly ran along the lines.

*“My sweet June!*

*I would give a fortune and serve Mr. Shaw myself if only to see you right now! Oh, so much to tell you! So much to discuss! So many people to meet! It is my intention to introduce you to the best gentlemen of London as soon as you get back.*

*They say the business of pleasure is that of wit and determination. But it is also most fun!*

*It's been less than a week, and I already feel like I've lived eight lives. Like a cat. Am I a cat, June? At times I feel like one. I do not care about who becomes my beloved for an evening. All I wonder is who would be a better opportunity in the future or whose pocket will cater to my whims.*

*Here, in the Belle House, they say men are like colts—rowdy wild horses and with temper when they are young and untamed, but the proper training, guidance, and touch—and you can ride them with confidence. They will even come and eat off your palm if they get used to you. How true!*

*There are rules, of course, some of which I am not fond of.*



*There are three categories of women in the Belle House. There are the new arrivals like you and myself and those who have been in residence for less than a year. We do not have much choice in terms of choosing the clients. In the afternoons, when the men start arriving, we have to be present downstairs, and unless the clients prefer their regular lady, we have to make company to them whether we like it or not. It wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for occasional schmucks like Baron Carlile, with who I had the displeasure of spending an evening. Do not ask me what vile things he made me do. Nothing that went against the rules of the House (you remember those from one of the lectures, and, thank Lord, for some men are real brutes, they say), but I hope to never see that filthy man again.*

*The next category is the experienced ladies. They have regular clients and choose whether they want to spend evenings in the Grand Parlor downstairs. They are allowed more time off from the Belle House without paying the absence fees. They have priority at using the House carriages and maids.*

*And then there are those who make their own rules. Though only a few. Eliza is one of them. She had been provided for by one of her lovers for a year but left him and came back. She owns twenty-five dresses, forty pairs of shoes, and the number of pieces of jewelry too high to count.*

*And then there is Eva Bernal. She comes from the noble family and was married once, but her treacherous husband lost it all and took his own life. Can you fathom such a course of events? She is the example of utmost grace. They say Lord James Volchen paid a fortune to have her accompany him on his trip to Paris without any service provided!*

*Remember my words, June, one day, I will bring many men down to their knees and make them plead for my hand! I swear! Though now that I see how much can be achieved by pleasing men, I wonder why one would want a husband at all. Why settle for one if you can be admired and loved by many? Unless, of course, it's a prince, or a maharadja, or the king*

*himself. Though, Catherine Wilde is said to have denied a Duke. We are not harlots. We are the mistresses of love, June.*

*But I am forgetting myself with all this talk. Surely, you are dying to know of the latest development on Archer Bellington!*

*I am so fond of that man! Ah, our hearts! If only we could train them like horses! Truly, I can't tell you what it is that is worthy liking in Archer, besides his charming smile and high spirits. I was mad at him for not pursuing the bid at the auction. Guess what he told me the next day when I made my first appearance in the Belle House? "I don't mind going second," he whispered into my ear. "You might like me better anyway."*

*The nerve!*

*Though, of course, I couldn't resist him the night you left. Among the ten men that were in attendance that night, half were ogling me like I was a delicacy. The other half were from the auction.*

*You'd think men want to be serviced with skill, yet they drool over new ladies like wolves. I ensured that every one of them wanted me that night, but my heart was set on Archer.*

*Well.*

*He wasn't bad, but nothing spectacular either. He said I had much to learn.*

*How dare he!*

*I almost threw him out of my room (which, by the way, is bigger than the dining room on Baker Street). But the scoundrel only laughed and offered lessons as long as I spend time with him free of charge.*

*Scoundrel! I would've slapped him if I weren't a lady!*

*I know perfectly well what the brute is trying to do. He thinks I am a silly plaything who will open her legs for him easily. No-no-no. You know me, June. I didn't sign up for this to be a toy to rich men. If anything, it is the other way around. But I do need to make a plan. I watch Eva Bernal when I see*

*her around, and Eliza, and Kat Wilde. They have their way with men. A wiggle of their finger and men come running.*

*So, I've decided to give Archer an ultimatum. He will have to get me my personal carriage. For a year. All expenses paid. I think I am already pulling the strings around this place. And that scoundrel, Archer, will soon be under my heel! I promise! I swear on my pearls!*

*I do have to run, sweet June. Oh, how I miss you! I can't wait to have you here again. What fun we will both have! There are much better men than that solemn Mr. Shaw who stole you away from me. I hope you bear his company with the patience that you so religiously exercise in daily life. I hope he is much better in bed than my Archer. I still have to find out what all the fuss of the art of pleasure is about. It seems that men have a better grip on it than women. Oh well.*

*Much love!*

*Yours,*

*Rebecca."*

The letter made June smile. As much as she avoided thinking about the Belle House and her return there, she was happy for Rebecca, who so easily slid into the business of pleasure.

And, of course, Becky wasn't interested much in June's affairs. But that was Becky—riding life with ease and joy, not caring much about others.



“Your friend is very thoughtful,” said Desmon when June came to his study.

“She is more eager to boast of her personal achievements than to see how I am doing.” June smiled, leaning with her back toward the book case. “That’s Becky. She is unapologetically selfish. But she is the sweetest thing.”

Desmon tried to pull a smile, though right now, June's story didn't cheer him up.

"Did you get bad news?" she asked, noticing Desmon's solemn face.

"Pardon me?"

"One of your letters. It looked like it caught you by surprise. Is everything all right?"

She looked at him with so much genuine interest that he felt she would be the only one who would understand what he felt. The letter indeed stirred him greatly, and his thoughts and feelings were bursting out of him.

"I received another letter from Catherine."

"Oh!" June's face rendered in surprise. A smile flickered on and off as she waited for Desmon to say more. "Good news or bad news?"

Desmon smirked. "I am not sure."

Catherine had lost her husband. He knew that already. But what she had written was far more emotional than in the first letter he'd gotten over a month ago.

*There has not been one day I did not think of what we once shared.*

What was it that they had shared, he wondered now? Surely, it wasn't precious enough for her to stay.

*You must hate me.*

He used to, with all his heart. Though in the past years, he had exhausted himself. There was no more room for hate. But there was bitterness.

*Finally, I am free to do what I please. Finally, I thought over my actions and realized what I've done.*

Ah! Here we go! She was now looking for a spare.

As Desmon told June about the letter, anger coiled through him—that very poison, black and thick, that lived inside him for years.

Her husband wasn't a good man. In fact, he was a despot.

So, now Catherine was...

*Beset by regret.*

Sure.

*Suffering from guilt.*

Served her right.

*Never forgot her feelings for him.*

Precious!

Desmon talked and talked and talked, forgetting himself or the reason why he talked his heart out to June instead of Mrs. Fogg, who'd been his adviser and consolation during those wretched times.

"She wants to be with me." Desmon closed his eyes for a moment, feeling blood pump into his ears.

June stood silent. He didn't see the look on her face or the way her fingers started picking at Rebecca's letter that she still held in her hands.

Desmon opened his eyes, exhaling heavily. "Would you like to read this nonsense?" He smirked.

June shook her head. "Do you still want her back?"

Desmon smirked again. "I would like her to tell me in my face what made her leave me."

His mood seemed to affect June, and the rest of the day was uneventful—taking a walk in the garden, strolling to the stables to talk to Mr. Jefferson and watch the jockeys.

June retired to her room. "I am starting a drawing that I promised you," she said.

Desmon didn't like promises. They reminded him of Catherine. But his heart fluttered with familiar by now tenderness at the thought that June was doing something *for* him.

The peaceful routine and June's presence calmed Desmon quite a bit, and by the end of the day he had almost entirely

abandoned the thoughts of Catherine. He noticed June's sad smile and quietness at dinner and felt bad for pouring his heart out to her.

“How is the progress on your drawing?” he inquired.

The mention of it lit June's face with a smile. “It is coming along. It won't be very detailed. I don't have much time. But I hope you like it.”

“Well, I have a surprise for you, too,” he said.

June's eyes twinkled with curiosity. “What is it?”

“Can't tell you yet.” His eyes sparkled with mischief. “But tomorrow, we are going on a trip.”

They set out before noon.

“Will you please take a few of your drawings with you?” Desmon asked June.

It made her wonder, but she didn’t ask questions. Wherever the trip might be—Desmon probably wanted to show off her art, and it only pleased her.

“It is a two-hour ride,” he explained as they rode through the Kent countryside. June felt the familiar excitement at the adventure. She hadn’t had many in her life, and this was the second in just a week. “If you wish, we can stop on the way back and take a stroll in nature.”

June took the opportunity to process the latest events.

She couldn’t forget Desmon’s reaction to the letter from Catherine. Was he upset? Hopeful? She didn’t know. But while he had vented in front of her in the study, the unfamiliar feeling had crept into her heart. Jealousy. She, June, was jealous that another woman still had a grip on Desmon. Catherine did, she was sure. Catherine wanted to be with him, and Desmon was willing to talk. There was only one way such arrangements went.

June had brushed the thoughts away. Her role with Desmon was different.

He seemed to have forgotten the other woman when he had kissed her last night after dinner.

When his kisses had grown passionate.

When his touch had turned the sparks of her desire into flames.

When he had muttered, "Let's go up to the bedroom," his hands roaming along her body.

When he had said, "I want you in my bed every night. I can't have you in the other room and not be able to touch you," and she only whispered, "Yes. Yes. Yes!" as she pulled him closer.

They could barely contain themselves on the way upstairs, and there, in his room, they had both shed their clothes, their frustration, the unspoken words and worries, and had let themselves go.

June felt her undergarments already wet as she thought of last night. They rode somewhere that Desmon was excited about, yet her thoughts were about their love-making. Her mouth still tingled from the hours of kissing. Her breasts ached with sweet pain from his insistent hands. Her nipples were tender from his mouth that had devoured them. Her sex was on fire from him taking her again and again, twisting her body, turning, opening her up until they lay exhausted and smiling at finally getting what they'd craved.

And then he'd taken her again...

June bit her lip, suppressing a smile. She wanted him again. Right now. How was that even possible?

"A penny for your thoughts," Desmon said, interrupting the silence in the carriage. His smile was cunning, for he surely knew what she thought about.

She stared down at her gloved hands. "I really enjoyed last night."

He hooked his finger under her chin, turning her blushing face toward him. "Not as much as I did."

He was kissing her again, and, oh, Lord, she would have to use her drawers to soak up the mess between her legs. And she felt weak again in his arms. She would've let him have his way. But she was worried about her dress. They were approaching their destination, and she surely didn't want to



walk out of the carriage looking like she'd just had a good tumble.

She pulled away slowly.

“I think, Mr. Shaw, it's about time you told me what the surprise is,” she said with a smile.



He was glad June had stopped him. Otherwise, he would've lifted her skirt and fucked her all through the remaining ride.

He cleared his throat and tried to breathe deeper to make his erection go away.

“I have done some research,” he said, adjusting his jacket and studying her flushed face.

“About?” June squirmed in her seat, fixing her skirt.

“About the man your father was involved with.”

June froze and stared at him with a frown. “Mr. Byrdwing?”

Desmon nodded. “Lord Henry Byrdwing. Yes. I've arranged to meet him.”

He couldn't tell by the sudden change in her face whether she was happy or upset. She stared at him, then turned toward the window, looked outside as if searching for an escape.

“How?” she asked, turning to gape at him.

“Well, I might have gone over the top a little.” Desmon chuckled.

He wrote a letter to the man, requesting to see him and explaining who June Aveling was and that she would love to meet him. The letter was sent with a servant to London, the Entomological Society, with the instructions to locate the man and get the response.

“That is a four-hour trip, Desmon!” June exclaimed in shock.

Desmon nodded with a proud smile. “Indeed. But what are servants for if not running errands?”

The servant had been told that Lord Henry Byrdwing was at his country house in Kent.

“He lives around here, June,” Desmon said with pride.

It was a coincidence that his house was only two hours away from Dambridge. The servant then rode to Lord Henry’s house and waited for three hours until the lord returned.

“The man was delighted after reading the letter. That’s what the boy said,” Desmon concluded.

The boy then returned to the manor with the letter from the lord. The lord said that he would be at his country house for the next week, and meeting Miss June would be an honor.

“He is delighted to meet you, June. Do you understand?” Desmon took her hands in his.

June squeezed his hands lightly, bit her lip, and turned away.

Desmon frowned, his heart lurching in disappointment. “Do you not want to see him? We can leave. I thought...” He exhaled in slight frustration. “I thought it would please you.”

He had wanted to make her happy, and she didn’t seem to be. But she turned to look at him with tears welling up in her eyes.

“I will be delighted to see him. It’s just...” She chuckled nervously. “It’s all very emotional. You see, he is one of the very few people who knew my father for a long time. And meeting him is like meeting the part of my father’s life that I know very little about.”

Desmon stroked her face. “It will be all right, June. He was delighted to hear about you,” he said, smiling with relief.



They heard Lord Henry before they saw him, his voice loud and booming through the hallway of the big two-story country house with an addition being built at the back.

“Miss June! Oh, how wonderful to finally meet you!” Lord Henry almost ran toward them and took both June’s hands in his and kissed one, then the other.

He was a tall, slender man in his forties. His gestures were exaggerated, his hands occasionally flying so wide that Desmon thought the scientist would fly away.

“Thomas, tea! And pastries!” he shouted to the butler and waved his hand in the air, turning again toward June and Desmon. “You must be hungry after the long ride. Oh, Mr. Shaw! How so ingenious of you to write to me! And to track me all the way here!”

He was already walking toward some door, June and Desmon following without invitation, exchanging amused glances.

“You see, I do most of my work in London,” he explained. “But here, in my country house, we have this new project.”

He talked non-stop, led them through another parlor, then dashed back to the door and shouted, “Mary! Tell them to make fruit plates and warm up croissants!” and trotted back to his guests.

June only smiled as she glanced at Desmon with amusement.

“You don’t mind me calling you by your name, do you?” Lord Henry’s gaze on June was so endearing that she wanted to take his hands in hers and thank him for inviting them. “That’s all I ever heard from your father. June this. June that. And your sketches! Ah!” He pressed his right hand to his heart and bent backward in a theatrical way. “Oh, how I wish you hadn’t disappeared after your father’s passing! My condolences. I never got a chance to talk to you. It is unfortunate. So much work was lost. Ah! Why dwell on the things past and gone!”

The man talked fast. He gestured generously. He constantly turned to look at them as he walked ahead of them. At times, he stopped as if what he was saying were so important that they needed to pause. His facial expression changed as rapidly as his topics.

“You have a peculiar last name,” June said with a smile.

“Does he?” Desmon raised his eyebrows.

Lord Henry chuckled. “It just so happens that *birdwings* are the species of butterflies, Mr. Shaw. The most common, in fact. It’s all about the world of little creatures for us, *aurelians*. But yes, Miss June is right. I wonder if it was my last name that determined my calling.”

They all laughed as the man led them through the house with the largest windows June had ever seen. There was so much light, in fact, that she looked around in search of the chandeliers that were lit during the daytime.

“They designed the house to have as much light as possible,” Byrdwing explained as if he had heard her thoughts. “You see, they are building the addition in the back to set up a butterfly garden.”

“How wonderful!” June exclaimed in excitement and thought that it was the first word she’d said in twenty minutes.

There was kindness in the way he spoke, the humbleness of a man of science who was more preoccupied with nature and the laws of science than with the real world and etiquette.

“It could be wonderful,” he continued. “Except we had the glass tanks set up in the house. The light, you see, is essential for the butterflies. They all died. Yes-yes. Sad. The bacteria, the tiny insects, in fact. They killed the plants and, eventually, the butterflies. We are working on figuring out how to introduce other insects into the butterfly habitat so as to combat the diseases. But it’s tricky. Ah! There!”

When Byrdwing flung open the double doors and let them into his study, June gasped, and Desmon produced an inarticulate sound indicating amazement.

A study was an understatement. June's eyes widened in awe as they stepped into a giant hall two-story high and the size of a king's ballroom. Clustered with desks and bureaus and bookcases floor to ceiling, the room had one wall occupied entirely with the shelves that housed glass displays of insects.

"They are separated by species and cataloged by both species and regions." Byrdwing walked about, waving his hands upward. "I can't possibly describe it to you in one day or a week, but if I ever get a chance to have you as my guests for a longer period of time, I will surely delve into more details. There, of course, are my favorite..."

Lord Henry was already walking in a different direction, distracted by something else, telling them about the recent acquisition of samples from the Orient, though Desmon stopped paying attention. He stared at June, and his heart beat heavily at the realization that he'd made her happy.

June walked around as if hypnotized, a smile frozen on her lips.

Shelves full of books. Encyclopedias. Notepads. Tables full of papers. Charts. Graphs. Cases full of thousands of insects from all corners of the world.

There were books on the tables, on the bureaus and stands. Curious contraptions stood in the corners.

"Where is my father's collection?" June asked finally, turning to the scientist with her eyes full of anticipation. She'd sold it, and having another look would remind her of how they used to be—lined up on the shelves of their small flat.

Birdwing frowned.

"Your father never gave me any of his specimens."

"No. No. I know." She smiled, nodding. "But the man that came after his death—the one that bought it all."

The frown on Byrdwing's forehead deepened. "Pardon me?"

June swallowed hard. “I came to see you after my father’s funeral and left a message for you at the British Museum. Then a man came on your behalf and bought the entire collection.”

Lord Byrdwing’s both hands went up to his forehead and rubbed it as if trying to rub out a frown.

“Miss June, I am afraid I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Desmon felt cold grip his insides as he looked at June and saw the most hopeless expression on her face. She turned to look at him as if he had an answer.

“Oh, June,” he whispered.

June told Byrdwing about the collection, about the man who’d purchased it.

“S-s-scoundrel. Thief,” hissed the scientist, his face for the first time rendering in an angry grimace. “Argh!” He grunted loudly and stood with his fists on his waist, shaking his head in reproach. “It’s my old assistant, Blake. The vile and dishonest man. He probably bought it for pennies.”

He turned to look at June, who only shrugged her shoulders. “I didn’t know the prices back then. I needed money.”

“Argh!” barked Byrdwing. “Arg! Argh! Argh!” His fists flew upward with every word. “Oh, how I wished they were in my hands!” he exclaimed in frustration. “Not to mention that you would’ve gotten so much more for them. Miss June, do you have any idea of how much those specimens would fetch at an auction? Any! Auction! Let alone among the entomologists.”

June bit her lip, trying to hide her frustration, but Desmon saw it. Saw her eyes dropping down to the floor, saw them scan the surroundings and shoot upward as she tried to keep the tears from spilling.

Byrdwing paced around. “Oh, how mad I am at myself for not finding you on time! Will you forgive me, Miss June?”

He turned to her and pressed his hand to his heart as a sign of genuine grief.

“It is no one’s fault, my lord,” she murmured, trying to console herself.

“Mr. Byrdwing. Please. Call me Mr. Byrdwing.”

He had tried to find June, he said. But by then, she was gone. He and Mr. Aveling had worked for several years to create the most extensive study on the butterfly species of England, and it was most devastating to find out that the man had passed and all the work was gone.

“But it’s not,” said June, gazing at Byrdwing with new hope. “I have most of his journals and writings. The man only bought the collection, but I kept everything else.”

Desmon had a feeling that Byrdwing would grab June in his hands and toss her up in the air like one did playfully with a toddler.

The man’s arms spread out, so did his fingers. His knees buckled, and his eyes widened so much as he stared at June that they looked like they were about to pop out.

“Oh! God! Why didn’t you say so at once!” Byrdwing grabbed June by her shoulders as if she held those precious writings in her hands this very moment. She turned to look at Desmon with a flicker of amusement and back at Byrdwing. “To hell with the specimens! I must have your father’s journals, Miss June! Oh, how much time they will save me! We talked about those writings for months back then! We shook our heads. Do you know how many people got upset at the news about your father? He was prolific. He could’ve saved us years! You are a godsend, my dear!”

If he kissed June in excitement this very second, Desmon would’ve probably forgiven him. Desmon himself smiled, realizing that fate had decided to give June another chance.

They had lunch outside on the back patio. If Desmon thought it was impossible to talk more than Byrdwing, then he was wrong, for Byrdwing didn’t stop talking even for food, so elated was he at the news about the writings.

“Do you notice something out there?” He pointed at the vines that were shaped in hedges that formed a simple garden maze.

“I’ve never seen vines with so many blue flowers,” said Desmon as he and June now finished their lunch while Byrdwing barely touched his.

“Ah! Of course, you haven’t, Mr. Shaw. They are not flowers.” Byrdwing squinted playfully at him, then at June, then raised his forefinger in the air. “They are butterflies!”

He motioned for them to follow, leading them along the vined hedges.

Indeed, when they got closer, the vines trembled with a sea of blue spots as dozens of butterflies started rising in the air.

June’s eyes open wide with awe.

“Magnificent,” she whispered, stretching her hand as she walked and letting the butterflies graze her skin with their wings. Even Desmon was mesmerized.

“Dutchman’s Pipe, these very vines, are the favorite of the caterpillar larvae of Swallowtail butterflies. Yes. Bluevine Swallowtails make their home here every summer. Who needs a butterfly garden when you can *lure* the beauties to your garden?” He cackled. “Nature is the most magical world.”

“Everything is somehow always connected with nature,” Desmon said, looking at June. She’d taught him that, and he only marveled how so many of his thoughts went through the prism of her stories.

“It always is, Mr. Shaw.” Byrdwing nodded. “Yes. Most people get too tied up with their lives and society and think they are invincible and are detached from their biological roots. But at the end of the day, the king and the pawn go in the same box. We all come from nature, and that is where we all go.”

Byrdwing, the master of the storytelling of the natural world, continued talking. His speech was now slow and articulate as if he was finally exhausting himself. He led Desmon and June around the garden. He brought up the



sketches June's father had shown him. He sang praises. And when she told him she had brought some of them with her, he called for the servant and ordered to fetch them from the carriage.

"Marvelous," he whispered as he studied June's sketches when they were back to the study. "I never got a chance to show them to the other members in the project. Your father never left any with me. Do you mind if I hold on to them for a while, Miss June?"

June blushed, agreeing.

"You should see what she draws. Entire scenes! She is brilliant!" Desmon said, his gaze on her more admiring than ever before.

Byrdwing took a step toward her. "Do you still reside in London?"

June smiled. "Well, yes."

"Would you please come to visit me at the museum during one of our entomological meetings? I would like to show your sketches to my colleagues and introduce you."

June stood silent, seemingly having caught her tongue in shock at such invitation.

"That would be splendid," Desmon answered instead.

His eyes were only on June.

It was late evening when they finally left Byrdwing's country house. The man had given June his card, asking her to return to discuss the project at her earliest convenience.

June was overwhelmed.

"It's so unusual," she said as they rode back home, the carriage submerged into darkness. "My father. His collection. The fact that it ended in the wrong man's hands. Lord Henry, who I finally got to meet. He seems like a pleasant and humble man, doesn't he?" June looked at Desmon with hope.

"Yes, indeed. Most charming. Very much obsessed with what he does."

June laughed.

Her laughter—so magical, so enchanting—made Desmon’s heart clench with tenderness.

“You should see the man again, June,” he said softly. “It might be a good opportunity.”

He didn’t say that it was an opportunity to stay away from the Belle House. But the thought occurred to them at the same time, and they stayed quiet for the rest of the ride.

It was barely past dawn, but Desmon and June were already awake. With just a sheet wrapped around her, June sat on his bed and stared curiously at the adjoining door as Desmon was preoccupied with something in her bedroom.

“Another surprise?” she inquired excitedly.

The day before was one of the biggest adventures June had ever had. They had returned to Dambridge excited but exhausted, had supper up in the room, and Desmon made love to her. She cuddled up to him at night but couldn’t fall asleep, her mind reeling with thoughts of how strangely the events in her life had unfolded. She listened to his calm breathing, stroked his hair, and couldn’t help feeling blessed at having him by her side, if only for several more days.

They rose before dawn.

“If we were at the stables, you would see that the horses are already awake,” he whispered as he coaxed her out of her sleep. “The best time to ride is early in the morning when nature is just waking up.”

Now he was doing something in her bedroom.

“I am afraid I didn’t have time to prepare a proper riding habit for you,” he said loudly from the other room. “I do have side-saddles. But I think you will enjoy riding the way I do.”

He strolled through the adjoining door, and June wished he had taken off his drawers—the only piece of garment that

covered his otherwise gorgeous naked body.

“I’ve put together an outfit. It’s simple. It’s only proper for a man.” He smiled as he took a spot on the bed next to her and traced the curve of her shoulder with his forefinger, raising his playful eyes at her. “But it will be of much comfort for riding. To reassure you—it’s much too early in the morning for anyone to see us, and we are riding on my property, so there won’t be any eyes on us. The lake we are going to is very secluded.”

“It is peculiar we are worried about my riding outfit when I am here on a quite scandalous arrangement.”

They both laughed, surprisingly at ease by now at the mention of it.

Desmon suddenly pushed off the bed and clapped his hands, ushering her. “Let’s go!”

She only chuckled at his boyish excitement, slipped out of bed, and padded naked toward the adjoining door and into her room.

Laid out on her bed was a man’s riding outfit.

“Do you like it?” asked Desmon from his room.

June shook her head with a smile.

She put on her short slip first, with a corset over it, then stockings, breeches, and a man’s shirt. The riding boots were a tad too big. So was the shirt, and she had to roll up the sleeves. The outfit probably was meant for a jockey, one of the younger boys.

When she looked in the mirror, the reflection of a young man with a woman’s face and golden hair was such an unusual sight that it made her grin. With her front hair gathered in the back and the rest hanging loose, she looked like a young lady in disguise.

“I do look slightly ridiculous,” she told Desmon when they walked out of her room. In a lower voice, she added, “Do you think the servants will be appalled at the sight?”

“You need to stop worrying what staff thinks about ladies and lords.”

He gave her a playful leer as they walked down the hall.

“Marvelous,” he said with a satisfied smile.



June inhaled deeply and grinned, her heart swelling happiness. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so excited and happy just being and breathing.

Mr. Jefferson brought out two horses and helped Desmon put the saddles on.

June couldn't stop looking at Desmon. Even horses seemed to be fond of him the most. The darker one nuzzled its nose into his hand when he fed her carrots. The other one, Lady White, playfully rubbed her head against his shoulder.

Desmon responded with soft words that seemed too intimate for a talk with horses. It made June remember his love-making. She watched Desmon's hands that stroked the horses' shiny hides and remembered his hands on her.

*Ridiculous!*

She smiled, shaking off the memories.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked her, and she only blushed. “Oh, I see. Something you want to share?”

June chuckled and waved him off, turning an even deeper shade of red.

Desmon motioned for her to come over and showed her how to mount the horse. He held it by the reins as June stood on the left side of the horse and put her left foot into the stirrup. He told her to hold on to the pommel and lift herself up with a push, then throw her other leg over the horse's back.

“I won't make it too far.” June looked up in hesitation.

“Oh, yes, you will.” Desmon smiled so endearingly as if it weren't an option. “You did great the other day. I can assure

you, riding a horse properly is much easier and much more liberating than sideways and with someone else behind you.” Still holding the reins, he came to stand next to June, putting his hand on the small of her back. “Remember, a horse doesn’t like hesitation. If you think you are too forceful when you mount it, you are not. It’s much like with everything else you do. You do it with fright, and you might never want to try again. Do it with determination, and even if you fail, it will pick you up and make you want to take another chance. I can help you,” he said with a smile as his hand slid down to her buttocks, “but you might get distracted.” He grinned and removed his hand.

It wasn’t as hard as she had imagined, thought June when she’d done exactly as Desmon had instructed and seconds later was straddling her horse, her heart beating wildly but a smile on her face—from ear to ear.

Desmon mounted his horse in one swift move and, still holding the reins of her horse, guided both animals forward.

June had felt like this too many times in the last several days—the feeling of novelty that made her heart beat faster and her mind reel. Not all feelings had been great, but the ones that had to do with Desmon made her skin tingle with excitement.

June deeply inhaled the smell of grass and flowers. It was everywhere, saturating the fresh morning air.

Desmon passed her the reins, and June felt like she could fall off the horse any moment. One wrong movement—and the horse would lunge forward, sending June tumbling into the grass.

But the longer they rode, the more she felt she was in charge. On her own, being so high above the ground, leaving the manor and stables behind, she felt free. The flowery grass field ahead seemed like an ocean, the horse under her—a ship that she stirred in the right direction. But what gave her confidence was Desmon riding next to her, watching her, a smile flickering on his lips.

He soon asked if she wanted to go at a faster pace, showed her exactly how to nudge the horse, how to hold the reins by doing it to his horse, then restrained his horse and waited for her. They started trotting, and even though June felt slightly uncomfortable, she knew, or rather felt, that nothing would happen to her with Desmon by her side.

“Would you like to gallop?” he asked.

June shook her head. “I don’t know about that.”

“Next time, maybe?” He smiled in understanding.

She wished there *was* a next time.

There was a smell of leather and animal sweat—the smells so unlike most in the city that it added to the excitement. They were quite far from the estate already, and June slowed down her horse. She could feel the heaviness on her thighs and didn’t want to hurt herself.

As if understanding her every motion, Desmon slowed down too, turning his horse toward June’s.

“How are we doing?” he turned his horse away from hers, nudged it into a trot, took it around hers, and pulled back on the reins to bring his horse next to hers again.

It made June smile. She loved how skilled he was, yet so patient with her.

“*We* are doing grand,” she said grinning.

She was so preoccupied with the new experience that she didn’t pay attention to the meadow. It was full of insects and small butterflies. The sun was coming up from behind the horizon. The air was warmer now, and nature was coming to life. Oh, how she would’ve loved to spend hours here, just wondering around!

They rode for another half an hour, taking a trail into the woods—a trail that seemed to have been tramped by the horse-riders for a long time. Another twenty minutes and they rode out onto the banks of a small lake that glistened like a mirror.

“I like to come here early in the mornings,” Desmon said, stopping his horse only several feet from the water and

dismounting. He helped June down. “Would you like to go for a swim?”

His eyes were playful as he gazed at her, tying the reins around the tree.

“Right here?” She stared at him in surprise. “I... I am not a lover of cold water.”

“Well, then, I won’t force you.”

He pulled a blanket out of the saddle bag and spread it on the ground.

“My lady.” He motioned theatrically toward it, and June took a seat, gracefully positioning herself on her side.

She didn’t know why what happened next came as a surprise. Surely, Desmon wouldn’t go swimming in his clothes. But when he unbuttoned his shirt and stripped it off, June’s heart fluttered with anticipation. His boots followed as he kicked them off. He unbuttoned his breeches and slipped them off, his eyes not leaving June. She’d seen him naked, but this was the first time she observed him in daylight, and his form was even more impressive.

She glanced around as if expecting someone to walk in on them.

Desmon seemed unconcerned. With a playful smile still on his lips, he untied his drawers, tugged them slowly down his hips, and stepped out of them.

June held her breath but didn’t look away. Her heart was beating fast, and she felt the now so familiar arousal creep through her.

Oh, she wanted to be naked too! She wanted to stroke his body and please him and feel his hands on her again. His nakedness had become her addiction. She wanted more of it. More of *him*.

He turned around and walked up to the water.

June couldn’t look away, her eyes hungrily studying his nakedness. There was something primal in a naked man surrounded by nature. He looked like a tribal man, one of



those June had read about, who lived in the jungles and roamed around naked, hidden away from civilization.

June didn't have much to compare to. But she knew that human bodies were like personalities—some preferred over others, some desirable, others repulsive.

Desmon's was perfection that of Greek warriors in old picture books. It could be natural or the result of physical exercise, horse-riding, and country living. She wanted to watch him longer, wanted him to turn around so she could study every inch of his body—his strong shoulders and chest, his muscled arms and legs, the patch of dark hair down below, and his manhood.

Oh, how things had changed! She used to think the human sexes were much too primitive to be attracted to. Now she couldn't stop thinking about Desmon's. That was truly embarrassing, for she had to admit that what some courtesans had taught about was right—a man's cock was the most desired object if it belonged to the man you wanted.

Desmon was being slowly swallowed by the water, his buttocks disappearing beneath the surface, and after several feet dove right in. He disappeared off the face of the water—long enough for June to start frantically looking for the ripples on the surface. In a short while, he emerged out at a distance, splashing water around, shaking his hair like a dog, smoothing it out with his hands and smiling at June.

“It's great!” he shouted at her. “The water is not cold at all.”

She grinned. He was so natural and himself, the only witness—June. Sitting in the shade under the tress, with insects buzzing around, the horses quietly snorting nearby, and Desmon splashing cheerfully in the distance, June felt like she was in a different land.

They only had several days left. If that was to be the best time of her life with the man who was slowly taking over her heart—she would cherish every moment, she would not give in to fear or shyness, she would let him give to her all he had to offer, letting him fulfill his deepest desires.

With these thoughts, June slowly rose from her blanket and kicked off her riding boots.

Desmon didn't pay attention yet. He dove in and out of the water as she slowly unbuttoned her shirt and let it drop onto the ground. She felt the cool morning air lick her bare skin as she undid her corset, which found its place next to the shirt.

She saw Desmon in the distance turn toward her and pause, his eyes fixed on her.

She suppressed her smile, felt her heart flutter as she unbuttoned her breeches and got rid of them too. She did the same with her stockings and stood only in her tiny silk slip and nothing underneath it.

Desmon started walking out of the water—slowly, like a predator, his eyes drilling into her.

She picked up the hem of the slip and slowly pulled it up and above her head, dropping it into the heap of clothes.

This openness was new. It was the first time she'd offered herself with such confidence at this newfound power—of knowing what she could do, how much pleasure she could bring to a man, and that the man in front of her wanted her more than any other woman.

Desmon slowly walked out of the lake and toward her, drops of water running down his body. His member was hard. June noticed and smiled. If she were the June from before, she would have blushed and hidden her eyes. But something was changing in her. Now she looked at his erection with admiration, studying his form in its raw nakedness that was tempting and making her stir with want.

His cold, wet hands cupped her face when he approached. "I'm glad you've changed your mind. The water is perfect."

He kissed her gently on her lips. She answered, slipping her tongue into his mouth. Her fingers touched his damp chest, then ran down his torso, to his erection, briefly touching it, then came back up.

She pulled away. "I am not in the mood for swimming," she said and smiled.

He pulled her flush against his body, and his mouth crashed into hers.

The coldness of his skin jolted her into a shock. The contrast against her warm body was sudden yet spurred the desire in her. There was something animalistic about making love in the middle of nature. They were both like tribal people now, like Adam and Eve, standing naked under a tree, his damp cold body against her warm one.

June could feel his erection pressing against her belly, and when her hand wrapped around it, Desmon grunted and bucked his hips.

She wanted him. Wanted to please him. Wanted to hear him grunt and moan, just like the night before. There was a hidden power in making a man fall apart. She had that power now. It wasn't taught. It was acquired. And it fed her own lust that now slashed through her as she held his cock in her hand.

She pulled away and, with confidence, slid down and onto her knees.

She had always thought taking a man's member in one's mouth was humiliating. Of all the things she had been taught back on Baker Street, this was the most shameful one. She had always averted her eyes and later had thought about it with utmost repulsion.

Now, all she wanted was to please Desmon. Her body wanted to make him feel good and get the same in response. Her feelings for him that she didn't have the name for yet collided in this primal need to possess his most intimate part.

It was unexplainable. It was carnal. It was so arousing that when June found his member in front of her face and stroked it gently, raising her eyes at Desmon to see his approval, she felt her own sex burn with need, the betraying liquid pooling at her feminine core and coating her thighs.

She kissed his member gently, felt Desmon's hands thrust into her hair as if for support. She repeated the kiss, with more pressure this time, and heard him grunt.

She did not think of anything she had been taught in the “School for Ladies.” Instead, she went with how she felt. Her kisses on his cock were slow and soft at first. Her lips moved from the tip of his erection to the base of his shaft. She traced the length of his cock with her tongue, gathering the droplets of lake water, and her mouth closed on his tip, sucking it gently.

Desmon exhaled loudly.

“June,” he whispered.

She sucked on the tip slowly, then took more of him in her mouth and sucked at it again. Her one hand caressed his buttocks as her other cupped his balls. Her lips started sliding up and down his erection, and when his hands started gently guiding her head, when his hips started bucking, pushing his manhood into her mouth, she found the rhythm, understood what he wanted and kept taking him in, releasing, and taking him even deeper into her mouth.

He stroked her hair as she was pleasuring him. His hands were gentle. His grunts arousing. He bent his knees and pushed deeper into her mouth. And she went along, enjoying every moment of it.

No one had told her she could derive pleasure from this intimate act. Yet, her core was on fire. It begged to be penetrated. It wanted to be filled with him, so they could both enjoy this. Her knees dug into the grass, legs parted, and she thought of bringing her hand down between her legs and touching herself.

“Sweetheart,” Desmon said, holding her head in his hands and pulling himself out. “Stop,” he whispered.

She obeyed and looked up at him in surprise, thinking she had done something wrong.

“Lie down on your side.” He motioned toward the blanket. And when she did, he followed, facing in the opposite direction. His member was in front of her again. His hand cupped her chin. “Go on,” he said softly, motioning with his eyes toward his erection.

She smiled. It wasn't as comfortable doing it this way, but she took him in her mouth with new enthusiasm.

In a second, she felt his kisses on her hips and thighs. His kisses made their way to her inner thighs, and she trembled. She kept slowly sucking on his manhood, but her mind exploded when his kisses nudged closer to the junction between her thighs. His hands pushed her legs apart, his head nudged between them, and his tongue gave her sex a long slow swipe.

She forgot where they were. The sensation of his mouth on her sex had outdone any other before. She'd always thought she would burn with shame if a man would do something like this. But there was no shame. It was the feeling of pure pleasure that flared between her legs at the touch of his velvet tongue.

"You are perfect," he whispered as his fingers spread her cunny lips, and his tongue licked the open flesh.

The sensation wracked her body, drawing moans out of her. But she didn't let go of his cock. She kept taking it in rhythmically, yet now her mind was focused on what Desmon did to her.

She felt his tongue lick her flesh, suck on the lips of her sex, dip, and swirl. He found the sensitive nub in the center and took it in her mouth, sucking it.

Heat rose in her at the realization. But it wasn't embarrassment that made her moan when his mouth devoured her feminine core, licking it with the ferocity of a hungry man. There was the dizzying sensation of being filled everywhere—her mouth with his sex, her own sex flaring up under his tongue, their hands caressing each other's bodies. She trembled and opened her legs wider, pushing her cunny into his face, letting him devour her flesh, lap at her wetness like a dog, lick her clean front to back.

It was desire.

Pure.

Raw.

Unrestrained.

Her moans resonated with his grunts. He bucked his hips at her, pushing his cock deeper into her mouth. She wanted it. Wanted *him*. Wanted *more* of him. Wanted him to fill her every orifice. She sucked him faster, picking up his speed as his tongue liked her yielding flesh, so open for him. Nothing else existed, but this overwhelming feeling of joined flesh.

Sensation rippled through June like a wave, starting in that little pearl between the lips of her sex that Desmon flicked and stroked with his tongue. It resonated somewhere deeper when she felt Desmon's finger slid inside her core. She moaned loudly, and his cock pushed deeper into her throat. She thrashed, feeling the ecstasy coming, pushing her cunny toward Desmon's tongue, gripping his buttocks, taking in his cock, wanting it deeper and harder. She cried out when the wave of pleasure finally rippled through her entire body like a tsunami.

She couldn't concentrate anymore and was only vaguely aware of Desmon's body going rigid, his cock thrusting faster into her mouth. She heard his loud groan and felt hot salty liquid flood her mouth. She swallowed, feeling tears well up in her eyes from the unexpectedness of it, yet not wanting to let go. Her climax was subsiding as more liquid spilled into her mouth. She swallowed that too, then pulled away and licked Desmon's sex clean—the gesture so primal yet erotic.

They let go of each other. In the state of exhaustion, June rolled herself onto her back and felt Desmon come lay next to her.

Her eyes were wide open in shock as she lay splayed on the blanket, staring at the tree branches above her and wondering if she had completely lost her mind.

For the first time with Desmon, she had let go so completely that she didn't care what was wrong or right, proper or not, lady-like or more suitable for a courtesan.

She was lost in him.

She was *his*.

And for that short time, she had felt he was only *hers*. Completely. Unconditionally.



*What just happened?*

Desmon grinned like a fool as he lay next to June and turned his head to look at her.

This was better than any wild fantasy he'd had about her.

“Did you like it?” he asked softly, not able to peel his eye off her.

He hadn't expected this—such passion, such unrestrained desire. He'd never gotten lost so completely in an intimate act that before had only served as a duty to please someone in return. And he hadn't expected June to be so open, so ready, so confident.

Had it been in her all along?

She looked different at him today. Open. With quiet wonder. Could it be that she wanted him as much as he wanted her? That this wasn't just part of the contract, but perhaps she felt the same

He couldn't imagine doing this with someone else either. This woman was unleashing in him the desire that burnt through any sense of propriety or shame. And it burnt him with feelings that went much deeper than lust or love for pleasure.

He studied June with tenderness. He wanted to pull her into his arms and caress her and kiss her endlessly.

*Dammit!*

How was it possible that his heart was still beating fast from having just climaxed, but as he looked at June, as she turned her head toward him and his eyes met the beautiful blue abyss that shone at him through hers, his heart slowed down but with a deeper thud, making it harder to breathe.

He was in love...

*Ah, dammit!*

The very thought made his heartbeat shake his chest so violently that he felt it would explode.

“Was that all right?” he asked instead, wanting to hear her voice. “What we did...”

A little frown appeared on her forehead.

“Tell me. If that was too much,” he insisted.

She shook her head. “You know that they show us a lot of things in the “School for Ladies.” They tell us stories. They give us explicit descriptions. They even...” She chuckled and looked away, then returned her eyes to Desmon. “They brought a man and a woman several times, and the woman pleased the man as we sat and watched. It was *entertaining*, as Becky described it. I was appalled.”

She chuckled again and looked away.

*Of course*, Desmon thought with slight disappointment.

“It seemed too vulgar, even taking into account the profession. Too mechanical,” she explained. “But now it’s different.”

June rolled onto her side to face him. She cushioned her head with her hands and gazed at him. The tiny smile that touched her lips was so sweet that Desmon felt like kissing that smile, and the little frown on her forehead, and those eyes that he could gaze in for eternity. In the shadow of the tree, with nature all around them, on this blanket, next to him, she was truly magical—a woman out of this world.

“With *you*, it’s different,” she continued. “I...” She paused in hesitation and studied the pattern of the blanket. “I was so aroused, I don’t think I realized what we were doing.” She raised her eyes at him. “And how it went, and how it looked, or how *I* looked, being naked and so open for you.”

*For you...*



“I liked it,” she said quieter. “I don’t know how and why. It is probably not proper for a woman to act in such a way. I never thought anyone could like *that*... But, with you, I love everything we do, Des.”

She smiled softly.

*Love...*

He stretched his hand to stroke her hair. In the shade, it was a darker color, duller. He wanted to grab her and carry her out onto the sun, where it would catch the sun rays and shine like gold. Her eyes were darker, deeper blue. But hell! It didn’t matter if she was in the light or in the darkness—her eyes burnt him all the same. They seemed to look through him, all the way into his soul, and make his heart beat faster.

“There is no shame in what two adults do away from others’ eyes,” he said. “And there is no shame in wanting someone. But I can assure you”—he smiled—“your desires are not even close to what I feel around you. If I told you what I want to do with you, you would leave and walk on foot all the way to London.”

They both chuckled.

“I doubt that, Des.” She smiled.

*Des...*

Only his relatives called him that. It was the most endearing name he had, and she’d called him that several times now.

He turned to his side, so now they were mirroring each other.

“Did you know that butterflies have a game of seduction too?” June asked. “They flirt, yes, don’t smile. They compete for female attention. They are very territorial. Caterpillars are made for eating—they are immatures, like babies. They need food to grow, and that is their entire life. Well, butterflies are made for love. But they mate with their abdomens attached, facing away from each other.”

“We should try that some time,” Desmon said, narrowing his eyes at her.

She laughed, and he couldn't help but laugh too. The day was warm, the smell of fresh grass and pine mixed with the scent of fresh water. It was so easy to be happy around June. Desmon felt weightless, careless, like he'd felt in adolescence when there were no worries. Just this—a simple ride into the forest, a swim in the lake, resting under the trees. No time. No commitments. No future and no past. Just this—the weightless feeling of being.

It surprised Desmon how quickly they'd gotten used to each other, with how much ease they talked about everything. It shocked him how much he wanted her, how often, in the most inappropriate times.

Right now, the memory of her soft lips around his cock just a short while ago stirred him again. June lay right next to him, on the grass, her bare breasts just inches from his chest and her bare cunny—the sight of which made him hard every time he thought of it—just down below.

Desmon stretched his hand, broke off a long piece of grass, and, holding it by its stem, traced the side of June's shoulder with its other end.

“I see one butterfly in front of me,” he said, dragging the tip of the plant toward her bare breasts, “and I sure have my mind on catching her.” The tip of the grass circled her nipple, making it harden. June bit her lip but didn't look away, her eyes narrowing at him.

Desmon felt his cock harden at the sight of the plant caressing her nipple.

June's eyes dropped down to his hardening sex and flicked up at him again. “You know, catching butterflies requires less effort than one thinks.”

“Is that so?” Desmon kept playing with her breast.

“The best way to get a butterfly you see is to hold very still, almost motionless. And if you are lucky, the butterfly will come and perch itself on you.”

“I see,” whispered Desmon, feigning a conspiratorial gaze. He stopped playing with the plant, lowered himself onto his back, cushioning his head with his hands and not taking his eyes off June. “Like that?”

She tittered, shaking her head, her eyes glancing at the erection that proudly stood up.

“I see one beautiful butterfly,” Desmon said, pursing his lips to hold a smile. “I think I will just stay *very*,” he whispered the last word, “*very* still here,” he resumed in a low voice, “hoping that my butterfly will come and perch herself here.” He grinned, motioning with his eyes downward to his cock.

June grinned in response, leaning in and bringing her lips to his ear.

“Well, Mr. Shaw,” she said playfully, rising to her hands and knees, “you are in luck.” She slowly shifted to straddle Desmon just below his aroused cock. “This butterfly is very naughty and is very fond of this particular stranger.”

And when she sank onto him, Desmon thought that she was the most incredible woman he’d ever met.

June glowed. She wanted to sing. Her body still tingled from being with Desmon, making love by the lake.

On their return, Desmon had stayed behind in the stables. And June, with her chin high and a smile on her lips, strode through the main hallway.

“Good morning, Mrs. Fogg,” she chirped to the housekeeper, who glanced briefly at her attire and nodded politely in return.

“Good morning, Jacob.” June nodded to one of the servants who was about to walk into the dining hall with the breakfast tray and turned and walked backward, watching her and grinning.

“Oh, Miss June!” The housekeeper stopped her. “This came for you.”

It was another letter from Becky. June grinned and rushed upstairs.

*“Oh, my sweet June!*

*I have to tell you of the latest developments. I have had the honor of getting acquainted with Lord N. That is his name in the Belle House, though I know his true name now. You will not believe it if I tell you that he is the most influential man in the Parliament! And, it so happens, is quite enamored with me.*

*Yes, after only one night. I told you I will have it figured out, June!*

*On the other hand, Archer irritated me the other night. He seems to think I am his possession. Less than a week, and the man is acting like a jealous husband. What women's charm do!*

*There is a party at Lady Filippa's townhouse in two weeks. Lord N said I might be able to attend. Imagine! From Baker Street to the party in Mayfair!*

*Ah, June! When will your Mr. Shaw let you out of captivity? I am dying to introduce you to all the fancy men I got to meet in the last few days.*

*Would you please hurry!*

*Always yours,*

*Rebecca."*

June chuckled at the letter. Only Becky could take pride in having multiple lovers. Somehow, she was under the impression that Desmon had taken June against her will.

If Becky had cared to know, June would have told her that her days at Desmon's estate were the happiest in months, years even.

She felt the familiar sadness wash over her at the thought of the Belle House. Becky talked about it like it was the "new ton." However unbelievable, the Belle House with its network of clients was, indeed, its own world. The world of lust and pleasure. The world of intrigues and power games.

Yet June had no desire to join that world. She'd accepted her fate before, made it the decision, and followed up. Now, she cringed at the idea of being with men. With *any* man. Except for Desmon.

With these thoughts, June took a bath, dismissing Susie, as always, and changed into the pale green dress. Assessing herself in the mirror, she admitted that she was, indeed, a beautiful woman. She'd always known that but taken it for

granted. Now she wanted to see herself through Desmon's eyes. Was that all he saw in her—the slender body, golden hair, and sweet smile?

Her cheerful mood didn't last long. She was coming down the stairs when she noticed the unfamiliar figure. There was someone's lady's maid in the entrance hall, talking to Mrs. Fogg.

The heads turned when June stepped down into the hallway. She heard an unfamiliar laugh in the main parlor. A female laugh. Her heart jolted in unease at the fact that there was a female visitor in the house.

The visitor strolled through the open door of the parlor and slowed down, seeing June.

June's heart thudded heavily.

The woman was a bit older than June but pretty and dressed elegantly in a pink gown and wide summer hat with flowers. She donned a ruby necklace that fell into the deep groove of her full bosom. Her brown hair was elegantly done, the front in bands, braided at the ends and turned up again. The hair framed a pretty full face with arched eyebrows and dark eyes that now studied June.

Behind the woman stood obedient Susie, whose eyes were narrowed on June, but only for a moment as she lowered her gaze and skirted along the wall and toward the servants' quarters as quickly as a mouse.

The woman slowed down as she approached June and came to a stop ten or so feet away. She gracefully cocked her head, studying June up and down in a way too straightforward for a stranger.

June felt weak. There was nothing hostile in the woman's gaze per se, but she raised her chin with a sense of superiority only in the way one woman assessed another who threatened to steal her man.

"I am Catherine Coles," the woman said slowly, her voice deep with pride that made June want to shrink into a ball. "And you, I assume, are Desmon's mistress."

June swallowed.

There were other words for what June was. Mistress was the nicest of them. But somehow, coming from the woman who had once been destined to be Desmon's wife, it sounded more insulting than the word whore.

So, the woman had come to claim the man.

There was nothing that should have been intimidating June. She was a guest. She had been invited here. Yet, the presence of a proper lady made June feel even more scandalous.

There was nothing June wanted to say to this woman.

"I see," Catherine said without much emotion on her face but strolled slowly around June like a predator around the prey. "He was always fond of beautiful women. Though I never thought he would be capable of bringing a mistress into his country estate."

June wasn't sure how to answer or act. Despite Catherine's past history with Desmon, she had more rights to be here than June. Did she? June felt confidence drain from her with every click of Catherine's heels against the floor. She felt the housekeeper's eyes on her. And the other girl. Were they judging?

"Do you think he will keep you for long?" Catherine asked in a lower voice that only June could hear as she came even closer and stopped only a foot in front of June.

That very moment the main door burst open, making both women whip around to face it.

"You have no business being here!" Desmon's voice boomed through the hall as he stomped toward them.

His face was angry. There was savageness in it, his eyes burrowing into Catherine as he was approaching.

June stepped back. She didn't have any business here right now, she knew. She glanced at Catherine, whose face transformed into the expression of utmost affection, then at Desmon.

He stopped. He only stared at Catherine, and Catherine at him.

In this abrupt silence, the senses were heightened, June's heart felt like a drum, and her eyes stayed on Desmon's while Desmon's...didn't leave Catherine's.

"Excuse me," whispered June.

She walked, almost running toward the back of the hall, to the door that led outside into the garden. Her legs felt like jelly. She trembled all over. And blood rushed into her ears. She didn't want to be around the woman. Didn't want to hear more insults. But more than anything, she didn't want to witness Desmon's weakness as he faced the woman he'd once had feelings for.

She burst outside and trotted toward the garden. The greenery hid her from the manor and obscured the view of the place. Only then did she stop. She closed her eyes and forced herself to calm her breathing.

She didn't want to be a witness of what was to come. Was there a chance her stay here was over? Would Desmon succumb to the past feelings and accept whatever rubbish Catherine would come up with?

Catherine Coles was pretty.

Jealousy crept into June's heart.

Pretty. Confident. A lady, unlike June.

But then, again, June was forgetting who she was. Becky had reminded her just this morning in her letter, yet June let herself dream. And as she realized that everything that had been happening was never part of her real life, she felt her heart tighten. A lump in her throat made it hard to breathe. Tears prickled her eyes. And June bit her lip and fisted her hands as hard as she could to keep those tears from coming.

She didn't know how much time had passed before she decided to go in again. After all, she had to get used to her profession, accept it and carry herself with confidence.



She walked back and stepped into the main hallway with her heart beating violently at the thought of seeing Catherine again. There was a creak of the door down the corridor and voices.

Catherine's.

Desmon's.

They were talking calmly as they were leaving the study, and June darted toward the stairs as fast as she could. But not until she heard Catherine's voice.

"You gave me hope, Desmon. That is all I ask for right now."



June burst into her bedroom, leaned with her back against the wall, and closed her eyes. She trembled, thinking of how her life was about to change again. She wanted to be alone.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

The maid's voice made June jump.

There was always Susie. She was, indeed, like a spider—in every part of the manor, peeking from around the corner, her little eyes staring at June.

What was the maid always doing in her bedroom? She seemed to be everywhere June was.

"Miss Catherine is stunning, isn't she?" the maid said with poison in her voice as she dragged the dust brush along the desk where June had her drawing tools. "Such a lady. You can always tell the lady from how she behaves and who she is around."

June studied the maid in silence, restraining herself from throwing her out.

"I was supposed to be Miss Catherine's maid. Back then, you know," the maid continued, her eyes cast downward as she dusted the desk. "One day, I still might."

Unexplainable hatred toward the girl rose in June's chest. No doubt, the girl had said something to the woman. Now, she was gloating at June's humiliation, and there was judgment in her voice.

"Do you think—"

"I want you to leave," June interrupted her.

The maid's eyes flickered at June with surprise.

June pushed off the wall. "And I don't want you to touch any of the stationary," she said louder. "Not to clean. Not to move. Nothing. Is that understood?" Her voice was soft but determined.

She wanted to scream at the maid, kick her out and never see her again. She had two days left, and she didn't want to see the spider eyes that stared at her at all times.

Susie didn't raise her eyes, but her chin went slightly up in a contemptuous way. "Mrs. Fogg told me to clean. I am doing what I am told by my master and my employer," the maid retorted politely, though the poisonous notes in her tone could compete with that of a viper.

"Leave," said June louder.

"I will. But the orders of the—"

"I said leave!" shouted June, wanting to throw something at the brazen hussy.

The maid flinched. She raised her eyes with a trace of a glare at June, then curtsied, turned on her heel, and walked out of the room.

June looked at the drawing that lay on the desk.

She felt lost. There were so many emotions that collided in her that she needed to close her eyes and not think. She wanted to calm her heart that was booming in her chest, but her heart didn't listen.

She felt anger. At the maid, at the intrusion, at the fact that around the servant, she, June, didn't feel superior.

Hurt took over, twisting her heart with almost physical pain. It hurt to think of Catherine and the fact that Desmon still had feelings for her. Hurt to think that Desmon thought of June the same as the rest.

And sadness. June knew that he was a gentleman. He would never treat June unfairly or say what he truly thought. Yet it pained her to think that in other circumstances, in another life, they could've had a chance. But not now. Not when they were a gentleman and a courtesan. When his former betrothed was sweet-talking him.

This was the weakest June had ever felt. Weaker than when she and Becky had first come to the house on Baker Street to seek acceptance. Back then, she had a choice. Now, she couldn't change a thing. She wasn't even in charge of her own life. And the fact that she would go back to the Belle House and never see Desmon again ripped her from the inside.

There was only one thing that always saved her in moments like this.

Only one thing was the reminder of her dreams.

Only one thing could sooth her heart and take pain away.

She had to draw.

She walked up to the desk and gazed for the longest time at the drawing that she'd started the other day. A sad smile grazed her lips. This talent had never done her any good yet remained the only thing that was truly hers.

June sat down at the desk and put her palm on the pencils and brushes, blanketing them. She caressed them for a while as her eyes roamed the sheet of paper in front of her. The lines started forming in her mind. The images came to life as the creature on paper was taking shape and form in her imagination, making it clear what needed to be added and how it would all come together.

If there was anything she could leave in this mansion after herself, it would be this drawing.

This was part of her.

This would be a part of June Aveling that she would leave for Desmon.

She smiled and went to work.



Desmon sat in his study for over an hour after he had parted with Catherine.

Cathrine Cole.

She had a new last name now. New dress. She looked great, all silk and flowers and sweet smiles, apologies and gentle touches as she tried to get close to him.

Yet he couldn't help feeling that she was exactly the same with him as she had been seven years ago. Nothing had changed. It was a *deja vu*. He couldn't help feeling that some strange moment of his life was replaying again. But it didn't feel good. It felt eerie.

He was shocked to see her in the hallway. The memories had flushed through him with such force that he had disregarded June. The bitterness, the hatred, the humiliation—and not a spec of love—they put him in a momentary stupor until he saw June walk away, and he said, "Let's talk in my study."

Catherine was sweet. She knew how. She'd played this hand before, years ago.

Desmon said he didn't know how he felt now about their meeting or the conversation.

"That gives me hope!" she had exclaimed at the end.

*Hope?*

Desmon had almost choked on the word.

How could a woman that had betrayed him and humiliated him could possibly think of hope? If she were his true love, if his feelings years ago had been such that they could never be replicated, then perhaps he could've found the way to forgive

her. She had been young and naive. Mr. Cole could've manipulated her with Lord knows what filthy accusations against Desmon.

But when Desmon walked out of the parlor and parted with Catherine, he had caught the sight of June rushing up the stairs.

His heart thudded heavily.

*There* was the woman who took his breath away. The way she made him feel surpassed any affection he had ever felt toward Catherine.

It startled him that moment—the thought that the woman he had bought was more important to him than the woman he had once offered his hand and heart to.

He stood in the presence of two women, and there was no doubt in his mind which one mattered the most.

In fact, the *only* one who mattered.

Catherine had said that she wanted to meet in London and talk again. But did he want to? He wasn't sure.

Now, sitting by himself in deep thoughts for who knows how long, he still didn't know what bothered him about Catherine and why he considered meeting with her again.

He didn't know how much time he'd spent in the study when he heard the soft knocking.

June walked in. Like a fairy. His heart swelled with tenderness at the sight of her.

“An unexpected visitor?” She smiled softly as she came up to his desk. “Are you all right?”

He nodded. He should ask Mrs. Fogg what had been said between the two women in his absence.

“I am a bit confused,” he answered, his thoughts returning to his conversation with Catherine.

“About?”

“I still don’t understand how one can betray the future husband, jilt him at the altar for her own selfish reasons, and then... And then dare come back years later and profess her love.”

June walked past the desk and toward the window. She stood in silence, not saying anything. There must have been some exchange of words between the women, Desmon thought, for June was unusually quiet.

“Did you know,” she said softly, not turning to look at him, “that some butterfly species migrate down south for hibernation and then come back up north?” She gazed out the window as if she could see the very scene unfold outside.

“I wouldn’t know that, no.” The question was so out of place that it made Desmon smile, despite his distress.

June turned around to gaze at him. She was calm, but there was more sadness in her eyes than ever before.

A smile flickered on her lips as she continued. “They are willing to do anything in pursuit of happiness, some scientists joke. Of course, the butterflies don’t have a sense of feelings. We, humans, do. Yet most of us succumb to comfort and the norm instead of pursuing happiness.”

*Oh, I see.* He now understood that this conversation was still related to what had happened.

“My father’s friend,” she went on in the same low voice, talking slowly as if she were telling him a fairytale, “was in the Americas once and observed an extraordinary spectacle in one of the forests in Mexico. Orange-and-black clouds swirled in the air, rising higher into the sky, morphing from one shape into another. Among the firs and pines, those black clouds, made up of thousands of tiny specs, rose up above the forests like a tornado, then sank low onto it. When my father’s friend got closer, he realized they were butterflies. Beautifully patterned, millions of them swarmed in the air.”

Desmon watched June’s face as she told the story. Her eyes came alive, her lips were formed into a permanent soft smile. She was beautiful. There was a hypnotic power in her

knowledge of nature, so peculiar and odd, yet bringing her so much joy. He'd never understood how any type of skills or knowledge in people made their personalities more intriguing. But June's was mesmerizing.

"Monarch butterflies, my father explained." She now strolled in front of Desmon's desk. "The forests in Mexico were warm enough for the butterflies to hibernate over the winter to stay alive. They came from up north, all the way from the northern parts of the United States, then after the winter, made their way up again. It takes several generations of the monarchs to move, reproduce, and finally get to their destination."

"Why?" Desmon asked, genuinely curious. "Why wouldn't they just stay in one place?"

June shrugged her shoulders. "Nature is often unexplainable. Perhaps they like the nature up North. But it's too much cold for them to stay there, so every year they migrate south, to that particular spot in Mexico."

"How do they know where to go?"

June smiled wider, gazing at him. "Another mystery. Perhaps, they are very sensitive to temperature and can gauge it as they move. Perhaps they are motivated to search for comfort."

"Animals are motivated by survival instincts."

"Animals are much better at figuring out how to find perfect habitat," she said. "In this respect, they surpass humans."

"Oh, you think humankind is not good at it?"

"We are too much like them is what I meant—we do things out of self-preservation mostly. Only a few search for happiness."

"Is that so?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"Those who dare to abandon comfort and the better surviving conditions are often the outcasts. We become cowards when we are threatened with losing comfort. Only a

few do what it takes in pursuit of their dreams. Miss Catherine did that, I suppose.”

Desmon felt a prickle of bitterness at the words. “She did that out of lack of nobility.”

“If you say so. I don’t mean to redeem her in your eyes by any means. But often, people do unspeakable things for the simple reason that they see an opportunity to be happy. And they do it even when they know it is at the cost of someone else’s.”

June smiled and lowered her eyes, then raised them at Desmon. “We are here because I did what it took to survive, and you had the means to get what you wanted. I wish I could pursue my dreams. But at the end of the day, survival is a more important mission.”

Desmon only nodded. So he was her survival. Great.

“The thing is,” she continued, “I really enjoy myself with you, Des.” She smiled again. “I haven’t expected that. Nor have I expected to be so attracted to someone. And...”

“And?” He raised his eyes at her.

“I don’t think it’s a good thing.” She looked away with a nervous smile.

“To be attracted?”

“That much,” she replied.

He felt his heart tighten. He’d felt that since the day he’d met her. It could’ve been a simple infatuation. Except for the more time he spent with June, the more she hypnotized him with her charm, her lively character, her stories, the depth of her personality. He couldn’t remember a single lady of the high society who had drawn him as much. In fact, now that he thought about it, even Catherine hadn’t possessed such depth of character, let alone a speck of the talents and skills and charm that June did. Catherine had been the first woman who had been intimate with him. Desmon hadn’t known back then what it was like to be with a woman. He had been curious. The intimacy had been so new that he had submerged himself completely into Catherine. And Catherine had been drawn



toward another man. Perhaps, she had fallen in love. Perhaps, June was right, and Catherine had dared to dream.

“Have you ever been in love?” Desmon asked suddenly.

The question startled June. “No.”

“What I had for my fiancée wasn’t love.” He felt the need to explain. He always felt like he wanted to talk his heart out to June. About everything. Except for his feelings for her. “I know it now, but it came close. You might say it’s like standing in the middle of a regular day, in your familiar surrounding, and seeing an orange-and-black cloud of butterflies swirling in the sky.” June chuckled at the comparison. “It is beautiful, mesmerizing. You want to be close, to be in the very center of it. And when you are—it feels like a fairytale.”

June nodded, smiling broadly. “Except fairytales are not real.”

“You don’t know that.” Desmon smiled back. “Just because something didn’t happen to you doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Have you seen the migration of the monarch butterflies, June? With your own eyes?”

He cocked an eyebrow, and June burst out with laughter.

Her laughter was so easy and careless as if in those moments, any trouble were forgotten and she was happy.

“There is one thing I can say for sure right now, June. You make me very happy.”

Her laughter and lively gaze managed to wipe away whatever grim thoughts he had on his mind. It was so easy to talk to her and be around her that Desmon had forgotten the burden of his feelings after talking to Catherine. The only thing that still held his heart tightly and wouldn’t let go were his feelings for June.

And those he still didn’t dare talk about.

There was only one place he let himself go—his bedroom. And that night, he showed June everything he felt.

Without words.

“*I*’ve finished the drawing for you,” June announced the next day.

They spent the morning by the stables. It delighted Desmon how much June loved it. If they had more time, he would have trained her to be a great rider.

But the time was running out. He knew it. He felt it. Even when she came into the study in the afternoon and told him about the drawing. He felt this was a farewell present.

“Is it really done?” He rose from his chair, came over to her, and wrapped his arms around her.

She traced the outlines of his shoulders with her fingertips. “Yes. It’s quite good.”

He chuckled. “Everything you showed me was brilliant. Can I see it?”

“You can do anything you want, Desmon Shaw,” she said quieter and stood on her tiptoes to give him a kiss.

When she pulled away, she glanced at the open door. “We should not do this downstairs. The servants see us.”

Desmon shook his head. “I don’t care. They are servants. I can do anything I please.”

“True, but...”

“There is no but.” He chuckled.

“But one day, you will bring your wife here, Des.” She paused, and he went still at the words. “And gossips might reach her that you had a mistress who roamed around the mansion doing scandalous things.”

*A wife...*

He had always felt so burned by the sad past that the idea of giving marriage another try had never occurred to him.

But now, he gazed at June with surprise. How easily she discussed with him his personal life! As if there was no care in the world for her.

And as if she'd read his thoughts, her hand cupped her face. “I didn't mean to preach,” she said softly.

Desmon didn't mind. Truly, nothing bothered him when it came to June—neither her questions, nor her straightforwardness, not her preaching, nor the scandalous reason of her being here. He loved all of the above. But there was one word that had struck him out of hundreds that had been spoken.

*Wife...*

The word had gripped his mind in the strangest way.



It was getting dark as June and Desmon made their way upstairs to her room. Desmon lit the candles in the sconces as June walked up to the desk.

“The details are much more vivid in the daylight. But still. Come here.”

She lit the candles and set the candelabrum on the desk next to the drawing. She looked at Desmon hesitantly, studying his face and trying to gauge his reaction as he studied the drawing.

It was on a two-foot-long by one-foot-wide sheet of paper. June had used the yellow and brown watercolors to tone the paper, then flooded part of it with the diluted ink to make the

subtle lights and darks give the surface more depth. For the rest, she used the same technique as in all her drawings—ink for the outlines, graphite for the general texture.

The bottom corner was a delicate patch of flowers, from which started the profile of a young woman. Her slender neck and sensual lips were reminiscent of June's. She'd never drawn people before and had to look at herself in the mirror to draw.

But the majority of space on the drawing was occupied by the woman's lavish hair that came down in waves, completely obscuring the woman's eyes and splayed upward in soft waves as if something was pulling it from above. Intertwined in the hair strands were what June loved the most—myriads of flowers, from large roses to smaller meadow chamomiles, insects of all kinds, from large butterflies to tiny ladybugs. She had created another wash of ink and light burgundy to tint the hair and then used the watercolors to add the vibrance to the details. The result was breathtaking and mesmerizing—a morphing of a human being and nature.

“Do you like it?” she asked timidly, for Desmon stared at the drawing for what seemed like an eternity. “I've applied the fixative so that the graphite doesn't get smudged,” she explained.

Desmon stretched his hand to pick up the drawing, but June playfully slapped it away.

“Not yet,” she scowled, but right away smiled. She gently took his hands and pulled them away. “The fixative takes some time. Once it is dry, you can take the artwork. I don't have varnish. It's quite expensive. But you can get it done later. It will look much more vibrant.”

She studied the drawing, admiring her own work. And when she looked up, Desmon's eyes weren't on the art piece but on her.

“You are the most talented woman I've ever met, June.” His hands let go of hers and cupped her face. “It looks perfect.” He kissed her gently on the lips. “Thank you.” He kissed her cheek. “Thank you.” His kisses trailed down her

neck. “Thank you,” he whispered as his tongue licked her creamy skin.

There was no better way to say it, June thought as she closed her eyes, relishing his touch.

He pushed aside her sleeve to kiss her shoulder. “Thank you,” he murmured as he tugged down the bodice, exposing her nipples.

“Des,” she gasped, her hands raking through his hair and pressing his head closer. His lips on her breasts made desire coil through her again. She could feel the liquid pooling up at her feminine core. Seconds was how long it took for his touch to bring her into the state of sweet longing.

“We should do something about this,” she muttered, arching her back to press her breasts closer to his insistent mouth.

“About what?”

“About us.” She gasped. “About this. Right now, Des. Before dinner.”

He didn’t need to hear anything else. His mouth took hers as he fumbled with the buttons of his trousers. He pushed her backward until they bumped into the desk.

June pushed onto his arms. “Not here, Des. The drawing.”

“Yes, yes,” he muttered, backing her up further toward the bureau.

He whipped her around and hurled her skirts up.

In a moment, he untied her drawers, letting them fall down her legs.

“There you are,” he murmured, squeezing her buttocks, sliding his one hand between her legs.

June moaned. With her hands on the bureau, she nudged her buttocks toward him.

“Would you like me to fuck you, Miss June?” he whispered into her ear as he unbuttoned his trousers and took his cock out.

“Please, do,” she whispered back, turning her head to catch his mouth in a kiss.

He gathered her skirts around her waist. “Hold these,” he ordered, then grabbed her by her hips, pulling them toward his, and thrust into her in one powerful push.

She cried out, but he didn’t stop. He kept thrusting, pushed her legs apart, bringing her a bit lower, so he could be even deeper inside her. He thrust harder. There was no prelude. The desire burned through them like a blaze, turning into a forever-hungry beast that begged to be satisfied. The climax was approaching so fast that he was afraid he would reach the peak without her. Without stopping, he reached over and between her legs, found her bare cunny and started rubbing it feverishly.

“Des!” she cried out.

But he didn’t stop. He felt her knees buckle, felt her stumble. She lowered herself onto the bureau, pushing her buttocks at him. His cock was pounding into her as his hand rubbed her smooth flesh, kneading her little petal, pressing harder until she exploded into a series of tiny cries, her body shuddering in climax as Desmon exploded inside her.

It took them a while to regain their breathing. His arms wrapped around her.

“My lady, you are turning me into a beast,” he said softly, kissing her neck.

“My good sir, I am losing my mind with you,” she said, throwing her head back onto his shoulder.

“Good.” He kissed her smile and pressed her even closer.

He had never wanted anyone so much. But the biggest revelation was that this mesmerizing woman wanted *him*. Without restraints. Without shame.

As they fixed their garments, he studied her. He never tired of doing it.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her hair was splayed around her shoulders, falling in messy strands onto her face.

He loved seeing her like this. Her gaze slightly unfocused, her movements disoriented, a vague smile on her lips—the signs of their passion. It reminded him of the intimate moments they had just shared and the fact that he was the cause of it.

“What are you grinning about?” she scowled playfully and turned, fixing her dress and hiding her own smile.

“You.” He pulled her toward him again for a brief kiss. “Are you hungry? For food, that is.” He laughed, seeing her roll her eyes and bite her lip. “My little hungry woman.” He thought how lucky he was to have found her and sad that he was about to let her go.

“What is it?” she asked, frowning just a tiny bit as her eyes searched his for the cause of his sudden silence.

“Nothing,” he said. *Liar*. “Shall we?”

“Yes!” June pulled away and walked over to the desk. She carefully put out the candles, moved the candelabrum a foot away from the drawing, and gave her artwork one more glance.

There was one more first, Desmon thought.

No one had ever created art just for him.



The dinner was lovely, though June barely paid attention to the food. The first several days, she'd savored every dish at every meal, even if she was full, and marveled at the variety of dishes. Now she hardly cared. The food, the manor became secondary, as there was only one thing that took up all her attention—Desmon.

They talked about horses and jockeys and Wooly, who had shown her tricks on horses in the morning. They drank wine and laughed about nonsense as they walked upstairs after dinner.

They were giggling about something as they entered June's room when she froze, staring at the desk.

"Oh, no," she whispered, and there was so much horror on her face that Desmon's eyes darted to what she was looking at.

There, on the desk, lay the drawing. Next to it lay a candle that had fallen from the candelabrum. But the worst of it—a thick spot of melted and hardened wax spread across part of the painting.

"No-no-no-no-no," June muttered as she flitted up to the desk and wanted to pick up the drawing only to pause with her hands hovering above it, unsure what to do. "But...how..." Her eyebrows were knitted into the most pitiful expression. "Des..." she whispered as if it were the worst thing that had happened to her.

Desmon was confused. He tried to talk it over, then cursed under his breath, then tried to find an explanation of how this could have happened.

"But I put out the candles," June interjected softly, still not touching the drawing but hovering over it as if she could rewind the time.

"June. It must be an accident. It is fine. I love it just as much. I will hang it in a frame, and the wax spot will add a certain charm to it."

This was true. The drawing wasn't completely ruined. If anything, the hardened yellow wax added a sort of a dark, moody touch to the art piece. Not that Desmon knew anything about art.

But June was inconsolable. He could see it in the way she bit her lip, how she widened her eyes and tried not to blink so as not to cry. But she did. She tried to turn away and wipe the tears with her fingers, but it didn't escape him.

Desmon pulled June into a hug. He kissed her hair, her face, her wet cheeks. He whispered the consolation as his heart expanded from tenderness. He wanted to never let her go. He wanted to shield her from the harm or danger or people or anything that brought tears to her eyes.



“It will be all right, June,” he whispered. You will do another one. Ten more.”

She sobbed. “It’s just... Everything meaningful in my life has always gone away.” Her hands rested on his chest as her forehead was pressed to his shoulder.

He wished he was that one meaningful thing she talked about.

“It’s a drawing, June.”

“Yes, I know. Still,” she whispered, barely able to hold her tears.

This was a silly drawing, he wanted to say. He wanted to *be* a fucking drawing that she cared about so much.

But he couldn’t possibly know that it wasn’t about the drawing. It was about everything she’d ever cherished: her father, her education, her art, her dreams. Desmon... It was only a matter of time until she would lose him too.

He didn’t know her thoughts, yet felt the sadness...

Two more days. They were painfully tangible, like sand in an hourglass. He could see the sand dripping the minutes away, could feel the emptiness that was expanding as if June were slipping through his fingers.

He stroked her hair.

This mourning for the drawing was a mourning for *them*, and he felt it.

“I shall see that the one responsible is punished,” he said softly.

June shook her head. Desmon’s fingers stroking her so gently made her body melt. She wanted to close her eyes and dissipate under his touch, become the air that he breathed and the lake water that clung in droplets to his skin.

This was what Mrs. Hilderbog had warned about. “The worst mistake you could make is to fall in love. The next mistake is to think that you are something special to the client you are with.”

June had made both mistakes. And, God, did it hurt! Her feelings for Desmon were ripping her heart into tiny threads. His touch only reminded her that they had two precious days left of this dream. Because all this was a dream.

June felt hot tears stream down her cheeks and sobbed.

Desmon hooked his finger under her chin and lifted her face toward him.

“June, love, don’t get so upset.”

*Love.*

She suppressed a chuckle.

That was it!

She was deeply in love with him, and there was no saving her from it.

Desmon tried to wipe her tears with his thumbs, but the tears kept coming as she gazed into his beautiful dark eyes trying to remember this moment for the future.

“I am silly, I know, Des,” she murmured and tried to smile. “I just need a moment. Please.” She pulled away from him. “I need to be alone.”

What she *wanted* was to wake up in the world where she could have Desmon, where no one knew who she was, where she didn’t belong to the Belle House and meant to become a courtesan.

What she *needed* was to pull herself together and come back to reality.



Desmon marched downstairs, his nostrils flaring like those of a bull at a corrida. Underneath this anger, his heart was breaking at the memory of June’s tears.

It wasn’t about the drawing, he knew, for he felt it too—the imminent ending to something that was flaring between them.

Knowing that someone—and he had a suspicion who—was careless enough to hurt June made the familiar feeling of hatred rise in him. And by the time he was halfway down the stairs, he was boiling with fury.

He caught a glance of Mrs. Fogg at the bottom of the stairs.

“Female staff lined up in the kitchen. All of them!” he barked as he descended the staircase. “Now!”

Mrs. Fogg darted toward the servants’ door before he even made it down, and he followed her, flexing his fingers, trying to calm himself.

He never bothered with the servants’ business.

But now, staring at them as they quietly lined up in the dim kitchen, he felt bitterness. They’d always been treated well, better than in other estates he knew. He was the only master, save the occasional guests. And now that he had a guest, someone dared to sabotage her peace.

He stood with his hands clasped behind him and studied the faces of eleven servants from under his eyebrows.

“Miss June’s drawing was ruined today,” he said in a low, raspy voice.

Mrs. Fogg stood behind him. She hadn’t heard this voice in years, and it reminded her of the times when he used to torment the staff in his drunk fits.

“Someone spilled wax on it,” Desmon continued. “No, it did not happen on its own. Someone did it, by accident or not. I want to know who.”

The silence was deadly. The servants didn’t dare lift their eyes at him. June only had one maid, but there was a chance this could be someone else’s nasty trick, though no male servant would have probably dared to enter June’s room.

Desmon rolled on his feet, studying the lowered faces of the females.

Finally, he spoke again. “Let’s do it differently. If I don’t hear whose careless actions ruined Miss June’s art, all of you

will be dismissed tomorrow morning. With no letters of recommendation.”

A dozen pairs of eyes shot up at him almost at once.

“Mr. Shaw—” Mrs. Fogg made an attempt to speak, but Desmon lifted his hand, and she felt silent.

“We’ll manage, Mrs. Fogg,” he said, his voice now angrier. “It’s a small estate. Stuff is easy to find, and we don’t need that many.”

He knew it. Eleven maids were too many for only one resident. He wasn’t a demanding master. There was no family to serve. If this was what it took to make the servants remember their place, he would do it. He would let all of them go. At once! This was about June. She was the most precious person that had ever set foot in this manor, in *his* manor, and someone managed to ruin it.

*Aargh!*

Desmon felt like breaking something right now! His jaw tightened as he breathed in and out slowly to calm himself. There was silence around and the gazes cast to the floor.

Desmon straightened up.

“Very well. Mrs. Fogg”—he scanned the lineup—“see that tomorrow all female staff gather their possessions and leave the manor.”

Mrs. Fogg shifted uneasily in her place. “Mr. Shaw, perhaps it’s a—”

“You heard me,” Desmon cut her off and turned toward the door. “If anyone has something to say, let Mrs. Fogg know,” he added as he was already walking through the doorway, leaving the servants exchanging horrified looks.

He shook with anger when he came to the study and poured himself a drink.

*Bastards. Cowards!*

He never talked much to the staff, except his help in the stables. They had a job to do. Everything else was none of

their concern. Yet, someone had a grudge against June. Either because of her beauty, or her talent or this arrangement. June would never treat others badly despite the insults. He knew it. He had already found out what Catherine had said to her. And that made him ache even more for June.

Only half an hour later, there was a knock at the door. Desmon didn't turn away from the window where he stood all this time staring aimlessly into the outside darkness and deep in his thoughts.

"Mr. Shaw, sir," he heard the soft voice of the housekeeper.

"If you think I am too harsh," he said without turning around, "don't bother explaining. You know me too well, Mrs. Fogg. I don't act irrationally."

"It's Mary, the junior maid," the housekeeper said instead.

Desmon turned around slowly to look at her.

"She said it was most probably Susie, Miss June's maid, who did it. Said, Susie came into the servants' quarters during dinner with a smirk, saying 'the pretty missus will be crying her eyes out tonight. Serves her right, for...'" She went silent.

He arched an eyebrow. "For?"

Mrs. Fogg cleared her throat. "For she is a fallen woman."

Desmon felt his blood boil at the words.

*How fucking dare they!*

He had never been a violent man, but he felt a momentary urge to go downstairs and toss the insolent maid out into the dark and make her spend a night in the woods.

But he only nodded. "See that she is gone at first light tomorrow. The rest can stay. Has Mary been with us for long?"

"A year," Mrs. Fogg replied. "She is a decent girl. Quiet. Obedient. Doesn't talk much."

"Assign her to Miss June's room. Tell everyone if so much as a word is spoken in the way Miss June doesn't like, they are gone."

So much for a happy last day, thought Desmon as he stayed in the study a bit longer.

He would go up to the room, tell June everything would be fine. By now, June had probably calmed down.

But that wasn't what bothered him.

The tears weren't for the drawing. The desperation wasn't about the nasty trick.

He felt that his time with June was like a dream, a beautiful piece of art, a marvelous creation that was slowly being ruined by hot wax. He could see it—the thick opaque liquid that was just like his past—empty and only a memory—that was swallowing what was left of their future.

One more day.

She'd dreaded this day since she'd gotten to Dambridge.

The last day.

One was always advised to cherish the last moments of great experiences. But when it came down to it, the last moments were the saddest. The realization that their time was coming to an end weighed down on both Desmon and June.

Their smiles were sadder. Their touches were frequent and more tender. Their conversation with a note of melancholy. The breakfast—prolonged. The stroll to the stables—less exciting as before. A sad glance from Desmon when she said goodbye to Wooly and wished him luck.

There was nothing great about the last day of being together. The estate seemed like a different world. Away from everyone June knew, it was as if she and Desmon had started a new life.

Except her new life was awaiting her in London.

June spent a day with a heavy heart, trying to smile and sound cheerful. Yet when she watched Desmon, her heart swelling with emotions she had hard times to subdue, she realized that he was all she'd dreamt about before.

The silly conversation with Becky about a handsome lord sweeping her off her feet—that was Desmon.

A dream man who would fall in love with her and take her to his magical kingdom—that was *her* Desmon.

The man who would take over her heart and fill it with love, deep and profound, the one that only poets described in their works—Desmon.

He was June's fairytale. And the fairytale was coming to an end. Except there was no happy ending. Her heart was falling apart, piece by piece, with every minute that was gone in the day.

Desmon had arranged for them to have dinner in the garden.

“Will you wear the red dress for me tonight?” he asked, taking June in his arms and planting soft kisses on her cheeks.

She would have done anything he asked, even if he had asked to run away with him, with no money or prospect.

This was the dress she hadn't worn yet. Of bright red color, it was the most lavish, and she joked about it with Desmon before.

She thought the dress would look too vulgar. But when she put it on and assessed herself in the mirror, she smiled in approval.

The red silk reflected the candlelight and seemed to change color as she moved, from dark burgundy in the folds of its skirt to coral in the parts highlighted by the light. The short sleeves elegantly rested on her shoulders. The décolletage—deep and revealing but exposing her collarbones and the upper slopes of her breasts perfectly. Her golden hair assumed the pink overtones as if picking up the brightness of the red silk.

She didn't look like a courtesan, June realized, contrary to what she'd thought before. She looked like a lover. She was passion. In this dress, she was an incarnate of desire and all that she felt for Desmon. If it were their last dinner—she would do her best and enjoy it.

Desmon gaped at her as she came down the stairs and into the hallway.

“You asked for it,” she said, laughing, studying his face as his eyes went up and down her dress, again and again. “Is this



too much?" she asked with hesitation. "I am afraid I only have a certain number of dresses. I can change if you—"

"It's splendid," he said quietly, and her heart fluttered at the intensity of his gaze. "I think I was at a loss of words when you walked out looking so dazzling. You look great in red, in cream, in stocking, without anything on."

He chuckled.

She smiled. "It's peculiar."

"What is?"

"You are the only person in the world that has seen me in all my dresses." She smiled wider. "And in all state of undress," she added, pursing her lips.

He didn't respond and only gazed at her for what seemed like the longest time.

"What is it?" she asked finally, thinking that perhaps she'd said too much. Though after days of copulating in every place possible and in the most scandalous manner, a vulgar dress or an inappropriate remark were the last things that would have shocked him.

Desmon ruffled his messy hair and smiled.

"Everything is great," he replied, pulled her closer, and kissed her.

Sudden and brief, the kiss took her by surprise.

But as abruptly, Desmon pulled away, and took her hand.

"Shall we?"

He was dressed like he was in London—a proper shirt and tie and dark-grey three-piece suit. He was unusually quiet as they made their way out into the garden.

A small table had been set up in the clearing, on the grass, surrounded by three stone fire pits and numerous candelabra. Lanterns had been lit up around the perimeter of the clearing. It was beautiful and intimate. Surrounded by trees and rose bushes, under the night sky, when June turned away from the manor, it felt as if they were in the middle of nowhere.

She said just that to Desmon, who took her hand in his but didn't answer.

They made small talk, unexciting and dull compared to the conversations they'd had every day in the last week. But it felt more magical than ever before.

Desmon was quiet. His gaze was more intense. It made June's heart beat heavily and her own emotions occasionally overwhelm her. She felt a lump in her throat that would not go away.

Did Desmon feel the same? She didn't know. Should she tell him of her feelings? It would probably make no difference if not make things harder on both of them.

So she avoided the topic, smiled and tried to cheer up the evening with fun talks, but they fell flat. The dinner was grand, but she didn't have an appetite.

Desmon was often lost in his thoughts, quiet for minutes. He picked up the wine glass, fumbled, and spilled wine on the table, cursed quietly but waved to the servant not to bother.

"I feel strangely lost today," he finally said, staring at the burgundy patch that saturated the white table cloth.

June didn't reply. Lost was not the word she would use to describe how she would feel once they parted. She would feel devastated, and she blinked fast, trying to blink away the tears that were welling up in her eyes.

"Should we walk?" she asked, pretending to study the dark garden while she kept her hands under the table, pinching her skin as hard as she could so that the pain subdued the emotions that were brewing inside her.

"There is something I would like to show you," said Desmon, rising from his seat, helping her up, but avoiding looking at her.

He ordered for the lanterns to be put out.

"Why?" June asked curiously.

"You will see," he said and led her to the clearing between the apple trees and the wide path that led deeper into the

garden and toward the stables.

He stopped and, standing behind her, wrapped his arms around her in a gentle embrace.

“Do you see that?” he asked as June tried to figure out what she was supposed to look at. “Fireflies. They are abundant in this part of the country. This time of the year is perfect. There.” He moved his finger in one direction, and June noticed the tiny flickers in the air. “There.” He pointed in another direction.

And now she saw it—little stars flickering here and there and becoming denser in the darker areas. If one didn’t pay attention, one could mistake it for the reflections of the lights from the house. But there was nothing for them to reflect on. And the tiny stars that sprinkled the night darkness were the little bugs.

“They are everywhere,” she said quietly and smiled.

One didn’t see them too often in London. This sight was magical. The more her eyes got used to the dark, the more tiny sparkles she noticed until the air around them seemed saturated with specks of light.

“The light—that’s how the male bugs attract the females,” she said, mesmerized by the show but even more aware of Desmon’s hands around her. His embrace was warm. His scent was stronger when he was so close to her. All she wanted was to stay like this, in this place, in this moment, and never leave.

“I love that you know all that.” Desmon kissed her on the temple and pressed his mouth to her head. “I love that you like nature.” She turned her head and tilted it up to meet his lips that pressed to hers in a soft kiss. June closed her eyes to savor this moment. His voice seemed to caress her soul. “I love everything about you, June.”

She smiled and wanted to answer but felt a lump in her throat.

*And I love you*, her heart whispered, and tears welled up in her eyes again.

She tried to subdue the silly tears, held her breath, and then exhaled as silently as she could as she watched the magical show that nature put up just for the two of them.

They stood like this for the longest time. These last minutes of the lovers saying goodbye were sad and tender and full of unspoken words that burnt the air around them but never came out.

That night they went to bed without speaking much. Desmon's kisses were insistent but soft. His hands were demanding but gentle. He took her in the most simple way, just as he had done the first night after the auction. There was no hurry. His love-making was slow, and June had matched his caresses with hers—trying to remember every inch of him, his scent, his taste, his touch.

They had one more night in London, yet this night at the manor with the windows open and the night breeze wafting in was the last of the magical days they'd spent together.

Afterward, they lay in silence, the darkness caressing their naked bodies, their hands still caressing each other as if they couldn't stop.

He kissed her again—softly and gently, then planted the kisses down her body. Like an addict who couldn't get enough when the high wore off, he chased another one and kept kissing her. He mouthed her breasts, slowly licking at her nipples as if he could lick them off her skin. He pushed her legs open and kissed every inch of her thighs. When he got to her core, his tongue took over where his lips couldn't reach.

He made her moan.

He made her whimper.

He made her cry out in climax when his tongue ventured into the part his member had just invaded minutes ago.

He turned her onto her belly and continued—to her back, her buttocks, kissing every curve of her body. When she fell apart in another climax, she took over. She matched every move of his, covering every inch of his body with kisses like

he had done to her. He whispered her name. He grunted. And he moaned as her lips and tongue brought him to climax.

That night wasn't about lust or the art of pleasure.

That night was a confession.

Their lovemaking was the words that none of them dared to say. They spilled through their hands that caressed each other, their lips that fused in the passionate kisses, their tongues that penetrated the most intimate spots.

Just two weeks ago, they had started with lust.

It had turned into passion.

And now, it had grown into something that neither of them had expected.

Love.

Not able to sleep, Desmon got up at dawn when the pink of the rising sun was pushing the darkness from the horizon. He padded to the adjoining room and dressed quietly. In minutes, he was outside, marching through the damp grass toward the stables.

His heart was a mess. He didn't want to go to London. He didn't want to let June go. But it was a contract. She did it for money. What she did was her job. Was it? Was there anything to indicate that her feelings for him were beyond simple attraction? Perhaps. He'd tried to find clues. But how could he possibly read them when his own mind was clouded with feelings so strong it was hard to understand what was happening?

Were there signs?

Everything and nothing. They could be true or a clever farce. Honesty or lies.

*Arg!*

He didn't bother waking up the stable boy. It was much too early. But the only thing that could clear his mind was a horse ride.

He saddled his stallion, mounted it, and trotted toward the meadows.

Only twenty feet, and he spurred his horse and started galloping.

In minutes, he was at full speed, the sound of the horse's hooves thudding against the ground and resonating in his chest, the trembling of the horse under him and the tension of its muscles in sync with his heartbeat that thudded at the thought of June and what was to come.

June had heard him leave. He'd told her before that he liked to ride at dawn, but during her stay, he'd only done it with her.

She rose from the bed and padded toward the window. She saw his figure, broad and tall, march toward the stables. She heard his loud "Ha!" in the distance as he nudged the horse right off into trotting, and the louder, angrier "Ha!" as he set out galloping across the meadows.

She stood by the window listening to the thudding of the galloping horse and felt it resonate with her own heart. She wanted to ride with Desmon right now—dash into the foggy horizon together and never come back. Not to this world where their lives were about to go in different directions.

June pursed her lips, trying to hold her tears.

She'd never known love. Now, staring into the foggy dawn, her heart clenched with emotions that made it hard to breathe.

She loved Desmon. Loved him deeply and tenderly. And at this realization, she let go, closed her eyes, and let tears run down her face.

The morning of their departure was sad. The staff lined up next to the carriage as if they were seeing a duchess out. June nodded with a smile, but her heart was heavy.

She stayed silent almost the entire ride to London.

“You are quiet,” Desmon said.

“Ah, it’s a bit strange coming back,” she explained with a strained smile. “As if we have come back from a magical land.”

*Indeed*, Desmon thought, feeling slight repulsion at thinking about the city.

The Belle House was on his mind. He was sure it was on hers. When they reached the outskirts of the city, he saw June lower her eyes and pick at her gloves. When the carriage stopped at his flat and they stepped outside, Desmon had a feeling as if the ten days had been just a dream. There was a sense of loss that overtook his heart with almost physical pain. A heavy stone lay on his chest and made it hard to breathe.

They went out for dinner to Covent Garden. June didn’t mind. But sitting in silence in a private booth, with wine and candlelight, their thoughts were less than romantic. The cheerful faces in the crowd on their way back seemed out of place. The street band seemed like a farce. The laughter of the passers-by made their mood even gloomier. Everyone basked in the warmth of a perfect summer evening. And Desmon felt like he was at a funeral.

The butler met them at the door with an apologetic stare. Loud voices came from the sitting room, making Desmon frown.

“What is it, Gerald?” he inquired. The last thing he wanted was to see strangers.

“The gentlemen are here to see you, sir. They insisted on waiting,” the butler said, taking Desmon’s jacket and June’s hat and gloves.

“Oh, we insisted all right!” a loud booming voice came from down the hallway from a man who now walked in their direction. “You show up in town and don’t bother telling your friends, Shaw? What’s been keeping you so preoccupied and uncivilized?”

*Frederick Khol. Dammit.*

“Long time,” Desmon said, forcing a smile.

Any other time he would be happy to see Frederick and others whose voices in the sitting room he could now recognize. Warren. Harry. But their visit was untimely. June gave him a timid look as she stood next to him, and he responded with one of apology.

“Oh!” Frederick cocked an eyebrow as he pretended he had just noticed June. “I see.” His mischievous eyes returned to Desmon. “You have the most marvelous company. No wonder. Would you care to introduce?”

Desmon did so reluctantly, noticing that Frederick held June’s hand in his longer than needed.

“And Miss June is from around here?”

“Yes,” she replied with a graceful nod.

“Well, then, let’s celebrate!” Frederick exclaimed theatrically, his eyes not leaving June.





June went into the bedroom to freshen up. She could hear the voices in the sitting room, and her heart beat violently at the thought that she had to go back and face the gentlemen.

This was most inappropriate—she was in the company of a man. Moreover, she had come from his estate, having spent a week there.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid*, said June to herself. It hadn't occurred to her until now how her new status and profession would clash with the social norms. How could she have possibly escorted a man without being doomed a prostitute?

Oh, how obvious it was now! There was no way around it! Not in London, not anywhere anyone knew her client.

*Her client!*

The thought had jerked her back to reality so fast that she felt dizzy for a moment.

Desmon was her client and nothing else. There was no other way to explain to men why she was with him.

Oh, this was a proper comeback. As if life had given her a taste of the best and now brought her right to where she was supposed to be. In London. Off to the Belle House.

The realization made her want to laugh, but she felt anger building up—anger at herself and Desmon, so sweet and considerate, yet somehow just an illusion of love, a fairytale that she'd conjured in her mind. It wasn't his fault.

With these thoughts, June threw one more glance at herself in the mirror, straightened up, fixed her hair, and walked out of the parlor. She had to face what she was. And when she entered the sitting room, men stood up, greeting her, though their eyes were full of questions.

Desmon tried to manage a smile but looked away. He introduced Warren and Harry. They bowed politely and studied her with interest. And Frederick held his brazen gaze on her a little too long and winked, making her blush and her insides turn.

The gentlemen chatted about the latest rumors that June knew nothing about. The maid served appetizers that one of the men had ordered on the account that they were famished. There was an empty bottle of brandy already, and another one was open, and June realized that the men had been drinking for quite a while.

Desmon drank too, gulping one glass after another, avoiding looking at June. She had a drink too, and it went straight to her head, making her dizzy and her face flush with heat. Uneasiness had swept over her and hadn't let go. Her profession would be just that—keeping men company, exactly as she did now.

“So, Miss June, are you from London?” Warren inquired.

“Yes.”

“And what do you do in London?”

She didn't know how to answer.

They asked if she was married. No. They asked if she went to balls. Never. They asked where her chaperone was and who had let her be in Desmon's company. The latter comment was followed by chuckles. She answered no to most questions, hesitant in answering others. And Desmon was of no help, seemingly as uneasy as her.

She gave up this game of hide-and-seek when Warren asked her where she resided.

“The Belle House,” she finally said louder.

The room sank into silence.

All eyes were on her.

Harry and Warren exchanged glances.

Frederick narrowed his eyes on her with a mischievous smile.

“O-ho-ho.” He chuckled. “The. Belle. House.” He assessed her with renewed curiosity as if he were appraising her. “I was wondering, Shaw, where you got so much beauty and with so little supervision.”

Frederick laughed loudly and shifted in his seat, his eyes studying June from head to toe.

“That’s wonderful,” said Harry, summoning politeness. His attitude didn’t change. Instead, he seemed to have found ease in her company. “How long have you been with the Belle House?”

“I haven’t.”

“Oh, a new arrival!” chimed in Frederick. “Shaw, how did you manage to snatch a new arrival before she even got a chance to debut?”

June cringed at the words. He was the only man in the company who talked about her but not *to* her, though his eyes never left her, studying her greedily.

“Leave it, Khol,” Desmon said and gulped another glass of liquor.

“No-no. I am curious.” Frederick leaned with his elbows onto his knees as if to take a closer look at June. He stared at her openly, his eyes licking her up and down in the most brazen fashion. “What is the going rate at the Belle House right now?”

“Khol!” Desmon barked. “Quit it!”

“Really, mate,” said Harry quietly, shifting in his seat. “Be decent for once.”

The room sank into an uncomfortable silence. The smell of liquor was strong, and its effect on the gentlemen was obvious.

June rose from her seat. She wanted to leave. She’d felt worse than at the auction when the men bid on her. Being in a small company made her realize—she was meant to be bought and used.

“I should leave you, gentlemen,” she said meekly.

Desmon rose from his seat. So did others.

Frederick made his way to her, taking her hands in his. “Please, stay, Miss June!” he said with feigned cheerfulness and with a sly smile.

June tried to pull her hands away, but the man held them firmly in his, not letting her go, a predatory sparkle in his eyes. He pulled her even closer, towering over her. “How much would it cost to have your company for a night?” His liquored breath wafted into her face as he said the words.

“Leave her, I said!” barked Desmon.

He covered the distance in several long steps, knocking a glass off a coffee table. He pushed Frederick in his chest, breaking him away from June, and stood between them.

“Leave,” Desmon hissed, his angry eyes on his friend.

“I should go,” murmured June, taking a step back.

“This is all very unnecessary,” said Warren. “Frederick, let’s leave, mate.”

Desmon stood facing Frederick, who stared back at him drunkenly. Their tall, well-built figures matched, but while Desmon’s chest rose heavily and his eyes burrowed into his friend with utmost spite, Frederick only smirked. His eyes shifted to June, who hid behind Desmon.

“Shaw, you are being a little too sensitive about something that is pure business.” He chuckled again.

“Quit it,” Desmon hissed.

“Oh, way too touchy, mate. She is a courtesan. There is no need to be overly noble when she opens her legs for money.”

Desmon shoved him into his chest forcefully, making him stumble back.

“I warned you, Frederick,” Desmon hissed. “You have no business talking like this in my house to someone who is a guest. I asked you. And I won’t ask you again.”

Frederick fixed his waistcoat, giving a look at his two friends who stood awkwardly, with hats in their hands. He smirked, then took a step around Desmon, brushing his shoulder, and approached June.

Desmon turned around, watching him like a hawk.

June felt the heat rise in her body, concentrating on her face. Blood rushed to her ears. She was dizzy from alcohol but mostly from the shame that burnt her, making her heart race wildly.

She wanted to leave. She *should've* left already. But she didn't dare move. As if this moment decided how she would carry on with her profession.

Warren cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I think it's time we left."

"We are quite drunk." Harry nodded, motioning for Frederick to follow as he started for the door. "Till tomorrow, Shaw."

Frederick stood only a foot away from June, his head cocked, his eyes sparkling devilishly. He scowled.

But June didn't turn her gaze away. If men were to be her business, she had to learn to withstand insults such as this.

"Yes, you should go," said Desmon, his form behind Frederick too close to him, as if pushing him out, his eyes burning with madness.

Frederick's lips stretched in an ugly smile as he stared straight into her eyes. There was contempt. There was lust. And there was the acknowledgment of his superiority as the man who could buy her services.

The silence was so thick, one could hear the clock ticking, when Frederick spoke again.

"I might pay a visit to the Belle House to see you, Miss June," he said with a smirk, and his hand stretched toward her, his finger giving her face a stroke.

Shocked, in momentary indignation, she wanted to slap him. But that very second, something else pulled the man away from her.

In a flash of a second, Desmon grabbed Frederick from the back, whipped him around, and his arm swung in the air, sending a punch into Frederick's face.

June shrieked.

The sound of the breaking glass followed as Frederick flew crashing into the coffee table, breaking it into pieces and sending the glasses and bottles scattering onto the floor.

“I fucking warned you,” growled Desmon, lunging at Frederick again.

But Warren caught his large form and pulled him away.

It was a commotion of bodies. Harry ran up to June, shielding her from the men’s bodies that were struggling. Desmon tried to reach for Frederick, but Warren tried to restrain him, stepping on glasses, tripping, stumbling, but holding onto him as if for dear life.

“Des!” exclaimed June, as if her voice was the only thing that could stop him.

“Quit it!” shouted Warren, fighting Desmon, who kept lunging at Frederick. “Both of you!” Warren shoved Desmon away and stood panting, fixing his waistcoat and cravat.

The only sound was that of Frederick getting up off the floor. There was the same smirk on his face, but this time, his eyes were spiteful. Wiping the blood off his lips with his fingers, he looked at Desmon from under his eyebrows. He stumbled. Stepped backward. His eyes—on Desmon. He chuckled—his chuckle low and sinister as June breathed heavily, not knowing what to do or say.

The men walked out in silence.

Frederick jerked his jacket on, throwing, “Good night, Miss June,” from the hallway. The two others nodded to June politely and said, “See you later, Shaw.”

The butler stared in shock at the table and called the maid to clean up while June and Desmon stood silently in the middle of the sitting room.

“I am sorry,” June said quietly, though she wasn’t sure what she was apologizing for.

Desmon still didn’t look at her but took a seat on the sofa and set his elbows on his knees, gripping his head between his hands.

“You have nothing to apologize for, June,” he said quietly. “I should apologize for my friends, and for this unexpected mess, and for everything I dragged you into.”

His voice was low and raspy as he slowly raked his fingers through his hair.

June walked up and took a seat next to Desmon. Her hands were shaking. She clasped them tightly, trying to hide her distress, and stared at the mess and the maid who came and started picking up the shards of glass. There was a strange symbolism in the scene. The pieces of crystal and glass caught the candle light and cast reflections onto the ceiling. Yet they were parts of something that had been whole and now was broken.

*This is it*, June thought. The fairytale was over, and all that was left was this—Desmon and she—in awkward silence, sitting by the broken table.

“It will be all right, Des,” she said quietly, a smile flickering on her face, though she felt like screaming. “We will be all right.”

But the words didn’t reassure her, only made her heart heavy as if it were made out of iron.

Desmon didn’t look at her. He sat with his head hanging low, ruffling his hair, his eyes shut tightly. The despair seemed tangible. It was enveloped with a heavy silence. It had the smell of liquor and stale tobacco. And it had the sound of the ticking clock in the corner—the clock that ticked the lovers’ time away.

The rest of the night passed in low spirit. June tried to sound more cheerful than she was. Desmon tried to smile. But when their eyes met, there was no trace of cheerfulness, only a sad understanding that it was all coming to an end.

They retired to bed before midnight, but Desmon didn’t make love to her.

“I just want to hold you,” he said.

They put out the lights and lay on their sides, her back toward his chest, his arms wrapped around her, pressing her

close.

Without words.

Without caresses.

Without kisses.

Just this embrace.

Desmon thought she was asleep. So did June. But both lay for hours, their eyes wide open, savoring the last moments they spent in each other's arms, for tomorrow was the end of it all.



# PART III

---

“*J*une, I need you to do something for me,”  
Desmon said at breakfast.

The last breakfast together. The thought didn't sit well with him at all. In fact, it was ripping him apart, and though he didn't yet know what to do and how to go about it, he couldn't—wouldn't!—take June to the Belle House. Not until he sorted out his thoughts and his heart.

June gazed at him in silence.

“I need to leave,” Desmon explained, cringing at the way he weaseled out of the actual explanation. “For several days. But I would like you to stay here until I come back. Would you do this for me?”

June didn't respond. There were questions in her gaze, yet Desmon didn't have the answers.

“I shall sort it out with Mrs. Sharke,” he explained.

His butler came in with a letter. “This came for you the other day, sir.”

Catherine Coles...

Desmon couldn't raise his eyes to look at June. Just holding the letter burnt his fingers, but he opened it.

She wanted to meet. Here, in London.

He exhaled loudly, not even looking at the address, and tossed the letter onto the table. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, trying to concentrate on his thoughts.

June still didn't speak, and when he finally looked at her again, she sat staring at her cup of tea.

Desmon left shortly, giving instructions to the staff and holding June's hands in his before walking out. He needed time away from her. He needed to see if he could bring his heart to the normal beat when she was not around. Because when she was, all he could think about was her.



"I will pay for a week," he said to Mrs. Sharke. "I need more time."

Mrs. Sharke smiled.

Desmon hated that smile and the Belle House and the reminder of what was to be June's fate. He looked around at the golden chandeliers and red carpets and exotic statues and couldn't fathom how June could possibly fit here.

"You might not realize it, Mr. Shaw," the madam said, "but Lord James Volchen's bid paid plenty. Though I am never the one to reject the money. If you are so interested in the girl and are concerned about her well-being, why not take her as a mistress? You can afford it. You might enjoy it tremendously. Already did, if I am not mistaken."

Mrs. Sharke, of course, made money when a contract with one of her girls was signed. The establishment not only provided one-night high-class entertainment but also long-term companionship to the wealthiest of England.

"I am not interested in a mistress," Mr. Shaw answered angrily, irritated with the madam's knowing smile.

"Then *what* are you interested in, Mr. Shaw? And what is the point of this *safe-keeping*, if you will?"

*Tsk-tsk.*

Desmon was in turmoil. Of this Mrs. Sharke was sure.

When he left, the madam sat in her armchair, sipping brandy and contemplating yet another love development. She

was curious about how the story would unfold. Mr. Shaw had enough wealth not to care about the rules of the ton and, as per the information she had gathered, didn't give a damn about the ton in general. Not after being jilted at the altar.

Mrs. Sharke only smiled to herself. No matter what anyone said about the courtesans, with how much bitterness and contempt, the clueless folks underestimated two things—the power of women and the power of love.



The next stop was Volchen's townhouse.

Desmon was conflicted about seeing his friend. He didn't know how to look into Volchen's eyes. The devil knew what Desmon was about to say before the words left his mouth. Hell, Desmon had a feeling that Volchen possessed some gift of clairvoyance.

*It's the small things that can set in motion an unexpected chain of events, Desmon. With a butterfly wing.*

Argh! The damn butterflies!

Desmon wanted to laugh at the memory of Volchen's words which had turned out to be so true.

On the other hand, Volchen was the only person who had ever given good advice. What Desmon needed now was for someone to tell him what was happening to him.

"I need a drink," said Desmon as he stormed into Volchen's townhouse.

"Oh? No hello. No how are you. How are *you*, my friend?"

Volchen's lips curled in a smile and his eyes narrowed on Desmon, who took a seat on the sofa in the sitting room and raked his hair.

"Can I stay here tonight?" Desmon asked as Volchen passed him a drink and took a seat in the armchair across from him.

“Tell me more.” Volchen gave him a backward nod, studying him.

Volchen’s flawlessly tailored suit and his always perfect composure were even more so irritating right now when he, Desmon, was a mess.

“I am back in London,” Desmon explained.

“I see that.”

“And...” Desmon exhaled heavily. “I don’t know. I need time to think.”

Volchen waited for more, but Desmon stayed quiet.

“I will be gone for two days, so make yourself at home,” Volchen finally said. “Are you not afraid to leave your woman in the Belle House?”

*Your woman.*

Somehow, Desmon felt elated at thinking about June as his.

“I didn’t. She is still at my place.”

Volchen whistled. “You keep her prisoner?”

“Nonsense.”

“You leave her by herself?”

“I need time to think.”

“About?”

“Just leave it! Please!”

“As you wish.”

Desmon had hoped his emotions subsided with time, but they only grew stronger.

Volchen left, and Desmon sat for the rest of the day, staring into empty space and walking about the sitting room.

The butler threw suspicious looks. The maid walked around on tiptoes. But Desmon didn’t care. The feeling of utmost emptiness possessed him as if there were a void in his life without June.

He tossed and turned the entire night, grim thoughts keeping him awake till dawn. His mind was a constant flickering of images of June. Her golden hair. Her kind blue eyes. Her lips that he had kissed more than any other woman's.

*Most of us succumb to comfort and the norm instead of pursuing happiness.*

Her words whispered in his mind. Her laughter chased him in his dreams. Her presence was constant, though she wasn't with him.

The next day was much of the same. The street noise wafted into the open windows with the summer heat—the sounds that back in the days Desmon had loved so much. *The voice of the city*, he used to say.

But now, he was repulsed by it. Among the thousands of people that busied and hurried down the streets outside, there were men who were now making their way to the Belle House. He imagined June naked, opening her legs for some wealthy lord, and the image made him sick.

A black butterfly with red and white dots on the wings flew into the sitting room window. The Red Admirable, June had told him, the most common in London. This random fact that he now had the knowledge of almost set him laughing. But the sight of the butterfly that reminded him of June made his heart swell with tenderness.

He went to see his friend, Warren, to apologize. He felt awful about the entire affair with Frederick, yet just the thought about his friend made his blood boil with anger.

Warren was in Harry's company, the two of them drinking and smoking in the sitting room and about to have dinner.

“Do join us!” they insisted.

Desmon was thankful that Frederick wasn't around.

“No man with respect for himself would disrespect a woman of any standing,” Desmon said after apologizing again and again. “Tell me I am not insane. Tell me what happened at my flat was utterly disrespectful on his part.”

Warren and Harry exchanged looks.

Warren smiled. “Anything that has to do with women is bound to bring either a scandal or misery.”

But while his mates chatted cheerfully about business and drank two bottles of brandy during the course of dinner, Desmon barely touched his plate or said a few words.

“What is the matter, Shaw?” Warren finally asked, lighting a cigar and leaning back in his chair, studying Desmon across the table with interest.

Harry smirked. “Are you still brooding over the episode with Frederick? Leave it. He is an insolent brute. And he doesn’t have respect for his own wife, let alone a courtesan.”

“She is not a courtesan,” Desmon interjected bitterly, shaking his head.

“Well, technicalities aside, the number of men and all that, you did pay for her company, did you not?”

Desmon raised his eyes at him with a smirk. “Do you not pay for your wife’s indulgences that she repays back in bed?”

Warren burst out in laughter, choking on the cigar smoke. “There you go! Bite him, Shaw!”

It was a well-known fact that Harry possessed the wealth, his wife—connections. He married her for that very reason, and so his wife was financially at his mercy. It was a common arrangement among the wealthy, and Harry didn’t flinch at the joke.

“There is a difference,” Harry said, and Warren raised an eyebrow in a silent question. “My wife is lacking the skills and enthusiasm that brothel ladies have.”

Both Warren and Harry burst out in laughter, and even Desmon smiled, shaking his head in reproach and downing another glass of brandy in one go.

Mrs. Sharke sat in her upstairs parlor of the Belle House. It was late into the night, and she'd left the remaining patrons with the ladies who would soon take them up to their rooms. The business of pleasure was never-ending and never boring.

To her surprise, June had arrived earlier, despite Mrs. Sharke's arrangement with Mr. Shaw.

There was a visible change in the girl. She was still a sweetheart and dazzling in her quiet beauty. But there was a newly acquired calmness in her. She was upset—you didn't have to be a psychic or even remotely as intuitive as the madam of the Belle House to see June's empty eyes, her quiet submission, her absent gaze when she had said she was terminating her contract with the Belle House.

Mrs. Sharke only nodded, not giving away her surprise.

"I think"—June's eyes had wondered around the madam's parlor aimlessly—"I am not the right person for this type of work. You've heard it before, I am sure. And I have been preparing myself for over a year for this. But..."

Mrs. Sharke only stared at her without a single word of response.

June clasped her hands under her breasts and lowered her eyes as if in prayer.

"I hope we can find a way to resolve the financial issue, ma'am." When her eyes had come back to Mrs. Shark, they



were full of despair but also determination which Mrs. Sharke had seen plenty in those who were on the brink of making a life-changing decision.

The madam had considered such a development, of course. She'd seen it before, mostly in the girls who'd come from the house on Baker Street. Too new, too timid, and too overwhelmed with the profession that needed some time getting used to. One got used to anything, and the Belle House offered the initiation into the oldest profession with utmost style. Money always made things run smoothly. Gold and silks always made one close one's eyes on what it took to acquire them.

Mrs Sharke had seen *this* very scenario—girls falling for their first decent client or realizing they were not cut out for the job. Some of them eventually learned to deal with it and got over their infatuations. No one was forced to work in the Belle House. Some were naturals, like Kat Wilde. Some, like Blanche Carrey, not. Someone like Eva Bernal joined the house of pleasure reluctantly but established their own rules.

June was fragile, Mrs. Sharke knew. The girl required caution and persuasion. Mrs. Sharke had watched her carefully the first night of her debut. And now, she had come back with even greater resistance. Mr. Shaw had worked some kind of magic on her—it was obvious. Mrs. Sharke had no problem giving her some time off.

“You have time to think, Miss June,” said Mrs. Sharke with a cold smile. “Keep the room until you come to a final decision.”

The decision had come easily. Selling happiness was the primary business of the Belle House. New girls often needed time to adjust, but Mrs. Sharke was definitely not interested in martyrs. She liked her girls willing, not forced.

June's residence on Baker Street had been paid off by the bid. There was no financial issue. But there could be plenty of things that could change June's mind.

They would just have to wait and see.



That day, June only saw Rebecca for a brief moment.

“Oh, how lovely to have you back!” Rebecca grabbed June’s hands and whirled around with her in a dance.

Two weeks had turned Rebecca into a dazzling young lady—in a new dress with a daring décolletage, a new set of earrings and necklace—at Sir Henry’s expense, she explained—and a whole beauty bureau filled with powders and perfumes. She moved with newly-acquired elegance. She chirped away a thousand words a minute, telling June about shopping, carriages, gentlemen, the rumors about the Duke of Cleveland, her visit to the theater, and the fabulous townhouse that belonged to a certain Lord N with whom she’d spent two days.

And, of course, there was that scoundrel, Archer, who didn’t give her a minute of peace and threw jealous fits about every client she spent time with.

“God, he is becoming such a burden!” Rebecca exclaimed, flinging herself onto the sofa.

“I thought you had your heart set on that young man.” June smiled at her friend’s ever-changing preferences. The lifestyle seemed to be doing wonders to Rebecca, and June was happy for her.

“Well, Archie was talking about renting out a flat for me. For a year! All expenses paid! Oh! June!” Rebecca laughed again as if everything that had to do with men was a source of utmost happiness. “Only two weeks ago, I would have been delighted at such proposal! But now that I see the true potential in men, the idea of living caged up in some flat to cater to Archie’s every whim doesn’t seem so appealing. Boring, in fact. I decided against it. How time changes us!”

*Indeed*, June thought, though her thoughts were about Desmon.

June had read the letter Catherine had sent him, asking to meet up and leaving the address. Somewhere out there, Desmon was probably making amends with her. The memories of the past could very well bring back the feelings in him with new force.

Right now, Desmon was just a memory, too, though June's feelings only bloomed inside her stronger.

She had to leave. She had to go before the humiliation of him coming back from the meeting with Catherine and taking June to the Belle House. He'd left her in his flat just like Rebecca had just said—caged up.

“June, dear,” Rebecca's cheerful voice pulled her out of her thoughts, “you need to liven up this room a bit.” Rebecca suddenly sprung up from the sofa and walked about the modest room with a frown on her face. “I can talk to Lord N. He knows a great antique dealer. He is the one who's gotten that lovely sitting room set for me. He might get you one in credit. Oh, silly me!” Rebecca pressed her palm to her forehead with theatrical exaggeration. “I completely forgot! Sir Henry Willis was asking about you. He's heard about the auction, and he is mighty interested.” Becky's eyes narrowed as she stared at June with sassiness. “Oh, how much fun we are going to have!”

“I am leaving, Becky,” said June quietly.

“So am I. I have a dinner to attend,” answered Rebecca without looking at June and instead assessing herself in the mirror.

“I am leaving the Belle House, Becky,” June repeated.

Rebecca turned around and frowned at seeing June's serious face. “You mean...”

June nodded.

“But... How would you support yourself?” Rebecca flitted toward June and grabbed her hands. “Oh, June!” Her eyebrows knitted in pity.

June explained her plan as much as she could. Or, to be exact, as much as she hoped it would work.

Rebecca only shook her head. “It is all his doing, isn’t it? Your Mr. Shaw? He’s put all kinds of ideas in your head. And now you think he wants you.”

June shook her head in response. “He is not part of this decision. I’ve made up my mind. I will manage.”

Rebecca soon left. “We shall talk more!” she said before flitting away like a bird to meet the patron from the night before.

June spent some time walking aimlessly around her room. The room was alien. Everything smelled of powder and flowers—someone else’s and repulsive. She missed the fresh air of the country, the breeze with the scent of freshly-cut grass and summer blossoms that used to waft into the open window of her bedroom in Dambridge.

And she desperately missed Desmon.

June had been ready for anything in her profession. Shame. Repulsion. Even humiliation.

But not hurt. Not the despair of wanting to be with a man and knowing it was impossible.

Way past midnight, June put out the candles, opened the window that overlooked the back street, and stood staring into the night for the longest time. The sounds of the night city seemed foreign. Her life felt disconnected from her surrounding. June remembered Desmon, their nights together, his kisses and caresses and his smile that could cut through any sadness.

But no more.

She felt tears well up in her eyes and wished Desmon was next to her.



The next day, she woke up to a male cackle out in the hallway. It was followed by a woman’s tittering and a squeak. June lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling and wondering how she could

have possibly thought she could wake up here every day of her foreseeable life.

It was a new day, and thanks to Mrs. Sharke, she had time to think. She'd spent plenty of days in her life letting fate decide *for* her. She'd allowed other people to take charge—Rebecca, Mrs. Hilderbock, Lord Volchen.

But no matter how she tried to persuade herself that Rebecca was right and a woman had the freedom of choosing who to bed so that she had the means to survive, June had come to the realization that scrubbing floors was a much better option than lifting her skirt to anyone who had a fat coin pouch.

She rang for a maid and bathed, then put on the blue silk dress, gloves, and hat and assessed herself in the mirror.

The last time she'd worn this dress was in Dambridge. The sweet memories now were tarnished with sadness. But June raised her chin and forced a smile. This was her opportunity. And if she was persuasive enough, there would be no men she would have to wear this dress for.

Suddenly, she felt elated. There was hope in her future, and it made her heart beat with happiness. If she failed today, she would try to find another way out. But something told her that her life was about to change.

And that change depended on one man—Lord Henry Byrdwing.

He thoughts of June didn't leave him. They were constant and invasive. The images of her found their way into his head everywhere he looked.

He had thought that being at Volchen's townhouse would help clear his head.

Damn if it had!

He thought of his own sitting room where they had spent their first night. He remembered her first mention of butterflies.

*The fucking Duke of Burgundy! Argh!*

Everything in his life seemed to have her touch. He would never look at butterflies the same way again. The lake at the estate would always bear the image of her perfect naked body splayed on the dewy grass, her smile, and her words, "*I wish we could stay in this moment forever.*"

The two days were spent in those torments almost constantly. June was only a twenty-minute ride away, at his place, by herself, yet he waited for something he didn't know. He listened to his heart, trying to see if there was a change in it when June was not around.

All in vain. Not being next to her made the world seem empty and devoid of meaning.

If fate had played out differently, June wouldn't have ended up on Baker street. She could have been making a

living, however modest, doing what she loved—so rare for a woman in these days, in this society.

But then a peculiar thought struck Desmon.

If it weren't for that auction that he had been so reluctant to attend, for Volchen's trick, Desmon would have never met June.

The realization was marvelous and painful at once.

Oh, how easy it would have made his life! It would have spared him the "pangs of dispriz'd love." He smiled sadly, remembering Shakespeare's words. But what was life if not a multitude of experiences that made it so beautiful? And what he'd had with June were by far the happiest days of his life. Without her, his life would be the monotonous mediocre existence that he'd had for the last years.

Desmon thought about Catherine's note, and a wild smile started spreading on his lips.

He couldn't explain what had nagged at him when he thought of his meeting with Catherine. There was a feeling that lingered on the surface that he couldn't quite grasp. And only now did the realization hit him like a hammer.

He didn't care what had happened to Catherine. He didn't care for her explanations. He didn't care for her feelings or the fact that she wanted to be with him. Nor did he want to see her. He had mourned something he'd lost when, in fact, it had brought him to other joys. It had brought him to June!

It was shocking, for it was the closure of years of torments and constant thoughts.

He didn't care anymore.

He had finally let go.

He couldn't say when it had happened, but his mind had started taking a different course when he met June.

He had talked to Catherine and had blown up after she'd left but only because she reminded him of all the pain.

But it was June who'd made him realize he didn't want the past. He wanted the future. And his future was June. He wanted her in his life, because she filled it with all that it lacked—love.

God! He wished he could see June right now!

There was nothing in his life he wanted more than to talk to her. He should. He should tell her how he felt.

He didn't want to see Catherine. He didn't care what else she had to say. He forced himself to think about her again and again, yet nothing moved inside him at the memories.

Done.

Poof!

Just like that, Catherine was gone from his life.

But there was another one that loomed like the sun over his existence every waking moment.

June.

His feelings made him light-headed. The memories of her made him drown in sweet longing. And his misery at being away from her was only his, Desmon's fault. He could change it easily.

His lips stretched in a smile. He sank in the chair in Volchen's sitting room and stared at the blurry ceiling, for tears welled up in his eyes at what was the decision that made his heart flutter in his chest.



Desmon's flat felt deserted, despite the presence of his maid and butler.

Desmon stood with his eyes transfixed on the note he held in his hand. This time it was from June.

“What do you mean she left?” he asked, staring at it.



“The very day you left the house, sir,” the butler said politely. “She called for a cab. She asked to give you the note when you came home.”

“Did anyone come to talk to her?”

“No, sir.”

The note was short.

*“I have spared us a miserable farewell,” June said. “I tried to spare you the inconvenience of taking me to the Belle House. Forgive me. It would be too hard for me to look you in the eyes and say goodbye.”*

Desmon closed his eyes. He’d read the note a dozen times and knew every line by heart.

Emotions collided in him with such force that he gritted his teeth trying not to curse. He felt emptiness, the loss almost close to grieving.

He felt a sudden sense of betrayal like he had back then, years ago, at the altar.

He’d rushed home to finally tell June how he felt. And now she was gone.

His butler walked in, bringing with him a tray with tea that Desmon had completely forgotten about.

“Thank you, Gerald,” Desmon said without moving a finger. He sat on the sofa, stared at the floor for the last half an hour, and couldn’t help thinking that he felt betrayed.

He raised his eyes and studied his butler. The man in his forties moved with precision and practiced quickness. He was a bachelor, and in his nine years of service to Desmon had never found a wife. Desmon could not imagine spending a life serving another person.

Yet, his butler was the most loyal of men, sharing Desmon’s heartbreaks and moments of happiness as if his

layman's life somehow depended on it. How could one possibly disregard one's personal comfort for the sake of someone one didn't know?

"Tell me, Gerald," Desmon said, observing his butler arrange the tea tray. "What do you think of a wealthy person marrying a commoner?"

Gerald straightened up and looked at his master with suspicion, shifting from one foot to the other. "Are you feeling all right, my good sir?"

"I am fine. But this is a serious question."

"It is not in my position to give an opinion, sir. I am a commoner. For me, such a scenario is much too unusual."

"Still. Tell me."

"Aye, why not ask your friends?"

Desmon waved him off. "I know what they think. That is why I ask you."

"Well"—the butler clasped his hands in front of him, casting his eyes down—"the folks of your status consider it inappropriate."

"I know the folks of my status, Gerald!" exclaimed Desmon impatiently. "You! Tell me what *you* think! If you ever witnessed such a thing, how would you take it?"

Gerald shifted uneasily in his spot, then looked at his master from under his eyebrows again.

"Don't be afraid," said Desmon. "I won't get angry. Just tell me."

"Well, in all honesty, it would not be such a bad thing, sir," Gerald answered, paused as if checking for Desmon's reaction, then continued. "People are divided by money, you see. The wider the gap—the less they find in common, despite the fact that some lords can be pigs, and some commoners can be of the highest intellect."

Desmon chuckled, amused. "Go on."

Encouraged by his master's approval, the butler continued.

“When one has little—one doesn’t look at others with contempt. But when one has plenty—it’s as if nothing but money matters in the world. Why is that, sir, I ask you? If one has plenty—I don’t see why one wouldn’t do what one wants. But that is often not the case. Such an odd thing! Lords and ladies often stay miserable just to please others. But if one has money—why live to please others, sir? If I had plenty of money, I...” He paused, glanced at his master, and cast his eyes down again. “Forgive me, sir.”

“Go on!” encouraged Desmon, a half-smile on his lips, staring at his butler with renewed curiosity. “Go on, Gerald! If you had money, you were saying...”

“Well, sir, if I had a lot of money, I would’ve chosen the woman that I like even if she had no penny to her soul. If she made me happy and all. Why would I care about others’ opinion—some folks who I don’t share a bed with?”

Desmon burst into good-hearted laughter. His butler’s talk made him cheer up, if only for a moment. “Marriage is not just about sharing a bed, Gerald.”

The butler looked at him with interest. “That’s not how noblemen think, sir. But what else? You need a woman to love you and warm you up at night. Plenty of lords marry miserable women and then become miserable themselves. A title is not going to warm up your bed. Social standing is nothing when you feel so miserable that you want to drown yourself. And when you are gravely ill, even money won’t cure you. You see? A partner you care about can do all of the above. A good woman is what a man needs. And you are wealthy, so you can choose what you want. What is money for if not to get the most out of life?”

“Huh.” Desmon sat shocked at this little lecture by a commoner.

“Being happy is to get what one wants. Money sure helps, sir.”

Desmon thought about it for a while. Most people would never listen to the opinion of laymen. Desmon wasn’t sure

what had made him ask his butler, but the words stuck in his mind.

He spent the next hour thinking about it, letting his tea get cold when he received a note from Volchen.

*“Sorry to have missed you. Any news about butterflies?”*

“*W*hat is money for if not to get the most out of life? That’s what he said. A servant! A layman!”

Desmon repeated the words as he walked about the sitting room of Volchen’s townhouse. Hands clasped behind his back, his eyes aimlessly shifting around, he was now in more turmoil than before.

He had tried to stay in his flat, but everything seemed dull. June had left. So desperately aching to see her again after three days, he had felt crushed at finding his flat empty. He had wanted to go to the Belle House, yet, the mess in his heart kept him from it. He needed to talk. And there was no better person than his friend.

Sitting in his armchair and smoking a pipe, Volchen studied Desmon with interest. “Laymen,” he finally answered, “do not understand the complexity of the social organization. Nor do they understand the true meaning of money.”

“What is the true meaning?”

“Power. Your butler was right and wrong. He thinks that money is needed to acquire what one wants. It’s a primitive outlook on things. But he was right in saying that money does give one options. It is unfortunate that for many noblemen, money also erases common sense and the basic human equality. In this country especially. The sense of superiority that comes with wealth surpasses the genuine intellectual value of a man.”

“Ah, this is all rhetoric, James. I didn’t come here to argue about social inequality.”

“Then?” Volchen studied Desmon’s face contorted with almost physical pain, the collar of his shirt too loose, just as the cravat, merely hanging around his neck. Desmon was a mess. A mess in love. And Volchen observed him with amusement and slight envy.

“I don’t know what to do, James. About June. About myself. You started all this, and now I am...”

“What bothers you, mate? Are you falling for the girl? That’s only natural. You are young. She is beautiful. And you spent a great time together.”

“It’s not just about the *great time*, James.” Desmon raked his fingers through his hair. “She is... She is more than anything I’ve ever seen in women. You don’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand, Desmon. You are in love. And you can buy as much time with her as you wish.” His cunning eyes narrowed on Desmon as if coaxing an answer.

“She went back to the Belle House. She left, though I asked her to stay.”

Volchen only nodded.

“She fucking left, Volchen!” Desmon exclaimed impatiently.

“Oh, my!” Volchen feigned surprise. “You don’t like that she disobeyed?”

“It wasn’t an order,” Desmon snapped. “I can’t tell her what to do. She is an independent woman.”

“Indeed. I’m glad you think like a gentleman. Then?”

“The thought about the Belle House—I can’t tell you how it makes me feel. And I can’t stand thinking about her there.”

“Then put her up in your flat, and she will make you a happy man at your convenience. That’s what many men do. And you don’t have a wife to sneak away from.”

Desmon grunted with anger. “I don’t want her to be a courtesan! I don’t want her to be a mistress. I don’t want her to be with me for money. How do you not understand? I don’t want to *buy* her!” Desmon exclaimed, almost shouted.

“Well, I did that for you, as I recall.”

“Volchen, please!” Desmon threw his head back and covered his face with both palms, rubbing it in frustration. “You don’t have to remind me. That was a long time ago.”

“Two weeks, yes, an eternity.” Volchen chuckled. “And then *you* did buy her again.”

Despite his jokes, his eyes never left Desmon, who paced around with unconcealed desperation.

“I can’t stand it, really, Volchen. I am trying to tell you that...” He exhaled in frustration. “I don’t know what I am trying to say. It’s useless.”

“I will say it for you because you clearly can’t see it.” Volchen exhaled heavily as if he’d said this a hundred times before. “You think she left you. You expected her to stay by your side as long as you paid or asked, and she didn’t. The truth is that she knew that there would be a time you would leave her. Today. Tomorrow. In a week. Women are not dumb, Desmon. What she did was to avoid feeling like you did at the altar.”

Desmon’s head snapped in Volchen’s direction.

“Don’t look at me like that. You’ve had the upper hand in this arrangement the entire time. You knew it. She did too. But you could come and go as you pleased. She didn’t. Whether she had feelings for you or not, she would do her job because, despite her feelings, this *was* her job. I suspect that the reason she spared you both the heart-breaking parting was that the girl is in love with you too. She simply spared herself the humiliation.”

Volchen sat in silence, the only sounds—his puffing out the smoke and Desmon’s quiet footsteps on the carpet as he walked about, his hands clasped behind his back. Volchen silently marveled at this unusual display of emotions. It

reminded him of the days after Desmon's mishap at the altar. Back then, Desmon had burnt with fury. He hadn't been tormented by the matters of the heart as much as by the betrayal and humiliation.

Volchen finally stirred, and this time there was no mockery on his face. "Why not marry her?" he asked indifferently.

Desmon didn't answer, didn't flinch, but continued walking as if the words weren't shocking.

Volchen arched an eyebrow and puffed out circles of tobacco smoke, carefully studying Desmon's reaction.

But Desmon didn't answer, and Volchen knew why.

"You've thought about it, didn't you? Is that what you are trying to figure out?" Volchen's eyes narrowed.

The room sank into silence for a while until Volchen spoke again.

"I will tell you what you are afraid of, Desmon." His face had no trace of a smile when he spoke. He talked slowly, deliberately pausing after every sentence, letting it sink in. "You are not afraid of disapproval from those around you. The idea is quite uncommon, true. But you are wealthy enough to do what you please. Therefore, your choice is truly libertine. You didn't need your butler to tell you that. The girl is of decent background, and though without a penny to her soul, she seemed like she could act her part in your circles. Oh, with the training at the "Schools for Ladies" she definitely can, I assure you. And! And this is a very important part..." Volchen paused, and his lips curled in a smirk. "Despite the peculiar arrangements and the Belle House and all that, she's only been with you, Desmon. If she hasn't taken up any clients yet, that is."

The last remark made Desmon glare in his direction.

"But here is the thing, my friend," Volchen continued, his eyes on Desmon the entire time, as if, like some street gypsy who claimed to read one's fortune, he was reading Desmon's as Desmon started to pace around the room. "You are afraid of another betrayal."



The word made Desmon chuckle angrily. “Nonsense.”

Volchen blinked away. “It is absolutely true. I am not saying that the girl will run away or fall for someone else. No. And I am positive she will be your most loyal companion. What you are afraid of is that her feelings are not like yours. You’ve trusted Catherine.” Desmon flinched at the mention, but Volchen didn’t stop. “You were infatuated with her, and what hurt you the most was not that she broke off the engagement and embarrassed you in front of the ton, but the fact that someone you had feelings for didn’t feel the same.”

Desmon didn’t answer. He wanted to interject, get mad at Volchen for bringing up his past, for comparing, for telling him what he, Desmon, felt.

The truth was, Volchen was right. He almost always was.

Desmon had had enough experiences in his life—engagement, betrayal, fallen women, parties. And through all that, Volchen was his most trusted friend, his brother, no less. With time, Desmon had come to realize that Volchen had a brilliant understanding of human nature. It would take hours, countless sleepless nights, and turbulent days for Desmon to start figuring out the cause of his distress. But one word from Volchen—and it was as if the man could see into his soul.

“You are afraid that June doesn’t feel as you do, that she will do this just to escape her lifestyle,” Volchen continued, quieter now as if giving Desmon time to think it over. “The strangest thing—and you will come to realize it later—is that there is no shame in saving someone you truly care about. She is a good-hearted person, as per your stories. If you love June and all that”—he waved his hand in the air as if he were talking about some trifles—“all that matters is that you want to be happy and make her happy. I will tell you a secret, my friend. It’s better to be the one in love than to be loved. Others’ love will not make you happy. Your *own* love, on the other hand, can make you a happy man. Fuck society. The elite plays by the rules. And it makes them unhappy. Why do you think this city has so many brothels? They only cater to hungry lovers and those who are unhappy. The latter is more common, I assure you. The Dekkers—they definitely could care less

about the rules. They fuck society. And they fuck women and men and everything that moves. But do you want to know a secret? They love each other. They *adore* each other. It's true. I know that for a fact. They have an enormous appetite they have to feed. And they do it happily, indulging in anything they want. But at the end of the day, they come home to each other. And that is what makes for a happy ending—a person you love to come home to.”

Desmon stood still now, listening to Volchen.

“Do you want to be like me?” Volchen smirked. “Going to houses of pleasure, hiring courtesans to escort me everywhere just because I can't bother with searching for a decent woman who can stir my heart, and have never found a feeling remotely close to what I had toward my late wife lost too soon? When she passed, I would've given all my wealth and title and lived a poor vagrant for the rest of my life if only I could have her back, even if for one day. *That*, Desmon, is what we all strive for. I had my share of happiness, my friend. And I am jealous when I see torments such as yours. You are a fool. The person you love is only half a city away.” Volchen chuckled.

Desmon raised his eyes at him. “You are laughing at me.”

“I envy you, my friend.”

“You think I am insane for wanting her to be mine. You think it shall pass.” There was desperation in his voice and eyes that stared at Volchen intensely.

Volchen's smile faded. “I think you are a fool if you have such strong feelings and even consider letting her go.” His eyes darkened as he added, “Ever.”

Desmon blinked away.

“Look into your soul,” Volchen said quietly, “and tell yourself, without thinking about tomorrow, what would make you the happiest man right now, this very moment. That shall be your answer.”



Desmon took a carriage to the Belle House, and when it came to a stop on the corner of Piccadilly, which was blocked off by an overturned cart, he jumped out and trotted the rest of the way.

His heart pounded. His mind raced. The heat soaked his shirt with sweat. He disregarded the scowls of the passersby that he bumped into occasionally. His only thought at that moment was to see June and tell her he wanted her more than anything in the world.

Two weeks ago, he wished to have her for one night.

Oh, how tricky fate could be!

Right now, he couldn't imagine his life without her. His wish was to have her by his side. To love her. To be with her. To show her that dreams, indeed, came true.

The Belle House was buoyant with gentlemen's laughter and cheerful chirping of the ladies as Desmon stood impatiently in the hallway, waiting for the audience with Mrs. Sharke and uneasy at what he might find out. The smell of freshly-cut flowers and perfumes spread between the mirrored walls and birds-of-paradise wallpaper and tickled his nostrils. The most well-known house of pleasure in England—it surrounded him with all that wealth could buy, and Mrs. Sharke had plenty, the rumors said. So many times he'd visited such establishments in the past, excited to see the ladies and marveling at their beauty.

But now, he stared desperately through the half-open door to the Grand Parlor with dread. His eyes tried to catch a glimpse of the ladies inside, but not with anticipation—with the dread that he might see June.

Mrs. Sharke wore a dark-brown house dress with enough lace trimming to make three dresses. With her hair loosely piled on top of her head, she looked extravagant, her neck and wrists wrapped into hundreds of pounds worth of jewelry. She

greeted Desmon with a smile too static to be genuine and a stare too intense to be friendly. He didn't like it a tiny bit.

"Mr. Shaw! What a surprise to see you in our humble establishment twice in the last three days." She sashayed toward him with an outstretched hand that he kissed hurriedly.

"I am looking for Miss June," he replied, trying to conceal his slight distress.

"Ah, Miss June..." She studied him for a moment, then walked to pour herself a drink as Desmon patiently waited. "Every time I see you, Mr. Shaw, there is a peculiar turn of events. And this time, you cost me money, for I am sure you are the cause that Miss June is no longer with the Belle House."

*Gone!*

A momentary relief washed over Desmon but very quickly was replaced by a more terrifying thought. What if someone had signed a contract with June? Someone like him—one of many men who bought women and their services.

It must've reflected on his face as he gaped at the madam, for she chuckled and shook her head.

"With the money that was left from the auction bid, Miss June paid off the inconvenience of breaking the contract with the Belle House and departed yesterday," the madam informed him. Where—she didn't know and didn't care since their contract had been terminated.

Desmon's insistence and dozens of questions didn't help a bit to find out anything more.

"Miss Rebecca would know." Mrs. Sharke now lounged on the sofa, lazily drinking her brandy and observing Desmon.

She summoned Mrs. Boots, the housekeeper, who informed them that Miss Rebecca had left with certain Lord N for dinner at Willi's Rooms Restaurant.

"I trust you will not create a scandal with my girl and her clients, Mr. Shaw," the madam warned him when he was

leaving. Though she knew perfectly well that the last thing one could trust was a man in love.



Walking out of the Belle House, Desmon felt relieved at the news that June had left the establishment. But not knowing why and with who made his unease even stronger.

He took a carriage to Willi's and wondered the whole way if he was insane, chasing the woman across the city, going from one place to another. June had told him once that butterflies couldn't be chased. The easiest way to catch one was to stay still and let it come to you.

But Desmon was done with waiting. He was tired of letting fate decide what was best for him. If there was something to chase, it was June—the woman who had captured his heart.

He was approaching the Willi's Rooms, noticing the doorman who glared at something behind him, when someone clutched his arm so forcefully that it startled him.

“Mr. Shaw?”

Desmon whipped around to see who was so brazen as to grab him on the street and found himself face to face with Archer Bellington.

Archer's appearance was unusually disheveled—his jacket crooked, his waistcoat with a button loose, his cravat tied messily around his neck. His hair came in rough strands uncombed from under his top hat and stuck to his sweaty forehead. A smell of stale liquor and the garments not changed in several days told Desmon that Archer Bellington was on a bend.

“Mr. Bellington? I believe we've met at the auction,” Desmon said, trying to force a smile and feeling awkward at the mention of the Belle House.

“Indeed! Are you here for dinner?” Archer's eyes were bright and sparkly as if from fever. They darted over Desmon's

face, then to the entrance of the restaurant, and back to Desmon.

“I am here looking for Miss...” Desmon paused. It was peculiar that they had met at the auction, and now Desmon was looking for the women who had brought them together. “I am looking for Miss Rebecca, actually.”

Archer’s eyes pierced Desmon with such coldness that it startled him.

“Are you one of her clients now?” Archer grabbed him by the arm again, and the momentary madness in his eyes was so profound that it sent shivers down Desmon’s spine.

“No,” he answered and glared at Archer’s hand that still gripped his arm.

“Forgive me,” Archer murmured, letting go of his jacket.

“No,” Desmon said calmer, fixing his jacket. “She has some information that I need. That is all.”

Archer’s lips formed a silent “oh,” and he exhaled with obvious relief. “She is inside,” he said. “With Lord N or whoever.” He chuckled nervously or bitterly—Desmon couldn’t tell. Archer pulled a flask out of his jacket pocket and took a swig. “She won’t see me.” He smirked. “But if you are lucky to see her”—his eyes shot up at Desmon with desperation—“please tell her I am looking for her.”

Desmon nodded and turned toward the entrance.

“Please!” Archer pleaded as he walked behind Desmon. “Tell her I need to talk to her!” he exclaimed as Desmon, overcome with shock at such dramatic behavior, walked through the door, held open by the doorman. “Tell her it’s urgent!” shouted Archer from the distance as he was blocked by the big form of the doorman who growled, “You are not welcome here, sir,” as Desmon disappeared inside.

Finding Rebecca wasn’t a hard task. All Desmon needed was to spot the most lavish dress in the establishment. And there she was—a young beauty in green silks and hat with feathers in the company of lords. The server took a message to her, and when she walked briskly and with grace toward

Desmon, a smile on her face, gentlemen's heads turning, he couldn't help but marvel at her beauty and how different it was from that of June. Both stunning, June had a noble charm while Rebecca screamed for attention.

"Mr. Shaw! What a surprise!" she exclaimed with a smile and stretched her hand out for a kiss. "What brings you here, sir?" she inquired with the utmost politeness, but he couldn't help noticing how intense her gaze was, how cleverly chosen her words were, how she moved and nodded and smiled with practiced calculation.

He explained that he was looking for June and that Rebecca was the only one who could help.

"I see." Rebecca smiled, studying Desmon with a deliberate slowness that made Desmon uneasy. All eyes in the restaurant were fixed on them. Rebecca was so young and already with the attitude of a duchess that drew attention.

"She took up an upstairs room on 26 Bernard Street," was the short answer. "She left the Belle House, Mr. Shaw. I am not sure whether I should blame you for that or if it's for the better."

He thanked her and was about to walk out when Rebecca's voice turned him around.

She still stood where he'd left her, but with no trace of a smile. "Whatever you do, Mr. Shaw, please, don't break her heart."



It was a quest to find June. She'd fallen so easily and unexpectedly into his arms only two weeks ago! She'd taken over his heart and mind so effortlessly! And now he'd been to two establishments, trying to find her, and the longer it took, the heavier Desmon's heart grew.

He walked the streets of London briskly, simmering in the summer heat, and one thought repeated in his mind—it wasn't too late, it wasn't too late, it wasn't too late.

But he halted to a stop when he turned the corner of Bernard Street and saw her.

June stood thirty or so feet away by the entrance to one of the two-story houses that lined up the street. She wore the same blue dress she'd worn at his estate. Her lovely hair crowned by a small summer hat caught the sunlight and shone like gold. He could see her profile. Her gestures were animated. And her smile was still lovely. She threw her head back in laughter—so familiar and so dear to Desmon that he wanted to run and take her into his arms and laugh together at whatever amused her at the moment.

But...

She was laughing with someone else. And that someone was a tall gentleman who now held her hand with both of his, bowing just slightly.

A sick sensation gathered in Desmon's stomach within seconds. The day felt even hotter. His head felt dizzy.

Who was the man? A new benefactor? Someone who in just a few days had managed to get his filthy hands on June?

Disappointment clutched his heart and started spreading fast into his mind, into his legs, making them weaker, into his blood that was starting to boil with anger.

He couldn't see the man's face, but it didn't matter, for that very second, the man brought June's hand to his lips and kissed it.

She laughed again happily.

*Dammit!*

Desmon felt the urge to run and pull the bastard by the scruff of his neck and tear him off June. But the man opened the door and bowed to her in farewell as she smiled and nodded and disappeared inside.

Spite mixed with disappointment in Desmon's heart as he turned and walked behind the corner, then stopped and leaned with his back against the stone wall of the building. He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself.



It didn't matter, he told himself, feeling the heat of the summer and his emotions burn through him. June couldn't have given herself to another man, he told himself. She had feelings for him, he was sure. They couldn't possibly be anywhere close to his. He loved her. He ached for her. But June...

"Mr. Shaw?"

The familiar male voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

"Mr. Shaw, is it you?"

Still overcome with emotions, Desmon opened his eyes and turned his head toward the man who had just been talking to June. And the eyes that now stared at him and the mustache were familiar and had a name. It took Desmon a moment to pull his memories together until the face found that very name.

"Lord Henry Byrdwing," he said quietly, taking an effort to pull himself together.

"How splendid to meet you again!" The man outstretched his hand, and when Desmon slowly pushed off the wall and outstretched his, Byrdwing took it in both of his and shook it as if they'd been dear friends for years. "Are you on your way to see Miss June?"

Desmon nodded, not knowing what to say. Why would a man ask?

"I had just walked her to her place," Byrdwing explained, his eyes on Desmon. They were kind and curious. He talked with the same humbleness as a week ago. "We had just come back from the British Museum. She'd told you, I assume."

"Told me?" Desmon frowned, afraid to find the news about something that could break his heart.

"About our arrangement!"

"Your arrangement..." Desmon felt his heart tighten with unease.

"Perhaps she didn't have time. Perhaps she is too shy. She is such a humble person, isn't she?" Byrdwing talked fast. "I

am so honored she accepted my proposal. Truly! I couldn't be happier!"

*The proposal...*

Desmon felt the ground sinking under his feet.

The proposal? But how? When? Impossible!

"We are both so excited about the new venture," the man continued.

"The new venture," Desmon echoed.

"Yes. With the Entomological Society! She was commissioned for the new project for the 'Cabinet of Oriental Entomology,' and they just contracted Miss June to do the drawings for their second volume. It will be most splendid, I am sure! Though honestly"—Byrdwing chuckled—"I don't know how she will manage to juggle all of it. I told her that my work, 'British Butterflies and Their Transformations' in two volumes, should be her priority." The smile didn't leave Byrdwing's face. "I offered her quite a deal, and she accepted. Not to mention that her father and I started it a long time ago, and only unfortunate circumstances—and, well, the interference of untrustworthy people—deterred it from being accomplished. But we will manage, Mr. Shaw! Yes-yes! With her father's journals and her illustrations that are halfway done, we are on a fast track!" He raised his forefinger in the air and chuckled.

He kept talking, but his words faded as Desmon's lips stretched in a vague smile. It was as if a heavy stone had been lifted off his chest. He felt elated. In just a matter of seconds, he'd gone from being a heartbroken man, suspecting the worst, to feeling like a feather that had been picked up by the wind and carried higher.

He'd been such a fool!

How could he possibly doubt June?

How could he imagine the awful scenarios that only poisoned his aching heart!

Desmon listened to Byrdwing, but his mind was already racing toward the door of the brick house, up the stairs.

Suddenly it was unbearably hot, and, listening to the blabbering of the man, he took off his jacket, breathing in deeply and feeling relieved.

“Oh, forgive me, Mr. Shaw.” Byrdwing abruptly ended his story. “I am holding you up with all this chatter. Miss June will tell you all about it.”

The man smiled so apologetically that Desmon felt guilty and wanted to hug the man. He hurriedly bade farewell and, in a minute, was at the front door of June’s building, stormed in, and raced up the stairs, taking two steps at a time.

He wanted to break down the door when, after knocking several times, there was no response. He knocked again and heard the fast footsteps behind it.

June opened the door with a smile and, seeing him, froze in shock.

Desmon thought that his heart would explode from tenderness, for her face was the sweetest thing that he’d ever seen in his life.

The last three days in London had been the most chaotic for June—the thoughts about what life had in store for her, the decision to find the way to change it, the meeting with Lord Henry Byrdwing who'd been most helpful and had offered her to do illustrations for the project he'd worked on with her father.

And then the offer for the “Cabinet of Oriental Entomology”! It all exceeded anything June had thought could be possible. She had never dreamt of such opportunities. And when she had, that was all it was—a dream.

It had taken her all the courage she could summon to talk to Mrs. Sharke. She'd expected the wrath of the madam to crush her, but Mrs. Sharke had spent time talking things over, making sure June knew what she was doing and understood that there was no easy way back.

June hadn't planned to come back. She had talked to Byrdwing again and had offered him the most precious thing she possessed—the Bhutan Glory butterfly.

“I know how much it means to you, Miss June. I know what it took for your father to get it. If you ever feel like you want it back—I will gladly sell it back to you.”

With the money, June had taken up a room on Bernard Street. A modest place with only a bed and a desk, it was all she could afford. But she didn't care. Stirring away from the predetermined course was the hardest of things, but leaving the Belle House had brought her the biggest relief.

Yet, during those days that had pulled her from despair into utmost elation, she had been saddened with the thoughts of Desmon.

She missed him terribly. At nights she craved his touch. During the day, when she walked the streets of London, she searched the crowd as if he would magically appear in front of her. She dreamt of Dambridge and replayed their time together again and again.

Her love for him seemed to grow stronger now that he wasn't around. She felt happy and hurt at the same time. Happy at having known him. After all, their meeting had changed her life. But the thoughts of Catherine never let go. What was June compared to the proper lady, even the one who had scandalized herself? June had been bought. Twice. By the same man. The ten days at the manor had been the most blissful in her life. But Desmon was only a client. And he was probably back with the woman that had once promised herself to him.

June's heart ached at the thought. But she was a rational person. And though love was by no means rational, June had spent two days thinking that it was her love for Desmon that had changed her.

June hadn't drawn anything but butterflies—this was what she knew and loved.

Now there was a person who had joined that list—and that was Desmon.

She didn't need to have him next to her to remember every detail of his face when the night before she had sat down at the old desk in her new room. In the dim light of the candles, she started sketching his portrait. The lines had started slowly—the shape of his face, the strong jawline, the straight nose, the lips, firm yet sensual. But as she went along, the memories of him came back. The strokes came faster. The lines started flowing with ease. And when she drew his eyes—dark, sparkling, playful yet kind, she smiled.

When she finished, she gazed at her sketch for the longest time. The first of many to come, she knew. If she couldn't be

with the man she loved—she would have his portrait. She would draw a dozen of his portraits, and if life became unbearable without him—she would look at her sketches and remember his gaze, his kisses, his touches.

She had cried the night before. She'd dreamt for years of her prince dashing into her life and sweeping her off her feet. Except, her prince had bought her at the auction, had paid for the ten days with her, then softly, tenderly, seduced her with his caresses. He had done it effortlessly—like a butterfly that perched on one's shoulder, its touch unnoticeable but its presence sinking one into the state of quiet admiration.

That was Desmon. *Her* Desmon.

She had hoped to see him again, of course. She had willed him to come. Yet, it had been the desperation of her imagination.

When she parted with Byrdwing and came to her room, her mind was preoccupied with the new project. She had many things to do, organize, drawing tools to buy.

There was a knock at the door.

Lord Byrdwing must have forgotten something, June thought, opening the door.

And there stood Desmon.

She wasn't prepared to see him.

Not here, in her shabby room.

Not in the middle of the day.

Not so soon and so abrupt that it made her heart flutter like a moth against the window, making it hard to breathe.

"Des," she whispered, feeling her knees buckle from weakness at the mere sight of the man she loved and missed.

"June." His voice was as quiet as hers as he took several steps toward her.

She felt a lump in her throat. The emotions surged through her like a geyser, making tears well up in her eyes. She bit her lip, trying to keep herself from crying.

“What are you doing here?” she asked though she was thanking every power of the universe that had brought him to this room.

“I wanted to see you. I shouldn’t be here,” he said, studying her face as if he hadn’t seen it for ages. “*You* shouldn’t be here. We should have never left the manor, June. I should have never let you go.”

A smile flickered on Desmon’s face.

“June,” he repeated in a low voice, stretched his hand, and his fingers caressed her cheek.

She closed her eyes—just for a moment, just to immerse herself into his touch, just so she could open her eyes again and make sure this all wasn’t a dream.

In a second, Desmon’s arm was around her waist, pulling her closer, his hand cupping her face and tilting it upward to face him.

“I can’t tell you how much I missed you,” he said softly, and his lips touched hers for a brief kiss—the sensation so familiar and sensual that it made her dizzy. He kissed her once, twice, until she couldn’t restrain herself anymore. She took his face in both her hands and pulled him in for a long kiss.

Nothing compared to this. Not even their passionate nights together. Nothing could come close to the feeling of losing one’s love and getting it back.

They were lost for a moment. Their hands caressed each other. Their lips fused in soft kisses.

“You are here,” she whispered between the kisses.

“I shouldn’t be anywhere else but next to you,” he whispered back, kissing her face.

He pulled away and gazed at her for a moment.

“It took an eternity to find you,” he said with a smile.

She chuckled. “Yes, this is not a palace but I can afford it. For now.”

“How?”

“I sold the Bhutan Glory.”

“June,” he whispered. “Mr. Ogle.”

She chuckled through tears. “That’s alright. Mr. Byrdwing has it now. It’s in good hands. He is happy. It’s amazing how happy little things can make one. And...” She paused. Her hand that had been stroking his face slid down and rested on his chest. So did her eyes. “I realized I couldn’t be in the Belle House,” she said quietly, not looking up at him. “Those women—they are intelligent and confident and beautiful. But I can’t be like them.” She spoke slowly and quietly, grateful that Desmon didn’t interrupt. “I can’t be like Becky,” she continued. “I probably could’ve if”—she swallowed and raised her eyes at him—“if I haven’t met you, Des. You changed it all. I thought it would be a simple contract, a silly game. But it wasn’t. And I already knew it when I saw you at the Belle House that first night. I realized I didn’t want to be with anyone but you, Des. I don’t want to know what it’s like to be with someone else, for the way I feel about you is so overwhelming that nothing else makes sense when you are not around.”

She felt her eyes, her mind, her heart burning from the emotions that were spilling off her lips. They resonated in Desmon’s gaze that was burning just the same.

“Will you forgive me, June?”

“For what?” She frowned, not understanding.

“For letting you go. For not seeing beyond the social rules and the stupid prejudice that I was raised with. For not telling you that the ten days we spent together were the happiest in years. Hell, June, the first night with you was the best that I’ve had with any woman.”

She chuckled and cast her eyes down.

“I am saying the wrong things. Forgive me.” He kissed her forehead. “It wasn’t about one night. Nor was it about bedding you. Those ten days made me realize one thing—I want you in my life, June.” He took her chin between his fingers and tilted her head up. And when her eyes met his, there was no mistake



about his feelings that were no short of hers. “I can’t bear thinking about other men touching you. I can’t bear thinking that you will have to hide your smile and pretend in order to make a living. I can’t bear to think that you are not mine. But more importantly, June, I can’t imagine living a life without you in it.”

She felt those treacherous tears well up in her eyes, making his face blurry.

“We talked a lot,” he continued, not taking his eyes off hers. “You and I. It’s something that I’ve never had with anyone. I was bitter for years at the fate that plunged me into so much humiliation and heartbreak. I cursed the fate that put *you* through so much misery. Your father’s death. The man who’d stolen his collection. The house on Baker Street. The auction.” He stood in silence for a moment, then spoke again. “But then I realized one thing. If all those atrocious things didn’t happen to you or me, I would have never met you. The thought was so awful that it knocked the air out of me. I can’t bear thinking that there was a chance I wouldn’t have gotten to know you.”

She smiled meekly. “I know. It is strange to think that some horrible events can lead to the happiest moments.”

“I love you, June,” Desmon said quietly.

She raised her eyebrows, her eyes wide open, afraid that if she blinked, the tears would roll down and there would be no stopping them. She wanted to look away but couldn’t, Desmon’s fingers soft but still holding her face in place. And her heart was beating so fast that she was afraid it would rip through her chest and fly away.

“I was in love when I first saw you,” he said softly. “I thought if I spent time with you, I would get enough, and the feelings that were first new and perhaps uneasy and too overwhelming would go away. But I couldn’t be more wrong. The more I got to know you, the more you pulled me in. I should’ve told you that on the last night at the manor, for it was tearing me apart.”

Oh, how it sounded just like her feelings!

“Does it feel like a fairytale?” she asked with a meek smile.

“What?” his lips mouthed.

“You told me that, years ago, it felt like a fairytale. Like standing in the familiar surrounding and seeing a million butterflies swarming in the sky—watching them in awe like it’s a miracle.”

“No.” Desmon shook his head and smiled softly at her. “It feels like those butterflies—all millions of them—are inside me. Every time I think of you, they are in my head. Every time I see you, they take over my heart. When you touch me, they spread all over my body. And when you are in my arms, June, there is no feeling that is more splendid and fulfilling. I feel like I can turn into a million pieces and saturate the air around you. But I don’t want a fairytale.” His smile grew bigger. “I want it to be real, June. I love you, and if you feel even a fraction of what I do, I will take that. I can make you very happy.”

June felt her chest shake as she tried to hold her sobs inside, but the tears started spilling onto her cheeks.

The words had stitched together all her feelings for Desmon that had been in her for days—admiration, tenderness, love. She couldn’t have explained it better than the way he just had.

“I love you, Des,” she said softly. “If I knew the feeling was mutual, I would’ve told you days ago. If I could ever hope to have you by my side, I would’ve told you that you took over my mind, my heart, and…” She chuckled through tears. “The silly butterflies cannot possibly explain it.”

He laughed softly, pressing his forehead to hers. “The day I saw you, I wished for one night. But one night was not enough. I wished for ten days. And then I realized there was nothing else I wished for more than seeing you next to me. Every day. Having you. Every night. Being with you. Every waking moment I could.”

His fingers caressed her face and wiped her tears.

“Look at me, June,” he said softly, making her look up at him. “I can’t find a better way to ask you than this.”

His hands slid down to take hers, and he lowered himself onto one knee.

“I don’t want to play games.” He gazed up at her. “Nor do I want to step out into the world and let others think of you less than what you deserve.” He felt his heart beat wildly at the words. “And I surely can’t wait to have you next to me again. June”—he gazed at her with that tenderness that was too much to bear, his eyes soft and glistening with intense emotions—“will you do me an honor of being my wife?”

She smiled through tears and the sob that escaped her. She tried to not burst out crying. And she tried to calm herself, squeezing his hands tighter and feeling him do the same.

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “Yes.”

He rose with a smile, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her closer.

“Yes?” he whispered just to hear her say it again.

“Yes,” she said quietly, burying her face in his chest.

“This is the first time with me that you are given a choice, you know. I hope we continue in the same manner.”

She laughed through tears. He kissed her temples, her eyebrows, her cheeks, finding her lips that were searching for his, finally meeting for a kiss. There was no timidity in it anymore. It grew into passion, and though they didn’t shed their clothes like they usually did in moments like this, they knew they had their entire lives ahead of them.

They kissed for the longest time. He pulled away and whispered more words that had stayed bottled up for way too long. And his mouth took hers, again and again, kissing her as if with those kisses he could seal their fates.

When they finally let go of each other, Desmon walked around the room while June told him more about the upcoming projects with Byrdwing.

It was then that he noticed the sketchbook on the chair.

His lips stretched in a smile as, recognizing himself, he picked it up and studied his own portrait.

June came from behind him and pressed her cheek to his arm. "I thought if I never see you again, I would at least have your face next to me," she said.

Desmon turned around and wrapped his arm around her waist. "Now you can have all of me next to you at all times," he said and kissed her softly. "I would like a full-body portrait, Miss June."

She chuckled, her hand reaching his face and stroking it gently. "For that, I need you to pose for me."

"Oh!" He feigned surprise.

"And since I like all things natural, you would have to do it naked."

He laughed happily, put the sketch away, and took June in his arms.

There was nothing more fulfilling than having a loved one in his arms. It was the greatest wish of all. And the one that had finally come true.

"We are off to a great start," he said, and his lips took hers in a kiss.

## EPILOGUE

Two months had passed.

One of the downstairs parlors of Dambridge Manor had been converted into a workroom. Mr. Desmon Shaw called it a study. Mrs. June Shaw called it a studio. Often it was both. Occasionally it was a love room.

The display cabinets full of glass boxes of curious insects, which Desmon had acquired for his wife, lined up the two walls. Among them—Mr. Ogle, the Bhutan Glory, by now famous among the servants.

There was a giant cabinet full of art supplies. Carts full of ink bottles, tubes of watercolors, oils, and gouaches. There were expansive fixatives and varnishes. Paper of all sizes and textures. There was a bookcase full of journals and volumes on the natural world.

The project with Lord Henry Byrdwing was almost complete—seventy-five illustrations of the butterfly species of England in addition to the several rare species from other parts of Great Britain. The British Museum and its natural history department had requested imprints and were arranging an exhibition of “The winged wonders of England” that was soon to be open to the public.

June Shaw was a celebrity, an “Aurelian Muse” as they called her in the predominantly male entomological circles.

June had just finished her recent illustration of the Scotch Argus. She had let the fixative dry and was now bent over the

large desk with the drawing pinned to it, applying the last coats of varnish when Desmon strolled in whistling.

“Wooly sends his regards,” he said cheerfully. He walked up to her and, placing his hand on the small of her back, looked over her shoulder.

“Almost done?” he asked with curiosity, wanting to spend time with his wife, who had been preoccupied with the illustrations day and night in the last two months.

June didn’t straighten up and continued what she was doing. “If you make me mess this up right now...” she said slowly and quietly, holding her breath but continuing to slowly drag a wide brush along the bottom of the drawing.

When finished, she put the brush away and picked up a linen cloth.

Desmon only chuckled and slid his hand down to her buttocks, squeezing them lightly.

“If you don’t stop, Desmon Shaw, I will kill you,” June whispered, still holding her breath so as not to move as her hand steadily wiped the excess liquid off the edge of the drawing.

Desmon smiled and stepped back. He crossed his arms at his chest and leaned back on one of the tables, studying June with a soft smile.

“You know, I barely see my wife these days,” he said, a smile not leaving his face. It had been weeks, and his admiration for his wife was only growing every day. “Mrs. Shaw here. Mrs. Shaw there. With the Entomological Society. At the Natural History function. The British Museum presentation. I feel like a bachelor,” he teased her.

June didn’t respond. Finally, she straightened up, carefully laid the tools on a separate tray away from the drawing, and assessed her work. She then wiped her hands with a cloth and took a slow step back as if afraid to spook the butterfly that now shone vibrantly under a layer of varnish.

Only then did she turn toward Desmon. She took him by the hand and tugged gently.

“Let’s move away from the piece, shall we? It needs to dry.”

“Everything else is more important than me,” Desmon teased her, taking small steps behind her, his arms wrapping around her as he kissed her neck.

“Silly. Never!” She chuckled happily.

“And here I am, a humble husband to the so-busy wife whose skills and attention are more in demand than those of the trendy Giovanni Campi.”

“Oh, stop!” June turned around, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him deeply. “I need you on that sofa,” she murmured with a mischievous smile and nodded toward the sofa that had become his usual spot when he posed for her sketches.

“Oh, we are at it again.” He feigned surprise. “I am always willing to pose.”

He planted soft kisses on her neck as he started unbuttoning his shirt.

June had done a dozen of sketches of Desmon, some of him naked. She was the only woman who had seen him in all his clothes and all stages of undress, he often joked, repeating her words.

“I am afraid my state of excitement might make the posing session complicated,” Desmon said in a husky voice, taking June’s hand and cupping with it his hard member that strained his riding breeches.

Many times he’d had an erection while posing. He masturbated as June sketched. A couple of times, he’d made her sketch naked, and those sessions were the shortest, turning into love-making, often on that very sofa or on the floor.

“Oh, I am in no mood for sketching,” June answered, unbuttoning his breeches and pulling them down his thighs, freeing his erection.

Desmon grunted, feeling desire coil through him.

“Great minds think alike,” he whispered, his fingers tugging at her bodice.

“And lovers seldom differ,” she murmured into his mouth, giving his erection a teasing caress.

He grunted in pleasure and started undressing her in a hurry. Their hands tugged at each other’s garments, freeing more flesh. Their mouths greedily kissed each other’s skin. They giggled, tumbling down onto the sofa, June on top of Desmon, their moans and grunts mixing with the chirping of the birds outside the open window.

“We have to be quick,” June said, panting, her hands gliding up and down Desmon’s body. “I am starting another project.”

Naked, save for the skirt, she straddled Desmon, who was trying to pull the skirt from between her thighs.

“Oh, no, I don’t think so,” he growled.

Suddenly, Desmon sat up, grabbed her by her waist, and in a matter of seconds, she was on her back, trapped under his weight. His eyes, only inches from hers, sparkled devilishly. “It’s time you gave your husband some attention. And there is no hurry when you do that.”

His lips moved down to catch one of her nipples and tugged it gently.

She squeaked, and he laughed devilishly.

“Your wish is my command, Mr. Shaw,” she said sassily, bringing his face up to hers for a kiss.

“That’s better,” he murmured and slid his hand between her thighs.

“Des,” she whispered, arching her back in pleasure.

“You say my name enough times, and I might let you get back to your work by tomorrow,” he said huskily and added with a mischievous smile, “Mrs. Shaw.”

THE END



## **SUBSCRIPTION**

GET A FREE COPY OF "THE WICKED BET" WHEN YOU  
SUBSCRIBE TO VLAD KAHANY'S NEWSLETTER



[GET MY FREE EBOOK!](#)

## FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader!

Thank you for reading “A Gentleman’s Wish.” Please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads.

Quick notes:

“Aurelian” is an old term for those who studied and collected butterflies and moths.

Against the proper grammar rules, the butterfly names in my book are capitalized. This is done so you don’t flinch at the random words and think that they are out of place. All the insect names are true, though some of them (like the Duke of Burgundy) didn’t acquire their names until the beginning of the 20th century.

All the facts about the insects are true, too. The migration of monarch butterflies from the northern regions of the United States down to the specific forests in Mexico (as described by June Aveling) is a true phenomenon observed every year.

And no, butterflies don’t flap their wings.

Thank you for reading my books,

Vlad.

November 22, 2021

**ALSO BY THIS AUTHOR**

STEAMY HISTORICAL ROMANCE NOVELS SET IN VICTORIAN  
ENGLAND

**THE BELE HOUSE SERIES**

**Read for FREE with KindleUnlimited!**

**(Please, visit your country-specific Kindle store)**

**Book 1: THE TENDER DAYS OF MAY**

Lord Ashbee and May

**Book 2: THE TENDER TOUCH OF NIGHT**

Frank “Lucky” Handley and Maude “Ginger” Daly

**Book 3: THE TENDER RULES OF EDEN**

Samuel Riley and Eva Bernal

**Book 4: THE TENDER KISS OF FATE**

Marko Farini and Blanche Carey

**Book 5: THE TENDER ART OF WAR**

Jean-Christophe De Luca and Catherine “Kat” Wilde

**STAY IN TOUCH!**

**ANNOUNCEMENTS AND FREE BOOKS:**

[WWW.VLADKAHANY.COM](http://WWW.VLADKAHANY.COM)

**FACEBOOK:** [V. KAHANY BOOKS](https://www.facebook.com/V.KAHANYBOOKS)

**INSTAGRAM:** [@V.KAHANY.BOOKS](https://www.instagram.com/V.KAHANYBOOKS)

**FEEDBACK OR SUGGESTIONS FOR A NEW BOOK:**

EMAIL ME: [VLAD@VLADKAHANY.COM](mailto:VLAD@VLADKAHANY.COM)