

GENTLEMEN MAKE THE BEST PRISONERS...



Theodore Bradshaw

Gentlemen Make the Best Prisoners

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Prologue

June, 1855, Sevastopol, Crimea

The sounds of the canons nearby were deafening.

Jack Sterling did his best to shield his ears whenever they ignited near him. He knew that without a doubt, his hearing would be affected greatly after this—if he survived, that is.

The Russians were almost certainly routed. Sevastopol would not stand much longer, and the combined efforts of the British and French forces would secure the city within no time. They attacked by surprise, landing overnight, and the Russian empire didn't stand a chance.

Jack would have been happy, had blood not been pouring from his face.

He moved quickly, arm-in-arm with another soldier, back towards their fortifications. Whether it was a stray bullet or shrapnel let off from an explosion, he did not know; the only thing Jack could focus on, underneath the buzzing in his ears and the dull throb of pain, was that he couldn't see out of his right eye, and whenever he touched a hand to it, it came back red.

“Aye, general, just a bit further now!” the soldier next to him shouted over the din. Jack knew he would certainly have perished had it not been for the man. He would have to learn his name soon to thank him properly.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. At long last, they made their way back towards safety. Jack was passed off to a tent where his face was wrapped up like a mummy, and he was told not to get up for at least the next six hours. As if that were going to hold him back.

At some point, when the sun was low in the sky and the raging battle was quieting down, Jack heard shouting outside his tent. He craned his head to investigate, desperately trying to hear over the ringing in his ears.

“But, sir!” a young man called out, “the battle is nearly won! We’ve no need to push forward, and the battalion here is too wounded.”

“Too wounded?” came a gruff voice. “Rubbish. Don’t be daft, boy. I won’t have the French be the first with their flag on that bloody capital! We will press forward, as originally planned.”

Jack was already outside his tent by the time Algernon Earlshope, Marquess of Tilby, had finished speaking. The man was handsomely positioned on top of his horse, his red coat almost completely spotless. He was flanked by two other officers bearing the standards of Britain, equally as clean. It was a dreadful comparison to the bloodied rags both Jack and the other soldier were wearing.

“I’m the general of this battalion,” Jack called out, his own voice sounding alien in his head, “and I have already ordered our unit back towards Scutari. These men aren’t fit for battle at the moment.”

Lord Earlshope spat on the floor, not bothering to look towards Jack. “Are you disobeying my order already, boy? We press forward, all as one. You gave an oath to obey the authority of the crown. Don’t squander your promise now.”

He rode off, clearly not expecting Jack to speak again. The words died on his tongue, but he was thankful for it. What he had to say to Lord Earlshope would not have been very polite, but he would have fucking deserved it.

The other young man, a boy of nineteen named Eric, came up to him. “Are you alright, sir? Shall we round up the others and move ahead? Sundown is in just a few hours, so we’ll need to get moving.”

Jack looked around the camp. His entire unit was in ruins. The sickening cries of the men, all of whom were barely of age, drowned out Eric’s voice as he looked around. They were all injured, all too tired to keep fighting. There were many faces that Jack had come to know that weren’t nearby, their still bodies likely left out on the open fields just on the outskirts of Sevastopol.

Even with half his head bandaged, it sickened Jack to realize that he was one of the most able-bodied of the group. Some were missing partial limbs; others had large shards of shrapnel lodged deep inside their midsections; many were ill, delirious with fever or malnourishment.

Jack Sterling was young for a general, but he didn't earn it for nothing. He was a good soldier, and he took good care of those in his unit. To press forward, regardless of what the fool Earlshope said, would be absolute suicide. He commanded one of the front infantry forces, and his was one of the few that remained since the beginning of the siege. Almost all the others had already retreated back to Scutari. He couldn't help but feel like the suicide mission was intentional. Lord Earlthroe was ruthless with the men beneath him.

But goddammit, Jack wasn't.

"No, Eric," he said firmly. "We're moving back. There's only a few dozen of us anyhow that can stand on both feet at the moment. I won't be risking your lives for some egotistical attempt at conquering the capital before the French."

Despite himself, Eric looked incredibly relieved. "Yes, sir," he said quickly. "I'll tell the carriages waiting. We'll be out of here in no time."

When he took off, Jack surveyed the remains of the camp. So many were dead. So many faces that would never even get to be buried. Why he survived, as their commander no less, and not them was already beginning to haunt him.

His orders to move back could be viewed as treason, but he wondered if Earlshope would even notice or care. The ramifications of disobeying the marquee could be severe, but if there was one thing Jack knew, it was that he wasn't going to throw away the lives of everyone else in his unit that he had been entrusted with. Not over Earlshope's ridiculous orders. No matter the consequences.

And if Earlshope had a problem with it, then he could deal with Jack himself.

Chapter 1

September, 1875, Somewhere in the north of England

Lord Louis Earlshope sighed, throwing his book against the window. The train was moving slowly, far too slowly, and it bored him to death. It would be a good eight hours at least before he got back to London. The thought made him want to cry.

How he hated trains. Stupid, smoky things, cramped full of all breeds of men and women and children. He didn't even know why he had to go to Edinburgh over the last month to begin with. As soon as the London season ended, his father, the Marquess of Tilby, forced him on this stupid trip to visit old relatives. As if anyone, relatives or not, living up in that backwater of a city were worth his time.

Pouting was of no use, but that didn't stop Louis. His train cabin was empty save for him, likely since no one else coming from this far north could afford the luxury, which only amplified Louis's boredom—not that he wanted to be around the company of *travelers*, but anything might beat out this restless solitude.

He shouldn't have even been by himself to begin with. How could his father have his only son traveling in such conditions *alone*? The thought was preposterous. Louis knew he deserved better. What if something happened to him? What if he needed to change stations or stay the night somewhere? What was he going to do?

He crouched low in his seat, blowing a strand of hair out of his eyes. How he hated trains. How he hated his father. How he hated life.

A trolley attendant was making her way up the aisle, which Louis could hear from the rambling of the infernal wheels of the cart. There was hardly anyone so far up in this section of the train, so the attendant was likely only making her way through towards the back half of the train where all the children were. Not that this would disway Louis.

He leapt up and threw the door of his compartment open, just as the old woman was trotting by.

“Good Heavens!” she cried out, pushing her hand up against her bosom. “You scared the wits outta me, sir!”

“My apologies, ma’am,” Louis said, keeping his voice light like honey. “Not my intention, but I just couldn’t help myself when I heard you go by. What’s on the cart this lovely morning?”

He gazed down at the cart filled with sweets and confections. It made his mouth water.

“Oh, the usual, sir!” she exclaimed jovially. “Each a’penny, but choose whatever you like.”

“Oh, but, ma’am,” Louis said, curling his brows down and pouting his lips, “I’ve forgotten my purse with me; it’s all in the trunks below. I’m sure just one sweet missing wouldn’t be a bother, now would it?”

The older woman made a noise that sounded like a sneeze. “No purse! As if a fancy lord like yourself couldn’t afford a treat. For shame, sir!”

“Oh, please, ma’am,” he said. “I’m all alone up here, you see. I’m so bored. I need something to survive off of.”

She muttered to herself under her breath. He enjoyed the way she grew red from frustration. It’s not that Louis necessarily enjoyed teasing others so, but just that common folk were simply so easy to tease.

“Oh fine!” she grumbled, reaching towards the bottom shelf and pulling out a hard stick of licorice-flavored candy. “Naughty boy. And don’t be asking for seconds, ya hear!”

“Loud and clear, ma’am,” he grinned as he took the candy from her. He watched her face; she grumbled until she realized he had slyly deposited a whole shilling in her palm as he took the licorice from her. The red in her face deepened as she stuck the coin in her dress.

“Off with you, you foolish boy,” she chuckled, pushing the trolley along.

“That’s *sir* to you, ma’am!” he said teasingly, before shutting the door again. He stuck the stick of licorice into his mouth and sucked on it as he looked out the window.

The beautiful trees, just barely beginning to change into shades of fiery orange, that surrounded Edinburgh were long gone. Now, the dismal expanses of moorland surrounded the train, much to Louis’s displeasure. The countryside of Yorkshire was his least favorite place in the entire world, save for maybe his father’s study.

He wondered how else he might spend his time before he arrived at his destination. Out of the many words one might use to describe Louis, patient was certainly not one of them. But, as a 20-year-old man, drenched in wealth, eagerly awaiting the day he would inherit his father’s title, who could expect him to be so? He kicked his feet up on the seat next to him and reclined against the rumbling side of the compartment. He closed his eyes, biting off a piece of the licorice, as he let his mind wander.

He wasn’t sure if he had actually fallen asleep, or simply dozed on and off for a few moments, but a loud shriek woke him with a start. He dropped the stick of licorice to the floor as he strained his ears to hear what was going on.

More screams echoed down the train. The shuffling sounds of boots rattled the floor, and a few loud men’s voices could be heard. Louis wondered if it were some silly show or a lover’s quarrel. He bit his lip, excited at the possibility for a bit of mischief, and made his way towards the door to his compartment.

The smile died on his face as he heard another woman’s scream. It sounded awfully like the trolley lady that gave him the candy.

“Please, sir,” she cried out. “I don’t know nothin’ about it! I don’t know if he’s on here, God honest!”

Who? Louis pressed his ear to the door, trying to make out any more words.

“This change your mind at all, lass?” a gruff man’s voice said. The woman shrieked again, and then the sounds of footsteps grew louder.

Louis could barely step away from the door before it was swung open. Before him stood a gigantic man, dressed all in dirty black clothing, brandishing a knife.

“Aha!” he exclaimed, stepping forward. “There’s the little lord. I knew he was here.”

“Excuse me, sir,” Louis said, his voice trembling. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Can it, boy. Don’t make me hurt you now.” He lunged forward, gripping the lapel of Louis’s jacket in his fist, and pulled him forward.

“What? Who are you? Let me go!”

As much as he struggled, the giant man barely seemed to exert any effort as he dragged Louis down the alley of the train towards the back. Louis cried out, desperately slapping at the man’s arm, but to no avail. The rest of the train was empty, or at least the passengers were all cowering inside their compartments. No one dared to risk themselves to help him. Useless louts that they were.

Knowing he couldn’t release the man’s grip, Louis looked down and stuck his foot out, right as the kidnapper took a step. The move had its intended effect, and the tall man tripped over it and plummeted down, releasing Louis’s jacket to break his fall.

“You bastard!” the man called out as Louis leapt over him and ran down the hall. He couldn’t go backwards, knowing how little space there was up in the front of the train, and he could only desperately hope that he might run into someone willing to help him towards the back half.

“Help! Anyone!” he cried out, heart pounding in his chest as he ran. He was never very athletic as a boy, but he sprinted down the aisle like he never had before. The train was resoundingly empty, with not a soul willing to show

themselves. If he had time to consider it, Louis would have been shocked by their cowardice.

Or, he thought chillingly, was there just no one else on the train?

He dared a look behind him, barely seeing the outline of the assailant make his way down the aisle. Louis was positive he could outrun him, but there was only so much train to run down.

Before he could think of what else to do, just as he turned forward, he ran into a firm wall.

“Oof!” he gasped out, getting knocked to the floor. Out of his daze, he realized it wasn’t a wall, but another person. A man—a very, very tall man—who turned around to look down at him.

He almost shouted for his assistance, before the man smiled at him. Like the other assailant, he wore all black, his clothes dusty from the moors. He had black hair with a thin row of silver slicked away from his forehead, and his jaw was covered in closely shorn black whiskers.

But the most striking thing about his appearance was the patch over his right eye. When he gazed down at Louis, he curled up his brow and bared his teeth.

“Aye, that’s him alright!” came the breathless voice of the man behind him, slowing down and resting his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. “Just like I told you. I knew this was the right train.”

“Yes, well done indeed, Graham,” the eye-patched man said in a deep voice. He never broke eye-contact with Louis, and it made his blood run cold.

He squatted down in front of him, looking over Louis’s body. “What a pretty specimen you are, though I can see the resemblance to your father. A shame, if you ask me.”

“Who the hell are you?” Louis breathed out, resting on his elbows as he tried to pull himself back slightly. “My father? What are you talking about? I’ve done nothing wrong!”

“It’s not about wrongdoings, now is it?” the man said, gripping the front of Louis’s shirt. “It’s about making what’s right.”

“What a stupid thing to say.” Louis couldn’t help himself. It *was* hardly comprehensible.

The man behind Louis huffed. A few more voices, which Louis realized were more men surrounding him, were also chuckling.

“Is that so?” the eye-patched man said with a smirk. “Still got a mouth on you, I see. Keep it up, and I’ll gag you. Is that understood?”

Rather than wait for him to respond, the man stood up straight, hoisting Louis to his feet by his hold on his clothing.

“What is your name, boy? I want there to be no doubt of who you are.”

Louis didn’t answer. The man tightened his grip and pulled him closer. He had a striking face, a strong jaw covered with scruff, and his good eye was a dark, deep blue.

“When I ask a question,” he said, staring down Louis, “I expect an answer.”

Louis stared back, pale with fear, but still couldn’t help himself. He stuck his tongue out and blew a raspberry right against the man’s face.

The other men all hooped and hollered. The train roared with noise as they laughed.

The eye-patched man, who must have been the leader, slowly wiped his face and chuckled as well. “Not bad,” he said. “Looks like I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

“Is it money you want?” Louis said, his voice shaking more than he wished it would. “I’ll give you money. Please, just let me go. I won’t tell anyone!”

The man snorted. “Money, he says. Well, gentlemen, what do you say? How much is he worth?”

The other men hollered again, cackling and yelling. They said a few perverse statements that made Louis blush and desperately try not to hear.

“No,” the eye-patched man said, leaning his face in a bit closer. “You’re worth more than gold to me, little lord. You’ll see soon enough.”

With that, he released his hold on Louis’s shirt, nearly causing him to fall down on the ground.

“Tie him up. Quickly now, boys, we’re approaching the next stop.”

The other men obeyed, crowding in around Louis and tying his hands behind his back. The leader walked in closer once more and gently untied Louis’s cravat, staring him down as he did so. He took off the violet length of silken fabric and held it up.

“I wasn’t going to at first, but since you wagged your little tongue at me,” he said, grinning wickedly, “how could I resist? Not that it’ll matter. No one will hear you scream where we’re going.”

With that, he wrapped the cravat around Louis’s mouth and tied it firmly in the back. Before Louis could even think to protest, someone threw a canvas bag over his head and pushed him forward.

The sounds of the train approaching the stop echoed down the aisles. The men all chattered around Louis, not that he could hear them over the drumming of his heart in his ears. One firm and large hand gripped him hard around his bicep. Louis could feel the heat of the man’s body radiating against him. It made him shiver.

“Just stay quiet, little lord,” the man said, hot against his ear, “and all will be well. I promise.”

It was the leader again. He tightened his grip on Louis’s arm, and just as the train came to a full stop, pulled him along as the men got off the train.

Louis never knew if there were other passengers on the train, or if anyone could see them as they made their swift exit

off the platform. All he knew was that he could see nothing through the canvas bag over his head, and that the man's grip on his arm was going to leave more than just physical bruises.

He couldn't tell if he was about to cry or not, but Louis did as he was told regardless. He didn't make a single sound as he was forced onwards in complete and utter darkness.

Chapter 2

Louis had no idea how long they had been driving. He had a vague idea that the bandits had thrown him on top of a curricule, if the wind against his skin was any indication, and drove off. Not that he could see any of it with the bag over his head.

He wasn't ashamed to admit that he was entirely frozen in fear. What could he do? He was no hero and certainly wasn't athletic enough to escape or fight off an entire band of villains—who exactly was? So he sat there, trembling in his silken clothes, trying to maintain some sense of reality as he breathed against his cravat gag and saw the bits of sunlight flitter through the weaving of the canvas bag.

Eventually, they came to a stop, slowing down off the side of the road. The bag was roughly pulled off Louis's head, but his tousled, auburn hair still shaded his eyes. A large hand pushed his hair back from his forehead and forced him to look ahead. It was the eye-patched leader, who now stared him down with his one dark blue eye. His mouth was pursed in a tight line, but he curled the side of one lip up as if he were smiling. Louis honestly couldn't tell.

“Not much longer now, little lord,” he said gruffly. He loosened the cravat pressed against Louis's lips and pulled out a large canteen of water, holding it up to his mouth. “Drink,” he commanded.

With his hands tied together in his lap, Louis had no choice but to bow his head and let the large man pour the water into his mouth. It was humiliating and debasing, and filled Louis with a rage that burned through some of his fear. Though the cool water was refreshing against his parched throat, Louis felt the urge to act irrationally; he had a much better idea as he held the liquid in his cheeks.

As the man pulled the canteen away, Louis pursed his lips and spat the water back in a thick stream against his face. The man didn't even flinch.

“Aye, you’re a little cunt, aren’t you?” he mumbled. Before Louis could reply, the man gripped his pale jaw between strong fingers, forcing Louis to open his mouth in pain, before pouring more water between his lips. Afterwards, he held his fingers against Louis’s closed mouth. “Swallow.”

Louis did as he was told, since he had no other choice. He was internally grateful at the second opportunity to quench his thirst, not that he was going to express that to his captor.

The man kept his hand pressed firmly against Louis’s mouth. His eye narrowed in on Louis’s, his black hair blowing close to his face.

“Enough with the shit. Alright?” he said, tapping against Louis’s lips. “You’ll drink when I tell you, and you will eat when I tell you. You’re useless to me if you don’t survive.”

When he released his mouth, Louis couldn’t help but snarl. “My apologies, sir, if I am not overly kind to my captor.”

“Keep your kindness. I just need you to do what I say. It’s not my goal or intention to see you hurt.”

Some of the other men, who were on horseback, began to move forward again. There were five of them in total, if Louis could see them all, that is, including the leader who was driving him in the curricle. The moors seemed endless around them, and there wasn’t even a house or cottage in sight. If Louis tried to escape now, he would certainly die of exposure, if the bandits didn’t recapture him and kill him first.

“Might I at least insist,” Louis said hesitantly, “that the bag stays off? It’s making my head spin with these poor roads.”

“Sorry that my driving is not up to par with his lordship,” the man huffed. “Very well. Keep bloody quiet, or I’ll put it back on with the gag.”

With that, they drove off. Louis wished for half a second that he were blinded and gagged again. The use of his senses was making the trip nauseatingly real, and the reality

that he was likely to be murdered or God knows what was becoming far too much. He felt his head spin, as if he were about to be sick or faint.

“Where are we going?” he murmured, trying to distract himself, even if it meant talking to the beast beside him.

“None of your business,” the man said, not taking his eyes off the road in front of him. The curricule was led by two large horses, whose dexterous movements proved they had driven on this road plenty of times before.

“I’m afraid it *is* my business, good sir,” Louis grumbled. “You’ve at least got to admit that.”

“Fine. I’m still not telling you though.”

Louis frowned. “Well, then, how much farther are we?”

“A few hours.”

“And you would prefer we spend the hours in pure silence, just as we did the first few?”

“I’ll gag you again. Don’t think I won’t.”

Louis bit his lip, feeling hopeless. He tried to focus on his breathing, imagining that he was simply bored rather than terrified out of his mind. The longer he was silent, however, the more panicked he began to feel. His stomach churned, threatening to make him sick soon from fear.

He thought through his actions. Escaping would mean certain death; fighting back would mean certain death, if not something worse; playing along may or not result in death, but so far, it provided him the best odds. He swallowed, his throat thick and dry again despite the water, and felt a wave of panic descend on him again.

“If you get sick,” the man said, breaking through the cloud of his hysteria, “turn away from me.”

Louis didn’t like how easily he was able to read him. “I won’t be sick,” he muttered.

“You should eat something, then.” He reached down between them and threw a small sack on Louis’s lap, not taking his eyes off the road for a second. “There’s some rations in there. Eat it, and if you even think about spitting it back at me again, I’ll cuff you until your ears are bleeding.”

The lingering taste of the licorice candy made Louis feel like gagging, so he tried the best he could to maneuver his bound hands into the bag and find the food the man mentioned. It was much more difficult than he imagined, and he groped uselessly at the tied-up bag for a few moments in sickening humiliation.

“Oh, for the love of—*here*,” the other man said, reaching over into Louis’s lap with one hand. He untied the bag and pulled out a small loaf of cake, studded in currants, that was wrapped in a delicate cloth. It was certainly more appetizing than the hard bread Louis had been expecting.

“Thank you,” he mumbled, before raising his tied hands to his mouth and biting into the cake. It was relatively fresh.

They rode on in silence. The food helped calm Louis’s frayed nerves and settle his stomach, and he felt slightly invigorated by his chances of managing not to die in the middle of the endless moors. The sun poked out between thick clouds that rolled in, threatening a storm soon. Louis hoped desperately they would get to their location before they were drenched.

“We’ll arrive before it will start raining,” the man said.

Again, startling him from his reverie, he managed to read Louis’s thoughts. It was more than unsettling.

“Yes, well, I’m sure I shall be grateful for that at least,” he said sullenly. “I hate the rain—despise nothing more than dampness.”

“Bad country to live in, then.”

Louis scoffed. “Is it too fanciful to hope you are taking me away to some sunny, warm place?”

“Imagine whatever you like, little lord. I’m still not telling you where we are headed.”

“Then allow me to imagine myself on the Amalfi coast, and you are shepherding me towards a scenic spa.”

“As you like.”

Moments of silence passed. Louis bit down hard on his cheek. He had been thinking of how best to ask and wanted to sound as genuine as possible. He thought his sentences through, feeling his mouth dry up as he began to form the words.

“Please,” he said softly, “if I have done wrong, I wish to know how. If you don’t want my money, then why have you taken me? Don’t you know who I am? When my father hears of this...”

“Your father,” the man cut him off, his grumbling baritone sharpening into a crack of thunder, “*will* hear of this. Of that, there is no doubt.”

“He is the Marquess of Tilby!” Louis continued. “Do you really think you will get away with taking his only son? The whole of London will be after you soon. If you would just help me now—”

“You really think I didn’t know that?” the man said, his voice hardening up more. “Yes, the Marquess of Tilby, and you are Louis Earlshope. I know this.”

“If it is something that my father has done, then surely I can...” he stopped there. Louis didn’t know what exactly he could do. He hadn’t seen his father in a few months, and they were far from being close or in each other’s confidence. He noticed that the man’s hands were tightening harder and harder on the reins the more they were discussing his family. It filled Louis with dread.

“I told you that if you just do what you are told, you will remain safe,” the man said slowly, his voice low in his throat. “But if you mention your father around me again, invoking his name like some saint, I will put the gag back on you and throw you in the back with the trunks. Understood?”

“Quite,” Louis breathed out, feeling his face grow hot. “You’ve made yourself plenty clear, good sir. I will do as I am told. I don’t want to get hurt.”

“Good,” the man said, relaxing his grip on the reins.

“May I just ask you one more question, sir?”

The man turned to face him, for the first time, with his eyebrow raised with a warning. Louis pressed on, trying not to feel intimidated. He wasn’t even sure why he wanted to know, but the question fell from his lips anyway.

“What is your name?”

He cocked a brow. “What’s it to you?”

“You know mine, it seems, so it is only fair.”

The man snorted, shaking his head. After a minute in silence, he said, “Just...call me Jack, I suppose.”

“Just Jack?”

“There would hardly be any point to using my family name.”

Jack. Louis wasn’t going to press on. Jack was enough for now.

Chapter 3

A few hours had passed before civilization finally came back into view. The thought of being around others, even strangers, as long as they weren't actual murderous bandits, filled Louis with anxiety. If he could just get a moment—a single opportunity to run for his life—he just might find a constable or another type of law enforcement.

But the civilization, as it were, was less than ideal. It was a farming village, if that could even describe it. Louis could count the cottages he saw on one hand, none of which bore any kind of semblance of lawful life, and acres upon acres of farmlands and hills separated them from each other. He wondered briefly if his captors lived here, and it was somehow a village filled with criminals like them.

“The storm is moving in quickly,” Jack said, breaking the eerie silence that the two of them had been sitting in for at least the past hour. “We’re stopping here, and we will continue the journey tomorrow at dawn.”

“Stopping where exactly? Are we to camp over in a barn?”

Jack didn't answer him, but they kept riding along. The others in their group had ridden so far ahead that Louis couldn't see them anymore. It improved his odds, if only barely, that Jack was the only bandit in sight, but with the storm quickly moving in, and the sky darkening by the minute, Louis didn't dare to do anything drastic. He kept his mouth shut for the time being.

Eventually, Jack pulled to a stop at the bottom of a wide hill, and he gave Louis a long, wary look. Even with one eye, it felt scalding hot against Louis's skin, and he had to turn away to not feel the full intensity of Jack's glare. It made his body flush with anxious heat.

“Your clothes are too fine,” he said after a minute, not looking away from him.

Louis looked back finally. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Your clothes,” he repeated, reaching forward and snagging the sleeve of his coat between his fingers. “You’ll draw too much attention. You’ll have to change.”

Louis huffed. “Wouldn’t want that, now would we? Are you out of your bloody mind? Do you think if I had spare clothes, they would look less fine than this? Not that I even had time to grab my belongings before you threw that damned bag over my head—”

“Shut up,” Jack cut him off. “And don’t worry. I’ve come prepared. Get out.”

He leapt off his side of the curricule, moving back towards the luggage. Louis was confused. What did he mean prepared? He sat up tall, trying to get his bearings. Nothing, of course, looked familiar, and there wasn’t a soul in sight. If the village hadn’t been abandoned, everyone was already in doors ready to wait out the approaching tempest.

“Get out,” Jack said again now at Louis’s side, startling him. He looked up at him, holding another canvas sack, waiting with an impatient look in his eye.

“Excuse me?” Louis said, looking down. His arms were wrapped tightly together, and the jump down the curricule was much higher up than he was expecting. He wasn’t afraid of heights...necessarily. But he certainly didn’t want to risk jumping down without the use of his hands to break a potential fall.

“Now. Get out!” Jack said again, his voice louder.

Louis moved sideways, ready to crawl down, but the sight of the ground beneath him made his head spin. Fine, he had to admit it; he was a little afraid of heights.

“It’s...too high up,” he said, closing his eyes and feeling a strange rush of embarrassment. Why did he care what the bastard thought of him?

“Are you fucking joking?” Jack said gruffly.

“No,” Louis said, looking away. “Untie my hands first, or I’m afraid I will fall.”

“Real bloody likely,” Jack said, murmuring some other profanities under his breath. He moved forward, to which Louis stuck his arms out, fully expecting him to untie the ropes binding his wrists together.

Instead, Jack dropped the bag at his feet and snaked an arm underneath Louis’s legs, lifting him up out of the curricule in one swift motion.

“Oh, God!” Louis cried out. “Please, put me down! What on earth are you doing?”

“Will you be quiet?” Jack said angrily, placing Louis back down on his feet. “What a useless one you are. And a lord, my ass! How old are you, boy? What are you so afraid of?”

Louis looked down in embarrassment, feeling absurdly angry and pathetic all at once. Jack sounded, in some ways, just like his father. It brought back a few rather unsavory memories.

“Hey,” Jack said, shaking his shoulder roughly. “I’m speaking to you.”

“I’m not a dog,” Louis spat out. “I do not have to do what you command me to, nor do I have to answer what you ask me.”

Jack licked his lips and then tightened his hold on Louis’s shoulder. “Do we have to go through this again already?”

“No,” he said sullenly. “Just please don’t pick me up again like that.”

“Fine. Whatever. Just put this on.” He bent down to rummage through the bag he brought out from the luggage. He held up a few ragged pieces of fabric.

“Excuse me?” Louis said again.

Jack sighed, running a hand through his black hair with the silver streak. “Why do you talk back to everything I tell

you to do? I don't want to hurt you, dammit. Just do what I fucking say!"

He threw the pieces of fabric at Louis. With his wrists bound together, they fell in a sad heap on the ground between them. They both stared at the floor for a moment, and then at each other.

"Er, right," Jack said awkwardly. He stepped forward and began undoing the knots binding Louis's arms together.

"Even for a bandit, you are awfully rude," Louis said as he shook his arms free of the rope.

"I'm not a bandit," Jack said. "Put those clothes on. Now."

Louis bent down to pick them up. They were all brown and tan, made of rough, cheap material. There were some moth-eaten holes in them, and they smelled of horses.

"I can't wear these," he cried out. "They're disgusting." He knew his own clothes were soiled as well, both from his own sweat and the dirt from the journey, but they were certainly infinitely cleaner than wherever these rags came from.

Jack stepped forward, until he was pressed close to Louis's front, grabbed the front of his waistcoat, and ripped it open with both hands. The buttons flew off to the sides, and the fabric tore where the buttonholes were.

"Are you insane?" Louis cried out, cowering away from the man's grip. "Stop it!"

He tried to push him back, but Jack didn't budge or listen. He reached forward again, towards Louis's shirt, and pulled it apart right down the opening in the center. The fabric shredded in a near perfect line.

"Good God, man!" Louis cried out, covering his exposed chest with his hands and turning away. "What in the blazes is wrong with you?"

"There," Jack said with a pleased grin on his face. "Now you have to put those clothes on. Do it now, or I'll rip

your trousers apart too.”

“My God!” Louis felt more enraged than afraid. Those clothes were expensive and beautiful. He had owned them for a few years and loved that outfit. Now, it hung in torn shreds around Louis’s neck.

He pushed his shoulders out of his waistcoat, stripping down to the torn shirt, but hesitated. The smoldering gaze of Jack’s one eye stared at him intently.

“Will you please give me privacy?” he said haughtily.

Jack snorted. “Bloody fucking princess. Should I get you a maid while I’m at it?”

“Just turn around!”

“Fine!”

Jack turned, putting his hands on his lips and huffing loudly. Louis waited a moment, making sure that he wasn’t going to turn back around, and then pulled his ruined shirt off of his head. He quickly dressed in the new (if it could even be called new) shirt and waistcoat, buttoning it up as quickly as he could. The chilled wind was picking up speed as the clouds loomed overhead. It made his nipples grow hard from the cold, and his body shivered as it was exposed to the open air.

As quickly as he could, and still with a faint blush, Louis pulled his trousers off, all the way past his fine boots, and pulled the new ones on. They were itchy and tattered, but surprisingly warm – certainly warmer than the silks he previously had on. Jack didn’t hand him a new coat, so he put his old one back on, slipping his arms through the holes.

“I’m decent,” he muttered sullenly.

Jack turned back around. “Fits you well enough.” His gaze trailed down Louis’s whole body, which made him flush with annoyance.

He crossed his arms absent-mindedly. “Now what? Are we going to get moving again?”

Jack looked past him. Without saying anything, he grabbed the rope off of the ground and began tying Louis’s

arms back together. He tightened it hard against the wool of his coat, before knotting the other end around the side of the curricule.

“Don’t move,” he said, walking past him up towards the top of the hill.

Louis turned around and saw some of the other bandits waiting up against the horizon. Jack walked over to them, still mounted on their horses, and they all had a conversation that Louis couldn’t hear. Even with the new clothes, he shivered against the wood of the curricule. He knew that it would start raining at any minute now. He stood impatiently, hoping they would get to somewhere warm soon.

Jack returned after a few minutes. The other men rode away on their horses, leaving the two of them alone once more.

“Where are we going?” Louis asked. “Where are they going?”

“Stop asking questions,” Jack said. “Now, can you get back up in your seat on your own, or do you need my help?”

Louis snarled at him. “I can manage it myself, thank you.”

He did, but it was an awkward struggle. It wasn’t fair that his hands were bound up before he was back on the curricule, but he shimmied his way back up the side of the mount until his torso was on his seat. Then, lifting his legs for the momentum, managed to inch his way up on the curricule enough to sit up straight. He looked down smugly at Jack, who looked as if he were holding back a laugh.

“All set?” he said with an evil grin.

“You’re a bastard,” Louis said back, looking forward angrily. He was surprised at how easily the man seemed to get under his skin. He was feeling less fear than he was anticipating and, at this point, was mostly just annoyed. If he had to live the rest of his days in Jack’s captivity, then he hoped his life would be a short one.

Jack mounted his own side of the curricule and readied the reins again. Within a few minutes, they were moving up the hill and were back on the road. A thick, cold drop of water fell on Louis's face. When he looked up, he saw the greyness of the sky churning. The storm was hitting them at last.

"It's raining," he said stupidly, as if Jack wouldn't be aware.

"Not long now," Jack said. "There's an inn we will stay at tonight, and then we'll proceed as I said before."

"We're staying at an inn?"

"Yes. Despite what you probably think, we are not so uncivilized to sleep in a barn for the night. But don't get any ideas. We know the owners, and they won't mess in our business. If you say anything to anyone—"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure," he said impatiently. "You'll bludgeon me or poke my eye out. I get it now. Enough with the disgusting bodily threats."

"Oh, look who's got a tongue on him again? An Earlshope through and through, I see."

Louis didn't know what he meant by that, but the way he said his family name made his blood run colder than any of Jack's previous threats. What did he have against him or his father? How did he know who the Earlshopes were? Was it some kind of personal vendetta against his family?

The gravity of the situation began to hit Louis afresh, realizing that he was the prisoner of a dangerous man who, for some reason, hated him and his family. Now, in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by villagers who were somehow all aware of Jack's gang, there was no chance of escape.

They carried on in silence, with the rain beginning to pelt them from above, across the hill.

Chapter 4

Louis could have dozed off by the time the carriage stopped. In fact, he wondered if he had a bit, considering how disoriented he felt when he heard Jack shuffling next to him. The rain had maintained a steady drizzle, bursting out in larger drops now and then, but nothing to cause concern. In fact, it was almost peaceful.

Save for the fact, of course, that Louis might be murdered at any given moment.

He wasn't sure if the sun had set or if the clouds were just too thick to see any light, but it was dark enough for the inn before them to have a gas lamp burning in front of its entrance door. Their surroundings were perilously quiet, save for the gentle tapping of the rain against the wood of the curricule, and Louis was so exhausted he could have wept.

"Don't move," Jack said gravely to him, before jumping out of the carriage and walking inside the inn. Tied up as he was, it's not like Louis could get very far. It was a stupid, petty thing to think of, but it made Louis hate him all over again. Being kidnapped was one thing. Being left tied up was quite another, and the absolute limit of his patience—not even to mention the horrid excuse of clothing he was forced to wear.

It wasn't long before Jack came back through the small, wooden entrance and made his way towards Louis's side of the carriage. Without even a word, he gripped the side of Louis's arm and hauled him off the curricule in a swift motion. At this point, Louis didn't even care to protest. All he wanted was a hot bath and a warm bed—preferably in much safer circumstances.

"We're staying here tonight. Yes, I know who owns this residence. Yes, you will regret it if you speak out of turn."

"Okay," was Louis's sole response. Jack cocked a brow at him for a moment, as if waiting for some kind of sass to roll his eyes over, but then just cleared his throat. He untied the rope around Louis's arms and brushed his sleeves off.

“This is coming back on as soon as we get upstairs.”

Louis was too tired to argue. He followed in Jack’s footsteps as they made their way towards the entrance and down the narrow hall to the inn. It was noisy inside, with candles and lamps glowing to chase away the autumnal gloom just outside the small building. It was an old inn, probably at least half a century old if Louis could guess at all, but surprisingly welcome and cozy. He breathed a sigh of relief from the soothing warmth that began to erase the day’s chilling drizzle.

By the time they entered the center of the building, Louis noticed just how full it was as well. Men of all sorts and of all ages sat around in close circles, drinking from stained pewter tankards, speaking in low voices and laughing in loud ones. It was strangely intimidating, and Louis felt a childish annoyance at himself for stepping a bit closer to Jack as if asking for protection.

“Don’t worry, little lord,” Jack said with a smirk, looking behind him towards Louis. “None of them will bother you tonight. I’ll make sure of it.”

Louis felt another pang of irritation for how relieved those words made him feel.

They went up the stairs together, unnoticed by the other patrons, and down the far end of the hall towards a tall, wooden door. Jack unlocked it with a key he pulled from his coat pocket and opened the door.

The room was small. A traditional, practical, Yorkish room that boasted no pretense, but plenty of simple comforts. Louis wanted to exult in its coziness, save for one minor detail: there was only one bed, right in the middle of the room, with an old chair and a small table by the lit fireplace.

“Um,” he said awkwardly. He looked up to Jack for some kind of assistance, but he looked just as confused as Louis. A long beat drew on, with both men standing still at the entrance of the room, staring at the one bed.

The sound of footsteps broke them from their bewilderment, and they both turned around to find a servant approaching

them from up the stairs, holding the trunks they left in the curricle. He set them down inside the room, and Louis noticed the rather large tip that Jack handed him for rendering the simple service.

“Aye, thanks to ye, sir,” he said, bowing politely.

“Are there, by chance, any rooms larger than this?” Jack asked.

“No, sir, it’s the last one. Bed’s big enough, I’d wager, and the boy don’t take up much space!”

“Right.”

And with that, as well as any hopes of maintaining a sense of respectability, Louis watched the servant leave them to stew in their own shared awkwardness.

Jack cleared his throat and approached Louis with the rope once more.

“Wait, please,” Louis said quickly. “My wrists are chafed to hell and back. Please don’t tie them up again. I can’t bear to be flayed at the moment.”

“And what would you have me do? Let you go free to traipse about the premises and look for a way out?”

“I’d have nowhere to go, and I haven’t the slightest idea where the devil we even are. Any chances I have of living through this is to stay put, nevermind how bloody tired I am to begin with. Please, I beg of you, sir.”

Jack looked at him for a moment, and Louis made the best possible pleading face he could muster. He thought about all the times when he was a little boy when he begged his mother for an extra tart or for his father to go see the bugs down by the creek of their country estate with him. To his surprise (and relief), Jack pursed his lips and let out a long sigh.

“Fine.”

Louis could hug him, if he weren’t so terrifying to look at.

“Oh God, thank you, Jack! All I’m good for now anyway is falling right to sleep. You have no idea how exhausted today

has been for me.”

Jack glanced quickly towards the bed with his one eye, which filled Louis again with an awkward fluttering feeling in his stomach. He pushed his black and silver hair back with a hand and scratched the back of his neck. Louis hadn't seen Jack as anything but a terrifying psychopath before, and the hesitation—and possibly bashfulness?—that Louis saw on his face now made him feel some strange sense of pity. He knew he would regret it, but his mouth opened before his mind worked.

“Let me sleep in the chair. I won't cause any problems—I promise you. Please, just let me sleep.”

Jack's nose crinkled. “I should make you sleep on the floor.”

“You don't mean that. Besides, I've been nothing but the perfect *détenu* one such as you could ask for.”

“Just quit with the French, and I'll allow it.”

They both went to opposite sides of the small room to change out of their outerwear. Louis kept his back strictly to Jack, facing the fire to extract as much warmth as he could as he pulled off the jacket and waistcoat that he was forced to wear. The room was cozy, but the rain and wind from outside picked up in intensity, and he knew it would be a cold night. He slipped off his boots and curled up gingerly on the old, moth-bitten chair.

It was the most uncomfortable thing he had ever touched in his entire life.

The seat was entirely lopsided from overuse, and the entire thing smelt of old dust and dirty clothes. Louis would have retched had he not been so close to sleep already. The warmth of the fire began to lull him towards unconsciousness, until he felt something grab at his legs.

“Oh!” he cried out suddenly. He looked down to see Jack tying something around his ankles.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Would you be fucking quiet?”

“You scared the blazes out of me. What on earth are you doing?”

Jack was tying his legs together with a smaller, silken cord. At the end of the cloth was a small bell. Jack rattled it tauntingly.

“I won’t tie your hands up,” he said, standing back up before Louis, “but I won’t let you get off that easily. If I hear your bell rattle too much tonight, or if I hear you try and make a run for it, I’ll make you regret it. Understood?”

“A bell? You can’t be serious. I already told you that I’m not a dog!”

The look Jack gave him was particularly savage. “Shall I make you bark? Do you forget who has the power here?”

Louis scoffed, feeling thoroughly degraded in a way that he never had in his entire life. “If my father ever hears of this, and I live to see what he does to you for how you’ve treated me, I would thank God in heaven for such a blessing.”

Jack sneered, his well-groomed whiskers rising just above his sharp, white teeth. If his goal was to intimidate Louis, then it was working extraordinarily well.

He leaned in close, resting his hands on his knees, until his face was just a few inches away from Louis’s.

“What did I tell you about mentioning your father?”

Louis gulped, feeling his face grow hot as tremors of fear ran down his spine.

“Honest mistake,” he said quietly. “I merely forgot. Please pardon my tongue.”

Jack’s one eye scanned up and down Louis’s face, his dark blue iris scorching his skin under its intensity. Between the eye-patch, whiskers, and overall churlish demeanor, Jack truly was terrifying to look at. Louis had almost forgotten how dangerous he was considering the past few minutes they’ve had together.

He winced when Jack lifted a hand up, fully expecting a sharp smack to the face. Instead, he saw Jack curl his finger to his thumb, before delivering a sharp flick right to Louis’s nose.

“Ow!” he yelped out.

Jack grinned down at him, showing off his white teeth again. "Sleep well, little lord. We've a big day tomorrow."

Louis rubbed his nose, annoyed at Jack's fickleness, before turning around in his chair in a huff. He heard Jack pull his own boots off and slide under the covers, turning the last gas lamp off in the room. Only the faint light from the small fire right next to Louis allowed him to see anything, and the howling of the storm outside filled his ears and drowned out the pounding of his heart.

He couldn't erase the image of Jack's face from his mind. He had been close enough for Louis to examine all of his features, which only confused him more. He was somewhat handsome, in a twisted, evil way, but handsome nonetheless. Like a devil might be. His whiskers were trimmed and neat and he looked, for lack of a better word, *clean*.

But what stood out for Louis the most was how white his teeth were. Those were not the teeth of some vagabond or criminal. Assuming Jack hadn't plucked those teeth from the mouths of his various victims over the years, it meant he had at least some access to decent society. Just who was this man? And what did he want with Louis?

Confusion and anxiety kept him awake for some time longer, but utter exhaustion won over eventually.

He wasn't sure why, but Louis felt a strange feeling in his chest, just as he was about to fall asleep, when he heard a deep intonation behind him. It almost startled him at first, before he realized what it was.

Jack was snoring.

Louis curled his lip in annoyance, at the very least just for the utter ridiculousness of the situation in which he found himself. He tried not to shift too much, as the bell jingled each time Louis repositioned himself on the disgusting old chair, but Jack's snores soon filled the room and drowned out even the sound of the wind and rain outside.

And soon enough, it lulled Louis to sleep as well.

Chapter 5

The night, as Louis anticipated, had turned frigid.

He was shaking in the old chair when he cracked open his swollen eyes. Images of safety flashed beneath his eyelids, as if he were dreaming of a place far away from the dirty inn where he lay chained. When the wretched daylight of morning streamed in from the open window, the realization that he was still in danger was almost too much to bear.

The fact that someone was picking him up from his makeshift bed certainly didn't help.

He blinked the blurriness from his eyes, making sure he caught that bit clearly. A strong form wrapped its arms beneath him, the mortifying bell attached to his ankles rang softly from the movement.

“What the devil—put me down!” he grumbled piteously. He was never much of a morning person, never mind the less-than-stellar circumstances he was in.

His wish was soon granted. The figure deposited him on the firm mattress, still warmed from use. When Louis's vision cleared enough to focus on what was before him, he saw Jack's face peering down at him.

Of course it was him.

“I suppose this means the affairs of yesterday were not some horrible dream to wake from?”

“Afraid not, little lord,” Jack said, gripping Louis's wrist and pulling it above his head. “I won't be gone long. Behave in my absence.”

Louis had little fight in him left, certainly at this time of day, so he simply hummed his affirmation. These bandit types were so droll in their ways; argument was of little use.

“What are you doing?”

“Can't have you slinking away from me just yet. Not after all we've been through so far.” Jack wound a rough cravat across Louis's wrist, before securely knotting it against the bedpost

behind him. The cloth itself wasn't particularly uncomfortable, but the knot limited any movement Louis might have made with his hand.

He sighed in discomfort.

"Is this *really* necessary?"

Jack huffed, moving towards the other side of the bed to grab his other wrist. "Best not to find out. I prefer to keep my cargo secured."

"Yes, this is all very humiliating and debasing," Louis curled his lip, as Jack tied his other hand to the bedpost. He was drawn out, his arms stretched and exposed, as if he were crucified upon the rumpled mattress. "I'm sure you derive much pleasure from my mortification."

"Let's just call it an added benefit." Jack leaned forward and gently gripped Louis's jaw between his thick fingers. "Like I said, I won't be gone long. Don't move—don't make noise. Most importantly, don't make me regret not gagging you."

"Yes, sir," Louis spat out. He wanted desperately to bite off Jack's finger. Drawing a bit of his blood just might make up for the absurdity of the situation. Jack pulled the sheets up the rest of his body, covering him in their warmth, and finished pulling on his coat.

And with that, he walked out and locked the door behind him. Louis surveyed his surroundings in the daylight. The sun streamed in at such a low angle that he could only assume it was just after dawn. No noise, save for some light birdsong, carried over into the isolated room. The fire went out overnight, but the warmth of the covers kept Louis from shivering too terribly. The more he pulled on the restraints, the more it chafed his wrists, so he quickly discarded any half-thought out attempts to wriggle out of the bindings and escape. On the mattress he was to remain—until Jack decided otherwise.

Being at the mercy of the man's whim was depressing, to say the least. Louis had never been denied anything, save for during his father's half-hearted attempts at raising him. He

was a natural charmer—eager to please and easy to be liked—so people typically just, well, gave him what he wanted. He wasn't sure if this bear of a man who captured him even knew what charm was. He was diabolically uncultured and uninteresting. At least his bed was warm.

The night of rest, despite how little he got, afforded Louis the chance to clear his mind. He wasn't sure if he would be able to get out of this situation without causing major bodily harm to himself. Despite Jack's philistinism, he seemed to, in his own disturbing way perhaps, at least give Louis the opportunity to avoid any lasting damage to his person. Never mind the mental scars this ordeal would leave him with. He wasn't sure what these marauders wanted from him, but he could only assume, based on Jack's reactions, that it had something to do with his father. Blackmail, perhaps, or some ridiculous attempt at achieving vengeance by capturing his only son. If he were being honest, his father probably deserved the scare and scandal this would all cause, as long as Jack and the rest of his band of apes hanged for it. At the very least, if Louis got out of this alive, it would make for an appealing story to woo the ladies with during the coming London season. He might even be seen as a hero, if he were able to escape the clutches of these brutes with his life (and more importantly, his good looks).

That meant, if he wanted to make it out alive and handsome, he needed to keep his wits about him. Do what they say, keep his head low, look for the first opportunity to make a break for it. Preferably once they are out of Yorkshire.

The relative peace of mind these thoughts brought him made Louis weak with sleep once more. The bed was just *so* warm and inviting, especially after the back-breaking stiffness of that wretched chair, that he felt his eyelids droop, despite the way his wrists were bound so inelegantly to the bed frame.

To his delight, the bed also smelled somewhat pleasant, of woodsmoke and cedar, as opposed to whatever barnyard odors he might have anticipated from a place of such low repute. If he could only forget about the slight ache in his wrists, he would have felt entirely comfortable. But the lull of the early

morning proved victorious, and Louis drifted off back to sleep before long.

And, before long once more, he was reawakened—the second time being no more glamorous than the first.

The loud jingling of Jack’s key in the door, amplified by the creaking of the floorboards beneath his ghastly long legs, elicited a drawn out sigh from Louis.

“You could at least attempt not to rattle my teeth wherever you step.”

Jack didn’t reply, and the elephant-like stomp of his boots did not come any closer towards Louis. That, at last, got him to open his eyes.

He saw Jack staring at him, his hands on his hips. His mouth was pursed tight, as if in an attempt to either stifle a laugh or to encourage one out of Louis. It was dreadfully confusing, and the discomfort in his wrists, now even more precarious due to how numb they felt, woke Louis fully out of his half-asleep stupor.

As did noticing his own long, turgid erection poking out from under the sheets.

There really was no denying it. A brief attempt at shifting or covering his manhood with his hands proved obviously to be fruitless. Bound as he was, with his ankles still tied together, Louis could do nothing to hide his habitual morning arousal.

A sudden urge for sputtering came quickly.

“Untie me this instant!” he cried out, feeling his cheeks burn scarlet. “Heavens above! Is a man afforded not a whit of privacy or decency?”

Jack didn’t move, nor turn away. Instead, to Louis’s increasing mortification, he wheezed out a laugh, which he only barely attempted to conceal with a quick wipe of his nose.

“My apologies,” he said, finally walking over towards the side of the bed to undo the tied knots. “Had I known this would

cause such a reaction, I would have flipped you onto your stomach.”

“Oh, you’re a villain,” Louis snarled. He could hear how high-pitched his voice had become, how thickly his posh accent rolled off his tongue from the embarrassment. “Absolutely criminal. I’ll have you hang for this, sir. Please release me immediately.”

“Poor choice of words, boy,” Jack said as he freed Louis’s restrained hand, which promptly snaked underneath the sheets to cover his solid prick. “Nothing there to be ashamed of.”

“Oh, blast it. Confound it all. I have never been treated thusly in my entire life.”

“Perhaps it should happen more often. I don’t see any complaints coming from your body.”

Jack undid the other wrist, and Louis sat up promptly and hugged his knees to his chest. With the initial cause for embarrassment now obscured, more righteous anger pooled in his chest.

“I suppose that was your plan all along? You filthy pervert. How dare you. To whisk me off of a train like a wild animal is one thing, insulting my name and my father quite another. But this? To—to insult my very honor in such a way? You’ll pay for this. I swear it.”

“Oh, relax, little lord,” Jack said, packing up the rest of his trunk and not even bothering to look at Louis again. “So what—your prick got hard from being tied up. It happens. Be as shocked as you wish, but I didn’t tarnish any bit of your honor. You’re not some maid in need of keeping.”

This accusation only spurred Louis’s anger even further.

“Tied up! Tied up!” he ejaculated. “Don’t insult me with such rubbish. It’s natural and—and completely *normal* for such a thing to occur upon waking. It had nothing to do with the restraints.”

Jack ignored his stammering protests. “Anyway, we must leave within the quarter hour,” he continued, all sense of

humor draining from his voice. “Get dressed. We’ve more riding ahead of us today, and I won’t be putting up with any of your nonsense this time around.”

Louis mumbled more profanities under his breath, swinging his bound legs off of the side of the bed to untie the belt surrounding them. He then turned completely against the wall as he stood up to pull the itchy trousers back on alongside the rest of his outerwear. The pressure in his bladder, now in full force after he recovered some of his tarnished dignity, reminded him of one more task to complete before he made through with his desire to never speak to this man again.

“May I at least relieve myself in privacy before we continue on? Or would you like to act as my voyeur once again?”

“Have at it,” Jack huffed, pulling the trunks up into his arms with little effort. “I’ll be waiting outside, and I trust you’ll take care not to forget your way, in case you get any ideas of running off. Oh, and one more thing?”

Louis shot him an impatient look.

“Feel free to take care of any *other* business that would help relieve you,” he said, glancing back down towards Louis’s cockstand.

Louis blinked slowly. Before the rush of shame burned into more indignant anger, Jack cackled loudly and shut the door behind him.

Chapter 6

Louis waited impatiently on the curricle while Jack was speaking to another man on the other side of the stables. He tapped his foot against the wood of the vehicle, not appreciating the soggy, breezy morning. The clear skies above were quickly turning yesterday's rain into thick humidity, which only served to worsen his mood.

If he were going to be imprisoned as cargo for blackmail, these bandits could at the very least be quicker about it.

He wondered if he spoke too soon when a figure approached his side.

"Sleep well, lad?" the gruff voice barked out.

"As well as one might, in such conditions," Louis drawled, before turning to see with whom he was speaking. It was a sallow, tall man, dressed in all black just like the others. His gray mustache was curled up into devil-like horns, raised higher by the man's toothy grin. Well, as toothy as it could be, with half of his front teeth missing.

"Careful there," Louis spoke before he could stop himself, "flies might get in through those gaps."

The man's face darkened, and he shut his mouth.

"I'd lose a bit of that lip, if I were you," he said spitefully. "The General might be keen on keeping you without a scratch, but it wouldn't be the first time I went against his orders."

"The *General*? You must be joking. Rethink the pretty little titles, if you blackguards want to be thought of as anything like a real threat."

The man started forward, clearly about to either strike Louis or perhaps spit on him like some beast through his missing teeth, but he stopped himself at the approaching sound of footsteps. Louis turned to see Jack raising himself up into the driver's side of the curricle. One acidic look was all it took for the other man to make a break for it.

“Was he giving you trouble?” he said, turning to gaze at Louis curiously.

“He was deficient in manners, though I cannot hold it against him.”

“No one else is to speak with you. I made that quite clear to them early on. If any of the other men say so much as a word —”

“You’ll what?” Louis grumbled in irritation. “Challenge them to a duel? What a shining, white knight you would make. Better rethink the grave robber’s clothes”

“Careful there, boy,” Jack said more quietly, with a hint of steel to his voice. “I don’t mind your candor, but be careful.”

Louis just pursed his lips, which was all he could do to not roll his eyes, as they drove off.

Yesterday’s fears were quickly becoming today’s annoyances. Whatever terror this motley band of vagrants had instilled in him was rapidly depleting. If they wanted to appear thuggish and brutal, they might at least make more of an effort at it. Something about the way they cowed before Jack, or “the General” he ought to say, made him feel bold, possibly a bit reckless. They answered only to Jack, and Louis felt pretty damn sure that Jack really didn’t want to hurt him. He considered, then, how much he could actually get away with.

He decided to push his limits during the day’s ride.

“What is that man’s name? The one with the curled mustache?”

“What’s it to you?” Jack said, voice even. Louis wondered how long it would take to rile him up again.

“Am I not allowed to be curious? There’s hardly any other attractions in these desolate hills.”

A beat passed. “It’s Randall.”

“Randall, hmm? You gentlemen sure like your monographs, don’t you? Jack. Randall. What’s next? Though, I suppose such is the result of poor breeding. Do you even know your father’s name?”

Jack didn't respond, much less look even slightly irritated. Another beat passed.

"He called you *The General*. My, my, now what do we make of that?"

"What game are you playing at, boy?"

"I simply wish to know. The General sounds so *awfully* scary. I ought to have brought my salts in case I faint."

"Enough. Or I'll give you something to really faint over."

"You know, you're not *that* scary, I dare say," Louis pressed on. He draped his arm over the back of the curricule's seat, relishing in the fact that he wasn't tied up at all. He wanted to make Jack regret that decision. "Though the eyepatch works well in your favor. It gives a bit of mystery, a rusty sort of charm. Is it even real?"

His taller partner just huffed in response. Louis couldn't tell if his jaw was clenched out of anger, annoyance, or in an attempt to hold back a smile.

"I'd wager it is. You don't seem the vain type. Not that you need to be, mind you. If only the rest of your men weren't so disgusting to look at. I thought all you villains needed some sort of dastardly charm to get away with murder. Well, I guess that works well in your favor actually, doesn't it? Just pin it all on the ugly one."

At last, Louis detected a hint of a curling lip on the man's scarred, whiskered face. It looked to be perhaps the beginnings of a smile.

"If you do decide to kill me and sell my skin and bones for money—or whatever it is you do," he continued, "might I suggest buying Randall a set of false teeth with the first earnings? Better yet, give him mine. I've taken great care of them in the meantime. I'll be sure to write out my dental routine in the will."

Jack shook his head and laughed. It was a bark more than anything, a single exhalation that he really tried to

prevent. It wasn't much, but Louis was willing to take any victory, no matter how small.

Relishing in winning the silly mental wager he created for himself, Louis waited until his partner spoke up first.

"You are quite talkative today."

"Indeed. One does make do with one's society, no matter how grim."

"Must be nice finding an outlet for release, especially after the day you just had."

"Quite."

"As worked up as you were, too, might I add. I'm happy you are more willing now to open your mouth."

"Now, that's not—" Louis felt the heat rise to his cheeks.

"I wonder how else I might get you to open up," Jack continued, not taking his eyes off the road before them. "Tying you down seemed to work well."

"Don't be so vulgar," Louis snapped. His face felt hot. "I'd rather you not mention that again."

"I've heard that one before, little lord. That is, until the next time the rope is in my hands."

"You're disgusting."

"For someone of your wit, I'm surprised how virtuous you are. Maybe I will let you talk to Randall after all. He's got some stories that would make your dainty little ears start bleeding."

"I'd rather sew my mouth shut."

"Oh, is that what you're into? I'll keep it in mind if I ever get you to lay on your belly."

Louis scoffed in revulsion. He should have known that these men, on top of being thugs, were also inverters. The very thought was abominable, and the recollection of Jack walking

in on Louis in his, well, *predicament* was enough to make him burn in shame anew.

The man was impossible to understand. He looked as crude as a pirate, with an eyepatch and ridiculous wardrobe to match, yet he spoke well enough. He ruled over these other men with an iron will, strong enough for them to cower from a mere glance from his one eye, yet he'd basically all but given his promise that Louis isn't actually in any immediate physical danger. And now, in what he could only think of as a battle of wits, he managed to emerge victorious—over *Louis*, of all people—through some admittedly barbaric remarks about sodomy.

He couldn't bear to look at Jack again, except in a brief glance, only to notice that he was smiling smugly, likely winning his own little wager to make Louis want to vomit as quickly as possible. They rode on in silence, and he could only hope that whatever fresh circle of hell awaited him, it wasn't going to be much farther.

The remainder of the drive passed as Louis continued to tend to his wounded sensibilities. The clear weather, with the sun burning away most of the humidity after the first hour or so, made the drive rather lovely—if such a word could even be used in a situation like this.

His interest was piqued even further when they finally appeared to be approaching their destination. A large house, incredibly large even by Louis's standards, appeared down a tree-lined grotto just ahead. The architecture was remarkable, possibly from somewhere around the 16th century or so if his lessons held up, and in beautiful condition. The stoneware was well-washed beige, and the lawns were impeccably manicured.

“Are we here at last?” he said, eyes wide as they approached ever closer.

Jack didn't respond, but the slight smirk on his face told Louis all that he wanted to know.

Some of the others were there waiting for him already. A handful of men stood just before the gate leading into the house's shrubbed entrance. Upon seeing the curricule, they pulled the iron gate apart and let them through.

Louis couldn't blame himself for his excitement. The grand house was more fabulous than he ever could have predicted, especially considering the wretched state of the inn they were at just the night prior. He wondered what kind of men this band actually consisted of, and why they would have access to something so ostentatious.

To his even greater astonishment, the front of the house was lined with liveried servants, all of whom were perfectly dressed and polished. It looked to be a real royal entourage awaiting them all—awaiting Louis in particular, he imagined.

He was already beginning to like it here.

As the curricule finally stopped at the front of the manor, and the dust of the driveway settled, a woman came out of the great doors leading inside. She walked with an elegance that, to Louis's well-trained eye, could only mean proper breeding. She was a real lady, titled perhaps, and obviously of a distinguished family. As she hurried down the steps, a great, friendly smile blossomed across her face.

It was odd, then, that he had never seen her before, nor had any clue who she was.

"At long last!" she bellowed out, the servants parting out of her way. "My dears have *finally* arrived. I do hope the journey was not very unpleasant?"

"Not at all, ma'am," Jack answered, smiling at her as he jumped out of the vehicle. "No trouble indeed."

"Very good. Very good. And I see you have brought along this fine, young gentleman." She smiled up at Louis. This was his element, if nothing else. He knew how to charm women like her with nothing but a look.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said, curling his tongue around the words and laying on the thickest possible accent he could muster. "I'm afraid I haven't had the courtesy of a

proper introduction. Perhaps our mutual friend here might do me the honor.”

Jack raised a brow at him.

“Er—,” he continued unphased “or perhaps unusual circumstances call for unusual etiquette.”

“Ah, but you see, sir,” the woman smiled up at him. “I already have the privilege of knowing who you are. You, my dearest, are Lord Earlshope, son of the Marquess of Tilby. I know you quite well, in fact, though doubtless you will not know who I am. I won’t hold it against you.”

The woman was of a relatively non-descript appearance. Middle-aged, though not wrinkled; elegant, though not beautiful; graceful, though not tall. She wore a pink dress, overlain with a black mesh that served to tone down what otherwise would be a garish tone at such an early hour. Her light brown hair was done up in an older style, with a strong part down the middle and looped up to cover the lobes of her ears. Her smile seemed inviting enough, yet Louis hesitated.

“Of course, ma’am,” he said. “And would you be so good as to inform me of whom I am addressing?”

“All to come, dear boy, all to come. Now, may I show you inside? You’ll be staying with me for some time. I do hope you’ll find it to your liking.”

He was about to acquiesce, reply with some form of “yes, ma’am” or “of course!” But, just as the words formed on his lips, a change overcame the woman’s countenance. Her smile dropped, her eyes became shaded, her posture drooping slightly.

“Bag him,” she called out in a deeper voice.

Jack moved to her side quickly, shooting a brief, almost sympathetic smile towards Louis, as two of the servants moved in from the sides with a canvas bag and silver handcuffs.

Louis thought of yelling for help, but thought, *oh bother, what on earth would be the point?*

The bag was thrown over his rustled hair, and his hands were bound in metal behind his back. The servants, both sprightly men who towered over Louis's lithe frame, gripped his arms and pushed him roughly forward. He followed without protest.

He figured this was all becoming a tad too easy.

Chapter 7

Louis stared up at the pink ceiling. It was garishly puce, an abysmally wretched, nauseating color—and it was all that he had to look at for the past three days.

He was going insane. He could feel it. Three days locked in the pink room, with not a soul for conversation. The only living creature he encountered was the tall, stone-faced servant who came in to drop off his meals, take away his plates, and set up his bath every other night. His paltry attempts at appealing to the servant's sensibilities never worked, and they only made Louis feel even more hopeless.

Upon arriving at the great house, and after that witch of a woman had the bag thrown over his head, Louis had been locked away in this solitary confinement. He had no idea what her plans were with him, or who she was. The way she knew his name and title was slightly unnerving, and she possessed none of the rustic charm that Jack carried with him. Louis had concluded, somewhere during the second night of his confinement, that he was utterly, and completely, fucked.

At least his belongings arrived. The servant had dropped off his trunk containing his clothes, books, and other items from his travels to Edinburgh, no doubt having been snatched from the train by the rest of Jack's gang. He had no valet, of course, so his toilet was abysmal and messy, but the familiarity of his own clothing was vastly superior to the rags Jack dressed him up in.

He lay sprawled on the large bed, feverishly fanning himself in an attempt to stave off panic and insanity. He was beyond bored, and the pink room had no amusements with which to distract him. A desk with no paper and an empty dresser were his sole companions. The door was obviously locked, as was the tiny window which overlooked the expansive grounds of the woman's estate. The weather over the three days had been glorious—perfect sunshine and perfect clarity. Staring out that window only made Louis sick with longing, so on his bed was he to remain.

Like clockwork, just as the midday bell rang, the door opened again. The same tall, bland servant walked in carrying the silver tray, upon which a cold sandwich waited for Louis. The servant set the tray down on the desk.

“My father would have heard of my absence by now,” Louis said, not taking his eyes off the slight crack in the pink ceiling. The house was shoddy as well as tacky—go figure. “If you were to help release me, I promise he would pay you handsomely.”

The servant said nothing. The only response was the slight clattering of the silverware being laid out on either side of the luncheon.

“Tell me, sir, the cost of your allegiance, and it will be yours. 50 pounds? 60? 100? I don’t care much for money any more; have my entire fortune, if it pleases you. I’m sure you’ve never even seen that much money all at once.”

“I don’t want *your* money,” the servant said. It was quiet, perhaps meant to be hidden under his breath, but Louis heard it regardless.

He bolted up in bed. The man spoke to him. They were the first words he had heard in over seventy-two hours.

“I could kiss you after hearing those words. Surely, no nymph’s song was ever as beautiful as the sound of another human’s voice. I’ve come to despise my own.”

The servant looked at him awkwardly, likely feeling as though he should apologize for what Louis could only imagine was breaking a strict order of silence, but saying nothing to avoid breaking it further. Instead, he simply bowed, and made his way out. The sound of the lock turning in the door made Louis wince.

“Ah, well,” he muttered, flopping back down onto the mattress. He had developed the horrible habit of talking to himself. True insanity, therefore, could not be very far.

Another two days passed without incident.

As breakfast was brought into Louis's chamber early in the morning of the fifth day, the servant paused before exiting.

"What?" Louis groaned out, not bothering to lift his head from under the pillow.

"Her ladyship requests your audience this morning," the servant said.

That roused Louis. "Her ladyship? Oh, the mistress of the house, I suppose. Am I finally to be released from this wretched condition?"

"I'll be back to retrieve you after you've finished your meal, sir."

"Wait. I must dress. Can you send someone to help me? I can't possibly go out looking like *this*. Her ladyship, I imagine deserves better, and I must not disrespect her hospitality."

The servant said nothing, and turned on his heel. The door was locked once more.

When Louis was sat down across from the mysterious woman, he could hardly contain his vitriol, made even more difficult from his wretched appearance. He had a sudden newfound respect for valets for the effort they put into neatly dressing their employers.

She, however, still seemed intent on playing the hapless innocent.

"I trust you've been enjoying my home during your stay, Lord Earlshope? I apologize for my absence. I must tend to my other guests as well, you see."

"Very pleasant indeed, ma'am," Louis said tiredly. "Though there are cracks in my ceiling. You ought to look into fixing them before long. I doubt the infrastructure will hold up to a winter storm."

"Cracks? No, you must be mistaken, dear boy. My house is perfection itself. I will not hear of any faults that you may find with it."

“Then may I return to my chambers? For I can think of nothing else but my many thoughts of this abyss.”

“Hmmpf,” she said, looking to the side and sipping at her tea. Louis was not offered to partake in any of the refreshments the servants were laying out. “I’m sure you are quite confused, and that you have many questions.”

“Where is Jack?” They both seemed surprised at Louis’s words. He wasn’t sure why he blurted that out. He didn’t even really care where the man was.

“He is away. I will be your guardian in the meantime.”

“And who, exactly, are you? I don’t find it fair that we are not on even playing terms here, ma’am. You honor me by knowing my family history. It would be right if I knew any of yours.”

“I am not so deficient in manners to know that. You may refer to me as Madame D’Arc. That is all I can tell you of myself for the time being.”

“D’Arc? *Êtes-vous française, madame? Est-ce que je m’adresse à une noblesse du pays?*”

She colored slightly, and then sipped from her teacup once more. “I feel obliged to tell you as well that you will come under no harm here, so long as a reason is not given.”

Louis kept a smile from his lips, though only barely. The woman was a sham; any semi-respectable lady would have been able to parse his elementary French. It was all a ruse, and she was no likely any more civilized than a tradesman’s toddler. He kept this realization to himself—for the time being, at least.

“Shall I thank you for such a privilege?” he said with acid in his voice.

“Yes, in fact. You should.” She gave him a look. “Many have underestimated me before, perhaps because I am a woman, or whatever else, but that has been their undoing. Take care not to do the same.”

He could see she was not joking. Class pretender or not, the woman looked vicious. Something in her eye, marred

perhaps by the lack of any real beauty or distinction in her countenance, hid something particularly dangerous. Not even Jack or any of his men carried such an uncanny disposition.

“Yes, ma’am,” was all he said in turn.

“I am in a generous mood, however,” she said, her dour look resuming her hospitable smile. “I would like to relate to you a story. Do you care to listen?”

“If it pleases you, ma’am.”

“Indeed. Well, how shall I begin? Perhaps as all good stories ought to: once upon a time, there was a young woman. She was well-liked—amiable and kind—though no real beauty and possessing no name of consequence. I could not flatter her even this. She met a young man who was very handsome and very kind to her. Though, of course, he came from a station far above hers, and regardless of her wishes and dreams, she knew she could never marry him, no matter how deeply she loved him.

“And you must not blame her, for she believed he loved her in return. Though lacking beauty, the woman was rich and in possession of a large income thanks to her father’s pursuit in trade. He, meanwhile, had title, but very little left of his fortune, for it had been squandered by the actions of those who came before him. They plotted an elopement, to the benefit of both of their situations. Do you follow?”

He nodded in return. He had a vague sense of who the man in her story was.

“After running off together,” she continued, “but before they were married, the man had abandoned her. Left alone, and shunned from society, this young woman had little to turn to, you see. He, all the while, returned to his elegant society at the promise of another woman who might share her fortune with him. They married happily, and the young woman of our story? Well, she was all but forgotten.”

Louis, now quite bored with the euphemisms, crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair. “Yes, and

I am sure you are very eager now to get vengeance on the man's lineage. How very clever of you."

She smiled. "Oh, I bore you, do I? Perhaps you had not been left alone in the room long enough to tolerate my kindness. My mistake. How do you think another fortnight would serve? Perhaps then you would be happy to hear my tale?"

He scoffed, mostly to hide the rising feeling of alarm at the thought.

"Your kind always runs on your own time," she said, her smile slowly fading away. She looked him up and down, her dark brown eyes searching for something he could not discern. "It really is my pleasure to alter your perspective a bit. That's why you have been left in my care. Do you understand now?"

"Clearly, ma'am. Like crystal."

"Our world, dear boy—our very way of life—it is evil. I simply wish to change what I can, when I can."

"By torturing a young man, innocent of whatever broken promises still haunt you, simply because of his name?"

"Individuals have suffered far worse fates for having the wrong name. I think perhaps it is time to try and even the scales."

"So what? You lock away one heir. You hold me for ransom, and make my father pay in whatever way you wish for breaking your heart. What exactly do you suppose that is going to change?"

"Oh, my dear. I didn't mean to imply you were the one and only, nor that *your* father was the villain in my little story. You see, the point is, you knew it *could* have been your father, because men of his situation in life are always keen on treating others in such a way. I'm afraid you are not the first to interpret my tale in this way. There is nothing special about you, Lord Earlshope—simply your addition to my collection will prove useful in the long run."

He started at her words. "There are others here?"

She smiled in return. "My house *is* very large."

"How many?"

"I don't wish to bore you with numbers. But, as much as I have enjoyed our little chat, there is a young woman I am due to speak with next. You will return to your room."

She rang the bell. Two servants stepped in from the wings of the house to escort Louis back to his imprisonment. A bag was thrown over his head once more, and he was pulled up aggressively from his seat.

His mind was racing as he was thrown back into the pink room, left alone without a word or so much as a glance from the two men. The house was quiet, and the distance between his room and Madame D'Arc's drawing-room was quite far, from what he could tell. The thought, however, of each of these rooms being filled with other captured nobility was almost too absurd to consider. To test the theory, he went to one side of the room and pressed his ear closely to the wall. He could hear nothing.

But morbid curiosity was getting the better of him. Could someone be there? He knocked on the firm, solid wall. There was no response. He knocked again, harder this time.

He swore, as he strained his ears, he could almost hear a quick shuffling of feet. Maybe the rustling of some bedding? He knocked again even more loudly.

A beat passed, before a knock came from the other side of the wall.

Chapter 8

The servants had just left, taking away the remains of Louis's dinner, and he could finally exhale.

It was with great difficulty that he managed to contain himself. Not usually accustomed to keeping secrets or hiding his emotions, the realization that someone was likewise incarcerated in the room right next to him was—what, exactly? Terrifying? Relieving? Damning? Liberating? He couldn't quite tell. It disturbed him that he was not the only one suffering the fate of being locked away for ransom, but at the same time, he was glad not to be alone in this den of vipers.

He walked back over to the side of the wall, pressing his ear close to the paper. Was that pacing he could hear? It was so faint it could very well have just been his imagination; the walls must have been fortified to muffle sound so strongly.

And yet, when he knocked firmly—three taps, exactly—a moment passed before the same knock was heard from the other side.

This made him shiver once more. He didn't dare use his voice, terrified that it might carry in the wrong direction, but hugged the wall as if it were the person on the other side of it. Desperation and loneliness would do that, even to someone like Louis. He groaned inwardly, knowing how ridiculous he must have looked.

Naturally, the door opened at that moment, and a tall, broad figure slipped in.

Louis scrambled down to his feet, turning towards the door and hoping that whatever the intruder didn't see much. A gas lamp lit up the room, which was beginning to darken as twilight passed by outside, and Jack's face lit up in the orange glow.

“What are you doing?” he said with a twinge of exasperation to find Louis sprawled out on the floor. As much

as he hated to say it, hearing Jack's voice was overwhelmingly comforting.

"It's you!" he called out, shuffling up to his feet. "I don't know whether to thank God for the privilege of conversing with someone who's not one of those stupid servants, or curse him for bringing *you* to me, in this state, after what you've done."

Jack walked up to him, inspecting him closely from his gargantuan height. Louis craned his neck to meet his one-eyed gaze, defiantly staring back. He pretended not to notice the flush he felt spread down his own body as Jack's eye raked across it.

"You don't seem hurt," he said, "so quit the melodrama. You're fine."

"Fine? *Fine?!?*" Louis said incredulously, voice rising to a dangerously high pitch. Before he could make a bigger fool of himself, Jack quickly stepped closer and pressed his palm over Louis's mouth and muffled his affronted cries.

"Dammit all, could you learn to be quiet for once in your life?" Jack hissed.

A moment passed, Louis internally deciding whether to scream just to anger him or to bite the finger enclosed over his lips. However, the intensity of their closeness, and the dancing light of the gas lamp across Jack's dark pupil, silenced any thoughts of rebelliousness. He gave a quick nod, and Jack stepped back.

"I'm not supposed to be here," Jack said quickly. "Don't let me get caught."

"Wouldn't want you to get in trouble with Bloody Mary, now would we? You would deserve to be locked up just like this, for what you did to me. How dare you even show your face—wait a minute, then why are you here?"

A spasm passed over Jack's face. To many, perhaps it would have gone unnoticed, but since Louis had not looked at another semi-familiar face in nearly a week now, all minute gestures felt magnanimous.

“I worried for you,” Jack said with a cool shrug.

That was unexpected. Louis was silenced by it, unsure what to say in response.

“Worried?” he tried. “Having regrets *now*, are you? Awful timing, dear fellow. To be sure, if only you’d thought twice of this ridiculous scheme before delivering me into the hands of Satan’s bride herself. How many others like me have you given to her and are locked away as we speak?”

The look of momentary awkwardness was now long gone, and Jack curled his brow. “You’re the only one of mine—at least the only one that matters. And I told you before: I like to keep my cargo safe and secure. You won’t be harmed as long as you do what you’re told.”

“Very reassuring indeed. As long as I live my life as a glorified pauper, an abject mummy to waste away in this god-forsaken *pink* dungeon, then no harm will come to me. Rubbish. Do you have any idea what this has been doing to my mental state?”

“You seem well enough—not much changed since we last spoke. Maybe even a bit improved.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“Those aren’t the words of a gentleman. Maybe Madame D’Arc’s treatment is working more quickly than expected.”

Louis huffed, crossing his arms. “Is that the whole point of this? To make me see the err of my ways? Of the ways of my father? Shall I flagellate myself to appease your radical notions of achieving some kind of classless utopia? How very noble.”

“I admit, Madame D’Arc justifies her actions with a lot of nonsense, never mind the amount I paid her to keep you here. But her sentiments are not my own—I don’t care whether you are penitent or not for being a snotty brat. This isn’t about you at all.”

“Well, it sure as hell feels about me now! Do you forget that I am the one suffering here?”

“There are countless worse ways to suffer, believe me. I should expect you to have thought this was all about you. Seems typical of an Earlshope.”

“Oooh. Harsh. Got me there, mentioning my family name again. Aren’t you tired of that insult? You’ve exhausted it fully.”

“There are plenty of other things I find insulting about you. I’m merely reaching for the lowest hanging fruit.”

“Well, reach higher next time, if you want to impress me,” Louis said.

“Yes, because that’s what interests me: impressing you.”

“You were the one who came to check on me! I’m not some lady of yours in need of safekeeping.”

“Only to find you hugging the wall like some lunatic. I’d never let a lady of mine behave in such a manner. You’d know better.”

“*You* want to lecture *me* on manners?”

“Someone ought to. If you behave like a spoiled child, then you will be treated like one.”

“You—you—oh, damn! You bloody bastard!” Louis said, admitting defeat, before breaking down in a fierce sob. That stunned Jack into silence, who stood awkwardly while Louis wiped tears from his face.

“Are you alright?” he said stiffly. “That, well, that wasn’t really my intention.”

“No, no, I’m not crying because I am so very hurt,” Louis said sniffing. “It’s just—it’s been so *long* since I’ve had a decent conversation. You don’t know what it does to a gentleman to be without good society.”

“Believe me, I’m sure I can relate. Anyway, er...” he trailed off, looking anywhere but directly at Louis. “Do you need a handkerchief?”

“Please. Do not make me wipe my nose on my sleeve. I couldn’t bear it—I love this coat.”

Louis took the linen square Jack offered him and calmed down from his unexpected outburst. They both stood, Louis unsure what to say, under the glowing lamp in Jack’s hand.

“Is boredom really all you suffer from?”

“Do not say it like that. Jack, I sit here, day and night, and do nothing but stare at a wall. Not even the servants will speak or look at me. I have nothing to read—well, save for the few books I brought to Edinburgh, which are not very good—and nothing at all to do.”

“It won’t be for much longer. You will be released when I have finished my use of you.”

“Oh good. Well, I’ll be sure to extend my gratitude when this is over. Thanks for your consideration.”

“Imagine yourself a monk, then. Use the time to commune with God and make peace with your sins.”

“This is England, my dear. We broke away from Rome for a good reason. We don’t make peace with our sins—we bide our time until we can commit them again.”

“Then do just that. I should go; I have already stayed too long.” Jack reached out and gripped Louis by the shoulder, just as he had when he first hauled him off that train. This time, however, it was much gentler. Louis was thankful for the touch.

“You will be alright?” he said softly.

Louis shrugged. “Not my choice of words, but I will not die.”

“Good. Like I said—you’re no use to me if you’re dead.”

Before he could respond, there was an audible shuffle on the other side of the wall behind Louis. It sounded as though someone was either bending down to listen closer, or perhaps scurrying back after having listened. A quick shot of

dread ran through Louis, knowing it must be the other incarcerated noble.

Jack looked at the wall for a moment, then to Louis, then back at the wall. Louis wasn't sure what he was thinking, but hoped he didn't realize that *this* was why Louis had been on the floor when he had first entered the chamber.

If he did realize, then he said nothing. Jack squeezed his shoulder once more before letting go and slipping out, just as quietly as when he first entered. The slow turn of the bolt locked Louis in once more.

Now incredibly exhausted, he eagerly fell against the bed, wondering if he should even bother disrobing before slipping underneath its cold covers. He had no idea how long it would take Jack to finish his "business" whatever that meant, but the conversation refreshed him, breaking up the spirit-crushing boredom he felt day in and day out.

Before sleep overcame him, he managed to rouse himself to take off his outer layers at the very least. They *were*, afterall, quite expensive, and he doubted the servants would be willing to iron out any creases for him.

Some luxuries, he thought, as he hung up his clothes, were just not worth sacrificing.

Chapter 9

Another day passed without note. Louis's descent into madness had been stemmed thanks to both Jack's unexpectedly consoling conversation, and the knowledge that someone—or something, perhaps—was on the other side of his wall. With no proper means of investigating the knock, Louis dared not hope it was anything worth considering. If it were another unfortunate soul locked away until ransom was paid, there was no means of communicating with them. If Madame D'Arc and her household were even crueler than he anticipated, it might as well just be a servant playing a practical joke on Louis. He wouldn't put it past them, the bastards.

How he hated servants in general, but especially those of this household. He made sure to remind them each time they disturbed his solitary confinement.

“This makes you feel big, does it? Like a true martyr for the common people all over the globe?” he hissed, the lanky blond man at whom these insults were directed not even bothering to lift his head as he laid out the silverware. “So very righteous and noble. May I insist that you strike me while you are at it? I desire to be knocked unconscious until I leave this horrid room once and for all. Think you are up for the task, good sir?”

He wouldn't let them see the misery this affair was causing him. They may not know he cried at night and in the early mornings, desperately wishing to be anywhere but in this stasis, but they would surely see his anger.

But his hatred, however poignant, was not prejudiced. When the afternoon servant came by to inform him that Madame D'Arc wished for him to join her out in the gardens, he would make sure she would likewise become the victim of his tongue, whatever good that did.

“You are quite trained at making others feel your misery,” she said with a chuckle, after he properly informed her of his gross feelings about her. “I've heard it all before. Go

ahead, by all means, continue if you please. I enjoy the more colorful variants.”

“Madame, there are many things in this world I can excuse,” Louis said with feeling, “but *pink*? Really? Why—in a house with so many rooms—why must I be stuck in that nightmarish pastel den? I hate pink.”

“Pink is my favorite color.”

“Yes, ma’am, I have no doubt it is. Taste is bred, not borrowed, and you will have to try a lot better than that if you wish to pass as some distinguished dowager.”

The two of them were walking calmly out in the estate’s large gardens. To any onlooker, they would seem nothing more than a good-natured woman out with a kindly young gentleman. The cultivation in the gardens was exquisite, though not entirely tasteful, but Louis was relieved to be out in the open air and surrounded by other forms of life regardless. He knew that pansies were not the sort of bloom to plant so vulgarly next to that many goldenrods, but he said nothing. He may have been hotheaded, but he knew better than to insult a lady’s flower arrangements.

“You amuse me, Lord Earlshope. I have had many—shall we say visitors?—stay in my home. You are amongst the most fiery.”

“Call it the arrogance of youth.”

“Yes, you are quite young, I see. It’s a shame for you to be waylaid in this fashion without having spent long in society. If you were a young woman, just barely come out, I would have pity on you. Though as a male you no doubt have had your share of decadence and conquest already. A privilege your sex has only ever used to sow misery.”

Louis had not. Most of his adolescence was spent in solitude and well-meant indolence. He had never even kissed a girl before, not that this woman needed to know any of that.

“Mr. Sterling was quite determined to enact his plans and have you this year, however, and as much as he cares for my opinion, I am no more than a business partner of his. His

affairs are not mine, and my duty is to keep you here for the time being.”

“Mr. Sterling?” Louis interrupted.

“Yes, Mr. Jack Sterling. The charming man who brought you here.”

Louis nodded. He did not know that was his last name. He combed through his brain, trying to remember if that name was familiar in any way. Before he came to any conclusions, Madame D’Arc spoke again.

“And, as I am but a humble patron in these matters, I have no right to question his judgment, no matter how absurd I find it. Therefore, you are to accompany me on my midday walks every day, if the weather permits.”

That stopped Louis mid-step. “This is Jack’s doing?”

Madame D’Arc kept walking, not bothering to look if he were planning to keep pace with her. “Yes. Mr. Sterling was adamant that you were not to go deranged with ennui. He worried that you would hurt yourself, and then where would we be?”

The thought was oddly touching. Louis’s concerns had not fallen on deaf ears, and Jack (Mr. Sterling, he should say) had taken the effort to give him a modicum of comfort.

“Does this not interfere with your plans of eroding away my years of proper breeding? How can you convert me into some brainless radical if I am not made to suffer?”

She scoffed. “Oh, ignorant child. This isn’t a *school*,” the last word said with disgust. “I am not here to educate you, and I do not care whether you learn anything or not. It’s not a matter of education; it’s a matter of adjudication.”

“Would not educating the upper-classes to understand their position be a more worthwhile endeavor?”

“Maybe to some, who lack imagination. I prefer the thought of horsewhipping them in public.”

“Good God.” He shook his head. “You truly are deranged. A proper Madame Defarge. I am sure that is where

the French likeness begins and ends.”

“I will take the allusion as a compliment. Our country rightfully feared the revolution in France, for we are guilty of the same sins.”

“So you take it on yourself to kidnap the young and privileged? I still fail to see how this helps anything at all.”

“No, my dear, I don’t do any such vulgar act. Like I said, I am simply a business partner to those who might need to store illicit cargo somewhere. I do my part, in the greater scheme of things, as they do theirs.”

Louis knew there was no point in arguing with a madwoman like she, but he had to admit he was enjoying the conversation. Talking to a pink wall for as long as he had would do that to a man.

“Spoken like a true martyr,” he said wistfully. “I hope these convictions are comforting when you inevitably swing for this. The gallows shall be your pyre, and you will die horribly for an impassioned cause just as your namesake did, Madame D’Arc.”

She smiled broadly, showing off her large teeth. He imagined a loon like her would probably froth at the mouth about the idea of dying a martyr for a greater, democratic purpose. He decided not to indulge her further.

“Nevertheless,” he continued, “my legs tire easily these days, likely on account of the imprisonment and all. I shall therefore excuse myself. Are we to meet here again tomorrow, then?”

“Yes indeed, sir. Good day.” With a brief nod of her head, the two manservants, who had been strolling casually behind them, quickly trotted up to either side of Louis.

This time, he barely even blinked when they put the bag over his head once more and carted him off.

Chapter 10

That night, Louis's thoughts were consumed by a more primal need.

He was aroused. There was simply no other way of putting it. The danger and subsequent encapture had muddled his youthful vigor, but the relative ease of the day made his mind turn to baser thoughts once again.

He lay in his bed, staring up at the pink ceiling, feeling his turgid cock swell under the sheets. The footmen had taken away his bath, and he was now freshly cleaned and half-dressed. He thought back briefly to Madame D'Arc's comments about the likelihood of his sexual conquests, and he wondered what it would be like to actually have sex.

It's not necessarily that it was a sore spot with him, but Louis had never been interested in sex the same way that other males of his age seemed to be. He was, of course, alone during most of his younger years, and there was scarcely a fair woman around to incite his interest. Sometimes, however, he felt these urges at very random and inopportune times. When his cheerful valet would dress him back in his father's house, or even a few times in class next to his peers when he was away at school. He never thought anything of it and just took care of himself when an opportunity was presented.

Now, as the evening servants had already gone, he would be alone and locked away until breakfast. For the first time since arriving, he was thankful for the mandated privacy. Nothing had been more embarrassing than when Jack—Mr. Sterling—had barged in on him at that wretched inn, only to see Louis harder than iron after being left tied to the bed as he was. He shivered at the thought of it.

He ran a timid hand down his chest, feeling his flushed skin through his open shirt. His stomach muscles tingled at the contact, and his prick throbbed hard in his pants. He bit his lip, almost embarrassed by the state of himself, and reached down further.

The door cracked open.

Louis shot up in bed, hugging his knees to his chest. He knew who it was before his eyes even adjusted to the person before him.

“Jack!” he said breathlessly, buttoning up his shirt as if he were doing nothing more than leisurely getting dressed. “I mean—Mr. Sterling!”

The gas lamp lit up his features, giving Jack the appearance of one about to tell a ghost story. The sheer look of amusement on his face, however, suggested otherwise.

“Mr. Sterling now, is it?” he said in a low voice.

Startled and embarrassed, Louis didn’t dare move. Now, once again, this beast of a man caught him in an otherwise private moment. “Madame D’Arc told me of your name; it’s only proper to address you so.”

“Whatever,” he said, stepping closer. “What are you doing?”

The question elicited an embarrassing attempt at forming words, and Louis’s stammering, stuttering, and mumbling probably provided Jack with all he needed to know as to what he was getting up to alone in his bed at such an hour.

Like a true gentleman, however, he said nothing about it.

“Anyway, get up. I have something for you. Is there more than one chair in this room?” he turned away, looking around the tiny compartment as if more furniture would magically appear in the corner.

Using the opportunity, Louis tucked his erection against his waistband, straightened his clothes, and swung his legs off the side of the bed. “No, just the one at the desk.”

“Then we sit on the floor.”

Louis watched in confusion as the hopelessly tall, broad man of ill-repute seated himself on the floor right in front of him, and crossed his legs like a schoolboy. He

gestured openly to the space across from him. Louis slithered down and crossed his legs as well.

“You have something for me?”

“Yes. Well, not really *for* you, but—think of it as a minor peace offering.” With that, he reached into the pocket of his leather coat and pulled out a deck of playing cards.

“Cards?”

“Yes.”

“For what? Solitaire? I dislike that game.”

“No, you idiot. I will play with you.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “Don’t make me regret this decision. Please stop asking fruitless questions.”

The gesture was absurd, and it left Louis speechless. Why did Jack want to play cards with him? Was this a ruse? What was going on?

However, as the alternative was, well, nothing at all, Louis eventually shrugged and consented.

“What shall we play?” he asked.

“Rummy?”

“I hate that game. It’s so middle-class.”

“Okay. How about *ecarte*?”

“No.”

“*Vieux garçon*?”

“Are we children?”

Jack stared at him blankly, fluttering the cards between his large hands as he shuffled them. Louis grinned back.

“You’re a brat. *Piquet*?”

“Never played it.”

“Never played piquet?”

“No, because I am not an old man.”

They settled on piquet, because it was the only game Louis did not outright object to. In truth, he would have played any of those games (save for rummy, which truly was vulgar), but he derived more pleasure from giving Jack a headache with his responses.

They split the deck and drew their cards. Louis drew higher and therefore dealt. They arranged their hands in silence, and then the game began.

“Point of four,” Louis said first.

“Good.”

“Tierce.”

“How high?”

“To the Jack,” Louis said with a giggle at the double meaning of the phrase, given the present company.

“Not good.”

Eventually, after the declarations were over, Louis could hardly stand avoiding the obvious topic between them.

“So, why did you come to play cards with me?”

“Like I said; it’s a peace offering.”

“To make up for kidnapping me.”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s not nearly enough. Though, with the addition of my afternoon walks with Madame D’Arc, I’ve decided I won’t strike you outright at the first chance I get.”

“She mentioned that she enjoyed your company today.”

“I bet she did. You know she’s a psychopathic lunatic, right?”

“Oh, of course.”

After the trick plays, Jack came out with almost double the points Louis did. They reshuffled and played again.

“If you know she’s beyond help, then what about you?” Louis asked, staring down at his cards. “Why are you doing this to me? Then again, why do you feel the need to make me a peace offering?”

“There is something very specific I am hoping to accomplish, which involves your unwilling role in it. Beyond that, I have no desire to play the villain. Point of three?”

“Not good, ” he said, looking at his cards once more. “But you run a band of mercenaries. You are quite literally a criminal, likely bent on raping and plundering whoever stands in your way. Don’t pretend like you are some poor facsimile of Robin Hood.”

“That’s not exactly the full story—and anyway, we don’t rape and plunder.”

“Yes, I am sure they are quite respectable, despite having no teeth or wits about them.”

“They are good men,” Jack said sharply. “You don’t know their history—or mine, frankly.”

“Then why not tell me? We’ve time enough.”

“No. After your father pays your ransom, you will be free to go and return to your precious life, little lord. There is no reason to become more familiar than that.”

Louis stared at him. “And yet, here we are.”

“Humph.”

They played on. Louis won the next hand, and the next, and the next. It soon became apparent that Jack had very little room to catch up to him before the game was over.

“We should be playing for money,” Louis muttered under his breath. “That would teach you.”

“You said you never played before,” Jack said irritably.

“Ah, I did, didn’t I? Lesson one: never trust a gentleman’s words.”

Jack quirked his brow at that. “Believe me, I know that much.”

Louis won by a long shot. He gathered the cards afterwards, trying not to outright grin at Jack’s clearly wounded ego. It served him right to be knocked down a peg or two.

“That was fun,” he said with childish glee.

Jack grumbled, and then grunted loudly when he slowly rose back to his feet. “Sitting like that again would render me an invalid.”

“Next time, you take the chair then, old man.”

Louis moved to stand as well, but, to his horror, he felt that his erection was relentlessly pressing into his trousers once more. He wasn’t sure when it had come back, or if he had just barely noticed its lingering presence during their game. He awkwardly shifted onto the bed, mortified beyond words, and kept his eyes down towards the ground.

Jack, in his tiresome way, noticed immediately.

“Well, then,” he said, stepping closer into Louis’s space. He had to look up, lest he be staring directly at Jack’s groin, though the new angle did little to relieve him of his embarrassment. The way Jack looked down at him was merciless, and he showed all his white teeth in his smile.

“I’ll leave you to whatever it was you were doing before I interrupted. Shall I knock next time?”

“You’re a bastard.”

“Indeed,” Jack said, leaning down towards Louis’s face. He grabbed the deck of cards out of his hands, their fingers touching briefly, all while staring into his eyes.

Louis didn’t dare breathe, though the moment felt eternal as close as they were. The heat from Jack’s body rolled off him in waves, and somehow, it piqued Louis’s arousal even more. A single, wild, incomprehensible urge to lean up and kiss the man clouded his thoughts. Shame and desire bloomed

over Louis's face, but to his combined horror and relief, Jack stepped backwards.

"I'll be back to reclaim my honor sometime soon," he said smoothly. "Don't mention this to D'Arc."

"Don't want her to horsewhip you for dealing with the enemy?" Louis said, barely regaining his ability to speak words.

"It's not her business, but she talks. It wouldn't be right if my men knew I was consorting with you behind their backs."

Did they not know? What did Jack mean behind their backs? Emotion and confusion overwhelmed Louis, and he barely muttered a proper goodbye as Jack picked up the lamp and slid out the door once again.

Before losing his nerve, and before decency overtook his brain once again, Louis frantically tore away his clothing, throwing them to the side as if it were on fire, and gripped his cock in his fist.

The pleasure was immediate. He carded his fingers through the bedsheets, arched his back as he sat on the edge, and stroked himself off until he reached climax embarrassingly quickly.

He dared not remind himself what was on his mind the moment his peak came. It was too base, too disgusting, too utterly vile, and he shuttered in self-hatred as he quickly cleaned himself up and threw himself back under the sheets.

But the image was burned into his brain: Jack's one eye, smirking down at him as he watched him jerk off. Louis didn't know what to make of it, whether this meant he was some invert or just carried a brain-fever induced fetish for the man who locked him away against his will.

Regardless, sleep came slowly for Louis that night. He wondered if Jack would visit him the next day or not. He hoped in turns that he either would or would fall off the edge of the earth and never bother Louis again.

Chapter 11

By now, over a week had passed since Louis's initial disappearance from the world, and the days continued to drag by. Jack visited him some nights, where they did nothing more than play a friendly game or two of cards. The nights he did not visit were particularly challenging, and a test to Louis's restraint. It was difficult, to say the least, to touch himself while not thinking of his captor.

He wondered what his friends and family were thinking about his absence.

If he were to be honest, it was probably not much, but this thought did not distress him too severely. His mother died when he was a child; his father was distant and unkind; his peers were few and far between. In many ways, these thoughts were both comforting and disturbing.

Would anyone miss him if he were to die? Would anyone care? His father surely would, in his own way, simply because Louis was the heir to his title. The Marquesses of Tilby was not a particularly strong or noteworthy position, but they as a family had lineage and honor. Louis's father was a decorated hero from his time leading the masses during the Crimean War. They were respectable, and possibly because they had little in the way of political motives, they had maintained a great deal of their familial fortune—something that was becoming less and less common with other noble names as the years went on.

The other pressing thought in his mind of course was what to make of Jack Sterling. He had not forgotten the horror of masturbating to the thought of the man, and his diabolical grin still haunted Louis's mind each time he shut his eyes. He wondered if he would ever be free of his presence. He imagined that, though his father seemed to be moving at a glacial pace to negotiate whatever ransom Jack wanted from him in order to free Louis, he still *would* be freed likely before the month was out. After that, he would move on with his life and hopefully forget about Jack, Madame D'Arc, and most importantly this awful pink room.

In the midst of his reverie, the knock on the other side of the wall came, just as it always did now around lunch time. Louis leapt off his bed to knock back.

He and his fellow prisoner exchanged knocks whenever they could. He wondered if the other poor sap ever got the opportunity to leave the room as Louis did with his walks with the Madame. He wondered too if the other prisoner was ever able to speak to anyone during their stay, as Louis had been with Jack.

The thought was painful to him. Who had brought the other prisoner to the house, and who would pay their ransom? Did Louis know them? Maybe a friend from school or a title he would recognize? It was all possible. Strangely enough, he believed it when Jack told him that he was the only person he and his gang had locked away in this house, and potentially for some semblance of a noteworthy cause. But the thought of Jack capturing anyone else made him feel weirdly jealous.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway, and Louis quickly made his way back over to the bed. The last thing he wanted was for the prisoner next to him to possibly get in trouble for the two of them knocking back and forth. The servants who entered the room came to collect him for his daily walk with Madame D'Arc.

This time, Louis went happily, with the goal of getting more information out of her about Jack.

"It is only fair," he pouted, walking beside the older woman out in the gardens. "He apparently knows so much about me. How can I know nothing of him?"

"I've said it before, child: it's not my business to meddle in the affairs of my patrons. It would look badly on my business to gossip with their cargo."

Nevertheless, she was smiling. It was a calm, breezy day, and the Madame seemed to be in a particularly good humor. Louis had been working the past fifteen minutes or so at buttering her up as best he could.

“Oh please, ma’am?” he urged. “Really, I’ve been nothing short of the best possible prisoner. Oughtn’t I get some sort of reward for good behavior?”

She chuckled. “Out of all the men who come to me, Mr. Sterling is the one I would *least* like to disrespect. Allow me to say *that* at the very minimum.”

“Because he is so frightening, I presume?”

“Not at all, my dear. Because he is so gallant. He always pays on time and never brings any ghastly fools who seek to disrupt my house or injure my servants.”

Aha. That was strangely comforting. And yet...

“So he has brought others to you before?”

She declined to answer, but it did tell Louis what he needed to know. He might be the only current prisoner of Jack’s, but not the only one who has existed before. It was difficult to reconcile the idea of Jack kidnapping anyone else. Was he as strangely thoughtful to the others as he was to Louis? Then again, what was it that he told him?

That I am the only prisoner who matters.

“He was strangely kind to me before we arrived here,” Louis mused. “He made sure to remind me that I wouldn’t be harmed unless I became violent first.”

“Such is his way, but may I also say that you do not wish to see him violent. Mr. Sterling is very proud of his men. He would never allow anyone to harm them.”

“Oh?”

“Once, I heard he crushed a man’s skull underneath his boot. I’m sure the fool deserved it, but still—imagine how difficult it must have been to clean the floors after that. Or his boots!”

For a woman so adamant on respecting her clients’ business, she really shouldn’t have gossiped so flagrantly. It was almost too easy for him to get her to talk, but Louis decided not to push his luck any further—nevermind the fact that he was stricken at the thought of Jack *murdering* someone.

They walked on in peaceful silence for some time more.

“You know,” she said, staring out over the grassy hills towards the horizon. “My servants tell me you are still quite nasty to them. You may not be violent, which I appreciate, but I hope you learn your manners sooner or later.”

“Manners? Me?” he said, stunned. “I have been nothing but the picture of manners! They are the ones who do not even look at me or speak. I’d cast them off if they were employed in my household.”

“But you see, they are not. They do not wish to be treated like your cattle, Lord Earlshope. More so, they do not wish to be bribed repeatedly to give you your freedom. It’s unfair to put them in such a position, not even to mention the fact that I doubt they *want* you to have your freedom back.”

Louis just scoffed at that, irritated by her chastisement. He was always kind to servants, when they warranted his kindness. If he had ever been testy with those employed here, then it was no fault of his own. They were literally aiding in his imprisonment.

“I mentioned yesterday that this is no school,” Madame D’Arc went on, “but I would still like it if you at least considered educating yourself in the slightest. I would feel better knowing you went back out into the world if you were willing to treat your future household with more dignity”

“Dignity! And this is what you think of me? Coming from a woman who employs criminal low-lives to hide away their victims, no less!”

“Watch your tone, dear boy. I think you are very clever, but do watch yourself.”

“Well, now you sound just like Jack.”

“Do I now? Then I can see why he has taken such a peculiar interest in you. No doubt he enjoys your precious little attempts at standing up for yourself.”

“Now it is you, ma’am, who venture close towards danger.”

At this, she laughed. They turned back around towards the house. She said a few more small bits here and there, but Louis's mind was otherwise occupied. Jack took a special interest in him? Why was the thought so shocking to consider? He knew of course that he himself had taken a sick fancy towards the man, in some ways, but this gave Louis a strange sense of delight. He wondered how he might use it to his advantage, the next time Jack came to play cards with him.

After he was bagged and carted off once more, Louis's mind was swimming with strange thoughts. He was thankful for the canvas bag hiding his countenance, at the risk of looking ridiculous as he thought about Jack.

Just as the servants led him towards the hallway where his room was, they stopped some distance in front of the door and gripped his shoulders more firmly.

"Say nothing, and make no noise," the footman on his right said close to his ear.

"What?" he said loudly.

"Shhh!" the one to the left squeezed his arm roughly.

"Ow!"

Both servants scoffed and moved him forward with more roughness than was necessary. Louis was just about to protest once more as they unlocked his door and led him in. When they took the bag off his head, however, he was struck speechless. Another man sat on the bed, looking up at the three of them expectantly.

"Hello," the stranger said, rising quickly and looking around awkwardly.

"Who the devil are you?" Louis said, before receiving a rough smack to his back. "Sorry," he said more quietly. With that, the two footmen turned around and locked the door behind them, leaving Louis there alone with the unfamiliar man.

He was tall, broad, and blond. His hair was cut short and slicked back, and his dress was remarkably put together. The picture of a perfect English youth, in all his golden glory.

“My name is Sir Maurice Grantham,” he said with a weak smile. “We don’t have much time, but I thought I should meet you and, well, say hello I suppose.”

“I don’t know a Sir Maurice,” Louis said dumbly, still stupified by what was happening.

“I’m next door,” he said, gesturing towards the wall. “You know...” he proceeded to mime, knocking the air with his fist.

“Oh!” Louis brought his hands to his mouth. “*Oh.*”

“Yes, like I said, we don’t have a lot of time, so we must be quick, but I think I know of a way out of here. I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving you behind, and really this would be easier if there were two of us working together. So, it would be best if you tell me right here and now: can I rely on you to help?”

“I, uh—”

He swallowed against his stammering tongue. Sir Maurice gave him a sharp look, obviously not willing to waste any time with his hemming and hawing. Faced with very little alternative, Louis took in a deep breath. What choice did he have?

So he nodded.

“Yes, I’m in. Just tell me what I need to do.”

Chapter 12

Once the initial shock had passed, Louis and Maurice sat comfortably on the edge of his bed, laughing at each other's misfortunes. Maurice's father, Lord Grantham down in Bristol, was something of a scoundrel and owed a considerable gambling debt towards a few unsavory fellows. Maurice assumed he was to be the ransom until his father paid up, which would likely never come.

"Therefore," Maurice said, with the strange calmness of a man who never had a single worry in his mind, "I must take my leave on my own."

"You are very brave to consider this. Are you not afraid of Madame D'Arc catching you?"

"Not at all. Old dowagers like her don't frighten me."

Louis thought that was a strange remark, and he wondered if Maurice was aware of the actual state of danger they were both in. He knew, however, it was never a good idea to contradict an Englishman like Maurice, who believed he owned the world, so he just smiled and nodded.

"I know there may be some others in the house as well," Maurice continued, "but I am not sure how to get to them. Lindsey and Algie only allowed me the time to speak with you, since you are so close by."

"Who?"

"Those two footmen that led you in. Very charming fellows."

"You know their names?"

"Naturally. They are the only souls I've had a chance to speak with since I arrived at this house."

"But...they are servants?" Louis was aghast.

"And?"

He just shook his head, confused that a man like Maurice would have chatted up the footmen. His thoughts briefly

returned to the Madame's advice regarding his own manners, but more pressing concerns needed to be dealt with first.

"Anyway," he continued, clearing his throat, "you say you think you can escape. How do we get out of here?"

"Lindsey and Algie are more than willing to help us. I offered them a position at my house in Bristol for triple the pay they make here if they leave with me. All we need, in order to properly make our way out, is a distraction in some other wing of the house. Maybe we find a room that always has a fire lit or something? We throw some curtains in, the house panics as the wing catches fire, and we are left unattended. They'll come to lead us out, and freedom is ours."

"You bribed them? I tried that as well, but they barely even look up at me."

Maurice hummed. "Not bribe—but offer a promotion. There's a difference. But I'm afraid, dear chap, they also just do not like you very much. You've got to befriend someone first in order to bribe them. Everyone knows that."

Louis nodded slowly, stifling away any offense those comments gave him. "Okay, but neither of us, I am assuming, have even seen anything beyond these corridors. How are we going to create a distraction?"

Maurice smiled at him, which made his already handsome features downright hypnotic. "That is where you come in, dear chap."

"Me?"

"Lindsey told me that you have a guest who has been coming to your room the past few nights? I don't know the details of why you are here, but I am assuming this visitor has something to do with it?"

"Perhaps..."

"Well, do you think you can convince him to show you around the house at night? Or leave the door unlocked? Or find some way to have you survey our surroundings?"

"Absolutely not."

Maurice did not look deterred in any way. “Lindsey said you seem to be something of a pet of his, and that you have the privilege of walking with that old hag during the day. I’m sure you can think of something.”

Louis felt sick. He was terrified of asking Jack something so bold.

“Come now,” Maurice continued, “you have more sway with your captor than I imagine anyone, and the old woman too. You would be the only one who could haggle a means of seeing the rest of this great house.”

“Sir Maurice, I think you are greatly overestimating my relationship with Jack.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Er—Mr. Sterling, my captor, that is. Yes, he has been somewhat kind to me despite putting me in this predicament, but he is not my *friend*. He would never agree to it.”

“Well, clearly, but I do not think you ought to ask him as just a friend.”

“Then what, pray tell, am I to him?”

Maurice gave him a confused look, and then trailed his eyes up and down Louis’s body. “Wait, are you telling me—”

“What are you alluding to?” Louis felt his face grow hot. “Please, sir, tell me immediately. I fear the conversation has gone out of my depth.”

Maurice wiped his mouth, possibly in the attempt to hide a smile, and then cleared his throat. “For the sake of time, please allow me to bypass any formalities at the moment and ask you directly something of which I mean no offense. Has this Mr. Sterling not been coming to your chambers at night to bed you?”

“*What?*”

A short rap came on the door following Louis’s shriek, likely one of the footmen urging them to be more quiet.

“He is not your lover?” Maurice said in a sharp whisper.

“Good heavens! No! I am not an invert! What the devil—how dare you think—I cannot even begin—”

Maurice rolled his eyes. “Algie was quite sure that was why he came to your room, that is all. I thought then, if you were something of a dear to him, you might—I don’t know—exert some kind of influence over him to allow you more freedom. Forgive me.”

“Absolutely not. I cannot believe you, and the *servants* of all people, would dare think such, such, disgusting things of me.”

“Then what do you do with Mr. Sterling when he comes to you at night?”

“Well...we play cards.”

Another rap came on the door, this time in a set of three knocks. Maurice sighed deeply and stood up. “I’m afraid that’s my call. I must get going now, and I must rethink some of my plans. One of us will have to find a way to create a diversion of some sort so that we may leave. I beg your pardon that I thought you would be more capable.”

“One minute now, I never said I wouldn’t be willing to help...”

“I just don’t see now what either of us can do.”

“Why not have one of the footmen create the distraction?”

“They are already doing enough for me; they aren’t willing to be caught by the old woman in a part of the house they should not be in.”

“I—I will think of something. Please, visit me again, if you can?” Louis said desperately, standing up as well.

“We’ll see. Perhaps I will write a note to you when I gather my thoughts, or I will visit again if I have the capability.”

“You have pen and paper in your room?”

“Lindsey gave me some. Good heavens! They were not joking when they said they did not care for you.”

Maurice laughed at him again and made his way towards the door. The two servants opened it, and the three of them left Louis alone. The door clicked shut once again.

Louis’s mind was buzzing the rest of the day, especially after the sun went down and Jack visited him again.

How does one look into a man’s eyes knowing that the rest of the house assumed they were fucking?

They sat on opposite sides of a small table in chairs. The footmen brought in an additional seat when they came to take away his dinner plate, likely an order from Jack so he could avoid sitting on the floor again. Louis meant to say something to the two servants, but his courage failed him. Instead of asking them which was Algie and which was Lindsey, he ended up just staring awkwardly while they came in to clear away the food. They must have thought he was ruder than ever before.

“I don’t know how to speak to them,” Louis said, writing down his points after the hand ended. He and Jack were playing piquet again, with Jack having no chance of beating him once more. Their features were dimly lit by the single gas lamp on the table.

“They are people. Just speak to them like you would anyone.”

“They are not just people—they are servants. How can I speak to them in terms of equality?”

Jack just shook his head. His disappointment cut Louis deeply. He felt humiliated, despite feeling like he was in the right. How was one supposed to talk with servants? Especially when they were also one’s jailors?

“Sometimes,” Jack said after a moment, “you remind me so strikingly of your father.”

“Oh.”

“It doesn’t suit you. I think you have the capability of choosing better for yourself. Point of three.”

“Not good,” Louis could barely look at his hand to call it. He felt so overwhelmingly hurt and embarrassed by Jack’s comment.

“I don’t know what evils my father has committed, or what he has done to you, but if I could change any of it—”

“Let’s not have this conversation.”

“If we cannot, then at least tell me what he did. No one tells me anything. But everyone makes so many assumptions about me, I do not think it fair. I benefit from my father’s privilege—allow me to understand what he has done wrong.”

“No,” Jack said firmly, in a loud enough voice to slightly startle Louie. “I’m not interested in your pity.”

“Then what are you interested in? Do not think I have failed to notice that your visiting me is unusual. You stick around Madame D’Arc’s estate, for what purpose? I’m sure there are other fops you might as well go burgle in the meantime.”

“I’m not a burglar.”

“Then what are you? *Who* are you?”

“None of your business.”

He likely meant it in a sort of sarcastic way, not unlike the kind of fruitless bickering he often indulged in with Louis. But, for some reason, all it did was rouse him into a fit of fury.

Louis was not sure when his embarrassment turned to anger, but it descended on him swiftly. He was rarely the angry type, nor the sort of person to be a victim of strong emotion. But something about Jack infuriated him to no end. Embarrassed, tired, and irritated, he proceeded to stand up from his seat and swipe the cards off the tiny table.

“What the fuck?” Jack huffed out.

Louis turned his back and walked towards his bed, pacing back and forth. As long as he didn't start crying, he would be okay.

"I don't want to play anymore," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I'm tired of this. Stop offering me these stupid little peace treaties if you are just going to avoid telling me anything about why I am even here. I'm not your bloody pet!"

"Never said you were," Jack said coolly, picking up the cards from the floor.

Something about his calmness made Louis angrier. He turned desperate, feeling the words flood his chest and knowing he would regret it as soon as he said them.

"You know that's what others think, don't you? Do you know the servants gossip about me, and you, for that matter. They think—they think you come here at night to bugger me!"

His voice cracked at the last few words, at which Jack stiffened.

"Yes, that's right! I know they do. So, if you aren't here to bugger me, then why are you here? Just to taunt me again and again how I'm such a horrid person, just like my father, while never telling me what he actually did that was so egregious to you?"

"Do you want me to bugger you?"

"It's just so tiring, not knowing what you actually *want* from me! I want to go home, but I also want to make up for whatever—wait, what did you just say?"

Jack just shrugged.

Louis's face contorted in disgust. "How dare you. Disgusting, horrid, beast of a man. I'm not your fucking whore."

Jack threw his hands up in confusion. "Good Lord, man, get a grip. I was merely joking."

"Well, it's not very funny, is it? I see the way you stare at me. Your—your lecherous way of looking at me when my

prick was hard! It's so vulgar." Louis's voice was shaking. "You have not even the goodness to do it with any respect or decency."

"How am I supposed to stare at your prick with decency?"

"I don't know! Figure it out!"

"So you want me to look at your prick respectfully?"

"Yes!"

The subsequent silence stunned them both. Louis wasn't sure what came over him to say that out loud, but there was no way it could be true. He couldn't believe his own words, nor trust his thoughts at that moment. But the way Jack was now looking at him made his body shiver all over. Conflicting thoughts ran through his mind. *Disgusting, shame, inverted* ran one thought; *I want him to rip my clothes off and shove his cock inside me* ran the other.

"Alright, look," Jack said calmly, standing up from his chair and walking over to Louis. "Let us make sure we understand one another properly."

Louis took an involuntary step backwards. Jack closed the gap immediately. If he could just avoid looking into his eye, then he would be alright. As long as he didn't look up...

Jack touched his chin and lifted his face to meet his.

"I've noticed how flustered you get," he said slowly, as if this was a normal conversation between a criminal and the man whom he captured. "I assumed, perhaps too freely, that you were enjoying this. I've just been teasing you."

"Well!" Louis couldn't say more than that.

"But if you actually want this," he drawled out, his one eye searching Louis's face, "then just say so."

How could he possibly answer that? His cock twitched in his pants.

"Don't lie and say you don't."

When Louis said nothing again, Jack stuck his leg forward, so his thigh ran right up against Louis's groin. Louis's prick was rock solid, because of course it was. He moaned obscenely.

"You have reservations, that much is clear. Are you afraid of what others might think, knowing you are an invert? That the servants will gossip about you being a sodomite? Or perhaps it's simply because I have you locked away here against your will? Do you object because of conventional morality, or because it is me?"

Lying was of no use. Not when Jack's leg was rubbing ever so slowly against his cock.

"The former..." he said breathlessly.

"I figured. You seem to be enjoying yourself bound to my will. I remember that morning at the inn..."

"Oh God."

"Perhaps I should tie you down to the bed again right now?"

Yes, yes, please, yes.

"It's—it's not right."

"Says who?"

"If my father knew..."

Jack's face darkened, his lip curling into nothing short of a snarl. "I told you before, little lord, I don't like it when you mention him."

His hand curled harder around Louis's chin, their faces only inches from one another. Louis looked at his lips, which was a mistake. He thought only of what it would feel like to kiss him.

Jack grinned.

"Though," he said, rubbing his thumb against Louis's cheek, "knowing that if I ravished the marquee's son, it would only cause him more suffering..."

Louis pulled away slightly at that. “It’s not about my father. This is between you and me.”

“Ooh. Touchy. You want this then only for your own sake?”

“I—”

“It’s a simple question: yes, or no?”

“Yes.”

“Prove it.” With that, he gripped Louis by the collar of his shirt and gently pushed him backwards against the bed.

Looking up at him as he was, Louis couldn’t help but realize this was just like his fantasy the night before. He sat on the edge of his bed, staring up at Jack, and his cock was throbbing with need.

All rational thought was completely out of the question. All Louis could think about was pleasure. He started unbuttoning his shirt.

His hands were shaking, and his breath kept hitching in his throat, but he didn’t dare look away from Jack’s burning gaze. The way he looked down at him, fully prepared to—God knows what—it made Louis want to shout. After what felt like an eternity, he was at least shrugging his shirt from his shoulders and pulling his trousers down towards his ankles. His cock was painfully hard, standing outright from his waist. It was absolutely obscene.

“Stand up.”

Louis obeyed, quivering from a non-existent chill.

“Last chance. You want this?”

“Yes.”

At last, that broke Jack’s considerable restraint and sent him into a frenzy. Louis gasped in shock by the force of his body against his. He pressed himself to him and kissed his mouth deeply. Strong fingers dug into Louis’s tender sides, gripping him harshly and holding him still.

Jack's face was sharper than Louis was expecting. His black whiskers grated against his smooth cheeks, but he couldn't stop himself. He moaned desperately when he felt Jack's tongue inside his mouth.

They fell down against the bed. Jack's body was so large, so strong and firm, that Louis had no chance of escape, not that he ever dreamed of it. He couldn't believe this was happening. It was so sudden, so quick, as if Jack had just been waiting for Louis to realize it.

Had he been? Is that what this all was? Was Louis truly so blind?

He wrapped his bare legs around Jack's waist, feeling the leather of his coat against his thighs. It was absurd, somehow, and infinitely more erotic, that Jack didn't even bother to disrobe. He reached a hand down, furiously unbuttoning his own trousers, and Louis soon felt his burning hot prick right up against his thigh.

"Oh!" he groaned out. Jack covered his lips in a kiss once more.

They stayed like that for some time, rocking back and forth, their cocks barely touching as Jack curled Louis's body in half. It was dreadfully glorious, but still not enough. The lack of more sensation made Louis whine pitifully.

"What do you need?" Jack grunted in his ear.

"I—I can't say it."

Jack nipped his earlobe. "You have to say it, or I'll leave you just like this."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

Louis shut his eyes hard, feeling a wave of embarrassment. As wanton as he felt, he couldn't get his mouth to work properly for some reason.

"Could you—would you, please, um—"

"Yes?"

“Fuck me?”

“Oh?”

“Please, Jack, *please*.”

Though sounding ridiculous to his own ear, as if he were some floozy tart, it spurred Jack on further. He gripped Louis’s hips and pulled him right up against his groin. All of his moans were covered by Jack’s waiting mouth. The kisses were his reward, and Louis felt like he particularly earned it. Any lingering trace of embarrassment or hesitation was now long gone—all he wanted was to feel Jack inside him.

He knew, in theory only, that people did enjoy being sodomized. He knew there would be pain, possibly unlike anything he had ever felt before. But Louis was ready—he needed to know what it felt like. He needed Jack to do it to him.

Jack reached his hand up and stuck two of his fingers between Louis’s lips. The sensation, though unexpected, was not unwanted. He sucked them eagerly, particularly enjoying the way Jack bit down on his earlobe as he did so. Before long, he removed his fingers once more, and pressed them against his backside.

“*Oh*,” he moaned out stupidly. That’s right, Jack was going to fuck him, and he needed to be lubricated. He was about to be bugged. About to be—

He moaned out again as Jack’s fingers slipped inside him. It was a clawing, burning, numbing pain, mixed with a euphoria he had never felt before. Louis’s body writhed desperately against the mattress, pinned in place by Jack’s weight.

The sensation itself, admittedly, was almost too painful to bear. He could feel his own body rejecting Jack’s intrusion, his nerves fraying at the thought of what was about to happen. But the fingers were relentless; Jack kept probing him, opening him up gently, not one to admit defeat. Slowly, ever so slowly, Louis’s body began to respond in turn.

“Lie on your belly for me, little lord.”

‘I—what?’ Louis could hardly hear anything, much less parse actual words.

“Flip over. Come on now.” Jack stuck his hand under his side.

Right. Louis would be taken from behind. That’s how men did it to each other. Like a wild animal, Jack would take him like this, make him his. He unhooked his legs and flipped over willingly.

Just when he thought it couldn’t get any more obscene, Jack spat into his hand and gripped his own cock. The gesture was so overwhelmingly base and perverse, it almost made Louis’s climax come much too quickly. Strong hands grabbed his hips, pulling him up into an arched position. Louis buried his face beneath the covers, gripping the fabric tightly, waiting for Jack to start already.

Then Jack slid into him—firmly, but not unkindly—and Louis saw stars. Pain overrode pleasure, and the unnatural feeling made him wince. The overwhelming sensation of complete fullness, marred only by the initial pain, began to send him into a near panic. He clutched sheets hard, whimpering into them, as Jack moved deeper inside.

“You’re mine, little lord,” Jack grunted in his ear. “All mine.”

He whined desperately, deep in his throat. Hot tears built in his eyes, before Jack leaned in to kiss his neck from behind. It was a kind gesture—a human one. Louis had to remember that Jack was a man too, and one who cared at least somewhat about his pleasure and comfort.

It was slow at first. Experimental, if anything, and very awkward. Louis’s body was hardly letting Jack breach inside. But Jack wasn’t the patient sort, and he quickly picked up pace.

Louis cried out. The pain was unimaginable, but he was hardly in a position to refute now. He wanted it, regardless if it killed him, and he would have it. Jack was only too eager to give it.

He fucked him vigorously. Louis had never felt so much sensation at once in his entire life. Pleasure and pain mixed into one, and in his ecstatic agony, he couldn't tell the difference between. Thinking only made it worse; he wouldn't allow himself to comprehend what was happening to him. He was being fucked—Jack was fucking him. And worse of all, his body was beginning to enjoy it. His cock was hardening again, growing firmer as the pain searing into his ass began to lessen.

Jack took no pity on him, instead bearing down at him like a smug bastard. He gripped Louis's hands into his own, wrenching them away from the sheets, and pinned them behind his own back. It was obscene and humiliating. Louis was just his prisoner again—just a hole for his pleasure—and he loved every second of it.

Another hand ran through his hair, a tender moment in the midst of so much brutality, and Louis began to feel his climax rise.

“Come on,” Jack whispered in his ear. “Cum for me.”

Louis did, without a choice. Jack's thrust increased in speed and vigor, and without any control over his body or hands, Louis surrendered himself completely. His orgasm was wrenched from him, feeling all his muscles flex as his body contracted. He felt like a wild animal, pinned down and captured, with no means of escape. He had never felt such pleasure before.

Jack followed soon after, speeding up his thrusts and bearing down on Louis with increasing force. He grunted loudly as he pushed himself all the way in, and then quietly as Louis felt the thick hot spurts of his release cover him from within. He never heard Jack sound so vulnerable—so unguarded.

They stayed like that for some time, neither willing to move, as they breathed against each other's lips. Louis knew deep down that something terrible just occurred—something that would forever change the course of his life. But

nevertheless, he didn't care. He felt the sweat of his brow run down his face.

"Fuck," Jack panted out, being the first to move. He quickly pulled out, making Louis wince from the pain, and looked around in the dim lighting of the room for anything to clean them up with. Louis crumbled against the sheets, afraid to move or see if he would be bleeding or not. Noticing Jack looking around awkwardly, he gestured towards the silken handkerchief in his coat, which he immediately regretted as Jack wiped both their seed from Louis's body with it. He loved that handkerchief.

"I..." he began.

"No. No words," Jack said, wiping the sweat from his brow and readjusting his clothes, as he looked awkwardly back and forth from the floor and the bed. He at least had the decency to pick up Louis's shirt from the floor and toss it over his naked body. He never felt more like a whore then, treated in such a way, his naked body on full, vulgar display for anyone who came by.

Jack turned around and picked up the last of the playing cards from the floor.

"You are leaving," Louis said, despising the hollowness in his throat.

"I must."

"Why?"

"Stop asking questions."

The coldness in his voice twisted deep in Louis's chest. His body, wrung out entirely of all pleasure, was now throbbing and sore. He watched dumbly as Jack picked up his cards and grabbed the gas lamp.

"Please," he said softly, lifting himself up shakily on his hands, "we should—"

"Not now, little lord," Jack said with a forced smile. He cleared his throat, made an awkward attempt at either going to shake Louis's hand or clap him on the shoulder, decided to do

neither, and turned around. He slipped out of the room with as little noise as he did when he first entered.

Darkness enveloped Louis's room once more. Too stunned to understand what just occurred, his mind focused entirely on the discomfort he felt in his backside from being buggered so ruthlessly.

Moments passed in this stillness, with Louis barely able to even hear himself breathing. What he did hear, before long, was a gentle rap on the wall.

Three knocks, just as he and Maurice had been doing, rang out clearly from the right side of the room.

Louis wanted to scream.

Chapter 13

Louis awoke the following morning to the servants coming in to drop off his breakfast.

“Take it away,” he muttered underneath the pillow, not bothering to open his eyes just yet. The clattering of the dishware continued—the delicate footstep of one of the footmen squeaking against the floorboards—the waft of eggs and boiled fish floated towards Louis’s face.

“I said, take it away!” he snapped, sitting upright in the bed. It was an immediate mistake; his backside seized in pain from the sudden exertion, and it caught his breath in his throat.

Not that the servant seemed to care at all. He didn’t look up, not heeding Louis’s command whatsoever, and finished laying out a napkin and a small cup of coffee. Finished with this duty, he raised the tray back up and left the room.

Louis groaned. Now was not the time to worsen his relationship with the household staff, but he did believe the man could have at least *attempted* to be quieter.

Everything that day seemed to be lopsided to him. His heart was racing for no apparent cause, and he felt a relentless urge to burst into tears at any moment. His eyes were swollen nearly shut, and his head ached. In short: he was desperately miserable, and it was all Jack’s fault.

He still could not believe what had come over him last night. He suddenly understood in a disturbingly clear way so much of his country’s literature was concerned with keeping its women from going astray. Giving in to pleasure, allowing the heat of the moment to overtake him, was far too easy. Louis barely put up a fight, and he paid dearly for it.

Well, did he? Sir Maurice obviously heard of his business with Jack. Louis wasn’t sure if he would ever forget the sound of the knock across the wall, making him feel even more naked and abandoned than Jack’s hasty retreat. Would Sir Maurice say anything? Would he seek to ruin Louis’s

reputation? Probably not. He hoped not. In fact, Maurice was the one who even suggested it in the first place. Only now, of course, Louis probably had even less sway with Jack than before he fucked him.

Worse than his reputation, however, was the nagging feeling that he had irrevocably ruined his relationship with Jack. Despite all his misgivings and regret, the sensation of being with the man—feeling him inside him, holding him close, kissing his mouth—was almost too euphoric to recollect. If Jack had stayed and offered to do it all with him again, Louis knew he wouldn't be able to refuse. He wasn't sure if he could refuse Jack anything.

Moping, however, was not a good look on him. Frowning led to lines on one's face, and crying would only make his eyes puffier. Armed with the conviction that last night's mistakes were not worth crying over, Louis wiped his face against his sheets, sat up (more gently this time), and slowly made his way over to the desk to break his fast.

Rather than being dragged out into the gardens to meet with Madame D'Arc, the two footmen instead deposited Louis on a sofa before taking the bag off of his head. He looked around the drawing room, recognizing it as the same one where he first met the Madame at the beginning of his stay here.

She narrowed her eyes at him immediately.

“Are you ill?”

“No, ma'am.”

“You must be. Your eyes are nearly swollen shut. Algernon, please go tell Mrs. Wilton that Lord Earlshop's bed sheets need to be changed.”

The servant departed at once.

“Perhaps it's the damp in the air—I see you are not accustomed to the climate in the north,” she continued, smiling dryly at Louis. “I would have you relocated to a room facing

the morning sun, but I know how much you despise the pink room.”

She clearly meant it as a—if not exactly friendly, then familiar—barb, but Louis did not take the bait. He kept his face still, too exhausted to even fake a smile.

“Oh dear,” Madame D’Arc furrowed her brow. “You really *are* ill.”

“No, ma’am,” he tried again. “Truly, I am not sick, nor stricken with allergens. I am fine.”

“Something happened to you.” She looked him up and down. “But, and I cannot believe I am saying this in my own house, perhaps it is none of my business.”

He sighed in relief. Louis wasn’t sure if he could handle an interrogation from her just now. He assumed that she probably had some idea what had occurred; but the thought of telling a lady, even one such as her, about what troubled him would have been too mortifying to bear.

They drank tea in near total silence. Louis didn’t bother to ask why they were not on a walk that day, since the weather was still bright and warm enough for outdoor activity. Madame D’Arc made a few comments now and then about the rapidly approaching October, whether the food was to his liking or not, and a repeated remark that he should really consider having his hair cut.

When the tea was finished, she cleared her throat.

“Though I can see you are not in an inquisitive mood today, I must nevertheless tell you why I have brought you here. There has been a letter from your father.”

That captured Louis’s attention.

“My father?” he said quickly. “He wrote to me? Give it now.”

“Stupid boy. He wrote to *me*, not you. But, given the circumstances, I will allow you to read it. Here you are.”

She handed him the letter; it was short, which Louis could tell right away by the size of the envelope. The seal had

already been broken, but inside, his father's familiar, all too-tidy penmanship covered the page.

He read on:

Dear Sir or Madam,

If you think I am to be persuaded by your criminal ways to willingly indulge this fantasy of yours to acquire wealth, even for the sake of my son, then you are sorely mistaken. I hardly believe he is even with you, but if you somehow managed to abduct my son, then if so much a hair is misplaced on Lord Louis when he inevitably returns to me, then I will have no choice but to retaliate by the highest severity of the law. You will hang. If you prefer to keep your life, my son will be returned to me unscathed at the earliest convenience.

“He didn't even sign it,” Louis said. He wasn't sure why that was the first thing he noticed.

“Indeed, likely to avoid any sort of paper trail connecting him to such sordid dealings. You know how fastidious fathers can be.”

“But what can he mean by *earliest convenience*?”

“In my experience, and I have been doing this for some time you see, vague threats imply empty threats. I doubt he even noticed your absence, my dear child. So sorry.”

“You are simply trying to upset me,” Louis said, looking down at the letter. He wasn't sure why his hands were shaking.

“Now, now, don't worry. I'm sure he is quite preoccupied with the others in your family. Give the man the benefit of the doubt.”

“I am his only son, and my father never remarried.”

“Oh, that's right,” she said smiling. “My mistake.”

Louis became overwhelmed with confusion, then sadness, and then anger. His father had always been a distant bastard, but this was shocking even for him. He had no idea where Louis even was, so the chance of retaliating with the

law was more than just an empty threat—it was a lazy one. He didn't even entertain the idea of paying a ransom. The letter might as well have been written by a stranger.

“I expected such conciseness from him,” Louis said, “but I would have at least thought my capture would provoke *something* more substantial from him.”

“Yes, well, the Marquess of Tilby was never much of a good man, was he?”

“He treated my mother poorly,” he said quietly, unsure why he was telling her this. “I barely existed to him, even as a child. He never drank, never gambled—he was hardly even ambitious. I never understood what it was he did with his time to justify being so disinterested in his own family.”

“His own life satisfies him enough, I dare say. Why should he bother with such common things like caring for others?”

“I can't believe I am saying this, but I think you are right, Madame.”

“I usually am. Now, to business, as they say,” she said with a clap of her hands. “As I am sure you can imagine, this throws an interesting wrench in Mr. Sterling's plans.”

“Why isn't he here to tell me this?”

“Oh, you know him,” she said with a wave of her hand, as if he ever possibly could. “He's off galavanting somewhere no doubt; he left very early this morning. I am simply playing messenger today.”

“Alright. So what now?”

“That's up to you, I should think. Your immediate cooperation might...delay any drastic actions.”

He felt his chest constrict at her words. “What do you mean?”

“May I speak plainly? Of course I may, why am I even asking? Anyway, there are a few others in Mr. Sterling's party who think we should up the ante. Perhaps your father would

be more interested in discussing terms of your release should we send, say, one of your fingers alongside our next letter?"

"Excuse me?"

"Their words—not mine. But imagine the look on your father's face if he opened a package containing your bloodied finger! How shocking. One or two is usually enough to get lords to start talking. For someone like him, I might wager three in total should suffice."

Louis stopped listening to her. Alarm rang through his head, and his heart hammered quickly in his chest. The pain knotting in his stomach almost made him wretch.

"No fear now, little one. It really is not so bad."

"You're bloody animals!" he cried out, panting hard. "You said as long as I do what I am told, I will not come under any harm!"

"Precisely. Which, if you recall earlier in our conversation, is the very situation we are in now. Your cooperation is very necessary here, so listen carefully. I think a letter written in your own writing should suffice for the present. If you agree to these terms, you won't be harmed. Simple! What say you?"

"I'm sorry—what on earth are you talking about?"

"Rather than send a more visceral threat, let's first try something in your own writing, just to be sure that he understands you really *are* staying with us."

"So my options are to either write a letter to my father myself, or lose a finger?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not start off with that suggestion?" he said loudly.

"Because I do so wanted to see the look on your face."

He buried his head in his hands, struggling to catch his breath. Madame D'Arc was insensibly cruel. He made sure to tell her this promptly.

“I’ve heard it all before,” she replied casually. “Now, what say you? I can give you some advice, but I imagine you know how to write a dramatic letter. A few hints, here and there, about worrying for your bodily concern, and your father will become more than pliant. I’ve done this dozens of times before, and it always works.”

“You are a sick woman, but I feel the urge to thank you for not immediately slicing my finger off.”

“Don’t thank me—it was Mr. Sterling’s idea.”

Of course it was. Jack’s promise to keep him safe had not been forgotten. Louis rubbed his hands together, as if to remind himself that all his fingers were still attached to his body.

“I see.”

“Yes, it was quite the row. Some of the others *really* would have preferred to send a finger. They believe it would have been more becoming of them—more fearsome and threatening— and I cannot help but agree. Mr. Sterling was adamant that this was not to be the case. I’ve never seen him talk to his men like that before.”

“Do Mr. Sterling’s men often disagree with him?”

“Almost never. They are very loyal to their General. But, enough chit chat. I’m not very patient. What will it be? Your words or your finger?”

As if he even needed to be asked.

“I will write the letter.”

“Good choice. Be advised, naturally, that I will read every word before the letter is sent, so any attempt at staging a rescue would result in worse than merely losing a finger. Now, off with you. I’ll supply you with ink and paper later today.”

Louis stood when the footmen ushered him out of his seat, but he shied away from the bag for a moment.

“Just one more question, ma’am, if you please.”

“Oh?”

“When did Mr. Sterling and his men discuss this?”

“Why, just this morning, before he left. I’ve no doubt their argument inspired such an early departure. Mr. Sterling does enjoy his solitude when he can get it.”

Louis nodded, and let the bag be placed over his head. He figured as much, since Jack would have almost certainly told him in person had these plans been set before he visited Louis last night. The thought was more or less comforting. Even after defiling his body, Jack wasn’t yet willing to disfigure him.

He wondered briefly who it was in Jack’s group, then, who so viciously offered to cut off his finger. This, coupled with Jack’s chilling remarks about not wanting to be seen with Louis by his own men, made him slightly uncomfortable. Jack and the Madame D’Arc were more than enough to deal with already, but were there more dangers lurking nearby?

And if so, could he even rely on Jack to protect him?

Chapter 14

Sir Maurice was waiting in his room when Louis returned to it. He should have expected it, but the sight of the tall, blond man sitting with his elbows on his knees startled him all the same. The look on his face was positively filthy.

“So, you did the deed, eh? Good for you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Louis said quietly, as Algie and Lindsey walked out of the room and locked it behind them.

“No worries—few words necessary. Didn’t seem like *The General* was one much for pillow talk either.”

Louis gave him a harsh look. If he had a drink in hand, he would have thrown it at Maurice’s face.

“What do you want?”

“You already know,” Maurice said with a smile. “You’re my ticket out—our ticket out. When will that man visit you again? Think it could be tonight? We need to act fast if our plan is to work.”

“I don’t think he will come back,” Louis said, sitting down at the desk. He felt a rush of shame once more, knowing how red his face must have been.

“The heartbreaking type? I wouldn’t concern yourself over it, old chap. Your beau seemed more than satisfied with the first go. He’ll be back.”

“Would you stop being so vulgar?”

“Would you stop being such a pansy and start acting like you actually want to get out of here alive?”

Louis was startled by this, but kept his eyes downcast.

“Oh no, don’t tell me you don’t even want to escape now. You cannot tell me here and now that you care about that filthy old pervert.”

“Mr. Sterling is a good man, and I do not care for him.”

“Then why not help me out here? You know what we need—find a way to create a distraction: the sooner the better.”

“Sir Maurice,” Louis snapped, “not only are you speaking well out of line for someone of *your* standing, but you are also severely overestimating my relationship with Mr. Sterling. I have no power over him. We need to find another way to get access to the rest of the house and create a diversion.”

“*My* standing? Now you seek to scold me for being beneath you as well? Your arrogance is astounding.”

“I’m not the one acting like a schoolboy, listening to other people’s business during *private* affairs, and then abusing them to their face all while trying to get something out of it. You’re being a bully now, Sir Maurice, and if you continue, I will have no part in your stupid little scheme. Find someone else to do the dirty work for you.”

Maurice stood at that, looking irritated at last. Louis felt satisfied with the reaction his words were causing him.

“You bloody little—” he grumbled out, before turning around to pace around the room. Eventually, he turned back around, red in the face, though otherwise composed. “Look, I don’t want to have to do this, but I doubt your father or the rest of London would be too thrilled to learn about your adventures here, now would they?”

“Your point?”

“It’s a shame that I know so much already. Wouldn’t want anyone to ask me about what the marquee’s son got up to during his stay at this abysmal manor.”

Louis stared up at him dumbfounded. Maurice looked down, his face not betraying anything.

“Are you blackmailing me?”

He shrugged. “If you wish to call it that.”

“It’s your word versus mine. As if listening across a thin wall would get you anywhere even in idle gossip.”

“Algie and Lindsey would agree with me. They heard it too, and I believe they would be more than happy to see you

knocked down off your high horse.”

That was a blow. Louis bit his lip and stood up, regretting the decision instantly. Maurice towered over him, and he felt stripped down and defenseless as close as they were. Maurice breathed out slowly and resumed his countenance of sophisticated ease.

“Look,” he said curtly, “the goal here is to get us out as quickly as possible. I value my freedom, regardless of whether or not you do. I won’t let you prevent me from getting it. If the threat of blackmail is what it takes, then I am willing to use it against you; I’ve always been a man of conviction. Now, will you help me or not?”

Louis didn’t have the words to respond—he was far too angry.

“I’ll take this silence as your polite acquiescence. It’s not like you have to fuck him again—I don’t care what you do—but you need to convince him to let you out and start a distraction. Preferably some time this week. Algie and Lindsey already know to come escort us out if the house is distracted; we wait simply for your signal.”

“And if I cannot convince him?”

“Then you better hope you have more luck convincing your father that you didn’t ask a criminal lowlife to bugger his only son.”

Louis spat on him. He could hardly help it—it was the only response Maurice deserved.

He wiped his coat gently and gave Louis another brief smile. “I’m assuming my time here is up. I’ll be listening tonight, so I will know if he visits you. Good luck, Lord Earlshope.”

As if on cue, the door creaked open again and Maurice slipped out. Algie or Lindsey locked Louis in once more, and the three of their footsteps rounded down the hall into the next bedroom.

Jack didn’t come that night.

Louis waited, his heart pounding, as sunset drew close and the sky darkened. A bath was prepared for him that night, and he scrubbed his body hard enough that his skin glowed red. Any lingering evidence of sex, the ghosts of Jack's touch, were now entirely purged from his body. Hours ticked by, before three knocks on the side of the wall indicated that Maurice too was likely sick of sitting up for nothing. It was almost midnight by the time Louis willed himself to fall asleep as well.

The morning brought little relief from his anxiety. He had strange dreams where Jack lay on top of him in bed, covering his mouth to silence him as he either murdered or fucked Louis. The image of him became almost unbearable, yet he couldn't clear his head of him. Louis wasn't sure if he ever felt so strongly about someone—so full of confusion and hatred and fear, as well as erotic thrill—but then again, he had never been captured and held hostage before. He supposed it came with the territory.

When breakfast arrived, so did a stack of papers, a pen, and an inkwell. Louis almost forgot that he was to write the letter to his father in an attempt to keep his hand uninjured, on top of the madness that Maurice was putting him through. He inspected the servant closely as he laid the plates. Louis hated himself for not knowing his name—whether he was Algernon or Lindsey. He hated himself for allowing the servants to despise him so dearly, as it was only helping Maurice's threats of blackmail.

Though normally at a loss for words when it came to addressing servants, Louis swallowed hard and forced himself to speak up.

“Excuse me, sir, but your name is Lindsey, correct?”

He gambled on the name. $\frac{1}{2}$ odds were not so very bad.

The footman gave him a pointed look, staring down at him still sitting in bed. “Yes, sir,” he said coldly. Louis briefly thanked God for his luck at guessing correctly.

“Lindsey, then. Thank you for bringing me the paper. And pen. And, well, everything else, I guess. I've been told I need to

work on my manners.”

The man nodded and walked out.

Louis sighed. It was, at the very least, a start. Lindsey was taller and blond with buck teeth; Algie, then, was the shorter one with brown hair. Louis could remember that, and he would begin calling them by their names whenever necessary.

It's not that Louis despised servants. Quite the opposite; he understood how vital they were to how his world functioned. They were just in a different life than his, which meant there was little they would have in common. Maurice's quick friendship with the two footmen, however, was quickly proving that theory wrong.

Louis's father always taught him to be mindful of servants and to keep one's distance from them. “They talk,” he would always say. “They have none of the integrity that we do. Never give them a reason to use it against you.” Turns out, given Maurice's recent threats, this theory was wrong as well. Gentlemen were just as likely as servants to betray you at their earliest convenience. Up and down the entire social ladder, Louis realized, were assholes.

He got up to eat his food, and his eye drifted towards a small envelope that lay on top of the stack of papers. It was unaddressed, but obviously meant for his eyes only. He sliced the paper open with the butter knife and unfolded the contents. Inside was a brief letter, in very fine penmanship, that addressed Louis by his first name only. He dropped his eyes to the bottom of the page.

It was signed “Mr. Jack Sterling.”

Chapter 15

Louis,

My presence at Madame's estate has been a distraction to us both. I have a singular purpose in my dealings with you at present, and therefore I cannot tolerate any distractions.

My ambition was never to cause you distress, or at least any more than you would have suffered in the process. I seek vengeance against your father, for something that happened long ago, and I require a means to do so—you are that means. In my folly, I have tried to limit your discomfort whenever possible, for despite what you most likely think, it is not my object to become a villain. However, in my attempt to do so, I have perhaps caused you even more distress. For that, I am sorry.

I am now making my way to deal with your father more directly. I seek now only to end this ordeal, so that you may be freed as soon as possible.

Mr. Jack Sterling

Louis read the letter again and again, taking in each word as if they were drops of rain falling on his bare skin. It said nothing and everything—Jack was sorry yet unrepentant—his father was a bad person, yet Louis still did not know what he did to Jack.

His eyes stung, but he did not know why. There was nothing to be sad about. If anything, this was comforting news; Jack would negotiate with Louis's father more directly, whatever that meant. He would get out of this alive, and possibly soon. Why, then, was the letter making him so miserable?

Regardless of his feelings, the letter spurred him to action. Louis had his own letter to write, and he needed to tell Maurice as soon as possible that Jack was no longer going to be an option to get them out. They would need a backup plan, if they were to work together. Louis really would have preferred not to, and to instead let Maurice rot in the

Madame's house until someone finally bothered to pay his ransom, but his threats did not weigh lightly in Louis's mind. He didn't care what others would think, should he spread those awful rumors, but he did care what his father would think. Louis was certain he would be disinherited, regardless if the rumors were true or not, if his father had any reason to believe he was an invert. If there was anything the Marquees of Tilby did not tolerate, it was scandal.

Scandal. That gave him a fresh idea. Perhaps there was something he could rely on his father for. Louis got to work, sitting down and pulling out a fresh sheet of paper. He barely thought of what to write before he began scratching the page with a fresh nib.

Dear Father,

I'm sure you are well aware by now that I have been held against my will in some desolate place. Please know that I have not been harmed so far, but I'm afraid my safety is now precariously out of balance. I have been warned that if you do not soon pay whatever fee they are asking for, they will begin to mutilate my body.

As I can assure you I have no desire to endure this, please acquiesce to whatever their requests are. No doubt, if I make it out of this alive, the scandal that would ensue regarding my absence would be the ruin of us both. Imagine me coming home crippled, what would we do then? I am afraid that the best way for us both to avoid this terrible fate would be to give in. I really would rather not have to discuss why my hand is missing all of its fingers to every new lady I meet when it is my time to marry.

Your devoted son,

Louis Earlshope

He read over his words once, twice, and then folded the paper and sealed it shut. His words were slightly vulgar, but this was no time for pageantry and flattery; he needed his father to act, and if the threat of terrible gossip was all that Louis had to offer, then so be it. It was the way of their world; gossip and

scandal was the lifeblood of the upper-classes. If Maurice could blackmail, then so could Louis, even if it was to his own family.

The door opened soon after, just as Louis had finished scarfing down his bread. It was Algie, the shorter butler, who came in. He looked rather timid, especially when compared to his fellow servant, and Louis sought to capitalize on it while he had the chance.

“Algernon—may I call you Algie?” he said, standing immediately.

He looked confused, but nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“There is a very brief business I must discuss with Sir Maurice. It is of the utmost urgency, and I’m afraid it cannot wait. I know I’ve not been the most kind to you, and I’m sorry for it, but would you please—please—be so kind as to lead me to Sir Maurice’s room? Just for a brief moment?”

The footman looked shocked, his eyes wide, unsure what to say. Louis could tell Algie was less confident than Lindsey, and therefore more willing to obey commands regardless of the possible dangers, but even then he hesitated.

“It involves us all,” Louis continued, taking a step closer, keeping his voice steady. “If you truly wish to depart this house alongside Maurice, then you will let me into his room. If not, I’m afraid we might lose our chance at escape.”

Algie stood still for another moment, and then he nodded again. He looked white as a ghost, no doubt terrified of getting caught without Lindsey by his side.

“I have to remove his breakfast things as well. Come with me, and I hope that will be ample time as I clean up before you return here?”

“More than enough.”

“Then let’s go.”

They walked out together, Louis’s padded footsteps making no noise. The hallway was clear, and he realized this was the first time he had seen this part of the house. It was large and grand, but woefully devoid of any notable decoration. The paper

covering the walls was in ill repair, and it peeled in corners and was discolored. The ceiling was cracked as well, no doubt having gone long years without any meaningful attempts at upkeep. Louis was disgusted by the Madame's slovenliness.

Algie unlocked Maurice's door, and they went inside together. His room was shockingly green, as deeply colored as an emerald, and just as bare as Louis's own. Its sole inhabitant looked up in surprise from his bed, closing the book in his hand.

"Earlshope?"

"Jack's help is off the table," Louis said quickly, as Algie went to the desk to clear it of the dining utensils. "He just wrote me a letter, and he will not be coming back here for at least some time. We have to find another way. Read it yourself if you don't believe me."

He threw the letter at Maurice, probably with more force than was necessary. The blond man picked it up and scanned its contents quickly. Louis waited impatiently, ears straining for any other noise down the hall.

"I see you are right," Maurice said, still looking at the letter and tapping his finger against it. "Then perhaps we are simply fucked."

"It was a risky plan anyway, and I would have been put in danger if I tried anything in the house if Jack were with me—though I am sure that was part of your intention all along."

"That's not true," Maurice said, standing up. "It was simply all I could think of at the time. Look, Earlshope, last we spoke, I probably—"

"Save your pleasantries for later. Algie only agreed to let us speak until he was done taking away your breakfast."

"Algie now, is it? Alright, then, what's the plan?"

"Are you positively sure neither Algie nor Lindsey would be willing to let us out themselves? It would be so much easier."

"We can't," the footman broke in, picking up the knives very slowly. "We only tend to this wing during the day. We can't

get across the house past sun down without alerting the guards.”

“Guards? There are guards here?”

“Naturally. And yes, they are armed. I’d think that was pretty obvious.”

Louis huffed. “Well, excuse me for not being familiar with the intricacies of this dungeon.”

“Enough now,” Maurice broke in. “Don’t worry. I’ll think of something—we don’t need to rush.”

“Perhaps we do,” Louis said. “If our loved ones don’t pay our ransom soon, they’ll start taking fingers. I’ve already been warned.”

“You’re joking.”

“If only. I never joke about losing fingers—it’s unseemly.”

“You’ve been here long enough,” Algie said, moving towards the door. “I need to get you back to your room. Discuss this later.”

Carrying the tray of dirty silverware, Algie opened the door and threw it open wide. Just on the other side stood three others: an armed footman, Lindsey, and Madame D’Arc herself.

“I told you they were all conspiring together!” Lindsey called out, pointing inside the room. “You’ve heard them yourself. This servant is trying to aid in their escape!”

“Lindsey, what are you doing?” Algie said in shock, dropping the tray. It clattered on the wooden floor.

“So this is my repayment?” Madame D’Arc said, stepping closer inside the room. Behind her, two more armed footmen came into the small, green room. “Algernon, I saved you from the slums once before, and now you seek to break my trust. Tsk. I should have expected as much.”

“No, ma’am, you’ve got it all wrong,” he said, the pitch of his voice rising higher.

“I’m afraid I heard enough.” She turned to look at Louis. “Imagine what Mr. Sterling will say when he finds out what his ward has been up to in his absence. I imagine a finger or two won’t be nearly enough.”

“Now, now,” Louis said hastily, “let’s not act rash. You could have hardly expected us not to at least *try* and escape. Of course her ladyship would thwart us in time.”

“Don’t flatter me, boy—or at least try and do it better.”

“Best I’ve got,” he said weakly. “Perhaps if I had another day to think on it, I could write you a sonnet.”

“I don’t like poetry, and more importantly, I don’t take insubordination lightly, from either my guests or my servants. Algernon, I will deal with you separately. As for these two, you know where to take them.”

She walked out, leaving the room full of the armed guards. They looked as ragged as Jack’s gang, but dressed up in the same liveried finery as the rest of the household. One of them grabbed Algie by the wrist and pulled him out of the room, following in the Madame’s footsteps.

Lindsey grinned at Louis and Maurice.

“Bloody bastard,” Maurice spat. “I could have helped you.”

“Her offer was better, I’m afraid. Come along now—this won’t be pretty.”

Louis shrieked as the guards aimed their guns. Maurice raised his fists, ready to try and brawl them, as if that were capable of stopping them.

But, to Louis’s surprise, and before any else could react, Maurice stepped forward quickly and threw a fist right against Lindsey’s nose. The cracking sound, the splintering cartilage and flesh, rang in Louis’s ears.

A brief skirmish followed. Maurice was taken out by the knees; Lindsey howled in pain and pushed himself to the side. Before Louis could react, one of the tall guards stepped close to his side and raised his gun. He smacked Louis in the head with the butt of the weapon.

Dizziness clouded his mind. Words failed him as he tried to yell out in pain. And then, before long, everything blacked out.

Chapter 16

Louis opened his eyes and blinked several times. He had to make sure his eyes actually *were* open, since all he could see was the same pitch black void.

Now relatively experienced in the art of being tied up and captured, Louis did not panic nor make a loud noise. Instead, he took a brief assessment of his surroundings, using the senses that were still available to him. He could see nothing of course, but he felt cold and damp. The ground beneath him, for he was sitting down with his knees to his chest, was wet and hard, possibly stone or hardwood. His head ached like the blazes; the faint sound of creaking footsteps were above him; his arms were tied behind his back. Upon further inspection, he felt another body pressed closely to his from behind, and he could feel the shifting of the person's breathing. They were alive.

Louis craned his neck backwards, feeling the broad shoulders of his fellow captive. He was almost certain it was Maurice, who still seemed to be unconscious.

"Maurice," he whispered urgently. "Maurice, wake up. Wake up."

There was a brief stir and a barely perceptible mumble. Louis was able to recollect vaguely that Maurice attempted to put up a fight with the armed guards, and he likely suffered worse blows than Louis himself. Pain radiated from his left eye, right below his brow. He hoped desperately none of his facial bones were broken—he didn't think he could pull off the battered face it would no doubt result in.

"Algie," he called out, slightly louder. He couldn't forget about the footman who got caught because of him. Louis felt terrible for it, but felt an even stronger anger towards Lindsey for betraying all of them for God knows why. There was no response, and Louis couldn't feel anyone else tied to him besides Maurice. He could only hope that Algie was somewhere else then, and hopefully not in a worse situation than he.

“Mmph,” came the mumbler behind him. The large body was stirring.

“Maurice?” Louis tried again, shifting his body side to side in an effort to help wake him. “Maurice, is that you? Get up, for Christ’s sake. You’ve had enough beauty sleep.”

“What was that?”

“Maurice? It’s me, Louis. Wake up.”

The voice was no doubt his. Maurice stirred more and cleared his throat.

“What on earth—”

“I think we are in a cellar—possibly the basement? Underground certainly.”

“Earlshope? Is that you?”

“Good Lord. Keep up!”

“Christ! Fine, okay.”

They shifted, uselessly, back and forth to see if they could wriggle out of their ropes. The bindings barely budged, which Louis could only expect from seasoned criminals like the ones they were dealing with. He had an all new appreciation for Jack’s relatively sympathetic knots in comparison to the Madame’s tourniquets.

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck*,” Maurice groaned out, moving with an increasing urgency as he stirred fully out of his stupor.

“Maurice, calm yourself. You’re pulling on my ropes too.”

“I bloody hope I am! You got me into this mess! Oh *God*, we are going to die here, aren’t we?”

“Will you shut up? Pull yourself together, man. Panicked desperation is not a look you wear well.”

“If it weren’t for you—you little scamp—meddling,” he cried out, “then *I* wouldn’t be here! I can’t believe I ever thought you were capable of helping me get out of here.

You've only made it worse! Bloody pansy invert! What was I *thinking?*"

"Yes, it's all my fault, I am sure. Blame me after we find a way to at least stand up straight."

More impassioned accusations and eye rollings occurred for the next few minutes. Louis was increasingly agitated by Maurice's vexing personality, his fickle humor whenever life decided to stop working so effortlessly in his favor. There were many similar young men he had encountered in his life—all vastly privileged, all about as thick-skinned as a flower's petal. They were a despicable kind of person. If Louis ever thought he was indolent, it wouldn't hold a candle to Maurice's expectations of comfort.

"Are you quite finished?" he said.

Maurice gave another heaping of breathless curses before he stopped wriggling. Louis waited them all out before continuing on.

"How badly are you injured? Can you stand?"

"Yes, I believe so. The fellow just got a jolly good shot at my ribs. Shall we try?"

"On three."

They pressed against each other's backs as they extended their knees, toppling over slightly, but righting themselves before falling entirely. Soon, they were standing, back to back, with an extremely uncomfortable angle in Louis's wrists due to Maurice's taller frame.

"Shall we walk forward?"

"Your forward or my forward?"

"I don't care, just pick a direction!"

Maurice ended up moving ahead, with Louis barely managing to keep up with his footing. They leaned together to the side, trying to feel for a wall, but encountering none. From what Louis could tell beneath his feet, the ground was made of stone, confirming his fear that this was a deeper part of the

house than a mere wine cellar. It was nothing short of a dungeon.

“Maurice, can you please crouch down slightly? This angle is twisting my arms.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Eventually, after finding more even footing, they hit a wall. A bricked up, wet expanse lay before them, entirely shrouded in the darkness of the chamber. They walked along its perimeter for a few more feet before hitting the corner. They continued on, getting a feel for the size of their cell, which couldn't have been any larger than a wide larder.

“Let's sit again. I feel nauseated from all this circular motion.”

Seated once more in the center of their cubicle, Louis felt a bit hopeless. Jack was well on his way from the estate, and Algie, the only other possible ally, was likely in a cell of his own. There was no gate which led into the locked room, which meant it must have been some kind of hidden entrance made of bricks as well. Their cries for help, therefore, would go entirely muffled.

“I don't suppose you have any ideas?” he asked.

“None at all, dear chap. I'm afraid this is the end.”

“Let's not get that sentimental just yet. I'm sure they have no plans to murder us—they still need us for the ransom.”

“Well,” Maurice said quietly, “there is a thing about that.”

“Please, do not tell me anything I do not wish to hear. I couldn't bear another misfortune at present.”

To Louis's misery, Maurice continued.

“My family is poor—completely, utterly without money. Sold off much of the estate, you see. And I'm a third son. I fear I am somewhat expendable to them. My father would be slow to act if my captor is charging too high. I'm

sure the old woman is better off just ridding herself of me entirely.”

“Do you know who it was that took you?”

“Not at all. Like I said earlier, I assumed it was because of some gambling debts either my father or I left behind in London. I went willingly. You can guess my surprise when I ended up here.”

“Wait, what? You went willingly?”

“Yeah. First thing I said to the old woman too was debtor’s gaol is much nicer than I expected. You should have seen the look on her face.”

Louis thought he was even more of a moron than before.

“Well, in any event,” he continued, trying not to despair given his partner’s questionable intelligence, “I’m going to say our original plot is now forfeit. There is no way we can cause any kind of distraction to find our way out.”

“If I’m being honest, I wasn’t even sure if that was such a good move to begin with. Who’s to say the entire house would rush to the scene of a minor fire in the dead of night? I bet they are trained to remain where they are. I didn’t realize how many armed guards she had in this hell.”

“Yes, I suppose we both overshot our capabilities. Now we suffer.”

“I wouldn’t have actually blackmailed you,” Maurice said suddenly. “I can get a bit hot-headed in the moment—it was the only way I could think of convincing you to stay on board. I hope you can forgive me for what I said.”

“I wasn’t planning on backing out. Though, I must say the sole reason I got Algie to let me into your room in the first place was to show you the letter in hopes of calling off your bluff to blackmail.”

“So I got us into this mess, eh?”

“Quite.”

They sat in companionable silence for some time, as was right for two gentlemen who hardly knew one another and narrowly avoided a scandal—nevermind the physical predicament they were in.

“What of your family?” Maurice asked. “The Earlshopes are quite rich, aren’t they?”

“Yes, though I don’t know how much that will benefit us now. My father is calling their bluff, and I had to convince him to act more quickly or else the mutilation would start. I figure such niceties are now out the window.”

“Convince him how?”

“Write him a letter, though I dare say that has now been trashed.”

“Any brothers?”

“I’m an only child.”

“I’m surprised at your father’s response. I would do just about anything to save anyone in my family, much less my sole heir.”

His words haunted Louis, because they were right. Louis’s father *should* have been more willing to secure his safety. It was almost like he had already decided his son was lost, and his rescue was too much of a bother to lift a finger for.

Before any more sentimental dwelling could occur, a loud noise scratched against one of the walls, and the small cell was lit up by the blaze of a gas lamp.

“Algie!” they both called out in unison, upon seeing the slight frame of the man holding the lamp.

The footman said nothing in return, keeping his eyes down as he walked in and set down a large plate of cubed bread. Illuminated under the flickering light, Louis could barely make out the young man’s drawn out complexion and severely bruised face.

“Oh God, Algie,” he said. “What have they done to you?”

No response still. He looked utterly traumatized, trained not to engage with any of Louis's or Maurice's urgings any longer. As soon as the plate was dropped off, he turned around and exited the chamber. The scratching of the bricks against each other rang in Louis's ears.

"Fucking hell," Maurice breathed out.

"It's all my fault." Louis wanted to cry. He couldn't believe what they must have done to him.

"We already agreed that this was my responsibility."

In the darkness, Louis couldn't see where the food was, but he wasn't even remotely hungry to begin with. The wretched thought of how they were expected to eat, likely curled on their sides, chewing the bread without the use of their hands, made him feel even more ill. In fact, enough so to warrant concern.

"I'm going to be sick," he called out in warning.

"For God's sake, man, keep your distance then. And not on the bread."

"Where is it again? I—oh, no—"

He heaved pitifully, only hoping that it wasn't directly on their supposed meal for the day.

"Just what we needed," Maurice said with a hollow chuckle. "Now everything smells like vomit."

Louis prayed for freedom before either of them had to piss.

Chapter 17

The day dragged on, not that Louis was aware whether night had fallen yet. The crumbs of bread were left uneaten, with Louis feeling too sick and Maurice claiming no appetite. It was probably for the best, as sitting even as they were was incredibly uncomfortable. Any pathetic attempts at stuffing their faces would cause more than just emotional discomfort.

He wasn't sure how people could stand such conditions. Louis had a newfound sympathy for any other hapless fool who had been thrown into gaol, knowing that their sentence, at the very least, was lawful. Thoughts and hopes of escape came and left his mind—he could only assume Maurice was going through a similar journey of utter despair.

Louis was glad of the silence; there was little he wanted to say. Instead, his mind was occupied strangely of Jack Sterling. He would blame his own circumstances as the cause, but he could not get the man's visage out of his mind—burned into the void before his eyes was Jack's striking face, his dastardly look, one working eye, and black whiskers. Images of their night together flashed in his mind, though he tried desperately to avoid lingering on them. This was not the time nor place to reminisce on the joys of being fucked within an inch of his life.

He had never been a religious man, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Louis prayed to God, uncertainly, and slowly, for he could hardly remember any of the actual phrases one might use in church. Instead, he cultivated a more casual audience out of his Lord, asking him (perhaps stupidly) for one thing above all else: to see Jack one more time.

Jack had to be their savior. It could be no other. Algie was hardly conscious; Lindsey betrayed them; Madame D'Arc put them in this dungeon in the first place. There were no other allies in the house, much less other humans that might be lurking nearby. If there were other captives, there would be no way they would know the location of this cell. If Jack didn't,

for one reason or another, return to the estate and demand Louis's freedom, then they would rot away in the dank room.

Louis must have either fallen asleep or blacked out large chunks of the day. He felt dizzy and weak, his stomach empty and twisted in knots, when the door opened once more, almost certainly for their evening meal.

"Algie, please," he groaned, expecting the butler's presence once more. "Please help us."

Not bothering to lift his head up, he was surprised to feel the cool band of a piece of fabric wrap around his mouth. A gas lamp lit up the chamber, and he whipped his head up hopefully.

Before him stood a man, dressed all in black, with a few missing teeth in his sinister grin. It was Randall—one of the other men in Jack's gang.

"Hmmp!" he mumbled out, desperately hoping that this was the rescue mission that it looked like.

"Aye, you're coming with me, lad," Randall said chillingly. "Best we get going, before the General wonders where you went."

That didn't sound promising at all. He flinched away from the man's touch as he tried to haul him to his feet.

"Don't struggle now, or I'll smack you upside the head."

The resulting scramble caused Maurice to wake as well.

"The bloody hell—" he called out.

"Who's there?" Randall yelled, stepping back slightly.

"The bastard who'll break your teeth in. Unhand Lord Earlshope this instant!"

"*He has no teeth,*" Louis wanted to say, but it sounded only like muffled garbage through the mouth gag.

Another gas lamp turned on. Algie stood to the side of the room, still looking downcast. The additional light

illuminated Maurice's profile, revealing that he too was bound up.

"Idiots," Randall laughed. "Try your hardest to resist. I don't know who the fuck you are, but I don't need you where I'm going. I'm taking the little lord, and that's it."

He worked quickly, holding the faint light up to the space between the two gentlemen as he started untying the knots.

"Fuck is this? Tied up together like two loons. Figured that bitch wouldn't make this easy for me."

Louis pushed himself to the side, trying to crawl away. Maurice attempted to twist his body and aim a kick at Randall, but the angle was all wrong.

"Algie!" Maurice called out. "Do something, you bloody idiot!"

The servant stood still, not looking up from the flickering glow of the lamp.

Louis saw an easy opportunity and took it. Randall leaned forward to get a closer look, and Louis reared his head back and slammed it forward, right against the man's temple.

"Fuck!" he groaned out.

"Mmph!" Louis moaned, his damaged head rattling in his skull. He regretted the idea immediately, forgetting that he had just been smacked with the end of a gun, though took pleasure in seeing Randall in pain.

He regretted it further when a knife was suddenly held to his throat.

"Try that again, or anything else, and I will end it once and for all. Don't think I'm bluffing, boy. I've killed for less."

"Son of a—" Maurice hissed out. Louis leaned his head back against his shoulder blade, hoping it would come across as a gesture to back down. The look in Randall's eyes told him he wasn't joking. The last thing he needed was Maurice's masculine bravado getting his own throat slit.

The bandit kept a close eye on both of them as he lowered the small blade and began cutting away at the rope connecting the two of them together. Louis used the moment to think briefly. He supposed this was better than nothing, and possibly a better fate than rotting away in this dungeon for even one complete day. Maurice, however, would be stuck here alone, and Randall did not seem like the kind of man to treat Louis with any modicum of dignity. He thought fast, looking up towards Algie.

He caught his eye in a brief moment. Algie winced and looked away, but darted his eyes back to Louis's again. They stared each other down in the orange glow.

Louis took back his previous prayer. He hoped instead that telepathy was real, and that Algie was able to read his mind.

He flicked his gaze between Algie's and the lamp he was holding. A gas lamp, of course, could be deadly in the right hands. The contents were highly combustible, as Louis heard many stories of poor ladies igniting their own gowns on fire with clumsy elbows knocking against lit up walls. He prayed that Algie knew what the initial plan he and Maurice developed was. Create a distraction—set something on fire. Better yet, smash the lamp against Randall's head and kill him. Louis wanted Algie to do something, *anything*, or else both he and Maurice would be doomed.

In a flash of a gesture, before Louis could breathe in fully, Algie reached down and pulled off Louis's shoe. It was a light slipper, easy to slide on and off. He held it behind his back and gave Louis a quick nod.

He had no idea what it meant, or how his shoe could possibly help anything. A brief examination of Algie's intelligence would be in order, right after Maurice's.

The knot was soon loosened, and Louis was pulled free from Maurice, who quickly shook out of his bindings and began to stand up.

“Now, now!” Randall called out, pulling Louis up against his body and holding the knife to his throat. “Any

sudden movements, and the little lord chokes on his own blood. I'm nothing short of a cat with this blade, so I'll gut you right after if you take another step."

Maurice paused, his fists half-raised in a sparring pose. He looked down at Louis.

He shook his head, really not wanting to die, and knowing that Algie was planning something. He flicked his eyes to the servant and back to Maurice, over and over again, hoping that the other man understood.

Something seemed to work. Maurice sat back down, groaning in exhaustion, as Randall backed up slowly towards the door.

"Open this fucking cell up, boy!" he hissed at Algie.

Algie set the lamp down, not far away from Maurice, and found where the hidden opening to the room was. The chamber was far too dark to be able to tell what he did to open it, but the scratching of brick on brick burned through Louis's ears again as Randall yanked him through roughly.

As he was being dragged up the stairs, he saw Algie work to close the door again.

"Make sure it's secured," Randall called out, looking down. "I don't want that fool getting out."

Algie locked it again and turned to face them both. Seemingly satisfied with his work, Randall resumed hauling Louis up the tall, narrow staircase.

Just before the base of the stairs went out of view, Louis could see the faint glimmer of something lodged in the door frame. The bolts to the door were locked, but something was holding it ajar—keeping it slightly opened. Just barely, nothing more than an inch or two. Just enough to create some give should, say, a strong man try and kick it open.

Of course, it was Louis's slipper. He also didn't fail to notice that Algie walked up the stairs with them again without the gas lamp he was holding.

He changed his prayer one more time. Now he hoped that Maurice could read minds, and he would understand what to do. He also added in, at the last minute, a brief prayer hoping that Algie would stay safe in the mess regardless.

Chapter 18

The corridors were all dark—narrow and long, nearly endless—and Louis could see no way of escaping. Therefore, there was no reason for Randall to be pulling Louis by the nape of his neck as hard as he was.

He tried to voice his concerns, but with the cloth gagging his mouth, it came out as little more than an annoying whimper. Randall smacked the side of his head, which promptly ended all such attempts at speaking.

It was shocking how little noise could be heard. Louis had assumed that the other rooms were filled with fellow hostages, but now wondered if any actually were there. No guards were to be found, neither were any servants; it was almost as if the entire wing of the house was abandoned. Algie had also disappeared down the other hallway as soon as they reached the top of the stairs where the prison had been.

Something, he was realizing, was not adding up properly. Madame D’Arc’s house was in a terrible condition, and the lack of any useful security did not seem to befit a woman of her magnitude. She must have been lying, on top of her attempt at emulating a higher class, about the full extent of her wealth. Louis wondered if there were *any* guards beyond the handful who came into Maurice’s room when they were discovered.

The thought emboldened him. He resolved, after another few steps, not to go lightly wherever Randall was trying to take him. He could only assume the bandit was thinking of collecting the ransom all on his own, bypassing Jack’s command, so the threats of death had to be exaggerated to some degree. Louis debated on just how far he was willing to find that out.

Seconds away from attempting to twist out of Randall’s grasp, another man approached them from down the hall.

“Got him,” Randall said.

“Took you long enough. How’s the head, little lord?” the stranger said, bending down to smirk at his face. Louis snarled back. The additional man looked vaguely familiar, possibly part of the party that originally helped Jack carry him off the train. He was likewise dressed all in black, though noticeably younger and less gruff than Randall.

“No need to drag him so hard,” he said with a surprising touch of tenderness. “Bet he’s glad enough as it is to get out of that disgusting prison.”

“I’m not gonna take a chance with this fop,” Randall said, tightening his hold on Louis’s collar. “You’ve seen how feisty he gets.”

“No wonder the General took such an interest in him. A shame he ain’t gonna get any of the profits.”

Louis would have berated them had he had a functioning mouth. He couldn’t believe how idiotic they were, more than willing to spill all their personal business right in front of him. His suspicions were confirmed—they were acting beyond Jack’s orders. This realization further justified any attempts of his to escape their grasp.

They continued to discuss, rather loudly, which way was the best to exit the house. The new one claimed the back was the most obvious; Randall hesitated, saying it would therefore be the most dangerous—better take the front exit, which no one would be expecting should there be any of Madame’s guards lingering about. They both hummed along to the other side’s point, pretending to have enough of a brain to appear capable of considering one plan over the other.

Louis meanwhile, looked around where they came from. The darkness of the halls was disconcerting, but also something he could use to his advantage. Beyond the low light of the lamps Randall and the other man carried, they could see no better than Louis himself. If he ran quickly enough, he must escape their sight before they could grab him again. Wearing one shoe was not ideal, but perhaps being in just his stockings would further muffle his steps. In his contemplation, he slid the other shoe off and kicked it to the side.

God, meanwhile, seemed more than eager to answer Louis's prayers, which was more than enough evidence to justify that going to church was useless. A loud crash echoed down the opposing corridor. The unmistakable sound of curling flame, a powerful and unstoppable ignition, startled all three of them. Maurice must have snuck out and used the gas lamp as some kind of incendiary.

Louis wasted not a second. In the brief moment of shock, Randall's grip loosened slightly on his collar, and Louis twisted his neck out of it. The hand came off, and he ran down towards the sound of the crash.

"Shit!" Randall said.

"Fuck!" the other said simultaneously.

Louis's footsteps were silent, but he could hear the trudging of the other men's boots start after him. There was a resounding *oof*, followed by more expletives, as one of them tripped—possibly over Louis's slipper.

They had no means of catching up with him. Louis breathed hard, covering the length of the hallway in long strides. An orange blaze erupted some distance in front of him, allowing him to see where the corridor turned into another wing. He followed the path, hoping not to run directly into the flames, as he heard a gunshot burst through the wall next to him.

More curses could be heard behind him. One of the men must have pulled out a gun, and in a thoughtless attempt at stopping Louis, tried to shoot him dead. Randall's voice echoed, berating himself for his lousy shot. Louis would have laughed if his mouth could open.

Around the corner, the orange blaze was igniting remarkably fast. It looked to be a sitting-room, a reading nook overlooking the gardens, with old bookshelves likely covered in very flammable dust. The decrepit nature of the house was finally coming to Louise's advantage. The old, dried out wallpaper curled under the heat, as the fire began to spread at an alarming rate.

Maurice was nowhere to be found, so Louis could only hope he made it to safety as he ran through the nook and onto the next room. He could see nothing, and all the curtains had been shut up, cutting out even starlight. The bindings on his wrists dug deep into his flesh, but fussing with them was of no use just yet. Instead, he kept running.

The voices of the bandits disappeared beyond the roar of the blaze. Louis could only imagine they were stopped in their tracks, and the fire grew large enough to limit anyone else's passing. Stirring was heard upstairs, as more servants were likely waking up to the noise and heat. It wouldn't be long before the entire house was awake and panicking.

Louis found the next door, and then the next, and then the next. The sheer size of the house was ridiculous, and the darkness only served to make it appear even larger. He had no idea where a way out was, or if he were on the ground floor or not. All he could think of was the urge to keep moving—keep running—don't stop for one second.

A door opened in front of him, nearly causing him to slam into it. A candle was held out, illuminating a timid and purple face. It was Algie.

“Hmmp!” Louis screamed through his gag, almost retching from needing to gasp for air. Algie looked on in shock, stunned for a few seconds, before grabbing Louis by the arm and pulling him into the room.

“What is going on out there?” he said, looking around the room desperately.

Louis said nothing, for his mouth was still gagged shut.

Panic was quickly filling the rest of the house. More voices could be heard all around them, as did the sound of more shattering glass. It sounded exactly like the initial gas lamp being thrown against the wall.

Algie soon found a small pair of scissors, quickly cut the cloth away from Louis's mouth, and began to work on his wrists.

“I think Maurice set the house on fire,” Louis breathed out, gasping for air. “The others are chasing me—ran away before they got me—whole house is a disaster—must leave immediately.”

“I made out that much. I wasn’t expecting Sir Grantham to act so quickly!”

“Who?”

“Sir Grantham. Maurice Grantham.”

“That’s right—nearly forgot the family name—how unlike me.”

Algie made surprisingly quick work of the ropes around Louis’s wrists, and he pulled his arms away free.

“Good God. I am so sick of losing access to my hands!”

“Glad to be of assistance, Lord Earlshope.”

“Algie, wait, don’t call me that. I am so sorry for what happened. I’m sorry for everything—we need to get out of here immediately.”

“No, I cannot go with you.”

“Why not?” Louis grabbed his arm. “Please don’t tell me you are still upset with me.”

“No, it’s not that. If Madame finds out that I helped you at all, I’ll be dead. I’ll find my own way out. Just go on without me!”

“Are you sure? Okay—well, good luck then. Also, which way is out, exactly?”

With a few more questions answered, Louis hugged him and said, “God bless you!” before running out of the room once more. A few months ago, if someone ever told him he would hug a servant or say something about blessings, he would have laughed in that poor sod’s face.

To his horror, the flames seemed to be building rather quickly. He could see the fiery glow from where he just came, so forward was the only option. Another door nearby opened,

with a tall figure coming out. Louis halted in fear, and then watched as the figure turned on another lamp in their hands and threw it forcefully against the curtains overlooking a window. The fabric immediately burst into flame.

“Maurice!” Louis called out. “What the bloody hell are you doing?”

“Earlshope! Creating a distraction. Help me out?”

“We only needed one fire! You’ll kill us all!”

The flame from the curtains made its way up towards the ceiling, before catching onto more of the scaffolding that crowned the top. The wallpaper and paint, being so old, was as good as being soaked in oil against the heat of the gas lamp’s fire.

“How many have you lit already?”

“Half a dozen, I’d say. I’m not stopping until this rat’s nest is coated in ash.”

Louis looked at him in horror. “You’re joking. There are servants in this house—possibly other captives. They will die if they do not get out in time!”

“Not my problem,” Maurice said with an annoying gusto. “They should all perish for their involvement here.”

“Algie was just in the room before this. You’ll kill him too?”

“If that’s what it takes, though I dare say he’ll get out just fine on his own.”

They had to move forward, as the fire came too close for them to remain where they stood. Louis glanced over at Maurice’s face, horrified by the look of placid shock and vitriol in it. Bruises and cuts lined his sharp features, and his lip was split open in a particularly painful looking way. He wondered if the man had gone entirely insane during their time locked up. Louis couldn’t blame him, but could try and stop him from doing something as ridiculous as killing everyone inside the house.

“Please, Maurice, stop this now. We’ve done enough. Let’s just go find a way out together.” He pulled on his sleeve, trying to get him to keep moving when the other man stopped to wrestle open another door.

“You go on. I’ve more work to do.”

“This is madness! Stop before you get yourself killed.”

“Get your disgusting hands *off* me!” Maurice shouted, shoving Louis to the floor, who looked up at him in shock and horror. “I don’t need the help of some vile sodomite like you. Go find your lover boy if you like, but get out of my way.”

He shouldered the door open, leaving Louis there alone and completely stunned. A woman screamed inside the room, likely a maid or other servant of some kind, and then proceeded to run out, skipping past Louis on the floor. He quickly got back up on his feet, looking over his shoulder only once to see Maurice lighting another gas lamp he took from the room and launching it against the next pair of curtains.

He followed the footsteps of the maid, but was beginning to lose sight of her as she ran fast through the familiar halls. A few other doors were opening, with the rest of the servants waking up to the building inferno, but Louis didn’t stop running to follow their lead. He simply couldn’t slow down at all.

Eventually, Louis found himself near the grand staircase at the opening of the house. It was another blessing to have gone the right way, but before he could run out of the house, two shadowy figures stepped out in front of him.

Thinking quickly, Louis stepped to the side, hugging the wall. Randall and the other had not seen him yet, but with the light of the fire approaching from behind, he wouldn’t have long before his features were illuminated. A small table came up against his side—another brief blessing—as he ran his fingers over the top of it. A three-pronged candelabra stood on top of it, heavy and made of silver. The two men stopped to speak to each other.

“Think he’s gone out of here yet?”

“Must have, otherwise he’s been turned to ash.”

“Is the entire house on fire?”

“Wouldn’t risk finding out. We need to get going. Damn the boy.”

Another gas lamp exploded just at the corner of the house where Louis had come from. The resulting blaze startled all of them and created a bright glow. The unfamiliar man looked to his side, directly into Louis’s now lit up face, and took a deep breath as he opened his mouth.

Without waiting, and perhaps without thinking, Louis tightened his grip on the heavy candelabra, knocked his arms back, and swung forward. A resounding thud echoed as the heavy metal collided with the man’s skull, and he dropped to the floor instantly.

Randall yelled out in shock, looking down at the ground towards his collapsed partner, before looking where the source of the blow originated from. But by then, Louis was already gone.

He bound towards the front doors, quickly filing in line as the rest of the house made their way out. The stench of scorched dust and paper was making him dizzy, but fresh air was just around the corner. He pushed past a few bodies, ran out of the large double doors of the entry, and kept running into the night.

There was a full moon out, and his eyes quickly adjusted to the better lighting of the wide outdoors. He looked over his shoulder, saw that half of the house was now lit up in flames, as the rest of its inhabitants looked on in terror.

Louis’s last thought, just before he turned back around, was that he realized it wasn’t Randall whom he knocked out. It was the other one, the kinder one who urged Randall to loosen his grip on Louis’s hair.

The recollection of it was haunting, but stopping was not an option. Randall could be on him at any moment.

And so, he kept running.

Chapter 19

Louis ran on until he couldn't run any more.

His feet were screaming in pain. It was a terrible idea to lose his shoes before embarking on an endless voyage through the middle of the night. He had no idea where he was, no idea what time it was, nor any idea if there was someone nearby who could help him. It was, possibly, one of the worst decisions he had ever made.

The alternative was no better. He may as well have murdered one of the men who were looking to chase him down. No matter what, giving in to Randall was not something he was willing to compromise on—he'd rather die on his own.

That might be a tad bit dramatic. Before the matter of life and death came about, Louis would prefer at the least to try and find anyone who might be willing and able to help him for the time being. No matter how fast he ran, the blaze in the distance would not come out of view. The entire house, by this point, was set to burn apart from within. Madame D'Arc might have been dead, as might Maurice. There's no telling how many other lives could have been caught up in the blaze. Louis couldn't help but feel the crushing responsibility of it all; it was partially his fault. He could have done more to stop Maurice's tirade, done more to convince him to only create a minor diversion and not set the entire estate to the torch.

He sat down on a nearby stile, just to the side of the main road, to catch his breath. Severely dehydrated, exhausted, weak, and terrified, there were little options for Louis to consider. Perhaps if he just waited long enough, and tried hard not to move, he would wake up from this bizarre nightmare. His life seemed so far away from him now. Once, so indolent! So restful! And now a constant escape from bandits, crooks, blazing fires, and murderers. The sight of one more villain might just be enough to cause his sanity to break at last.

The light of the moon was rather beautiful otherwise, as was the calm, chilled breeze of the early nighttime. October,

indeed, was right around the corner, and this would be the last of many days to come where one could sit happily outdoors as little clothed as Louis was. Despite this, never one to suffer the cold lightly, Louis hugged his tired legs to his chest and huddled close on top of the stile. What else was one to do but sit and wait, hoping for a miracle? The voices of the house in the distance continued to grow louder, as attempts to placate the fires were made.

A different noise came from the opposite direction. It sounded, if Louis listened closely enough, like the soft gallop of a horse. It trudged, louder and louder, until he knew it was unmistakably the beat of an approaching rider. For this, Louis stood high up on his perch, looking over the road, ready to call for help if possible.

His heart thudded hard in his chest. Who could possibly be making their way down this road at such an hour? It was too fanciful to hope for a long sheriff or constable. Beyond that, Louis had no idea who else even lived here—much less the types of people they were.

The rider approached nearer, slowing down atop the slight hill to overlook the road leading towards the blazing house. Louis stared down the tall, dark horse—strong and capable of riding through long distances. His eyes traveled up the rider's long legs, recognizing a familiar form.

“Jack!” he cried out.

Jack's head whipped to the side, noticing Louis standing on top of the stile.

“What the fuck?” he said in return.

It was almost too good to be true. Why had Jack returned? Was he really here or was it just Louis's overheated mind playing tricks on him? He was almost too happy for rationality, and, momentarily forgetting where he was, Louis stretched his arms out and walked forward.

“Oh my god! Jack, please—please you have to help me. I've come this way to—*oof*.”

He fell forward, realizing too late that he was a step up on his perch, and landed on the wrong side of his ankle against the dirty road. Pain immediately enveloped his foot, and he gasped in deeply to stave off the incoming shouts of protest.

Jack cursed, dismounting his horse masterfully, and crouched down beside him.

“Dammit, lad? Are you alright?”

“Not by any means.”

“What’s going on? What’s wrong?” he scooped him up into his arms, pressing him close. Louis could see, beyond the initial confusion, a deep concern in Jack’s face.

“Well, for starters, I am glad to see you. Something must be wrong with me there.”

“Smart-mouthed brat.”

He helped Louis up to his feet, or singular foot really, but kept his arms wrapped tightly around his midsection. The feeling was the first bit of comfort Louis had felt in days, and he relished in the familiarity of the man. As his *first* kidnapper, Jack really held a special place in his heart already.

“The house is burning down,” he said quickly, not minding the look of confused horror on Jack’s face. “Maurice—one of the other gentlemen there—is lighting it ablaze. It’s a long story, and I’m afraid if we wait here for me to tell it all, something terrible will happen to me. We have to go immediately.”

“Tell me the short version, then. Should I go down to get help?”

“Let’s see—no help needed, for the entire household is at work and likely alerting someone else more important. No offense. The Madame was going to kill me and Sir Maurice, and the latter wasn’t willing to go down so easily. Chaos ensued, and here I am.”

He started at those words. “She tried to kill you?”

It wasn’t exactly far from the truth, so Louis nodded.

“She wasn’t supposed to touch you. You’re not hers to touch.”

“And, therefore, I left. Now, if you please, capture me again on your own. No one holds me prisoner as well as you.”

Jack eyed him warily. “How can I trust you? You’re still the one at risk here...I’m not sure—”

“Jack, please,” Louis said urgently. “Please, just trust me. I will do what I can to help you extort my father—I don’t care. I’ll do anything you want; I just cannot stay here a minute longer, or they will kill me. Please, *please*, just trust me now.”

It was shocking how easily it worked. So easily, in fact, Louis had to actively hide from his conscious reprimanding him for lying to Jack’s face. He didn’t dare mention Randall, not just yet, and certainly not the fact that he retaliated against one of Jack’s own men. Mutinous or not, he remembered Madame D’Arc’s words of how much Jack cared for the others in his group.

Despite his own misgivings, Jack nodded, lifting him slightly towards the horse, and swinging himself back up gracefully on the large animal. He held his hand out to Louis.

“Come on, just lift yourself up with your good foot.”

The height of the animal, coupled with the extreme pressures of the night’s activities, all bore down on Louis at once. Jack was simply too far up, too far away to reach on his own, and it paralyzed Louis with fear in his place. He said nothing.

Jack looked at him sympathetically, likely remembering their earlier skirmish regarding the curricule.

“Just trust me?” he said softly. “Grab my hand and look into my eyes. That’s it—just slowly now. I won’t let you fall. I promise.”

Somehow, it worked. Louis grabbed onto his hand, holding it as tightly as he could, and let his body be lifted up onto the gargantuan monstrosity called a horse. He always hated riding as a child and ventured never to step foot near one

again. However, it was a desperate occasion, so allowances had to be made.

He wrapped his arms firmly around Jack's waist, clutching him from beyond with all his might, and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Ready?"

"Just go."

And off they galloped, away from the blaze, away from Madame, and away from Randall and the other—all because Jack trusted Louis's word. He hoped it would be enough. He was just about willing to do anything for Jack in return for this trust. Well, almost anything.

"You told me to look into your eyes," he said, trying not to let the wave of nausea overcome him.

"And?" Jack rode fast yet smooth—elegant yet determined. Conversation was more than easy to carry out in the silence of the night.

"You only have one eye."

"I suppose I do, little lord."

"What happened to it?"

"I'll tell you about it soon. But first, we need to figure out where to go tonight. Somebody, it seems, already set fire to my bed in my absence."

Despite his words, Jack seemed to know exactly where he was headed. They rode on in silence, with Louis concentrating only on the beat of the horse's hooves and the warmth emanating from Jack's body. This was the longest he had been mounted since he was probably the age of five and was mighty pleased with his own bravery.

The local parish, just a few miles off from the great house, came into view. By now, the town had all but settled indoors for the night, creating the eerie silence one could only find in some hovel of a backwoods area in the middle of nowhere—not that Louis could see any of it; he just knew by instinct.

It wasn't much longer until they stopped. A small hanging sconce illuminated a single door, but the building itself was nothing more than a silhouette in the dark of the night. Jack deftly dismounted, before tenderly helping Louis down from the beast's back. Louis would have felt more surprise at the gentleness, had his anxious mind not been preoccupied by the fact that he rode such a tall horse for as long as he did without making a scene.

They had arrived at an inn, but it was different from the one the two of them had stayed at a few weeks prior, and of course, in much different circumstances. This boarding house was more in the style of a French hotel, which shocked Louis despite his exhausted sentiments. The interior was well-polished, the few footmen on duty were groomed, and the first floor was less of a scene of drunken revelry than a clean lobby where a gentleman, or even a lady, might pass through unscathed.

He listened as best he could as Jack spoke to the proprietor, trying to keep weight off of his sore ankle. Beyond the initial shock of Jack's appearance (and to Louis's horror, probably his own), the gray-haired man conducted business for the two of them swiftly and with ease. If the man had any opinions of them, or questions as to why Louis was without shoes and looked as though he just emerged from a jungle, he said none of them. They were soon led to the room where they were to stay, briefly told the amenities offered in the morning, and then left alone.

"You speak like a gentleman," Louis said. "It was odd hearing you converse with that man—a far cry from the ruffian I have come to know."

"I think you still know nothing of me," Jack said with a smile, before stepping close. "How is your ankle?"

"Sore, but not broken. It should be fine soon enough."

"You look flushed—and you are very warm. Are you well?"

"Perfectly."

“Give me your hand. Ahh, see—you feel feverish.”

“It was a long ride, and it is a warm night.”

“It was hardly a couple miles.”

Louis did not appreciate this line of questioning, and therefore decided not to respond. It was none of Jack’s business anyway why, or if, he was flushed and distracted. He pulled his hand away and walked behind him.

“Well,” he said, taking a look at the two narrow beds that made up the tiny room, “at least there will be no sleeping on a chair this time. I cannot help otherwise but feel that I have been in this very situation before.”

“Perhaps I should tie your ankles together again for old-times sake?”

“That wasn’t funny then, and it certainly is not now.”

Louis walked towards the bed closer to the fire and landed on it face first, sighing heartily. He had never felt so exhausted in his life, despite the fact that he wondered if sleep would ever come. His nerves were far too stretched, his mind still racing, and something about Jack’s presence so close by was making his stomach flutter hopelessly.

Jack, as far as Louis could tell, did not seem interested in the slightest to mention the last time they saw each other. He did not seem perturbed, nor even remotely awkward about knowing that just the other night, he had taken Louis’s virginity. If it weren’t going to bother him, then it sure as hell wasn’t going to bother Louis. He cleared his throat and turned his head to the side, watching Jack shrug his coat off and sit down in the bed across from his own. He gave Louis a stern look.

“You need to tell me what exactly happened at the Madame’s house tonight.”

“Can’t it wait until breakfast?”

“No. And I mean it. Start talking.”

Seeing that he was not in the mood to jest, Louis said up in bed as well, mirroring Jack’s pose. “I told you the basics.

Maurice set the house on fire.”

“Who is Maurice again?”

“The gentleman who was locked up beside me, in the room next door.”

“And he was the one who was knocking on your wall the first night I came by?”

Louis looked up at him. “I figured you would have caught that. Yes. That was him.”

“Why did he knock on your wall?”

“He wanted to know if there was someone near, I suppose. I don’t know much more.”

“You’re lying. Start again.”

“Really, Jack, I don’t—”

Jack snapped his fingers, loud enough to make Louis start. “This is serious. What else were you two planning? I need to know.”

“Well, he snuck into my room one night—”

“How did he do that?”

“Would you let me finish? He snuck into my room to tell me a plan he was making to try and escape. The footman let him into my room.”

“Which butler?”

“The taller one. His name is Lindsey.”

Jack nodded at that, and Louis decided not to incriminate Algie as well. Better left unsaid, especially if Jack wasn’t going to ask.

“And I assume you two got caught?”

Louis nodded. “Madame D’Arc said that your men were thinking of cutting my finger off to send to my father. I wrote the letter she wanted me to, but then—I panicked. She said you left, and I was scared what might happen to me without you there.”

Jack looked surprised at that, but said nothing. Louis continued.

“Lindsey let me into Sir Maurice’s room; we talked more, and then we were caught. She sent us into some dungeon beneath the house.”

“And did she hurt you at all?”

“No. We were just left there in the dark, tied to each other.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t,” Jack huffed. “You would have deserved it. I *told* you to just do what you’re supposed to.”

“And you expected me to listen?”

Jack gave him a look, so he just went on.

“Anyway, we got out. Lindsey helped us. I guess he felt bad, so he came to free us. Then Maurice decided to set the entire house ablaze. I ran, and then you were there.”

“Wait—I thought you said she tried to kill you.”

“Well, she did. When I got out of the dungeon, they, er, chased me with guns and shot at me. Her guards did, I mean. They would have killed me had I stopped running.”

It was a deliberate avoidance of Randall’s involvement. Louis wasn’t quite sure why he didn’t say it—it’s not like he was the one who disobeyed Jack’s authority; Randall and the other man were the traitors. Jack may have even been pleased to hear of Louis’s moves against them.

But, just how much would he believe? It seemed too much to take in all at once. Louis wouldn’t believe it, if he were in Jack’s position. He feared for what Jack would do if Louis ended up admitting that, traitors or not, he bashed one of their heads open as he ran out of a burning house.

Jack just nodded, looking down at the floor, not saying anything. Louis felt as though his heart had never beat as fast as it did in that moment, terrified to lie to Jack, but equally as terrified to admit the truth. He felt like a coward, unsure why

he didn't just admit to it all. But soon, before regret could linger, the moment passed.

"I *should* bring you back there," he said. "For attempting to escape, and jeopardizing her entire business, Madame would have had a right to shoot you dead."

Louis bit down on his lip.

"But I won't."

Another long moment passed. He wasn't quite sure what to say. Gratitude, in a moment like this, was not exactly the emotion one ought to share with their captor, even for the honor of not being shot to death right away.

"I hope everyone got out alright," Jack said, changing the subject.

"Me too."

"The rest of my men are near London now, last I heard, and likely to stay there for some time. You're lucky I turned back around when I did."

It was a subtle confirmation, but just as Louis suspected. Randall and the other man should have been in London as well. But when did they manage to escape Jack's notice?

"Why did you? Why are you here at all?" Louis said.

Now, it was Jack's turn to look flushed. He turned to the side, clearing his throat. "I'm not sure," he said evenly. "I suppose I just had a bad feeling. I wanted to check on things one last time. I left in a hurry this morning."

"Well, it's very good that you did. Otherwise, I would have lead embedded in my skull. Or be food for a wild animal. Or both."

"I guess now you owe me your life."

Louis rolled his eyes. "This is all your fault anyway. Savior of the day or not, you still put me in this mess. I am not so quick to forget that just because you decided to be nice to me now."

“Yeah—don’t get used to it.”

“I promise you, I won’t.”

An awkward silence followed. At least it was awkward for Louis. The situation was particularly absurd, and Jack seemed to be deep in thought. When he was thinking hard, the lines in his face grew more severe, making him look much older than Louis assumed he truly was. At the same time, it was a flattering look on him. He looked wise—serene, somehow. He was meant to be a great thinker—a strategist of some kind. How he ended up as the ringleader of a group of ruffians was beyond Louis’s understanding.

Regardless of what Jack was thinking, Louis’s own thoughts, of course, were focused on something much more mortifying. Without the constant din of their banter, he could hardly look at Jack, much less speak to him normally. When he saw that withered visage, the one eye and dark whiskers, he thought only of how he looked when they lay together. He thought only of how he wished Jack would kiss him again now. He thought about initiating it himself. It would be so simple—just a quick forward lean, a crane of his neck, and he could kiss those lips. He was certain Jack would respond. How could he not? With the fire that he showed Louis the night before, how could he resist him now?

“So, what do we do?” Louis said instead.

Jack gave him a long look. It wasn’t heated or dismissive, but tired. Jack looked positively exhausted as he looked Louis up and down. “You’ll come to London with me,” he said eventually. “I’ll keep you nearby until I deal with your father.”

“Can’t get enough of me, can you?” Louis smiled weakly.

“Clearly. I should also clear things up with D’Arc, assuming she is still alive.”

“I have no doubt she managed to escape before she was anywhere at risk.”

“The house is far enough away to escape the notice of most of the town, but it still might be too risky to go back so soon. I’m sure she’ll understand if I pay my respects to her later. She will be very angry that I didn’t give you back to her for what you did.”

“I didn’t do anything. Maurice did it.”

“Whatever you say, little lord.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Sterling.”

He gave him another weathered look. “Don’t call me that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Or that. I told you what to call me already.”

“Master?”

At last, it got him to chuckle. Louis laughed alongside him, trying to escape the tension he felt whenever silence descended.

Jack rubbed his face through his hands and sighed. “We should get some sleep. London, after all, is a long distance from here.”

“And where are we now exactly?”

“Back with the questions, I see. There was a reason I dumped you off at that house. I guess I’ll just have to tie your mouth shut again anyways.”

The reference, however oblique, to Louis being restrained again brought back the full force of their previous rendezvous together. Louis blushed deeply, looking away and feeling hot. Jack said nothing, but his eyes lingered, as if he were about to. Louis could see him stare out of the corner of his eye, but couldn’t bring himself to look forward.

The moment passed—Jack stood first. He undressed quickly, all the way down to his undergarments, as Louis did the same. After stepping out of his trousers, he pulled the blankets all the way up to his chin, just as he did when he was a child, and stared at the ceiling to keep from watching Jack

climb under his own sheets. The last lamp was extinguished, and the room was now pitch black save for the small fireplace near him. He watched his own faint shadow dance across the ceiling.

“Goodnight Master Sterling Sir,” he said quietly.

He heard a brief huff and the sheets shift as Jack turned away to fall asleep.

Louis stared up at his shadow for as long as he could, before his eyes became crusted over with sleep, and he closed them at last.

Chapter 20

A rough hand caressed his face. Louis woke with a start.

“Time to get up, little lord,” Jack said, staring down at him.

Before being completely overwhelmed with desire, Louis wisely looked away from Jack’s lips and towards the clothes he was wearing. They were stiffened flannels, dark brown in tartan patterns, but not black. The incongruity of the scene was enough to get him out of bed in a few seconds.

“What are you wearing?” Louis said, rubbing his eyes and running a hand through his hair.

“Clothes.”

“You’re not funny, so stop trying.”

Jack seemed pleased with his own answer, and ignored him, going back to tying his cravat tightly to his neck. His form was highlighted in the warmer colors, the seat of his trousers hugging his thick thighs very fashionably. Louis had never seen someone look so much like a gentleman when he clearly was not one. He rubbed his eyes again just to make sure he wasn’t dreaming.

At the foot of his own bed was a fresh set of clothes, similarly brown and tartaned, which was becoming more popular these days.

“Am I supposed to wear those?”

“Yes, and do so quickly. We need to leave before we cause even more trouble here.”

Louis grumbled, but obeyed. He wasn’t completely sure what the state of the town, or Madame’s estate, was at the moment, but he wanted to get out of there as soon as they could. He got dressed with ease, pleased with the overall comfort of the clothes Jack picked out for him. They were less debasing than the rags he dressed him in before, but nothing like the brocade silks he would have picked for himself.

Nevertheless, since they were likely to be traveling discreetly, the middle-class compromise would have to do.

“Should I even ask where you procured these dressings from?”

“I’ve got friends nearby.”

“But you see, *friend* is not a word that is compatible with your nature. I am sure you mean *victim* or *associate*.”

“Whatever.”

By the time Louis had all but his coat to shrug into, Jack had packed up what little belongings they had left. Neither of their clothes were in the room.

“Where did you put my clothes?”

“They’re gone now—how’s your foot?”

“What do you mean *gone*?”

Jack stepped close to him, examining his face closely. The proximity was enough to quiet Louis from protest, which was in and of itself a mean feat.

“Can’t bring them along—they might be incriminating—town’s flooded with constables at the moment. How’s your foot?” He looked at Louis’s eyebrow closely, furrowing his own.

“What do you mean flooded with constables? Are we going to be arrested?”

“Not if we move quickly,” Jack touched his brow bone, which elicited a sharp yelp from Louis.

“Ow!”

“Your eye is swollen. When did you get hit?”

“Madame’s guard knocked me with the butt of his gun.”

“And how’s your ankle?”

“It’s fine! Now quit examining me. I am perfectly capable of doing it myself, thank you.”

“Put those shoes on. Do they fit alright?”

“Please, Jack. Slow down—I cannot keep up with you at so early an hour.” Despite his protests, Louis did slide into the shoes, which were a little large on him, and put his coat on. He peered at his face in the small looking-glass on the desk and was promptly horrified by his own appearance. The left side of his face, between his cheekbone and temple, was puffy and dotted with purple specks. It didn’t hurt too terribly, but the sight of it was enough to make him groan from discomfort.

“Cover it with your hair. The less it looks like we just survived a fight, the easier it will be to get on our train. Come here.”

He fussed with Louis’s hair, who fussed back irritably.

“Stop! Allow me to do it,” he said.

“You don’t need to look ready for court,” Jack said. “Just cover your bruise with your fringe. Like that.”

“I can’t go out looking like this. I still have a reputation to uphold. What if I’m recognized?”

“That’s the point. You don’t want to be recognized.”

“Hmm, very well.”

The important business of styling Louis’s fringe now over with, the two of them exited their room and made their way out of the hotel with as little noise as possible. Jack mentioned again, on their way down the stairs, that the police had been summoned after the fire. They are searching for a cause, which put Madame D’Arc and the rest of the house in a terrible bind. In the chaos, Jack and Louis would best be off by slipping away unnoted, before Sir Maurice, if he were even alive still, would speak of Louis’s involvement in the affairs as well.

To this, Louis just nodded along and did what he was instructed. He dare not invoke Jack’s retaliation should he make any attempt or hint at running off to the police himself, not that Jack would let him step even an inch away unchecked. Furthermore, not that Louis even particularly wanted to. The resulting scandal his involvement would cause would be

enough to send his father into hysterics. Likewise, it was much more fun this way to sneak out like naughty schoolboys.

The day was blustery and chilled, and the town was much busier than Louis might have guessed. It was less the decrepit hamlet he imagined, and more of a quaint, though clean, working village. Some of the women walking by were even wearing lace on their bonnets, which boded well for their nearness to true civilization. Louis pulled his hat down closer on his head, feeling awkwardly out of place amidst the relatively well put together villagers. He himself felt like a pariah, with his blackening eye and thrifted clothing. Thankfully, no one seemed to be staring at him.

Jack, meanwhile, was attracting quite a bit of attention. Men stared at him openly; women eyed him through handkerchiefs or gloved hands. He was, after all, hardly better than an ape wearing pearls, but Louis would have stared at him too. He was very tall, his shoulders squared proudly, and the eyepatch seemed only to give him a bit of masculine charm rather than elucidate questionable morals. He looked more like a gentleman than Louis did at that moment. Something close to envy clawed from within. It was a ridiculous notion, but one that could hardly be helped. Louis felt envious of Jack's stalwart ease, his manly forthrightness. Broiling within as well was a knot of desire for the other man. The tartan flannel absolutely made him look irresistible in the raw, sunny morning.

What was further intoxicating was the way Jack spoke to the coachman as they approached the station. It would be a quick carriage ride from the center of town towards the train station, and Jack spoke to him as if he had been bred in a castle. He was clearly familiar with the area, comfortable talking to men from all backgrounds, and put Louis's prideful conceit to shame. Had he spoken to the coachman, he would have barely said more than a few words—Jack, meanwhile, ended the conversation with a clap on the stranger's back, as if they had known each other since the schoolroom.

“Where did you learn to talk like that?” he said, sitting across from Jack in the small cubby of the carriage.

“What do you mean?”

“You talked to that man like a brother. Where did you learn to be so democratic?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps one doesn’t learn to be democratic, but unlearns it somewhere along the way. Is that enough philosophizing for you today?”

“Hardly. My mother would be very impressed with your manners.”

“The late Lady Earlshope herself!” Jack said with mock enthusiasm. “I’d be so honored. Think I could ask for your sister’s hand in marriage?”

“I don’t have a sister,” Louis said gloomily.

“Course not—but I can’t very well ask for your hand, now can I?”

He scowled. It wasn’t right for Jack to tease him like that, especially since he seemed determined never to mention their brief tryst together. Louis would never allow himself to be the first to bring it up, but he wanted, more and more by the passing minutes, for Jack to say *anything* about it. But he didn’t. In fact, neither of them said anything during the remainder of the brief ride to the train station, nor as they approached the stands and made their way towards their track. It would be an hour-long wait before the next train to London, which would then be a three-hour-long journey. The signs revealed to Louis that they were in northern Cheshire, not far south from Liverpool. For some reason, he expected them to be further away. The realization that they were still in English territory, not far from a large port city, sobered some of Louis’s more fantastical thoughts. This was still England, Louis was still a prisoner, and Jack was still not mentioning their night together.

Chapter 21

The hour passed quickly, because Louis fell asleep. The subsequent rush of the travelers making their way to board the locomotive stirred him from his early morning nap, and he ventured into one of the first cars alongside Jack. Blissfully, they were alone, likely given the early hour on a Tuesday.

Feeling rejuvenated from his brief respite, Louis was also in a proper mood to begin teasing his new companion in full force.

“I find it very interesting how like these circumstances are to another time in my life.”

“Is that so.”

“Yes. Very like indeed. In fact, as recent as just the beginning of this month, when I was on a train departing from Edinburgh. I’m quite struck by the likeness.”

To this, Jack made no response. More teasing, therefore, was in order.

“But you see,” he went on, “I traveled alone during that time. I was also forced to deboard early, due to some of the other passengers on the vehicle.”

“And what did these other passengers do?”

“Nothing unusual I suppose. Just the run-of-the-mill murder and pillage scheme. I barely made it out with my life.”

“Uh-huh.”

“The leader of this jovial group was particularly dreadful. Unbearable to look at. A one-eyed monster. Vinegar on the palate.”

“We—I—didn’t murder anyone.”

“Oh I’m sure that’s a nice story to tell yourself, if only to remind your conscience that there are a few more steps before total damnation.”

“I’m damned enough as it is,” Jack said. “I don’t need any additional notches in my soul’s bedposts.”

“I don’t think you are using that phrase correctly.”

“I know what I’m doing,” he said with a smirk.

Louis huffed and looked outside the window. “Anyway, back to *my* story: if you could believe it, it actually gets worse.”

“Oh, pray tell.”

“Stuck with this cyclops, I was forced to walk for miles on foot. It tore my clothes from my back, locked me away in its rooms, and abandoned me to a proper she-wolf. I had truly landed in the realm of monsters.”

“You must despise such a creature for taking you like that.”

“You have no idea, yet I can’t help but feel the urge to help it. Like when one sees a wild animal caught in a hunter’s trap—can’t help but feel sorry for the poor soul.”

“There’s likely nothing left you can do for it.”

“Not the case,” Louis smiled. “In fact, I think I know exactly how to help the beast make a full recovery. The real question is whether I ought to or not.”

“What are your reservations?”

“A lifetime of understanding the law. Familial duty. Love for my parents and their legacy. Respect for the commandments. Etcetera.”

“And the opposing argument?”

Louis shrugged. “I’m not sure yet. I suppose if a good argument were presented to me, I might be more willing to help. But, I can’t ask the creature to speak, for I am sure it doesn’t know how.”

He could see Jack lick his lips through the reflection of the glass window.

“So you want me to tell you why I’m doing this to you and your father.”

“Precisely. I don’t consider this an absurd request, given the circumstances.”

Jack looked thoughtful. “It’s not necessarily that I don’t want you to know. It’s more of a question of why does it matter if you know. It’s more of a liability, if you will, for me and for my men. I don’t want to put us at risk.”

“You think I’m a risk?”

“Yes.”

“Fair enough. But me wanting to know isn’t a good enough reason to tell me, I suppose?” Louis said.

“It certainly hasn’t been yet. Though, like you said, considering the circumstances, I might change my mind. Of course, there is still the matter of whether to trust you or not.”

“I feel that I have given you no reason to suspect that I would retaliate in any way. I don’t even like my father—you know how unwilling he was to even attempt to care about my disappearance. Maybe I would enjoy seeing him shamed slightly.”

“Besides the fact that you set Madame’s house on fire,” Jack said, “it’s more than a question of simply shaming the Marquesses of Tilby.”

“I didn’t set fire to the house. Maurice did.”

“And I should just take your word for it?”

“Yes.”

“And why should I do that?”

“Because—well, because I wouldn’t lie to you.”

Jack raised a brow at him and then looked out the window as well. The train was now well on its way headed south, and there were not many people in any of the nearby cars. There wasn’t really anywhere else for them to turn to. Confronting each other, then, was the only way forward.

“I dislike the thought of you harboring any feelings or sentiments towards me,” Jack said slowly, “because of what happened between us the other night.”

“Oh, is that so?” Louis said bitterly.

“It was a moment of weakness on my part. It won’t happen again. You were meant to stay out of this sordid affair—it does not concern you.”

“You keep saying that, Jack, but it obviously does concern me. It is my father you are trying to rob, and it is me that you fucked. I can’t be any more involved even if I wanted to be.”

“I’m not robbing your father,” Jack said. “This isn’t over anything as simple as money. It’s more than that.”

“You know, I am truly getting sick of hearing your mystery man routine. Either just tell me what is happening, or stop mentioning it.”

“Fine, then I choose the latter.”

“You’re such a toddler,” Louis spat out.

“Rich coming from you.”

“Ugh!”

The train slowed down as it approached its first stop. Again, few people boarded and even fewer disembarked. The engine roiled up again within moments, and they carried on. The brief lull allowed Louis’s anger to settle deeper—less sharp, but still strong—like the burning coal that powered the train he sat on.

A waiter came by soon to serve them breakfast, which he was grateful for. Dining during long travels was quickly becoming very fashionable throughout society, something that Louis typically thought was a bit vulgar. However, at the appearance of coffee and hot food, he decided not to object based on principle. He spent extra care to thank the man who laid out their food and coffee, for he was positively starving, before tying a napkin delicately around his neck. The longer he could avoid looking back up towards Jack, the better.

“You were very polite to him,” Jack said between sips of his coffee. “If I were your governess, I would be proud of your improving manners.”

“Do not speak to me while I’m eating.”

“And back towards the nursery we go. Very well.”

Louis rolled his eyes and bit into his muffin. “Don’t patronize me. You think just because you put on a fancy hat and suit that you can walk around and act like a gentleman. You are still beneath me, and I reserve the right to avoid conversing with you when it doesn’t please me.”

“For *that*, I would box your ears, were I your governess.”

“Yes, indeed, from the king of propriety himself! And his very words being that he committed a momentary act of weakness, and that it should therefore be entirely forgotten. And these are supposedly the actions of a gentleman!”

“Ahh,” Jack said, taking a lingering bite of his own food. He had been eating remarkably well with pleasant manners, but he then shoveled an entire slice of fried tomato into his mouth at once. “I have wounded your pride because of it. I didn’t think you minded too much.”

“More than just my pride,” Louis said quickly. “My—my integrity. My feelings. My *innocence*. Heavens above, I cannot believe I just used that word!”

Jack furrowed his brow. “You mean to tell me that was the first time you lay with someone?”

“Was that not markedly obvious?”

“You’ve not been with other men before?”

“No! Now please, stop talking. I can’t bear this at the moment.”

Louis quickly cut into his sausage in order to stuff his mouth, so that he would not be expected to speak for a moment. He wished there was something he could stuff in his ears as well.

But rather than make a retort, Jack looked pensive. He kept his eye firmly on Louis’s face, looking a bit confused. It made Louis’s skin grow warm the longer his gaze lingered.

“I didn’t know that,” Jack said after a moment.

“What?”

“That you are a virgin.”

“Well,” Louis said, stretching his neck awkwardly, “not any more.”

Jack resumed his gloomy stare, and Louis drained the last bit of his coffee. He suddenly wasn't feeling very hungry. In fact, he felt a bit sick, so he wiped his mouth and placed the napkin over his plate.

“I was...somewhat rough with you then.”

Louis nodded, feeling awkward. “Though I did ask for it.”

“Still. It might have been better for you had I known. I can't imagine how much that must have hurt.”

“You were a very attentive lover, and I believe I managed it quite well enough. Now please, stop feeling morose over it.”

“Forgive me,” Jack said sheepishly, placing his own cup of coffee closer to Louis. “I assumed it was all just part of the moment.”

“What was?” he said, taking the extra cup and sipping from it.

“When you mentioned that night that you were worried what others, like your father, would think. That you were worried about being an invert.”

“Oh,” was all he could say.

“It's quite common for men, especially in your station, to consider themselves led astray each time, no matter how often they seek the company of other men.”

“I'm not following.”

Jack cleared his throat. “I assumed it was all part of a fantasy of yours. I assumed you were attracted to the thought of, well, being made to give into me. I assumed, at the very least, that you've done it before with others.”

Louis's expression softened. “I'm afraid to say, my dear fellow, that your corruption of my soul was entirely legitimate. There haven't been any others.”

“Well, then perhaps I have caused enough suffering to your father already,” he said facetiously.

Louis couldn't help but giggle. "I thought the same exact thing."

Jack gave him a long, studied look, and then returned to eating in silence. Louis sipped at his coffee in silence as well, feeling the rush of conflicting emotions. He didn't know that Jack didn't know that he was a virgin. There was something comedic about it all—a kind of dramatic irony that made him smile. At the same time, however, all of it made him feel a tad bit queasy as well. Acting on his sexual feelings towards other men in a moment of passion was one thing—tittering on the edge of engaging with them again with a man like Jack was quite another. It wouldn't do to make a habit of sleeping with his kidnapper.

But could Jack still even be considered his kidnapper? Sure, he did it before, but Louis was following him to London basically out of his own free will. Or was he? Why exactly was he going along with Jack's plan anyway?

"I gave you my coffee," Jack said, moving aside Louis's napkin, "so give me your sausage."

Louis giggled again as Jack speared the meat on his fork and looked at him. "What?"

"There's a pun to be construed there, but my own sense of humor is too refined to comment."

"And yet, you laughed at it," Jack said, chewing thoughtfully.

"And now that I gave you my sausage," Louis said, biting his lip, "it is my turn to take something from you again. I would like an answer to a question."

"Ask away."

"Give me a good reason why I should help you, er, do whatever it is you plan to do to my father."

"That's not a question."

"I do loathe you. Fine—why should I help you get revenge on my father?"

Jack chewed the meat and looked up, considering his answer. "Because you have little alternative. It is the path of least

resistance to obey me until I get what I want.”

“That’s a boring answer, yet it also has another double meaning that I dare not say. I think you are doing it on purpose.”

“My turn. Will you run away at the first chance you get, if there is a chance to do so?”

“No,” Louis said quickly. It was true. Not that he could fathom why, but so it was. Jack nodded, as if expecting that answer and also believing its validity.

“Doesn’t hurt to check.”

“Now I go. What happened to your eye?”

“A cannonball landed near me and hit it with a piece of metal.”

“Cannonball?” Louis said. “Where on earth did you get hit with a cannonball?”

“Uh-uh, it’s my turn,” Jack said with a wave of his fork, spearing the tomato off of Louis’s plate. “Are you attracted to that other man at Madame’s house? Maurice, or whatever his name is?”

Jack kept his gaze firmly on his plate as he asked, looking a bit bashful, if anything. Louis was stunned by the question.

“No—no, not at all,” he said. “What an odd question! Maurice is despicable. I would never be attracted to a man like that. He’s very self-righteous, and possibly a bit insane.”

“Alright, then. You go now.”

Louis wiped his palms on his trousers, feeling very warm again. Maybe it was the rush of his newfound freedom from the Madame’s house, or maybe it was just the two cups of coffee he drank quickly, but he spoke before his mind could stop him.

“If I asked you to, would you fuck me again?”

To this, Jack looked up quickly, staring Louis down. It was a look of surprise, and then, slowly, ever so slowly, of rising heat. Louis felt like all the air in the cart vanished at

once, and he couldn't even inhale despite how breathless he felt.

A loud thud rang out from behind him, which Jack started at.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"Hear what?" Louis said, not wanting the moment to slip away.

Another thud.

"That."

"Okay, yes. I did hear it that time."

Louis could hear voices grow louder in the cart near them, before the door swung

open quickly. A large man stood in the door frame, gave the two of them a once over, and turned to shout behind him.

Jack was up in a flash, knocking over some of the breakfast dishes as he stood. The noise interrupted the man before he spoke, and as he turned his head back round to face Jack, he was met with a fist.

Louis screamed. He huddled back against the window, trying to keep away from the violence as much as he could, as Jack stepped behind the intruder and shut the cabin door again.

"Christ!" the strange man shouted out. "Fuck was that for?"

"Who are you?" Jack said, breathing fast.

"The Madame sent us to find the boy," he said angrily, cupping his face in his hand as he stood up. "I didn't expect to find you with him."

"What does she want from me?" Louis said.

"As if you don't know. Bloody lunatic set the house on fire, and acts like he doesn't know!"

"I didn't do it!"

"He didn't do it," Jack said at the same time.

The stranger wiped his nose again, which to everyone's surprise, was not bleeding. "By Jove what a hit! Fuckin 'ell. I didn't do nothing to deserve that!"

"Er—it was a precaution," Jack said coolly. "Could I offer you a napkin?"

"Please."

They all sat back down, Louis breathing heavily, as the man wiped a tear from his eye. It was a strange sight, seeing a man of his size shed a tear, even if it was because of a punch to the nose. He was tall and wide, with cropped brown hair and thick mutton chops. The stranger wheezed out a laugh as he watched Louis and Jack sit around the fine dining ware.

"Proper little family affair, I see," he said with a smile. "Sorry to interrupt. The Madame's gonna want the chap back, I'm afraid."

"Not a chance," Jack said, tearing into a piece of bread. "He's coming with me."

Louis was still reeling from the rush of adrenaline. How Jack and the strange man could just so casually resume conversation after an altercation like that was beyond confusing. Perhaps it was simply the ways of brutes like them. Louis, meanwhile, struggled to catch his breath, feeling his heart flutter uncomfortably in his chest.

"Not sure if I can honor that request, boss," the man said. "The Madame respects you, General Sterling, but the kid's gotta answer for what he did."

"How did you find me?" Louis said.

"Easy enough to ask around for a boy looking lost back in town. No one mentioned this bloke alongside you though. Figure they were too scared to rat out the General's presence."

"How bad's the damage?" Jack asked between mouthfuls of bread.

"Ain't nothing terrible. Hardly any injured, if you could believe. One poor bloke got caught up in the smoke and passed, unfortunately, but it happens. Madame's a mess though

—angry as hell itself. The other gentleman this one was with got away too. She’s debating on sending out a search for him as well, last I heard.”

“I’ve a name, you know,” Louis said. He briefly wondered who it was that perished in the smoke, and was reminded, again, that he had lied to Jack after he rescued him. If either of Jack’s men did die, then he could be in some trouble.

“Quiet,” Jack flicked a crumb at him, before turning back to the other man. “How many are with you?”

“Half a dozen. None so big as me.”

“I’ve met you before, haven’t I?” Jack continued. “Remind me your name—was it Charles? Chuck?”

“Charlie, but I’ll give it to you. My father went by Chuck.”

“Well, then, Charlie, how much would it take to turn back around and tell the others the boy wasn’t here?”

That surprised Louis. He looked between the two of them, unsure whether to breathe or not. Charlie, as it were, nodded his head as if considering the deal.

“A tenner.”

“Tell you what—I’ll give you fifteen, and then update me if I need to be on the lookout for anyone else headed our way. Here, let me give you an address. Louis, do you have a pen?”

It was strange, watching the business so casually. Louis watched the two of them chat a bit longer, as if they were old chums. Charlie’s mood seemed to be rapidly improving, with him belting out a few laughs at something Jack said. Eventually, they shook hands, and the man was on his way, mentioning how lucky they were that he was the only member of the group to go this far up the train.

Jack looked as unperturbed as if he merely dismissed a cook for letting them know he would be expecting guests for dinner that night.

“What in the hell was that?”

“Our cue to leave,” Jack said, eating the last of the roll. “Madame’s got it out for you, it seems. It won’t be long before she’s on your trail again. We’ll need to get off the train soon.”

“But that man said he would tell the others I wasn’t here?”

“Knowing her, they’re not the only group after you. Trust me, I know a warning when I see one. I’d be able to convince her eventually to leave well enough alone, but I’d rather not deal with her at all for the moment. We’ll need to get back to London in a different way after a few days. Now, be quiet and let me think.”

He chewed the roll wistfully. Louis was still stunned.

“Jack, why did you—”

“I said *be quiet*.”

Louis listened that time. It was hard not to. Jack had a certain tone of voice he used which made it nearly impossible to disobey him. But the entire exchange was so absurd, so utterly ridiculous, that he almost wanted to laugh. He wasn’t sure the full extent of just how perilous it was to be caught on Madame D’Arc’s bad side, but the thought made him shiver in anxiety. At the same time, the thought of Jack’s considerable influence on others, including her, was as warm as a ray of sunshine. Jack wasn’t just escorting him—he was full on protecting him from danger.

“Alright,” he said again after another few moments. “You can go back to talking, if you like.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

Louis gaped at him. “What are we going to do?”

Jack wagged his eyebrows at him. “Fancy a peek at the sea? We’re changing trains soon.”

“Where to? God, why do you make me ask so many questions?”

“Just to annoy you. We’re going towards Bristol first. I’ve got an old friend there, and I’m due for a visit anyway.

May as well take care of two businesses at once.”

By this point, Louis could only describe his mood as being properly stretched thin. He was overstimulated, somehow afraid and exhilarated at the same time, and feeling a strange pull of gratitude towards Jack. Vague recollections of his youth reminded him of what the sea looked like. It had been so long since he had seen it that he was looking forward to the diversion. Bristol, however, was not the sort of place he wanted to go necessarily. Nevertheless, as always, Louis was willing to follow Jack’s lead.

“You didn’t have to pay him off for me, you know.”

“Course I did. I couldn’t have you dragged out of here in cuffs. That’s my job,” Jack said with a snort.

“I meant,” Louis said, “that I could have paid him myself. I’m good for it—son of the marquess, remember?”

“It’s better this way. You’re in my debt now,” he said with a wolfish smile. “Don’t think I forgot what you asked right before we were interrupted. We’ll continue our conversation at a better time, alright little lord?”

Louis blanched but nodded. Oh right, he had almost forgotten that he more or less asked Jack to fuck him again. What exactly had the world come to, for Louis to be in such a position? Indeed, it seemed he truly had entered the land of monsters.

Chapter 22

A change of stations, a brief layover, and a failed attempt to nap later, Louis could finally stretch his legs and quit worrying about being followed.

The remainder of their journey had been uneventful, for which he was grateful. After the skirmish of the London train, Louis wasn't sure if he could handle any more excitement, especially when Jack had been looking at him the way he was. Something was happening between them, and Louis didn't know whether he liked it or not. Actually he did like it—he was less sure about whether he *should* be liking it.

It was raining in Bristol by the time they arrived. The chilly weather from the coast flowed through the town, even in its central square where the two of them were. This time, given the relentless drizzle, far fewer strangers stared or even noticed them walk by; it was a night and day experience from the gawking onlookers back in Cheshire.

In spite of all this, Louis was feeling a bit cranky. Sleep was hard to come by after nearly being sent back to Cheshire by force. He was tired and felt a bit musty from all the traveling, resenting the fact that he lost all of his clothes in the flight from Madame's D'Arc's estate. Asking Jack to go shopping, however, didn't seem like the kind of thing one should do at the given moment.

“Who is this friend we are visiting?” he asked, when the two of them got into the carriage to take them right to the door of Jack's friend's estate.

“His name is Sebastian de Eliza, but don't call him that, or he will strike you.”

“What should I call him, then?”

“His majesty, if he had it this way,” Jack said, not elaborating.

Louis was not in the mood to humor Jack's obnoxious habit of forcing chain questions out of him, so he kept his mouth shut. It wasn't to be a long ride, thankfully, but it was

mostly up a steep hill. This de Eliza character seemed to live out in the middle of nowhere, right against the edge of the cliffs overlooking the sea.

And, as it turns out, the house quite literally was on the very edge. The thought of overlooking the side made Louis nauseated, and he filled briefly with panic for how high up they were. Jack noticed, bumping their knees together.

“Alright?”

“Yes. Heights, as I’m sure you have collected by now, aren’t exactly my style.”

“Ahh, of course. Don’t worry—I won’t let you fall.”

The carriage approached the long entryway towards the mansion, and they both stepped out of the tiny chamber. Louis was, once again, struck with a sense of *deja vu*; this was so similar to his experience when he first arrived at Madame D’Arc’s that he half-expected liveried men to jump out of the shrubs and throw a bag over his head.

“How do you know this man?”

Jack just shook his head. “It’s a long story. Best not keep him waiting—he doesn’t know we are visiting.”

The thought of arriving unannounced to anyone’s house was unheard of where Louis was from, but he remembered that these people did things differently. He wondered what kind of wretched business de Eliza conducted behind the scenes, especially to afford such a beautiful home.

To call it an estate wasn’t quite accurate, because it wasn’t big enough to cover many grounds. Inside, the house was very tall and narrow, dark gray, which perfectly matched the dismal overlook of the sea just in the distance. The trickle of rain, blowing all over on account of the fickle ocean breeze, would have been irritating had it not been so beautiful. To Louis’s astonishment, Jack walked right up to the front door and opened it, not even bothering to knock.

“Hello?” he called out, looking up into the terrace above. Louis followed hesitantly, suddenly unsure and a little frightened. The inside of the house was tidy and cleaned, but

in an obviously outmoded condition. The wood that made up the structure of the home was in bad condition, likely on account of the constant damp that assaulted it. The home, like the exterior, was likewise decorated in slate grays and muted blues.

“Bastien!” Jack called again, looking up the grand stairs that wound up either side of the main entrance. The house was silent, with only the faint creaking of the wood against the neverending wind making any sound. Louis was about to turn around, dragging Jack out with him by the finger, when a dim light came through the central hallway.

“Hello?” came a sing-songy voice. The light, emitting from a single lit candle, was accompanied by a slim, tall figure. A man, possibly around the same age as Jack, walked out to greet them. He wore a black suit, his cravat tied up and close to his throat like a clergyman, and had thick, black hair pushed away from his face. His skin was dark like a Spaniard, and he sported a thin moustache just on the top of his lip.

“By Lucifer himself!” he called out, an unfamiliar accent curling around the words. “General Sterling? Is that you?”

“The one and only.”

“Well, I’ll be damned—was I expecting you this Tuesday? Wait, or is it Wednesday? One can hardly keep count up here. Come and greet me like a man, for Heaven’s sake!”

Louis couldn’t help but gape as Jack walked up to him, smiling ear to ear, as he gave the slender man a tight hug and kissed him on his cheek. De Eliza practically gasped in pleasure.

“And who’s this fine little thing? A new toy for the General himself? I’m charmed you brought him by.”

“This is Louis,” Jack said quickly. The hint to avoid saying his last name was all too clear to Louis himself.

“My, my—Louis, and just as bright as the Sun King himself! I’m honored.”

“Likewise, sir,” he said awkwardly.

“No, no, no! That won’t do. Call me Bastien or call me nothing. I can’t bear the formalities, especially in my house.”

“Seems like none of Jack’s friends do stand on ceremony, which would explain his manners.”

“Har har! A charming little thing!” Bastien said in a high voice, clapping his hands together like a child might. It was a strange sight—amusing, yet also peculiar. Louis wasn’t quite sure what to do, so instead just smiled politely, just as his mother taught him to do when he had to deal with lunatics.

“Er, Bastien,” Jack said, “we’ve come into a bit of trouble at the moment, and you know I’ve been meaning to make a visit. Care if we stick around for a couple days?”

“Care? Care! Oh yes, I care deeply. You must stay a fortnight. I will accept no less, you see, and that is my price. A fortnight at the earliest as my prisoners, and then I will release you both back into the world. This little thing must look positively *delicious* in chains, don’t you think?”

Louis couldn’t help it. He rolled his eyes. Jack and Bastien didn’t seem to notice.

The three of them soon found themselves in a damask sitting-room, covered wall to wall in taxidermied animals and furs, drinking out of purple china cups filled with Turkish coffee. The extent of eccentricity the man seemed to go to was a tad more than Louis himself was comfortable or even familiar with. To best keep from making a face of perpetual shock, he kept his mouth shut as the other two talked.

They were waited on by a very old man who smiled cheerfully at Louis. He thanked him heartily for the light lunch that was brought out, and tried his best to keep up with the conversation at hand.

“My goodness! Has it really been that long? I must have looked not a day out of a crib back then. You must think me so haggardly nowadays, though the ocean air has done wonders for my skin.”

“You look great, Bastien,” Jack said with a smile.

“Charming—always so very charming! I see why you stick around,” he said, winking at Louis, who blushed deeply. “Even with one eye, the General has always had a knack for spotting beauty, wherever it grows. Now, tell me how you have found yourselves so positively in the middle of nowhere? I must know everything and all at once.”

Jack related their tale, all the way from the initial capture towards finding Louis running away from Madame’s burning house. Bastien laughed heartily, shrieking like a banshee, at the image of Madame D’Arc’s house going up in smoke.

“No! No!” he said, almost crying from joy. “I can’t believe it! Oh, poor Sylvia! What a foolish old hag she is, passing off that rat’s nest like a castle. It’s what she deserves! Good on you, boy!”

Louis would have responded, feeling more prepared to engage with the silly and the eccentric now that it had complimented him, but he was caught off guard by one thing: Jack did not mention his family or the initial reason for capture. In fact, it seemed like an intentional move to avoid mentioning that Louis was an Earlshope. Bastien, then, must know what exactly went down, and Louis could only assume that he wouldn’t want to house the son of the markees in his own home, even with Jack’s blessing.

Not that he asked why Jack captured him to begin with. Louis could only assume it was a routine and expected part of the man’s life.

“So, I was right. The boy looked so good in his chains, you just couldn’t help but keep him?”

Jack grimaced. “Something like that.”

Bastien, then, made a noise that could only be described as a whistling purr.

“Anyway, D’Arc’s sent some hired thugs after us,” Jack said with a shrug. “Best we lay low for a bit. Sorry again for the intrusion—I really hope you don’t mind.”

“Darling, I will host you in these halls until the end of time as long as it enrages Sylvia. You know the last time I saw her, she tried to tell me I cheated her out of a game of whist! Can you believe such nonsense? Absolutely arrant nonsense.”

The more they talked on, the more tired and uncomfortable Louis got. There was something he couldn't quite put his finger on, but it gave him a lingering sense of anxiety to be around Bastien. His air, his mannerisms, the tone of his voice, his familiarity with Jack—it was all shocking and utterly alien to someone with Louis's background, no matter how kind or hospitable he was to a complete stranger arriving at his doorstep unannounced.

Jack, however, seemed perfectly charmed. He indulged Bastien's petty gossips and loud exclamations. Louis would like to have thought by now that he could tell when Jack wasn't in a good humor, but he was practically eating out of Bastien's hands.

“This poor little creature is so exhausted, I fear we are putting him to sleep,” the man said, gesturing towards Louis, who slouched back on the sofa draped with leopard fur.

“No, my apologies,” Louis said sitting up. “It's just been a very long day. Excuse my poor manners.”

“Little duck! Poor manners are the lifeblood of this house! I insist you insult me this very instant. Go on, do it.”

He wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

“Don't tease him too hard,” Jack said with a chuckle. “He's got quite a mouth on him—might be the first who could keep up with you, Bas.”

“How very interesting. I bet he could. Look at those flaming locks of his. I must insist on keeping a curl of your hair, my dear, before you depart. It is too beautiful to never see again.”

Louis, who wasn't sure whether to be disturbed or flattered, just nodded along again.

The conversation, having eventually run its course, turned towards setting up Jack and Louis in a wing of the

house to rest before dinner, the news of which allowed Louis to sigh in relief and exhaustion.

“Now, where are your things? I didn’t see any trunks out in the hall, unless Bertie already took them up?”

“We packed light,” Jack said. “I’ve got just this small bag, and Louis’s things were left in Madame’s house.”

“Poor thing! To be without a wardrobe is as good as dead, in my book. I must take you shopping when we have the chance.”

Bertie, who apparently was the old man who waited on them, came back down to escort them towards their rooms. They went up the first floor into a small hallway, which served as the supposed guest “wing.” Instead of a set of multiple rooms, Louis was met with a single room filled with a large mattress dressed in black sheets. They were shown in, told to ring should they need anything, and left alone.

One bedroom—one bed. Just like the night at the inn.

“Has time gone circular?” Louis said with exasperation. “I could have sworn I have done this all before. What circle of hell are we in, Jack?”

“We are making our way down slowly, to be sure.” When Louis looked at him, he noticed Jack was hiding a smile and a light blush, which of course, made Louis blush as well. As the need for rest overtook the need for propriety, Louis climbed up on the tall mattress and flopped down against the pillows on the right side. Laying down, sprawled out in this way, was perfectly glorious.

“How are we going to dine tonight?” Louis said through the pillows. “We’ve no dinner garments. I can’t eat while wearing these filthy rags.”

“Bastien will think of something. Trust me, you’ll regret your words soon enough, knowing him.” Jack stretched out next to him.

Laying together, side by side, made Louis’s heart jump slightly in his chest.

“How on earth did you meet such a fellow?”

“Same way I meet everyone.”

“I’m done playing this game with you—I won’t ask more when you give so little.”

Jack made no response, and Louis was too busy recounting the torrid events of the day to notice. The bed was extremely comfortable, so soft that he sunk deep against the fabric. The room was warm and hazy, somehow uniquely familiar despite the odd decor. He turned his head to look at Jack, who had closed his eye and was breathing steadily, as if already asleep.

Following close behind, Louis allowed himself the indulgence of scooting ever so slightly closer to him before closing his own eyes. A brief nap was in order, and if it happened to be right next to Jack—the only source of familiarity in the midst of so much uncertainty—then [\[1\]](#) all the better.

Chapter 23

It continued to rain all day. The afternoon passed by lazily, with Louis finding it difficult to stir from his bed. He heard the soft pattering of the rain against the old, wooden house, and it gave him strangely nostalgic memories of his youth. Sitting indoors with his mother, when he was a very young boy, was one of the few things he remembered about her.

Jack slept soundly, if a bit stiffly, on his back, as if afraid to move at all. He kept his hands clasped over his stomach like a mummy, which Louis thought was the most charming sight in the entire world. He watched the man's wide chest rise and fall with each breath. In such a position, Jack looked almost like a different person. So different was the sleeping man that lay next to him, tired and world weary, to the snarling commander of a ragged bunch of outlaws. And now, learning he kept friends such as Bastien was almost too shocking to understand. Who could have thought! The wild and unpredictable Jack Sterling was dear pals with a sniveling eccentric! The more Louis learned of him, the more interested he became.

He enjoyed risking such closeness, inching nearer towards Jack as if he were a slumbering bear not to be disturbed. The black whiskers, the grim mouth, the line of gray running through his hair—it was all so pleasing to look at; Louis couldn't help but to admit it. The man was very handsome, and Louis believed him when he once claimed that he would try and keep Louis safe and out of trouble as much as he could. With any luck, he wouldn't come to regret it.

When Jack opened his eye, blinking his lashes against the somber gray light of the room, Louis didn't flinch away. He stayed close, the heat of their skin mixing from sheer proximity, when Jack turned his head to look at him.

It would have been easy to kiss him—nothing more than a brief strain of his neck—but he was concerned with seeming too forward. His feelings towards Jack couldn't be denied, but he was always taught that acting on such feelings

was the true sin. Louis didn't care about sinning, but he did feel something tumultuous in his conscience. Kissing Jack would be wrong, on many, many levels, but it would also feel so exquisitely good.

Something in his face must have betrayed such thoughts, for Jack opened his mouth as if to speak. The air stood still for a moment, and Louis could swear he heard every single drop of rain splash against his window as he waited, but then came a knock on the door.

The manservant Bertie entered the room, with the gentle suggestion that tea would be served soon downstairs. Bertie didn't seem to even notice the closeness he shared with Jack, but almost being caught made him blush and shy away. The tender moment passed again, and they both stood to dress and go meet their host.

"I am so dreadfully sorry to have interrupted your peaceful slumbers," Bastien said, watching the two of them shift awkwardly as they all sat down at tea together. "However, I forgot to mention some of the particulars earlier. A few of the girls will be over to dine with us this evening—how wonderful is that? Louis, you will enjoy their company beyond words, never mind your pedestrian understanding of decorum, just you wait. There is, of course, the matter of what you both shall wear. I'm sure there is something in these manifold closets to dress you in. Come tomorrow morning, I will take the young duck here to town to pick out a few new raiments. Wearing second-hand is never fashionable, and I don't care what old Griselda has to say about it!"

"Just a few guests, eh?" Jack snorted.

"Who's Griselda?" Louis asked.

Bastien ignored them both, continuing to talk on about the dinner menu and various activities that would be taking place throughout the house. For a casual dinner affair, it seemed awfully complex.

They drank their tea, were ordered away by two new servants—both much younger and sprightly looking men—and told to be ready to come downstairs at the first ring of the

bell. One of the servants took Louis down a separate hallway, which irritated him, as he assumed he would be getting dressed with Jack.

“My name is Ansel,” the servant said as he led Louis into a large dressing chamber and sat him down in an ornate chair painted white. “The master told me to find you something to be presentable in, but I think that shouldn’t be a problem at all! Look how gorgeous your hair is, and those cheekbones! I think Giles will have quite a time with that other oaf, dashing though he is.”

Ansel winked at him, and Louis smiled politely. He spoke in a similarly articulated way that Bastien did. He had long, brown hair and large bucked teeth—not particularly handsome, but charismatic enough to make up for any physical deficiencies.

“I’m not sure why it will take so long to dress for dinner,” Louis said. “Can’t we start later on? It’s not even five yet.”

“Oh, dear, bless you!” Ansel said with a nasal laugh. “God’s given you beauty, but that doesn’t mean it won’t take me ages to doll you up yet. Hold still now, while I see what I can do with this marvelous canvas. Truly, you are a work of art; I could picture you in marble.”

To Louis’s surprise, after looking intently across his face, Ansel pulled out a large, silver box full of cosmetics. Rouge, powders, liners, and glosses lined the beautifully designed tray, and he made quick work of sorting through the colors he needed.

“Is the dinner some kind of masquerade or costume ball?” Louis asked.

“They always are, aren’t they? What is a dinner if not a thinly veiled excuse to show off the latest fashions?”

Louis held still as Ansel gripped his face and began applying a blackened stick of some kind to his eyebrows. “And this is the latest fashion? I’ve never seen anything like this in London.”

“Oh heavens, a green one, too! I don’t know what the master thought bringing you two in without so much as an invitation. The girls will eat you up though. Beauty and stupidity go far, wherever you are,” Ansel said, emphasizing the rhyming syllables as if pleased with his wit.

Louis, meanwhile, was not amused at being called stupid, and kept his mouth shut as Ansel continued to dress up his face.

The process, just as Bastien and Ansel predicted, took a very long time. His back grew tired sitting as he was, but Ansel lightly smacked his shoulder every time he slouched. He couldn’t believe a servant of all people would treat or talk to him in such a way. But, minding his manners, he said nothing—it wouldn’t do to make enemies of another household full of servants.

He did speak up when presented with a few options for clothes.

“You’re joking, right?” he said incredulously. “This amount of decadence is absurd! You’ll have me dressed up like some French noble.”

“That’s the point, my dear!” Ansel said impatiently. “Master was committed to making you out to be the Sun King, or at least one of his descendants. Imagine how glorious you’ll look, with the rest of the girls eating right out of your palms. You’ll be the star of the ball, and isn’t that the only thing anyone’s ever wanted?”

“My intention is not to attract a wife tonight.”

“My dear, I’ll pretend that you didn’t just say that. Now, make up your mind quickly: pink or green for the waistcoat?”

Louis scowled in humiliation as he was dressed up like a victim of the French Revolution. His sleeves were laced, his waistcoat a bright green, and he wore endless drapings of pearls and golden bands. It was disgustingly burdensome and outdated, and he couldn’t understand why wearing such gaudy rags was expected of him.

“Now, don’t pout, your grace,” Ansel said with a lilt in his voice. “A proper king *needs* a proper wardrobe. You’re lucky all this finery even got left behind! Master loves throwing these Versailles-themed parties. Now, be a doll, and sit back down. It’s time to powder your hair.”

As if the ribbons and silk stockings weren’t enough, soon Louis’s hair was pulled back from his face and practically glued down with a horrible gray dust. Ansel, quite pleased with his efforts, finished by rouging his cheeks and planting a singular beauty mark right below his eye.

“Now, your grace,” he said in mock courtesy, “I dare say your tone will change as you see yourself in the looking-glass. Look how beautiful!”

Presented with his own visage, Louis burned in humiliation.

“I look like a proper fool,” he said in horror. “What have you done?”

“What do you mean? Your grace, you are nothing short of spectacular!”

“I look like a clown!”

“You look like a king!”

Louis brought his hands up to his face and felt foolish for wanting to cry. He looked like a proper macaroni, a facsimile of a French fop who was destined to be sent to Madame Guillotine for starving the peasants of his country. Noticing his horror, Ansel set down the looking-glass and patted his back gently.

“Now, now, your grace, don’t worry. The sight of such beauty is always overwhelming the first time you see it.”

“I can’t go out looking like this!” he said sullenly. “I won’t do it.”

“Don’t be such a child! Look now, you’re simply gorgeous. What’s the concern?”

Louis didn’t want to say it. He pursed his lips, looking into Ansel’s eyes, and then looked down in shame. The truth

was, despite feeling like a fool all on his own, that he feared what Jack would think. Jack would laugh at him and find him appalling. Their delicate balance and uncertain relationship, marred by Louis's own reservations of being seen as a sexual deviant, would only be worse by dressing in such a swishy, effeminate way.

Ansel cupped his face between his hands (gently, as to not smear any of the powder), and smirked. "Don't worry, your grace. You won't look a drop out of place! See, even your boy friend will look just as glamorous. Giles will do him justice."

He winked at Louis, who just stared in mild confusion. He couldn't even imagine Jack dressed up as a macaroni, much less being willing to allow basically a stranger to paint him up in such a way.

The humorous thought of such a sight, however, was more than enough to get Louis to agree to go back downstairs—even if just to get a single look, before fleeing back into his room at the earliest opportunity.

Chapter 24

Dressed, rouged, and thoroughly embarrassed, Louis made his way down the staircase only to be greeted by some of the additional servants, who likewise were all dressed up and powdered in a similar way.

“Right this way, your grace,” one of the men said, leading Louis into a large set of doors that he hadn’t seen before.

“I’m not actually a king, as you know.”

“But tonight,” the servant said with a smile, “the artifice is the real. You are what you wish to be, as is the rest of the party. Do enjoy yourself.”

Flummoxed by such cryptic words (coming from a servant unmasked no less), Louis was left with a sour look on his face as the doors to the ballroom were opened and a tall woman stood up to greet him.

“Oh, my precious little duckie! Look at you!” said the voice of Sebastian de Eliza. However, no such person was nearby.

“I—” Louis tried awkwardly.

“Come now, darling, don’t play coy. You ought to recognize me anywhere, after our time together, no?”

Louis stared at the woman more closely, realizing in his own naive fashion, that it was Bastien’s voice he was hearing. This tall figure, draped elegantly in a gown of dark green and black, was no woman at all. It was Bastien himself!

“Bastien?” he called out.

“Tonight, my darling, call me Eliza. Fitting, no? And you, my sweet, are Louis the 14th! Or was it 15th? 16th?”

A choice now lay before him. Properly confused and left speechless, Louis’s instincts told him to turn around immediately and run back up to his room, admitting that he was outmatched in this unfamiliar world where he had no part. However, his drilled-in manners, coupled with a burning

curiosity to understand more of what was happening, forced him to smile cheerfully and hold his hand out.

“A pleasure, ma’am.”

“Charming boy,” Eliza said, gripping his gloved fingers with her own as a princess might have. “Oh! Pardon me—I meant to say, *your grace*.”

“What’s this all about?” he said in a whisper, trying to keep his voice steady.

“It’s about fun! Relax a little, and allow me to get you some wine. I can’t be seen as a bad hostess now, can I? Meanwhile, come meet some of the girls!”

Louis looked behind him, noticing how the servants were entirely unperturbed by the fact that the master of the house, now turned mistress, was wearing women’s clothes and dressed up as what could only be described as a mock version of Spanish royalty. Eliza led him towards a large sofa by the fireplace, where three similarly garish women sat and fanned themselves, looking up expectantly at Louis.

“My dears,” Eliza called out, grabbing a glass of sparkling wine off a tray held out by a servant and offering it to Louis. “The Sun King of Versailles himself has condescended to join our little soiree this evening. Give him a warm English welcome, if you dare!”

Each woman bowed and smiled, fluttered their lashes, and sipped from their own flutes of champagne. Louis drank his quickly. He learned through the hostess that their names for evening were Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, though apparently bearing no resemblance to the illustrious Bronte sisters of Haworth.

“Tis a mere coincidence,” one said.

“Imagine our shock when their names were revealed to the world! Though, good gracious, I fear I am revealing our frightful ages.”

“Though I dare say, we are better looking, no?”

They giggled together, made more serene marks directed at Louis and Eliza, and the evening continued. Louis realized they were introduced based on Christian names alone, wondering if family names were supposed to be taboo during a ball like this.

Furthermore, Louis suspected that like the hostess, the three women were men by day and women by night. But, remembering the kind butler's words on his way in, artifice was all that mattered tonight. They were replicas of the Brontes just as much as Louis himself really was the Sun King. Supposedly.

The house began to fill up quickly. More guests, all entering with their own unique flair and campish costumes, filled the ballroom. Louis was soon introduced to a Mary Queen of Scots, Cleopatra, Boedica, Godiva, Salome, and even Napoleon himself who, with his drawn-on sideburns and ample breasts, must have been a woman dressed up in military garbs—all just to enumerate a few. Rather than trying to remember names, Louis found it easier to instead drink more champagne, which he did happily and repeatedly. The buzzing in his head made the carnival-like progression much more enjoyable—not merely because he was less concerned with understanding it all, but more so because he was feeling less like the sole outcast in a room full of a tightly-knit community. These people all obviously knew one another, and the sole individual whom Louis could recognize was still nowhere to be found.

“Well, duckie, what thinkest thou?” Eliza said close against Louis's ear.

“I'm a bit overwhelmed,” he admitted.

“I'm glad to hear it. I would have served my own head on a platter had you not been impressed. Don't worry though, none of the girls will bite—but do watch out for Napoleon.”

It must have been Louis's fourth or fifth flute of champagne when the doors opened again, this time, with a tall man (in men's clothing) walking through. The whole room clapped and cheered, with Eliza rushing to welcome him in.

“And how could I forget! My dear friend Sir Francis Drake in the flesh!”

Louis grinned, unable to hide his warmth, as he saw Jack walk into the ballroom. He was dressed up in black silks, looking positively Shakespearian, though with an appalling attempt at playing up a pirate-themed costume. His whiskers were darkened with charcoal, his eyepatch decorated with a painted on skull, and his shirt was undone halfway down his chest to reveal a few gold chains. He looked ridiculous—utterly, alarmingly, and so very handsomely ridiculous.

Jack, or Sir Francis Drake, likewise seemed at ease with the present crowd, many of whom stood to greet him with a kiss on the cheek or shake of the hand. Louis realized he must have known most of (if not all) the present company. He stood awkwardly in the corner, holding his glass tightly, as the spotlight was directed entirely away from him during this final procession. The ballroom doors were closed, signaling no more guests were to arrive, and the merriment began in full.

As laughter rang throughout the space, Jack spotted Louis, smirked at him, and made his way directly to his side.

“Your grace,” he said solemnly.

“Your pirateliness,” Louis said in an attempt not to laugh.

“Come now, you can do better than that.”

“Not after all the wine I have drunk. My head is about to spin off my neck.”

Jack sipped from his own glass, looking content and relaxed in the space, as the others all shared an earnest conversation about the merits of bustle dresses.

“I didn’t realize Bastien, or Eliza, rather, was a crossdresser,” Louis said.

“You’d be surprised how many people are. She’s just rather forthright with it all.”

“I think my father would drop dead at the sight of such a crowd.”

Jack snorted, and Louis giggled. Perhaps, if that were to happen, both of their problems would simply vanish, and they could carry on with their lives. But such a thought made Louis pause—that would mean he would almost certainly lose contact with Jack.

“It’s all in good fun,” Jack said. “I hope your delicate sensibilities aren’t too assaulted.”

“Not at all. I’m having fun.”

“What kind of scoundrel does that make me, then? You should be chained underground, whispering the name of your beloved as you fear that you would never see daylight once more.”

“Yes, I much prefer Madame D’arc’s methods. You allow me entirely too much freedom.”

The rounds were made, as was expected, but Louis never let Jack out of his sight for long. Jack, likewise, kept glancing back, giving him reassuring smiles or brief waggles of his eyebrows, while talking to the others. The uncertainty and self-consciousness evaporated from Louis’s mind, and he didn’t think it was just the wine any longer; the company present consisted of genuinely good and interesting people. Furthermore, he realized he was probably the least decorous individual present. Next time, should there be another, he would let Ansel put in those faux earrings he so desperately rejected at first.

After a few games of cards, billiards, and bouts of heavy drinking, Louis noticed a small band forming in the distant corner. Eliza was directing some of the manservants to move around the tables and roll the rug away. The ballroom, it seemed, was going to live up to its name that night.

Like a proper hostess, not unlike others Louis has seen in the cutting-edge of London society, Eliza called the first dance to order and commanded everyone to choose their first dance partner. Some of the older guests reclined on the sofas by the fire, looking eagerly as the others partnered up quickly, and Louis made his way to join them. Jack, however, came up from his side and lightly touched his elbow.

“What do you say, little lord? Care to dance the first set with me?”

Louis blinked in shock, fully thinking it was a joke. Two men dancing together, though not entirely unheard of, would be an affront to all the ladies present. He was about to make such a remark, before noticing Jack’s tight expression: a gentle smile, though one that didn’t reach his one eye. He looked, Louis realized, a bit nervous.

Furthermore, the other partners didn’t seem to care at all which gender they were. Godiva paired with Cleopatra, Eliza with what looked to be an Ancient Grecian woman. Denying Jack’s offer based on gender alone, therefore, wouldn’t do.

Did Louis have any other reservations? Maybe. Probably. He certainly should, but the combination of the wine, merriment, and the desire to rid Jack of the pained expression on his face was an overwhelming inducement to say yes. He nodded mutely, feeling a strange buzzing in his chest as he was led to the center of the floor by a tender touch at his side.

Jack grabbed his right hand and held it high in the air, before letting his other hand slide delicately around Louis’s waist.

“I don’t know how to follow in a waltz,” Louis said.

“If I said to just follow my lead, would that be a redundant instruction?”

“I hate you.”

In spite of his words, looking up into Jack’s face rendered him filled with overwhelming passion. The ridiculous makeup, the crudely drawn skull on his eyepatch, the large ruffled collar undone at the neck—none of it could marr Jack’s natural, masculine beauty. He looked intense, gazing down at Louis with one blue eye, as if there was never anything more important in the world.

The music began, and Louis found his feet moving underneath him as if on their own.

He recognized the steps of course, but it was as if he were in a mirrored reality. Everything was backwards, the wrong way, *deviant*, but to his surprise, it felt so natural. It felt so fun and freeing. He never enjoyed a dance as much as he did with Jack, spinning effortlessly across the stage. Jack's mastery over the dance was surprising, and Louis still couldn't reconcile that this was the same bastard of a man who hauled him off that train a month ago kicking and screaming. Instead, he saw more of the man who came to his rooms just to play cards with him out of fear that he was bored and lonely. He saw the same man who kissed him and fucked him, almost without thinking. He saw the same man whom he wanted to kiss and be fucked by again.

The warmth of their bodies together, the rush of wine to his head, the single-purposed stare that was blistering his skin like the sun—it was all ecstatic, and then, far too soon, it was over. The room clapped loudly, cheering for themselves and for the others admiring their elegance and natural grace. Louis could hardly look away, holding onto Jack's hand as the only nearby anchor.

“What a charming pair!” Eliza said, prowling up to them and laughing heartily. “Who would have thought? France and England come together at last, and it only took what? How many centuries? Har har!”

Her words broke the spell, and Louis looked away, suddenly feeling very embarrassed and flushed. The room seemed to have moved on from the first number. The others were eagerly pairing up before the next song began, but Louis could only think about how they all *saw* him. They saw him dance with a man, but furthermore, they saw the way he was looking at Jack. They had to have known—had to have seen it. His emotion for Jack must have been written plainly on his face for all to see.

“I—should excuse myself. I need air,” Louis said, stumbling off the floor.

Eliza whistled, whispering something to Jack, but Louis couldn't bother making out what exactly it was. Instead, he walked quickly over to the entrance, where the ballroom

doors had been reopened to let the cool air flow in from the corridor.

He exited the room, trying to find a way outside, feeling eyes on the back of his head as he fled. The sudden urge to vomit overwhelmed his senses, and his eyes prickled with nearly fallen tears.

What is happening to me?

At last, a side entrance came into view, opened with a single servant watching the door. The breeze whistled through the short hallway as Louis made his way down, forgetting up until that point that it was still raining outside. The servant merely nodded at him as he walked past, thankful that the small balcony was sheltered from the rain, and caught his breath, gripping the cold metal railing fervently.

No one followed him. He was glad of it, and allowed the burst of emotion to overwhelm him entirely. Tears fell, sobs choked, and hands shook, but Louis was no stranger to hiding emotion whenever needed. He would give himself a minute at most to collect his thoughts, before marching back into the ballroom as if nothing had happened.

At least, that's what he hoped he would be able to do.

The gentle rainfall, however, was comforting. The cool breeze of the night—the perfect early autumn chill—calmed down his overheated nerves and fluttering heart. He wiped his eyes against his gloved hand, which he regretted immediately, for it was now covered in the black kohl that lined his lashes.

“Need a handkerchief?” came a voice behind him.

Louis flinched before turning around. Jack was standing right behind him, having walked up unnoticed, with a hand extended out holding a piece of fabric. Louis swiped it from him quickly.

“You move too quietly,” he mumbled, wiping his nose. “I should tie a bell around your ankles to see how you like it.”

“You're welcome to try.”

Jack came up to his side and gripped the bannister beside him, looking out into the darkness as well. The light from the house illuminated just the outskirts of the rocky hills in the near distance, which just beyond, would drop off immediately towards the endless sea. Louis was grateful not to be able to see such heights at the moment.

He fully expected Jack to leave him in peace, but he didn't budge. They stood side by side, hearing the faint clattering and laughing of the party behind them. Louis tried to think of what to say—tried to form some kind of apology or excuse for his strange behavior. However, he wasn't sure how to excuse himself, not knowing what it was he would be apologizing for.

“Your father served in the Crimean War, you know,” Jack said after a long moment.

“Yes, I know that. All of England knows that.”

“I did as well.”

Louis looked up at him. Jack's face was still, contemplative, betraying nothing.

“I was a general of one of the battalions headed towards Sevastopol,” he continued. “I answered to your father as one of my few superiors.”

Louis nodded, understanding where this was headed.

“A lot of my unit was wounded early on in the siege. I wanted to retreat—Lord Earlshope commanded that we pressed onwards. It would have been a suicidal effort. But, in war, some must die for others to live. Even on the winning side.”

“You didn't listen to him,” Louis said, his voice hollow.

“That's right. I was dishonorably discharged for it. As were the rest of the men in my unit. Your father argued that we hang for treason.”

Louis held his breath. “Would that be considered treason though?”

“In his eyes, yes. In the eyes of the law, it very well could have been. I never found out. We left England before a verdict was passed.”

“How did you escape England in the midst of a trial for treason?”

“You doubt my abilities?” Jack said, looking at him with a light smirk.

“I doubt anyone’s ability to stand up against a capital offense, especially in matters of war. England is not kind towards dissenters.”

“I had friends all over—your father didn’t. As long as I remained in the Continent, it would have all been forgotten. But, as you can imagine, I couldn’t leave well enough alone.”

“No, I know you too well. So, because of him, you’re a wanted man in a country you almost gave your life for.”

“Precisely.”

“And you lost not only compensation, but your very name because of it. You had to start all over.”

“Precisely.”

“That’s why you wanted to get back at him?”

“Pre-cise-ly,” Jack said, enunciating each syllable this time.

“But by capturing me? Exhorting money from him?” Louis shook his head. “I don’t know if that really would have done much. My father is very rich.”

“No—I told you before, it wasn’t about the money. I wanted him to—” he broke off. A loud hollering of laughter came from behind them followed by a large crash. A few more crashes came from within, as if the guests were purposefully dropping their glasses.

They both looked at each other and laughed as well.

“I feel badly for the servants,” Louis said. “They will have to clean up such a mess.”

“Look at you, empathizing with the lower-classes. I’m very proud.”

“I’m not truly so terrible.”

“No,” Jack said gently, turning towards him. “You’re not.”

His look was heated, and his hand was very close to Louis’s on the railing. Louis couldn’t help but look back up at him, his mouth hanging slightly open in anticipation of—what exactly? What did he want from Jack? What did Jack want from him?

“Why did you tell me all that?” he asked instead.

Jack shrugged. “You deserved to know. You’re involved now, more than I wanted you to be. And now, I’m debating on asking if you’d like to become more involved.”

“And what does that mean?”

“I think you know.”

Louis bit his lip. “You mean, you’d like to ask if I’m willing to take things further between us, even though my father ruined your life, and I’m so bloody pathetic that I tear up because I was seen dancing with a man?”

“Is that what you fleeing the room was all about? Are you upset with your nature?”

“I don’t know,” Louis said. “I don’t know what came over me. It was all a bit much, and I can’t help but feel like I am going against everything I have ever been taught. Of course, you now telling me other horrible things my father has done is only further complicating my feelings.”

“It’s only fair.”

“Right. Since fairness is what we really care about here.”

“Well what would be fair to you?” Jack moved closer, his body boxing off Louis’s against the bannister. “What do you want me to do?”

Louis was breathless. Without thinking, he stepped backwards, right up against the railing, which Jack used to his advantage to crowd him in from all sides. He placed his right arm on the other side of Louis, who now could no longer move or look away from him.

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly.

“Do you want my help?” Jack looked down at him. “Or do you want to figure it out on your own? I won’t be offended either way—I will understand.”

Louis lifted his hands to Jack’s chest and rubbed them up and down his waistcoat. He felt the warmth emanating from his body, the smoothness of the black fabric. His hands trailed up towards Jack’s shoulders, his muscular arms, and back towards his neck, feeling the rough stubble of Jack’s face as he held his cheeks between his palms.

“I want your help,” Louis said, his voice cracking gently, “but I don’t know what I’m doing. I feel like I don’t know anything anymore.”

Jack kissed his forehead. “And this is what a gentleman’s education buys one in this country?”

Louis smiled, gasping as he felt his soft lips against his face. “But you know far more, I suppose?”

“I know many things,” Jack said huskily. “Shall I teach you?”

“Yes.”

He leaned up and pressed his lips against Jack’s. It was a slow kiss, much more delicate than the rough urgency they felt back in Madame D’Arc’s house, but no less intense. Louis whined against his bearded mouth, feeling a rising sense of both panic and pleasure, and then wrapped his arms around Jack’s neck to pull him closer.

Jack responded eagerly, deepening the kiss and moving his hands down to Louis’s waist. They kissed for what could have been mere moments or entire days. Time slowed. The rain fell. And soon, Louis’s hard prick throbbed too painfully in his breeches to endure any more foreplay. He pulled away.

“I—” he whispered out. “I want you to touch me.”

“Oh? Out here? A servant’s just down the hall.”

Louis pushed him away quickly. “Goodness! No, I forgot. I thought we were alone.”

“I’m sure the man doesn’t mind. He’s likely seen worse.”

“I won’t be caught tittling with another at a ball in front of the servants. I might have forsaken most of my good breeding these past few weeks, but I will never stoop *that* low!”

Jack nodded solemnly, his twitching mouth betraying the desire to laugh. “Indeed. Perhaps we should take our business elsewhere—or would you prefer to dance another set first, in order to stop any tongues that might wag about our absence?”

Louis grabbed his hand and marched back inside. “Absolutely not. I’m not that self-abnegating. Now, please lead us towards our shared bedroom. I don’t recall where exactly it is.”

If Jack noticed that Louis’s voice had become increasingly higher pitched over the past few minutes, then he made no comment. In fact, he made no comment about anything. Instead, he led Louis down the hall and up the stairs. He squeezed his hand gently as they made their undignified exit from the ball.

It was more than enough to comfort Louis’s rising nerves.

Chapter 25

Louis realized just how nervous he was when Jack led him into the bedroom and all but threw him down against the sheets. The way he was looking down at him was fearsome—his pirate-themed costume really came to life, and for a second, Louis almost couldn't recognize him. Mixed with his other unsteady emotions, it gave him considerable pause.

“Wait,” he said, sitting up on his elbows as Jack leaned in. “Could we—go a little slower tonight?”

“I did hurt you last time, didn't I?”

“No. Well, it did hurt a little bit—but that's not the point.”

“Okay, then,” Jack said, rubbing his fingers through Louis's powdered hair. “Just tell me how to please you. I am all yours, *your grace*.”

It made him giggle, so he brought his hands up to cup Jack's face and kissed him. “Now you're my prisoner?”

“If you wish. Do you want to try it the other way?”

Another kiss. “I'm not even sure what that means. I want it like before—just slower.” Louis took in a breath. “And I want to see you naked.”

“Well, how could I deny that?” Jack gripped his sides and moved him further up the mattress, as if he weighed nothing, and then crawled into the space between his legs. He stared down at Louis all the while, shrugging off his black silken coat and unbuttoning the rest of the layers covering his torso.

Louis lay there on his back, stunned, as Jack stripped off his clothes. Removing the fine silks did nothing to diminish his size. If anything, Jack looked all the more barbaric with his naked chest out, his pale skin glowing brightly in the light of the lamps dotted about the room. Louis ran his fingers across the warm skin, feeling the thick hair across it. Jack let him explore, watching his face, as he

touched the muscles on his shoulders and down towards his stomach. Soon, he wrapped his fingers around one of Louis's wrists and brought it to his lips, kissing his palm. It was so intimate, so tender and unexpected, that Louis gasped.

"I see that you are nothing more than a delicate bloom in my hands," Jask said, leaning close to his face. "I was entirely too rough last time. I will take care of you from here on out."

"I'm not a flower, and poetry is not your strongest virtue," Louis said. The bite to his words was lost on account of the shaking in his voice.

"Such delicate petals you have," Jack continued, rubbing the stubble of his beard against Louis's throat. He kissed down his thin sternum through the fabric of his clothes, unbothered by the scrawniness of his body, towards his ribs. "How could I have been so cruel? You are to be adorned in luxury, your grace. I was wrong to tie you up before with common rope—only strings of pearls will do."

Louis wanted to giggle, but the feeling of Jack's lips against his ribs made him pant. "You talk such nonsense. You aren't to be trusted like this."

"You'd rather be abused than flattered? I would be happy to do either."

"Whatever is more honest."

Jack gripped his hands around Louis's waistcoat, and in a quick motion, pulled it apart. The buttons, carefully sewn into the green fabric, scattered about the room.

"You brute!" Louis giggled loudly. "How could you?"

Jack laughed too, resting his forehead against Louis's stomach as he tried to catch his breath. "I couldn't resist. I'm sure Bas won't mind."

"I mind, however. It took me some time to get used to the fashion, but I have come to love this waistcoat—which you have now destroyed."

Jack pulled out Louis's shirt from underneath, revealing the delicate skin of his stomach and ribs, which he promptly kissed.

"Oh God," Louis moaned. He clutched the bed sheets on either side of him, trying not to push Jack away in response to the intense stimulation.

"And so sensitive too," Jack continued, his voice deepening again. "You are so wonderful to touch, I don't know how nobody else has taken the privilege of being your first."

That made him blush. "Your words are very pretty, but I beg you, I can't hold on much longer with you touching me like this."

"You said you wanted to go slow," Jack said with a smirk.

Louis couldn't think of what to say. Not that he needed to, for Jack was quick to lift his shirt cleanly off his head and begin to unbutton Louis's trousers. Soon, his leaking cock sprung out, untouched, and throbbing hard in the open air.

"Fuck," Jack moaned out, staring down at him. "You are so very beautiful, Louis."

"I'm not sure I've heard you say my name before."

"Would you like me to say it?"

Louis nodded and was rewarded with Jack's fingers wrapping around his erection and pumping it slowly. The response was immediate, as Louis curled against the sheets and gripped Jack's forearms in pleasure.

"Oh God, that feels so wonderful."

Jack leaned forward and kissed him again, moaning into his mouth. "Louis," he said softly. "My beautiful Louis. Do you like this?"

"Yes," he breathed out, thrusting up into the loose fist. "God, yes I do."

"Shall I keep going?"

"I—" Louis began, knowing it was ungentlemanly of him to take so quickly without willing to give in return. But, the

urgency of pleasure, coupled with Jack's experienced hand, could not be denied. He nodded, moaning deeply when the grip tightened slightly.

"I would like to see you cum," Jack said against his mouth, between kisses. "Will you cum for me, Louis?"

"I—I think I have little choice in the matter," Louis managed to breathe out.

Jack grinned. "Just how I like to have you."

At those words, as if it were Jack's intention all along, Louis felt his body tighten up. Great pressure overtook his lower body, and then a rush of heat and pleasure shot straight through his prick. He came in thick threads, embarrassingly, quickly, all over Jack's fingers.

"Oh God!" he cried out. "Jack!"

Jack moaned with him throughout it all, pressing their lips together, as Louis's cock spurted against both of their skin. He felt wrung out, wracked entirely with pleasure and exhaustion, as his climax ended. It was so perversely intimate, feeling Jack's hand rub his cock, covering him more in his own spend.

With the initial urgency out of the way, decorum reared its head once again in the forefront of Louis's mind.

"Allow me to help you too," he said quickly, trying to sit up and reach down for Jack's crotch. "I'm sorry I ended so quickly—but, well, it was your fault a little bit."

Jack shooed his hand back, kissing him once more. "In due time, little lord. Just rest for a minute—don't worry about me."

"But you are as hard as a rod still. Here, just let me—"

"No."

"Well that's not very fair."

Jack shifted up and lay on his back, threading his arm underneath Louis's head. "We've got all night. Just relax for a bit. I think you deserve it, after what I did with you last time. Can't have you thinking I am little more than just a beast."

Uneasy at the thought of not doing his duty, Louis hesitated before nestling closer and resting his head on Jack's chest. The nearness and warmth, mingling with his post-orgasm high, was enough to make his heart ache with longing for something that he never felt before—something that he didn't know he'd ever feel.

He was beginning to fall in love with Jack. It was obvious, painstakingly clear if anyone else had access to his own mind. But to Louis himself, it was a surprise. He couldn't pinpoint the exact moment, if such a thing were even possible, but slowly and surely, he began to fall in love with his captor. It was a horrible cliché that Louis wouldn't wish on anyone else.

Jack rubbed circles against his back slowly, content to just lay there in peace despite the obvious erection in his trousers. Louis blushed as he looked, feeling like it was improper.

“Why have you been so nice to me?” he asked, trying to think of anything else besides Jack's cock.

“What do you mean?”

Louis looked up at him. “You hate my father and everything he stands for, but you've been repeatedly kind to me throughout it all. I don't think I deserve it.”

“Kidnapping you and locking you away in a stranger's house isn't exactly what I would refer to as kindness.”

Louis slapped his chest playfully. “You know what I mean. Playing cards, setting up my daily walks with the Madame, even offering to dance with me tonight. You didn't have to do any of it. Yet you did.”

Jack was silent for a while, before shrugging his shoulders. “We've all suffered enough. I didn't want to take any of it out on you.”

“Yet here I am stuck with you, rather than in my own home surrounded by my admittedly small family.”

“You don't seem to be suffering to me, unless I mistakenly interpreted your moans earlier as ecstasy rather than agony.”

“True, but I am still your prisoner, am I not?”

Jack flattened his palm on Louis's back, letting the warmth of his hand cover him. "I don't want you to be. Not necessarily, anyway. I just assumed that maybe, well—"

Louis turned to look up at him, surprised at the uncertainty in Jack's voice. "You'd rather I stayed to help willingly?"

"Yes," Jack said firmly. "Yes, I'd prefer if you stayed with me."

"Because you need me to blackmail my father."

"No." Jack grunted in irritation. "You know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't. I don't know what you mean at all, Jack. That's part of the problem I'm having."

They were both quiet for a long time. Louis wasn't going to rush him, despite how intensely curious he was. There were many things that Louis was hoping he was about to say. Anything that might help to alleviate some of his own uncertainties.

"I was never planning on returning to England after I fled," Jack said slowly, looking up to avoid Louis's gaze. "In fact, I made a fine life for myself down in the countryside of France. I spent nearly twenty years there. I was angry, of course, and I hated your father. But I was happy enough there to let it go."

Louis nodded, resting his head back down on Jack's chest. He could hear his heartbeat right underneath his ear.

"I lived with someone from my unit, one of the other men who was also discharged. We were—friends, of a kind. I cared very deeply for him. His name was Eric, and he saved my life back in Crimea, right after I lost my eye. He was injured more severely than I was, and he never quite recovered from it. He died in France a few years ago."

"From his injuries?"

"Not directly, but they started troubling him again during his illness. He couldn't walk, and things got worse very quickly. During his last days, the only thing he could talk about was how Lord Earlshope destroyed our lives. I don't think he ever was happy in France. It reminded me just how much I hated

your father, and I made it my mission to set the record straight. It wasn't long before I made plans to return to England."

"I believe you, and I know that you are right," Louis said slowly, "but what you did *is* considered treason, is it not? Disobeying your commanding officer?"

"Yes it is. I deserve this fate—I was willing all along to shoulder the consequences of saving the lives of my men. Eric didn't deserve it; none of the other survivors did. I lost contact with the rest of them a long time ago."

"I assumed the other men in your group now were your fellow soldiers."

"No. I met most of my men through friends of friends. I've known Madame and Bas for a long time, and they have wide connections. She in particular mentioned her business of blackmailing for ransom, so it seemed an easy way to get close enough to others that would help me get to you. That's what got me into contact with others that were living under the law."

"So, you truly *aren't* a villain. Well, only sort of."

"Depends on whom you ask. The men knew I was only in this to get to you. But, as they say, you are the company you keep."

"And yet. you still feel responsible for them."

"I do. I can't let my actions ruin their lives, so I've been cautious. They've all been in hiding for some time now, mostly over petty crime or offenses. I helped them earn enough money to live off of comfortably with a few ransom missions—others we kidnapped before you. None of them would deserve to waste away in gaol, or worse."

"Kidnapping others is exactly the sort of thing one does to deserve being gaoled."

Jack chuckled. "Perhaps you are right. Though, if you ask Madame, she would tell you those whom we kidnapped deserved it too."

"Just for being rich? And why don't you call her Sylvia as Bastien does?"

“For using their wealth poorly, I suppose. And because she does not like the name Sylvia.”

“I can see why I am a liability,” Louis said, pressing his hand firmly to Jack’s chest. “If I got free, or knew too much, I could ruin everything. It makes sense that you were hesitant to tell me this.”

“But I don’t want to ruin your life either. You’re a complication I wasn’t quite expecting. I wasn’t supposed to get distracted so easily by a smart tongue and a tight ass.”

Louis smiled at that, lifting his head to look at Jack. “It would have been easier had I been an ugly, pompous fool, just like my father?”

“You’re still a pompous fool. And a brat. And a pain in my neck from the very start.”

“So, just to clarify, you’re saying I’m not ugly? That’s all my ambition, really.”

Jack smiled, pinching his nose. “You know what you look like, and I dare say you have been using it to your advantage from the first night we were together. I should have gouged out my other eye at the sight of you—or just kept the bag on your head.”

Louis kissed him. He kissed him once playfully, and then again with more force, stroking his cheeks. “I’m sorry,” he said gently, “for whatever that’s worth. I’m sorry all this happened to you. And Eric, and the others.”

Jack looked at him thoughtfully. “I believe you.”

They kissed again and again, each time with increasing urgency. Louis’s cock was stirring again, hardening quickly against his stomach, which pressed into Jack’s side. He blushed under the look Jack was giving him when he felt it.

“Such vigor. I will be sure to make good use of it.”

“Let me pleasure you,” Louis said, kicking off his trousers all the way and moving to straddle Jack’s hips. “Tell me what to do.”

“Are you sure? I’d be happy to make the night all about you. I know how much you enjoy being the center of attention.”

“I prefer you as a villain. I can’t bear this soft-stomached nonsense.”

Jack laughed at him. “Very well. How about I make you do all the work, while I do nothing at all?”

Louis shifted his hips on Jack’s lap. “And how do I do that?”

“You’re off to a great start,” Jack moaned as Louis shifted his hips right on top of his hard cock. He moved his hands down Louis’s slender hips, circling his fingers around them and holding him tightly.

“Is this something people do?” Louis said, moaning as he felt Jack’s cock press against the curve of his ass. “With me on top, and with your cock—well, you know.”

“Inside you? It certainly is, little lord. And it will certainly feel very good for both of us.”

They paused briefly, only to fully free Jack’s legs from the confines of his trousers and to find a small jar of scented petroleum jelly that Bastien had stored in every room. Louis laughed when Jack told him this, and again when he found it in the third drawer that he opened.

With the gel, it was significantly easier on Louis as Jack slicked him up; the feeling of his fingers pressing inside his hole was enough to make him moan eagerly. He felt his cock bounce on top of Jack’s stomach.

“Next time,” Jack said hotly, “I will make you do this yourself too. Then you truly will be my plaything, always ready for when I want you.”

For some reason, the position was strikingly intimate. Louis had so much control sitting on top of Jack, but wasn’t quite sure how exactly to use it. As Jack entered him, he moved slowly, testing out the feeling of the large cock stretching him out from within. The pleasant burn, almost

electrifying in its intensity, made it difficult to maintain a steady rhythm.

“You’re doing great, Louis,” Jack cooed, steadying his hips with his hands. “Fuck, just like that.”

Louis held onto the frame of the bed, invigorated by Jack’s encouragement, and began to move faster. The fullness was overwhelming as he sank down on top of the thick cock each time, but he couldn’t slow down. He was insatiable, and Jack was making sure that he enjoyed every second of it.

This was very difficult than the last time they fucked, though no less pleasurable. Louis was anticipating the burn and pain, and was glad how much more quickly it subsided into perverse pleasure. Jack too seemed to be enjoying himself, looking up at Louis almost as if he were proud of him.

“Oh God,” he cried out as Jack wrapped a hand around his cock, pumping it in beat with his own movements. Now this was true pleasure. He felt Jack deep within, fucking him as before, but Louis could do as he wanted. This felt equal somehow—more like two souls uniting rather than two beasts wrestling for domination. He was no good at poetry either, but he couldn’t stop himself from thinking such ludicrous nonsense.

Jack could flip him over and take him, just as he did before. But he didn’t. He let Louis control the pace. He trusted Louis—and Louis trusted him in return.

He moved faster, picking up urgency as the pleasure became stronger, and soon his climax was coming again all too quickly. Louis cried out loudly, his semen coating Jack’s stomach and chest, as he tried to hold on to the railing to maintain his position.

Jack followed close behind, likely pent up from the extended foreplay. He pushed his hips up, pressing all the way inside Louis, and grunted deeply. The surreal feeling of being pumped full of semen, just like the last time they fucked, made Louis cry out in pleasure.

He fell forward, pressing his forehead to Jack's as they breathed in sync. Strong arms wrapped around his sides and held him close. They pressed their lips together in a lazy kiss.

The pleasure of sex was soon replaced by the discomfort of realizing that they were probably quite loud, and the house was filled with guests and servants who were all still awake. Louis burned in shame as they cleaned up and readjusted, lying close in each other's arms again. Jack just laughed at him.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we heard any of the others doing the same thing later tonight. Bas's parties are no different than Roman festivals. Thorough debauchery is to be expected and celebrated."

"They must think I'm a whore. They heard me—I know they did."

"I think all of England heard you, Louis."

"Shut up! Stop immediately, I beg you!"

After a few more playful jests, verbal sparring, and intermittent kisses, they were soon laying on their sides, and Louis pressed his back against Jack's chest. The comfort and security of the position made him tired.

"I was very hurt, the last time we did this, when you left immediately after," he said with a yawn.

"Were you now? I'm sorry for it," Jack said, kissing his neck.

"Yes. It was ungentlemanly."

"I thought staying would have made things more awkward. I felt as though I overstepped my boundaries, and the best course was to leave before messing up anything else."

"Please never do that again."

"You have my word. Every time I fuck you, I promise to hold you close to me after."

Louis had to hold back a foolish grin, overwhelmed at the implications of there being multiple future occurrences of

the activity. “And promise that you will be here when I wake up in the morning.”

“I promise. We shall be unmoved when we wake. You will still be in my arms.”

“Good.”

Louis grabbed Jack’s hand and interlocked their fingers. He brought it up to his lips to kiss one last time, unable to resist the urge.

“Jack, one last thing.”

“Yes?”

Louis took a deep breath. “I promise to help you avenge Eric. I promise that I will do whatever I can to make my father pay for what he did to you and your men. I swear it.”

To this, Jack squeezed his hand back, but said nothing.

Chapter 26

Louis woke to an empty bed.

His eyes were blurry with sleep, and attempts to blink his vision back into focus continued to fail. He sat up, looking around for Jack.

The night was incredibly restful, and he was glad for not having a throbbing headache despite the large amount of champagne he drank. On top of that, the bed was comfortable and warm. The morning was clear and bright. Jack, however, was absent.

As little as he wished to leave the comforts of the bed, he swung the covers off and began to get dressed.

Except, of course, he had no clothes to wear.

This was an embarrassing situation, and one Louis had never been in before. There were no clothes for him to wear, and he was stuck alone in a mostly unfamiliar house. He looked around for a bell to ring one of the servants, but before he could find anything useful, the door opened.

“Jack,” he called out, sitting up in bed, entirely nude save for the bed sheet wrapped around his waist. He figured the pose was elegant enough for Jack, and might possibly entice him to come back to bed for another hour or so.

Jack, indeed, did enter the room, but so did two others. He opened his mouth, about to speak, but Bastien and Madame D’Arc pushed past him first and gasped.

“I knew it!” the Madame screamed.

Bastien, meanwhile, cackled so loudly he fell over onto his knees.

Louis looked to Jack, who just stared at him with a slightly apologetic smirk and shrugged. To this, Louis, in the midst of burning deeply in shame, fell backwards against the sheets and fainted.

Or, he would have liked to have fainted, if possible. Instead, he buried his head under a pillow, groaning

desperately for everyone to get out of the room, while Madame continued to yell angrily at no one in particular, and Bastien laughed until he said he was in critical danger of pissing himself.

“How could you, Jack Sterling!” Madame D’Arc grumbled again, as the four of them sat in the breakfast room picking at leftover food from the night before as fresher trays were brought out to them. “Bloody, disgusting, rump of a boy. I can’t believe you. Upon my life, I have never been disrespected so thoroughly. And he was in your bed!”

“Come now Sylvia,” Bastien said smugly. “You can’t blame our dear General for falling for such a beautiful face! Look at the duckie—he’d break anyone’s heart, and we ought to let him, even if he is an Earlshope.”

Louis looked in slight alarm at Jack, who sat next to him at the table, at hearing that Bastien now knew of his last name. In response, Jack squeezed his knee reassuringly. Apparently, he had handled most of the troubling revelations while Louis still slept.

The morning was a slow start for everyone in the house. The ballroom was still a disaster, as the party didn’t end until dawn broke, and the servants were making a fuss about cleaning it all up. Bastien may or may not have still been drunk, and Sylvia D’Arc journeyed all the way to Bristol as soon as she learned that Jack Sterling had burrowed himself there alongside the despicable arsonist Louis Earlshope himself.

Louis, meanwhile, was drowning in fabric, as the only clean clothes available for him were an extra set that Jack brought. The sleeves of his linen undershirt extended far past his jacket, and the waistcoat basically had to be belted onto him in order to stay put. The only person who seemed unbothered was Jack, who eagerly dived into the tray of scrambled eggs that was placed before him.

“I wasn’t the one who started the fires,” Louis said, in a break between the Madame’s tirades. “It was Sir Maurice.

Please, you have to believe at least that.”

“I don’t care which one of you bastard sons of bitches started it!” she shrieked. “My house is now covered in soot, and it will take weeks to clean it! I should stick this knife down your neck where you sit.”

“Goodness, my dear,” Bastien said. “Language now, language! I will have no cursing so early. Such profanity before luncheon assaults my eardrums.”

“How did you even know where we went? I paid off the men looking for us,” said Jack, in between bites of egg.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” said Louis.

“Bastien sent a telegram, that’s how! Though I’m certain he only did it to vex me,” said Madame D’Arc.

“Indeed, Sylvia. I was delighted to see what would happen to get you three all in my house at once. I sent the message as soon as Jack walked through my doors. What a merry family we make!”

Madame D’Arc’s rage quelled with every curse and blaspheme she threw towards Louis and his wretched life, and soon her voice was back towards a palatable octave before the dishes were cleared away. As the four of them sipped on coffee, she told the tale of what exactly happened back at her estate after Louis fled the scene.

“No one could find the little rat, nor the blond gentleman,” she said. “It’s as if *he* never existed, though thankfully, I have unearthed at least one culprit. Repairs will be done, but the weeks I have to see my home in shambles will never be reclaimed.”

Louis clutched onto his cup of coffee tightly, terrified about whether she would mention the appearance of Randall and the other man at the house that night. Jack still didn’t know, but he didn’t know if she knew either.

“Sylvia, my dear,” Bastien said, “stay here! Make a merry quartet with us all. Jack and his little Hyacinth shall stay for the remainder of the autumn, isn’t that right?”

“No,” Jack and Louis said in unison.

“See? They already mime each other’s sentences. A true love story for the ages. One could almost be envious of such domesticity, if they were into such a thing.”

“Well, they certainly won’t be returning back to *my* home, no matter what Mr. Sterling says!” the Madame said.

“What *is* your plan, dearies? Will you send the little strumpet on his way back to his father after he coughs up what he owes you?”

Jack looked over at Louis for a brief second, considering his response. “We planned on staying here just for a few days, since the hired men Madame sent our way were going to take Louis back to Cheshire. Now, however, since you so helpfully told her of our whereabouts, Bas, we are under no such obligation to stay any longer.”

“Oh, poopoo!” Bastien said. “What’s the fun in that? I haven’t even taken my favorite little duck out shopping yet.” His voice lowered into a deep whisper. “And you two clearly had so much fun last night—why rush away so soon?”

Louis blushed, looking down at his plate. He stuffed his mouth with a piece of smoked fish to avoid answering the question. The truth was, despite the shame of Bastien’s dig towards their nocturnal activities, he *was* enjoying himself thoroughly, and he did enjoy the company that the house provided. Why were they in such a hurry to leave? Why not stay around longer? Why not up the stakes that Louis’s father would have to endure in order to get his son back?

“I’m afraid we can’t,” Jack said. “And don’t ask—you all know why.”

“Yes, you are very close to getting to the marquees now, aren’t you?” Bastien said.

“Speaking of which,” Madame said. “Lord Earlshope, there’s a letter for you from your father.”

“There is? May I have it? I can read it to us all now.”

“No—not until you apologize for destroying my house.”

“Come now, Sylvia, it’s hardly *destroyed*. That house has been in need of repairs since Waterloo. You should be grateful it hasn’t crumbled around you yet.”

“Mr. de Eliza, if you insult my house one more time —”

“Oh stop insulting *me* with these formalities!”

“Enough,” Jack barked out. Three heads swung towards him, all shocked at the sharpness of his voice. Louis was still impressed by the ease at which he could control a crowd of others. It must have been a skill that served him well back in the Crimean War.

“Just give Louis the letter,” he said.

“Fine. Fine! And after all these years, what does our friendship bring me but sorrow? Here’s your letter, Earlshope. Read it to us quickly.”

He took the paper that she tossed his way. He remembered quite suddenly that he did write his father a letter before his escape, but assumed that it never got sent, where he discussed the Madame’s plans of possibly butchering him until the ransom was paid. But by the looks of it, it had been delivered, and the last that Louis’s father knew of his whereabouts was that he was about to have his fingers cut off one by one unless he caved to whatever Jack’s demands of him were.

The letter was short.

“Here we are,” he began. “It reads:

To Whom it May Concern,

I won’t entertain such filth by even suggesting that this could have been willingly written by my son’s hand. You may have mimicked his lines well enough, but he would never stoop to such standards as this letter suggests. In fact, I wonder if you even have him in your possession at all? For all I know, Louis’s off chasing his own whims

and fancies, just as he's done his entire life. I will not respond any further to notes of this address. Any further attempts at communication will be put immediately in the kindling.

The note was unsigned, though inarguably written in his father's handwriting. It was the most concise, simple, and painfully stiff way to wipe his hands clean of the whole ordeal, and to figure Louis, if he truly were in any danger, would manage to get out on his own.

For once, since breakfast began, the room was silent. Everyone looked a bit awkward, waiting for someone else to speak. If Louis had thought that he was overreacting to his father's strange and dismissive way of dealing with his son's kidnappers, then the silence of Madame D'Arc and Bastien would have proven otherwise. He realized that he would need to speak first.

"I expected such a response," he said, his voice thin. "Though perhaps I shouldn't be so ungrateful. Indeed, I am not in any active danger, so he isn't so off the mark as to imply that I could get out of this situation on my own."

Jack's hand returned to his knee and squeezed hard. "Don't try to justify his behavior. He simply is trying to avoid noticing your predicament in the hopes it resolves on its own."

"He's avoiding compliance to avoid scandal," Bastien said. "I've seen it all before."

"I figured that," Louis said, "but when I last wrote, I specifically mentioned how this *would* be a scandal if my absence went on for too long. How could he not care what others would think if I were left in a dungeon somewhere to rot away while he carried on as before?"

"My dear boy, the problem is you assumed that others would think that. Your father might instead suggest that you simply—I don't know—ran off. Men of your age and station are quite fond of such actions," Madame said.

"You'd think he'd lie? That my father would prefer me gone than to even bother lifting a finger to help me when I need

him?”

“I would say that you know your father the most,” Bastien said, looking towards Jack, “but in present company...”

Louis looked at him as well. Jack looked solemn, choosing his words carefully.

“Perhaps there it is more of a scandal that you were kidnapped either way,” he said. “Maybe even your rescue wouldn’t matter, as your worth might be affected after being in the hands of criminals for so long.”

“That’s nonsense,” Madame said. “He’s not a fair lady. His reputation wouldn’t be at risk.”

“Surely not in the same way as a young woman’s might, but it’s still entirely possible. People would talk regardless, and that is something Louis’s father seems more than happy to avoid whenever possible.”

“Even as the prospect of losing me? What if I died?”

“He’s not so *very* old that siring a new heir would be off the table?” Bastien threw his hands up when three pairs of eyes looked at him quickly. “What? These aren’t my sentiments, but if the duckie died, who’s to say he wouldn’t just—how do the young ones say it nowadays?—pop out a new duckie?”

Louis looked down at his hands in his lap. Jack reached up his leg to clasp one of them between his own.

“Now, now, don’t pout!” Bastien said. “We’ve all known the markees is an asshole for decades now! I’m sorry you are so late to the party. Ow!”

Madame smacked him across the chest, and then did it again. “Have some compassion for the poor boy! Christ above, you’re going to make him start weeping if you keep talking like that.”

“Well *I* wasn’t the one who barged in on him entirely nude, and threatened to hang him for setting some ratty curtains on fire!”

The two of them bickered more, but Louis drowned out the noise. Surprisingly, he felt less hurt than he assumed he would.

Or perhaps it was just the hollowness that grief would fill later. Regardless, knowing that one's own father would write off their only child in such a flippant way was a crushing thing to come to terms with.

“Are you alright? Want me to get them to shut up?” Jack said.

“No, no. It's okay. I'll be okay—I just need a minute to think.”

“Take as much time as you need, but remember—we've got your back. He'll pay for this, for talking to you like that. We made a promise, eh?”

Louis managed a weak smile. “Indeed, though you already broke another. I woke this morning to find you gone.”

“The circumstances called me elsewhere. Anyway, maybe we could try again? We could either stay here and listen to these idiots yell at each other, or perhaps go to bed and start the day over. Hopefully on a better note. Your call.”

Louis squeezed his hand. He was paralyzed with shock, not moving despite the tempting offer that Jack gave him. He would accept it soon enough, allow himself to be led back to bed and wrapped in Jack's firm arms. But, for the present, he was just going to sit still and let the hollowness inside burrow deeper.

Chapter 27

Louis's mood did not improve too much by returning to bed, but it certainly didn't hurt to indulge in a brief session of resting on Jack's chest, followed by being tugged off quickly by Jack's skillful hand. It was a balm if anything, and his mood was still quite low—but what a glorious balm it was.

They lay in bed for an hour or so, before the raucous of the house proved too noisy to even pretend to sleep. Bastien's shrill voice carried out instructions to the servants as they cleaned out the ballroom, and to Louis's curiosity, the voices of the servants were slinging back at him in an equally snappy way.

"I see why my manners towards servants was so ill-received by you," he said, pulling his trousers back on. "You come from circles where they are hardly less than equals to the masters of the house."

"Bas's relationship with his servants is singular, no doubt, but he saved them from worse fates. You know they are all sodomites as well—some of them even make appearances at his cross-dressing balls."

"No! Really? That's fascinating."

"He's a good man, of a sort," Jack said, with a waver in his voice as if he couldn't even believe his own words. "Maybe not, but he nevertheless cares for others who are like him."

"Like us, you mean," Louis said, looking down at the floor.

"Yes. Though, I wouldn't say that with such a glum look when you're around Bas—he'll chew your head off for being so conventional."

"And what does the Madame think of all of this?"

"She thinks all of England's elite should be thrown into hellfire. I don't think she particularly cares if some of those who help her achieve this goal like to bugger others of the same sex."

Louis hummed. "Fair enough."

When they made their return to the others, Madame D'Arc was quick to pull Jack aside to discuss important business matters, probably about what to do with her "business" while her house was being renovated after the fire. They spoke in hushed tones, obviously meant to keep their conversation private, so Louis thought little of it and instead explored the eccentric displays of art hanging about the sitting-room. A great deal of the paintings were depictions of nude men, mostly recreations of actual historical works of art locked away in museums. Louis had seen some of them before in London galleries, and he never thought much of the display of male nudity. Afterall, the male form was considered nothing short of divine by their Greek and Roman forerunners. However, with so much flesh uncovered before him all at once, it was almost overwhelmingly perverse.

One painting in particular was of note. It was of a nude man tied to a tree, with his arms raised up and wrists tied together, and his body was littered with arrows. It was a portrait of Saint Sebastian, though the darker pallor of the model's skin was vaguely familiar. Sebastian here looked almost like a Turk, with a pointed mustache and goatee. His eyes, raised up towards the heavens, gave off a look of ecstasy, despite his entire body being embedded deeply with the sharp arrows.

"Strike your fancy, does it?" a voice came from behind him.

Louis turned, though smiling as he did so. "Yes indeed, Mr—I mean, Bastien. I've never seen such a rendition before."

"You have no idea how much your words please me. You do realize who the model is?"

Louis was about to shake his head, but by looking into Bastien's waspish eyes, staring down at him with such unfettered pride, he didn't need to. "It's you, isn't it?"

"Me, indeed, duckie. Aren't I stunning? Now, of course, this was nearly a decade ago, when the passing of time was not so harsh upon my features. I am glad you find it so...enthralling."

"In the portrait, you look as though you are—"

"Close to orgasm? Yes. Are you familiar at all with the Saint that I am posing as? He is my namesake afterall. Many of our

persuasion find him to be an interesting piece of work. I think it's the arrows.”

“What does that mean?” Louis said.

“The arrows, darling. They penetrate him deeply, like a cock might? It's a glorious metaphor, really. I wish I had been the first to think of it, but that honor goes all the way back to the Renaissance.”

Louis blushed, unable to look up at Bastien or at the ecstatic portrait now. “I doubt men of the Renaissance knew of such behaviors. Maybe it was subliminally present, but I dare say they couldn't have known better.”

“Oh, dear, you aren't joking, are you?” Bastien leaned in close, pursing his lips in a pout. He was wearing a suit one might wear during mourning. Draped in black velvet, he gave off a rather sinister air. “You know they all fucked each other? Michaleangelo, Da Vinci, Boticelli—hell, probably even Raphael, why not?—they were *all* fairies. Marys. Mollies. Boy lovers. Bum-fuckers. Pillow-biters—”

“Yes, yes, I understand,” Louis said quickly.

“I'm not sure if you do. This isn't just my dark influence attempting to win you over. I speak nothing but historical fact. Ask any lettered historian—but be sure to write down their responses verbatim. I would *love* to hear what they would have to say in return.”

Though feeling a rush of both abhorrence and tongue-twisting embarrassment, Louis did his best to swallow it all down. Jack was right—there was no use denying it any further: he too was an invert, now no longer just in theory. He allowed another man to have his way with him, multiple times now, and he would again and again as long as there was a willing partner.

So, instead of walking away politely, he stood his ground and met Bastien's eye.

“I'm sure you know, I am rather new to all of this,” he said awkwardly. “Jack has been kind enough to try and...lessen my shame about my *inversion*.”

“Such a horrid word—I’d rather you use any of the other nouns I have listed—but do go on.”

“I just don’t understand how one can be so forthright about it all. I have not your confidence, and I can’t help but think how much my family would be ashamed of me if they ever found out.”

“Family? And we are talking of the same daft, pigeon-livered blunderbuss that is your father?”

“Well...yes?”

“Alright, little duckie,” Bastien said, putting an arm around Louis’s shoulder, “you’ve convinced me. Allow me to take you under my wing—see? Just like this. Now, can I give you some advice? I think you ought to renounce your father as having any claim over you. You are a grown man, afterall. It doesn’t do to always do what daddy says. Now, that’s a beautiful string of alliteration.”

“I’d rather not risk being cut off and excluded entirely from my title.”

“Oh titles, what good do they ever do? I should send you back to Sylvia’s dungeons; she would love to have a nice chat with you about the issues that lie within our parliamentary procedures.”

Louis smiled. “You and I come from very different worlds, I fear. After all this is over—if all this is ever over—I will have to go back home and do my duty.”

“And I’m sure the General would just *love* for that to happen.”

Louis’s face twisted for a moment. There was a lot to think about regarding his future, especially with Jack, but he admittedly had been trying to avoid the topic as much as he could. He didn’t know what would happen after Jack was done with him. Would he still want them to continue whatever it was they were doing? Maybe Louis could fix what his father did to him—restore his name and honor, clear him of being discharged in such disgrace. Maybe they could even be friends of a respectable sort. But, with friends like these, would Jack even want that?

“I can see you thinking,” Bastien said, bringing him back to attention, “but I cannot say it becomes you. You are meant for pleasure, not wisdom. Might I propose an alternative to your brooding?”

“And what would that be?”

“Let’s go shopping,” Bastien said, his smile equally child-like and wicked.

The carriage ride from the house down to the downtown of Bristol was only about an hour and a half, but the steep decline left Louis panting and fidgeting. Bastien, meanwhile, rambled tirelessly about the things to do in the city, which did not amount to much.

The old town was beautiful, and the two admired the stony architecture of the historical buildings after they arrived. Bastien took Louis throughout the quaint streets, up towards the long harbor which was quite crowded, and into various haberdasheries and linen shops.

“If I had it my way, I would dress you up in these glorious silks,” Bastien said, holding up a swath of a pink floral pattern.

“I think that pattern is for women’s dresses.”

“Of course it is, you little fool. But I dare say a proper ballroom mockup for you would be just the thing!”

Louis giggled. “I’m not quite sure I am ready to be dressed in women’s clothing.”

“One day, you will, and you will say to me: ‘Oh my heavens, Bas! I can’t *believe* it took me so long to put this bonnet on! Look how beautiful it suits my auburn curls! Mwah!’”

Louis giggled more and blushed furiously at Bastien’s volume, which was loud enough to attract a few odd looks from the women shopping near them.

Eventually, at Bastien’s urging, Louis was able to procure a few ready-made garments that would get him by before a more extensive wardrobe could be fashioned for him. Despite the less-than glamorous idea of wearing ready-made waistcoats,

he supposed it was a better alternative to wearing the ill-fitted garments loaned to him by Jack. He looked preposterously young in them, like a small boy who playfully puts on his father's evening wear as a joke.

"I wouldn't be concerned at all about it," Bastien said smoothly. "Giles is a natural when it comes to fitting clothing. He'll give these a few stitches here and there, and they will hug your hips like a soldier ought to."

"In my limited experience," Louis said, "the soldier I know hugs me a little too tightly."

"Oh my, how delicious. I'd be envious of the General's infatuation with you, but of course, I did know him before he lost his other eye. Without his patch, he has no charms whatsoever. A complete bore."

Louis laughed and, feeling emboldened by their repartee, had the cost of his clothing credited towards his family name down in London. Upon hearing of his title and the name "Earlshope," the clerk's eyes went wide, looking strangely between Louis and Bastien, before continuing on with the purchase. His new wardrobe would be sent to Bastien's house as soon as possible.

"How nice it is to simply say 'oh yes, my father will be paying for that' whenever you want something," Bastien said as they walked up the next street.

"Indeed, and therefore you have uncovered the true reason I am hesitant to be cut off from my connections with him."

"Har har! Oh Louis, I knew there was a hint of gunpowder in you. Jack wouldn't be so in love with you if not."

Louis startled slightly, before walking on, hoping it went unnoticed. "I'm sure Jack is equally as gallant to all his lovers."

"No indeed! Don't give yourself so little credit, duckie. He's positively in love with you. I've never seen him look at another with such vigor."

"Even with one eye?"

“Especially with one eye,” Bastien said emphatically.

Louis could read the tone in his voice, and spoke hesitantly. “He certainly is passionate.”

“Please, I’m a big boy—I can handle the intimates of your time alone with him. Now, be honest, what’s it like?”

Louis blushed, but continued. “You know how he does that thing with his voice? Like this morning, how he can just command a room to do whatever he wants with a single word?”

“Indeed,” Bastien said with a wide grin.

Louis blushed until he was certain he was purple. “Imagine he’s doing that, but with his hand on your prick.”

Bastien howled loudly, shrieking in wild humor, and nearly falling to his knees by the force of his laughter. The crowded street, filled with middle-class men and women going about their business, parted in half as the two of them walked by them. Bastien gave no thought to the exasperated stares his laughter incited from the strangers, but Louis kept throwing apologetic glances to those they nearly ran into.

“Louis! Oh, Louis, my dear—my heart! You’ve bewitched me now. Where has *that* confidence been? You little flower, hiding such depths of wickedness and debauchery. How might I ever convince our beloved General to let me keep you as my pet?”

Louis was about to respond, especially as they came towards an open park that was much less crowded with onlookers, but he was struck by a couple standing just under a tree not too far ahead. There was a finely-dressed woman, who looked a bit out of place amongst the muted hues of the working-class masses, and she was holding the arm of a tall man. Like her, he was dressed elegantly and had his blond hair swept fashionably away from his forehead.

Before thinking twice, Louis smiled brightly and made his way towards them.

“Maurice?” he called out, walking up to the man’s side. “Sir Maurice Grantham? I can’t believe it! What are you doing

here?

Maurice turned to face him, confused at who could possibly be addressing him so openly.

“I’m shocked—you got out unharmed! Where did you go? Are you okay? I haven’t heard anything since that one terrible night.”

“I’m sorry,” Maurice said, his voice cold and tight, “but I’m afraid I don’t recall having met you before.”

“Excuse me?” Louis reached out to mime knocking on a wall. “Remember? It’s me, Louis. What are the odds we have ended up in the same place after we escaped! In fact, I forgot until this very moment that your family lives here in Bristol. Fancy that!”

Maurice took one long look at him, taking in his ill-fitted clothes and especially the presence of Bastien, who stood just at Louis’s side. If possible, his face seemed to freeze up even more dramatically.

“No, indeed,” Maurice said, repeating himself, “I don’t recall. You must have mistaken someone else for me before. How do you know my name?”

Louis understood what was happening. At first he was confused, then aghast, then suddenly quite angry. The woman he was with looked off to the side, seemingly unbothered by the strange conversation that was taking place, and acting as if there weren’t two people standing directly in front of her.

“I see,” Louis said slowly. “Forgive me, sir. I must be mistaken.”

“I’d advise you gentlemen not to make it again.”

“Oh can it, chickie,” Bastien said with a snort. “Don’t puff your feathers at us for nothing.”

Maurice looked between the two of them again, back and forth, before the slight twinge of a smile appeared on his lips. “What company you keep. Yes, I am certain now I’ve never met the likes of you, I’m afraid. Please excuse us.”

However, Maurice didn't move away, clearing expecting Louis and Bastien to go first. They likewise stood their ground. An awkward moment passed where the four of them stood rather close for having nothing to say.

"Is this a matter that I will have to alert a constable with?" Maurice said, his voice slightly louder.

"By all means, go run off to find one. What will you charge us with? Standing outside in the open air?" Louis snapped.

"I'm sure they'd think of something to fine you with. Bloody degenerates like you have all sorts of vices worth investigating."

"Oh my, what have we here?" Bastien purred. "Afraid of a few sodomites breathing the same air as you? Don't worry, you're not really my type."

Louis cringed slightly, annoyed that Bastien brought up once more something that Maurice already suspected about him. He noticed the woman too stiffened at the remark, and he would bet a quid that she would have a few interesting questions to ask Maurice later on.

Maurice looked about to respond, but said nothing. Instead, he gave the two of them an icy glare, filled with abject disgust, before dragging the woman on a little too roughly deeper into the park.

Bastien just huffed, but Louis felt like doubling over.

"Lord, what a piece of work he is."

"So that's the chap who lit Sylvia's house up in flames?"

"Yes."

"That poor girl he was with," Bastien said solemnly. "If that's his betrothed, she'll live a hard life."

"Why did you provoke him?" Louis asked irritably. "You shouldn't have told him we are sodomites."

"Why ever should I have not? It's true, though it's no credit to him for discerning the very obvious."

"I'm not so obvious as you."

“And what does that mean?”

Louis gave him an incredulous look, gesturing vaguely to Bastien’s stance with his hand on his hip.

“Oh, I see now,” Bastien said. “Afraid my presence sullies your good name? Fine. Next time, I’m sure Sylvia will just love to take you out into town.”

He walked ahead, emphasizing the dramatic swing of his hips, but Louis quickly caught up.

“No, wait,” he said, grabbing Bastien’s arm. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It *was* quite rude.”

“I’m sorry. It was ungentlemanly of me and cowardly.”

“Yes, it was.”

They walked on, arm-in-arm, in no particular direction. Louis’s heart was beating fast, not because of Bastien’s close presence, but because of his encounter with Maurice. He was shocked at the way he spoke to him, and, though not for the first time, annoyed at how temperamental that man was. Bastien was right: if that woman he was with was to be his wife, then she would always live in regret of it.

“Do you forgive me?” he said again after a while.

“Hmm, afraid not. I never forgive anyone.” Bastien’s tone, however, was playful.

“Which is quite right. Forgiveness is the most heinous of Christian virtues.”

“Right behind modesty.”

“Certainly. I bow to your wisdom,” Louis said.

“As long as you keep bowing, and accept that I am irrefutably right always, then I shall allow you to return to my good graces. Maybe.”

Louis, in a quick motion, took his arm back and fell to his knees dramatically. In a mock bow, like a puny servant might

towards an emperor, he saluted Bastien in the middle of the street.

“There,” he said. “I have humiliated myself in front of the entire public of Bristol. Am I forgiven?”

Bastien by now was already laughing and helped Louis back onto his feet. “Fine. Consider it forgotten, except as a lesson that you really ought to develop a thicker skin. Men like him don’t deserve even a moment’s worth of consternation.”

“That is sage advice. Will you continue to provide such guidance if I buy you a drink?”

“You dare to drink in public with such a shameless *invert*, as you say, as me?”

“If only to avoid Madame D’Arc’s company back at home for as long as I can.”

“Oh, duckie, you learn so quickly. Fine. Follow me, and allow me to tell you of the time that your beloved General dressed up as Catherine the Great over a pint.”

Chapter 28

Louis and Bastien returned home slightly drunk, only to find Madame D'Arc and Jack still in discussion. They had a map and a few scraps of paper in front of them. To an unsuspecting eye, they almost looked like they were planning a vacation. But to Louis, it was clear they were possibly looking for additional places to hide their prisoners.

“Will you two louts get off the clock already?” Bastien cried out, struggling to shrug off his coat.

“Jack, my dear, I tried a wonderful wine from America for the first time, but I do not remember what it is called. Bastien has it specially delivered to this club we went to. Have you heard of it before? It's very delicious,” Louis said, moving towards him and putting his hands on his shoulders. “He also suggested we go down to the shore tonight—just against the cliffs to watch the sunset. Wouldn't that be romantic?”

Jack looked a little subdued at first, staring up at him for a long moment with a tired expression. After a while, he smiled warmly and swung Louis around into his lap. “Are you sure? It's very high up, and we would be able to see down the edge.”

“Yes! Yes, I am quite determined to overcome all of my fears today. I have learned the importance of accepting my faults—and how best to best them!” Louis giggled.

“I think I've quite exhausted myself talking today,” Madame D'Arc said, rubbing her face. “So just don't expect any conversation from me while we are there.”

“My dear,” Bastien called out from the hallway, ringing the bell to summon a servant, “no one wants conversation from you anyway. Not that you would shut up for five minutes in any case.”

“Bastard,” she muttered under her breath.

Jack and Louis shared a short but passionate kiss. In his inebriated state, Louis felt powerful and confident—able to conquer the world if he so desired. And, having Jack holding him so close, it felt like a real possibility.

Jack, meanwhile, still looked a bit distant.

“Why are you grinning like that?” Jack asked him.

“Because I am having fun.”

“Good time with Bas? I thought you two might get along.”

“Yes, indeed, though I was referring to kissing you now.” Louis kissed him once again for good measure, happy that neither the servants who came in with Bastien nor Madame D’Arc seemed to mind whatsoever. There was freedom and comfort in such a bohemian setting. There was freedom and comfort with Jack as well.

“Is everything okay?” he asked gently.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t they be?” Jack said.

“You just seem a little...distracted. Like a cloud covering up the sun,” Louis said, dragging his fingers down the sides of Jack’s face in an attempt to cheer him up.

It seemed to work. He smiled up at him, the lines around his eye crinkling.

“I’ve just been sitting at this table for hours now. It’s not very good for my back.”

“Oh, Sylvia,” Bastien said, peeking his head around the hallway. “Has Louis mentioned yet? We saw that man in town—the one who set your house on fire.”

“*What?*” she bellowed.

“Yes, what was his name again? Sir Grandese? Something like that. Anyway, I’m off to get changed. Ta-ta!”

He went up the stairs, leaving Jack and Louis alone with Madame D’Arc as she angrily summoned every possible curse that she could in regard to Maurice. Louis placated her as best he could, stating that they hardly exchanged a few words, and that he even pretended not to know who Louis was. To this, Jack seemed offended for him, and Madame cursed him again for mistreating Louis in such a way. It made him smile.

They packed a light picnic, including a few bottles of champagne, and set off for the edge of the cliff not far from

the towering house. Having drunk a few glasses worth of wine already did help to calm Louis's nerves about riding so close to a high location, as did Jack's hand holding his, so he was able to enjoy the carriage ride more than he was expecting. It helped of course too that it was only a quarter of an hour before they got out, and they were met with a rather breathtaking view.

Gazing westward, right where the sun was slowly approaching the horizon of the sea, the four of them stood and said little. Louis was surprised that anything was capable of quieting Bastien, but the serenity of the view proved more than enough. The two footmen who came along laid out the cloth and food for the picnic, and they all soon were sitting and enjoying the peace of being so far away from any form of civilization.

"It is good for one's soul to be apart from others of his species," Bastien said, in way of a toast. "Of course, it helps when one's present company consists only of beasts and fallen angels, if only to remind one of their humanity."

"That almost made sense, my dear," Madame D'Arc said, drinking heavily from her glass.

"I'm trying to say that you are as ugly as a cow's hoof, Sylvia"

She threw an apple at him.

The evening was fast becoming chilled, and no one was dressed for the cool weather. Tomorrow would be the first of October, marking nearly a month since Louis was initially abducted on his way back from Edinburgh. If one were to have asked him back then that this was where he would be, he would have laughed in their faces; Bristol, of all places, was a town that Louis never thought he would have lived to see. And yet, he was enjoying himself immensely.

Bastien and Jack soon became engrossed in a conversation about agriculture, of all things, which left Louis in the mercy of Madame D'Arc's company.

"You know, you are still not forgiven for what you did," she said with her nose raised high.

“Convincing you that I was not at fault seems to be a fruitless task, so how can I make it up to you, Madame? Shall I throw stones in Sir Grantham’s window? I’m sure we can find his address rather easily.”

“No, I will deal with him. The creditors who dropped him off under my care will be alerted of his location, first and foremost. He still hasn’t paid off his debts he accrued in London.”

“Ah, so it was his gambling that led to his imprisonment?”

“Yes, though I’m sure he deserves to be properly gaoled at this point for it. I’ll advise them to send Sir Grantham to a real debtor’s prison this time.”

“Well, I’ll leave him to you. Back to me—how can I convince you to forgive me?”

“First, you may apologize.”

“Very well,” he said seriously. “I *am* quite sorry for what happened, and for my involvement. I did try to stop Maurice from doing what he did, but clearly not as well as I should have.”

“Second, you must swear never to return to my home.”

That was an easy one; he swore happily.

“And third, you must convince your *cara sposo* that it was not my fault that you ended up in my dungeons with a welt on your head. He is very angry with me for you being harmed in my care.”

“That, I can do, for truly it was not your fault.”

“Thank you. That is what I have been trying to convince him for the past four hours. He’s quite committed to vexing me for your suffering—as if a few bruises could result in any lasting damage.”

They sat in an easy silence for a moment.

“I did enjoy our walks together,” Louis said after a time. “I know it was not your intention to educate me of anything, but I

did learn a lot from my time with you. Even Jack has noted the progress that I have made with my manners.”

“Oh? Well, you might soon be worthy of his affection yet.”

“I doubt it. He is far too good for me.”

“In that, we are in agreement. I’m glad you are starting to see things my way.”

“If I may ask,” he said gently. “What will you do now? I realize your business might be halted while your house is being restored to its proper glory.”

She sighed. “I’ve been due for a holiday for some time now. You and that other despicable young man were the only two real charges I had to worry about for the time. There was only one other while you were my guest, but her parents paid off her debts within a couple days.”

“You must make a decent living for doing something so bold.”

“It provides me with an independence without having to marry, and yes, I realize the irony of earning my own living through the imprisonment of others. Despite it all, I think I am getting too old for this.”

“What? Kidnapping young men and women and holding them hostage until their families pay off their ransom?”

“I’ve told you before: I am not the one doing the kidnapping. Think of my estate as...a hotel for those traveling against their will.”

“Yes, for that is very reassuring.”

Jack and Bastien had risen to stand right up against the edge of the short cliff, looking off into the sunset. It was a charming sight, the two of their silhouettes lit up from the setting sun—the crashing waves of the ocean just beneath them. Louis felt a remarkable sense of peace for the first in a long while. It felt, in a bizarre way, as if this were family he were with.

“Mr. Sterling is going to need some proper sympathy over the next few days,” she said.

“And why is that? Did something happen?”

“Yes, and it was rather shocking. I’m not sure if you recall that some of his men were present in my home the night of the fire?”

Louis felt a chill run down his spine. He sat up on his elbows, looking at her closely. “There were?”

“Yes, just a handful. I suppose just to check in with me since Mr. Sterling was on his way to London by that point. Well, anyway, they ran into a bit of trouble that night. One of them got a nasty blow to the head, and he was left to perish in the smoke! I couldn’t believe it myself. That was the first time someone ever died in that house while I’ve owned it, and it is not a habit I would like to form.”

Louis felt his chest constrict in anxiety. He wondered if this was the cause of Jack’s sullen mood when they first returned home. “He...he died?”

“Yes, it was rather tragic. I didn’t want to sully the mood by speaking of it too soon, and Mr. de Eliza hates to hear me talk of death. I figured you ought to know as well.”

“Well...who did it?”

“Sir Grantham, of course. I’m sure in his bloody tirade, he thought Jack’s man was one of my guards and bashed his head in. His body was found underneath the sitting-room curtains, so I dare say he was moved while unconscious to suffocate in the smoke. Horrid way to go.”

“He died?” Louis said again, now fully incredulous and feeling overwhelming remorse for what he did. The moment flashed before his eyes, again and again, where he swung the candelabra and hit the man in the head. However, who could have moved him deeper into the smoke? Louis knocked him out right by the front entrance, not inside the sitting-room. Would Maurice have really dragged him in just to ensure the man would die?

“Oughtn’t we charge Sir Grantham for murder, then? How could he—how could we let this happen? What do we do?”

“Oh, little bird,” she said with a chuckle. “I forget how green you are. The poor man was likely running from the law for one

reason or another, or else he wouldn't have joined Mr. Sterling. Nevermind the fact that he was helping keep both you and Sir Grantham imprisoned. I'd never allow the law to perform an inquest in my home. You must be joking!"

That's right. At certain times, even like now, it was easy to forget that Madame D'Arc and Jack were actual criminals. He wondered if Bastien had any role to play in their schemes as well. Justice, through the law, was therefore out of the question. Internal justice would also best be avoided, lest it be revealed that Louis, not Maurice, was the one who hit the man over the head to begin with.

But that man dying in vain, especially since he was somewhat kind to Louis when Randall was trying to abduct him, was enough to fill his heart with dread.

"So what happened to his body?"

"The same for all those killed in the line of duty, as it were. An unmarked grave just off in the distance. There is a reason my house is so far away from town." Despite her flippant words, her tone and face were solemn; she took no joy in having to have buried the man.

Louis tried to calm down, reminding himself that he was only acting in self-defense, and even in Jack's best interests. The two men were disobeying Jack's orders. Had Louis done nothing, he would likely be in a ditch somewhere, without a few of his fingers at the very least, rather than sitting comfortably at the seaside under Jack's protection. He would have to tell Jack—tell him that he lied about who was trying to kill him back in Cheshire. He would have to admit that his actions led to the deaths of one of his men, mutinous or not, and he would have to bear the consequences, whatever they were.

"Pardon my curiosity, but I have one more question for you. The two footmen, Lindsey and Algie, what became of them?"

"Lindsey and Algie? Ah, Algernon, of course. I'm surprised you remembered their names."

“Well, the former betrayed me, and the latter helped me escape.”

“Indeed. They both still work for me, and neither were harmed in the fire.” She shrugged. “It doesn’t do to let servants go, even if they get a little antsy and act out—not in my profession anyway. One must simply provide them a little bonus for their hard work, and suddenly everyone’s happy once more. You’d be surprised what people do for money.”

That, at least, was relieving. Louis had been worried on and off about what happened to Algie, the kind young footman who helped him get out right until the very end of his stay in Madame’s house.

Jack and Bastien came back, and the former saw the hollowed look on Louis’s face.

“Are you alright?” he said teasingly. His mood seemed improved, which Louis could only imagine was Bastien’s influence. It was hard not to smile near that ridiculous man.

Louis nodded. Now was not a good time, especially not with Madame D’Arc right next to them, to mention what was now plaguing *his* mind. He had a quick horrible thought, a flash of imagination, where Jack raged at him and the three of them threw him off the cliff’s edge after admitting to his secrecy.

Best to wait until he was alone with Jack. And preferably, away from the edge of a cliff.

“I think I’ve just had too much to drink,” he said calmly.

“Again, eh? I’ll have to start cutting you off. You’ll need a clear head for later tonight.”

“Is that so? What are you planning?”

Jack grinned wickedly at him. The subsequent blush was enough to make him temporarily forget his worries and lean into the pleasures of the moment once again. Jack wouldn’t hurt him, right? After what they’ve been through so far? He knew how much Jack cared for his men, how much he would be willing to give up to keep them safe. But would Louis be one of those things?

And if so, what would that mean for him?

Chapter 29

It was an early night for the house. They returned after it grew dark, and after the chill was too severe to bear any longer, and they all went their separate ways. Madame D'Arc was exhausted from her journey that morning; Bastien fretted over losing beauty sleep two nights in a row; Jack disappeared from view; and Louis found his way towards the little alcove, the small outdoor patio he ran off to during the ball after he danced.

It was a peaceful night. He was now dressed in his ready-made clothing that arrived at the house in their absence, and therefore felt much more confident and complete without being drowned in fabric. The cut of his waistcoat was quite elegant and was colored dark blue—this, plus his outer layers, provided enough warmth to tolerate the coolness of the early autumn breeze.

The door creaked open behind him. He didn't need to turn around to know who it was; instead, if he adjusted slightly, leaning forward so that his backside arched *just* a bit more, then none would be the wiser.

Jack came to stand by his side, as he did the night before. They stood in silence, with the edges of their pinky fingers touching on the cool metal.

“William died in the fire,” he said after a while. “He was one of the men who came with me when we got you. I don't recall if you would have met him or not.”

Louis's hands tightened on the bannister.

“Sylvia, or the Madame I should say, told me before you and Bas came back. I wanted to apologize for my somewhat reticent behavior earlier. I wasn't expecting it.”

“No need to apologize. I'm sorry for your loss.”

“He was a young man. A prostitute died during a night with him a few years ago, probably from some illness or intoxication. He was blamed for it, nevertheless, and was

branded a murderer. I found him after he'd been living in the streets for some time."

Louis felt a slight sting in his eyes. *This is the man whom he all but outright killed?*

"Not everyone's tale is so sentimental," Jack continued, "but he deserved better. I'm ashamed I wasn't there to help him get out alive."

"I'm sorry, Jack," Louis said again. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry, lad. It happens. He knew the risks involved with sticking around me."

Louis shut his eyes. Jack was blaming himself, while it was Louis's fault. And possibly Maurice's, of course. But Louis had the candelabra. He had knocked him unconscious to begin with.

"Though I can't help but think of twisting his spine around, D'Arc seems keen on sending that other gentleman to a debtor's gaol. I think that fate is more deserved for him. I couldn't really kill a man, though I'm sure you might think otherwise."

"Is that so?"

"It's true. I dislike killing, especially after my time in Crimea."

"She once told me a story of a time where you smashed someone's head in under your boot."

Jack huffed out a laugh. "Yes, she's fond of that tale, and she's a mean gossip too. Don't believe a word she says."

Louis was overcome with grief and anger. He had to tell Jack—had to say something. He was so sorry that the man died. He was so sorry for the part he had played in his untimely end.

"Jack, I—" he began weakly, his voice trailing off.

"Shh now, no worries, little lord. It's alright." He closed his hand over Louis's.

"I want to get back at my father for all this. I want him to know what he's done to you—to me—to others. I just don't really know how."

Jack hummed. "I thought it would be easier, hoped for it, perhaps. But this has not gone according to my plan. I didn't think it out as much as I thought."

"No," Louis smiled weakly, "perhaps not."

"It was more for Eric's sake than mine. He was so furious with the marquees, so convinced that we would have lived better lives had he not forced us from England. Sometimes I wonder how true that is. But now? It's not like I can stop, or he and William will have died in vain."

"Why was William even at the house? Where are all your men now?"

"The men go where they please; I can hardly control them. We update each other when needed, and they might call me the General, but I'm no real authority of them, not that I would want to be either. Capturing you was one of the few times I rounded them all up. Though, I can't really figure out why William was at Madame's that night."

"She suggested it was just to check up on me, since you left that morning," Louis said hesitantly.

Jack shrugged. "Possibly. Doesn't matter now, of course."

"Right."

They sat in silence for some time. Jack rubbed his thumb over Louis's finger. It was a small comfort, and it helped ease his fast-beating heart. He wanted to say more to Jack, but the words kept dying on his lips. Maybe now, in Jack's mourning, it wouldn't be a good time. But then when would it?

"It seems my father doesn't care about my absence," Louis said, "or at least doesn't believe that I've really been captured. My use to you has run its course. I'm sorry for that too."

Jack smiled and shifted closer. "Yeah, you've been nothing but a pain this entire time. What was I thinking, taking you with me?"

"Indeed."

"I would say you are free to leave whenever, but I'm afraid I can think of a few other uses of you while you're still under

my control. First of all, I find myself in need of a distraction.”

“I’m being serious,” he said, though the waiver in his voice proved otherwise. “What do we do now?”

Jack slid behind him, pressing close against his back. He lay both his hands over Louis’s against the railing. “Nevermind that. We’ll figure it out later. Now, where was I? That’s right—uses I can find for you. Yes. In fact, I could think of more than a few.”

“Shouldn’t we be, I don’t know, in mourning?”

“Please? Distract me?” Jack whispered in his ear.

Louis shuddered, feeling his hot breath tickle his neck. It was intense for all the right reasons, yet he still felt a weight in his stomach about what he needed to tell Jack.

“I…” he said softly. “This is wrong of us.”

“You can’t seriously be facing a moral dilemma now. After what I’ve done to you already?”

“Jack…” he moaned.

“I’m afraid you’re already debauched. Hellbound. Damned fully.” Jack continued, pressing his hips against his backside with every word.

“Have you no shame?”

“None whatsoever. It’s my wish to rid you of any lingering doubts as well. You’re mine now, Louis. Just enjoy it.”

He continued to push against Louis’s arse, the hardness in his trousers feeling like a hot iron branding him. Louis’s response was immediate—his body arching backwards, his cock filling at an alarming rate. He wanted Jack so desperately, wanted his touch and his kisses and his body all over him.

“*I’m* so ashamed,” he choked out, feeling overwhelmed with how idiotic he must have sounded. His face lit up in embarrassment, feeling the prickle in his eyes as tears formed. He was so ashamed for lying to Jack, for being a terrible snob and a deceitful lover. He wanted Jack to rip it all out of him, as if to punish him for what he did to William.

“Don’t be,” Jack breathed in his ear. “Don’t hide from what you find pleasure in. I take much pleasure in you. Can’t you see?” He pushed his erection firmly against Louis’s arse, who moaned in response.

Louis was beginning to understand; Jack thought he was ashamed of being an invert—of his sexuality. But by now, that was very far from the truth. Loving Jack was all that brought him comfort, all that made him feel like he could be a good person. He deserved better than Louis. He breathed in deeply again, his breath hitching in a new sob.

“What’s with these tears?” Jack said softly, brushing his fingers over Louis’s burning cheeks. “No one so beautiful as you should ever cry.”

The silly poetry of his words, which always seemed to come out during lovemaking, made Louis smile. “I feel as though I ought to,” he said. “I am ashamed because I am a bad person. I don’t deserve to be touched like this.”

“Nonsense. Allow me to prove otherwise to you.”

Jack’s gentle kisses, all across the back of his head and neck, made Louis sigh in response. He couldn’t help it—couldn’t not respond eagerly to the pleasure. Jack could bring it out of him so easily.

“Jack...oh please, Jack...”

“How could I possibly deny you anything? What can I give you? It’s yours.”

“Please,” Louis swallowed deeply. “I want it...rough, like the first time. I don’t want you to be gentle with me.”

“Oh?”

Louis nodded. He felt like he needed it—needed the pain, the catharsis. He wanted Jack to punish him, so that he could forgive Louis. He was too ashamed to admit to Jack what he did, but he could make up for it by offering his body. Right?

“So honorable, so bashful,” Jack said, reaching down to undo the buttons of Louis’s waistcoat. “I should show the world that

you have nothing to be ashamed of. What if I took you right here, in plain sight, where anyone could see?”

“Oh God.”

“I think I might. The door is open behind us. A servant could walk by anytime, not that they’d need to. They will be able to hear you from downstairs. They will hear you all the way into the city.”

“Jack...”

“I will fuck the shame out of you. I will replace it all with pleasure. I can’t have you regretting this for a moment.”

Louis whined, feeling the shock of the cold as Jack stripped away outer layers. Soon, he was down to just his shirt, the thin linen doing nothing to stop the cold wind from penetrating deep into his skin. His nipples grew hard, and he shivered back against Jack’s warm body.

“Such a slip of a thing. I shall warm you up. And please, be as loud as you like.”

Jack pulled down his trousers and Louis’s as well, grunting softly against the shell of his ear as skin touched skin. The head of Jack’s cock, turgid and throbbing, lay against the curve of Louis’s ass. As if against his will, Louis pushed back against it, his own cock leaking at the thought of what was to come.

But Jack wasn’t done yet. He pulled Louis’s trousers all the way down to his ankles, stepping in on either side of him. Then, in a swift motion, he lifted Louis’s shirt up from his chest and over his head. He was left entirely bare, exposed to the elements of the autumn night.

“Jack!” he cried out, shivering, though his cock throbbing hard in its full display.

“Perfect,” Jack purred. “Beautiful. See? What have you to be ashamed of? If only you could see yourself now.”

Just as the first time, Louis heard him spit into his own hand, and then felt the unusual pressure of his fingers pressing

against his entrance. There would be no proper lubrication this time.

Jack opened him up slowly, biting down on his shoulder while his long fingers worked against Louis's tight muscles. It left him panting in pain and panic, but pleasure was just in sight. It was like clockwork now—the gentle ministrations, followed by the eventual ecstasy. He held out, feeling release at surrendering himself so fully to Jack's whims.

“Rough, you say?” Jack said darkly.

“Yes,” Louis panted out.

“Are you sure? I don't wish to—”

“Jack, please. I deserve it.”

He pressed in. Unrelenting, hot, fierce. The sudden pain made Louis gasp, unable to breathe in. He gripped the banister until his knuckles turned white.

“Fuck,” Jack moaned out, moving out and then in again. Just as Louis asked, he gave it to him roughly. The motions were quicker than ever before, less tender, though still brimming with care and passion. He threaded a hand through Louis's hair, kissed his neck, moaned his name, gripped his arse furiously, and fucked him hard.

When Louis was able to fill his lungs again, he let it back out quickly in a low moan. Then a higher one, and again and again until he was crying out Jack's name with every thrust. He held back the self-pity and shame, focusing on the pleasure in his own cock, as Jack had his way with him. He deserved this—less than this actually. He shouldn't have felt such pleasure. Jack would probably never do it again if he knew what troubled his heart. But he said nothing except for a wish that this would never stop.

Jack's finish was quiet, restrained, likely to make Louis's voice sound all the louder. He pressed in hard, biting down on his neck again, and grunted with each pulse. Louis thought him a wild animal once more, possessed with the unrelenting urge to dominate and conquer. He gave himself willingly. His

own cock throbbed hard, untouched, but he kept his hands on the railing still.

It was amazing how quickly Jack could transform in the given moment. He was multifaceted—dimensional in a way that Louis could hardly comprehend. He was both the beast that claimed him and the man who kissed him tenderly. Likewise, he was the marauder hellbent on vengeance and the pirate dressing up for his friend's crossdressing ball. Regardless, Louis loved each part of him. He loved him whole and separately. Really, he just loved Jack so very much.

“How beautiful you are,” Jack hummed raggedly. “Meant to be fucked like this.”

He kissed Louis softly after, rubbing his whiskers against his neck, and then reached down to touch his cock.

Louis finished quickly. He didn't mean to, and wanted to tell Jack not to let him finish, that he was in no position to receive such pleasure, but he couldn't help it. Jack stroked him gently, cooing in his ear, until he was bucking in his fist and climaxing against the metal railing.

They breathed together, in sync, as Jack huddled him close to his own body. With the throes of lovemaking now over, the cold was seeping painfully into Louis's flesh. The warmth and comfort of the bed was all he could think of.

“I'd have you again and again, if I could,” Jack said with a kiss to his neck, “but you will freeze to death out here.”

“Yes, I want to go to our bed now.”

“I fear I ought to be ashamed, as you might catch cold regardless, but I can't say I regret it at all.”

Jack helped him back into his clothes, wiping away the remains of their seed that he could, before bundling him back indoors. They made their way to their room, and Louis felt like a schoolboy found out of his dormitory after hours. He giggled as Jack held his waist as they snuck through the halls, and again as he pushed him against their bed.

“Now,” he said, looking down at Louis with a devilish grin, “allow me the honor of warming you back up properly.”

“You will split me in two if you act as you just did. You’re a horrid beast.”

“There are many other ways to wring pleasure from you. Aww, my little lord—so virginal—there is much I have to teach you. I’m having too much fun leading you astray.”

Louis blushed. He couldn’t help it. Jack, who had once been so cold and domineering, was now nearly foolishly displaying his affection for him. It was painfully endearing.

That night, Louis learned the pleasures one’s mouth might bring to a cock, and just how warm one could get in the arms of another. Sweating and naked in Jack’s arms, he nearly forgot entirely about what was distressing him so acutely just hours before. Things could work out, somehow, and Jack’s affection ran deep enough. Maybe he had fucked the shame out of Louis afterall.

Regardless, now was not the time to sully such joys. He would tell Jack one day soon, but not tonight. Not for as long as Jack kept doing that to him with his tongue, simply because words and coherent thoughts of any kind were entirely impossible.

Chapter 30

Louis woke late the next morning, and his body ached miserably.

Lovemaking was a difficult task, and Jack was not one to let him rest easily. He should have expected as much, considering he asked for it, but he regretted the pain all the same.

He also regretted waking in an empty bed once again.

With a roll of his eyes, Louis stood to get dressed. Jack was due for a proper chastisement at this point, having left the bedroom two days in a row before Louis woke. He dressed as quickly as he could, admiring the bruises on his pale flesh that were left as imprints from the night before. It was absurd the amount of joy it brought him.

As he made his way down the hall, he heard the sounds of whispered voices. The quiet was confusing, for none of the others in the house were particularly keen on keeping their voice down. But, when he rounded the last corner into the breakfast room, he was met with an unexpected visitor.

Randall was there, standing and staring at him, and the heads of Jack, Madame D'Arc, and Bastien all whipped towards Louis upon his entrance.

His face immediately flooded with shame and fear. Randall looked at him eagerly, with bloodthirsty eyes, as he smiled his toothless grin.

After the initial explosion of voices, as Randall and Louis shouted at each other and the others tried to interfere, they all moved towards the sofa in a different, more comfortable room. Servants lingered awkwardly, unsure what to do, and Louis was the only one who sat down.

"I told you all what the boy did," Randall said fiercely. "I don't know why we suffer him to live another day. He killed one of our men!"

"I did not!" Louis breathed out.

“I was there!” Randall hissed, jumping towards him, only being held back by Jack. “I saw you! You will not deny what you did? You bludgeoned William to death.”

“It’s not true,” Louis could hardly speak, his voice shaking as hard as it was. “I didn’t kill him—I didn’t move him back into the house. I don’t know how he died.”

“But he *was* at my house? You saw him and this gentleman here?” Madame D’Arc said.

Louis’s silence rang in the air for a few moments.

“The boy’s got no defense. He knows what he did. I’ll be damned if I let him kill you too, General. Don’t get near him again.”

Jack looked helpless, his face stony and gray, as he looked between Randall and Louis.

“I’m afraid I will need *someone* to take it from the top,” Bastien drawled out. “I can’t recall—who exactly are you again?”

“He’s one of mine,” Jack said quietly.

“And he was at your house, Sylvia?”

“Yes,” Randall answered for her. “I came back with William. The two of us wanted to make sure all was well with the Madame while the General was away. Thank God we did! The house might have burned down if we didn’t stop this bastard.”

“You helped stop him?” Madame D’Arc said.

“Oh, you didn’t know? He and his little friend were igniting the place together. It was the two of them; I saw the boy carry the lamps with my own eyes!”

“He’s lying,” Louis breathed out again. “It’s not true—I didn’t start any of the fires.”

“Well, my duckie, then what is true?” Bastien said, sitting down on the couch beside him.

“Maurice started the fires. Randall and...and William...well, they chased me through the house. They wanted to kill me.”

“We wanted to stop you!” Randall shouted.

“Enough,” Jack barked out, the entire room going still and silent. He looked down at Louis, his fist curling and uncurling by his side. “What happened?”

Louis looked up at him and only him. He kept his eyes focused on Jack’s, the cold blue and the black leather patch. He felt tears well up in his own. “Randall and William were there. It wasn’t Madame’s guards who were chasing me—they were. They shot at me and wanted to take me for themselves. I...I *had* to stop them somehow. He would have seen me had I not —”

“Not what?”

“—Hit him. Yes, I did hit William. I was hiding, and he looked my way, and I acted without thinking. I ran out afterwards, but I didn’t move his body into the drawing-room. We were right by the entrance.”

“General,” Randall said. “I saw it with my own eyes. Your... *boy*, or whatever this cretin is to you—I saw him drag William into that room right as the blaze was headed our way. I went to chase him after him, but he was too quick for me, and by then, I had to retreat as well. William was lost after a few moments.”

“You’re lying!” Louis cried out.

“Now, now,” Bastien hushed, patting his back lightly. “Now is no time for tears—not after so melodramatically betraying us all.”

“Oh God! I didn’t!”

“I’m just joking. Goodness me, bad timing?”

Jack was still staring at him in wide-eye confusion. His teeth were set, making his jaw muscles bulge out painfully. Louis risked getting nearer.

“Please, Jack,” he said softly. “Please believe me. I—I didn’t know when to tell you. I’m sorry I lied, but I didn’t move William’s body. I didn’t want him to die. I just had to escape.”

“Why would they be trying to kill you?” he said slowly.

Louis blinked in frustration. “Because—because they were going to take me for themselves. They said they were going to betray you and turn me in to my father themselves.”

“Bold face lies,” Randall hissed. “Why would I go against the General? After all he’s done for us? For me?”

“Why don’t you tell him? You said it right in front of me! You and William talked of your betrayal while dragging me through the halls!”

“But why would they say that to you, my dear?” Madame D’Arc said. Her face was stony as well, the same look of authoritative disdain she had when she first had Louis bagged and thrown into the pink room.

“Don’t ask me why he’s a bloody moron!” Louis said passionately. He couldn’t help himself; his voice was rising dangerously high. The others all looked at each other in disbelief at his excuse.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Jack said.

“I wasn’t sure how...I wasn’t sure when. Please, Jack, please believe me. Last night—”

“Don’t mention last night,” Jack’s voice boomed. His face went from confusion to snarling anger in a flash. “How could you lay with me—all night—and not once bring this up? How could you lie to me for so long?”

“Jack, I—”

“After what I’ve done for you? How could you?”

In bitterness, irritation, and abject misery, Louis spoke without thinking. His knee-jerk reaction to such injustice, even if he did deserve some kind of punishment, came before reason.

“And what have you done for me?” he spat. “Kidnapped me? Locked me away? Have you forgotten what you’ve done to *me* all this time?”

The words struck Jack hard. Louis watched him flinch, and he immediately regretted what he said. The others, however, pounced on it.

“Little brat,” Randall said. “Let’s kill him. Let’s send his father his fingers—see how the lord believes us now. It’s the least he deserves for murdering our own!”

“I knew something was wrong here,” Madame D’Arc said, walking in circles and pointing her finger. “I knew it!”

Bastien was silent.

Louis held his hands to his face, wiping the tears that suddenly began to flow out. “It’s just not true! I didn’t do it. I didn’t kill him.”

“How can I possibly believe you now?”

He stared at Jack, stunned by his words. The tone of his voice, the look in his eye—it was all too familiar. It was the same way Jack looked at him all those weeks ago, when they first met. It was the way Jack looked at him when he only saw him as Lord Earlshope. Not as Louis.

“Jack,” he said, almost in disbelief.

“I need time to think,” Jack declared, his voice tight and despondent. “And Randall, we need to talk more. I want him out of my sight.”

Louis realized Jack had gestured towards him. Everyone stood stunned, unmoving, before Jack barked his orders once more.

“Get him out of my sight!”

The room went into a frenzy. Randall grabbed him by his wrists and pushed him towards the door; Madame D’Arc rang the bell for the servants, summoning two very confused footmen, at whom she barked orders to place Louis somewhere far away. Bastien disappeared from view, as did Jack.

Louis went willingly. How could he not? The entire house now was working against him, and he probably deserved it. And worse. He lied to Jack, but he didn’t kill William. Someone else moved his body.

His face was numb, and he hardly registered where he was pushed until a door opened and he was thrown in. It was a small room, not unlike the pink room at Madame’s. This time,

however, Randall produced a short rope, likely hidden in hopes of this very purpose, and tied Louis's hands together behind his back. He was left there, pushed onto the bed, as the others all filed out. The door clicked behind them, and solitude was upon him once more.

He sat on the bed, looking at his feet, his mind racing in every direction. It was the proper response, he told himself. Jack was a criminal. As was Randall, and Madame D'Arc, and very likely Bastien too. They all were, and Louis was just the son of a marquee who ruined their friend's life. Why would he think Jack would have reacted otherwise? Why would Jack believe him?

Because I'm telling the truth. Because I love him, and I hoped he loved me.

The idea now was nearly foolish. Loving Jack was about as possible as mixing oil with vinegar. They came from different worlds, different classes, with different people and different rules. How could he love him?

The answer was simple: because he did.

And now, he was locked away again, against his will, by the man he loved. There wouldn't be a savior this time.

And perhaps, Louis didn't deserve one.

Chapter 31

The hours passed by listlessly. Louis watched the sun rise higher in the sky, peaking at noon, and then make its way down as the afternoon progressed. No one came in to check on him. It felt as though he had been forgotten about entirely.

Of course, this was impossible. Louis could hear the voices argue, despite his far distance from the common areas. There was much shouting, questioning, orders barked by Bastien and Jack alike. It seemed like no one knew what to do with him now—or if they could believe anything he was claiming.

The solitude was wearing his spirits down. His patience grew thin, and he became angry with Jack. Very angry. How could he believe Randall over him? How could he treat him so? Yes, Louis should have told him sooner. But did that mean he deserved to be locked away again? Even if he were Jack's lover?

The familiar, sickening sense of *deja vu* overcame him. He stared at a wall, wondering if or when anyone would come by to give him food, for he was wretchedly hungry. His arms ached from being tied behind his back in such a painful manner. The taste in his mouth was cloying and dry, signifying his dehydration, and the pain of his empty stomach was memorable. It only served to fuel his anger.

Eventually, as the sun's ray showed pink and gold against the horizon as it set, the door opened. Jack came into the room, but Louis didn't even bother to raise an eye to look at him.

He came to sit down by him, pulling up a chair towards the bed where Louis lay. He stared at him for a long time.

"You aren't lying, are you?" he said quietly.

Louis didn't dignify him with a response. He kept his eyes down, looking at his own legs.

"Louis," Jack tried again gently, "answer me please. Are you telling the truth?"

He still said nothing. There was a sharp sting in his eyes, and his cheeks grew red as the silence stretched on.

“Answer me this instant.”

The rage within broiled over. Louis turned his head towards Jack and spat towards him. It was more of an empty gesture, if anything, but it incensed Jack all the same. Good.

“For God’s sake,” he grunted angrily. “Fucking talk to me!”

“Yes, for we have seen what good that has done me already.”

“What choice did I have?”

“Anything but this. I should have known better—I don’t know what possessed me to assume a lowlife criminal thug like you could even be capable of higher feelings.”

Jack’s face twisted, briefly, in pain. But he controlled it, and in a flash, it was gone.

“Louis, you killed one of my men—”

“I didn’t.”

“You left him to die!”

“That’s not true! Randall was right there with him. If anyone left him to perish in the smoke, it was him—the very man who boasted of going behind your back!”

“You were already deceitful. How could I believe you in this?”

“Because it’s true! Because I am telling you now that it is true.”

They stared at each other, neither backing down. Louis set his jaw firmly, despising himself for feeling it quiver as he spoke.

Jack ran his fingers through his hair, looking exhausted. His face had aged years in just the span of the day, but even then, it was becoming of him.

“If you are here to kill me, or take one of my fingers,” Louis said bitterly, “then I would appreciate it if you would hurry up on the matter.”

“I’m not going to kill you. Don’t be stupid.” He paused. “Or take your finger, for that matter. Dammit Louis! I wouldn’t do that to you!”

“And yet, you’d do this? Leave me locked in this room, alone, with my hands bound and without food or water! Yes, this is luxury itself! How lucky am I to have such a thoughtful lover.”

“No one’s come by to feed you?”

“Don’t play dumb with me now. I have hardly moved from this spot since being so unceremoniously dumped here.”

Jack frowned deeply. “I’m sorry. I thought—”

“I don’t care for excuses right now. I’m beyond them.”

He left the room without another word, shutting the door (but not locking it) behind him. Louis heard a few more shouts, all in Jack’s voice, before loud stomping back down the hall. He reentered the room with a tray.

He resumed his seat in front of Louis and set it down. There was a glass of water, a glass of wine, and the remains of a tea sandwich.

Jack held the glass of water up to his lips. Louis wished he could have rejected it, but pride caved to necessity. He craned his neck forward and drank deeply.

They sat in silence while Jack fed him. It didn’t move past Louis that his hands had not been untied. Perhaps Jack thought he would claw his face to shreds had he been released. Upon deeper reflection, it wasn’t a completely absurd possibility.

After Louis drank most of his wine, he felt rejuvenated enough to speak. His anger began afresh, now that nature’s demands had been met.

“If you aren’t going to kill me, then I want to go home. I’m done with this.”

“Louis—”

“I mean it,” he said firmly. “I’ll write to my father again if I must. I don’t care. I’ll do anything you say. As long as I get to go home.”

Jack looked miserable, but said nothing.

“Better yet, I’ll go get my own checkbook and you can simply extort it all from me. Put it in my father’s name—take my inheritance—whatever. Just be done with it so I can move on.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“Then what *do* you want, Jack? Because I have been asking and guessing for a month now, and you have never once told me.”

“My conditions for your father,” Jack said slowly, “were to retract his statement about my unit. That’s all. He would simply have to make a public statement, and allow anyone who worked for me, if any are even still alive, to return to England if they wished without retaliation.”

Louis looked at him. “I thought you’d say that, and I hoped you wouldn’t. My father would never agree to it.”

“I figured, but it’s what’s right. I had to try.”

“You don’t understand. You are asking him something he couldn’t do. It’s one thing to take a man’s money, but this is—his very *word*. As a gentleman, that is all that matters to him. My father’s reputation would be ruined if he were branded a liar. *My* reputation would be ruined.”

“Perhaps it’s for the best.”

“For who? You, or Eric?”

Jack curled his lip. “Don’t start with that.”

“You are asking my father to sully the Earlshope name. He’s close to sixty years old. He’ll be dead before either of us, unless we manage to kill one another. The only person this would affect in any meaningful way would be me. My family name would bear these consequences.”

“But it’s what’s true,” Jack said. “Your father lied. These are the conditions that he must pay.”

“He didn’t lie. You disobeyed his commands. Even if I agree with what you did, it does not mean my father lied.”

Jack just shook his head in disbelief.

“Should the sins of the father ruin the life of the son? Because that’s what your conditions would result in.”

Jack huffed. “I think you are overreacting to this. I thought you would be surprised how lenient these conditions were. I assumed you would want your father to pay more for what he did.”

“Certainly. I want *him* to suffer, not *me*. Not any future children I might have. Jack, if my father had to retract his statement in court, even if it were—what? Fifteen years ago?—he and I would be ruined. You don’t know how a scandal like that would affect us. No one in London, in all of England, would want to associate with us anymore if we were publicly branded as liars.”

“I can’t believe you still care about such things,” Jack said bitterly, looking down at the floor. “I thought—I thought you would want to be done with it all. I thought maybe—”

“What? That I’d go live with *you*? That I’d stay here, in a house filled with people who despise me? Who would throw me in a dungeon at the first opportunity? You’re out of your mind. You’re a bigger fool than I thought you were.”

“You’re angry,” Jack said slowly. “I understand why. But mind your words—”

“I’ve minded my words with you from the very start. I’ve concealed much from you, though you’d never think to ask. There is much about *me* that you do not know. You think you are the one with all the secrets, but you are wrong.”

“Yes, like the fact that you left William to die.”

“Randall did. Randall left him to die. If you cannot even fucking believe that!” Louis stopped, pausing to take a

breath. “Then why should I tell you anything else? Why bother telling you how I really feel about you?”

“Oh? And what’s that?” Jack’s voice was rising as well. “Tell me how you really feel. Go on now—don’t hold back.”

“I...” Louis said, feeling his lip quiver again. Blast it all. It wasn’t possible to stop it this time. Not with Jack looking at him like that. “I love you. I thought—I thought maybe you could have loved me too. I loved you, but you didn’t believe me. You left me here to rot. Threw me away as if I were nothing!”

He kept his mouth set firmly, though he felt a single tear roll down his cheek. He would have wiped it away, not wanting Jack to see him cry over something so stupid, but he couldn’t.

Jack stared at him back. His anger, rising rapidly as Louis spoke, died down just as suddenly. He now stared back, coldly, without feeling, and perhaps without thought. He looked empty. Drained. Like he had no idea what to see when he looked Louis in the face.

“Yes,” Louis continued on, “I love you. I began to love you in earnest, and now you think I am a liar and a murderer, and on top of this, you wish to destroy my family’s reputation, my own included, because my father destroyed yours two decades ago. Well guess what, Jack, destroying my life isn’t going to fix anything. It isn’t going to get you your life back, and it won’t bring Eric or any of your other men back to you!”

By this point, Jack looked as though *he* might start crying. His face deflated more, all residual anger and vitriol leaving, with just an empty expression in its place.

“Louis...” he said softly.

“Stop talking. Better yet, why not do what you do best? Leave me here alone and tied up. I’m still your prisoner, Jack. Come back tomorrow—I’ll still be here. Goodnight.”

He did. Jack stood and walked out the door, leaving the tray on Louis’s bed. He walked out and locked Louis back into

his solitude.

Alone once more, his own feelings ebbed from him slowly. He had nothing left to cry over, nothing left to rage out. He resumed staring at the wall, waiting for nothing.

Chapter 32

Another visitor came by not long after. The sun, by then, had mostly gone down, and the darkness of the twilight cast its lonely shadows all throughout the room where Louis sat.

He looked up at hearing the door creak open, watching as Bastien slipped inside.

“Hello, duckie.”

He, too, was undeserving of a response. Louis dropped his gaze again.

“Come now, don’t be rude. I shall never forgive such a slight to my character.”

“Bastien, please. It’s been a long day. Leave me be.”

“Afraid I can’t stand Sylvia’s wild accusations any longer. I’m taking respite here with you—this is for my sake, my dear, not yours.”

He walked over to Louis’s bed and sat beside him right on the mattress. They shared the singular pillow.

“I assume you’ve been holding up poorly?”

“I’m used to this by now,” Louis said, laughing without mirth.

“Indeed. One must when dealing with these kinds of people. Your general has always been a bit melodramatic.”

“He’s not *my* general. Don’t call him that.”

“Oh, but of course he is, duckie. I’m sure you’re very unhappy with him now, but what household is without its pins and needles? You’ll be in his arms again soon.”

“You don’t understand. We’re not like that.”

“But you are. Jack’s anger will subside shortly, and that rancid mutt of his will pay dearly for setting you up like this.”

Louis looked up at him. “You believe me, then?”

“Indeed.”

“So why am I still here?”

“I’d be happy to cut you free this instant. See look—scissors. What a darling invention!” He unearthed a pair of golden scissors bejeweled in sapphire-toned gems from a pocket inside his coat. Louis couldn’t help but smile at them.

Bastien made quick work, cutting away the bindings and freeing Louis’s hands. He rubbed them together, hearing his bones crack as they righted themselves. His wrists were slightly chafed, and the freedom of his hands once more was positively delicious.

“I could kiss you,” he said brokenly.

“Please—don’t suggest such horrid things, lest our dear friend locks *me* up next for daring.”

“What are you saying?” Louis eyed him warily. “Are you freeing me? Can I leave?”

“Absolutely. I hereby pronounce you free to go. Take my carriage even, and don’t look back. My driver is already waiting—I must simply give the word.”

“This isn’t a trick, is it?”

“No. I am not capable of such subtlety. I am painfully honest and always have been.”

Louis, still, did not move. He rubbed his sore hands, looking awkwardly about the shadowed room. He could leave—take the carriage—be on his way back to his father within a few hours. But...

“You hesitate,” Bastien said.

“I do. I’m not sure why.”

“Unfinished business and all that? The heart wants what the heart wants? Revenge must be served cold and immediately? Which epigram works best here...”

“I don’t know—it seems wrong to leave so suddenly, and I know how that sounds, considering my present circumstances. I said some things to Jack—”

“That I am sure he deserved. Trust me, duckie, feel no remorse over treating him poorly. He should be flogged in public for what he did to you, I dare say. I’d grab the whip myself, if I weren’t so keen on seeing you do it first.”

“Why didn’t he believe me?” Louis said wretchedly. He hated how pathetic he sounded.

“My dear, if it makes you feel any better, I think he wanted to. But you must know how this situation all looked at first. Sylvia is still convinced you had a plan to stick a knife through his throat at the first opportunity.”

“She despises me thoroughly.”

“No, she’s simply a tough-love type of woman—well, maybe she dislikes you just a little. But the point is, it was a shock to us all. Our beloved Jack, however, should not have so quickly sided against you. I told him so thoroughly.”

“I agree.”

“And even if you *did* drag that boy’s body back into the inferno, and that horrid man barged in here with photographic evidence of you in the act, then Jack *still* ought to have defended your honor against all odds. It’s only right.”

“Precisely—though I did no such thing.”

Bastien patted his hand gently. “Well, duckie, what will you do? Shall I alert my driver, or shall I go grab our whips?”

Louis thought for a second. “Neither. I want to go to sleep.”

“Yes, I understand. Flogging takes more effort than one wishes. You’ll want to get a full night’s rest. Allow me to leave you to it.”

He stood, collecting the cut rope and the empty tray off the side table.

“Bastien?” Louis called out, just before he left.

“Yes?”

“Thank you. For everything.”

He winked at him, though it was barely perceptible in the low lighting. “Whatever happens, Louis, you’ll have a friend in me. Don’t forget it now.”

Another visitor came some hours later. Louis had fallen asleep before the sound of the door creaking open woke him up.

He didn’t bother opening his eyes, assuming it was either Madame D’Arc coming in to either apologize or berate him, or, more desirably, Jack coming to take another use of his prisoner one more time.

The cold, clammy grip that pulled him from the blankets, however, belonged to neither of them.

“Fuck,” Randall grumbled. “Why aren’t your hands bound? How’d you get out of them?”

Louis was pulled onto his feet, making him stumble slightly against the brutish man. “Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Whatever—doesn’t matter now. You’re coming with me, boy.”

“Oh good heavens. How many times can one be kidnapped in their life?”

Louis didn’t resist. Why should he? For one, he was dreadfully tired, half wondering if this were a dream or not. Secondly, it was almost absurd watching Randall’s admittedly poor techniques at stealing him away from under everyone’s noses.

He brought no additional rope, so Louis’s hands remained unbound; perhaps out of pity, or maybe just sick humor, Louis kept his hands dutifully clasped behind his back. Then, in an attempt to cover Louis’s mouth with a strip of linen cloth. Randall fumbled, repeatedly, and Louis had to lean forward to help him secure the knot. There were many opportunities to scream for help, to run away, or even to fight back, but he just allowed it all to happen to him. Maybe it was for the best that someone else would make a decision for him. Maybe it was just a touch of the fatalism that he was slowly beginning to understand.

Regardless, Louis took pity on his poor kidnapper and was a dutiful prisoner. He walked out of the room with him silently, kept his head down, and gave a look of frightened surprise whenever Randall threw a glance his way. By now, it was all just routine.

When they exited the house, Louis was shocked to see that the greenish hue of dawn was already breaking over the horizon. He was asleep longer than he thought, and the morning was brisk and raw against his face.

He puffed out his cheeks until the poorly tied linen fell down around his neck. “Where are you taking me this time, Randall?”

“Straight to your father.”

That answer was surprising. He waited until they had both climbed up into the shoddy curricule, very possibly the same one that Jack drove him in all those weeks ago. The horse did not take kindly to Randall’s fevered attempts at forcing it to begin its trot, but they were soon on their way.

“And why, pray tell, are you taking me to my father?”

“He’s put a fine bounty out for your safe return, little lord, and I’m going to be the first to claim it.”

“You mean the *only* to claim it, unless my poor luck results in yet another pitiful attempt at abduction.”

“Watch your mouth—hey! Put that gag back over your mouth!”

Louis didn’t, but Randall wasn’t really in a position to force him to. He looked remarkably anxious for a man who was supposed to be a fearsome criminal. Randall glanced over his shoulder every other second, cursed in between each time, and nervously flicked the reins at the aggravated horse. Louis, who was now properly experienced in the art of being an abductee, would rate this attempt poorly. Randall certainly was no Jack.

Still, he didn’t fight back. A safe deliverance back into his father’s house wasn’t the worst thing in the world, all considered, though it did begin to dawn on him that Randall easily could have done far worse to him before he knew where

they were headed. At this point, however, it was fair to assume that Randall wouldn't even know how to competently remove one's finger in the first place. So why bother resisting?

"Randall, since I am making this all quite easy for you, may I ask a few questions?"

He eyed him warily, but said nothing. Louis took this as an acquiescence.

"When did you learn of my father's bounty?"

A brief pause, but in Randall's anxiety, he couldn't help but ramble out an answer. "Before Will and I headed back to that woman's house."

"Ahh, I see—so that is why you returned to whisk me away while Mr. Sterling was away?"

"Mmhm," he grumbled out, as they rode over a particularly large rock and shook the entire carriage. Louis kept his back firmly away from the right edge of the vehicle, avoiding looking out over the sea. He tried to maintain his center of calm, for their precarious elevation was certainly more treacherous than Randall.

"Did Mr. Sterling ever know that there was a bounty for my safe return?"

"How the devil would I know that?"

"Just wondering. A few more questions, good sir, and then I will resume my dutiful silence."

Another rough bump. At this rate, the curricule would likely break apart before they even got near the center of Bristol. Louis assumed that Randall was not so idiotic as to try and take him all the way to London in the contraption.

"You let William die," he said calmly.

"Yes. I bloody did. Stupid boy was of no bloody use to me anyway—shit!" Another bump. If the curricule began to ride somewhat lopsided, Louis did his best not to notice. The angle was beginning to make him feel sick.

“You dragged him into that room. You let him die in the smoke.”

“I had no choice. I knew you were gonna tell the General about everything—ruin everything for me. But I knew he’d take my word over yours, no matter how pretty your arse is.”

“I never told him.”

Randall laughed. “Oh don’t I know! Stupid boy. Made it all the easier for me. And now look at you!”

“You know my father won’t actually pay you, right?”

“Like hell he won’t. I’ll make sure—”

“What? What will you do? No, I shouldn’t expect you to have thought that far in advance. Poor Randall—second fiddle to all and always the last to understand.”

“Shut up, boy, or I’ll carve your—”

“Then you certainly won’t get anything for delivering me home.”

“Be quiet!”

Louis pressed in, feeling the enclosing panic as the light of dawn grew brighter. They were so high up, right against a small cliff, and the curricule’s condition was so poor. His fears, however, were his weapon. They poured out in his words like acid.

“Such scum you are, Randall. Poor, poor man. My father will gaol you as soon as you show your monstrous face in London. You never thought of that, did you? He’ll double-cross you, just like you tried to double-cross Jack. It’s only fitting.”

“I swear upon my life—” Randall hissed.

“Do you think it will be worth it, while you rot in prison? These half-wit attempts at spiriting me away, betraying your ringleader, even killing one of your own...I bet that will haunt you while you rot behind bars.”

“I had to kill the boy! He was as good as dead anyway—after you bludgeoned him—”

“Do you believe in ghosts, Randall? You seem the superstitious type. William will haunt you, I am sure of it. And you will get nothing. My father will throw you in a cell, where you will remain until you die. And you will get nothing!”

Louis’s laugh at the end was hardly intentional, but it came out as more of a hysterical howl than anything. The fear in his gut, mixed with the pain and grief he felt over leaving Jack behind, all came out at once. It was shrill, banshee-like, properly villainous, and, as it turns out, more than what his abductor could handle.

Randall flipped the reins roughly, turning to Louis possibly in an attempt to strike him, but the motion startled the already agitated horse. The beast whinnied, bounding up on its hind legs, and whipped around. The curricle jerked hard, its loosened wheel broke down, and the entire vehicle spun sideways.

The disaster happened quickly. Louis soon found himself rather dizzyingly on a rock with a sharp pain in his back. He heard screaming, unsure from him or Randall or both, and his eyes slowly adjusted to the scene before him.

The curricle had fallen on its side, with its horse braying loudly in an attempt to shake off the reins. Louis had fallen just slightly ahead, thankfully on his rump and without any major damage that he could immediately discern. He was, however, perilously close to the edge of the cliff, and started to crawl inwards towards the road.

On the other side of the mangled vehicle was Randall, who lay flat on his back and moaning pitifully in pain. Louis thanked God, in his usual casual fashion, that he himself had not been injured despite the odds. He pulled himself up to his feet, feeling the soreness in his backside from the fall, and tried to catch his breath.

The sight of Randall was gruesome. He had landed on his wrist, it seemed, and it snapped easily in the speed of their

fall. He clutched the mangled bone to his chest, groaning deeply in pain, as Louis shielded his eyes from the sight.

What to do now? The horse was in no condition to be ridden, but they were not so very far from Bastien's house. It likely would be more than an hour's walk, and Louis wasn't sure if his body would be up for the task. He had no desire to bring his captor, preferring to leave him to fend for himself as would be deserving. But would that be right? Morals were hard, and Louis wasn't quite sure yet where he stood in the matter of saving the life of a treacherous bastard like Randall.

He peeked once more at the mass on the floor. Randall's wrist lay at an unnatural angle, but the bone had not pierced skin. There was no external bleeding, which was probably a good sign, and since it was just an arm that was injured, he could theoretically walk back perfectly on his own as well.

Louis made up his mind. He would go back alone, but alert the others about Randall's condition. The man would undoubtedly live, though experience some rather brutal pain throughout. Oh well.

Plan secured, Louis made his way up to the man. Though squeamish, anger overrode most other emotions. He was angry at Randall for obvious reasons, and angry at himself and Jack for less so. He wanted Jack, but couldn't have him. He wanted friends, but didn't know where to find them. He wanted...he wasn't even sure what.

A thought occurred to him. He wanted to see Randall suffer more.

Therefore, in a moment of pure passion and irrational frustration, Louis ground his teeth down hard and stepped closer to Randall, before kicking him firmly in the ribs.

"Ugh!" the man cried out.

"Bastard! You goddamn bastard!"

He kicked him again, firmly, though not enough to cause lasting damage. Hopefully. Louis wasn't in the habit of

kicking others, so he wasn't really sure what kind of damage he might be causing.

He aimed his foot for one more final blow, but the sound of hoofbeats came from above. Louis looked back up the road, the uphill path where they had just come, and saw two riders making their way towards them. Louis raised his arms high and waved them furiously.

The riders were quick and agile, skilled in their command over their horses. Soon, as they approached, Louis could make out their forms and faces. It was Jack and Bastien.

“Jack!” Louis cried out, and then regretted it right away. The exertion of yelling, on top of kicking Randall a few times, made his body ache out in numbing pain. He clutched his back and gasped inwardly.

Jack and Bastien were upon them both in the next few moments. Once again, as if by divine intervention, Jack somehow was exactly where Louis needed him to be. By his side.

“Oh, look here!” Bastien said curtly. “A couple of rough riders out and about? Good morning to you, gentlemen.”

Randall grumbled incoherently in pain.

“Sad state to be in. Oh my—Jack, my darling—look at his hand. Poor fellow snapped a bone.”

Jack cursed in a lengthy and foul way that best not be repeated. He cursed at Randall so hard that spittle flew from his mouth, and for so long that his face shone bright red. He cursed his being born, his ever having joined Jack's party, and for thinking he had the right to touch Louis. Bastien soon had to make him pause in order to remind him to breathe.

“Now, my dear,” Bastien said, “you may continue.”

And he did. Jack leapt from his horse and bellowed in the injured man's face. Randall's whining ceased, looking instead properly terrified with his back to the floor as Jack pointed at him and cursed. It was a sight to behold, and, to Louis's perverse pleasure, an entirely enjoyable one.

Pausing for breath again, Jack looked up at Louis and crossed his way to him in a few long strides.

“Louis?” he said, cupping his face between his hands. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, Jack. I landed on my rear, which broke my fall.”

“I’m sure it did, my love. It’s quite plump.”

Louis broke out in a wide grin. It was such a silly thing to say, yet somehow very much like Jack. *My love*, the words rang in his ears. *He called me his love*.

“I’m so sorry,” Jack murmured over and over again.

They embraced. They kissed. They pet each other’s hair and whispered softly against each other’s mouths.

Randall continued to pant in pain and mortification. Bastien sat elegantly on top of his horse, waiting patiently.

“Are you two finished yet?” he called out eventually, after the lovers sat in a long embrace. “I do enjoy a beautiful reunion such as this, but I fear there’s still something to be done about this buffoon.”

Right. Louis pulled away first, though hesitantly, and thought of what to do. “He didn’t hurt his leg. He can walk his way back.”

“I don’t desire him in my house any longer,” Bastien said.

“Town’s too far still. I don’t think he can walk all the way down,” Jack said.

“As if *I* care about that? Make him ride that beast, then, since he thinks he is capable of such maverickism.”

The beast in question still trotted back and forth in irritation. Jack walked over to it, gently putting his hand to the horse’s muzzle, and calmed it down rather quickly as he took off the reins tying it to the broken vehicle.

Randall begged gently, claiming his wrist hurt too poorly to walk far or mount a horse.

“Maybe send for the carriage?” Louis suggested, unsure why he would offer something so kind.

Bastien agreed, snarling as he did so. He would ride back to the house and return with the carriage, letting Randall ride down to find a nearby surgeon to set his wrist. Jack tied the driving horse to Bastien’s saddle, which seemed more than happy to get away from its previous driver.

“Farwell, my duckie,” Bastien said dramatically, with a deep bow and wink. “I hope life treats you well, and remember that I’m always but a call away. You’ve been such a fabulous companion, and Sylvia sends her best too, though you won’t hear it from her lips.”

Louis giggled. “I will see you again shortly, will I not?”

Bastien did not answer, but rode away. Even on the horse, with the additional one tied behind, he looked outstandingly elegant.

Randall managed to sit up, leaning against the wrecked seat of the sideways curricule, and stopped groaning enough to be understandable once more. “Sorry, General,” he said quietly. “It was nothing personal.”

Jack said nothing, walked up to him, and cuffed him in the side of the face. It was more than enough to get him to shut up. With this business now taken care of, Jack tended dutifully to Louis, squeezing his backside to ensure it was well enough to ride a horse for a bit longer.

“I’m fine!” he squealed, moving away from Jack’s pinching grasp. “Stop!”

“I’m just making sure nothing’s broken,” Jack said in mock seriousness. “Can’t be too thorough, now can I?”

With Louis’s rump properly inspected, the two mounted Jack’s horse. By this point, and especially with Jack, Louis had no reason to be afraid of heights. The exertion of the morning drained him of all emotion other than relief and happiness. Still, if he clutched a little tightly against the broad back in front of him, then no one else would need to know.

Even from this position, however, he realized that Jack set off in the direction opposite the house.

“Where are we going?” he said.

“You trust me?”

“Well, honestly, I’m not so sure. Are you kidnapping me again?”

“Maybe.”

“Fine. For you, I’ll allow it.”

He held on to Jack’s back as they rode on. He did trust him—of course he did. That wasn’t even up for debate. Despite everything, despite Jack not believing him at first, Louis still trusted him.

My love.

Chapter 33

The sea stretched out endlessly before them. The wild grass felt cool against Louis's skin, and he threaded his fingers through it. The cliff edge was rocky, and honestly a bit disgusting, but the early morning calm made up for any personal discomforts. So did Jack's presence.

They didn't ride for much longer, instead taking a detour towards a spread out, scenic view. They sat close to the edge, as close as Louis could bear, and did nothing—nothing at all—for a long while.

Jack had the goodness to bring food, which they nibbled at. It was not exactly a high-scale picnic, but close enough. Between the location and the food, Louis wondered if he had planned to take him here regardless, but woke to find him missing from his bed.

"I could tell something was off," Jack said, staring out at the sea when Louis asked him. "Don't ask me how—I just woke up too early in my bed, and I knew something was wrong."

"Randall was going to take me back to my father's. Apparently, he put out a reward for my safe return."

"How does that make you feel?"

Louis shrugged. "I'm not sure. I was reconciled to the idea that my father forgot about me entirely. I suppose it's right that he was being cautious—not that I think that excuses him of his behavior towards me. Or you, for that matter."

"Indeed."

"Jack," Louis said quietly, "I said a few things last night—"

"No, don't apologize please. It is entirely unnecessary."

Louis looked up at him.

"I was solely at fault," Jack continued. "I was wrong not to believe you straight away, and I should have realized that it was perfectly sensible for you not to tell me of what

Randall and William had done. Why would you? I would have been very angry. I'm not always a rational man." He laughed in a self-conscious way, shaking his head.

Louis just looked at him.

"I was blinded by my outrage. I treated you poorly. I'm very sorry for it."

"It's no matter, General Sterling," Louis said. "I hereby give you my full and utter forgiveness."

"I'm glad for it, but it's really not so simple. My actions were unpardonable. I had a suspicion for some time that Randall was acting behind my back, but who was I to say anything about it? I don't control him."

"You were his leader. Regardless of what your group was or what you did, you were still in charge."

"I'm tired of leading. I'm not very good at it. Seems I trust blindly and betray those whom I shouldn't. What I *should* have done was just stay in the continent. I was happy enough there."

Louis nodded. He expected as much, and it hurt, in an odd way, regardless.

"I should have stayed there," Jack continued, "but then I wouldn't have met you. And that just wouldn't do."

"What have I caused but misery and frustration? To either of us!"

"You caused me to see my own errors. To see how ill-planned this entire endeavor was from the start. I should have just told you from the start what I planned to do, but I didn't out of stubbornness or some other ridiculous fault. I knew it would affect you, to have your father rescind his statements all those years ago. I just didn't want to admit it—I don't want you to get hurt by it."

"He deserves it. I probably deserve it too."

"You deserve no such thing, Louis," Jack said, looking into his eyes. "You're a spectacular person—one I've grown used to rather quickly. I was being too selfish to stop myself. I

had a half-blind idea of getting revenge for something that happened two decades ago, out of an ill-conceived notion of honoring my dead friend's wishes. But what would that have gotten me? I'm in England now either way—no one's suspected I am due for deportation. I have friends all over the country, still willing to house me and accept my company, not to mention the life I made for myself anyway back in France. I was willing to throw it all away, and your life too. How stupid could I have been?"

"You were trying to honor Eric's anger," Louis said. "You wanted to right an injustice. There is no fault that can be found in that."

"But there is fault that can be found in my attempts to achieve that justice. I'm sorry for kidnapping you, Louis. Amidst many other things, but that most of all. I wish I could have spared you all this."

"I'm not sorry for that at all!" he said passionately. "I've done more, seen more, and lived more in the past month than in my entire life! What had I done before I met you? Wasted away in my home, ate supper, walked about London, called on friends and distant relatives whom I've never met before. But now? I've traveled all over! I've talked to people and been exposed to things I never thought possible! You've shown me the error of my manners, least of all. I've befriended servants and cross-dressers; I've conquered my fears; I've made love! You did me an impossible good. I can't thank you enough for abducting me."

Jack gave him a watery smile. "I'll use you as a reference for my next victim."

"I don't wish to go home ever again," Louis said firmly. "My father can keep his bounty. I'm not going back. I've made up my mind. What I said last night was entirely out of anger—I could see a life for myself here."

"You can't abandon your life, Louis."

"Like hell I can't! Just watch me. When I spoke last night of how your plans would ruin my life as well, I thought about if I truly wanted that life. And guess what? I don't. I

don't know if my father would ever be willing to admit he was wrong all those years ago, but in the end, he lost either way, because I don't want to carry on his title. I'll be much happier on my own—or with others, if they'd have me." He looked meaningfully at him as he said the last few words.

Jack nodded. "I would have you, Louis. I mean it. I do love you. Impossibly so, and against all likelihood—I love you."

"I love you too, Jack."

"But I must return you to your father."

"No," he said, rising up from his seat on the ground. The wind was blowing hard, the ocean salt coming with it.

"Yes," Jack stood as well, towering over him. "Whether you wish it or not, I'm taking you back."

"You cannot make me."

"I can. I've done it before, and I'll do it again."

"Jack—you can't be serious."

But from the way he was looking down at him, Louis knew he meant it. Even if it meant tying him up *once again*, he would deliver Louis back into his father's hands.

A cloying lump formed in his throat. He knew what this meant—what Jack was implying. It was too horrible to even consider.

"Why? Jack, why?" he cried out, feeling his face burn in grief. "I love you! And you love me. Why can't I just stay with you?"

"Because that is impossible."

"It's not. We've already been together. Anything can be made possible."

"Not this. Louis, I took you away from everything you knew and loved. How could I live with myself if I kept you from it any longer? What would I do when you come to resent me for it? For us living a life below what you could have once

had? One day, you will be a marquee. That means something. I cannot just steal you away from this legacy.”

“You have before, and you can again. This is good for both of us, Jack. You will ruin my father, leaving him without his only son, and I get to be with you. I want to leave it all behind! We would both win.”

Jack shook his head firmly, stepping closer and gripping onto Louis’s arms. “It’s easy for you to say this now. I’m sure you believe it—but in a year from now? In five? Ten? You will regret it. I know you will. I cannot do this to you.”

Louis clutched on to his coat. “But then, what are you saying? Will I see you again?”

Jack said nothing, but his look spoke volumes.

Louis cried in earnest. He felt the hot, wet tears fall from his eyes as he gasped for breath. “No—no, Jack. I can’t accept that. I won’t!”

“Life will go on, my love. You will move on. I promise you that.”

“No, you do not know that. You are asking me to do something that is not possible. How could I forget you? How could I move on from this?”

He pressed his face into Jack’s chest, holding onto him as tightly as he could. Jack embraced him in return, wrapping his arms tightly around his body. Louis cried desperately.

“How could you? After everything. How could you?”

“How could I not?” Jack’s voice was rough and gravelly. “I would take your life from you by keeping you as mine. Even if that hurt your father—even if it damaged his reputation or left him without any family—it would also be hurting you. I’ve done that enough to others already—I could not to you. I won’t.”

“My life is not yours to give or take. I offer it willingly! And you will offer yours in return. That’s how this works, Jack. We love each other! Is that not enough?”

“I don’t know,” Jack kissed his head. “I don’t think so.”

“This is cowardice,” Louis said, pushing him away and wiping his eyes. His grief was quickly becoming anger. “You are a coward! You cannot just do this to somebody and flee from the consequences. You have made me love you. You have said I am yours.”

“Louis,” he said softly, “just think about it—for just a moment, please, think about it. You are asking me to take you away from your family and home, based on our time together in the span of a month. A single month. Most of which, we hardly spoke to one another, much less loved! This is what’s best for you—I grieve deeply, but I can’t let you do this.”

“Don’t decide for me, Jack. I am a grown man—I can make this decision myself!”

“You are hardly two decades old. There is more to life than even what I have to offer. You would be throwing everything away to stay with me. I’m twice your age, with hardly any prospects. I kidnap people for money. I can barely keep my own men from scheming behind my back. How could I take care of you?”

“No, Jack, that is what you have become—it is what you do. That is not who you are. I have seen who you are. You are kind, and considerate, and noble. You have more integrity than anyone I have ever met in my own circles. And regardless of how old you are, I can take care of myself. I don’t need you for that!”

The wind whipped around both their heads. Neither had any more to say, but Louis felt his heart bleeding from within. He hated Jack for his prudent forethought. He hated the idea of being left alone, of leaving him and Bastien and even Madame D’Arc behind. He looked out towards the sea, watching the waves crash into each other. Everything felt vivid and intense. This moment would affect his life forever. He wanted to be with Jack.

And he had to convince him that being together was at least worth trying.

“We will argue in circles over this,” Jack said, looking down at the ground. “I did not wish for this. I would like our time together to be happier.”

“If you really didn’t expect me to put up a fight about this, then you do not know me at all.”

He smiled. “I admit, it was mostly wishful thinking. Come now, Louis, let us be at peace. I don’t wish to argue. Not now.”

“I’m not your prisoner anymore. You can’t tell me what to do.”

Jack stepped close again, crowding around him before he could push him away again. Louis wanted to fight back—wanted desperately to push him away and rage once more over how absolutely stupid he was being. But the look in his eyes silenced all such convictions. It was a look of sorrow and acceptance, of tenderness—it was also a look of heat.

“I can and will tell you what to do,” Jack said slowly. “I will make you go home to your father, even if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you myself.”

Louis rose to the challenge. He stepped even closer, looking up at Jack until his neck hurt from craning it.

“Then I will resist you the entire way. I will break free at every possible opportunity. I can be a terrible prisoner if I wish to be.”

“Think you can best me? I’m a professional.”

“My love, at this point, so am I.”

They kissed. It was slow at first as they rediscovered each other’s bodies. Louis groaned at the feel of Jack’s whiskers grating at his skin, the heat emanating from his body despite the mid-morning chill. He threaded his hands through his black hair, feeling the leather strap of his eyepatch and soft skin on the back of his neck. He wanted to taste Jack, desperately so, deep enough that he would remember it always. Jack responded just as eagerly.

It was near perfection, but still not enough. Louis crawled up his tall frame, throwing his legs around Jack's waist to keep him as close as possible. Firm hands rested on his backside, keeping him high off the ground. Louis had never felt so high up before, and he kissed Jack with renewed vigor, with their faces now lined up perfectly.

It didn't last long. They soon returned to the hard stones of the ground beneath them. Jack held him tenderly, keeping his hand behind Louis's head as he pressed him down. The taste of Jack, the smell of him, his sweat mixed with the leather he was wearing, the feel of him on top—it was all Louis ever wanted. All he could imagine himself ever wanting. What was wealth to this? What was notoriety? How could something as mundane as a title stand up to Jack's lips? His hands and arms? His cock?

It couldn't. It simply couldn't. Whatever Jack might say, nothing would beat this. Louis would bet his entire life on it—and would make sure that Jack knew of his commitment. He kissed him hard, gripping his hair, fighting back whenever he could. Jack pinned his arms down—Louis bit his lip in return. He pushed his hips down with his groin—but Louis grinded back against him. He would fight back, all the way to London, if he had to. He would prove to Jack that he wanted to stay with him.

He wrapped his legs around Jack's waist and flipped him over, moving quickly enough not to alert a reaction until he succeeded. They flopped over, Jack sprawling out beneath him, and looking up at him in slight alarm and amusement.

Louis smiled.

He made his way down Jack's body slowly, kissing a trail down his chest and stomach. He pulled away what fabric he could, getting access to his skin wherever possible. Jack had taught him many things over their time together, and he always endeavored to be a good student. He undid Jack's trousers quickly and pulled out his solid cock.

Jack had done this to him once the other night. He used his mouth on Louis, making him writhe and cry out into his

mouth. It was otherworldly, and Louis desperately wished to do it in return. Now, he would.

He licked the tip eagerly, watching as Jack panted in arousal. The taste of his cock was pleasant and strong, the bead of moisture from the tip bitter, but by no means offputting. He wrapped his lips around the head of his cock and sucked hard.

“Oh, Louis,” Jack cried out.

It was far too easy, and he was having far too much fun doing it. He kept his hands firmly on Jack’s waist and sucked, bobbing his head up and down over the length.

“Louis...my God...”

He welcomed the feeling of Jack’s hand gripping his hair, easing him further down his shaft. He sucked vigorously, trying to remember what had felt good on him in return. His tongue darted against the sensitive tip. His lips curled powerfully as far down the shaft as possible. His fingers dug into the bones of Jack’s hips, holding him down as best he could.

The fingers in his hair tightened, and Louis moaned in pleasure. The palm of Jack’s hand splayed out against his skull, pushing him eagerly against his cock—farther and deeper—until it made Louis sputter. It was no deterrent. If anything it strengthened his passion.

“Louis...you will be the death of me,” Jack moaned out. His voice was deep and guttural. “I’m not far now, my little lord. Oh!”

Louis sucked him in deeply, moaning, feeling the skin vibrate as he did so. The feeling was so intensely erotic, it was almost sublime. He understood, all at once, why people enjoyed such a thing. Why people enjoyed being buggered as he had as well. Why people get aroused at submitting to others. Jack might have had him by the neck at that point, but he had all the power. With every curl of his tongue, he sent him panting and begging for more. He moved, faster and faster, until Jack’s fingers pulled painfully into his hair.

“I—God, my love. Move away now! Fuck!”

But Louis didn't. Jack didn't for him, so he would swallow it all in turn. Jack's hips shuddered beneath him, and his mouth quickly filled with his warm release. Louis swallowed, tasting its bitter heat. He sucked and swallowed until there was nothing left to give, pulling his mouth away and gasping for air.

“Oh,” he managed to say, before coughing loudly. “That—that was lovely.”

Jack groaned. “I'll say. I knew your mouth would be good for something other than talking back.”

“You're welcome.” He pulled himself up, straddling Jack's hips once again and rubbing his hands down his body. When Jack's hands reached for his waist, palming at his painfully hard erection, Louis swatted them away.

“No.”

“No? This doesn't look like a 'no' to me.”

He swatted his hands away again, before leaning forward and looking deep into Jack's one working eye. “I'm proving how selfless I can be. I will not take my pleasure with you again, if you plan on leaving me still.”

“That doesn't sound very charitable to my ears.”

“No? Well, think of it like this. I will not be sated, not one bit. So, for the length of our journey back to London, if you've need of my services again, I'll be more than willing. And I know how you like to take the scenic routes. By all means, let's make the trip last all day long if you like.”

“I think you would be more than willing regardless.”

“Very likely. But now, there is no doubt. You might have to bind my hands again, just to keep me from touching myself.”

“Is this what you think I want from you?”

“Utterly compliant? Willing? Desperately wanting? Yes.”

“Fair enough.”

Louis was already beginning to regret his decision. He found it difficult to let Jack pry him away as he redressed himself. Any attempts at touching his chest or caressing his face were playfully rebuffed.

“You asked for this,” Jack said with a smirk. “And if I even see you reach for your crotch, I won’t hesitate to bind your hands together again.”

“I’m afraid that might just make me spend in my trousers.”

“I always knew you liked to be tied up.”

Louis wanted to say something along the lines of trying it the next time they fucked, but would there be a next time? He hesitated to ask.

“Jack,” he said softly, as they stood back up and dusted each other off, “please tell me, if nothing else, that I will at least see you again?”

“Shall I steal into the night, in your childhood bed, to whisk you away whenever you need a little adventure?”

“Are you joking? Because that sounds like a plan to me.”

“Is that really what you want?”

“I want you, Jack. Plain and simple. I just want you.”

“I think you deserve more than just an occasional escape. You deserve someone you can wake up to every morning.”

Though his words were cutting, Jack’s face looked unsure. There was a small crack in his countenance, a flicker of reconsideration.

Louis smiled, feeling a sense of calm overcome him. Perhaps even a sense of finality. He could win this argument. It’s what he did best. “I... understand your misgivings. I do not agree with them at all, and I do not think I ever will, but if I place myself in your position, I can see why you hesitate.”

“Yes.”

“But you are underestimating just how much this past month has altered me. I am hardly who I was this past summer. I wouldn’t even recognize myself, and I thank you for that.”

Jack nodded, saying nothing.

He continued. “I’m seeing the world through better eyes. I’m more of a man than I ever thought possible, and I owe that to you. You taught me how well I could manage on my own. And, of course, you taught me how to love. I will never stop loving you, Jack. Nothing will ever make me change my mind on this point. I promise this.”

He said it with as deep of a conviction as he possibly could. This time, he stood as a man speaking to another. There were no tears, no wavering in his voice. There was no doubt. Nothing would change his mind.

“I love you more than I’ve ever loved anything, even when you have treated me terribly and locked me away more times than I can count. But it is not just you. I think maybe you don’t know enough of the home to which I return. It is no one but me and my father, who is always away. I have hardly any friends and no one to love. But here? With you? I have come to love so many. You and Bastien alone have shown me more kindness than I have ever received since my mother died when I was just a child! Madame D’Arc, even—when she is not wishing for my death that is—has treated me fairly and with respect. I have a place here. I have a place with you. I want you to see that and understand.”

“I do see that. I do understand.”

“So how could you be so willing to send me away?”

“My love,” Jack said, cupping Louis’s face in his hands, “I am not willing. Not at all. I would rather anything than to be torn from you. I just...I see no alternative. You don’t know what you might be missing at home.”

“Then may we come to a compromise? Something—anything—to let it remain a possibility that someday I might

live with you? I would go live on a farm with you in the middle of France in a heartbeat if I could, but I understand why we ought to be prudent.”

“You are many things, little lord, but you are not a farmer.”

“Yes, that might be pushing my limits.”

Jack hesitated, stroking Louis’s face between his fingers. “We do have a long journey ahead of us. Perhaps we can think of something. You seem capable of convincing me of anything.”

Louis smiled. “It’s because I had you in my mouth, isn’t it?”

The opportunity was open. The justification was made. Louis laid his case, and Jack accepted it. They would try and work something out. He sighed in relief, feeling a glimmer of hope that he had not felt in quite some time now. He was happy to be with Jack, and he would prove to him that he always would be. Someday.

Chapter 34

Since riding a train directly into London, now that they knew Louis's father had an active warrant out for his return, was impossible, the scenic routes became a necessity. They would travel the old-fashioned way, carriage by carriage, through the countryside, stopping wherever they might, until Louis was close enough to the city to continue on his own. Along the way, they would discuss their plans for the future.

All would be well. Louis told himself, as they mounted the horse again and debated on whether to return to Bastien's house or go straight into Bristol proper, that regardless of what happens now, he would never regret having met Jack.

But, oh, did he wish to keep him near for the rest of his life.

Changing Jack's initial stubborn resistance to seeing him again at all was easy enough. Convincing him now of a new plan to see him frequently was his next task. They left Bristol soon after, anticipating a long, leisurely ride through Hampshire on their way back towards London. It would take nearly the entire day, in any case, but neither seemed to mind too much.

"What will you do now?" Louis asked, as they sat facing each other in the hired coach.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, will you still try to enact vengeance against my father? I did promise you that I would help."

Jack shrugged. "I'm not entirely certain yet. To be sure, he should be faulted for what he did—but how best to achieve that is beyond me. Clearly, my original idea was not so wise, now was it?"

"Simple bribery isn't enough. And he has few pleasures in the world, though I'm sure you'll think of something. Kidnapping me was a remarkably good idea, if only the follow-through had been better executed."

Jack sneered at him, and then took his hand in his. “Of course, I have also been thinking that I already avenged myself and Eric.”

“How so?”

Jack stroked his fingers. “Because I have you, the sole heir of the Earlshope name, willing to do whatever I say. You weren’t wrong when you suggested it earlier—I could leave your father with no family or heir. I could steal you away with me this instant. In fact, if memory serves, you were the one *asking* to be stolen just a few hours ago.”

“Ahh—I see. And have I convinced you yet to take me away forever? You hold my father’s legacy in your very hands.”

“Indeed. For now, at least, maybe that’s all I need.” He shook his head, clearly moving on from the conversation about Louis’s father. “In any case, what about you?”

“What will I do? The usual, I suppose. Lots of boring talks, visiting others, learning how best to wear my title. I’ve been called entirely too green before, though I wonder what my father will think of me now. I feel so very changed.”

“Yes. You are quite different from when we first met.”

“Instead of spitting on you, I kiss you now.”

“You spat on me just last night.”

“But it was well deserved.”

They fell back into their game of asking each other a single question. It would be at least two hours before their carriage was to be changed, and there was not much else to do. Louis, too, did not wish to dwell too long on silence, out of fear that unhappy thoughts would start to return.

“Will you at least remain in England?” Louis asked next.

“I think I ought to. Getting back here in the first place wasn’t entirely easy, and I don’t do too well on sea voyages. I suppose I’ll just have to lie low, as they say.”

“And what about your men?”

“Uh-uh. It’s my turn next. Would you ever marry, if the situation presented itself?”

Louis was surprised by the question. He thought about it for some time. “I don’t think so. Unless there was a miraculous situation where a friend desperately needed to marry me out of—I don’t even know what—then I’m opposed. Marrying for love, or just to have children, is out of the question. For me at least.”

“I can’t really imagine you with a wife.”

“I’m quite gifted around the ladies, I dare say. But, now it is my question. What will you do with your men?”

Jack shrugged again, his typical response for any question that he didn’t really have an answer for. “Tell them I’m retiring? That the plan to thwart the Marquess of Tilby is over? There were only about a dozen that I met with regularly anyway—not including Randall or William.”

“I’m sorry about that again. William didn’t deserve to die.”

“No. He didn’t,” Jack said.

“But retirement? How will you support yourself?”

“Though it is not your turn, I will humor this question by stating I am not sure *yet*. This is all as new to me as it is to you. I didn’t decide to move on from all this until just this morning, mind you, when I knew for sure that Randall had lied to me.”

The uncertainty was expected, but Louis did feel relieved at knowing Jack wasn’t going to risk breaking the law over and over again. If he were caught, and somehow his identity was officially discovered, the consequences would be disastrous. Regardless of what his sentence would have been twenty years ago, fleeing the country before a verdict passed would not be regarded lightly.

Furthermore, a hidden lover who was both a man *and* notorious criminal was just begging to give him a lifetime of issues.

Such basic questions were soon discarded in favor of more personal ones. Louis inquired of Jack's home life when he was young, and what his parents and siblings had been like. Jack asked in return what Louis's mother was like when he was young, and how exactly his father treated him.

"He was never overtly cruel," he answered. "But he was always very distant. Beyond our blood connection, I do not think there is anything we really have in common or even like about each other."

"I despised your father for a very long time—and I still do," Jack said. "Though now, I recognize that a lot of my anger has done nobody any good. I acted rashly during the war by disobeying him, and I expected consequences. I suppose I just didn't expect my consequences to have impacted my friends as much as they did."

"Eric was very devastated, then, to have had to flee England."

Jack nodded, looking away. "He was angry because he was dying. He shouldn't have passed so young, but the war weakened him. I was lucky not to have been so affected."

Louis touched the side of his face, right against his eyepatch. "You have scars as well, you know."

"Indeed, though this has hardly been an inconvenience. Other than how easily I am recognized from the streets."

"Which makes it hard to be an escaped criminal, no doubt."

"Precisely, my love."

Little by little, throughout the whole of their journey, Jack became more and more easily persuaded to give into Louis's plan. He devised it during a break in their game, when they were merely holding each other close in the carriage, knowing it would be some time before they saw the other again.

The plan, at least according to Louis, would be perfect. It was simple and straightforward, but would provide enough satisfaction to them both, should they desire it. Louis argued

that, as a young man with a father with remarkably strong health, it wouldn't be so odd for him to spend much of his time traveling and learning the ways of the world. It would hopefully be a long time before he would need to take on any official duties that his office might require, which gave him and Jack years, if they were lucky, to ensure neither would regret any big decisions they undertook together.

Louis would not become a farmer, that much was laid clear. He spoke fairly decent French, though had never lived abroad and wasn't sure if he would enjoy it or not. He despised cold weather and any kind of grisly effort, though he made sure to add that he would bear such things for Jack's sake.

Wisely, Jack said nothing to this.

But such dreams, as previously stated, would have to linger for some time. Jack did not want to make Louis take on a new life before he was decided on what he wanted. The option existed as well that Jack might somehow be involved in Louis's life when he inherited his estate officially. There were possibilities and options, opinions and feelings—none of them were completely off the table.

For the present, however, something would have to be done much sooner. Louis did not want to imagine years of separation from Jack. Therefore, he constructed his plan.

Jack listened closely. He smiled and nodded along as Louis regaled him of what was to come. By any luck, they would see each other again in just a few months—which, if Jack agreed, would be plenty of time to ensure that the pleasantries of aristocratic life would not make Louis forget about him entirely.

They headed south, taking multiple carriages until the day was beginning to reach its close, all the way towards Brighton. Their plan was solid; both agreed to it, and both agreed not to contact each other until their set date. It would be hard—and Louis knew that the pain of separation would be unimaginable—but it was a necessity. He conceded that Jack was correct. They needed to return to their normal lives,

whatever that meant, before resuming such fantasies and acting on them.

In Brighton, Louis did his best to say goodbye with dry eyes. It was a hopeless cause.

“Now, remember, Jack,” he said, in between breathless sobs, “remember what I told you. It is very, *very* important that you do. In any case, I hope to see you again in December.”

“Stay well, alright? I’ll see you in December.”

In broad daylight, and in the middle of the busy streets of Brighton, they could not kiss. They shared their final kiss in the carriage, but now, they must act like nothing more than dear friends. Louis hugged him tightly. He held his breath to try and stop crying. It didn’t work.

They parted at the station. Louis took the next train heading directly for London. Jack was headed back to Bristol, where he would stay with Bastien for at least the time being.

Louis’s train was first, and he waved goodbye as he boarded. He hid his face, as to not show how wretched his sobs were. He hoped to see Jack again. He hoped their plan would work, and more importantly, that they would both still want it in three months.

All he had to do now was wait until December.

And hope that Jack would still want to see him then.

Epilogue

December, 1875, Somewhere in the South of England

It was a miserable day. The forecasts were hardly expecting such dreadful weather. The rain was endless—punctuated by heavy flurries of snow and sleet. It was disgusting—bitterly cold, wet, and gray. Exactly the kind of weather that Louis would rather be doing anything than being outside in.

Of course, this day, of all days, was when he needed to catch a train on his way out of London towards Bath. It was by no means the season for going to the seaside town, but he had been adamant on visiting a friend over there before Christmas. It was very important to him, he was sure to remind his father multiple times, and no bout of seasonably dreadful weather could stop him.

So, there was hardly anyone to blame but himself as he trudged through the snow and sleet, through mud and rain, to the terribly packed station filled with folks of all classes and ages making their holiday journeys. By the time he had his seat, up at the very front of the train, of course, his mood was barely beginning to improve. It had been a terrible past few weeks, filled with endless activity and visitations and work, but he had been looking forward to this brief escapade for months now. Bath, even in December, *was* always a remarkable sight—no matter what everyone else had to say about it.

He looked out the window, reflecting on his life these past few months.

His father, as it turned out, was fairly convinced that Louis's handwritten note from when he was locked away in Madame D'Arc's estate was not actually from him. He was slightly worried, but instead merely presumed that Louis had chased after some girl who caught his eye and did as he would. It would explain the odd expenses that came from the clothing stores in Bristol. In fact, he hardly believed Louis was kidnapped to begin with, and the so-called "bounty" that he set

out for his return was mostly a rumor that had spun out of control. God knows how Randall must have heard of it.

Nevertheless, the Marquess of Tilby was glad to have his son safe and sound back in London. The rest of the autumn progressed as it normally would have, and few made comments about Louis's extended absence. Despite his tendency to be something of a homebody, nobody thought it was odd for him to have seemingly disappeared overnight for the entire month of September. They wrote it off as the exuberance of youth. Something that boys like him would and should do. Louis was more than happy not to correct them.

If only they really knew what he had been up to during that time.

When the trolley-cart passed by, parceling off hot beverages to anyone with a spare coin or two, Louis was sure to tip the young boy generously. He savored the warmth from the cup he received in return, even if the quality of the coffee was subpar. It was more about the experience, if anything, to be riding a train, on his own, in the middle of a fierce bout of seasonal precipitation. The month so far had been mostly calm, and then, as if out of nowhere, the claws of winter bore down upon England. He could only imagine what it was like up north.

The journey wouldn't be too long—only a few hours. Not many were going so far as Bath, since the seaside was likely the last place anyone with common sense would want to be in such weather. Louis watched as passengers entered and exited. Came and went. Sat by him and stood once more. It wasn't long before his cart was almost empty. There was but a single old man sitting across from him, dozing off pleasantly, as the freezing rain pattered against their shared window. To an unfamiliar eye, one might almost assume the man was his father. But the Marquess of Tilby would never venture out of London at such a time of year. Louis couldn't actually even remember the last time he rode a train with his father.

He came to terms, as much as one could, with the antics of his family. His father meant well, but hardly registered Louis's existence most of the time. This suited him

just as well—a trip to Bath, in the middle of December, could hardly be negotiated if his guardian actually minded his well-being.

Solitude did him good as well. He missed the grounds of his family estate, just beyond the city limits. He paid respects to his servants warmly upon his return, being sure to address them as respectfully as he could. Certainly, the behavior that Bastien often indulged in with his servants would likely go over poorly in his own house, but he did what he could.

Speaking of whom, keeping up with Bastien was one of the few pleasures Louis routinely had access to while back home. They wrote back and forth, in long and interesting letters of information and philosophy, about their lives and health. Madame D’Arc even wrote to him once, containing little more than a formal invitation to call on her the next time he happened to be anywhere as northwestern as Chesire. Knowing her, this was as close to an acknowledgment that he was right that he would ever receive, much less an apology. He treasured it with all his heart.

It was to both of them that Louis wrote of his excursion to Bath. He dared them to ask what they might think of his plan, how ridiculous it was for him to travel so far away from family and home on an odd desire to see an old friend. In fact, Louis was quite specific about the time and date of his travels—noting the specific train he would be in, even the cart number where he was assigned to sit. Such details, he figured, were probably useless to most people, but he liked to be fastidious. Ever since he was kidnapped once, he liked to remind at least one person where he was at all times whenever he could. Who knows what kinds of people travel out and about these days?

The door to his cart opened once more, and another passenger joined him and the old man. The newly arrived sat next to Louis and opened a newspaper to read from. All was quiet, save for the relentless tapping of the rain against the window.

Louis’s heart was thundering in his chest.

He could hear the rustling of the passenger's paper right beside him, and it quickly shortened his temper. He wasn't sure how long he could take it, sitting there, in the absolute stillness of the morning, saying nothing. He risked a few words.

"Dear fellow," he said calmly, glancing over at the person to his right, "would you mind terribly to read your paper a little more—quietly?"

"Do I disturb you?"

"Indeed. I am busy trying to hear the rain. And that man's snoring," he said quietly, gesturing to the other man across from them.

"Don't worry, lad, you won't have to suffer my noise for much longer."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," the man said softly, behind the top of the paper, "that we will be getting off shortly."

Louis suppressed a smile. He crossed his arms and ankles below, trying his best not to squeal in delight like a child. "I think you are mistaken, sir. My exit's not until Bath."

"Not anymore," the man said, leaning close. "You're coming with me. Don't make any loud noises, or I'll stick this...knife...right between your ribs."

Louis giggled when he felt Jack's fingers press into his side.

"I say!" he said in mock fear. "Is this a hold up?"

"Worse," Jack grinned at him. "I'm taking you as my prisoner."

"Now that sounds utterly wicked. What will you do to me?"

"The usual."

"By this point, sir, I'm not sure what a usual kidnapping actually looks like."

Louis's face was bright red. He stared into Jack's eye, admiring his weathered features. He hadn't changed at all in three months.

"I think you've got a bit more grays this time around," he said.

"Oh do I?"

"Actually, no. I lied. You look wonderful, Jack."

"Glad you think so. The privileged life has suited you well, little lord."

"Are you trying to say I've gotten fat?"

Jack smiled warmly. Louis assumed that he tried to wink, but with his one eye, it looked little more than like he was blinking slowly at him, fawning over their close presence to one another.

Words could not convey the joy Louis felt and had to contain within. Jack came. After three months—three long and pitiful months—he was still willing to come and take Louis away with him.

His plan worked excellently. If they could both do without the other for the rest of the autumn, then they should meet for a little reunion just in time for Christmas and the New Year. And, what better way to embarrass Louis's father than by having his son up and leave again in the middle of all the holiday cheer?

The only caveat, of course, was that they would both *want* to see the other again after all this time. Either could have stayed home and forgotten all about the plan, which more or less would have signaled an end to their relationship. But Jack was here. He came, and so did Louis. If nothing else, it meant they both had at least a little faith in their ability to continue loving each other.

He bumped his knee against Jack's, who pressed back just as firmly. It was all they could do for the time being. But soon, Jack would kidnap Louis again, taking him off the train early, well before Bath, and make their way up towards Bristol. Any solitude they could find along the way would be

filled with tender caresses and well overdue kisses. Louis's lips tingled at the thought of it.

Jack would only be willing to keep Louis away for the holidays themselves, before returning him, however unhappily, back to his father. But more adventures would await. Louis would travel more, visit more of England and even the continent, should they wish for it, and Jack would always be there to meet him, whenever he could. If such plans worked out for long enough, then maybe one day, Louis would simply not return to London after being stolen away. They would simply have to wait and see.

“And what have you been doing with yourself these past few months?”

“Staying with Bastien. Working with his horses. He's got a full stable now full of them.”

“Are you kidding? Are you saying you've become his stable boy?”

“More like an extended guest who happens to know a thing or two about horses.”

“How very democratic of you. Do you sleep in the servants' quarters as well?”

“Very funny. I sleep in our room, where I have waited for you to come back to.”

Louis blushed. There was much he wanted to talk about, and many tender things he wanted to do with Jack, but he had to tease him more first. “I wonder what Bastien thinks of you living off his coin for so long. Never thought you'd be the kind of friend who overstays his welcome.”

“Please. Bas wouldn't let me leave even if I tried. Not with the promise of you coming back.”

“He misses me that much?”

“We both do. It's not been the same without you, Louis.”

He blushed again, biting his lip to keep his smile from overtaking his entire face. “So are you saying I'm going to be

the first person you have kidnapped since...well...the last time you kidnapped me?"

"Indeed."

"And are you glad to return to your dark profession?"

"Hardly. I'd like to think of this as a positively poor attempt at kidnapping. I'd also like to think that you will be coming with me willingly."

Ah well. There would be more time for teasing later. "Fine. You think correctly. I'm sure you are fully aware how happy I am, and how hard I am trying to hold back tears at the sight of you once more. I'm simply trying not to stroke your already overblown ego."

"My ego certainly likes to be stroked. As do other things of mine."

"Still a perverted bastard, I see. Nothing has changed, has it?"

"Hopefully not much." Jack now gave him a warm smile. It was soft and genuine, and it filled Louis with so much emotion that he did, to his shame, begin to cry.

He couldn't help it. He'd always been a weepy fool whenever the chance presented itself. He looked out the window, trying to distract himself, as a few tears ran down his cheeks. The old man across from them was now fully asleep, seemingly unbothered by what must have been a very strange conversation happening right in front of him. Jack squeezed Louis's thigh hard.

"I love you, Louis. I missed you. I'm glad you've come back to me."

He wiped his face. "I will remind you that this was your idea. I never would have left in the first place."

"Yes, but see what it has brought us instead? You're crying just at the sight of me. Imagine what I can make you do later."

"This is not an appropriate conversation to be having in public. If you wish to talk such nonsense, then you must

remove me from this train first.”

“That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?”

Louis squeezed his hand harder, enjoying the rough feel of Jack’s skin beneath his own.

They had much more to discuss, much to catch up on, and much to make up for. Louis had no idea how he was going to be able to leave Jack’s side again after the new year had begun, but he dared not think of it too much now. All that mattered in that moment was that Jack had come back to him. They were together again. And, if all went well, they would soon be together always.

Louis had plenty of questions on the tip of his tongue. He wondered what Bastien’s Christmas party was going to look like, what costumes they would be expected to wear. He wondered what became of Randall or the others in Jack’s group, now that he decided to hole himself up in Bastien’s house. He wondered how the repairs were going in Madame D’Arc’s house, and if she were still holding hostages, and what happened to Sir Maurice, and what Jack had been thinking about every night since they had been apart. Louis felt like the only thing that had been on his mind was Jack.

But all that could wait. They sat in silence for a long while, doing nothing but gazing out the window, watching the falling flurries of snow and rain, and holding each other’s hands down by their knees.

There would be time to talk later. But now, Louis allowed himself to dream and hope.

“Our stop is soon, my love,” Jack whispered in his ear.

“Is it now? What kind of a criminal are you? I’m not even wearing handcuffs or have a gag over my mouth. Don’t tell me you forgot to bring such equipment—I am your prisoner after all.”

“No worries. They are somewhere far more secure.”

“And where might that be?”

Jack gave him a devilish grin and risked a brief kiss to his cheek.

“Waiting for us in our bedroom. Now, come on, little lord. This is our stop, and I will haul you over my shoulder still if I have to.”

Louis giggled. “You wouldn’t dare, you old man.”

“Oh? You’re wrong—I would dare. Just watch me.”

THE END

About The Author

Theodore Bradshaw

Theodore Bradshaw is the living reincarnation of Charlotte Bronte (so he thinks), lives in Massachusetts, and enjoys reading as much as he does writing. Follow his Instagram for more: [@theodoredbradshaw](#)